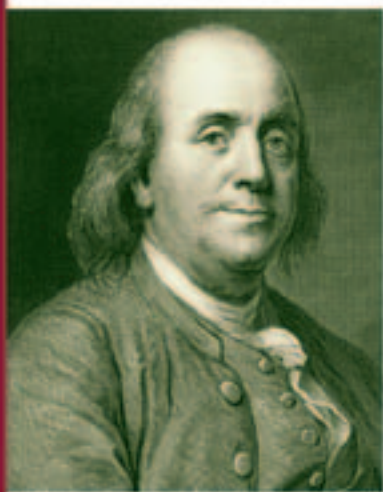


STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS





**STUDENT'S
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
GREAT AMERICAN
WRITERS**

VOLUME I: BEGINNINGS TO 1830



STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

VOLUME I: BEGINNINGS TO 1830

ANDREA TINNEMEYER

PATRICIA M. GANTT, GENERAL EDITOR

Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers, Beginnings to 1830

Copyright © 2010 by Andrea Tinnemeyer

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Student's encyclopedia of great American writers / Patricia Gantt, general editor.
v. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: [1] Beginnings to 1830 / Andrea Tinnemeyer — [2] 1830 to 1900 / Paul Crumbley — [3] 1900 to 1945 / Robert C. Evans — [4] 1945 to 1970 / Blake Hobby — [5] 1970 to the present / Patricia Gantt.

ISBN 978-0-8160-6087-0 (hardcover: acid-free paper) ISBN 978-1-4381-3125-2 (e-book) 1. Authors, American—Biography—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. 2. American literature—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. I. Tinnemeyer, Andrea. II. Gantt, Patricia M., 1943–

PS129.S83 2009
810.9'0003—dc22

[B]

2009030783

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text design by Annie O'Donnell
Composition by Mary Susan Ryan-Flynn
Cover printed by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Book printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Date printed: June 2010
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi	Washington Irving	203
List of Writers and Works Included	vii	Thomas Jefferson	214
Series Preface	xi	Cotton Mather	235
Volume Introduction	xii	Thomas Morton	250
		Judith Sargent Murray	259
John Adams and Abigail Adams	1	Samson Occom	269
William Bradford	12	Thomas Paine	278
Anne Bradstreet	21	Mary White Rowlandson	291
Charles Brockden Brown	43	Susanna Haswell Rowson	297
William Cullen Bryant	51	Catharine Maria Sedgwick	305
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	62	John Smith	314
Samuel de Champlain	71	Edward Taylor	330
Christopher Columbus	80	Phillis Wheatley	348
James Fenimore Cooper	96	John Winthrop	363
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	107		
Jonathan Edwards	115	Appendix I: List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i>	375
Olaudah Equiano	134	Appendix II: Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i> , by Birth Date	378
Hannah Webster Foster	145		
Benjamin Franklin	155		
Philip Morin Freneau	174		
Jupiter Hammon	189		
Handsome Lake	199		

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Jeff Soloway at Facts On File for his patience, guidance, and thoughtfulness. I would also like to thank Pat Gantt for believing in my abilities to steer the ship of this volume through its journey. My colleagues at The College Preparatory School have been invaluable sources of knowledge, laughter, and wisdom.

Last, I want to dedicate this book to my family, especially Eddie, Riley, and Magnolia, and to the doctors who saved Riley's life this past year: Dr. Penny Harris, Dr. Barbara Botelho, and Dr. Peter Chira. My most profound thanks for returning our young boy to us.

LIST OF WRITERS AND WORKS INCLUDED

- John Adams (1735–1826) and
Abigail Adams (1744–1818)** 1
Correspondence of John and
Abigail Adams
Autobiography of John Adams (1807)
- William Bradford (1590–1657)** 12
Of Plymouth Plantation (1630,
1644–1650)
- Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672)** 21
“In Honour of that High and Mighty
Princess, Queen Elizabeth of Happy
Memory” (1643)
“A Dialogue between Old England and
New” (1643)
“The Prologue” (1650)
“To the Memory of My Dear and Ever
Honored Father” (1653)
“In Reference to Her Children, 23 June,
1659” (1659)
“Here Follows Some Verses upon the
Burning of Our House July 10th,
1666” (1666)
“On My Dear Grandchild Simon
Bradstreet, Who Died on 16 November,
1669, Being But a Month, and One
Day Old” (1669)
“As Weary Pilgrim” (1669)
“The Author to Her Book” (1678)
“To Her Father with Some Verses” (1678)
“The Flesh and the Spirit” (1678)
- “Before the Birth of One of Her Children” (1678)
“To My Dear and Loving Husband” (1678)
“A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon
Public Employment” (1678)
“In Memory of My Dear Grandchild,
Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased
August, 1665, Being a Year and a Half
Old” and “In Memory of My Dear
Grandchild Anne Bradstreet, Who
Deceased June 20, 1669, Being Three
Years and Seven Months Old” (1678)
“To My Dear Children” (1867)
“For Deliverance from a Fever” (1867)
- Charles Brockden Brown
(1771–1810)** 43
Wieland (1798)
Edgar Huntly (1799)
*Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year
1793* (1798–1800)
“Somnambulism, a Fragment” (1805)
- William Cullen Bryant
(1794–1878)** 51
“Thanatopsis” (1814, 1817, 1821)
“The Yellow Violet” (1814, 1821)
“To a Waterfowl” (1815, 1818, 1821)
“To Cole, the Painter, Departing for
Europe” (1829)
“The Prairies” (1832, 1833)
“To the Fringed Gentian” (1847)
“Abraham Lincoln” (1865)

- Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (1490–1556)** 62
“The Account: Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación*” (1542)
- Samuel de Champlain (1570–1635)** 71
The Voyages of Samuel de Champlain (1604–1635)
- Christopher Columbus (1451–1506)** 80
Journal of the First Voyage to America (1492)
Letter to Luis de Santángel (1493)
Narrative of the Third Voyage (1498)
Letter to Ferdinand and Isabel (1503)
- James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851)** 96
The Pioneers (1823)
The Pilot (1824)
The Last of the Mohicans (1826)
The Deerslayer (1841)
- J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813)** 107
Letters from an American Farmer (1782)
- Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)** 115
“A Divine and Supernatural Light” (1734)
“The Images of Divine Things” (1737–1741)
A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversions of Many Hundred Souls (1737)
“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)
A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (1746)
The Freedom of the Will (1754)
The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended (1758)
- Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797)** 134
The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789)
- Hannah Webster Foster (1758–1840)** 145
The Coquette; or, the History of Eliza Wharton (1797)
The Boarding School: Or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils (1798)
- Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)** 155
Poor Richard’s Almanac (1732–1757)
“The Way to Wealth” (1757)
“An Edict by the King of Prussia” (1773)
“Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One” (1773)
“The Ephemera, an Emblem of Human Life” (1778)
“Information to Those Who Would Remove to America” (1782)
“Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America” (1784)
“Speech in the Convention” (1787)
The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1788, 1791)
- Philip Morin Freneau (1752–1832)** 174
“The Power of Fancy” (1770)
“A Political Litany” (1775)
“The House of Night” (1779)
“On the Emigration to America and Peopling the Western Country” (1785)
“The Wild Honey Suckle” (1786)
“The Indian Burying Ground” (1787)
“Part 2: The News” (1790)
“On Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man” (1791)
“To Sir Toby” (1792)
“On the Religion of Nature” (1795)

- “On the Causes of Political Degeneracy” (1798) *the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (1706)
- “On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature” (1815) *Bonifacius: An Essay to Do Good* (1710)
- “On Observing a Large Red-Streak Apple” (1822) *The Christian Philosopher* (1720)
- “To a New England Poet” (1823) *Manductio ad Ministerium* (1726)
- Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806) 189**
- “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries” (1760)
- “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, Who Came from Africa at Eight Years of Age, and Soon Became Acquainted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (1778)
- “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York” (1786)
- Handsome Lake (1735–1815) 199**
- “How America Was Discovered” (1799)
- Washington Irving (1783–1859) 203**
- “Rip Van Winkle” (1819)
- “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820)
- Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) 214**
- Declaration of Independence (1776)
- Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785)
- Letter to Peter Carr (1787)
- Letter to Handsome Lake (1802)
- Letter to Benjamin Hawkins (1803)
- Letter to Nathaniel Burwell (1818)
- Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* (1821)
- Cotton Mather (1663–1728) 235**
- The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693)
- Magnalia Christi Americana* (1698)
- The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work,*
- Thomas Morton (1579–1647) 250**
- New English Canaan* (1637)
- Judith Sargent Murray (1751–1820) 259**
- “Desultory Thoughts upon the Utility of Encouraging a Degree of Self-Complacency, Especially in Female Bosoms” (1784)
- “On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790)
- “Sketch of the Present Situation of America, 1794” (1794)
- The Medium, or Virtue Triumphant* (1795)
- The Traveller Returned* (1796)
- The Story of Margaretta* (1798)
- “Observations on Female Abilities” (1798)
- Samson Occom (1723–1792) 269**
- “A Short Narrative of My Life” (1768)
- “A Sermon Preached by Samson Occom, Minister of the Gospel, and Missionary of the Indians; at the Execution of Moses Paul an Indian” (1772)
- Thomas Paine (1737–1809) 278**
- Common Sense* (1776)
- The American Crisis* (1776–1783)
- The Age of Reason* (1794)
- Mary White Rowlandson (1637–1711) 291**
- The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD, Together with the Faithfulness of His*

- Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)
- Susanna Haswell Rowson (1762–1824) 297**
Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth (1791)
- Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789–1867) 305**
Hope Leslie, or Early Times in the Massachusetts (1827)
 “Cacoethes Scribendi” (1830)
 “A Reminiscence of Federalism” (1834)
- John Smith (1580–1631) 314**
A True Relation of Virginia (1608)
Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles (1623)
The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith (1630)
Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England, or Any Where (1631)
- Edward Taylor (ca. 1642–1729) 330**
God's Determinations Touching His Elect (1680)
 “The Preface” to *God's Determinations Touching His Elect* (1680)
 “The Soul's Groan to Christ for Succor” (1680)
- “Christ's Reply” (1680)
 “The Joy of Church Fellowship Rightly Attended” (1680)
Preparatory Meditations before My Approach to the Lord's Supper (1682–1725)
A Metrical History of Christianity (ca. 1695)
- Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) 348**
 “On the Death of Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, 1770” (1773)
 “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth” (1772)
 “To Maecenas” (1773)
 “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773)
 “To the University of Cambridge in New England” (1773)
 “A Farewell to America” (1773)
 “To the King's Most Excellent Majesty” (1773)
 “Thoughts on the Works of Providence” (1773)
 “To S. M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works” (1773)
 “Letter to Samson Occom” (1774)
 “To His Excellency General Washington” (1775, 1776)
 “Liberty and Peace” (1784)
- John Winthrop (1588–1649) 363**
A Modell of Christian Charity (1630)
The Journal of John Winthrop (1630–1645)

SERIES PREFACE

The *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* is a unique reference intended to help high school students meet standards for literature education and prepare themselves for literature study in college. It offers extensive entries on important authors, as well as providing additional interpretive helps for students and their teachers. The set has been designed and written in the context of the national standards for English language arts, created by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, the two professional organizations that have the most at stake in high school language arts education (see <http://www.ncte.org/standards>).

The volume editors and many of the contributors to this set not only are university scholars but also have experience in secondary school literature education, ranging from working as readers of Advanced Placement examinations, to developing high school literature curricula, to having taught in high school English classrooms. Although the volume editors all have extensive experience as scholars and university professors, they all have strong roots in high school education and have drawn on their experience to ensure that entries are stylistically appealing and contain the necessary content for students.

The set's five volumes are organized chronologically, as many literature textbooks and anthologies are. This system is convenient for students and also facilitates cross-disciplinary study, increasingly common in high schools. For example, a section on the Civil War in history class might be accompanied by the study of Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane in English class. To help students find what they need, each volume contains two lists of all the authors included in the set: one organized chronologically and the other alphabetically.

Within each volume, authors are presented alphabetically. Each author entry contains a biography

and then subentries on the author's major works. After each subentry on a work is a set of questions for discussion and/or writing. Another set of broader discussion questions appears near the end of each author entry, followed by a bibliography. The entire five-volume set therefore contains more than 1000 discussion questions. These questions make up perhaps the most important and useful features of the set, encouraging further creative thought and helping students get started on their own writing. Many of the questions reference not only the subject literary work or author but also related works and authors, thus helping students to make additional literary connections, as emphasized by the literature standards.

The authors and works included in the set were selected primarily from among those most popular in the high school classrooms—that is, those often featured in secondary-school literary anthologies and textbooks; those often appearing on age-appropriate reading lists; and those most often searched for in Facts On File's online literary database Bloom's Literature Online, used primarily in high schools. In addition, we have endeavored to include a range of writers from different backgrounds in all periods, as well as writers who, though not perhaps among the very most popular today, appear to have been unjustly neglected and are gaining in popularity. No selection could be perfect, and those writers favored by scholars and critics are not always as popular in the high school classroom, but the general editor and volumes editors have attempted to make the set's coverage as useful to students as possible.

Above all, we hope that this set serves not only to instruct but also to inspire students with the love of literature shared by all the editors and contributors who worked on this set.

Patricia M. Gantt

VOLUME INTRODUCTION

Early American literature is an exciting and often bewildering amalgamation of voices. The authors commonly taught today in surveys of the period had a variety of backgrounds and had equally varied reasons for writing. Included in this volume are authors identified as explorers, colonists, former slaves, ministers, founding fathers, poets, farmers, and journalists. The explorers wrote in different languages and hailed from different countries, such as France (Samuel de Champlain), Italy (Christopher Columbus), Spain (Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca), and England. What they all had in common is that they explored and wrote about territory that later became part of the United States of America.

Many authors included in this volume write from the perspectives of newly forged identities, whether as colonists arrived in a new land, or converts to a new religious faith, or people freed from slavery or captivity. The most prominent writers among the early colonists were Puritan ministers born in England. One of them, John Winthrop, compared his new home to “a city upon a hill,” thus projecting onto the newfound landscape an image for future generations to emulate. For Winthrop, his new identity was to be a model for later Americans. Other early Puritan writers who immigrated to the new colony, such as William Bradford and Anne Bradstreet, were just as spiritually minded, often seeing the American landscape as a means of gaining paradise on earth. The land’s provisions for its colonists were to them symbolic of God’s divine love for his chosen people.

Some early writers found themselves forced by events into adopting a new identity. A Puritan female voice in the wilderness, Mary White Rowlandson wrote what historians have identified as the first female captivity narrative, a disjointed tale of the time she spent with native peoples. In her tale and in most tales involving prolonged contact with American Indians, Europeans colonists reveal some

difficulty in maintaining the prejudices they previously held about America’s indigenous population. Other captivity narratives addressed in this volume include John Smith’s famous tale and that of the explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, whose time among native peoples resulted in his transformation from conquistador to healer and reformer. Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative provides an example against which to place the other accounts. His insistence that natives are more moral than the conquistadors makes his account of captivity vastly different from the more conventional tales presented by Mary White Rowlandson and John Smith.

One of the greatest poets of early America was Rowlandson’s contemporary, the Puritan minister Edward Taylor, whose work was only published long after his death. Taylor too examined landscape and other elements of nature as encoded messages from God that he needed to meditate on in his own writings. As had his predecessor, the poet Anne Bradstreet, Taylor turned to writing to seek solace for difficult times, such as after the deaths of family members.

The transformation of other people’s identities, as embodied in the conversion of individuals to a particular form of Christianity, was the central aim of many Puritan settlers, particularly Cotton Mather. He writes not only on the subject of the conversion of African slaves, “The Negro Christianized,” but also on the temptations that Puritans themselves faced in the form of witchcraft. Mather’s documentation of the Salem witch trials has provided literary scholars, sociologists, and historians with a wealth of information on how the Puritans conducted their trials, what their beliefs were, and how they justified the deaths of several women and young girls. Another influential minister was Jonathan Edwards, whose famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is an unforgettable expression of the Puritan mentality.

Subsequent writers were not so purely religious in outlook. As the colonists established themselves in the new land, many of their authors chose to tackle the difficult social and political issues of their time, such as the colonists' relations with the English government, the persistence of slavery and domestic servitude, and the cause of democracy and attendant rights for women. The event that galvanized these voices and forged a national identity was of course the Revolutionary War, in which the original thirteen colonies fought for their independence from England. The greatest pamphleteer among the revolutionary writers was Thomas Paine. Through the plain style of his work, Paine introduced ordinary readers to many of the central ideas of the Revolution, such as political and economic independence from England. Paine's writing was purposefully straightforward and did not employ the eloquent, even lyrical language that would appear in the writings of other founders, such as Thomas Jefferson. Rather, Paine's *Common Sense* promoted itself as a direct and reasonable series of arguments for the separation of the colonies from England, then represented by King George. Another writer famous for his revolutionary passion was Philip Morin Freneau, sometimes called the "poet of the American Revolution."

Ben Franklin was another writer immersed in politics, but his achievement was much richer and more varied than Paine's. Using the common language and images that distinguish Paine's rhetoric, Benjamin Franklin took on various personas to launch his critiques not only at the British government, but also at the foolish people in America as well. His *Poor Richard's Almanac* offered contemporary readers entertaining essays on such various topics as government rule, personal economy, and other forms of homespun wisdom. His *Autobiography* likewise painted a public face for a private man, referring to his own attempts to create an elevated image of himself as a learned, moral, and sophisticated gentleman and providing readers with a guideline to self-improvement.

The ideas of the American Revolution are seen most clearly in the actual document that launched

the war: the Declaration of Independence. Here, Thomas Jefferson articulated the central beliefs that the former colonists were willing to shed blood for: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is telling that the Declaration of Independence appears as a piece of literature in American literature courses and as a central document examined in American history courses as well. As literature, the Declaration, as well as the changes made in it by Jefferson's peers, provides readers with insight into the common interests held by members of the original thirteen colonies as well as their disputes, especially over the issue of slavery. Jefferson's document reflects the loftiest, most sublime views of democracy on paper, and the enthusiasm that this founder had for America is also reflected in his more personal, yet equally public document, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

The personal ramifications or potential effects of the American Revolution may be explored in a variety of texts addressed in this volume. One notable example is the lively and intimate correspondence of Abigail and John Adams, in particular the letter in which Abigail uses humor earnestly to request the inclusion of women in the discussions about rights. Another important example is the poetry of the emancipated slave Phillis Wheatley. Many of her poems not only examine figures from the Revolution, such as her panegyric for George Washington, but also revel in its spirit of freedom and of inalienable rights, hinting gently and indirectly at the limitations of revolutionary ideals as applied to the enslaved.

Other authors who provide insight into the institution of slavery include Olaudah Equiano, whose first-person account of early childhood in Africa and of the middle passage to America marks the first such description to appear in print from the perspective of a former slave. His narrative should be considered alongside other major early American life writings, such as those of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, as well as the work of other figures living at the margins of American life, such as Samson Occom, Jupiter Hammon, and Phillis Wheatley.

In his own autobiographical work, entitled *A Short Narrative of My Life*, Samson Occom reveals the difficulties facing a converted Mohegan who is no longer fully culturally associated with his own tribe, but is also not completely acknowledged or embraced by white Christians. Similarly, Jupiter Hammon, a minister and poet, reveals the difficult position of converted Africans who were not fully embraced with the attendant rights and privileges as fellow European Christians. Hammon spoke directly to fellow slaves, most famously in his 1786 "Address to the Negroes of the State of New York," urging them to seek solace for their enslaved conditions by looking to the life to come and reading key passages in the Bible.

The "woman question" was a central topic for many important writers of the new nation. Just as the private letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams touch upon the possibility of suffrage for women, the public articles of Judith Sargent Murray in *The Gleaner* consider many of the popular beliefs and arguments employed to deny women the right to full citizenship. Hannah Webster Foster's *Charlotte Temple* cautions women against the seductive powers they might succumb to if they travel away from home and find themselves without the sage advice of female friends or their mothers. On the surface, the novel might seem to work assiduously against the movement for women's rights, and yet its insistence on the power of women's knowledge and experience works to justify different types of intelligence other than that acquired through schooling. The subject of women's education is taken up in Foster's other novel, *The Boarding School*.

American literature started to come into its own in the early 19th century. The natural world, not only the natural resources of America, but the beauty, splendor, and distinctive quality of American landscapes, became the central subject matter for the poets William Cullen Bryant and the novelist James Fenimore Cooper, whose *Leatherstocking* (*Leather-Stocking*) Tales were the first great successes in the American novel. Of course, nature had already been an important influence on American writers. Philip Morin Freneau's nature poems are usually regarded as more successful than his political ones. Even Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, elevates his prose beyond a simple recitation of facts to wax poetic about the profound beauty he found in the American landscape.

To other writers, the landscape was also a source of anxiety and fear. Through the psychologically probing prose of Charles Brockden Brown, predecessor to later figures such as Edgar Allen Poe, whose works Brown was first to publish, readers can penetrate the minds of mentally disturbed and distressed figures. Brown transplanted the gothic novel to an American landscape. Similarly, Washington Irving situates his famous tales "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" in a dangerous American landscape that acts almost as its own character in the stories, hiding threats to the pusillanimous teacher Ichabod Crane and cradling the drowsy Rip Van Winkle.

Early American literature not only laid the foundation for the great American writers of the future, but also provides a strange and often powerful pleasure to lovers of literature today.



JOHN ADAMS (1735–1826) AND ABIGAIL ADAMS (1744–1818)

You will see, in a few days, a Declaration setting forth the causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution, and the reasons which will justify it in the sight of God and man.

(John Adams in a July 3, 1776, letter to Abigail Adams)

I will never consent to have our sex considered in an inferior point of light. Let each planet shine in their own orbit. God and nature designed it so—if man is Lord, woman is *Lordess*—that is what I contend for.

(Abigail Adams in a July 19, 1799, letter to Elizabeth Smith Shaw Peabody)

JOHN ADAMS'S EARLY LIFE

John Adams, best known as the second president of the United States, was born on October 30, 1735. Yet Adams left behind an extensive diary and autobiography, as well as numerous essays, letters, and political documents.

Born and raised in the North Precinct of Braintree, Massachusetts (incorporated as the town of Quincy on February 22, 1792), Adams was a fourth-generation New Englander and the descendant of Puritans. Adams's great-great-grandfather, Henry Adams (ca. 1583–1646), arrived in the late 1630s and settled near Mount Wallaston, in Braintree, near Boston. He lived with his wife, Edith, and eight sons and one daughter.

Henry's son Joseph, born in 1626, married Abigail Baxter. Joseph Jr. (1654–1737), one of Joseph and Abigail's 12 children, married Hannah Bass, who was a great-granddaughter of John and Priscilla Alden “of the Plymouth landing and *Mayflower* epic” (Diggins 17). In turn, John and Priscilla had a son named John—this was President John Adams's father. John married Susanna Boylston, who was from a well-known Massachusetts medical family, and they had three sons—

the eldest of whom was John Adams, the future president.

The elder John was a deacon, a farmer, and a shoemaker who, as had his predecessors, lived in Braintree, Massachusetts, and who wanted a college education for his son with the hope that he would enter the ministry. The younger John enjoyed outdoor activity far more than intellectual work. When he told his father that he would rather not pursue that path, his father assigned him the task of digging a ditch on their property. After two days of backbreaking work, the younger John decided that studying Latin grammar might be a good idea after all (Diggins 18).

In 1751 Adams entered Harvard College when he was 15 years old. He studied Greek and Latin, logic, rhetoric, physics, and, in his senior year, moral philosophy and metaphysics (Diggins 18). When he graduated in 1755, he accepted a teaching position at a grammar school in Worcester. Teaching during the colonial period was a particularly poorly paid profession so he began to look at other options.

Soon Adams began to study law in the offices of James Putnam in Worcester, Massachusetts, in August 1756. On November 6, 1758, he was

admitted to the Suffolk County Bar. In 1762 the young lawyer was admitted as a barrister before the Superior Court of Judicature.

Adams's first published pieces appeared during summer 1763, when the *Boston Evening Post* and the *Boston Gazette* printed articles signed by "Humphrey Ploughjogger" and "U."

ABIGAIL SMITH ADAMS'S EARLY LIFE

Abigail Smith Adams was born in Weymouth, Massachusetts, on November, 11, 1744 (November 22 by the Gregorian calendar). Though perhaps best known as the wife of John Adams and the first first lady to live in the White House, she was an avid letter writer, who maintained correspondence with many people during the revolutionary and early republic periods. People with whom she corresponded include her husband during his lengthy absences; Mercy Otis Warren, a political satirist, dramatist, and poet; and James Lovell, a Massachusetts delegate to the Continental Congress.

Abigail's parents were William Smith (1706–83), a Congregationalist minister, and Elizabeth Quincy (1721–75). Her father was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts (January 29, 1706), and died in Weymouth, Massachusetts (September 1783). William, Abigail's father, was an ordained minister of the North Parish Congregational Church of Weymouth. He was "descended from a prosperous family of merchants with branches in South Carolina and the West Indies," yet "his parents pointed him toward Harvard College and the ministry" (Akers 2).

Abigail's mother, Elizabeth (born in Braintree, MA; died in Weymouth), was a member of the prominent Quincy family. Elizabeth was the daughter of John Quincy, a member of the colonial governor's council, a colonel of the militia, and a speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly. John Quincy held the latter post for 40 years, until his death at age 77. He died in 1767 just three years after his granddaughter, Abigail, married John Adams.

William Smith and Elizabeth Quincy married in 1740. They had four children: Mary Smith Cranch (1741–1811), Abigail Smith Adams (1744–1818), William Smith (1746–87), and Elizabeth Smith

Shaw Peabody (1750–1815). And "Parson Smith joyfully baptized each babe the first Sabbath of its life and dutifully recorded the act in his parish records" (Akers 3).

As someone who had no access to formal education, Abigail advocated an education for girls in the public schools that was equal to the education boys received. Abigail herself was educated at home. She learned to read and write and had access to the personal libraries of her father and maternal grandfather. She showed interest in philosophy, theology, Shakespeare, the classics, ancient history, government, and law. Richard Cranch, her sister Mary's suitor and, later, husband, tutored Abigail in French and "challeng[ed] her mind with the fine points of English literature" (Crane 745–765). By the time Abigail was in her thirties, "her intellectual social climbing" gave her access to Homer, Plutarch, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jonathan Swift, Montaigne, John Locke, Pope, and Molière among others (Crane 746).

JOHN AND ABIGAIL ADAMS

On October 25, 1764, 29-year-old John Adams and 20-year-old Abigail Smith married in Weymouth. They had three sons and two daughters: Abigail "Nabby" Amelia Adams Smith (1765–1813), John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), Susanna Adams (1768–70), Charles Adams (1770–1800), and Thomas Boylston Adams (1772–1832). The arrival of the Adamses' firstborn in 1765 coincided closely with John's entrance into public political discourse. The pattern inextricably linking family and politics continued throughout their lives—even extending into subsequent generations.

Adams entered into public politics as a response to the Stamp Act of 1765. This act meant that for the first time in history colonists had been taxed directly, and when news of this legislation reached Boston, people "exploded in anger. Tax collectors were tarred and feathered, stamp seals seized and burned, effigies hung and bonfires lit, and the house of Peter Oliver, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson's brother-in-law, was stormed and smashed into shambles; soon after, Hutchinson's own luxurious house full of paintings, silver,

china, and rare books was gutted” (Diggins 24). Adams, shocked by the violence and mob rule, “wondered whether liberty could survive the passions of a mob riot” (Diggins 25).

Adams wrote *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, which was published in the *Boston Gazette* during the months of August through October 1765. The essays, originally published anonymously, later appeared in London, and in this work he “was attempting to explain the meaning of America to America and to the world” (Diggins 25). According to John Patrick Diggins, “The Dissertation signaled Adams’s most radical moment when he seemed to be questioning authority in the name of liberty and obedience in the name of resistance” (25).

On the night of March 5, 1770, in Boston shots rang out. British soldiers had killed two townspeople and mortally wounded three others. Among those killed was Crispus Attucks, the first person of African descent to be killed “in the cause of American freedom” (Diggins 26). As a consequence of the Boston Massacre, as the event came to be known (so dubbed by Sam Adams, John’s cousin), an arrest warrant was issued for Captain Thomas Preston on March 6. Preston, a 40-year-old Irishman and the officer in charge of the troops involved in the shooting, was arrested in the middle of the night, and eight soldiers under his command were arrested hours later. John Adams successfully defended the British soldiers and was elected the Boston representative to the General Court; it “was a mark of Adams’s legal attainments that he instantly assumed the role of senior counselor on the weightiest legal and constitutional issues” (Grant 89).

In 1774, when Adams was elected a Massachusetts delegate to the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia, the period of long separations between John and Abigail began. It was during these periods of separation that most of the letters between the couple were written. The *Boston Gazette* published his “Novanglus” essays in January–April 1775. For much of the remainder of that year (May–July, September–December), he attended the second Continental Congress. He proposed George Washington

as commander in chief on June 15. Two days later his wife, Abigail, and his eldest son, John Quincy Adams (approximately one month shy of his eighth birthday), witnessed the battle of Bunker Hill from Penn’s Hill in Braintree. Then in July, John Adams was elected to the Massachusetts Council, a position he held until April 1776. On October 28, 1775, Adams was appointed chief justice of Massachusetts, but he never served in the position and resigned on February 10, 1777.

His absence from home for most of 1775 continued the following year, 1776. He attended the Continental Congress from February to October. He wrote his “Thoughts on Government” in March and April. Abigail, who was quite familiar with her husband’s political work and philosophy, wrote the famous “Remember the Ladies” letter on March 31; in it she suggested that women should be recognized by the new government.

Adams served on the committee to draft a declaration of independence and gave the principal speech in favor of the resolution for independence. The resolution was approved on July 2. The text was debated and the document was adopted on July 4. Afterward, he drafted the “Plan of Treaties,” which was to be a blueprint for the new country’s foreign policy.

From January to November 1777, Adams attended the Continental Congress. He was away from home when Abigail gave birth to a still-born daughter, Elizabeth, on July 11. Congress elected Adams, along with BENJAMIN FRANKLIN and Arthur Lee, to a joint commission to France. Adams departed for France in February 1778, taking his young son John Quincy Adams, who was merely 10 years old. They sailed on board the frigate *Boston* and arrived in Paris on April 8; there they took up residence with Benjamin Franklin. On May 8, John had his first audience with Louis XVI.

While John and his eldest son were in France, Abigail had “discovered an opportunity to develop her entrepreneurial skills; she became a merchant” (Gelles 509). Abigail began by selling goods that John had sent from France to help supply their domestic needs. Soon Abigail began to request

specific items: "Such were the beginnings of a business that was to become a more complex and important source of income in the next six years. As it became apparent that John could provide European goods to his wife without too much trouble, the amount and variety of goods escalated" (Gelles 510). Thus, Abigail provided a means, in effect, to subsidize her husband's political career.

On February 11, 1779, John learned that the joint commission was superseded by Benjamin Franklin's appointment as minister to France. John and John Quincy Adams sailed from Lorient to Boston on board the French frigate *Le Sensible*. Abigail wanted their son to travel with John because "his going out into the world was the best way to improve his understanding and sense of responsibility" (Diggins 30). Furthermore, she chose to stay behind because the trip itself was a dangerous two-month ordeal, plus her husband, as a prominent rebel, could be tried for high treason and locked up in the Tower of London to await hanging if the ship were captured. Their children, Abigail felt, should have at least one parent if the worst were to happen.

Shortly after his return to Massachusetts in August, he proposed founding the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which was incorporated in 1780. During September and October he drafted the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which was adopted on October 25, 1780. John Adams composed "A Translation of the Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe . . . into Common Sense and Intelligible English" between April 19, 1780, and July 14, 1780. It was published in Amsterdam in November and in London in January 1781.

On June 29, 1780, Congress commissioned John Adams to raise a loan in the Netherlands. John, John Quincy, and Charles Adams traveled from Paris to Amsterdam. While in Amsterdam, John Adams wrote his "Letters from a Distinguished American" in July 1780; they were published in London in 1782. In 1780 John spent much of his time traveling between the Netherlands and France negotiating treaties. Between July 27 and August 10, John and his sons John Quincy and Charles traveled from Paris to Amsterdam. On December

29 John was commissioned by Congress to conclude a commercial treaty with the Netherlands.

On May 2, 1781, John presented a memorial to the States General of the United Provinces calling on it to recognize and conclude a commercial treaty with the United States and then published the memorial as a pamphlet in English, French, and Dutch. Then on June 15, 1781, Congress revoked John Adams's commissions to negotiate Anglo-American peace and commercial treaties in favor of creating a joint commission of Adams, Franklin, John Jay, Henry Laurens, and THOMAS JEFFERSON to negotiate a peace treaty. Despite this personnel switch in negotiating for an Anglo-American treaty, Adams returned to Paris to discuss the proposed Austro-Russian mediation of the war and opposed American participation without prior recognition by Austria and Russia of American independence.

Adams fell seriously ill in Amsterdam with a fever. His son Charles left the Netherlands for America on board the *South Carolina*. And John's "A Translation of the Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe . . . into Common Sense and Intelligible English" was published. Shortly after the State General of the Netherlands recognized American independence on April 19, 1782, Adams presented his letter of credence as minister plenipotentiary from the United States to William V, stadholder of the Netherlands. On April 22 he took up residence in the Hôtel des Etats-Unis at The Hague, the first American legation building in Europe. After successfully negotiating treaties with the Netherlands, including trade treaties and a loan of 5 million guilders with a syndicate of Amsterdam bankers, he traveled to France. Once in Paris, he, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay signed the preliminary peace treaty between the Americans and Great Britain.

John Adams stayed in Europe during 1783 and 1784. He traveled among Paris, The Hague, and Amsterdam negotiating treaties. On September 3, 1783, he signed the definitive peace treaty with Great Britain. He suffered another serious fever during September and October 1783. Once recovered, he spent the remainder of the year traveling with John Quincy Adams to England, where they visited London, Oxford, and Bath.

On June 20, 1784, after an extended absence from her husband, Abigail sailed from Boston for England with her daughter Nabby. They arrived in London on July 21 and were reunited with both John Adams and John Quincy Adams by the end of the month. From August 1784 to May 1785, the Adamses resided at Auteuil, near Paris. Then, after John Adams was named the first American minister to Great Britain, the family moved from Paris to a house in Grosvenor Square in London. In June 1785 John Adams, Abigail, and Nabby were presented to King George and Queen Charlotte.

In 1786 Thomas Jefferson visited John Adams in London to negotiate commercial treaties with Tripoli, Portugal, and Great Britain. While he was there, Jefferson and Adams toured English gardens. Later in the year, John and Abigail visited the Netherlands to exchange ratifications of the treaty with Prussia. In September John began his three-volume *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*. The following year, in July and August, the Adamses took care of Mary “Polly” Jefferson, Jefferson’s nine-year-old daughter, and her traveling companion, Jefferson’s slave Sally Hemings. Abigail grew quite fond of Polly. Years later, it would be the occasion of Polly’s untimely death at the age of 25 that compelled Abigail to contact Jefferson after years of separation.

Adams petitioned Congress to allow him to return home in 1787. After a farewell audience with George III in early 1788, John and Abigail returned to Massachusetts and moved into their new home. The next year began a new chapter in John’s political life when he was elected the first vice president of the United States. He took the oath of office on April 21, 1789, in New York. His written work continued after he began the serial “Discourses on Davila.” The title was taken from Enrico Caterino Davila, the 17th-century author of *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia*, “an eighteen-hundred-page chronicle of the French civil wars of the late sixteenth century” (Grant 364).

In 1790 John and Abigail moved to the new U.S. capital, Philadelphia. Then in May 1791, John was elected president of the Academy of Arts and Sciences, a role in which he served until 1813. His

political career continued when he was reelected vice president in February 1793, and then, in 1796, narrowly defeated Jefferson in the presidential election.

Shortly after Adams was sworn in, a diplomatic crisis between the United States and France arose. The new French government, a five-headed executive committee called the Directory, “had refused to accept the credentials of America’s minister to France, Charles Pinckney, and ordered him expelled from the country” (Diggins 96). The Jay Treaty, which “had America siding with England and breaking the alliance it had with France during the Revolution” had upset the French government. Adams sent an envoy to France, and French officials, dubbed X, Y, and Z, solicited bribes. President Adams declared a state of quasi-war with France and published the XYZ papers to document French attempts to bribe American diplomats. French ships attempted to confiscate goods traveling between the United States and Great Britain. Adams then proposed, and Congress approved, the creation of the Department of the Navy.

In July President Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts, laws that were designed to curtail foreign influence and criticism of the government. The acts became a serious point of contention in the presidential race between Jefferson and Adams, an election in which Jefferson prevailed.

In September 1800 Alexander Hamilton attacked the Adams administration with the publication of his *Letter from Alexander Hamilton, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq. President of the United States*, a letter highly critical of the president, which Adams would address two years later when he began writing his autobiography. Then in October 1800, American diplomats concluded the Convention of Mortefontaine with France, ending the quasi-war, and the Franco-American alliance of 1778. In November Adams became the first president to live in the White House. On December 1, 1800, John and Abigail’s son Charles Adams died in New York City. Later that same month, Jefferson defeated Adams in the presidential election. On the eve of Jefferson’s inauguration on March 4, 1801, Adams

packed up his belongings and retired to his farm in Quincy.

The retired president began writing his autobiography in 1802, a project that continued until 1807. Upon hearing of the death of Jefferson's daughter, Polly, Abigail wrote a letter of condolence to John's former political rival. In 1807 John wrote 10 letters to Mercy Otis Warren to protest her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. His literary efforts continued into 1809, when he began a series of letters to the *Boston Patriot*. Adams resumed his correspondence with Jefferson in January 1812, and their exchange provided insight into the philosophical beliefs of two former revolutionaries.

Abigail Adams, who managed to avoid various outbreaks of smallpox during the revolutionary period, succumbed to typhoid fever on October 28, 1818. Adams died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, just hours after his old friend and rival Jefferson.

Correspondence of John and Abigail Adams

Both John Adams and Abigail Smith Adams corresponded with multiple people, including each other, for much of their lives. Letter writing was an important medium for communication during the 18th century—particularly for people like John and Abigail Adams, who were separated by war, political duty, and family duty for months or years at a time. Indeed, just reading the letters between John and Abigail gives a sense of the trials and tribulations that led up to, occurred during, and remained after the American Revolution. Their exchange also provides contemporary readers with rare insight into the relationship between an extraordinary man and woman in the late 18th century.

Their grandson, Charles Francis Adams, first published a collection of his grandmother Abigail's letters in 1840. By the end of the decade, four more editions of that collection appeared. Their grandson then edited and published between 1851 and 1856 a 10-volume collection of the writings of John

Adams that continues to be an authoritative source for material not yet reedited in the ongoing Adams Papers project (Shuffelton vii). In 1876 Charles Francis Adams published a single volume of letters written by John and Abigail, for "as Charles Francis Adams saw it, the American Revolution had typically been portrayed in terms of the great men like Patrick Henry, James Otis, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Samuel Adams who were thought to have made it." What Charles thought was missing from these early histories were accounts that "recognize the 'moral principle' behind the Revolution" (Shuffelton vii). Such a history would include the work of his grandfather and suggests that other Adamses, aside from John Adams as discussed in his own autobiography, also believed that the second president's political contribution to the revolutionary effort was misunderstood.

The most famous exchange, or certainly the most widely anthologized, between the two begins with a March 31, 1776, letter from Abigail to John:

I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation. (Adams, *Letters* 148)

John, in turn, responds in a April 14 letter:

As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another

tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented. . . . Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. (Adams, *Letters* 154)

Because of Abigail's famous call to "remember the ladies," there is much debate over the level of seriousness with which her comments should be taken and whether or not such statements constitute some type of feminist consciousness.

In "Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail's Discontent" Elaine Forman Crane suggests that "Abigail expropriated republican ideology and gave it a gendered twist that was both subtle and nuanced. She connected political philosophy to women's rights, but did so deviously—and in the grand tradition of eighteenth-century European literature" (745). In other words, Abigail uses language from the revolutionary effort and applies it to the situation of women.

Abigail frequently discusses politics with her husband, so the political aspect of that letter in itself is not unusual. In fact, she passes on local news pertinent to the Revolution whether it is her report on witnessing the battle of Bunker Hill (1775) from Penn's Hill in Braintree or local sentiment regarding revolutionary activities. Along with discussions of politics and political philosophy, Abigail and John correspond on more mundane matters, some of which provide a glimpse into the everyday lives of regular citizens—including the consequences of inflation during revolutionary times, labor shortages, and outbreaks of smallpox.

Both Abigail and John exchanged letters with other people as well. Both corresponded with Thomas Jefferson and Mercy Otis Warren. In fact, after the infamous break between Jefferson and John Adams, Abigail was the first to broach that divide. On May 20, 1804, Abigail wrote to Jefferson after learning that his daughter, Mary "Polly" Jefferson Eppes, had died on April 17, 1804. The former first lady knew Polly from their days in London, when Jefferson's daughter, then nine years old, felt lonely. Thus, when news of Polly's death reached Quincy, Abigail reacts with genuine sorrow. After Abigail's letter of condolences, Jefferson

and Abigail exchanged several letters in which they began to clear the air regarding past political disagreements (Levin 412–413). Abigail, however, cut off the correspondence on October 25, 1804, because she did not want to enter "a correspondence on 'political topicks' when she had written him" (Levin 418).

Jefferson, however, held on to the letters and forwarded copies of his correspondence with Abigail to Dr. Benjamin Rush on January 16, 1811 (Levin 419). Rush, in turn, sought to reconcile Jefferson and Adams and succeeded when the latter wrote a letter to Jefferson on January 1, 1812 (Digging 153–155; Grant 440–442), and the two men corresponded for much of the remainder of their lives, discussing a variety of subjects including philosophy, politics, religion, and their own experiences of aging. These letters provide insight into two minds behind the Declaration of Independence.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Abigail and John Adams wrote about a variety of subjects including improving the political status of women. Using Abigail's letter of March 31, 1776, to her husband as a launching point, locate and discuss the views that each expresses.
2. Critics have viewed the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams as documents that provide an intimate portrait of 18th-century domestic life. How do they express the roles they occupy as husband and wife?
3. Compare Abigail's letters with John with ANNE BRADSTREET's poems written to her husband. How do they imagine themselves as wives? How do they view their husbands?

Autobiography of John Adams (1807)

The autobiography is divided into three parts, called "Part One: To October 1776"; "Part Two: Travels and Negotiations, 1777–1778"; and "Part Three: Peace, 1779–1780." Adams himself created these divisions and Adams himself explained the purpose in writing his own story at the outset of his project. Including the first paragraph of this

work in its entirety allows Adams's purpose and style in this work to become clear:

As the Lives of Phylosophers, Statesmen or Historians written by them selves have generally been suspected of Vanity, and therefore few People have been able to read them without disgust; there is no reason to expect that any Sketches I may leave of my own Times would be received by the Public with any favour, or read by individuals with much interest. The many great Examples of this practice will not be alledged as a justification, because they were Men of extraordinary Fame, to which I have no pretensions. My Excuse is, that having been the Object of much Misrepresentation, some of my Posterity may probably wish to see in my own hand Writing a proof of the falsehood of that Mass of odious Abuse of my Character, with which News Papers, private Letters and public Pamphlets and Histories have been disgraced for thirty Years. It is not for the Public but for my Children that I commit these Memoirs to writing: and to them and their Posterity I recommend, not the public Course, which the times and the Country in which I was born and the Circumstances which surrounded me compelled me to pursue: but those Moral Sentiments and Sacred Principles, which at all hazards and by every Sacrifice I have endeavoured to preserve through Life. (253–254)

In short, he feels misrepresented and wants to clarify his life and actions to his children. Perhaps *because* he does not intend his work to be read by the public, the autobiography develops as a particular aspect of his life comes to mind. He works by association rather than chronology, and later on in the work he begins to pull entries from his diaries and inserts them into the autobiography.

John Adams began writing his autobiography on October 5, 1802. He had lost his bid for a second term as president to Thomas Jefferson in 1800. Famously, he packed up his family and left Washington on the eve of Jefferson's inauguration in 1801 to retire to private life in Quincy, Massachu-

setts. Adams felt that he had been misunderstood and misrepresented. Indeed, while Adams was seeking reelection in 1800, Alexander Hamilton attacked the Adams administration in his "Letter Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq." Adams chose to present his side of the story in an autobiography.

Within the pages of the first section of his autobiography, Adams was intently self-scrutinizing. He chastised himself for acting in a false or selfish manner and examined his own actions, words, and motivations in a merciless manner. In the past, critics and historians have attributed this almost obsessive level of self-scrutiny to his Puritanism. His biographer John T. Morse views Adams as "an admirable specimen of the New England Puritan of his generation, not excessively straitlaced in matters of doctrine, but religious by habit and by instinct, rigid in every point of morals, conscientious, upright, pure-minded, industrious" (6). Similarly, the biographer Page Smith would echo Morse's conception of Adams as a traditional Puritan: "Protestant Christianity, Calvinist in its temper, if increasingly relaxed in its dogma, dominated [Braintree's] life, shaped it, directed it, made it in its own view at least, an important arena in the universal drama of salvation. To spend one's boyhood in such a community meant to bear its imprint for life on the conscious and subconscious levels of one's existence" (5). For these biographers, then, Adam's autobiography and its attentiveness to self-correction and introspection are in accordance with Puritan doctrine and the general atmosphere of his childhood home, which Adams could not but breathe in and be influenced by. Recent critics, however, have examined the autobiography's indebtedness to the indomitable figure of Cicero.

Adams's affection for and admiration of Cicero were rich and deserve attention as a means of understanding his influence on Adams and his self-portrait in the autobiography. As did Cicero, Adams believed himself to be misunderstood and unappreciated. In a poignant and candid letter to his friend Benjamin Rush, Adams wrote, "Mausoleums, statues, monuments will never be erected to me. Panegyrical romances will never be written, nor flattering ora-

tions spoken, to transmit me to posterity in brilliant colors” (reported in Farrell 505). This mourning for a lack of public recognition and celebration was a deep emotional connection Adams felt with Cicero, who was convinced “all Rome was admiring the wisdom, activity, integrity, and benevolence of his administration” when in fact he had been forgotten. Similarly, when Adams returned to America after years spent abroad in diplomatic service, he “returned [to] one third of my best friends dead—another third superannuated, and the remaining third grown unpopular” (reported in Farrell 506). Further connection with Cicero included their mutual belief in the power of language and the influential role of the statesman-orator.

Adams’s attempts to fashion himself as the likes of Cicero is readily apparent in his autobiography, in which he opens with his own career as an orator. Early in his autobiography, he frames his rhetorical skills in public speaking as a key characteristic and a strength recognized widely by his peers and those in positions above him. He makes much of a speech he gave in town, a speech according to the historian James Farrell that is “insignificant” “by conventional historical standards,” yet rises to assume “great importance as [Adams’s] first public act, which set the pattern for the narration of later rhetorical events” (513). Not surprisingly, Adams inserts himself into a more distinguished position in national history by highlighting his July 1776 speech as the pinnacle of his *Autobiography* and an essential moment in national history. Farrell characterizes “Adams’s speech for independence—his showcase, his master stroke, his tour de force—[as] the last great oratorical moment related in the first section of his *Autobiography*” (520). Read in this light, Adams’s use of sections from his diary, letters, and paraphrases of his speeches in the following two sections is explained as secondary to this pivotal moment, his independence speech. Critics have cited the odd mixture of narrative, diary entries, excerpts from letters, and paraphrases in Adams’s *Autobiography* as a central reason for the absence of substantial critical accounts of it. The critic Bernard Bailyn believes “the *Autobiography* hardly exists as an integral document at all” (242).

It is on the basis of his oratorical skills that Adams pits himself against figures whose position in the public limelight cast him into the shadows of obscurity. Such figures with whom Adams contended in his *Autobiography* for glory and fame include THOMAS PAINE, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. On the subject of Franklin, Adams writes condescendingly of his use of the spoken word, “He has the most affectionate and insinuating way of charming the woman or the man that he fixes on. It is the most silly and ridiculous way imaginable, in the sight of an American, but it succeeds, to admiration, fulsome and sickish as it is in Europe” (2:121).

Adams dismisses the centrality of Paine’s *Common Sense*, stating, “It has been a general opinion that this pamphlet was of great importance in the Revolution. I doubted it at the time and have doubted it to this day” (3:335). Adams writes further that this “star of disaster [only] gleaned from those he saw the common place arguments concerning independence” (3:330). Adams continues, “[Paine] came from England, and got into such company as would converse with him, and ran about picking up what Information he could, concerning our Affairs, and finding the great Question was concerning Independence. . . . Dr. [Benjamin] Rush put him upon Writing on the Subject, furnished him with the Arguments which had been urged in Congress an hundred times, and gave him his title of common Sense” (Adams, *Diary* 3:330). Though Adams admits that “the Arguments in favour of Independence I liked very well,” he is less impressed with “his Arguments from the old Testament,” calling them either “honest Ignorance, or foolish Supersti[ti]on . . . or from willfull Sophistry and knavish Hypocrisy on the other” (Adams, *Diary* 3:330–331). And, as Farrell states, “Rather than being a hero of the Revolution, Paine, as Adams portrayed him, is little more than a hack writer who lacked, ‘Veracity, Integrity or any other Virtue’” (Farrell 517).

As for Thomas Jefferson, Adams treats him a bit more kindly than Paine. While admitting to Jefferson’s skills with a pen, he nonetheless takes him to task for having never spoken in public. Adams

believes Jefferson “could stand no competition” from orators in Congress with regard to “elocution and public debate” (reported in Farrell 517). Adams concludes his written battles with these figures of the Revolution by including the venerable father of the nation, George Washington, in the following statement: “The examples of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson are enough to show that silence and reserve in public are more efficacious than argumentation or oratory” (3:336).

Adams attributes his own rhetorical prowess, most particularly his ability to speak extemporaneously, to the absence of his mark on national history. As he opines in his autobiography, “I never wrote a speech beforehand, either at the bar or in any public assembly, nor committed one to writing after it was delivered” (3:310). In other words, because Adams spoke in the moment and never committed his speeches to paper, posterity is deprived of an accurate portrait of his skills and thus of his rightful position in the history of the republic.

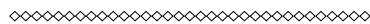
L. H. Butterfield, editor of the *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, writes that John Adams “was jolted by an earthquake into starting a diary. With this record of a young schoolmaster’s daily thoughts and experiences, the family records may be said truly to begin. . . . The habit of making and keeping written records became as persistent a trait among the Adamses as the distinctive conformation of their skulls” (xiii). This legacy in writing that Adams began with his diary and continued with his autobiography, as well as more public documents and writings, continued in the following generations.

James M. Farrell makes compelling arguments regarding John Adams’s desire to be remembered, particularly as an orator, in “John Adams’s *Autobiography*: The Ciceronian Paradigm and the Quest for Fame”: “Even in the first histories of the Revolution and commentaries on his administration, Adams saw evidence that his part in the American historical drama would be misrepresented, his motives misunderstood, his character mistreated, and his historical image misshaped” (505). Indeed, much of the earlier portions of his autobiography are used to correct “what he saw as inaccurate and

often intentionally distorting accounts of his own participation in the American experiment. . . . At the same time, he created a self-portrait that could validate his claim to the title of America’s patriot-orator” (Farrell 510).

For Discussion or Writing

1. John Adams is particularly interested in leaving a legacy in writing while wanting to be remembered as an orator. Consider the relationship between oral and written communication in Adams’s time. How does that differ from the relationship between oral and written communication in our own time?
2. Locate and examine passages in which John Adams draws from classical sources in his autobiography and diaries. What role does allusion have in his work?
3. John Adams writes about Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* in his autobiography, his diary, and letters to his wife, Abigail. Examine these passages. Does his view of *Common Sense* change over time?
4. How does Adams characterize Jefferson’s political opposition to him in his autobiography? In his diary?



FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ADAMS AND ADAMS AND THEIR WORK

1. In his correspondence, diary, and autobiography, John Adams laments that he will not occupy a more prominent position in national history. Compare the hopes and aspirations Adams held for the republic with those of Franklin and Jefferson. Are they the same? Do the men see their roles in the nation differently? If so, how? If not, what might account for Adams’s relative obscurity?
2. Abigail Adams is most famously known for a phrase in her letter to her husband in which she pleads that he “remember the ladies” in drafting the Constitution. Compare the remarks Abigail Adams makes in favor of the

rights of women with those of more outspoken figures such as JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY. Are their arguments similar? What is their basis for suffrage?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Adams, John. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. Edited by L. H. Butterfield. 4 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1961.
- , and Abigail Smith Adams. *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*. Edited by Frank Shuffelton. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Akers, Charles W. *Abigail Adams: A Revolutionary American Woman*. 3d ed. New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007.
- Bailyn, Bernard. "Butterfield's Adams: Notes for a Sketch." *William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (1962): 238–256.
- Butterfield, L. H. "Introduction." In *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. Edited by L. H. Butterfield. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Crane, Elaine Forman. "Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail's Discontent." *William and Mary Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October 1999): 745–774.
- Diggins, John Patrick. *John Adams*. New York: Holt-Time, 2003.
- Farrell, James M. "John Adams's *Autobiography*: The Ciceronian Paradigm and the Quest for Fame." *New England Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (December 1989): 505–528.
- . "'Syren Tully' and the Young John Adams." *Classical Journal* 87 no. 4 (May 1992): 373–390.
- Gelles, Edith. *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992.
- Grant, James. *John Adams: Party of One*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005.
- Levin, Phyllis Lee. *Abigail Adams: A Biography*. 1989. Reprint, New York: Thomas Dunne Books—St. Martin's Press, 2001.
- Massachusetts Historical Society. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.
- McGlone, Robert E. "Deciphering Memory: John Adams and the Authorship of the Declaration of Independence." *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998): 411–438.
- Morse, John T., Jr. *John Quincy Adams*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1880.
- Shuffelton, Frank. "Introduction." In *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams*. Edited by Frank Shuffelton. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Smith, Page. *John Adams*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1969.
- Thompson, C. Bradley. "Young John Adams and the New Philosophic Rationalism." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 55, no. 2 (April 1998): 259–280.
- Trees, Andy. "John Adams and the Problem of Virtue." *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 393–412.



WILLIAM BRADFORD (1590–1657)

What could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not.

(*Of Plymouth Plantation*)

William Bradford was born in 1590 in Austerfield, Yorkshire, as the only son of William Bradford and Alice Hanson and was baptized on March 19 of the same year. His father, who was a yeoman farmer, died when William was but a year old. His mother, who was the daughter of a village shopkeeper, remarried, and care for the young William fell to his grandfather and uncles. When he reached the age of 12, William joined a group of Separatists led by William Brewster, who would later be a founding member of the Plymouth Colony. William expressed an earnest desire to read the Bible, and in his writings, such as *Of Plymouth Plantation*, he would often quote from the Geneva version. As Brewster was in the nearby village of Scrooby, the young Bradford soon moved there. His involvement in the Separatist Church, later called the Congregational Church, would continue throughout his lifetime and would deeply influence his view of himself and the colony in New England. In his biography of Bradford, COTTON MATHER reports that Bradford's relatives scorned and scoffed at the young man for becoming a church member in 1606.

When the church, following the leadership of JOHN SMITH, John Robinson, and William Brewster, quit England to seek out religious freedom in Amsterdam, Bradford set sail with them. He used the money he had inherited from his family to purchase a home in Leyden, where the

church remained for 12 years before journeying to what is currently the United States. During his time in Amsterdam, Bradford earned a living as a weaver and taught himself Dutch in order to communicate with the locals. In his religious pursuits, Bradford worked assiduously on Latin and Hebrew, languages deemed essential for religious leaders and scholars. His appetite for knowledge led him to acquire a considerable library, which he took aboard the *Mayflower*. By the time of his death in 1657, Bradford's library had grown to nearly 400 volumes, including John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, John Speed's *Prospects of the Most Famous Part of the World*, Peter Martyr's *De Orbe Novo*, Jean Bodin's *De Republica*, and Pierre de la Primauday's *French Academy* (Morison xxxvi).

While in Amsterdam in 1613, Bradford met and married his first wife, Dorothy May. She accompanied him in 1617 on their famed voyage and died by drowning while their ship was anchored in Provincetown Harbor. Although Bradford does not mention her death in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, he learned of it during his absence from the *Mayflower* when he joined an expedition to explore Cape Cod. She had accidentally fallen overboard and drowned before anyone could offer her help. Historians such as Samuel Eliot Morison attribute the silence surrounding Dorothy Bradford's death to the belief that it was suicide rather than accident (xxiv). Probably the rumor of Dorothy's suicide

originates in an article written in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in June 1869, entitled "William Bradford's Love Life."

This article, essentially a historical romance, begins with the theory that William Bradford was originally in love with the woman who would become his second wife, Sarah Carpenter Southworth. As the story begins, Bradford is in London awaiting departure for Holland, has already proposed to Alice, and is impatiently waiting for her response. Alice, however, described as a "spoiled little beauty," artfully demurs, postponing her decision until the following morning. She even belittles Bradford when he remains at her house awaiting her answer, teasing him, "Truly the elders of your church did ill to entrust their mission to such a dreamer and laggard as yourself" (135). He responds seriously, describing "our people [as] mindful to remove to some country over seas where shall be room for all and opportunity for all to thrive by honest labor" (136). Bradford's dedication to the church prevails over his own love life, as evidenced from his absence the following days from dear Alice's home. She learns through her father that Bradford and "the deputies from the dissenting folk at Leyden had returned thither," and heartbroken, Alice readily agrees to marry Edward Southworth (136).

Bradford learns that Alice is married and, as she has, he quickly marries the next available woman, Dorothy May. She agrees to marry him even though she is aware of his recent heartbreak about Alice. When they make their fated trip to America aboard the *Mayflower*, Bradford requests that May and their newborn baby join him. Initially, Dorothy was to remain behind with her mother, only to join Bradford in the future after she and the baby were well and sturdy enough for the journey. When Bradford learns that Alice's husband has passed away, and that she will be traveling to America to join her father, Bradford requests that Dorothy join him and leave their child behind with her mother. In true melodrama form, the *Harper's Monthly* author writes, "and that day she began to die." In one of the last sections of the story, entitled "Doro-

thy Bradford's Journal," she documents repeated nightmares of her dead baby and reports that Bradford has been dreaming about Alice. These fictional journal entries abruptly end, followed by a love letter from Bradford to his beloved Alice, reminding her of his first proposal and expressing his interest in her as a future wife. It is quite interesting that the unnamed author of this fictional tale should turn to the tale of William Bradford, a leading Puritan figure, and address him as a character second to the two women in his life—Alice Carpenter Southworth and Dorothy May. It is also quite telling that the author follows the same format Bradford does in *Of Plymouth Plantation*: She incorporates letters and journal entries. Perhaps because of this element of the story, or perhaps because of the popular interest in the fate of Bradford's first wife, this fictional tale has become part of the lore associated with the arrival of the *Mayflower*.

In 1621, when Bradford was 31, he was elected governor of Plymouth Colony. His election followed the death of its first governor, John Carver. Bradford remained governor, being reelected 30 times to the office, until 1656. The only gap in his 30-year span as governor was a five-year period in which Edward Winslow and Thomas Prentice served. In 1623, when additional members of the Leyden church sailed for the colony, Bradford met his second wife, a widow named Alice Southworth, who had two sons by her previous marriage. Together the two bore a family of three additional children, two sons and a daughter.

He began his most famous work, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, in 1630, "sure . . . that New England would be the model for Old" (Daly 561). The narrative recounts the rise of the Separatist Church out of the forced Catholicism under James I of England, and the rifts and divisions separated that faction even further. Critics believe that Bradford began work on his chronicle in 1630 because it was a historical moment in which he felt confident and assured of the colony's success in fulfilling their special covenant with God as his chosen people. Just two years later, in 1632, his greatest hope would turn to despair as he was witness to a hurricane, the

loss of their furs in a ship that sank, their near starvation, and the departure of the young members of the colony for Duxbury and Marshfield. Dejected, Bradford quit writing the journal in 1648 and only returned to it in 1650 to write out a list of passengers on the *Mayflower*.

The critic Mark Sargent believes that Bradford attempted to return to his task of recording the colony's history with a series of three dialogues that attempted to reconcile its past with its present. Entitled "A Dialogue or the Summe of a Conference between Som Younge Men Borne in New England and Sundery Ancient Men That Came Out of Holland and Old England 1648," the dialogues were a genre popular among Elizabethan Separatists (Sargent 390). Sargent attributes the survival of the first dialogue to Bradford's nephew, Nathaniel Morton, who copied it into the Plymouth Church Records (391). The second dialogue has been lost, but the third was found among Thomas Prince's collection of books and manuscripts in 1826 (391). Through an analysis of the two extant dialogues, Sargent argues, readers can discern "many of the pressures that were diverting [Bradford's] attention from the chronicle" (392). Among those pressures were the "signs of reconciliation between Puritan Congregationalists and Presbyterians" that began in 1648 (Sargent 400). Bradford was emboldened by the attacks on the Separatists in the late 1640s and thus took up pen again to work out the dialogues (Sargent 401). Bradford's chief accuser was the Scottish Presbyterian minister Robert Baillie, who in 1645 published *Dissuasive from the Errors of Time*, which contained a direct attack on "a small company at Leyden" (reported in Sargent 402). Baillie argues that the Separatists undermined the possibility of reforming a national church. He engaged in a heated debate, through publications, with John Cotton and Edward Winslow, a chief ally to Bradford and member of the Plymouth Colony who returned to England to answer charges against the colony.

Bradford revisits the early history of the Separatist Church in the wake of criticisms against him and his colony for their intolerance of Anabaptists, a charge launched against Bradford in 1645 that he omitted from *Of Plymouth Plantation*. In his

first dialogue, Bradford reframes the past less as the necessary isolation of one sect from all others who were prone to various forms of idolatry or sin, and more as part of a larger trend with the French, Dutch, and Scots, their former enemies (Sargent 406). In the spirit of casting the Separatists with a larger body somewhat removed from the Church of England, Bradford writes of a "Church of Christ" with "visible Christians professing faith and holiness" (406). He goes further in his attempts to recast the past by imagining an "implicit covenant" existing between the Separatists and the Church of England (406). The voice of the ancients in Bradford's first dialogue admits to their former mistake in insisting upon "too rigid" a separation: "Out of some mistake and heat of zeal . . . [they had shunned] communion in lawful things with other godly persons" (reported in Sargent 407).

Bradford also takes pains to dissociate the Separatists from Robert Browne, a figure whom the youth in Bradford's dialogue imagine to be a leader for the sect. John Cotton is invoked by the young, who cast Browne, the author of *A Treatise on the Reformation without Tarrying for Any*, as the "first inventor and beginner" of the Separatist movement, with his publication functioning, as Sargent describes it, as their "chief manifesto" (407). In his reinvention of the Pilgrims' collective past, Bradford not only removes the taint of Browne, who was labeled an "apostate," but also distances them altogether from the title of Separatist. The conspicuous absence of this term leads Sargent to write: "'Separatism' was now as much an allegation as it was a creed, and Bradford wore the title with both respect and reluctance" (408).

By the third dialogue, written between 1648 and 1652, Bradford returns once again to the confident voice that dominates much of his text. This assuredness is due in part to Oliver Cromwell's military victories against Charles II and the Scots. Bradford interprets these triumphs as vindications for the Congregational Church, which he now uses as a self-identifying term rather than Separatists. Flush with this success, Bradford again returns to the Deuteronomic formula shaping *Of Plymouth Plantation*. He views the Pilgrims as an exemplary colony that

sparked the religious change in England. This image was difficult to create and sustain, given the reality of the Plymouth Colony in 1652, just five years before Bradford's death. The churches in Plymouth lacked steady ministers, and Bradford felt the need to reinvent the colony's past in order to keep it relevant and central to movements in England and Massachusetts. Critics argue that by the time Bradford began his third dialogue, he had stopped working on *Of Plymouth Plantation* altogether.

Some of the additional writings included in this third dialogue that were not part of the series of conversations provide readers with insight into one of the subjects that began to preoccupy Bradford's mind, the study of Hebrew. The inside cover of his third dialogue contains the Hebrew alphabet, and a Hebrew verse from Proverbs appears on the manuscript's cover page. Further, Bradford included three passages from Psalms in Hebrew on the Dialogue's cover page, all indications of his growing interest in and ease with this ancient language. In a picture poem roughly dated in 1650, Bradford expresses his own desires to acquire knowledge of Hebrew:

Though I am growne aged, yet I have had a
 longing
 desire, to see with my owne eyes, something of
 that most
 ancient language, and holy tongue, in which
 the Law,
 and oracles of God were write; and in which
 God,
 and angels, spake to the holy patriarchs of old
 time; and what names were given to things,
 from the creation. And though I cannot
 attaine too much herein, yet I am refresh-
 ed, to have seen some glimpse hereof;
 (as Moyses saw the Land of can-
 can a farr of) my aime and
 desire is, to see how the words
 and phrases lye in the
 holy text; and to
 discerne somewhat
 of the same,
 for my owne,
 contente.

The format of the poem is quite significant since the inverted triangle was viewed as both a symbol of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) and the symbol of morality in the 17th century (Westbrook 103). What also makes the poem so significant is that it exists at all. Given the Puritans' general distrust of all art forms because they could seduce the reader and writer into worldliness and play upon the writer's natural inclination to the sin of pride, there is a scarcity of Puritan poetry. Bradford's use of this form to convey his desire to learn Hebrew gives readers an indication of the deeply profound connection he made between the language and its access to the Bible, referred to as the "Law" and "holy texte" in the body of the poem. Many religious scholars believe that learning Hebrew is essential to understanding the Bible in its original language, stripped of its layers of interpretation and translation. For Bradford, who describes himself at the beginning of the poem as "growne aged," the quest for a more personal and spiritual connection to God and the Separatist religion through linguistic skill is in keeping with his current situation. The Separatist movement has been rendered obsolete, even an obstacle to the reconciliation of the branches of Christianity, and the colony has not fulfilled his deepest wishes. Bradford's only solace, then, lies in a retreat to his religion, and a deeper understanding of it gained through knowledge of the language in which it was written. The biographer Percy Westbrook believes that Bradford probably taught himself Hebrew, with the aid of a Hebrew grammar book and Hebrew lexicon, which were both in William Brewster's extensive library (102).

His choice of the poetic form was not limited to the poem cited; indeed, on his deathbed, Bradford expressly requested that his executors be mindful of his various writings, to include both *Of Plymouth Plantation* and poems that were found in a "little book with a black cover." Westbrook declares that although the original book has been lost, the contents were preserved by Thomas Willett, the 15-year-old son of John Willett, who was one of the executors of Bradford's will. In an attempt to edify young Willett, it is quite likely that he was made

to copy out Bradford's poems (Westbrook 104). The very titles of the poems reflect Bradford's own requests on his deathbed: "I commend unto your wisdom and discretion some small books written by my own hand to be improved as you shall see meet; in special I commend to you a little book with a black cover wherein there is a word to Plymouth, a word to Boston, and a word to New England with sundry useful verses" (reported in Westbrook 104).

***Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630, 1644–1650)**

Of Plymouth Plantation is Bradford's most famous work. The narrative recounts the rise of the English Separatist Church from the time of mandated Catholicism under James I and proceeds to describe the journeys the Separatists undertook, the establishment of a new colony in Massachusetts, and the difficulties faced by the colonists. He began writing the work in 1630, probably because at this time he felt confident and assured of the colony's success in fulfilling its promise. Just two years later, in 1632, his hopes would turn to despair, as he was to see the colonists suffer through a hurricane, the loss of their furs in a sunken ship, their near-starvation, and the departure of the young members. Dejected, Bradford quit writing the journal in 1648 and only returned to it in 1650 to write out a list of passengers on the *Mayflower*.

Chapter 1 of the chronicle likens the Separatist struggle against "popery," "popish trash," and "relics of that man of sin" to an epic battle against Satan. As he begins the first chapter, Bradford chronicles how "Satan hath raised, maintained, and continued against the Saints, from time to time, in one sort or other" (3). The Saints, or God's chosen people, as the Puritans preferred, were martyrs and true Christians who resisted conversion to the ceremonies and rituals that were associated with Catholicism. The tale then does not pursue a "broadside at Catholicism" but rather builds a "case for Separatism" (Sargent 398). As they "shook off the yoke of Antichristian bondage," they joined to form the Separatist Church, which would be called the Congregational Church in later years (9). Bradford briefly

mentions a few central leaders in the formative time of the Puritan movement and church: John Smith, John Robinson, and, most famous of the three, William Brewster (9–10). The latter formed the Separatist congregation at Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, which Bradford joined as a young man (xxiii). After meeting together in worship for a year, the group determined to flee to Amsterdam, where they might enjoy religious freedom (10).

Chapter 2 addresses the trials the Separatists faced, both on land and at sea, once they had resolved to abandon England for Holland. The first company climbed aboard ships supposedly bound for Amsterdam only to discover that they had been betrayed when they were robbed, and their possessions rifled through and ransacked (12). Their second attempt to board ships was hurried by the unexpected appearance of an armed company, which resulted in the separation of men from their wives and children, since the men were the first to board (13). Although the families were reunited eventually, Bradford depicts the ordeals faced by the separated family members with considerable emotional resonance. While the men faced rough sea conditions and prayed for God's deliverance, the women and children, without homes to return to, were shuttled between constables, who were uncertain of where to place them. Bradford appears to undermine the wives' anxieties by writing that the constables were "glad to be rid of them in the end upon any terms for all were wearied and tired with them" (14). The women and children appear to be more a nuisance for the various constables than the loyal and suffering male members of the Puritans who endured hardship as testimony to their faith.

Oliver Cromwell's victory in England, coupled with widespread reform within the Church of England, made it rhetorically impossible for Bradford to characterize the Separatist Church against the image of a popish and religiously intolerant England. In fact, Bradford concedes this point, albeit in 1646 and on the back of one of the pages of the first chapter: "Full little did I think that the downfall of the Bishops . . . had been so near, when I first began these scribbled writings" (reported in Sargent 398). Bereft of an image of England against which to rally

his Separatists, Bradford turned instead to dissension within the group, forged by the unorthodox teachings of John Smith. The flock loyal to John Smith had “fallen into contention with the church,” so the leaders Robinson and Brewster determined to remove to Leyden “before they were any way engaged with the same” (16). Having remained in Leyden for 12 years, the Separatists decide to leave and embark once again on a journey, this time to the New World. Bradford enumerates the reasons for their departure, stating that he does so to dispel the “slander” that they were importuned to remove to New Netherland, or were influenced by “any newfangledness or other such like giddy humor” (22, 23). Indeed, as historians and critics alike remark, Bradford was especially sensitive to criticism launched against him and the Separatists, and it is from a defensive position that he writes his tale and resumes it after a 10-year silence.

The dangers presented by a harsh environment, the brutality of savages, and that of the Spaniards, who already had colonies in Florida and the Southwest, were listed as central reasons to select Guiana over America, but ultimately, Bradford writes, they decided “to live as a distinct body by themselves under the general government of Virginia . . . and to sue His Majesty that he would be pleased to grant them freedom of religion” (29). When the king refuses to grant their request, they begin consultations with the Virginia Company directly and obtain a patent under the name of *John Wincope*; despite all of their effort and considerable financial loss, the Separatists did not make use of this patent (34–35). Instead, they relied upon Thomas Weston, who procured a patent for them, and, after much debate over the conditions for their colony in America, they embarked. Bradford includes a list of the conditions, commenting on the two amendments from the original, as well as letters from the future governor of the colony, John Carver, and Robert Cushman, who was a chief organizer of the *Mayflower* expedition but who did not sail on this ship because of his disputes with Weston’s articles (38, 42–46). He justifies including such correspondence and dwelling so minutely on the details leading up to their journey on the *Mayflower*: “I have been the larger

in these things, and so shall crave leave in some like passages following . . . that their children may see with what difficulties their fathers wrestled in going through these things in their first beginnings; and how God brought them along, notwithstanding all their weaknesses and infirmities” (46).

In his description of the initial departure from Leyden to Southampton, aboard the *Speedwell*, Bradford refers to the colonists as “pilgrims,” and historians credit this first use of the term as influencing future references to the *Mayflower* company as *pilgrim fathers* (47). The voyage was not without incident, as leaks were discovered twice in the lesser of the two boats, causing delays in Dartmouth and in Plymouth. Eventually, the smaller ship was deemed unseaworthy, and its passengers and their luggage were removed to London while the *Mayflower* set sail alone (52–53). Among those who voluntarily quit the voyage were Mr. Cushman and his family, whose absence from the enterprise Bradford seems to deal with in an especially harsh manner, including an admission that those reading the enclosed letter written by Cushman while the ship was being repaired will “discover some infirmities in him (as who under temptation is free)” (54). In dealing so roughly with Cushman, Bradford reveals a tendency to punish and publicly humiliate those who have disappointed him in one manner or another; this pattern of ridicule will continue throughout the narrative, most especially when the colony finds itself challenged economically, politically, and religiously.

Chapter 9, which details their landing at Cape Cod, contains the most famous passage from *Of Plymouth Plantation* and provides a singular reading of the American wilderness that the critic David Laurence believes was nearly two centuries before its time. “The depiction of the Pilgrims’ landing at Cape Cod stands out almost freakishly within Bradford’s writing and also from the entire seventeenth-century context. No mere backdrop to the event, the setting functions as the crucial figure that reveals the Pilgrims’ relation to spirit” (56). Bradford himself pauses and stands “half amazed at this poor people’s present condition,” noting the lack of any of the comforts of civilization such as houses or friends, as well as the hostile “savage

barbarians” who inhabit the “hideous and desolate wilderness” (61–62). Some of this sense of despair stems from the season: “summer being done, all things stand upon them with a weather-beaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue” (62). Markedly absent from Bradford’s account of their arrival is the self-assured sense of God’s benevolence, his guiding hand in taking his chosen people to such an ominous and forbidding place. The very land itself appears to be alive and endowed with the characteristics of its native inhabitants, for Bradford employs similar adjectives, including *savage* and *wild*, indiscriminately for both. Laurence argues, “The sublimation of anxiety into exultation is the true subject of the passage” (57). In writing of the landscape in such a manner, Bradford, in Laurence’s estimation, shifts the very phenomenon that challenges the Pilgrims’ legitimacy into a symbol of their triumph (57). Despite their presence in a hostile environment in winter, Bradford and his pilgrims prevail, and in their survival they transcend the obstacles facing them.

Bradford immediately follows this account of their dismal first landing with assurances of their favor with God, and their praise of him for taking them to the “desert wilderness” (63). God’s favor is attributed repeatedly to the events that follow their first explorations of the landscape of New England. They discover corn and seed to plant and are left unharmed by the American Indians who attack them. All of these events serve Bradford as “a special providence of God” (63–70). After their “First Encounter,” Bradford writes, “Thus it please God to vanquish their enemies and give them deliverance; and by his special providence so to dispose that not any one of them were either hurt or hit, though their arrows came close by them and on every side of them” (70). Other instances of divine intervention include the drowning of a man who had cursed the Pilgrims immediately juxtaposed with the tale of the near-drowning of a young Pilgrim, John Howland, who “became a profitable member in both church and commonwealth” (59).

Shortly after this account, Bradford ends the first book. The critic Robert Daly reads the first book

and the annals of the second, which spans 1620 to 1632, as given over to the fulfillment of the Deuteronomic formula. As Bradford’s numerous references to this particular gospel, and to God’s special providence on the Pilgrims attest, he imagined the recording of their history as didactic in principle, providing future generations with lessons on their privileged relationship with God. “This belief in the validity of earthly evidences” was a central component of the Deuteronomic formula, which expected rewards and other signs of God’s preference to be bestowed on the select people with whom he had formed a covenant (Daly 558). Viewed in this light, Bradford’s selective recounting of history in the years following 1632 becomes more clear. “He records only those events which affect or clarify the progress of his colony” (562). Thus, the death of his first wife, Dorothy, along with those of other individuals not central to the grand design are simply omitted from the account.

He does provide brief detail of the death of the colony’s first governor, John Carver, who appears to have suffered a stroke or aneurism: “He complained greatly of his head and lay down, and within a few hours his senses failed, so as he never spake more till he died, which was within a few days after” (86). Carver’s wife, described by Bradford as “a weak woman,” dies five or six weeks afterward (86). Thus ends the life of the first governor and begins Bradford’s position of supreme power as both religious and civil leader (86). Interestingly, Bradford refers to himself and his election to the governorship in third person, although he uses first person at other times in the account, such as his initial description of the *Mayflower’s* landing. It is quite likely that such a rhetorical device was employed for the sake of humility, as the pilgrims were admonished to place God as the agent of all the good events or fortunes that befell them, and as they were to share equally in food, housing, and so forth, and thus cultivate a communal rather than individual identity.

The appearance of Squanto, the surviving member of the Patuxet tribe who had acquired English as a slave and traveler in England and Newfoundland, was heralded by Bradford as “a special instrument sent by God for their good beyond their expecta-

tion” (81). Through Squanto, who served as an interpreter and intermediary figure between the Pilgrims and neighboring tribes, especially the Wampanoag, who were led by Massasoit, a peace treaty was brokered. Bradford details the six terms mutually agreed upon, which included a pact between the two cultures to aid each other in war and to traffic in trade with each other unarmed (80–81). As a result of Squanto’s intervention on the pilgrims’ behalf, they engaged with several neighboring tribes in trade, to include the lucrative fur trade. In relating the “first Thanksgiving,” which Bradford refers to as a “small harvest,” there is no mention of Squanto or other American Indians. Rather, Bradford seems intent on dispelling the disparaging remarks made regarding the quantity of food that they report enjoying: “Many afterwards writ so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports” (90). The historian John H. Humins provides a more detailed account that includes the presence of Massasoit and 90 of his warriors, who engaged with the Pilgrims in a somewhat friendly display of their military prowess (61).

Squanto, as Humins reports, has been given undue credit for ensuring the pilgrims’ survival, as his desire to gain fame and notoriety at the expense of Massasoit threatened to undermine the very peace agreement he helped to forge (54). When Massasoit begins to mistrust Squanto for fear that he has been purposefully creating strife between the Massachusetts, he demands that Bradford return him to the Wampanoag to receive a just punishment. Bradford reveals the indispensable role Squanto has begun to fill when he refuses to hand over the Patuxet, who later dies (99). Bradford’s characterization of him was difficult to sustain, however, once he learned that Squanto was selling protection against smallpox under the pretext that the Pilgrims could control the disease: “He made them believe they kept the plague buried in the ground, and could send it amongst whom they would” (99). After Squanto’s death, peace resumed between the pilgrims and Massasoit and his tribe, thus justifying Captain Myles Standish’s preference for the sagamore over the ambitious interpreter (70).

Bradford’s characterization of his most famous enemy, THOMAS MORTON, would also fall under question, even during the former’s own lifetime. Daly attributes Bradford’s great conviction to initial beliefs in the veracity of his account of the “former pettefogger of Furnival’s Inn” (564, 205). Seeing Morton as the embodiment of all possible threats to the Pilgrims, Bradford labels him the “Lord of Misrule,” who he claims “maintained (as it were) a School of Atheism” (205). On the basis of Bradford’s accusations against Morton, which included traffick-ing in guns and alcohol with the local tribes, Morton was arrested and returned to England. The modern historians Minor W. Major and Robert Daly believe that the accounts were not factual but were based rather in Bradford’s “prejudices,” meaning his conviction that the Plymouth Colony was destined for greatness and that Morton posed a “great threat” to its destiny (Minor 1–13, Daly 564–565). Even with the removal of Morton, the Plymouth Colony was not safeguarded against further calamity.

After 1632 and the arrival of the larger and more prosperous Massachusetts Bay Colony, Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* begins to take on a different form, shifting in voice and form, as Robert Daly believes, from eloquence and self-assurance to “a tedious account of unsorted administrative details” (557). A host of events, including the prosperity of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in contradistinction to the natural and human-caused disasters that befell the Pilgrims, forced Bradford to abandon the narrative of progress and divine intervention (Daly 566). His own people migrated to other colonies in search of more arable land to plant crops, and Bradford likens the departure to “an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children” (334).

The Pequot War in 1637, in which the colonists prevailed, seems to be a singular event in a series of unfortunate disasters. In a chapter entitled “Wickedness Breaks Forth,” Bradford details “the breaking out of sundry notorious sins,” employing a language that makes these various acts seem like a plague or contagion, as though the appearance of one prompted others to follow. One reason, Bradford cites, “may be that the Devil may carry a greater spite against the churches of Christ and the gospel here . . . that Satan



ANNE BRADSTREET (1612–1672)

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits.

("The Prologue")

In the same year that the poet Anne Bradstreet (née Anne Dudley) contracted smallpox and nearly died, she also married. She was 16. We know this because years later she wrote about the illness in "To My Dear Children," a memoir she left her children to aid in their spiritual development after her death: "About sixteen, the Lord laid his hand upon me and smote me with the smallpox. When I was in my affliction, I besought the Lord and confessed my pride and vanity, and He was entreated of me and again restored me." Had Bradstreet not listed her age, we would have only known that she suffered from the illness sometime around the year she married, or we might not have known at all. There are no records of her birth.

We do know that in 1630, when she was about 18 years old, she left the England she knew to board the ship *Arbella* with her parents, siblings, and new husband, Simon Bradstreet. Under the reign of Charles I, there was growing threat of excess taxation to pay for the king's military exploits in Europe. According to Rosamond Rosenmeier, Anne's father felt the growing tension directly. Founding members of the Massachusetts Bay Company, her father and new husband had worked out a plan to emigrate to New England as part of the new venture, but also in order to escape political and religious persecution (37).

Their sea voyage across the Atlantic was to last six weeks. When they landed in Massachusetts Bay,

Anne and her family had their first taste of "the blazing heat of an American June" (Rich ix). They also had their first glimpse of the immensity of the American wilderness, the close quarters of a Salem home, and their first understanding of meager provisions.

In England Anne Bradstreet's father, Thomas Dudley, had been a steward to the earl of Lincoln. The Dudley family lived at the earl's manor house in Sempringham, where Anne had access to the earl's sizable library. She read the great Renaissance poets Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and probably John Milton, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare (Martin 21). It would be an understatement to say that her life in the New World offered fewer comforts than what the family had left behind. While her family held no tremendous stature, their needs were met, and they lived on a large estate. As the poet Eavan Boland writes, in England, for a time, the Dudleys "lived in the shadow and peace of greatness" (179). Contrast this image to the one painted in a letter Thomas Dudley sent from America to the countess of Lincoln in England:

There is not a house where is not one dead, and some houses many . . . the natural causes seem to be in the want of warm lodging and good diet, to which Englishmen are habituated at home, and the sudden increase of heat which they endure that are landed here in summer . . .

for those only these two last years died of fevers who landed in June or July, as those of Plymouth, who landed in winter, died of the scurvy. (Cited in Rich x)

In the same letter Dudley also complains that in their first Salem home, there was no table or desk to compose the letter he was writing, and that the Dudleys and the Bradstreets, all living under one roof, were cramped into one room with a fireplace. Even though her father and husband were founding members of the Massachusetts Bay Company and would each eventually become governor and lead a prosperous life, the initial move to New England took them to an environment that was more confined indoors and vaster than they had ever imagined outside.

For the young Anne Bradstreet, this was quite a change, tempered perhaps only by the lengthy sea journey's poor conditions, which offered a brief period of adjustment. Of her first response to America she would later write, "I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose. But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church at Boston." Rosenmeier is careful to point out that "new manners" are not necessarily bad manners, but that they represent new habits and ways of living that were foreign to Anne Bradstreet: the ways people kept house, their responses to tight quarters, their basic coping mechanisms in such a wild and unpredictable terrain (73). Critics agree that Bradstreet's phrase "at which my heart rose" refers not to any welcoming feeling, but to feelings of rebellion and disgust: Her heart rose *against* these new manners. After reflection, Bradstreet resigns herself to her situation because "it is the way of God." Note her use of the word *submitted*. A theme that arises often in Bradstreet's poetry is that of resistance followed by resignation—to death, to her husband's absence, to the patriarchy, and to God.

A woman often visited by sickness and lameness (her first poem we know of, written at the age of 19, was entitled "Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno. 1632") now living in a land plagued by death and hardship, Anne Bradstreet in some ways needed to

give up her own control over her body and life to that higher power, if only to maintain a sense of structure and reason. Adrienne Rich posits that "in a society coarsened by hardship and meager in consolations, any religious doubt must at times have made everything seem dubious" (x). It is indeed arguable that Bradstreet herself would have had to struggle to locate some control over her own life, being passed, as young women were, from father to husband. Even her first book was published without her control or knowledge. Raised a Puritan, Bradstreet practiced a religion that encouraged the belief in which every affliction, every woe, every setback was an opportunity for a lesson and an exercise of God's will upon his chosen people.

There is a tension, however, always at play in Bradstreet's life and work, between what she observes in the world around her and what she is told, and much energy is spent trying to reconcile the two. She acknowledges the times she was "sitting loose from God": finding joy in the physical world, questioning Puritan doctrine or the existence of God, privately musing that Catholicism might have the same merit as the Puritan order. In her poetry, this too plays a role alongside the twin impulses to resist and to yield. The critic Wendy Martin makes note of these tensions:

Although she played the role of a dedicated Puritan and a dutiful daughter and wife, Bradstreet often expressed ambivalence about the male authorities in her life, including God, her father and husband, and the literary critics and authors whose models she initially copied. On one hand, she very much wanted their approval and, on the other, she was angered by their denial of the value of her experience and abilities. (16)

Critics' responses to Bradstreet's relationships with men are as varied and complex as her own formulation of resistance and resignation. Even though her husband was 11 years her senior and a man she married when she was, even by the standards of the time, a bit young to marry, she loved him passionately, or grew to. This love is evidenced by

her marriage poems. Rosenmeier speculates that the marriage was something planned by her family. Anne's husband, Simon, was almost like a son to the Dudleys, having been orphaned at 14 and taken to work under Anne's father for the earl, and the difference in their ages meant that he was equipped to take care of her (Rosenmeier 38). Anne Bradstreet is a complex figure; she took pleasure in her life as a wife and mother of eight, and, unlike many other Puritan women, she was given the space to read, write, and reflect—and was essentially respected for it by both men and women.

Although Anne had no formal education, her father made sure to expose her to language and literature. Lacking a university education himself, Thomas Dudley was tutored in England by an Oxford graduate. According to biographers, he encouraged his daughter to read and probably taught her Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French. Equipped with these tools, a motivated reader of the era could approach any text and understand it. Her father valued books so much he took his library along with him to the New World. Anne had access to all his books and absorbed their breadth and style in her own early poetry.

Most notably, the French Calvinist poet Guillaume Du Bartas is seen as a great influence on her work. In fact, in an introductory verse to her first book, Nathaniel Ward refers to her as “a right Du Bartas girl,” implying that her work exists only as a clever imitation. While celebrating her ability as a poet, Ward diminishes her achievement by comparing her to male poets and showing both a sense of disdain and trepidation toward women who choose to write. In the last two lines of his poem he suggests that a woman writer can do no more than dress up in her male counterparts' clothing, this “right Du Bartas girl,” Anne Bradstreet, is “shod by Chaucer's boots, and Homer's furs, / Let men look to't, lest women wear the spurs.” Note his implication that women will be good poets only in disguise, and that these trappings—the boots, the furs, the spurs—are not inherent qualities to women writers, but simple accoutrements that are easily removed when the woman is needed in her more traditional roles. Paradoxically, Anne Brad-

street would demonstrate—especially as her poetry matured—that a woman poet can exist simultaneously in traditional and nontraditional roles, her poetic nature deeply embedded within her consciousness, not her clothes.

Worthy of note is the literary period into which Anne Bradstreet entered. While she is indeed the first published American poet (and a woman, too), her work is also tied to a long tradition of European poetry, on the heels of the English Renaissance. Eavan Boland observes that in 1612 Bradstreet was born “in an England that had been nine years without its imperious queen, and would, in another four, lose William Shakespeare and the raffish ethos of the Tudor world” (179). Boland surmises that the young Anne must have heard stories of the great Elizabethan age, as evidenced by her elegies celebrating Queen Elizabeth and Sir Philip Sidney in her first book. But the England Anne was born into was a country slowly shifting, under the strain of unrest, verging on the edge of civil war. Had she stayed in England, Boland concludes, Anne Bradstreet probably would not have been offered the same freedoms in her writing as she had in her new continent. After England's restoration of the Crown, “women,” Boland claims, “would be considered bait for princes, rather than poets in their own right.” And Anne Bradstreet would have remained voiceless as a poet. “She left a poetic tradition in which she would almost certainly have remained anonymous and founded another in which she is visible, anomalous, and crucial” (Boland 181).

Still, New England had its own brand of unrest and dangers for women. Anne Bradstreet's careful handling of authority—private resistance accompanied by resignation—kept her safe from the fates of her own sister, Sarah Keane, and Anne Hutchinson, both excommunicated from the church at Boston and exiled from the community for overstepping their intellectual and religious bounds (Martin 16–17). Both Bradstreet's father and her husband sat on Hutchinson's trial. Thomas Dudley, then deputy governor, was a magistrate, and Simon Bradstreet was an assistant at the General Court proceedings. According to Rosenmeier,

Simon Bradstreet “does make a point of saying that he is not opposed to women’s meetings and thinks such meetings ‘lawful’” (83). Thomas Dudley, however, vehemently opposed Hutchinson and the antinomians. While there are no records of Anne Bradstreet’s reactions to the Hutchinson trials, we can be sure that she was aware of the proceedings. Perhaps the absence of a response by her indicates why she avoided the same fate.

Ten years later, Anne’s closest sister, Sarah Keane, was also heard preaching, but not on American soil. She had followed her husband back to England after he abandoned her. John Winthrop’s brother, Stephen, reported to him that his “she Cosin Keayne is growne a great preacher” after hearing her speak openly about religion (Martin 59). He was far from impressed, and the use of the term *great preacher* is laced with irony. When she returned to Massachusetts without her husband, she was charged with “irregular prophesying in mixed assemblies” (quoted in Rosenmeier 93). What is more, her husband had previously sent letters to John Wilson and Joseph Cotton proclaiming that Sarah had “‘impoisoned’ his body with syphilis” (quoted in Rosenmeier 93). As is often the case with such accusations, there is no evidence that Sarah had given him the disease. Laura Ulrich observes, “Attacks upon religious dissenters frequently included charges of sexual irregularity, as though disruption on one social boundary inevitably entailed the disruption of another” (quoted in Rosenmeier 93). The couple divorced, and Sarah was banished. Critics differ over the degree of Thomas Dudley’s anger at his daughter; there are reports of disinheritance and there are reports of a small sum left to her after his death. To be sure, living in such proximity to these events, through family and geography, must have been distressing for Anne Bradstreet, a woman with a strong mind and her own ideas about God and nature. Unlike her sister, she let her ideas leak out quietly through her poetry and private meditations rather than in the church. “Only by careful execution of her prescribed responsibilities could she escape [their] fate,” claims Wendy Martin (17).

Puritan belief—and probably any belief system on the edge of famine, death, and what could seem

a threatening wilderness—does tie the body to religious piety, and illness, in the form of the venereal disease Anne’s sister was accused of spreading, or Anne’s own illness, was regarded as an opportunity for either judgment and condemnation or spiritual cleansing and self-examination. We know that Anne viewed her own illnesses as entrances into a closer bond with divinity by way of punishment for having at the age of 14 or 15 what she called a “carnal heart,” one that valued worldly desires and pleasures over God’s will. In her spiritual memoir she surmises that “it pleased God to keep me a long time without a child, which was a great grief to me and cost me many prayers and tears before I obtained one.” Her inability to conceive is viewed as God’s will—his pleasure—and the delay, albeit painful, is something Bradstreet accepted, possibly aligning herself with Abraham’s wife, Sarah, in Genesis. Similarly, her great illness, “a lingering sickness like a consumption together with a lameness,” which inspired her first poem, is perceived as a correction applied to her moral sensibilities. One could also read causality, as Anne probably did, in her sickness in 1632, her supplication to God, and the conception of her first child, born the next year.

For contemporary readers, this sense of punishment meted out by God as infirmity may also imply that any disfigured or ill person during that period was perceived by Puritans as having turned away from God. This of course is the danger of 17th-century Puritan ideology. So it might be surprising that during Anne Bradstreet’s long illness, her family’s absence from the Boston church was tolerated. Rosenmeier concludes that it was quite possible that Anne’s illness coupled with the winter weather kept her family home. After all, the Bradstreets and Dudleys would have had to cross water to attend church services in Boston, already an all-day undertaking in itself (75–76). Rosenmeier points out that absence from church was more common than we would expect, and not cause for condemnation. Apparently, a woman’s preaching in mixed company was more odious.

Anne’s illness allowed her not only to discover a more private form of faith than that being practiced in the church; it also helped her recognize her

own mortality. It is quite possible that her deepened understanding of the body allowed her to differ in the thinking from the predominant feelings of shame associated with the body that one would expect in Puritan culture. Bradstreet's discussion of the body and its functions is characterized by Rosenmeier as "frank and positive" (4). As her great-nephew COTTON MATHER will echo years later, she sees the activity of the bowels as vital and, in some ways, miraculous: "transmutation . . . but not excretion" (Rosenmeier 4). This differs sharply from the Puritan ideology of the intestinal process as the filthy and horrendous "loathsomeness of the inner man" (Rosenmeier 4) or EDWARD TAYLOR's view of the body as a "dung-hill." Physicality, according to Puritan doctrine, was the antithesis of the soul's flight, yet for Anne Bradstreet, it is a source of fascination, despair, and passion—ultimately, a route to God. Consequently, the physical world—bodies, death, fire, nature, love—is also a wellspring for her poetry.

The Bradstreets and Dudleys packed up house and moved to new outposts many times. Critics speculate that Bradstreet began writing in earnest after her family's move to Ipswich in the mid-1630s. The poems she was writing during this period were celebrated by many at the time, but the majority of them have lost their luster, or at least pale in comparison to her later poems. The poet Adrienne Rich surmises that had Bradstreet stopped with these early poems or simply carried on with similar work, she would have possibly become "at best a literary fossil" (xiii).

When her brother-in-law the Reverend John Woodbridge traveled back to England in 1647 to negotiate with King Charles, he took a manuscript of Anne Bradstreet's collected poems with him, without Bradstreet's knowledge. He arranged for the book to be published in London. No other manuscript by a resident of the New World had yet been published. Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America, or Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning, Full of Delight* was the first. When the book was published in 1650, Bradstreet was 38 years old.

The book was prefaced by a variety of introductory comments written by men endorsing the

poet and the work, followed by three anagrams of Anne Bradstreet's name. Nathaniel Ward wrote the simultaneously condescending and celebratory verse introduction, honoring the remarkable nature of her accomplishment in a man's arena while also suggesting that she is merely putting on the trappings of a poet. John Woodbridge, the man who took the book to London, wrote an epistle to the reader that declared Bradstreet's piety and discipline as a wife and mother, and her remarkable achievement in the creation of these poems:

It is the work of a woman, honored, and esteemed where she lives, for her gracious demeanor, her eminent parts, her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discreet managing of her family occasions, and more than so, these poems are the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep, and other refreshments. (A3)

He is sure to protect her dignity in what most Puritans would consider her primary occupations, those of wife and mother. Hence, she has stolen only from herself in the creation of these poems. This move makes her seem all the more disciplined as both mother and poet. In case her piety is not already clear, he adds that he has decided to publish these poems without the author's knowledge, "to bring to public view what she resolved should never in such a manner see the sun" (A3). In actuality, when Woodbridge returned to Massachusetts and placed the book in her lap, Bradstreet's feelings were mixed. Certainly the thrill of seeing one's work in print was great, but she would have preferred to have had the opportunity to revise the poems, clean up the rhyme structures, and correct any errors. This is clear in her later poem, "The Author to Her Book," which, through a clever figurative conceit of motherhood and child rearing, narrates the story of the publication of this book, her "rambling brat."

Despite Bradstreet's reservations, the book did quite well on both sides of the Atlantic, listed in the *Catalogue of the Most Vendible Books in England* in 1658 (Martin 29). The book contained

her Quaternions, four long poems of four sections each, covering the four elements, humors, ages of man, and seasons. The book also included her "Dialogue between Old England and New," her elegies for Queen Elizabeth and Philip Sidney, and the one poem from the book that is still considered a truly important part of her work and of our history, "The Prologue." Vacillating from modesty to feminist outrage and back, "The Prologue" is impressive in its quiet, revolutionary tone. It is the only poem from *The Tenth Muse* to be discussed in this volume.

Critics and poets agree that Bradstreet's greatest work was yet to be done. The poems in *The Tenth Muse* do indeed follow their influences a bit too closely; they seem lofty, "elaborate and conventional," writes Boland. "The public tone often falters; the language rarely shines" (Boland 183). There is a "clumsy percussion" (183) to the work, as if, Josephine Percy observes, Bradstreet was "a beginner doing finger exercises" (xi) at a piano. Percy, along with other critics and poets, is quick to point out that if Bradstreet had known the work was to be published, *The Tenth Muse* might have become a much different book. And she soon set about revising it for a second edition.

The second edition, which corrected some portions of the first and included newer poems, did not reach print until six years after Anne Bradstreet's death in 1678. One can easily imagine this self-scrutinizing and proud poet revisiting and revising her poems again and again. Her later poems are the ones for which she is best known. They are the most revolutionary in content and the most important to literary and cultural history. They become more personal, dealing more with the daily struggles she witnessed in her life, and responding also to the majesty and vastness of the New England landscape.

In 1653 Thomas Dudley died. This is an important moment for Bradstreet. Critics and poets note that after her father's death, Bradstreet began crafting different poems. It would be a mistake to say that Dudley's death was the only experience to change her work, but we also must recognize its

importance, remembering that, in a way, he was Anne's first teacher and literary guide; she read from the books in his library. No doubt—and this is evident in some of the poems—she wanted to write poems that would please him and correspond to his aesthetic tastes, his notions of the qualities that made a poem good. Let us not forget, too, Dudley's role in Anne Hutchinson's trial and his disappointment with his daughter Sarah when she was excommunicated. Perhaps Anne Bradstreet worried about how he might receive and judge her work. Wendy Martin speculates that

perhaps her father's death in 1653 as well as the publication of her work in 1650 gave her the psychological freedom necessary to express herself more openly. The more honestly she wrote of her emotional and religious tensions and her desire for recognition and her love of life on earth, the more accomplished her poetry became. (17)

Eavan Boland describes the ways Bradstreet's poetry changed after her father's death in terms of subject, emotion, tone, and music—all elements still considered crucial to lyric poetry today. She notes that Bradstreet's "subjects closed in" to the world she was experiencing. Instead of writing "elegies for lost courtiers," Bradstreet was exploring her feelings, marriage, and home. Her elegies were instead for her grandchildren and for her burned-down house. Boland notes that as the music of the poetry shifted to something richer and fuller, "the volume turned down" and "the voice became at once more private and more intense" (183–184). She was writing her best and most moving poetry. The lines were no longer strained, or if they seemed so, it was probably an intended component in the poem's craft, or a shift integral to the meaning of that line.

It was in this period that Bradstreet wrote what some consider her best poem, "Contemplations," a long and difficult poem of 232 lines that some contend is the first American nature poem. In it, the poet reconciles her admiration for the earth

and its creatures with her own awe at God's creation. The sun is asked, "How full of glory then must thy Creator be, / Who gave this bright light luster unto thee?" The poem's eighth stanza prefigures Emerson's or Hawthorne's journeys through the New England landscape: "Silent alone, where none or saw, or heard / In pathless paths I lead my wand'ring feet." The mastery of these lines is that they at once celebrate nature, its untrampled paths, and display a self-consciousness of the poet's act of making: It is through these pathless paths that she, the poet, leads her "wand'ring feet," punning on the term used to define poetic meter, *feet*. This pun, while at once quite clever, is equally modest, because she admits they wander. She constructs a self in her poems that is awestruck, intelligent, approachable, and fallible.

Other poems Bradstreet wrote in her later years approach subjects that had not previously been written about from a woman's perspective, with images culled from daily life. Interestingly, Bradstreet's greatest contribution to literature might very well lie in her confidence in covering new territory with her subjects. Adrienne Rich notes, "Her individualism lies in her choice of material rather than in her style" (xix). In an age that did not reward individualism as it is recognized today, writing something new and different was a brave thing to do. Bradstreet wrote movingly about the deaths of her young grandchildren and the burning of her house in 1666. These poems, in their quiet lyric intensity and in their powerful imagery, make daily colonial life extremely present for her readers. That she felt the power to privilege her daily experience in verse is remarkable. Boland asks, "Where did she get permission for this?" (185). It is a good question. Bradstreet's later poems carved new spaces of possibility. No longer derivative, Bradstreet's poetry—her marriage poems, for instance—may employ extended metaphors, such as the hunt, that originate in English Renaissance love sonnets, but the difference arrives in the occasion for her poems—her husband's absence. She turns what might be a familiar masculine image into her own. These later

poems "were sharp and musical and impossible to overlook" (Boland 187).

It is arguable that in this period Bradstreet's poetry became, as Josephine Piercy notes, an "outlet for pent-up emotions created by her environment" (*Anne Bradstreet* 116). Her passions for her husband, her grief over outliving her grandchildren, her deep sadness over the house fire that destroyed, as she attests, not only possessions but memories are expressed in these poems, where the poet also seeks a means of comprehension and synthesis, sometimes seeking the hand of God, to make sense of unruly situations beyond her control.

A great deal of Bradstreet's life was indeed beyond her control: her health, her early marriage, her emigration from England to America, the publication of an unready book. Through synthesis of her varied and often contradictory roles of daughter, wife, sister, mother, grandmother, Christian, and poet, she is able to locate a sense of a multidimensional self in which all experience is one. "She came to enact in her life and in her work a world of action, faith, expression, family, and ordinary adventure. . . . And so she generates a poem in which they are indivisible, from a sensibility that is not divided" (Boland 188–189).

The mother of eight children, Anne Bradstreet, her cheeks scarred from the smallpox that nearly killed her as a teenager, died at the age of 60. She was quite frail at the end of life, "wasted to skin and bone . . . much troubled with rheum," her son Simon wrote (quoted in Martin 76). She questioned and wrestled with Puritan ideas of God, of behavior, of the divisions between this world and the next, and sought her own definitions. As Wendy Martin writes, "Her faith was based on a profound desire to remain connected to life, whether in this world or the next. Repeatedly, she observes that if it were not for death and decay, earth would be heaven" (76).

Anne Bradstreet has had a profound impact on poetry, most notably in the 20th century and beyond. In 1959 John Berryman published a long poem entitled *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. In it, he conjures up and commingles with what he imagines to

be the spirit of Anne Bradstreet. Although the poem is a great technical feat and was considered masterful in its time, feminist scholars and poets alike have come to understand his construction of Bradstreet as merely that: a construction of a woman created by a man. Eavan Boland characterizes Berryman's quest as "the poet's voice usurping the very identity [Bradstreet's] he is seeking out" (178). Still, she admits, his poem drew Bradstreet to her attention when she was a young poet. More than 100 years before William Wordsworth would celebrate the common man, Bradstreet was celebrating common, everyday female experience, while also defending her abilities as a female poet. This, along with her observations on nature, has influenced contemporary women poets such as Eavan Boland, Mona Van Duyn, Mary Oliver, and Adrienne Rich. Bradstreet's legacy is this: that her work invites readers to identify with her, so that women poets of any era, when they read her, are strengthened.

"In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory" (1643)

In the proem, or preface, to this elegy for Queen Elizabeth I, Bradstreet faces the difficult task of placing herself and her tribute "mongst hundred hecatombs of roaring verse" (11). As she will later write in her famous poem "The Author to Her Book," Bradstreet employs the poet's conceit of poverty and humility. Bradstreet relies upon Queen Elizabeth's graceful "acclamations of the poor as rich" to "deem [her] rudeness [in writing the poem] is no wrong" (16–17). Because the queen never cast aspersions on the work of the poor, Bradstreet's own verse, which "bleating stands before thy royal hearse," might be just as welcomed by the queen as the famous works written on her behalf by Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, John Speed, and William Camden that Bradstreet references in the opening lines of the poem proper (12, 19–20). Even as Bradstreet acknowledges the greatness of these literary predecessors, she feels

confident enough in her own literary skill to add her own voice to theirs. Rather than returning to the conventional stance of humility often affected by young or new poets when faced with the daunting legacy of their predecessors, Bradstreet instead considers the grandness of Queen Elizabeth I to be deserving of additional praise, stating: "No Phoenix pen, nor Spenser's poetry / No Speed's nor Camden's learned history / Eliza's works, wars, praise, can e're compact" (19–21). Bradstreet's strategy is rather clever; instead of placing herself and her poem in direct comparison with those of more famous learned men, she instead makes the argument that there can never be enough praise of Queen Elizabeth I, and thus her offering must be welcomed and even necessary.

The aspect of Elizabeth that seems most appealing to Bradstreet appears early in the poem: "She hath wip'd off th' aspersions of her sex" (29). Elizabeth's position as a strong, admirable, even bellicose queen makes her a celebrated figure for women everywhere. Bradstreet attributes Spain's attack on Britain to Philip II's underestimation of a female ruler and considers Britain's sound defeat of the Spanish Armada to be a triumph over such sexist assumptions: "She taught them better manners, to their cost" (32). Interestingly, it is Queen Elizabeth's military record rather than other aspects of her reign that garners most attention from Bradstreet in her poem. She references the queen's ordered attack on Portugal under the command of Sir Francis Drake, the defeat of Philip II of Spain's armada, as well as the submission of the Irish under Hugh O'Neill, second earl of Tyrone, to the British Crown (44–47, 55–56). Elizabeth's military victories are attributed less to the men who carried them out and more to her own wisdom; Bradstreet compares her to Minerva and Pallas Athena, the Roman and Greek goddesses of wisdom, respectively (58, 60).

The poem concludes with its praise of Elizabeth as an extraordinary queen and exemplary symbol of women's potential: "Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long / But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong" (97–98).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603; the major works dedicated to her were published at least 20 years before Bradstreet penned her elegy. Why might Bradstreet have felt compelled to write “In Honour of . . . Queen Elizabeth”?
2. Bradstreet offers two epitaphs for Elizabeth. Compare them to one another. How do they differ in tone and subject matter? Consider them both in the context of the poem and in its particular celebration of Queen Elizabeth.
3. Compare Bradstreet’s praise of Elizabeth with Sor Juana’s “In Reply to a Gentleman from Peru.” What arguments against women do the two poets address? How do they counter these arguments?

“A Dialogue between Old England and New” (1643)

One of Bradstreet’s earliest poems, “A Dialogue between Old England and New” provides a different aesthetic and subject matter from the more personal and spiritual concerns that will occupy her later, more well-known works. The poem’s format, a dialogue, is rather unusual for Bradstreet, although it is certainly a traditional form. Bradstreet embodies two separate voices in the poem: Old England, who is characterized by a “wailing tone” and “mournful guise,” and New England, who, though her “humble child,” offers sage advice and guidance for the mother’s future. She casts the relationship between the colony and England as daughter and mother, respectively, and thus seems to naturalize their relationship. This dynamic, however, is ruptured in the final portion of the poem, in which New England calls for the end of monarchical rule and the shift to Parliament as the source of legal and moral authority.

As a dialogue, the poem allows Bradstreet not only to launch criticisms at England for the violence and bloodshed that have resulted from monarchical rule and religious intolerance for Puritans like Bradstreet who fled to America, but also to have Eng-

land respond to these charges. Almost like a lawyer in a court case trying England, Bradstreet provides a long list of specific crimes that Old England has committed, to include the execution of those touting royal bloodlines: Edward V and Richard, who were murdered by Richard III, and Lady Jane Grey, who was executed by Queen Mary (112–113). Aside from these murders, which were committed by those who wished to possess the British throne themselves, Bradstreet delves into the source of England’s woes: “punishments ordain’d on high” (85). Old England confesses her “sins—the broach of sacred Laws” (90). As a Puritan, Bradstreet identifies the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church as two corrupting factors that have brought about “Idolatry.” As specific examples of the means by which England has sinned, Old England delineates: “foolish superstitious adoration / Are lik’d and countenanc’d by men of might / The Gospel is trod down and hath no right / Church Offices are sold and bought for gain / That Pope had hope to find Rome here again / For Oaths and Blasphemies did ever ear / From Beezlebug himself such language hear” (92–98). New England’s response is rather militant: Burn all items associated with the Anglican and Catholic Churches and attack the seat of Catholicism, Rome (232–237, 266–281).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bradstreet is by no means the only early American author to focus on England’s religious intolerance or its supposed slide into moral depravity. Consider how the dialogue form of this poem compares with works of other authors such as JOHN WINTHROP and WILLIAM BRADFORD who make similar points in different formats.
2. How does the metaphor of family, used by Bradstreet to compare Old England to a mother and New England to a daughter, compare with THOMAS PAINE’s use of the family metaphor in *Common Sense*?
3. “A Dialogue between Old England and New” concludes, “Farewell, dear mother; Parliament, prevail” (294). What arguments does Bradstreet offer for the elimination of the succession of

kings? How does her argument for the destruction of monarchical rule in England compare to PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU's in "On the Causes of Political Degeneracy," BENJAMIN FRANKLIN's "An Edict by the King of Prussia," or Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*?

"The Prologue" (1650)

"The Prologue" introduces readers to Bradstreet's feminism and her subtle deployment of humility. This poem is a prime example of her ability to criticize the patriarchy while appealing to it through consistent claims of inferiority as a female poet.

The first four stanzas lure the reader through repeated claims of imperfection in the face of the great poets she admires. Bradstreet assures the reader that her "obscure lines," her lack of skill, and her "foolish, broken, blemished Muse" make her inferior simply because nature made her a woman. Unlike Demosthenes, who overcame a speech impediment through his art, she suggests her "weak or wounded brain" cannot be cured and is unable to compete with the poetry of men.

Then the tone shifts dramatically: "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits." Comparing the needle associated with domesticity to the typically masculine pen, she reveals the attitudes she anticipates from male readers. They will think either that she is lucky or that she stole the ideas. In a way, that is how Nathaniel Ward portrays her in his verse introduction to her own book.

Following the vein of her feminist argument, Bradstreet is still able to maintain the charming modesty of the early stanzas, but she also suggests that her poetry is more earthy and real than the overpolished work of men. Refusing the traditional laurel wreath ("I ask no bays"), she prefers the domestic herbs of here and now: "thyme or parsley," wholesome, humble. By maintaining her humility throughout the poem, she highlights the "pomposity and cruelty of those male writers and critics who disdain women" (Martin 32).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the poem's final image, which compares unrefined ore to gold. How does Bradstreet convey humility here? How does the image subvert typical assumptions of value?
2. Addressing the poem as an argument, locate and discuss Bradstreet's thesis.

"To the Memory of My Dear and Ever Honored Father" (1653)

As Bradstreet notes in the full title of the poem, her father, Thomas Dudley, passed away on July 31, 1653, at the age of 77. He had been the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for four separate terms and had served as deputy governor under JOHN WINTHROP, with whom he had several conflicts. In her elegy, Bradstreet acknowledges both aspects of her father's identity. She refers to his key role in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the following lines: "One of thy Founders, him New England know" and "True Patriot of this little Commonweal" (23, 27). Because of her father's notoriety, Bradstreet writes in the poem: "Nor was his name, or life lead so obscure / That pitty might some Trumpeters procure. / Who after death might make him falsly seen / Such as in life, no man could justly deem" (13–16). The lines work in two ways: They assure the reader that Dudley's fame and reputation will shield him from any other characterization, either by a devoted daughter or by those filled with "malice" and "envy" (11). In other words, Dudley's prominence, which makes him the target of those animated by "malice" and "envy," also protects him from them because he is too well known for false tales about him to be believed. That said, Bradstreet, too, is hampered in her elegy for her father; she cannot praise him too much for the same reason that others cannot chastise him or cast dispersions on his character.

Bradstreet eschews the traditional aspect of an elegy, which is to offer praise in remembrance and honor of the person who died. She does so not only because such a turn is in keeping with Puritan tra-

dition, but also because it helps to temper the feelings held by those who believed Dudley to be too desirous of the power that John Winthrop wielded over the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She writes: “Nor honour pufft him up, when he had part; / Those titles loathed, which some do too much love / For truly his ambition lay above” (36–38). Bradstreet’s father, a good Puritan, sets his sights above worldly accomplishments and rewards, for “he a Mansion had, prepar’d above” (50).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Bradstreet’s view of her father to John Winthrop’s characterization of Thomas Dudley in his journal.
2. How does Bradstreet’s description of her father compare with her other poem written for him, “To Her Father with Some Verses”? How does the theme of debt appear in both poems?
3. Offer an interpretation of the opening line of the poem: “By duty bound, and not by custome led.”
4. How does Bradstreet cope with the loss of her father in this poem compared with her later poems in which she expresses her feelings on the loss of her grandchildren?

“In Reference to Her Children, 23 June, 1659” (1659)

Bradstreet sustains a bird metaphor throughout this poem in which she captures a moment in her life when her role as mother is somewhat in flux. Of her eight children, “eight birds hatched in one nest,” she describes the current lives of the eldest four, who have matured, left home, and begun careers or families of their own. Although the bird imagery that casts leaving home as taking flight seems to make these movements seem natural and in accord with the progression of life, Bradstreet maintains a constant refrain for their return. Even of her first-born son, Bradstreet pleads, “Leave not thy nest, thy dam and sire / Fly back and sing amidst this choir” (11–12). The use of a natural metaphor—

birds leaving the nest and taking flight—undermines Bradstreet’s pleas for her children to return home, making this request seem both unlikely and unnatural. Tellingly, when Bradstreet details the lives of her second- and third-born children, both daughters, she is silent on the plea for their return. Perhaps because both daughters have married and created families of their own, Bradstreet cannot impose a mother’s wish on daughters who, too, have become mothers. She seems content that the firstborn daughter, who originally married and moved “Southward,” has “norward steered with fill sails” (18). The daughter’s proximity seems enough to content the mother bird, and yet of the second-born daughter, also married but living “where Aurora first appears,” Bradstreet makes no plea for a return home or a move closer to home (25).

Similarly, the gender expectations that a mother has for her “cocks” and “hens” appear yet again when Bradstreet details the life of the second-born son: “One to the academy flew / To chat among the learned crew; / Ambition moves still in his breast / That he might chant above the rest” (27–30). One can imagine the mother vicariously delighting in the ambitions of her son, and thus expressing pride as a parent in a manner more befitting Puritan women. Indeed, she seems to impose high expectations on the most recent son who has left home: “My fifth, whose down is yet scarce gone, / Is ’mongst the shrubs and bushes flown, / And as his wings increase in strength, / On higher boughs he’ll perch at length” (33–36). By imagining the son as a recently matured bird, “whose down is yet scarce gone,” Bradstreet makes her expectations for his success and achievements seem natural. When “his wings increase in strength,” Bradstreet anticipates that he will abandon the lowly position he currently occupies “’mongst the shrubs and bushes” for “higher boughs.”

Bradstreet unites the children when she discusses how she worries over them, even more than she did when they were still in her household and under her care and supervision. She lists a variety of dangers that might befall them, fearing that in protecting them too much she has kept them ignorant

of the perils that might lie ahead of them. These fears are quickly allayed, however, as Bradstreet shifts to the topic of her own inevitable flight to “a country beyond sight.” The poem concludes with the belief that in their tales of her and her love for them, Bradstreet “thus gone, amongst you I may live” (90).

For Discussion or Writing

1. As in her poem “To My Dear Children,” Bradstreet anticipates her own death, writing of it in a very frank and open manner. How does her treatment of a topic that understandably must be difficult for her children to read, much less contemplate, differ in this poem from that in “To My Dear Children”? To what extent does the form of the poem account for this difference?
2. What insights into 17th-century domestic life might readers derive from reading this poem?

“Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House July 10th, 1666” (1666)

The tension between the substantial, material world and the spiritual realm is again enacted in this poem, yet another elegy, but this one for her house and belongings turned to ash. The other, less noticeable tension at play in this poem, the one that seems impossible to untangle in all her work, lies in the reconciliation of domestic identity with her identity as a poet. Ultimately, the two tensions are intertwined here. The domestic sphere, the house, the place of Bradstreet's duty as a Puritan wife and mother, is gone.

When Bradstreet grieves for her home, she mourns also her own identity as a woman in her culture and in her religion. This is evident in some of the most moving lines of the poem: “Under thy roof no guest shall sit, / Nor at thy table eat a bit.” After cataloging many of the material objects that are also witness to marriage and family—the trunk, the chest—she arrives at this image of the absence of guests—hence, the absence of her hospitality and her ability to provide nourishment. The

house is not only her “dwelling place”; its importance lies deeper than that, in Bradstreet's particular relationship to her complex identification with domesticity.

In her early poem “The Prologue,” Bradstreet rejects the misogynist notion that she is better suited to traditionally female duties such as sewing than she is to writing. At the end of that poem, however, she privileges parsley or thyme, domestic herbs, over the laurel wreath thought, by men, to crown great poets. Later, in her “The Author to Her Book,” she conflates the act of writing with child rearing and domesticity even further: She dresses the child-book in “homespun” cloth. The “needle” and the “pen” are at odds, in that the expectations prescribed to women counter those offered to men. But Bradstreet finds ways to embrace the paradox as unifying.

As in this poem's catalog of what will never happen in this house, one way to read this poem is through its absences and omissions, essentially in what remains unsaid. Note that there is no reference in the poem to any place where she wrote: no desk, no special table, and no ink bottle. Bradstreet includes places where she lay and sat, but the closest she approaches to discussing writing is in the couplet “No pleasant tale shall e'er be told / Nor things recounted done of old.” Those are stories told, not poems, not books. A closer look at the poem's epigraphic subtitle, “Copied Out of a Loose Paper,” is quite telling. Her beloved books, her own poems in progress, her pen, her ink, all are gone; hence, she must write the poem on “loose paper” and start again, perhaps through the writing of this poem that laments the loss of her domestic space.

Worthy of note is her husband's absence. He was in London at the time and writes in his diary that his father-in-law's library of 800 books was destroyed, and that his own books and papers were lost. Anne, on the other hand, wakened by the fire's “thund'ring noise,” misses the furnishings, the comfort, the ability to provide for guests. This could be a strategic move to make the poem's speaker seem more common.

However painful the fire may be, for both poet and reader, Bradstreet's focus is on the lesson she must gain from tragedy. Here lies the poem's overt

tension. She moves from near personification of the beloved house to a litany of introspective questions accusing the speaker of caring too much for the things of this world. Ending on an affirmation of “that mighty Architect[’s]” “house on high” that awaits her, the poet seeks—and in this case, finds—some comfort in her faith.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the similarities between this poem and “The Flesh and the Spirit.” In each poem, how is heaven portrayed in comparison to earth? Compare the dialogue in this poem between two sides of the self and the dialogue between the two sisters in “The Flesh and the Spirit.”
2. Consider the importance of marking the date in the title of this poem and in the elegies to her grandchildren.
3. Compare Bradstreet’s resolve to deny the things of the material world for the treasures of heaven with MARY WHITE ROWLANDSON’S view of her own losses after her and her children’s captivity in *The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD*.

“On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet, Who Died on 16 November, 1669, Being But a Month, and One Day Old” (1669)

This poem marks the loss of two grandchildren in fewer than six months. In three years Anne Bradstreet herself will die, but now she grieves for her third grandchild taken by death, this one “no sooner came, but gone, and fall’n asleep.” The elegies for her granddaughters Elizabeth and Anne devote not more than two lines specifically to Christ or God; in this poem Bradstreet focuses much more on accepting God’s will, or at least trying to accept it.

The dead children are represented by “three flowers.” In each elegy, in fact, Bradstreet plants floral imagery: Anne is a “withering flower,” while in the elegy for Elizabeth the poet modifies Shakespeare’s famous sonnet: “Summer’s lease hath all too short a date” becomes, in her elegy, “buds new blown to have so short a date.” The baby

Simon is blown “i’ th’ bud.” Bradstreet rationalizes the senseless deaths by offering that they were “cropped by th’ Almighty’s hand; yet is He good.” The semicolon after *hand* is significant. It marks a quick shift in perception, tone, and temperament. Referred to as a caesura, the abrupt division of the line seems too swift, too hasty. More tellingly, the word order of the second half of the line, “yet is He good,” inverts the subject and verb when it is not necessary for the rhyme or meter of the poem; the line would sound the same either way. We invert subject and verb when we form questions. It is very possible that Bradstreet intends this not to be so much a sea change as an expression of doubt.

Throughout the poem she implores herself and the reader to accept God’s will quietly and not question it. But this advice rings hollow—what she knows they should do, but not what she feels. This is especially apparent in the line “Let’s say He’s merciful as well as just.” The poet could have used countless words to evoke certainty here, if that is what she was after; “let’s say” could become “we know,” for instance. But the construction as it is is more honest, more human. She knows they are supposed to say these things, but she still has trouble understanding God’s mercy or justice in the deaths of these children.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do you account for lines 5 and 6, “With dreadful awe before Him let’s be mute, / Such was His will, but why, let’s not dispute,” given the presence of the poem? Is Bradstreet sincere in calling for silence and acceptance of God’s will?
2. Compare the tone, imagery, and ultimate message in this poem with Bradstreet’s other two marking the premature deaths of her grandchildren. In what ways are they similar? In what ways do they differ?

“As Weary Pilgrim” (1669)

Three years prior to her death, Bradstreet composed “As Weary Pilgrim,” a contemplative poem

anticipating the ultimate end of all her “sins,” “cares,” and “sorrows” (20). As the poem opens, Bradstreet casts herself in the role of “weary pilgrim, now at rest” (1). The metaphor is an apt one because the Puritans referred to themselves as pilgrims once they arrived in America; by using this term, Bradstreet identifies the religious context for her poem as well as the conventional sense of the term, one who has journeyed. As does a bird, she “hugs with delight her silent nest,” grateful for having all dangers in the “past, and travails done” (2, 6). Once again, the pilgrim metaphor operates on two levels: It represents the toils and strife that are humans’ fate in a postlapsarian world, and it signifies the reflections of a person for whom death is nearer than life.

For Bradstreet’s “weary pilgrim,” life offers nothing more than suffering, psychological, spiritual, and physical. The second stanza represents the landscape itself as hostile: filled with a “burning sun,” “stormy rains,” “briars and thorns,” and “hungry wolves.” For the pilgrim anticipating the end of life, these antagonistic elements no longer pose a threat because “He erring paths no more shall tread” (11). The dangers of an earthly existence are identified as the results of treading a sinful path, or living a life of sin, which was considered to be an inevitability for Puritans given the fall of humankind with their expulsion from Eden. As further support for Bradstreet’s link between suffering on earth and the sinfulness of the flesh, the second stanza concludes with the metaphor of diet: “Nor wild fruits eat instead of bread” (12). Readers should be attentive to the presence of the morally corrupt adjective *wild* as a descriptor of fruits as well as the marked absence of any adjective describing the bread. Bradstreet makes clear that the abandonment of the “erring paths” is intimately linked to abstaining from a diet of “wild fruits.” The weary pilgrim is no longer tempted by the ways of the physical world, nor victim to its devices for suffering.

This theme of renunciation of the physical world for the spiritual gifts of the afterlife informs the remainder of the poem, in which Bradstreet, her

“clay house mold’ring away,” anticipates the day when the “corrupt carcass” is transformed into a “glorious body [that] shall rise” (22, 35–36). The resurrection of the body is a power reserved “by Christ alone” (38). Such a moment when “soul and body shall unite” becomes the poem’s ultimate hope as it shifts from the early images of decay and suffering in a hostile environment to “lasting joys” that “ear ne’er hear nor tongue e’er told” (39, 41–42).

For Discussion or Writing

1. As Bradstreet does, Emily Dickinson imagines Death or Christ as a bridegroom in her famous “Because I Could Not Stop for Death.” Compare the use of this characterization of either death or Christ in the two poems.
2. How does Bradstreet’s anticipated spiritual deliverance relate to that of her fellow Puritan and poet EDWARD TAYLOR in “The Soul’s Groan to Christ for Succor”?

“The Author to Her Book” (1678)

Responding to the publication of her book without her knowledge, Anne Bradstreet narrates the process by which her brother-in-law and minister—“friends, less wise than true”—planned to print the book in England. Through an extended metaphor, a conceit, she represents her book as a child. Addressing this child-book, this “ill-formed offspring of [her] feeble brain,” heightens the stakes for a poet and mother in Puritan society, writing about poetry and child rearing in such a way that they are inseparable, hovering together as metaphor. Although the poem’s conceit structure is influenced by the English metaphysical poets Bradstreet read, it differs greatly in subject. Bradstreet’s ability to cast herself as the book’s multifaceted mother, and to do so modestly, lovingly, and cruelly, performs feats of wit that rival any of her predecessors’.

Although the poet initially wants to reject the book for being prematurely published/born, hid-

eous, and deformed, she cares for it because it is hers: “Yet being my own, at length affection would / Thy blemishes amend, if so I could.” She lovingly attempts to revise, noticing the way her alterations make matters worse. Aware of the uneven meter in her early poems, Bradstreet cleverly puns on the word *feet* in the line “I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet.” As the poet dresses the book-child, she can find nothing but “homespun cloth,” an image that connects domestic life to the act of versifying, comparing the cloth’s weft and weave to the placement of lines and the use of language. They are inseparable. Unlike children raised in a home, however, this child significantly has no father, emphasizing the solitary act of writing by the female author. In the poem Bradstreet acknowledges that she alone has created something fatherless, imperfect, cherished, and worried over.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you see the poem’s final act, sending the book-child out the door, as abandonment or as a release of the book back to the public? Is it an act of submission, or is it a recognition of the book as a separate, imperfect entity?
2. What role does Bradstreet envision for the poet or for the audience in this poem? How does this role differ in her poems directly addressed to her flesh and blood children such as “To My Dear Children” or “In Reference to Her Children, 23 June, 1659”?
3. Compare Bradstreet’s sense of herself as a poet and the role that poetry should have to that of Sor Juana, who writes of herself as a poetess in “In Reply to the Gentleman from Peru.”

“To Her Father with Some Verses” (1678)

As “The Author to Her Book” does, this poem employs a conceit to compare the relationship between Bradstreet and her father to financial indebtedness. The sonnet is tight and quick-moving, employing the language of finance used in the 17th century with words like *principle*, *yield*,

and *stock*. It does not behave like an Elizabethan or Italian sonnet but is held together by the swift structure of heroic couplets, common to much of Bradstreet’s poetry, every two lines rhyming together. The form is thus at odds with the poem’s content because Bradstreet flouts the traditional structure of the sonnet even as the poem itself displays a very traditional sense of filial obligation. She seems to derive the sense of singularity that allows her to divorce herself from these traditional sonnet forms by focusing on her singularity in repaying her debt to her father: “Such is my debt, I may not say forgive / But as I can, I’ll pay it while I live.”

In the body of the poem, Bradstreet never alludes specifically to a father and a daughter; the title is the only part of the poem that tells its reader what kind of relationship the conceit represents (Rosenmeier 42). Bradstreet recognizes, from the beginning of her apostrophe to this man, the tremendous debt she owes to her father. He is “dear” to her in more ways than one: beloved and costly to repay.

Her characteristic modesty weaves its way through this poem, but it is more somber than in “The Prologue.” Burdened with the awareness that her father’s investment (spiritual, emotional, educational) in her has not paid off in the way she would have hoped, she questions her own worth. She feels she has squandered what he has given her; now it “amounts but to this crumb.” Her “stock,” her worth, is “so small” her only means of partial repayment is “this simple mite.” Although not entirely clear, a reasonable interpretation of “this crumb” and “this simple mite” could be this very poem, this speck of verse that is anything but simple.

Aware, in the sonnet’s turn, that she is the only one who can pay off her filial bond, she proclaims that it is a lifelong debt to continue paying until her death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider why Bradstreet feels the debt will not be paid until she dies, rather than in the hereafter. How does this relate to other Puritan notions of filial obligation?

2. Compare Bradstreet's emotional debt to her father in this poem to the dynamic she reveals in "To the Memory of My Dear and Ever Honored Father."
3. Consider this poem in comparison to "The Author to Her Book," in which Bradstreet describes herself as "poor." How does this use of the language of economic status work for familial relationships or those that exist between an artist and her work?

"The Flesh and the Spirit" (1678)

The verse dialogue was quite popular among poets in Bradstreet's time. On the other side of the Atlantic, Andrew Marvell composed verse dialogues between the resolved soul and created pleasure, and between the body and the soul. There are parallels between their poems, notes the critic Wendy Martin, but "Bradstreet stresses the *pleasures of eternity*" (52).

Curiously, Bradstreet's experience with her own sick body only briefly enters into her dialogue between the flesh and the spirit, without acknowledging that in periods of illness she felt closest to God. In her poem both Flesh and Spirit are portrayed more through the desires that separate them and the pleasures offered by their respective realms. Flesh is the embodiment of desire and pride. There are pride and anger in Spirit, too, but she is a figure ever looking upward. Bradstreet seems mostly concerned with the interaction between the two figures and the rhetoric each uses to convince the other of the superiority of earth or heaven. They are complementary parts of the same whole.

It is important to note that the poem's speaker hears the conversation; rather than present the dialogue on its own, Bradstreet uses an intermediary party who listens in. Flesh and Spirit are two sisters, twins with different fathers: The father of Flesh is Adam, and the father of Spirit is God. They bicker. They fight. Spirit refers to Flesh's disingenuous nature: "Thou speak'st me fair, but hat'st me sore, / Thy flatt'ring shows I'll trust no more." Flesh, on the other hand, wonders whether Spirit's high-

mindness is mere hallucination, grasping "at shadows which are not." In short, they are typical sisters, with a bit more enmity between them than most.

Flesh berates her sister for having no substantial existence, for living on "Nothing but meditation." Her attempts to convince Spirit to enjoy the pleasures of the earth at first surprisingly refer to qualities many value highly: industry and honor. But these are tricks; industry has its rewards, and honor confers fame. In her answer, Spirit reminds her sister of all the times she tricked her in the past. She has sworn to defeat her. Wendy Martin explains that "in the Christian ethos," the battle between body and soul "is resolved only with the destruction of the body" (51), and Spirit desires to be the victor. Spirit's passionate description of heaven differs little in substance from the attempts Flesh makes to convince her sister to give in to secular pleasures. Both places are described in terms of this world: cities, gold, pearl, what can be gained there, beauty, sparkle, pleasure. Martin notes, "Her belief in heaven was actually a sublimated expression of her love of life on earth" (6).

For a poet so in love with this world, it is surprising that the struggle between the flesh and the spirit is easily won by Spirit, the figure who, once she defeats her sister, will be crowned, in her victory, with a laurel wreath, not parsley or thyme, the wreaths requested in Bradstreet's "Prologue." In this, her most assured presentation of Puritan ideology, the poet's reservations are evident.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the values expressed in Bradstreet's "Prologue" and "The Flesh and the Spirit." How are earthly concerns portrayed? How are the skies portrayed?
2. How does Bradstreet differ from Edward Taylor in perceptions of the flesh?

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children" (1678)

Although Anne Bradstreet successfully gave birth to eight children, this poem is evidence of her very

real fear of death in childbirth, and the frequency of such deaths among 17th-century women. According to Rosamond Rosenmeier, “Since mortality rates for both mother and infant were high, the birth event was fraught with peril, but so too was it laced with significance. Prayer preceded sexual intercourse and accompanied the newborn into the world” (19). Given that the spiritual and physical importance of these events was so high, Anne Bradstreet seems the perfect author to intertwine them. Again, we witness the poet’s complex integration of a female act with the traditionally male act of writing poetry. Strikingly, the poem reads as one written by a soldier going into battle, in effect the male equivalent, in mortality rate, of giving birth. In the form of a farewell letter, Bradstreet honestly speaks of those fears, “not,” as Adrienne Rich observes, “from dread of what lies after death, but from the thought of leaving a husband she loves and children half-reared” (xvii).

Addressed to her husband, Simon, this poem points to a relationship of equals, the woman here wise and strong. She speaks with authority and bravery about death and tries to comfort her husband with her recognition of the grim situation they may face. Theirs is a relationship of equals, uncommon at the time. Her use of the term *friend* suggests partnership and true fondness. Worthy of note is the exclusion of men from the infant’s delivery in the 17th century. Should she die, Bradstreet recognizes, they may not have access to each other beforehand.

Bradstreet asks her husband to “look to my little babes, my dear remains. / And if thou love thyself, or loved’st me, / These O protect from stepdame’s injury.” She pragmatically recognizes the possibility of remarriage. Customarily, Puritan widowers in New England did not live alone; her husband would—and did, after her eventual death—need the help of a woman in his home; the stepdame was as inevitable as death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the ways children replace their absent parents in this poem and in “A Letter to Her Husband.”
2. How does the kind of motherhood addressed here relate to the motherhood presented in “The Author to Her Book”?
3. Imagine Bradstreet’s poem functioning in the same way as HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER’s advice to young women in *The Coquette* or *The Boarding School*. How do the two writers imagine roles for women across the span of a century in America? Are their ideas different across time? Does religion play such an important role for both authors in defining the position that women can and should occupy?

“To My Dear and Loving Husband” (1678)

Anne Bradstreet’s love poems to her husband shine because they surprise her readers. Taking on the passionate forms of the Renaissance poets Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney before her, in writing love poetry to her husband she steps out of the boundaries set for Puritan women and sets foot in more masculine occupations. She subverts the roles prescribed to her. Another way these poems surprise, especially this one, is that they are poems rooted in marriage. Unlike Sidney and Spenser, Bradstreet celebrates a love that is attainable and continuous. In so doing, she refreshes the genre while still utilizing traditional constructions and well-worn tropes.

“To My Dear and Loving Husband” has a logic to it, an if-then construction. Each heroic couplet is its own logical unit in the argument the poem sets forth. If the first line of the couplet is about the husband’s love for the wife, the second line will be also, and then the next line will switch back to the wife, each line building toward the poem’s concluding “then” moment, when the speaker, part wife, part cavalier, reveals to the husband through reason that they should continue loving each other in order to find, through love, eternal life. It is a tightly ordered poem. Curiously, it is two lines away from being a full sonnet and seems somewhat incomplete.

As a cavalier poet does, Bradstreet compares notes with an audience, but it is an imagined audience of “ye women,” not men. The common tropes

of “mines of gold” and riches are deployed but made new because the acts of mining or producing riches had previously been reserved for men trying to impress women. Tackling these tropes, as well as the love unquenched by a river, Bradstreet has the freedom to compose in New England the kind of poem men like Donne and Marvell write in her old England.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In this poem Bradstreet refers to a love she “can in no way repay.” How does this debt differ from the one described in “To Her Father with Some Verses”?
2. The poem concludes with a move to life after death, guaranteed by their love. Compare this notion with the shift away from worldly pleasures suggested in “The Flesh and the Spirit.” Which is closer to Puritan doctrine?
3. Compare the relationship Bradstreet has with her husband, as indicated in this poem, with Edward Taylor’s courtship poem for his future wife, Elizabeth, entitled “This Dove and Olive Branch to You.”

“A Letter to Her Husband, Absent Upon Public Employment” (1678)

Leading on, it seems, from the two-in-one premise set up in “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” Bradstreet moves toward a poignant cry in “A Letter to Her Husband Upon Public Employment.” Previously, that image served as exaltation of the couple’s love, ultimately persuading the husband to “persevere” in their love. “A Letter to Her Husband,” however, responds to a greater strain, her husband’s lengthy absences from Ipswich to work in Boston, and her despair without him. Again we see the image of two as one, phrased as a reminder—“If two be one, then surely thou and I”—but now it is followed by a question of lament, rather than a celebration: “How stayest thou there, while I at Ipswich lie?” The two-as-one theme occurs again in “Another [Letter to Her Husband].” If two are one, Rosamond Rosenmeier suggests,

then each member takes an equal part in the union (116). Bradstreet asserts her importance in the relationship, which makes these poems seem at once particularly modern for a woman, while also echoing the techniques and themes used by male poets in England, bravely presenting them through a female perspective.

In the two-verse “Letter[s] to Her Husband upon Public Appointment” Bradstreet’s characterization of her relationship with her husband is at once spiritual and natural, acknowledging the physicality of their union. In the first, she portrays herself as the earth, and he as the sun, who, when he is away, benights her days, leaving her chilled in a frozen landscape: “My chilled limbs now numb lie forlorn.” His absence, read through the metaphor of the zodiac, creates the winter (Capricorn), and his presence, as her sun, carries in the summer (Cancer). Some critics view the sun image as a pun on the Son, implying that their union is one sanctioned by Christ and that her husband is a guiding force in her life. Bradstreet also references Genesis with her final lines, “flesh of thy flesh, bone of thy bone,” suggesting that their union is ordained by God, created by God.

But this comparison to prelapsarian Adam and Eve also conjures, quite literally, the reality of the flesh. It is through flesh that she remembers and welcomes her husband home. When he is away, she remembers him through their children, “those fruits which through thy heat I bore.” Through this very frank recognition of the couple’s sexuality and parenthood, Bradstreet conveys a recognition of the cycle of life and the gifts of the body. She sees in their children “true living pictures of their father’s face.” Likewise, in the image of the “glowing breast, / The welcome house of him my dearest guest,” Bradstreet simultaneously addresses physical desire and the heart beating inside that breast.

The second letter to her husband presents the marriage as natural by comparing it to varied animal species’ reaction to separation from their mate. By beginning with the image of the deer, she hearkens back to images of the hunt often used in 16th-century love sonnets written by men, such as Wyatt’s “Whoso List to Hunt.” But here, it is

the doe seeking out her buck, waiting, hoping to detect some sign of his return. She thus subverts the common, masculine trope, while also lamenting her husband's absence. Comparing her state to the mullet fish thought to leap, suicidally, to shore when her mate is caught, Bradstreet expresses a level of sorrow deeper than in the other marriage poems. She feels she "seem[s] no wife" without her husband's physical presence.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The last two lines of each poem have a different rhythm than those that precede them. Instead of five stresses, there are four. Why do you think Bradstreet crafts her poem this way? How does this rhythm affect the ending?
2. Small words like *here*, *there*, *where*, *thence*, and *hence* are very important to these poems. In their use, does Bradstreet ultimately conflate their separate meanings? In other words, do these repeated markers dissolve the difference between them?
3. JOHN ADAMS AND ABIGAIL ADAMS spent several years apart while he was functioning as an emissary for the fledgling republic. Compare the letters between John and Abigail Adams with Bradstreet's "letter" to her husband. How do they imagine their relationship?

"In Memory of My Dear Grandchild, Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased August, 1665, Being a Year and a Half Old" and "In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet, Who Deceased June 20, 1669, Being Three Years and Seven Months Old" (1678)

In her marriage poems and in these poems marking the death of her grandchildren, Bradstreet is perceived by contemporary readers to portray the role of loving wife and mother. But Puritan dogma warned that earthly love may distract the flock from their duty and love of God. Notes Wendy Martin: "Although they accepted the necessity of marriage, Puritans worried that conjugal love

would tempt the married couple to lose sight of God. . . . Similarly, it was important not to love one's children excessively" (69). She cites Benjamin Wadsworth's treatise in 1712: "Let this caution be minded, that they don't love inordinately, because death will soon part them" (quoted in Martin 69). According to this ideology, Bradstreet loves too much the things of this world, and doing so constitutes a transgression.

By lamenting the loss of her grandchildren, Anne Bradstreet seeks some sense of reason for their departure, a lesson about attachment. Not only does poetry provide her the "outlet" that Josephine Piercy writes of, but we can see the poet's striving to come to terms with her grief and having trouble doing so. The poetic form of these poems is the elegy, whose purpose is to lament and "find consolation in the contemplation of some permanent principle" (Preminger 215). However, locating a sense of consolation proves difficult with each of these elegies. The lessons seem thin compared with the enormity of her grief.

One could say that the frequency of deaths among children in the 17th century may have necessitated the doctrine of not loving one's children too much, a protective measure against grief. Bradstreet's elegies present contemporary readers with the harsh reality of child mortality in the Massachusetts colony. But the poems are also significant because Bradstreet recognizes the tragedy of her condition: As her full life is nearing its close, her grandchildren are mown down, having barely lived. It goes against what is assumed to be the natural order of things.

The elegy for her grandchild Elizabeth takes its form as a sonnet with a complicated rhyme scheme. Most of the lines are ordered in iambic pentameter meter, which helps contain the poet's sorrow. All but one. In the final line, which attempts to confirm God's reason, which is beyond our earthly control, "Is by his hand alone that guides nature and fate," the rhythmic structure breaks down. Instead of the five-beat line structure of the rest of the poem, this final line has six stresses, and the meter is far less regular. In resigning the baby's death to the sphere of God and accepting his power

and control, Bradstreet displays uncertainty via the line's irregularity. It is as if the poet is trying to make herself believe that the religiously acceptable solution should dry her tears.

In the elegy for her grandchild Anne, the poet's grief is even more palpable in her images of mutability. She recognizes she has pinned hopes on "fading things" and likens the child to "a bubble, or the brittle glass, / Or like a shadow turning as it was." The bubble will burst, the glass so fragile it will break, and the turning shadow—her grandchild a mere shade, and then—one turn and she is gone. These lines deeply grieve for the child's absence as they mourn the transient, brittle nature of life on earth. The poet seeks consolation in the proximity of her own death, which will reunite them.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In both elegies to her granddaughters, Bradstreet uses the term *lent*. Discuss the different meanings of the term and how they contribute to the poem.
2. Compare the manner in which Bradstreet treats the deaths of her granddaughters to her treatment of that of her grandson in "On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet." Do her poems reveal gender expectations for them?
3. Cotton Mather attributes deaths to God's judgment in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. How does his belief differ from Bradstreet's as demonstrated in these two elegies to her deceased granddaughters?

"To My Dear Children" (1867)

Some time near her death Bradstreet composed a short prose memoir in the form of a letter to aid her children in their spiritual development after her departure. It was published long after her death. Ever modest, Bradstreet provides an apology: "This was written in much sickness and weakness, and is very weakly and imperfectly done, but if you can pick any benefit out of it, it is the mark which I aimed at." This is the last sentence of the letter. Critics make note of the absence of the forceful

zeal we find in other Puritan works. Bradstreet only wants her grown children to "pick any benefit out of" her letter. She is not aiming to change their lives or immediately save their souls. Rosamond Rosenmeier observes that "nowhere do we meet a jeremiad; nowhere does Bradstreet rail at her readers, even when her readers are family members to whom she is writing instructions about how to live their lives" (4). Bradstreet's own experience of doubt and affliction narrated in "To My Dear Children" is key to her understanding of struggle's role in the pilgrimage of any soul. The letter is a thoughtful and revealing work of prose and has proven to be one of the most important documents to help biographers and critics understand Bradstreet's life, childhood, theological outlook, and response to the New World.

Her memoir reveals the undecorated life examined. Here we are not witnessing a poet in her effort to maintain the measure of a line or adhere to form. Openly confronting her early doubts and afflictions, Bradstreet presents the source for her poems' patterns of observation or grief followed by resignation and acceptance. She finds a direct relationship through her life between affliction or hardship and what she views as deepening her relationship with God:

Among all my experiences of God's gracious dealings with me, I have constantly observed this, that He hath never suffered me long to sit loose from Him, but by one affliction or other hath made me look home. . . . I have no sooner felt my heart out of order, but I have expected correction for it.

Every hardship and illness is a "correction" for turning away. Seen through this lens, the hasty lessons provided in her elegies become perhaps more understandable; she is trying to come to terms with loss that she interprets as a divine lesson. This is symptomatic of the Puritan notion of the elect: that they are God's chosen people, so they must be the ones most guided by God. However, Bradstreet imagines that her Puritan contemporaries' experience of the divine is more complete: "I have often been per-

plexed that I have not found that constant joy in my pilgrimage and refreshing which I supposed most of the servants of God have.” At least she is honest.

Her honesty in this letter sinks deeper than what any other Puritan would admit. She confesses her doubt, “many times by atheism how I could know whether there was a God.” She then convinces herself of God’s presence through observing the ordered beauty of the earth and seasons, “the daily providing for this great household upon the earth.” Bradstreet also discloses her early doubts of the Puritan elect. She asks, “Yet why may not the Popish religion be the right? They have the same God, the same Christ, the same word. They only interpret it one way, we another.” These doubts reveal the mind of an independent thinker. Although she casts herself as “an untoward child” of God, she conveys throughout this letter a sense of self-examination, awareness, and introspective theology.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bradstreet interprets the act of writing this letter as going through the labor of birth again. Contrast this idea to the final sentence of the letter, and discuss how freedom plays in her understanding of her role in her children’s lives.
2. How does the poet’s presentation of heaven and hell in this letter compare to those conveyed by the Puritan fathers such as John Winthrop?

“For Deliverance from a Fever” (1867)

In this poem, published posthumously, Bradstreet ultimately praises God for his redemption of her, drawing heavily on the Puritan interpretation of the body’s illness. Because Puritans were ever alert for signs of God’s grace or disfavor as indications of an individual’s position as a member of the elect, illness took on a spiritual dimension. One was not merely ill, but rather being punished by God or else being given the opportunity to search one’s soul and purge oneself and one’s body of the evils associated with the flesh and with life on earth. Bradstreet opens the poem with this double sense of illness in the third line when she refers to “pains

within and out.” One could interpret this description of her illness both as the physical agony she endured and as the spiritual crisis she underwent.

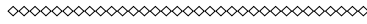
Bradstreet draws upon Puritan belief by casting these physical symptoms within a spiritual light: “Beclouded was my soul with fear / Of thy displeasure sore, / Nor could I read my evidence / Which oft I read before” (9–10). The term *beclouded* is worthy of mention because it is a visual and thus physical means of describing something that exists beyond the material world. A beclouded sky is a sky crowded by darkening clouds; Bradstreet uses this visual image to explain how her fear overwhelmed her soul, an intangible and invisible aspect of her. This fear was so great that it rendered invisible the link between the physical (her illness) and the spiritual (the state of her soul), thus the line “Nor could I read my evidence.” Perhaps the fear of God’s “displeasure sore,” or more specifically the anxiety that stems from the belief that her illness might be a harsh sentence from God, causes her to lose the ability to consider the spiritual implications of her fever.

In her documentation of the prayers and pleas she offered to God during her illness, Bradstreet certainly gives evidence of the interpretation of her illness as a means of purging her body of its evils. Bradstreet refers to the illness as a trial, a test of her faith: “Though know’st my heart, and hast me tried” (15). She repeats the very pleas for healing that she offered up while ill, and they are for her soul, for the very source of her spiritual salvation. “O heal my soul . . . though flesh consume to nought” (17–18). Tellingly, despite her prayers for her soul and her praise of God’s mercy, Bradstreet does not directly mention spiritual renewal but instead the termination of her corporeal pain and suffering. Bradstreet writes, “Thy rod Thou didst remove / And spared my body frail” (21–22).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Bradstreet’s spiritual view of illness with Cotton Mather’s as evidenced in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, which recounts the Salem witch trials. How do the two writers address the Puritan connection between the physical and spiritual realms?

2. Unlike in other poems, in this poem Bradstreet employs direct quotations to represent her interactions with God. How do these reported prayers differ from the poem as a whole, which can be viewed as a prayer of deliverance?



**FURTHER QUESTIONS ON
BRADSTREET AND HER WORK**

1. Several of Bradstreet's poems address the issue of personal tragedy, whether it be an illness, the loss of a house, or the loss of a loved one. Examining a few of these poems together, what conclusion might you draw about how Bradstreet copes with loss? How do her views of loss relate to the Puritan belief that one should shun aspects of worldly existence in favor of the rewards of heaven?
2. Bradstreet is a lone female voice in early American poetry. How does she cast herself as a writer in her poetry? To what extent are her poems limited by the restrictions placed on women?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Anne Bradstreet. Available online. URL: <http://www.annebradstreet.com/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.

Anne Bradstreet Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/colleges/artsands/langandlit/bradstreet/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.

Blackstock, Carrie Galloway. "Anne Bradstreet and Performativity." *Early American Literature* 32, no. 3 (1997): 222-248.

Boland, Eavan. "Finding Anne Bradstreet." In *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*, edited by Jonathan F. S. Post. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Gordon, Charlotte. *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005.

Martin, Wendy. *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Piercy, Josephine. *Anne Bradstreet*. New York: Twayne, 1965.

———. "Introduction." In *The Tenth Muse (1650), Facsimile Edition*. By Anne Bradstreet. Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1965.

Preminger, Alex. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Enlarged ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Rich, Adrienne. "Anne Bradstreet and Her Poetry." *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, edited by Jeannine Hensley. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967.

Rosenmeier, Rosamond. *Anne Bradstreet Revisited*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991.

White, Elizabeth Wade. *Anne Bradstreet: "The Tenth Muse"*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Woodbridge, John. "Epistle to the Reader." In *The Tenth Muse (1650), Facsimile Edition*. By Anne Bradstreet. Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1965.

Laurie Clements Lambeth



CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN

(1771–1810)

Of all the forms of injustice, that is the most egregious which makes the circumstances of sex a reason for excluding one half of mankind from all those paths which lead to usefulness and honor.

(*Alcuin: A Dialogue*)

Born on January 17, 1771, to Quaker parents in Philadelphia, Charles Brockden Brown grew up in a liberal household filled with books. Because of his poor health, he was oftentimes indoors during his childhood and expressed an early penchant for writing essays and poetry. Writing would be the dominant force in Brown's life, which he referred to as a means of expressing a "soaring passion and intellectual energy" (Watts 2). His father, Elijah, and mother, Mary Armitt Brown, enrolled him in the Friends Latin School at the age of 11, and he studied with Robert Proud. Six years later, at the age of 17, he graduated.

Because Quakers were opposed to college education, Brown honored his parents' request and worked for six years in the law offices of Alexander Wilcocks. Brown vented his frustration over his obligation to study a career that he deemed to narrow his intellect: "I should rather think that he can only derive pleasure, and consequently improvement, from the study of laws, who knows and wishes to know nothing else" (Watts 32). However, he ultimately disappointed them when he decided not to pursue a legal career (Korobkin 723). He explained to his family about his moral objections to working in a profession that would have him defending guilty parties or furthering unjust causes.

Although Brown did not pursue a career as a lawyer, the critic Laura Korobkin believes that Brown's legal work significantly informed his fic-

tion writing. More specifically, Korobkin argues that Brown's familiarity with the law shaped *Wieland*, not only in its meditations on questions of judgment, but also in its very structure of Clara's functioning as both a lawyer and a witness. The legal cases presented in Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and Sir Geoffrey Gilbert's *The Law of Evidence* create the foundation for Brown's fictional treatment of the laws of evidence and the fallibility of eyewitnesses and their testimony (Korobkin 724–725). Many critics believe Brown drew on the gruesome tale of James Yates, a religious fanatic who under God's guidance killed his wife and four children in 1781, as the basis for *Wieland*. The law and its processes of determining truth and guilt would be the topic for other novels that attempted to plumb the psychological depths of its characters such as Arthur Meryn and the deceitful Welbeck.

In 1787, at the age of 16, Brown began the first of what would become a series of efforts undertaken throughout his short life to cultivate and support the talents of budding writers. This first endeavor, called the Belles Letters Club, sought to foster and support the literary talents of its members. When he delivered the keynote address for the club, Brown spoke of reason as "the authority which exerts over obedience" but insisted that it needed to be tempered by "the invigorating influence of the fancy" (Watts 29). His biographer Steven Watts believes

that Brown's advice regarding the balance between reason and fancy was quite personal. According to Watts, Brown was prone to "attention-seeking, despairing outbursts [that] seem to have become an emotional habit by his early twenties" (52). These feelings of despair affected his writing, as he repeatedly boasted to friends about various literary projects that he would begin and then promptly abandon (Watts 52, 78). In his correspondence, Brown first addresses the concept of a divided self, a private versus a public, that would manifest itself in his first novel, *Skylwalker* (Watts 79). Brown's letters also reveal the deep anxiety he suffered around writing. Of the young writer's emotional vacillations, Watts writes that "Brown's frustrated psychological energy, literary commitments, and desire for social success comprised a coiled motivational spring. Its release powered a tremendous outpouring of fiction during the last two years of the century" (80).

When Brown left Philadelphia and moved to New York in 1796, he relied upon the introductions made by his dear friend Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith. Smith had met Brown in his hometown of Philadelphia and suggested that when Brown moved to New York, he consider joining a group of liberal-minded individuals called the Friendly Club. The chief pastime of the Friendly Club was to discuss the works of many of the radical authors of his time, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin's *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* (Ringe 19). Aside from the friendships Brown made through this club, he could rely upon the playwright William Dunlap, who would later write the first biography of Brown, to offer him support in launching his literary career. Indeed, the combined support of these two close friends, Dr. Smith and Mr. Dunlap, encouraged Brown to write his first book, *Alcuin: A Dialogue*, which advocated women's rights (19). Smith was Brown's publisher for this two-part text that appeared in April 1798.

Both Brown and Smith fell ill with yellow fever, contracted from an Italian physician who lived briefly in Smith's home. Dr. Smith's exposure proved fatal. Brown's good friend Dunlap provided him with a place to mourn their mutual friend's death, as well as recover from the fever. Remark-

ably, in that same year (1798), Brown published *Wieland* and seems to have written most, if not all, of *Arthur Mervyn*. The following year he began publishing and editing the *Monthly Magazine and American Review*. In the same year, Brown renamed the magazine *The American Review and Literary Journal*, and it remained in print under this new title until 1802. In the following year, he published two political pamphlets opposing the Louisiana Purchase. These notable pamphlets gave him the kind of public attention that he had previously failed to garner for his literary works. In this pamphlet, Brown assumes the persona of a French counselor of state who writes to Napoléon about the strategic and economic advantages of the Louisiana territory (Ringe 130).

In that same year (1803), Brown launched a new periodical, the *Literary Magazine and American Register*. In his "Editor's Address to the Public," he proclaimed the goals of his work: "In ages like this, when the foundations of religion and morality have been so boldly attacked, it seems necessary . . . to be particularly explicit as to the path which the editor means to pursue. He therefore avows himself to be, without equivocation or reserve, the ardent friend and willing champion of the Christian religion . . . [and] shall scrupulously aim at the promotion of public and private virtue" (reported in Watts 155–156). The morally ambiguous eponymous character, Arthur Mervyn, seemed a figure of the past in Brown's dedication to promoting and publishing works that contained moral virtues. His often anthologized short story "Somnambulism, a Fragment," first appeared in this new magazine in 1805. In that tale, the narrator finds himself lacking the kind of self-control that Brown earnestly pursued in his own life and in his courtship of his future wife, Elizabeth. Watts traces the arc in Brown's politics from "youthful utopian radical to stodgy middle-age conservative" (25). These political positions, Watts believes, follow the national trends as America transitioned from its days as an early republic into a nation shaped by a rising bourgeoisie and the emergence of liberal capitalism (25).

At the turn of the century, in 1800, Brown began his courtship of Elizabeth Linn, a woman

to whom he would be engaged for over four years. Once again, Brown's Quaker upbringing stood between him and his desires. Elizabeth's family was devoutly Presbyterian, and they did not look fondly on the prospect of their daughter's marrying a man of a different faith. Indeed, the Brown family's Quaker beliefs, which include pacifism, caused them to be briefly removed to Virginia during the American Revolutionary War on the false charges that Brown's father was sympathetic to the British. Nevertheless, Brown worked assiduously to make himself beloved by Elizabeth's family, and he succeeded. Their extended courtship made him close to every member of the Linn household, especially to Elizabeth's brother, John. As testament to his closeness with John, Brown published "Sketch of the Life and Character of John Blair Linn" in 1805, a year after the death of his brother-in-law, as an introduction to Linn's poem *Valerian* (Ringe 130). Perhaps the most telling example of Brown's closeness with the Linn family occurred on their actual wedding day. Elizabeth's father, who was a Presbyterian minister, performed their wedding ceremony on November 19, 1804 (Watts 148, 154). Brown's parents made their displeasure at the union known by remaining absent from the wedding. The Quaker meeting in Philadelphia censured Brown because of marrying outside his religious faith (Watts 154). Despite this controversy, however, Charles and Elizabeth appear to have had a very happy, albeit short marriage. In their five years together until his death in 1810, Elizabeth gave birth to four children: twin boys in 1805, their son Eugene in 1807, and their daughter Mary in 1809 (Watts 154).

Because of his deep interest in the unconscious, Brown's influence on the American renaissance writers Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne is easily recognized. In fact, Poe himself praised Brown's work. In his lifetime, he had written sentimental fiction, gothic novels and fragments, historical reports, editorials, and countless letters to family and friends. Some critics believe that he is remembered more for those figures of the American renaissance whom he influenced and who succeeded him; others believe that in his sudden burst of literary talent and energies, he produced intrigu-

ing tales that continue to engage readers. On February 22, 1810, Charles Brockden Brown died of tuberculosis. He was only 39 years old.

Wieland (1798)

Brown's gothic tale of infanticide and patricide, aided by religious fanaticism and the practiced arts of a rogue, is in many ways a meditation on the unforeseen impact that people's actions can have on others.

Told retrospectively from the diary of Wieland's sister, Clara, this novel is an American gothic tale of extraordinary events that befall one family after its encounters with Carwin. The novel opens with a tale of the patriarch, who is nearly maniacally taken up with his own sense of sin and desire for constant study of Scriptures. Although the father does not belong to any organized religion, he does remain faithful to his own form of worship, which involves spending the Sabbath in an outdoor church of sorts. It is this outdoor site that proves a source of mysterious power and ultimate madness and death for the family. While he is attending his own private worship, members of the family see a bright light, hear the discharge of a gun or cannon, and hear the moans of their father. He appears mangled, somewhat in shock, and delivers what seems to be a half-truth of the source of his injuries. A few days later, he dies.

Wieland himself hears the voice of his wife, Catherine, telling him that he is wanted back at home. Wieland's dear friend and brother-in-law Pleyel also learns from the disembodied voice of his sister that his beloved, Baroness Theresa de Stolberg from Germany, has died. Wieland's sister hears voices, too, that sound like murderers plotting her death from her nearby closet. Wieland and Pleyel, however, are awakened from their slumber and rush to her aid not because of anything that she said or did, but because they hear a voice warning them to awake and aid one of their own who is dying. The same voice of the murderer who suggested running her through with his sword awakens her as she sleeps outdoors near a stream on the family

property. This time, the voice repents its previous designs for her murder and warns her to stay away from the exact location for fear of death. The voice intimates that her fate, should she divulge this warning to anyone else or should it be unheeded, will be similar to her father's.

A bedraggled stranger, whom Clara spots wandering near her home, produces an uncommon reaction in her. She finds herself crying and unable to keep the man's face out of her mind. Indeed, she feels compelled to commit it to memory by drawing a portrait of him. Even the portrait seems to exude some unexplained power over her. When she shows it to Pleyel, he playfully promises to discover who this man whom Clara has clearly fallen in love with is. While in a coffeehouse in town, Pleyel spies Carwin, having known him previously when the two met in Spain. Although a native of England, Carwin had taken a Spanish surname, converted to Catholicism, and declared that he would live out his days in his newly adopted country. Carwin assiduously deflects all of Pleyel's inquiries into Carwin's current habiliment as a rustic and his return to America.

Carwin quickly becomes a frequent visitor to Wieland's house, and once they feel comfortable enough in his presence, they begin to recite the tales of disembodied voices heard by Wieland, Pleyel, and Clara. To their surprise, Carwin does not appear disjointed or shocked by their tales; rather, he becomes an animated and gifted storyteller, weaving tale after tale of similar extraordinary events eventually attributed to human agency rather than to God or some supernatural phenomenon.

When Carwin appears in Clara's closet near midnight and vaguely threatens to rob her of her virtue, Pleyel believes Carwin and Clara are lovers. As he approaches the house at night, he hears what he takes to be the voices of Carwin and Clara, which are really just a trick of Carwin's ventriloquism. The next morning, Pleyel upbraids Clara for what he imagines to be the loss of her virginity to such a fiend as Carwin and informs her that he is known to be a thief and a murderer. While Clara goes into town to plead her innocence to Pleyel,

Wieland goes to Clara's abandoned house and is visited by a veiled specter, who orders him to take his wife to the house in order to kill her. When his servant gives him a packet of letters, Pleyel flies for Europe. Only after the deaths of Catherine and her children does Clara learn from her uncle that Pleyel fled to Europe in search of his love, Baroness Theresa de Stolberg, who had reported her own death in order to conceal herself in her pursuit of Pleyel in America.

The novel reaches its dramatic peak when Wieland, hearing voices that he believes to be divine, agrees to take his wife to Clara's empty house and murder her. Their children soon follow as victims of Wieland's madness. In courtroom testimony, Wieland calmly relays the tale of bloody murders by characterizing his actions as sanctioned by God. While confined, Wieland twice breaks out of his shackles and travels to the houses of Clara and Pleyel, intent on completing his sacrifices to God.

Wieland escapes from custody and arrives at his sister's house, intent on fulfilling his "divine calling" and adding her to the list of the dead. Just prior to his arrival, Carwin confesses to Clara his powers of ventriloquism and his morbid curiosity in determining how virtuous and brave she was, as well as plumbing the depths of Wieland's religious fanaticism. When Wieland threatens Carwin, he makes a hasty retreat, and Clara is left alone with her mad brother. Carwin returns to the house and hurries upstairs, where he speaks to Wieland as if he were the disembodied celestial voice who first bid him to sacrifice his family. Carwin commands Wieland to return to a rational state, recognize that he alone is responsible for the murders of his family members, and desist in his current plans of killing his own sister. Briefly restored to himself, Wieland grabs the penknife that Clara had recently been holding and stabs himself in the neck.

The novel concludes after a three-year break in which Clara and her uncle have moved to Montpellier and been joined by Pleyel, after the death of his wife, the baroness. Clara also relates the story of how Louisa Conway was orphaned. As Carwin affected her own family, Louisa's parents, the StUARTS, were likewise unduly influenced by a malevo-

lent character named Maxwell, who, failing in a duel against Louisa's father, contrived his revenge by attempting to seduce his wife, Louisa's mother. In order to flee Maxwell's influence, and the loss of her reputation, Louisa's mother disguises herself and travels with her daughter to America. Clara concludes that people should be cautious about the amount of influence they allow another person to exercise over them; had this admonition been heeded, she argues, *Wieland*, his wife and children, and both of Louisa's parents might all be alive.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the undue influence Carwin and Maxwell exercise in *Wieland* to characters in the short fiction of Poe and Hawthorne. Can you trace Brown's influence on these later writers?
2. Many critics consider *Wieland* an attack on rationalism. How might you explore this reading of the novel in your own essay?

Edgar Huntly (1799)

In his preface to this tale, Brown consciously adapts the "gothic castles chimeras" of European literature to fit the "native of America": "incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness." As such, he draws deeply on the American landscape to narrate a psychological tale of an insane murderer whose appearance, nationality, instincts, and natural dwellings and haunts make him the outsider of American civilization and thus present, along with gray panthers and American Indians, the dangers lurking on the edges of the newly formed republic.

Edgar Huntly journeys farther and farther into the wilderness, leaving the vestiges of domesticity (his uncle's home and the home of their neighbor, Inglefield) in pursuit of a madman whose wild nature young Edgar believes himself capable of taming. The source of Clithero's atavism seems to be the murder, in self-defense, of his beloved Clarice's father, and the subsequent death, by shock and heartbreak, of his patroness and the sister of the murdered man. Once Edgar learns the circum-

stances surrounding these two deaths, he follows his own compulsion to absolve Clithero of his overwhelming guilt and remorse, in the hope that he can rehabilitate him into society.

Critics have commented at length on Brown's detailed and romantic incorporation of the American landscape in his gothic tale of murder, stating that Edgar's frequent forays into the unknown wilderness surrounding his rural village mirror his psychological plumbings into the motivations of Clithero, a figure who symbolizes the dangers of a reversion to a life lurking on the periphery of civilization and its hallmark, domesticity. Edgar begins to resemble the object of his curiosity and his daily musings (Clithero) when he sleepwalks, waking to find himself deep within a pit, fitted only with a shirt, pants, and a tomahawk. His act of "going native" occurs when he kills the gray panther also occupying the pit by throwing the tomahawk at its skull, and this act is confirmed by his escape from the pit only to find himself among four "brawny and terrific figures," whom he does not at first correctly identify as American Indians. The occasion transports Edgar back to the murder of his own parents at the hands of American Indians in the last of the Indians wars and to a larger history of race relations in the region of Norwalk, where Edgar and his uncle reside.

He murders an American Indian by lodging his tomahawk in the man's chest, rescues a female captive, and finds himself wholly disoriented as the two effect an escape through an unknown landscape: "No fancy can conceive a scene so wild and desolate than that which now presented itself" (chapter 18). These actions—deliberate attacks upon symbols of the American version of the gothic—appear necessary for Edgar Huntly's return to the civilized world and for the conclusion of the novel.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How might you compare Brown's characterization and use of American Indians with that of JAMES FENIMORE COOPER?
2. How does the tale of Edgar's rude education in the wilderness compare to Natty Bumppo, Cooper's protagonist in the *Leatherstocking Series*?

**Arthur Mervyn; or,
Memoirs of the Year 1793 (1798–1800)**

As the novel takes place while a pestilence rages in the city, it is not surprising that its chief motifs are charity and human compassion in the face of certain death and adversity. On multiple occasions, Arthur is the recipient of charitable acts. Indeed, the novel opens as Arthur Mervyn, suffering from yellow fever, is miraculously rescued and nourished back to health by an unnamed narrator and his wife. Soon after his departure from his paternal roof, Arthur gains employment and residence with a wealthy man named Thomas Welbeck. Later in the novel, the hardworking farmer, Mr. Hadwin, gives Arthur room and board in exchange for his labors on the family farm. Even Colvill, the manipulative schoolmaster who seduced Arthur's sister and precipitated her suicide, is not without compassion. As Welbeck informs Arthur, Colvill took him in and nursed him back to health. When Arthur hazards his own life to search for Susan Hadwin's fiancé, Wallace, in the city, he is taken in and given food and a place to sleep by a neighbor living next door to the house where Wallace was recently employed.

Yet, just as much as the novel provides readers with multiple examples of human charity and compassion, it also includes the stuff common to the gothic genre—hidden motives, dying requests, treachery, seductions, and theft. When the family friend Wortley visits the narrator's house and reveals that he met Arthur before, the narrative quickly switches to the voice of the titular character, who tells of his flight from his parental home after the death of his mother and his father's unseemly marriage to a woman of low character. A simple lad from the country, Arthur is repeatedly duped by people, including the calculating Thomas Welbeck, who takes him in under the pretext of employing him as an amanuensis.

The second volume, published in New York in 1800, tests the reader's faith in and reliance on eyewitness testimony, as the narrator's friend, Mrs. Althorpe, begins to relate an entirely different tale of Arthur's childhood, his relationship to his stepmother, and the circumstances under which he left his paternal home. Thus, in the figure of Arthur

Mervyn, Brown introduces readers to a potentially unreliable narrator who might prove guilty of being "a tissue of ingenious and plausible lies" as his accusers testify. Because his marriage to Achsa Fielding, an older European Jewish woman, calls into question Arthur's proclaimed affinity for Eliza Hadwin and a moral life, the critic Emory Elliott argues that it purposely "send[s] the reader back, with a new skepticism, to the beginning of Arthur's testimony" (144).

Dr. Stevens admits that had he read or heard Arthur's tale, he would not have believed it, "but the face of Mervyn is the index of an honest mind" (218). The degree to which Stevens trusts and defends the accused to "maintain his faith in humanity" reflects Brown's sense of the psychological aftermath of the Revolutionary War (Watts 160). His setting of Philadelphia during a yellow fever epidemic is emblematic of "the mercenary world of post-Revolutionary America" (160). In such difficult times, Arthur must try to adapt; the reader, too, must devise a more nuanced system for analyzing characters like Mervyn who surpass the black-and-white limitations of "guilt" and "innocence."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Arthur Mervyn mentions BENJAMIN FRANKLIN as an author whose books he has read, and Charles Brockden Brown expressed an admiration for the founding father. How might you compare Franklin's autobiography to Mervyn's own narrative of moving from the country to the city, and from rags to riches? Is the comparison favorable or critical?
2. Critics have debated the true nature of Arthur Mervyn. Provide textual evidence in favor of his innocence and his guilt. What conclusion might you draw from your findings about the protagonist or life in postrevolutionary times?

"Somnambulism, a Fragment" (1805)

Although "Somnambulism, a Fragment" was published anonymously in the *Literary Magazine and American Register* in 1805, many critics and schol-

- Baym, Nina. "A Minority Reading of *Wieland*." In *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*, edited by Bernard Rosenthal. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981.
- Berthold, Dennis. "Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, and the Origins of the American Picturesque." *William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1984): 62–84.
- Charles Brockden Brown Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition. Available online. URL: <http://www.brockdenbrown.ucf.edu>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Charles Brockden Brown Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.brockdenbrownsociety.ucf.edu/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Crain, Caleb. *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Dunlap, William. *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown with Selections from the Rarest of His Printed Works*. Philadelphia: James P. Parke, 1815.
- Elliott, Emory. *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725–1810*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Kafer, Peter. *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Korobkin, Laura H. "Murder by Madman: Criminal Responsibility, Law, and Judgment in *Wieland*." *American Literature* 24, no. 4 (2000): 721–750.
- Ringe, Donald A. *Charles Brockden Brown*. New York: Twayne, 1966.
- Rosenthal, Bernard. *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981.
- Warfel, Harry R. *Charles Brockden Brown: American Gothic Novelist*. 1949. Reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1976.
- Watts, Steven. *The Romance of Real Life: Charles Brockden Brown and the Origins of American Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.



WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

(1794–1878)

Weep not that the world changes—did it keep / A stable, changeless state, 'twere cause indeed to weep.

(“Mutation”)

William Cullen Bryant, one of the “fireside poets” or “schoolroom poets” of early America, is best known for such poems as “Thanatopsis,” “To a Waterfowl,” “The Prairies,” and “The Death of Slavery.” However, any account of his literary achievements must also acknowledge his work as editor in chief of the *New York Evening Post* for almost 50 years. In this position, Bryant wrestled with the most important social issues of his time, such as slavery, states’ rights, and free speech.

As a youth, Bryant loved the outdoors and revelled in the natural beauty of his family residence in Cummington, Massachusetts. The influence of nature’s fragility and terror is witnessed in Bryant’s poetry describing aspects of New England. He has been called “the American Wordsworth” for his reflective nature poetry akin to that of William Wordsworth in Great Britain (Wortham 281). When the adult Bryant rebelled at the demands and crowds of city life, he bought a family home on Long Island in 1843, and this historic residence called Cedarmere is still open to the public today.

His early family life was important for Bryant’s personal and intellectual development. At the age of 10, he was translating Latin poetry. His father, Dr. Peter Bryant, was a medical doctor who encouraged his son to achieve and helped to provide a good education, but Dr. Bryant died young in 1820. William Cullen Bryant’s mother, Sarah Snell Bryant, who happened to be a descendant of *May-*

flower pilgrims, was an industrious housekeeper who taught her children that “if you are never idle, you will find time for everything” (qtd. in Brown 10). Bryant later praised his mother’s “excellent practical sense” and “sensitive moral judgment” (qtd. in Phair 92). Affirming the youth’s talents, his first poem was published in 1807, and his politically satirical poem “The Embargo” was published in 1808.

Placed in a sophomore college class at age 16 as a result of his careful preparation in foreign languages, Bryant began study at Williams College in 1810 (Peckham 13). At college he participated actively in a literary society, for these groups were the center of all social life at colleges in early America (Peckham 15). However, Bryant was at Williams for less than one year. He returned home with hopes of attending Yale University, but there were inadequate funds. Instead, it was decided that Bryant would work in the legal profession as a way to earn a living. In 1811 he began studying the law in a lawyer’s office in order to prepare for admission to the bar (Brown 51).

While continuing to compose poetry, Bryant completed his legal training in fewer than four years (Brown 71). For instance, he wrote “The Yellow Violet,” a poem about flowers that, in a style that would prove typical for Bryant, described the flower but also offered a moral or lesson (Brown 72). He may also have composed “To a Waterfowl”

in 1815 during the months before beginning his legal practice, and since its publication in 1818, "To a Waterfowl" has always been honored as an important American poem.

By 1817 Bryant, who had never been enthusiastic about being a lawyer, was already dissatisfied with the job. He did practice law from 1816 to 1825 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (McLean 13). Ultimately, despite his leaving the legal profession, Bryant's training in this area provided him effective background for engaging in the civic issues of his time as a newspaper editor. After 1817 the favorable response to his poem "Thanatopsis," first published in the *North American Review*, inspired him to try a different line of work for which he felt himself better suited—editing and writing for a magazine or newspaper. Because it was Bryant's father who submitted poetry to a literary journal on behalf of his son, there was some confusion about the authorship of the poem. Bryant finished revising "Thanatopsis" to his satisfaction in 1821 (Brown 102).

The year 1821 was an excellent year for Bryant, both personally and professionally. He published *Poems*, a book of only 44 pages but superior quality (Brown 101). He delivered a long poem, "The Ages," at the Harvard College Commencement (McLean 13). Bryant knew he had literary talent, but he was nervous about entering the literary field full-time and actually became ill with nervousness about writing and presenting the Phi Beta Kappa poem for Harvard (Brown 97–100). Also in this banner year, Bryant married Frances Fairchild, beginning a happy union that lasted until her death in 1866. Their first child, also named *Frances* and known as *Fanny*, was born in 1822.

Bryant's acquaintance with the novelist CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK, with whose brother Charles he had roomed in college, was among the meaningful literary connections Bryant sustained throughout his life. In his 1825 review of Sedgwick's novel *Redwood*, Bryant praised the book for elevating America's "national character" at home and abroad. He called for literary traditions based on native materials, saying that U.S. writers should "show how the infinite diversities of human charac-

ter are yet further varied by causes that exist in our own country" (250). The previous year, Sedgwick had mentioned Bryant as a man of high reputation who could contribute to the new "native literature" as well, and she in fact had dedicated *Redwood* to Bryant (Brown 112, 118).

Bryant's friendship with Catharine Sedgwick began in 1820, when she asked him to contribute hymns for an anthology. Although he was a member of the Congregationalist Church, Bryant had been raised Calvinist but was no longer strict in his denominational affiliation, so he provided five hymns for the Unitarian songbook (Brown 93). The hymns and Bryant's other poetry suggest that Bryant believed in eternal life and the basic tenets of evangelical Christianity, although he ultimately became a Unitarian (McLean 66). The Sedgwick family encouraged Bryant to relocate to New York and find his fortunes in writing in the metropolis (Brown 120; Peckham 74–79). By 1825 Bryant was in New York to work as junior editor.

In 1825 he was hired as coeditor of a literary gazette, which went through several mergers and name changes before closing in 1827 (Phair 3–5). Bryant then decided to take a more practical course of employment in journalism rather than in literature. In 1826 he joined the editorial staff of the New York *Evening Post*. In 1829 he became the editor in chief, succeeding William Coleman in that role, and he held the editor's position until his death in 1878 (Peckham 219). Bryant invested himself both financially and personally in the *Post*, and he did not avoid the business end of it, demonstrating that a poet can be pragmatic in his professional life. One remark in a private letter is often quoted: "Politics and a belly-full is better than poetry and starvation" (qtd. in Brown 168).

Nevertheless, Bryant did not relinquish poetry or aesthetics. In 1832 he published another volume, called *Poems*, which the *North American Review* described as "the best volume of American poetry that has yet appeared" (qtd. in Phair 170). The poem "To the Fringed Gentian," composed in 1829, is among his important poems from this period. In 1842 he published *The Fountain and Other Poems* and continued publishing poetry

throughout his editorial career. The recent critic Thomas Wortham says of Bryant's poetry that his "reflections on human mortality and the transience of all things are countered by a liberal faith in the sanctity and benevolence of progress" (281).

Appreciation of Bryant's cultural contexts requires understanding Bryant's position as one of the "fireside poets." This is an academic designation also including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell. A "Fireside poetics" includes the ideas that poetry played a beneficial role "in the world of human affairs and sympathies" and that creating a national American literature was important (Wortham 286). The name relates to the idea of expressing in verse "ancient, hearthside truths, [and] eternal verities" (Wortham 286). An exemplary text of the fireside poets, Whittier's 1866 poem "Snow-Bound," establishes the fireplace as a symbol of "an intimate community" that "reflected national habits" and common values (Sorby 37). Fireside poets were representative, not rare creative artists, because their works "typified values and desires that in the minds of thoughtful men and women in the nineteenth century were synonymous with culture or civilization" (Wortham 286). The works of the fireside poets comforted the listener or reader, as did the work of Robert Frost in the early 20th century. They are also sometimes called schoolroom poets because their works were often studied in school, memorized, and given as recitations by American schoolchildren (Sorby xiii).

In Bryant's poetry and literary criticism, he promoted nationalism and individualism for American literature. In an 1818 article for the *North American Review*, Bryant criticized the trend toward poetic imitations of European styles. He supported and tried to compose uniquely "American" poetry—for instance, he depicted plants and animals found in America, not Europe—although, because of the difficulty of categorization, critics have differed about how unique, quintessentially American, or brilliant Bryant actually was. His works were considered such American "classics" even in the 1870s that they were chosen to "authorize" the opening of an important new magazine for youth,

St. Nicholas (Corby 74). Bryant also admired and was a friend of JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, famed writer of the Leather-Stocking Tales, including *The Last of the Mohicans*, one of very few early American authors who was close to earning a living through creative literature, and a novelist who built his career on characters and landscapes particular to the United States.

In addition to Bryant's accomplishments and recognition as a poet, most of his time from the 1830s until his death in 1878 was devoted to the practices of editing a daily newspaper. As editor of a major paper like the *Evening Post*, Bryant "wielded enormous influence in regard to the civic and political questions of his many days" (Wortham 280). These diverse issues included slavery, sectionalism, the national bank, currency stabilization, the creation of Central Park, the need for prison reform, labor rights, copyright laws, and freedom of the press (McLean 21–22). Bryant did not seek to enter politics, preferring to stay outside elected office and to be an advocate for the good of the people through journalism, and he even repudiated suggestions in 1872 that he should run for president.

Bryant's editorial participation in the cultural debate about slavery and abolition demands particular attention. While he expressed disapproval of slavery as early as 1820, in the 1830s as an editor, he was not immediately actively calling for the end of all slavery in the nation. As did some other cultural leaders of the time, Bryant erroneously thought that slavery would inevitably expire by itself but should not be extended into newly acquired territories (McLean 89–90). In an 1833 editorial in the *Evening Post*, he supported the Colonization Society, which sought to return slaves to Africa, and he "feared that antislavery agitation would produce violence and divide the Union" (Brown 215). But a series of events made him realize that a free American society was gravely threatened by the existence of slavery within its boundaries. Among the legal issues were the Fugitive Slave Law, the Missouri Compromise of 1850, the move to annex Texas, the martyrdom of the abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, and the censorship of mail. He began writing ardently against slavery.

Bryant's principled stance against slavery hurt the finances of the *Evening Post*, as some advertisers withdrew their business. In 1847 he placed the following slogan above the masthead of the editorials: "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Trade, and Free Speech," the beliefs of the Barnburner wing of the Democratic Party (Brown 330). He supported the Wilmot Proviso, which would forbid extending slavery into new lands (Brown 339). By 1849 Bryant was actually hated in the South because of his editorials against slavery.

However, Bryant had also been giving newspaper space to the Southern perspective, such as by reporting on the speeches of politicians and reprinting proslavery editorials (Brown 344–345). Bryant remained affiliated with the Democratic Party because it still honored several of his basic tenets—"states' rights, free trade, and freedom from government interference in the private affairs of the people" (Brown 359). Despite complaints that the *Evening Post* was erasing its previous stance against slavery, Bryant wrote that the newspaper still opposed slavery but considered that there were multiple issues at stake (Brown 360). By 1854 Bryant had left the Democratic Party finally, and the newly formed Republican Party became the gathering place for antislavery advocates. Furthermore, in 1855 the conflicts between free settlers and slaveholding settlers in Kansas made people realize that party label by itself did not mean as much as actions.

Despite his preferred candidates' not winning the presidential election of 1856, Bryant editorialized on the duty of antislavery advocates to work through their state legislatures, even if the president and the Congress would not help them (Brown 386). In the Supreme Court Dred Scott case, Bryant disagreed strongly and publicly with the decision, arguing that the Constitution was violated. Bryant continued to be an antislavery advocate and in 1860 championed the cause of electing Abraham Lincoln to the presidency of the United States. After Lincoln's election, Southern states began seceding from the union, and Bryant declared "Peacable Secession an Absurdity" (Brown 421). While supporting the Union cause in the Civil War, Bry-

ant and the *Evening Post* also criticized President Lincoln when necessary; for instance, in 1862 Bryant's editorials faulted Lincoln for not pursuing the war more aggressively and for not being strong enough for the cause of abolition. The 1866 poem "The Death of Slavery" is a nationalistic denunciation of slavery with criticism of the people who had defended the immoral institution and might still oppose freedom even after legal emancipation of formerly enslaved persons (McLean 107). The poem "The Death of Lincoln" includes the stanza "Thy task is done; the bond are free / We bear thee to an honored grave / Whose Proudest monument shall be / The broken fetters of the slave."

Although Bryant's editorial rhetoric demonstrates how fiery he could become, some readers of Bryant's poetry, in his own era and today, have characterized him as too calm and self-collected, particularly when contrasted to the exuberance associated with Walt Whitman or Edgar Allan Poe. For instance, James Russell Lowell's satirical poem *A Fable for Critics* in 1848 characterizes Bryant as "a smooth, silent iceberg" because "He's too smooth and too polished to hang any zeal on." Of course, Lowell's including Bryant among the authors lampooned also indicated the importance of Bryant as a poet. After the anonymous publication of *A Fable for Critics*, critics began commenting on the question of whether Bryant was actually an "iceberg" in style and temperament (Phair 176). But even if it is true that Bryant contained his energies and acted rationally, Judith Phair is among those who suggest that "there was a great deal of heat beneath the icy demeanor" (6). For instance, he had a quick temper in his youth, and Bryant's editorials "attest to the editor's ability to write both eloquently and feelingly about the condition of mankind" (Phair 8).

Bryant published few statements about his own work, preferring to let his life speak for itself. In 1851 his "Reminiscences of the *Evening Post*" focused on policies of the paper and identified him with the publication. In 1876 the poem "A Lifetime," written in quatrains, presents his life as a series of orderly vignettes. Family had remained very important for the editor. He enjoyed married life with Frances and told his daughters of how

much her insights had mattered to him: “I never wrote a poem that I did not repeat to her and take her judgment upon it. I found its success with the public precisely in proportion to the impression it made upon her” (qtd. in Bigelow 193). His second daughter, Julia, remained unmarried and accompanied her father on many of his travels abroad. Bryant’s elder daughter, Fanny, married in 1842, somewhat against her father’s initial wishes; her husband, Parke Godwin, was a well-known writer and became an early biographer of William Cullen Bryant in 1893.

Near the end of his career, Bryant’s translations of Homer’s *Iliad* (1870) and *Odyssey* (1871) were well received. Critics stated that this English translation was significant for American literary history and was “the most truly poetic,” possessing “the noble simplicity of Homer” (Phair 178–179). In the 1870s Bryant was heralded by one critic as forming, along with James Fenimore Cooper and WASHINGTON IRVING, “the early triumvirate of American literature” (Phair 45). His last major poem was “The Flood of Years” (1876), which can be read as more conventionally religious than his early works and as “an answer to the religious doubt expressed in the great poem of his youth, “Thanatopsis”” (Brown 515). His very last poems, in the year of his death, included one about the birthday of George Washington and one about the Spanish author Cervantes (Brown 515–516).

After Bryant’s passing in 1878, other authors appreciated his important qualities and his contributions to American letters. They consistently noted Bryant’s “love of nature, loyalty to the democratic way of life, and rugged integrity” (McLean 134). Walt Whitman wrote admiringly of Bryant in *Specimen Days* as “pulsing the first interior verse—throbs of a mighty world—bard of the river and wood, ever conveying a taste of the open air, with scents as from hay fields, grapes, birch-borders” (qtd. in McLean 135). It is for William Cullen Bryant’s poetry about nature and mortality, as well as for his committed work as an editor of the *New York Evening Post*, that he would be remembered into the next century and beyond.

Amy Cummins

“Thanatopsis” (1814, 1817, 1821)

Some controversy exists over the actual date on which Bryant wrote “Thanatopsis,” with some critics placing the date as 1811 and William Cullen Bryant II arguing persuasively for 1813, the same year as an epidemic in Massachusetts, the death of his young friend’s bride, and his disappointment upon learning that his father’s financial standing prohibited him from entering Yale College. In either case, Bryant was rather young at the time, either 18 or 20. What critics all agree upon is the means by which the poem came into print: his father, discovering it, recopied it and submitted it to the *North American Review*, where it was published. The critic Robert Ferguson agrees with other scholars who recognize in Peter Bryant’s actions the father’s desire to put into practice the very principle he himself lived by: a balance between vocation and literature (442).

As the poem opens, Bryant introduces the reciprocal dynamic between humans and nature available “to him who in the love of nature holds / communion” (1–2). Such a sympathetic understanding permits Nature to “glide / Into his darker musings, with a mild / And healing sympathy, that steals away / Their sharpness, ere he is aware” (5–8). Bryant’s notion here renders Nature as a knowing friend who has the ability to dull one’s depressive or morbid thoughts, even without one’s being conscious of the friend’s effort. Such a power renders humans at the mercy of Nature, who exercises unknown and unseen influence. Given Nature’s gift for soothing troubled minds, the narrator next suggests that readers given over to thoughts of death should “go forth, under the open sky, and list / To Nature’s teachings” (14–15). They should avail themselves of the lessons that Nature makes available of how the dead become one with the earth and are indistinguishable from the elements.

Lest the reader fear a lone return to the earth after death, Bryant’s narrator assures him or her that he or she will exist in “one might sepulcher” with “the powerful of the earth—the wise, the good” (37, 35). Its breadth, spanning from the “Barcan desert” to the Oregon, demonstrates the expansiveness of

this communal tomb. Critic John Scholl explains that Bryant uses *Barcan* because of the heralded trek of his neighbor, General Eaton, through 600 miles of desert in Barca to meet with Hamet Pasha, the sovereign of Tripoli (248). "Oregon," Scholl believes, appears because it was the original name of the Columbia River, which became famous in 1807 when tales of Lewis and Clark were published (248). The whole world functions as a tomb, as "all that breathe / will share thy destiny" (60–61). Bryant's treatise on death is to consider it a common fate of all humanity, and to recognize that the world is filled with those "that slumber in its bosom" (50).

Cognizant of the common fate of all, including "the speechless babe and the gray-headed man," the narrator encourages his readers to "live" so that when death arrives, it will seem to be a final sleep: "like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams" (80–81).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider why critics, and Bryant himself, might concern themselves with the actual date when "Thanatopsis" was written. Why might it matter?
2. Bryant's poem looks to nature to soothe his concerns about an impending death. How does it compare to the lessons PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU offers in "The House of Night"?

"The Yellow Violet" (1814, 1821)

Numbered among Bryant's most honored poems, "The Yellow Violet" likewise appears during the period when the poet unhappily followed the career of a lawyer. In the personal tensions Bryant experienced as a lawyer between 1811 and 1830, critics locate the material and emotional depths that formed his creative voice as a poet. Robert Ferguson is so bold as to declare all poems written by Bryant after 1830 lesser, as they mark the period in which the poet exhibits a "growing serenity of tone and mood that robbed the later poetry of urgency and strength by removing all possibility of conflict"

(435). Agitated by a successful but unsatisfying position as a lawyer, Bryant, according to Ferguson, writes poetry that reveals those anxieties, harnessing them in the service of emotionally resonant verse. Such a poem, Ferguson states, is "The Yellow Violet," which appeared in 1814.

As with most of Bryant's nature poems, this one begins with a description of the natural setting, and the object of the poem within it. At the beginning of spring, "when beechen buds begin to swell," Bryant witnesses the "sweet flower" "alone in the virgin air" (6, 8). The violet distinguishes itself for its early bloom, which occurs in the "sunless" month of April and precedes the more colorful and audacious flowers that appear the following month. Unlike the "loftier flowers [that] are flaunting nigh," the yellow violet "peeps from the last year's leaves below" (20, 4). Despite its demure nature, Bryant, ever the observant traveler in the woods, notices this flower, which "stayed my walk" (22).

However, Bryant admits that despite his notice and celebration of the yellow violet, "midst the gorgeous blooms of May / I passed thee on thy humble stalk" (23–24). The appearance of these other colorful but unnamed blossoms creates a marked contrast in Bryant's treatment of the yellow violet; originally "bathed . . . in [the sun's] own bright hue," it is soon after lessened in the poet's esteem: "slight thy form, and low thy seat" (15, 17). While the flower undoubtedly remains the same, the change in the environment in which Bryant sees it drastically shifts his valuing of it. He recognizes the moral lesson contained in his own capriciousness by comparing it to the abandonment of early friendships by those fired by worldly ambitions: "So they, who climb to wealth forget / The friends in darker fortunes tried" (25–26). Countless biographers and critics alike remark on these lines as emblematic of the shift in Bryant's life from a desire to continue his education as a "man of letters" to his pragmatic choice of law and later journalism as his career paths.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the Calvinist sentiments expressed in the poem.

2. The poem concludes with the resolution to remain attentive to the violet despite the distractions of other more showy and visible flowers. What larger message does Bryant convey with this conviction?
3. Philip Morin Freneau's "The Wild Honey Suckle" also singles out a particular flower and creates a moral or lesson around it. Compare the two poems and their lessons. Are they particularly American? Why or why not?

"To a Waterfowl" (1815, 1818, 1821)

Because "To a Waterfowl," one of Bryant's most celebrated poems, appeared with an article written about his friend the landscape painter Robert F. Weir's painting *An Autumnal Evening*, critic William Cullen Bryant II believes other critics have been confused regarding the circumstances surrounding the poem's genesis (183). When the article on Weir appeared in the *New York Mirror*, it was accompanied by Bryant's poem, quoted in full (184). As Bryant II remarks, it would be incongruous for a wild goose to scan the landscape for a summer home while in the middle of a Massachusetts winter (183). This brief controversy or misunderstanding aside, Bryant's poem was immediately celebrated by the famous British poet and literary critic Mathew Arnold as "the best short poem in the English language" (reported in Bryant 181).

In the poem, Bryant opens by wondering about the destination of a solitary bird he spies in flight. By beginning the poem with such a question, he sets for himself and the reader the same mood of inquiry and uncertainty. Thus, from the first stanza through the final one, in which the narrator has discovered "the lesson thou hast given," the narrator is looking to Nature to provide guidance and insight (27). Certainty arrives in the fourth stanza when the narrator declares, "There is a Power whose care / Teaches thy way along that pathless coast" (13–14). By capitalizing *power*, the narrator gives the impression of a source outside but controlling nature. Whether this power is God or Fate, it has the ability to "teach" along a "pathless coast,"

meaning that it instructs even when there seems to be no evidence of its presence or its influence. And yet, the wild goose's flight itself serves as proof or evidence of this higher "Power."

Bryant's description of the landscape for this lone bird's flight bears discussion, as his attention to American territory is a hallmark of his poetry. The sky itself appears as a hopeful but also awe-inspiring element that is "illimitable" (15). The infiniteness of the very element that the bird travels in calls to mind the need for a "power whose care" guides it (13). The bird's own tireless flight is another source of inspiration in the poem as the narrator remarks, "all day thy wings have fanned . . . yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land" (17, 19). The bird's quest seems to drive it onward in the "cold, thin atmosphere" as the promises of "a summer home, and rest" constitute its just reward (18, 22). Having witnessed the bird's flight until it is no longer visible, the narrator retains the image and its meaning "on my heart" (26).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Briefly explain Bryant's line "lone wandering, but not lost" (16). What is its meaning? How does it contribute to the poem's tone?
2. Given the confusion about the poem's inception, what role might the seasons play in the poem's meaning? Does it matter that the goose is searching for a "summer home" "midst falling dew" in "the last steps of day"?
3. What is the lesson learned from observing the bird in flight? How does this lesson compare with that in "Thanatopsis"?
4. Consider Freneau's "On the Religion of Nature" and compare the two poets' conclusions about the relationship between nature and religion.

"To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe" (1829)

Thomas Cole, a close friend of Bryant, wrote in "Essay on American Scenery" of the American landscape's being "destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European"

(reported in Ferguson 433). As a member of the Hudson River school of painters, Cole was committed to the preservation and depiction of those aspects of nature characteristic of an American landscape. Cole's value for the American character of the natural setting was also embraced by Bryant, who wrote to his brother John, advising him about the need to write from experience and observation: "Let me counsel you to draw your images, in describing Nature, from what you observe around you. . . . The skylark is an English bird, and an American who has never visited Europe has no right to be in raptures about it" (reported in Ferguson 433). Thus, Bryant considers the flora and fauna of America to be a central and commanding difference between the new nation and its European ancestors. He lauds Cole's "glorious canvas" as a testimony to the beauties of America's natural world: "lone lakes—savannas where the bison roves — / Rocks rich with summer garlands—solemn streams— / Skies, where the desert eagle wheels and screams—" (5–7). In cataloging these particular images of America, most especially the desert eagle and bison, Bryant follows his own advice to his brother and celebrates those very animals inherent to the native landscape. Notice also that aside from an occasional animal, the landscapes are solitary.

He admits that "fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest" but undermines the beauty he imagines Cole to encounter in Europe with his use of adjectives to describe the two lands. America is "our own bright land," but in Europe the scenes are "different" not only because of traces of humankind throughout, but also because "life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air" (3, 10, 12). Rather than offer a list of the natural beauties to be found in Europe, Bryant instead remarks on the evidence of continual human occupation: "everywhere the trace of men / paths, homes, graves, ruins" (10–11).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bryant emphasizes the "wildness" inherent in an American landscape that contrasts it sharply with European scapes. How does this notion of wilderness compare to Freneau's "The Wild Honey Suckle"?
2. In what ways is the poem specifically addressed to his friend Cole or to fellow painters? How does the poem address the visual element that is the purview of painters?
3. Cole's landscapes, as detailed by Bryant, are void of a human presence. The observer in paintings is, naturally, outside the frame, viewing from a museum wall or some other man-made space. How does this dynamic of unpeopled space and human observer relate to Bryant's casting of his narrative presence in "Thanatopsis," "The Prairies," and "To a Waterfowl"?

"The Prairies" (1832, 1833)

In his initial description of the prairies as "the gardens of the Desert," Bryant imagines them an oasis, a place set apart from its surroundings. The sense of isolation and exceptionalism continues as he pictures "the encircling vastness": "Lo! they stretch / In airy undulations, far away" (6–7). Their sheer expanse is reminiscent of an "ocean," especially with the motion of "surface rolls" brought on by the wind.

When Bryant contemplates the source of this wind, however, the poem begins to shift from a timeless and geographically vague locale to a landscape rich with history. Bryant imagines the "breezes of the south," and their origins: "ye have played / Among the palms of Mexico and vines / Of Texas, and have crisped the limpid brooks / That from the fountains of Sonora glide" (18–21). Thus, Bryant imagines a ripple effect of the common winds that blow south of the United States' border, to include Texas, which was still a territory of Mexico although it would become a republic in just four years. The geographical remoteness of these southern climes is all but erased as he witnesses the breezes' effect on the prairies.

The sense of a historic past, however, becomes more immediate as he "think[s] of those / Upon whose rest [his horse] tramples" (38–39). As in "Thanatopsis," Bryant imagines the landscape to

be a common grave, but rather than its holding the people of his generation, he considers the bones of “the dead of other days” interred in the ground beneath his horse’s hooves (40). These people, who predate the American Indians, are described as “mound-builders,” who were coterminous with the Greeks and their erection of the Parthenon (60, 50). In imagining their lives upon the landscape, before the “red man came,” Bryant gives to America a hoary past to rival Europe’s (58).

The conflict between white men and red men is also chronicled in the poem with the tale of a captive man who marries a native woman, “yet ne’er forgot—the wife / Of his first love, and their sweet little ones / butchered” (83–85). Thus, the landscape is witness to scenes of brutality and events that prove the fleeting and helpless nature of humankind. Just after this tale, Bryant mentions the removal of the American Indians to a place “nearer to the Rocky Mountains,” “a wilder hunting ground” (92–93). Also absent from the prairies are the bison and the beaver. All seem to have abandoned this landscape for remoter climes in response to “the sound of advancing multitude” (116).

Despite his awareness and chronicling of the various animals and peoples who have inhabited and will inhabit the prairies, Bryant is able to return to the solitary contemplations originating in the poem’s initial lines. With the appearance of a “fresher wind,” “I am in the wilderness alone” (123–124).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Ferguson believes that “Prairies” “begins as a description of that setting but becomes an imaginary political history of the region” (448). Reread the poem for evidence in support of Ferguson’s interpretation.
2. How does the expansiveness of Bryant’s “Prairies” compare to the democratic sweep characteristic of Walt Whitman’s poetry? What are the political feelings animating the two poets?
3. What might be the source of the wind that “breaks my dream” and places the poet “in the wilderness alone”?

“To the Fringed Gentian” (1847)

Bryant dedicates his poem to a rare but beautiful flower located primarily on the eastern seaboard. The fringed gentian was not only the subject for Bryant’s poem, but also has been celebrated in verse by Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau. Its rarity stems from its deep blue color and its appearance in November, a time at odds with nature, which is then in the throes of winter. Bryant recognizes the flower’s bloom as an incongruous source of life in surroundings that portend winter and death: “when woods are bare and birds are flown / and frost and shortening days portend / the aged year is near his end” (10–12). The flower’s appearance in autumn serves as a reminder and an assurance that there can be hope in the most dismal of circumstances, such as those represented by the surrounding woods.

In isolation, and amid harsh and uninviting conditions, the fringed gentian “doth thy sweet and quiet eye / look through its fringes to the sky” (13–14). In this anthropomorphizing of the flower, it appears coquettish, as though its “fringes” were eyelashes or the ends of a veil concealing a young woman. Its demure nature is also inconsistent with the supposed heartiness of a plant that must sustain itself in the rigors of late fall and early winter. And in this image, the incongruent life amid death and decay, the beautiful source of inspiration and hope in wintry climes, and the singular flower unaccompanied by violets or columbines, Bryant finds sympathy with his own condition. The flower, in its almost unearthly blue tint, seems in sympathetic relation to the sky from which it receives its name. Bryant describes the shocking blue of this flower with the term *cerulean*, a reference both to a pigment first introduced in 1821 and to the Latin root word *caeruleum*, meaning “sky” or “heavens.”

In the final stanza, Bryant opines that the flower’s bravery will inspire him when “the hour of death draw near to me / Hope, blossoming within my heart” (18–19). As with the image of the solitary flower, blooming in nearly impossible conditions, Bryant aspires to find hope within his heart as he approaches his own death.

and starvation.” In it, Bryant seems to pit politics against poetry as if the two were adversarial or mutually exclusive. Keeping this quotation in mind, write an essay in which you examine two or three of Bryant’s poems about nature. Where or how might you identify Bryant’s politics in the poems?

2. Bryant is often known as one of the fireside poets. Using the definition of this group provided in the biography section of this entry, explain why Bryant does or does not belong to this group. Be sure to reference lines and concepts from his poetry specifically in your response.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- American Literature on the Web: William Cullen Bryant. Available online. URL: <http://www.nagasaki-gaigo.ac.jp/ishikawa/amlit/b/bryant19ro.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Bigelow, John. *William Cullen Bryant*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1890.
- Brodwin, Stanley, and Michael D’Innocenzo, eds. *William Cullen Bryant and His America: Centennial Conference Proceedings, 1878–1978*. New York: AMS Press, 1983.
- Brown, Charles Henry. *William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971.
- Bryant, William Cullen. *The Life and Writings of William Cullen Bryant*. 4 vols. Edited by Parke Godwin. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1883.
- Bryant, William Cullen II. “The Genesis of ‘Thanatopsis.’” *New England Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1948): 163–184.
- . “The Waterfowl in Retrospect.” *New England Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1957): 181–189.
- Ferguson, Robert. “William Cullen Bryant: The Creative Context of the Poet.” *New England Quarterly* (December 1980): 431–463.
- Krapf, Norman, ed. *Under Open Sky: Poets on William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.
- Lowell, James Russell. *A Fable for Critics*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1848.
- McLean, Albert, Jr. *William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- Peckham, Harry Houston. *Gotham Yankee, a Biography of William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Vantage Press, 1950.
- Phair, Judith Turner. *A Bibliography of William Cullen Bryant and His Critics, 1808–1972*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1975.
- Scholl, John William. “On the Two Place-Names in ‘Thanatopsis.’” *Modern Language Notes* 28, no. 8 (December 1913): 247–249.
- Sorby, Angela. *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005.
- Spivey, Herman. “Bryant Cautions and Counsels Lincoln.” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 13 (1966): 99–103.
- Wortham, Thomas. “William Cullen Bryant and the Fireside Poets.” In *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, edited by Emory Elliott. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.



ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA

(1490–1556)

Speaking among themselves, they said that the Christians were lying, because we had come from the East and they had come from the West; that we healed the sick and they killed the healthy; . . . that we coveted nothing but instead gave away everything that was given to us and kept none of it, while the sole purpose of the others was to steal everything they found, never giving anything to anybody.

(*Relación*)

Born in 1490 in Jerez de la Frontera, an Andalusian town, to Francisco de Vera and Teresa Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar was the family's fourth son (*The Account* 11). Both parents had ancestors who had distinguished themselves by their participation in colonial or Reconquest events. His paternal grandfather, Pedro de Vera Mendoza, was involved in the conquest of the Canary Islands, while a relative on his maternal side had received the honor of grand master of the Order of Santiago for his part in the Reconquest, a 600-year-old conflict with the Moors for control over the Iberian Peninsula (11–12). Cabeza de Vaca's surname originates from an ancestor on his mother's side who was granted the unusual honorific for loyal service rendered to the Spanish Crown during the Reconquest. Martín Alhaja provided King Sancho of Navarre with a secret passage up to the Sierra Morena, which he marked with a cow's skull. By using this unguarded trail, King Sancho and his soldiers were able to summit the mountain without detection and gain a necessary advantage over their enemies, the Moors (12). In fact, the battle, known as Las Navas de Tolosa, was "the most decisive battle in the Reconquest." In acknowledgment of his loyal service, Martín Alhaja and his descendants received the noble title Cabeza de Vaca, which translates literally as "cow's head." The fame associated with the appellation was ample reason for his parents to bestow such a weighty surname on him. His deeds

would more than demonstrate his worthiness of the distinguished family name.

At the age of 21, Cabeza de Vaca joined the military and was sent to Italy, where he fought in the Battle of Ravenna the following year on April 11, 1512. His bravery on the battlefield of a conflict that resulted in French withdrawal from Italy was rewarded with his promotion to lieutenant (*alférez*) in the city of Gaeta (12). His military service continued the following year (1513) in the city of Seville. While serving as aide to the duke of Medina-Sidonia, Cabeza de Vaca was instrumental in defeating the Comunero Revolt against the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (who, as Charles I, was King of Spain) (12). What biographers know next in the military man's life occurs seven years after his involvement in overthrowing the Comunero Revolt. On February 15, 1527, he received the appointment of king's treasurer by Charles V and was assigned to Pánfilo de Narráez's expedition (12). What followed was a nine-year ordeal in present-day Florida, Texas, and northern Mexico (Sinaloa) in which the conquistadors diminished in numbers because of a hurricane, rough seas, desertion, and warfare with the native population. Cabeza de Vaca documented the events of the failed expedition, together with his seven-year captivity, in his *Relación*, which also bears the title *Naufragios* (shipwrecks).

Contemporary critics regard Cabeza de Vaca as one of the earliest proto-Chicano writers in North

America. Juan Bruce-Novoa, for example, notes his success at cultural syncretism, or the blending of two seemingly incongruous cultures: the European and the indigenous (14). Because this is the nature of the Chicano, who is shaped by the intersection of these very same cultures, Bruce-Novoa imagines Cabeza de Vaca as initiating a history of literature for Chicanos that predates the English colonization of the eastern seaboard (4). Cabeza de Vaca, in his multiple roles as explorer, captive, Christian, healer, and trader, functions as an intermediary between the two cultures, an interpreter, and a figure who attempts to bring about peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange (14). Critics are quick to point out how this explorer differentiates himself from all the others because of his intimate familiarity with the tribes, their customs and languages, and, based on this knowledge, his estrangement from his own people, fellow conquistadors, who do not share his view of Amerindians. In remaking himself, “as neither native nor foreigner, but a mixture of the two,” Cabeza de Vaca predates such quintessentially American figures as BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (Bruce-Novoa 17).

When Cabeza de Vaca returned to Spain in 1537, after recuperating in Mexico City, where he was welcomed by Hernán Cortés, he was one of four survivors of the Narváez expedition, which originally included 500 men. His hope was that Charles V would reward his service by granting him command of a second Florida expedition, but, as the history books tell us, this honor went to Hernando de Soto. Although de Soto offered to include Cabeza de Vaca in his voyage to Florida, the latter demurred, probably because of ideological differences. De Soto was a soldier, with a famed military history, and it is supposed that Cabeza de Vaca feared that he would face constant opposition from the conquistador in the humane treatment of Amerindians. The recently returned explorer also refused Charles V’s offer of an expedition to explore the northeastern part of North America. Instead, Cabeza de Vaca received a patent from the king in March 1540, which bestowed upon the conquistador the title of *adelantado* (a title reserved

for conquerors and discoverers) and the governorship of the South American province of Río de la Plata (a region extending from Peru to the Straits of Magellan). He embarked on a five-month voyage in November of the same year for Santa Catarina in Brazil, as expedition leader of a crew of four ships. Rather than follow the sea route to arrive at Asunción, Paraguay, Cabeza de Vaca set out on foot for a 1,000-mile trek. With 250 men and 26 horses, he traveled from November 2, 1541, to March 11, 1542, and only suffered a few casualties during the overland trek. Historians also remember Cabeza de Vaca for his distinction as being the first European to view the famous Iguazú Falls (Morrison 572–574).

Once he had settled in Asunción, Cabeza de Vaca began to put into practice the very theories of the indigenous/conquistador dynamic that he had developed during his 10-year ordeal in Florida, Texas, and northern Mexico. Because he had experienced firsthand the humanity of Amerindians, as well as their signs of civility in contrast to the barbarous Spaniards, who resorted on two occasions to the taboo act of cannibalism, Cabeza de Vaca instituted and enforced strict laws on the treatment of the Guaraní. If any Spaniard mistreated a member of the Guaraní, the tribal member would immediately be removed to the household of a kinder master. He also instituted an equitable form of taxation in which those taxes paid by the poor were reduced, and officials of the Spanish Crown, traditionally exempt from taxation in colonial settings, were expected to pay their share. Even more radically, Cabeza de Vaca forbade the enslavement of captives taken during the Guaraní warfare with other tribes, and thus put an end to what was a lucrative slave trade for some. In accord with the abolition of the slave trade, Cabeza de Vaca also included in his edict of April 1542 the end of concubinage, a practice in which native women were given to chiefs and influential Spaniards in order to cement agreements. Just as Cabeza de Vaca believed that Spaniards should be subject to taxation as their native converts were, he also believed that the conquistadors needed to set a moral

example for the newly converted Christians. Since canon law prohibited polygamy, it appeared sacrilegious and hypocritical for Spaniards to amass harems of native women. Because the concubines had borne the mestizo children of the Spaniards, there was considerable uproar against the dissolution of these bonds. Cabeza de Vaca, however, remained resolute in his edict, reasoning that because many of the women taken into concubinage were closely related to one another (mothers and sisters, for example), the men were violating another church taboo, against incest.

In July 1542, Cabeza de Vaca led a punitive expedition against the Guaycurúes, a tribe antagonistic to both the Spaniards and the Guaraní. His intent seems to have been not only to broker peace, which he was unable to do, but to awe the natives with a display of the Spaniards' military power. He had previously outlawed the trade of metal or any object that could be converted into a weapon with the native population for fear of undermining Spain's stronghold in the region. Indeed, Cabeza de Vaca knew of the region's volatility since the colony of Río de Plata, the original destination of his expedition, had been abandoned after attacks by the native population. He would not know, however, that despite his military victory over the Guaycurú, he would face more dangerous foes back at Asunción.

Because of his reforms, Cabeza de Vaca created enemies within the administration of Asunción, especially that of the interim governor, Domingo Martínez de Irala (Bishop 212–213). While Cabeza de Vaca was traveling to find a path to the Paraguay River, and the mythic El Dorado, Martínez de Irala was fomenting an attack against him, gaining alliances with wealthy inhabitants and soldiers. Cabeza de Vaca and his soldiers returned to Asunción because of a lack of adequate provisions and heavy death tolls brought on by diseases. Further, a chief related to the Guaraní named Aracaré sabotaged the group of 90 Spaniards and Guaraní during their journey by setting fires in the jungle that alerted the neighboring tribes of their presence. In December 1542, Cabeza de Vaca captured Aracaré, who had launched a second attack on the Spaniards,

and he was hanged. In retaliation for his brother's execution, Tabaré led an attack against the colonizers, which Irala was ordered to quell and end as peacefully as possible. The fighting ended in March 1543 with a new peace treaty.

The events of April and June 1543 led to the uncovering of a plot against Cabeza de Vaca. The first was his edict eradicating the taxation plan, called the *quinto* because it exacted one-fifth of the inhabitants' income. This edict adversely affected the wealthy conquistadors. Cabeza de Vaca also made enemies of two friars, Bernardo de Armenta and Alonso Lebroaacute, who had fled into the surrounding wilderness with a number of female converts, in protest against the governor's law making their relationships with the females unlawful. In response to the pleadings of the women's parents, Cabeza de Vaca sought out the friars and had the natives' daughters returned home to them. In a short span of time, Cabeza de Vaca had outraged two central bodies in the colony: the aristocratic element, led by Irala, and the religious element, represented by the two Franciscan friars.

In June and July 1543 Cabeza de Vaca uncovered the plot to oust him and put several key members of the Spanish colony on trial. Although historians surmise that the governor knew Irala was the mastermind of the plot, Cabeza de Vaca did not prosecute him in the hope that he would become an ally. On April 8, 1544, the tension within the colony was palpable. Just 17 days later, on April 25, 1544, Cabeza de Vaca was placed in chains and under arrest. He returned to Seville in disgrace in September of the following year. Bruce-Novoa beautifully summarizes the explorer's fate: "They exiled the governor back to Spain, a chained prisoner, shipwrecked on the rocks of his own culture" (16). He was briefly imprisoned in Madrid and then released a few months later under house arrest. In 1551, the Council of the Indies ended its six years of deliberations and sentenced Cabeza de Vaca. He was to be exiled to Oran, in present-day Algeria, and permanently banned from the Americas. On the basis of his appeal, his sentence was changed, and his ban was limited only to the Río de la Plata region, where he had formerly served as governor.

In 1555 Cabeza de Vaca wrote *Comentarios*, his account of the five years he had spent in South America, and he issued a second edition to his *Relación*. It appears that these texts were intended both to vindicate his actions and to create some revenue. The six-year trial at the Council of the Indies had depleted the family's landholdings, as his wife is reported to have sold all of her property in his defense.

He died in 1559, destitute, in Valladolid. As Samuel Eliot Morison writes, "Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca stands out as a truly noble and humane character. Nowhere in the lurid history of the Conquest does one find such integrity and devotion to Christian principles in the face of envy, malice, treachery, cruelty, lechery and plain greed" (2:580).

"The Account: Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*" (1542)

In their introduction to his text, the editors Martín A. Favata and José B. Fernández name Cabeza de Vaca "the first Spaniard to traverse—on foot—a larger portion of the recently discovered territory of North America" (11). His account of the journey he made would inspire two subsequent expeditions, including Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's trek through the southwestern United States (11). Because of its thick description of the land and its inhabitants, as well as the early date of authorship and publication (it first appeared in print in 1542), Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* has distinguished itself as an invaluable document for scholars interested in a host of subjects ranging from ethnography to literature, from adventure to anthropology. Further, Bartolomé de Las Casas folded Cabeza de Vaca's tales of peaceful colonization and his detailed descriptions of native customs into his own *Apologética sumaria historia*, which argued for the humane treatment of indigenous populations predicated on their innate capacity for religious faith (222). This latter point would be the central controversy debated in Valladolid in 1550 and 1551: If the purpose of conquest was to convert the native populations to Catholicism, the

argument went, then the natives must necessarily have souls; therefore, the torture and inhumane treatment of them by the conquistadores could not be justified. If, on the other hand, the natives were soulless, then the conquest did not have a religious justification, for the natives were incapable of conversion. Because of Cabeza de Vaca's documented account of civilized natives who adopted him and cared for him, his *Relación* was used as evidence in favor of Las Casas's argument for the humanity of natives, and the need to treat them in a peaceful manner.

Cabeza de Vaca's *Account* appeared in print two times during the reign of Charles V: once in 1542 and again in 1555. The critic Rolena Adorno characterizes these two publication dates: "before royal attempts to control publications of the Indies, and again during the time when the rights to the rewards of conquests became a heated controversy" (220). That Cabeza de Vaca's tale was republished twice in Charles V's reign is all the more remarkable given its divergence from the politics of conquest. Rather than capitulate to conquest doctrine that dehumanizes the Amerindians, Cabeza de Vaca's nine years in captivity and his knowledge of the tribes of the current United States rendered him incapable of telling the conventional conquest tale. Mary Gaylord interprets Cabeza de Vaca's cultural ambiguity in the following manner: "Separated from his ship, from his men, from his authority, from his entire culture, Cabeza de Vaca returns able to say only that he cannot retell the Official Story. As he reports the failure of the accepted model, as he unwrites an old story that literally unravels—like his clothing—in his hands, he ends up writing a new one" (134). Such an inability to echo conquest doctrine stems from moments of cognitive dissonance, such as when other conquistadors first spy Cabeza de Vaca, dressed as the natives and in their company, after several years in captivity. The silence that accompanies this moment of reencounter is quite loud and speaks to the uneasiness of viewing one of your own (a fellow conquistador) transformed (gone native). Lisa Rabin interprets this silence as "allied in the text with the author's own adjustment of himself as protagonist in the

master narrative of conquest” (42). In other words, Cabeza de Vaca is silent as well during this reen-counter, and his silence derives from his need to reimagine himself through the lens of his fellow conquistadors.

The actual journey chronicled began in 1528 when he embarked as the king's treasurer on an expedition led by Pánfilo de Narváez to conquer Florida. As an official loyal to Charles V, Cabeza de Vaca was positioned immediately in an awkward struggle between two authority figures, the king and the expedition leader, who represented the symbolic and immediate powers, respectively, influencing his tale and his actions. Although the expedition began with 500 men, it met with such disasters that only Cabeza de Vaca and three other men survived and returned to Spain with tales of their harrowing experiences.

In the proem, which is addressed to Charles V, Cabeza de Vaca flatters the king by referring to the “diligence and desire” exhibited by his loyal servants who, in their earnest efforts to honor his majesty, find themselves performing “more distinguished deeds than he expected” (28). Thus, Cabeza de Vaca avoids appearing as a braggart when he recounts his amazing tale of survival to the king because he attributes all of his actions to his desire to please the sovereign. Despite his efforts to gain fame and distinction for his service, Cabeza de Vaca notes that their sins brought about “such great dangers” and “such a miserable and disastrous outcome” (28). The only service that he can provide to the king, therefore, lies in his tale, which he hopes will benefit “those who go to conquer those lands” (28). Critic Walter Mignolo notes the absence of the conventional language of modesty and a list of sources or personal qualities that qualify Cabeza de Vaca for his role as historian. From the very beginning of the narrative, then, Cabeza de Vaca defies convention in carving out for himself a position from which to speak an unconventional tale of shipwreck, desertion, separation from Narváez, captivity among Amerindians, and eventual reunion with conquistadors.

Early on, the *Relación* adheres to colonial tales of navigating lands, reporting on the presence or

absence of riches and attributing all acts of kindness to God and providence rather than to the native peoples themselves. He writes, for example, of the conquistador's “finding” corn rather than stealing it from the natives who had cultivated it (36, 38, 41, 44). The only divergences from convention are the hum of discord between him and Narváez, which will soon result in their permanent separation from each other, and Cabeza de Vaca's uncharacteristically complimentary description of Amerindians. When a tribe attacks the conquistadors, wounding Cabeza de Vaca and “two other Christians,” the chronicler frames them as worthy opponents and unparalleled human specimens: “Since they are so tall and they are naked, from a distance they look like giants. They are quite handsome, very lean, very strong and light-footed. . . . They shoot their arrows from a distance of two hundred paces with such accuracy that they never miss their target” (44). It is understandable that one would create the image of a worthy opponent, especially in light of wounds received by that opponent, but Cabeza de Vaca's description of the Amerindians transcends their prowess as warriors. He refers to them as “handsome,” for example, an attribute that has nothing to do with their position as worthy adversaries but is rather a compliment to them as fellow humans rather than ugly savages. It is not the only instance in which he compliments the natives, for a few pages later he refers to a tribe as “large, handsome people,” and to another group as “the handsomest people . . . who appeared very attractive” (50, 52).

The second moment of narrative departure from the conventional conquest tale occurs soon after the expedition leader orders the construction of five boats to sail away from Florida's coast. When Cabeza de Vaca requests that Narváez throw him a line to help him follow him and keep the five boats together, the leader replies in a manner that negates his position of authority and the purpose of the expedition in general: “He told me that it was no longer necessary for any of us to give orders, that each of us should do what seemed best to save his life, since that is what he intended to do” (53). Critics point to this moment of crisis as a point when

Cabeza de Vaca must deal with the abandonment of one authority and replace it with another. For a time, he proves himself a worthy leader, noting that although many of the men had fainted, he had remained well and alert, anxious over the sick and dying soldiers (54). He attempts unsuccessfully to relaunch the boat and set out to sea, but their boat cannot survive the rough surf and they return to the same shore in worse circumstances: “Those of us who survived were as naked as the day we were born and had lost everything we had” (56). This description of a return to infancy functions rhetorically to give the men a rebirth. It is at this time that Cabeza de Vaca begins to refer to his fellow conquistadors not as Spaniards but as Christians (57). With the loss of Narváez, the survivors take up a new authority, God, and shed their identities as subjects of the king for their newfound positions as servants of God.

God becomes the central authority for the narrative, so much so that some critics read Cabeza de Vaca’s account less as a colonial tale of conquest and more as hagiography, recording the life of a saint (Bruce-Novoa 16). Bruce-Novoa recognizes the expediency of such a shift in the narrative’s predominant genre: Having failed to “achieve the goal most highly prized by the Christians—the conquest of wealth—he made a virtue of his failure, of his talent for alterability, of his ability to relate different terms, and even of his resemblance to a saint” (16). He reconfigures his failure into a victory of the spiritual or religious over the banality of earthly possessions such as gold, which the conquistadors sought but never found. Thus, the tale turns more to detailing the beliefs and practices of the native populations, an aspect of the narrative that would prove invaluable to de las Casas in Cabeza de Vaca’s own time and to historians and ethnographers in the present.

Cabeza de Vaca details various customs and beliefs, ranging from marriage ceremonies to rites of mourning. As testament to his declaration that “these people love their children more and treat them better than any other people on earth,” he details the village’s engagement in a yearlong period of mourning for any child who perishes

(60). They honor the sanctity of marriage by practicing monogamy, with the exception of the medicine men, who are given two or three wives. The wives function as intermediaries between the two families united in wedlock: Each wife carries food gathered or hunted by her husband to her father’s hut, and the in-laws in turn take food to their son-in-law (60). Because the two families are not permitted to converse or even look at each other, it is the women who must carry messages from the one family to the other. This practice of shuttling between families or tribes is strictly associated with women, and for this reason the folklorist Mariah Wade collapses Cabeza de Vaca’s role as interpreter and trader among tribes with indigenous women’s role as go-between (333).

Cabeza de Vaca’s own progress toward his role as cultural go-between is charted out in his estrangement from Spaniards, whom he differentiates from “Christians,” and in his cultural and linguistic affiliation with the native peoples of North America. In a reversal of the traditional colonial worldview of self and other, the Spaniards become the “other,” as Cabeza de Vaca includes tales of “five Christians” who, to the horror of the Amerindians who discover them, resort to cannibalism in order to survive (59). He reports their reactions: “The Indians were quite upset by this happening and were so shocked that they would have killed the men had they seen them begin to do this” (59). Just prior to this tale, Cabeza de Vaca relates how he feasted on raw corn rather than eat the slaughtered horses (56). Later in his tale, he tells of cannibalism practiced by Hernando de Esquivel, whom he ironically refers to as a Christian, and others: “As the men died, the survivors cut and dried their flesh. The last one to die was Sotomayor, and Esquivel cut and dried his flesh, surviving by eating it until the first of March, when an Indian who had fled there came to see if they had died and took Esquivel away with him” (69). Food and what one will and will not consume are culturally specific markers that help to identify a person, and to register a shift or change in his or her cultural affiliation. The parents who are in mourning, for example, enact their sorrow over the death of a child or sibling by refusing to

forage or hunt for food. They rely solely on their fellow villagers or extended family members to give them food; further, they only consume “very bad water” for three months (62). Among the Yguazes, for example, Cabeza de Vaca mentions how their hunger drives them to eat unusual items such as ant eggs, worms, dirt, wood, and deer excrement, but, as he implies, they never stoop as low as the Spaniards to consume another human's flesh (71).

Cabeza de Vaca's introduction into his role as healer comes about by the natives' intent to “make us physicians, without testing us or asking for any degrees, because they cure illnesses by blowing on the sick person and cast out the illness with their breath and their hands” (62). The notion that they were destined to be healers was attributed to their greatness. He demurs, and the group find themselves without food until they agree to function as healers. What follows is a brief account of the manner in which medicine men cure (making an incision and sucking out the area and then cauterizing the incision with fire) and the manner in which Catholic rituals are integrated into Cabeza de Vaca's own brand of healing: “We did our healing by making the sign of the cross on the sick persons, breathing on them, saying the Lord's Prayer and a Hail Mary over them, and asking God our Lord, as best we could, to heal them and inspire them to treat us well” (62). Even though he is treated well and given food and other provisions for his inexplicable ability to heal, Cabeza de Vaca, in invoking God and the Virgin Mary during his healing performances, is careful not to overstep his bounds and create the illusion that he has acquired godlike status among the Amerindians. The very possibility that the Amerindians would elevate his status because of his healing is quickly obliterated when he recounts being made a captive for a year to a tribe who worked him hard and abused him so that he sought to escape and went to live with the Charuco (64). Thus, Cabeza de Vaca reinvents himself, for a time, as an interpreter and trader.

When Cabeza de Vaca gets lost and is alone in this strange new world, his narrative begins to resemble that of a saint's life as more and more Christian symbology appears in his account.

Cabeza de Vaca, as did Jesus, who witnessed a burning bush while alone during his solitary trial in the desert, spies a symbol of God's intervention: “It pleased God that I should find a burning tree, by the fire of which I endured that cold night” (77). His second abandonment by his fellow Spaniards likewise resembles Jesus's betrayal by Peter and Judas (78). As did Jesus, Cabeza de Vaca survives his struggles alone in a brutal environment and emerges transformed. His healing rituals are more infused with prayer and elements of Catholic ritual, such as making the sign of the cross over those in need of healing. Cabeza de Vaca also begins to rely on God rather than on himself or his fellow conquistadors for deliverance from captivity (79). His healing powers are so great that he revives a dead man, much as Jesus did when raising Lazarus from the dead (80). Along with Castillo, the two men garner almost deitylike status among the Amerindians who arrive from far away in the hopes of being healed.

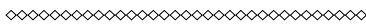
In his role as saint, Cabeza de Vaca converts native populations to Christian faith and saves himself and others in his reluctant role of healer. Soon after his capture, Cabeza de Vaca was considered to be a folk healer and gained a modicum of cultural authority. His tales of healing are a hybrid of medicines and Catholic prayers. Bruce-Novoa views his role as folk healer as reflecting negatively and in a parodic manner on the king's own position: “As a healer, Cabeza de Vaca situated himself at the center of an imperial parody: surrounding him were hundreds of Indians who lived off his activities; he in turn was elevated to power by divine intervention. The difference between Charles V's Imperial Court and this imperial parody is that Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca now occupied the center” (8). Thus, for Bruce-Novoa, the conquistador's new identity as healer gave him an authority over the native populations that rivaled the king's own authority over his dominion, and thus diminished or belittled the king.

Ultimately, however, Cabeza de Vaca must reconcile himself to the Spanish Crown, as well as to his fellow conquistadors, whom he refers to as Spaniards even as he refers to himself and Castillo as

Christians. Critics argue that he never fully returns to the status of conquistador because of his seven-year captivity, because of his linguistic and cultural affiliations with the Amerindians, and because of his profound belief in the innate humanity of those he encountered in his *Account*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative of conquest is also a tale of captivity. How do these two genres coexist? How do they create alternative identities for the author?
2. How does Cabeza de Vaca’s survival technique as a trader between tribes compare to JOHN SMITH’s position as the Cape Merchant? How does each colonist negotiate a place for himself between the two worlds—European and indigenous?
3. What might account for Cabeza de Vaca’s different interpretation of Amerindians from those chronicled in other conquest narratives, specifically that of John Smith, whose capture by Powhatan and rescue by Pocahontas have become the stuff of legend?
4. What role does food play in the tales of captivity by Cabeza de Vaca and MARY WHITE ROWLANDSON? How do their diets reflect their cultural identities?
5. Compare Cabeza de Vaca’s treatment of the indigenous populations he encountered with CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS’s. How are the two explorers different in their views of the role that the indigenous populations should play in relation to the Spanish Crown? What larger views about politics, race, and or religion are central to the differences in their views?



**FURTHER QUESTIONS
ON CABEZA DE VACA
AND HIS WORK**

1. Later in his life, Cabeza de Vaca not only espoused ideas, but instituted policies that radically departed from the conventional treatment Spanish conquistadors meted out to the peo-

ple they had conquered and colonized. Write an essay in which you argue for the influence of Cabeza de Vaca’s experiences in Texas and Florida, documented in *The Account*, in shaping the later views he championed while in South America.

2. Critics have struggled with categorizing Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación* in terms of a single genre: autobiography, ethnography, hagiography, captivity, or conquest narrative. Having read *Relación* carefully, make an argument for the categorization of Cabeza de Vaca’s most famous work, making sure that you provide support for your view with examples from the text.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Adorno, Rolena. “The Discursive Encounter of Spain and America: The Authority of Eyewitness Testimony in the Writing of History.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (April 1992): 210–228.

———. “The Negotiation of Fear in Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufragios*.” *Representations* 33 (Winter 1991): 163–199.

Bruce-Novoa, Juan. “Shipwrecked on the Seas of Signification: Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación* and Chicano Literature.” In *Reconstructing a Chicano/a Literary Heritage*, edited by María Herrera Sobek, 3–23. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993.

Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez. *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca*. Translated by Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Favata, Martin A., and José B. Fernández, eds. *The Account: Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca’s Relación*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993.

Gaylord, Mary. “Spain’s Renaissance Conquests and the Retroping of Identity.” *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 16 (1992): 125–136.

Krieger, Alex D. *We Came Naked and Barefoot: The Journey of Cabeza de Vaca across North America*, edited by Margery H. Krieger. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

Mignolo, Walter. “Cartas, crónicas y relaciones del descubrimiento y la conquista.” In *Historia de la Literatura Hispanoamericana: Epoca Colonial*. Vol. 1, Madrid: Catédra “Cartas, crónicas y relaciones

- del descubrimiento y la conquista” edited by Iñigo Madrigal. 1982, 681–694.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. *The European Discovery of America*. Vol. 2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Rabin, Lisa. “Figures of Conversion and Subjectivity in Colonial Literature.” *Hispania* 82, no. 1 (1999): 40–45.
- Southwestern Writers Collection: Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. Available online. URL: <http://alkek.library.txstate.edu/swwc/cdv/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Wade, Mariah. “Go-between: The Roles of Native American Women and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in Southern Texas in the 16th Century.” *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 332–342.



SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN (1570–1635)

As for me, I labor always to prepare a way for those willing to follow.

(Champlain's journal)

Samuel de Champlain was born in Brouage, a small seaport in Saintonge, France, on the Bay of Biscay sometime in 1570. His biographer Samuel Eliot Morison writes that Brouage was an important and bustling seaport at the time of Champlain's birth, as it was the center of the salt industry. Prior to refrigeration for meats and fish, salt was widely used as a preservative so merchants would find their way to the city of Champlain's birth in order to pickle their meats in brine. Not much is known about his parents except their names, which appear in Samuel de Champlain's own marriage contract. His father, Antoine de Complain, was a captain in the merchant marine, and his mother was Marguerite Le Roy.

Because his father was a seaman, Champlain received his education at sea. On the basis of a letter that Champlain wrote later in life to Marie de Medici, queen regent of France, we know that he must have spent much of his childhood fishing along the coast: "The art of navigation from childhood has stimulated me to expose almost all my life to the impetuous waves of the ocean, and has made me navigate and coast along a part of the lands of America, especially of New France" (reported in Morison 17). The first documented activity Champlain engaged in was a battle at Fort Crozat near Brest against Spanish invaders in winter 1594. Four years later, when the war ended, Champlain sailed on the *Saint-Julian*, a ship commanded by his uncle,

Guillaume Hellaine. Together, they made a tour of the West Indies that included the Lesser Antilles, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. The year was 1599, and Champlain was 29 years old. His journey took him as far inland as Mexico City, whose fertile soil he admired even as he expressed disdain for the Spaniards' cruel treatment of the indigenous population (20). His biographer Morison attributes Champlain's humane treatment of the indigenous populations he encountered in New France to his early exposure to the cruelty of colonialism. "No early European explorer was anywhere near so successful as Champlain in making friends of the natives, or so humane in protecting them" (20). From his series of West Indies voyages, Champlain returned home to France and began composition of a *Brief Discourse of the Most Remarkable Things Which Samuel Champlain of Brouage Has Observed in the West Indies during the Voyages He Made Thither in the Year 1599 and the Year 1601, as Follows*. In it, Champlain provides sketches as well as labored, extensive descriptions of the various flora and fauna he encounters in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. He includes pictures and detailed descriptions of such exotic items as avocados, rattlesnakes, and agave cactus.

"After having spoken of the trees, plants, and animals, I must give a short account of the Indians, their nature, manners, and belief" (37). He mentions the ceremonies of the indigenous population,

“who are not under the domination of the Spaniards” and who “adore the moon as their Deity.” When he addresses those converted to Christianity, Champlain’s tone seems to shift rather dramatically and he writes sympathetically:

At the commencement of his conquests, he had established the Inquisition among them, and made slaves of or caused them to die cruelly in such great numbers, that the sole recital would cause pity. This evil treatment was the reason that the poor Indians, for very apprehension, fled to the mountains in desperation, and as many Spaniards as they caught they ate them; and on that account the said Spaniards were constrained to take away the Inquisition, and allow them personal liberty, granting them a more mild and tolerable rule of life, to bring them to the knowledge of God and the belief of the holy church; for if they had continued still to chastise them according to the rigor of the said Inquisition, they would have caused them all to die by fire. (38)

Champlain cites the horrors that both the Spaniards and the native Mexicans are capable of performing: cannibalism and auto-da-fé. Tellingly, he does not seem to condemn the practice of consuming fellow human beings, a taboo in most societies, but instead chastises the Spanish for the methods undertaken in the Inquisition for gaining religious converts. As a fellow Catholic, Champlain is not averse to religious conversion; indeed, the quotation speaks to a desire to include the native population in the dominion of the Catholic Church. Rather, Champlain pointedly disapproves of the methods employed in the Inquisition. Further, he accepts a priori the humanity of Mexico’s indigent population by referring to personal liberty and even by expressing a desire for their “knowledge of God and the belief of the holy church.” That he sees the natives as humans is striking when compared to the early colonial accounts along the eastern seaboard, or even of Spanish conquistadors like Hernán Cortés just two centuries prior. Champlain writes more feelingly of the native

inhabitants of Mexico: “All these Indians are of a very melancholy humor, but have nonetheless very quick intelligence, and understanding in a short time, whatever may be shown to them, and do not become irritated, whatever action or abuse may be done or said to them” (40). Champlain’s note of sympathy, even admiration, will appear in his subsequent voyages to North America, but they will not appear consistently.

When he returned to France in 1602, Champlain presented the manuscript of his voyage to the West Indies to King Henry IV; the following March, Champlain made his first voyage to Canada at the age of 33. The route, even the navigation routes taken once they arrived in North America, followed the voyages made previously by Jacques Cartier and Jean-François de la Roque de Roberval in 1541. The areas along the St. Lawrence River near Quebec had been founded as summer colonies, meaning that they were all but abandoned during the winter months but flooded with fur traders and fishermen during the summer months. Champlain’s purpose for this voyage in 1603 was to establish permanent colonies in Canada in exchange for monopolies on fur trade granted by King Henry IV. At the king’s request, Champlain joined the voyage commanded by François Pont-Gravé, under the auspices of recording their expedition. He did so in his first publication, *Des Sauvages, ou, Voyage de Samuel Champlain, de Broulage, fait en la France nouvelle, l’an mil six cens trois*. This 36-page document was published in Paris near the end of 1603, and it contained factual accounts of the waters, coastline, potential trade products, and customs of the native populations. Aside from this rather dry recitation of facts, Champlain included one interesting bit of lore gathered from the Micmac tribe, the tale of Gougou:

There is an island where a terrible monster resides, which the savages call Gougou, and which they told me had the form of a woman, though very frightful, and of such a size that they told me the tops of the masts of our vessel would not reach to his middle, so great do they picture him; and they say that he has often devoured and still con-

tinues to devour many savages; these he puts, when he can catch them, into a great pocket, and afterwards eats them; and those who had escaped the jaws of this wretched creature said that its pocket was so great that it could have put our vessel into it. (165)

Champlain's inclusion of this tale within a document that is primarily factual bears further comment. Morison believes that Champlain might well have noted the dry nature of his book and wished to offer readers something enticing in the form of native lore. The concept behind the Gougou is also quite interesting first and foremost because the horrible creature is in the form of a female.

It is all the more interesting that Champlain would include the tale of the Gougou since he makes a concerted effort for veracity and exactitude in his entries. He gives maps of the shoreline which continue to amaze contemporary cartographers for their accuracy and details given the rudimentary tools available to map-makers in Champlain's age. He offers detailed descriptions of the waterways that he encounters, and he even consults with local natives on numerous occasions to ascertain the locations of their settlements as well as the presence of additional rivers and lakes. At one point in the narrative, Champlain makes a crude map on the ground, drawn with sticks, to which the natives conversing with him add six pebbles signifying the locations of their tribes. At another point in the narrative, Champlain when he discovers what he believes to be the Norumbegue River, "It is related also that there is a large, thickly settled town of savages, who are adroit and skillful, and who have cotton yarn. I am confident that most of those who mention it have not seen it, and speak of it because they have heard persons say so, who knew no more about it than they themselves" (46). In contrast to those who will simply relate untruths in their narratives, Champlain avows, "I will accordingly relate truly what I explored and saw, from the beginning as far as I went" (46).

He dedicated the rest of his life to documenting and mapping his excursions into Canada and North America, producing a series of detailed maps that continue to amaze contemporary cartographers for their accuracy. He was responsible for gaining alliances with the Huron, Algonquin, and Montagnais, an agreement solidified through trade and mutual warfare waged against the Iroquois. His time in New France was punctuated by warfare not only with the native population, but also within his own settlement. Champlain successfully thwarted a mutiny caused by those who would sell their territory, and its rights to fur trading, to the highest bidder, whether English or Spanish. The mastermind behind the mutiny was strangled and decapitated and his head placed on a pike so that all could see the consequences of such schemes. Champlain also faced constant battles in France against people vying for his monopoly, and members of the royal family who would not contribute the kind of money, colonists, and Catholic missionaries needed to make New France a large, expansive territory as Champlain envisioned it. Much of his time was spent alone, or in the company of his native allies, but this changed in late 1610.

On December 30, 1610, Champlain, then 40 years old, married Hélène Boullé, in Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois. She was the daughter of Nicolas Boullé, secretary of the king's chamber. What made the union unusual, however, was Hélène's age. She was only 12 years old. "In consideration of the tender age" of the bride, Champlain signed a marriage contract containing a provision that the groom would wait two years before consummating the marriage. Just a few months later, on March 1, 1611, Champlain set sail for Tadoussac and Quebec once again. He left his child bride behind in l'Auxerrois, having hired a maidservant to tend to Hélène and their new home. Morison reports, "Of all his twenty-three voyages across the North Atlantic, [the 1611 trip] was much the worst, and the longest—over ten weeks" (124–125). They encountered both ice floes and icebergs. Once they arrived, Pont-Gravé remained at Tadoussac to engage in fur trading while Champlain took the pinnace to La Chine rapids, where he established

a new trading post and solicited native guides to assist in his exploration of the Ottawa River. He founded the site for Montreal, which would not have year-round settlement until 1642. In terms of his plans for northwestern exploration, Champlain received approval from the council of Huron, Algonquin, and Montagnais to continue establishing fur trading posts in the Ottawa region during his next trip. Unlike his long and dangerous voyage to Canada, Champlain had a rather quick return trip to France. His return to his wife, however, was significantly delayed until late in 1611 because of injuries sustained when a horse fell on him.

After his convalescence, Champlain took the next 18 months to write and publish *Les Voyages du Sieur de Champlain Xaintongeois, capitaine ordinaire pour le roy en la marine*. French colonizer Pierre Dugua de Monts and Champlain were able to convince Henri de Bourbon, prince de Condé, to serve as the titular head of their Canadian enterprise, serving as viceroy of New France. Although securing Condé to help promote their voyages was helpful, it also introduced new partners, merchants who launched a rather scathing attack against Champlain. They called him nothing more than a painter and characterized his multiple journeys to New France as mere attempts to puff up his ego and gain public notoriety. Despite their insults, Champlain sailed to New France again, this time as the deputy to the viceroy. Champlain's anxieties about the English appeared in the form of a tale of a wrecked English ship and a young survivor who had joined the natives. Champlain heard this tale from Nicolas de Vignau, a sailor whom Champlain had exchanged with the Algonquin for a boy of the same tribe whom Champlain had baptized as Savignon. Vignau's story seemed plausible, especially since there had been stories about Henry Hudson, who was in James Bay during the previous winter. When Champlain arrived at Muskrat Lake and met Chief Nibachis, he soon learned that Vignau had never left their village during the previous winter and thus could never have reached Hudson Bay and seen John Hudson, the explorer's son. That Champlain traveled so far on the word of Vignau speaks

to the pressure Champlain must have faced to claim the region before it could be declared the territory of the ever-encroaching English. Indeed, he planted a white cedar cross on the Lower Allumette River to leave some sign of his presence and then returned to France. He had realized that he would not achieve his goal of reaching Hudson Bay.

Just as before, his time in France was largely spent in garnering support for his venture in New France. To that end, he wrote and published *La Quatrième voyage de sr. de Champlain* in Paris in 1614. A new society, called La Compagnie de Canada, was created in November 1613 to ensure the continued success of Champlain's efforts; members promised to pay de Condé a horse valued at 1,000 écus each year, and to finance Champlain. In exchange, they would enjoy an 11-year monopoly on fur trade along the St. Lawrence River, and six families would settle there to establish a permanent claim on the territory. Another tactic Champlain undertook to ensure France's stronghold in the region was to return in 1615 with a group of Franciscan monks intent upon converting the native population. A third element of colonization was maintaining good relations with the Huron, Algonquin, and Montagnais through engaged warfare against the Iroquois. When they reached Iroquois territory by Lake Oneida, their attack was not as successful as their previous one. Champlain was wounded in the knee and leg. The tribe they thought were going to assist them in their attack, their new allies the Andaste, never appeared.

Champlain spent the next four months recuperating from his injury among the Huron. He writes of their use of sweat lodges for medicinal purposes and of the sexual promiscuity prior to marriage he witnessed among the younger population. It is quite likely that Champlain focused on these particular aspects of Huron culture because, in his estimation, the absence of civilization that these practices indicated necessitated the presence of additional missionaries. In the memoir he drew up and presented to Louis XIII and to the Paris Chamber of Commerce, Champlain warns against the English and Dutch efforts to colonize North America; he

also reminds his readers of the labors he has dedicated to the cause of New France over the past 16 years. He makes various promises about the wealth to be gained in further exploration and specifically argues for the permanent settlement of at least 300 families and 15 friars. The court, however, was not interested in religious converts nor in permanent settlement. During his year and a half in France, Champlain penned and published his third book, *Voyages et découvertures faites en la nouvelle france* . . . accounting for his explorations in the interior as well as his military failure against the Iroquois at Onondaga. He missed the annual voyage to Canada in 1619 because he became embroiled in a dispute over his authority and position in New France after de Condé sold his viceroyalty to his brother-in-law.

In spring 1620, Champlain sailed back to Canada with his wife, Hélène, who would remain with him for four years in Quebec. Their return to France in 1624 was due in no small part to further disputes and questions over Champlain's role and authority in New France. The new viceroy dissolved the Campagne de Canada and gave a fur trading monopoly to Guillaume de Caen. The duke, however, confirmed Champlain's position as lieutenant and increased his salary twofold. When Montmorency sold the viceroyalty to his zealous nephew, Henri de Lévis, who was intent on securing Native converts, Champlain was issued a new commission that gave him complete authority. He sailed with the new viceregal edict back to Quebec in 1626 without Hélène.

When France was at war with England, Champlain experienced the conflict in the very real terms that he had feared and warned the French against: seizure of French territory by the English. Champlain first heard of the presence of English ships on Cape Tourmente from some native guides. Soon enough, word arrived from David Kirke, who commandeered an English fleet off Quebec, that they had blockaded the St. Lawrence River to cut them off from any supplies or aid from France. After consulting Pont-Gravé, Champlain decided to hold out: They would neither surrender nor engage in battle. When their only hope, a French fleet con-

taining supplies, was soundly defeated by Kirke, Champlain and the other settlers faced certain starvation. He had no alternative but to raise the white flag and broker a surrender agreement that included the repatriation of all French settlers. The peace treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye concluded the war between England and France in March 1632. Canada and Acadia were returned to France.

In March of the following year, Champlain made his final voyage to Canada. He returned to Quebec and saw it once again as French territory; he had the role of diplomat to play in order to run the English out of Quebec. He restored the seigneurial system, a feudal land settlement that allowed people to gain property in New France. In October 1635, he suffered a stroke from which he never recovered. He died on Christmas Day, December 25, in Quebec.

The Voyages of Samuel de Champlain (1604–1635)

Although he is known as the father of New France, Samuel de Champlain was first to explore Plymouth Bay and Boston Harbor, years before the settlements of the British. His biographer Samuel Eliot Morison speculates “as to the course of history if the French had settled at the site of Boston and had received enough support from home to defend it against the English Puritans . . . a town on the Rivière de Gua (Charles River) would have become the capital of New France extending from Cape Cod or Long Island to the North Pole” (63). Champlain did sail a pinnace into Boston Harbor, but he decided that it did not rival Penobscot, or Annapolis Basin, Nova Scotia.

Champlain opens his book of voyages from 1604 to 1607 with a wide lens—human motivations—that narrows to the topics of colonization and trade routes, and then stretches across time to document various voyages undertaken in the hope of discovering a northerly route to China: “The inclinations of men differ according to their varied dispositions; and each one in his calling has his particular end in view. Some aim at gain, some at glory, some at the public

weal" (21). He compares the desire for sovereigns to amass "objects of beauty and rarity obtained from foreign nations." For this reason, Champlain states, "many princes have striven to find a northerly route to China, in order to facilitate commerce" (22). His narrative then offers a brief history of nautical endeavors to discover such a trade route, beginning in 1496 with the king of England's commissioning John Cabot and continuing with the works of Spain and France. Into this history, Champlain does not assert himself directly, but speaks instead of the arduous labors of Sieur de Monts to "attempt what had been given up in despair" (24). Having convinced the king of the fertility of the soil, and of his own conviction to establish a permanent settlement, Sieur de Monts set forth to found a new place in the interior where it would be geographically advantageous to "plant the Christian faith and establish such order as is necessary for the protection of a country" (25). It is thus in the service of the king, Sieur de Monts, and the spread of the Christian faith that Champlain sets forth his book of travels. Although he does not directly establish himself as the inheritor of the fame and glory attributed to ocean voyagers in the past, by invoking them in his introductory statements, Champlain certainly does imagine himself within this glorious history.

Throughout his travels, Champlain meets with members and sachems of various tribes along the eastern seaboard. Quite a few encounters follow an almost formulaic trend: Either they meet with the chiefs and exchange goods, or else Champlain and his men see smoke or other telltale signs that the natives had recently been in a particular spot but had deserted it in advance of the French. It is perhaps in compensation for the absence of a more profitable or hoped-for exchange that Champlain offers readers a more detailed description of the natives. When Champlain and his men discover that "they had nothing but their robes to give in exchange, for they preserve only such furs as they need for their garments," Champlain launches into his first full description of the Almouchiquois:

These savages shave off the hair far up on the head, and wear what remains very long, which

they comb and twist behind in various ways very neatly, intertwined with feathers which they attach to the head. They paint their faces black and red, like the other savages which we have seen. They are an agile people, with well-formed bodies. Their weapons are pikes, clubs, bows and arrows, at the end of which some attach the tail of a fish called the signoc, others bones, while the arrows of others are entirely of wood. (61–62)

Champlain has mentioned several other encounters, but the only details given are the goods that were exchanged, usually biscuits and knives for furs and other food. As Champlain himself states, they had encountered other "savages" who have also painted their faces in this manner, but he has never thought to include such a description in his narration.

His narrative of riverways, shoreline, and islands that he encounters is also interrupted during his first winter when he mentions, in graphic detail, the pains associated with scurvy, and its exacting toll on the settlers. Indeed, by Champlain's count, 35 of 79 settlers succumbed over the brutal winter to scurvy, caused by the absence of vitamin C. In the winter, it is difficult to obtain this vitamin, which is mostly found in citrus fruits. The Natives offer Champlain and others the "plant called *Aneda*, which Jacques Cartier said was so powerful against the malady called scurvy. . . . The savages have no knowledge at all of this plant, and are not aware of its existence, although the above-mentioned savages has the same name" (60). The quotation is a bit difficult to understand, but it seems as though Champlain is stating that the Oneida (perhaps the name *Aneda*) are named after this very plant (what he identifies as the white pine, but others call the eastern white cedar) but are unaware of its medicinal properties. How Champlain could know that they were unaware of its properties in curing scurvy is rather uncertain.

In terms of how the Natives fare during the winter months on the island of St. Croix, Champlain tells of equal amounts of suffering and endurance that parallel those of the French, but without the added misery of scurvy. While the French subsist on

salted meat and vegetables and drink “bad water” as well as melted snow, the Natives “hunt elks and other animals, on which they live most of the time” (54, 55). Champlain almost seems to marvel at the abilities of the Natives, especially the women and children, who wear snow shoes and follow the men as they track animals. Once they have made a kill, “the women and children come up, erect a hut, and they give themselves to feasting” (55). During the winter months, Champlain writes, “they clothe themselves with good furs of beaver and elk. The women make all the garments, but not so exactly but that you can see the flesh under the arm-pits, because they have not ingenuity enough to fit them better” (55). The language is worth comment because Champlain seems at once to marvel at the ability of entire families, people of various ages, to endure a difficult climate. He even states that winter lasts for six months, noting that although the French have only survived one winter in this new environment, the natives have done so for lifetimes. Even so, however, Champlain finds fault with the sewing techniques of the native women, who leave the skin under the armpits exposed because of lack of “ingenuity.” The only item that Champlain documents with any degree of approval are the furs themselves, described as “good.”

Because the winter was so extreme, Sieur de Monts sought out a new settlement, which they named Port Royal. They quickly began work constructing houses and felling trees so that they would have the majority of their buildings erected prior to their return to France, where Sieur de Monts would petition for additional resources from the king. Because Champlain wishes to explore Florida, he remains behind, along with Pont-Gravé, whose illness they hope will be cured by a warmer climate and a “change of air” (82).

In winter 1603, Champlain was the subject of a mutiny organized by Antoine Natel, a locksmith who survived a previous attack on the coast of Massachusetts. Champlain learns of the plan from his pilot, Captain Testu, to whom Natel confesses. He writes, “Nothing had impelled them except that they had imagined that, by giving up the place into the hands of the Basques or Spaniards, they might

all become rich and that they did not want to go back to France” (134). Champlain, together with Pont-Gravé, decides to put the head of the conspiracy, Jean Duval, to death. In a rather matter-of-fact manner, Champlain relates the grisly details of Duval’s death: “who was strangled and hung at Quebec, and his head was put on the end of a pike, to be set up in the most conspicuous place on our fort” (136). The other three main conspirators were arrested, deposed, and returned to France under Pont-Gravé’s authority.

Throughout much of his voyages, Champlain expresses a wish for the natives to accompany him in further exploration. He asks for a party to help him explore whether there is a sea to the north because “it is maintained that the English have gone in these latter years to find a way to China” (129). The place Champlain had heard of through tales of migratory tribes with whom they had traded furs is actually Hudson Bay, discovered by Henry Hudson in 1610. Not until late in his voyages, after he has established good relationships with the native tribes, solidified through trade and military alliances, is he given permission by local chiefs to travel farther into the interior of North America. Whenever he spies new territory, Champlain offers meticulous descriptions of the waterways, exact locations of the new territory with respect to previous locations, detailed maps, and inventories of the local flora and fauna.

Champlain also spends a considerable amount of his writings discussing the habits and culture of the Native tribes with whom he has become acquainted through trade and exploration. Although Champlain himself never learned any of the Native languages, he was always able to effect some level of communication through signs and interpreters. Early on in his narratives, Champlain comments upon a subject that would become increasingly important to him and his endeavors in Canada: the conversion of North America’s native population. He notes how the natives encamped near them engage in fishing and hunting, first of eel and then of beaver, in preparation for winter. In contemplating the hardships they endure, Champlain states, “I am of the opinion that if one were to show them how to live, and teach them the cultivation of the

soil and other things, they would learn very aptly” (141). Champlain continues by specifying “other things,” to mean not only agriculture, but also conversion to Catholicism. He describes the natives as people who “observe no law at all” and are “full of superstition” (141). Champlain attributes their lawlessness to their ignorance of worship and prayer to God. As proof of his claim that they live “like brute beasts,” he includes his observations about soothsayers and marriage rites “such as they are.” Sandwiched between these two descriptions intended to mark the absence of civilized living is an odd comment about skin adornment in women: “The women, also, are well-formed, plump, and of a swarthy color, in consequence of certain pigments with which they rub themselves, and which give them a permanent olive color” (142). This single sentence speaks volumes. It addresses Champlain’s claim that natives can change if they are “shown how to live” by imagining one of the physical markers of difference, skin color, to be artificial and thus easily reversed. Further, as a prefatory note to a description of marriage rites, particularly to the perceived promiscuity of native women, this sentence about dyed skin imagines native women as possible wives to French colonists. As can the skin dyes, Native marriage and courtship rituals can be undone, or reversed. Indeed, the prospect of proper Catholic marriages would preserve the virginity and sanctity of Native women, improving their current position: “When a girl is fourteen or fifteen years old, and has several suitors, she may keep company with all she likes. At the end of five or six years, she takes the one that pleases her for her husband, and they live together to the end of their lives” (142). Although Champlain does not expressly project how conversion will change marriage rites or the sexual activities of women before wedlock, it can be inferred that readers would know how Catholicism would dictate social behavior in these realms.

Regarding the position of soothsayers, Champlain offers a very interesting account that directly includes him. After having observed the shaman and the tales surrounding him, Champlain peels back the curtain to reveal the truth behind the Pilotois, as they are called. When the people report

that the devil makes the Pilotois’s cabin shake or makes fire erupt from its top, Champlain blithely responds, “I could see [to] the contrary” that the man inside the cabin “took one of the supports of the cabin, and made it move in this manner” (159). He continues in a remonstrative tone, “these rogues counterfeit also their voice, so that it is heavy and clear, and speak in a language unknown to the other savages.” “I often remonstrated with the people, telling them that all they ought not to put confidence in them” (160). These soothsayers, however, exercise such control over the members of the tribe that they take their military orders for engaging in battle from the “charlatans” and “scapegraces.” Despite Champlain’s brief diatribe against the superstitious beliefs of the Algonquin, he participates in them. Several nights pass dreamless for Champlain, and yet the natives never fail to inquire of him whether he has dreamed of the Iroquois, their enemy. One night, however, Champlain reports that he has indeed dreamed of the Iroquois. In his dream, the Iroquois were drowning in a lake near a mountain, and when he asked his allies whether they should all save their enemies, the reply was to let them drown because they are of no importance. The next morning, when the Algonquin ask Champlain whether he has had a dream, he relates it and reveals, “it gave them so much confidence that they did not doubt any longer that good was to happen to them” (168). Champlain seems to take on some of the visionary qualities associated with the soothsayer he has most recently criticized. Indeed, Champlain seems to compensate early on for the lack of visionary dreams, writing, “Yet I did not cease to encourage them, and inspire in them hope” (162).

Likewise, Champlain rouses loud cries from the Algonquin when they initially engage in battle with the Iroquois. The men create a passageway for Champlain, who advances 20 paces in front of the rest of the army, with only 30 paces separating him from the Iroquois. Aiming his musket, he discharges a shot that fells all three Iroquois chiefs, killing two of them immediately. Just as his dream aroused confidence in the Algonquin, so too does his prowess with his musket. The Iroquois, under-

standably, are also affected by this display. Champlain reports that they were “greatly astonished” at the sudden death of two of their chiefs. The additional report of another musket is enough to send them retreating into the woods, where the Algonquin, Huron, and Montagnais follow in order to capture prisoners. Champlain concludes this tale of military victory by naming the lake near the battle: “The spot where this attack took place is in latitude 43 and some minutes, and the lake was called Lake Champlain” (166–167).

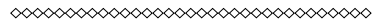
Later, in 1623, Champlain would broker peace with the Iroquois, but his ability to create alliances with the Huron and other tribes is of most importance. Because Champlain lived, traded, and fought alongside the natives before the arrival of the English, he established a precedent for native and European relations. His actions dictated how the neighboring tribes would deal with JOHN SMITH and other early English settlers. Further, the statements he makes about native customs, beliefs, and rituals have provided ethnographers and historians with invaluable information.

Much of the rest of his voyages address his annual trips from France to Canada and back. Each return to France is marked by a constant search for additional funding and resources that he believes are necessary for the preservation and future of New France. His narratives are published in order to arouse support and interest in the region, as well as to continue to ensure his own position and authority.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Champlain’s express desires for the conversion of Huron and other tribes to Catholicism with ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA’s views on Christianizing the native peoples he encounters in Florida and Texas. How do the two explorers imagine religion’s role in colonization?
2. Champlain faced considerable criticism at home concerning his motivations for sailing annually to North America. Locate passages in his *Voyages* in which he seems to be directly or indirectly responding to such accusations. How

does he justify his multiple trips to what would become Canada?



FURTHER QUESTIONS ON CHAMPLAIN AND HIS WORK

1. As the only representative of French colonization in North America, Champlain writes of his country’s aims for its fledgling colony. How does the colonial enterprise from France differ from that of Spain, represented by CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS or Cabeza de Vaca, or England, represented by early settlers like JOHN WINTHROP and Smith?
2. Champlain’s narrative of his multiple voyages to Canada and North America paint him as both a military leader and a religious crusader. How, if at all, are these two roles reconciled?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Calloway, Colin G. *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Champlain, Samuel de. *Champlain Explores America, 1603–1616*. Translated by Annie Nettleton Bourne, edited by Edward Gaylord Bourne. Dartmouth, Canada: Brook House Press, 2000.
- . *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599–1602*. Edited by Alice Welmer. London: Hakluyt Society, 1859.
- Litalien, Raymonde, Käthe Roth, and Denis Vaugeois. *Champlain: The Birth of French America*. Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004.
- Marchand, Philip. *Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Samuel de Champlain: Father of New France*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972.
- Samuel de Champlain. Available online. URL: <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1142.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Sayre, Gordon. *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

(CA. 1451–1506)

Thus the eternal God, Our Lord, grants to all those who walk in his way victory over apparent impossibilities, and this voyage was pre-eminently a victory of this kind.

(letter to Luis de Santángel)

I am ruined, as I have said; till now I have wept for others. May Heaven now have pity on me and earth weep for me. Weep for me whoever has charity, truth and justice!

(letter to Ferdinand and Isabel)

Christoforo Colombo, as he would have been called in his native Genoese dialect, was above all else a man of destiny. His fervent belief in what historians have referred to as a “supernatural sense of mission” led to his discovery of a New World for Europeans, an event that would have immeasurable consequences on both sides of the Atlantic for centuries (Cohen 20). Historians have lauded Columbus’s courage and skill as a mariner just as they have derided his ability to govern the Spanish settlements in the Caribbean. Many hold him responsible for initiating the slave trade in the Western Hemisphere while others praise his tenacity in realizing his dream.

A serious analysis of his life, however, must take into account the vast amount of information that is not known as well as the embellishments, misconceptions, propaganda, and legends surrounding the few confirmed facts. In his quintessential work on Columbus, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, Samuel Eliot Morison highlights the fact that an “authentic portrait” of Columbus does not exist (xviii). Columbus himself was notoriously secretive and “could be vague, contradictory, and self-serving in what he did

write” (Wilford x). Everything about his life, from his origins to his motives in crossing the Atlantic to his death, has been debated. Precious few questions have been definitively answered. On this alone there seems to be consensus among historians.

One of the greatest controversies surrounding Christopher Columbus concerns his nationality. Though it was accepted during his lifetime that he was Italian, as his historical importance became more apparent, a series of articles and books appeared over the years attempting to demonstrate that his origin was French, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Greek, or English. These claims reached their apogee during the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s first transatlantic voyage (Phillips and Phillips 6). While Columbus himself claimed Italian as his native tongue, he wrote in Castilian and often mixed in Portuguese and Catalan words. But as J. M. Cohen notes, this was not uncommon for men who spent most of their time at sea (20).

Columbus himself played a principal role in creating confusion regarding his origins, rarely writing about them or his family. The biographers William and Carla Phillips suggest that this is probably due to the fact that his humble background did not match

his fierce ambition for wealth and status during a time when rising from modest beginnings to great affluence and position was not necessarily appreciated (87). Another factor that may have led Columbus to play down his family origins was that in the volatile political situation of 15th-century Genoa, Columbus's family was linked with an anti-Spanish faction, which would not have boded well with his patron, the Spanish Crown (Phillips and Phillips 90). In any case, "every verifiable historical document clearly indicates that Columbus was born in the independent Italian republic of Genoa, in the late summer or early fall of 1451" (Phillips and Phillips 85).

Columbus's father, Domenico Colombo, worked as a wool weaver and was also a resourceful businessman, having spent time as a tavern keeper and in buying and selling land. Domenico married Columbus's mother, Susanna Fontarossa, the daughter of a weaver, around 1445. Columbus had three younger brothers—Bartolomelo (better known as Bartolomé or Bartholomew), Giovanni-Pellegrino, and Giancomo (better known as Diego or James)—and a younger sister, Bianchineta. Despite his reticence regarding his background, family ties were extremely important to Columbus. The significance of family to Columbus is evident when we consider that two of his brothers, Diego and Bartolomé, would later accompany him to Spain and on several of his voyages across the Atlantic. Bartolomé was Columbus's most ardent supporter and advocated his cause in Portugal, England, and France. Columbus would thank him later by bestowing on him important titles to the land he had discovered after his first voyage. The critic J. M. Cohen emphasizes the strength of fraternal bonds by stating that throughout his life, Columbus "confided in no one except his brothers" (19).

Columbus is thought to have tried his hand at several professions, including as a wool worker, a mariner, a merchant, and a bookseller. This shift in careers was not at all uncommon in late 15th-century Genoa, where "no one occupied a narrowly-defined profession" and conditions led many, including members of Columbus's own family, to use "their labor and capital for whatever they

could" (Heers in Phillips and Phillips 92). His son Hernando's claims in his greatly embellished *The Life of the Admiral by His Son, Hernando Colón* that his father attended the University of Pavia are unfounded. Hernando's declarations probably exaggerate the elementary education Columbus may have received from a school for the children of Genoese clothiers' guild members (Phillips and Phillips 91). There is little doubt that the religious instruction Columbus received was Roman Catholic. The fact that his father and grandfather were landowners and engaged in politics—privileges limited to people of the Catholic faith—supports this idea (Phillips and Phillips 91).

In any case, Columbus took to the sea as a sailor from a young age, initially on short trading voyages from the Genoese coast. He later traveled as far as the island of Chios in the Aegean Sea and would know the Mediterranean well and reach Atlantic waters by his early twenties. Columbus eventually arrived in Portugal in the mid-1470s amid circumstances that have never been fully clarified, though Hernando's account has him miraculously surviving a naval battle off the coast of Lisbon, clinging to an oar after his ship had been sunk. Regardless of how he arrived, Columbus would live in Portugal for a decade, earning a living from maritime and commercial activities. Here he became integrated in the lively mercantile culture of Portugal and Spain, made important personal contacts, and began to speak and write the Portuguese and Castilian languages.

While in Portugal in the late 1470s, Columbus married Felipa Perestrelo e Moniz, a woman of noble Italian descent with connections to the Portuguese court and its possessions in the Atlantic. The marriage would produce a son, Diego, who would later find work under the Catholic sovereigns of Spain. By way of this marriage, Columbus gained possession not only of some degree of wealth, but more importantly of the maps and papers of his late father-in-law, a seaman, which contained pertinent information about the seas and winds surrounding Portuguese territories in the Atlantic. These newfound connections, along

with the experience and knowledge he now had with regard to commanding a ship and engaging in commerce, laid the groundwork for his idea to sail westward toward India and Asia and open up a direct trade route to the West.

Wilford suggests that “in arriving at his grand scheme, he had not come into possession of a singular idea that had eluded others” (74). Columbus did not, in fact, originate the idea that the world is round, as common lore suggests, though he knew the world was a sphere, as did many others of his era. Through books new and old, now readily available as a result of new typesetting techniques, Columbus had access to a variety of scholarly opinions about the makeup of the known world and its inhabitants. Cohen suggests that Columbus’s idea that his intended destination would be “lands flowing with gold and spices and eager to be awakened to the true faith” arose from his readings of Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville (13). Columbus read, or at least consulted, Ptolemy and Marinus of Tyre for geographical measurements of the world and the works of Aristotle and Seneca about the possibility of sailing west. In the opinion of John Wilford, however, Columbus read not to learn, but rather “to gain support for what he already thought to be true” (66). He was therefore consulting these documents and others in order to confirm and document his plan rather than to conceive it.

Historians agree that while inventing his “grand scheme” and pertinent supporting evidence, Columbus made massive miscalculations about the circumference of the world. These miscalculations led to the rejection of his plan by the royal experts of the court of John II of Portugal in late 1483 or early 1484 and played a role in his plan’s being initially rejected in Spain in 1486. These early critics were in fact correct regarding Columbus’s errors in calculation of the distance from Europe to Asia, but Columbus persisted stubbornly, if not blindly, in defense of his ideas. It is rather ironic, as Wilford suggests, that had he been correct in his calculations or listened to these learned men, he might never have attempted to put his grand scheme into practice (80).

Full of ambition and unwilling to accept what he had heard in Portugal, Columbus left Lisbon

for the Spanish port of Palos de la Frontera with his son Diego. In Spain, Columbus met numerous influential people who helped him form his ideas and eventually gain an audience with the Catholic sovereigns. He did not go at his enterprise alone, as the romantic accounts of his son Hernando and Washington Irving suggest. His influential backers included important figures from all sectors of society. Among them were Fray Antonio de Marchena; Enrique de Gúzman, duke of Medina-Sidonia; Luis de la Cerda, count of Medinaceli; Alonso de Quintanilla, the court treasurer; and Juan de Pérez, a former confessor to the queen.

After his initial inconclusive audience with the Catholic sovereigns, Columbus befriended Diego de Arana and eventually fell in love with his cousin, Beatriz Enríquez de Arana, who, though she was an orphaned peasant, had been adopted by a relatively well-off family, which would offer some financial assistance to Columbus. Columbus had a son, Ferdinand (better known as Hernando), with her, but they never married, perhaps because her social status would be unsuitable for a man of his fierce ambition. And after his first successful voyage, “it would have been unthinkable for an admiral to take a wife who could not be presented at court” (Wilford 89).

During the period following his first audience with the Catholic sovereigns, Columbus’s brother Bartholomew worked on his behalf, appealing once again to John II of Portugal and later pleading his brother’s case in England and France. Though these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, through his influential friends in Spain, Columbus was granted another appearance before the monarchs. His plan was submitted to review once again and ultimately rejected, though this time the reason appeared to be Columbus’s excessive demands and conditions, which stunned the court. Amazingly, Columbus never relented on these terms. A last-minute intervention with Queen Isabella on his behalf by her financial secretary, Luis de Santángel, apparently led to a reversal of what had been yet another, apparently final, rejection by the court. Columbus was able to retain many of his conditions as laid out in the Capitulations of Santa Fé, the agreement that was

finally reached between the monarchs and Columbus, after months of hard bargaining, on April 17, 1492. Columbus set sail from Palos de la Frontera on August 3, 1492, finding land on the morning of October 12, some 2,400 miles into the Atlantic.

Columbus would make four voyages in all to what he always maintained were the Indies. Historians generally concur in attributing his allusion to having arrived in the Indies to what Cohen describes as “his need to provide successes or victories in order to get renewed backing for his explorations” (16–17). He would face many physical and mental hardships, chief among which was returning to Spain from his third voyage in chains, having been arrested by the overseer of the Indies appointed by the monarchs. What seemed to hurt him most, however, was the loss of the rights set out in the terms of the Santa Fé agreement. He was denied the supposed amount of wealth he was to receive and lost his powers over the new territories because of his poor handling of the position of colonial administrator and the Catholic sovereigns’ own designs on complete and undisputed power over the territories.

Columbus died on May 20, 1506, in Valladolid, no more than 55 years old, “but much older in body and tormented mind” (Wilford 237). There has been wild speculation about his cause of death, attributed to, among others, diabetes, syphilis, complications of gout, and, most recently, Reiter’s syndrome. He was neither alone nor destitute as in legend, but was surrounded by his two sons and two companions from his last voyage, one of whom was his great friend Diego de Méndez. He had battled until the bitter end for the wealth and titles due to him, but those hopes all but died on November 26, 1504, along with Queen Isabella, who had always been the more sympathetic of the monarchs toward his cause.

Journal of the First Voyage to America (1492)

Columbus’s *Journal* is not the work of a gifted writer. It employs a fairly limited vocabulary and occasionally obtuse syntactical structures.

Its descriptive passages are laden with cliché and hyperbole and are repetitive and stereotyped. In considering this document, one must not forget that Columbus was not even a native speaker of Spanish, which in fact was the third language he learned, after his native Genoese vernacular and later, Portuguese. Columbus himself notes that he is incapable of doing justice in words to the marvels he observes upon landing in the New World, writing that he hopes

some other may see this land and write about it. When he sees the extreme beauties of this coast he will then be able to prove himself more fortunate than I in the use and choice of words with which to describe it. (Cohen 84)

Despite the fact that Columbus may have been an “artless” narrator, Van Wyck Brooks notes in his introduction to the *Journal*, “It has the charm of all primitive narratives and it narrates one of the great adventures of history, advantages that few books possess” (viii). Indeed, the journal’s lack of brilliantly written prose should not in any way diminish its importance. Columbus and his men would go on to make contact with the native inhabitants of the Americas for the first time since the Vikings had done so some five centuries before (Phillips and Phillips 155). In his introduction to his recent translation of the journal, B. W. Ife states that Columbus’s diary of this first voyage to America, though incomplete and condensed in its surviving form, “gives an unrivalled insight into the events of the voyage.” Ife notes that within its pages we have Columbus’s first impressions of the inhabitants and culture of what he mistakenly assumed to be Asia and that the *Journal* has also played a critical role “in the creation of many of the myths surrounding the New World which have coloured its view of itself down to the present day” (iv).

Ife underlines the fact that keeping a journal was not at all common during Columbus’s era and would not become necessary by law for the captains of Spanish vessels until 1575 (v). A strong argument can be made to suggest that Columbus’s principal

motives for keeping the journal were “the need to be accountable and the need to communicate effectively with the powerful people back in Spain” (Ife xv). Ife emphasizes the tension between these two elements in the journal:

At times one feels a strong sense of the writer looking over his shoulder, fending off criticism and justifying his actions and decisions. At others he is desperately trying to get the people who hold the keys to reward and recognition to understand and re-live the problems he faces. (xv)

Ever ambitious to secure his legacy and acutely aware of the historical significance of his mission, Columbus also may have seen the journal as a guarantee he would be given his due credit in history. His preoccupation regarding his place in history is evident in the measures he takes to secure this credit when his ship is rocked by a terrible storm on the return voyage:

So that Their Highnesses would know how Our Lord had given him in triumph everything he desired from the Indies . . . if he were to perish in the storm, he took a piece of parchment and wrote on it everything he could about everything he had found, beseeching whomsoever [*sic*] might find it to take it to the Monarchs. He wrapped the parchment tightly in a waxed cloth and called for a large wooden barrel and put it in the barrel without anyone knowing what it was . . . and then ordered it be thrown into the sea. (Ife 219)

Despite Columbus's exhaustive efforts to document his greatest triumph, his original journal disappeared around the time of the death of the queen Isabel in 1504. The queen had made a copy, which she gave to Columbus before his second voyage in 1493. The copy was inherited by his son Diego after Columbus's death in 1506 and was passed on to Diego's son Luis in 1526. Though Luis apparently gained permission to have the *Journal* published in

1554, it never appeared in print. This has led to speculation that Luis sold the *Journal* in order to finance his decadent lifestyle. In any case, Columbus's original *Journal* and its only confirmed copy have vanished (Ife vi).

Were it not for the historian Bartolomé de Las Casas, the contents of Columbus's *Journal* probably would have been lost forever. Las Casas, whose father and uncle had traveled alongside Columbus on his first voyage, made extensive use of Columbus's *Journal* in his epic *Historia de las Indias*. It is thought that he consulted a copy of the *Journal* rather than the original as he noted “scribal errors and confusions” in his monumental book on the Indies (Ife vi). Apparently because he had limited access to the document, Las Casas created an abstract of the *Journal* for his own use, paraphrasing the majority of the text, but transcribing Columbus's own wording in especially noteworthy or interesting entries. Entire entries from when Columbus arrives in the New World, for example, are written in the first person, where it is assumed Las Casas is using the admiral's own words. In all, approximately 20 percent of the digest is written in first person (Ife x).

There is considerable doubt among historians, however, about Las Casas's working methods and whether or not a dedicated native apologist could have accurately and impartially summarized Columbus's work. Evidence suggests that Las Casas's version is far from perfect and “at best, two removes from the original” (Ife vi). Some of Las Casas's own notations in the text reflect his preoccupation with the accuracy of the text, noting “bad transcription of the text” or commenting, “if the text is to be believed” (Ife vii). Historians generally agree, however, that despite inevitable imperfections, “the use of quotations from the admiral makes (the *Journal*) the prime authority for the voyage itself” (Cohen 37).

One of the many curiosities of the *Journal* illustrates potential problems regarding the summarizing of Columbus's words. According to Las Casas's digest of the *Journal*, Columbus had a tendency to make two sets of calculations in his log book

about the distance the expedition had traveled. It seems that Columbus knew one of the calculations was true, yet he repeatedly gave his crew the other, supposedly incorrect, calculation. This oddity first appears in Columbus's entry for September 10, four days after the three ships had parted from Gomera of the Canary Islands. Las Casas writes: "That day and night he went sixty leagues at ten miles (2 ½ leagues) an hour. But he reckoned only forty-eight leagues so as not to alarm the crew" (Cohen 41). According to Las Casas's summary, Columbus consistently reckons less than what he knows to be the correct distance. It is apparent that Las Casas feels this practice is intended to prevent discontent among his men, who were worried about traveling too far out to sea:

That night they went seventeen leagues southwest, a total of twenty-one. The Admiral, according to his custom, told the men they had gone thirteen leagues, for he was still afraid they would consider the voyage too long. Thus throughout the voyage he kept two reckonings, one false and the other true. (Cohen 46–47)

Las Casas later notes that the admiral always kept the "true calculation" to himself (Cohen 48). Columbus's decision to keep two reckonings could very well be due to what many historians have referred to as his obsessive secrecy, almost to the point of paranoia. It was also true that the unrest and near mutiny that later occurred on the first voyage were largely due to the crew's fears that they would not reach land or be able to sail back to the Spanish mainland.

Phillips and Phillips, on the other hand, feel that what they refer to as "the false log theory" is illogical. They note that Columbus would have had to deceive numerous experienced navigators, including the men on his ship as well as the captains, masters, and pilots of the other two ships. Columbus regularly compared notes with the pilots of the other two vessels, and there is no evidence that he had to convince them to accept his calculations. A more likely scenario is that Las Casas, far from an

expert navigator, simply misunderstood this portion of the diary. This theory holds that Columbus would have first calculated the distance using a method he learned as a young mariner and then found the equivalent in terms his crew would have understood, much as present-day travelers first calculate a distance in miles or kilometers, beginning with the system they are more familiar with, before converting the distance into the measurement of the other system. Though this is an interesting theory to explain one of the greatest mysteries of the *Journal*, Phillips and Phillips concede, "We cannot know for sure until and unless the original version of the diary is found" (147–148).

On August 3, 1492, Columbus and his men set sail from Palos de la Frontera in the south of Spain toward the Canary Islands. The expedition consisted of three well-equipped ships, the flagship *Santa María*, with Columbus as captain, and two somewhat smaller caravels, the *Pinta*, captained by Martín Alonso Pinzón, and the *Niña*, captained by Pinzón's brother, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón. Choosing to cross the Atlantic from the Canary Islands "was either his greatest stroke of luck or the proof of his genius as a mariner" as the islands are considered to this day to be a perfect starting point for transatlantic sailing (Phillips and Phillips 145). While some historians argue that the genius of Columbus was at work in selecting the Canaries, others point to the fact that he may have left from the Canaries simply because they were under Spanish control, while other possible starting points, such as the Madeiras or the Azores, were Portuguese possessions. Arguing in favor of his nautical knowledge, Phillips and Phillips note that he was familiar with the winds and currents of the eastern Atlantic and had heard of frustrated expeditions that left from the Azores and had to return because of strong headwinds (146). Columbus also believed that Japan was due west of the Canary Islands.

The expedition left from Gomera on September 6 and took just 33 days. Columbus's account of the voyage as summarized by Las Casas details "good weather, mainly calm seas and remarkably little disension" (Phillips and Phillips 148). Columbus's log

book for the voyage is mainly filled with observations of birds, seaweed, and other signs that Columbus felt meant they were approaching land.

According to Las Casas's digest of the logbook, "a sailor named Rodrigo from Triana," whom historians have recognized as Juan Rodríguez Bermejo, first sighted land on October 11 (Cohen 52; Phillips and Phillips 153). He is careful to note, however, that "the Admiral had seen a light at ten in the evening on the poop deck, but it was so indistinct he would not swear it was land" (Ife 27). Columbus had his sighting of the light confirmed by Pedro Gutiérrez, the royal steward. In his summary of the journal, Las Casas continues:

After the Admiral had spoken, the light was spotted a couple of times, and it was like a small wax candle being raised and lowered, which struck very few people as being a sign of land, but the Admiral was certain he was near land. (Ife 29)

Las Casas may have gone to lengths to give some credit to Columbus because Columbus would later claim the prize offered by the sovereigns of an annual payment of 10,000 maravedis as his own. Columbus also kept the silk jacket he had later promised to give to the first man who spotted land. Perhaps regretting his behavior down the line, he assigned the annuity to Beatriz Enríquez de Arana, his mistress and mother of his youngest son (Phillips and Phillips 153).

Columbus and his men reached the island the natives referred to as Guanahaní at around two o'clock on the morning of October 12. By finding land and claiming it for the Catholic sovereigns, Columbus had also fulfilled the requisites for claiming the title he so desired: Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

The first impressions of the land where Columbus initially landed undoubtedly confused him as well as his men, as historians have suggested, "Where he expected to find the sophisticated subjects of the Great Kahn and the bustling ports of the Orient, he found naked innocents and little else" (Ife xix). Phillips and Phillips concur that "nothing about

the island matched their mental image of Asia as described by Marco Polo and Toscanelli" (157). Columbus convinces himself, or perhaps wisely chooses not to admit otherwise in his writing, that he has landed in the Orient. Despite apparent evidence to the contrary, recognizing that he had not landed in Asia would have been admitting failure. He instead chooses to acknowledge that he has not yet found exactly what he is looking for, as he will do throughout the *Journal*. Ife notes that this is a very effective strategy in terms of "keeping spirits up, keeping the expedition going and giving it a sense of purpose" (xix). This objective is normally gold, which always seems to be just out of reach, usually on the next island. It must be remembered that Columbus had promised his patron, the Catholic sovereigns, that he would vastly increase their wealth, for which reason the search for gold and its apparent proximity appear so prominently in the *Journal*. For this reason, he also spent little time in surveying the smaller islands he sighted: "As beautiful as they were, (they) had little gold or other trade goods that would be attractive to Europeans" (Phillips and Phillips 163).

A primary feature of the *Journal* once Columbus and his men reach land is its use of what Ife describes as "repetitive and formulaic description" (xi). Columbus's descriptions of the sea and later the land and climate he encounters frequently harken back to Spain, particularly Andalusia:

(The trees) were green as Andalusia in the month of May. (Cohen 66)

Here and throughout the island, the trees and plants are as green as in Andalusia in April. (Cohen 70)

There were also holm oaks and strawberry trees and others like those of Castile. (Cohen 83)

This repetition may result from a desire to make this new world seem familiar—even predictable—since Columbus was understandably struggling to describe a reality he could not understand. It was especially important for him to make this new

world understandable to people of distinction in Castile. When seen in this light, using Castile as a reference point seems natural and practical.

Columbus's later departure from the familiar is also seen by Ife as strategic. Columbus repeatedly states with each successive "discovery" of a new island that "it is the most beautiful that I have seen up to now" (Cohen 83) or "the most beautiful that eyes have ever seen" (Cohen 76), though he chides himself for having done so when he arrives at the harbor he names "Puerto Santo":

I was so astonished at the sight of so much beauty that I can find no words to describe it. For in writing of other regions . . . I have wrongly used the most exalted language I knew, so that everyone has said that there could not possibly be another region even more beautiful. (Cohen 83–84)

Columbus, admittedly lacking the vocabulary to describe what he is seeing, describes "not so much what he saw, as the sense of wonder with which he saw it" (Ife xxi). His hyperbole can be understood as tactical, for although "beautiful views cannot be turned into cash. . . , where there are such wonderful things, who can doubt that there are many more things of value yet to be discovered?" (Ife xxi).

In considering his limited written expression, one must also keep in mind the fact that Spanish was not his native tongue. According to Ife, however, one should not underestimate Columbus's linguistic prowess, for he "was not naïve where language was concerned," but rather understood "the power of language to constitute reality" (xii). Ife backs up this claim by citing Columbus's numerous allusions to the difficulty of communicating with the native inhabitants of the island and the importance he attached to this linguistic roadblock. Phillips and Phillips note that Columbus was well aware that "language was the key to cultural understanding and the only sure route to conversion" and "The problem of language loomed large among Columbus's preoccupations" (166, 169). Columbus writes of plans to take some natives back to Castile, where they will be taught the language, and emphasizes

the idea that language is one of the principal barriers to converting the otherwise compliant inhabitants of the islands to Christianity.

According to Ife, Columbus's affinity to name (rather than "rename") the islands and other geographic landmarks with Christian names (though he knows the name the inhabitants have given them) demonstrates that he had a deep understanding of "the power of naming" as well (xiii). Ife calls this "an attempt at linguistic and cultural colonisation through language." He also notes the irony that in "suppressing the Indian name" of the island on which he made his first landfall (the island Guanahani, which he renamed *San Salvador*), Columbus effectively "erased the site of his greatest triumph" (xxv).

Columbus's entries on the whole are also overly optimistic. Phillips and Phillips suggest "his will to succeed led him to color reality in the rosiest possible hues" (167). Whether in describing his futile hunt for gold or the possibility of converting the native population to Christianity, his journal entries constantly hearken back to his promises to the Catholic sovereigns. His early entries regarding the natives describe them as perfect prospects for conversion to Christianity, "in part because they had no bad habits to overcome" (166). According to Ife, it was not easy for Columbus to present "the best of the reality which presented itself to him" in relation to the native inhabitants of the islands (xxii). Unlike the extravagantly dressed Indians of the tales of Marco Polo, these Indians were "naked as their mothers bore them" (Cohen 55).

Columbus does his best, however, describing his meeting with a local chieftain on the island he named Española (Hispaniola) as if it were an elaborate ceremony among men of high status in a sophisticated society, involving the exchange of gifts and pleasantries. Columbus even goes as far as to invent a speech the young king supposedly made praising the king and queen of Spain. He obviously could not have made such a speech, or at least Columbus could not have known he made such a speech, since Columbus himself notes they had great difficulty understanding one another (Phillips and Phillips 172). Ife sees in Columbus's

description of an “awesome, well-mannered, softly-spoken and above all *generous* Indian a not too distant reflection of the Great Kahn himself” (xxiii). It should be noted that among the many documents Columbus took along with him on the voyage were letters to the “princes” of the Indies from the Catholic sovereigns.

Throughout the diary, he also exaggerates the potential financial gains of the islands, speaking often of the “very great quantity” of gold to be found. When he does not find the great gold fields he expected to find or even the pearl fields that had been described to him by the natives, he turns to other potentially useful commodities of the islands, such as timber, cotton, and aloe. Phillips and Phillips point out that in his actions throughout the first voyage, Columbus “followed Portuguese precedents, contacting local inhabitants and their leaders, trying to gain their confidence and learn the locations of trading centers” (158).

He soon has the realization, however, that he has not found the hub of Asian trade he was seeking. His frustration is increasingly evident, as when he describes the natives as “people poor in everything” (Phillips and Phillips 159). It is interesting to note, however, that it is precisely when this realization sets in that Columbus’s descriptions of the physical settings he encounters become progressively more elaborate and hyperbolic and he often directly addresses the Catholic sovereigns:

This country, Most Serene Highness, is so enchantingly beautiful that it surpasses all others in charm and beauty as much as the light of day surpasses the night. (Cohen 83)

Once again, he is probably interested in alleviating his disappointment while also drawing attention away from it for his audience in Spain.

On November 21, en route from Cuba to Hispaniola, the *Pinta* became separated from the other two ships. Las Casas, speaking for Columbus, claims that the captain of the *Pinta*, Martín Alonso Pinzón, had left Columbus “deliberately,” for he was “impelled by greed” after hearing from some Indians he held captive aboard his ship that “there was much gold

in the Island of Bohio” (Cohen 82). Phillips and Phillips note that the main reason Pinzón indeed may have left Columbus was to trade for gold, since “Columbus had prohibited any trading outside his auspices” (168). Columbus’s principal worry regarding Pinzón’s departure was probably that he might return to Spain without Columbus and his men and “seize the glory for the discoveries” (169). With this in mind, after his abandonment by Pinzón, Columbus seems “anxious to cover himself,” taking great care in his entries to note his “thoroughness” in all that he does. This attention to detail “would make up for any lack of speed” in the case that his fears of Pinzón’s arriving first in Spain should be warranted (Phillips and Phillips 169).

Soon after Pinzón’s departure, Phillips and Phillips detect a change of tone in the diary as Columbus realizes that “European enterprise, and not trade alone, would be necessary to produce wealth from the islands” (168–169). The observations and comments he would make from then on follow accordingly. Columbus had begun to consider the idea of settling the island in order to establish trade in Europe with the products found on the island. Christian missionaries would also have an easy task in converting the locals to Christianity once they had learned their language.

Though Columbus never gives up hope of finding gold, his designs on making profit from the island eventually turn to colonizing it. On December 16, he lays out what he feels would be an adequate policy for colonizing the land, borrowing heavily once again from the Portuguese model in Africa (Phillips and Phillips 171). As previously mentioned, Columbus sought to take a number of “Indians” with him on his return trip to Castile to teach them the language so that he could take interpreters back with him on his next expedition. Phillips and Phillips suggest that although Columbus never explicitly says as much, “the captured islanders would also serve as proof of his reaching a distant land with exotic peoples” (162).

In any case, his designs on colonizing the islands and making use of their inhabitants are clear. Ife notes that Columbus’s entries offer clear foreshadowing of what was to come:

Columbus anticipates in the *Journal* many of the forms of exploitation of both human and natural resources which will lead in a very short time to the total destruction of a whole way of life in the Caribbean. (xxii)

Though praising their humanity and other qualities at certain points in the *Journal*, he at other times describes the islanders as if they were simply another commodity for the Crown, saying they “should be good servants” (Cohen 56). According to Ife, Columbus saw the islanders as “nothing, a tabula rasa on which the Catholic faith and European civilisation had still to be inscribed” (xxv). Columbus repeatedly mentions their lack of weapons and knowledge of warfare and claims that “with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we wish” (Cohen 59). As always, Columbus appears to be scrambling for something “to justify the faith the sovereigns had shown in him” (Phillips and Phillips 167). Whatever his motives may have been, history has not pardoned him, assigning him what Phillips and Phillips call “the dubious distinction of being the first European slaver in the Western Hemisphere” (162).

Phillips and Phillips point out that the sinking of the flagship, the *Santa María*, on Christmas Day, “the moment of greatest drama in the trip,” was reported “laconically in the diary,” undoubtedly to diminish the impact of what was clearly a devastating loss for the expedition (172). Las Casas’s summary shows that Columbus also was clearly eager to “deflect blame from himself” in the matter (Phillips and Phillips 174). For the devoutly religious—or opportunistic—Columbus, the shipwreck had been God’s will.

Despite the circumstances—his flagship has been sunk and he has been abandoned by Pinzón—his next journal entry is especially optimistic. He describes the inhabitants of the island and their king, who were of great help to Columbus and his men after the sinking of the *Santa María*, in an extremely favorable manner and once again expresses optimism about their conversion to Christianity. Left only with the *Niña* to make the

trip home, it is also now a reality that some of the crew will have to stay on the island of Española. It is possible that Columbus has their protection in mind when he shows off the power of their European weapons in a demonstration before the natives, firing a shot from a small cannon into the *Santa María*, leaving the king “both horrified and amazed” (Cohen 94–95). Phillips and Phillips note that in his journal entries, he seems to be trying to convince the Catholic sovereigns and himself that a profit could still be made and that the settlers would be safe (174). Columbus also orders his men to start building a fort. Columbus would leave 39 men behind on Española, naming the settlement there *La Navidad*, or “Christmas,” in commemoration of the sinking of his flagship on Christmas Day.

With only one ship left and fearing that Pinzón might reach Spain first and reap the awards he deserved, Columbus was ready to depart for Spain. On January 4, he began sailing along the northern coast of Española, where he is sure Cipango (Japan) is located, where “there is much gold and spices and mastic and rhubarb” (179). Not two days later, he found the *Pinta* and Pinzón. It what must have been an awkward meeting, Columbus manages not to let his anger show in order to prevent risking the voyage home:

Martín Alonso Pinzón came to the caravel *Niña* where the Admiral was and made his excuses, saying that he had become separated from him against his will, giving reasons; but the Admiral says that they were untrue and that he had acted out of great pride and greed on the night that he had gone off and left him. . . . The Admiral decided to turn a blind eye, so as not to give Satan a chance to do his evil deeds by hindering the voyage as he had done up till then. (Ife 181)

Despite what he may have felt about Pinzón, his insinuations about gold on the island led to some further exploration along the east coast of Española, where they encountered hostile islanders for the first time. Las Casas notes that Columbus

thought he had finally encountered the infamous Carib, “a daring people for they roam these islands eating anyone they can capture” (Ife 193). Columbus does seem to have seen the battle they engaged in with the warlike islanders as a bad turn of events, particularly with regard to the effect winning the battle may have had on the safety of the men he had left behind at Navidad. The entry of December 13 describes Columbus’s attitude about the confrontation:

When the Admiral learned what had happened he said that in one sense he was sorry but in another not; *because they will fear the Christians, because without doubt* (he says) *those people are*, he says, *evildoers*. (Ife 195)

After a brief attempt to sail toward the supposed island of the Carib, Columbus caught favorable winds to return directly home. Considering his options, he decided to set sail for Spain. The return trip was wracked by bad weather, unfavorable wind conditions, and shortages of provisions. Phillips and Phillips note that though he was familiar with the easterly patterns before he left Spain, “he found the westerlies only by trial and error” (176). When a horrible storm hit on February 14, Pinzón and the *Pinta* once again became separated from the *Niña*. The storm was so terrible, the admiral resorted to divine intervention, ordering several pilgrimages be made. It was during this terrifying storm that the fear of death and of leaving his two sons orphaned led Columbus to “reveal a bit more of himself in the diary as he had done before” (177). His fear of failure, however, probably overcame even that of death, for “if he died and Martín Alonso Pinzón survived and reached Spain, Pinzón would steal the glory for the discoveries” (177). It was this fear that led Columbus to write a letter on parchment to the Catholic sovereigns, attach it to a wooden barrel, and throw it into the sea in the hope that it would be found should the ship sink. He also reprimands himself in the entry for having lacked faith during the ordeal, considering all that God had allowed him to accomplish up to that point of the expedition.

Columbus and his men amazingly escaped the storm and sighted what Columbus was sure was the Azores. Once the men reached one of the islands, Las Casas’s summary of Columbus’s entry takes on an oddly self-congratulating and defiant tone:

The Admiral says that his course had been very accurate and that he had plotted it well, thanks be to God. . . . And he says that he pretended to have sailed further to mislead the pilots and sailors who were plotting the course so that he would remain master of that route to the Indies, as he in fact remains, because none of the others was certain of the course and none can be sure of his route to the Indies. (Ife 223)

Phillips and Phillips note this passage “may be yet another incidence of Las Casas’s failure to understand nautical matters” (178).

Though Columbus and his men were initially well received on the island, the following day the men he had sent to the island were arrested by its captain. Columbus claimed he was the admiral of the Ocean Sea under the authority of the Spanish monarchs and that he would send word to the sovereigns of the outrageous treatment he and his men were receiving, to which the captain replied that in Portuguese territory, papers from the Spanish monarchs meant nothing. The standoff that ensued lasted some three days until the captain finally agreed to release Columbus’s men after examining his papers.

Phillips and Phillips note that while he was beset by bad weather during this period, “Columbus drew on religious speculation to explain the real world.” For Columbus, the temperate weather conditions of the part of the Indies the expedition had arrived at explained why theologians and philosophers had long situated the terrestrial paradise there. Columbus seemingly had no problem weaving together the prophecies of the Bible with what he directly observed. Phillips and Phillips conclude on the matter that “despite his long experience as a merchant and mariner, his religious mysticism would often lead him to see what his religious beliefs prepared him to see” (179).

The *Journal* notes that the expedition continued to be rocked by storms once it left Santa María and that Columbus appealed to God through promises of pilgrimages to carry the ship through to land. He would eventually land and anchor at the harbor of Restelo near the Portuguese capital, and shortly thereafter he was received by the Portuguese king, John II, who offered him numerous favors. The king apparently had designs on Columbus's discoveries, which he felt could have been his, based on treaties he had signed with Castile. For his part Columbus was rather reluctant to meet with the king, who had initially rejected him. He did so "to avoid suspicion," as he notes in the *Journal* (Ife 237).

On March 13, 1493, the *Niña* left for Andalusia. In his last entry on March 15, Columbus once again pays his respects to the Divine Majesty who has allowed him such great and miraculous success on his voyage despite the doubters of the royal court, "*all of whom were against me saying this undertaking was a jest*" (241). God had allowed the admiral to accomplish his mission and silence his detractors, at least for the time being.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Columbus's descriptions of his encounters with native inhabitants of the Caribbean with those of ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA in North America. How are they similar? In what ways do they differ? What do you think accounts for these differences?
2. Describe some of the apparent contradictions in Columbus's description of the native inhabitants of the island in his *Journal*. Why do you think these contradictions appear in the *Journal*?
3. In what ways does the *Journal* foreshadow what was to happen in the Americas? Cite specific examples from the text.

Letter to Luis de Santángel (1493)

Columbus's letter to Luis de Santángel, the man who had played such an important role in convincing Isabella to finance the expedition, was "a

formal exclamation of discovery." According to Columbus, the letter, dated February 15, 1493, was written "in the caravel off the Canary Islands," though in his *Journal*, Columbus writes that he was off Santa María in the Azores (Cohen 123). Upon arriving in Portugal, Columbus immediately dispatched the letter to Santángel, though he also sent copies to others in the court, fearing that a single letter might not reach its destination. Couriers arranged through friends from Columbus's youth in Lisbon delivered the letter some 700 miles overland to Barcelona (Wilford 18).

The letter is largely a summary of what appears in Columbus's *Journal* of the first voyage and maintains the same optimistic and, at times, exaggerated tone. Phillips and Phillips note that in his letter to Santángel, Columbus "emphasized and exaggerated the positive features, minimized or omitted the negative features and exuded energy and optimism" (186). There were of course many embellishments and errors, chief among them Columbus's claims of having gold mines, which amount to a boldfaced lie.

Columbus was acutely aware of the importance of making it sound as though his discoveries were going to generate a great deal of profit. As was his custom, Columbus carefully selects evidence to serve his purpose. With this in mind, he extols the innumerable virtues of the islands: the plethora of birds and fruits, the fertile soil, the existence of mines and rivers containing gold, and the multitude of native inhabitants. The hyperbole rampant in Columbus's *Journal* is also prevalent here. The island of Hispaniola "has many fine harbors finer than any I know in Christian lands . . . and mountains incomparably finer than Tenerife" (Cohen 116). The island of Hispaniola is, simply put, a "wonder" (Cohen 117). On the other hand, Columbus's characteristic use of familiar metaphor also appears, as when he mentions the trees are "as green and lovely as they are in Spain" (Cohen 116).

The picture he paints of the islands is one of "new lands of boundless wealth and numerous people apt for Christian conversion" (Phillips and Phillips 186). Despite countless references to the possibility of their

conversion, Columbus clearly sees the native inhabitants as a profitable commodity as well. They are described as naked and docile people without knowledge of weapons, who are likely to convert willingly to Christianity, though Columbus had heard of the existence of warlike Indians and cannibals who would have to be conquered. He hopes that the former may be protected against enslavement and that the latter will be conquered and enslaved for profit (Phillips and Phillips 183).

Columbus is also quick to remind his sponsors that he has recognized and honored them in the naming of the islands. Ever devout, in naming his discoveries in a “descending hierarchical order,” Columbus puts his “divine sponsors” before the royal family (Phillips and Phillips 183).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Historians have noted echoes of the religious and secular legends of his era in Columbus's description of the islands (Phillips and Phillips 183). How does Columbus reconcile the potential religious and secular benefits of the islands? Cite examples from the text.
2. How does Columbus's description of the lands and their inhabitants differ from those represented in JOHN SMITH's writings? Can these differences be attributed to cultural and religious beliefs? If so, how?

Narrative of the Third Voyage (1498)

In his *Historias de las Indias*, Bartolomé de las Casas titled Columbus's emotional account of his third voyage “Narrative of the Third Voyage of Christopher Columbus to the Indies, in Which He Dispatched to the Sovereigns from the Island of Hispaniola.” This narrative contains several key elements that are prominent throughout Columbus's logbook and letters regarding his voyages, all of which are related to what was at the time an urgent need to better his reputation and refute criticism in Spain. First, he speaks at length about the hardships he has had to endure as well as the unfairness and cruelty of his detractors. Second, his descriptions of

the natives and the land he encounters are characteristically extravagant, for, as always, he is eager to maintain the interest of his audience, the Catholic sovereigns. Finally, he intertwines religious mysticism and scientific theories, this time in order to create his own theory about the shape of the Earth and the location of the earthly paradise.

An expedition of six ships left Sanlúcar de Barrameda, near Cádiz, on May 30, 1498. On this voyage, Columbus and his crew would first land at Trinidad before reaching what is today Venezuela. Columbus had been ordered by the Catholic sovereigns to take a group of colonists along with supplies to the island of Hispaniola, though he apparently had his own agenda as well, mainly to carry out further exploration (Symcox and Sullivan 24).

The third voyage as described in his narrative was by no means without its difficulties. He claims he “had hoped for some rest on this new voyage to the Indies, but my distresses were doubled” (Cohen 206). Columbus describes a harrowing beginning to the voyage in which he first had to avoid attack from a French fleet (France and Spain were now at war). At sea, he endured eight days of terrible heat in which, he writes, “I was afraid my ships and crew would be burnt” (Cohen 207). Columbus later details a horrendous eye infection, in which his eyes bled and caused him great pain.

Throughout the narrative, Columbus addresses what he feels is unmerited criticism from Castile. He notes at the beginning of the narrative that his inability to send back ships “laden with gold” immediately had led to “abuse” and “disparagement” from his critics in Castile (Cohen 206). Toward the end of the narrative, Columbus asks God “to forgive the persons who have libeled and do libel this noble enterprise” (Cohen 225). He then counters the arguments of his critics, discussing the short amount of time that has passed, the unforeseen difficulties that have arisen, the innovation of the enterprise, and the precedent of success with the Portuguese colonization of Guinea. He concludes his narrative by appealing once again directly to the sovereigns, reminding them of the purpose of the expedition, its accomplishments, and how

they have always supported him. Columbus seems almost as if he is trying to convince himself that the monarchs are still on his side as he reminds them that they had previously assuaged his fears:

Your Highnesses answered me with that magnanimity for which you are famous throughout the world, telling me to take no account of these fears because it was your will to prosecute and maintain this enterprise, even if it should produce nothing but rocks and stones. (Cohen 226)

Columbus's characteristic hyperbole, which he had already employed in his letters regarding his other voyages as well as in his journal, can be found throughout the narrative. Under heavy criticism back home regarding the lack of tangible results and increasing costs of his enterprise, he seems almost desperate to justify the sovereigns' continued faith in him. With this in mind, it becomes clear why Columbus, "ever optimistic," paints a picture of "rich and promising" lands (Symcox and Sullivan 25). Arriving at Trinidad, as his customs dictates, he begins by likening this unfamiliar territory to Castile, "fine cultivated land, as green and lovely as the orchards of Valencia in March" (Cohen 209). Again staying true to form, he goes from using familiar metaphors to claiming he has come upon land more beautiful than anything he has seen before: "I found some of the most beautiful country in the world" (Cohen 212–213). The native inhabitants receive similarly flattering treatment in the narrative. They are "all very well built, tall and with finely proportioned limbs . . . fairer than any others I have seen in the Indies," as well as "quicker, more intelligent and less cowardly" (Cohen 214, 219).

A large portion of the narrative is dedicated to Columbus's theorizing about the shape of the world and the location of the earthly paradise, which he "ferently believes" lies within the land he has discovered (Cohen 226). Columbus describes the shape of the Earth as that of a pear in which the land and the sea slope gradually upward to a point. His ships were now sailing in the direction

of this point, which was the mountain of paradise. He backed up his arguments with quotes from the book of Genesis, concluding, "I am firmly convinced that the Earthly paradise truly lies here, and I rely on the authorities and arguments I have cited" (224). Symcox and Sullivan see in Columbus's speculations "evidence that Columbus's mystical religiosity deepened in his later years" and that he "had convinced himself that his voyages were part of God's plan to spread the Gospel to the ends of the Earth" (25), while Phillips and Phillips feel they reveal "some of his more eccentric geographical notions" (220). They also note that "to Columbus and his contemporaries, Holy Scripture was not just a religious text, but a valid source of knowledge about the world" and that, as a result, "his blending of the Bible, Ptolemy, and his own experience would not have seemed as odd to his intended audience as they seem to us" (221).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Columbus's characterization of the native inhabitants in the narrative of the third voyage to that of the *Journal* of his first voyage. In what way are his descriptions similar? In what ways are they different? How may the differences in the characterization of the natives have served Columbus's interests better at the time?
2. It has been argued that Columbus's religious fervor increased over the course of his voyages. Compare the influence that Columbus's Catholicism has upon his view of earthly paradise with Puritanism's impact on the views of JOHN WINTHROP and his idea of a "city upon a hill."

Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella (1503)

In June 1503, during his fourth and final transatlantic voyage, Columbus was marooned on the northern coast of Jamaica and suffering from what may have been gout or Reiter's syndrome. Columbus asked Diego Méndez, along with several natives, to make a 105-mile crossing in canoe to Hispaniola to seek aid. He also entrusted his friend with a letter to the Catholic sovereigns

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Brooks, Van Wyck, ed. *Journal of First Voyage to America*. New York: A & C. Boni, 1924.
- Cohen, J. M., ed. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. London: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Columbus Navigation Homepage. Available online. URL: <http://www.columbusnavigation.com/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Heers, Jacques. *Christophe Colomb*. Paris: Hachette, 1981.
- Ife, B. W., ed. *Journal of the First Voyage*. Warmister, England: Aris & Phillips, 1990.
- Kadir, Djelal. *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe's Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Koning, Hans. *Columbus: His Enterprise: Exploding the Myth*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1942.
- Phillips, William D., Jr., and Carla Rahn Phillips. *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick. *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Symcox, Geoffrey, and Blair Sullivan. *Christopher Columbus and the Enterprise of the Indies: A Brief History with Documents*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Traboulay, David M. *Columbus and Las Casas: The Conquest and Christianization of America, 1492–1566*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994.
- Wilford, John Noble. *The Mysterious History of Columbus*. New York: Knopf, 1991.

Matthew Zealand



JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

(1789–1851)

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or, if we may so express it, greater antithesis of character than the native warrior of North America. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just, generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste.

(The Last of the Mohicans)

James Fenimore Cooper was born into two wealthy families: His mother, Elizabeth Fenimore, was an heiress, and his father, William Cooper, succeeded in land speculation after the Revolutionary War. Some of the land, the 40,000 acres known as the Croghan Patent, would become central to Cooper's identity and his writing. The family mansion, named Otsego Hall for the lake adjoining the land grant, would become the model for Judge Marmaduke Temple's estate in *The Pioneers*.

From all accounts of his family members and his instructors, Cooper was "extravagantly fond of reading novels and amusing tales" (Long 15). His precociousness—he matriculated at the age of 13 at Yale—was tempered by his desire to be outdoors, engaged in physical sport, or else playing a practical joke on fellow students or professors. Because of his propensity for pranks and literature above all other subjects, Cooper was expelled from Yale in his junior year. His subsequent year at sea as "a common sailor-before-the-mast" was, in the opinion of his biographer Robert Emmet Long, "one of the most formative experiences of his life" (15). After his marriage, James acceded to his wife's request that he forgo a life at sea. His fondness for sea life appeared, however, in some of his fiction and is seen by critics as a precursor to Herman Melville's nautical novels such as *Moby-Dick*. It is certainly true that the wilderness of his childhood surroundings significantly shaped Cooper's imagination and

would appear time and again as the backdrop for his fiction.

In December 1809, Cooper's father "was struck from behind by a political opponent . . . and died as a result of the blow" (16). Cooper received a significant inheritance from his father: \$50,000 and an interest in the father's estate estimated at \$750,000 (16). Cooper was only 19 years old. Soon after his father's death, James married Susan Delancey, the granddaughter of the former governor of New York (16). In marrying into such a wealthy and powerful family, Cooper was following in his father's footsteps. For a time, the couple lived at Angevine Farm, where Cooper fulfilled the role of a "gentleman farmer" (17). The two had five daughters, but only four survived to adulthood. Their first daughter, Elizabeth, died two years after her birth.

The events that led up to his literary career range from the tragic to the comic. Despite Cooper's significant inheritance, the economic depression after the War of 1812 and the careless speculations of his four elder brothers depleted the family estate to the extent that the family home, Otsego Hall, was sold (18). Thus, Cooper was economically motivated to fulfill the boast his daughter Sarah recorded after her father read a contemporary English novel. As Sarah recounts in her "Small Family Memories," Cooper, disgusted by the lack of quality in the English novel, declared that he could write a better novel himself (reported in Long 18). His first

novel, *Precaution*, appeared in November 1820 and was followed shortly by the next, *The Spy* (18). The family moved from their farm in Scarsdale to New York City in order for Cooper to be closer to editors and others in the publishing world, and to ensure that his daughters receive a proper education. This second work garnered Cooper international attention as *The Spy* was translated into numerous languages, and thus was available to a multilingual readership (19).

Because of the success of *The Spy*, readers eagerly awaited the arrival of his third novel, *The Pioneers*, which appeared in print in 1823. *The Pioneers* was the first in the Leatherstocking Tales series, which included *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*, *The Deerslayer*, and *The Pathfinder*. Cooper's early fame was solidified by the publication of *The Last of the Mohicans*, and because of its popularity, he took his family on a grand tour of the Continent, which kept him away from North America for seven years (20). Critic Robert Emmet Long suggests that one of the reasons for the family's long stint in Europe was economic: Cooper wanted "to make the foreign publication of his works yield more significant income. In the absence of international copyright laws, his novels had been pirated freely; but Cooper now planned and while in Europe secured arrangements to have the books published in authorized editions" (20). While in Paris, Cooper met and befriended Sir Walter Scott and Samuel F. B. Morse (who invented the telegraph). He wrote and published *The Prairie*, *The Red Rover*, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, *The Bravo*, *The Heidenmauer*, and *The Headsman* during his seven-year stay abroad.

Upon his return to the United States in 1833, Cooper fell into a deep despair over the vast changes that he witnessed in the land of his birth. The country's rapid growth and its obsession with material wealth were disheartening to Cooper. His response took the form of a pamphlet entitled "A Letter to His Countrymen," in which he critiqued the nation's isolationism, defended the policies of President Andrew Jackson, and announced his retirement as a novelist (Long 24–25). It is fortunate that his retirement was short lived, as he needed

a vehicle for his nervous energies and returned to the page, publishing a satire of America, *The Monikins*, in 1835. The following year, he repurchased his family home of Otsego Hall and became embroiled in a controversy over the public use of his lands, Three Mile Point (25). The public outcry was substantial, and Whig editors who were already unhappy with Cooper because of ideas expressed in his pamphlet attacked him and his novels in their newspapers (25). The public controversy seems to have spurred Cooper to a heightened degree of literary productivity as he published an astonishing 20 works in the 1840s, two of them the "dark" contributions to the Leatherstocking series.

Cooper's chronic liver illness was responsible for his rapid decline, beginning when he turned 60. "He wrote until he could no longer hold a pen, and then dictated chapters [for a history book called *The Towns of Manhattan*] to his daughter Susan" (28). He died at his family home on September 14, 1851, just hours shy of his 62d birthday. His wife died a few months later, and their daughter Susan, who never married, was buried with Cooper's journal when she died in the 1880s (28).

The Pioneers (1823)

Published in 1823, *The Pioneers* inaugurated the Leatherstocking Tales series and introduced readers to the hero, Natty Bumppo, a frontiersman whose symbiotic relationship with the wilderness, thinly disguised from Cooper's own childhood, is set in marked contrast to the rapacious plunder of recent settlers to the area, embodied by the figure of Judge Marmaduke Temple. As the famed frontier critic Richard Slotkin argues in his reading of *The Pioneers*, the novel has two central plotlines that address separate, but at times intertwining, conflicts. The first plotline follows the romantic convention of a novel of manners that Cooper inherited from his reading of the novels of Sir Walter Scott. In Scott's novels, national conflicts such as the Revolutionary War are resolved on the level of the family; in this case, the marriage plot of

Oliver Effingham and Elizabeth Temple reconciles the two families' differences fomented by the Revolution. The second conflict, expressed in a separate plotline, involves the clash of what Slotkin terms different "modes of perception" and "mythologies between Indians and Europeans" (486). Although Judge Temple participates in both plotlines, they are distinct and separated in the novel. Slotkin suggests that Cooper's reliance on two separate cultural mythologies accounts for the separation in plotlines. The tale of families reconciling through the marriage of their children adheres to European mythology expressed by Scott; the manner in which both cultures view the land stems from indigenous cultures that Cooper, ironically, gleaned from a European historian, John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder (Slotkin 485).

The novel opens on a cold Christmas Eve as the widowed Judge Temple returns to the family manor with his daughter, Elizabeth, who has been away for four years while attending school. The family's somewhat pastoral journey home is disturbed by the sound of hunting dogs and the judge's own rifle, which he aims at a buck bounding frantically across their path. Although the judge is in relative proximity to the buck, his numerous shots do not fell the hunted deer, who leaps into the air in its final death move from a well-aimed bullet shot from the novel's hero, Natty Bumppo. As the old hunter and the judge debate who is responsible for the buck's fatal shot, it is revealed that the judge's aim was so bad that he wounded Natty's young companion, a hunter who remains nameless until the judge demands his name and he falsely identifies himself as Oliver Edwards (80). A physically awkward and not terribly educated "doctor" named Dr. Elnathan Todd is called to attend to this young hunter, who the reader later discovers is none other than Oliver Effingham, the son of the judge's former business partner. The true physician responsible for young Oliver's recovery from the judge's bullet is Indian John, companion to Natty Bumppo and a sad and broken version of his former warrior self, Chingachgook.

When Cooper introduces readers to the figure of Chingachgook, he expounds for several pages

on the history of his tribe and the existence of the Six Nations, who "amalgamated" in the face of dire adversity brought on by "the Europeans, or, to use a more significant term, the Christians" (70). Cooper places the weight of this cultural legacy onto the sturdy but old figure of Indian John, as he is known to the settlers after his conversion to Christianity. His very description of Chingachgook figures him as the final survivor: "But war, time, disease, and want had conspired to thin their number; and the sole representative of this once renowned family now stood" (72). This notion of a "sole representative" is pervasive in Cooper's fictional accounts of American Indians and culminates in one of the *Leatherstocking Tales* series' titles, *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper balances his apocalyptic treatment of American Indians, as embodied in the character of Indian John, with his similar sense of the first generation of settlers, personified by Indian John's faithful companion, Natty Bumppo.

Natty Bumppo, who takes on the name *Hawkeye* when aligned with Chingachgook against the overcivilized settlers such as Judge Temple, is "an old man on the verge of decrepitude, the representative of an admirable but vanishing breed of man, the Indian-like hunters of the first frontier" (Slotkin 484). In the figure of Natty, Cooper invests the philosophy of symbiosis between humans and the wilderness: "Hawkeye's law ordains, not the conversion of the land, but the adjustment of man to the land; not the breaking of the forest to man's will, but the submission of human will to the laws inherent in nature" (Slotkin 488–489). Thus, Natty's conflict with Judge Temple over the hunting law that prohibits the killing of any deer during an artificially established period has broader implications as a debate between natural law and human, or civil, law.

The climax of the tension embodied by Judge Temple and Natty Bumppo involves Natty's successful and ritualistic hunt of a deer during the season in which the judge has banned all hunting. The critic Robert Long writes, "Ironically, Natty is prosecuted for killing a deer by the very men whose response to nature and its wildlife has been plun-

dering and rapacious" (40). Prior to the conviction and incarceration of Natty, the old hunter stands in shock as he witnesses the wholesale carnage by pioneers against a sky filled with passenger pigeons. The men in the village all shoot indiscriminately into the air, and two men fire off a cannon, greatly increasing the ratio of dead pigeons to fired ammunition. As the historians Robert Hine and John Faragher attest in their study of the novel, "Cooper's depiction of the war waged upon the passenger pigeon . . . was no fiction. . . . A local newspaper editor vouched for the accuracy of Cooper's depiction of the pigeon shoot" (435). The slaughter of pigeons is not the only scene in the novel in which the pioneers' plunder of the land is juxtaposed to Natty's and Indian John's ritualized, almost sacred, hunting of wildlife.

During a debate over Judge Temple's newly imposed ban on hunting deer, Cooper likens the conflict over law and order in the village to the law and form of government being debated in France during their revolution. The judge fears the Jacobins (147) and quickly follows his characterization of them as "bloodthirsty" with a justification of the recent laws passed by the country that he believes are "much required" (147). Taken in the context of a discussion about the French Revolution, Natty's response, "I think one old law is worth two new ones," ironically paints the hunter as a loyalist (148). Natty's point, however, refers instead to the "old law" obeyed by American Indians for the last "forty years": "Game is game, and he who finds may kill" (148). This "old law" is flexible to account for the hunter's circumstances, excusing the death of a doe and fawn when the hunter's "moccasins are getting old, or his leggings ragged" (148). The philosophy of hunting presented by Natty Bumppo is selective, respectful, and motivated by necessity. It is the pioneers like Richard Jones who aim cannons into the sky to slaughter pigeons who appear "bloodthirsty." Cooper clearly indicates that the two codes of conduct regulating the behavior of Anglo Europeans and American Indians are radically different and incompatible.

This difference across cultural lines imbues the reading and misreading of Natty's hunt for the

deer during Judge Temple's imposed off-season. Although Long recognizes "the hunting rites of an earlier time" echoed in Natty's slaying of the deer, it is Slotkin who uncovers the actual myth, and its possible source for Cooper, in the study published by Heckewelder on American Indian culture, history, and mythology. In Heckewelder's account of Delaware creation myth, the people "lived under a lake until one of their hunters discovered a hole through which he saw a deer. He hunted the deer, killed and ate it, tasted in its flesh the sweetness of earth and the goodness of the goddess of nature, and brought his tribe out to people the earth" (reported in Slotkin 490). Viewed from this vantage point, Natty's action participates in the ritual of creation. Slitting the deer's throat in the lake paradoxically invokes life at the same time its signals death. The natural law by which Natty and Chingachgook abide would view their ritual as law abiding, but the civil law that Judge Temple governs and is governed by only sees the hunt as illegal and grounds for a 30-day jail sentence. What appears to be a triumph of civil over natural law, with the incarceration of Natty Bumppo, turns instead into another occasion in which the need to balance these two systems of belief becomes readily apparent. Natty replies to the judge's sentence in the following manner: "You may make your laws, Judge, but who will you find to watch the mountains through the long summer days, or the lakes at night? Game is game, and he who finds may kill; that has been the law in these mountains . . . and I think one old law is worth two new ones."

Natty breaks out of jail just as fire begins ravaging the wilderness. Not surprisingly, Jotham Riddel, the same character responsible for goading Natty to hunt out of season by cutting the thong restraining Natty's hunting dog, is also to blame for igniting the fire while he was searching for a nonexistent silver mine. The fire threatens the lives of Elizabeth, Oliver Edwards, Chingachgook, and Natty himself. Had Natty not escaped from custody, the judge's own daughter might not have survived the engulfing flames. Although Natty's rescue of the two lovers demonstrates the preeminence of natural law, the death of Indian John and

the self-exile of Natty both testify poignantly to the inevitable demise of the “old law.”

Richard Slotkin interprets the death of Chingachgook as following “archetypal myth: when the king of the woods becomes impotent through age or disease, his land suffers with him. Only if the king surrenders his blood to the soil in sacrifice and passes his power to a successor can the homeopathic relationship between the people and their land be profitably maintained” (491). Thus, Chingachgook’s death takes on symbolic portent as he is first emasculated when the powder horn he is carrying explodes between his legs. This leaves him as an impotent leader, incapable of extending his bloodline into the next generation. Cooper’s description of the dying chief “looking into the womb of futurity” bears out Slotkin’s assessment of the link between the forest fire and the fatally wounded Delaware. His death is reflected in the forest damage suffered from the fire; the aftermath of this fire is a promise of rebirth, but such a promise has been foreclosed for Chingachgook, and thus for other American Indians by extrapolation. “It serves as symbolic confirmation of the termination of Chingachgook’s kingly powers and the passing of the power of the soil to a new and better lord, Oliver Edwards/Effingham” (Slotkin 492). When he replies with an indigenous death song to the minister’s request for his last confession, Chingachgook expels the version of himself as “Indian John” and closes off the circle of his life to return to a time before the white men arrived, to a time before he himself was converted to Christianity. All that is left by the novel’s conclusion are the figures representing civil law. Chingachgook’s death has paved the way for their lives, for their future.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the clash between the two sets of laws, natural and civil, Cooper also presents his readers with two different myths, native and Christian. Explore the connection between natural law and Delaware myth as well as the link between civil law and Christian mythology.
2. Compare Cooper’s treatment of the relationship between American Indians and Anglo Americans in this book to that of his other Leatherstocking Tales. Is there a consistent pattern? If so, what is it? If not, how does the dynamic change?
3. How does Cooper’s view of the connection between humans and nature compare to the poetry of WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT such as “Thanatopsis”?

The Pilot (1824)

Published in January 1824, *The Pilot* was Cooper’s fourth novel and his first attempt at writing about the sea. Readers should recall that Cooper reluctantly resigned his position in the navy at the behest of his wife and would continue for nearly 20 years to write both fictional and nonfictional accounts of sea life, and the nation’s need for an expanded navy (Nelson 129). It became a “conspicuously popular success and initiated a long series of Cooper’s sea novels” (Long 19–20). In his preface to the novel, Cooper identifies a conversation with his publisher, Charles Wilkes, over Scott’s *The Pirate*, which Wilkes praised and Cooper critiqued, arguing that it would not appeal to nautical readers more experienced with life at sea. As Cooper states, this conversation provided the germ for his first sea novel, whose plot he had sketched out that very evening (46). The novel’s realism, or historical accuracy, not only applied to its genre, but also to its portrayal of the historical figure John Paul Jones (thinly disguised as Mr. Gray) as its protagonist. Long notes that no biography existed at the time of Cooper’s novel and suggests that he might have been “influenced by dark rumors and legends and quite probably by the libels in Nathaniel Fanning’s *Narrative of the Adventures of an American Navy Officer*” (46).

Regarding the realistic portrayal of life at sea, critics credit the assessment of Cooper’s old messmate, Commander William Shubrick, with establishing a pattern for celebrating the novel’s accurate depiction of ship life. His only critique leveled at Cooper is reported to have been rather small and minute: “It’s all very well, but you let your jib stand

too long, my fine fellow!” (reported in Anderson 389). The critic Charles Anderson, however, uncovered a dissenting opinion of Cooper’s authenticity from “an audience of ordinary seamen on board the frigate *United States* during a cruise in 1823–1828” (390). Nathaniel Ames, who was aboard the ship, recalls how his shipmates reacted to a reading of Cooper’s first incursion into sea novel writing: “I recollect once being desired by a dozen or twenty of my top-mates, to read a few passages of *The Pilot*. Every thing seemed to please them well enough, till I came to one of the rope-yarn dialogues, when ‘Pshaw! heave the d——d thing overboard,’ broke out from the lips of half a dozen men of war’s men at once. They appeared to think that such ridiculous language ‘did discredit to our mystery’” (reported in Anderson 390). Regarding the novel’s other main character, [Long] Tom Coffin, Ames considers him “a caricature (and not a very good one) of an ‘old salt,’ but terribly strained and stiff” (390). Cooper’s daughter Susan reports her father’s agreement with this assessment of the character, writing that in later years, Cooper recognized Coffin to be nothing more than “a sketch, and would gladly have wrought up the portrait of the old salt, a man after his own heart, to a finished picture, as he had done with Natty Bumppo” (xxiii).

The Pilot’s plot combines a raid on Britain (off whose coast Coffin harpoons a whale) with a series of captivities and escapes that are further complicated by the twin romance plots of Colonel Howard’s niece, Cecilia Howard, and his ward, Katherine Plowden, with two young officers: Lieutenant Edward Griffith and Lieutenant Richard Barnstable, respectively. Mr. Gray and the two officers are charged with capturing prisoners to be used in exchange for those held by the British government, and coincidentally their target is the very abode where Colonel Howard is keeping them. Long considers the plot devices of captures and romance that *The Pilot* revolves around to be staple features of Cooper’s Indian romances as well as his novel *The Spy*. Also reminiscent of other novels are the stereotypical portrayals of the hero, here Jones, who exhibits uncommon bravery at moments of

crisis, and of the asexual sidekick, a role fulfilled by Coffin, who exists outside the romance plots sweeping through the novel.

The critic James Schramer views the main conflict of the novel as revolving around the tension between public deeds and private desires, which are best embodied in the figure of Jones, who fights for the Revolution but does not claim either America or Britain as his nation. Further, his former fiancée, Alice Dunscombe, accuses him of being animated by a desire for glory and public notoriety rather than by a pure passion for the principles behind the Revolution. Because of Jones’s self-aggrandizing motivations, Schramer believes that Cooper reserves the figure of Edward Griffith, who quits his naval career once the war has ended and returns home to live as husband and father with Cecilia, as the novel’s true hero.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Cooper’s depiction of life at sea square with his descriptions of the wilderness in the Leatherstocking Series? Is the sea another frontier?
2. Compare the thinly veiled figure of John Paul Jones (Mr. Gray in the novel) to Cooper’s Natty Bumppo. How are the heroes similar or dissimilar?
3. Compare Cooper’s fictional treatment of life at sea to the real-life descriptions in OLAUDAH EQUIANO’S and CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS’S travel narratives. How do they imagine the sea?

The Last of the Mohicans (1826)

The biographer Robert Long identifies both indirect and direct influences on Cooper’s creation of *The Last of the Mohicans*: the presence of an Indian graveyard in his childhood home of Cooperstown and his interviews in 1821 and 1822 with Ongpatonga and Petalesaro, members of the Omaha and Pawnee tribes, respectively. Long reports that Cooper informed the duchess of Brogile during his stay in Europe, “Ongpatonga had been his model for Chingachgook, and Petalesaro for Hard-Heart

in *The Prairie*,” but Long finds it more likely that the latter “inspired Cooper’s conception of Uncas” (52). In addition to Cooper’s interviews with these two members of an Indian delegation whom he followed to Washington, D.C., “his immediate source for [the novel] was a trip Cooper took to Glen Falls and Lake George in early August 1824 in the company of four young Englishmen, including Edward Stanley, later prime minister of England” (Long 52).

Cooper opens the novel with a brief retelling of George Washington’s gaining military fame for his performance in the French and Indian Wars. This history is united with the creation of the Six Nations, tribes of the eastern seaboard. From this broad historical scope, Cooper narrows in on a party traveling in the woods in the hope of reaching Fort William Henry and their father, Colonel Munro, on the other side of the lake. The party, made up of two beautiful half sisters named Cora and Alice Munro, are led by Captain Duncan Heyward and an Indian runner named Magua, Huron by birth but adopted by the Mohawk, whose mere presence alongside Cora is enough to unsettle her and solicit an unguarded look mixed with pity and horror. William Starna has pointed out Cooper’s historical inaccuracy in casting Magua as a Huron: “Huron Indians, as described so vividly by Cooper had ceased to exist almost a century before the time-frame of his Leatherstocking tales,” having been killed by the Iroquois in the mid-1600s (727). The party is soon joined with a song master, David Gamut, who unintentionally amuses the two sisters and Heyward with his awkward style of dress and lack of horsemanship. By employing two different riding styles simultaneously, David Gamut forces his horse to travel, on each side, at separate paces. He might very well represent the Yankee whom Cooper, as did WASHINGTON IRVING, detested, for the song master’s pride in his voice is responsible for alerting the Iroquois in the woods of their presence and location, and he holds a high opinion of himself despite his inability to aid in the party’s travels or escapes.

From the scene of the traveling party, Cooper exerts his authorial presence to relocate the readers

to the west, where they encounter a conversation between Chingachgook and Hawkeye over such weighty topics as truth, oral versus written history, and the comparative worth and skill of white versus red skin. When Chingachgook recalls his own tribal history, he laments that although the blood of chiefs is in his veins, and that his bloodline is unmixed, his son Uncas is the “last of the Mohicans.” The history of the Mohican chasing off and defeating the Iroquois still resonates in the present as Uncas reports to his father that 10 Iroquois are currently hiding in the very forest where they are. At this moment, the two sets of characters meet because Heyward suspects that his Indian runner, Magua, has betrayed them for an ambush by the Iroquois. These misgivings are only voiced when Hawkeye gives a clear and deliberate reading of Magua, stating, “Once a Mingo, always a Mingo.” Heyward disapproves of Hawkeye’s two plans to punish the deceptive runner, and when he attempts to trust his own manhood to take on Magua, the runner quickly escapes, having received a wound from Hawkeye’s rifle. Left without a guide and lost in the woods, the traveling party solicits the pity of Uncas, Chingachgook, and Hawkeye, who feel responsible for the safety of the two daughters, whom they describe as “such flowers, which though so sweet, were never made for the wilderness.” Rather than accept Duncan Heyward’s offer of a monetary reward for their service as guides, the trio ask instead that the party keep secret the location where they will take them to safety. Uncas slaughters the foal attached to David Gamut’s colt in a swift action that the narrator characterizes as a seemingly cruel yet necessary death to allow them to proceed through the river and into safety in a cavern behind the waterfall.

The Iroquois soon discover the safe haven and engage in gunfire and hand-to-hand combat on steep precipices with the party. Uncas saves Heyward’s life, and the two men clasp hands in a sign of respect and camaraderie that will later be echoed in the novel’s final scene, when Chingachgook and Hawkeye join hands in their mutual mourning over Uncas and their vow to remain in each other’s com-

pany, and to keep the fallen warrior's memory alive. Although Cooper allows for this momentary crossing of the racial line, it is critical to note that it is a homosocial bond, and not one that would actually result in racial crossing, as the romance between Uncas and Cora Munro might.

The protectors and guides soon exhaust their supply of ammunition, and in their absence to retrieve more gunpowder, Magua and the Huron take Alice, Cora, and Gamut captive. In exchange for Alice's release, Magua reveals his desire to make Cora his wife, less out of an attraction to her and more as an act of revenge against her father, Colonel Munro. Long believes that readers should not view Magua's expressed wish to marry Cora as sexual at all. Magua, Long believes, views Cora as "an extension of her father. . . . By making her one of his wives, by reducing her to subjection and degradation (to a condition where he may kill her at any time he wishes), he will be humiliating and torturing her anguished father, his old enemy Colonel Munro" (58).

The Mohican and Hawkeye quickly arrive at the scene and rescue the captives, thus delaying Magua's attempts to marry Cora. A second captivity happens soon after the fall of the fort, and this time, Uncas acknowledges that Cora belongs to Magua and only secures the release of Alice, who is being held by the Huron. In their pursuit of the Huron, however, Uncas witnesses Cora's murder by a member of the Huron tribe. His attempts to avenge her death are scuttled when Magua stabs him in the back. Hawkeye then shoots Magua with his rifle, and the villain plummets to his death. The novel concludes with the burials of Cora and Uncas, and the unbreakable bond between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook.

The romantic tendency of the novel is therefore dashed. The interracial romance between Cora and Uncas, who are mutually attracted, is destroyed by their deaths, and their reunion in the afterlife is precluded by the belief that the two worship different deities. Some critics believe Cooper was willing to unite Cora to Uncas only because of Cora's racial identity. She is described early on as having

dark tresses, and later readers learn from Colonel Munro that her mother was from the West Indies, meaning that Cora's identity includes African blood. It is at this moment that Heyward reveals his revulsion at the knowledge of Cora's "Negro blood" and expresses his desire to wed her white, blonde half sister, Alice. Thus, only by making Cora racially ambiguous, critics argue, is Cooper capable of nodding to a cross of racial lines. The rigorous policing of the racial line appears time and time again in Cooper's description of Natty Bumppo, the very white man whose association with Mohican society and its members makes him a candidate for racial mixing or racial ambiguity, as "a man without a cross," meaning a man with racially pure white blood. Long counts 15 instances of this phrase (59). D. H. Lawrence believes that Cooper "kills [Cora and Uncas] off" in order to assure that only "the white lily," represented by Cora's half sister, Alice, who marries Major Heyward, survives to propagate the race (55). Leslie Fiedler argues that the interracial romance of Cora and Uncas constitutes Cooper's "secret theme" in the novel. Another critic, Donald Davie, believes that Cooper briefly considers miscegenation only to "repress it hysterically" (109).

Stephanie Wardrop extends the critique of Cooper's treatment of Cora a step further, arguing that "in terms of the nationalistic project integral to Cooper's writing, to allow Cora to live and marry would call into question not only the right to slaveholding still safeguarded by the Constitution, but the Colonialist expansion across the West that was displacing millions of other people of color—Native Americans" (62–63). Not only must Cora's union with Uncas be prevented, but her life itself must also be extinguished as she represents an anathema to the project of western expansion that Cooper champions. Further, Cora's display of bravery in the face of the Huron, compared to the nearly constant swooning fits of her sister, Alice, threatens the masculinity of those men around her who, in the shuttling of capture and rescue, look to her to function less as a figure capable of defending herself and more as a helpless victim whose inability to

act on her own behalf helps to shore up the masculinity of those around her. Nina Baym extends the feminist aspect of Wardrop's argument by declaring that "outspoken bravery, firmness, intelligence, self-possession and eloquence in a woman" are not celebrated or rewarded attributes in male-authored 19th-century fiction (44).

The critic Donald Darnell imagines the novel divided up spatially, with the first half occurring in the "white man's world" represented by Fort William Henry and presided over by Colonel Munro, and the second half, following the massacre and destruction of the fort, transpiring in the "Indian's stronghold" where "the white man is the intruder who must constantly look over his shoulder" (261–262). Uncas's very name in the gauntlet scene, when the Huron have captured him through the deceitfulness of Magua, causes a stir among the tribe, which is only surpassed by their awe at the sight of his totem sign, a tortoise tattooed on his chest. Darnell contrasts these emotional reactions, coupled with the mythology surrounding the son of Chingachgook, to the satanic figure of Magua, who forecloses the myth of Uncas and the Mohican tribe when he murders him. The Delaware prophet Tamenund who delivers Uncas's eulogy clearly recognizes the connection between the tribe's fate and that of its fallen warrior: "In the morning I saw the son of Unamis happy and strong and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans" (433).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the fate of the romance between Cora and Uncas to the happy conclusion of Faith Leslie and Oneco in CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK's *Hope Leslie*. Consider the racial politics that allow the one marriage and prohibit the second. How do the two authors imagine relations between American Indians and Anglo Americans?
2. Compare the death scenes of father (Chingachgook) in *The Pioneers* and son (Uncas) in *The Last of the Mohicans*. What end or purpose does each death serve?

The Deerslayer (1841)

Cooper's final novel in the Leatherstocking Tales series covers the early years of its protagonist, Natty Bumppo. D. H. Lawrence, in his assessment of the series from its beginnings with *The Pioneers* to its conclusion with *The Deerslayer*, remarked: "The Leatherstocking novels . . . go backwards from old age to golden youth. That is the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and writing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America." Professor R. W. B. Lewis, author of *The American Adam*, agrees with Lawrence's assessment and sees that the nation's myth of "a fictional Adamic hero" is the Deerslayer, "a self-reliant young man who does seem to have sprung from nowhere and whose characteristic pose . . . was the solitary stance in the presence of nature and God." Clearly, both critics envision the mythic and moral qualities of Cooper's last Natty Bumppo novel: Whether they imagine it as a tension between the material and spiritual or between Christian and pagan mythologies, they nonetheless recognize that this novel is devoted to Natty's ability to wrestle with a series of exacting challenges.

The novel opens on an isolated and pristine spot inhabited by Lake Glimmerglass, the sublime image of nature that Cooper writes "such as a poet, or an artist, would have delighted in." Yet, nestled within this confined idyllic space, dwells the Hutter family, whose very presence in a "castle" and "ark" that they have constructed in the very heart of the lake symbolically reminds readers of the "fragmentation of the world and spirit" (Long 122). In Tom Hutter's cabin, "greed, violence, and brutal self-assertion" dwell and emanate, especially since the patriarch has infected one of his two daughters, Judith, with a desire for worldliness at the expense of her reputation (Long 122). Further, Hutter associates himself with Hurry Harry, who was once a formidable rival to Natty, but whose lack of moral standing makes him prey to Hutter's devices. Not surprisingly, Hutter poses a threat to

- Dyer, Alan Frank. *James Fenimore Cooper: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.
- Franklin, Wayne. *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Hine, Robert, and John Faragher. *The American West: A New Interpretive History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000.
- James Fenimore Cooper Society. Available online. URL: <http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Lawrence, D. H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.
- Long, Robert Emmet. *James Fenimore Cooper*. New York: Continuum, 1990.
- Nelson, Paul David. "James Fenimore Cooper's Maritime Nationalism, 1820–1850." *Military Affairs* 41, no. 3 (October 1977): 129–132.
- Schrumer, James J. "James Fenimore Cooper and the Myth of the Citizen Soldier/Sailor." *James Fenimore Cooper Society Miscellaneous Papers* 17 (2002): 7–14.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973.
- Starna, William. "Cooper's Indians: A Critique." In *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art*, edited by George Test. Oneonta, N.Y.: N.p. 727.
- Verhoeven, W. M. *James Fenimore Cooper: New Historical and Literary Contexts*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993.
- Wardrop, Stephanie. "Last of the Red Hot Mohicans: Miscegenation in the Popular American Romance." *MELUS* 22, no. 2 (1997): 61–74.
- Writings of James Fenimore Cooper. Available online. URL: <http://www.wjfc.org/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.



J. HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CRÈVECOEUR (1735–1813)

I wish I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman, when he first lands on this continent. He must greatly rejoice that he lived at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled.

(*Letters from an American Farmer*)

Born Michel-Guillaume-St-Jean de Crèvecoeur on January 31, 1735, Crèvecoeur is best known by his anglicized name—J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur—and for his seminal work, *Letters from an American Farmer*. His shifting name mirrors the tensions of his sociopolitical loyalties. He was a Frenchman by birth who spent much of his life in British territories, and yet he developed an American identity and is credited with the American immigration concept of the melting pot.

Crèvecoeur was born near Caen, Normandy, France, to parents whose families held some influence in the region. His mother, Dame Marie-Thérèse Blouet, was the niece of Michel-Jacques Blouet, Lord and Master of Cahagnolles and treasurer-general of Caen, also godfather to Crèvecoeur. Crèvecoeur's father, Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur, was a squire whose predecessors had lived in Normandy since at least the 12th century. Crèvecoeur's father owned an estate at Pierrepont, approximately 10 miles northwest of Caen, and though he lived at the estate for much of the year, he wintered in Caen.

At the age of 12, Crèvecoeur attended school at the Jesuit Collège Royal de Bourbon, a boarding school that was “the Catholic equivalent of an English public school” (Allen 5). The Jesuits were known for their rigorous education, and students were encouraged to debate and discover through reason. Daily writing—“nulla dies sine aliqua scriptione”—was encouraged, and Crèvecoeur

seems to have maintained this practice throughout his life (Allen 6). He left the *collège* in July 1750.

While at the *collège*, Crèvecoeur probably experienced the typical Jesuit education, which was a writing-intensive experience focusing on Latin, French, and rhetoric. Probably his education included the study of mathematics, which at this *collège* emphasized the practical application of math and science. This included classes in surveying and cartography. Though there is no record that Crèvecoeur learned these skills here, his American biographers Gay Wilson Allen and Roger Asselineau write, “[Students] learned to use such necessary instruments as alidades, plate levels, and verniers. So Crèvecoeur did not improvise his professions of land surveyor and cartographer in America. He had learned these trades at the Collège Royal de Bourbon.”

After he left school, Crèvecoeur's parents sent him to England to stay with distant relatives in Salisbury—to give him a chance to improve his English by constant practice or possibly to give the young man an opportunity to pursue an occupation that might not have aligned with his father's wishes. At any rate, he may have arrived at Salisbury as early as 1751. Little is known of Crèvecoeur's time in England, but he was engaged to marry the only daughter of a Salisbury merchant, who died before the marriage took place. Rather than return to France, he “left for America shortly after her death” (Allen 16).

His exact activities in the New World between 1755 and 1759 are not completely clear. His father “thought he was a merchant’s partner in Philadelphia” (Allen 17). However, he ended up in New France, now Canada, and may have arrived there as early as 1755–56. In New France, records indicate that he enlisted in the French army. Though both his date and place of birth were incorrect (listed as January 6, 1738, and Paris, respectively) on his enlistment record, his sponsors were recorded as Baron Breteuil and Marquis d’Houdetot, who were old Crèvecoeur family friends (Allen 19).

For much of his military service, Crèvecoeur worked as a mapmaker. He mapped the regions around the St. Lawrence River and its tributaries. He also traveled up the Ottawa River guided by Indians and traveling by canoe and, once in the forest, by foot. He mapped Fort George and the surrounding area, helping the marquis de Montcalm win a ferocious battle with the British.

However, neither Montcalm’s success nor Crèvecoeur’s would last. On September 13, 1759, Crèvecoeur was wounded in the battle on the Plains of Abraham. The French lost control of Quebec, though they maintained control of Montreal for almost a year after Crèvecoeur left Canada. French officers were treated well, however, and Crèvecoeur surrendered his commission that autumn for £240. Quite possibly, resentment against Crèvecoeur grew as a result of his fondness for British culture. He arrived in New York on December 16, 1759, on a British ship that stopped there before continuing on to London with French officers who wished to return home.

The next record of Crèvecoeur’s life is from his application for naturalization as a British citizen. He applied under the name Hector St. John, an anglicized name perhaps to disguise his French origins, and his request was granted in New York City on December 23, 1765, by act of the provincial legislature.

During the 1760s, Crèvecoeur worked as a surveyor and traveled from Vermont to Virginia in pursuit of that line of work. While in Vermont, he was adopted by the Oneida Indians, “and he was so proud of the honor that in 1801 he listed himself

on the title page of *Voyage dans la haute Pensylvanie et dans l’état de New-York* as “un Membre adoptif de la Nation Onéida” (an adopted member of the Oneida Nation).

In 1767, Crèvecoeur joined a small group of hunters, guides, and surveyors on a trip into interior regions of North America. His group traveled across Pennsylvania, then down the Ohio River toward the St. Louis region. He mentioned spending two months in that area, and he estimated that he traveled 3,190 miles in 161 ½ days round trip, beginning and ending in New York.

Crèvecoeur married Mehetable Tippet on September 20, 1769. The marriage certificate lists her home as Dutchess County, though most records indicate that she was from Yonkers in Westchester County. Tippet was a Protestant, and they were married by a French Huguenot minister, Jean Pierre Tétard. Interestingly, Crèvecoeur married under his French, rather than his English, name despite the fact that he knew that Catholic France did not recognize the legality of marriage to a Protestant, and this would be a formidable obstacle if he ever wished to claim his inheritance to the Crèvecoeur estate in Normandy.

A few months after his marriage, on December 12, 1769, he bought 250 acres of land from James and Phoebe Nesbit for £350. He built a house on the property and called it Pine Hill. Crèvecoeur cultivated his land, raised his children, and wrote most of his *Letters from an American Farmer*. His three children, his daughter América-Francés (“Fanny” born December 14, 1770), son Guillaume-Alexandre (“Ally” born August 5, 1772), and son Philippe-Louis (born October 22, 1774), were baptized by Jean Pierre Tétard on December 27, 1776. The usual practice was for children to be baptized shortly after birth. Crèvecoeur had arranged for the baptism of his daughter the winter of her birth, but because of weather and the relative inaccessibility of Pine Hill during the winter months, Tétard was unable to travel there as originally planned (Allen 38).

Earlier in 1776, events of the American Revolution were encroaching on Crèvecoeur’s New York.

He sympathized with the Tories, those who supported King George III, and who became known as the Loyalists. Perhaps as a result of the increasing difficulty of disguising his political loyalties, Crèvecoeur sought to leave Orange County. He decided to return to France in order to solidify his children's inheritance, and so he took his son Guillaume-Alexandre with him. Though Crèvecoeur was legally Catholic, his children were not. Indeed, under French law, his children were considered illegitimate because of his wife's Protestantism.

He arrived in New York City in mid-February 1779 to find conditions there difficult at best. Because of the war, he had requested permission to enter New York so had written to General George Washington. On July 8, 1779, Crèvecoeur was arrested "on the basis of an anonymous letter sent to Sir Henry Clinton" that accused Crèvecoeur of corresponding with General Washington and of possessing maps of the harbor (he had briefly worked as a cartographer for Antoine Van Dam, the master of the port of New York). Though Crèvecoeur was soon cleared because of his Loyalist leanings, he remained jailed for three months. Friends, meanwhile, took care of Ally, who worried that he would never see his father again.

The winter after his release from prison (1779–80) was a difficult one. Father and son had so little money that a British soldier paid for a flannel outfit to be made for Ally. Crèvecoeur became gravely ill with a fever that swept the city. He grew quite weak, suffered from delirium, and was seized with a violent trembling Crèvecoeur himself called epilepsy.

Finally, on September 1, 1780, Crèvecoeur and his firstborn son left for England. Their ship was one of a fleet of 80. The ships were separated by a violent storm and they were shipwrecked on the coast of Ireland. Father, son, and a trunk full of manuscripts survived (Allen 68). They made their way in 1781 to London, where Crèvecoeur sold the manuscript of *Letters from an American Farmer* to the publishers Thomas Davies and Lockyer Davis for 30 guineas. The book was published in 1782, and it was such a success in Europe that a second edition was published the following year.

Crèvecoeur returned to his parents' home in Normandy on August 2, 1781, nearly 27 years after leaving for Salisbury. Once in Pierrepont, he discussed new plants and agricultural techniques with gentleman farmers of the region. One of these men was Étienne-François Turgot, the elder brother of Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, Louis XVI's former finance minister and distant relative of Crèvecoeur. With Turgot's encouragement, Crèvecoeur wrote a 72-page treatise, "Traité de la culture des pommes de terre et des différents usages qu'en font les habitants des États-Unis de l'Amérique," on the culture of potatoes (Allen 77).

Sometime before the end of 1781, Turgot took Crèvecoeur to Paris. There he was introduced to the salon culture of Paris—the literary gatherings generally hosted by women—through Mme d'Houdetot, whose husband owned an estate near Pierrepont. Mme d'Houdetot herself was a friend of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Through the salons, Crèvecoeur met the count de Buffon and became acquainted, through correspondence, with BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

In 1783 Crèvecoeur returned to New York as consul appointed by Louis XVI to New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. He was also "elected correspondent of the Academy of Science for his work as an agronomist" (Allen 99). His son, Ally, remained in France. Crèvecoeur returned to New York on the *Courier de l'Europe*, the same ship that carried the final draft of a treaty that negotiated the British withdrawal of troops from New York. It was November 19, 1783. Upon landing, he learned that his wife was dead, Pine Hill had burned to the ground, and his daughter and younger son had been taken to an unknown location. As a result of the strain of a transatlantic voyage that had encountered violent storms and had taken longer than usual, and the news of his family's troubles, Crèvecoeur fell ill with the same nervous symptoms he had earlier described as being like epilepsy.

Two years earlier, while still in France, Crèvecoeur went to the aid of five American marines who were in need of an interpreter. One of the men, Lieutenant George Little, had agreed to carry

letters back to Crèvecoeur's wife and children. He knew that upon their return he would probably be redeployed elsewhere, so he would make arrangements for Lieutenant George Fellowes of Boston to receive the letters. Fellowes left in search of Crèvecoeur's family. Mrs. Crèvecoeur had died, but Fellowes found the children and persuaded their caretakers to let him take them to Boston. He wrote a letter to Crèvecoeur on December 11, 1781. The letter had gone to London but had returned to New York. Crèvecoeur was reunited with his daughter and younger son in Boston in spring 1784.

In New York Crèvecoeur established a packet line running from France to New York. He also encouraged trade between France and America in order to solidify relations between the two countries. Additionally, Crèvecoeur sought to exchange medical information and was instrumental in establishing botanical societies in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey.

In June 1785 Crèvecoeur began a furlough that was to have lasted six months but stretched to two years. He was reunited with both his sons (he had sent his younger son to France) at Pierrepoint before continuing on to Paris. He remained in Paris, then Pierrepoint, for two years. Crèvecoeur finally returned to New York, and his role as consul, in June 1787. In 1789, he was elected to the Société Royale d'Agriculture and the American Philosophical Society.

In May 1790 one month after his daughter's marriage, Crèvecoeur returned to France. He had been increasingly worried about the unrest in France and the welfare of his sons. He returned to a changed France. The Reign of Terror, a brutal period in the early 1790s near the end of the French Revolution, had radically transformed the nation. Normandy seemed to be immune to these changes, however.

Crèvecoeur returned to Pierrepoint in 1796 to take care of the family estate. His father, nearly 90, needed the help of his eldest son. With the exception of brief visits to his daughter and son-in-law, Fanny and Otto, who had settled in France, Crève-

coeur remained at Pierrepoint until his father's death in 1799.

He began writing *Voyage dans la haute Pensylvanie et dans l'état de New-York* in 1800. It was published in France the following year, but its reception was disappointing despite favorable reviews. Except for brief trips to Munich and Hamburg, Crèvecoeur remained in relative anonymity until his death on November 12, 1813, at the age of 78.

Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's influence on American literature primarily rests on his *Letters from an American Farmer*. While readers may be more familiar with other literary works of this period, the well-known idea of America as a melting pot is taken from this novel. Written primarily during his years at Pine Hill (1769–78), the book is an epistolary novel in which an American farmer, Farmer James, writes 12 letters to an imaginary European recipient. The subject of each letter ranges from a celebration of the American farmer as a heroic figure, to the culture of Nantucket, to Charleston and slavery, and to the very definition of an American. As in many writings during this period, the influences of the Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals shape the novel even as they shaped the author and his readers, whether European or American. Susan Manning writes that *Letters from an American Farmer* melds "the thinking of French Enlightenment writing translated into fiction in an American context" (xv).

The philosophy and intellectual environment of the Enlightenment differ from those of the 17th century in part in their view on reason. In the 17th century, reason could be found in authority, tradition, and the metaphysical. In the 18th century, however, reason becomes a tool to gain authority and for some philosophers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a move to a more practical, physical world.

Crèvecoeur's choice of central character, a farmer, signals his own attention to personages in a

practical world. Furthermore, the American farmer differs from the European one of the period: “Even the term ‘farmer’—as Crèvecoeur’s narrator is at pains to point out—[‘farmer’] meant something rather specific in America in the late eighteenth century. He was not, as in Europe, a tenant owing taxes and paying tithes, but a freeholder, a man without a master” (Manning xviii). Thus, for Crèvecoeur, farmers in 18th-century America can be seen as liberatory figures in charge of their own destinies.

As might be expected of someone trained in European schools, Crèvecoeur draws upon European literary traditions and is influenced by his own experiences in North America to create a work that can be deservedly known as the first work of American literature. The epistolary novel, generally written as a series of letters or documents, is a form that was popular in both England and France during the 18th century. Notable epistolary novels of this period include Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749) written in English, while French examples include Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Pierre Chodorlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which was published in 1782, the same year as *Letters from an American Farmer*.

The first letter introduces the book and sets up the conceit of Farmer James’s writing to a European acquaintance at the urging of his minister and his wife. The minister, as for many colonists, must also farm, but he finds this conducive to his religious and intellectual pursuits: “After all, why should not a farmer be allowed to make use of his mental faculties as well as others. . . . I have composed many a good sermon as I followed my plough. The eyes, not being then engaged on any particular object, leaves the mind free for the introduction of many useful ideas” (19).

Furthermore, Jean F. Beranger argues that “the introductory letter is no mere declaration of intention, a one way message from the narrator. Rather, it contains a four voice exchange which expresses and makes comments about a

desire and launches the correspondence, a multiple communication. It houses a debate between farmer James, his wife, a minister, and the mysterious Mr. F. B., the English correspondent” (74). For Beranger, then, *Letters from an American Farmer* is a dynamic text that engages in a debate between Americans and Europeans, farmers and clergy, men and women.

Beranger also suggests that the farmer’s wife believes that her husband’s writing activities are scandalous:

To her a “scribbling farmer” is a ridiculous person and somehow scandalous too. So, if James starts writing, the improper and sinful act must remain a well-kept secret between her, her husband, and the minister. Local secrecy is supposed to ensure protections against the dangers she imagines. It will also protect the family from public scandal and other discomforts. Writing generates an ambiguous status for the farmer; it may involve a change of status and material losses. She perceives it as a completely negative activity. (77)

The farmer’s wife, having internalized English class distinctions, seems to favor manual labor. She remains suspicious of any other type of work or activity. The wife, Beranger writes, has “inbred respect for class distinctions and the scale of European values,” so, in turn, “she incarnates criticism and alienation” (Beranger 75).

In the second letter, “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer,” Farmer James describes his farm. He further details how a farmer captures bees and sets up a hive, among other agricultural practices. This is a celebration of doing work on your own land and for your own benefit. The 10th letter and the 11th letter also focus strongly on observations of the natural world.

The most famous letter is the third one, “What Is an American?” In it, Farmer James seeks to define his fellow Americans. There exists a decidedly democratic strain in this letter:

Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one, no great manufactures employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. (Crèvecoeur 40–41)

In other words, class distinctions disappear in this new land. This description is at once a critique of Europe and a celebration of America. Indeed, “names of honour” are rare, and the “only appellation of the rural inhabitants of our country” are “lawyer or merchant” (41).

This democratic and decidedly classless trend continues as the farmer continues the definition: “Whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race, now called Americans, have arisen” (Crèvecoeur 42). This letter introduces the idea of the American melting pot to the world, for this is where immigrants, noting of course that Crèvecoeur writes of those from Europe, arrive and meld, mixing with each other despite different countries of origin to become something new.

Letters four through eight, sometimes referred to as the Nantucket letters, describe areas of the Massachusetts Bay. Though he discusses Nantucket at the greatest length, he also describes Martha's Vineyard. Crèvecoeur's past as a cartographer appears in the form of maps of both locations. These Nantucket letters receive the least critical attention though they are of great interest to some critics, such as Anna Carew-Miller, who notes that “here Crèvecoeur presents a picture of the ideal Enlightenment community. Yet this picture is puzzling, full of contradictions and tensions. A careful examination of these Nantucket letters clarifies Crèvecoeur's definition of Americanness.” One of these contradictions is that he “forc[es] . . . an equation between whaling and farming” so “reveals, perhaps unconsciously, a need for violence within man's relationship to the landscape; this violence is

couched in a morality of masculine work. By both praising and undercutting his admiration for the progressive domestic structure of Nantucket family life, Crèvecoeur reveals his uneasiness with the changing roles of men” (242).

Letters nine and 12 are markedly different from the idyllic first three letters, and even quite different from the travel letters. Though letter nine deals with a traveler's observation, its primary focus is on the inequities and atrocities encountered within the slave economy of Carolina. Unlike the idealized lack of class differences mentioned in the third letter, this letter, as implied by its title, “Description of Charles-Town; Thoughts on Slavery; On Physical Evil; A Melancholy Scene,” reveals a stark contrast between slaveholders and the slaves. Crèvecoeur notes that “the inhabitants are the gayest in America” (151), yet he then writes:

While all is joy, festivity, and happiness, in Charles-Town, would you imagine that scenes of misery overspread in the country? Their ears, by habit, are become deaf, their hearts are hardened; they neither see, hear, nor feel for, the woes of their poor slaves, from whose painful labours all their wealth proceeds. Here the horrors of slavery, the hardship of incessant toils, are unseen; and no one thinks with the compassion of those showers of sweat and of tears which from the bodies of Africans daily drop, and moisten the ground they till. (153)

Crèvecoeur, despite depicting idealized scenes of other aspects of American life, now delves into the less than ideal situation of slaves around the Charleston area. The letter ends with the horrific encounter our farmer has with a slave who was caged and left to die of exposure for the crime of killing an overseer.

The final chapter, “Distresses of a Frontier-Man,” addresses changes wrought by the American Revolution. The fear of the immigrant, expressed in this letter, is the fear of starting over. Farmer James, facing a similar dilemma, chooses to move west with the Indians: “By the close of the Letters Farmer

- Beranger, Jean F. "The Desire for Communication: Narrator and Narratee in *Letters from an American Farmer*." *Early American Literature* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 77–85.
- Carew-Miller, Anna. "The Language of Domesticity in Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer." *Early American Literature* 28 (1993): 242–254.
- Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John de. *Letters from an American Farmer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Jehlen, Myra. "Traveling in America." *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. Vol. 1, 1590–1820. General Editor Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kulungian, Harold. "The Aestheticism of Crèvecoeur's American Farmer." *Early American Literature* 12 (1977): 197–201.
- Kunkle, Julia Post Mitchell. *St. Jean de Crèvecoeur*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1916.
- Manning, Susan. "Introduction." In *Letters from an American Farmer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Osborne, Jeff. "American Antipathy and the Cruelties of Citizenship in Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer." *Early American Literature* 42 (2007): 529–530.
- "St. Jean De Crevecoeur: (1735–1813)." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap2/creve.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Traister, Bryce. "Criminal Correspondence: Authorship and Espionage in Crèvecoeur's Revolutionary America." *Early American Literature* 37 (2002): 469–496.



JONATHAN EDWARDS (1703–1758)

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire: he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire.

(“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”)

Jonathan Edwards, who has continued to haunt the imaginings of modern poets, received just homage from Robert Lowell, who wrote the following lines:

I love you faded,
old, exiled and afraid
to leave your last flock, a dozen
Houssatonic Indian children

The image is certainly not the one critics and readers commonly associate with the Puritan minister who gained fame during the Great Awakening, but this is indeed a true and sympathetic portrait of Edwards later in life.

Jonathan Edwards was born to a minister, the Reverend Timothy Edwards, and his wife, Esther, who hailed from East Windsor, Connecticut. He was the middle child (fifth) and only son in a family of 11. His maternal grandfather was Solomon Stoddard, “the most powerful New England clergyman of his time” (Griffin 6). For the only male child, and the son and grandson of ministers, it seemed inevitable that Jonathan would pursue a career in the ministry. Griffin considers the undue pressure the young Edwards must have felt as the “likely heir to Stoddard” and the child of “a highly intelligent, willful mother and a demanding father” (6–7). Further, the period in which he was born, which witnessed the backsliding of Puritans

from the apex of the first generation and launched a revival in the form of the Great Awakening, also exerted pressure on all ministers who were charged with an exacting task. Edwards’s childhood motto, “To live with all my might, while I do live,” is perhaps the young man’s reaction to such high expectations. He is reported to have experienced his first conversion at the age of 10 while attending one of his father’s revivals. In response, he built a “prayer booth” behind the family home and would retreat there to pray in solitude.

Primarily educated by his father, Edwards entered the Collegiate School at New Haven, now known as Yale University, when he was just shy of his 13th birthday. Four years later, in 1720, Edwards graduated, but he remained in New Haven to complete his graduate study in theology. During his two years in graduate school, 1720–22, Edwards underwent a personal spiritual struggle, the sum of which appeared in his *Personal Narrative*. He returned to New Haven as a tutor after a brief eight-month stint as a candidate for the ministry serving a Presbyterian church in New York. For the years 1724 and 1725, Edwards taught courses at Yale. His curriculum included learning not only about the theology of his Puritan predecessors, but of the “liberal” movements that threatened it: deism, Socinianism, Arianism, and Anglican Arminianism, as well as the most current thought in Europe, such as British empiricism and continental rationalism. His study

and writings on natural philosophy and metaphysics while at Yale occasioned the critic Perry Miller to name him the “first and greatest homegrown American philosopher.” The following year, he was ordained a minister, and “to the surprise of no one,” as Griffin writes, he was invited to assist his prominent grandfather, Mr. Stoddard, at his church in Northampton. He was only 23.

In the following year, 1727, he married Sarah Pierrepont, who was 17. The two would create a large family of 11 who would relocate in 1751 to the wilderness of Stockbridge. In December 1729, Edwards's sister Jerusha died of a fever; the following April, in honor of his sister, the Edwardses named their daughter *Jerusha*. They would follow this same tradition in 1736 when his sister Lucy's death on August 21 was honored 10 days later by naming their daughter, born August 31, after her. Jerusha's birth was followed by those of Sarah (1728), Ester (1732), Mary (1734), Lucy (1736), Timothy (1738), Susannah (1740), Eunice (1743), Jonathan (1745), Elizabeth (1747), and Pierpont (1750).

In *Personal Narrative*, Edwards confesses, “From my childhood up, my mind has been wont to be full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me.” Here, Edwards encapsulates his doubts about the Puritan doctrine of the elect who alone were predestined to enjoy heaven in the hereafter while countless others, not among the elect, would suffer for eternity in hell. Although he would ultimately embrace the notion of God's sovereignty, he “never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was thus convinced.” In writing of his own personal struggles, and the emotional or intuitive means by which he experienced his own conversion, Edwards displayed a belief in many of the primary doctrines espoused in the Great Awakening.

Chief among those beliefs was the notion of “holy affections,” the profound spiritual feelings that attend an individual who has been awakened.

In *Religious Affections*, Edwards developed this theory more fully. He argued in part that “a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love of God” was the foundation for all other religious affections, which might include “an intense hatred and abhorrence of sin, fear of sin, and a dread of God's displeasure, gratitude to God for his goodness, complacency and joy in God when God is graciously and sensibly present, and grief when he is absent, and a joyful hope when a future enjoyment of God is expected, and fervent zeal for the glory of God.” In reviewing this theory, readers can recognize key emotional reactions imagined and created during “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The intense emotional response also marked Edwards's own conversion, which he recounted in his *Personal Narrative*: While outdoors, walking in his father's fields, Edwards felt “a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God.” This feeling intensified as the days passed leaving him with the realization that his former joys and delights paled in comparison and thus never really penetrated his heart as at this moment of conversion.

Edwards became the sole pastor at Northampton after Stoddard's death, and he maintained the prominence of both the family reputation as well as that of their church. As his biographer Griffin reports, “Two of the most important religious revivals took place during [Edwards's] pastorate there, and Edwards was a key figure in both of them” (8). The first, referred to as “surprising conversions,” occurred in 1734 and 1735; the second was the Great Awakening itself, which took place in the 1740s and was launched by George Whitefield. Edwards recorded the events of the “surprising conversions” in *A Faithful Narrative*, which appeared in print the following year, 1736. As Griffin reveals, the tragic event of a suicide in his wife's family promptly put an end to his widespread influence over Northampton's youth. Sarah's uncle, Joseph Hawley, slit his throat in 1735 in despair over “the unhappy state of his soul during a time of widespread conversions” (Griffin 8). With regard to the Great Awakening itself, Edwards welcomed Whitefield to Northampton, but his dislike for the

overly emotive and impulsive aspects of Whitefield's sermons drew strong words of criticism from the former toward the latter. Others besides Edwards had become skeptical of the authenticity of conversions that were signaled by physical signs, actions, and excessive displays of emotion (9). Nevertheless, Edwards himself contributed sermons to the movement, most notably "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" and "The Future Punishment of the Wicked."

Perry Miller writes that in 1741 Edwards was "at the height of his career and influence." This was due not only to Edwards's own participation as a minister in the Great Awakening, but also to his role in publicly defending the movement against charges from Charles Chauncy, who wrote "Enthusiasm Defined and Cautioned Against" in 1642. The central disagreement between the two ministers involves their notions of whether the mind or the heart should be the central organ through which an individual experiences and expresses the Spirit of God. Chauncy, who was educated at Harvard and the pastor of the First Church of Boston, a Congregational church, adhered to traditional theories of the soul as a tripartite being in which reason, residing in the mind, should always dominate. "The plain truth is an enlightened mind, and not raised affections, ought always to be the guide of those who call themselves men; and this, in affairs of religion, as well as other things" (Marsden, 281). In 1643, he published another pamphlet in opposition to the Great Awakening, entitled *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*.

Critics believe that Edwards was attempting a new theory of understanding how one experienced faith, and how this experience translated into a sense of the human psyche. Part of his project in developing this new theory appeared in his 1746 publication *A Treatise on the Concerning Affections*. Griffin believes that Edwards relied greatly on the theories of Thomas Shepard and John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in formulating his own notions of the psychology of conversion (23). A central component of Edwards's theory was a defiance of the traditional

belief in a divided and hierarchical soul that culminated in the mind, the organ of reason. Edwards looked instead at the unity of these faculties in the soul, thus dismissing the notion of hierarchy and separation (Griffin 24).

Ironically, although Edwards appeared as the defender of the Great Awakening, his own skepticism regarding the sincerity of the conversions occasioned by this phenomenon led him to write critiques and psychological analyses of the Awakening that would lead, by 1750, to his dismissal as pastor of the Northampton church (Griffin 10). Edwards instituted a strict policy for admission to the church that revived a practice held by early Puritans. Full membership in the church depended upon true Christian practice and a profession of faith that included evidence of a conversion. Not surprisingly, between 1744 and 1748, there was not a single applicant for full membership in Edwards's church (Griffin 11).

Other disputes, including those in Edwards's personal life, would also contribute to his public downfall and disgrace. One of these events was Edwards's mismanagement in 1744 of the punishment of several youth accused of tittering over a handbook for midwives. In New England style, justice involved the creation of a committee of inquiry who would preside over the questioning, confession, and admonishment of the guilty parties. While Edwards set this form of justice in motion by calling on his congregation to form a committee of inquiry, he also defied the tradition by publicly announcing the names of the accused as well as those of witnesses. Unfortunately, many of the youths named by Edwards were members of prominent Northampton families, and they were outraged that their pastor would besmirch their families' reputations in such a public forum (Griffin 12). As Griffin notes, the ill will generated by his mishandling of the book incident remained among members of the congregation for the next four years, constituting "an easy reference point for his enemies" (12).

In the same year, Edwards's salary was withheld by the church over disputes about his wife, Sarah's,

wardrobe. She was accused of purchasing jewelry and extravagant dress material, thus revealing her vanity, a characteristic to be shunned by a minister's wife. Sarah Pierpont Edwards would address issues of her reputation, her position as the minister's wife, at the time of his imminent break from the church through her own conversion. As she wrote, and Edwards later retold her tale, she experienced moments of divine light that caused her to become a religious source in her own right. In his "Apostrophe to Sarah Pierpont," Edwards defies the image of her as worldly and vain, suggesting instead that she values her profound relationship with God over such truck: "Therefore, if you present all the world before her, with the richest of its treasures, she disregards it and cares not for it, and is unmindful of any pain or affliction."

When in December 1748 someone actually applied for full membership in the church but refused to offer the profession of faith that Edwards had made mandatory four years earlier, the minister found himself embroiled with congregation members. Edwards himself instigated the formal declaration of these tensions by calling a state of controversy between himself and the people. During the subsequent proceedings that lasted for nearly two years, Edwards held steadfast to his theological convictions and attempted to limit the congregation's opposition to his religious beliefs rather than to larger issues of personal disfavor. In accordance with his desire to frame the debate over theological rather than personal issues, Edwards issued *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Compleat Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*. As Griffin reports, "The people did not read his book" (13). Nor, he states, did they attend a series of five public lectures that Edwards held in the Connecticut Valley during March 1750 (13). Just three months later, on June 22, 1750, the council voted to remove Edwards as their pastor. Edwards recalled, "Nothing would quiet 'em till they could see the Town clear of Root & Branch, Name and Remnant."

Edwards's dismissal did not end the controversies surrounding him, however, as his own kins-

man, Ephraim Williams, Jr., balked at the mention of Edwards's taking over the mission at Stockbridge. In 1750, after his ousting from his ministerial duties at Northampton, he became a missionary at Stockbridge, serving the Housatonic Indians. Samuel Hopkins, Edwards's friend, sponsored him for this position, and a formal invitation was issued in December 1750 (Griffin 14). Critics wonder at Edwards's choice in becoming the missionary preacher in Stockbridge over other offers extended to him in Canaan, Connecticut, and Lunenburg, Virginia (Griffin 13). Edwards's cousin, Ephraim Williams, Jr., objected when Edwards's name was proposed as a possible successor to the recently deceased John Sergeant. Williams believed Edwards was unsocial, impolitic, and too old to learn the Indians' language. Williams lamented what a shame it was that "a head so full of divinity should be so empty of politics."

Griffin believes that the minister's seven years in Stockbridge "was no bower of bliss" (14). In addition to an environment made hostile by his own kinsmen, the Williams family, the town suffered from inadequate schools and untrained schoolmasters. Further, the outbreak of war in 1754 made Edwards's time there extremely difficult. As evidenced by manuscript sermons in excess of 200, Edwards preached regularly to his Indian pastorate. He employed an interpreter, John Wauwampequanaunt, to aid him in communicating with his Housatonic congregation. In response to criticisms from his own cousin, Solomon Williams, regarding his policy for church membership, Edwards wrote *Misrepresentations Corrected, and Truth Vindicated*. His years in Stockbridge were surprisingly prolific, as he also wrote *The Freedom of the Will, Original Sin, The Nature of True Virtue, and The End for Which God Created the World*.

In part for these publications, as well as a family connection, Edwards was offered the presidency of the College of New Jersey (present-day Princeton University). At first, Edwards demurred, for fear that the heavy teaching load at the college would hamper any time he had available for additional research and writing. In a letter to the board of

trustees, Edwards wrote that his studies “have long engaged, and swallowed up my mind, and been the chief entertainment and delight of my life.” He also worried that his health would not endure the stress, and that his 11 children could not be easily removed from their home in Stockbridge (Griffin 14). However, the college would not accept his refusal and instead offered a compromise: a reduced teaching load that only involved courses in theology and Hebrew (Griffin 16). In contrast, Aaron Burr, Edwards’s son-in-law and former president of the college, had taught all courses to one of the classes, and all the languages to the college in its entirety (Griffin 15–16).

Edwards accepted the offer and arrived at Princeton in February 1758. There had been an outbreak of smallpox in the town, and Edwards was vaccinated. Unfortunately, the vaccination proved fatal for the 54-year-old when “a secondary fever set in; and by reason of a number of pustules in his throat, the obstruction was such, that the medicines necessary to stanch the fever could not be administered.” Edwards died a month later on March 22, 1758. Edwards recognized that the strength of his talent lay in his writings. When he accepted the position at Yale, he told the trustees: “So far as I myself am able to judge of what talents I have, for benefiting my fellow creatures by word, I think I can write better than I can speak.”

“A Divine and Supernatural Light” (1734)

This sermon was delivered in Northampton in 1733 and appeared in print the following year at the request of Edwards’s congregation. As the full title of the sermon suggests, Edwards’s goal was to offer proof through “scriptural and rational doctrine” that the Spirit of God touches true Christians. As evidence, he opens with a passage from the New Testament in which Peter Simon is praised for his recognition of Christ’s divinity. Most crucially to Edwards’s purpose, Peter’s declaration stems not from witnessing physical or visible proof of Christ’s identity, but rather from

God directly through his love’s being set on the disciple. Using the phrase “for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven,” Edwards mounts the argument that “God is the author of all knowledge and understanding whatsoever,” and that the knowledge imparted is not always received through the brain, or the site of reason and rationality. Reason requires physical proof, described in the Scripture as “flesh and blood.” But, as Edwards argues, because God is the original source of all knowledge, and that knowledge arrives in more mysterious ways than rational thinking can account for, God does not always “make use of intermediate natural causes, as He does with other knowledge.”

Edwards’s point here is twofold: first, that knowledge can be imparted in more than one manner, and, second, that regardless of the medium, God is always the messenger and the source. He seems to be deliberately addressing the rise of empiricism and continental rationalism, two trends deriving from England that posed a threat to the kind of profound experiences Edwards himself had in his personal conversions, and that his congregation would experience during the Great Awakening. According to rationalism, all knowledge is acquired through experience and observation. Peter is commended for recognizing Christ as the Son of God without the aid of any revelation through flesh and blood, or without any empirical evidence. This type of evidence, which is derived from observations in the physical world, Edwards refers to as “natural means” and relegates it to humans, who use it as a method for imparting God’s knowledge to others. Thus, Edwards does not deny the importance of empirical evidence but rather relegates it to the realm of the physical world inhabited by humans rather than the ethereal world of God.

As Edwards reasons, how else could one explain that illiterate fishermen like Peter would gain an understanding of Christ while learned men like the scribes and Pharisees, “men of vastly higher advantages, and great knowledge and sagacity, in other matters, remained in ignorance?” If knowledge were only acquired through empirical means, these

learned men would have recognized Christ as the Son of God rather than the “persons of low education,” such as Simon Peter, who distinguished themselves for their knowledge of Christ.

To clarify the type of knowledge imparted to Simon Peter, Edwards explains, “there is such a thing as a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means.” The emphasis on “immediate” is key as God does not utilize any “natural means” in making faithful Christians understand. In other words, God bypasses the more indirect route for imparting knowledge and instead touches their souls with a knowledge that transcends the flesh and blood. Edwards systematically approaches the various aspects of his argument, first in rendering a definition of divine light and its varying influences on people depending upon their spiritual status. Because all are touched by the Spirit of God but have different religious states (ranging from the unregenerate to the saint), it manifests itself differently. For the unregenerate person, or the unsaved person, Edwards states that the divine light acts upon him as “an extrinsic occasional agent.” The Spirit of God remains extrinsic, or outside, the unregenerate man because he is filled with unrepented sins. For the saint, or one who is fully committed to his or her faith, divine light unites with him and “actuates and influences him as a new supernatural principle of life and action.”

Edwards further explains and defines the spiritual and divine light as “a true sense of the divine and superlative excellency of the things of religion.” This is to be contrasted, Edwards warns, with a rational belief in God’s glory. Rather, those touched by a divine and spiritual light have a “sense of the gloriousness of God in [their] heart[s].” Reason appears as an obstacle to faith that spiritual and divine light can help remove because it “engages the attention of the mind, with more fixedness and intenseness to that kind of object.” Divine light enables those whose reason has created an enmity toward Scriptures and Christ’s divinity to lose this disadvantage and see more clearly. Edwards lik-

ens this phenomenon to a person’s recognizing an object’s true form in sunlight versus a vague notion of it from viewing it in “dim twilight.”

Edwards concludes by offering various biblical passages proving the scriptural precedent for his sense of divine and spiritual light. He also argues that it is rational that only the faithful, those who are not blinded by spiritual pollution, will be able to see and recognize the divine; the unregenerate, who may be discerning in temporal matters, will remain blind to divinity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the final section of the sermon, Edwards states, “This doctrine may well put us upon examining ourselves, whether we have ever had this divine light let into our souls.” How does this invitation to self-examination anticipate the principles of the Great Awakening?
2. How does Edwards’s sermon address opposing theories of rationalism and empiricism? Consider his definition of knowledge in your answer.
3. Unlike the usual characterization of Edwards as a minister of hellfire and brimstone, this sermon presents a different sense of the man. How might you reconcile the messages behind this sermon and his more famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”?

“The Images of Divine Things”

(“Images or Shadows of Divine Things”) (1737–1741)

Written within a hand-stitched journal Edwards titled alternately “The Language and Lessons of Nature” and “The Images of Divine Things” are more than 200 entries demonstrating the means by which “the works of nature are intended and contrived of God to signify . . . spiritual things.” The spiritual doctrine underlying “The Images of Divine Things” is known as typology, which was a practice of discovering types in the Old Testament and recognizing them as prefiguring correlative types in the New Testament. The mass exodus of the Jews, recorded in the book of Exodus, is

considered, according to typology, to prefigure the time that Jesus spent wandering in the wilderness, which is recorded in the New Testament. Besides biblical applications, however, Edwards viewed typology, as he detailed it in “Notebook on the Types,” as a “certain sort of Language, as it were, in which God is wont to speak to us” (cited in Knight 532). By opening up the realm of typology beyond the Bible, Edwards was taking a less conservative approach to the doctrine. His justification for doing so, however, was his belief that God’s communications with humans extended beyond the Scriptures to imbue objects and events in everyday life. As Knight expresses it, these signs in nature were, for Edwards, “part of a divinely instituted system of symbols that continuously prefigure and communicate the divine presence in nature and in history” (532). History’s role in typology is especially significant in its context of the coming of the Second Kingdom of God, which will be accompanied by the apocalypse. Prophecies, according to this theory, would become more frequent and more exact as the second coming of Christ draws nearer (Knight 533). Knight acknowledges that Edwards’s belief that divine communications will increase in number and in significance as the end of the world approaches was less than conventional (533).

Entry number 7 cites biblical Scripture for the doctrine of typology: “That the things of the world are ordered and designed to shadow forth spiritual things, appears by the Apostle’s arguing spiritual things from them. ‘Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die.’” Edwards compares this doctrine, which he views as a reference to Christ’s resurrection, as being founded in the Old Testament book of Hebrews, “For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is a force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth” (9:16–17).

Despite his reference to the conventional use of typology, comparing Old Testament types with their New Testament antitypes, Edwards’s subsequent entry, number 8, delves immediately into his

argument for the observation of divine communication in nature and the “visible world.” Edwards argues, “Again, it is apparent and allowed that there is a great and remarkable analogy in God’s works. There is a wonderful resemblance in the effects which God produces, and consentaneity in his manner of working in one thing and another, throughout all nature. It is very observable in the visible world. Therefore ’tis allowed that God does purposely make and order one thing to be in an agreeableness and harmony with another. And if so, why should not we suppose that he makes the inferior in imitation of the superior, the material of the spiritual, on purpose to have a resemblance and shadow of them?” In referencing “God’s works,” Edwards is essentially assuming rather than proving his argument because “God’s works,” for Edwards, include not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the forms of communication made apparent in nature. He views the two worlds, material and spiritual, or inferior and superior, respectively, as analogous to one another as well, and this image of the natural world as “a shadow of the spiritual world” is essential to his doctrine of typology.

In entries number 50 and 54, Edwards views the sun as a type occurring in nature whose rising and setting represent the death and resurrection of Christ. Scholars have identified these two entries in particular because they are indicative of Edwards’s interpenetration of categories—biblical types and types that appear in nature (Knight 541). Entry number 50 simply states, “The rising and setting of the sun is a type of the death and resurrection of Christ.” The critic William Madsen disagrees with Edwards’s use of types, stating, “a type is a historical person or event, not a mythical person or a recurrent event like the rising and setting of the sun” (99). For Madsen, then, the difficulty with this use of typology has to do with the unevenness of the two types being compared. Christ only dies and is resurrected one time, while the sun, to which Edwards compares Christ, rises and sets every day. Edwards himself seems to have anticipated this argument and

offered the following explanation in *Images of Divine Things*, “it is no sign that it is not a type of the resurrection of Christ that is but once, for it is fit that the type should be repeated often but that the antitype should be but once” (59). Edwards continues his argument by pointing out that there are repetitions of types in the Bible and that this repetition, like the daily rising and setting of the sun, is deliberate because it “signifie[s] the great importance of the antitype” (95).

One of the most well known entries, number 63, tells of the temptations of the devil, as viewed in nature by the deaths of birds and squirrels who are charmed and destroyed by the serpent. The image of the serpent as a symbol of the devil is taken from the Old Testament book of Genesis and recurs in the works of early American Puritan writers as a symbol of the earthly temptations generally or the American Indians specifically, who were seen as a threat to the colonists. For Edwards, the serpent’s charm is of primary interest because it compels its prey, though displaying fear and distress, to be rendered incapable of running away entirely and thus saving themselves. He tells of the animal that “runs or flies back again a little way, but yet don’t flee quite away.” This image of partial retreat reminds Edwards of “sinners under the gospel,” who “have considerable fears of destruction and remorse of conscience that makes ’em hang back . . . but yet they don’t flee away.” The temptation for the sinners, Edwards believes, is lust. The sinner, like the charmed animal, is helpless and will eventually become the serpent’s prey. The remedy, Edwards insists, is for someone to kill the serpent: “Christ’s coming and bruising the serpent’s head” is the means by which moral men, prone to the temptations of the serpent, are able to escape destruction and eternal damnation.

Rather than the image of the rodent powerless against the serpent’s charms, devout Christians appear in this entry as “the things we use [that] are serviceable to us.” Another famous entry, number 158, discusses the roles that “true and sincere saints” play as “God’s instruments.” As examples,

Edwards notes that the “utensils of life, an ax, a saw, a flail, a rope, a chain” are only useful if they are “being strained, or hard-pressed, or violently agitated.” A bow will not shoot an arrow, Edwards observes, unless it is strained hard to do so. So, too, does Edwards liken these images of everyday life, the staff that a man walks with, the bow strained to shoot the arrow, with the hard work asked of Christians: “enduring temptation, going through hard labor, suffering, or self-denial.” Only through such difficult work can “true and sincere saints” “answer God’s end and serve and glorify him.” Edwards condemns hypocrites, those incapable of the long and enduring tasks God puts before them, by likening them unto “a broken tooth, a foot out of joint, a broken staff, a deceitful bow, which fail when pressed or strained.”

The critic Janice Knight argues that the origins of Edwards’s use of typology in *Images of Divine Things*, whether this use be deemed conventional or radical, stems from his sense of God. In *Dissertation I Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, Edwards characterizes the Almighty as having a “disposition to communicate himself, or diffuse his own fullness” so that “there might be a glorious and abundant emanation of his infinite fullness of good ad extra, or without himself” (cited in Knight 545). From this characterization of God as disposed to communicate himself, it logically follows for Edwards that those forms of communication would not be restricted only to the Bible, but would be visible to the devout believer in nature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Edwards’s use of typology to EDWARD TAYLOR’s as expressed in *Meditations*.
2. How does Edwards’s perception of spiritual communication in nature compare with PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU’s or that of the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau?
3. Create your own entry by observing something in nature, and then extrapolating a moral lesson from it.

***A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversions of Many Hundred Souls* (1737)**

Jonathan Edwards originally drafted *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* as a letter to the Reverend Benjamin Coleman of Boston in 1736, but the text proved to be of such great interest that it was circulated and eventually published in 1737. In it, Edwards provides an account of the “little Awakening” that had begun in his church in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1735 and had spread through the surrounding region in the following months. This text is significant not only because it records the events themselves, but also because it represents one of Edwards’s first efforts at organizing a theological response to the dramatic events of religious revival. Within five years of the publication of his *Faithful Narrative*, Edwards would find himself catapulted into the same role on a larger stage, constructing the theological framework that would give shape to the emotional events of the Great Awakening.

Edwards begins this early narrative with a description of the people of Northampton, writing that they are “as sober, and orderly, and good sort of people, as in any part of New England; and I believe they have been preserved the freest by far, of any part of the country, from error and variety of sects and opinions” (57). In other words, Edwards reports, the events he is about to describe result from the unusual work of the Holy Spirit, not from any peculiarities among his parishioners. Edwards mentions what many New Englanders would have considered a typical “declension” from the faith of earlier Calvinists but notes that in the period immediately preceding the revival, many young people experienced a change of heart, marked in “a disposition to hearken to counsel” and a leaving off of “frolicking” that culminated in “a very unusual flexibleness, and yielding to advice” (59). This seriousness of mind combined with the sudden deaths of two young people in a neighboring community to prompt spiritual seeking and even conversions. Soon, “the minds of the people were wonderfully taken off from the world; it

was treated amongst us as a thing of very little consequence” (62). Edwards’s somber delight in these events emerges in his discussion: “The town seemed to be full of the presence of God. . . . Our public assemblies were then beautiful, the congregation was alive in God’s service, everyone earnestly intent on the public worship” (63). Worshippers rejoiced in God’s love and wept with “pity and concern” for their loved ones.

Recalling that it “was a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons’ minds were intent upon was to . . . fly from the wrath to come” (62), Edwards sketches imagery that will make a far more fearsome tableau in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” And yet, the *Faithful Narrative* is composed lovingly and warmly, reminding the reader that Edwards’s focus in preaching “Sinners” was to lead the listener away from the dangers described and toward the joys of repentance. Indeed, he writes that while some congregants experienced anxiety over salvation, “there has been far less of this mixture in this time of extraordinary blessing, than there was wont to be in persons under awakenings at other times; . . . for it is evident that many that before had been exceedingly involved in such difficulties, seemed now strangely to be set at liberty” (69). Ultimately, the resolution of anxiety, not the production of it, demonstrated the authenticity of the revival.

In his discussion, Edwards carefully avoids taking credit for the revival, writing in a curiously indirect passive voice, “There were then some things said publicly on that occasion concerning justification by faith alone” (61). He explains the revival as a work of God, not of man: “This seems to have been a very extraordinary dispensation of Providence: God has in many respects gone out of, and much beyond his usual and ordinary way” (64). He provides evidence of the sincerity of the conversions experienced during this period: their number (about 300), their variety (occurring in equal numbers of men and women, rather than in greater numbers of women as his grandfather, the former minister, had experienced previously in the

church), their diversity (occurring in the elderly as well as in the young, and in “Negroes” as well as white colonists), their immediacy (resulting in rapid changes in the lives of converts), and their breadth (spreading beyond the town into the region). This careful consideration of the quality of the conversions presages Edwards’s tests for genuine revival in “Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God” (1741) and “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections” (1746), two later texts in which he proposed systematic evaluation of the distinctions between true conversion and mindless enthusiasm.

In nurturing individual converts, Edwards advises that the first awakenings often involved “something of a terrifying sense of God’s anger” and an intent to live a more righteous life (71). Because God provides many early encouragements, new converts may hope that their sanctification will soon be complete, but they must learn to stand in their faith through the extended periods of difficulty that are part of every believer’s life. Edwards writes that they often have “more distressing apprehensions of the anger of God” toward them as they become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit, but he reminds his readers to treat them kindly. Such new converts, in his experience, “plainly stood in need of being encouraged, by being told of the infinite and all-sufficient mercy of God in Christ” (72–73). While these sinners experience some “legal distress” as they realize that God would be justified in punishing them, they begin to know true grace: “The way that grace seems sometimes first to appear after legal humiliation, is in earnest longings of soul after God and Christ, to know God, to love him, to be humbled before him, to have communion with Christ in his benefits” (75). In his intimate awareness of the concerns of these new believers—and how to allay those concerns—Edwards reveals his devotion to pastoral care.

Further illustrating his interest in gentle edification, Edwards includes in the narrative an extended case study of a young woman named Abigail Hutchinson who became converted and experienced such great sweetness in God that she no longer desired to avoid death. Rather, she

became joyously resigned either to live or to die. As her attention shifted to the realm of heaven and away from the earthly realm, she found that she no longer could eat, and she eventually died of an ecstatic anorexia, submitted either to life or death as God might will. Her pious life and death resulted in further conversions, including that of her own sister.

By the late spring of the following year, however, the conversions had slowed. Then, in a terrible incident, Edwards’s uncle took his own life, cutting his throat, and several other faithful people also recalled a strong impression that they too were being instructed to slit their throats, so that they needed to draw upon all their will to withstand the temptation. Edwards writes that these spiritual afflictions may have been the rather ordinary tactics of Satan, but that the devil had been restrained during the awakening. This tragic event, along with two strange experiences of enthusiastic delusions (as do his contemporaries, Edwards uses the term *enthusiasm* pejoratively), signaled to Edwards that God had determined to withdraw his Spirit as sovereignly as he had decided to visit it upon the people of Northampton. Edwards ends the text with a plea to the reader to heed this truthful account of the events and not to be swayed by misrepresentations of this gracious work of God.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What emotions seem to be associated with God’s presence in this text?
2. How does the experience of God depicted here contrast with the religious experience described in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”?
3. How does Edwards’s tale of Abigail Hutchinson compare to ANNE BRADSTREET’S “Deliverance from a Fever”?
4. How does this text reflect the same concerns that drive Edwards’s later works “Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God” and “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections”? How do both of these texts illuminate Edwards’s role in the Great Awakening?

Tara Robbins

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)

On July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards delivered this most famous of his sermons to a crowd at Enfield, Connecticut. From the attendant the Reverend Stephen Williams, we have learned that it was a well-received sermon that prompted “such a breathing of distress, and weeping, that the preacher was obliged to speak to the people and desire silence, that he might be heard” (reported in Trumbull 48). Partly because of this contemporary account, and partly because of selected editions of the sermon appearing in textbooks, most readers are only familiar with this sermon’s frightening images of hell and damnation. E. H. Cady asked, “Why has it become the classic of hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching which so long shut out our view of the tender minded and philosophic Edwards?” (61). Stuart attempts an answer to this rhetorical question in investigating the Reverend Stephen Williams’s reaction to the uplifting aspects of Edwards’s sermon: “And several souls were hopefully wrought upon that night. And oh the cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances that received comfort” (reported in Stuart 46). In addition to the very pervasive and effective images and depictions of hell that Edwards includes in the sermon, Stuart argues, there are moments of hope and comfort for those who repent their sins (46).

The use of fear was a tactic that Edwards had strategically deployed, as he reveals in “Preparatory Walk,” for a particular class of audience members. “In the more unthinking people, such as husbandmen and the common sort of people who are less used to reasoning, God commonly works this conviction by begetting their minds a dreadful idea and notion of the punishment: in the more knowing and thinking men, the Holy Spirit makes more use of rational deduction, to convince them that ’tis worth their while to seek earnestly for salvation.”

In his opening reference to Deuteronomy, “their foot shall slide in due time,” Edwards establishes a prevailing image and tone for his sermon. As he provides explication for the biblical citation, he

not only makes the text understandable, but also renders it applicable to his contemporary audience. Although the text originally applies to the “wicked Israelites,” Edwards shifts from the vague pronoun *they* to a more direct reference to his audience members, “wicked men” and “we.” The commonplace experience of falling, occasioned by treading in slippery places, which Edwards uses to illustrate the susceptibility of sinners to lives of eternal damnation, makes this peril seem both comprehensible and imminent. “As he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall, he cannot foresee one moment whether he shall stand or fall the next; and when he does fall, he falls at once without warning.” By linking the physical act of falling with the spiritual act, Edwards lets the body be the receptacle of sin. The very weight of this sin burdens the body and makes it more susceptible to fall: “Then they shall be left to fall, as they are inclined by their own weight.”

Man’s precarious position, his likelihood of falling at any moment and without warning, is further demonstrated by an analysis of God as the only agent who “keeps wicked men at any moment out of hell.” The figure of God portrayed in this section of the sermon is an all-powerful and just figure, but one who exercises an untold degree of strength over humans. Edwards gives numerous examples of the fruitless nature of humans’ endeavor to resist God: “There is no fortress that is any defense from the power of God.” As a metaphor for God’s power, Edwards offers the dynamic between a human and a worm: Just as easy as it is for a human to “tread on and crush a worm,” so it is for God to “cast his enemies down to hell.” “Nothing but the hand of arbitrary mercy and God’s will” prevents people from being cast into hell. Edwards proclaims the justness of sinners’ fates, and God’s action in allowing them to fall as they are prone to do, as a means of awakening the fallen members of his audience to their imminent fates.

And in this tension between God’s divine justice and man’s inherent proclivity to mortal fall Edwards echoes the Puritan view of religion. The individual is at God’s mercy to be saved from

eternal damnation. Edwards constantly creates images of an open pit, or hell's open mouth, which is ready and desirous of sinners. And yet humans are not utterly powerless, despite the horrific image Edwards conjures of standing in limbo with God's sword of divine justice over their heads and a fiery pit just below them. True, Edwards depicts "corrupt principles" in the "souls of wicked men" that would reign unrestrained were it not for the hand of God, but his main purpose in creating such horrifying scenes of death and endless torture is to prompt his audience members to pray to God and repent their sins. He warns that these prayers of repentance must be sincere to be heard and heeded: "Till he believes in Christ, God is under no manner of obligation to keep him a moment from eternal destruction." For those who are not true believers in Christ, however, Edwards offers no hope: "They have no refuge, nothing to take hold of all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliterated forbearance of an incensed God."

It is for these people, whom Edwards calls "unconverted persons," that he details this "awful subject." His desire is to make them aware and sensible to the precarious position of their souls: "There is nothing," Edwards proclaims, "between you and hell but the air." For those who do not recognize God's hand in their current situation, Edwards offers evidence: "the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your life, and the means you use for your own preservation." These sources of an individual's strength are useless when faced with God's justice, and the withdrawal of his hand from them.

All of the elements, including the earth and the sun, are only sustaining the lives of sinners at God's "sovereign pleasure"; thus, being out of harmony with God places the unrepentant sinners or unbelievers out of harmony with their place in the world. Edwards writes: "The sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air does not willingly

serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies." This image of a begrudging rather than nurturing domain drastically contrasts with the dynamic of man and nature presented in Genesis, in which man is given dominion over all the living things in the various elements. For the evil, sinning human, Edwards states, even the elements are antagonistic. In the first book of Genesis, "God said 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'" (Genesis 1:26). Edwards notes the difference between this dynamic with nature and the one outlined in Genesis by stating that "God's creatures are good, and were made for men to serve God with." Another indirect reference to Genesis immediately follows when Edwards uses a simile to compare God's wrath to "great waters that are damned for the present." The impending flood, threatening with "constantly rising" waters, evokes the enormous deluge described in Genesis when God floods the world in his anger at man's fall from grace.

Perhaps the most famous of all images that Edwards conjures in his sermon, the one that prompted the biographer Elisabeth D. Dodds to name it the "spider sermon," is that of man hanging precariously, as if on a spider's thread, over a fire. To convey the powerless state of a sinner, whose fate relies solely on the mercy of God, Edwards writes, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked." More examples of God's omnipotence follow in subsequent paragraphs in which Edwards compares the wrath of God to that of a king or absolute monarch. Just as Edwards discounted man's power of resistance to God's will, so, too, does he diminish the power exercised by kings or "the greatest earthly potentates" in comparison to "the great and almighty Creator and King of heaven and earth." He quotes from Luke, in which mankind is advised not to fear the person who can

kill the body, but the power that can kill the spirit by casting one into hell.

Edwards attempts a definition of eternal damnation in the following paragraph. Up until this point, hell has been an immediate, but not necessarily an infinite threat. His shift in the depiction of hell, less as a fiery pit and more as an inconceivable eternity spent in turmoil, occurs on the brink of his final plea to his listeners to repent their sins and sincerely commit themselves to their religious faith. In imagining hell as “a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul,” Edwards shifts from the physical aspects of eternal damnation to its emotional and psychological effects. To make the concept of eternal damnation more understandable and accessible, Edwards points to those “in this congregation now hearing this discourse that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity.”

Despite his employment of numerous images to emphasize man’s helpless state as an unrepentant sinner, Edwards also claims man’s agency, or ability to change these dire circumstances, when he writes in the application section of the sermon, “The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation.” Stuart identifies the “logical inconsistency” in the sermon: Edwards “went on to use the poles of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility to maintain an effective tension in everyday religious life. To some, this tension is suspect, because of its logical inconsistency. But to others, it appears singularly effective in keeping man from falling into either despair, on the one hand, or complacency, on the other” (56). He calls on members of the congregation to recognize and act upon the “extraordinary opportunity” to convert and commit themselves to Christ. If they will but listen to Christ “calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners,” their “hearts [will be] filled with love to Him who has loved them.” Here, Edwards shifts from a characterization of God that has prevailed in the sermon as an angry and vengeful God, to one more in keeping with New Testament readings, a God of love and acceptance.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Robert Lowell’s poem “Mr. Edwards and the Spider” and consider his interpretation of the sermon.
2. Edwards’s sermon is visually rich, freighted with provocative images depicting the tenuous state of an unrepentant sinner. Select what you believe to be the most effective or powerful of these images and explain how they work, and how they fashion a dynamic between God and humans.
3. How does Edwards reconcile the image of God as angry, powerful, and mighty with the image of him near the sermon’s end as loving and forgiving? Are the images mutually exclusive? If not, how does Edwards reconcile them?

A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (1746)

Edwards’s preface to *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* illustrates the critical importance of his work: “There is no question of greater importance to every individual of mankind than this; —What is the nature of true religion?” Although Edwards believes that there are ample means to answer this question, he notes that it is a divisive one: “There is no question upon which professing Christians are more divided.” In this time of revival, Edwards mourns the existence of “counterfeit” mixing with “true religion,” which he recognizes as a tactic undertaken by the devil to “gain the greatest advantage against the cause of Christ.” Edwards traces this phenomenon throughout time, arguing that it is particularly during moments of revival when this very division occurs. It will continue occurring, Edwards states, “till we have learned to distinguish between saving experience and affections, and those numerous fair shows, and specious appearances, by which they are counterfeited.”

Part 1 of the *Treatise* addresses the nature of the affections and their importance in religion. Examining a verse from Peter, Edwards proposes the

doctrine that “true religion consists in holy affections.” He defines the affections by differentiating them from the other faculty of the soul, which is perception and speculation. For Edwards, the “lively and powerful exercises” of one’s inclination are synonymous with one’s affections (15). His emphasis on “lively and powerful exercises” stems from the Bible, specifically Deuteronomy, in which God insists that his followers be “fervent in spirit” (17). These affections are “the springs which set us to work in all the affairs of life” (19). Without being affected, specifically by the emotions of love, joy, fear, hatred, sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal, Edwards argues, there can be no true belief or practice of faith (20–26). Through a series of biblical references to these very affections, Edwards concludes that “those persons who deny that much of the true religion resides in the affections . . . must reject what we have become accustomed to esteem as the Bible” (26).

Edwards centralizes “a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love to God” as the basis for all subsequent religious affections (28). He demonstrates further biblical proof of the centrality of religious affections through an examination of three prophets: David, Paul, and John (29–32). In daily exercises of faith, such as prayer, Edwards believes that the necessity for religious affections is abundantly clear. People do not pray to “inform God or to incline his heart to show mercy, but suitably to affect our own hearts as we prepare ourselves for the reception of the blessings we ask” (34). It is for this very same purpose that Christians attend sermons so that their affections are raised in their appreciation of the biblical text (35). Finally, Edwards notes how sinfulness is described repeatedly in the Bible as “hardness of heart,” thus displaying that a “tenderness of heart” is prerequisite to a true faith.

The second part is entitled “On Those Things Which Afford No Decisive Evidence, Either That Our Affections Are Truly Gracious, or That They Are Not.” As the title suggests, Edwards’s purpose in this section is to “discriminate between true and false religious affections” (44). Part of the impetus for the pamphlet, which was amassed from a series

of sermons that Edwards delivered, was to combat the belief promulgated in the Great Awakening that “bodily effects” were the true sign of conversion. Edwards addresses the fervent nature of affections, noting that it corresponds that those with excitable passions are naturally inclined to heightened expressions of their religious affections (47–48). That said, Edwards does not conscience a wholesale acceptance of all great expressions of affections necessarily stemming from “a spiritual and gracious nature” (49). More specifically, Edwards argues that though these affections “produce strong effects upon the body, [there] is no proof either that these affections are truly gracious, or that they are not” (50). He bases his statement about the enigmatic nature of bodily effects by arguing that they might stem from strong emotions that might themselves be based on spirituality or on earthly things (50–51). Edwards admits that “there is certainly great power in spiritual affections,” and thus he cannot state definitively that bodily effects, such as fainting, are not prompted by religious affections (51). As proof, Edwards provides scriptural examples of prophets whose bodies are overwhelmed by the sight and the glory of God (51–54). Edwards defends most ardently those people who express the belief that their bodies are affected by the Holy Spirit, arguing that it is in keeping with the miraculous works God has performed and that have been recorded in the Bible and that such descriptions of conversions, particularly in the New Testament, are public, wonderful, and sudden (58).

For every example of true religious conversion, such as “preparatory and convictions and humiliation” followed by “alarm and terror” and then converted into “comfort and joy,” Edwards offers counterarguments that these affections, even that of love, might arise from the devil or from expressions that are not based on true conviction but are merely counterfeit. He concludes the section by deferring to the Scriptures, “this notion of ascertaining the state of others by our love being excited toward them is antisciptural. The sacred writings say nothing of any such mode of judging respecting the state of others, but direct us to

form our opinion of them chiefly from the fruits they produce” (102).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Edwards’s treatise was occasioned by the Great Awakening, one of the most famous and influential revivals of the time. Why might this moment necessitate a defense of the “true religion”?
2. How does Edwards’s treatment of religious affections compare to his account of them in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*?
3. How might you compare Edwards’s treatise on bodily and emotional affectation with COTTON MATHER’s *Wonders of the Invisible World*?

Tara Robbins

The Freedom of the Will (1754)

Jonathan Edwards published his treatise on the freedom of the will in 1754, under the title “A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue, and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame.” Edwards had conceived of this exploration in the years following the first Great Awakening, writing to his fellow theologian John Erskine in Scotland in 1747 that he hoped to draft “something particularly and largely on the Arminian controversy, in distinct discourses on the various points in dispute, to be published successively, beginning first with a discourse concerning the Freedom of the Will, and Moral Agency; endeavouring fully and thoroughly to state and discuss those points of Liberty and Necessity, Moral and Physical Inability, Efficacious Grace, and the ground of virtue and vice, reward and punishment, blame and praise, with regard to the dispositions and actions of reasonable creatures” (quoted in Ramsey 2). Edwards thus intended this treatise as the first installment in a series of works that would entirely disassemble what he perceived as the specious foundation of the Arminian complaint against Calvinism.

Here, Edwards entered into the century-old conflict between the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace (the idea that a person elected by God to receive salvation could not resist divine grace, in spite of human sinfulness) and the Arminian doctrine of conditionalism (the idea that salvation required some element of faith generated by the human person). By the mid-18th century, the influence of Scottish commonsense philosophy had led some to question whether Calvinism’s notion of irresistibility undermined Enlightenment doctrines of moral responsibility by implying that man was incapable of—and therefore could not be held accountable for—upholding moral standards. Arminianism, with its insistence that man could either accept or reject God’s grace, seemed to offer a solution for this problem. Thus, as the historian Paul Ramsey writes in the introduction to the authoritative edition of Edwards’s text, in choosing to begin with a treatise on the freedom of the will, Edwards “planned to join argument with Arminianism precisely on the ground of its greatest strength, i.e. the importance of the ethical and the human for understanding the relation between God and man” (2). Edwards commences his assault on Arminianism on the very doctrinal point most attractive to its own followers, striking what he intended as a death blow to its heart.

While he did not permanently resuscitate the entire Calvinist orthodoxy, Edwards did achieve a monumental revival of many of Calvinism’s doctrines for an audience of professional theologians and lay readers alike. After his *Life of David Brainerd*, “Edwards on the will” was the most reprinted of his texts through the middle of the 19th century (Conforti 109), and 20th- and 21st-century biographers of Edwards often point to it as his greatest achievement. Indeed, the Yale University Press edition of Edwards’s complete *Works* begins with this text as the first volume. The series editor Perry Miller writes in his preface that “although it is not the first in the Edwards chronology, it is the work through which his fame has been most widely spread abroad, even to the multitudes who have known the book only by hearsay” (Miller vii).

Edwards's influence was both critical and popular, domestic and transatlantic, immediate and long lasting.

The text itself is divided into four parts: a first part setting out Edwards's terms and three others refuting the Arminian position that free will and liberty were necessary for the imputation of moral responsibility. Edwards's argument proceeds with painstaking logical precision, and much of the groundwork is established through the definitions in the first part. In this section, Edwards equates the will and the act of volition, arguing that a man cannot truly will to do something and refrain from doing it; a man who claims to have done so has actually willed not to do the act. Further, the will "is *determined* by the greatest apparent good, or by what seems most agreeable" (144). Actions derive directly and necessarily from what the mind perceives as most desirable, and a man's disposition determines his actions (Gura 192). Edwards also differentiates between moral and natural necessity. Natural necessity means that a man's actions are determined by certain physical realities; moral necessity means that his actions are determined by his disposition, in the face of God's worthiness. While sinful man may be morally incapable of loving God because his disposition has been corrupted, he possesses the freedom to do so. He is free to do whatever he wills, but without God's grace, he wills only to sin. Thus, Edwards counters Arminianism and insists that man's will is free, but that man can only sin—and that God is therefore justified in condemning the sinner for failing to exercise his freedom to will to do good.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When did Edwards originally conceive of his text, and what did he hope to achieve with it? What doctrinal system did Edwards oppose in *Freedom of the Will*?
2. What are Edwards's central arguments in the text? How do they relate to your own ideas about moral responsibility? Are people responsible for actions that they feel too weak to avoid if those actions cause harm to them or others?
3. Edwards was very interested in science, especially as it illuminated truths about the human condition. How would he have responded to modern debates that suggest that people's actions are determined by their biological characteristics.

Tara Robbins

The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended (1758)

Edwards died before this document could be published, although the advertisement mentions that he had reviewed most of it before his untimely demise. He begins by identifying Dr. Taylor's *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination* and *Key to Apostolic Writings* as the two key books written in opposition to the concept of original sin. Dr. Turnbull is also identified, and quoted throughout the book. Not believing that "any thing which has the appearance of an argument, in opposition to this doctrine, should be left unanswered," Edwards insists that this doctrine's great importance casts light on interpretations of the gospel and the doctrine of salvation.

In the first section, Edwards addresses the "true tendencies of the innate disposition of man's heart," whether we are innately evil or innately good. He cites Turnbull's argument that the number of wicked or evil acts in the world occupies a small percentage when compared to the good and virtuous acts. Similarly, Turnbull dismisses the source of information on this important question, stating that a prison does not represent the vast majority of law-abiding citizens; nor does a bout of illness in an otherwise healthy life accurately represent the health of a person. In response, Edwards argues for man's moral tendency for evil or wickedness without the interposition of divine grace. He writes, "It would be very strange if any should argue, that there is no evil tendency in the case, because the mere favor and compassion of the Most High may step in and oppose the tendency, and prevent the sad effect." Thus, Edwards argues, the absence of

a criminal or evil act by a person does not prove the innate goodness of the person, but rather the divine intervention of God to prevent the person from acting on his or her natural disposition toward evil.

Before tackling the subject of man's innate tendency to moral ruin, Edwards addresses the subject that all humans who are "capable of acting as moral agents" are guilty of sin. He provides numerous scriptural passages to document the representations of man as a sinful being in need of confession and repentance. Edwards states that Dr. Taylor himself asserts and affirms "these things" but differentiates between holy law and sinfulness so that man can "transgress the law, and yet not be guilty of sin." Taylor writes alarmingly of how one transgression against the law subjects the individual to everlasting death. Edwards defends God's law as "holy, just, and good" and maintains his belief that humans are "the subjects of guilt and sinfulness, which is, in effect, their utter and eternal ruin."

In support of his use of the term *tendency*, Edwards clarifies it through rational explanation. A single event, he states, does not qualify as a tendency, but observations of events in the natural world hundreds and millions of times do qualify. He provides readers with an example of throwing a die one time or thousands of times. After observing a die thrown thousands of times, Edwards states, one can draw conclusions from the preponderance of evidence that the die has a tendency to land on one side over others. For humans, he concludes, to observe the history in a family to murder themselves or die of consumption would indicate a tendency in that family or race. Edwards uses Taylor's own language against him in expanding this point, incorporating Taylor's phrase "We are very apt, in a world full of temptation, to be deceived, and drawn into sin by bodily appetites." Edwards agrees, focusing on Taylor's use of the term *apt* to imply a "tendency." In opposition to Taylor's sense that sin is an external source, Edwards notes that it occurs in both sexes and has been "observed in mankind in general, through all countries, nations, and ages, and in all conditions." Further, Edwards

again employs Taylor's own words and logic against him by stating that if God made the world and pronounced it good, then there is no room in such a habitation for sin. Thus, Edwards concludes, sin must originate in man himself and not in the world about him.

In the third section, Edwards tackles the implications behind Taylor's complaint that humans are disproportionately punished to eternal damnation for committing one sin. Given the truthfulness of this statement, Edwards writes, it must follow that the numerous good deeds of a person do not compensate for a single act of sin. The answer to this quandary, Edwards insists, lies in man's "infallibly effectual propensity to moral evil, which infinitely outweighs the value of all the good that can be in them." Thus, what appeared to Dr. Taylor to be an excessive punishment that was not equivalent to the crime is, to Edwards, a just punishment for humankind's "immense guilt." Against those who would talk of the "prevailing innocence [and] good nature" of man's nature, Edwards counters with the absurd example of a wife who, though she committed adultery with the slaves and other scoundrels, performed her wifely duties more often than her acts of adultery and thus should be deemed a good wife.

Edwards employs a passage from the Gospel of John as further proof that all humans are born into a fallen state: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." If there were ever a time with people born without sin, Edwards reasons, it must have been during John's time during the "primitive Christian church," and those people must have been the children of Christian parents. However, he immediately dismantles this possibility by rhetorically questioning why John would write such a passage as that quoted previously if his own environment, that of the primitive Christian Church, were not itself without sin. The reason Edwards offers for sin's immediacy is its great disposition that "will not suffer any considerable time to pass without sin." Edwards imagines this disposition to have a cumulative and self-perpetuating effect: Because humans are prone to sin, the tendency to increase

wicked habits and practices likewise increases over time, so long as the motion is not arrested. This notion accounts for why adults are more prone to sin than children.

Edwards counters Dr. Turnbull's sense of human's well-proportioned affections by remarking on the absence of a justly proportional love and gratitude to God for his goodness. Instead, he witnesses a stronger inclination "to anger towards men for their injuries." Even among those men who are Christian and who love God, their love for him may not be enough, and thus "there is more sin, consisting in defect of required holiness." The presence of sin among good men, Edwards concludes, is further proof of the natural tendency to sin. The following section includes humankind's propensity toward worshipping idols, such as the paganism practiced by indigenous populations of North and South America, and mankind's "great disregard of their own eternal interest" as additional evidence of an innate fallen status.

Beginning with Adam; continuing through his son Cain, who committed fratricide; and on to Abraham after the flood, Edwards cites numerous scriptural passages that provide a continuous and unremitting history of humankind's wickedness. He further adds that Dr. Taylor himself "owns" to these very passages in his own book. "Thus," Edwards remarks, "a view of the several successive periods of the past duration of the world, from the beginning to this day, shows, that wickedness has ever been exceedingly prevalent, and has had vastly the superiority in the world." Further, Edwards writes in the next section, mankind was given ample warning against continuing their wickedness by Noah, and yet the people took no heed. Edwards observes, despite the "new and extraordinary means" God took with the Flood they "were so far from proving sufficient, that the new world degenerated, and became corrupt." The continued wickedness of men, however, continued even afterward with the destruction of Babylon. He provides additional examples from Scriptures of man's "extreme degree of corruption," culminating in the Jews' rejecting Christ and his Gospel. In Edwards's own time, he sees the "corruption of the Church

of Rome" as another manifestation of mankind's wickedness.

Given the preponderance of evidence Edwards offers in this book in support of the doctrine of original sin, he nevertheless believes that humans have hope in God's grace.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the dynamic of humans and God that Edwards conveys in this book with that of his sermons. To what extent does the period or the genre (a book rather than a sermon) contribute to the difference?
2. In this book, Edwards directly addresses figures holding opposing views from him, Dr. Taylor and Dr. Turnbull. What of his other opponents, those who contributed to his ousting from the Northampton church? How does he position himself with respect to them?



FURTHER QUESTIONS ON EDWARDS AND HIS WORK

1. Jonathan Edwards is primarily associated with the "hellfire and brimstone" aspects of the Puritan faith rather than regarded as a holy man endeavoring to convert followers during the Great Awakening. Examine his texts carefully and make an argument for Edwards as a compassionate man, intent upon preventing the backsliding of Puritans and reinstating their position as God's chosen people.
2. Conduct additional research into the Great Awakening, which was such a pivotal event in early American history, and argue for the position that Jonathan Edwards occupies in this critical historical moment.
3. Consider how Edwards's examinations of nature relate to his understanding of mankind's relationship with God, and compare these ideas to those of Cotton Mather and then to those of the transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Is there a point of commonality?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Cady, E. H. "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards." *New England Quarterly* 22 (1949): 61–72.
- Conforti, Joseph A. *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Dodds, Elisabeth D. *Marriage to a Difficult man: The Uncommon union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God." In *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*. Edited by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995.
- . *Freedom of the Will. Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Vol. 1. Edited by Paul Ramsey, series editor Perry Miller. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957.
- . *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*. Edited by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Griffin, Edward M. *Jonathan Edwards*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.
- Gura, Philip F. *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005.
- Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University. Available online. URL: <http://edwards.yale.edu/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Knight, Janice. "Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature." *William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1991): 531–551.
- Madsen, William G. *From Shadowy Types to Truth: Studies in Milton's Symbolism*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968.
- Marsden, George M. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Miller, Perry. "Edwards to Emerson." *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956.
- , ed. "General Editor's Note." In *Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Vol. 1. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957.
- McDermott, Gerald. *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Ramsey, Paul, editor for Volume I. "Editor's Introduction." In *Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Vol. 1. General editor Perry Miller. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Stuart, Robert Lee. "Jonathan Edwards at Enfield: 'And Oh the Cheerfulness and Pleasantness . . .'" *American Literature* 48 (1976): 46–59.
- Trumbull, Benjamin. *A Complete History of Connecticut*. New York: Arno Press, 1972.
- Wainwright, William. "Jonathan Edwards." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available online. URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/edwards/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.



OLAUDAH EQUIANO (1745–1797)

hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least; and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty.

(The Interesting Narrative)

***The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789)**

What scholars know of Olaudah Equiano's life is derived mainly from his autobiography, whose full title is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. We have therefore chosen to address Equiano's life and major work in a single section.

In his introduction to the 1989 bicentennial edition of Olaudah Equiano's narrative, critic Wilfred D. Samuels connects Equiano's text to the burgeoning genres of autobiography and slave narratives. As a predecessor to the works of Booker T. Washington, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Hannah Crafts, Equiano's account tells of his enslavement in Africa, his experience of the middle passage to America, and his struggles to liberate himself both physically and spiritually. Samuels attributes the book's popularity to this last characteristic, the book's "spiritual elements" (iv–v). As a conversion tale, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* gives itself to "lengthy discourse on his conversion to Methodism" (v). In this particular theme, Equiano creates a narrative arc that traces his movement from slave to freeman, from spiritually empty to enriched. This development informs other aspects of the book, namely, its autobiographical move-

ment. By focusing on the life of an individual in the 18th century, when readers were looking for moral guidance or "admonitory and historical values," Equiano necessarily included his spiritual development as an aspect of his tale that more than satisfied readers' expectations.

A distinguishing feature of Equiano's narrative lies in its early chapters' focus on his childhood and his tribe's cultural practices and beliefs in Africa. Equiano orients his reader, after dispensing with the traditional declarations of humility and lack of literary talent, to "that part of Africa, known by the name of Guinea, to which the trade of slaves is carried on" (4). Deep within a wealthy kingdom that touches the coast, into "the interior part of Africa to a distance hitherto . . . unexplored by any traveler," Equiano was born. His description of the tribe's lands as "unexplored" or unmapped, as it were, immediately renders him an expert, or at least an individual with privileged information. A member of the Eboe (modern-day spelling of *Ibo*) tribe, Equiano writes that his isolation within the interior of Africa accounted for his having "never heard of white men or Europeans" (5). Historians have located more exact coordinates for Equiano's home. Samuels writes, "Equiano was an Ibo born in the Essaka region, northeast of the Niger River, in the interior of Nigeria" (v). More recent developments, brought about by additional research into his early childhood, reveal that this past might be

fictional. The biographer Vincent Carrera argues in his biography of Equiano that this famous figure was actually born into slavery in present-day South Carolina and manufactured the story of his childhood spent in Africa.

Equiano tells of his father's prominent position in the Ibo tribe as an "embrence; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur" (5–6). He proceeds to provide readers with the means of creating this physical marker of distinction and, in such a rhetorical strategy, invites his readers into the private cultural practices of the Ibo. He continues in this vein of making the unknown or foreign knowable and familiar by comparing aspects and practices of the Ibo with those of the Jews (30, 32). The Ibo practiced polygamy but abhorred adultery so much that it was a crime punishable by death (7–8). The marriage ceremony resembles modern common law marriages in which all that is required for a couple to be deemed husband and wife is the public declaration of both bride and bridegroom "in the midst of all their friends" (8). The bride wears "round her waist a cotton string of the thickness of a goose quill, which none but married women are permitted to wear" (9). Equiano's attention to the ritual and symbols of marriage among the Ibo has the rhetorical function of refuting 18th-century European beliefs regarding the sexual licentiousness of both African men and women. This racially informed conviction helped to further the cause of slavery because, as proslavery advocates argued, the absence of any markers of civility—such as marriages—made the inhumane practice of slavery seem not only justified, but a civilizing practice.

As further testament to Ibo civility, Equiano details the division of labor based on sex and the customary diet, which is lacking "those refinements in cookery which debauch the taste" (13). Thus, the simplicity of the Ibo diet is favorably contrasted to the supposedly more sophisticated, yet more "debauched" tastes of European cuisine. For example, Equiano emphasizes the Ibo's proclivity for cleanliness before eating: "Our cleanliness on all occasions is extreme" (13). Again, one

sees that Equiano's careful documentation of the Ibo's markers of civility are detailed, various, and made readily apparent. Just as they are simple in their gastronomic tastes, so is their architecture reflective of a "study [of] convenience rather than ornament" (15). Lest readers or observers mistake simplicity for baseness or rudimentary starts into civility, one need only consider the Puritan lifestyle burgeoning in America at the same time as Equiano writes. The Puritans' desire to move away from the debauching features of a life overtaken with sophistication, earthly pleasures, and luxuries caused them to strive instead for simple pleasures and for unadorned lives. The practical purpose behind simple architectural style of housing of the Ibo is easily explained: "Houses so constructed and furnished require but little skill to erect them. Every man is sufficient architect for the purpose" (17). Thus, the basic nature of the houses has a clear, utilitarian purpose because people have all the skill necessary for the construction of their own dwellings.

In describing their economic system of trade with neighboring tribes, Equiano first brokers the book's initial foray into its difficult subject of slavery. "Sometimes indeed we sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous" (19). In his reckoning of slavery, Equiano criminalizes the practice through its associations with those committing trespasses deemed "heinous." He also foreshadows his own subjugation to the slave trade by mentioning his suspicion that neighboring tribes entered the Ibo's marketplace not only for the purpose of trade, but with large, empty sacks intended to capture individuals for future sale as slaves.

Equiano blames the introduction of European goods as the controlling temptation that lures traders to "accept the price of his fellow creatures' liberty with as little reluctance as the enlightened merchant" (24). To satisfy his greed for European wares, the trader "falls on his neighbor, and a desperate battle ensues" in order to take prisoners of war, who can then be sold into slavery (24). To

make sure that readers can distinguish between the practice of slavery among the Ibo and that in the West Indies, Equiano details the salient points: "With us [slaves] do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters; their food, clothing, and lodging were nearly the same as theirs (except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free-born); and there was scarce any other difference between them, than a superior degree of importance which the authority which, as such, he exercises over every part of his household" (26–27). With the exception of their absence from the table of freeborn people when dining, nothing distinguishes slaves from masters. Most notably, the system of slavery as practiced in Africa by the Ibo is not a race-based institution.

As mentioned before, Equiano makes numerous comparisons between Ibo practices and beliefs and those of the Jews. He mentions the significance of hand washing, libations, and general hygiene, as well as the practice of circumcision, as two central practices the cultures share in common (30, 32). Equiano has been struck "very forcibly" by the "strong analogy . . . in the manners and customs of my countrymen and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise . . . an analogy, which alone would induce me to think that the one people had strung from the other" (38). To corroborate this theory further, Equiano refers to "a Dr. Gill, who, in this commentary on Genesis, very ably deduces the pedigree of the Africans . . . [and] the descendants of Abraham" (38).

As the biographer Carrera has noted, no section of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* contains so many references to other sources, such as Dr. Mitchel, Mr. T. Clarkson, and Dr. John Clarke (39, 40, 41). Within these sources Equiano finds additional authority for his claims against the institution of slavery based on documented proof and testimony regarding the civility of Africans. The central argument Equiano references for proof of Africans' humanity involves the correlation between pigmentation and geography. As the argument goes, "the difference of color between the Eboan Africans and modern Jews" can be attributed to their geographi-

cal proximity to "the torrid zone" (40–41). If, as Equiano argues, a Spaniard can change complexion and yet remain the same mind, then there is no basis for the "apparent inferiority of an African" (42). Indeed, he carries the argument a step further, insisting "that understanding is not confined to feature or colour" (42).

Chapter 2 opens with the swift termination of Equiano's blissful childhood with the abduction of both him and his sister. Snatched together, the two are able to comfort each other by "being in one another's arms all night, and bathing each other with our tears" (50). Even this small relief is stolen from them as the two siblings are ripped from each other's arms and forced to endure the pains and anguish of their mutual enslavement alone. Equiano soon attempts to return to his family home and takes advantage of the freedom allotted him by his master to orient himself to the geography of his new home in the hope of a future escape. The opportunity for escape occurs unexpectedly when Equiano kills one of the master's chickens and runs off to hide for fear of receiving a beating as punishment. The thickness of the bushes, along with the searchers' general consensus that he has fled for home, prevent those of his master's household from discovering him. But upon overhearing his searchers speak of the futility of his return home, given the significant distance, Equiano emerges from his hiding place at dusk and drags himself, filled with despair, into his master's kitchen in search of food and drink (57).

After the death of the master's daughter, Equiano finds himself sold to yet another family. He does not specify how long he is with this new master nor mention how many other times he is sold. The singular event that marks his captivity while still in Africa is the unexpected but brief reunion with his sister (59). In rhapsodizing on the particular dangers slavery imposes on women, Equiano hopes for the protection of his sister's innocence and virtues (62). Equiano wonders about his sister's fate, and, in so doing, narrates the fate common to many female slaves: "fallen victim to the violence of the African trader, the pestilential stench of a

Guinea ship, the seasoning in the European colonies, or the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer" (62).

Equiano's experience of slavery in Africa seems to be polarized by extremes. While residing with one family, for example, he is bathed, clothed, perfumed, and treated as a member of the family. He notes his initial astonishment when he finds himself seated at the same table as his masters for dinner (64). These luxuries and the homelike environment are juxtaposed with the household of his next master, among "a people who did not circumcise and ate without washing their hands" (67). Further, the women are not modest and do not follow the practices of the women from the Ibo tribe. The people offer no sacrifices or libations before eating, the men and women swim together in the water, and the women sleep with the men (66, 67, 68). In this cataloging of ill manners and lack of civility, Equiano shows the disparity between master and servant. Having been born to a tribe practicing all of these gestures that mark their civility, Equiano occupies a position of moral authority.

From this position of moral and cultural estrangement, Equiano finds himself on the seacoast and face to face with a slave ship. The mistrust, fear, and bewilderment that characterized his experiences among his most recent slave owners gain intensity and emphasis when he is forced aboard the ship. He narrates his innate distrust and fear on seeing the Europeans, whom he rightly took to be "bad spirits," and details how "their complexions too differing so much from our, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief" (70–71). His vantage point reverses the cultural authority on the issue of slavery.

Equiano's next description provides even more information on the subject of slavery than was previously known. His narrative, in addition to its attention to life in Africa, is most notable for its detailed description of the middle passage, or the sea voyage African slaves endured chained together in the hull of a ship as they made their way to Euro-

pean colonies: "I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything" (73). Conditions below deck worsen for Equiano and his fellow captives when another ship moves alongside theirs and unloads additional cargo:

It became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. (79)

In opposition to his previous description of the importance of cleanliness, hand washing, and general hygiene among the Ibo, and even among the various owners he had in Africa, the deadly conditions suffered during the middle passage are "pestilential" and cause the deaths of several slaves. Equiano attributes his survival to his ability to dwell on deck without "fetters." Both kindnesses he believes are purchased by his "extreme youth" (80). At the height of the disparity between civilized and barbaric, Equiano twice mentions his and other shackled slaves' shared fear that the European captors were cannibals who would cook and eat them.

In direct opposition to his moments of fear and despair are moments of wonder and curiosity. Having never tasted certain foods during his 11 years among the Ibo, Equiano expresses his delight, while a slave in other parts of Africa, in being introduced

to coconuts and pumpkins. When aboard the slave ship, Equiano wonders at the magic spell that the Europeans must have cast onto the ship in order to make it sail. When he asks the other shipmates about its properties, their ignorance of naval mechanics only further affirms this belief in magic. When the shipmates note Equiano's natural curiosity about the quadrant, "they at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my curiosity, made me one day to look through it" (83). He is also surprised by flying fish and "seeing people on horseback" (83, 85). In gathering these moments together, the reader recognizes how Equiano returns to his own childhood and the naturally inquisitive mind that all children have.

Soon after his arrival in Virginia, Equiano maintains his sense of wonder and amazement at some of the natural and man-made sights. He marvels at snow, which he had never witnessed before. He wonders at a clock, a picture, and an iron muzzle when he is called into the big house to fan his ill master (92–93). The wonder quickly turns to fright when he examines the metal contraption a black female slave had "on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink" (91). The inventions, then, span from the novel (a clock, a picture) to the insidious, the iron muzzle, and this spectrum might easily be used to describe Equiano's understanding of European slave owners, who seem capable of both innocuous behavior as well as extreme cruelty.

The naming, or rather the presumption of slave owners that they may name their slaves, is one instance of slavery's occupying the spectrum between innocuous and cruel, where the two seem to blend into each other. Equiano notes in passing that he was renamed Jacob and thereafter referred to as Michael (93). His latest owner, Michael Henry Pascal, changes Equiano's name yet again, this time to Gustavus Vassa (96). When Equiano demurs and insists that his name is Jacob, he is "cuffed" (96). A simple and yet significant matter of naming oneself begins innocuously enough but very quickly turns cruel as Pascal uses physical violence to force Equiano to submit to a new name.

Similarly, those on board the ship bound for England, including Equiano's master, Pascal, take advantage of his youth and easily convince him that their threats to kill and eat him are quite real (97, 99, 100, 101, 102–103). Having learned before of the cruelty of Europeans by witnessing the fatal flogging of a sailor and the unceremonious dispatch of dead slaves overboard, the reader cannot help but sympathize with the 11-year-old Equiano, who takes quite seriously the cruel jests and threats of his master and fellow sailors.

The natural wonder that Equiano expresses about new foods, flying fish, and snow quickly translates into an appreciation for God, the Creator, and for church (105). Thus does Equiano remove the racial or cultural slant of his wonder and awe. Rather than attributing these items, and his sense of wonder about them, to the Europeans who introduce him to them, Equiano very wisely connects them to God, and thus acquiesces to a power greater than he and the Europeans (105). It is because of his desire to understand more about "God, who made us and all things" that Equiano "soon got into an endless field of inquiries, as well as [being] able to speak and ask about things" (105). Thus, Equiano's linguistic forays into English, his desire to communicate, stems from a spiritual hunger for more complete knowledge of God.

He attempts to converse with a book and remarks how he "ha[s] often taken up a book, and ha[s] talked to it, and then put [his] ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer [him]" (107). Religion soon becomes a means of cultural and moral authority, which Equiano can wield as a socially sanctioned judgment over others. Immediately after his accounts of his own ailments, chilblains, which might have led to the amputation of his left leg but did not, for which he thanks God (116), Equiano begs his reader's leave to relate a tale of a sailor who lost his eye in a circumstance that Equiano considers "as a judgment of God" (117). The sailor damns his eyes and nearly immediately after receives "some small particles of dirt" in his left eye that caused an inflammation and, within a week, the loss of his eye (117). Although Equiano

does not expressly compare his miraculous recovery to the loss of the blasphemous sailor, it is relatively impossible for the reader not to draw such a conclusion given that the two events immediately follow one another.

As Equiano gains more knowledge of and familiarity with seafaring and its vessels, not to mention its naval officers' rank and reputations, he takes on yet another cultural structure that affords him a modicum of authority. Having left the sea and lived in England for roughly two or three years, Equiano describes himself as being "happily situated; for my master treated me always extremely well; and my attachment and gratitude to him were very great" (131). He credits his time aboard ship, where he experienced warfare and witnessed some of the wonders of the open water, for his self-identification as "almost an Englishman" (132). This declaration is followed, not surprisingly, with a statement of his proficiency with the English language, his desire for literacy, and his "anxiety" to be baptized, as he was in February 1759 at St. Margaret's Church in Westminster (132). Soon after, Equiano and his master returned to the sea aboard the *Namur*, destined for the Mediterranean (137). While at Gibraltar, he learns of the death of his beloved companion, Dick, and he makes a failed attempt to reunite with his long-lost sister. Equiano remarks that the young woman resembled his sister on first glance but then was revealed to have been born in another nation by her speech and manners (138).

Additional battles at sea, all waged against the French, result in further recognition and promotion for both Equiano and his master. Both men hazard their lives for the British Crown, and both receive commendation. The master is appointed captain of a new ship, the *Aetna*, and Equiano is named the captain's steward (151). As another tale of divine Providence, and further solidifying Equiano's ties with Christianity, he recounts the bizarre story of Mr. Mondle, "a man of very indifferent morals" (154). Waking from a horrific nightmare in which St. Peter warns him to repent his ways because his time is short, John Mondle gives away his liquor, begins reading the Scriptures, but can-

not relieve his mind's "state of agony" (156). On hearing people cry out for God's mercy, Equiano and others hurry on deck, only to see a 40-gun ship named the *Lynne* strike their own ship "with her cutwater right in the middle of [Mondle's] bed and cabin . . . in a minute there was not a bit of wood to be seen where Mr. Mondle's cabin stood" (157). Equiano considers this bizarre accident "as a singular act of providence" and takes leave with his reader to relate "another instance or two which strongly raised my belief of the particular interposition of heaven" (159). One tale is of a mother and her child, who miraculously survive a fall from the ship's upper deck down to the hold, and another is Equiano's own survival of a headlong fall from the same location, the upper deck, to the afterhold without receiving "the least injury" (160). These three singular events strengthen Equiano's faith in God and transfer his fear from fellow humans to God alone (160).

Their return to Portsmouth is soon followed by "great talk about peace," which is mirrored by Equiano's own opportunity for peace as a freed slave. "I too was not without my share of the general joy on this occasion. I thought now of nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education" (171). Equiano's forays into literacy, arithmetic, and the Scriptures are all assisted, while he is aboard the *Aetna*, by a well-educated 40-year-old named Daniel Queen. A father figure to Equiano, the latter would use whatever money he received to purchase sugar or tobacco for this kind man who promised to apprentice Equiano in his own business once the two departed from the *Aetna* and Equiano obtained his freedom (173). Similar to the kindness that Queen showed Equiano, his master's treatment of him and concern for his moral character are linked in Equiano's mind to his inevitable emancipation. "From all this tenderness, I had never once supposed, in all my dreams of freedom, that he would think of detaining me any longer than I wished" (174).

Equiano's hopes for freedom are soon dashed when his master attempts to place him on another

vessel, threatening to cut Equiano's throat if he "moved out of his sight" (175). Once he is placed aboard Captain James Doran's ship, the *Charming Sally*, Equiano's ownership is immediately transferred. Equiano "plucked up courage" and informed Doran of the various reasons why his assumption of the claim to be master to Equiano was both specious and legally impossible. Equiano references his numerous years of loyal service to his previous master, which were unpaid. More importantly, in terms of "the laws of the land," he informs Doran that he has been baptized and thus cannot be purchased or sold (177). The two men, former and future slave owners, attempt to dismiss the veracity of Equiano's knowledge of the legal status he has as a baptized person and suggest instead that Equiano should not have placed his trust in people who only pretended to befriend him by providing him with false knowledge and false hope. Tellingly, the new master chastises Equiano for talking "too much English" and makes physical threats to reassert his position as Equiano's new master. As the transaction over Equiano is complete and Equiano's former master departs the ship, Equiano "threw [himself] on the deck, while [his] heart was ready to burst with sorrow and anguish" (179).

To maintain his previous employment of Christian belief to supersede the hierarchy imposed on him by slavery, Equiano attributes his current situation as Doran's slave to his personal sins and transgressions against God. He "considered [his] present situation as a judgment of heaven," and he pours out from a contrite heart "unfeigned repentance" (181–182). Equiano soon finds some comfort in his current circumstance by professing that "God might perhaps have permitted this in order to teach me wisdom and resignation" (182). Several failed attempts to escape from the ship while it lay in port do not register as painfully with Equiano as the loss of a guinea to a man who promised to procure a boat for him to use in making his escape from the *Charming Sally*. This concern with money is further reminiscent of Equiano's attempts to hide what little currency he has for fear that his former

master will rob him of it. It further foreshadows the means by which Equiano will purchase his own freedom. It is thus telling that Equiano's arrival at Montserrat, "this land of bondage," which causes "a fresh horror [to run] through all [his] frame," should be inaugurated by two sailors' robbing him of all his money (190).

Doran sells Equiano to Mr. King, a Quaker who sets sail for Philadelphia (191, 193). Equiano expresses gratitude to both Captain Doran and his former master for providing him with a strong character reference that would be appealing to a "charitable and humane" master. King seems to be a merchant involved in the triangle trade, however, as Equiano soon learns that he "collect[s] rum, sugar, and other goods" (196). Most scholars interpret this last phrase, "other goods," as slaves. For his labor, Equiano receives monetary compensation that "was considerably more than was allowed to other slaves that used to work with [him]" (196). King provides both pay and food to the slaves of other masters who perform services for him (197). To strengthen further the bond between freedom and economic power through the possession of money or other goods, Equiano tells the tale of "a countryman of mine" whose frugality and industry aided him in purchasing a boat, which was then seized by the governor solely because he knew the owner to be a "negro-man" (199). The only satisfaction this man receives in compensation for the theft of his boat is the news that the governor "died in the King's Bench in England . . . in great poverty" (200). The man escapes his "Christian master" and makes his way to England (200).

Equiano speaks openly of his own participation in the slave trade when he refers to the "different cargoes of new negroes in [his] care for sale" (205). He speaks of witnessing cruelties to slaves as well as the "constant practice to commit violent depredations on the chastity of female slaves" (205). Equiano expresses his own anguish at his inability to stop these acts. From a rhetorical standpoint, it appears that he wishes to inform readers of these "abominations" but at the same time remove himself from any responsibility or culpability in con-

tinuing these practices (206). Equiano distances himself even further from his own hand in the slave trade by discussing at length the punishments and inhumane conditions suffered under slavery. He mentions the sexual double standard that permits the lynching of a slave involved with a white prostitute but condones the satisfaction of a white man's wanton lust upon a 10-year-old slave child.

In a passage that might seem counter to his larger goal of advocating the abolition of slavery, Equiano lavishes praise on certain slave owners, besides his own master, who "to the honor of humanity," are "benevolent" and "most worthy and humane gentlemen" in their treatment of their own slaves. Equiano not only provides the readers with the names of these exemplary slave owners, but also launches into an economic treatise on the money to be reaped from the humane treatment of slaves. Healthy and happy slaves are more productive and perform "more work by half than by the common mode of treatment they usually do" (210). Equiano attributes the annual requirement of 1,000 new slaves to the West Indies to maintain the land's "original stock" of 80,000 to the mistreatment and early deaths of these slaves (211).

Equiano quickly abandons the economic arm of his argument for the humane treatment of slaves and continues to provide specific examples and painful details of the abuses, attempted suicides, and punishment of slaves. He arrives at a general point of law and cites an act passed by the Assembly of Barbados (217–218). Slave owners are not legally responsible for the mistreatment of their slaves except when such cruelty results in the slave's death, at which time the slave owner is obliged to pay the "public treasury fifteen pounds sterling" (218). In this act's refusal to punish murder as a crime but rather as an act resulting in the loss of property (thus the fine paid to the public treasury), Equiano believes lawmakers "deserve the appellation of savages and brutes rather than of Christians and men" (218). In references to the tale of a slave owner who has fathered the slaves laboring as "beasts of burden" in the fields, Equiano exposes how this act condones the social taboo of filicide

and opposes the natural relationship that a father should have with his own children (219). In this manner, Equiano argues that "the slave trade [is] entirely a war with the heart of man" (220).

He makes the charge against slavery that most abolitionists do: "It is the fatality of this mistaken avarice, that it corrupts the milk of human kindness and turns it into gall" (223). Equiano wonders how slave owners can reduce both themselves and their slaves to the status of brutes and yet show no concern for a possible insurrection (226). "By treating your slaves as men, every cause of fear would be banished" (226). He makes such bold statements because he writes from a position of authority, having witnessed "many instances of oppression, extortion, and cruelty" in the West Indies (227).

Equiano "endeavored to try [his] luck and commerce merchant"; during visits where he sails with Captain Thomas Farmer, he begins to make small purchases and then resell the merchandise for a small profit. His first exchange is a glass tumbler bought at St. Eustacia and then sold upon his return to Montserrat at a profit of fourpence (233–234). His foray into the business of merchant proves successful, and he increases from his initial investment of two pence to a dollar in six weeks (235). His experiences, however, include moments like the one mentioned earlier in the narrative when the governor seized a man's boat for no other reason except that the man was a Negro. Along with another African, Equiano departs at Santa Cruz in the hope of selling three bags of citrus fruits. When two white men take the bags, Equiano and his companion "could not at first guess what they meant to do" (236). When the men threaten to flog them if they do not depart, Equiano and the other man show them their vessel and explain that they have sailed from Montserrat. Their combined disadvantage of being "strangers as well as slaves" is quickly revealed when the two try to make the thieves understand that they just departed from a ship and were intending to sell their wares. As these three bags of fruit constituted their entire fortunes, the two appealed to the fort's commanding officer for redress. They were answered by a horsewhip (238).

Distraught but still hopeful, they arrived at the house of the men who had carried off their bags. Others in the house strike a bargain with Equiano and his companion, offering to return two of the three bags of fruit to them. Out of pity for his companion, whose bag was not returned, Equiano gave over a third of his produce and the two returned to the marketplace and received “favorable” payment from “providence” (240, 239).

The horrific conditions of the West Indies, which frequent ship travel allow Equiano to place in a larger context and draw unfavorable comparisons, contribute significantly to “a mind like [his]” and cause his desire for freedom to become even more powerful (242). Being a Christian, Equiano places his faith in God for gaining his liberty “by honest and honorable means” (242). Indirectly, Equiano provides the reader with the prevalent reason why he did not simply attempt to run away as a means of escaping bondage. Montserrat’s surf, coupled with his inability to swim, make the idea of escape seem less liberating and more suicidal. Equiano provides nearly three pages worth of examples of near drownings, overturned boats, and the “howling rage and devouring fury” of the West Indies’ surf (244).

Equiano adds to the treacherous conditions that made escape impossible the “cruel thing . . . which filled him with horror”: The tale of a free mulatto named Joseph Clipson who was arrested and taken forcibly aboard a ship to be returned to his master in Bermuda. Although Clipson “showed a certificate of his being born free in St. Kitt’s,” he was forced aboard ship. His request to be taken ashore before the secretary of magistrates only results in his transfer to another ship and his forced departure from a life as a free man, as well as his loss of his wife and their child (248). In contemplating the fate of Joseph Clipson, Equiano concludes: “Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least; and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty” (249). Because a freed slave cannot enter evidence of his free state in a court of law in the West Indies, and because the

conditions of slavery are so much more horrific in the West Indies, and because the treacherous surf makes his escape an impossibility, Equiano “determined to make every exertion to obtain [his] freedom, and to return to Old England” (250). Equiano pays the shipmate to teach him about navigation in the event that if he is “ill used,” he might find a sloop and make his way back to England (251). Equiano turns down an opportunity to board a ship sailing for France, stating that he had determined that he would only escape if he were ill treated and that his show of fidelity would prove advantageous to him in the future (253). In the short term, his refusal to escape on the France-bound ship is rewarded by lessons in navigation from his master himself, much to the consternation of their fellow passengers, who believed it “a very dangerous thing to let a Negro know navigation” (253). Now aboard the *Providence*, a 70- or 80-ton vessel that his master commanded, Equiano left the West Indies and set sail for Charles Town and Georgia (253). This was his route for 1764. On the eve of their departure for Philadelphia in 1765, Equiano’s master calls him into his office and tells him of the rumors he has heard of Equiano’s plans to run off. He also informs him that he is much valued: Having paid 40 pounds sterling for him, the master threatens him with the possibility of being sold to Captain Doran’s brother-in-law, “a severe master,” or to someone in Carolina for a 100 guineas (256). The conversation improves, however, as Equiano offers numerous accounts of opportunities for escape that he did not take. His master’s recognition and confirmation of “every syllable that [he] said” strengthen the two men’s desires to respect each other’s wishes within reason (258). In a speech that “was like life to the dead of [him],” Equiano and his master arrive at an agreement: The captain will sail to places that allow Equiano to continue his trade as a merchant (even crediting him some wares), and Equiano, once he has accumulated 40 pounds sterling, will purchase his freedom (260). The prospect of imminent liberty, purchased by his own labor, “gladdens [his] poor heart beyond measure” (260–261). This future as a free man is corroborated by a “wise woman, a Mrs. Davis” who

- Murphy, Geraldine. "Olaudah Equiano, Accidental Tourist." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (1994): 551–568.
- Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African. Available online. URL: <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/index.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Potkay, Adam. "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (1994): 677–692.
- Sabino, Robin, and Jennifer Hall. "The Path Not Taken: Cultural Identity in the Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano." *MELUS* 24, no. 1 (1999): 5–19.
- Samuels, Wilfred D., ed. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Coral Gables, Fla.: Mnemosyne, 1989.
- Wheeler, Roxanne. "Domesticating Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 4 (2001): 620–624.



HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER

(1758–1840)

That time is very greatly misspent, which is bestowed in reading what can yield no instruction.

(The Boarding School)

The eldest daughter of Hannah Wainwright and a wealthy merchant, Grant Webster, Hannah Webster was born in Salisbury, Massachusetts, in the years before the American Revolution. Because of her family's economic status, young Hannah received a fine education, much of it at a boarding school that would become the basis for her second novel, *The Boarding School*. Growing up in a life of privilege, Hannah Webster would be enrolled in an all-female academy at the time of a traumatic event in her life, the death of her mother. This tragic event happened in 1762, when young Hannah was only four years old.

Five years before the American Revolution, Webster was writing and publishing newspaper articles on the subject of politics. Her literary talent would later be passed on to two of her daughters. At the time, Webster's articles drew the attention and admiration of her future husband, John Foster, who was then in graduate school studying to become a minister. The two married in 1785 on April 7 and began their family in Brighton, Massachusetts, where John was employed as the town's only minister for the First Parish Church. After the birth of her sixth and final child, Foster penned her first novel, *The Coquette*, in 1797. It became a best seller. In his introduction to the 1939 republication of *The Coquette*, Herbert Ross Brown of Bowdoin College notes that the sensational novel "enjoyed

its greatest vogue between 1824 and 1828, when the novel was reprinted eight times" (xiii).

Literary historians have discovered that the fictional character of Eliza Wharton was based on the real-life story of John Foster's distant cousin, a woman named Elizabeth Whitman. Foster's cousin, the wife of Deacon John Whitman, was the first cousin of Elizabeth Whitman's father (Bolton 51). This young woman rejected two marriage proposals from ministers (just as the fictional Eliza Wharton, whose fiancé, Mr. Haly, dies, subsequently rejects the suit of J. Boyer) and later found herself pregnant by a lover who abandoned her. Herbert Ross Brown considers Jane Locke's 1855 edition of *The Coquette*, which includes a brief memoir of Foster's life as well as her declaration that Pierpont Edwards (grandson of JONATHAN EDWARDS) was the model for Peter Sanford, to provide "an ample amount of information, mainly mistaken" (viii–ix). Still, Brown notes that Foster's fallen heroine and the historical figure of Elizabeth Whitman share several connections: Whitman was related to John Foster, the women coquetted two ministers, and J. Boyer of Foster's novel shares the initials of Whitman's minister, the Reverend Joseph Buckminster (xi). The scandalous tale of Elizabeth Whitman's seduction and ruin was passed on orally in the form of community gossip, and it was also spread through written form in local newspapers.

The desire to tie the historical figure of Elizabeth Whitman to the fictional one of Eliza Wharton unmistakably compelled an 1855 edition to include a historic preface in which “the real names of the principal actors in this most affecting and lamentable Drama are for the first time given to the public by the daughter of the author who possesses peculiar means to ascertain the FACTS” (reprinted in Bolton 153). Jane E. Locke writes a memoir of Foster in the 1866 edition, which is the first version of the novel to carry Foster’s name as the novelist (Bolton 154). There is also mention of a three-act play, *The New England Coquette*, made of Foster’s novel by J. Horatius Nichols in 1802 (Bolton 154–155).

Charles Bolton writes sympathetically of Elizabeth Whitman, stating that hers was a tale “of an era when there was less of variety in a girl’s daily round, and few opportunities for the expression of her individuality. These pages tell also of one who chafed under these conditions” (xi). Bolton cites another source who believes that Elizabeth Whitman may have been the figure who inspired Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (10). Bolton reproduces a poem penned by Elizabeth Whitman, which appeared in the *Centinel* on September 20, 1788, entitled “Disappointment” (16–22). Whitman died, probably of puerperal fever (a common cause of many women’s deaths after childbirth due to infection of the uterus), on July 25, 1788 (Bolton 30). Notice of her death, and the death of her child, appeared in the Salem *Mercury* on July 29 and was soon reprinted and circulated in the Massachusetts *Centinel* (Bolton 33–37). The notice was intended to alert family and friends of the demise of the “strange woman.” Interestingly, the language employed in the description of Elizabeth Whitman seems very much in keeping with Foster’s fictional Eliza: “Her manners bespoke the advantage of a respectable family and good education. Her person was agreeable; her deportment, amiable and engaging; and though in a state of anxiety and suspense, she preserved a cheerfulness which seemed to be not the effect of insensibility, but of a firm and patient temper” (Bolton 36).

Aspects of this language are echoed at the novel’s conclusion on the tombstone erected by Eliza’s friends (260).

Following this moral line, it would be quite easy (and ultimately simplistic) to read Foster’s novel as a tale intended to warn young female readers. Boston’s *Independent Chronicle* printed an article of September 11, 1788, that drew upon Elizabeth Whitman’s personal tragedy as a source for a communal morality lesson: Both this aforementioned article as well as one published in the same newspaper just nine days later credit Whitman’s reading habits with her demise (xi–xii). The September 11 and September 20 letters refer to Whitman as a “great reader of romances” with the latter pursuing the logic that this genre was culpable for her downfall by insisting that “she had formed her notions of happiness from that corrupt source” (xii). Because the newspaper accounts of the historical figure who many see as the basis for Eliza Wharton all point to her seduction as a moral tale intended to warn young ladies against following the same path, it seems quite logical to imagine that readers of Foster’s novel would consider the fictional figure as a subject of moral instruction.

Unlike her fallen heroine, Hannah herself appears to have led a conventionally moral and upstanding life. In their first 10 years of marriage, she bore six children: three sons and three daughters. Until his retirement in 1827, John served as a minister in the local church. Two years later, John Foster died. After her husband’s death, Hannah Webster Foster left Massachusetts to live in Montreal, closer to two of her daughters, Harriet Vaughan Cheney and Eliza Lanesford Cushing. Hannah Foster Webster died in Montreal in 1840 at the age of 81.

The Coquette; or, the History of Eliza Wharton (1797)

When it was first advertised in Boston’s *Columbian Centinel* on August 5, 1797, the author appeared under the nearly anonymous descriptor of “a lady of Massachusetts” (v–vi). It was not until 1866,

nearly 70 years after the first edition of her novel, that Foster was identified by name as the author of *The Coquette*. This tale of the seduction and tragic fall of Eliza Wharton draws from the epistolary form made popular for seduction tales by Samuel Richardson with the publications of *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, among others. Foster begins the life of her protagonist after the death of her fiancé. Released back into society, a young and vibrant Eliza finds her temperament revitalized. She enjoys the pleasures of a public life filled with social gatherings, parties, dances, and retreats at the homes of her friends. However, her foray into social life is quickly checked by the introduction of another potential suitor, a minister named Boyer who is enamored of her and hopes to make her his wife as he settles into a new community. Eliza's rejection of his suit, to the complete shock and dismay of her female companions and fellow members of society, is seen by many critics to mark the beginning of her downward spiral into sin and eventual death. The critic Sharon Harris disagrees with this reading and argues instead that Eliza's fall occurs at the very beginning of the novel when Eliza recognizes that "there is no place in late-eighteenth-century American society for her opinions" (5). Unlike Harris, most critics see her impregnation by Sanford as the natural end of her innocence. Eliza soon succumbs to the flattery of a silvery-tongued rake named Peter Sanford, who, seeing her as nothing more than a coquette, feels justified in bedding and then abandoning her. Without the safety of marriage, a pregnant Eliza sequesters herself from the judging eye of the society she once enjoyed and dies alone soon after giving birth to her illegitimate child.

Foster opens her novel with Eliza Wharton's first letter to her friend Miss Lucy Freeman, while the former visits General and Mrs. Richman. The visit not only takes young Eliza away from the recent death of her fiancé, an elderly man of the cloth, but provides her with a second opportunity to be launched into society and thus into the pool of eligible bachelors. Rather than move in social step from engagement to engagement, Eliza con-

fesses to her friend and correspondent Lucy Freeman the liberating and invigorating qualities of being unattached in society. She identifies pleasure as the "unusual sensation possess[ing] [her] breast" on the occasion of her departure from her "paternal roof" (5). This declaration of independence, the reader learns as the novel progresses, comes at a dear price.

In her early descriptions of her fiancé, Mr. Haly, Eliza displays a mixture of regret and thinly veiled anger toward her parents, who encouraged her betrothal to the point of arranging their intended nuptials. Although she rightly mourns the dead, Eliza immediately notes "the disparity of our tempers and dispositions, our views and designs" and wonders how anyone could "suppose [her] heart much engaged in the alliance" (6). Indeed, her anger seems most naked and apparent when she names the social institutions that have encouraged such filial obedience in the manner of daughters' acquiescing to their parents' will in selecting their future husbands. In retreat from her own parents' will, which forced her into a potentially unhappy union with Mr. Haly, Eliza places her reputation and her future in jeopardy by leaving home.

The reader catches early glimpses of Eliza's potential peril when the young letter writer expresses joy after leaving her family house. Her brief description of her own mother as a "poor woman," ignorant of Eliza's feelings (actually lack thereof) for Mr. Haly, furthers the 18th-century reader's anxiety over Eliza's fate. Even Eliza's correspondent, Miss Freeman, finds her sage and conservative advice offhandedly dismissed by the "coquette." Inherent in the notion of republican motherhood is the belief that mothers are the primary inculcators of the correct morals and values in their children, especially their daughters. In accordance with 18th-century notions of republican motherhood, Eliza's pleasure at leaving her mother and her happiness at escaping a marriage register as alarms that foreshadow her impending downfall. In her second letter, Eliza delights at the lifting of her melancholic feelings. Without the moral guidance of her mother and surrounded by people who are the "picture of

conjugal felicity," Eliza "finds [her] natural propensity for mixing in the busy scenes and active pleasures of life returning" (8, 9).

By her third letter, Eliza has met J. Boyer, a minister, who quickly befriends her, almost immediately after she divests herself of her mourning weeds. When a fellow visitor, Mrs. Laiton, interrupts Eliza's pleasant walk outside Colonel Farington's home to express sympathy regarding Mr. Haly's death, Foster reminds her readers of how the customs of society can be at odds with the emotions and dispositions of its members, such as Eliza. With the exception of this one moment, Eliza finds real pleasure and enjoyment in the social setting of Colonel Farington's home, where she enjoys tea, dinner, and an evening's entertainment. She closes her third letter by taking stock of her life thus far and states assuredly, "a few juvenile follies excepted, which I trust the recording angel has blotted out with the tear of charity, find an approving conscience, and a heart at ease" (12).

In his first letter to his friend Mr. Selby, the latest minister pursuing Eliza (J. Boyer) writes cautiously yet enthusiastically of her. He praises her "elegant person, accomplished mind, and polished manners," and in his judicious portrait of her, one can easily discern the attributes suitable to a minister's wife (13). Noticeably absent from Boyer's letter is any mention of Eliza's physical features. He appreciates her "naturally gay disposition" but then appears to undermine this particular quality by stating, "It is an agreeable quality, where there is discretion sufficient for its regulation" (14). Mr. Boyer wants to temper or control Eliza's characteristic happiness and gaiety, just as others have, either through endorsing marriage to Mr. Haly, expressing sympathy for his death, or cautioning against Eliza's unguarded desire to enjoy her time in society as an eligible young woman. Because we as readers have already been privy to her unwanted engagement, we may not look favorably on Mr. Boyer's sentiments.

In contrast to Boyer's characterization of Eliza, and the apologetic excuses of Mrs. Richman, who attributes Eliza's disposition to "juvenile indiscre-

tion" rather than "design," Peter Sanford, the rogue who will ruin her, imagines Eliza to be "exactly calculated to please [his] fancy" (23, 25). For Sanford, Eliza is easily dismissed as a figure "apparently thoughtless of every thing but present enjoyment" (25). In labeling Eliza as a coquette, Sanford justifies his mistreatment of her. He writes to his friend Charles Deighton that he "shall avenge his sex, by retaliating the mischiefs, she meditates against us" (26). His language militarizes romance, stating that he will "only play off her own artillery, by using a little unmeaning gallantry" (26). It is thus fitting that the consummation of their affair should likewise be couched in military terms as Sanford boasts to his friend of having succeeded at his goal of "the full possession of [his] adorable Eliza!" (211). Further, Sanford paints Eliza's initial rebuffs of his assault upon her virtue in similar terms: "in reliance upon her own strength, endeavoring to combat, and counteract my designs" (212).

Eliza's declaration of independence is echoed soon after in her relaying of Boyer's marriage proposal to her friend Lucy and her thoughtful response. In accordance with her view that marriage amounts to a prison sentence (a belief shared by Peter Sanford, who writes of the institution as shackling), Eliza's "sanguine imagination paints, in alluring colors, the charms of youth and freedom" (41). She begs Mr. Boyer to "leave [her] to the exercise of her free will" (41). In response, Mr. Boyer describes his future prospects: "I expect soon to settle among a generous and *enlightened* people" (42, emphasis mine). Despite the appearance that Eliza has enjoyed and can fully enjoy the freedom of society as well as exert her will in selecting her own marriage partner, the novel exposes the significant social forces at work outside the nuclear family to see Eliza, and all eligible young women, for that matter, safely settled into good unions through Eliza's chafing against Mrs. Richman and her friends, as well as the weighty disapproval of her correspondent. With little if no regard for Eliza's own feelings, all the female characters rally behind Mr. Boyer's suit, referencing his reputation and his class position as just reasons for their stance.

The unrealistic class aspirations of Elizabeth Wharton appear in the Boston *Centinel* as partial cause for her downfall. Had she not imagined herself above marriage to a minister, the anonymous writer argues, her fate might have been different. Foster echoes this sentiment by having the fictional scoundrel write to his friend regarding his own connection of marriage and class position: "Whenever I do submit to be shackled, it must be from a necessity of mending my fortune" (33). Lucy writes quite frankly to Eliza on the subject of class ascension: "I know your ambition is to make a distinguished figure in the first class of polished society," but Mr. Boyer's "situation in life is, perhaps, as elevated as you have a right to claim" (38). Sanford soon after writes of the prospect of marrying an heiress because he "know[s] of no other way to mend his circumstances" (49). "If my fortune, or [Eliza's] were better," Sanford opines, "I would risk a union" (50). In these discussions of marriage and status, Foster exposes 18th-century disapproval of loveless unions based solely on class aspirations.

Having summarily dispatched Mr. Boyer and his socially sanctioned marriage proposal, Eliza mistakenly believes herself to be free again to enjoy the pleasures of society as a single female. But without the guidance of parents or the shelter of an engagement, Eliza too easily and tragically falls victim to the calculating schemes of Peter Sanford. When he catches her alone in the garden, Sanford's "zeal, his pathos alarmed" Eliza (72).

The critic C. Leiren Mower is particularly attentive to the manner in which the novel ends, stating that Eliza's attempts to have control over her own life and her own body are quickly undermined in her death when friends and family take the opportunity to speak for her and to impose their own readings onto her particular fate. In the letters, old friends write to each other of how "happy [they] would have been, had [Eliza] exerted an equal degree of fortitude in repelling the first attacks upon her virtue!" (257). In such statements, Foster seems to echo 18th-century sentiments that would place all the blame for pregnancy outside wedlock squarely on the shoulders of the woman. Mower

believes that the public nature of society's reading of her is best exemplified not in the correspondence among friends and family, but in the message inscribed upon her tombstone "by her weeping friends," who hope that "candor [will] throw a veil over her frailties" (260). In death, Eliza can no longer exercise control over the public readings of her body. Throughout the novel, Mower argues, her sole purpose is to "manage the publicness of her body's performance" (316). In ever-decreasing spaces, Eliza attempts visibly to register control over her own body. She does this first by appearing on the public scene soon after the death of her fiancé. However, she flouts the social rules that allow her access to this public realm because she refuses to fulfill her part of the social contract by accepting Boyer's marriage proposal. "To the extent that Eliza remains engaged in the 'externals of enjoyment' . . . without committing herself to the status of *feme covert* (a married woman), she violates what might be thought of as the reciprocity of the market" (331). As she circulates in the public sphere of parties, picnics, and dances, Eliza is perfectly safe and her actions are sanctioned, but once she defers and later rejects Boyer's proposal, she becomes victim of the public's disapproving view of her.

Foster makes reference to her literary predecessors in this genre through the figure of Mrs. Richman. During her conversation with Eliza on the subject of Peter Sanford, Mrs. Richman declares him "a second Lovelace," the name of the famous seducer in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (55). When Eliza replies that she is not an object of seduction, Mrs. Richman equates Eliza's status with that of "Richardson's *Clarissa* [who] made herself the victim [of seduction] by her own indiscretion" (55). Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa* was published in 1747 and is argued by many critics to be the basis for Foster's best seller. Where critics tend to disagree is regarding the moral of the novel as well as its ability either to comply with or to thwart the politics governing women's positions in the 18th century.

Mower disagrees with Cathy Davidson's assessment that *The Coquette* "fails to openly challenge

the basic structure of patriarchal society” (316). Rather, Mower argues that Eliza Wharton’s desire to possess her own body “for her own pleasure and purposes” presents a different affront to 18th-century notions of property, ownership, and the status of women. Mower cites the influential philosophies of Locke and Rousseau, as well as the pseudoscientists studying physiognomy, to provide a context in which to recognize and understand Eliza’s defiance.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the story of Foster’s character Eliza Wharton in terms of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN’s *Autobiography*. In what ways does gender narrow the field of possibilities for men and women who leave home in search of their own futures?
2. How might you compare Foster’s seduction novel with SUSANNA HASWELL ROWSON’s *Charlotte Temple*, published in 1794?
3. JOHN ADAMS is reported to have equated democracy in America with Richardson’s seduction novel, stating that democracy is Lovelace and the people are Clarissa. How might you read Foster’s novel in political terms? How might Eliza stand in for the people and Sanford for democracy?
4. As mentioned earlier, Foster’s *The Coquette* enjoyed its greatest popularity in the 1820s. Why would her novel appeal to women 30 years after its initial publication?

The Boarding School: Or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils (1798)

Dedicated to “the young ladies of America,” Webster’s second novel presents itself as the author’s careful “collecting and arranging of her ideas on the subject of female deportment.” It is considered by critics to be one of the first fictional accounts of education in the United States.

After the death of her husband, Mrs. Maria Williams, Foster’s fictional preceptress, opens a boarding school with a desire to preserve a patrimony for

her two daughters, as well as “a wish to promote their advantage and enlarge their society” (5). During their final week of school, prior to graduation, Mrs. Williams suspends the traditional schedule and subject of study to dispense “a collection of [her] own sentiments, enforced by the pathos of the occasion” (10). She begins with a tale of Clara, a young girl “nursed in the lap of affluence, and accustomed to unbounded expense,” to explain the importance of needlework, one of the many subjects taught at the boarding school (11). Because of a “series of unavoidable disasters, such as no human wisdom could foresee or prevent,” Clara is reduced to “narrow circumstances” and required to ply her needle to support herself and her four young children after the untimely demise of her husband (11–12). Even for a woman not so burdened as Clara, Mrs. Williams indicates, needlework proves to be a necessary skill. The fictional example of Matilda mends her “cast-clothes” before giving them to “some poor person” (13). Her charity is increased by her use of the needle. Mrs. Williams cites classic examples of needlework from Roman times as further argument for “the honor and utility of this employment” (14).

The second skill, reading, also commands the attention of Mrs. Williams as she reviews its function in her pupils’ daily lives and education. In an indirect reference to her first novel, *The Coquette*, and to published admonitions about certain reading subjects (namely, romances), Mrs. Williams warns her pupils of dangerous reading material:

Romances, the taste of former times, are now so far out of vogue, that it is hardly necessary to warn you against them. They exhibit the spirit of chivalry, knight-errantry, and extravagant folly, which prevailed in the age they depict. But they are not interesting; nor can they be pleasing to the correct taste and refined delicacy of the present day. Novels are the favorite and most dangerous kind of reading, now adopted by the generality of young ladies. . . . Their romantic pictures of love, beauty, and magnificence, fill the imagination with ideas which lead

to impure desires, a vanity of exterior charms, and a fondness for show and dissipation, by no means consistent with that simplicity, modesty, and chastity, which should be the constant inmates of the female breast. They often pervert the judgment, mislead the affections, and blind the understanding. (16–17)

As a testament to the dangers of unfettered imagination whetted by immoral novels, Mrs. Williams provides the cautionary tale of Julianna, a young daughter to a wealthy widower who overindulges her every whim. The fanciful tales of lovers she has read in circulating libraries directly corrupt Julianna's most critical choice of a husband. After rejecting her father's choice, Julianna finds herself swept up by a military man interested only in pursuing her patrimony. Even a brief scuffle between her father and her paramour that ends with her father's wounding is incapable of alerting Julianna to the rash nature of her choice of husband. Indeed, she becomes more resolved in her relationship with the rogue, and the two marry against her father's wishes. The loss of his daughter to a scoundrel proves too much strain for the aging father, and he soon dies, leaving the daughter a portion of his fortune, which her husband quickly spends. The moral tale of Julianna ends with the woman, abandoned and unsupported by her husband, living with her young children in squalor, clinging to a novel, and proclaiming her imagination to be her sole luxury (21).

For high-quality reading material, Mrs. Williams recommends good poetry that "soothes the jarring cares of life, and, pervades the secret recesses of the soul, serves to rouse and animate its dormant powers" (23). She also mentions "Mrs. Chapone's letters to her niece, which contain a valuable treasure of information and advice" (23). Hester Chapone was the author of two 18th-century books of advice for young women: *A Letter to a New-Married Lady* and *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*. Mrs. Williams also advises her pupils to seek out history books because their "retrospection of events" offers

a "competent acquaintance with human nature in all its modifications" (23). By reading judiciously in a variety of subjects, Mrs. Williams argues, young ladies will not only be "highly ornamental in [their] discourses with the polite and learned world," but will have skills to make them capable instructors of their own children (24, 25).

On the following morning, Mrs. Williams takes up the subject of writing, proclaiming it to be a good method for enlarging one's mental powers (27). Through writing down one's thoughts and sentiments, one is able to review one's own mind, expunge unworthy thoughts, and refine others as a means of learning more about one's self and improving one's expressions. Mrs. Williams celebrates America as a "land of liberty" that affords young women an equal opportunity to write, unshackled by "the restraints of tyrannical custom, which in many other regions confines the exertions of genius to the usurped powers of lordly man!" (28). Foster specifically mentions the epistolary form as a "happy substitute for personal conversation" and a means for writers to exchange sentiments (29). She seems to laud letter writing as an extended field of literature in which women may excel, as seems fitting given her own personal success with *The Coquette*.

Because letters will survive their author's deaths, Mrs. Williams cautions against including improper subjects in the misguided belief that they will remain secret. She provides a tale in the figures of Celia and Cecilia, two companions at a boarding school, to explain the hazards of including private sentiments or indelicate thoughts in correspondence. When Celia's male companion, Silvander, intercepts the two ladies' letters, he is "mortified, disgusted, and chagrined" to read the "illiberal wit, frothy jest, double entendres, and ridiculous love-tales" (31). As just punishment, Silvander copies entire sections of the intercepted letters and circulates them among his friends, shaming and humiliating Celia (32).

Mrs. Williams next speaks to her pupils on the absolute necessity of arithmetic. In their current single state, the girls are allotted budgets of

discretionary funds from their parents and families. Good knowledge of arithmetic, coupled with good sense, should provide the students with the necessary skills for remaining within their budgets. Further, math skills will enable them to set aside a modest amount of money to be donated to charity. In this manner, the application of arithmetic in daily life has sound moral results. In the case of a fictional character named Lucinda, prudent exercise of arithmetic skills helps to save her father's sanity, her family's welfare, and their future status. Lucinda wisely sells the family's "superfluous moveables and purchase[s] a small stock for trade" (35). Lucinda's profitable business restores the family's fallen financial state. Mrs. Williams notes that after marriage, these women will be called upon to impose "order and economy [on their] domestic affairs" (33). Thus, their education in arithmetic will have far-reaching application.

The skills acquired with boarding school extend into the arts to include music and dancing. These two talents of social refinement and accomplishment should be displayed in public gatherings but should never become sources of vanity (36). Neither, Mrs. Williams advises, should a young woman put on the "affectation of uncommon modesty or ignorance" as these are truly "ridiculous" (36–37). "How perfectly absurd," Mrs. Williams states, is the young woman who refuses an invitation to entertain with her musical talents by means of false excuses or elaborate lies (forgetting music, being out of practice, putting on false humility over the lack of one's skills). Because these affectations of modesty are intended to solicit further compliments and encouragement from members of an already solicitous audience, such pretenses do nothing more than degrade the young woman.

Musical talents, if overindulged to the detriment of other aspects of an education, have the dangerous power to "lay the mind open to many temptations, and, by nourishing a frivolous vanity, benumb the nobler powers both of reflection and action" (39). In the ruined figure of Levitia, a young woman

who attempts to better her social standing through the cultivation of her musical talents, Mrs. Williams offers a cautionary tale. Employed as a "professed actress," Levitia quickly falls to the position of a "complete courtesan" because she is easily deceived by libertines and votaries who prey upon her vanity (41). Not surprisingly, her fallen status contributes directly to her mother's death and to her father's mental and financial downfall. Even though the prodigal daughter eventually returns to her paternal roof, Levitia's excessive life has ruined any chance for happiness or a return to normalcy. She lives a solitary life, "despised and avoided by all her former acquaintance" (42). In stark contrast, Mrs. Williams offers the brief image of Florella, who "is superior to the vain arts of flattery" and who wisely recognizes her musical talents as "amusements only; and assiduously cultivates the more solid branches of her education" (42). Mrs. Williams sums up her lecture on music and dancing by asking her pupils the rhetorical question, "Who would not rather be a ressembler of Florella, than a vain, imprudent, and ruined Levitia?" (43).

Writing is to be a tool for moral instruction and constancy for young women after their graduation from boarding school. Mrs. Williams recommends the practice of retracing "the actions and occurrences of the day, when you retire to rest; to account with your own hearts for the use and improvement of the past hours" (45). Such a practice will lead to self-knowledge and shield women from the empty flattery of "every coxcomb" (45). The preceptress warns of worshipping beauty through the tale of Flirtilla, a beautiful young girl with a superficial and fashionable education whose "empire suddenly overturned" when she contracted smallpox (49). To prevent a horrific future like Flirtilla's, Mrs. Williams advises honest self-scrutiny and self-improvement in those areas where one finds fault (50–51).

On the subject of dress, Mrs. Williams advocates neatness and propriety, meaning that one should wear clothes in keeping with one's age and social position. She displays particular disdain for "people in dependent and narrow circumstances to imi-

- Foster, Gwendolyn A. "The Dialogic Margins of Conduct Fiction: Hannah Webster Foster's *The Boarding School*." *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* 25 (October 1994): 59–72.
- Foster, Hannah Webster. *The Boarding School*. Reprint, Boston: J. P. Peasless, 1829.
- Hamilton, Kristie. "An Assault on the Will: Republican Virtue and the City in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*." *Early American Literature* 14 (1989): 135–151.
- Harris, Sharon M. "Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*: Critiquing Franklin's America." In *Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797–1901*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.
- Mower, C. Leiren. "Bodies in Labor: Sole Proprietorship and the Labor of Conduct in *The Coquette*." *American Literature* 72, no. 4 (June 2002): 315–344.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "Domesticating 'Virtue': Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America." In *Literature and the Body*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Tassoni, John Paul. "'I Can Step Out of Myself a Little': Feminine Virtue and Female Friendship in Hannah Foster's *The Coquette*." In *Communication and Women's Friendships*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993.



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (1706–1790)

I began to suspect that this Doctrine, tho' it might be true, was not very useful.

(*The Autobiography*)

Benjamin Franklin, in the words of his biographer Carl Van Doren, was a “harmonious human multitude.” As Van Doren’s assessment suggests, Franklin’s life and work are at once difficult and simple to summarize. On the one hand, his multitude of contributions to the worlds of printing, journalism, literature, science, and politics defy brief summary. On the other hand, these many accomplishments were in harmony with one another, sharing a common theme of human progress through human initiative. More than any other American, Franklin personified the age of Enlightenment, a time when humans were growing more aware of their world and inventing ways to control it for their benefit.

His Enlightenment perspective shines through his literature, which includes some of the most important works to appear in America in the 18th century. Over more than six decades, he produced an enormous and varied body of work, including the best-selling *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, literary hoaxes such as “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” and “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” satires such as “An Edict by the King of Prussia,” humorous sketches such as “The Ephemera” and “The Elysian Fields,” and informational pieces such as “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America,” as well as countless news articles, letters, scientific reports, and proposals related to civic affairs. His masterpiece, *The Autobiography*, is one of the classic books of American literature.

Although he eventually would be strongly associated with Philadelphia, Franklin began his life in Boston, where he was born on January 17, 1706. He entered a large family, which included his father, Josiah Franklin, and his mother, Abiah Folger Franklin, as well as 11 siblings. His father, who made soap and sold candles for a living, hoped that his youngest son would enter a religious profession and sent him to grammar school when he was eight years old. His father changed his mind, however, and moved Benjamin to George Brownell’s English school during the 1715–16 academic year. When he was 10 years old, Benjamin left school for good after only two years and went to work in his father’s shop. The work, however, did not agree with him, and his father set out to help his son choose a different trade. Finally, at the age of 12, he became an apprentice in his brother James Franklin’s print shop, where he would work for several years. When he was not setting type or doing other work in the shop, young Franklin was reading, sometimes deep into the night. He took a special interest in the witty, satirical essays he found in a popular English periodical, the *Spectator*. In an effort to improve his own writing, he sometimes read the essays, noted the basic ideas in the sentences, and then attempted to rewrite them in his own words. In 1722, when he was 16 years old, he wrote a series of satirical essays under the pseudonym *Silence Dogood* and secretly slipped them under the door of his brother’s shop.

These essays made their way into his brother's newspaper, the *New-England Courant*, and were among Franklin's first published works.

The two brothers' relationship was a tense one, however, and Benjamin decided to break his indenture. In 1723, when he was 17, he left his job and family in Boston, going by boat first to New York and then to Philadelphia, where he landed with a handful of change and no connections. His entry into Philadelphia would become one of the most famous episodes in his autobiography. "I was in my working Dress, my best Cloaths being to come round by Sea," Franklin wrote. "I was dirty from my Journey; my Pockets were stuff'd out with Shirts & Stockings; I knew no Soul nor where to look for Lodging. I was fatigu'd with Travelling, Rowing, & Want of Rest. I was very hungry, and my whole Stock of Cash consisted of a Dutch Dollar, and about a shilling in Copper."

From such humble origins, Franklin perhaps had little reason to think that he would become famous and wealthy. He was, however, a man of means. Over the next several years, as he worked for various businesses in Philadelphia and England, he studied human nature and mastered the means of achieving success. When, for example, he refused to pay a fee he found unfair—and consequently found his work sabotaged—he changed his mind and paid the fee, "convinc'd of the Folly of being on ill Terms with those one is to live with continually." In short, Franklin was a model of practicality, a theme nicely summed up in his evaluation of deism, a religious philosophy he had adopted as an adolescent: "I began to suspect that this Doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful."

In 1728, Franklin and an associate, Hugh Meredith, started a printing house of their own in Philadelphia. Meredith would leave the business within a few years, but Franklin's printing establishment eventually became the most successful in the colonies. Over the next two decades, the firm published 432 broadsides, pamphlets, and books, including *The Psalms of David* (1729), antislavery pamphlets by John Woolman and other Quakers, and JONATHAN EDWARDS'S *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1742). In 1744, he reprinted

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, thus becoming the first printer to publish a novel in the colonies. A translation of Cicero's *Cato Major*, which Franklin published the same year, has been called "the most beautiful example of the colonial printer's art" (Green 270). Franklin also became a force in colonial printing, supporting a number of other printers, influencing others' practices and principles, and making significant improvements in the printing press (Green 271; Tebbel 104). He retired from printing in 1748 when he was 41, but he would long identify himself with the trade. Years later, writing his autobiography, he sometimes slipped into the language of printing, referring to mistakes he made during his life as *errata*, the printer's term for errors in a published document.

Even while he was becoming the leading printer of colonial America, he also was becoming one of its leading journalists. In 1729, a year after he and Meredith went into business, Franklin began publishing a newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which he had bought from his former employer, Samuel Keimer. In an age when more than half of newspapers failed within two years, Franklin's *Gazette* not only survived, but succeeded brilliantly (Emery and Emery 51). Calling it "the best newspaper in the American colonies," journalism historians Edwin and Michael Emery note that the *Pennsylvania Gazette* "had the largest circulation, most pages, highest advertising revenue, most literate columns, and liveliest comment of any paper in the area" (Emery and Emery 44). Much of this success may have grown out of Franklin's own journalistic instincts. As a reporter, he wrote cogent "straight" news stories on crimes, acts of nature, and other subjects. He also had what the journalism historian Frank Luther Mott has called "a lively news sense for the unusual and interesting," and his paper sometimes featured what modern journalists call "brights"—quirky stories intended to entertain readers. On October 16, 1729, he reported: "And sometime last Week, we are informed, that one Piles a Fidler, with his Wife, were overset in a Canoo near Newtown Creek. The good Man, 'tis said, prudently secur'd his Fiddle, and let his Wife go to the Bottom."

Franklin and journalism were a good match. “Journalism,” his biographer Esmond Wright explains, “was, in Franklin’s day, the career before all others that offered opportunity to enterprise and imagination” (18). Franklin’s career as a printer and a journalist provided him with a venue for both his ambitious sense of enterprise and his lively imagination. In the *Gazette*, he published scores of his own essays and sketches on a wide range of topics, including health care, defense, business, drinking, religion, marriage, and virtue, often using a pen name, such as *Anthony Afterwit* or *Obadiah Plainman*. Some of these writings, such as “Apology for Printers” (1731) and “On Protection of Towns from Fires” (1735), were serious discussions of civic affairs. Others—such as “The Art of Saying Little in Much” (1736), which features a parody of legal prose, and “The Drinker’s Dictionary” (1737)—were lighter fare. He also published writings, including “Essay on Paper-Currency, Proposing a New Method for Fixing Its Value” (1741), in his *General Magazine*. He occasionally published writings in other periodicals as well. Before acquiring the *Gazette*, he published a string of satirical essays, known as the Busy-Body series, in the *American Mercury*. His most famous sketch from this time, “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” appeared in a London periodical, the *General Advertiser*, in 1747. From his press issued his greatest commercial success, *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, later known as *Poor Richard Improved*, which appeared annually from 1732 until 1758. A compilation of information on astronomy, weather, and other matters, along with clever and amusing aphorisms, this book became one of the period’s best sellers.

As Franklin’s writings on money and fire prevention suggest, Franklin was heavily involved in the civic life of his community at this time. In 1727, he formed a group of Philadelphia men, many of them also tradesmen, who could benefit themselves and their community through conversations. Members of this group, called the Junto or the Leather Apron Club, gathered on Fridays and discussed matters of business and society. In “Rules for a Club Formerly Established in Philadelphia,” written around 1732, Franklin lists some of the ques-

tions for discussion, including “4. Have you lately heard of any citizen’s thriving well, and by what means?” and “15. Have you lately observed any encroachment on the just liberties of the people?” Franklin’s Junto nicely demonstrates one of the central tenets of his Enlightenment perspective—that is, that humans can greatly improve themselves and their world through collaboration. “The Junto,” his biographer Leo Lemay notes, “served as the incubation chamber for several public projects” (338). One of these projects was the first subscription library in the colonies, the Library Company of Philadelphia, founded in 1731. In these early decades of his life, Franklin also played important roles, partly through his writing, in the formation of a fire department, a night watch, a hospital, and the University of Pennsylvania.

As were many young men, Franklin was carving out his identity as a public person at the same time that he was facing momentous developments in his personal life. In 1730, he entered into a common-law marriage with Deborah Read Rogers, whose first husband had abandoned her. In his autobiography, written years later, Franklin recalled that his future wife had witnessed his humble entry into Philadelphia as a boy of 17 and must have found him a “ridiculous” sight. Together with Franklin’s illegitimate son, William, born to another woman around 1729, the couple lived in a house on Market Street in Philadelphia. In 1732, Deborah gave birth to their first child, Francis. They would lose this son to smallpox in 1736. They had one other child, Sarah, or “Sally,” born in 1743. Franklin’s marriage to Deborah would last until her death in 1774, although they spent many years apart, as she never accompanied him to England, where he lived from 1757 to 1762 and from 1764 to 1775.

In 1748, at the age of 41, Franklin retired from printing. For two decades—from the establishment of his partnership with Meredith in 1728 to his transfer of the business to a new partner, David Hall—his press had provided him with publicity for his writings, a voice in civic affairs, and support for his growing family. Now it was about to give him something else: freedom. Thanks to the success of his printing business, Franklin was now

a wealthy man and did not need to devote time to making a living. As Franklin explained years later in his autobiography, his retirement gave him the leisure to pursue his interest in science.

As Philip Dray notes in *Stealing God's Thunder*, Franklin had a “life-long fascination” with science. Good Enlightenment thinker that he was, he continually observed the workings of nature and, in some cases, developed ways of controlling it. Even before his retirement, he had found time to invent, in 1741, the Pennsylvania fireplace, or Franklin stove, which could heat a room efficiently while restricting smoke from entering it; two years later, he made an important discovery concerning the movement of storms in the Northeast. Around this same time, he became fascinated with the study of electricity, then still a novelty. People knew it existed and observed it, even using it to perform tricks, but no one completely understood it. Franklin, as did Abbe Jean-Antoine Nollet and other contemporaries in France and England, began developing experiments with Leyden jars and other equipment to study this magical phenomenon. He reported on his work in *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, published in 1751.

In 1752, in what would become the most celebrated incident in his life, he set out to test his hypothesis that lightning was a form of electricity. With the help of his son, William, he flew a kite equipped with a pointed piece of wire in stormy weather and felt a shock when he put his hand in range of a key attached to the string. His hypothesis validated, Franklin continued studying electricity and eventually invented a device that would change the world. Almost comically simple, yet revolutionary in its effects, the lightning rod provided Franklin's contemporaries with a means of preventing the fires often caused by lightning strikes. Perhaps even more significant was the psychological effect of the invention; as Dray points out, Franklin had unveiled one of nature's greatest enigmas and most threatening forces (82). His work in electricity made Franklin, already a mover and shaker in Philadelphia, an international celebrity. He received the Copley Medal from the Royal

Society of London in 1753 and became, as the historian Gordon Wood notes, “the most famous American in the world” (66).

Franklin's contributions to science and technology continued long after his triumph in electricity. In 1761, he invented a musical instrument called the armonica, which became a sensation in Europe; both Mozart and Beethoven composed music for it. In 1768, he mapped the Gulf Stream, and, in 1784, he invented bifocals. Believing that inventions should serve one's fellow humans, Franklin refused to secure patents on any of his inventions and thus forfeited untold income from his ideas. In a way that almost seems scripted, Franklin's successes in printing and science contributed to his successes in yet another field, politics, to which he would devote much of his time and energy in the third major phase of his adult life. In 1751, he won election to the Pennsylvania Assembly, where he would serve until 1764. As joint deputy postmaster for the colonies from 1753 until 1774, he introduced important developments in the postal system, including home delivery and improved efficiency (Isaacson 157). In 1754, he proposed the Albany Plan of Union, an early plan for uniting the English colonies in North America.

His greatest political triumphs, however, lay ahead. In the 1760s, Franklin watched the growth of tensions between England and its American colonies. As Gordon Wood has shown in *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, Franklin, who loved England, initially played the role of peacemaker, trying to resolve the tensions and prevent a break. Nevertheless, he found fault with England's government of the colonies and, in 1773, aired his grievances in two of his best-known satires, “Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One” and “Edict by the King of Prussia.” These sketches, which were frequently reprinted, helped to create a rift between Franklin and England, which removed him from his office as deputy postmaster in 1774 (Lebaree 390). The onetime peacemaker was now, in Wood's words, “a passionate patriot, more passionate in fact than nearly all the other patriot leaders” (Wood 151). In 1775, he

represented Pennsylvania in the Second Continental Congress; the following year, he collaborated with THOMAS JEFFERSON and others on the Declaration of Independence. Later that year, Congress sent him to France to seek assistance in the war effort. There, the fame Franklin had achieved as a writer and a scientist worked to his advantage. As Wood has noted, Franklin, by helping to secure an alliance with France in 1778, helped the colonies win a war they otherwise might have lost (196). Although he helped the colonies win the war, Franklin suffered a painful loss of his own. In siding with the Loyalists, William Franklin alienated his father, and their once-close relationship dissolved. They would never effect a complete reconciliation.

Before the break, however, Franklin's relationship with his only living son had helped to inspire his greatest literary achievement. In 1771, he began writing his autobiography, which he addressed to William. At separate stages over the next two decades, Franklin continued his life story, which would become a classic of American literature. He died before finishing it, writing the last installment in 1790. In this last stage of his life, he wrote other important works, as well. To entertain some of his French friends, he wrote a series of brief, witty sketches, which he called *bagatelles*. Two of the best known of these works are "The Ephemera" (1778) and "The Elysian Fields" (1778).

In 1785, after nine years in France, Franklin returned to what was now, thanks largely to his efforts, an independent nation, the United States of America. He helped to shape what that nation would become, serving as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Two years later, he wrote the first remonstrance against slavery to be addressed to Congress. By this time, however, he was suffering from poor health, plagued by both gout and kidney stones. Finally, on April 17, 1790, he died at his home in Philadelphia at the age of 84.

He left a legacy of diverse, yet harmonious accomplishments, held together by a common thread. In the aphorisms of Poor Richard and the lessons of his autobiography, in his invention of the Franklin stove and the lightning rod, in his establishment of

the Junto and the Library Company, and in other words and actions, we see a commitment to the principles of the Enlightenment. His pragmatism, furthermore, has become a touchstone of American values—for better or worse. Although some have celebrated Franklin and his accomplishments, others have found him opportunistic, materialistic, even simplistic. D. H. Lawrence, for example, complained that Franklin oversimplified human psychology: "Why, the soul of man is a vast forest," Lawrence declares in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, "and all Benjamin intended was a neat back garden" (52). Detractors aside, Franklin remains one of the most successful and diverse men in American history. He was indisputably the country's greatest printer, as well as one of its most successful journalists. In the field of science, he made important contributions to the study of electricity. As a founding father, he was instrumental in the cause of independence. Throughout these various careers, he wrote, producing an astounding number of news articles, essays, satires, sketches, hoaxes, proposals, observations, reports, aphorisms, bagatelles, and letters, as well as an autobiography that has become a classic of world literature. Indeed, Franklin's literature may be his most enduring legacy. More than two centuries after his death, his words continue to enlighten.

Mark Canada

Poor Richard's Almanac (1732–1757)

As a genre, almanacs were popular in America, containing information ranging from the names of rulers in Europe to the dates for fairs and road books with descriptions of locations where travelers could stay along their journeys. When Franklin began writing his own almanac under the pseudonym *Richard Saunders*, he was 26 years old. He was more financially set than he had previously been because he had recently paid off his debts, and he and his wife had opened a shop in Philadelphia near the marketplace. From 1632 to 1657, for 25 years, Franklin wrote and refined his *Almanac*.

Its prominence is gauged by the critic Van Wyck Brooks not only by its presence in one out of every 100 households, but also by its popularity in France, Scotland, England, and Ireland. One of its most prominent articles, "The Way to Wealth," was translated into a significant number of languages: Russian, Chinese, Catalan, Gaelic, Polish, Bohemian, and Welsh (ix).

In its first installation, in 1733, Franklin introduces his readers to the fictional author and his wife, a "good woman" who is "excessive proud" and unable to "bear, she says, to sit spinning in her Shift of Tow, while [Poor Richard] do[es] nothing but gaze at the Stars" (3). Thus, Franklin considers the *Almanac* as a financial necessity that allows him to escape from his wife's admonitions and her threats to "burn all [his] books and rattling-traps (as she calls [his] instruments)" (3). Poor Richard's wife, both her mood and her wardrobe, become indications of the success of the *Almanac*. In 1734, Poor Richard proudly and appreciatively informs his "courteous readers" that his wife now owns her own pot, a pair of shoes, and two petticoats and that he himself is now the owner of a secondhand coat (13).

His first edition also includes an indirect attack upon his competition, a man named Mr. Titan Leeds, who in his 1734 *American Almanac* claims to "have supplied his country with almanacks for *thirty seven* years by past, to general satisfaction" (297). Franklin takes Leeds as a friend to his fictional Poor Richard and claims that at Leeds's request, Poor Richard has calculated that Leeds will die on October 17, 1733, at 3:29 P.M. (3–4). Naturally, his friend disputes this calculation and believes that he will survive until October 26 (4). This thread of the narrative for his fictional author is carried through in the following year, 1734, when Poor Richard states, "I cannot at this present writing positively assure my readers; forasmuch as a disorder in my own family demanded my presence, and would not permit me as I had intended, to be with his in his last moments" (13–14). Despite the lack of eyewitness account of Mr. Leeds's death at either of the predicted times and days, Richard

assures readers that he must be dead because "there appears in his name, as I am assured, an almanack for the year 1734, in which I am treated in a very gross and unhandsome manner," and "Mr. Leeds was too well bred to use any man so indecently" (14). Leeds himself clearly felt compelled to respond to Poor Richard's prediction, for in his own 1734 edition of the *American Almanac*, Leeds blasts Poor Richard as a "Fool and a liar," "a conceited scribbler" whose "false prediction" is proven false by the author's ability to survive the predicted date of his demise (297). Leeds signs and dates the time of his writing as further proof of Poor Richard's inaccurate prediction, but more importantly of Leeds's own inability to recognize Franklin's prank.

Indeed, the following year, 1735, Leeds and Poor Richard addressed one another in the introductions of their volumes once again. Poor Richard writes, "There is no harmony among the star-gazers; but they are perpetually growling and snarling at one another like strange curs or like some men at their wives" (25). In essence, Franklin chides Leeds for his inability to take a joke and expresses his own weariness that his prank has been taken so seriously for so long. Accordingly, Poor Richard lampoons the very talent Leeds claims to have—the gift of prognostication. Surely, Poor Richard writes, this ability to predict the future is infallible; thus Leeds must have died at the precise date and time Poor Richard calculated. As further proof of Leeds's death, Poor Richard points readers to the current state of Leeds's *American Almanack*: "The wit is low and flat, the little hints dull and spiritless, nothing smart in them" (26). Poor Richard concludes, "No man living would or could write such stuff as the rest" (26).

When Leeds actually passed away in 1740, Poor Richard felt the need to address the issue, first by reminding readers of the initial mention of Leeds in the 1734 preface, and then by incorporating a series of letters exchanged by the two men. As Poor Richard insists that Leeds actually died in October 1733, as Richard predicted, he accounts for the mysterious appearance of these letters by stating

that they were on his desk when he awoke from a dream while writing the current (1740) preface. In a letter written from the grave, Leeds apologizes to Richard for the “aspersions thrown on you by the malevolence of avaricious publishers of almanacks who envy your success” (76). Leeds confirms Poor Richard’s calculation of his death but rectifies the exact time by five minutes and 53 seconds (76). He also explains his ability to write a letter to Poor Richard from beyond the grave, stating, “No separate spirits are under any confinement till after the final settlement of all accounts” (76). Considering the rectifying of Poor Richard’s good name an essential duty, Leeds “entered [Poor Richard’s] left nostril, ascended to [his] brain, found out where the ends of those nerves were fastened that move [Richard’s] right hand and fingers, by the help of which he is writing” (76). Leeds’s ghost further pledges Richard additional glimpses of the future and offers as proof of his gift for prediction knowledge that an old friend will remain sober for nine hours, to the astonishment of his friends (76–77).

Franklin did not treat all fellow almanac writers as he did Leeds. In 1747, Franklin paid homage to the passing of Mr. Jacob Taylor, “who for upwards of forty years supplied the good people of this and neighboring colonies with the most complete ephemeris and most accurate calculations that have hitherto appeared in America” (137). Franklin further praises Taylor as “an ingenious mathematician as well as an expert and skillful astronomer” (137). In contrast to Franklin’s cavalier and somewhat cruel treatment of Leeds, readers may recognize in his kind words for Taylor an indictment of the kinds of predictions offered by Leeds. Note that Leeds attempts astrological predictions according to the zodiac calendar, similar to today’s horoscopes, while Taylor knew the dates of the winter and summer solstice (the shortest and longest days of the year, respectively). As a logician himself, Franklin naturally would frown upon Leeds’s form of predictions and applaud Taylor’s, which were reckoned through mathematics and astronomy charts.

As for the content of the *Almanack*, the first edition contains many of the elements common

to the genre: cycles of the moon and other factual information. The contents that distinguish Franklin’s *Almanack* from others include his aphorisms, or witty sayings, that are displayed in terse two-line phrases or else are presented in short, one-stanza poems. Critics have noted that some of these clever proverbs reappear in subsequent years and that others are not originally Franklin’s, but are borrowed from the British writers Alexander Pope and John Dryden, the French writers François Rabelais and François de La Rochefoucauld, and classical Latin writers such as Horace (viii). Franklin pokes fun at his own talents as a poet in the preface of his 1747 volume: “If thou hast judgment in poetry, thou wilt easily discern the workman from the bungler. I know as well as thee, that I am no poet born; and it is a trade I never learnt nor indeed could learn” (136). As for his use of other writers’ works, Franklin states, “’Tis methinks a poor excuse for the bad entertainment of guests that the food we set before them, though coarse and ordinary, is of one’s own raising, off one’s own plantation when there is plenty of what is ten times better to be had in the market” (137).

Common topics involve the power struggle between husbands and wives, the need to moderate one’s consumption of food and drink, a general dislike and distrust of lawyers, the perpetual struggle between the wealthy and the poor, and the value of friendship. His rhetorical image of Poor Richard’s wife, whose carping is the reason he begins the enterprise of the almanac in the first place, becomes a recurring theme in his sayings, such as “I know not which lives more unnatural lives / obeying husbands, or commanding wives” (142). One of his most famous sayings that still circulates is “Fish and visitors stink in three days.” Franklin also makes use of a classical form known as *antimetabole*, which is a purposeful inversion of the order of two nouns in a two-line phrase, such as “Keep thy shop and thy shop will keep you” and “A brother may not be a friend, but a friend will always be a brother.”

Regarding the almanac’s traditional role of offering predictions regarding weather so that

farmers may consult them for their various agricultural cycles, Franklin writes, tongue in cheek, in his address to readers of the 1753 volume that his predictions of “snow, rain, hail, heat, frost, fogs, wind, or thunder, may not be “what comes to pass punctually and precisely on the very day, [but] in some place or other on this little diminutive globe of ours” (213). For those who might wish for weather predictions to be more precise for the British colonies, Franklin demurs, insisting that the “matter of the weather, which is of general concern, I would have it more extensively useful, and therefore take in both hemispheres” (213). In his preface to the 1756 volume, Franklin hastens to inform readers that although he has prepared information on the weather along with “other astronomical curiosities,” his hope lies in the belief that readers have recognized his “view to the improvement of thy mind and thy estate,” which appears manifest in “moral hints, wise sayings, and maxims of thrift, tending to impress the benefits arising from honesty, sobriety, industry, and frugality” (245).

Franklin's advice and informational columns also run along the lines of the practical and the topical. He draws upon his own expertise in the 1753 volume, namely, with the understanding that lightning is indeed a form of electricity, his famous discovery while flying a kite during a thunderstorm. With his own knowledge of electricity, he offers readers practical advice on fashioning a lightning rod and thus securing their homes from lightning (223–224). He offers a concise history of the reckoning of the calendar from Egyptian times and differentiates between Roman and Julian calendars (202–203). His preface to the 1748 volume contains a detailed account from Captain Middleton of the Royal Society of winters in current-day Canada, including such practical information as how to season beef, pork, mutton, and venison so as to store it for the winter, and how to dress for more brutal winter weather (143–146).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Drawing from one of the topics commonly considered by Poor Richard (friendship, the need for moderation, or the relationships between the rich and the poor), try to write your own sage piece of advice using a few of the formats Franklin employs (antimetabole, aphorism, or one-stanza poem).
2. Examine four or five of Franklin's saying and explain their application in today's society.
3. Compare the aims of Franklin's *Autobiography* with those of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. How does his desire to educate the populace in the right ways of thinking and acting correspond with the objectives of a religious figure such as COTTON MATHER?

“The Way to Wealth” (1757)

Also known as “Poor Richard Improved” and “Father Abraham's Speech,” Franklin's essay first appeared in the 25th-anniversary issue of *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Resuming the voice of Father Abraham, Franklin opens with a mock address to the reader in which he boasts of his popularity among the people. Although he does not “find his works respectfully quoted by other learned authors,” he has “frequently heard one of other of [his] adages repeated” in daily conversations. By contrasting his reception in the two social circles, Father Abraham is squarely placed as a man with homespun knowledge whose adages are heeded and repeated among the masses.

The setting for this particular essay is a gathering of people “at a Vendue of Merchant Goods,” waiting for the hour of sale to arrive. As they wait, the people begin to inquire of Father Abraham, described as a “plain clean old Man, with white locks,” about the timely issues of taxes and general advice on financial matters. Once Father Abraham opens his mouth, Poor Richard takes over as all the old gentleman states are adages and pithy quotations from another of Franklin's personae. Taken together, the advice falls into a few categories: frugality, industry, and prudence. Through the double guises of Poor Richard and Father Abraham, Franklin advises the people at the Vendue against

living beyond one's means, such as making extravagant purchases "for the sake of finery."

As the critic Edward Gallagher points out, the impact of the essay results from its unlikely conclusion. Despite the string of approximately 100 proverbs and aphorisms, "the people heard it, and approved the doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary." The sudden reversal, Gallagher believes, "was designed to shock, surprise, and consequently involve the reader with the thematic issues of the speech" (483). Initially, like Poor Richard, the readers were witnesses to Father Abraham's advice. Once the people act in defiance of the advice and begin their purchases, the recipient of his wisdom falls on Poor Richard, who we learn was at the Vendue to buy material for a new coat. When Richard heeds the sage advice and turns away from the Vendue, the reader recognizes the indirect indictment of the people's foolishness. This, for Gallagher, constitutes the second climax of the essay (484). The real challenge in the essay is in its final line, where the reader is directly addressed: "Reader, if thou wilt do the same, thy profit will be as great as mine." The irony of Richard's being affected by his own words echoes the opening of the essay, where he tells of quoting himself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do the tone and structure of Franklin's advice in this essay compare to those of Cotton Mather in "Bonifacius"? How do the two depict their readers?
2. In the final paragraph, Franklin presents a brief homage to JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY, whom he met and to whose writings, under the pseudonym *The Gleaner*, he subscribed. In what ways might this essay speak to Murray and her own writings?

"An Edict by the King of Prussia" (1773)

Written in 1773, just prior to the American Revolution, Franklin's clever hoax of the British suffering

taxation at the hands of Prussia places the British in the current position occupied by the American colonists. The essay mimics the legalistic language common to edicts and other legislative acts, with phrases like "We do therefore hereby ordain and command" and "We do therefore hereby farther ordain." In enumerating the reasons for this tax on all trade to and from Great Britain, the "King of Prussia" lists Prussia's aid in the war against France, which enabled England to "make conquests from the said power in America."

The edict also includes a ban on all manufacturing of iron in Great Britain, against the presumptuous notion of the island that "they had a natural right to make the best use they could of the natural productions of their country for their own benefit." The extreme nature of this particular ban is demonstrated in the lengthy descriptions Franklin provides: "No mill or other engine for slitting or rolling of iron, or any plating forge to work with a tilt-hammer, or any furnace for making steel, shall be erected or continued in the said island."

An additional ban is placed on wool and all wool products in order that Prussia might dominate in "the raising of wool in our antient dominions." Just as with the ban on iron production, the detailing of the forbidden items adds to the ridiculous nature of such legislation: "worsted-bay, or woolen-yarn, cloth, says, bays, kerseys, serges, frizes, druggets, cloth-serges, shalloons, or any other drapery stuffs, or woolen manufactures whatsoever." In answer to the anticipated question of what the colonists will do with their current supply of wool, the king suggests that "our loving subjects . . . use all their wool as manure for the improvement of their lands."

To further the point made in his commentary on the edict that England "treat[s] its own children in a manner so arbitrary and tyrannical," Franklin includes hats, whose "art and mystery of making" have been perfected in Prussia, as an additional item restrained in Great Britain. Not only will those involved in the transport of such contraband be charged a penalty, but the vehicle employed in the transport, be it a "vessel, cart, carriage, or horse," shall also be forfeited.

Finally, the edict ends with a proclamation that all criminals—and again Franklin follows with a laundry list of the various crimes they may have committed—will be thrown out of their jail cells and sent to the “said Island of Great Britain for the better peopling of that country.”

The final word, however, is from Franklin, who removes the mask of the King of Prussia to reveal “these regulations are copied from Acts of the English Parliament respecting their colonies.” He declares the notion “impossible” as he cannot conscience that a “people distinguished for their love of liberty” should behave in such a “mean and injudicious” manner.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Just as in “The Way to Wealth,” Franklin reserves the real message of his essay until its conclusion. Consider the reason for this rhetorical decision, and its effects in the two essays.
2. Franklin’s essay appeared in a London newspaper while the statesman was visiting England. He reports that his host, Lord Le Despencer, at first believed the essay and later attributed it to “your American jokes upon us.” Consider how this essay’s intended audience shapes its content.

“Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One” (1773)

Franklin dedicated this pamphlet, which appeared on the eve of the American Revolution, to Lord Hillsborough, British secretary for colonial affairs. It provides the “ministers who have the management of extensive dominions” with a step-by-step set of instructions on how to decrease this “troublesome” burden, and thus liberate more time for “fiddling,” by reducing the empire. The common themes reemerging in the pamphlet involve taxation without representation, the inflated salaries and general dispositions of colonial authorities, and the legal system to which the colonists are subject.

Before helping to secure an alliance with France in 1778, Franklin put his pen to work to express the sentiments of the colonists. In this sketch, published in the *Public Advertiser* in 1773, Franklin provides a list of 20 actions that a large empire, such as England, can take to alienate its colonists, foment a rebellion, and ultimately reduce its size. Number 11 of these actions, for example, reads, “To make your Taxes more odious, and more likely to procure Resistance, send from the Capital a Board of Officers to superintend the Collection, composed of the most *indiscreet, ill-bred* and *insolent* you can find.”

“Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One” belongs to the genre of satire. A favorite form for 18th-century writers such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, satire involves ridicule of someone or something—a person, for example, or an institution. In this case, the target of Franklin’s satire is the English government. As does the Declaration of Independence, which Franklin helped to write three years later, this sketch delineates England’s transgressions against its colonies. Instead of taking a straightforward approach of simply naming these transgressions, as the Declaration of Independence does, this satire employs irony, a common ingredient of satire. Irony always involves some kind of contrast; in this case, Franklin implies that the English leaders wish to turn their “Great Empire” into a “Small One,” when he knows very well that they do not. As is often the case with irony, the effect is humor.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare this satirical sketch with the Declaration of Independence. What do the two works have in common? How are they different? Why do you think that Franklin chose this satirical technique to criticizing England’s behavior?
2. Imagine that you are an English authority. Write your own set of “rules” in which you satirize the colonists’ behavior.
3. Franklin’s pamphlet was preceded by the Stamp Act, which was passed in 1765, and followed by the Intolerable Acts of 1774. Research these

particular acts to see how they are reflected in his 20 steps Britain can take to incite revolution in the American colonies.

“The Ephemera, an Emblem of Human Life” (1778)

While in France under the duty of a commissioner sent by Congress to obtain aid from that country, Franklin stayed in the village of Passy, outside Paris. There, he met the accomplished woman Madame Brillon, with whom he would maintain a lifelong friendship that culminated in a failed attempt to wed her daughter, Cungonde, to his son, William. “The Ephemera” is addressed to Mme Brillon, who is identified in the opening sentence as “my dear friend,” and as “the ever amiable Brillante” in the closing one.

Franklin opens the piece with a scene of the two taking part in a walk in which they are introduced to a “kind of little fly, called an ephemera,” who “were bred and expired within the day.” Staying behind to observe some of these flies upon a leaf, Franklin, who credits himself with proficiency in “all the inferior animal tongues,” listens in on their debate regarding the merit of two foreign musicians. He muses that they must live under such a just and mild government to be able to engage in any topic, such as music. He then turns his attention to a solitary fly, “an old grey-headed one” who was speaking to himself, and diverts the rest of the piece to the fly’s soliloquy.

This great philosophizing fly, who has outlived generations, a full “four hundred and twenty minutes of time,” opines on the future of his “present race of ephemerae” after his inevitable death. Not only will he not live long enough to enjoy the honeydew he has amassed on his leaf, but he wonders about the future of his political struggles and philosophical studies. Mocking the millennial and apocalyptic views held by many, Franklin’s elderly fly wonders, “What will become of all history in the eighteenth hour, when the world itself even the whole Moulin Joly, shall come to its end, and be

buried in universal ruin?” The ironic treatment of such dire predictions and views of the world is best expressed through the viewpoint of an ephemera, who considers Moulin Joly to be the world, and the sun’s departure from the sky to signal “universal death and destruction.”

Franklin dismisses the elderly fly’s proclamations of doom to frame the tale with his own voice: “To me, after all my eager pursuits, no solid pleasures now remain, but the reflection of a long life spent in meaning well, the sensible conversation of a few good lady ephemerae, and now and then a kind smile and a tune from the ever amiable Brillante.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Historians note Franklin’s initial flirtation with Madame Brillon. In what ways does this piece function as a love letter?
2. As a statesman, inventor, and founding father of the United States, Franklin was certainly an accomplished man with a legacy well intact. How might you judge his final statement in the piece regarding his greatest pleasures in life? Does he merely strip one facade in the piece (the fly’s perspective) to offer yet another one?
3. In its own way, “Ephemera” offers wisdom through observations in nature, a trait shared by the poetry of WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT and PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU. Selecting one poem from either poet, compare it to Franklin’s “Ephemera.” Do the writers reach similar conclusions, despite differences in format? Or do the different forms create different lessons or conclusions?

“Information to Those Who Would Remove to America” (1782)

Franklin’s essay reads like an advertisement tract for emigration to America and, in its celebration of industry and frugality in its citizenry, an indirect indictment of the staid aristocratic societies still reigning in Europe. The essay promises to dispel potential emigrants’ “mistaken ideas and expectations [of] what is to be obtained” in North

America. Thus, Franklin begins not with the glowing qualities of America, but rather with the criticisms launched against it from Europe, with which Franklin would be all too familiar, having traveled extensively in France and England. Chief among these critiques was a lack of sustained cultural history, which would produce fine works of arts and science, and of an aristocratic class whose ancestors were connected to royalty through marriage and bloodlines. In the supposed absence of any symbols of culture, then, Europe imagines that “strangers of birth must be greatly respected,” along with those “possessing talents in the belles-lettres, fine arts, etc.” Additional misconceptions arise from the country’s colonial past, which paid for transportation to emigrants and provided them with land in the hopes of populating the new world. Franklin chalks all of these notions to products of a “wild imagination.”

He begins his characterization of America’s positive attributes by mentioning the difference in governments: America has civil offices that are “not so profitable as to make [them] desirable,” unlike Europe, which is overburdened with “superfluous ones.” In this initial point of comparison, Franklin sets the tone for the rest of the essay: America appears as a spacious nation filled with hearty, industrious workers who value utilitarianism, while Europe seems incapable of caring for its own people in terms of work and land and mistakenly values other instances of superfluosity. Rather than inquiring of a person’s heritage, Franklin notes, in America they ask of his usefulness, his skill. Thus, the privilege afforded by heredity in Europe is replaced by a respect and admiration for industriousness. Franklin jokes that emigrants might seek the aid of a genealogist to prove their relation to “ploughmen” rather than to royalty.

After identifying America as “the land of labor,” Franklin details the kind of laborers who would thrive on American soil: those who “understand the husbandry of corn and cattle”; those who can build houses, furniture, and utensils; and those willing to apprentice as servants of journeymen. He also argues that morally Americans are more sound

and less prone to vice because of their industry and constant employment.

Finally, Franklin recommends that all potential emigrants read the Constitution, adding that it has been published in London and, in a “good translation” into French, in Paris as well.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Franklin’s essay to JOHN SMITH’s promotional tract or the first book of THOMAS MORTON’s *New English Canaan*. To what extent do the writers base their depictions of America on negative images of Britain or Europe in general? What values emerge as desirable in an emigrant?
2. Which aspects of North America does Franklin focus on and celebrate and why? What aspects of the nation does he ignore or misrepresent?

“Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America” (1784)

Franklin begins this essay by noting the influence of cultural perspective on coloring one’s view of another culture: “Savages we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs.” As case in point, Franklin points to the differences of opinion regarding what constitutes an education that erupted during the Treaty of Lancaster in 1744. When members of the Six Nations were offered the chance to have a half-dozen of their young men educated at the college in Williamsburg, the tribal members responded with gratitude for the gracious offer but demurred nevertheless, stating “our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours.” The unnamed tribal leader responds that those young people who were “brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces” returned unable to speak their native language, withstand the elements, or provide for their tribe through hunting once they were back. In short, the tribal leader concludes, “they were totally good for nothing.” He ends his speech by offering to teach “a dozen of their sons” and “make men of them.”

Franklin offers another point of comparison between the natives of America and their British counterparts in the way of conducting councils or meetings. Great respect is afforded to the native speaker, whose rising is met with a “profound silence” that lasts for five or six minutes after his speech is concluded, to ensure that he has a moment to reflect on his speech and insert any additional point he neglected to make. This respectful manner of listening to one another is sharply and negatively contrasted to that of the British House of Commons or “polite Companies of Europe,” in which speakers are rendered hoarse, speeches are uttered with great rapidity for fear of being interrupted, and many speak at once.

In terms of the extent of native civility, Franklin provides anecdotal tales of the frustration suffered by missionaries who cannot discern whether the natives’ signs of approval when hearing the Gospel signify assent or mere civility. After a Swedish missionary preached on the main tenets of Christianity, to include man’s fall from grace “by eating an apple,” the Susquehanna orator concludes, “What you have told us is all very good. It is indeed bad to eat apples. It is better to make them all into cider.” The orator continues by giving the missionary the tale of how they became acquainted with kidney beans, tobacco, and maize, which the missionary immediately renounces as a “fable, fiction, falsehood” in comparison with his stories of “sacred truth.” In the orator’s reply, Franklin voices his own conclusion on the matter, which is that the missionary should practice the same rules of civility that govern the Susquehanna when hearing a tale.

The final tale of Conrad Weiser, who functions as an interpreter for the Mohawk and British, and his conversation with Canassatego, during which the latter asks the former about the practice of shutting up shops one day a week to attend a meeting and “learn good things,” an oblique reference to attending church and hearing the gospel. A deist himself, Franklin must have delighted in recounting Canassatego’s interpretation of this cultural practice. The chief wonders why it has taken

so long for white men to learn good things, and he remains convinced that the only subject discussed in meetings is “how to cheat an Indian in the price of beaver.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider Franklin’s characterization of American Indians as civil and apt critics of the colonists’ behavior and practices. How is his moral tale in this essay compared to his adages in the voice of Poor Richard?
2. Compare Franklin’s sense of American Indians with Jefferson’s in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. How does each treat America’s native populations with regard to European standards for civility?

“Speech in the Convention” (1787)

On the final day of the Constitutional Convention, September 17, 1787, Benjamin Franklin had James Wilson, from the Pennsylvania delegation, read the following speech. Speaking from his position as an old man, Franklin confesses that he grows to doubt his own opinion and judgment of others as he ages. With this provision, he also admits that he does not “entirely approve of this Constitution at present,” with the understood proviso that he may very well change his opinion, as he has on other “important subjects.” He further places his own doubts about the Constitution within the frame of human fallibility that results, ironically, through the belief in infallibility. As an example of this high regard that people hold for the rightness of their own opinions, Franklin quotes an unnamed French lady who tells her sister that the only person she meets who is always right is herself.

In this spirit, Franklin declares his agreement to the Constitution, “with all its faults,” and recognizes that “there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people, if well administered.” In other words, Franklin looks beyond the Constitutional Convention to consider the future of

the United States and the form of democratic government it will practice. His thoughts on America's future cause him a moment of unreserved pride, when he declares his astonishment at finding a "system approaching so near to perfection as it does." The degree of perfection that has been achieved is all the more remarkable, Franklin notes, because it was assembled from a number of men "who carry with them their prejudices, passions, errors of opinion, local interests, and selfish views." And, rather than having such a motley crew dissolve into bloodshed and a Tower of Babel, where they are rendered incapable of communicating with one another, instead they have created a document that "will astonish our enemies."

As for his previous objections to the Constitution, which he does not name specifically, Franklin consigns them to the four walls of the convention. He does so out of a conviction that "much of the strength and efficiency of any government in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends on opinion." Thus, Franklin will not whisper a word of his own prior doubts about the Constitution, and he expresses a desire that other members, when returning home to their constituency, will likewise remain silent on the detracting aspects of the document. Doing so will cultivate the continued good opinion held by foreign nations, as well as among ourselves.

Franklin ends his brief speech with a call to "every member of the Convention" to consider his own fallibility and "put his name to this Instrument."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Franklin presents two controlling themes in this brief but powerful essay: the fallibility of humans and the exercise of unanimity for the greater good. How are these two notions linked to the concept of democracy?
2. Franklin raises the specter of foreign opinion in his essay. How do his words of cultivating the appearance of unanimity relate to his cultivation of a public persona in his autobiography?

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1788, 1791)

As the critic William H. Shurr readily admits, Franklin's *Autobiography* "has been judged one of the most important and influential of American books" (435). A central part of the importance of Franklin's self-narrative lies in its identification of a particularly American character, a self-made man. Further, Franklin's own large presence as a founding father would naturally give considerable weight to any telling of his own life and his part in the founding of the nation. Ironically, Shurr writes, Franklin's *Autobiography* is held up as a model for the genre in general and yet the term *autobiography* did not come into existence in English until 1797, seven years after Franklin's death. Even then, the term referred to an "odd, pedantic neologism" (Shurr 435).

The *Autobiography* contains four parts, the first begun in August 1771, five years before the onset of the American Revolution. The second part was penned 13 years after the Revolution. In the first section, Franklin makes express use of the phrase *Dear Son* and seems to have addressed his illegitimate son, William, as the intended reader. He opens in the way that a father might write to a son, by recalling family anecdotes and by striking a kind, familiar tone. Franklin writes, "Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the circumstances of my life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with, and expecting a week's uninterrupted leisure in my present country retirement, I sit down to write them to you." On the basis of these opening remarks, then, part I appears to be a written version of the kind of conversation one had with one's elders. To determine one's place in the world, one needs to have knowledge of one's forebears. For William, this kind of family history might prove painful, however, because he was Benjamin Franklin's illegitimate child. In fact, Shurr believes that the opening references to "some sinister accidents" that Franklin desired to change was in fact a direct attack on his son's illegitimacy" since William's coat of arms would have to bear "the bar sinister—the heraldic mark of illegitimacy" (444–

445). As Franklin himself points out, employing the metaphor of life as a manuscript, there are no possibilities of repetition to eliminate those sins (or errata) that he has committed, such as the siring of a son out of wedlock. Therefore, “the next thing most like living one’s life over again seems to be a recollection of that life, and to make that recollection as durable as possible, the putting it down in writing.” Interestingly, it seems as though Franklin considered the telling of his tale, its commitment to paper and thus to posterity, as a means of atonement.

Through notes gathered from an uncle, Franklin becomes acquainted with the family’s longer history, including such details as their residence in the same village, Ecton in Northamptonshire, for 300 years. By tracing his own father’s birth, as contained in the register at Ecton, Franklin figures out his place in the larger family genealogy: “I was the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back.” In his brief accounts of his paternal grandfather’s four sons, Franklin asks William to forgive him for any errors or missing details because of “this distance from my papers.” William is encouraged to look for these as a source for “many more particulars.” The uncle whom Franklin mentions first is Thomas, a man who “became a considerable man in the county affairs [and] was a chief mover of all public spirited undertakings.” It is this uncle who, Franklin reminds William, “struck you as something extraordinary from its similarity to what you knew of [my life].” By reminding William of the connection that he himself made between his father and his uncle, Franklin is able to seem the humble family historian rather than a braggart who sees in himself echoes of a dynamic ancestor.

To account for the family’s remove to New England, Franklin offers the family anecdote of a Bible concealed in a joint stool, which was then turned upside down and placed upon the knees of the family patriarch, who read from it. Because “conventicles,” religious meetings or gatherings, were forbidden by law, Franklin’s father, Josiah, along with his first wife and their three children, left for New England in 1682. Franklin was born

to Josiah’s second wife, Abiah Folger, in Boston. He describes his mother’s family as belonging to “one of the first settlers of New England, of whom honorable mention is made by Cotton Mather in his Church History.” His maternal grandfather, Peter Folger, was also a poet of “homespun verse of that time and people,” as well as an outspoken supporter of “liberty of conscience,” meaning that he supported the religious sects such as the Quakers who were persecuted and ostracized by the Puritan majority. Having read Peter Folger’s poetry, Franklin declares it to contain “a good deal of decent plainness and manly freedom.”

Given such ancestors, it is no wonder that Franklin would grow to attain such eminence in his life. Anecdotes of his early childhood, such as being promoted three grades within one year or having an “early readiness in learning to read,” all fit not only with the image readers have today of this extraordinary figure, but also within the general character of his ancestors, both maternal and paternal. Ironically, Franklin’s close resemblance to the defiant and intelligent nature of his ancestors also functioned to remove him from his immediate family, first from his position as an assistant in his father’s shop as a “Tallow Chandler and Sape-Boiler,” and later in his reluctant and brief role as apprentice to his brother James’s press. When he was 12 years old, Franklin was apprenticed to James for a period of nine years, to end when he reached the age of 21. Happily, Franklin writes, the position afforded him access to books and a tradesman named Matthew Adams who gave Franklin access to his library. His father discouraged Franklin from his early inclinations to be a poet, “telling him versemakers were generally beggars,” and thus he looked to prose writing as “a principal means of advancement.” He began copying editions of the British humorous newspaper the *Spectator*, in order to increase his vocabulary, work on the structure of his arguments, and perfect his use of language in the same way that a poet might. The significance of language in Franklin’s life is not to be underestimated since it was an essential part of his personality. It thus is in keeping with his public image of

himself that he would provide a detailed account of honing his linguistic skills, including his anonymous contributions to his brother's newspaper and his victories at verbal sparrings.

Had Franklin's life followed this model, where he remained dutifully in apprenticeship to his brother James, we might not have the fully realized image of the American character that Franklin brings to life in his *Autobiography*. His own quiet rebellion against his family and their limitations on his freedom would resonate years later with the American Revolution, in which the colonies would be cast as the rebellious children of Mother England. Franklin disguised himself and left for New York. Tellingly, the disguise Franklin and his friend John Collins devise for him contains the very mark of moral corruption that would later prove to be true: "my being a young acquaintance of [Collins's] that had got a naughty girl with child, whose friends would compel me to marry her." From New York, Franklin soon made his way to Philadelphia. He notes his account of his travels to William: "I have been the more particular in this description of my journey, and shall be so of my first entry into that city, that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there." He wishes William to gauge his current success from his poor, unlikely beginnings in Philadelphia. Shurr considers this aspect of part 1—Franklin's "need [for] his son's approval and even admiration"—to have political resonance since William Franklin was then the governor of New Jersey and had such high political standing that he was invited into Westminster Abbey to attend the coronation of George III while the father was forced to stand outdoors in a temporary booth (441). William was a royalist, and in 1771 when Franklin penned this first section of the *Autobiography*, he may have been seeking out insurance in the form of his son against any possible punishment for his own disloyal and rebellious behavior against the Crown (Shurr 441).

Franklin's awareness of how others might perceive him remains a central theme in his autobiography. He explains to William near the close of

part 1: "In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances of the contrary. I dressed plainly; I was seen in no places of idle diversion; I never went out fishing or shooting . . . and to show that I was not above my business, I sometimes brought home the paper I purchased at the stores through the streets on a wheelbarrow." Although some critics, including Lemay, Shurr, and Looby, like to argue that part 1 is radically different from the subsequent parts, and that the whole does not adhere as a unified book, perhaps the preceding quotation serves as a point of continuity across all four parts. For Looby, "Scholars and critics have labored diligently to process the text into coherence, to produce the requisite unity that is the goal of much literary criticism; but in doing so they have obscured, I would argue, what are among the text's most meaningful features" (85). Looby interprets the fractures and contradictions of Franklin's *Autobiography* as proof of the influence that the revolution held over Franklin, especially because he purposely does not mention it in any of the *Autobiography's* four parts. Given that part 1 was written in 1771, years before the revolution, it naturally makes sense that Franklin could not have written about an event that had yet to transpire. Instead, the first part follows traditional models by retelling events from family lore and from his own childhood. Franklin was assiduously invested in promoting a public image for himself. Keeping this tendency for self-promotion in mind, the reader can easily make the leap to part 2, which has been described as "an explanation of Franklin's bookkeeping method for attaining perfection through practice of the virtues" (Shurr 437).

Thirteen years after the Revolutionary War, Franklin returned to his *Autobiography* and began writing part 2. Unlike the politically uncertain Franklin of part 1, the Franklin of part 2 had emerged triumphant from the war. Another central distinction between the two parts involves its intended reader. All references to William, whom he had publicly disinherited and disowned by this

time, are noticeably absent (Shurr 437). Instead, the *Autobiography* is opened up to a larger readership, an audience of “American youth,” as one of his friends imagined it in a letter included at the end of part 1. To transition from a letter intended for his son to a larger endeavor intended for the edification of the next generation, Franklin includes letters from two of his friends: Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan. James writes quite directly of the singularity of Franklin’s character: “I know of no character living nor many of them put together, who has so much in his power as thyself to promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to business, frugality, and temperance with the American youth.” In Vaughan’s letter, he describes Franklin’s letter as a “noble rule and example of self-education.” Vaughan extends this characterization of Franklin’s writing to the general population: “Your biography will not merely teach self-education but the education of a wise man.” Thus, James imagines Franklin’s task as the education of the masses by a wise and sage man, his friend, Franklin.

Part 2 is entitled “Continuation of the Account of My Life Begun at Passy 1784,” and yet critics note the difference in tone, intended readership, and subject matter. He briefly recounts the creation of the public library, which was originally called a “subscription library,” and notes how it was expedient for him to create the pretense that “a number of friends” had arrived at this idea rather than he alone. Franklin displays his humility by willingly forgoing the opportunity to “raise one’s reputation in the smallest degree above that of one’s neighbors” and instead granting others a share in authorship. Similarly, it is at his wife’s insistence that “her husband deserved a silver spoon and china bowl as well as any of his neighbors” that china and plate made their first appearance in the Franklin household. In both instances, Franklin is the beneficiary of the good opinion of others, even when he must suppress his own role as inventor of the public library in order to solicit subscriptions.

Perhaps one of the most enduring and influential aspects of Franklin’s autobiography is the

topic that constitutes most of part 2: what Franklin himself described as the “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.” The topic of self-improvement is, not surprisingly, introduced through Franklin’s brief treatment of his own religious beliefs and practices. While he states that he “never doubted . . . the existence of the Deity that made the world and governed it by his providence,” he “seldom attended any public worship.” He pays his annual subscription for the salary of the “only Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia,” but found the sermons “to me very dry, uninteresting, unedifying, since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforced.” Rather, Franklin insists, the aim of the ministers was more “to make us Presbyterians than good citizens.” He sees the two goals—religious and secular—as at odds with one another and he would rather follow the latter than the former.

Franklin lists 13 precepts that he has met with in his reading. Not surprisingly, for a figure like Franklin who has dedicated his life to language, he finds moral lessons in his daily reading material. The critic Christopher Looby believes that “because Franklin claims a representative status for himself, presenting his life as an allegory of American national experience, it is also an account of the nation’s self-constitution in language” (73). In other words, the way in which Franklin declares and presents himself on the page becomes a model for future Americans to write of their own life stories. The 13 precepts are, in order, temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. As Franklin reasons, “Temperance first as it tends to produce that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction to ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations.”

It is a methodical, logical manner Franklin devises in which to approach the moral and philosophical issue of self-improvement. To fulfill his third precept for “order,” Franklin imposes on himself a “scheme on employment for twenty-four hours of

- Gallagher, Edward J. "The Rhetorical Strategy of Franklin's 'Way to Wealth.'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1973): 475–485.
- Green, James N. "English Books and Printing in the Age of Franklin." In *A History of the Book in America*. Vol. 1, edited by David D. Hall, 248–298. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- La Bree, Leonard W., ed. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959.
- Lawrence, D. H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953.
- Lemay, J. A. Leo. Benjamin Franklin: A Documentary History. Available online. URL: <http://www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- . *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*. Vol. 1, *Journalist, 1706–1730*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- . *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*. Vol. 2, *Printer and Publisher, 1730–1747*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- Looby, Christopher. "'The Affairs of the Revolution Occasion'd the Interruption': Writing, Revolution, Deferral, and Conciliation in Franklin's *Autobiography*." *American Quarterly* (1985): 73–96.
- Morgan, Edmund Sears. *Benjamin Franklin*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Mott, Frank Luther. *American Journalism: A History: 1690–1960*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.
- Papers of Benjamin Franklin. Sponsored by the American Philosophical Society and Yale University. Digital Edition by the Packard Humanities Institute. Available online. URL: <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Shurr, William H. "'Now, Gods, Stand Up for Bastards': Reinterpreting Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*." *American Literature* 64, no. 3 (1992): 435–451.
- Talbott, Page, Richard S. Dunn, and John C. Van Horne, eds. *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Tebbel, John. *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* Vol. 1. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1972.
- Van Doren, Carl. *Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Wood, Gordon S. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Wright, Esmond. *Franklin of Philadelphia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986.



PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU (1752–1832)

O Washington! —thrice glorious name / What due rewards can man decree— / Empires
are far below thy aim, / And scepters have no charms for thee / Virtue alone has your
regards, / And she must be your great reward.

(“Washington’s Arrival in Philadelphia”)

Philip Morin Freneau was the eldest of five children born to a French father, Pierre Fresneau (note the different spelling of the surname), and a Scottish mother, Agnes Watson. They lived in New York, where Freneau was born on January 2, 1752, but the family soon moved to New Jersey to buy land and start a farm. His father constructed a country house at Mount Pleasant (near modern-day Matawan) and gained some wealth by working in timber. As the firstborn son and a child with a natural propensity for books and writing, Philip was groomed for life as a preacher. His father sent him to school in New York. In 1767, when Philip was 15 years old, his father, Pierre, died, leaving behind a significant amount of land but little money.

The following year, 1768, Freneau entered the College of New Jersey (now known as Princeton University), and, because of his academic preparation, he was accepted as a sophomore (Marsh 16). The curriculum at Princeton included courses in rhetoric, oratory, and the classics (writings from Homer and Longinus). Before Freneau enrolled at Princeton, the university founded two literary societies: The Cliosophic, who valued legal and religious arguments, and the Whig, who preferred satire. Freneau and his roommate, Hugh Brackenridge, provided the Whigs with their victories against their rivals, the Cliosophes. Among the Whigs were James Madison, who would become the fourth president of the United States; Pier-

pont and Jonathan Edwards (sons of the famous Calvinist JONATHAN EDWARDS), and Aaron Burr, who would later go on to kill Alexander Hamilton (Marsh 17). Although Freneau roomed with Brackenridge for most of his time at Princeton, it appears that he also shared a room with Madison as the latter wrote home to his father about his new friend and companion.

Much of Freneau’s early writing, including his first piece of fiction, *Mr. Bombo’s Pilgrimage to Mecca*, exists because Will Bradford, a fellow Princeton student and admirer of both Freneau and Brackenridge, recorded their writings in his journals and notebooks (Marsh 20, 23). This early work of fiction tells of a shipwrecked Bombo, who appears on the shore of Ireland, becomes a teacher, but is expelled by his pupils, who dislike him. Freneau’s unfortunate protagonist, after much traveling, arrives in Philadelphia, where he dies. Freneau also dedicated his talent to writing more serious poetry, including “The Power of Fancy,” which was penned in 1770 when he was 18 years old. The following year, 1771, Freneau, Brackenridge, and Burr graduated from Princeton in a class of 12.

His mother had remarried after the death of his father with a man named Major James Kearny, who had five children of his own from his previous marriage. The recently graduated Freneau would understandably need to support himself financially. He did so by becoming a teacher, first at a rural

school in Flatbush (currently Brooklyn) and then with his friend Brackenridge in Somerset County, Maryland. He did not seem well suited to the profession, however, as he complained in a letter to James Madison of the “30 students . . . who prey upon me like leeches” (Marsh 28). He also wrote to share the news of his first publication, a small collection of poetry entitled “The American Village,” which appeared in print in New York (Marsh 28–29). Perhaps because he was attempting to fulfill his father’s dying wish, perhaps because a career in teaching seemed too unappealing, Freneau returned to Princeton for two years (1773 and 1774) to pursue a career as a Presbyterian minister (Marsh 32). His natural proclivity for Newtonian science, however, became too difficult to overcome, and Freneau rejected Presbyterianism to embrace deism. The biographer Philip Marsh attributes Freneau’s deism to his admiration for the writings of Addison in the *Spectator* (33).

In February 1776, Freneau accepted the invitation of John Wilkinson Hanson, owner of Prospect Hill plantation, to set sail with him for Santa Cruz (present-day St. Croix). He wrote later to his friend Alexander Anderson of “being averse to enter the Army and be knocked in the head” (50). Marsh argues that the island’s remoteness from scenes of the Revolutionary War did not mean that Freneau was ignorant of battles or of the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, the island’s economic interest in trade alone would have guaranteed that Santa Cruz would receive news (53). On the basis of Freneau’s application for a federal pension, we know that he spent time two years as a privateer (54). It is certain that he sailed to Bermuda and stayed for five weeks (56). On June 5, 1778, Freneau left Santa Cruz and returned to the newly created United States of America (57). On July 15, a mere six days after his arrival at Monmouth, Freneau enlisted in the army as a private and served as a master aboard the *Indian Delaware* in October 1778. While on board this ship bound for St. Eustatius, Freneau penned “American Independence,” which made fun of the British for their folly (Marsh 61–62). With the publication of this and “Ris-

ing Glory,” Freneau “returned to his first love—love of America, its future, and its perfectability” (63). He remained on the army’s rolls until May 1, 1780, meaning that he served for two years. When the 20-gun privateer that Freneau was sailing on, the *Aurora*, was hulled, Freneau was arrested and taken aboard a prison ship called the *Scorpion* (69). His time aboard the *Scorpion* was only three weeks as the conditions proved unhealthy and an ill Freneau was transferred to the *Hunter*, a hospital ship, on June 22 and exchanged on July 13. Freneau’s hatred for the British now was unmasked and personal. He drew on his own experience as a prisoner of war for his “The British Prison Ship,” which was published in 1780. At this time, he began writing his play, *The Spy*, and satirical pieces for the *New-Jersey Gazette* (72).

Freneau began working for Francis Bailey’s newspaper, the *Freeman’s Journal*, in July 1781. “The next year was his most productive. Reporting news and commenting on it, in the next fourteen months he published forty poems and forty prose pieces. . . . He now did his best satires” (Marsh 77). He began a series of long essays named *The Pilgrim*, which ran for 19 numbers and took its inspiration from Addison and Steele’s works in *The Spectator* and the *Tatler* (81). He took on different personae and voices to address a variety of subjects: “Christopher Clodhopper” and “Priscilla Tripstreet” quibbled over ladies’ fashions; “Virginius” took on a British perspective to express hopes of reconquering the States (85). Whatever his pseudonym, Freneau seems to have written his last prose for the *Journal* in June 1784, when he sailed for the West Indies aboard the *Dromelly*. A hurricane hit the ship, and they landed in Jamaica (97). Francis Bailey published Freneau’s immigration propaganda, “Stanzas on the Emigration to America,” in 1785 in *Bailey’s Almanac*, and the following year a collection of over 100 of his poems appeared in print, also with Bailey as publisher (99–100).

Freneau began writing more consistently on the issue of American Indians in the latter half of 1790, and all of the essays were published in the *Daily Advertiser*, a newspaper that employed him

in March of that year. On April 15, 1790, Freneau married the daughter of a neighbor, Eleanor Forman. Although Freneau had hopes of marrying her as early as 1783, the wedding could not take place until her brother David withdrew his objection (116, 118). Freneau left his position with the *Advertiser* and accepted a part-time job as a translator. This move would solidify his position in history as a political writer. After all, it was James Madison, his old friend from college, and THOMAS JEFFERSON who secured the position for him. Their motivation was for Freneau to publish a Whig organ, as he did in 1792, and lambaste their common enemy, Alexander Hamilton. Freneau founded the *National Gazette*, which printed its first issue on October 31, 1791. Freneau's position as gadfly with the *Gazette* gained the attention of the president himself, as Washington dubbed him "that rascal Freneau" during a cabinet meeting recorded by Thomas Jefferson (199). Because Jefferson had a hand in appointing Freneau to his first national position as translator, and because the *National Gazette* championed Jefferson and his political party while attacking Hamilton, Freneau found himself facing charges, first in 1792 and later in 1801 (278).

Despite its popularity and widespread readership, Freneau's *National Gazette* published its last issue on October 26, 1793, in part because of an outbreak of yellow fever and a general panic over contagion, as well as the newspaper's practice of billing readers after they had received six months' issues of the paper (206). Freneau returned to the family home in Monmouth and began writing and printing his own newspaper, called the *Monmouth Almanac*, which was his equivalent of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S *Poor Richard's Almanac*. When this venture failed, Freneau joined the *Jersey Chronicle* in 1795 and submitted a series of essays on American Indians. In summer 1796, Freneau quit work in rural New Jersey and returned eagerly to the bustle of New York, writing for Bache's *Aurora* and for the *Time Piece* until the end of 1798. In that year, when he covered the presidential campaigns of Adams and Jefferson, Freneau wrote a series of 24

essays on the character of Richard Slender, which continued until 1801 (266).

Freneau's biographer Marsh notes that when Freneau took to sea in 1801, under the financial support of his brother Peter, his exact whereabouts are unknown (285). He appears to have returned in 1804, when he docked in Charleston in June to visit his brother. Freneau returned to writing for the *Aurora* from 1808 until 1820. When a fire destroyed their family home in 1818, Freneau; his wife, Eleanor; and their two daughters who still resided at home moved temporarily to a nearby house and then to the house of Eleanor's brother. Freneau seems to have fallen into drink to soften his despondency about life in a place where he was no longer a pivotal figure. On December 18, 1832, Freneau was walking home from the local store and pub when a snowstorm hit. Blinded by the snow, and perhaps disoriented from drink, he fell into a hole, broke his hip, and died in his sleep.

"The Power of Fancy" (1770)

Influenced by Max Akenside's *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, which was published in 1744, Freneau offers his own broad and sweeping trek through portions of ancient Greece, sites made famous by Admiral Anson's circumnavigation of the globe, "Britain's fertile land," finally resting on the Pacific Ocean at "California's golden shore" (87, 123). The suggestion Freneau makes by linking images of classical literature and authors (such as Homer, Virgil, and Sappho) with America, specifically California, seems quite obvious: North America will be the source of new authors, poets, and a new inspirational landscape. Fancy appears in the poem alternately as the poet's imagination, the muse's inspiration, the transcendent quality of a beautiful landscape, and the ultimate source of happiness for mortals on earth.

Freneau begins and ends the poem with the morality of humans, which serves as both a source of human limitation and a connection to "the immortal race" (10). It is through the use of fancy

that mortals most closely approach the gods. Freneau explains how fancy can link humans with the gods by describing all aspects of creation: “These suns and stars that round us roll / What are they all, where’er they shine, / But Fancies of the Power Divine” (12–14). In other words, all of creation exists in the mind of the “Almighty,” and thus the ideas that Fancy implants or coaxes into the mind of the poet are reflections, however pale, of the kind of real creation brought about by God’s ideas.

As mentioned, Fancy is not relegated only to the realm of arts and letters, but also influences people’s understandings of the divine: “Leads me to some lonely dome, / Where Religion loves to come, / Where the bride of Jesus dwells” (35–37). The image of a lonely dome might refer to a cupola on a church, and thus the image Freneau creates is of a single follower, perhaps bent in prayer, exalted by Fancy in his or her beliefs and faith. The image of the bride of Jesus is taken from the New Testament, where it serves as a metaphor for the New Jerusalem after the rapture, or the second coming of Christ. From the exalted place of heaven, Fancy also descends “to the prison of fiends / hears the rattling of their chains / feels their never ceasing pains— / But, O never may she tell / Half the frightfulness of hell” (42–46). It is interesting to note the limitation Freneau imagines Fancy to have. Despite its ability to “walk upon the moon” and listen to the music of the spheres, it cannot convey a full sense of the horrors of hell (29).

The poem concludes in America, where the speaker bids, “Fancy, stop, and rove no more” (124). In this final landscape, the poet acknowledges his or her gratitude to Fancy and requests that the two continue their walk “alone” (154).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his political poems, Freneau makes references to classic Greek and Roman mythology. Compare his use of these symbols in “To Sir Toby” and “The Power of Fancy.”
2. Nature serves as a source of inspiration in this poem. Consider how it is described and what qualities are assigned to it in “The Power of

Fancy” compared with “The Wild Honey Suckle” or “On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature.”

“A Political Litany” (1775)

In the poem’s title and with each stanza beginning with the word *from*, Freneau takes the religious style of a litany, which is a repetitive or incantatory prayer, to plead for America’s independence from the evils of Britain. Within the poem readers can discern particular arguments that Freneau would go on to repeat in his political poetry, essays, and thinly disguised opinion pieces published in a number of newspapers. The central argument offered in the poem is for American freedom from a tyrannical government whose rulers are witless, cowardly, and cruel. Freneau makes both direct and indirect references to these leaders as he mentions the royal governor of Virginia, John Murray, who was also known as the earl of Dunmore; the royal governor of New York, William Tryon, who quickly fled when he learned of revolutionary plans in his territory; and King George III, who appears as “royal king Log” (13, 21, 26). The appearance of these political leaders by name or inference was a hallmark of Freneau’s particular brand of political writing, which he introduced and honed during his college days at Princeton when he led the writing society known as the Whigs. He would address the arguments or positions of his opponents, members of the rival Cliosophes, by using a rhetorical strategy known as *ad hominem*, meaning that he would attack the person rather than his or her argument.

Freneau devotes more attention to King George III in this poem than to any other leader as he stands as a symbol of Britain and is the ultimate authority over them all. Freneau likens him to the frog king found in Aesop’s fable, a tale of a group of frogs whose request for a king is answered with the appearance of a log for their ruler. Through this childhood cultural reference, Freneau chastises King George III as an inept ruler whose position of authority is a kind of cruel joke on the people,

who are desirous of a real ruler. This “tooth-ful of brains / Who dreams, and is certain (when taking a nap) / He has conquered our lands, as they lay on his map” continues to develop the notion of an inept authority who resides in the fantasy of colonization just as the tale of the frogs and their King Log resides in the fantasy of childhood tales (26–28).

The final three lines of the poem return to the religious structure of the poem by “send[ing] up to heave our wishes and prayers” of deliverance from Britain, who he is certain is “damned” (30, 32).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In “A Political Litany,” Freneau uses a religious format to launch a political plea, and yet the poem makes no mention of religion or worship. How can you reconcile the poem’s clearly religious format with its secular content?
2. Freneau’s litany is dominated by a list of British leaders and authorities. How do these figures stand in for different aspects of British colonial rule that Freneau wants abolished?

“The House of Night” (1779)

The biographer Philip M. Marsh attributes the graveyard verse tone of Freneau’s “The House of Night” to the popularity that English poets of the “graveyard school” had in America beginning in 1747 with the publication of Robert Blair’s “The Grave” (35). Including “Night Thoughts” and “Ode to Evening,” but best epitomized with “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” this school of poetry is noted for their themes of death’s certainty, the folly of fame, and the ephemeral nature of beauty. William Collins, Edward Young, and Thomas Gray dominated as the influential voices of this literary school.

Freneau’s poem, written on the eve of the American Revolution, but not published until 1779, is “a tale of grave, darkness, horror, and the illness, death, and funeral of Death himself” (Marsh 36). It begins with the speaker, still

“trembling” from the effects of a dream, recollecting the details of a “fearful vision” (1–2). “Poetic dreams” are differentiated from those dreams “which o’er the sober brain diffused / [that] are but a repetition of some action past” (15–16). By distinguishing the poet’s dream from those more common dreams, Freneau establishes the poet as a being of a “finer cast,” whose susceptibility to the power of Fancy allows him to be transported to scenes of heaven or hell (20). In this particular dream, the poet is transported “by some sad means” (21). Because *means* can refer to the mode of transportation, the poet’s sadness itself could be the poet’s conveyance to the House of Night. The lines in stanza 3 bear out this reading, because the speaker leaves to others to “draw from smiling skies their theme. . . . I draw a darker scene, replete with gloom” (9, 11).

When he arrives at the house, a light from the upper room illuminates the garden, revealing in an “autumnal hue,” “lately pleasing flowers all drooping” (46–47). Rather than the bright, brilliant colors of May, the month in which this poem takes place, the speaker notes, “No pleasant fruit or blossoms gaily smil’d” (53). It is in the garden that the speaker spies the tombstone amid “laurel shrubs.” Inside the house, reclining upon a couch, the speaker is Death himself, and learns from a “portly youth” that “Death [was] upon his dying bed.” Despite his current state, Death ends the poem by reflecting on his past power and glory, a “six thousand years . . . sovereign.” He mentions having made both Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar die “beneath [his] hand.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the use of gothic imagery in “The House of Night” to that of the late 18th-century author CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN in *Wieland* or of the early 19th-century author and poet Edgar Allan Poe.
2. Consider how nature appears in this poem versus in “On the Religion of Nature” or “On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature.”

3. Compare the personification of Death in Freneau's poem to its appearance in Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for death."

"On the Emigration to America and Peopling the Western Country" (1785)

The poem begins with the imagined journey and encounters of an emigrant recently departed from "Europe's proud, despotic shores" (7). This modern-day Palemon, a young male traveler who appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, distinguishes himself by departing from the crowd and seeking "where nature's wildest genius reigns" (2, 3). Freneau adheres to conventional—one might even suggest propaganda-fueled—depictions of the American landscape as the phrases "so long concealed, so lately known" echo the language of discovery and entice the reader, as they do the emigrant, to gain familiarity and mastery (20). Freneau does depart somewhat from this traditional view of an American landscape by noting how the democratic form of government has imprinted itself onto the land: "In our new found world" the explorer discovers a "happier soil, a milder sway" (9–10). It is as though the absence of a despotic presence, so recently felt in the Revolutionary War against Britain and King George III, impacts the foundation or core of the land, its soil.

Freneau quickly moves from democracy's influence on the landscape to a celebration of its two central rivers at the time: the Ohio and the Mississippi. Freneau praises the Ohio River, a "savage stream," as an enduring natural work of art that demonstrates nature's authority (13–14). The sheer force and immortal quality of this particular river "outvie / the boldest pattern art can frame," meaning that the river's beauty overwhelms the museum or art gallery attempts to corral or contain the art in a frame. The Mississippi River also receives praise, but not for its natural grandeur. Freneau promises that "no longer through a darksome wood / advance, unnoticed, to the main" (33–34). These lines can be interpreted in two

different but compatible ways: The poem itself provides notoriety to this river, whose course to the ocean, "the main," was previously unmarked, or "unnoticed," or, because of the plans to use the Mississippi's waterways for trade and commerce, its course will be navigated by ships whose crews will take note.

The native inhabitants of the New World also appear, albeit briefly, in Freneau's poem, but rather than the noble savage who appears in "The Indian Burying Ground," the "unsocial Indian far retreats / To make some other clime his own" (21–22). Freneau falls into the convention of the "vanishing American" that JAMES FENIMORE COOPER would canonize in the next century. The concept here is that the American Indian will simply vanish, or willingly and voluntarily relocate, to make way for the incoming flux of Europeans. Such a notion is at odds with the portrait of African slaves Freneau paints just a mere five stanzas later. He anticipates "the day / when man shall man no longer crush," but this sentiment is only reserved for African slaves and does not apply to the American Indians, who are native to this "happier soil."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Freneau's depictions of an American landscape with those offered in THOMAS MORTON's *New English Canaan*, JOHN SMITH's *A General History of Virginia*, or CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS's descriptions of the Americas.
2. Drawing on other poems from Freneau that address American Indians and African slaves, write an essay in which you account for the different treatments of the two races.

"Wild Honey Suckle" (1786)

Freneau's lyrical poem first appeared in the *Columbia Herald* in 1786. The biographer Philip M. Marsh believes that "at its most tender, the lyric genius . . . cultivated and elaborated, might have given the author a far greater fame" (105). The

poem's lyric quality seems similar to that of Wordsworth and WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

Freneau differentiates this flower from those that are cultivated or receive the dotting attention of horticulturists by emphasizing its wildness. Nature personified has cared for and nurtured this particular flower by "plant[ing] [it] here in the guardian shade / and send[ing] soft waters murmuring by" (9, 10). Although the honeysuckle is "untouched" and "unseen," it is protected from "roving feet" and a "busy hand" (5, 6). In writing a poem to this "fair flower," Freneau presents a pastoral image of humans' relationship with nature. The mindful poet records the beauty of the flower for his readers. Rather than employ a "busy hand" to pluck the flower and "provoke a tear," Freneau busies his hand with pen and ink to immortalize the bloom for posterity.

In the third stanza, Freneau links the fate of the wild honeysuckle to the fate of man after his fall from grace, identified with his expulsion from Eden. The poet's use of biblical references might seem surprising to readers more acquainted with his tone of biting satire employed in his political essays and other writings, but one should keep in mind that Freneau was groomed by his father to pursue a life as a clergyman, and to honor his father's wishes, Philip dedicated two years to seminary school. When Freneau writes that "the flowers that did in Eden bloom" were not "more gay" than those witnessed in the postlapsarian world, he seems to deny the Judeo-Christian separation of humans before and after the Fall. If Edenic flowers were not "more gay," meaning that they were not happier or more colorful than those depicted after the Fall, then the distinction seems false or arbitrary. What remains true is their shared fate: They will die (15).

In the final stanza, Freneau extrapolates from the lesson contained in the brief but brilliant life of the honeysuckle to the lives of humans. When he writes, "If nothing once, you nothing lose," Freneau touches upon the risk of attempting greatness in one's life. A figure who is "nothing once" has the opportunity to accomplish something and

become someone. This effort could lead to loss, as Freneau admits, but the following line offers consolation by placing the endeavors of an individual into a larger frame. He writes, "For when you die you are the same" (22). One could read this line as evidence of a pessimistic view of the human condition: that one's dreams, struggles, and losses prove irrelevant. This reading would certainly be in keeping with the tradition of the graveyard poetry that Freneau emulates in "The House of Night." In the context of this poem, however, which speaks lovingly of a wild flower hidden but protected from humans and nurtured by Nature itself, one might arrive at a tempered version of the previous interpretation. Although Freneau expresses grief at the certainty of the honeysuckle's "future doom," he has immortalized it in his poem and, in so doing, offered something that endures beyond the "frail duration of a flower" (24).

For Discussion or Writing

1. As in "On Observing a Large Red-Streak Apple," Freneau creates the image of a singular entity in nature in order to contemplate the human condition. Explain why the singularity of the item addressed in the poems, whether honeysuckle or apple, matters in imagining the fate of humans.
2. Freneau seems to advocate the expression of the self by writing "if nothing once, you nothing lose." Compare this sentiment to Emily Dickinson's expressed in the poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

"The Indian Burying Ground" (1787)

Originally entitled "Lines Occasioned by a Visit to an Old Indian Burying Ground," the poem was published in November 1787 in *American Museum* and appeared again the following year in Freneau's *Miscellaneous Works*, which also contained "The Wild Honey Suckle." Freneau's biographer Philip Marsh attributes Freneau's interest in the subject of American Indians to the appearance of members of

the Creek tribe in New York to broker a treaty with the fledgling republic (128–129).

The poem opens with a contrast between the burial rites and beliefs of the hereafter held by the culture referred to simply as “we” and those rites and beliefs held by “the Ancients of these lands” (5). Freneau establishes a binary of “us” and “them” from the poem’s first two stanzas, but the structure for this comparison of cultures does not end there. Rather, Freneau imagines both groups of people in large, sweeping terms. The American Indians are referred to as *Ancients*, and all Anglo Europeans are addressed as *we*. By naming the American Indians Ancients, however, Freneau casts them as members of North America’s past.

Freneau begins with the premise that in examining burial rites, one can deduce how a culture imagines life after death: “The posture that we give the dead / points out the soul’s eternal sleep” (3–4). In these lines, Freneau suggests that the burial of the dead, according to Western custom, reveals that culture’s belief that the afterlife is characterized by rest and repose. For the American Indians, who, according to Freneau, bury their dead in a sitting position, the afterlife must be a continuation of the activities one engages in while alive: “activity, that knows no rest” (12). Despite Freneau’s brief dip into a culture not his own, he maintains his old opinion. Indeed, when he considers the clashing views of life after death—“can only mean that life is spent / and not the old ideas gone”—Freneau forecloses on all other possible conclusions (15–16). In other words, rather than consider amending his belief or respecting the American Indians’ belief, Freneau definitively states that his culture’s “old ideas” prevail.

Despite his insistence that his culture’s rites and beliefs remain inchoate, Freneau requests that his readers, referred to as “stranger[s],” respect “the swelling turf” (19). He trains the reader’s eye to the symbols and signs of American Indians’ burial rites rather than the headstone; readers should be mindful of a “lofty rock” containing vestiges of a “ruder race” (21, 24). Freneau projects past images of children playing and a “pale Shebah” to animate

the landscape to consign American Indians to a hoary past as no living relative of these buried men appears in the poem.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Freneau’s romantic treatment of American Indians, exemplified in this poem, changed drastically in his later years when he published “The Musical Savage” in 1814. Read this other poem and compare its tone and treatment of American Indians to those in “The Indian Burying Ground.”
2. Thomas Jefferson writes of Indian burial mounds in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Compare the two authors’ views on American Indians. How do they characterize them?
3. How might Freneau’s depictions of American Indians coincide with JAMES FENIMORE COOPER’S?

“Part 2: The News” (1790)

“Part 2: The News” appeared in a four-part series that Freneau wrote in December 1791 and early January 1792 while working on the *National Gazette*, a newspaper that focused on political and congressional affairs in New York, which was then the headquarters of the federal government. “The Country Printer” appeared in four installments and offered praise for the noble profession of printer. “Part 2: The News” is a blend of Freneau’s political prose and his poetry.

Freneau heaps praise on the figure of the printer, a particular one cleverly named *Type* in this poem, who allows the rural village to remain connected to and informed of “whate’er is done on madam Terra’s stage” (21). Freneau suggests the “farrago” might include tales of “monarchs run away,” a reference to America’s gaining independence from monarchical rule under England’s King George, or of “witches drown’d in Buzzard’s Bay,” a reference to the witch trials and executions that took place in Massachusetts (23–24). In juxtaposing these two events, Freneau spans the nation’s most celebrated

and most scandalous moments and implies that the newspaper will be wide in its scope and impartial in its treatment of any given subject.

This avowal of journalistic impartiality is immediately undermined, however, in the following stanza, when Freneau admits jokingly, “Much, very much, in wonderment he deals” (27). As a patriotic voice shouting out the “wonders” of the newly formed republic, the newspaper writer acts as an everyday deity: “Some miracles he makes, and some he steals” (25). Those “miracles” are not of a religious sort, but they do aid in the creation of a national myth or character. The general nature of these “miracles,” stolen or made, involves the often-touted fecundity of the New World. Freneau uses hyperbole to express this point, employing the farmer’s generous descriptions of the size of his produce as an example: “apples grown to pumpkins size” (28). The hyperbole extends to “pumpkins almost as large as country inns” and ends with the most exaggerated of claims, “ladies bearing each, —three lovely twins!” (30). Freneau shifts from the abundance and fertility of America’s landscape, which can house people in its pumpkins, to the reproductive proclivity of America’s women, who bear “three lovely twins.” Clearly, three babies born at one time would be referred to as triplets, and Freneau plays with the idea that in their inherently fertile state, American women produce three children while others only produce two.

The villagers’ deaths and births, the journalist “with cold indifference views” (31). Freneau once again dismantles the disclaimer of objectivity by ending the poem with the following lines: “All that was good, minutely brought to light, / All that was ill, —concealed from vulgar sight” (35–36).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Freneau’s description of a printer with Benjamin Franklin’s. How are the two men similar in their views of the duties and responsibilities of a printer?
2. Consider Freneau’s treatment of America’s fertile landscape. How does it compare with that of travel writers and explorers such as CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, THOMAS MORTON, or ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA? How do these other writers connect the fertility of the land with the fertility of its female inhabitants?
3. How do Freneau’s notions of a journalist compare with contemporary notions?

“On Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man” (1791)

Written in the same style as all of Freneau’s politically driven poetry, in iambic pentameter with rhyming couplets, “On Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man” also follows the poet’s form by focusing on a specific issue (the overthrow of monarchy) and tethering this idea to a specific figure, in this case, THOMAS PAINE, the author of the 1791–92 *Rights of Man*. Further, as did most of Freneau’s poetry, it bore another title: “To a Republican with Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man.” Although it is commonly thought to have been written in 1791, in the same year as Paine’s influential text, it was not published until three years later in 1795. Readers familiar with Freneau’s poetry and his political arguments against the British Crown will recognize strains to appear in subsequent works. These recurring themes include the enslavement of men through forced labor in mines or impressments into military service. As he will in later poems like “On the Causes of Political Degeneracy,” Freneau dismantles the very symbols of monarchical rule, referring to “that base, childish bauble called a crown” (6). He likens a monarch to a “quack that kills . . . while it seems to cure,” meaning that the assumed authority of a monarch, which is imagined to be sanctioned by God and/or the pope, does more harm than good because people trust its wisdom and authority and lose their lives (presumably in wars or through “slavish” conditions) (10, 8).

In contrast to the “miseries men endure” at the hands of monarchs, Freneau celebrates the liberating properties of Paine’s “bold reform” (13). In a reversal of fortunes, Freneau writes, “In raising up mankind, he pulls down kings” (14). He accomplishes this double-purposed goal by employing

reason as he “sketched the sacred right of man,” meaning that Paine utilized the very authority central to a monarch’s claim for authority—God—and “sketched” out its application to democratic rule. Freneau imagines the shared reactions of his fellow readers, who “glow . . . with kindling rage” at every instance of “the rights of men aspersed, / freedom restrained, and nature’s law reversed” (27–28). Monarchy and any government not respectful of innate rights appear as unnatural, or against the order of things.

Freneau offers up Columbia, symbol of the American republic, as a shining example, “famed through every clime,” of how democracy can thrive (49). He opens four lines with the phrase “without a king” to mark the fortunate present of America as well as the hopeful future for Britain’s current colonies (36, 37, 41, 50). This phrase concludes the poem with a never-ending future “to see the end of time” (50).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read THOMAS PAINE’s *Rights of Man*. How does Freneau’s celebration of the text reflect the content of Paine’s book? How does it differ? What might account for these differences?
2. How does the promise of 1776, depicted in Freneau’s “A Political Litany,” compare with the reality of an American republic, as captured in this poem?

“To Sir Toby” (1792)

Freneau wrote about the conditions of island slaves beginning in 1790 with a piece that looked specifically at the condition of West Indian creoles. He based this poem, often entitled “The Island Field Negro,” on his own eyewitness accounts of life in Jamaica in the early 1800s while he was employed aboard the *Dromelly* (Marsh 97). He opens the poem with a seemingly unlikely quotation from William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* that follows a conversation between two young lovers, Jessica and Lorenzo. The passage fits the general

structure of Freneau’s poem, however, as he continually refers to the jarring dissonance between what is (slavocracy) and what should be (the abolition of slavery). In the passage from Shakespeare, the lovers are transported by the music they hear and wonder at the figure incapable of being moved or having his finer emotions heightened. Their conclusion is that such a character’s “affections [are] as dark as Erebus.” Thus, by casting the white man who is insensitive to music and any sympathetic connections it should foster as “dark” and “black,” Freneau reverses the common associations of race and morality to rage against slave owners.

He continues this reversal of white and black by cataloging the atrocities slave owners mete out against fellow human beings. Rather than refer to the slave’s sufferings, he cleverly turns his attention to those inflicting the violence with lines like “one to the windmill nails him by the ears” (26). Lest the readers miss his condemnation, he writes of slaves “driven by a devil, whom men call overseer” (34). Their predatory nature sets them as one of several “nature’s plagues”: “Snakes, scorpions, despots, lizards, centipees” (9–10). The juxtaposition of reptiles with “despots” demonstrates that their participation in slavery removes them from humanity.

Freneau also employs the inversion of binaries by juxtaposing the beauty of Jamaica’s landscape with its hellish conditions. He draws upon classical allusions to describe the island: “Here Stygian paintings light and dark renew, / Pictures of hell, that Virgil’s pencil once drew” (47–48). Virgil’s images of the underworld, found in book 6 of his *Aeneid*, parallel, in Freneau’s mind, the scenes of slavery witnessed in Jamaica. This comparison continues as slave ships, referred to as “Guinea ships” in the poem, are sailed by “surly Charons,” referring to the boatman who shuttles the dead over the river Styx and into the underworld (49–50).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Freneau employs Shakespeare and Virgil as literary predecessors to draw cultural authority for his position against slavery. Read act 5, scene 1

of *The Merchant of Venice* and book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid* and consider Freneau's employment of these texts to lend credence to his poem's political message.

2. Compare Freneau's argument against slavery with the poetry of PHILLIS WHEATLEY. Do they make similar arguments? Do they reference similar literary or cultural sources?
3. Consider the dangers inherent in Freneau's employment of racially loaded terms like *dark* and *black* to refer to slave owners.

"On the Religion of Nature" (1795)

As a precursor to the transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Freneau's "On the Religion of Nature" marks his belief in the divinity of nature, and an inevitable progression from a sympathy for deist and pantheistic thought expressed in "On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature." As in his other lyric poetry written in iambic tetrameter, Freneau returns to an earlier aesthetic to convey what would become a more popular, if still unconventional, form of theology.

Freneau begins by noting that nature's power that "gives with liberal hand" "abundant products of the year" is the source of life-giving and life-sustaining food and drink as well as the source of religion itself (1, 4). The definition of religion, however, will shift as the poem progresses to note the shortcomings it has or expresses in its current organized forms. Pointedly absent from the treatment of organized religions are any references to conventional iconography such as biblical figures or crosses. By writing more generally about both nature and conventional forms of religion, Freneau's poem attains the kind of universality he seeks in support of transcendentalist thought.

In contrast to the conventional doctrine of original sin that believes humans are marked from birth by the crimes committed by Adam and Eve, Freneau argues that humans are "born with ourselves, her early sway / inclines the tender mind to take / the path of right" (7–9). He insists on humans'

innate goodness by stating that mankind is "born with ourselves," meaning that no prior history or stigma exists at birth. Indeed, one's natural inclination is to "take the path of right," or to behave in a morally sound manner. If this supposition is true, Freneau contends, then humans need only look to nature, to the world around and within them, for a "religion, such as nature taught" (13).

Moreover, Freneau offers the conviction that a religion of nature avoids all of the negative aspects that characterize organized religion: "This deals not curses on mankind / or dooms them to perpetual grief" (19–20). When he writes these lines, Freneau refers to the doctrine of original sin, a "curse," and to a life lived in a postlapsarian world, or "grief" after humans' expulsion from Eden. Freneau states that all "can make their heaven below," as a way of ignoring or negating the exile from paradise and providing a reward in the here and now rather than in the hereafter (18). For those who are nonbelievers in the religion of nature, Freneau notes that there are no negative repercussions: "It damns them not for unbelief" (22).

He ends the poem with a hopeful note, imagining the "day when all agree" on the nature of religion (25). On such a joyful day, "truth and goodness lead" and "man's religion [will] be complete" (28, 30).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Freneau's arguments against conventional religion with those raised by Emerson.
2. Freneau offers less of an argument in favor of transcendentalism than a critique of the shortcomings of other forms of religion. How does this rhetorical strategy relate to his political poetry?

"On the Causes of Political Degeneracy" (1798)

Freneau's poem arguing against the doctrine of absolute monarchy, also titled "Reflections on the Gradual Progress of Nations from Democratic Status to Despotic Empires," was written and pub-

lished in 1798. He contemplates the source of despotism, wondering “whence came these ills, or from what causes grew,” and considers the possibility that “this vortex vast” originated in Mother Nature (7, 8). Such a concept as nature’s producing despotism, once raised, is just as quickly dashed, for “her equal blessings through the world displays,” meaning that because Mother Nature provides equally for all, she cannot be the source of a “life accurst” (14, 4). To exemplify nature’s egalitarianism, and thus to shore up an argument for the naturalness of democratic government, Freneau references seasons (death in winter is balanced by birth or rebirth in spring) and the water cycle (evaporation will lead to condensation and precipitation).

Freneau compares the condition of humans subjected to the doctrine of absolute monarchy to that of slaves: “Now starv’d in camps, now groveling in the mine, / Chain/d fetter’d, tortur’d, sent from earth a slave” (22–23). The first description of starving in camps might be a reference to forced conscription into military service, a practice that England put into place when its numbers of soldiers and sailors were low. The mines clearly refer to the practice of employing native peoples in colonies to mine and extract precious metals, such as gold, which were then shipped back to the colonial power. The image of a figure chained, fettered, and tortured, in other contexts, would clearly indicate the conditions experienced by either a slave or a prisoner. Here, it is a common condition held literally or metaphorically by all who are under despotic sway. Freneau offers another example of the enslaving qualities of absolute monarchy when he writes of wars, bloodshed, and countless dead at “some proud tyrant’s nod” (55). Warfare on a grand scale not only creates a significant death toll, but, as Freneau points out, is opposed to humankind’s natural peaceful disposition: “Left to themselves, where’er mankind is found, / In peace they wish to walk life’s little round” (61–62).

Freneau places the blame for despotism on “man’s neglected reason [which] breeds all the mischiefs that we feel or fear” (35–36). Against the “folly” and foolishness of the despot who deems himself capable of rule, Freneau offers the metaphor of democracy as a machine, with “man,

wise and skillful, giv[ing] each part its place” (38). In the reference to machinery, one might see a nod to deism over the Christian-based religions that provide a justification for their rule by divine right. At the heart of monarchical rule, Freneau finds nothing more “base” than “a robber’s view,” meaning that avarice provokes monarchs to conquer new territories (66). The use of a term like *robber* is also quite telling as it reduces the symbolic power behind “crowns and scepters” to the weapons that they are in the despot’s artillery (67–68).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Freneau’s depiction of slavery under monarchical rule compare with his account of race-based slavery in “To Sir Toby”?
2. Compare the use of natural metaphors to depict democratic rule with the language employed by such founding fathers as Franklin, JOHN ADAMS, Jefferson, and even Thomas Paine.

“On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature” (1815)

Although it appeared relatively late in Freneau’s career in 1815, this poem seems to be the product of his earlier conversion to deism, the same belief held by the founding father Benjamin Franklin. The Freneau biographer Philip Marsh notes that Freneau’s membership in the Deistical Society began as early as 1797 (236). In the margins of Burnet’s *Theory of the Earth*, Freneau wrote the following praise of this system of belief: “The hypothesis of the Deist reacheth from top to bottom, both through the intellectual and material world . . . is genuine, comprehensive, and satisfactory; hath nothing forced, nothing confused, nothing precarious” (reported in Marsh 53).

According to deist thought, the world was created by a benign but indifferent God commonly referred to as the “great clockmaker.” Following this theory, the universe operates on mechanical principles, and thus no nation or people may claim miracles or special favor or the attention of God. In

Freneau's poem, "nature's God" has crafted a "system fix'd on general laws," which some critics interpret as an indirect reference to Newtonian science and its pursuit of general laws or principles governing key aspects of life such as gravity. As support for deism's renunciation of principles of predestination and a model society most favored or worthy of favor by God, Freneau writes, "impartially he rules mankind" and insists upon his existence "throughout all worlds, to make them blest" (11, 24).

Freneau's depiction of nature's God seems to strike a compromise between the uncaring or uninvolved "clockmaker" and a Judeo-Christian god who displays acts of benevolence. Unlike the absent figure of God common in deism, Freneau's characterization "He lives in all, and never stray'd / a moment from the works he made" (7-8) harkens to a belief held by pantheists: that god resides in everything and everywhere. The line "He all things into being loved" implies that the act of creating the universe and all its inhabitants stemmed from love. This sentiment seems more attuned to a Judeo-Christian notion of God and the creation as depicted in the Old Testament and less a deistic notion of an uncaring but wise Creator.

The power of nature's god is "unlimited," but he is not cruel or capricious in the exercise of that power. For Freneau, this power "to all intelligence is a friend," meaning that he is a friend to all who value or embody intelligence but also that those who are swayed by their rational intellect, as deists must be, recognize a friend in nature's God.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Freneau's notions of God, life, and death in this poem with those depicted in "The House of Night" or in "The Wild Honey Suckle."
2. Examine how Freneau's sympathies for deism compare to Franklin's in his *Autobiography*.
3. How might JOHN WINTHROP's notion of a "city upon a hill" described in *A Modell of Christian Charity* or COTTON MATHER's belief in a divine war between good and evil, as detailed in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, clash with Freneau's belief in the impartiality of nature's God?

"On Observing a Large, Red-Streak Apple" (1822)

In this poem, Freneau returns to an often addressed theme originating from his earlier days of writing poetry in the vein of the graveyard poets: the inevitability of death. Rather than addressing the mortality of humans or Death personified, as he does in "The House of Night," Freneau centers his philosophical musings on a commonplace object, a red-streak apple.

In the first stanza, Freneau expresses admiration at the resiliency of an apple, which can endure on a branch "in spite of" winter's harsh conditions: ice, snow, hail, frost, and blowing winds. He wonders why the apple has "one wish to stay" "amidst this system of decay" (8, 7). He turns from the apple's durability to chastise nature as "a system of decay," or a large cycle that includes decline and death, to wonder at the motivation behind other larger systems such as fate and fancy (9). In the line "they meant you for a solitaire," Freneau conjectures that these inscrutable forces intended for the apple to function as a solitary gem does, gaining beauty and brilliance by virtue of its isolation. As the only apple remaining on the tree, the piece of fruit distinguishes itself.

When the narrator considers the possible though unlikely future of the apple on the tree for a second spring, Freneau speaks of how unnatural such a feat would be: "Another race would round you rise / And view the stranger with surprise" (19-20). The solitary nature of the apple that was once its source of beauty and a symbol of its endurance, when viewed in a different setting, the following spring or nature's rebirth, becomes a "stranger." Thus, the figure who endures beyond its natural time or time span would be estranged, rejected as an "old dotard" (22). Freneau might easily be considering his own fate, as he felt estranged and removed from his former brilliance and fame as a writer for newspapers and a figure in political circles. He pities the apple's fate: "a sad memento of the past" (28).

Freneau offers empty hope for this once-brilliant and promising apple. In the language of the subjunctive, he "would" that "the wrongs of time restrain" (31). The futility of these hopes is immedi-

ately revealed as “fate and nature both say no” (33). This line offers the first glimpse into a powerlessness shared by the poet’s subject, the red-streak apple, and the poet himself. Neither can chart a course for existence, as fate and nature reign in a capricious and perhaps inscrutable manner. The poet’s impotence at being unable to enact his sympathy for the late-blooming apple is best captured in the lines “All I can do, all in my power / Will be to watch your parting hour” (37–38). The poem accomplishes this task by bearing witness to the apple’s demise.

The apple’s death does not mark its end. In a moment reminiscent of the mythical phoenix who rises from its own ashes, Freneau imagines a progeny of “three or four” that rise from the apple’s core. Its seeds provide the poem’s final note of hope as the poet bids the apple, “live again” (42, 48).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the treatment of death in “On Observing a Large, Red-Streak Apple” and “The House of Night.” How is the subject treated in each poem?
2. In “Thanatopsis,” Bryant writes of the dynamic between humans and nature. Contrast Bryant’s sense of this dynamic with the one Freneau expresses here.

“To a New England Poet” (1823)

Freneau’s poem “To a New England Poet” follows the form of iambic tetrameter, with four feet of unstressed followed by stressed syllables. The rhyme scheme is *aabbccddeeffgg*, with a return to the rhyme of *d* (*land* and *stand* with *hand* and *stand*) in the third stanza and *c* in the fourth stanza (*pay* and *day* with *away* and *pay*). The least regular line, “And England will reward you well,” stands apart from the remainder of the poem, in terms of both its rhyme scheme and its content. As the 25th line of the poem, it serves as the fulcrum, or crux on which the poem relies as its foundation. Thus, it is all the more telling that the line, while it conforms to the meter of iambic tetrameter, deviates from the rhyme scheme by not rhyming with any of the

other lines. In a five-line stanza, “And England will reward you well” becomes more prominent as the odd-numbered line in a poem dominated by eight-line stanzas. When taken in context, the line stands as both a piece of sage advice intended for a “New England poet” and an angry complaint against a nation that pays its bards the same amount as “the meanest drudges” (5).

Freneau begins the poem with the disparity between the knowledge the poet holds, “Though skilled in Latin and Greek,” with the modest income he earns for his knowledge or education, “fifty cents a week” (1–2). The argument Freneau makes is that the poet, with his extensive classical knowledge, should be wise enough to realize that there is no economic advantage to be gained by writing poems. But Freneau’s argument is less about the foolishness of the poet who pursues a less than lucrative career. Rather, his real anger is targeted at America’s lack of respect for poets, especially when contrasted with their treatment by the aristocracy of England. He writes specifically of the case of WASHINGTON IRVING, who did not gain fame in America until he had become a celebrated writer in England and Europe in general. Freneau compares Irving’s reception in England, “he has kissed a Monarch’s hand! / Before a prince I see him stand,” with the daily stresses of a poet in America: “While you with terror meet the frown / Of Bank Directors of the town” (15–16, 19–20). The contrast is quite stark and effective. While Irving is feted and celebrated in England, the unnamed New England poet receives disapproving looks from bank directors, perhaps because his work is deemed unworthy, or perhaps because he owes money.

Given Freneau’s dislike of British aristocracy, as evidenced by the tone and content of his more politically charged poems, the reader should not mistakenly assume that Freneau wishes for the replication of this system in America. Indeed, the lines describing Irving’s royal reception are deflated with a reminder of the American Revolution and its express charge to eliminate rule by a monarch: “Forgetting times of seventy-six” (18). It is unclear from the placement of this line whether Freneau means to chastise Irving for acting in an un-American manner by “mixing”



JUPITER HAMMON (1711–1806)

If we should ever get to Heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black, or for being slaves.

(“An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York”)

Jupiter Hammon is often called the first published black writer in America. From the Lloyd family ledger, we know that Hammon was born into slavery on October 11, 1711 (O’Neale 38). His master at his birth was Henry Lloyd, and throughout his life, Hammon would remain a slave of the Lloyd family. In 1763, when Henry Lloyd died, Jupiter’s ownership transferred to Joseph Lloyd. In his later years, Hammon became the property of John Lloyd, the grandson of his original owner. The Lloyds were “one of the few families on Long Island, or for that matter in the state of New York, which had strong familial and commercial ties to Boston, Hartford, New York City, and London; the Lloyds obtained slave labor for their section of the state, prospering greatly from an exchange of goods and human chattel” (O’Neale 17). The family claimed ties to Welsh royalty and traced its lineage to Queen Elizabeth’s personal physician. Their manorial grant in Queen’s Village, which the family patriarch renamed *Lloyd’s Neck*, consisted of 3,000 acres. The nearby seaport proved essential to the family’s mercantile business, which included the slave trade to the island of Jamaica, as Henry Lloyd described his business ventures (O’Neale 18). The critic Sondra O’Neale, who studied the Lloyd family ledgers, has asserted that Jupiter Hammon’s parents were two other slaves owned by the family: a male slave referred to only as Opium and a female slave called Rose (22). O’Neale bases her assertion about the identities of Jupiter’s

parents on two observations gleaned from studying the Lloyd family ledgers: that Opium is one of two slaves who were owned continually, and he was not hired out after Henry Lloyd’s establishments as lord of the manor, and Jupiter’s birth, which both took place in 1711. Hammon was able to attend school and apparently served the Lloyd family as a clerk. The Long Island Quaker community helped Hammon find a publisher for his work.

As has his contemporary PHILLIS WHEATLEY, Jupiter Hammon has suffered his share of negative criticism, most of it generated in the centuries after their works appeared. The contemporary critic and advocate Sondra O’Neale attributes the negative statements made by other critics, both past and present, to their lack of knowledge of the Bible and the circumstances inhibiting any overt rebellion in the published works of slaves (3). J. Saunders Redding, who wrote critically in 1939 of Hammon’s poetic style, focused primarily on the religious content of his prose and on the supposed absence of a political message. Redding referred to Hammon’s verse as “rhymed prose, doggerel, in which the homely thoughts of a very religious and superstitious man are expressed in limping phrases” (4–5). Indeed, Redding yoked Hammon with Wheatley when he offered his most scathing remark: “Both preferred slavery in America to freedom in Africa” (5). Similarly to Redding’s assessment, the critic Benjamin Mays argues that Hammon’s devotion to

Christianity “serve[s] as an opiate for the people.” He also asserts that Hammon “was more interested in salvation in Heaven than he was in any form of social reconstruction” (102). For both Redding and Mays, Hammon appears as a naive and blindly devoted Christian whose religious convictions have erased all vestiges of rebellion against and subversion of the institution of slavery.

In her analysis of the often overlooked or unknown history of slavery in the North, Sondra O’Neale refers to the execution of slaves charged with rebellion and attempted escape; the draconian laws instituted in New York, Hammon’s home state, which dictated all aspects of a slave’s life; and the environment he must have endured as a slave at the Lloyds’ manor house. One specific example in which O’Neale argues that most critics misinterpret Hammon’s writings and messages involves his simple admonishment against slaves’ cursing. A law passed in New York in 1730 made the use of profane language by a slave punishable “by whipping, not exceeding forty stripes” (O’Neale 13). In researching the legal statutes that regimented the lives of slaves in New York, O’Neale offers a persuasive context in which critics should reimagine Hammon and his works. What on the surface seems to be a request for slaves to remain free of any form of sin becomes instead a matter of practical advice for slaves to save them from the whipping post.

In defense of Hammon’s employment of the Bible in his writing, O’Neale asserts, “In antebellum America the Bible functioned as a main instrument for slave proponents and abolitionists alike” (27–28). During Hammon’s life, Calvinist doctrine prevailed, and this sect promoted the institution of slavery as it complied with their vision of God and their relationship to him. For Calvinists like the Puritans who believed in predestination, humans had no free will: God had already selected who would be among the “elect” to enjoy the pleasures of heaven after death. If God had such overwhelming power over humans, then the humans were well within their rights to exercise the same system of complete control over those they deemed

brutes, Africans. O’Neale believes that Hammon was introduced to Puritanism (28); despite his knowledge of Puritan beliefs, it is quite evident that Hammon received a more liberating sect of Christianity in his association with the Quakers of Long Island and Oyster Bay (O’Neale 28). It was the Quakers of Philadelphia who published Hammon’s “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York” posthumously.

Against critics who directly or indirectly insinuate that Hammon must have been content with his lot as a slave or else he would have rebelled or died in his efforts to escape the bonds of slavery, O’Neale offers a bleak picture of the slave named Opium, who she believes may have been Jupiter Hammon’s own father. As mentioned earlier, O’Neale bases her assertion of Opium’s patrimony on his presence in the Lloyd household at the time of Jupiter’s birth and on his ownership by the Lloyd family for his entire life. Judging from the Lloyd family ledger, O’Neale argues that Opium was a valued member of the household who was routinely rented out to neighboring families for a sizable amount of money. He is listed as one of the family’s assets at one point in the ledger, and family members request his presence when he is serving at other homes. Despite his ability to generate significant revenue for the Lloyd family, Opium was also a significant liability to their accounts, as he was returned only one day after being leased to a neighboring family because he was recalcitrant and had attempted to escape. According to the ledgers, Opium made several escape attempts in his lifetime, and all of them ended with his punishment and return to the Lloyd manor. O’Neale suggests that in witnessing the fruitless attempts of his fellow slave and possible father, Opium, Jupiter Hammon would have lost all hope in attempting escape himself.

To address charges by critics that Hammon should have rebelled, O’Neale provides accounts of public executions held in New York of slaves whose only crime was attempting to gain their own freedom. In 1741, 18 blacks and four white indentured servants were hung on the strength of the sole testimony of a fellow indentured servant, Mary

Burton (O’Neale 12–13). A rash of house fires in New York that were all imagined to be the work of house slaves fomented widespread panic about the possibility of slave rebellion. O’Neale also points to a succession of laws passed in 1708 and 1712 “for preventing, suppressing, and punishing the conspiracy and insurrection of Negroes and other slaves” (11). Although the first law was created before Hammon’s birth in 1711, the passage of the second act in the year after his birth indicates that the animus spurring the first law was still in existence and strong enough to warrant another piece of legislation.

In his writings, Hammon exhibited a profound and abiding understanding of the Bible and of its cultural importance in colonial American society. For contemporary readers of his works like “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley” and “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York,” knowledge of 18th-century culture and religion, as well as knowledge of biblical Scripture, are a key to understanding what O’Neale calls “the founder of African American literature” (34).

“An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries” (1760)

In Jupiter Hammon’s first poem, “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries,” he develops a theme that carries throughout his writings: a direct challenge to Calvinist belief in predestination of a select few, who do not include Africans. O’Neale argues that Hammon’s challenge appears directly in the poem’s title in its use of the term *salvation*. “In eighteenth-century theological definitions, the meaning of ‘salvation’ was related to the title of Christ as Savior and to that act of redemption whereby a person was ‘saved’ from sin and Satan. ‘Savior’ is the title for the Old Testament Jehovah, who delivered the Children of Israel from bondage in Egypt” (42). Therefore, O’Neale states, Hammon’s contemporary readers, who were well versed in 18th-century religious rhetoric, would immediately associate the poet’s

use of the term *savior* with the enslavement of the Israelites, and their own enslavement by abstraction. “It was impossible for a slave, writing the first literary expression by an African-American, to have penned the term ‘salvation’ without having slavery—his own ubiquitous crucible and that of African fellows—utmost in mind” (42).

O’Neale alerts readers to the 18th-century interpretation of another key term and concept, that of *redemption*. “Redemption related even more to implications of slavery and emancipation than ‘salvation.’ Old Testament Jews called Jehovah the ‘Great Redeemer’ because he ‘bought’ them back from slavery” (43). As testament to the use of the term *redemption* in African-American letters to address release from slavery, Venture Smith, a 69-year-old former slave who wrote his narrative in 1798, used this term when addressing the topic of buying the freedom of his wife and children (Porter 551–555). Further proof of the term’s association with emancipation from slavery appears in the Reverend Daniel Veysie’s definition of the term: “A price, in the common acceptance of the word, is something given in exchange for some other thing; and this price becomes a ransom, when it is given for the deliverance of a person who is in a state of bondage or captivity” (43).

In the opening stanza of his poem, Hammon writes, “Redemption now to every one / That loves his holy Word” (3–4). The notion expressed in these lines directly challenges Calvinist thought about predestination, which held that God had selected a few who were to receive his salvation while the majority would suffer for eternity. As Hammon declares, redemption is available to all Christians. Hammon’s only qualifier, “every one that loves his holy Word,” does not discriminate along lines of class, race, or nationality, but instead penetrates these external trappings to consider only their faith. Further, as O’Neale has argued, the use of the terms *redemption* and *salvation* in this first stanza oriented readers to a more egalitarian sense of Christianity than that held by Calvinists in early America, and immediately reached out to fellow slaves.

With the lines “Dear Jesus give thy Spirit now / Thy Grace to every nation / that hasn’t the Lord to whom we bow,” Hammon functions in his role as a preacher and prays to God to extend his grace over the world, and not reserve it only for select nations or countries. This belief, too, flies in the face of early colonial thought, perhaps best expressed by JOHN WINTHROP, who imagined the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in “A Model of Christian Charity,” as a beacon for other civilizations to emulate, a “city upon a hill.” Even those climes not currently devoted to Christianity receive Hammon’s sincere hope for their salvation. Christ’s sacrifice, through his death and Resurrection, is imagined by Hammon to extend to all, as he writes, “It’s well agreed and certain true / He gave his only Son” (23–24). In a deft rhetorical move, Hammon states what is “well agreed and certain true,” yet takes this accepted knowledge of Christ’s Redemption and applies it to himself and other slaves. This reading of Christ’s sacrifice as an act intended to save all of humanity results from the combined effect of the preceding stanzas and their insistence on God’s grace for “every nation” and Redemption available to “every one.”

Hammon’s persona as a preacher in the poem appears again in stanza 7, when he pleads, “Lord hear our penitential Cry” (25). The use of *our* is key, as it expands the identity of the speaker from a singular voice to a representative of a larger body, perhaps a congregation. If this *our* is fellow slaves, as seems to concur with O’Neale’s interpretation, then the plea for “Salvation from above” resonates with a double meaning: spiritual salvation and physical relief from the sufferings of bondage. Another reference to slavery appears in the following stanza, stanza 8, in which Hammon names Christ as “being thy captive Slave” (32). O’Neale traces Hammon’s reference to Christ as a slave to the Gospel of Mark: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). The use of biblical text to refer to Christ as a servant or slave places African slaves like him in an elevated position, as it calls into question the authority that slave owners

hold over fellow humans. If Christ is a slave, and he is the slave of the Lord, then only the Lord can rightfully occupy a position of authority. Hammon cannot write out these conclusions in his poem and still have it published, but he can reference the gospel and trust that his readers, well versed in biblical text, would draw such a conclusion.

Hammon makes another biblical allusion, as O’Neale notes, in stanza 11 when he writes of “our lamentation.” She points out that in addition to the traditional definition of the term as a “mournful cry, it also is the title of an Old Testament book by the prophet Jeremiah. To understand Hammon’s use of the term, one should note that Jeremiah wrote the brief book to lament Israel’s enslavement under Babylon” (64). As an interpretation of the stanza’s final line, “We felt thy salvation,” O’Neale refers readers to a belief widely held “in the old-time camp meetings among Blacks in agrarian culture [that] prayer was not consummated unless the supplicant was assured that he had gotten his message through” (54). As an intermediary between fellow sinners and God, Hammon assures those joined with him in prayer that their penitential cries have been received, as evidenced by the speaker’s emotional response (54). Such a practice was widely exercised during the revivals of the Great Awakening in which sinners physically demonstrated their repentance (54–55). O’Neale’s interpretation extends to the next stanza and its second line, “give us a true motion.” Lest readers misinterpret this line for “true emotion,” O’Neale cautions, “Hammon is concerned here with general repentance rather than simply a veneer of church attendance and societal recognition that could result in pseudoassumptions of authentic Christian experience” (64).

The poem’s final biblical allusion to the common sufferings of Africans and Israelites in the bonds of slavery occurs in stanza 16 when Hammon references “thy leading Staff.” O’Neale points to Moses’ association with a staff in confrontation with Pharaoh, “the archetypal oppressor of Israelites” (64). For Moses, the staff functioned both as a weapon of revenge, for he used it to “bring plagues

on the Egyptians,” and as a source of nourishment and escape: “He parted the Red Sea with the same staff and used it to smite a rock to provide water for the tribes as they were exiting from Egypt” (64).

The speaker’s voice shifts from sincere supplicant and preacher to that of God, assuring them all of the reception of their pleas and of their future salvation in stanza 18. “Salvation gently given / O turn your hearts, accept the Word / Your souls are fit for Heaven” (62). Having laid the groundwork for an egalitarian interpretation of salvation from the initial stanza, Hammon makes clear that “your souls” includes his fellow slaves, whom Calvinism would deny a position among the elect. The remaining stanzas of the poem eagerly anticipate salvation in heaven: “let us with Angels share.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. In “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York” as well as “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley,” Jupiter Hammon directly identifies himself as a Negro slave, but his first poem makes no such statements. How does Hammon position or identify himself in this poem?
2. How does Hammon’s message in this poem compare to those in his other works? How would you describe the tone of this poem? Does it shift? If so, where?

“An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, Who Came from Africa at Eight Years of Age, and Soon Became Acquainted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (1778)

Jupiter Hammon invites Wheatley, defined as a “pious youth,” to celebrate God’s wisdom in taking her to America from “that distant shore” so she might “learn his holy word” (1, 3, 4). The complementary biblical verse to this opening stanza is from the final chapter of Ecclesiastes: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you will say ‘I find no pleasure in them’”

(12:1). Within this passage, we are reminded of the faith that we held when we were young and living lives devoid of trouble and filled with pleasure. Given Wheatley’s youth spent in Africa until her kidnapping and enslavement at the age of eight, this passage seems at odds with the first stanza. Although Wheatley referred to her own delivery into a Christian nation from the “land of errors,” the circumstances of her early life seem to work against a direct reading of Hammon’s own writing and references to the Bible.

Psalms 136, verses 1, 2, and 3 accompany Hammon’s second stanza, in which he considers the possibility that were it not for “God’s tender mercy,” Wheatley might still reside “amidst a dark abode” (7, 6). All three lines from the citation in Psalms begin with the same refrain, “Give thanks,” and end, “His love endures forever” (Psalm 136:1–3). This second half of the refrain, which speaks of God’s enduring love, might echo as a consolation to Wheatley for the temporary condition of enslavement that marks her time on earth. Because her journey to America occasioned her possession of the “holy word,” the brief difficulties she must endure will be rewarded in the hereafter. Hammon’s choice of terms, “Thou hast the holy word,” contains an allusion to her poetry, which is often informed by her Christian belief (8).

The third stanza builds upon the idea of slaves’ receiving their rewards after death for the ills suffered in life. Hammon writes of “reap[ing] the joys that never cease” (11). The second verse of Hammon’s first of two biblical citations for this particular stanza seems most in line with his own expression, as Psalm 1, 2 refer to God’s law that the mindful Christian “meditates [on] day and night.” The faithful who “does not walk in the counsel of the wicked” are blessed (1). The metaphor of walking appears to be carried over into Hammon’s line “fair wisdom’s ways are paths of peace, and they that walk therein” (9–10). The Psalms citation makes no mention of peace but speaks instead of wisdom and joy. It is possible that Hammon refers to peace as an indirect admonition to those who would rebel against the harsh

conditions of slavery. Hammon's reference to wisdom appears also in the second biblical citation for this stanza: "Do not be wise in your own eyes" (Proverbs 3:7). Despite the double appearance of this term in both the Bible and the poem, its meaning seems to be obscured rather than clarified. When considered in concert, the two references to wisdom defer to God and to peace, as though advising Wheatley to place her faith in God's plan and thus act peacefully when confronted with any difficulty. Given Wheatley's propensity to utilize the authority and voice afforded by her position as a pious Christian, the two passages on wisdom could easily be Hammon's indirect applauding of Wheatley's "wise" employment of Christian belief and biblical references when addressing the difficult subject of enslavement.

Hammon repeats the idea that "God's tender mercy" was at work in removing Wheatley from Africa. He writes of earthly and celestial rewards that are available to her because of her conversion and abiding faith: "In Christian faith thou hast a share / worth all the gold of Spain" (15–16). The rewards afforded by Wheatley's Christian faith, as outlined in Psalm 103, include the following "benefits": "He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases; he redeems my life from the pit and crowns me with love and compassion" (3–4).

Tellingly, the fifth stanza, which alludes to the middle passage that Wheatley endured "while thousands [were] tossed by the sea" makes no reference to a supporting biblical passage. Instead, Hammon simply includes the ominous but accurate term to describe the sea voyage from Africa to enslavement in the West: *death*.

Stanzas 6, 7, and 8 provide a meditation on the salvation purchased for both Wheatley and mankind in general through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. For Wheatley in particular, the death and resurrection of Jesus oblige her to uphold herself as "a pattern" "to [the] youth of Boston town" (21, 22). The corresponding biblical passages from Corinthians, Romans, and Psalms make no mention of the obligation Christians have to model proper behavior, but all speak instead of the benefits of a

life guided by righteousness, and of God's love and deliverance.

Hammon returns to Wheatley in stanza 9, in which he advises her to "seek the living God," echoing the language of Matthew, which assures the faithful that "he who seeks finds" (7:8). Such inquisitiveness, Hammon assures Wheatley, will result ultimately in her being "perfect in the word" (36). As with stanza 2, Hammon retains the double meaning of Wheatley's understanding of the Bible, or holy word, and the crafted verse of her poetry.

Although stanzas 10 and 11 return to the theme of Wheatley's removal from a "distant shore" and "heathen shore," neither of the accompanying verses from Psalms refers to God's deliverance. Hammon's invitation, "come magnify thy God," closely echoes the declarations of extolling, praising, boasting, and glorifying the Lord (Psalm 34: 1–3).

Hunger and thirst, two common needs that animals and humans alike must satisfy, are the subjects of stanza 13, which Hammon transforms to the basic needs the soul has for God. Psalm 42 describes a person whose "tears have been [his] good," a lamentable condition that too many slaves shared (42:1–3). Hammon's reminder, the third time it has appeared in his poem, that Wheatley "hast the holy word," might now refer to her ability to live off the monies earned from the publication of her verse. In direct opposition to the subject of Wheatley's meeting her basic needs on earth, Hammon devotes his remaining eight stanzas to the rewards that Wheatley, as a righteous Christian, can enjoy in heaven. The stark contrast between Hammon's only reference to the very real condition Wheatley and he could face as slaves—being hungry—and his immediate return from this subject to "heaven's joys," where Wheatley may "drink Samaria's flood" and never thirst again, is worthy of further examination. Hammon seems to take on a tone of gentle but firm admonition in his address to Wheatley. While he has praised her before as a model for the "youth of Boston town," and thus imagined within her a moral compass that would guide her and allow her to guide others, his sub-

sequent stanzas advise her to “seek heaven’s joys” and thus differentiate herself from those “thousands [who] muse with earthly toys” (67, 65). How can a reader reconcile these contrasting treatments of Phillis Wheatley—first as a “pattern” for others and later as a potentially fallen Christian in need of remonstrance? It might well be that Hammon’s reference, however brief, to the conditions of slavery, which were too difficult to solve on earth, indicates that all he could imagine were the rewards of heaven for those like him and Wheatley who suffer on earth.

For the first time in the poem, he refers to the two of them as *we* and projects himself into the poem. This occurs in stanza 17 when he writes, “Where we do hope to meet” (68). The reference to an eventual meeting place for the two of them is not to earth but rather to heaven, and the language falls short of the certainty expressed in previous stanzas as Hammon states that they “hope to meet.” Hammon again refers to their common fate in the 20th stanza, “Whene’er we come to die” (78). The two shall leave the body, “its cottage made of clay,” and transcend the brutal conditions of slavery imposed on them on earth (79). This is the only reference made to the body or to his and Wheatley’s African racial identity until the closing lines, when Hammon identifies himself as “a Negro Man belonging to Mr. Joseph Lloyd.” This reference to himself as “belonging” to another breaks the unified “we” between him and Phillis Wheatley as the African-born poetess had been manumitted in 1773, nearly five years prior to the writing and publication of Hammon’s poem. With this knowledge in mind, readers might cast a second look at the hopefulfulness of the first half of the poem with the potential for doing good deeds on earth and the transfer of such high feeling to one’s life after death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read some of the biblical references for the stanzas that are not provided in this entry and compare the concepts presented in them with the message contained within Hammon’s stanza. How might you account for the differences?
2. Compare Hammon’s treatment of slavery with Wheatley’s and OLAUDAH EQUIANO’S. How do they address freedom, racism, and the slave-owning Christians who use the Bible for justification of the institution of slavery? How do they reconcile Christianity with slavery?

“An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York” (1786)

Hammon composed this prose piece at Queen’s Village (present-day Hartford, Connecticut) in September 1786, and it first appeared in print the following year in New York, and then in Philadelphia. The urban area of Hartford, which was a haven for Joseph Lloyd during the Revolutionary War, proved a fruitful place for Hammon’s writing, as it also was the location where he wrote and published his address to Phillis Wheatley (O’Neale 248). The third edition of “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York” appeared in 1806, an indication that Hammon’s message struck a cord with a readership across the century. The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (the Quakers) published 500 copies of the “Address.”

Hammon’s “Address” is prefaced by both his brief statement of humility, which was in keeping with literary tradition, as well as an authenticating note from the publishing house, verifying Hammon’s identity as an African slave. In his authorial address to “members of the African Society in the city of New York,” Hammon commends them for “discovering so much kindness and good will to those you thought were oppressed, and had no helper.” Hammon offers his humble hope that the society members will “think it is likely to do good among [African slaves]” and “be of any service to them.” In their note dated February 20, 1787, the printers attest, “As this address is wrote [*sic*] in a better stile than could be expected from a slave, some may be ready to doubt of the genuineness of the production.” In addition to attesting to Hammon’s identity as both the author of the address

and a slave, the printers provide readers with a brief moral sketch of him, avowing that he “has been remarkable for his fidelity and abstinence from those vices, which he warns his brethren against.” It is quite likely that the printers were mindful of Puritan doctrine when offering statements regarding Hammon’s moral character, for the Puritans feared that the written word could be a potential source of moral corruption if either the author or the message were morally tainted. The printers’ pledge about Hammon’s morality also speaks indirectly to Northern fears of slave rebellion and contagion. If the printers were to disseminate a text by an amoral or immoral person to a body of African slaves, they could potentially be responsible for inciting rebellion or insurrection. If, however, as the printers testify, Hammon is free of the vices he addresses in writing to his fellow slaves, then the possibility of his mounting an insurrection is negligible.

Hammon likens his position of speaking to “my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” to that of the apostle Paul, who writes in Romans to his fellow Jews who have not converted to Christianity. By making this comparison, Hammon foregrounds his biblical knowledge and thus solidifies the position of authority from which he speaks. As Paul, who was a Jew who preached among fellow Jews to convert them to Christianity, Hammon imagines himself to be a prophet speaking to his fellow Negroes, who may or may not be Christians. Additionally, Hammon’s specific use of Paul, as the critic Sondra O’Neale views it, serves a subtler, but nonetheless crucial, purpose. The parallel with Paul allowed Hammon indirectly to reference the practice of segregation of black parishioners in colonial churches just as Paul “vehemently disagreed with this practice and the prejudice against Gentiles that it perpetuated” in the book of Galatians (O’Neale 213).

By opening with a biblical reference, and imploring his fellow slaves to read and believe the Bible, Hammon was not only looking to their spiritual well-being, but also providing them with what O’Neale refers to as a “secret code” to his own writ-

ing (213). “Hammon encouraged his slave audience to master reading and then to apply this skill to Scripture for two reasons: first, they could hardly understand his coded messages without some knowledge of biblical symbolism, of narrative, and of ethics, and of God’s special concern for all pariahs; and second, they could not comprehend the pretentiousness of colonists who professed Christianity while continuing the slave system” (O’Neale 215). O’Neale offers several biblical references that Hammon makes but “could not publicly explore” in his “Address” such as his references to God’s preference of the poor (slaves) to the rich (slave owners), his final judgment against slave owners, and a direct challenge to the Anglican-Calvinist belief in the absolute will of God. Hammon cites a passage from the second book of James in the New Testament in which God chooses the poor for salvation. This passage directly contradicts Puritan belief in predestination for the elect who envision themselves as the only ones deemed worthy of salvation; if God has also selected the poor for salvation, then the Puritans are not the only elect ones. Further, as O’Neale states, readers familiar with James would naturally think of the first book of this particular Gospel, in which James writes that “the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower,” and recognize in this indirect reference an indictment of wealthy slave owners (James 1:10). Another example of how Hammon relies upon the Bible as a “covert code” for communicating with his fellow slaves involves his use of Ephesians in his imaginings of slavery. In other portions of this gospel, Paul advised masters to treat their slaves as brothers, and then, in his epistle to Philemon, Paul pointedly requests that the master free his brother (former slave), who is now his equal.

Hammon offers his readers specific advice that appears to contemporary readers and critics to advocate complacency in enslavement, and for this reason, O’Neale and others believe that “this misinterpretation has done much to damage Hammon’s integrity and to prevent his veneration as the first Black writer of America” (228). When

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Baker, Houston. "Balancing the Perspective: A Look at Early Black American Literary Artistry." *Negro American Literary Forum* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1972): 65–71.
- Bruce, Dickson D., Jr. *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680–1865*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001.
- Carretta, Vincent, ed. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999.
- Greene, Lorenzo J. *The Negro in Colonial New England: 1620–1776*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1942.
- Hammon, Jupiter. "An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York." Available online. URL: <http://etext.virginia.edu/readex/20400.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Mays, Benjamin. *The Negro's God*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968.
- O'Neale, Sondra. *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African-American Literature*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993.
- Porter, Dorothy. *Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
- Redding, J. Saunders. *To Make a Poet Black*. College Park, Md.: McGrath, 1939.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806?)" Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap2/hammon.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Robinson, William H., ed. *Early Black American Poets*. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1969.
- Trumbull, Hammond J. *The True Blue Laws of Connecticut and New Haven and the False Blue Laws*. Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing, 1876.
- Veysie, Reverend Daniel. *The Doctrine of Atonement: Illustrated and Defended in Eight Sermons*. London: Sotheby, 1975.



HANDSOME LAKE (1735–1815)

Take these cards, this money, this fiddle, this whiskey and this blood corruption and give them all to the people across the water.

(“How America Was Discovered”)

Handsome Lake was born in 1735 in Conawagas, a Seneca village alongside the Genesee River, across from the present-day town of Avon, in Livingston County, New York (Parker 9). His teachings and prophecies were initially transmitted orally, until the ethnographer Arthur C. Parker, himself a member of the Seneca tribe, codified much of his work in the 1913 book *The Code of Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet*. Parker learned from interviewing Buffalo Tom Jemison that Handsome Lake was “a middle-sized man, slim, and unhealthy looking” (9). Parker could not determine Handsome Lake’s warrior name but did learn that he belonged to the “noble” class of Seneca, known as the *Ganiòdai’ìò* or *Ska’niadar’ìò* (9). Although Handsome Lake was a member of the Turtle Clan, he was raised primarily by the Wolves (9). As Parker states, “The general story of his life may be gleaned from a perusal of his code, there being nothing of any consequence known of his life up to the time of his ‘vision,’” which took place in 1799 (9). The only exception, Parker admits, is the presence of Handsome Lake’s name on a treaty dating from 1794, but the future prophet’s involvement in the debates leading up to the signing of the treaty is unknown.

From general oral tradition, Parker learned that Handsome Lake suffered from alcoholism, fueled in part by the despair he and fellow members of the Seneca tribe felt upon losing the Genesee territory, which was his birthplace. When he and fellow

tribe members moved to the Alleghany settlement, he fell into drinking, or, as Parker describes it, “became afflicted with a wasting disease that was aggravated by his continued use of the white man’s fire water” (9). Living alone in a “bare cabin [that] scarcely afford him shelter,” Handsome Lake seems to have endured this sick or drunken state for nearly four years, until his daughter, who was married by then, returned to care for him (9). During his illness, he experienced revelations or visions, which he later described in detail.

Handsome Lake’s popular appeal gained the attention of President THOMAS JEFFERSON, and after his visit to Washington, D.C., with a delegation of Oneida and Seneca in 1802, Jefferson requested that Secretary of War Dearborn write a letter commending the Seneca prophet. His message and his model of temperance were applauded by Dearborn, who wrote that if the tribes follow Handsome Lake’s wisdom, “the Great Spirit will take of [them] and make [them] happy.”

Handsome Lake’s vision in 1799 created what is referred to as the “Religion of Handsome Lake” and “The Old Way of Handsome Lake,” a set of moral codes directed to members of the Six Nations, another name for the Iroquois. In the early 18th century, six tribes, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora, banded together to become the Six Nations. Parker describes the emotional impact of Handsome Lake’s teachings by

contextualizing his message of hope and possibility against the historical events that had demoralized the tribe: loss of ancestral lands, broken treaties, and daily acts of hostility from the encroaching Anglo-European settlers. Against this atmosphere of collective despair, Parker situates Handsome Lake's vision as "a new system, a thing to think about, a thing to discuss, a thing to believe. His message, whether false or true, was a creation of their own and afforded a nucleus about which they could cluster themselves and fasten their hopes."

In Handsome Lake's vision, he falls down outside his cabin, apparently dead, after having uttered the words "So be it." His daughter and son-in-law spread word of his death, and relatives gather around his corpse only to discover a warm area on Handsome Lake's body that seems to spread until the presumed dead man opens his eyes and declares that he is well, and that he has been visited by four beings who impart a message to him from the Great Creator. In their message, they speak of four words that anger the Great Creator: *alcohol*, *witchcraft*, *evil charms*, and *abortives* (plants used to promote the spontaneous abortion of fetuses). The Great Creator's additional words of advice primarily concern the institution of marriage: He wishes for husbands to remain with their wives, especially after they have borne children together; for mothers-in-law no longer to intervene and disrupt marital harmony between new brides and grooms; for husbands to refrain from physically abusing their wives; and for spouses to remain loyal to one another. Interestingly, the Great Creator advocates practicing three activities that white men perform: cultivation of land, construction of houses, and cultivation of livestock.

Handsome Lake's prophecies, as the ethnographer Parker records in *The Code of Handsome Lake*, were still taught in the early 20th century as an integral part of the annual midwinter festivals that take place on reservations in New York and Ontario (5). Six chiefs (originally including Handsome Lake's half brother, Cornplanter) are considered to be the "holders" of Handsome Lake's teachings, and they exchange places with one another to pro-

claim the three-day-long recitation of the *Gai'wiiio*, the Iroquois name for Handsome Lake's "new religion" (6). Parker attributes the lasting appeal of Handsome Lake's teachings to the linguistic tie affected through the recitation of the *Gai'wiiio* in the Seneca language, as well as the lucid manner in which the moral precepts are expressed (7). The various versions of the *Gai'wiiio* were consolidated and codified by Chief John Jacket in the mid-19th century when he transcribed what was deemed by consensus to be the most accurate version of Handsome Lake's words into the Seneca language (7). The paper version was passed among the "holders" so that they might memorize the portions that they had misspoken in past years, but one of them, Chief Cornplanter, a different Cornplanter from the chief who was Handsome Lake's half brother, reportedly "lost the papers sheet by sheet" (8). Cornplanter's attempt to reconstruct the work was drawn to the attention of Parker, and a translation was begun.

"How America Was Discovered" (1799)

As the preface to Handsome Lake's prophecy, which occurred in 1799 and was later memorized and retold by six "holders" at sacred meetings held around the time when the first wild strawberries appear, this is the tale of how America was discovered. In Arthur C. Parker's *The Code of Handsome Lake*, the tale is entitled "How the White Race Came to America and Why the Gai'wiiio Became a Necessity." The term *Gai'wiiio* refers to the moral teachings of Handsome Lake. Thus, in the prophecy the original appearance of Anglo-European settlers in America is intricately tied to the moral teachings passed down from the Great Creator to Handsome Lake through his vision. The contemporary version of this tale derives from the oral version of "How America Was Discovered" given to the ethnographer and fellow Seneca Arthur C. Parker.

In Parker's *The Code of Handsome Lake*, the tale begins by situating the place from which this young minister or preacher originates: "Now this happened a long time ago and across the great salt

sea that stretches east. There is, so it seems, a world there and soil like ours. There in the great queen's country where swarmed many people—so many that they crowded upon one another and had no place for hunting—there lived a great queen" (16). The "great salt sea" refers to the Atlantic Ocean, and the world that appears with "soil like ours" is clearly Europe. The reference to a queen rather than a king, and the later reference to CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, specifically narrow the continent down to Spain, with the queen as none other than Isabella, who, along with King Ferdinand, financed Columbus's famous voyage that was supposed to discover a new trade route to the Indies.

Both versions, however, contain the same details of the young minister performing the duty his queen requested of him: dusting some old volumes hidden in a chest. When he finishes his chore, he opens the final book resting at the bottom of the chest. In Parker's longer version, the minister looks about him and listens for anyone approaching, signs "he had no right to read the book and wanted no one to detect him" (16). Thus, the knowledge derived from the book—that the preacher had been deceived and that the Lord was not on earth—appears in the longer version as forbidden knowledge, linked indirectly with the Genesis tale of the Tree of Knowledge from which both Adam and Eve ate, causing their expulsion from Eden. This aspect of the longer version recurs at the end of the tale, when the figure whom the minister trusts and with whom he enters into a bargain is revealed to be the devil.

The moral aspects of the tale are pervasive, with the search for God on earth ending with mankind corrupting mankind. The journey the minister first makes takes him to a golden castle across a river that is spanned by a bridge of gold. The multiple references to gold symbolize the avarice of early explorers such as Columbus who seek out new lands in the hopes of exploiting their natural resources. The minister ignores the warnings he has that his new acquaintance who dwells in the golden castle should be feared and not trusted. Two of his fellow companions pray, fall on their knees, and quickly depart before ever reaching the castle doors. They are sym-

bols of true believers who recognize a source of evil and turn their backs upon it just as the truly devout were said to look away from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament. When the minister enters the castle and is asked to bear a bundle of five things in exchange for a great reward, he has in essence sold his soul to the devil. Further, the implication of moral corruption in Handsome Lake's tale is not reserved solely to the unnamed minister but is extended to all explorers, beginning with Columbus, who hears the minister's tale and bargain and agrees to set sail for the new land.

The people who live "across the ocean that lies toward the sunset [in] another world" are described as "virtuous, they have no evil habits or appetites but are honest and single-minded." Columbus takes with him to the New World a bundle containing five things "that men and women enjoy"; in the longer version, these very items are described as the vehicle by which Columbus will "make [indigenous people] as white men are" (Parker 17). The five items are playing cards, money, a fiddle, whiskey, and "blood corruption." The latter is further defined in the longer version as a "secret poison [that will] eat the life from their blood and crumble their bones." All are inextricably linked with acculturation into Western civilization (18). Parker's *The Code of Handsome Lake* provides a more detailed explanation or definition of "blood corruption" so that it seems to refer to the fatal introduction of epidemics such as smallpox to indigenous populations by Anglo-European colonists.

Both tales end with the same note—the devil himself lamenting "his enormous mistake" of wreaking "havoc and misery" on such a grand scale.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As stated, Handsome Lake's tale "How America Was Discovered" appears as a preface for his moral tales and is even titled in such a way as to make the moral tales a necessity. Consider the moral aspects of the tale. Is it a particularly Christian morality? Does it directly condemn European explorers such as Columbus?



WASHINGTON IRVING (1783–1859)

A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener by constant use.

(“Rip Van Winkle”)

The youngest of 11 children, Washington Irving was born on April 3, 1783, to a merchant family residing in New York City. His father, William, derived from a wealthy Scottish family whose ancestry could be traced back to the secretary and armor bearer of William Bruce. Because of the family’s declining circumstances, William left Scotland and took to the sea. During service in the French War, William met Sarah Sanders, and the two married in 1761 and departed two years later for New York, where William took up work as a merchant. As a testament to the family’s loyalties to the American cause of the Revolutionary War, they named their youngest son after the nation’s founding father and first president, George Washington. The biographer Charles Dudley Warner reports that the family’s Scottish maid, following General Washington into a shop, presented the baby named after him, and that the young Irving received a blessing from his namesake. Little did the Revolutionary War hero know that he was meeting one of his future biographers.

Irving’s childhood education is described as barely adequate, chiefly because of the young boy’s desires to be outdoors, reading travel and adventure books such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Sinbad*. Owing to his lack of engagement with a formal education, he was allowed to complete his schooling at age 16, when his family insisted that he enter into the pursuit of law, following the career choice of two of his

older brothers. In 1806, Irving completed his study of law with Judge Hoffman and successfully passed the bar. As a lawyer, Irving joined his brother John in a partnership (Warner 44). His association with the Hoffman family would endure throughout his lifetime and be the source of much joy and sorrow. Judge Hoffman’s daughter, Matilda, soon became enamored of Washington, as he did of her. Their families both embraced the possibility of marriage, but young Matilda contracted a disease and died a short time after at the age of 17. Irving’s grief was palpable and a central reason, as he explained to the Foster family while in Dresden, Germany, years later, why he never entertained the thought of marriage again. His biographer Warner reports that Irving slept for months with Matilda’s Bible prayer book beneath his pillow, and after his death, a locket of her hair, together with a sketch of her, were found among his possessions.

Matilda’s death occurred while Irving was still composing *The History of New York*. Irving writes of the incongruity of the two events in his memorandum:

When I became more calm and collected, I applied myself, by way of occupation, to the finishing of my work. I brought it to a close, as well as I could, and published it; but the time and circumstances in which it was produced rendered me always unable to look upon it with

satisfaction. Still it took with the public, and gave me celebrity, as an original work was something remarkable and uncommon in America. I was noticed, caressed, and, for a time, elevated by the popularity I had gained.

Irving began his literary career as a commentator on American life and character at the age of 19. In a series of pseudonymous letters signed *Jonathan Oldstyle*, Irving published his comments on America's desires to emulate France and Britain in the arts and fashion, among other subjects. The letters appeared in his brother Peter Irving's *Morning Chronicle*, which circulated in their hometown of New York City (Hedges 17). All of Irving's critics who read the Oldstyle letters recognize the budding author's parody of Addison and Steele, British writers famous for their satirical articles in the newspapers the *Spectator* and the *Tattler*. Nevertheless, many critics see in Irving's early writings the hallmarks of what would be honed into his own style and subject matter in subsequent years.

His view of society was significantly widened when he embarked on the fashionable trend of the grand tour, leaving home for 21 months on travels through Italy, France, Switzerland, England, and the "Low Countries." The biographers William Hedges and Charles Dudley Warner reason that Irving's "respiratory ailment" was a central cause of his journey. Just years before, Irving made several trips along the Hudson with the sole purpose of alleviating his pulmonary weakness, and when symptoms erupted again, his brothers determined to send him to Europe. Hedges notes the trip's dual purpose: As his health improved, so too did Irving's aesthetic sense (34). In Rome, Irving's focuses on the ruins and "sense of inevitable decay were to be his substitute for a theory of history or a philosophy" (42). It was also in Rome that he met Washington Allston, a painter whose passion for the art and enthusiasm for the city's landscapes nearly persuaded Irving to remain in Rome and take up the profession of painting. It is quite likely that some of his attention to landscape, seen most particularly in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," where the landscape appears as a character, derives

from his association with Allston. In direct contradiction to Hedge's reading of a growing aesthetic in Irving, Warner argues that the young traveler enjoyed the finer aspects of society such as theater, salons, and fine dining, but "there is little prophesy that Irving would be anything more in life than a charming 'flaneur.'"

While attending to his affairs as a lawyer, which included acting as a minor aide during Aaron Burr's trial for treason, Irving stole away to write and begin publishing a semimonthly periodical entitled *Salmagundi*, which means "hash," a parody of British periodicals such as Addison and Steele's *Spectator*. He delineated its purpose: "simply to instruct the young, reform the old, correct the town, and castigate the age." Irving received support from his brother William and the publisher David Longworth (45). Irving's recent journey to Europe appears to have influenced his subject matter for *Salmagundi* as Hedges states that travelers and traveling "manifest a great deal of interest." He turns the lens on Europeans and their views of America: "trying to read European meanings into America" (Hedges 53). Warner notes that *Salmagundi* struck a cord with readers: "From the first it was an immense success; it had circulation in other cities, and many imitations of it sprung up."

Irving followed the two years of *Salmagundi* with *The History of New York*, a satire in which he introduces readers to the highly unreliable historian Diedrich Knickerbocker. He was 26 years old at the time of *History's* publication. Warner writes that Irving's brother Paul was central to the earliest imaginings and drafts of the text, which originally offered "a mere burlesque upon pedantry and erudition." When Paul had to leave for Europe to attend to business, however, Irving took it upon himself to complete the manuscript. In this text, Irving explores a relativistic concept of history, which is highly dependent upon point of view. He achieves such an end by offering readers a host of conflicting opinions on any given subject, ranging from the superstitious and absurd to the most rational and studied. As a result, the latter seems just as likely, or unlikely, as the former. The creative advertisement of the book bears mention, as it

adds another layer to Irving's treatment of legend. In local newspapers, Irving advertised for a missing person named Diedrich Knickerbocker, who was described as an old man clad in knee breeches and wearing a cocked hat. In subsequent weeks, the tale of Knickerbocker had grown, including the fact that he had left without paying his landlord, and that all that remained of his personal effects was an odd book. The book, of course, was Irving's *The History of New York*.

As testament to the book's success, Sir Walter Scott wrote praise for Irving's creation, comparing his wit to that of Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, and Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*: "I have never," Sir Walter Scott wrote, "read anything so closely resembling the style of Dean Swift as the annals of Diedrich Knickerbocker. I have been employed these few evenings in reading them aloud to Mrs. S. and two ladies who are our guests, and our sides have been absolutely sore with laughing. I think, too, there are passages which indicate that the author possesses power of a different kind, and has some touches which remind me of Sterne."

In 1848, when Irving issued a new edition of *The History of New York*, he expresses his main aim in penning the book: "to embody the traditions of our city in an amusing form; to illustrate its local humors, customs, and peculiarities; to clothe home scenes and places and familiar names with those imaginative and whimsical associations so seldom met with in our new country, but which live like charms and spells about the cities of the old world, binding the heart of the native inhabitant to his home." Here, Irving expresses a desire to yoke the enviable qualities of the Old World, its charms and spells, to the sights of New York. And yet, when Irving does include legends in his tales, their grandeur is severely undercut and critiqued by the banal, the man who dreams such wonderful stuff while napping at the dinner table, or the figure who is just as prone to enjoying the more sophisticated elements of culture as he is the most crude. Irving's artistry, developed with this text, lies in his ability to create and explore further his own contradictions.

One such area of contradiction that continues to baffle critics involves Irving's own political views, and his class-oriented sensibilities. The Irving's patriarch was a merchant, and the rather large family was populated by lawyers. Indeed, one of the judges under whom Washington Irving first worked became a member of the Supreme Court, and he was then forced to take up with another judge. Even then, Irving himself reports his doubts about his abilities to have passed the bar without a certain predisposition in his favor among those determining his examination results. Thus, Irving recognizes how his family name and influential associations have worked in concert to gain him his career as a lawyer. It is clear, then, that Irving arrives at the subject of his native soil from a privileged point of view, and yet he does not categorically look with disdain or condescension on the lesser elements of America. Indeed, they are celebrated, as they compose the primordial mass of the nation. However, in 1816, when the family fell on misfortune, particularly with the law firm, Irving worried whether he could make a living as a writer. In a letter to his friend Brevoort, Irving expresses a less elite sense of himself and his joys in life: "Thank Heaven I was brought up in simple and inexpensive habits, and I have satisfied myself that if need be, I can resume them without repining or inconvenience." The international success of *The Sketch Book* proved that he could. Warner includes as an anecdote to support Irving's fame that an English family, upon viewing a bust of George Washington, mistakenly identified him as the author of *The Sketch Book*.

Despite Irving's declarations that he could economize without grousing, he expresses a genuine disgust with the masses with whom he spoke and caroused while involved in the election campaign of a Federalist. "Oh, my friend, I have been in such holes and corners; such filthy nooks and filthy corners; sweep offices and oyster cellars! I have sworn brother to a leash of drawers, and can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life, —faugh! I shall not be able to bear the smell of small beer and tobacco for a month to come. . . . Truly this saving one's country is a nauseous piece of business, and if patriotism is such a dirty virtue, —prythee,

no more of it.” Despite these professed feelings of distaste for the masses, Irving proved himself too malleable than to be constricted by party lines, for although a Federalist and thus a loyalist to Alexander Hamilton, Irving expresses sincere sympathy for Aaron Burr, who killed Hamilton in a duel. Further evidence of his ability to cross party lines appears in a letter in which he expresses his surprise when dining with the very men who the night prior had been excoriated by “honest furious Federalists” as “consummate scoundrels,” as Irving discovers them to be “equally honest [and] warm” as those the previous night.

During the War of 1812, Irving became editor of the *Analectic*, a position that exposed him to British periodicals as the organ reprinted leading reviews and articles from England, as well as original material from America. He issued a second edition of *The History* and wrote letters to his friend Brevoort about town gossip and his profound sense of lethargy and ennui. In 1814, Irving enlisted in the army and became Governor Tompkin's aide and military secretary. This is yet another example of the contradictory nature of Irving, who had a deep affinity for Britain, but whose patriotism for America was riled with the burning of the capitol. Soon after his enlistment, in February 1815, peace was brokered between the two nations and Irving left for what was to be a brief trip to England to visit his brother Peter. He remained in Europe for the next 17 years.

With Peter's poor health, the future of the failing law firm fell to Irving, who spent 1815 and 1816 in Liverpool, engaged in attempting to buoy the family business. Critics and biographers of Irving all point to his dislike for the profession of law, as well as his predisposition, somewhat like his character Rip Van Winkle's, to avoid profitable labor at all costs. The two years thus employed were odious to Irving, as his letters home to his friend Brevoort prove. In a bit of a reversal of the very patriotism he had just recently expressed for America in his military enlistment, Irving writes to Brevoort of his general distaste for the breed of American he spied while in Liverpool: “Nothing can surpass the

dauntless independence of all form, ceremony, fashion, or reputation of a downright, unsophisticated American. Since the war, too, particularly, our lads seem to think they are ‘the salt of the earth’ and the legitimate lords of creation.”

Despite his reluctant work for the law firm, Irving managed to find time for one of his favorite pastimes, enjoying the theater. When on a trip to visit his sister Sarah, who had married Henry Van Wart of Birmingham, he came across a character of whom a sketch would soon appear in his next and most famous book, *The Sketch Book*. In a draft of what would become “The Angler,” Irving writes of a veteran angler who had spent some of his youth in America. “What I particularly liked him for was, that though we tried every way to entrap him into some abuse of America and its inhabitants, there was no getting him to utter an ill-natured word concerning us.” In comparison with Irving's general critique of the Americans he had recently spied in Liverpool, readers witness another in the author's series of contradictions. While he was quick to judge his fellow Americans abroad harshly, he seems quite defensive about hearing any disparaging words from Britons.

While in England, Irving met such notable literary figures as Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, and Isaac D'Israeli (father of Benjamin Disraeli, an author and later prime minister of England). He renewed his friendship with Sir Walter Scott. In the first part of 1818, all attempts to secure the family firm were exhausted, and Peter and Washington entered into bankruptcy. Although the process was excruciating for Irving, his biographer Warner characterizes the end of his family obligations to the firm as liberating, for it allowed the author to pursue his craft and allow nothing to distract him. This meant that the efforts of his brothers to procure him political and military posts, as secretary of legation and chief clerk in the navy, were declined. Likewise, Irving turned down the generous offers of Walter Scott and Mr. Murray to act as editor for various periodicals.

Instead, Irving dedicated himself exclusively to *The Sketch Book*, whose first number appeared in

America in May 1819, with the series completing in September the following year. “Rip Van Winkle” was one of the two pieces that appeared in the first installment. Of the success and instant fame he received on both sides of the Atlantic with the publication of *The Sketch Book*, Irving writes humbly: “I feel something as I suppose you did when your picture met with success, —anxious to do something better, and at a loss what to do.” To his friend Brevoort he expresses his intended aesthetic goal: “I have attempted no lofty theme, nor sought to look wise and learned, which appears to be very much the fashion among our American writers at present. I have preferred addressing myself to the feelings and fancy of the reader more than to his judgment.”

On the success of his latest work, Irving traveled to Paris, returned to England, and, in search of a cure for an unknown illness that plagued his ankles and prevented him at times from walking, toured Germany. He later returned to England and published “Tales of a Traveler.” Soon after, in February 1826, Irving journeyed to Madrid, Spain, and began work on his famous biography of CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, which was published in 1828. Warner considers this three-year period in Irving’s life to be his most productive, as he also wrote *The Alhambra*, *The Conquest of Granada*, and *The Legends of the Conquest of Spain*. These works came about through Irving’s access to primary sources and other documents, including Columbus’s journals. He returned to England when he received, and reluctantly accepted, an appointment as secretary of legation to the Court of St. James. In April 1830, the Royal Society of Literature awarded him a gold medal in honor of his literary works.

He died shortly after the final volume of his last work, a biography of his namesake, George Washington, was in press. He was buried overlooking Sleepy Hollow.

“Rip Van Winkle” (1819)

On its most basic and straightforward level, Irving’s short story, taken from *The Sketch Book*, recounts

the tale of a lovable henpecked husband named Rip Van Winkle who travels into the Kaatskill (Catskill) Mountains and sleeps for 20 years after having consumed the contents of the Dutch settler Hendrick Hudson’s flagon and witnessed figures resembling “an old Flemish painting” enjoying a game of nine-pin. He hastens with his faithful companion, a dog named Wolf, to escape from the harping remonstrances of his wife. When he awakens and returns to the village, he discovers that his extended nap transpired during the Revolutionary War, his wife and dog are deceased, and his daughter has grown and married, with a family of her own. Irving complicates this fantastic tale of a sociable loafer with a propensity to “attend to anybody’s business but his own” by interrogating the notions of truth, history, and what may or may not be believed.

The epigraph for “Rip Van Winkle” derives from a play entitled *The Ordinary* by the British playwright William Cartwright. In his selective reference to the play, Irving introduces readers to the idea that a person will keep truth “unto thylke day in which I creep into my sepulcher,” meaning that a person carries his or her own version of truth until death. In referencing Cartwright’s play, Irving preempts readers’ skepticism by turning the very notion of truth on its head. If each person carries his or her own sense of truth to the grave, then he or she cannot be persuaded to part with what he or she believes to be true, and this truth is not subject to interrogation or inspection. For Irving, then, truth is subjective. On a humorous note, Irving’s theme of the capricious nature of truth, that it exists for everyone but is not necessarily shared, explains the odd pairing of Dame Van Winkle and her husband. To him, the other members of the village, and his numerous friends and acquaintances, Rip Van Winkle is a “simple, good-natured man.” To Dame Van Winkle, his “termagant wife,” his reluctance to perform productive work for the farm has caused his estate to dwindle and fall into disrepair.

The discord between husband and wife, representing two different notions of labor and value, are reflective, perhaps, of the cultural shifts America

experienced in the years prior to and immediately following the Revolution. Dame Van Winkle appears somewhat despotic, and Rip must avail himself of the landscape, the physical distance separating England from the colonies, as a means of escaping from her. Just as England utilized the colonies for its own profit (such as with the imposition of taxes such as the Stamp Act), Dame Van Winkle relies upon her husband to perform “profitable labor.” In his direct and indirect rebellions, Rip might represent the American colonists desirous of a less despotic leadership than the “discipline of shrews at home.” His general popularity among members of the village likewise promotes the reading of Rip as an amiable American: “The children of the village, too, would shout with joy whenever he approached. He assisted at their sports, made their playthings, taught them to fly kites and shoot marbles, and told them long stories of ghosts, witches, and Indians.” In his pastime as a storyteller among the children, especially considering the topics of his tales, Rip Van Winkle represents a more amiable figure than Ichabod Crane, as he substitutes the fantasy of the tales for the reality of life.

The natural setting of New York plays a central role in this short story just as it does in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” but the relationship between the Kaatskill Mountains and Rip Van Winkle differs from that between Ichabod Crane and Sleepy Hollow. Although nature seems indifferent if not antagonist to Rip’s farm, it provides him with the means of escaping from a termagant wife whose tongue has been sharpened over the years by constant use berating her husband. Rip “declares it was of no use to work on his farm; it was the most pestilent little piece of ground in the whole country; everything about it went wrong, and would go wrong, in spite of him.” Gone is the fruitful and fecund landscape from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” that provided the Van Tassels with such natural bounty. “In the fictional world of Rip Van Winkle . . . [there is not] something familiar and comforting in nature” (Rubin-Dorsky 405). The wildness of the Catskills, however, provides Rip with a refuge but not without a cost. Although Rip

has successfully avoided the drudgery and demands of the work-a-day world, “he has had to surrender the major part of his mature life and become an alien in a community of which he had once been a valued part” (Ringe 465). The critic Philip Young views the loss of time in Rip’s life in the following manner: Rip “passes from childhood to second childhood with next to nothing in between” (570). Young’s point is that Rip has avoided precisely the responsibilities that mark adulthood, which his wife has chastised him repeatedly for neglecting. When he awakes, he has reached “that happy age when a man can be idle with impunity.”

The critic Donald Ringe views Irving’s story within a genre used by his fellow author JAMES FENIMORE COOPER in which New York writers critique the Yankee usurpers from New England who introduce rapid change and a profit-driven mentality to the tranquil New York neighborhoods, such as the old Dutch communities of Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winkle’s village. In contrast to the embodiment of New England in the figure of Ichabod Crane, Irving permeates the very atmosphere of the post–Revolutionary War village Rip encounters upon awaking with “a strong New England accent” (Ringe 464). As testament to Irving’s sense of New England as a destructive force, Ringe points to the inn that has become a Yankee hotel and the great tree cut down for a liberty pole. This critique, Ringe continues, was less about regions per se and more about Irving’s associations with them. For him, and for Cooper, New York represented the last vestiges of peace and tranquility available in America; New England, on the other hand, symbolized the chaos brought about by a society intent upon progress and profit at all costs. Ringe points to the fact that Rip is not a lazy fellow, as the narrative informs us of his numerous acts of labor performed for the benefit of his neighbors. What Rip is averse to, however, is the very kind of labor that New England represented for Irving: profit-based work (Ringe 465). Irving writes elsewhere of his dislike for New Englanders in “Conspiracy of Cocked Hats” in which he views “all turnpikes, railroads, and steamboats [as] those

abominable inventions by which the usurping Yankees are strengthening themselves in the land, and subduing everything to utility and commonplace.”

Another set of opposing forces like that represented by New England and New York exists in Irving’s fiction, that between truth and fiction. Haskell Springer terms Irving’s tension between truth and fiction a “technique of self-contradiction: the story proper and the comments upon the tale [move in] opposite directions” and by thus foregrounding the “reality” of events like Rip Van Winkle’s 20-year slumber, keep the fictional element of the tale ever present in the reader’s mind (14–15). The critic Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky elaborates on Springer’s concept by considering “Rip Van Winkle” as a meditation on the art and dynamics of storytelling. Unlike the current inhabitants of Winkle’s village, who believe the long-bearded man to have been out of his mind for 20 years, Rubin-Dorsky argues that the readers recognize the villagers’ “blunder” in not “acknowledg[ing] that doubt and belief combine to form the listening/reading experience” (399–400). Despite their initial skepticism, the villagers flock to Rip precisely, Rubin-Dorsky believes, because he has a story to tell, a “palliative, alleviating the anxiety of his loss . . . and compensat[ing] for unsettling changes” (400). By retelling his tale to the villagers in a postrevolutionary period, Rip Van Winkle not only makes sense of his own unsettling experience of outliving family and friends and returning to an entirely transformed village, but makes the chaotic effects of the Revolutionary War understandable because he has turned them into a story.

Ironically, despite the fact that Rip’s story centers on his witness to radical change in his village, the critic Rubin-Dorsky considers that his narrative allows temporal shifts because it echoes other stories of life: “The real, profound changes are the ongoing, perpetual ones, those of mortality. . . . This type of alteration is the result neither of historical nor political processes but rather of the natural ones of birth and death, growth and decay, which never cease and, in effect, make one period of time the equivalent of any other” (401). Thus,

Rip’s tale reinforces the human condition: that all experience change as the very fabric of their lives, and that these changes, which occur perpetually, are the norm and thus not distinguishable from each other. In such a reading, Rubin-Dorsky minimizes the disorienting effects of the Revolution and its alteration of Rip’s village by arguing that the act of storytelling itself has a homogenizing effect, “mak[ing] one period of time the equivalent of any other.” As testament to this interpretation, Rubin-Dorsky notes that George Washington has replaced George III, but there remains an authority in place, whether monarchical or democratic. Second, his son, Rip, Jr., looks exactly the same as he does and thus demonstrates how sameness can abide across time. In these continuities across time, in the discovery of a cyclical time that governs not only Rip Van Winkle but everyone, Rubin-Dorsky sees that Irving has discovered a truth. Rip’s storytelling “make[s] the connections between fact and fiction, between existence in the mutable world and the unchanging foundations of all human endeavor” (Rubin-Dorsky 405).

The tale does not end, however, with the interpretations of the villagers who “almost universally gave [Rip]’s tale full credit.” In a note, appended to Knickerbocker’s tale, he “shows that it is an absolute fact, narrated with his usual fidelity.” Fact, here, is entirely dependent upon perspective, and Knickerbocker’s avowal of factualness is more a testament to the fact that he copiously scribed the tale told to him rather than to the content of the tale itself. Irving adds yet another level of storytellers and truths in one additional layer in the postscript in which Knickerbocker details another tale of the Catskills, this one a myth of American Indians. In the tale, Manitou, a trickster figure, dwells in the Catskills, in a place called Garden Rock. When a hunter trespasses into Garden Rock, Manitou drops a gourd, whose contents creates a flash flood and drown the hunter.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle” both address change and attempts to

- resist it. How is this theme presented in the Leatherstocking series, of JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, a fellow New York writer?
- Rip sleeps through the nation's foundational event, the Revolutionary War. Does he represent America, or is he a figure sympathetic to pre-Revolutionary War times when the colonies were ruled by England?
 - Both of Irving's tales point to aspects of the country's violent past—the Salem witch trials and the Revolutionary War. How does Irving reconcile his treatment of these two events with his general desire for an idyllic past, represented by the secluded Dutch communities in the two tales?
 - How is the landscape imagined for the Dutch and native communities? Consider the arid conditions of Rip Van Winkle's farm and the dangers inherent in the Catskills.

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820)

Irving's short story, taken from *The Sketch Book*, opens with four lines from the Scottish poet James Thomson's “Castle of Indolence” in which a “most enchanting wizard” captures men who are curious or desirous of the life of ease presented by a minstrel who sings tales of the castle accompanied by his lute. The promises of a life given over to pleasure, repose, and the absence of work, however, are purchased at a dear price. The inhabitants of the castle lose their will and thus the means of escape:

For whomsoe'er the villain takes in hand,
Their joints unknit, their sinews melt apace;
As lithe they grow as any willow-wand,
And of their vanish'd force remains no trace

In his description of his unlikely protagonist, Ichabod Crane, Irving clearly draws upon the language Thomson uses in describing the victims of the wizard: “He had . . . a happy mixture of pliability and perseverance in this nature; he was in form a spirit like a supple jack—yielding, but tough; though he

bent, he never broke; and though he bowed beneath the slightest pressure, yet, the moment it was away—jerk!—he was as erect, and carried his head as high as ever.” Readers familiar with Thomson's poem would be likely to recognize that Crane resembles the inhabitants of the “Castle of Indolence,” and that their lack of will, alluded to in their extremely supple spines, will be their undoing.

Irving provides two frames for the telling of the encounter between the itinerate schoolmaster, Ichabod Crane, and the famous headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow. One of these frames involves the figure of Diedrich Knickerbocker, the inept fictional historian who narrates Irving's satirical *History of New York* and who also knits together his widely popular *The Sketch Book*. As a tale “found among the papers of the Late Diedrich Knickerbocker,” the story of Crane and the headless Hessian soldier gains prominence. It is less the fictional tale meant to entertain and more the documented oral tradition of an antiquated Dutch community whose “population, manners, and customs, remain fixed, while the great torrent of migration and improvement . . . in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved.” The second frame appears in the story's postscript, in which Diedrich vows to have given “the preceding tale . . . almost in the precise words in which [he] heard it related at a corporation meeting.” The tale thus has multiple storytellers: Irving himself, his fictional historian Knickerbocker, and the unnamed storyteller who appears at the end of the tale to discount nearly half of the story's truth.

The multiplicity of narrators keeps the fictional aspect of the tale ever present in the reader's mind, as does Ichabod Crane's reverence for COTTON MATHER's *History of New England Witchcraft* as well as Irving's references to Thomson's poem and to a German folktale as the basis for the story of the headless horseman. Irving purposefully mistakes the title of Mather's tale of witchcraft and the witch trials, which was *Wonders of the Invisible World*, because his readers would be familiar with Mather's famous book and would thus recognize the less-than-accurate account provided by his fictional historian, Knickerbocker. Although

Mather's recounting of the Salem witch trials does not include any mention of a headless horseman, it does imbue the story with a foreboding tone in which diabolic elements prey upon helpless inhabitants who have barely carved a space out of the howling wilderness for themselves. Indeed, most of the devilish acts retold by Mather occur in the wild, the same landscape that promotes the excitations of Crane's bewildered and befuddled mind.

The presence of multiple narrators and narratives also contributes to the tale's timelessness, which is a characterization not only of Tarry Town, but also of the culture of Dutch settlers residing there. The very dress of the women who gather for the party hosted by Old Baltus Van Tassel is a "mixture of ancient and modern fashions." A sloop out on the Hudson appears "suspended in the air," as though its very movements are arrested and it exists in a kind of drawn-out time. In creating a place prone to repose and sleepiness, and in conjuring multiple storytellers, Irving allows the very distant past and the present to coexist, and even to interact. One example of the past and the present's coalescing are the reverberations of Crane's voice as he sings out psalms in order to calm his anxieties while traveling alone at night. After his disappearance from the town, a young boy "has often fancied [Crane's] voice at a distance, chanting a melancholy psalm tune among the tranquil solitudes of Sleepy Hollow." The echoes or vestiges of Crane's voice also appear in the tales of old country wives "about the neighborhood round the winter evening fire" of how "Ichabod was spirited away by supernatural means."

The image of a voice lingering long after the speaker has ceased talking appears in Thomson's poem as the voice of the minstrel who seems to lure unsuspecting victims to the castle with his tales of rest and pleasure:

He ceas'd. But still their trembling ears
 retain'd
 The deep vibrations of his witching song;
 That, by a kind of magic power, constrain'd
 To enter in, pell-mell, the listening throng.
 (172-175)

Likened by Thomson to a "syren song," that of women who lured sailors to their deaths by bewitching them with their beautiful voices as their ships drifted heedlessly toward a rocky shore, the minstrel's voice tempts the listeners who still hear the song in their ears. The narrator of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" assures the reader that "there are peculiar quavers still to be heard in that church, which may even be heard half a mile off, quite to the opposite side of the mill pond, of a still Sunday morning, which are said to be legitimately descended from the nose of Ichabod Crane." Similarly, the oral tradition of this Dutch community who trade tales of the Revolutionary War and then promptly switch to more haunting tales of goblins, specters, and the headless horseman creates an alluring atmosphere that draws its listeners into a kind of stupor. Crane is especially prone to the effects of these tales as he encounters countless terrors on his walks homeward such as a snow-covered shrub that he mistakes for a ghost and his own feet crunching through frosty crust, which he imagines to be "some uncouth being trampling close behind him."

In the figure of Ichabod Crane Irving has created an unlikely protagonist with whom readers cannot identify, given Crane's excessive nervousness. His physical attributes do not speak highly of him, for he is described as "a scarecrow eloped from a cornfield" or "the genius of famine descending upon the earth." Further, his positions as the village's schoolmaster and singing master both appear unwarranted, revealing more about the ignorance of the inhabitants than about Crane's own ineptness. In reference to his knowledge or intelligence, "our man of letters" is rumored to have "read several books quite through." His second occupation as the village's song master gives him unparalleled access to his love, Katrina Van Tassel, but his talent for singing seems to reside mostly in his own opinion of himself, in his broken pitch pipe, and in his ability to make up in volume what he lacks in talent.

Thus, it is in the naive narrator, who reveals more about himself than he appears to understand,

that the kernel of Irving's tale rests. Crane's self-importance and his somewhat cruel dispatching of his duties as the village schoolmaster (he bore in mind the golden maxim "Spare the rod and spoil the child" and his scholars certainly were not spoiled) make him a likable version of England who wrestled to maintain its despotic control over the colonies who fought for their independence in the Revolutionary War. Irving's multiple references to this particular war, when the Hessian is said to have lost his head, aids in this reading of Ichabod. The language of empire and royal symbols abounds in Irving's descriptions of Ichabod Crane in the classroom and atop his neighbor's horse. The school is referred to as "his little empire," and on the day that he receives an invitation to Van Tassel's party, he "sat enthroned on the lofty school stool from when he usually watched all the concerns of his little literary realm. In his hand he swayed a ferule, that scepter of despotic power." Tellingly, Brom Bones, the rival to Ichabod's suit with Katrina, is the very image of physical power, but he is never described as given over to the cruelties associated with Crane. Indeed, Brom Bones enjoys "to play off boorish practical jokes" and "had more mischief than ill will in his composition."

Given their diametrically opposed personalities and physical features, it is perhaps not so surprising to imagine in the two suitors vying for Katrina's hand in marriage, and access to her father's sizable and fertile estate, a replaying of the Revolutionary War, which is also echoed again and again in the retelling of war stories and the tale of the Hessian soldier who rides out of his grave every night in search of his missing head. Crane's power is cruelly carried out against those who are smaller and less able to defend themselves, his pupils. Brom Bones, on the other hand, who is "broad shouldered" and known for his "feats of strength and hardihood," does not engage in a violent confrontation with Crane, which he would surely win. In his "not unpleasant countenance" and "air of fun and arrogance," readers might see the personification of the United States of America. He is naturally strong, good-natured, and not prone to the kind of cru-

elty or despotism that marks England, represented by Crane. Rather, Brom Bones is the local hero, whom "neighbors looked upon with a mixture of awe, admiration, and good will."

By casting Katrina as the love interest and point of contention and competition between the two characters of Crane and Bones, Irving recasts the Revolutionary War in terms of a love triangle. Katrina becomes less a fully developed character and more a symbol of the fecund land of North America over which both nations fight. As Crane, perpetually hungry and searching out his next meal, sees all aspects of the landscape as future dinners, Irving assumes his voice in the description of the young heroine. Crane describes her in terms of food: "plump as a partridge; ripe and melting and rosy checked as one of her father's peaches." As he rides to their house to attend the party, the last evening on which he will see Katrina, Irving lampoons Crane's propensity to view the world in terms of his next meal by likening Katrina's hand to pancakes: "Soft anticipations stole over his mind of dainty slap jacks, well buttered, and garnished with honey or treacle, by the delicate little dimpled hand of Katrina Van Tassel." Crane's avarice, channeled into a constant hunger and search for food, cannot abide, and his favor with Katrina is quickly and ironically dispatched with a well-aimed pumpkin thrown by Brom Bones. As the figure of Crane's fears, Brom Bones becomes the headless horseman and drives the superstitious rival out of the village. As America, mighty but just, marries Katrina, the romantic recasting of the Revolutionary War concludes, along with Irving's tale of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Irving details the landscape of this particular nook in New York quite assiduously. Read over some of these descriptions of the landscape and explain their role in creating the story's tone.
2. In the postscript, the storyteller and one of his listeners engage briefly over the question of a tale's purpose or moral lesson. The storyteller concludes that he does not "believe one half of



THOMAS JEFFERSON (1743–1826)

The earth should belong . . . always to the living generation.

(letter to James Madison, September 6, 1789)

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter and abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

(The Declaration of Independence)

Thomas Jefferson was a Virginian, farmer, father, husband, statesman, writer, revolutionary, collector of books, avid reader, lawyer, inventor, architect, diplomat, president of the United States, and founder of a university. He believed in a strict interpretation of the Constitution, an unintrusive federal government, and states' rights but did not always follow these beliefs. Jefferson spent most of his life in public service, though he “always claimed to yearn for a life of tranquil contemplation spent with his books, his architectural drawings, and his researches in science” (Bernstein ix). Jefferson is perhaps best known for his role in writing the Declaration of Independence and serving as the third president of the United States. It is not surprising, given his paternal family's history, that he was involved in politics despite his claim of distaste for public service. When Jefferson's Welsh ancestors first immigrated to the colonies, one served in the Virginia Assembly of 1619 (Parton 3). Jefferson's father, Peter, served in the Virginia House of Burgesses (Parton 10).

Peter Jefferson was born in Chesterfield, Virginia, in 1708 and he later “won fame and respect for his industry, strength, endurance, and skill as a surveyor and mapmaker” (Bernstein 2). Peter courted and won the hand of Jane Randolph, the eldest daughter of Isham Randolph, a tobacco lord whose plantation was located on the James River in Virginia. For two years Peter worked to build his farm and house so that he might entice Jane to marry him, and she did in 1738. Though the Randolph family was of the planter elite of Virginia, they were living in London at the time of Jane's birth. Peter named his farm *Shadwell* for the place in London Parish where Jane was born.

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, at Shadwell in Goochland (later Albermarle) County, Virginia, “on the western edge of the British empire” (Bernstein 1). He was the third child to Peter and Jane Randolph Jefferson. He had two older sisters, Elizabeth and Jane. Elizabeth, the younger of the elder sisters, had “developmental disabilities” and died at the age of 28 when “she

wandered from the family house during a thunderstorm and was found dead after the storm cleared.” He revered his older sister Jane and shared her love of music. He often accompanied her singing with his violin playing. According to Parton, when Jane, “the best of [Jefferson’s] friends,” died, there was a “void in the home and the heart [of Jefferson] that was never quite filled” (45). Jefferson also had several younger siblings, one younger brother and two younger sisters.

Jefferson was educated at home until the age of nine, when he went to a local private school run by the Reverend William Douglass from Scotland. There he learned Latin, Greek, and French nearly exclusively. In 1757, the year his father died, Jefferson added classical literature and mathematics to his list of subjects, now under the Reverend James Maury. Feeling he learned everything he could from Maury, Jefferson petitioned one of his guardians, John Harvie, to allow him to enter the College of William and Mary. He entered in 1760 and stayed until 1762. It was at William and Mary that he met a man who was to be one of his lifelong friends and confidants, as well as his law teacher and bar sponsor, George Wythe.

Jefferson met Wythe through Professor William Small, a mathematics, natural philosophy, and eventually moral philosophy professor. It was also through Small that Jefferson entered the circle of Virginia’s lieutenant governor, France Fauquier, also a compulsive gambler. Wythe, on the other hand, was a much better influence and role model for Jefferson. When Jefferson met him, he was one of the two leading attorneys in Virginia and was already “famous for his learning and culture” (Bernstein 5). Unlike some of the other students of law during Jefferson’s time, Wythe “refused to let Jefferson’s legal training rest on the familiar, threadbare formula of Coke and copying. Rather, he used an educational plan modeled on his own habits of thought and reading that was designed to inspire love of the law as a body of learning, devotion to its study, and adherence to rigorous standards of legal research and argument” (Bernstein 6). This would seem to suit Jefferson’s love of learning, as

he claimed that he spent at least 15 hours a day at his studies during his time at William and Mary. It is no surprise then that he constructed for himself a rigorous schedule for his study of law. Jefferson studied law under Wythe for five years, more than double the regular course of study. In 1767, Jefferson was admitted to the Virginia bar, with George Wythe as his sponsor. The following year, 1768, Jefferson, following in his father’s footsteps, was elected to his first political post, in the lower house of the Virginia legislature, the House of Burgesses. He was 25. Jefferson joined the radical bloc, including Patrick Henry and George Washington, against those backing the royal governor; they sought to govern themselves. The seeds of independence had already been planted in Jefferson.

In 1765, two years before Jefferson was admitted to the bar, the British Parliament and King George III enacted the Stamp Act against the colonies. This began the colonies’ argument against taxation without representation. Though Jefferson was not yet part of the legislature when the Stamp Act Congress met—it was the first intercolonial gathering to oppose British policies—the desire to see the colonies united was something Jefferson believed in. Even though Jefferson “insisted that the colonists were freeborn Englishman,” he also insisted that he was a Virginian and “a Virginian gentleman was as good as—and entitled to the same rights as—any native born Englishman” (Bernstein 19, 20). As such, Jefferson was one of the earliest proponents of the American cause.

So in 1773, Jefferson, Dabney Carr, and Richard Henry Lee proposed a “committee of correspondence.” This was to be a “group of politicians who would write letters to like-minded politicians in other colonies to share ideas, spread news, and coordinate political strategy and tactics in resisting British colonial practices” (Bernstein 20). After the Boston Tea Party, “Virginia took the lead in organizing colonial resistance” with Jefferson as a crucial figure. The First Continental Congress was formed as a result, and the instructions Jefferson wrote for the Virginian delegates, though considered too radical, were published by his friends as

A Summary View of the Rights of British America (1774) and became his first major political work.

In the midst of this political activity, Jefferson suffered two major tragedies. One was the fire on February 1, 1770, that burned much of Shadwell, where he was living with his mother and sisters. The most distressing part of the fire for Jefferson was the destruction of his already extensive library and his “painstakingly amassed collection of legal notes and papers” (Bernstein 10). The other was the sudden death of his boyhood friend, brother-in-law, and fellow politician Dabney Carr in May 1773. Amid these tragedies and his political work, on January 1, 1772, Jefferson and the woman he had been courting, a young recent widow, Martha Wayles Skelton, were married.

As the tensions between the American colonies and the British were rising, the call for independence from Britain became greater, and the Second Continental Congress, of which Jefferson was a member, began to focus its attention on independence. Although he was not originally part of the declaration committee, Jefferson replaced Richard Henry Lee. John Adams, along with the general favor of the entire committee, persuaded Jefferson to draft the “declaration.” Though we like to believe the myth that the Declaration of Independence was solely Jefferson’s own, and it chiefly was, the Congress made several changes, each of which Jefferson took as a personal affront.

Jefferson left the Congress in the fall of that same year (1776) to serve once again in Virginia’s lower legislative house, renamed the House of Delegates. He started immediately on law reform. His first projects were the issues of *entail* and *primogeniture*—he believed that men should be able to leave their properties and money after their death to whomever they wanted. At the time, Virginia did not allow this. Jefferson’s “most sweeping law reform, the one central to his vision of a just society and closest to his heart” was his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,” which emphasized his belief in the separation between church and state and “declared that the government has no right to dictate what anyone could believe in matters of

religion” (Bernstein 42). Many of Jefferson’s other bills, however, did not receive acclaim or support.

Jefferson was elected as Virginia’s second governor on June 1, 1779. The Revolutionary War infiltrated nearly every political issue and was Virginia’s dominant problem. During his second term as governor, Charlottesville and Monticello were seized briefly by Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton of the British army. When Jefferson left the capitol before Tarleton’s seizure of it and joined his family in Poplar Forest, he left Virginia without a governor for 10 days. Since the election was postponed, he was still acting governor though he assumed he was acting as a private citizen when he left two days after when his term would have ended (Bernstein 46). Jefferson was accused of cowardice and an investigation was supposed to follow. However, when the inquiry was to begin, George Nicholas, who proposed the resolution to begin Jefferson’s investigation, did not appear. No one else was interested in pursuing the charges. Jefferson retired from public service and would do what he would do every time he left office: swear he would never return to government.

By the time Jefferson retired from politics in what would become a string of retirements, he had already left his legal career. In this retirement, he began work on *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Originally *Notes* began as a response to a questionnaire sent out in 1780 by a French diplomat, François Barbé-Marbois. Later this manuscript would be revised to help refute Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon’s claims that America was naturally degenerative. The finished, authorized edition was published in 1787, the first publication bearing Jefferson’s name on the title page.

It was also during this retirement that Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson died on September 6, 1782, after giving birth to their sixth child, Lucy. Three of their children preceded her in death. Lucy would die approximately two years later while Jefferson and his oldest daughter, Martha, were in France. Some speculate that it was because of his wife’s death that he returned to politics to assuage his grief. In late 1782, he accepted his appointment

by Congress as part of a delegation including BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, JOHN ADAMS, and John Jay to negotiate with the British. However, the three men were so successful in their negotiations that the Treaty of Paris of 1783 was signed before Jefferson arrived in Europe.

Instead of going to Europe, he was then sent to Philadelphia to lead the Virginia delegation to the Confederation Congress. Jefferson's main interest was America's expansion westward, and Congress was amenable to his view. Because of his work in Congress, he had won great admiration and esteem and was once again given the chance to travel to Europe, this time as an American minister to France, an appointment he accepted in 1784. The Congress also named Jefferson in this same year, again with Adams and Franklin, to negotiate commercial treaties with Europe. Though the only successful free-trade agreement Adams and Jefferson were able to settle was with the king of Prussia, Jefferson was able to negotiate the Consular Convention of 1788, which outlined diplomatic activities between France and the United States. Aside from treaty negotiations, Jefferson also excelled at gathering information on other countries' affairs and reporting on it to the secretary of foreign affairs and other well-placed Americans.

While Jefferson was in France, the United States Congress was busy working on the Constitution. Jefferson saw the main flaw of the Constitution as its lack of a statement of a bill of rights. In a letter to James Madison on December 20, 1787, Jefferson writes that "a bill of rights is what the people are entitle to against every government on earth, general or particular, & what no just government should refuse, or rest on inference" (Bernstein 72). As Jefferson was advocating a bill of rights for the American constitution, he was at the same time witnessing the political turmoil and precursors to the French Revolution from the front row of the French theater. Although Jefferson, as a diplomat from another country, was supposed to remain neutral, this did not stop Lafayette and his supporters from seeking his advice, nor did it prevent Jefferson from giving it, despite assuring both the United

States and France that he was not violating his diplomatic duties (Bernstein 78). It seems that Jefferson was determined to have a bill of rights passed somewhere, even if it was in France. Jefferson contributed significantly to the drafting of the most famous document of the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. When Jefferson left Paris in fall 1789, he intended to return after six months, but he was to spend the remainder of his life in the United States.

Jefferson and his daughters arrived back in the United States about seven months after George Washington had been unanimously elected as the first president of the United States. Upon his arrival, Jefferson received a letter from Washington informing him that he had been nominated and confirmed as the first secretary of state. Jefferson finally accepted the position after receiving pressure from Washington. His ideological and personal conflicts with other members of Washington's cabinet, particularly Alexander Hamilton, led to what became the Republican and Federalist Parties. One of their main arguments was over foreign alliances. Hamilton wanted to remain neutral; Jefferson "feared that Hamilton's policies would enslave the United States to the dangerous, corrupt nation from which Americans had won their independence" and argued that they should ally with France since "the ideals of the French Revolution—liberty and equality—were the ideals of the American Revolution" (91). This, however, did not create the picture of revolution Jefferson had hoped as his enemies and opponents linked him to the love of excess and extravagance found in Europe, particularly France (Bernstein 94). After a series of frustrations and political battles, Jefferson resigned from his position as secretary of state on January 5, 1794, and swore, once again, that he was finished with politics.

During the next three years, Jefferson spent his time at Monticello. As when he returned from France, he found Monticello in disrepair. He spent much of this time at home working on new crop rotations, planting trees, and continuing his architectural hobby of building and designing

Monticello. Jefferson also experimented in farming: "He spent months devising and experimenting with a mechanical threshing machine. . . . He also designed a new type of plow that would cut through the soil more swiftly and with less resistance, making it easier and more efficient to cultivate the land" (Bernstein 107). Jefferson also had the opportunity to take on the role of the "doting grandfather" to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the son of Jefferson's daughter Martha and her husband, Thomas Mann Randolph. It was also during this time that Sally Hemings's first child was born. Today most scholars agree that Jefferson was the father of this child by his slave.

Jefferson was called back to politics when he was elected vice president in 1796. At the time, the vice presidency was a rather undemanding job; at least it was for Jefferson. During his vice presidency he was named the third president of the American Philological Association, and he published *A Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, which is still used as a reference in Congress today. Jefferson's major act as vice president was his response to the Alien and Sedition Acts, and his draft of the Kentucky Resolutions, which "declared that a state could strike down, or nullify, unconstitutional federal laws, preventing them from having effect within its own borders" (Bernstein 125). Madison drafted a similar resolution for Virginia. Both men hoped that these resolutions would have a broader acceptance and declare the acts unconstitutional; however, only Kentucky and Virginia adopted them.

As internal and external toil plagued the Federalists, by the elections of 1800 they were out of office. The Republicans, or rather what became the Jeffersonian Republicans, won both houses of Congress and the presidency. Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr tied for the presidential vote. Burr was an attractive candidate for the Federalists because they were hopeful that there would be a spot for them in his government even though he was a Republican. Nevertheless, on March 4, 1801, Jefferson was sworn in as the third president of the United States, and Aaron Burr was sworn in as vice president. It was because of this election that Con-

gress decided that the electoral votes had to be designated as a vote for "president" or "vice president" to prevent a tie.

Jefferson claimed that he wanted a smaller government and states' rights, and that he would abide by a strict reading of the Constitution. This was not always the case, most notably in his purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. There was nothing in the Constitution that allowed the federal government to spend money to buy land or make treaties for land purchase. Though the treaties that made up the Louisiana Purchase were ratified by the Senate, "Federalists mocked Jefferson for having abandoned [a] strict interpretation of the Constitution" (Bernstein 143). Another foreign policy issue that challenged Jefferson's commitment to a strict reading of the Constitution was his dealing with the Barbary pirates. After "five separate naval bombardments" against Tripoli in 1804, the rescue of the crew of the captured *Philadelphia*, and a sea and land raid on Tripoli in 1805 accompanied by a threat to seize the city and overthrow the pasha, the United States and the pasha signed a treaty involving a ransom payment for hostages held in Algiers. According to Bernstein, these events showed that "Jefferson was committed to a broad interpretation of the president's war powers—acting on his own initiative without asking Congress for a declaration of war" (146).

On the domestic front during his first term as president, Jefferson commissioned the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Northwest. They returned two years into Jefferson's second term. In the months before the 1804 elections, Jefferson's vice president, Aaron Burr, fatally wounded Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Burr's self-exile in the Southwest would cause problems for Jefferson during his second term as president.

Jefferson's second term was easily won with his new running mate, the New York governor, George Clinton. However, that seems to be about the only easy aspect of Jefferson's second term. Domestically, Jefferson waged an ongoing war with Chief Justice Marshall over attempts to convict Aaron Burr. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* incident of 1807 led

to the Embargo Act, which affected both foreign and domestic relations. A watered-down version of the Embargo Act, the Non-Intercourse Act, was enacted in 1809, three days before the end of Jefferson's presidency. The results of these two acts are what some scholars believe set the stage for the United States' lack of preparedness for the War of 1812 (Bernstein 169).

After his second term ended, Jefferson stayed in Washington long enough to witness James Madison's inauguration. His reason for not seeking a third term, though under pressure to do so, was that even though the Constitution did not forbid it, he feared the "office would become one for life" (Cunningham 314). Once he returned to Virginia, he stayed there for the remainder of his life. His time spent in his final retirement was bittersweet. He was plagued by debts due largely to a lifetime of overestimating what his crops would earn. He was also an extremely generous host in his later years. Many believed that the majority of his visitors were looking for free room and board rather than genuinely interested in meeting the former president and the "sage of Monticello." Furthermore, his lifelong project, Monticello, was expensive: "Jefferson continued to remodel his house until he no longer could commit funds to the enterprise" (Bernstein 171), and he "never recovered from the burden of debt with which he ended his public career" (Cunningham 345). Jefferson maintained his extensive correspondence with his friends, particularly James Madison. And his friendship with John Adams was restored through the intervention of Benjamin Rush. In this final retirement, he was able once more to take on the role of the devoted grandfather. His daughter Martha and her eight children moved in with him in 1809. By 1812 he was a great-grandfather.

The legacy that Jefferson left in the final years of his life was the creation of the University of Virginia. For nearly 25 years Jefferson had been dreaming of this university, and on March 7, 1825, the university opened its doors for enrollment. Reportedly, "It was one of the happiest and proudest days of Jefferson's life" (Bernstein 176). It was, in nearly every respect,

from the architecture to the hand-picked professors, to the way the courses of study were designed, Jefferson's brainchild (Bernstein 174).

Though we can arrange Jefferson's life and legacies by dates and accomplishments and sift through his correspondence and writings, he remains a bit of a mystery, even today. He believed that slavery would one day end and believed that it would be in his time, yet he never ended slavery on his own plantation. Likewise, his views and policies toward American Indians were equally conflicting and complex. And though he loved the company of women, he never thought them fit for public life or politics, with the exception of ABIGAIL ADAMS. He remained vigorous into his 80s, but at the age of 83, it seemed as if old age hit him all at once. Jefferson was besieged by a series of ailments in that final year of his life: diabetes, arthritis, a urinary tract infection, and what some biographers speculate was colon cancer (Bernstein 188). He died the day he was to be the guest of honor at the 50th anniversary celebration of the Declaration of Independence in Washington, D.C., July 4, 1826.

Nicole de Fee

***Declaration of Independence* (1776)**

Thomas Jefferson composed the document that remains a living testament to the Enlightenment ideals embraced at the inception of the United States of America. As Jefferson recounts in his *Autobiography*, a committee composed of him, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston was established to write the Declaration of Independence. Despite the talents of members of this committee, they asked Jefferson to take up the task alone. In his trademark humble form, Jefferson refers to his work in simple terms: "The committee for drawing the Declaration of Independence desired me to do it. It was accordingly done, and being approved by them, I reported it to the House on Friday, the 28th of June, when it was read, and ordered to lie on the table."

The ensuing debates among members of the thirteen colonies over the language and subject matter covered in this defining document are briefly mentioned in the *Autobiography* but not fully detailed. Rather, Jefferson's *Autobiography* accounts for the redactions. He claims that "the pusillanimous idea that we had friends in England worth keeping terms with" caused the removal of "those passages which conveyed censures on the people of England." Similarly, Jefferson states, "The clause . . . reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who, on the contrary, still wished to continue it." Despite the removal of these passages, the Declaration stood and stands as a brilliant expression of the Enlightenment principles that governed the thinking of the founding fathers of the nation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the language and reasons for revolution given in the Declaration of Independence with those of THOMAS PAINE's *Common Sense*. Are the two documents written for different audiences? Are the ideas the same but expressed differently?
2. In John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke lists the natural rights as "life, liberty, and property," whereas Jefferson adds another, "the pursuit of happiness." Consider reasons why Jefferson would make such a change, and why the phrase refers to the "pursuit of happiness" rather than simply to happiness itself.
3. One of the redacted sections of the Declaration directly addresses the institution of slavery: "[The king of England] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither." Consider the sympathetic light in which Jefferson writes of slaves versus his treatment of them in his *Autobiography*.
4. Consider other portions of the original Declaration that have been omitted or revised and offer an argument that identifies a pattern to these omissions.

Notes on the State of Virginia (1785)

As he mentions in the advertisement for the book, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* originated as his 1781 response to a French delegation in Philadelphia who were desirous of more information on the American states they were aiding during the American Revolutionary War. As the book began as a formal response to a formal query, Jefferson organizes each chapter or section in response to a specific question, such as "An exact description of the limits and boundaries of the state of Virginia?" Although the text is thus artificially constructed, and organized according to the wishes of the French delegation, Jefferson nevertheless finds rhetorical entry points that permit him to craft the text to his own purposes, one of which was to refute Buffon's theory of American degeneracy, another of which was to contemplate his own thoughts on the fates of American Indians and Africans in the new republic. The theory of the Comte de Buffon (George Louis Leclerc) of American degeneracy was a particularly well-known idea, having been published in 1761, and Jefferson's response to it was made public prior to the 1787 publication of this book. In answering the query regarding the boundaries of Virginia, for example, Jefferson demonstrates his adroitness at directing the questions to his own ends by concluding his scientific response of the longitude and latitude that form the boundaries of the state with a boast of the enormous size of Virginia in comparison to current British territories: "This state is therefore one third larger than the islands of Great Britain and Ireland, which are reckoned at 88,357 square miles" (127).

Jefferson delineates, in great detail, Virginia's river system, giving detailed accounts of navigable waterways, the tonnage of vessel that can pass

unobstructed into various rivers, harbors, and the amount of water carried by each river. He is also attentive to possible questions regarding the navigation of certain rivers, with an eye toward future commerce and transportation. He anticipates the Mississippi River to be “one of the principal channels of future commerce for the country westward of the Alleghany” (131). Aside from his more scientific rendering of the rivers, such as his noting that the channel of the James River is “from 150 to 200 fathom wide,” Jefferson gives himself over to a prideful and somewhat poetic depiction of Virginia’s waterways (129). He describes the Illinois River as “a fine river, clear, gentle, and without rapids” (133). He opines, “The Ohio is the most beautiful river on earth” (133). The Mississippi River, aside from its promise as a central means for national commerce and trade, provides a home to a host of wildlife. Jefferson lists “turtles of a peculiar kind, perch, trout, gar, pike, mullets, herrings, carp, spatula fish of 50 lb. weight, cat fish of an hundred pounds weight, buffalo fish, and sturgeon” (132). Note that the Mississippi River not only hosts an abundance and variety of aquatic life, but also supplies life to substantially large fish. It is as if Jefferson were already anticipating his response to Buffon’s theory by including a host of rather large-sized fish that dwell within Virginia’s rivers.

Although Jefferson readily admits, “Since the treaty of Paris, the Illinois and Northern branches of the Ohio since the cession of Congress, are not longer within our limits,” “they shall be noted in their order” (132). It is as though the abundance of life mentioned just prior in his description of the Mississippi River inspired him to lay claim to rivers no longer within the state’s purview. He relies upon the reports of Spanish merchants at Pancore for news on the exact length of the Missouri River (133). Jefferson does display a considerable knowledge of some Spanish colonial territories such as Santa Fe, Potosí, and Zacatecas, even to the extent that he knows that a road extends from the Red River along the coast down to the city of Mexico (133). Although he offers no additional comment on this connection to Spanish colonies, it seems

certain that Jefferson presents this information as sources of future commerce routes. Indeed, he begins his section on Mexican territories with a brief anecdote regarding the “not inconsiderable quantity of plate, said to have been plundered during the last war by the Indians from the churches and private houses of Santa Fe on the North River and brought to these villages [in Virginia] for sale” (133).

In his response to a query regarding the state’s mountains, Jefferson defers to the maps of Fry and Jefferson, as well as to “Evan’s analysis of his map of America for a more philosophical view of them than is to be found in any other work” (142). When he begins to provide names for the mountains, Jefferson obliquely references the American Indians who once inhabited the mountainous region. The Appalachian Mountains, he warrants, received their name from “the Apalachies, an Indian nation formerly residing on it” (142). He defers to their native name for the mountains rather than those imposed on the various ranges from European maps: “European geographers however extended the name northwardly as far as the mountains extended; some giving it, after their separation into different ridges, to the Blue ridge, others to the North mountain, others to the Alleghany, others to the Laurel ridge, as may be seen in their different maps. But the fact I believe is, that none of these ridges were ever known by that name to the inhabitants, either native or emigrant” (142).

To assert the precedence of inhabitants over foreign cartographers, Jefferson includes his own account of the spectacular view afforded in passing from the Potomac through the Blue Ridge (known as the Natural Bridge and Potomac River Gap): “perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature” (142–143). “The scene,” Jefferson assures his readers, “is worth a voyage across the Atlantic,” yet he mentions those living in close proximity to the “monuments of a war between rivers and mountains” who have yet to survey the spectacle (143). The critic Richard Slotkin notes of Jefferson’s description of this particular natural wonder: “Jefferson adopts as his vision neither the pastoral

nor the sublime extreme. Rather, he combines the two into a vision of the land which both excites and soothes the soul, which stimulates the mind with terrors and drama and sates it with bounty and beauty, which exhibits both the ruinous force and the creative power of time and nature" (245). Slotkin concludes, "For Jefferson the ideal experience of America is one which enables a man to immerse himself temporarily in the wild landscape and then to emerge on a high plane of thought, from which he can analyze the significance of the spectacle below him" (247).

In query 6, which pertains to minerals, plants, trees, and fruits, Jefferson opens with straightforward answers regarding the appearance and abundance of precious metals and jewels. When he arrives at the subject of limestone, however, Jefferson mentions the discovery of petrified shells impressed within "immense bodies of schist," considered by "both the learned and the unlearned as a proof of an universal deluge" (154). Ever the rationalist, Jefferson performs a brief calculation to refute this claim and declares that a "second opinion has been entertained": that the landmass was heaved up to the higher lands in a time prior to recorded history. Jefferson just as quickly dismisses this theory, noting the absence of any "natural agent" powerful enough to create such a "great convulsion of nature" (154). The third and final theory Jefferson considers to account for the appearance of the seashells in the North Mountain is that of M. de Voltaire, who believes that the rock, which can metamorphose into soft stone, shot its "calcareous juices" into the form of a shell (155–156). Rather than subscribe to any of these theories, Jefferson proclaims a preference for ignorance over error: The "great phenomenon is as yet unsolved" (156). In contemplating and rejecting various hypotheses as to the seashells' origins, Jefferson assumes an air of a rational scientist, as he does in a considerable portion of his book.

This air of confidence is nowhere more apparent than in his section on animals, where he directly refutes Buffon's theory that animals in the New World are smaller than those in the Old, that domes-

ticated animals have degenerated in America, and "that on the whole [the New World] exhibits fewer species" (169). Jefferson provides readers with Buffon's theory behind his conjectures: "the heats of America are less; that more waters are spread over its surface by nature, and fewer of these drained off by the hand of man" (169–170). Jefferson remarks sarcastically, "as if both sides were not warmed by the same genial sun," before launching into a more studied analysis of the French naturalist's theory (169). Buffon believes "moisture is unfriendly to animal growth," and thus the abundance of water in America renders animals smaller in size and stature. Jefferson points to experience: "We see more humid climates produce a greater quantity of food, we see animals not only multiplied in their numbers, but improved in their bulk" (170). In his narrative and in his comparison chart of America and Europe, Jefferson includes the mammoth as proof of the superiority of American conditions (climate, etc.) to produce extremely large quadrupeds. The mammoth bones that Jefferson later ships to Paris are less a gesture of goodwill than additional proof of the superiority of the American climate over the European, and direct refutation of Buffon's theory. In addition to the mammoth's bones, Jefferson offers the narrative a member of the Delaware tribe presented to the governor of Virginia regarding the mammoth, which they term the Big Buffalo (165).

Jefferson concedes Buffon's argument regarding the degeneracy of domesticated animals in America but attributes their smaller size and weight not to the "heat and dryness of the climate, but . . . good food and shelter" (181–182). Had the Americans a greater population and less wilderness spaces in need of cultivation, they would not need to tax their beasts of burden so much with labor and a scanty amount of food and rest. So, while he accedes to Buffon this particular aspect of his argument, he does so for entirely different reasons than Buffon's, even to the point of indirectly chastising the Europeans for not being as industrious as Americans; if they were, their domesticated animals would likewise be smaller in stature and girth.

Most noteworthy, Buffon extends his theory of American degeneracy beyond the animals inhabiting the New World to include humans, both native and immigrant. Jefferson disdains to address Buffon's theories for the native population of South America, likening the beliefs to "fables" like those one would read by Aesop (183–184). Buffon's notion of degeneracy in humans relates specifically to an absence or reversal of stereotypically male traits such as virility, bravery, and sexual prowess. Jefferson celebrates the composite portrait of American Indians:

He meets death with more deliberation, and endures tortures with a firmness unknown almost to religious enthusiasm with us: that he is affectionate to his children, careful of them, and indulgent in the extreme: that his affections comprehend his other connections, weakening, as with us, from circle to circle, as they recede from the center: that his friendships are strong and faithful to the uttermost extremity: that his sensibility is keen, even the warriors weeping most bitterly on the loss of their children, though in general they endeavor to appear superior to human events: that his vivacity and activity of mind is equal to ours in the same situation. (185)

Note that Jefferson's depiction of American Indian males imagines them balancing the bravery necessary for battle and warfare with the tenderness requisite to create and maintain bonds of familial relations. These traits are similar to those imagined for male members of the republic. Jefferson's portrait, however, deserves further consideration as there are rhetorical reasons for imaging American Indians in such a positive and glowing light. If Jefferson were to accede to Buffon's belief that the native population was governed by cowardice, he would cast a negative light on the colonial soldiers who fought in King Philip's War and other battles against the nation's native inhabitants. Rather than address the virility of American Indian males, Jefferson focuses on the fecundity of its female

population, and the circumstances that prevent them from producing large families. Their position on battlefields and exposure to "excessive drudgery" make childbearing "extremely inconvenient" (186). Further, the women themselves are prone to "procuring abortions by the use of some vegetable; and that it even extends to prevent conception for a considerable time after" (186). Thus, Jefferson emasculates American Indian males not in accordance with Buffon's line of thinking, that they lack sexual prowess and virility, but in comparison with the division of labor between the sexes practiced in New England societies. "Were we in equal barbarism," Jefferson argues, "our females would be equal drudges" (186). As proof of the role environment plays in a human's development, Jefferson points to the fecundity of American Indian women who marry traders or who are held enslaved by colonists (186–187). Similarly, the lack of education is to blame for the apparent lack of genius or mental powers.

Jefferson offers up the eloquent speech of Logan, Mingo chief, when addressing Lord Dunmore as proof of "their eminence in oratory," which he believes rivals those of Demosthenes and Cicero (188). Logan's speech is delivered via a messenger as part of a peace treaty brokered among the Mingo, Delaware, and Shawnee with the governor of Virginia. The occasion of their battle involves the chief's egregious loss of his entire family as Colonel Cresap's act of vengeful retaliation for the robbery and murder of two frontiersmen by members of the Shawnee tribe (188). Logan eloquently describes his own loss: "There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature" (189). Jefferson readily admits to "varieties in the race of man, distinguished by their powers both of body and mind," but he does not subscribe to Buffon's notion that such difference is dependent upon "the side of the Atlantic on which their food happens to grow, or which furnishes the elements of which they are compounded" (189). By moving so swiftly from praise to denigration, Jefferson reveals here a tendency that prevails in his life and his writings to deal inconsistently and incongruously with the

other races present in America. As to the eloquence and literary merit of Anglo Americans, Jefferson takes on the critique of the Abbé Raynal, who enumerates the great poets of the Greeks, Italians, Portuguese, English, and French but argues, “America has not yet produced one good poet” (190). Jefferson identifies Washington, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, and Rittenhouse as three American-produced geniuses whose brilliance in the arts of war, physics, and astronomy was forged in their American experiences.

In response to query 8, which asks about the number of inhabitants in Virginia, Jefferson consults public records, historians, and the census, calculating that “should this rate of increase continue, we shall have between six and seven millions of inhabitants within 95 years” (209). Jefferson takes this occasion of projected populations to address the proposal to “produce rapid population by as great importations of foreigners as possible” (210). Given America’s form of government, “more peculiar than those of any other in the universe,” coupled with the fact that the “greatest number of emigrants” will have imbibed the principles of absolute monarchies, Jefferson cautions against this emigration policy (211). Further, he points to the differences in languages and fears that “they will infuse into [the nation] their spirit, warp and bias its direction, and render it a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mess” (211). Jefferson’s opposition to massive immigration of foreigners, for fear that it will introduce heterogeneity into the polis, seems at odds with his policy for American Indians to intermarry with Anglo Americans. Similarly, Jefferson expresses another inconsistency in his thinking at the conclusion of this query; a slave owner himself, he refers to the institution of slavery as “this great political and moral evil” (214).

When Jefferson addresses the question regarding the native inhabitants of Virginia, he offers up what he readily admits to be rather faulty numbers. Notwithstanding, he observes the rapid depletion of the native population by “one-third of their former numbers [based on] spirituous liquors, small pox, war, and an abridgment of territory” (221). Rhetori-

cally, Jefferson seems to anticipate JAMES FENIMORE COOPER’s notion, just decades later, of a vanishing race of people. This is most evident in Jefferson’s entertaining of his own curiosity regarding the burial rites of American Indians through the excavation of a burial mound. With the air of a detached scientist, Jefferson details encountering the skull of an infant, another rib of an infant, and “a fragment of the underjaw of a person about half grown” (224). Nowhere in his description of the burial mound is there a reverence for those whose bodies he has decided to examine, but only a conjecture as to the circumstances leading to the mass burial (225). He concludes this section with anecdotes of the reverence that American Indians still hold for such sites, mentioning that those who had visited a burial mound returned “with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow” (225–226). It might well be that Jefferson wished to maintain his tone of scientific objectivity and thus only expressed his own respect, perhaps, in the anecdotal form of reporting its appearance in others.

“By [1781] critics were already beginning to draw attention to his blunt pronouncement of human equality in the Declaration of Independence, and his *Notes on Virginia* is his most comprehensive explanation of his understanding of the idea. This text, to a large degree, was an explication of the Declaration of Independence; it grounded, as he thought, some of the grand philosophical principles of the Declaration in the empirical proofs of science” (Boulton 472). On the basis of Jefferson’s disparagement of blacks in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Boulton concludes that his famous article “all men are created equal,” never included blacks, as Jefferson “excluded blacks from the category of man” (472). Boulton references Jefferson’s often repeated phrases “physical distinctions proving a difference of race” and “the different is fixed in nature” as proof that Jefferson considered blacks to be an inferior race (483).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Jefferson’s treatment of the abundant flora and fauna found in America with that rep-

resented by THOMAS MORTON in his *New English Canaan*.

2. Emerson, Murray, and others will also take up Raynal's critique of America's lack of celebrated literature. Examine their responses, as authors, and compare them with these of Jefferson, who was primarily a statesman.
3. Compare Jefferson's exhumation of an Indian burial mound with his contemporary PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU'S "The Indian Burying Ground."
4. Compare Jefferson's treatment of American Indians with his treatment of Africans. Why might he consider American Indians to be future citizens but argue that "the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."

Letter to Peter Carr (1787)

Peter Carr was Jefferson's nephew, the son of Jefferson's sister Martha and brother-in-law Dabney Carr. Through advising his nephew on the subjects suitable for his study, Jefferson considers the republic's future and expresses his reliance upon an elite group of individuals possessing what he deems to be a solid education. Although Jefferson considers Carr's recent association with George Wythe, a self-educated man who became a lawyer and statesman in Virginia, to be as fortuitous for his nephew as it was for himself, he nevertheless feels compelled to "mention . . . the books . . . worth your reading, which submit to [Wythe's] correction." Central to Jefferson's notions of a worthy education is an understanding of Latin, which provides scholars with the ability to read the classics in their original language. Jefferson detested reading translations and preferred the difficult pleasure afforded from deciphering texts on one's own. Thus, he advises Carr to learn Spanish as "the antient history of a great part of America is written in that language."

"Jefferson's educational object was to create an intellectual aristocracy, by taking the most gifted young men, irrespective of their parents' wealth or social station, and giving them a liberal education—an education of which the classics and ancient history were the core—that they might be the more fit to govern America, to embellish her cities with beautiful buildings, and to write a national literature" (Morison 78). "Jefferson saw three reasons for the study of the classics in America. These were, first, as models of pure style and taste in writing; second, the happiness and satisfaction to be derived from the ability to read the authors in the original; and last 'the stores of real science deposited and transmitted in these languages'" (Sand 94–95).

On the subject of morality and religion, Jefferson recommends "the writings of [Laurence] Sterne particularly form the best course of morality that ever was written." He bases this belief in morality's being located in Sterne's fiction, and not in the Bible, because of his conviction that "moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm." In other words, since Jefferson considered humans to be inherently moral, a tenet that directly contradicts biblical interpretations of mankind's inherent evil based upon Adam's fall from grace, he would rather his nephew dedicate his moral education to Sterne than to the Bible. If Carr is to read the Bible, Jefferson recommends perusing it "as you would read Livy or Tacitus," two respected Roman historians. He cautions against a literal interpretation of the Bible, especially when it comes into direct contradiction to "the laws of nature." It is not surprising that Jefferson would advocate knowledge of the classics since his plans for public education in Virginia included a curriculum filled with classes in Latin and Greek that would permit young boys access to classical writings. What seems a bit surprising, however, is that Jefferson, who penned this epistle while in Paris, should attempt to dissuade his nephew from similar travels, stating, "There is no place where your pursuit of knowledge will be so little obstructed by foreign objects as in your own country."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Jefferson's vision for a young man's education, as outlined in his letter to his nephew Peter Carr, with that for young women, as described in his letter to Nathaniel Burwell. What might account for these differences? What position must he imagine women taking in the nation?
2. Compare COTTON MATHER's *Bonifacius* and its reliance on the Bible to Jefferson, and his preference for classical texts. How does each writer imagine the inherent nature of mankind? What is the purpose of an education for both?

***Letter to Handsome Lake* (1802)**

In his November 3, 1802, letter to Ganioda'yo, the Seneca Indian chief commonly known as HANDSOME LAKE, Jefferson continues to advance many of the theories he set forth in *Notes on the State of Virginia* regarding the present and future of American Indians in the nation, with the exception of the considerable focus placed on the sale of "spirituous liquors." In *Notes*, Jefferson included liquor as one of three central enemies responsible for the drastic reduction in the native population. In his letter to Handsome Lake, Jefferson dilates upon the subject of alcohol: "It has weakened their bodies, enervated their minds, exposed them to hunger, cold, nakedness, and poverty." Years prior, on the occasion of Moses Paul's execution for murdering a fellow American Indian during a drunken brawl, the missionary SAMSON OCCOM provides a similar, but more elaborate list of alcohol's ill effects: "By this sin we can't have comfortable houses, nor any thing comfortable in our houses; neither food nor raiment, nor decent utensils. We are obliged to put up with very mean, ragged, and dirty clothes, almost naked. And we are half-starved, for most of the time obliged to pick up any thing to eat. And our poor children are suffering every day for want of the necessities of life; they are very often crying for want of food, and we have nothing to give them; and in the cold weather they are shivering and crying, being pinched with cold."

Interestingly, Occom never mentions white men's complicity in the alcoholism of American Indians through their selling or trading of liquor. Handsome Lake, however, does. Jefferson acknowledges that the Seneca chief's "censures" not only of his own people for buying and consuming the alcohol, but of "all the nations of the white people who have supplied their calls for this article" is understandable. Nevertheless, Jefferson initially defends the trafficking of alcohol between natives and whites by referencing the rules of a free-market economy: "They have sold what individuals wish to buy, leaving every one to be the guardian of his own health and happiness." Jefferson's argument here is that the supply for alcohol would not exist if the natives did not express a desire for it. He further argues that each is responsible for his own health and happiness, a tenet expressly derived, ironically, from the Declaration of Independence. Having expressed these defenses of the white men's trading and supplying an "article" Jefferson readily admits is a central cause of the demise of the native population, he proceeds to applaud Handsome Lake's efforts to arrest the trade of alcohol for his people's own good and promises to assist in stopping the flow of "spirituous liquors" to his tribe. This bit of praise, however, is not without negative repercussion. Jefferson writes, "As you find that our people cannot refrain from the ill use of [alcohol], I greatly applaud your resolution not to use [alcohol] at all." Note that Jefferson does not point to a lack of restraint of natives when it comes to the "ill use" of alcohol, but of fellow white people.

Evidently, Jefferson continues in his belief that whites represent the model to which native peoples need to aspire in their struggle for progress. This belief informs his next topic in the letter: natives' sale of their "excess" land and forfeiture of their hunting and gathering mode of living for the more civilized practice of agriculture. Jefferson assures Handsome Lake that America is "ready to buy land" provided "your consent is freely given [and] a satisfactory price paid." He further testifies, "Nor do I think, brother, that the sale of lands is, under all circumstances, injurious to your people." Jefferson urges Handsome Lake to persuade his people

to abandon hunting in favor of agriculture. The results, he forecasts, will reverse the image of ruin and degradation presented in the first half of the letter in reference to the abuse of alcohol: “Your women and children well fed and clothed, your men living happily in peace and plenty, and your numbers increasing from year to year.”

Jefferson’s letter to Handsome Lake concludes with language of kinship and amity as he describes the Seneca as “our brethren of the same land.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Jefferson’s treatment of the ruinous effects of alcohol on American Indians with Samson Occom’s portrayal of the “devilish sin of drunkenness” in his sermon preached at Moses Paul’s execution.
2. Jefferson hired Philip Morin Freneau to author a propaganda organ for his political party. Consider how the two men write about American Indians.

Letter to Benjamin Hawkins (1803)

As he expressed in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson disapproved of American Indian industries and what he deemed to be their inefficient use of the land, particularly because such activities as hunting and gathering exposed native women to drudgery and were central reasons for the low birthrates among native peoples. The political scientist Claudio Katz believes that Jefferson relied on a “Lockean vocabulary of improvement . . . enclosure and husbandry would enable Indian families to use much less land to provide a more comfortable subsistence for themselves” (9). Katz argues that Jefferson’s acknowledgment of native rights to the soil “was a tactical concession: purchase was a safer and less expensive way of acquiring land than war, and it made for a better representation of American intentions before European public opinion” (9).

In his letter to Hawkins, Jefferson expresses his plan for Indians to quit the “business of hunting” and “become better farmers.” Such a shift in land

use would, Jefferson avows, be mutually beneficial to both citizens of the United States as well as its native inhabitants: “While they are learning to do better on less land, our increasing numbers will be calling for more land, and thus a coincidence of interests will be produced between those who have lands to spare, and want other necessaries, and those who have such necessaries to spare, and want lands.” As farmers, Jefferson seems to suggest, American Indians will become more acculturated to an American sensibility and will thus situate themselves in a position to pursue his ultimate goal, the incorporation of American Indians into American culture: “The ultimate point of rest and happiness for them,” Jefferson writes, “is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people.”

As the historian Roger Kennedy remarks, Jefferson’s own family history attests to his approval of interracial marriage: Jefferson “was pleased with his daughters’ marriages to men who claimed Pocahontas as an ancestress” (105). Kennedy is quick to point out, however, that Jefferson’s approval of miscegenation was strictly reserved for mixtures between American Indians and Anglo Americans; he did not conscience unions between blacks and whites, despite his own notorious affair with the slave Sally Hemings. His somewhat utilitarian notions of land use and interracial marriage were predicated on the belief that American Indians were capable of improving to the level of Anglo Americans; all they wanted was for a change in environment or circumstances. Indeed, nothing speaks to Jefferson’s sense of egalitarianism with American Indians than his plans to confer U.S. citizenship upon them. He writes to Hawkins, “Incorporating themselves with us as citizens of the U.S., this is what the natural progress of things will of course bring on, and it will be better to promote than to retard it.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Historians have long argued that Jefferson’s policy toward American Indians was a guiding principle for President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Policy of the 1830s. In his letter to

Hawkins, Jefferson advocates extending U.S. citizenship to American Indians. How might Jefferson's policy apply to Jackson?

2. Consider Jefferson's stance on education as a cornerstone to citizenship and an elite-run government. How might this belief be reconciled to his imaginings of an American Indian citizenry? What kinds of education does he suggest for the nation's native population?

Letter to Nathaniel Burwell (1818)

Jefferson confesses that prior to Burwell's letter, "a plan of female education has never been a subject of systematic contemplation with me." That said, he consults his "surviving daughter" and one of her pupils to arrive at the general goals and specific subjects deemed proper for a "good education."

Although his letter to Peter Carr advocates the novels of Laurence Sterne, such as *Tristram Shandy*, for their moral content, Jefferson warns against young females' "inordinate passion prevalent for novels." He fears that "the result [of reading too many novels] is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life." One might conjecture that Jefferson's warning stems from a fear that females are prone to indulge in the fantasies presented in novels to the neglect of their household duties, or to the dedication of their attentions to more serious subjects. He does not dismiss literature altogether, however, but recommends narratives modeled "on the incidents of real life" because they are "useful vehicles of sound morality." He likewise cautions against too liberal a reading of poetry but applauds Pope, Dryden, Thompson, and Shakespeare for "forming style and taste." Markedly absent from Jefferson's list of subjects indispensable to a young female's education are the classics, which have a considerable influence on him and on his views about a proper man's education.

Jefferson advocates the "ornaments" of dancing, drawing, and music, although he strictly admonishes any female who pursues dancing after mar-

riage. While the parent of a young single woman can derive pleasure from seeing "his daughter qualified to participate with her companions" in dance, for the married woman, "gestation and nursing leav[e] little time to . . . this exercise [to make it] either safe or innocent." Drawing, which he confesses to be more fashionable in Europe than in America, is nevertheless useful and may be later employed in the mother's instruction of her children. Likewise, music, provided the young woman "has an ear," is an essential accomplishment and "furnishes a delightful recreation for the hours of respite from the cares of the day."

Jefferson concludes by acknowledging the central educational subject of "household economy," in which "the mothers of our country are generally skilled and generally careful to instruct their daughters." Given the thoroughness of mothers' instructions to their daughters on this subject, Jefferson does not feel the need to provide any further detail or recommendations. Rather, he elevates the importance of a house's order and economy by noting that in its absence, "ruin follows and children [are rendered] destitute of the means of living."

For Discussion or Writing

1. How would you characterize Jefferson's expectations for women in the nation on the basis of his recommendations for their education?
2. Contrast Jefferson's suggestions for a good female education with his suggestions for a good male education.
3. Compare Jefferson's ideal female education with HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER's as presented in *The Boarding School* and JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY's as outlined in "On the Equality of the Sexes."

Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson (1821)

Jefferson identifies his own "ready reference" and "information [for] my family" as the chief reasons compelling him to write "some memoranda and state some recollections" of his life at his current age of 77 (3). He begins by tracing back his paternal side

of the family to Wales, and then briefly mentions his uncles, Thomas and Field, before proceeding with an account of his father, Peter Jefferson, born in either 1707 or 1708 (3). His mother, Jane Randolph, married at the age of 19 and was born to a family derived from England and Scotland (3). Jefferson dedicates considerably more attention to his father, writing with pride that despite his father's lack of an education, his "strong mind, sound judgment, and eager[ness] for information" soon garnered him the honor of becoming a mathematics professor at William and Mary College, and later cartographer, with Mr. Fry, of the first map of Virginia. Jefferson references his father's map in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson further distinguishes his father by referring to him as the "third or fourth settler of the part of the country in which I live" (4). Almost immediately after these passages, Jefferson abruptly writes of his father's death: "He died August 17, 1757" (4).

Jefferson's autobiography then proceeds to address his own education, beginning at his father's behest at the age of five in English, and continuing at age nine in Latin. After his father's death, Jefferson pursued his study of Latin with a more apt instructor, the Reverend Mr. Maury, whom he describes as a "correct classical scholar," for two years, followed by two additional years at William and Mary College (4). His greatest mentor, however, is George Wythe, whom he met through Dr. William Small while attending classes at William and Mary. Through Wythe, whom Jefferson refers to fondly as "my faithful and beloved mentor in youth, and my most affectionate friend through life," he began his legal studies and an association with then-governor of Virginia, Fauquier (4). His positions as a lawyer, as well as a "member of the legislature," were both abruptly stopped by the events of the American Revolutionary War (5). Despite laboring under a government that attempted to circumscribe their minds "within narrow limits," Jefferson "made one effort in that body for the permission of the emancipation of slaves" (5).

His position as a lawyer introduced him, through his acquaintance with his fellow lawyer John Way-

les, to his wife, Martha Wayles Skelton, who was the 23-year-old widow of Bathurst Skelton (5). Interestingly, Jefferson's description of their marriage is devoid of any sentiment but speaks instead of their financial standing. Her patrimony, minus debts, "was about equal to my own patrimony, and consequently doubled the ease of our circumstances" (5).

Jefferson narrates his initial experience with revolutionary events as a law student, "at the door of the lobby of the House of Burgesses," where he overhears the eloquent oration of Patrick Henry (5–6). Just a few years later, Jefferson joined the ranks of Henry and others to create a committee that would unite the thirteen colonies in concert against the British government (6–7). Although the consulting members wished Jefferson would represent them, he demurred, offering his brother-in-law, Mr. Carr, instead (7). The second request made for Jefferson to take a leadership role, however, was met with his approval, and in anticipation of the new meeting designed to combat the Boston port bill with a day of fasting and prayer, Jefferson wrote a draft outlining the relationship between the colonies and Great Britain, which was published in pamphlet form as "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" (10). In a precursor to the Declaration of Independence, this pamphlet was "penned in the language of truth, and divested of those expressions of servility which would persuade his majesty that we are asking favours, and not rights, shall obtain from his majesty a more respectful acceptance" (105).

Jefferson recognizes that the historical events he is recounting of the Constitutional Congress blend both personal history, and thus are placed rightly within his autobiography, and "general history . . . [thus being] known to every one, and need not therefore be noted here" (10). In their review of two recent biographies of Thomas Jefferson, the historians Jan Lewis and Peter Onuf address this very issue of Jefferson's personal history's blending with the nation's by quoting the 1874 biographer James Parton: "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right"

(125). Pauline Maier attributes the synecdochal relationship between the nation and Jefferson to his authorship of the Declaration of Independence (reported in Lewis and Onuf 125).

Through the reported speech of Governor Livingston, Jefferson includes a fine piece of praise for his writing, and readers understand a link between the penning of his pamphlet and his eventual construction of the Declaration. Livingston deems the former “a production certainly of the finest pen in America” (11). With equal humility, Jefferson states, “I prepared a draught of the Declaration committed to us” (12). He proceeds to offer readers a rare glimpse into the internal struggles and debates within the Second Continental Congress, including the fear and reservations of some colonies to approve the Declaration of Independence (15–17). When all thirteen colonies were in agreement with the proposed resolution to break ties with England, the various representatives deliberated on the exact wording and sentiments expressed in that all-important document. Jefferson attributes the striking out of certain language related to “censure on the people of England . . . lest they should give them offence” to the “pusillanimous idea that we had friends in England worth keeping terms with” (18). South Carolina and Georgia argued for the removal of a clause “reprobating enslaving the inhabitants of Africa” (18). Other passages removed or amended are made available to the reader in the pages immediately following, with Jefferson’s judgment: “The sentiments of men are known not only by what they receive, but what they reject also” (18). By introducing the original Declaration of Independence, Jefferson makes an indirect statement regarding his own sentiments. As author of the document, Jefferson expresses more passionate sentiment, both in his desire to end the institution of slavery and in his critique of King George III’s despotism (19–24).

Jefferson informs readers that he writes selectively of the “details of reformation only; selecting points of legislation prominent in character and principle, urgent, and indicative of the strength of the general pulse of reformation” (37). He provides

readers with notes on debates among the founding fathers regarding the census and how each state will determine its tax, whether by the number of workers in the state (both free and slave), the number of houses, or the number of free persons. Further debate ensues regarding the establishment of voting rights for the various states, especially since the states vary so widely in size and population (24–32). He leaves these debates without imputing his own opinion until he introduces a bill that would change the system for inheritance. Rather than allow the patriarchs of “founding great families” to pass all of their property and thus create “an aristocracy of wealth, of more harm and danger, than benefit, to society” through the practice of primogeniture, Jefferson proposes to require an even distribution of lands among a father’s children. Such a requirement, he believes, will “make an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent, which nature has wisely provided for the direction of the interests of society and scattered with equal hand through all its conditions” (32). Jefferson considers such a class of people to be “essential to a well ordered republic” (32). Such a belief accords with Jefferson’s letter to his nephew Peter Carr, as well as his plans to establish schools throughout Virginia and the University of Virginia (42–43). Jefferson writes of his attempts at legislation regarding education in the state of Virginia. The bill to introduce elementary education “for all children generally, right and poor” does not succeed because “it would throw on wealth the education of the poor; and the justices, being generally of the more wealthy class, were unwilling to incur that burden” (42–43).

Interestingly, Jefferson promises readers to “recur again to this subject towards the close of my story, if I should have life and resolution enough to reach that term; for I am already tired of talking about myself” (43). Just as he has written earlier in his autobiography, Jefferson again links his private life to the public history of Virginia: “Being now, as it were, identified with the Commonwealth itself, to write my own history during the two years of my administration [as governor], would be to write the public history of that portion of the revo-

lution within this state” (45). Jefferson continues, “For this portion therefore of my life, I refer altogether to [Girardin’s] history” (45).

Jefferson abruptly changes topic to address another bill he successfully introduced to stop the importation of future slaves. Recalling his failure to include language regarding this very subject when he was first a representative of the House of Burgesses, and while authoring the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson seems pleased to know that his bill “stopped the increase of the evil by importation, leaving to future efforts in final eradication” (34). He returns to the subject a few pages later and writes more forcefully about the inevitable end of slavery and emancipation of all slaves: “Yet the day is not distant when it must bear and adopt it, or worse will follow. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these two people are to be free” (44). Despite these strong words that presage the Civil War, which would be fought in large measure over this very subject, Jefferson does not imagine a future for Africans in America: “Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them” (44).

In his descriptions of heated debates regarding the abolition of “religious tyranny” in Virginia, Jefferson is quite kind to his opponents, Mr. Pendleton and Robert Carter Nicholas. Jefferson’s love for oral debate is made evident in his praise of worthy opponents: “In justice to the two honest but zealous opponents . . . they were more disposed generally to acquiesce in things as they are, than to risk innovations, yet whenever the public will had once decided, none were more faithful or exact in their obedience to it” (35). When debating Pendleton over the form of inheritance, Jefferson refers to him as “the ablest man in debate I have ever met with. He had not indeed the poetical fancy of Mr. Henry, his sublime imagination, his lofty and overwhelming diction; but he was cool, smooth and persuasive; his language flowing, chaste and embellished, his conceptions quick, acute and full of resource” (33). He offers similar praise of George

Mason and James Madison (36–37). Lest readers believe Jefferson prone to verbosity, he declaims the current method by which Congress “waste[s] and abuse[s] the time and patience of the house” by giving in to lengthy and tedious debates (53). As examples of succinct debate, he points to Dr. Franklin and George Washington, both of whom he “never heard . . . speak ten minutes at a time, nor to any but the main point which was to decide the question” (53). In such praise, readers recognize that Jefferson’s own aesthetic is informed by his preference for brief but well-spoken comments.

From 1777 to 1779, Jefferson worked arduously with Pendleton and Wythe to create laws for the state of Virginia; Mason and Lee, who were on the original committee with them, both excused themselves from the difficult task (37–40). These four bills Jefferson was pivotal in drafting and passing—abolishing religious tyranny, abolishing primogeniture, creating general education, and providing the right to trial by jury—he regards as “forming a system by which every fibre would be eradicated of ancient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican” (44).

After the completion of his services as governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Jefferson returns to his service in Congress. He takes up the debate over national currency, is involved in the ratification of the peace treaty with Great Britain, and is appointed as plenipotentiary to Paris, where he takes his eldest daughter and joins Dr. Franklin and John Adams (54–55). Jefferson devotes several pages to an international proposal he makes, and whose terms he successfully negotiated with various European countries, in an attempt to mitigate against the “piratical states of Barbary,” who attack and plunder ships (59–61). Despite his valiant efforts, and his ability to garner support from various ambassadors and representatives of other nations, Jefferson’s proposal ultimately “fell through” because his own nation failed to ratify it, believing themselves incapable of gathering the necessary funds to contribute to a peacekeeping force of frigates who would patrol the waters against pirates (61).

Uncharacteristically, Jefferson provides readers with some insight into his personal life by mentioning his own travels through France in an attempt to alleviate the pain caused by “a dislocated wrist, unsuccessfully set” (65). He provides readers with a list of the various towns and provinces he visits, first as part of his pursuit of “mineral waters” and later in a more official capacity to determine favorable trade routes and to assess the rice country of Piedmont (65). In this passage that provides readers a rare glimpse into Jefferson’s personal life, he also mentions the arrival of his “younger daughter Maria from Virginia by way of London, the youngest having died some time before” (66). Jefferson treats the death of his wife in a more emotional manner, writing: “I had two months before that lost the cherished companion of my life, in whose affections, unabated on both sides, I had lived the last ten years in unchequered happiness” (46).

Upon his return to America, Jefferson debates the absence of particular articles to the Constitution, which he had no part in orchestrating. Specifically, Jefferson points to the term limitations for the president, the right to trial by jury, and “declarations ensuring freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of the person under the uninterrupted protection of the habeas corpus” (71–72). Further, Jefferson worries over the independence of judges from the executive branch of the government (72–74). In their current position, Jefferson labels them “the corps of sappers and miners, steadily working to undermine the independent rights of the States, and to consolidate all power in the hands of that government in which they have so important a freehold estate” (74).

His discussion of the obstacles currently facing the United States naturally blends into a historical recounting of the French Revolution, and Jefferson’s passion for a republican form of government is reignited as he speaks against the various means of oppression imposed on the citizens of France (78). The declarations made by the king in December 1788 closely resemble those that appeared in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, including a free press and the states’ independence from new taxes imposed by the king (80). Because the king’s “con-

stitution [is] timid, his judgment null, and without sufficient firmness even to stand by the faith of his word,” the queen, who exercised “absolute ascendancy over him,” in concert with the aristocratic ministers “whose principles of government were those of the age of Louis XIV,” reversed the king’s declarations by the evening of the same day (80). Jefferson “felt it very interesting to understand the views of the parties of which it was composed, and especially the ideas prevalent as to the organization contemplated for the government. I went therefore daily from Paris to Versailles, and attended their debates, generally till the hour of adjournment” (83). Jefferson further places himself squarely within the French Revolution and parallels it with the recent one in America: “I was much acquainted with the leading patriots of the assembly. Being from a country which had successfully passed through a similar reformation, they were disposed to my acquaintance, and had some confidence in me” (85). On the basis of this rapport, Jefferson proceeds to advise the French patriots to “secure what the government was now ready to yield, and trust to future occasions for what might still be wanting” (85). In other words, Jefferson attempted to prevent the bloody warfare of the French Revolution by asking the patriots to accept the rights offered by the king.

Despite the bloodshed of the Revolution, Jefferson believes that the French have never achieved anything more than the nine original articles of rights and privileges the king initially offered (85). Jefferson’s close proximity to the events of the Revolution places him passing through the lane just moments before the “signal for universal insurrection” commenced with the stoning of French cavalry that led to their desertion of Versailles (89). Jefferson learns firsthand from Monsieur de Corny of the arming of the people by the governor of the Invalides (90). He squarely lays the blame for the bloodshed and horror of war on the queen, who did not allow the king to act as Jefferson feels assured that he would have and who held undue sway over the monarch. Twice Jefferson assures his readers that the king always acted with France’s best interest, “and had he been left to himself, he would have willingly acquiesced in whatever they should devise as best for the nation” (92).

- loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/DeclarInd.html. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. "Is 'Liberal Education' Democratic? What Jefferson Advocated." *Hispania* 27, no. 1 (1944): 78–79.
- Parton, James. *Life of Thomas Jefferson, Third President of the United States*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1874.
- Sand, Norbert. "The Classics in Jefferson's Theory of Education." *Classical Journal* 40, no. 2 (1944): 92–98.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973.
- Stanton, Lucia. "The Other End of the Telescope: Jefferson through the Eyes of His Slaves." *William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2000): 139–152.
- Tauber, Gisela. "Notes on the State of Virginia: Thomas Jefferson's Unintentional Self-Portrait." *Eighteenth Century Studies* 26, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 635–648.
- Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive. Available online. URL: <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.



COTTON MATHER (1663–1728)

I write the Wonders of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of Europe, to the American Strand.

(*Magnalia Christi Americana*)

Named after two “most honored families in early New England,” the Cottons and the Mathers, Cotton Mather was destined for life as a Puritan minister. His paternal grandfather, Richard Mather, migrated to Massachusetts in pursuit of religious freedom from the Church of England. Richard Mather preached for nearly 34 years in Dorchester. He is perhaps best known for drafting the famous Cambridge Platform of 1648, which established the particular form of church government known as Congregationalism. Cotton Mather’s maternal grandfather, not surprisingly, was also a Puritan minister. In fact, John Cotton delivered the farewell sermon for JOHN WINTHROP’s departure for Massachusetts Bay in 1630 (Silverman 3). Just a few years later, John Cotton, along with his congregation, left England and landed in America, where he ministered at the First Church of Boston.

Richard Mather’s son, Increase, married Maria Cotton, the daughter of John Cotton, on March 6, 1662. Six years prior, Richard had married John Cotton’s widow; thus, the union of Maria and Increase created a double bond between the two formidable Puritan families, forged by consanguine and affilial relations. “At a quarter past ten in the morning, February 12, 1663,” Cotton Mather was born (Silverman 6). He was named after his maternal grandfather, “the most Eminent Man of God that ever New-England saw” (Silverman 6). With such a name as *Cotton Mather*, Increase acknowl-

edged and privileged his son’s family heritage. Increase expected Cotton to follow in the family’s profession, and so he did.

Early in life, Cotton began to exhibit signs of his propensity for knowledge and religion. He is said to have begun praying, even creating his own prayers, around the time when he first began to speak. As had his father, who first attended Harvard at the age of 12, Cotton Mather proved himself no less dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. By the age of 11, Cotton had read Cato, Tully, Ovid, and Virgil in Latin, as well as good portions of the New Testament in Greek. Reading in Greek was a skill he honed while attending Harvard. As part of the curriculum, students were expected to translate Old Testament passages from Greek into Hebrew or from English into Greek (Solberg xxiv). In 1674, Cotton passed the entrance examination, which involved proving a working knowledge of Greek and Latin, and was admitted to Harvard as its youngest student. He was 11. Because most of the scholars were years older, ranging in age from 15 to 18, and because Cotton suffered from a speech impediment (he stuttered), he left Harvard as a resident student after a month or so and studied at home with his father. His stutter remained with him until a few months prior to his 21st birthday, and then returned again years later.

Cotton Mather graduated from Harvard at the age of 15; the following year, on August 22, 1680,

he began his career as a Puritan minister by delivering his first public sermon in his grandfather's church in Dorchester. He spent five years in candidacy before his ordination as a minister. During this time, Cotton suffered a crisis of faith and sexual temptation (Solberg xxvii). It is not surprising, given his repeated advice in *Bonifacius* for readers to devote themselves to periods of self-examination, that Mather devoted a considerable amount of time in his five years prior to candidacy to just this practice. Given the Puritan belief in original sin and the impossibility of successfully purging himself of all sin, especially lust and pride, Mather sought out divine intervention. These two particular vices would haunt Mather for a good part of his life and cause him anguish and self-doubt. When he was awarded membership in the illustrious Royal Society, for example, Mather debated in his diary whether or not to wear the ring that signified his membership. His diary contains repeated entreaties to God to assist him in making sure that his actions were taken not to satisfy his own ambitions and desire for fame and recognition, but to further the glory of God.

On March 4, 1686, he married Abigail Phillips, the daughter of "worthy, pious, and credible Parents" who resided in Charlestown. She was nearly 16, and he was 23 (Silverman 50). Their firstborn, Abigail, died after five months, and two others died in infancy; Cotton was extremely fearful for the lives of his children who survived past the first few years. He prayed fervently for the life of his son, Increase, Jr., also known as "Creasy." Samuel died; Mehetabel died; Abigail died. His wife, Abigail, succumbed to smallpox on December 1, 1702. He married his second wife, Elizabeth, the daughter of the Boston physician Dr. John Clark and widow of Mr. Hubbard, and had four more children. Elizabeth Hubbard died in 1713 during a measles epidemic, along with the twins she had recently borne, and their daughter, Jerusha. He married his third wife, Lydia Lee Green, who was the widow of the wealthy merchant John George and the daughter of the Reverend Samuel Lee, on July 5, 1715. Unlike his almost pious devotion to his first two wives,

who he thought would make him closer to Christ, Mather was clearly physically and sexually attracted to Lydia. His third wife's considerable wealth and social standing put him and his family in a much roomier house than he had previously had.

In April 1721, a smallpox epidemic raged in Boston, infecting nearly half of the city (Silverman 336). Because Mather had two children, Elizabeth and Sammy, who had been born after the last epidemic (1702–3), he was particularly fearful that they would become infected. During the smallpox epidemic in Boston of 1721, Mather took a controversial proinoculation stance (Jeske 585; Silverman 338–339). In July of that same year, Mather addressed a letter to local physicians, informing them of the efficacy of inoculation in warding off the deadly effects of epidemics like smallpox. Much of his letter was based on information he had gathered from the Royal Society's *Transactions*. His biographer Kenneth Silverman also asserts that Mather's own servant, Onesimus, also served as a source on inoculation (339). Further, Mather's early interest in medicine, piqued during his days at Harvard, provided him with a requisite knowledge of medical theories in practice. Indeed, he corresponded briefly with Robert Boyle, who figures prominently in Mather's *The Christian Philosopher*, while acting as an amanuensis for Dr. William Avery. Mather's interest in preventing fatalities from the 1721 outbreak of smallpox also resulted in a "Letter about a Good Management under the Distemper of the Measles," which he intended as a means of instructing people unable to afford physicians. In it, Mather provides detailed descriptions of smallpox symptoms along with potential remedies, but his main advice is to let nature take its course. His scholarly interests and pursuits did not rest solely in the contemplation of religious matters, however. In fact, Mather's scientific inquiries, published in *A Christian Philosopher*, contributed to his being made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1713.

Cotton published over 460 texts in his lifetime but was most disappointed that he could not find a publisher for his *Biblia Americana*. At the end of

his *Bonifacius*, Mather includes a lengthy advertisement for *Biblia*, in the hope that it would pique the interest of subscribers and find a publisher. He describes the work as a collection of information on the Bible from nearly every conceivable angle, including biblical geography, the history of Jerusalem, scientific theories on the flood and Creation, and analysis of various translations of the Bible. A book that Mather worked on for nearly 15 years, from 1693, *Biblia* was a staggeringly large text whose sheer size made its publication cost prohibitive. Indeed, the finished product was six volumes, each volume containing roughly 1,000 pages.

As Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, and other scholars have argued compellingly, Cotton Mather employed the jeremiad in much of his writings. He strove to restore what he saw to be an increasingly straying and secularized Puritan culture to the origins of their religious convictions. With the dying out of the first generation of Puritans, Mather began to see the potential demise of the constant battle New England was waging between the Puritans and the creatures of the invisible world, witches and devils, who wanted to tempt the pilgrims away from their path of righteousness. In his lifetime, New England suffered two smallpox epidemics, two fires that destroyed large portions of Boston, and King Philip's War. Puritans read religious portent into these disasters and viewed them as a harsh judgment from God for their backsliding. This central theme—decline—operates through most of Mather's sermons and published materials. Besides heralding the deplorable conditions of a society, however, the jeremiad contains a message of future hope. Despite the fallen status of Puritan New England, Mather writes, there remains the potential to reclaim past glories and to surpass them.

The relationship between Cotton and his father is particularly relevant when understanding the conflicting emotions that animated the son. Increase was a formidable force. Not only did he have multiple visits with the acting monarchs in England, but he seemed to have curried enough political favor to be instrumental in the appointing

of the governor of Massachusetts and in the restoration of their charter. As a religious figure, Increase was known for a history of prognostications. He seemed to have the uncanny ability to predict disastrous events that befell New England, such as King Philip's War. As did his father, Increase, Cotton believed in the occult, or the ability to divine God's intent through signs in nature. The death of his wife Abigail in 1702 to consumption, as well as the death of his second wife, Elizabeth, to measles, however, severely tested this faith, as he had divined the signs to foretell of both wives' recoveries (Levin 753).

Like most sons, Cotton was desirous of his father's approval and felt himself constantly tasked with the difficult goal of surpassing a very accomplished and well-respected member of the Puritan community. Most tellingly, in the years of Increase's residence in England, Cotton enjoyed a prominence in both political and religious circles that he never enjoyed before or afterward. Another example of Increase's influence on his son can be seen in a general perusal of Cotton's papers and journals. He copied his father's sermons in a deliberate script and annotated them. At times, his annotations far outpaced the number of pages of his father's original sermons.

With the shift in the British monarchy from Protestantism to Catholicism under King James II, Massachusetts and the Puritans saw a challenge to their way of governance and worship. A new governor was sent to rule over New England, and he took with him a revocation of the Massachusetts charter as well as the king's commission for a new government. Sir Edmund Andros, the new governor, demanded Anglican services be held in the same church currently serving the Puritans; he arrested Cotton's father, Increase, on charges that he had slandered Edward Randolph, "a leading advocate of strict royal control over Massachusetts" (Silverman 61–65). When Increase left for England to meet with King James and discuss his indulgences for non-Catholics, as well as the environment under Andros's governorship, Andros seems to have targeted Cotton. In 1689, Andros sent out

a warrant for Cotton's arrest on the same charges that his father faced—libel against Randolph. Just months before, Cotton had managed to copy bits of Randolph's letters that clearly displayed his animosity for New Englanders. However, the charges against Cotton included an anonymous pamphlet published two years prior entitled *A Brief Discourse Concerning the Unlawfulness of Common Prayer Worship*.

When King James's wife bore a son, William of Orange gathered Dutch allies to help him attack the king and reclaim the throne. The Glorious Revolution in England resulted in Bostonians' taking arms against Andros and his government; the arrest warrant that had been pending for nearly two months over Cotton's head was now no longer a threat. Wait Winthrop, who would soon after serve as a judge in the Salem witch trials, was instrumental in squelching the arrest order. Scholars remain uncertain of the degree of Mather's involvement in this revolution against Andros, partly because Mather's journal is missing for this period, and partly because his chief adversary, Edward Randolph, accused Mather of fomenting crowds to riot against Andros and of holding meetings with armed men at his own home. What is certain is that in April 1689, Andros was arrested, chained, and imprisoned. The king recalled Andros, Randolph, and their sympathizers in July to stand trial against complaints against them.

Out of these events in New England emerged the *Declaration of the Gentlemen*, which may or may not have been penned by Cotton Mather. It is certain, however, that he embraced its notions of nonviolent revolt against Andros's governance in New England, which they proclaim to be part of a larger plot to undermine Protestantism in the New World in favor of Catholicism. Despite their seizure of government officials, the colonists of New England maintained their allegiance to England. This moment helped to launch Cotton Mather into a dual role as a political and religious leader.

Three months into their rule over England, William and Mary declared war against the French. In New England, Sir William Phips (future governor

of Massachusetts) launched a highly unsuccessful attack against the French in Canada. When Phips was appointed the new governor, and returned to Massachusetts with Increase, the colony once again had a charter that blended the relationship between church and state. Further, it should be noted that it was Increase Mather who negotiated the new charter with William and Mary.

At the insistence of William Stoughton, lieutenant-governor under Governor William Phips, who presided over the witch trials, and that of several other judges (including Judge Hathorne, great-grandfather of the well-known author Nathaniel Hawthorne), Cotton Mather set about explaining and supporting the trials. Samuel Sewall, Wait Winthrop (grandson of John Winthrop), John Richards, and Lieutenant-Governor William Stoughton, the men who made up the seven-man commission for the witch trials, were all close friends of the Mathers (Silverman 97). Cotton Mather began writing from court summaries, called breviatees, and completed *The Wonders of the Invisible World* in mid-October 1692, just a few weeks after the final execution in Salem on September 22, 1692. It is perhaps this particular text, which was a best seller in its time, that solidifies the relationship between Mather and the Salem witch trials. In 1689, Cotton and his wife, Abigail, took in Martha Goodwin for a period of five or six weeks to try to learn more about the invisible world and to depossess the girl. Martha claimed to be suffering under the torments of a laundress named Goody Glover. Mather published his account of Martha Goodwin in *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* in 1689. It went through a second edition in London in 1691 and a third edition in Edinburgh in 1697. Because of this particular publication, some critics see Cotton Mather as an instigator in the Salem witch trials, arguing that he taught the people of New England how to see cases of witchcraft. In the 18 months between the publication of the Goodwin case and the Salem outbreaks, Cotton Mather continued to draw the public's attention to the existence of devils and witchcraft.

While it is certainly true that a significant number of Mather's sermons, most of which were published, addressed issues of witchcraft and devilry, his was not the only voice preaching from the pulpit on these subjects (Silverman 88).

Although his ill health prevented him from accepting John Richard's invitation to attend the trials, he did write an extensive letter where he laid out guidelines for the court. He believed that the surest sign of witchcraft was in the form of credible confession from the accused. Further, and this point is worth emphasis, Mather warned against the overreliance on spectral evidence, arguing that the devil could represent the figure of an innocent or virtuous person (Silverman 98). He was alarmed when Bridget Bishop, the "thrice-married owner of an unlicensed tavern," was found guilty and hanged on June 10, 1692, the first victim of the trials (Silverman 100). In response, Mather wrote *The Return of Several Ministers*, in which he chastised the court for acting so hastily and placing an undue emphasis on spectral evidence, the only form of evidence used against Bishop. Nevertheless, Mather's statement went on to "humbly recommend unto the government the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the direction given in the laws of God, and the wholesome Statutes of the English nation, for the detection of witchcrafts."

After the execution of eight of nine condemned witches, Increase Mather wrote *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men* (1693), in which he "declared and testified that to take away the life of any one, merely because a spectre or devil in a bewitched or possessed person does accuse them, will bring the guilt of innocent blood on the land." Fourteen of the prominent ministers in Boston signed Mather's statement; Cotton Mather did not sign. Cotton had his reasons for dissenting. He believed this statement might endanger the lives of the judges, might divert attention from the diabolical plot unleashed against the Puritans, and might undermine the new government that his own father had helped to establish after the revolt of 1689 (Silverman 114).

Within 10 days after the publication of *Wonders of the Invisible World*, the court hearing witch trials disbanded, and most of those still held in jail were set free. It is clear from his notes in his diary that Mather was uneasy with his text, feeling, perhaps rightly, that he had been too swayed by Governor Phips and others on the court to render a more just treatment of the trials. He was soon facing trials of his own as his first son, named Increase, was born with an imperforate anus and died just a few days later. It was said that Mather's own wife, Abigail, had been assaulted by devils and other specters during her pregnancy and that this accounted for the infant's demise. In January of the following year (1694), Robert Calef, who had voiced his opposition to Mather and the witch trials just months before, wrote a lengthy letter accusing Cotton and his father of having inappropriately touched a young woman (Mercy Short) under the pretext of saving her from witches and posed leading questions to induce her to confess to being plagued by witches. Until 1696, the two would carry on lengthy correspondence in which Calef would pose direct and difficult questions regarding the Salem witch trials that Mather would elide or in other ways evade. Chief among his questions, however, was whether humans were capable of committing acts previously ascribed to devils or God exclusively. He also inquired into the extensive reliance on spectral evidence as the primary means of convicting and executing.

Mather's heated debates with Calef were not the end of his controversial tangles. In 1701, when Joseph Dudley (brother to the early Puritan poet ANNE BRADSTREET), who had served under the much-despised Governor Andros, began writing letters to Cotton Mather, he was seeking the minister's assistance in becoming the next governor of Massachusetts. Mather grudgingly complied, thinking that far worse individuals could be appointed by the king to serve as governor (one person who resigned before sailing for New England had been convicted of murder). Dudley arrived in 1702, 13 years after he had been imprisoned along with Governor Andros in the Revolt of 1689. He

quickly proved himself a dangerous figure for the Mathers, as he advocated the Church of England, a branch of religion that the Mathers regarded as close to the papists, who practiced Catholicism.

When Dudley became involved in Queen Anne's War against the French and indigenous tribes of North America in 1706, the differences bubbling below the surface erupted. Mather accused Dudley of having illicitly traded with the French, the very people he was sworn to fight. When exchanging prisoners with the French, Dudley and his friend Captain Samuel Vetch are reported to have initiated trade with the French in Nova Scotia, and to have profited personally from it. Mather seems to have joined forces calling for Dudley's removal by authoring a pamphlet entitled *A Memorial of the Present Deplorable State of New England . . . by the Male-Administration of their Present Governour* (1707). In the anonymous pamphlet, Dudley's crimes under Andros's governorship are recited, as well as accusations of his most recent illegal trade of ammunition and other supplies to the French and Indians. Dudley adroitly had himself cleared of all the charges laid out in the pamphlet and then proceeded to name the new president of Harvard. This seems to have been a turning point, for both Increase and Cotton began an earnest and much more frank campaign against Dudley. Dudley's recent failed attempt to attack Port Royal against the French was viewed as proof of his treason; the troops he led did not attack the fort, Mather wrote, precisely because Dudley "peremptorily forbid it."

Dudley replied by publicly ridiculing Cotton. He dredged up the name of Katharine Mccarty, a woman who had written to Cotton two months after the death of his wife Abigail and declared her love for him. Although in his journal he expresses admiration for her "rare wit and sense," he finds a divide between her and his life in the ministry. What compels him to continue visiting her, Cotton insists, is her conversion. Kate, however, had developed a bad name in the community; her reputation, coupled with the congregation's shock over Cotton's attentions to her so soon after his wife's death, made him ultimately decide against a match

with her (Silverman 188). In his private journal, Cotton confesses to the significant impact Kate had on him as a man and as a minister. He felt himself tempted by her, even to the point of questioning his belief in God. It is thus understandable how Cotton must have reacted when Dudley brought up her name up again in their public feud.

Dudley's attack on Cotton Mather's character seems to have invited other such forms of abuse. Quakers printed a broadside in 1710 entitled *A Just Reprehension of Cotton Mather* in which they accuse him of anonymously writing invectives against people, but not signing his name because he was rightly ashamed of his own work. In his *The British Empire in America* (1708), the historian John Oldmixon lambasted *Magnalia Christi Americana* as something that "resembles school boy's exercises forty years ago" (reported in Silverman 222).

But even in these difficult times for Mather when his public persona and reputation were being questioned, his published inquiries into religious and scientific matters were gaining him an international name. Mather received an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow, the first American to have such an honor bestowed upon him, in 1710. His *Magnalia Christi Americana* was listed as a singular reason for his doctor of divinity degree. Yet just as Mather was gaining international prominence, his reputation and his involvement in government and the North Church were diminishing. The building of a New North Church, only three blocks away from his own church, and the considerable depletion of his congregation surpassed his public feud with Dudley.

Mather died on February 13, 1728, one day after his 65th birthday. His final words are reported to have been "Now I have nothing more to do here. . . . My will is now entirely resigned to the will of God." In this death, as in his life, he wished to make of himself a subject of instruction and emulation. His son, Sammy, who would go on to pen a biography of his famous father, wrote: "He alone was able to support the character of this country abroad, and was had in great esteem through many nations in Europe" (reported in Silverman 425).

Today Cotton Mather, perhaps unfairly, is chiefly remembered for his connection to the Salem witch trials. One can discern him in the rigorous religious climate dominating Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and see him quoted directly in *Whole History of Grandfather's Chair*. His influence continues across the centuries, deeply informing Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a play about witch hunts that parallels the events of the late 17th century with the McCarthy hearings against communism in the mid-20th century. *Bonifacius* was most influential to BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, who fashioned his pseudonym, *Silence DoGood*, and his *Poor Richard's Almanac* after Mather's famous essays. The two men met at least once, and Mather is reported to have attempted to warn Franklin as he headed out the door to stoop lest he hit his head on the door-jamb. Franklin did just that, and Mather advised him, "You are young, and have the world before you; stoop as you go through it, and you will miss many hard thumps."

The Wonders of the Invisible World (1693)

At the urgings of Chief Justice William Stoughton and Governor William Phips, Mather's account of the Salem witch trials was completed and published a mere month after the final execution, which took place on September 22, 1692 (listed as September 17 in Craker). It contained multiple parts: "Enchantments Encountered," which covered the kinds of evidence that should be, but were not used, in the Salem trials; two sermons, "A Discourse on the Wonders of the Invisible World" and "An Hortatory and Necessary Address"; a brief account of witchcraft in England; five summaries (transcripts) of New England witchcraft trials; an account of witchcraft in Sweden. It concluded with a sermon entitled "The Devil Discovered." Mather completed *Wonders* on October 11, 1692.

In *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, Mather argues that there is a diabolical conspiracy under way in New England: Witches wish to root out Puritanism from America and plot New England's

ruin. This was, for Mather, a representation of the Puritans' war with the invisible world, over which witches and devils reigned. Also of importance to the witch trials was the specter of Catholicism. It is thus without surprise that several of the court testimonies include the taking of sacraments as a devilish variation on Catholic belief in transubstantiation (that the wine and bread offered during Mass are indeed the Blood and Body of Christ). When taken in the recent context of the Glorious Revolution, when a Protestant (William of Orange) took the throne from a Catholic (James), the references to "popery" are not surprising.

Nor is Mather's racialization of the devil or of witches in general. In early "confessions" by Tituba, the servant from Barbados who was accused of afflicting Betsy and Abigail, the devil is clearly described as a prominent white man. It is only in subsequent "confessions" that the devil transforms into a "tawny" or a "little black man." Most of Mather's sermons reveal a racialization of the devil so that he resembles American Indians or African slaves. Critics attribute this to the racial unconscious of the colony, which imaged itself as besieged by forces within (American Indian tribes that were being displaced and decimated through direct and indirect means) and without (King James's Catholicism, Andros's insistence on holding Anglican services, the French conversions of American Indians along the East Coast and into Canada). Indeed, Mather summarizes the book's intent by writing, "I have indeed set myself to counterminne the whole plot of the Devil, against New England."

Perhaps the most widely known section of Mather's work is the trial involving Martha Carrier. In court testimony, which Mather reproduces, Carrier's own children number among those who accuse her of witchcraft. A repeated theme in the testimony offered by Carrier's neighbors are their dead cattle, for which they believe Carrier to be responsible. Samuel Preston testified that "he had lately lost a cow . . . a thriving and well-kept cow, which without any known cause quickly fell down and died." A commonality in the accusations of witchcraft involved individuals' suffering some

ailment, affliction, or significant loss in property or income. Because Puritans subscribed to the Platonic notion of the world in which objects on earth were merely shadows of the real things in heaven, any occurrence, such as the unexplained death of one's cattle, could be, and was, taken for a sign from God.

The witch trials of 1692 can be divided into two periods: the Salem phase (late February to early June 1692) and the Andover phase (mid-July to mid-September 1692). Combined, these two courts tried 156 individuals who were accused of witchcraft. Of that number, 60 confessed to making pacts with the devil (Craker 333). The majority of those who confessed (43) did so in the Andover phase of the trials. Twenty-eight individuals were brought to trial; 20 were executed by hanging. Confession was the surest way to avoid trial. Interestingly, spectral evidence (based on the belief that a person who has entered a pact with the devil thus enables him to assume the person's appearance in order to recruit others) did not result in a single execution of a person accused of witchcraft. Further, spectral evidence alone was not considered by the court to warrant a trial (Craker 333). Indeed, the most damaging type of evidence in the Salem witch trials was what Craker refers to as "non-spectral evidence of malefic witchcraft," by which he intends the attribution of maladies, deaths of cattle, accidents, or other woeful events to a single person.

The events of 1692 began in February with Betty Parris (age nine) and her cousin, Abigail Williams (age 11), exhibiting strange behavior (babbling, crawling under chairs) and complaining of some unseen person pinching them in a most painful manner. The Reverend John Hale later published an account of their sufferings in *A Modest Inquiry* (1702). The two girls were in such a terrible state that their neighbor, Mary Sibley, implored her servant named Tituba to fashion a "witchcake" in order to discover who was behind these demonic acts against Betty and Abigail (Breslaw 538). When their "symptoms" worsened, Tituba found herself accused of witchcraft, arrested, and taken in

for questioning. After two days of interrogation, Tituba apparently confessed to being in league with the devil. She and another accused woman, Sarah Good, went to trial and were found guilty of witchcraft on May 25 (Silverman 97).

The gender dynamics of the trials are worth mentioning as more women were accused and executed than men. By some accounts, the ratio is three women to every man. The scholar John McWilliams creates the following profile of women most likely to be accused of being witches: "over forty years of age, without a secure social position or a male heir, but known to have a sharp tongue, skills and midwifery, familiarity with tavern life, and/or a reputation for having practiced white or black magic" (580–581).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the devil and witches afflicting Salem and the Puritan community in general as a manifestation of Mather's and other Puritans' fears. What are those fears? Is there any consistency or pattern to them?
2. How is Mather's text a defense of the Salem witch trials? What information does he give in defense? What does he assume about the beliefs of his reader?
3. The topic of witchcraft, and a society obsessed with rooting out evil threatening it from within, reappears in the centuries following *Wonders* with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Consider the treatment of witchcraft in two of these three historical moments and argue for commonalities or differences among or between them.

Magnalia Christi Americana (1698)

First conceived in early summer 1693, Mather's opus, a history of New England, was occasioned in part by the deaths of many members of the first generation of Puritans. The critic Michael G. Hall singles out this particular text, arguing that "*Magnalia* has received more attention over

the past two-and-a-half centuries than any other writing by an American Puritan" (496). The noted scholar Sacvan Bercovitch refers to it as "perhaps the supreme achievement of American Puritan literature" (337). This seven-volume work establishes an originary myth for the Puritans in America: history of the settlement of New England, lives of the governors, lives of the leading ministers, history of Harvard, account of New England manner of worship ("Acts and Monuments"), "Remarkables of Divine Providence," and a history of the invasion of New England churches by heretics, Governor Edmund Andros (a member of the Church of England), devils, Indians, and others. Critics continue to argue over the nature of *Magnalia*. David Levin refers to it as history; Sacvan Bercovitch recognizes its indebtedness to *The Aeneid* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*; Kenneth Silverman values its "sheer amassment of precious information about the early history of New England" and its function as "a small anthology of early American poetry" (338, 158). The work not only addresses the biblical and Puritan notion of regaining a glorified position with respect to God, but continues to imagine an ongoing battle between God and Satan in which the latter has the advantage. What unites this seeming mass of disparate items (sermons, biographies), a book made up of "many little rags," is Mather's desire to set down a history of American Puritans in New England, and a sustained argument regarding the elect status of the Puritans as the chosen people of God.

With the deaths of many of the first generation of Puritans, the people of New England began clamoring, as early as the 1670s, for someone to write the history of God's providences toward New England (Silverman 157). Among the primary sources Mather used to assemble his history of America were WILLIAM BRADFORD'S history of New England, surviving diaries, letters, his father's correspondence, and Cotton's own personal acquaintances with members of the first generation (Silverman 158). The larger aim of Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* was "of keeping Alive, as far as this poor Essay may contribute thereunto, the Interests

of Dying Religion in our Churches." Thus, Mather saw in the death of the first generation the potential death of the passion and conviction so necessary for the original Puritans who settled in New England to practice a religion for which they were persecuted by the Church of England.

Book 1 addresses the flight of the "primitive Christians" from Europe, described as the "kingdom of Anti-Christ" and a depraved environment, across the Atlantic to the "pure enjoyment of all his ordinances" in America. With the founding of the first Puritan church, Mather relates how "an howling wilderness in a few years became a pleasant land." Mather's book on the history of Harvard includes biographies of 10 of the university's "exemplary" graduates.

Sir William Phips, who became governor of Massachusetts during the Salem witch trials, figures prominently in Mather's section "The Great Works of Christ in America." Within this section, Mather retells the stories of how Phips overcame a mutiny plot on his frigate and how his discovery of sunken treasure off the coast of Hispaniola resulted in his knighthood. The point of this story explains why Mather includes the life of a governor who was previously a rather raucous treasure hunter among the lives of former ministers in New England. Phips was able to maintain rule and order at a time of mutiny. Further, he is an early example of the kind of self-fashioned individual, "A Son of his own Labours," made popular by Benjamin Franklin (Silverman 163–164).

Book 3 contains biographies of 50 of the greatest ministers who laid the foundation of New England theocracy. Chief among them is a hagiography of John Eliot, who was known as an "apostle to the American Indians." Just as Mather was called upon to help justify the Salem witch trials in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, he felt the need to provide a similar narrative to justify the marked absence of proselytizing by members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Indeed, several criticisms had been launched against New Englanders for their apparent unwillingness to engage in one of the practices that were central

to their charters—the conversion of “heathens.” Eliot himself, who receives such high praise from Mather in this text, first arrived in North America in 1631 but did not begin the business of converting the Algonquian until 1646 (Post 418). As Mather relates, Eliot believed American Indians to be descended from Israelites and cites their many similarities (including dowries, aversion to pork, and tradition of parables).

Mather devoted book 6, “Remarkables of Divine Providence,” to accounts of God’s favor of the Puritans. This particular book responded to calls made by his father and by a group of church elders in 1681 for ministers around the country to provide accounts of “apparitions, possessions, enchantments, and all extraordinary things wherein the existence and agency of the invisible world is more sensibly demonstrated.”

The final book characterizes the Indian wars as the latest obstacle set before the New Jerusalem. Because these wars were ongoing, they appear in the *Magnalia* as a continuation into the present moment of the religious battles the American Puritans had been fighting since their flight from Europe and their initial landing in the New World. The battles helped to solidify the connection Mather was drawing throughout the *Magnalia* between Puritans and the children of Israel.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Mather’s *Magnalia* resembles an accordion in its ability to expand to address the millennium and the second coming and its ability to contract and discuss the life of an early Puritan minister. Find examples of both movements in the text and argue for their relationship to each other.
2. Mather imagines Puritan Americans embattled and in a current moment of struggle against demonic forces. Provide textual support for this idea of warfare and trace its biblical and historical parallels.
3. As mentioned, Sacvan Bercovitch sees parallels between Mather’s book and the *Aeneid*, as well as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Consider one of these two texts and argue either in favor of or against Bercovitch’s comparison.

The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity (1706)

This essay was published in the same year that members of Mather’s congregation purchased Onesimus, a young man “of a promising aspect and temper,” for their minister. Mather encouraged Onesimus’s study, permitted him to work outside the household and keep his income, and allowed him to marry. In 1716, however, the servant proved to be “wicked, and grow[ing] useless, forward, immorigerous,” and Mather permitted the rude and disobedient Onesimus to purchase his own freedom. In *The Negro Christianized*, Mather argues for the conversion of African slaves and servants in the face of common belief that Christianized servants would become discontent and were therefore more likely to revolt or demand their freedom. On the contrary, Mather argued, Christian servants would be more patient and faithful to their masters. This idea was in part due to his belief that Christianity “wonderfully dulcifies, and mollifies, and moderates the circumstances” of slavery.

Not surprisingly, Mather employs biblical passages as proof that masters should become the “happy instruments of converting the blackest instances of blindness and baseness, into admirable candidates of eternal blessedness.” Although apologists for slavery habitually made use of biblical passages to justify their cruel institution, abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) wrote nearly a century and a half later than Mather of the Christian duty to free slaves, convert them to Christianity, and eliminate the institution of slavery altogether. Mather does not dismiss the belief that African Americans might well be the sons of Ham (a biblical argument set forth by slave owners in the 18th and 19th centuries), but he does postulate that they may also “belong to the Election of God!” In offering up this possibility that African Americans can be among the elect, among the chosen people of God, Mather insists upon their humanity, their possession of souls, and the duties that their masters have in treating them as fellow members of the community. However, Mather’s characterization of servants is limited; he

sees them as “barbarous” and “stupid.” Nevertheless, what is remarkable about Mather’s essay is its insistence on the humanity of slaves and the duty of masters to attend to their salvation.

Among Mather’s recommendations in *The Negro Christianized* are the employment of children in the home, a teacher on a plantation, and a master over his household to assist in the teachings of the catechism to black servants. He created a three-line catechism to instruct “poor Stupid Abject Negro’s” and personally paid a schoolmistress to teach blacks to read (Silverman 264). Specifically, Mather reminded readers of the shared humanity with African “servants”: “Men, not Beasts, that you have bought.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Locate and summarize Mather’s characterizations of African servants. How does this characterization square with his proposition that they may be among God’s elect?
2. Consider Mather’s use of the Bible in *The Negro Christianized*. Explain how it is employed to dual purposes.
3. Mather’s congregation purchased Onesimus in the same year as this essay’s publication. Consider the passage on Onesimus and how it might relate to Mather’s own conflicting views of slavery.
4. Compare Mather’s use of religion in his treatment of slaves to the writings of OLAUDAH EQUIANO and PHILLIS WHEATLEY on the same subject.

Bonifacius: An Essay to Do Good (1710)

As with most of Mather’s work, *Bonifacius* actually has a much longer title: *An Essay upon the Good, That Is to Be Devised to Answer the Great End of Life, and to Do Good While They Live*. Early on in the essay, Mather establishes the reason for his book: “I am devising such a book; but at the same time offering a sorrowful demonstration, that if men would set themselves to devise good, a world of good might be done, more than there is in this present evil world” (19). Cleverly, Mather antici-

pates critics of his book, arguing that a reader cannot call him- or herself a Christian and chastise a book whose aim is to perpetuate good in the world. Indeed, he goes so far as to call “an enemy to the proposal” as “little better than a common enemy of mankind” (21). He passionately writes about the need for repentance, and for people to be humbled by the little good they have done in the world. People need to put as much thought into their souls as they do into their business transactions (28). The noblest question in the world, Mather suggests, is “What good may I do in the world?”

Mather’s instructions or suggestions for parents are particularly lengthy and detailed. In considering them, readers may easily infer Mather’s own parenting practices and, perhaps, those of his famous father, Increase Mather. Parental resolutions begin with baptizing children and reminding them of their covenant with God formed in the baptismal rites, praying daily for the children’s well-being, teaching them stories from the Bible, teaching them short biblical passages that they can memorize and recite, teaching them the catechism, and teaching how to pray and how to conduct themselves with a courteous disposition. Mather suggests giving children money that they may then pass along to the poor in their community. He also advocates parental duties in the education of their children: teaching them to read and write, providing them with suitable books, teaching them to follow Christ’s example, hearing their confessions, inquiring into the state of their souls, watching carefully over the character of their companions, and preparing them for eternal life in Christ after their deaths.

Mather directs various proposals in this essay to different readers: family members and friends, children, servants, neighbors, distant relatives, masters, pastors, schoolmasters, magistrates, physicians, rich men, deacons, constables, grand jury members, selectmen, church elders, commanders at sea, military commanders, lawyers, judges, and ministers. For each of these different groups of people, he offers a list of activities they should engage in in order for them to do good works. Chief among these, not surprisingly, are practices that Mather engages in: reading good books in leisure time; spending time

in private meditation, prayer, and fasting; visiting widows, orphans, and the afflicted; giving alms to the poor; praying at home with family and servants; being watchful over members of the community as well as the associates of your family members; teaching catechism to children, servants, and members of the community; and spending time contemplating what good works still need to be performed.

Mather returns to the arguments he made in *The Negro Christianized* by asserting that servants should be taught to read and write and be converted to Christianity. Against critics who claim that Christianized servants are prone to rebel and escape, Mather argues, "They would be better servants to you, the more faithful, the more honest, the more industrious, and submissive servants to you, for your bringing them into the service of your Common Lord" (68).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Despite its extensive list of different occupations and thus different readers, Mather's *Bonifacius* is by no means exhaustive. Consider one or more occupations absent from the book and conjecture reasons for the omission.
2. One of Mather's central concerns is to eliminate "filthy" or "evil" books, which are more specifically identified as "foolish romances, or novels, or plays, or songs" (58). Why might Mather address these particular genres as working against his book's premise, which is to instruct people on how to perform good works?
3. Education and child rearing would quickly fall into the purview of republican mothers (18th century) and the cult of true womanhood (19th century). How does Mather's advice for parenting skills and practices compare with the writings of HANNAH FOSTER WEBSTER's *The Coquette*, or the writings of Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe?

The Christian Philosopher (1720)

In the mid-17th century, there was a growing trend among theologians of making inquiries into sci-

entific matters and discoveries, believing that one could read God's blueprint in nature. It is no surprise, then, that the Royal Society, which accepted Mather as a member in 1713, was founded in 1663 by a majority of Puritans (Jeske 584). In this book, which was originally a series of 10 letters sent to the Royal Society under the title of "The Christian Virtuoso," Mather seeks to yoke science and faith, using examples from scientific discoveries as proof of the existence and genius of God. *The Christian Philosopher* was the "first general book on science to be written in America" (Silverman 249). Within its pages, Mather summarizes the works of other eminent scientists such as Flamsteed (who was the first royal astronomer), Leeuwenhoek (Dutch merchant who refined the microscope), Huygens (who writes on the laws of refraction and reflection of light), and Newton (who studied the laws of gravity). The purpose of the text was to demonstrate Mather's own "Enquiries into the Wonders of the Universe, so it is both an Instruction and a Pattern to a serious mind." Patterning the work on other physico-theological writing, Mather sees all of the recent scientific discoveries, particularly those afforded by the use of telescopes and microscopes, as further proof of the divine purpose of the cosmos. To balance his praise of scientific discoveries with his continued belief in supernatural phenomena such as witches, Mather concludes by reminding readers of the limitations of human reason: "Every Thing puzzles us. Even the Nature, yea, the Extent of an Atom, does to this Day, puzzle all the Philosophers in the World." Mather's text contributed greatly to the popularity of new scientific knowledge in New England (Silverman 25). Mather's prominence as a minister in North Church, as well as his family's connections to Harvard University, certainly contributed to the reception of this book. Mather hoped it would appear in "our colledges" and that students in Glasgow would benefit from it (Solberg xlviii).

Beyond the summarization and recitation of other famous scientists and their theories, Mather includes information on his own scientific experiments and scientific observations made in his neighborhood (De Levie 364). The two most frequently

cited passages from *The Christian Philosopher* are Mather's treatment of the hybridization of Indian corn and his description of winter in New England (Solberg lxvi). These two original passages, probably taken from information gathered at the Boston Philosophical Society, have provided historians and cultural critics alike with valuable information on life in Puritan New England.

In April 1683, Increase founded the Boston Philosophical Society; naturally, Cotton was a member. The society patterned itself on England's Royal Society and endeavored to collect remarkable events like earthquakes and floods that displayed God's glory and served as warnings against sinners (Solberg xxiv). Mather drew heavily from the descriptions of natural phenomena in New England collected by the Boston Philosophical Society, as well as from John Ray's *Wisdom of God* and William Derham's *Physico-Theology*. Indeed, Mather's debt to these two texts is so great that Winton Solberg, who edits the most recent edition of *The Christian Philosopher*, states that "about 79 percent" of the text is taken from these two books (xlx).

As the first comprehensive study of science's relationship with faith written in America, *The Christian Philosopher* examines how American Puritans in the 18th century conceived of new scientific discoveries and technologies. Styled after other published works and respected scientific treatises (it was originally titled *The Christian Virtuoso*, which is the title of Robert Boyle's publication), Mather's book borrows its organizing structure for each of the 32 essays. He cites ancient authorities such as Pliny and Plato, then provides information from modern writers (including his own observations), and finally closes with an argument that the newly acquired knowledge "redounds to the glory of God." Mather also draws on the metaphor of two books: the Bible and nature. This metaphor, which is a central tenet of natural theology, can be traced back to its pagan origins with Plato, who used the beauty of the natural world, coupled with general consent, as his two-prong argument in favor of God's existence.

In the final and longest essay, "Of Man," Mather discusses how "the lord of this lower world" occu-

pies the highest position of all earthly creatures in the golden chain of being, which has God as its highest link. Mather states that humans "wert designed by God to be, the high-priest and orator of the universe" (237). In his study of the human body, Mather affirms, "Every writer of anatomy will offer enough to trample atheism under foot" (239). Mather exclaims, "Who can behold a machine composed of so many parts, to the right form, and order, and motion whereof there are such an infinite number of intentions required, without crying out, who can be compared to the Lord" (247–249).

In his earnest effort to prove that each aspect of the body serves a divine purpose, Mather accepts and offers as evidence some observations that contemporary readers will find absurd. He observes, for example, that men's breasts "besides adorning of the breast, and their defending of the heart, sometimes contain milk" (240). Mather continues by reference to Thomas Bartholin's example of a widower who suckled his infant son after his wife's death. Likewise, Mather offers multiple uses for hair, "not only to quench the stroke of a blow to the skull, but also to cherish the brain" (250). Mather refutes the ancients' belief that earwax is the "excrement of the brain," yet he offers up testimony of its healing properties against scorpion and serpent bites (262). When relating tales of afflicted men cured by music, Mather expounds, "But after all, who but a God infinitely wise could contrive such a fine body, so susceptible of every impression that the sense of hearing has occasion for" (268). Finally, when discussing the marvels of the intestines, Mather rhapsodizes, "The intestines, 'tis wonderful, they are six times as long as the body to which they appertain and now that they should keep their tone, and their site, and hold on doing their office, and give an undisturbed passage to what every day passes thro them, and this for some scores of years together, 'tis impossible for me to consider without falling down before the glorious God" (283).

Aside from providing summations of various medical and scientific treatises, measurements, and experiments into the human anatomy, Mather offers up the human cognitive faculty of reason as

further evidence of God's existence. "Reason, what is it, but a faculty formed by God, in the mind of Man, enabling him to discern certain maxims of truth, which God himself has established, and to make true inferences from them! In all the dictates of reason, there is the voice of God" (297).

Mather concludes *The Christian Philosopher* with a clear statement of the book's purpose: "To enkindle the dispositions and the resolutions of piety in my brethren, is the intention of all my essays, and must be the conclusion of them" (308). "Were what God hath spoken duly regarded, and were these two things duly complied with, the World would be soon revived into a desirable Garden of God" (309). In short, were readers to follow the example Mather lays out in his book, mankind would be improved on such a scale that they would be in the "Garden of God." This statement is very much in keeping with all of Mather's work: He envisions the third generation of Puritans as backsliding, moving further away from the purpose and goal of the founding Puritan fathers; with recognition, repentance, and a strict adherence to Puritan dogma, New England could fulfill its destiny and become a "Garden of God."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider a recent scientific discovery and consider how it challenges Puritan faith. How might you incorporate some of Mather's techniques for demonstrating the harmony between science and religion?
2. Mather relies heavily on two central scientific figures from his time—Ray and Derham. Who would replace them in current times? What kinds of literary responses have they received?
3. In Mather's time, the telescope and the microscope were instrumental in scientific discoveries. What technologies are central to our current understanding of the world and beyond?
4. Contrast Mather's insistence on the mutually reinforcing relationship between science and faith to Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter" or "The Birth-mark," where science seeks to replace faith.

Manductio ad Ministerium (1726)

It was not until the 1710s and 1720s that Mather and other writers began to formalize the curriculum for New England ministers. Mather's *Manductio ad Ministerium*, later published under the title *Dr. Cotton Mather's Student and Preacher* (1781 and 1789), was a guide for ministerial candidates in New England during their college years. From Mather's own experience of fraudulent ministers in Boston, it was imperative that strict guidelines be created for the education and screening of ministerial candidates. One "preacher" in particular, whose tale Mather recounts in *A Warning to the Flocks* (1700), was a man named Samuel May who advised the female members of his congregation to sleep with him. When the true story of this "preacher" was exposed, he was found to be Samuel Axell, a brickmaker from Hampshire (Silverman 142).

Among Mather's recommendations for future ministers was knowledge of Greek and Latin, a curriculum that closely followed the requirements for Harvard. Although Hebrew was out of favor in England and New England, Mather suggested its use in elucidating the Bible. Instead of studying Aristotle, whom Mather deems a "muddy-headed pagan," he suggests reading the works of Sir Isaac Newton. As further proof of Mather's conviction in liberally educated ministers, he advocates such subjects as mathematics, astronomy, music, and geography. It is no surprise that Mather would place such heavy requirements on ministers, as he declared their profession to be "certainly the highest dignity, if not the greatest happiness, that human nature is capable of."

For Discussion or Writing

1. In light of Mather's influence not only on the education of ministers, but on liberal education in general, what particular ideas in *Manductio ad Ministerium* remain important to a contemporary definition of an education?
2. In terms of Mather's rigorous curriculum for ministers, what kind of role or position does he imagine them to have in society? Are these roles



THOMAS MORTON (1579–1647)

I will now discover unto them a country whose endowments are by learned men allowed to stand in parallel with the Israelites Canaan, which none will deny, to be a land far more excellent than Old England in her proper nature

(*New English Canaan*)

The biographer Donald Connors notes that details of Morton's early life are relatively scarce, with the exception of his birth in the western part of England in 1579. Records indicate that Morton studied law at Clifford's Inn, one of the Inns of Chancery in London. After his training, Morton practiced law as an attorney in England's "west countries." On November 6, 1621, Morton married Alice Miller, a wealthy widow who owned significant property. He had been managing her legal affairs for roughly four or five years prior to their marriage. Court documents reveal that questions of property rights soon became a bone of contention between the newly married Morton and his stepson, George Miller, who had just come of age (Connors 18).

The following year, in 1622, he sailed for the first of several trips to New England. Donald Connors argues that Morton actually arrived in 1624, not 1622, as has been previously reported, and offers as evidence Morton's name on the passenger list for Captain Wollaston's ship. WILLIAM BRADFORD's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, which mentions the arrival of Wollaston's ship in 1624, supports Connors's claim. Further, the critic Edith Murphy's investigation into Morton's legal battles with George Miller, his stepson, reveals that their disputes were ongoing in 1622, and thus Morton's appearance in America at such a time seems quite unlikely. She argues that his physical presence would probably have been required in England to resolve these matters. The

following year, 1623, Morton's ongoing disputes with George Miller resulted in his abandoning his wife and taking all of her property with him (Murphy 761).

Morton arrived in New England in June 1624 aboard the *Unity* and soon became head of a trading post at Passonagesit (which translates as "little neck of land") located near present-day Quincy, Massachusetts. On May Day, May 1, 1627, Morton erected a maypole at Mount Wollaston, a place so named after Captain Wollaston, who commanded the ship that first carried Morton from England. In celebration of May Day, Morton renamed Mount Wollaston as *Ma-re Mount* and engaged in May Day games with local planters, fur traders, and native traders. His social interactions with American Indians did not sit well with his neighbors, however. Nor did his indulgence in alcohol in celebration of what the neighboring Puritans decried as a pagan holiday. Because his antics directly offended the Puritans, Miles Standish arrested Morton and sent him back to England for the first time in 1628. Morton spent the month of July on the Isle of Shoals (thinly disguised as Cape Ann in *The New English Canaan*) and, the following month, was shipped back to England to face trial.

The charges against Morton were dropped and he returned the following year, but his house at Ma-re Mount was seized or burned by Puritans, and he was forced to flee to England once again.

Morton began to work in earnest with an anti-Puritan Anglican authority to undermine the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but to no avail. It is during his 12 years in England when Morton penned his work praising New England but lampooning the Puritans, *New English Canaan*, which was first published in Amsterdam. Morton was associated with the Council for New England and employed his resources with them to promote book sales. When he returned to New England again in 1644, he was charged with slander and imprisoned in Boston. He settled in Maine and died two years later.

Morton's legacy is his single but influential publication, *New English Canaan*, not only because it provides contemporary readers and scholars with details of early colonial life, but also because it gives insight into American Indian culture and a balance to early colonial history, which has traditionally focused on Puritans exclusively.

According to the colonist Edward Winslow, when the settlers in Plymouth heard of a plot for the American Indians to attack Wessagussett and then Plymouth, they arranged a meeting, locked the doors of the meetinghouse, and killed all of the conspiring natives as a "preemptive" act of self-defense (Kupperman 660). The remaining colonists from Wessagussett found passage back to England, and the Plymouth colony lost its only source of competition in the fur trade so necessary for their success (661).

New English Canaan (1637)

Part promotional tract, part political pamphlet, part natural history, and part ethnography, Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* contains three sections that address life in New England. The first book, "Containing the Originall of the Natives, Their Manners & Customes, with Their Tractable Nature and Love towards the English," provides readers with a detailed account of American Indians in Massachusetts. The second book focuses specifically on detailing the landscape: flora, fauna, and land. The final book takes on the subject

of life in New England. And it is in this third book, entitled "Containing a Description of the People That Are Planted There, What Remarkable Accidents Have Happened There since They Were Settled, What Tenets They Hould, Together with the Practice of Their Church," that Morton attempts to provide his own version of history, which is markedly removed from Puritan doctrine. The two central principles animating Morton's publication are promotion of colonization in New England and warning of the antics of the Puritans, who he believed would undermine or in other ways frustrate the colonial enterprise.

Morton writes in his preface that the impetus for the book lies in "the zeale which I beare to the advancement of the glory of God, the honor of his majesty, and the good of the weale publike, hath encouraged mee to compose this abstract, being the model of a rich hopefull and very beautiful country, worthy the title of nature's masterpeece, and may be lost by too much sufferance" (3). To the reader, Morton writes of a desire to provide "better information of all such as are desirous to be made partakers of the blessings of God in that fertile soyle, as well as those that, out of curiosity onely have bin inquisitive after novelties" (6). His target of the Puritan settlers is obliquely referenced as "divers persons (not so well affected to the weale publike in mine opinion) out of respect to their owne private ends"; these folks "have laboured to keepe both the practice of the people there, and the reall worth of that eminent country concealed from publike knowledge, both which I have abundantly in this discourse layd open" (6).

Morton opens book I with a discussion of the temperate zones (Torrída Zona and Frigída Zona) and discusses the need for moderation in life (people should not desire to be rich, for they risk Nebuchadnezar's fate, or too poor, for fear of despairing, as Job's wife did). He agrees with Aristotle that the Frigída Zona is "unfit for habitation" and thus praises Sir Ferdinando Gorges Knight as the "noble minded gentleman" who found the "golden mean" between these two poles and "what land is to be found there," meaning he discovered New

England by navigating a path between these two extremes (15). Because New England “doth partipate of heat and cold indifferently, but is oppressed with neither: [it] therefore may be truly sayd to be within the compasse of that golden mean, most apt and fit for habitation and generation, being placed by almighty God the great creator . . . and is therefore most fitt for the generation and habitation of our English nation” (15–16). Because England is situated at similar latitude to New England’s, Englanders seem destined for this New Canaan, where they can enjoy life in a temperate climate; Massachusetts is ripe for colonization; and its coastline and wind currents are conducive to anchoring ships (17). As further proof of divine Providence’s hand in British colonization, “the wondrous wisdom and love of God, is shewne, by sending to the place his minister, to sweepe away by heapes the salvages” (15). Here Morton refers to the large number of native inhabitants killed by the plague. In the first book, dedicated to the lives of American Indians, Morton tells of the plague of 1616–18 and remarks how fortuitous it was that this disaster rid the land of most of its native inhabitants and thus made New England more fit for English colonization.

In chapter 2, Morton states that he was in New England in 1622 and reports that of the “two sortes of people” that he discovered there, “the infidels [were] most full of humanity, and more friendly then the other,” or “Christians” (17). Morton spends time among the natives of New England, seeking to learn their language, which he declares “doe use very many wordes both of Greeke and Latine” (18). Morton disagrees with those who believe “the natives of New England may proceede from the race of the Tartars” (19). Rather, he offers up the theory that “the natives of this country might originally come of the scattered Trojan” (20). As a sign of the natives’ desire to traffic in commerce with England, Morton points to the presence of a “mixed language” (20). Morton relies on the writings of Sir Christopher Gardiner Knight and David Tompson, a Scottish gentleman, both of whom are “scollers and travelers,” in his conclusion that “the originall of the natives of New England

may be well conjectured to be from the scattered Trojans, after such time as Brutus departed from Latium” (22).

Chapter three opens with the story of five Frenchmen who survived the burning of their ship, where they traded beaver with the natives. The five men became servants of five sachems. The remaining survivor warned them that God would punish them for “their bloody deede,” but the “savages replied and sayd, that they were so many, that God could not kill them” (23). As Morton recalls, their foolish pride is quickly checked by the visitation of a plague that “fell heavily upon them with such a mortall stroake, that they died on heapes” (23). Because of the catastrophic nature of the plague, the natives were unable to bury their own dead; instead, the carcasses became fodder for kites and other vermin. Morton informs readers how highly unusual this was, as the “custome of those Indian people [is] to bury their dead ceremoniously, and carefully, and then to abandon that place” (24). Once again, Morton insists that the plague severely reduced the native inhabitants of Plymouth with the result that “the place is made so much the more fitt, for the English nation to inhabit in, and erect in it temples to the glory of God” (24).

In chapter 4, Morton compares the houses of the natives of New England to those of the “wild Irish” (24). He provides some minute details regarding the materials central to the construction of teepees (24–25). He also writes of Native hospitality, stating that they will feed their guests as well as provide bedding for them if they remain long enough to sleep. “Such,” Morton declares, is “their humanity” (26). In comparison to the “gentry of civilized natives,” the natives of New England do not summer or winter in the same place but remove in the seasons to hunting or fishing grounds. In their leisure time Morton notes that they perform juggling tricks and “all manner of revelles” (26).

Morton cites Cicero’s belief that even the most barbarous people have some form of worship and argues that if Tully had had the same experiences he has had with the natives of New England, Tully would have changed his opinion (27). Further,

his theory would be refined were he to take the “judiciall councill of Sir William Alexander” (27). Despite other sections that directly and indirectly address native worship, Morton concludes this chapter by stating quite definitively, “The natives of New England have no worship nor religion at all” (28). Indeed, Morton confesses himself more inclined to believe that elephants worship the moon than to believe natives have a form of religion (27).

In the chapter dedicated to Indian apparel, Morton speaks of the modesty of natives, who are ashamed of their nakedness and their “secreats of nature; which by no means they suffer to be seene” (29). Once again, Morton compares the Natives to the Irish, stating that in their apparel, they look like “their trouses, the stockinges joyne so to their breeches” (30). The Native men wear shoes and stockings and mantles that are so long that they trail the ground behind them. Morton applauds their modesty, which he places on par with that of civilized people (31).

Morton seems to be impressed by the physical strength of pregnant women, who are capable of carrying heavy burdens on their backs without the threat of miscarrying the child (31). Further, Morton remarks that the babies are born “of complexion white as our nation” (32). This issue of racial markings seems key to this particular chapter as Morton writes at length about the conjecture that follows the birth of a gray-eyed child. Morton, on seeing the child’s eyes, informs the father in his native language that the child is a bastard. The father responds that the child should have an English name (32). What Morton is indirectly addressing here, despite an apparent insistence on racial difference, is the intermarriage and thus the closing off of any apparent gaps between the natives and the British. Indeed, Morton remarks on the artificial means employed by mothers to give their children tawny skin. The mothers make a bath of “walnut leaves, huskes of walnuts, and such things as will staine their skinne for ever” (32). Thus, were it not for actions taken by the mothers to effect a change in their children’s skin tone, it appears as though they would be indistinguishable from children of Morton’s nation.

As further testament to Morton’s recognition of the humanity and civility of New England’s native tribes, Morton writes in chapter 8 of their reverence and respect for their elders, hoping that this will “reduce some of our irregular young people of civilized nations when this story shall come to their knowledge, to better manners” (33). In essence Morton’s characterization of American Indians, and his detailed accounting of social and cultural practices ranging from clothing to the treatment of elders, results in a reversal, at times, of the racially charged categories of civilized and barbarian. Native behavior becomes exemplum for the more “civilized” Britains to emulate.

Chapter 9 briefly covers the subject of the shaman and equates the natives’ respect for their “powahs” with the British esteem for surgeons and physicians (36). Morton concludes with an anecdote of an unnamed Englishman cured of a swollen hand by a powah. Chapter 10 covers the rules of dueling, which involve two combatants’ firing arrows at each other from behind two trees.

Chapter 11 relies on one particular anecdote of a married woman whose father would not return her to her husband and whose husband would not send men to accompany her on her return as an illustration of the weight of reputation.

Morton provides some details of native commerce between tribes and with the British. Their currency is called *Wampampeak* and consists of white shells (which Morton likens to silver) and violet shells (which he compares to gold) (40). Morton mentions the natives’ ability to discern counterfeit or fake forms of *Wampampeak* but fails to mention whether it is the British or other natives who have been the counterfeiters. Note again that Morton’s subject of study presupposes not only that British settlers will engage in trade with the native population, but also that the natives have their own economies and currency systems, symbols of civilization.

In a discussion of native industry, Morton turns to the figures of labor common from Aesop’s fables, the ant and the bee. As they do, he declares, the natives store corn for the winter (42). Morton believes that if they knew of the preservative quality of salt, which

he deems a “chiefe benefit in a civilized commonwealth,” they would diversify their stored foods to include fish and meats (43). It is quite possible that Morton mentions salt because of its potential as a commodity for future trade.

Morton warns against an underestimation of natives: “These people are not (as some have thought) a dull, or slender witted people; but very ingenious and subtle” (43). He follows this pronouncement with a tale of how a sachem named Cheecatawbak used subtlety and psychological warfare to make the Narragansett believe the English with whom they had been trading were angry with them and would surely kill them if the natives did not depart quickly. To persuade the English to raise arms and prepare to battle the Narragansett, Sachem Cheecatawbak spun a tale of the ulterior motives for trading: to gain information on the strength of the English and assess their weapons and storehouses in order to reclaim the corn they had traded.

Morton’s celebration of this one particular sachem’s military or psychological strategy is followed by a chapter in which he makes a similar assessment of their physical skills. He is amazed by their keen sense of sight, stating that they can spy an approaching ship before the English, as well as their sense of smell. He claims that a native man can sniff the hand of a Frenchman and distinguish his scent from a Spaniard’s (48).

Despite previous statements denying the possibility of natives’ practicing religion, including a rather exaggerated statement that elephants are more likely to worship the moon than natives hold a theology, Morton states that “these salvages” have their own creation myth, which includes the initial origin of humans in one man and one woman, dominion over the earth, and a flood as punishment from a higher being. This figure is called Kytan, and those who are good are taken to his house when they die; those who are evil go to the centers of the earth. This belief very closely follows the Genesis myth of the Old Testament in which God creates the human race from Adam and Eve and delivers a flood as punishment for

sinfulness. As further testament to the parallels between the two belief systems, Morton concludes the chapter with an anecdote of a savage who had lived with him before marrying and raising a family. This same man approached Morton with the request that his son taught to read the Bible and thus become an Englishman and a good man (50). Morton is not personally interested in converting natives to Christianity, so his mention of this event in which a father wishes for his son to emulate the ways and beliefs of the English might be seen outside the context of proselytizing.

Morton relates burial and mourning customs, noting that they differ in accordance with the nobility or obscurity of the person who has died. He mentions that the Plymouth planters defaced the burial site of Sachem Cheekatawbak’s mother, believing it to be superstitious, and that the natives rightly considered this an impious act (51). Further, Morton includes an additional offense the English colonists committed against the natives when they made mention of anyone who had died, since the natives consider it a painful reminder (52). With an oblique reference to future democracy, Morton includes the natives’ observation that the English must be without a sachem since all of their graves look similar (52).

In chapter 18, Morton details the custom of control burns to remove underbrush (“underweedes”) (52–53). As a result, Morton suggests that settlers search the lower grounds and valleys when looking for large trees and good timber (53).

Ever with an eye toward the English settlers’ success in New England, Morton mentions the use of “lusty liquors” as a central component to trading in the northern parts of the country (54). Given Morton’s reported May Day revelries with American Indians, which included a fair amount of alcohol, it might seem as though he had no reservations in supplying the native inhabitants with “fire water.” Such an assumption, however, would be inaccurate. He seems to add a word of caution and even one of remonstrance by closing this short chapter with a tale of a native man who, when drunk, put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Keeping this story of desperation brought on by drink in mind, Mor-

ton avows, “Yet in al the commerce that I had with them, I never proffered them any such thing” (54).

Morton concludes the first book of *The New English Canaan* with an earnest and detailed attempt to dispel myths that the natives of New England—and hence the English settlers who live there—lead harsh lives. Morton assures the reader that the natives are without want; indeed, were the beggars of England to find food with such ease as the natives of New England, no one would starve in the streets and there would no longer be “gallouses with poore wretches” (55). The riches to be found in New England are not equal to the fineries and luxuries of civilized nations like England, Morton admits, but these trappings make men prone to sin. They become too proud of their clothing; they become gluttonous if their food is always served “in dishes of plate with variety of sauces” (57). In New England, one learns to appreciate simple pleasures and be unencumbered of too many trinkets or “superfluous commodities.” Indians live contented lives without the pomp that they daily witness in the English planters (58). Morton compares the idyllic life of natives to the utopic society envisioned by Plato.

Morton opens the second book by writing:

What I have resolved on, I have really performed and I have endeavoured, to use this abstract as an instrument, to be the means, to communicate the knowledge which I have gathered by my many yeares residence in those parts, unto my countrymen, to the end, that they may the better perceive their error, who cannot imagine, that there is any country in the universal world, which may be compared unto our native soyle, I will now discover unto them a country whose indowments are by learned men allowed to stand in parallel with the Israelites Canaan, which non will deny, to be a land farre more excellent then Old England in her proper nature. (61)

In fulfillment of this purpose, book 2 offers, at times, a catalog of flora and fauna that reads like a

promotional tract. Chapter 2, for example, covers the various trees to be found in plenitude. Chapter 3 briefly mentions “pottherbes and other herbes for sallets” (66–67). Chapter 4 covers native fowl, and chapter 5, “beasts of the forrest” (83). Morton covers stones and minerals in chapter 6 and fish in chapter 7. Chapter 8 is dedicated to the waters and contains tales of their extraordinary properties, such as a water that cures melancholy located on Morton’s property at “Ma-re Mount,” a water that cures barrenness, and a water that produces a deep sleep for 48 hours (93). The idea of medicinal waters was quite popular, stemming in part from tales of miraculous healing waters in places like Lourdes that were circulated by the Catholic Church.

Morton declares it to be truly a land of milk and honey (93). The final two chapters of book 2 cover various aspects of “New Canaan”: moderate rainfall, winds milder than in England, no inhabitants suffering a cold or cough, and fertile soil. “And since the separatists are desirous to have the denomination thereof, I am become an humble suiter on their behalfe for your consents (courteous readers) to it, before I doe shew you what revels they have kept in New Canaan” (96). In the final chapter, he speaks of increased understanding between the British and natives through knowledge of each other’s language: “It is tenne yeares since first the relation of these things came to the eares of the English: at which time wee were but slender proficients in the language of the natives, and they, (which now have attained to more perfection of English), could not then make us rightly apprehend their meaning” (98). Contemporary historians and ethnographers have benefited greatly from Morton’s documentation of Native languages and customs. What might have been a strategy to appear as an expert in American immigration or an attempt otherwise to curry favor with those in charge of the colonies, Morton’s inclusion of linguistic information has been invaluable.

To express the potential for England to lose or forfeit its colonial hold on America, unless they act in a timely fashion, Morton mentions the threat the

Dutch pose by encroaching on the Hudson River and gaining control of the beaver trade over both the French and the English (99). Morton offers up the possibility that one of the great rivers mentioned by the natives might well prove itself to be a passage to East India (100). For all of the reasons laid out in detail in book 2, Morton concludes that “it would be adjudged an irreparable oversight to protract time, and suffer the Dutch (who are but intruders upon his majesties most hopefull country of New England) to possesse themselves of that plesant and commodious country of Erocoise before us” (100).

Book 3 “contain[s] a description of the people that are planted there, what remarkable accidents have happened there, since they were settled, what tenets they hould, together with the practise of their church” (103). Morton opens the first few chapters of book 3 on the fate of Thomas Weston’s enterprise to colonize Massachusetts. He tells of how the English colonizers were known by the name *Wotanquenange*, which translates as “stabbers or cutthroats” (112). The savages at Wessaguscus were enjoying a feast set for them by the English planters who were their guests when the Plymouth planters murdered them with their own knives (111). Another act of cruelty and injustice against the natives occurred when one of the “planters of New England” stole a cache of corn. Although the Parliament desired to punish this man by executing him, they could not bring themselves to follow through with this plan. Instead, they dressed an old and sickly man in the clothes of the young man and prepared to execute him instead. A third action that results in a battle between these two groups is caused by desecrating the grave of the sachem’s mother (107). Morton provides another anecdote “so that by this [the reader] may easily perceive the uncivilized people are more just than the civilized” (125). He tells a tale of theft when white settlers take the 10 skins meant as payment for corn taken from the house of Passonagessit. The white settlers take the skins for themselves rather than pass them on to the owner; the owner then asks the sachem for payment of 10 skins for the corn. This time, a man approaches the

sachem the day before their arranged meeting and demands the skins of the sachem (125).

When Weston finally arrives at his plantation, he learns of the number of planters dead from sickness or else killed in battle against the native population. The surviving planters who have scattered in Plymouth begin to spin tales of the dangerous, subtle, secret, and mischievous nature of the savages (113). Morton seems to catalog this series of calamities for two purposes: to exonerate Thomas Weston of the crimes carried out by those he fitted out to create a plantation and to demonstrate how treacherous and deceitful the Plymouth planters are predisposed to be. As a corrective to these unfounded portrayals of the native population, Morton assures readers, “I have found the Massachusetts Indian more full of humanity then the Christians, and have had much better quarter with them” (114). Morton concedes that it is inevitable when two nations meet that “one must rule and the other be ruled” (114).

The planters do not limit their treachery to the natives of Massachusetts but mistreat the “good merchant,” Thomas Weston himself. They confiscate his ship, rob it of its contents, and hold Weston hostage while they do so. Just as they glossed their own misdeeds with Weston, so they spread false tales of Weston’s madness to cover their actions against him.

They then conspire to abandon Morton on Cape Ann, under the pretense that the weather requires them to take shelter. Morton chronicles how the planters’ plans were foiled by the wise Weston, who insisted that the oars and sails be taken ashore (thus dashing their plans to maroon him on Cape Ann and sail away in the night). Morton opens a bottle of “lusty liquor,” a sparkling Claret that the conspirators begin to drink in great quantities. Morton has quite fun declaring the religious implications of this act by the very people who had earlier been lamenting the lack of “the meanes” to worship: “knowinge the wine would make them Protestants” (118). In response to the Plymouth planters’ request for a minister, Master Layford is sent as their preacher. When they ask him to renounce

- Griffin, Edward M. "Dancing around the Maypole, Ripping Up the Flag: The Merry Mount Caper and Issues in American History and Art." *Renascence* 57, no. 3 (Spring 2005).
- Kupperman, Karen Ordahl. "Thomas Morton, Historian." *New England Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1977): 660–664.
- McWilliams, John P., Jr. "Fictions of Merry Mount." *American Quarterly* 29, no. 9 (1977): 3–30.
- Murphy, Edith. "'A Rich Widow, Now to Be Tane Up or Laid Downe': Solving the Riddle of Thomas Morton's 'Rise Oedipus.'" *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1996): 755–768.
- Read, David. *New World, Known World: Shaping Knowledge in Early Anglo-American Writing*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005.
- Sterne, Richard Clark. "Puritans at Merry Mount: Variations on a Theme." *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1970): 846–858.
- Thomas Morton (c. 1575 or 1579–1647). Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/morton.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Zuckerman, Michael. "Pilgrims in the Wilderness: Community, Modernity, and the Maypole at Merry Mount." *New England Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1977): 55–277.



JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY

(1751–1820)

I feel the pride of womanhood all up in arms.

(letter to a female cousin, 1777)

Judith Sargent was the first of eight children born to Captain Winthrop Sargent and Judith Saunders Sargent. Both her mother and her father were from wealthy New England families; her mother's family was associated with the area's maritime industry, and her father was a shipowner and merchant. As Judith Sargent wrote in a letter to her brother, her early education was hardly adequate: "But during my first years, although our parents were, as you know, the best of human beings, they yet did homage to the shrine of fashion, custom tyrannizes over the strongest minds—It was the mode to confine the female intellect within the narrowest bounds, and by consequence I was robbed of the aid of education—I shall feel the effects of this irrational deprivation, as long as I shall continue an inhabitant of this world." As Sargent would go on to advocate women's access to education, it seems certain that her own lack of a formal education influenced her later writings. Sargent's parents eventually recognized her exceptional intelligence and employed the Reverend John Rogers to tutor both her and her younger brother, Winthrop, Jr., who was to prepare for his entry into Harvard (Harris xvi). Because Sargent deliberately destroyed letters written before 1774, which she refers to as "a kind of history of my juvenile life," we do not have much further information on her childhood (Harris xvii). She married her first husband, John Stevens, who was a sea captain

from Gloucester, on October 3, 1769, and their marriage lasted 17 years. In reviewing Judith's letters to her sister, it is evident that the marriage, like most of its time, was not based on love, and Judith expresses a longing to return to her childhood home and the emotional comforts afforded by her mother and her siblings (Harris xviii).

Because of the Revolutionary War's impact on the maritime industry, as well as the financial ruin of Judith Stevens's father-in-law, John Stevens was forced to take to the seas in the hopes of avoiding debtors' prison and recouping some of the family's lost monies. He sailed to the West Indies in 1786, and shortly after his departure, Judith Stevens received news of his death. While she seemed content to live out her life as a widow, her growing friendship with a fellow Universalist, John Murray, who preached at the first Universalist meeting-house, which was dedicated to him in 1780 by her father, blossomed into love and the two were wed on October 6, 1788. In stark contrast to a loveless marriage of respect with Stevens, Judith Sargent Murray describes a marriage of equals in her happy union with second husband, John Murray.

The critic Sharon Harris speculates that the couple's dedication to the principles of Universalism, which Harris is quick to point out Murray advocated years prior to her marriage to John Murray, might have contributed to their egalitarian marriage (xxi–xxii). Universalism set itself in contradistinction

to Puritan belief in the elect, or predestination, in which only a select few were “elected” by God for eternal salvation. In Universalist thought, all people were eligible for salvation, and moreover, they had individual religious liberty. The Universalist Church was the first to ordain women; its first three female ministers would prove to be figures in the feminist movement. Murray certainly embraced the faith’s belief in equality of the sexes, as she would delve into the religious and biblical aspects of this theme in her famous essay “On the Equality of the Sexes.” She recognized the influence of the Genesis tale of Adam’s, and thus humankind’s, fall based on Eve’s temptation as a cornerstone to sexual inequality and wrote her own version of the first couple, providing Eve equal if not superior status to Adam. On their travels together during John’s preaching tour, Judith had occasion to meet some of the key figures of the 18th century, including JOHN ADAMS and ABIGAIL ADAMS, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, and Martha Washington.

Just as she offered support to her husband in his career as minister for the Universalist Church, so did John promote and support Judith’s literary career. The *Massachusetts Magazine*, to which she began contributing in earnest in 1789 after the still-born birth of her first child, was the “longest lived of all eighteenth century American magazines” and the central vehicle of Murray’s publishing career (xxiii). The *Magazine* provided Murray with the distinguished honor of being the first female writer in America with her own ongoing column (Harris xxv). She published under the pseudonyms *Constantia* and *The Gleaner* and under the second published an ongoing column focusing on contemporary cultural topics (Harris xxvi). Her first and only novel, *The Story of Margareta*, appeared serially in the *Gleaner* in 1792.

When the Murrays moved to Boston in 1793, Sargent Murray was introduced to a more culturally and politically rich arena, and she quickly found herself debating some of the central issues of the day in her columns for the *Massachusetts Magazine*. It was while in Boston that she began writing and producing her plays, the first of which was *The Medium, or Virtue Triumphant*. Although

it had only one performance, on March 2, 1795, it had the honor of being “the first play by an American author [to be] performed at [Boston’s Federal Street Theatre]” (Harris xxxvii). The critic Sharon Harris contradicts the assessment of other critics who attribute the play’s single run to its lack of quality and points instead to the gender bias that caused one critic to assume that her husband had coauthored the play, and a second critic to refer to her as a man, assuming that only men could be playwrights (xxxvii–xxxviii).

In 1798 Sargent Murray gathered her most popular writings and published them in a three-volume set entitled *The Gleaner* under her pseudonym, *Constantia*. Despite her use of the pen name, Sargent Murray’s identity was well known at the time she published *The Gleaner*. The three-volume series offered 100 essays on various topics and represents “a compendium of cultural issues relevant to late eighteenth-century America” (Harris xxxix). The series was extremely popular and successful, its list of subscribers including the foremost figures in 18th-century America: John Hancock, Martha and George Washington, President John Adams, the governors of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and SUSANNA HASWELL ROWSON, author of the best-selling seduction novel *Charlotte Temple*. The family’s financial strain was a central reason why Murray published *The Gleaner*, and despite its success, they continued to suffer.

Her cousin Lucius Murray was a source of criticism and cruel tricks. In 1807 21-year-old Lucius wrote to his 56-year-old cousin under the pretense of being a printer from Blecher & Armstrong with an interest in publishing her latter works, which appeared under the pseudonym *Honora Martesia*. After the demise of the *Massachusetts Magazine*, Sargent Murray had returned to poetry and, in honor of her time with the former, sought out a new pen name for the work she published with the *Boston Weekly Magazine*. After Sargent Murray “devoted precious time selecting appropriate works for the collection,” she was stunned to read from Armstrong that the printers had made no such request (Harris xlii). Lucius Murray in further acts of cruelty attempted to tarnish the reputation

of Sargent Murray's daughter, Julia Murray Bingaman, alleging that she had seduced her future husband while he was a boarder in her parents' home and that her pregnancy forced Adam Bingaman to marry her.

In 1809 John Murray suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed until his death six years later in 1815. In his last years of life, Murray edited and published her husband's writings, as well as wrote a biography of him. After his death, Murray moved to Natchez, Mississippi, to live with her daughter Julia and her son-in-law, Adam Bingaman, and remained there until her own death at the age of 69. Judith Sargent Murray was buried in the Bingaman family cemetery on St. Catharine's Creek.

“Desultory Thoughts upon the Utility of Encouraging a Degree of Self-Complacency, Especially in Female Bosoms” (1784)

Murray's other central essay on the station of women in 18th-century America opens with a poem in which she expresses the need for “self estimation” in young women. As her virtuous eponymous heroine does in *The Story of Margareta*, Murray argues that young girls are easily the prey of conniving men unless they are armed with enough sense of self-worth that they recognize praise as empty or hollow words and are thus immune to its seductive effects. Murray utilizes a nautical metaphor to imagine the effects of a lack of self-esteem: “lost to conscious worth, to decent pride / Compass nor helm there is, our course to guide” (15–16).

In delineating the various subjects composing Margareta's education, the narrator dilates at length on the necessity of “constantly inculcating one grand truth . . . her person, the symmetry of her features . . . are the endowments of nature—while the artificial accomplishments with which she is invested, resulting wholly from accident, and being altogether independent of her own arrangements, confer upon her no real or intrinsic merit.” In this passage, Murray distinguishes not

only between those endowments deserving merit and those void of it but also the regard Margareta should have for herself and her accomplishments. Rather than cultivating vanity or false pride in their adopted daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Vigillius nurture her self-esteem, placing due value on those aspects of her that deserve consideration. Armed with such sage advice, Margareta steers clear of Sinisterus's traps, depicted in the essay's poem as the dangers facing a ship at sea. If a young woman is not truly apprised of her beauty and her features, Murray suggests, then she is prone to a seducer's flattering tongue and corrupting influence.

Murray moves from the vague example of the “beautiful female” to a more intimate illustration of her point, her instruction for her own daughter. Although she would readily concede her daughter's external beauty, Murray would, above all else, address her “as a rational being” and persuade her to “adorn her mind.” To “set [her daughter] above the snares of the artful betrayer,” Murray believes her child should be well acquainted with the language of praise: so that “her mind would not be enervated or intoxicated . . . by a delicious surprise.” In so doing, Murray feels that a parent like her “would destroy the weapons of flattery, or render them useless” because the novelty of praise would have worn off through years of kind words from the young woman's family. A healthy dose of self-esteem would serve not only the young woman unaccustomed to praise, but also her kindred who are “taught also to regard her character ridiculously contemptible.” The “depression of the soul” resulting from a parent's desire to eradicate pride appears to Murray to have an extreme influence and to render the child just as susceptible to the seducer's flattery.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Murray's advice about a young woman's education relate to the descriptions of the educations received by SUSANNA HASWELL ROWSON's Charlotte Temple and HARRIET WEBSTER FOSTER's Eliza Wharton?
2. Compare Murray's treatise on female education with that of COTTON MATHER. To what extent

do the religious beliefs of the two authors contribute to their ideas about education?

“On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790)

Murray's most famous and anthologized essay first appeared in the *Massachusetts Magazine* in March and April 1790. Murray opens with a poem in which she expresses her belief that “such distinctions [between men and women] only dwell below” because “the soul unfetter'd, to no sex confin'd” (40–41). Thus, the poem establishes Murray's central argument in the essay: For souls that are not “confin'd” by sex, gender is irrelevant and only becomes a concern to those on earth, who “dwell below.” The distinction, then, between men and women is not inherent but due to depriving women of the substantial education reserved for men.

Murray playfully addresses the issue of women's innate mental faculties by dividing these up into four categories: imagination, reason, memory, and judgment. As proof of women's capacity for invention, she offers up the daily changing fashions and women's “talent for slander.” Any lack of reason she places squarely on the general deficiency of the education available to women: “We can only reason from what we know.” She likewise attributes any disparity in women's and men's reasoning faculties to “the difference in education, and continued advantages.” From an early age, Murray argues, the male “is taught to aspire” while the female “is early confined and limited.” As a result, when the young girl arrives at womanhood, she “feels a void . . . she feels the want of a cultivated mind.” Had she received something more substantial than a “proper education,” the woman would employ her knowledge of geography, astronomy, or natural philosophy in her understanding and contemplation of God. In other words, Murray assures her readers that educated women would be pious, more capable of religious devotion because of minds cultivated to comprehend God. Further, educated women would be better wives to their husbands. With their current lack of education, Murray argues, wives are set so far below their husbands

“that in those entertainments which are productive of such rational felicity, she is not qualified to accompany him.” Minds thus filled with worthy thoughts and substantive contemplations “would have little room for the trifles with which our sex are, with too much justice, accused of amusing themselves . . .”

Against the argument that educated wives would neglect their household duties, Murray insists that these activities are “easily attained” and, once attained, “require no further mental attention.” In short, because no education is necessary for conducting themselves about their daily chores in their homes, wives would be “at full liberty for reflection” even as they are “pursuing the needle or the superintendency of the family.” If time permitted, wives could commit these reflections to paper; if not, they would contribute to a more “refined and rational” conversation. Affluent women have the leisure time to devote to studies and more commendable subjects of contemplation, while for those who are in “embarrassed circumstances” Murray recommends early hours and close application.

On the subject of men's superior physical strength, Murray points to not only the presence of masculine females and effeminate males, but also to great minds like that of Alexander Pope, “clogged with an enervated body and distinguished by a diminutive stature.” As yet another example that physical strength does not account for a natural inequality among the sexes, Murray points to those who, though approaching death, and thus possessed of a “clay built tabernacle . . . well nigh dissolved,” remain capable of attaining sublime heights.

Murray ultimately arrives in a supplemental article to the *Magazine* at the most difficult argument held up to prove the inequality of the sexes: the downfall of humanity (and Adam) through the biblical tale of Eve. Extracted from a letter she wrote to an unnamed male friend in December 1780, Murray tackles the “sacred oracles” that constitute the entirety of her friend's argument in favor of the inequality of the sexes. Murray disagrees with the traditional reading of a “malignant demon” who appeared to Eve in “the guise of a baleful serpent”

and instead relies upon “the criticks in the Hebrew tongue” who insist that the “fallen spirit presented himself to her view as a shining angel.” Further, she considers the message of this entity, a promise of “perfection of knowledge.” Thus, she deduces, Eve was animated by “a desire of adorning her mind, a laudable ambition fired her soul, and a thirst for knowledge impelled the predilection so fatal in its consequences.” Her motivation was not based upon a satisfaction of her base appetite, but a noble desire for knowledge. Adam, Murray suggests, was not acting upon such a noble premise; nor was he deceived as Eve was, for he had witnessed “the fallacy of the argument, which the deceiver had suggested.” Adam “was influenced by no other motive than a bare pusillanimous attachment to a woman!” Sharon Harris traces the germs of this revision of Adam and Eve’s tale of fatal fall to a letter Murray penned to her cousin in 1777: “That Eve was indeed the weaker Vessel I boldly take upon me to deny” (reported in Harris xxv).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the subjects delineated in Hannah Foster Webster’s *The Boarding School* as proper and suitable for a young woman’s education with those suggested by Murray in her essay. In terms of the subjects they advise, what conclusions might you draw about their expectations for women after graduation?
2. Murray’s direct address to biblical precedent as an argument in favor of women’s inferiority to men only appears in the essay as a supplemental address extracted from a letter to an unnamed male friend. How does this form relate to the supplement’s content? Does it matter that it was addressed to a male?

“Sketch of the Present Situation of America, 1794” (1794)

As early as 1940, the critic Chester Jorgenson praised Murray for her ability to tackle the thorny political and philosophical issues raging in the newly formed nation. “Greater wonder is it that she

devoted so many of her Gleaner papers to discussions of ideas not normally found in the American magazine literature written by blue-stockinged females during our early national period. Judith Murray’s mind was as catholic and resilient as her heart was exquisite and tender. Her interest in masculine ideas is suggested most boldly in her essays on nationalism, the battle between ancients and moderns, and liberty in a federal republic” (Jorgenson 74). Murray tackles the thorny issue of the French Revolution and debates whether America, which had so recently been the beneficiary of France’s aid in breaking its colonial ties with Britain, is obliged to lend support to France. She considers the idyllic scene America enjoys because of its peaceful period after the Revolution. Commerce thrives, agriculture is hearty, and literature and the arts, genres specific to America, are growing. These signs of a peaceful republic, however, are rather recent, as the nation had suffered not long before from the chaos and bloodshed of war. Murray offers an uncommon view of war by focusing her attention on the women who weep at home for husbands never returned, and on the men conscripted into service who suffered “camp sickness and fatigue.” “These are not fancy pictures,” Murray avows.

Neither are the images of France in its current state of chaos and barbarity, Murray argues. “But alas! France exhibits, at this period, a spectacle, from which lacerated truth indignantly hastes, at which reason stands aghast, while morality and holy religion have received from base and murderous hands a fatal stab.” In this image, Murray paints the destruction of the very institutions of civility upon which all societies rest. Thus, at the same time that she offers a dire image of France, she suggests an immediate need for America to intervene. Murray characterizes factionalism with “its cloven foot” as the main obstacle preventing America from going to the aid of those from whom “we derived advantages so indisputably beneficial.” Murray wonders at the motivations of those who ascribe to Federalist thought and goals, which she terms “an aristocracy in the midst of your brethren.” And it is once she has alighted upon this subject that the reader recognizes that

Murray's main purpose is to hold up the promise of America, symbolized by a fragile and infantlike Constitution, against the terrors of France and the threat by Federalists to a government of the people.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Murray's and CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK's treatment of the factionalism, as described in "A Reminiscence of Federalism," dividing Federalists from Democrats. Considering that the two women subscribed to the two opposing factions (Murray was a Democrat while Sedgwick was raised a staunch Federalist), how do they imagine national harmony and the end of divisions?
2. How does Murray's argument about equality among people, a central tenet of Democrats rather than Federalists, adhere to the views she expresses of women's position in society?

The Medium, or Virtue Triumphant (1795)

Murray's first play was produced at the Federal Street Theatre, but only for one night. Critics speculate on the reason for the short-lived run, offering up critiques of the play's quality as well as sexism that clouded male theater critics' vision, prohibiting them from imagining a woman to be a playwright, or, for those who knew her to be the author, to believe that she had authored the play independently of her husband, John Murray.

In a refreshing reversal of emotional stereotypes, Sargent Murray casts Ralph Maitland in the role of mercurial male in need of a medium while Eliza Clairville and her star-crossed lover, Charles Maitland, embody virtue. Ralph Maitland's moods vacillate greatly, even as he professes a desire to embrace a calm medium between extreme emotions. He banishes his son when he learns of the latter's desire to marry a penniless orphan, Eliza. Despite their strong and abiding feelings for one another, Charles and Eliza refuse to marry against his father's wishes, which are predicated on Eliza's social status as an orphan and financial status as a

servant. Although she describes it in socioeconomic terms, Eliza's desire to marry on equal standing with her husband resonates with Sargent Murray's own ideas of the equality of the sexes, which she wrote about in the *Massachusetts Magazine*. The appearance of her maternal uncle, Colonel Mellfont, functions as the play's *deus ex machina* as he explains to her in the final act that she fled, under the false advice of Olivia, on the eve of discovering her mother's patrimony.

Sargent Murray peoples the play with characters who do little more than offer comic relief, such as Captain Flashnet, who repeatedly mixes classic references to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with allusions to contemporary writers like Jonathan Swift and John Milton. His flashiness is also revealed in his exaggerated tales of bravery during the Revolutionary War and his close friendship with General Washington. The female version of Captain Flashnet is a catty socialite named Miss Dorinda Scornwell, who brags of "already looking in on a little hundred of her friends" before visiting Augusta Bloomville. Although Scornwell laments "stiff compliments" and "the awkward grimace of ceremony," she immediately proceeds to engage her friend Matronia in a recitation of the previous evening's entertainment, replete with a narration of her own central position in the pleasantries.

Sargent Murray delivers the message of moderating such hectic social schedules in the advice Mrs. Matronia Aimwell offers to her newly married niece, Augusta Bloomville, after hearing from Augusta's husband that the new bride is rarely at home, having packed her schedule with social events and shopping sprees. Augusta reflects, "I have plunged into a life of gaiety, and the conclusion, which forces itself upon me, does not decide in favor of dissipation." She, too, amends her extreme behavior in promising at the play's conclusion to dedicate herself to her marriage and her husband, Major George Bloomville.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the depiction of marriage in the two plays, *The Medium* and *The Traveller Returned*.

What roles does Sargent Murray imagine for men and women?

2. In this play, Sargent Murray emphasizes the need for moderation, or striking a happy medium, both in married life and in one's personal life. What are the political ramifications of this message? How does it resonate with her writing in *The Gleaner*?

The Traveller Returned (1796)

Murray's second play was first performed at the Federal Street Theatre in Boston on March 9, 1796. The play appeared in printed form in *The Gleaner*.

Act I opens with a scene of Mr. Rambleton and his servant, Patrick O'Neal, arriving on the docks of a major port city (presumably Boston). Mr. Rambleton's identity and motivations for arriving at the city are immediately called into question as his servant, Patrick, begins to puzzle aloud about his master's reticence to reunite immediately with his wife and family. As the play progresses, the audience pieces together that Montague Rambleton wishes to discover whether his wife has been true and faithful to him, and so he has affected the disguise of Rambleton. The master and servant quickly befriend a hero of the Revolutionary War named Major Camden, and in their laudatory exclamations on the heroism and greatness of General Washington, Rambleton proudly recognizes the figure of his long-lost son, although he delays their reunion until later in the play. Patrick and Rambleton lodge in the same boardinghouse as Camden, and there they are introduced to Camden's landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Vansittart.

His wife, Louisa Montague, worries about the marriage of her daughter Harriot to the young military hero, Major Harry Camden, who saved her life. While Camden feels some affection for Harriot, her cousin, Emily, who discovers to her own dismay that she reciprocates his affection, stirs his finer feelings. The love triangle is potentially resolved with the introduction of a second

young gentleman, Alberto Stanhope, who wishes to marry Harriot and to whom she seems better suited. The marriage plots are suspended while the play turns to the plot of Rambleton, who has been falsely accused by the Vansittarts of being a Tory spy (in the wake of Benedict Arnold and Major Andre) and is detained by members of the Committee of Public Safety. By aligning Rambleton's disguised identity to the famous spies so recently associated with the Revolutionary War, Murray makes the events of the domestic plot (Montague has taken on this disguise to test the fidelity of his wife) resonate with the national plot (America's gaining its independence from Britain and worrying about harboring any disguised Tories or Loyalists).

The play's two plotlines resolve themselves in the fifth and final act, when Mrs. Montague recognizes her husband in the figure of Rambleton; Mr. Montague reunites with his daughter Harriot; and the parents become reacquainted with their son, who has been raised by a friend under the name *Harry Camden* rather than *Harry Montague*. Mrs. Montague considers in horror the possible sin she might have forced upon Harry and Harriot had their arranged marriage taken place, for brother and sister would have been united in holy wedlock. The specter of incest appears briefly in the play as the domestic equivalent to spying, as both oppose the natural affinities that one should have for one's family members and one's nation, newly formed.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Murray's play imagine the American Revolution? What place, if any, do women have in this nation-building event?
2. How do the women in the play (Mrs. Louisa Montague, Harriot Montague, and Emily Lovegrove) relate to the model of republican motherhood?
3. Compare Murray's treatment of General Washington and his role in the Revolution to PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU's in his poem dedicated to Washington.

The Story of Margaretta (1798)

Murray's serialized novel, which appeared in the *Massachusetts Magazine* under the pen name The Gleaner, distinguishes itself by being narrated from a male perspective (that of Margaretta's adopted father, Mr. Vigillius), and by breaking with narrative convention, a tale of marriage and honor prevailing over seduction and fatal shame written partially in epistolary form. Margaretta, with the sage advice and solid moral upbringing of her adopted parents, Mr. and Mrs. Vigillius, escapes moral fall at the hands of the aptly named seducer, Sinisterus Courtland. Through the machinations of her parents, Margaretta learns Courtland's true nature and ends their association. Soon after, she receives a letter from her friend Amelia Worthington informing her of Courtland's part in the ruin of a young orphan named Frances Wellwood, whose patrimony he quickly depleted and whose reputation he tarnished. Enclosed in Amelia's letter is a short epistle written by Wellwood herself, begging Margaretta to "help [her] to reclaim a husband, who, not naturally bad, hath too long wandered in the dangerous paths of dissipation." Fanny Wellwood promises to "draw the impenetrable veil of silence" over Courtland's past indiscretions in the hope that he will "acknowledge the honorable and endearing ties [of] father and husband." Again, Margaretta and her adopted parents prove their virtuous nature by reuniting Courtland and Wellwood, settling the debts that imprisoned Courtland, and overseeing their matrimonial vows. Thus, Murray not only allows for Margaretta's escape from Courtland's seductive snare, but redeems the unfortunate victim of his vice, Frances Wellwood, and their illegitimate children, through the bonds of holy wedlock.

Margaretta reunites with her intended, Edward Hamilton, and the two marry once Margaretta has reached the proper age of 19. Their marriage, however, suffers from Hamilton's gambling debts, which threaten to separate husband from wife since Hamilton's only financial solution seems to be to take to the open seas, as had Murray's first husband, John Stevens. The arrival of Margaretta's biological father, who was erroneously reported to

be drowned during a storm at sea, ends the Hamilton's financial woes and happily reunites father and daughter. Further, Margaretta's fears that her husband was in love with his childhood companion, Serafina Clifford, are dispelled by Serafina's declaration that she and Edward are in fact brother and sister. As with her two dramas, Murray relies upon the unexpected return of family members and the discovery of secret identities that aid in family reunions. The critic Sharon Harris believes Murray's only novel distinguishes itself from other 18th-century fiction by incorporating the fictional critiques within the story's plotline. As the novel appeared in serial form, Murray had opportunity to reflect upon some aspect of the novel that might have piqued the readerships' curiosity or drawn their critique. "Murray uses reader-response criticism for two significant purposes—first, to suggest the eclectic nature of her readership; and second, to emphasize her theme of equality" (Harris xxxi). On the subject of equality, Murray devotes several pages on the subject of Margaretta's education and her right to choose her own husband (even if her choice opposes her parents' wishes).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Murray's depiction of marriage differ from that in her plays and essays? What role does she imagine for women as wives and mothers? What role does she imagine for men as husbands and fathers?
2. Compare Murray's novel to Susanna Haswell Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*. What enables Murray's heroine to avoid the traps that ensnare Eliza Wharton and Charlotte Temple?

"Observations on Female Abilities" (1798)

The critic Nina Baym celebrates "Judith Sargent Murray, [as] the only Enlightenment historian of women-as-such, [who] based her account on claims of equality: scrutiny of the historical record showed women to be equally brave, equally intelligent, equally articulate, equally loyal, and so on"

(40). Murray's essay "Observations on Female Abilities" offers, in its introductory poem, to present readers with examples of the "Sex's worth" in "the patriot's zeal, the laurell'd warrior's claim / The scepter'd virtues, wisdom's sacred name / Creative poesy, the ethic page" (2–5). She further enumerates the various pieces of evidence that will be produced in the essay's span to prove women's equality "in every respect" to men. These shared qualities include bravery, patriotism, influence, heroism, ingeniousness, emotional endurance, eloquence, faithfulness, literary merit, and leadership in government.

In support of women's ability to endure, Murray points both to the women of Britain and to the "savage" women who are "subjected to agonies unknown to manhood." Murray anticipates a common 19th-century theory that native women were unfairly treated by their men and forced to suffer physical as well as mental hardships that their Anglo-American counterparts were spared. Women's ingenuity, which she believes too prevalent to require any specific example, is nevertheless expressed in the tale of a queen who commissioned an artist to render a feast in gold, as a means of convincing the king to desist from overworking his people in the mines while the fields lay fallow and his subjects were starving. Murray draws again upon classical history to narrate the incredible tale of heroism and fortitude exemplified by Arria, a Roman wife who, when apprised that she could not procure the freedom of her husband, took the dagger he was to use to dispatch his own life and killed herself. Handing the weapon to her husband, Murray relates, Arria stated, "Pactus, this gives me no pain." Not wishing to limit her examples to ancient Roman times, Murray points to Lady Jane Grey and Miss Anna Askew, who both bore their death sentences with grace and heroic stoicism.

Females who took up arms to defend themselves and their families or to avenge the bloody deaths of their family members are counted as illustrious examples of women's displays of heroism. Murray briefly recounts the tales of Jane of Flaunders, Margaret of Anjou, and Charlotte Corday (who was executed for killing the Jacobin leader Jean Paul

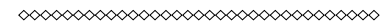
Marat). Murray adheres to the notion of republican motherhood when presenting examples of female heroism: mothers who tender up their young men or husbands in service of the nation. Murray considers both the physical taking up of arms, as well as the emotional sacrifice necessary to send loved ones to war, equally powerful proofs of women's shared qualities with men.

In contrast to the beliefs in innate equality between the sexes espoused by the *Godley's Lady's Book* editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, who recorded in the *Woman's Record* the opinion that the sexes' difference stems from "an organic difference in the operations of their minds," Murray not only provides a catalog of historical women whose feats illustrate on a factual and incontrovertible level the equality of women to men, but also considers contemporary women in England and America who deserve the laurels of fame and recognition for their accomplishments (reported in Baym 40).

Murray concludes by considering how many more women would prove themselves worthy members of and contributors to society were they given adequate educations to expand and cultivate their minds.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In this essay, Murray takes up what could arguably be called "male" traits and proves that women also possess them. Does she offer any celebration of stereotypically "female" traits? If so, what are they and how are they treated?
2. Consider Murray's argument in light of THOMAS JEFFERSON'S two letters addressing the proper subject matters for both men and women, his letters to Benjamin Hawkins and Nathaniel Burwell, respectively.



FURTHER QUESTIONS ON MURRAY AND HER WORK

1. Murray penned several essays on the subject of female equality. Reviewing them as a whole, decide which essay appears most credible or persuasive and why?

2. Consider the qualities Murray holds up as exemplary of both men and women. How do these characteristics coincide with her notions of democracy and the American nation? Which characteristics do not seem particularly laudable or do not require education?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Baym, Nina. "Between Enlightenment and Victorian: Toward a Narrative of American Women Writers Writing History." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 22–41.
- Eldred, Janet Carey, and Peter Mortensen. "'Persuasion Dwelt on Her Tongue': Female Civic Rhetoric in Early America." *College English* 60, no. 2 (1998): 173–188.
- Harris, Sharon, ed. *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Jorgenson, Chester. "Gleanings from Judith Sargent Murray." *American Literature* 12, no. 1 (1940): 73–78.
- Schloesser, Pauline E. *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- Skemp, Sheila. *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998.
- Smith, Bonnie Hurd. Judith Sargent Murray. Available online. URL: <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/judithsargentmurray.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Tanselle, G. Thomas. "Royall Tyler, Judith Sargent Murray, and The Medium." *New England Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1968): 115–117.
- Zagarri, Rosemarie. "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother." *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1992): 192–215.



SAMSON OCCOM (1723–1792)

I was both a School master and Minister to the Indians, yea I was their Ear, Eye & Hand, as Well as Mouth.

(“A Short Narrative of My Life”)

The American Indian critic Bernd Peyer believes “Native American literature in English actually began in the second half of the eighteenth century with the writer Samson Occom” (208). Occom’s position as the “father of modern Native American literature” seems all the more impressive when one considers both the circumstances of his own life and the larger cultural and political tensions he had to negotiate (215). At the time of Occom’s birth in 1723, factors including disease and colonial genocide had reduced the number of Mohegan to 350 (Peyer 209). Further, the remaining members had divided into two factions over land disputes. Ben’s Town and John’s Town were named after the two communities’ sachems, or leaders. Although Occom’s brief autobiography does not detail his family history, Peyer cites Harold Blodgett’s 1935 biography of Occom, which mentions his paternal grandfather’s migration from “the region around the Shetucket and Quinebaug Rivers” (in northeastern Connecticut and south-central Massachusetts) to Mohegan territory in the early part of the 17th century (209). His father, Joshua Ockham, married a woman named Sarah, who was a Mohegan. Her ancestry is rumored, according to *The Life of the Countess of Huntingdon*, to trace back to Uncas, the famous leader of the Mohegan. Both Blodgett and Peyer attribute Samson Occom’s conversion to Christianity to his mother, Sarah’s, prior embracing of the Christian faith.

The pivotal event in Occom’s life occurred in 1741, when he was 17 years old; the Reverend John Davenport converted Samson Occom to Christianity. Tellingly absent from his own narrative is his appointment by Ben Uncas as one of 12 councillors for the Mohegan. When he was 19, the Mohegan placed Occom into a leadership role. It is quite likely that his conversion to Christianity might have seemed at odds with his newfound position within his tribe, and thus Occom chose not to focus on it in his narrative. It is also just as likely, however, that his baptism into Christianity prompted his selection as a councillor because it placed him in an intermediary role between the two cultures.

In Occom’s own account of this life-changing event, his conversion to Christianity is strongly linked to his desire for literacy and access to biblical texts. On December 6, 1743, he began his education with the Reverend Eleazor Wheelock, a disciple of the Great Awakening who was appointed pastor of the Second Congregational Church of Lebanon one year after his graduation from Yale University. The Great Awakening, which lasted from the 1730s through the 1770s, was especially popular in England, Scotland, Germany, and in the British colonies in North America. Evangelical preachers held revivals throughout Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and beyond in the hope of counteracting the secularization of society caused by the age of Enlightenment. The prominence of the Great

Awakening in England and Scotland would prove pivotal to Occom's fund-raising tour of these two countries in 1766 and 1767. At the behest of his former teacher, Wheelock, and under the financial support of George Whitefield, the second earl of Dartmouth, Occom traveled to England and Scotland, delivering over 300 sermons to collect funds for what would eventually become Dartmouth University, which was then Wheelock's Indian Charity School. Peyer reports that Occom's efforts raised £12,000 for the school (211).

When Occom returned from his successful trip to England and Scotland, he learned of a land dispute commonly referred to as the "Mason Controversy," between the governor of Connecticut, who gained jurisdiction over the tribe in 1725, and the Mohegan. The Mason family, who represented the Mohegan in the court case, appealed the return of their lands from Connecticut's possession (Peyer 210). Occom's support of the Mohegan created tension between him and his fellow Christians, including his employers, who threatened to withdraw their financial aid for his missionary work. In a letter following the court's decision in favor of the colony of Connecticut, Occom writes of his outrage:

The grand controversy which has subsisted between the Colony of Connecticut and the Mohegan Indians above seventy years, is finally decided in favor of the Colony. I am afraid the poor Indians will never stand a good chance with the English in their land controversies, because they are very poor, they have no money. Money is almighty now-a-days, and the Indians have no learning, no wit, no cunning; the English have all. (reported in Caulkins 163)

Occom had good reason to rail against the undue sway money held over the English. While he was sermonizing in England and Scotland to raise funds for an Indian Charity School, Occom was under the mistaken impression that Wheelock would meet the needs of his wife, Mary Fowler, and their 10 children. Instead, he returned to the

disheartening scene of his family "in a state of extreme poverty and ill health" (Peyer 212). For Occom, the Mason Controversy and the dire circumstances his family suffered during his absence while fund-raising for the Indian school revealed how money could corrupt human relations and replace the respect one should have for another with greed for more money. To add insult to injury, Occom discovered that Wheelock "was no longer inclined to instruct Native American missionaries . . . and was removing the [Indian] school to New Hampshire . . . [where it] would be of no benefit to [Occom's] people" (Peyer 212). In an 1894 newspaper account of Occom written by the Reverend Dr. W. Deloss Love, the latter reports that the former "fell into intemperance. The original authority for the charge was a confession by Occom himself" (*Utica Morning Herald*). The community determined that Occom's intemperance was due to partaking of a small amount of alcohol on an empty stomach, and not to a more alarming pattern of alcohol abuse. Those who heard Occom's famous temperance sermon, delivered at the execution of Moses Paul on October 31, 1772, might well have heard rumor of his drinking problem and imagined that he wrote the sermon with himself in mind.

Occom's disillusionment with Wheelock, coupled with further conflicts between American Indians and English colonists, prompted him to join his former pupil and son-in-law, Joseph Johnson (who had married Occom's daughter Tabitha), to take up lands offered by the Oneida in New York as a resettlement location for American Indians from New England who had converted to Christianity. As early as July 1774, Occom and one of his brothers-in-law, David Fowler, traveled to New York to survey the lake and land that would eventually become a new settlement of converted American Indians. The outbreak of revolutionary activities, culminating in the Revolutionary War, which lasted until 1783, postponed the settlement. On November 7, 1785, Occom and Johnson founded Brothertown, "a Native American community with a political system modeled after Connecticut town government" (Peyer 213). Twenty families, including that

of Occom's son-in-law, Anthony Paul, traveled to Brothertown. The Oneida Historical Society reports that the town was geographically centered on the home of David Fowler, which also served as one of two places of worship over which Occom presided as pastor. The other house of worship was located in Stockbridge at Hendrick Aupaumut's home.

In 1787, just two years after the founding of Brothertown, the settlement's utopian vision was shattered by a land dispute between Occom and his extended family and the Oneida, who had initially gifted Occom and his followers with the land. Elijah Wampy, who brokered the deal with the Oneida to provide land for the new settlement, was later urged by the tribe to yield their tract and live in common with the tribe. Occom and his faction, led by David Fowler, had begun to make a living as farmers and did not wish to forfeit their labor to the community. Although a treaty was brokered the following year that reaffirmed Occom's and Fowler's title to the land, and thus affirmed their right to own tracts privately rather than communally, the bitterness from the dispute lingered. Matters regarding land rights and use continued to haunt the inhabitants of Brothertown. When English colonists began to lease lands from the American Indians, Occom once again resisted. He maintained that lands could only be leased to outsiders with the community's consent. Included among Occom's notion of outsiders were not only the white colonists, but members of other tribes from New England that were not "pure blooded," but had intermixed with Africans. "Occom had introduced into the original deed of gift, October 4, 1774, a condition that no such [people] should have any right to land in Brothertown, for his purpose was to keep the New England blood pure and preserve a tribal unity" (*Utica Morning Herald*).

Samson Occom died on July 14, 1792, at the age of 69. The Reverend Samuel Kirkland preached the funeral sermon. The Oneida Historical Society ended their 1894 meeting with a charge to "find the lost grave of Reverend Samson Occom, whose fame as a fervid Indian preacher lives on in the early

history and traditions of Oneida county" (*Utica Morning Herald*).

"A Short Narrative of My Life" (1768)

Samson Occom's "A Short Narrative of My Life" was unpublished until 1982, when the 10-page manuscript began to find its way out of Dartmouth College's library and onto the printed page of contemporary collections and anthologies of early American literature. Its three sections divide his life in terms of his conversion to Christianity, his time studying with the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, and his life as a missionary after leaving Wheelock. By imagining his life in such a framework, Occom emphasizes the religious and spiritual aspects of his life and diminishes or all but erases his preconversion life among the Mohegan.

The first sentence of his narrative establishes a preference for his life after his conversion to Christianity: "I was born a Heathen and Brought Up in Heathenism, till I was between 16 and 17 years of age, at a place called Mohegan, in New London, Connecticut, in New England." Casting it in this light of heathenism, Occom offers no redeeming qualities about his indigenous childhood except in negative contrast to his life after his midteen years. Such a construction serves more than one purpose: It allies him immediately with an English Christian readership who would ascribe to the very language and belief promulgated in the opening sentence and thus forms an alliance with these readers against non-Christian American Indians. It also creates a trajectory of conversion that would be expected from such readers and thus reaffirms the kind of work that he performs as an ordained missionary among the Oneida and Mohegan tribes. There remains yet a third purpose served by Occom's virtual silence regarding details from his own early childhood, and that is that he is able to maintain a cultural allegiance to the Mohegan by not revealing the sacred aspects of their culture to outsiders. The very tensions laid out in analyzing the opening sentence of Occom's narrative are not fully resolved in the brief tale of his life.

In his description of the Mohegan, Occom appears almost reticent to reveal many details, writing instead that the tribe “chiefly depended upon hunting, fishing, and fowling for their living.” Truly, this statement could be made about every tribe residing along the East Coast as well as the British settlers who were newly arrived. It is possible from the generic nature of this description to gain further insight into Occom’s doubleness—his status as a member of the Mohegan and his tentative status as a Christian missionary. By portraying the Mohegan in the same light as one would any other people residing in America, Occom might be in effect making a subtle comparison between the two cultures that recognizes their similarities rather than their differences. This notion of cultural similarity between the heathen and the Christian certainly resonates when Occom writes that they had no connection with the English except to “traffic with them in their small trifles.” Again, this very statement would certainly have been true as a descriptor of the English, who isolated themselves from the indigenous tribes, only meeting with them when brokering economic deals.

The uneven nature of the trade between the two cultures, however, breaks down this brief moment of cultural cohesion. Occom writes that the American Indians would attend meetings held by “a Minister from New London” but not with the intent of fulfilling the missionary’s purpose of converting them. Occom suggests that they did not attend the meetings out of “regard [for] the Christian religion, but [for] the blankets given to them every fall of the year.” Far from meeting their spiritual concerns, the American Indians were more invested in fulfilling the practical concerns of keeping warm for the coming winter months. Contemporary readers will no doubt recognize the bitter irony of American Indians’ sitting through meaningless sermons in order to receive blankets. Historians have linked the significant number of deaths among American Indians after their initial contact with English settlers to the infection of the plague, which was transmitted, unbeknown to either culture, through the circulation of blankets. As 18th-century scientists

were rather unversed on theories of contagion and infection, one would offer an anachronistic reading of this passage by imagining that Occom was aware of the blankets’ capacity to transmit fatal diseases. He certainly was not. His point here is merely to contrast the desires of the English minister with those of the native population.

By portraying the Indians as uninterested in Christianity, Occom is certainly not categorizing all indigenous peoples as doomed to heathenism, but rather is creating a niche for his own invaluable services as a native missionary. As the narrative develops, it becomes rather clear that Occom feels he has been a remarkably successful missionary, whose cultural and linguistic knowledge of the Mohegan people prove invaluable tools in their conversion to Christianity, a goal that the minister from New London was unable to accomplish because he could not create any desire, curiosity, or regard for the Christian religion among the native population. Occom continues by mentioning the sporadic efforts and successes of the missionaries to teach “Indian children,” including him, to read. Occom recalls that when he was 10, he and fellow children would “take care to keep out of [the missionary’s] way.” When the unnamed man was able to catch Occom or other children, he would “make [them] say over [their] letters,” but “this was soon over too; and all this time there was not one amongst us that made a profession of Christianity.” From Occom’s recollection, past missionaries proved ineffective not only at teaching literacy, but, more critically, at the very task they set out to accomplish: converting American Indians to Christianity.

In his second section of the narrative, entitled “From the Time of Our Reformation Till I Left Mr. Wheelocks,” Occom briefly relates his own conversion to Christianity and his time studying under the tutelage of Wheelock. Having heard “a strange rumor among the English, that there were Extraordinary Ministers Preaching from Place to Place and a Strange Concern among the White People,” Occom introduces a collective identity and recollection of the events leading up to his own conversion. He also subtly implies that such

acts as baptism and acceptance of God and Jesus Christ provoke anxiety in the English colonists by referring to the latter's reactionary feelings as "strange." It was certainly true in the 18th century that baptism was a controversial sacrament because it affirmed the humanity of American Indians and Africans, the very people who were deemed to be "savage heathens" by the Puritan culture. Because baptism is predicated on the notion of a soul that will be saved for all eternity from the damnation of hell, the act of baptizing or being baptized carried with it the tacit agreement that the baptized had a soul. A Christianized American Indian, derisively termed a "praying Indian" by the captive MARY WHITE ROWLANDSON, would prove very challenging to Puritan belief in the "savage heathen" as he or she would undermine the certainty that the native inhabitants of North America were not the Puritans' equals and thus could not be dispatched in such an inhumane manner.

Interestingly, Occom portrays his own conversion as being less the result of work by "extraordinary missionaries" or himself and more the result of "Divine Influence." Occom writes, "It pleased the Lord, as I humbly hope, to Bless and accompany with Divine Influences to the Conviction and saving conversion of a number of us." The phrase "I humbly hope" requires further attention. If neither the missionaries nor he is responsible for his conversion to Christianity, and divine influences are at work in the conversion of Occom and several others, then why would he "humbly hope"? Taken as a whole with the previous section that spoke with some judgment on the ineffectiveness and sporadic nature of visits and efforts of previous missionaries, this description of his actual conversion appears to be unfathomable. No one, not even God, seems to have orchestrated it.

The absence of any language clearly identifying an agent or agents central to Occom's Christianization seems to continue in this section. This rhetorical strategy could be attributed to his conversion, his identity as Mohegan, or both. Because a strong tenet of Christianity, particularly Calvinism, which preaches the doctrine of predestination, involves

the powerless position of humans, whose lives are directed by God, it seems understandable that Occom would write in a similar fashion, in which all the events that transpired in his life are attributed to God rather than to his own devices. Further, Occom's precarious position as a converted Mohegan, a figure existing between two worlds, would necessitate some rhetorical maneuvering on his part when leading up to his final argument in the narrative, which is for equal pay and equal treatment as a missionary. This being said, the narrative is of Occom's own life, and the tradition of autobiography provides literary license for authors to exercise authority over their own accounts. Occom's concluding plea for additional funding as a missionary must of necessity boast of his actions and abilities. Thus, this early moment in the narrative, which one would imagine to be pivotal to the life of a missionary, that is, conversion, seems to be rhetorically at odds with the rest of the narrative, which tells of his accomplishments and qualities.

Immediately after the rather strange description of his conversion, Occom begins writing in active voice of his desires and accomplishments such as learning to read and write. After six months of going to "all the meetings [he] could come at," Occom experiences a "trouble of mind" that results in his literacy lessons. Given the vague nature of the phrase "trouble of mind," one can only speculate as to its meaning. In the context of his conversion and first attempts at literacy, it may be that he is troubled by the inability to read the Bible on his own. However, his lessons seem to be secular in nature, as he describes the process: "Got me a Primer, and used to go to my English neighbors frequently for assistance in Reading, but went to no school." Once again, the vague nature of Occom's prose leaves it to the reader to discern whether he is gently rebuking the missionaries who held meetings but did not offer classes in reading and writing, or whether he is touting his own initiative to learn by any means available, or both. The "English neighbors" are not described as fellow Christians, so one might argue that the missionaries were not involved in the education of converted American

Indians. If this was true, then it makes one wonder about the missionaries' view of "praying Indians" and their perceived mental capacity to deepen their spirituality through studying the Bible.

Regardless of the missionaries' views of American Indians, Occom believed them to be his "Poor Brethren According to Flesh" who could be redeemed through literacy and religious conversion. His phrasing, which he would use also in his sermon on the occasion of Moses Paul's execution, is taken from the Bible. In Romans, the apostle Paul speaks of the Jews who have not accepted Christ as "my kinsmen according to the flesh." His four years under the tutelage of Mr. Wheelock included the study of English and Hebrew. Because of severe eyestrain and ill health, Occom "was obliged to quit [his] Studies." Turning the tables in his analysis of the teacher/student dynamic, the critic Bernd Peyer believes "it was primarily because of [Wheelock's] experience with Occom that [the former] decided to concentrate his teaching efforts on Native American students and founded the famous Indian Charity School" (210). It is an interesting angle for analyzing the dynamic of Wheelock and Occom, as the latter's time in England and Scotland, fund-raising for Wheelock's school, would demonstrate how Wheelock had begun to rely on, and even prey upon, the intellectual work and goodwill of Samson Occom. Once Occom returned from his European tour, his friendship with Wheelock abruptly ended.

Occom concludes his brief autobiography by developing his character and skills as a missionary after his ordination as a minister in 1759. He writes that he "endeavored to find some employ among the Indians." He taught in New London for two years and subsequently moved to Long Island and taught among the Montauk for 11 years. In direct contrast to his memories of the Mohegan reactions to missionaries, "the Indians were very desirous to have [him] keep a School amongst them." Occom further distinguishes himself from other missionaries by directly comparing the receptions of Mr. Horton and of him. Despite "a remarkable revival of religion among these Indians," they abandoned Mr. Horton and would have been lost were it not

for Occom's efforts to "reclaim them" in his "mild way."

Occom makes his motivations in taking up the position of teacher and missionary clear by noting that when he lived and taught among the Montauk, he "left it with them to give [him] what they pleased; and they took turns to provide food for [him]." The absence of any language about a salary or wages is telling, as the latter portion of the autobiography is given over to a direct and matter-of-fact address about the disparity in pay between him and a fellow white missionary without his years of experience or linguistic and cultural skills. Occom continued with this arrangement until his marriage and "needy circumstances" required him to take up the matter of his salary with Mr. Wheelock and Mr. Buell, who "were so good as to grant fifteen pound sterling." Despite the increase in salary, Occom's additional responsibilities and the births of several children necessitated an additional boost in salary. His tale now becomes extremely detailed as he provides an account of his various responsibilities, including acting as judge, visiting the sick, and entertaining visitors. He details his pedagogical methods for teaching literacy, to include "making an Alphabet on small bits of paper, and glu[ing] them on small chips of cedar" and requiring students to fetch particular letters as a means of learning their alphabet and recognizing alphabetical order.

Occom also details his extreme circumstances at home, including the "increase of [his] family fast." In all, Samson and Mary had 10 children. Occom "was obliged to contrive every way to support [his] family." He mentions his endeavors to supplement his income by raising corn, potatoes, and beans; keeping swine; binding books; catching fish or hunting for his family's meals; carving wooden spoons and ladles; stocking guns; and making pails and other items out of wood to sell. He briefly mentions an unlucky streak with horses: a young mare who slipped into quicksand and died, another who disappeared or was stolen, another who broke a leg, and another who died of distemper. All of these detailed accounts of his responsibilities, his attempts to augment his income, and his difficulty

with livestock and crops culminate in providing an emotional plea at the autobiography's conclusion. For all of his work, for all of his resourcefulness, for all of his skill as a bilingual and bicultural missionary, Occom has received "180 pounds for twelve years service, which they gave for one year's services in another mission."

Occom rightly guesses the reason for the gross disparity in salary and points directly at the inherent racism practiced among his fellow missionaries. He compares his plight to that of a "poor Indian boy" who explains that the reason he is beaten almost every day is "because I am an Indian."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Occom fails to provide any account of his early childhood before conversion to Christianity and remains silent on the topic of his family and his role as husband and father. Consider possible reasons for these silences in the narrative of his life.
2. How does Occom's image of himself compare with that constructed by BENJAMIN FRANKLIN in his *Autobiography*? What or who helped to fashion them into the men that they became?
3. How does Occom articulate an American Indian identity? How does it compare with the depictions of American Indians presented by THOMAS JEFFERSON in *Notes on the State of Virginia* or in the poetry of PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU? How does it compare with the fictional depictions of American Indians such as Chingachgook in JAMES FENIMORE COOPER's *Leatherstocking Tales*?

"A Sermon Preached by Samson Occom, Minister of the Gospel, and Missionary of the Indians; at the Execution of Moses Paul an Indian" (1772)

Moses Paul, an American Indian sailor from Martha's Vineyard, was sentenced to hang for the murder of a fellow American Indian, Moses Cook, in December 1771. The murder happened during a drunken brawl, and thus Occom's speech

addresses the issue of temperance. On the day of Moses Paul's execution, September 4, 1772, Samson Occom delivered a sermon, at Paul's request, on repenting one's sins and on abstaining from the evils of alcohol. The sermon was so popular that Thomas and Samuel Green published it on October 31, 1772, and it went through 19 editions (Peyer 213). With the publication of this execution sermon, Samson Occom became the first American Indian to publish in English.

Occom opens the printed version of the sermon, which he considerably lengthened for publication, with a preface that situates his voice and his message within an overabundant literary marketplace: "The world is already full of books," Occom writes, but he offers readers three "considerations that have induced [him] to be willing to suffer [his] broken hints to appear in the world." One of these three considerations is his plain style, a voice that "common people understand." Unlike "the most excellent writings of worthy and learned men," who write in a "very high and lofty stile," Occom's "talk" is accessible to little children, "poor Negroes," and his "poor kindred the Indians." His use of plain style also keeps him well within the parameters of Puritan culture, which emphasized the need to eliminate all sources of vanity in its writers and ministers as well as avoid any potential corruption of its readers through falseness, misinterpretation, or immoral reference. Occom's appeal to those figures on the outskirts of society, to include him, was quite radical for the period and imagines that Africans and fellow American Indians are just as worthy an audience. The biographer Harold Blodgett recognizes a coyness in Occom's preface, writing that he was "probably no more poorly educated than many a preacher of his day, and in eloquence, earnestness, and simplicity, superior to not a few" (36).

Occom includes two other "considerations" in his preface that might persuade readers to consider his published sermon. He considers his own ethnic identity to be a reason for readers to be induced to read: "because it is from an Indian." His next "consideration," that God "has used weak and unlikely instruments to bring about his great work," seems

cultures: Native and Anglo European? Look for evidence in the pieces to support your claim.

2. As a minister, Occom gains an authority denied to most American Indians in the 18th century. What are the conditions of his authority? In what ways does Occom use his authority? Is it exclusive to him, or does he extend it to others?
3. What is Occom's vision for future relations between Anglo Europeans and American Indians? What are the conditions under which they might live together harmoniously?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Blodgett, Harold. *Samson Occom*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 1935.
- Brooks, Joanna. *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Love, William DeLoss. *Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England*. 1899. Reprint, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- Murray, David. *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing, and Representation in North American Indian Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society*. Vol. 3. New Haven, Conn.: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1882.
- Peyer, Bernd. "Samson Occom: Mohegan Missionary and Writer of the 18th Century." *American Indian Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 208–217.
- Richardson, Leon B. *An Indian Preacher in England; Being Letters and Diaries Relating to the Mission of the Reverend Samson Occom and the Reverend Nathaniel Whitaker to Collect Funds in England for the Benefit of Eleazer Wheelock's Indian Charity School, from which Grew Dartmouth College*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College, 1933.
- Samson Occom or Occum (1723–1792). Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/occom.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- "Samson Occom: The Founding of Brothertown by Christian Indians." *Utica Morning Herald*, 14 February 1894.



THOMAS PAINE (1737–1809)

These are the times that try men's souls.

(*The American Crisis*)

Thomas Paine, a notable figure in America's history, lived a life full of both accomplishments and controversy. He was considered to be a strong influence on Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, and George Washington. He was a catalyst in the colonies' separation from England. He advocated promoting equal rights, creating a world peace organization, establishing a social security system, and abolishing slavery. His ideas have proven to be a forerunner to many of today's political policies and beliefs.

Paine was born Thomas Pain on January 29, 1737, in Thetford, England, to Joseph Pain, who was a Quaker staymaker (a maker of corsets, which are women's underclothes), and Frances Cocke Pain, who was an Anglican. Thomas Paine added the *e* to his name when he arrived in America (Fruchtman 56). Paine had one sister, Elizabeth, who had died at birth. The young Paine attended school until the age of 13, when he left his studies behind and became a staymaking apprentice. In 1753, Paine did attempt to join a merchant ship, but his father found him and prohibited him from boarding. Luckily for Paine, he did not remain on the ship, because it was reported that most of the seamen were killed. Several months later, Paine attempted once again to join a ship, and this time he was successful. In 1756, he served on the *King of Prussia*.

After his short attempt to work at sea, he returned to the trade of staymaking in 1757. In

1759 a master staymaker, Mr. Morris, loaned him money to set up his own shop in Sandwich. Paine met Mary Lambert, who was a maid for one of the town's shopkeepers. Their marriage was short-lived. Mary and their child died during childbirth in 1760. Mary's father worked as an officer for the Customs and Excise Service and persuaded Paine that he should study in this same field. At first Paine was unsure, but when his staymaking shop in Sandwich was having major financial problems, Paine decided to return to Thetford and study to be an excise officer.

Shortly after his first job collecting excise taxes in Alford, Lincolnshire, he was fired because he stamped a shipment without inspecting the contents. He decided to move to Norfolk and resume staymaking but still was not content. So, in 1766, he moved to London and tried his hand at teaching. He discovered that the salary was too low, so he wrote a letter of apology to the excise office, hoping to mend fences and return to his previous line of work. His request was accepted, and in 1768 he was appointed to another excise post in Lewes, Sussex. Because of his financial situation, Paine became a boarder of Samuel Ollive, who was a prominent tobacco shop owner. Shortly after Ollive's death in 1771, Paine married Ollive's daughter, Elizabeth, and took over the tobacco shop.

From 1772 to 1773 Paine abandoned his job and went to London to establish an excise tax col-

lectors' movement for higher salaries. He suffered a series of setbacks: The movement failed, he was fired for leaving his post, his tobacco shop became bankrupt, and his wife left him. In 1774, while in London, Paine met BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, who helped him emigrate to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Paine ventured into journalism.

He published an antislavery tract and became coeditor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. From February to September 1775, Paine worked as an editor and contributed poems and essays of his own. These early writings were already establishing the foundation for his later more political writings. For the magazine, Paine wrote articles about the latest inventions; later Paine himself would be the inventor of an iron bridge, smokeless candle, and several other items. In addition to covering the newest inventions, he wrote articles on social issues that interested him such as calling for the humane treatment of animals and urging equal civil rights (but not suffrage) for women. Paine was extremely vocal in his political beliefs. In one of his own articles, which he published on March 8, 1775, Paine advocated the abolition of slavery. In April 1775, he helped found one of the first abolitionist societies. He also criticized the colonists for complaining about Britain's enslaving them whereas many of the colonists kept their own slaves.

Through his association with the magazine, Paine met Benjamin Rush, who was a friend of JOHN ADAMS and other members of Congress. These individuals were already contemplating the idea of a free and independent America. Benjamin Rush was the person who suggested to Paine that he write a pamphlet on the subject of the colonies' separating from England. Rush was concerned with how the pamphlet would be accepted so he cautioned Paine to avoid the terms *independence* and *republicanism* (Freed 74). Paine disregarded the warning.

At first, no publisher would agree to set the pamphlet in print, but finally Robert Bell agreed. Paine wanted to title the pamphlet *Plain Truth*, but Rush suggested the name *Common Sense* (Foner 75). The pamphlet was published on January 10,

1776, and quickly became popular. *Common Sense* actually began with "an analysis of the principles of government and an attack on hereditary rule and the validity of monarchy, not with a discussion of America's relations with Britain" (Foner 75). Without *Common Sense* to sway public opinion, most historians now agree, the American rebellion would have failed from lack of popular support. THOMAS JEFFERSON reportedly was inspired by Paine's essay when writing the Declaration of Independence.

In 1777 Paine joined the army and served as an aide to one of George Washington's generals. While at Valley Forge, Paine wrote *The American Crisis*, which had a significant positive impact on the soldiers' morale. In April 1777 Congress appointed Paine as secretary of its foreign affairs committee, which included Indian affairs. In 1780 Paine wrote *Public Good*, a text that further explored the themes in *Common Sense*. *Public Good* explains Paine's disagreement with Virginia's claims to western land.

In 1787 Paine returned to Europe and spent the next four years traveling in Britain and France. While in France, Paine published the first part of *The Rights of Man* (1791), a doctrine banned by the English government and William Pitt, the leader of the Tories, because it supported the French Revolution. The book criticized the idea of monarchies and other European social institutions. Paine further argued for the ideal of a republic governed under a constitution with a bill of rights, elected leaders serving limited terms, and a judiciary accountable to the general public. He urged equal suffrage for all males.

Paine wrote and published part 2 of *The Rights of Man* in 1792. "Paine declared that governments exist to guard the natural rights of people unable to ensure their rights without that government's help. The four inalienable rights he named are Liberty, Property, Security, and Resistance to Oppression." Paine further argued that because in God's eyes all men are equal, every generation had the right to establish a political system that satisfied its needs. "Paine argued rationally that all men had an equal claim to political rights and that government must rest on the ultimate sovereignty of the people. He

expanded on this belief by explaining the ideal of a republic governed under a constitution with a bill of rights, elected leaders serving limited terms, and a judiciary accountable to the general public. He urged equal suffrage for all men (but not women). In part 2 Paine called for the end of social divisions by virtue of birth, rank, economics, or religion. He suggested specific social legislation for removing class inequities. He wanted *The Rights of Man* to inspire in England the same revolutionary thirst for independence from the monarchy as *Common Sense* had inspired in America. Pitt was furious with Paine, but Paine felt safe because he was in France. Nevertheless, Pitt had him tried in absentia and Paine was convicted of treason. Paine's native country, England, had banished him in December 1792.

Thought to be safe in France, Paine was still in the middle of political upheaval. France was also having some political problems in 1793 and Paine once again found himself in the middle of the controversy. In 1793, Paine was imprisoned in France for not endorsing the execution of Louis XVI. During his imprisonment, he wrote and distributed the first part of what was to become his most famous work at the time, the antichurch text *The Age of Reason*. Many people believed it to be an assault on organized religion. He was to be executed, but most biographers report that because of a mistake in marking prisoners' doors, Paine was spared. Finally, in 1794, thanks to James Madison, then the United States minister to France, Paine was released, poor and sickly, at the age of 57.

In 1795 Paine wrote his last pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*, which further developed ideas proposed in *The Rights of Man* as to how the institution of landownership separated the great majority of persons from their rightful natural inheritance and means of independent survival. The United States Social Security Administration recognizes *Agrarian Justice* as the first American proposal for an old-age pension (Kaye 211).

Paine remained in France until 1801, when he returned to America at the invitation from Thomas Jefferson. Paine was in poor health. Although he

was the inspiration for the Declaration of Independence, Americans treated him as an outcast in society. His old friend, James Monroe, gave Paine a place to live until he regained his strength. Once his health seemed to improve, he then moved to New York's Greenwich Village in 1808 into a first-floor boardinghouse room paid for by a friend. Paine died eight years later on June 8, 1809, at the age of 72. Some biographers thought Paine had arteriosclerosis of the brain, but this was never confirmed.

Paine's will, dated January 1809, requested that he be buried in the Quaker cemetery, but his request was denied. He was finally buried in a corner of the New Rochelle Farm. His will also stated that he wanted his gravestone to read only his name, age, and the words *Author of Common Sense*.

According to Craig Nelson, in 1809, William Cobbett, a journalist who in the past had openly criticized Paine, now began to admire his political ideas. Cobbett dug up Paine's bones and transported them to England for reburial under a grand patriotic monument that Cobbett intended to build. The British government refused to allow the construction of the monument. Paine was still considered an outlaw of the country. Cobbett died in 1835 before anything pertaining to the reburial could be settled. The location of Paine's remains has become a mystery. Some researchers such as Isaac Kramnick and Michael Foot suggest that the majority of them were lost at sea in the transporting from America, but this does not seem to be accurate because there are ship records that when Cobbett arrived in England, his luggage was inspected and it was recorded that he had transported the bones of Thomas Paine. Other researchers suggest that when Cobbett had died, his son took Paine's remains and possibly buried them in the family plot, and still others suggest that they were separated and still being kept by unknown individuals. The location of his remains is still unknown today.

Paine's statement in *The American Crisis* that "these are the times that try men's souls" also seems to be appropriate in describing his controversial life. Paine felt strongly about political issues and was able to relate his concerns to the common

man. His writing was accessible to the average individual, not just the elite. Because of his ability to explain his ideas to everyone, Paine was a man who had great influence on the founding of America as we know it today, yet at the time of his death it appeared that he had lost everything that was dear to him. Paine's biographer Jack Fruchtman characterizes Paine's legacy: "He wrote and said things that distinguished him as one of the great original thinkers, whose observations seem intensely relevant even today" (32). Paine, the man who was believed to suggest the *United States of America* as the name for the colonies, died without acknowledgment that was due him. In the 21st century there has been a resurgence of interest in the life of Paine, and maybe finally there will be some closure to the question of his remains and he will have the acknowledgment he deserved.

Cardaic Henry

Common Sense (1776)

Thomas Paine's most famous pamphlet is fully titled *Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America, on the Following Interesting Subjects: I. Of the Origins and Design of the Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution. II. On Monarchy and Hereditary Succession. III. Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs. IV. Of the Present Ability of America, with Some Miscellaneous Reflections*. It first appeared on January 9, 1776, and quickly went through 25 editions in that year alone, a publishing feat that speaks to the general interest Paine aroused in the Americans who were clamoring for independence from Great Britain. It was not as though other writers were not arguing for America to separate itself from Britain; rather, what made Paine's argument so singular, aside from his deliberate use of plain style to reach the widest reading public possible, was its basis in reason rather than in the religious realm of the Bible. Prior to Paine's pamphlet, Separatists and Puritans had made new homes for themselves in America precisely so they could

exercise religious freedoms and escape mandatory membership in the Church of England. Paine's very title, *Common Sense*, speaks to an audience on an entirely different ground, arguing for American independence from a secular perspective. This very basis for his argument would later become a point of public outrage against Paine, as he was considered both in Great Britain and in America as a threat to Christianity since his model for a harmonious society was not predicated on religious belief.

In his introduction, Paine creates a parallel between America's "cause as the cause of all mankind" and his anonymity as author of the pamphlet. Paine sees the crisis before America "not [as] local, but universal, and through which all the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected." Similarly, he refuses to identify himself as the pamphlet's author, arguing that "the Object for Attention is the Doctrine itself, not the Man." This rhetorical strategy, staged in the introductory pages of the pamphlet, sets the reader's expectations for the argument that will ensue and emphasizes the universal import of American independence. The concept of natural rights, for Paine, is larger than America and its struggles with Great Britain, just as it is larger than the writer himself, who remains anonymous in order to focus attention on the issue at hand rather than on its author.

In his first section, "Origin and Design of Governments in General," Paine wishes to separate society (produced by our wants) from government (produced by our wickedness). He offers a hypothetical situation, "a small number of persons settled in some sequestered part of the earth, unconnected with the rest," to illustrate the natural evolution of society and to provide readers with a "clear and just idea of the design and end of government" (6). One man alone, Paine argues, will be unable to survive in this new environment unless he forms bonds of "reciprocal blessings" with other immigrants, whose combined labor allows for the construction of houses and mitigates against the vulnerability of the individual to disease or other misfortune.

When the colony reaches a certain number, however, Paine describes the necessity for representative government rather than public gatherings in which all residents participate as they could do initially when their numbers were not so great. The presumption, Paine states, is that these representatives will have “the same concerns at stake which those have who appointed them [have]” (7). This form of government, in which representatives are elected, re-creates the image of the organically appearing society, for the electors “will establish a common interest with every part of the community, they will mutually and naturally support each other” (8). To this representative form of government, which Paine believes “the simple voice of nature and reason will say . . . is right,” he harshly contrasts England’s unwritten constitution, whose complexity makes it nearly impossible to discern “in which part the fault lies” (9).

Paine believes that the English constitution merely allows the absolute monarchy to continue, with only the pretext that the government contains some “republican materials.” Even though the constitution gives the commons the ability to check the king’s power, the king can exercise the same power over the commons, thus reinforcing the notion from the days of absolute monarchy that the king is wiser than any group of people (10). Paine concludes this first section by likening the Americans’ loyalty to the British constitution to a man’s fancying a prostitute: Such an individual is unfit to choose a wife. “Any prepossession in favor of a rotten constitution of government will disable us from discerning a good one” (12).

In the second section, which covers the topic of the monarchy and hereditary succession, Paine situates the origins of monarchies with the heathens, stating, “It was the most preposterous invention the Devil ever set foot on for the promotion of idolatry” (13). He cites the Holy Scriptures, specifically Gideon and Samuel, as expressly disapproving of government ruled by kings (14). Paine recalls how Gideon, after his successful campaign against the Midianites, not only refused the public outcry for him and his children to rule over the people as their

king, but also denied their right to create hereditary succession (14). Likewise, Samuel, when called upon to rule as king, prayed to God for guidance and even asked God to send signs in the forms of thunder and rain so that the populace might understand how God discountenanced their desire for a king (15–17). Just as he employs two tales of specific men who refused the title of king in the Old Testament, so, too, does Paine cite a specific monarch, William the Conqueror, to launch his argument about hereditary succession. Quite plainly, Paine labels William the Conqueror “a French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives.” William the Conqueror, Paine quips, is “in plain terms a very paltry rascally original” (20). Paine returns again to the Bible, noting, “A family of kings for ever hath no parallel in or out of scripture” (20). Indeed, with the notion of original sin passed down to all humanity from Adam’s fall, Paine notes, none can claim superiority over another (21). On a less religious and more practical note, Paine mentions that minors are able to gain access to the throne, as are those too increased in age to rule rightfully (21–22).

In the third and best-known section of *Common Sense*, in which he tackles “the present state of American affairs,” Paine prefaces his argument with a plea to the reader to maintain an open mind: “No other preliminaries to settle with the reader than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves” (24). He has not required such a precondition of his readers in previous sections, thus leading the reader to recognize the singular importance of this section; it is the heart of *Common Sense*. Paine immediately calls for war between America and Britain in the second paragraph, deeming the “volumes [that] have been written on the subject of the struggle” as “ineffectual” and “the period of debate . . . closed” (24–25). His tone is more strident, effective, and direct.

He justifies the call to arms and war by reference to the battle of Lexington, which took place

on April 19, 1775. He considers this battle, “the commencement of hostilities,” as a turning point, which rendered all previous “plans [and] proposals” as “useless now” (25). Paine deems it “right” to examine “on the principles of nature and common sense” what America stands to gain through independence and to lose through continued dependence on Britain (26). To address America’s losses as a colony of Britain, Paine examines the metaphor of “Mother England,” stating that even if America is the child who has “thrived upon milk,” it is just as preposterous to suggest that a child, even at the age of 20, should maintain the same diet as it is to suggest that America, who has been a colony for too long a time, should persist in its infantile and dependent state. As a child does, America has grown, and as a child who has grown up should, America should demand its independence. Following this metaphor further, Paine states that if “Britain is the parent country . . . then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their own families” (27). His reference to cannibalism stems from the various ways in which Britain figuratively feeds upon the American colonies as a source of raw materials, soldiers for its battles, and tax revenues for its coffers.

To disentangle the parent/child relationship between Britain and America further, Paine returns to his favorite whipping boy, William the Conqueror, noting that as the “first king of England of the present line” of monarchs, he was a Frenchman, “and half the peers of England are descendants from the same country.” Further, Americans themselves are not wholly British: “Not one third of the inhabitants, even of [Pennsylvania] are of English descent.” In addition to the fiction of common English blood uniting Britain and America, Paine notes the geographical distance between the two continents: “Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other, was never the design of Heaven.” Where these arguments regarding the fiction of unity between Britain and America are

not enough to convince his readers of the need for American independence, Paine lists the ways in which America is victimized by England. Great Britain’s foreign policy dictates America’s so that if England engages in a war, America is compelled to send troops and fight against “nations who otherwise seek our friendship and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint.” America’s foreign trade, Paine notes, is also determined by Britain’s foreign policies.

Paine’s final section calls for immediate action in the form of a military campaign against Great Britain in order to obtain independence. “The present time, likewise, is that peculiar time, which never happens to a nation but once, viz. the time of forming itself into a government” (55). Against anticipated arguments that Britain and its forces, particularly its naval power, significantly outnumber American forces, Paine argues that the geographical distance is to America’s advantage since Britain must travel overseas in order to refit and resupply its forces, that the absence of many seaports means America has less territory to protect, and that the military powers are based upon experiences of American colonists from the last war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Paine takes a logical approach to the subject of America’s independence from Great Britain, except in section 2, where he repeatedly cites the Bible as a source opposed to monarchies and the practice of hereditary succession. Consider the shift in his argument, and write your own version of section 2, in which you take a logical approach to these two political practices.
2. Compare Paine’s argument for natural rights with PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU’s depiction of them in his poem “On Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man.” Does Freneau’s characterization do justice to Paine’s prose? How do you reconcile the different genres (pamphlet and poem) to the manner in which the message of natural rights is presented?
3. Paine’s *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason* influenced both the American Revolution and

the French Revolution. Review the doctrines and list several similarities in his arguments.

The American Crisis (1776–1783)

The first installment of *The American Crisis* begins thus:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it *now* deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

These electrifying opening words effectively capture Thomas Paine's tenor in the pamphlets that he published serially throughout the American Revolution. Intended to rally the revolutionaries and bolster the morale of soldiers during periods of doubt and uncertainty, the 13 *Crisis* papers (one honoring each colony) stress the promise of America, assert the righteousness of the cause as well as its significance in world history, and insist on the certainty of victory despite the frequently dismal outlook on the battlefield. At times fiery, biting funny, and meticulously rational, Paine's rhetoric appeals to both the sentiments and the intellect of his countrymen. The pamphlets, which Paine composed in what he called "a passion of patriotism," were reprinted in newspapers across the country, cementing Paine's reputation as one of America's leading writers and as one of the most highly esteemed public figures of the revolution.

The first issue of *The Crisis* was published on December 19, 1776, in the *Pennsylvania Journal*. As was the case with following installments, the author donated all profits to the cause. In it, Paine argues in his characteristically clear and direct style that, despite the dire situation confronting the American forces, "no great deal is lost yet" (171). Paine assures his countrymen that there is no cause for fear, urging each individual to volunteer aid in support of the

cause (and not so subtly prodding lapsed militiamen to return to their units). In a stunning display of verbal dexterity, he contends that the obstacles facing the military actually work to the country's advantage, for "what we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly" (170), and that the challenges will bring out the best of the "manly and martial spirit" (173) in the soldiers and General Washington. The general himself must have agreed with this notion, for he commanded that this pamphlet be read to the troops on Christmas Eve 1776, shortly before the historic crossing of the Delaware—a victory that served as proof that American forces could in fact defeat the ruthless mercenaries hired by the British. Paine signed this and all further installments of *The Crisis* not with his name but with the title of his first pamphlet, *Common Sense*.

The second *Crisis*, published on January 13, 1777, was addressed "To Lord Howe," the commander in chief of British forces during the Revolution. The pamphlet was not, however, a personal appeal to the general, but rather a lampoon of his tactics and personal character. Paine published this paper in response to Howe's proclamation that all members of provisional congresses and commissions must cease and desist from "treasonable acts." In *The Crisis*, Paine ridicules this pronouncement, claiming that Howe does not possess the authority to make such a proclamation since America has already declared its independence. Paine explicitly states that his purpose in penning this pamphlet is "to expose the folly of your pretended authority as a commissioner; the wickedness of your cause in general; and the impossibility of your conquering us at any rate. On the part of the public, my intention is, to show them their true and solid interest; to encourage them to their own good, to remove the fears and falsities which bad men have spread, and weak men have encouraged; and to excite in all men a love for union, and a cheerfulness for duty" (192). He accomplishes these tasks by disparaging Howe's honor, attacking him for his mercilessness, and reiterating the idea that every challenge to the American side is in fact an opportunity for success.

This suggestion that obstacles actually present important possibilities for victory surfaces again in the third and fourth installments of *The Crisis*. In the third pamphlet, published on April 19, 1777 (exactly one year after the Battle of Lexington, which signaled the beginning of the conflict), Paine compels his readers to reflect on the course that the war has taken thus far and learn from the experiences, both positive and negative. He implores his fellow patriots to recall the arguments in support of independence in order to maintain their clarity of purpose. *Crisis IV*, published soon after the stinging defeats at Fort Ticonderoga and Brandywine, adopts a more austere tone, as Paine writes, “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it” (229). Paine also notes that Americans should take heart, for many British victories have revealed themselves to be catastrophic failures over time.

The year 1778 saw three installments of *The Crisis*. In the fourth issue, published on March 21, Paine mocks Howe, noting that although the general merits a monument for his infamy, it would have to differ from traditional memorials; ultimately, he suggests that Howe be preserved as the pharaohs were, but embalmed with tar and adorned with feathers. He then reasons that Howe’s conquests are trivial when compared with the vast expanse of America and further reassures his countrymen that the English army is in its last throes. Finally, he compares the republican project to that of Greece, arguing that America has far surpassed its predecessor in the scope of this new democracy.

The fifth pamphlet, published on October 20, is addressed “To the Earl of Carlisle, General Clinton, and William Eden, Esq., British Commissioners at New York,” who were sent to quell the chaos in the colonies. Congress responded that it would only consent to peace if Britain recognized America’s independence, but the king scoffed at this idea, replying that “farther concession is a joke” (261). Again, Paine indicates that the subsequent proclamations are “tedious and unmeaning” (262) and stresses that the revolutionaries do not seek

violence, but will retaliate if the king acts on his threats. Published only a month later on November 20, the fifth pamphlet is addressed “To the People of England,” whose lack of anger about the war Paine attributed to the deceptions of Parliament and the enormous distance between the countries, which makes the horrors of the conflict difficult to grasp. Appealing to the national honor and the pragmatism of English subjects, Paine urges the British public to entreat their government to end the war, as it is causing both financial and moral damage.

The eighth pamphlet was published in March 1780, five years after the beginning of the hostilities. Again addressing the people of England, Paine speaks about the “wanton cruelty” of the British in America (294) and asks the English to imagine how they would respond if the situation were reversed. He urges the British to liberate themselves from their insular prejudices and put an end to the war before any more damage is done to either nation.

On May 12, the British captured Charleston, South Carolina, issuing the Americans one of the worst defeats in the war. The Continental Army was already so bedraggled and lacking in provisions that the baron von Steuben had dubbed the American troops *sans-culottes* (no pants). In response, Paine contributed his entire life savings to the military and on June 9 published *Crisis IX*, an appeal to the states to support the federal government, warning of the financial penalties they would confront were they to become subjects of England once again. He argues that the United States will not be conquered piecemeal and that defeats such as this one only rouse more passion for the American cause. This pamphlet was followed by a supernumerary *Crisis* paper titled “The Extraordinary Crisis” and dated October 6, 1780, in which Paine defends the taxes being levied on the American public in support of the war. Since the rebellion was largely in response to British taxation, financing the war becomes a delicate issue. Printing more currency was often proposed as a quick solution, but, as Paine notes, this practice led to rampant inflation. Ultimately, Paine demonstrates through various calculations that the taxes in

America are far less than those paid by British subjects and argues that it is better to pay now in support of the Revolution than to lose the war and pay exorbitant taxes to the British Crown.

There is a large gap before the publication of the next *Crisis*, and the sea change that occurred in the intervening years is immediately clear in the 10th installment, published on March 5, 1782. Subtitled “On the King’s Speech,” it is a response to a speech the king made on November 27, 1781, just six weeks after General Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown, which effectively ended major combat. In this speech, however, the king hints at further aggression (and, indeed, the Treaty of Paris that solidified the peace would not be signed until 1783). Paine declares that the king’s words were “inquired after with a smile, read with a laugh, and dismissed with disdain” by the American people (323). The second part is addressed to the people of the United States, and it urges the government not to underestimate the costs of the war. Looking ahead, Paine argues for a strong central government in which “each state is to the United States what each individual is to the state he lives in” (341) for reasons of safety and national strength.

The last three *Crisis* papers confront an America at the close of war. The 11th edition, published on May 22, 1782, and entitled “On the Present State of News,” warns of Britain’s attempts to establish treaties with countries such as France without the participation of their allies. Paine advises the United States to reject any unilateral treaty proposed by Britain, because broken alliances would undermine the new nation’s standing abroad. Eight years after the initial battles at Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1783, Paine published *Crisis XII*, in which he casts doubt on America’s ability to forgive and work with Britain in the future. The final *Crisis* paper, aptly titled “Thoughts on the Peace, and the Probably Advantages Thereof,” declares, “The times that tried men’s souls’ are over—and the greatest and completest revolution the world ever knew gloriously and happily accomplished” (370). Despite this celebratory tone, Paine does express some concern over the future of America. He

warns that the nation must realize and hold true to its promise; the experiment of democracy is on display for the rest of the world, and “it would be a circumstance ever to be lamented and never to be forgotten, were a single blot, from any cause whatsoever, suffered to fall on a revolution, which to the end of time has contributed more to enlighten the world, and diffuse a spirit of freedom and liberality among mankind, than any human event (if this may be called one) that ever preceded it” (372).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *Common Sense* with *The American Crisis*. In both, Paine employs a clear, easily accessible writing style. What function does this “simple” language serve? What rhetorical strategies does Paine employ to attract others to his cause?
2. So much of *The American Crisis* is concerned with the project of independence that we frequently neglect to examine Paine’s imagination of the future. How would you describe the America and the Americans Paine envisions? To what extent was this vision realized?

Aimee Woznick

The Age of Reason (1794)

Paine’s *The Age of Reason* must be understood in its intellectual context. Historically, the period between the 1600s and 1800s was an intellectual revolution that provided the basic framework for modern man. By rejecting medieval theology as the final authority on matters, modern man now discovered that he was able to interpret the universe, the world, and himself through reason, science, and logical analysis. This “new rationalism” was widely considered by the 18th century to be the final key to the problems of mankind, and during these two centuries of intellectualism, the “rationalists,” finding in mathematics and science what they believed to be infallible methods for solving problems, accepted a mechanical interpretation of nature, which eventually led to the application of natural law to religion, society, and government.

Some effects of this intellectualism can be found in its application to religious ideas and purposes, since both religion and the concept of God were also altered and transformed. Some rationalists were skeptical of traditional religious views and instead established a new religion of reason: deism. To deists, the traditional views of God were contrary to other accepted attitudes concerning the freedom of man in an open and tolerant society. God was now simply the clock winder of the universe and, surprisingly, an impersonal force that was absent from micromanaging individual lives. The God who fashioned the Newtonian world machine, they said, would never “reveal” anything to man unless it was simple, clear, and logical. Since natural religion—that is, religion without revelation—had always been accepted as perfectly useful, revelation could add nothing to it. They, therefore, admitted that God had indeed created the universe, but after that, its immutable laws (laws that, by definition, excluded and rejected any concept of miracles) came into play, and those laws alone would be the focus of reason. It became useless and presumptuous to attempt to change these laws by prayer or by any other means. The deists accepted the moral and ethical teachings of Christ, but they refused to recognize the tenets of traditional Christianity, which they described as a mysterious and incomprehensible body of revelation. To them, the miracles associated with the divinity of Christ were in direct conflict with reason and established scientific law.

The attitudes of deism can be found most clearly among the writings of the early American founders—specifically in Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*. Paine’s book is divided into two parts. The first consists of an overview of deism and its relation to reason, and the second consists of the application of reason to critiques of both the Old and the New Testaments. (Criticism of traditional religious belief is provided throughout both parts.) Paine writes in the first few pages:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious

duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy. But, lest it should be supposed that I believe many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them. I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit. . . . Each of those churches shows certain books, which they call *revelation*, or the Word of God. Each of those churches accuses the other of unbelief; and, for my own part, I disbelieve them all.

It is difficult to overemphasize just how connected these religious attitudes of deism were to the conception of a free individual in an open society. Since the God of old refrained from micromanaging human affairs, man himself was left to his own rational devices. Divine commands handed down from revelation were rejected, and instead the moral and ethical teachings of Christ were understood and followed in a naturalistic, as opposed to supernaturalistic, context. This naturalism was connected at that time to the radical idea of self-government, as opposed to government by an absolute ruler (Durant 613–615).

Soon after I had published the pamphlet, *Common Sense*, in America, I saw the exceeding probability that a Revolution in the System of Government, would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion. The adulterous connection of church and state, . . . [entailed that] those subjects could not be brought fairly and openly before the world: but that whenever this should be done, a revolution in the system of religion would follow. (Paine 667)

But political considerations aside, Paine's criticisms of revealed religion in general (and of Christianity in particular) are the primary focus of *The Age of Reason*. In addition to Paine's claim that all revealed religions are promoted through the suspicious modes of "mystery, miracle, and prophecy" (711), his formal criticisms fall into several general categories: (1) attacks on the concept of revelation; (2) claims that Christianity either is founded on, or has adapted to, the earlier "heathen mythologies"; (3) claims about the atrocities committed in God's name in the Old Testament; and (4) claims about the irrationality of miracles and doubts about authorship claimed in both the Old and the New Testaments. It will be convenient to take each of these categories in turn.

For one, Paine draws an important distinction between *revelation* and *hearsay*:

Revelation, when applied to religion, means something communicated *immediately* from God to man. . . . But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only. . . . It is revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other; and consequently, they are not obliged to believe it. . . . It cannot be incumbent upon me to believe it in the same manner, for it was not a revelation made to *me*, and I have only his word for it that it was made to *him*. (667–668)

That is, hearsay can be objectively evaluated—and this is very different from the subjective nature of revelation. For hearsay, Paine will offer reasons for why this or that claim in the New Testament ought to be believed. But he also understands that for any claimed case of revelation, reason simply cannot be applied. He is also critical of the way in which such "revelations" were *arranged* into the completed forms we see today. Paine writes, "they decided by *vote* which of the books, out of the collection they had made, should be the WORD OF GOD, and which should not. . . . Had they voted

otherwise, all the people, since calling themselves Christians, had believed otherwise; for the belief of the one comes from the vote of another" (675).

Second, Paine simply appeals to historical explanations:

It is . . . not difficult to account for the credit that was given to the story of Jesus Christ being the Son of God. . . . It was not a new thing at that time to believe a man to have been celestially begotten: the intercourse of gods with women was then a matter of familiar opinion. (669)

Third, Paine believes that both the Old and the New Testaments, with their stories of Creation, the Fall, and sacrifice by innocent proxy, are both morally atrocious and unjust. In addition to calling the claim that "God *visits the sins of the fathers upon the children*" morally unjust, Paine is critical of further examples of bloodshed in the Old Testament by claiming it to be "scarcely any thing but a history of the grossest vices, and a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales" (668, 680).

Consider also his rejection of the assumptions concerning sacrifice through crucifixion:

If I owe a person money and cannot pay him, and he threatens to put me in prison, another person can take the debt upon himself and pay it for me. But if I have committed a crime, every circumstance of the case has changed. Moral justice cannot take the innocent for the guilty, even if the innocent would offer itself. . . . It is then no longer justice. It is indiscriminate revenge. (Paine 685)

Finally, Paine offers two sets of criticisms. The first concerns the irrationality of miracles:

Suppose, I were to say, that when I sat down to write this book, a hand presented itself in the air, took up the pen, and wrote every word that is herein written; would any body believe me? certainly they would not. Would they believe me a whit the more if the thing had been a

- Fruchtman, Jack. *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994.
- Kaye, Harvey J. *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2005.
- . *Thomas Paine: Firebrand of Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Larkin, Edward. *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- McCartin, Brian. *Thomas Paine: Common Sense and Revolutionary Pamphleteering*. New York: Power Plus Books, 2002.
- Nelson, Craig. *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations*. New York: Viking, 2006.
- Nicolson, Harold George. *The Age of Reason and the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Doubleday, 1961.
- Paine, Thomas. "The Age of Reason." In *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- . "The American Crisis." In *The Writings of Thomas Paine*. Edited by Moncure Daniel Conway. New York: Burt Franklin, 1962.
- Snyder, Louis L. *The Age of Reason*. New York: Van Nostrand, 1955.
- Thomas Paine National Historical Association. Available online. URL: <http://www.thomaspaine.org/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Thomas Paine. Available online. URL: <http://www.ushistory.org/PAINE/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Vickers, Vikki J. "My Pen and My Soul Have Ever Gone Together": *Thomas Paine and the American Revolution*. New York: Routledge, 2006.



MARY WHITE ROWLANDSON

(1637–1711)

I have been in the midst of these roaring lions and savage bears.

(Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson)

Born in Somerset, England, to John White and Joan West, Mary White and her nine siblings immigrated to the Bay Colony in 1639. Although they first lived in Salem, in 1653 the Whites were among the earliest Puritans to settle in Lancaster, Massachusetts, which was then a frontier town (around 35 miles west of Boston). The land comprising Lancaster had been purchased 10 years prior from the Nashaways by a “Boston trader” (Blevins Faery 25). Mary must have enjoyed a relatively privileged childhood since her father was Lancaster’s wealthiest original landowner (Burnham 14). Scholars attribute her uncommon degree of literacy, which afforded her the necessary skills to pen her own remarkable narrative of captivity and deliverance, to her class status and its access to education.

Around 1656, Mary White married Joseph Rowlandson, a prominent Puritan minister of Lancaster. Joseph had been the only graduate in his class at Harvard in 1652; he began his ministry in Lancaster two years later, in 1654 (Blevins Faery 26). Their first child, a daughter named Mary, was born in 1658, but died at the age of three. The Rowlandsons had three other children: Joseph (1662), another Mary (1665), and Sarah (1669).

Because of its remoteness, Lancaster was a likely target for attacks. In June 1675 King Philip’s War broke out. The cause was the sudden death of Metacom’s older brother, who Metacom suspected was poisoned by English settlers, and a number of

other grievances, chief among them the continual encroachment of English settlers into Wampanoag territory. Further, the death of a “praying Indian” (Christianized Indian) named *John Sassamon* sparked retaliatory actions on both sides: The English executed three Wampanoag, and Metacom attacked the village of Swansea. As sachem of the Wampanoag, Metacom rallied members of his own tribe, as well as soliciting the aid of the Nipmuc and Narragansett to form an alliance against the English. Because his sister-in-law, Weetamoo, was squaw sachem of the Narragansett, it was easy to unify these two tribes against a common enemy. Rumors of a potential attack on Lancaster spurred Joseph Rowlandson to travel to Boston to seek additional support. During his absence, Mary Rowlandson and the couple’s three children were taken captive.

On February 10, 1676, the town of Lancaster was attacked. Their garrison house, which was meant to be a fortress against the “vast and howling wilderness,” housed Rowlandson’s immediate family, plus two of Mary’s sisters and their families. Of the 37 people living in the Rowlandson home, 24 were taken captive. Rowlandson and her youngest, Sarah, were separated from her elder children, Joseph and Mary. Although Sarah died of wounds she received while in captivity, Rowlandson was rescued on May 2, 1676. A few weeks later, son and daughter were reunited with their family. Historians conjecture

that her captivity was due to the fact that her husband was a prominent figure in the community, with the result that she would fetch a high ransom. Indeed, her ransom was £20. John Hoar of Concord secured Mary's release on May 2; her total time in captivity was 82 days.

After her return, Rowlandson's family moved to Boston and eventually settled in the town of Wethersfield in Connecticut. In 1678, just six years after her captivity, her husband, Joseph, died suddenly. The following year, Rowlandson married Captain Samuel Talcott, a leader in the local community, who was also named as one of the those appointed to administer her late husband's estate (Greene 28). Talcott was born into an armigerous family, meaning that they were of a class entitled to bear arms, and was a graduate of Harvard. Nevertheless, as his father and stepfather were tradesmen by profession, it is clear that Talcott gained social status when marrying Rowlandson. Samuel Talcott was a member of the War Council during King Philip's War (June 1675–1678). His first wife, Hannah Holyoke, died in February of either 1677 or 1678 and left behind six sons and two daughters (Greene 29).

Rowlandson's *Narrative* of her captivity was published in 1682, with an introduction by the Reverend Increase Mather, an influential family friend.

Talcott died in 1691, and his will bequeaths to his "dear and Loveing wife Mary, the sum of ten pounds per annum; & the use of one of the lower room in my dwelling house, which she shall choose, with convenient cellaring & use of an oven or ovens in the same, as she shall have need, with sutable land for a garden, as she shall desire, & the keeping of one cow, which she shall choose out of my cows to be at her owne dispose" (reported in Greene 29).

Mary's son, Joseph, was the center of a sensational case in the colonial period involving the disappearance of his brother-in-law, Nathaniel Wilson. Joseph's wife, Hannah Wilson, was part of an upper-class family from Boston. Nathaniel made an even better match. He wed Susannah Jones, whose father, William Jones, was the deputy-governor of

Connecticut, and whose grandfather, Theophilus Eaton, was the governor of New Haven Colony (Greene 31). Two years into their marriage, however, Nathaniel disappeared, and it was rumored that he had died. Just when the courts were willing to consider evidence of his death, however, news arrived that he had appeared in court in 1707, declaring that Joseph Rowlandson, along with another man named, David Jesse, had gotten Nathaniel drunk, put him on a boat sailing for Virginia, and sold him as a servant (Greene 32). Joseph was arrested. Scholars have used court records of the trial to determine both the birth and the death of Mary Rowlandson, as she served as a guarantor that her son would appear in court.

On January 5, 1711, at the age of 73, Mary White Rowlandson Talcott died. Her legacy continues, as her captivity narrative has remained in print since its first edition in 1682. Rowlandson's narrative was widely read and recommended by some of the most prominent and learned men of New England: Samuel Sewall, Increase Mather, COTTON MATHER, and Thomas Prince (Derounian-Stodola 39). Increase Mather was already personally acquainted with the circumstances of Rowlandson's captivity since her first husband had sought out the minister's assistance in securing the release of his wife (Derounian 241).

***The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD,
Together with the Faithfulness of His
Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative
of the Captivity and Restoration of
Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)***

As Kathryn Derounian-Stodola notes, Rowlandson's narrative went through four editions in 1682, and "its estimated minimum sales of over 1,000 copies made it one of the earliest American bestsellers" (36–37). Rowlandson's narrative of her three-month captivity is sandwiched between an introduction, signed *per amicum* but most likely written by Increase Mather, and an appendix containing her first husband, Joseph Rowlandson's, final sermon, delivered on November 21, 1673, in

Wethersfield, Connecticut, just three days prior to his death. It was customary for a parish to publish the final sermon of their minister upon his passing. John Woodbridge, Jr., who succeeded Joseph Rowlandson in his position in Wethersfield, is thought to be responsible for collecting Rowlandson's final sermon and for sending it, along with Mary's captivity narrative, to the printer in Boston. (The Woodbridge family, as noted in the entry on ANNE BRADSTREET, was also instrumental in the publication of her first book of poetry.)

Mather opens the "Preface to the Reader" with a recitation of the military events preceding Rowlandson's capture. After English victories over the Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc, the War Council agreed not to pursue the "Heathen[s]"; this decision, Mather opines, "soon proved dismal." Removed from their territory and with dwindling supplies, the Narragansett "fell with a mighty force and fury upon Lancaster." What follows for Mather "is a Narrative of the wonderfully awful, wise, holy, powerful, and gracious providence of God." He likens Rowlandson's trials to those depicted in the Bible for Joseph, David, and Daniel. In Genesis, God saves Joseph from prison; in Samuel I, David is saved from Goliath; and in Daniel, he is saved from a den of lions. Thus, Rowlandson's rescue fits as another story in the book of divine providence from which Puritans can read of "God's dealing with her." Because the Puritans took a Platonic notion of the world where all observable events were interpreted as signs of God's judgment, Increase Mather naturally views Mary Rowlandson's captivity as such an event.

Mather's framing of Rowlandson's tale as an exemplary narrative laden with religious and communal portent deserves further comment. First, Mather's stamp of approval helps to dissipate aspersions on the unorthodox situation her narrative creates by thrusting a female member of the Puritan community into the public eye. In Puritan culture, women were to be modest; that Rowlandson penned her own narrative, and that her narrative is about herself, did, undoubtedly, place her outside the bounds of acceptable female conduct. Mather's endorsement of her as author and as the subject

of her narrative works assiduously to squelch any thoughts of improper female behavior on Rowlandson's part. Second, Mather characterizes Rowlandson's narrative less an autobiography and more a form of testimony where a faithful member of the community narrates events that illuminate divine Providence. In this manner, Rowlandson's captivity is less about her and more about the Puritan community in general; less about the afflictions suffered by one person, and more a "dispensation of publick note and of Universal concernment."

Finally, Mather casts the story of Rowlandson's capture and release as a moral tale whose message warrants multiple readings by members of the faithful community of Puritans. He closes his preface in the following manner: "Reader, if thou gettest no good by such Declaration as this, the fault must needs be thine own. Read, therefore, peruse, ponder, and from hence lay up something from the experience of another, against thine own turn comes: that so thou also through patience and consolation of the Scripture mayest have hope."

Rowlandson's narrative is structured by "removes," or the geographical locations where she and her captors struck camp temporarily before continuing their journey. There are 20 removes in total, and scholars who have tracked her descriptions of various locations—as well as the comings and goings of certain members of the Narragansett tribe—have estimated that she traveled around 150 miles in the span of 83 days (Leach 353).

In her opening scene of the attack on her house and on the town of Lancaster in general, Rowlandson includes gruesome details of human carnage: people knocked on the head, "stript naked" with their bowels split open; witnessing firsthand the deaths of her brother-in-law, John Divoll, and her eldest sister; a bullet that passes through her side and mortally wounds her daughter, Sarah, whom she is holding in her arms; and her house burning to the ground. She characterizes her attackers as "merciless Heathen" "hell-hounds" and "ravenous Beasts." This depiction of American Indians, however, will shift during her captivity as Rowlandson becomes acquainted with people who treat her nicely and extend unexpected courtesies to her.

Rowlandson's shifting depiction of American Indians has been a subject of much discussion and debate among scholars. Although she shows a marked dislike for neophytes (Christianized Indians), whom she refers to as "praying Indians," she appears to develop a friendship with Metacom, King Philip. Two "Praying Indians," Tom and Peter, who were converted members of the Nipmuc, mediated between the English and the Narragansett for Rowlandson's release. Despite their crucial role in liberating her, Rowlandson paints all "praying Indians" with the same brush, remarking on one person in particular, who liked to "wear a string about his neck, strung with Christian Fingers." And yet, Rowlandson's narrative contains numerous examples of large and small acts of kindness. There are people who give her the last of their food and go without so that she can eat. There are people who invite her to live in their wigwam when she fights with her mistress. Rowlandson details how "the squaw laid a mat under me, and a good rug over me; the first time I had any such kindness shewed me."

Among some of the more significant courtesies extended to her in captivity are her reunions with her son, Joseph, and her surviving daughter, Mary, and her possession of a Bible. Soon after the death of Sarah, Joseph's mistress takes him to see his mother while his master leaves for an assault on the village of Medfield. Rather than recognize the kindness of Joseph's mistress in arranging a meeting between her son and her, however, Rowlandson attributes this act to God. Similarly, she writes, "I cannot but take notice of the wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible. One of the Indians that came from Medfield fight and had brought some plunder; came to me, and asked me, if I would have a Bible." Although she is a captive and thus a pawn among the Wampanoag, Narragansett, and English, Rowlandson retains much of the class status into which she was born. The exceptionality of her status among the Puritans continues even while she is a captive. Rowlandson developed a friendship with Metacom, King Philip, himself. Her master and mistress during her captivity were Quinapin, the Narragansett sachem, and Weetamoo,

the Wampanoag squaw sachem. Weetamoo was the widow of Metacom's deceased brother, Wamsutta. It is from King Philip's own mouth that Rowlandson learns of her impending release.

Unlike slaves or indentured servants in Puritan culture, Rowlandson as captive of the Narragansett receives payment for her labor. When she makes shirts, hats, stockings, aprons, and socks for her master, mistress, and other tribesmen, she receives food and money as compensation. She attempts to hand over her payment to her master, "but he bade me keep it: and with it I bought a piece of Horseflesh." As an illustration of how common a practice it was for Rowlandson to receive compensation for her labors, she tells in the ninth remove of "a sorry Indian, who spake to me to make him a shirt, when I had done it, he would pay me nothing." Rowlandson hounds him until he agrees to give her a knife if she makes another shirt for his papoose. These details of exchange are important, as they indicate the social position Rowlandson held while captive. Had she been viewed as a slave or a mere piece of property, it is doubtful that she would continue to receive food and other forms of payment for her services.

Another subject commonly discussed by scholars as a sign of Rowlandson's gradual acculturation into Native society is her changing palate for indigenous foods. At first, she writes, "I hardly ate any thing . . . 'twas very hard to get down their filthy trash." But by her third week in captivity, she begins to find a Native diet "pleasant and savoury." Contemporary readers might blanch at her professed taste for horse liver, bear, a fawn taken from the womb of a slain deer, boiled horse hoof, and horse entrails. Indeed, she steals the horse hoof from a captive English child who is having difficulty chewing it.

Rather than depict Rowlandson's life after her return, the narrative concludes with a list of five passages of providence that are meant to speak more generally to the contentious relationship between the American Indians and the English settlers, and God's favor for the one group over the other. The first "remarkable passage of providence" is a repetition of Mather's preface in which he writes that the

- Faery, Rebecca Blevins. *Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race, and Sex in the Shaping of an American Nation*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.
- Greene, David L. "New Light on Mary Rowlandson." *Early American Literature* 20 (1985): 24–38.
- Lavender, Catherine. Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)." Available online. URL: <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rowlandson.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Leach, David Edward. "The 'Whens' of Mary Rowlandson's Captivity." *New England Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1961): 352–363.
- Mary Rowlandson. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/rowlandson.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Namias, June. *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- Sayre, Gordon M., ed. *American Captivity Narratives: Olaudah Equiano, Mary Rowlandson, and Others*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Stevens, Laura M. *The Poor Indians: British Missionaries, Native Americans, and Colonial Sensibility*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.



SUSANNA HASWELL ROWSON

(1762–1824)

A history which would tend to prove that retribution treads upon the heels of vice, and that, though not always apparent, yet even in the midst of splendor and prosperity, conscience stings the guilty.

(The Trials of the Human Heart)

Born on February 5, 1762, Susanna Haswell was the daughter of Susanna Musgrave Haswell and the British naval officer William Haswell. The two had married at the parish church of St. Thomas a Becket in Portsmouth, England, on March 3, 1761. Although Susanna Musgrave Haswell became ill only a few months after marriage, she was able to give birth to her only child. She died 10 days after childbirth, and parish records indicate that William buried his wife on February 5, 1762, and baptized his daughter a mere 10 days later. After his wife's death, William contracted with a nurse to look after Susanna as he departed for Massachusetts to work as a customs collector for the Royal Navy. Three years later, in 1765, William married his second wife, Rachel Woodward, in the port town of Hull, Massachusetts, at the entrance of Boston Harbor. In 1766, William returned to Portsmouth to retrieve five-year-old Susanna and her nurse. The three returned to Hull to join Haswell's new wife. In her autobiographical work *Rebecca*, Haswell describes her stepmother in the fictionalized figure of Mrs. Littleton. This less than matronly character professed "sentiments that are narrow and illiberal" as well as a "a kind of worldly knowledge which rendered her suspicious of the integrity of every human being" (9, reported in Parker 4). Although Rachel Haswell bore two sons, Robert and William, Jr., Susanna Haswell makes no mention of young or teenage boys in her

fiction, so it is difficult to determine through her writing how she might have felt toward them.

What does appear quite prominently in Haswell's fiction, however, is an event that held substantial meaning for her and her family—the American Revolution. With the outbreak of the war, there were growing pressures for the Haswells to declare their allegiances. As the biographer Patricia Parker argues, this was no easy matter for William Haswell. He and his daughter were born in England, and he held a position with the Royal Navy; his second wife was American, as were his two young sons. Further, the family owned property in Massachusetts and had extended family residing in neighboring towns. In the hope of a compromise, William declared himself a neutral figure, neither a Whig nor a Tory. Given their geographical proximity to Boston Harbor, the Haswells witnessed many of the early signs of impending war, such as the destruction of a British schooner off the coast of Hog Island (Parker 6). Even more pressing and dramatic a scene played itself out within their very home as the Haswells tried unsuccessfully to tend to a wounded British soldier, who died within hours of his arrival. Susanna assisted her father in burying the soldier in their backyard.

Soon after William Haswell requested to return to England, the family was taken prisoner. They were held from October 28, 1775, to December 5, 1777, in a small home in the town of Hingham.

They were then moved by order of the Massachusetts General Court farther inland to Abington. Rachel's health, which had been failing during their imprisonment in Hingham, took a turn for the worse during the winter spent in Abington. Susanna's father also took ill and it was up to the eldest child, then 15, to gather firewood and keep the family warm during the brutal winter. In May 1778, William successfully petitioned the legislature for permission to leave for Nova Scotia in the hope of being exchanged with other prisoners. The Haswells were traded with the American captain of the *Rattlesnake* and recuperated in Hull-upon-Humber before moving to London.

Although biographers are without specific details of Susanna's life while her family lived in London, most believe that she became a governess (Parker 10; Smiley v). Her father's physical and psychological deterioration during their time of imprisonment rendered him unfit to continue his position with the Royal Navy. With the birth of a third son soon after the family settled in London, it became readily apparent that Susanna, then 16, would need to seek employment, if not to support the family, then at least to lessen her burden on them. In February 1786, William Haswell, along with other immigrants who had suffered similar fates in America, was granted compensation for his financial losses. He also was provided with a pension for his navy service, and this income enabled him to support his family once again.

In that same year, 1786, Susanna met and married William Rowson, a hardware merchant who also occasionally played trumpet, sang, and acted on stage. Parker seems to insinuate, through a reading of some of Rowson's writings, that her father forced the marriage and that it was loveless from the very beginning. Whatever the nature of their union, it is quite likely that her own work as a lyricist for Vauxhall may have been the occasion for their original meeting (Parker 10). Just as she had provided financially for her family before marriage, so she continued to provide for herself and her husband for the duration of their less-than-perfect union. Rowson never had any children with her

husband, but she did raise his illegitimate son. Her career in the theater seems to have been the family's main source of income, and, given the mobile status of the theater, they must have moved quite often in accordance with her employment.

A good indication of Rowson's industrious nature can be seen in the list of her contemporaneous accomplishments. Because many of the smaller troupes of actors did not have casts large enough for all of the roles demanded in any given play, and because they typically staged new plays every night or every other night, Susanna was required to learn lines for up to 20 parts at a time (Parker 12). In 1786, the same year that she married, she published her first novel, *Victoria*. She quickly followed with two additional books, *The Inquisitor* (which was a collection of tales) and *Poems of Various Subjects*. Her knowledge of the theater was reproduced in a poem entitled *A Trip to Parnassus; or, the Judgment of Apollo on Dramatic Authors and Performers*. The following year, 1789, she anonymously published *The Test of Honour*. In 1791, she wrote *Mentoria* and *Charlotte*; the latter made her famous. It became a best seller in America. All of these publications occurred at a time when she was working primarily as an actress.

Although *Charlotte* was a success, Rowson did not reap the benefit of her pen. Because publishers did not pay women authors in accordance with the numbers of copies of their books sold, Rowson did not gain the large financial reward best sellers provide for contemporary authors. Joined by her sister-in-law, Charlotte, Susanna and her husband left for Edinburgh. In 1793, having failed to make a success on the English stage, the three eagerly signed on with Thomas Wignell and sailed on the *George Barclay* for Philadelphia. The outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia, which the author CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN suffered from and wrote about in his novel *Arthur Mervyn*, delayed the opening of Wignell's New Theater. After appearing in Hannah Cowley's *Who's the Dupe?*, which opened in Annapolis, Susanna embarked on a grueling career in American theater, beginning in January 1794. Her biographer Parker calculates that Rowson played 35 roles

in the first four-month season of the New Theater and 22 roles in the second (15). Wignell's partner at the New Theater, Alexander Reinagle, was also a musician and a collaborator with Rowson, who composed lyrics to his songs. She also began writing her first American plays: *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) and *The Volunteers* (1795). Despite her successful work as a lyricist and supporting actress for the New Theater, the Rowsons left Philadelphia for Boston in September 1796. William had been crossed off the list of actors and was quickly replaced when he proved too inept to work as a prompter.

When they arrived in Boston, Susanna was reunited with her two half brothers. Through their correspondence, Susanna learned that both brothers had pursued careers at sea. She also gained information about and employment from the Boston Federal Street Theatre, managed by John Williamson. Susanna continued writing songs, acting, and producing. Her next dramatic production was called *Americans in England*. The publication of her next book, *Reuben and Rachel*, would determine her next career move as the head of a boarding school.

The financial and political difficulties of the Federal Street Theater caused the manager, John Williamson, to leave for North Carolina, and Rowson, at the age of 35, to leave the stage and embark on a new career. In November 1797, she opened Mrs. Rowson's Young Ladies' Academy on the same street as the Theater, Federal Street. The school would have several locations during her 25 years as headmistress. In 1800, she moved the academy to Medford, a town northwest of Boston that provided a community of moneyed residents whose daughters became pupils at Rowson's school. Among her students were the daughters of Governor Claiborne of South Carolina and the daughters of New England's finest families (Parker 20, 21). Before returning to Boston, Rowson located her academy for four years (1803–07) in Newton, where she solicited the aid of her sister-in-law, Mary Cordis Haswell. When Mary learned that her husband, Susanna's brother Robert, had been lost at sea, she and her two baby girls took up permanent residence with Susanna. During that time, she

published *An Abridgment of Universal Geography*, a textbook that perhaps reflected her own family's engagement with the sea. While living at what would be her final residence, the academy's address on Hollis Street in Boston, Rowson wrote and published most of her textbooks: *A Present for Young Ladies* (1811), *Exercises in History, Chronology, and Biography* (1822), and *Biblical Dialogues* (1822).

Because of financial problems, and the alcoholism of her husband, Rowson's final years were not happy ones. Her husband accrued a massive debt and took out a mortgage on their Hollis Street home (the site of her academy and her residence). Parker reports that he was prone to humiliate her publicly, in front of her pupils and colleagues (23). Her worry over money may have been the reason why, despite a lingering illness, she continued to teach at the academy and publish works of fiction and instruction. She died on March 2, 1824, and was buried in the vault of her close friend, Gotlieb Graupner, in St. Matthew's Church in Boston. A mere five months after her death, William Rowson married a woman from Pennsylvania named Hannah Smith.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jane Smiley, in her introduction to the 2004 reprinting of *Charlotte Temple*, situates Rowson's most influential work within an 18th-century literary convention that contemporary critics dismissively cast as "melodramas of beset manhood" (xiii). Smiley notes how the subject of female vulnerability and exploitation was taken up by most of England's respected and renowned novelists, including Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*, and Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*. These authors tackled subjects like rape, incest, illegitimacy, false marriage, seduction, and child abandonment; Rowson's "tale of truth," by focusing on the ruin of its titular character, was very much in keeping with the literary trend of the time.

Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth (1791)

First published in England in 1791 and later in America in 1794, *Charlotte* (subsequently entitled

Charlotte Temple) became a best seller and overshadowed the publication of the rest of Rowson's works. Because of the novel's subtitle, *A Tale of Truth*, readers from the 18th century to the present have been searching for the historical identity of its main characters: Charlotte Temple and John Montraville. Rowson's own reference to her text by its subtitle and not by its genre, a novel, may have helped to foster this interpretation of the work as based on the real-life account of a young woman's seduction and betrayal.

Charlotte Temple begins with a brief encounter between the novel's two main characters and future lovers: Charlotte Temple and John Montraville. Although no words are exchanged between the two, a future meeting seems inevitable as Montraville presses a love letter for Charlotte into the hands of her corrupted and corrupting French teacher, Mademoiselle La Rue. Interestingly, Montraville also makes a present of five guineas to Charlotte's companion, "who promised she would endeavour to bring her young charge into the field again the next evening" (39). Thus, at the close of the first chapter, Rowson creates a correlation between money and corruption.

This connection will carry into the rest of the novel and appears immediately in the following chapter, which reviews the past history of Charlotte's mother and her family. When Lucy, Charlotte's mother, was younger, she was sought out as payment or compensation for the debt her father incurred with his son's dear friend, Mr. Lewis. When Mr. Lewis professes his love for her, Lucy, as a dutiful daughter, immediately reports the news to her parents and "cheerfully submit[s] [herself] to [their] direction" (45). Lucy's father, Mr. Eldridge, soon discovers that Lewis does not have honorable intentions toward Lucy but intends to abuse her as recompense for the money lent to her father. In rapid succession, Lewis has the father removed to debtor's prison; mortally wounds the son, his supposed friend; and indirectly causes the mother's death by sending her into a spiral of despair and mourning over her lost son. Reading this chain of events backward, the reader can easily identify Mr.

Lewis's connection between money and corruption as the source of the family's demise.

Unlike the chaste and pure Lucy, whose virtue is rewarded by a loving and respectful marriage to Temple, Temple's own sisters and his stepmother readily sacrifice their honor on the altar of class position. Rowson describes the unseemly marriages of Temple's sisters in the following manner: "[They] legally prostituted to old, decrepit men, whose titles gave them consequence in the eyes of the world, and whose affluence rendered them splendidly miserable" (40). Rowson describes the sisters as having forfeited happiness and love for the empty and unfulfilling allure of money and status. Temple himself will not prove immune to a marriage prospect that would increase his pocket but empty his heart. In the figure of Miss Weatherby, Temple encounters the moral and social equivalent of "the old decrepit men" who married his sisters. Although blessed with beauty and fortune, Miss Weatherby has a deficient moral character that is outlined by Rowson with the following judgment: "her form lovely as nature could make it, but her mind uncultivated, her heart unfeeling, her passions impetuous, and her brain almost turned with flattery, dissipation, and pleasure" (53). It is worth noting that Miss Weatherby's abundant beauty and wealth seem to be the corrupting agents behind her insensible heart. Thus, it seems in keeping with her nature that she would prevail upon her father to make an alliance with Mr. Temple and would be incapable of "imagining he could refuse a girl of her beauty and fortune" (53). Indeed, Miss Weatherby seems to be usurping the traditionally masculine role of wooer and pursuer on the basis of her wealth.

Mr. Temple learns of her desire to marry him from his own father, the earl, who encourages his son to unite with Miss Weatherby and marry for money and quit his association with Lucy Eldridge, whom he wishes to marry for love (52). To ensure that his son will make the correct choice in a future bride, the earl suggests that his son's newfound wealth would enable him to "be more liberally a friend of Lucy Eldridge" (52). The language is pur-

posefully vague and thus could refer to Mr. Temple's position as a patron of Lucy's budding art career or to her position as his paramour. Ever mindful that "the most affluent fortune could bring no increase of happiness," Mr. Temple rightly chooses to marry Lucy (54). To prevent losing Miss Weatherby's fortune entirely, given his son's refusal to wed her, the earl courts her and proposes, thus exposing how valuing money over love can severely corrupt the most intimate of family relations. The earl "expatiated on the many benefits arising from an elevated title, painted in glowing colours the surprise and vexation of [his son] Temple when he should see her figuring as a countess and his [stepmother]" (54–55). By casting Temple's would-be bride as his stepmother, Rowson implores readers to recognize the corrupting power of money, which motivates the earl's proposal, and pride, which fuels Miss Weatherby's desire to accept the proposal to avenge her bruised ego.

In contrast to this union of revenge and greed, Rowson paints the idyllic picture of connubial bliss in the figures of Charlotte's parents. As models for their daughter's future marriage and sympathetic mourners to her tragic fall, the Temples present readers with a moral gauge by which to assess all other unions, as well as other characters' responses to Charlotte's fallen state.

One of the moral tenets forwarded in this novel is charity. Charlotte's father first distinguishes himself as morally sound by Rowson's description of his capacity to care for others: "He had a heart open to every generous feeling of humanity, and a hand ready to dispense to those who wanted part of the blessings he enjoyed himself" (40). His reputation for benevolence is what sends him to the aid of his future father-in-law and to his first glimpse of and meeting with his future wife. Because he eschews living above his means or casting his heart aside for the sake of his bank account, he is justly rewarded with a rich and fulfilling marriage. And, as a character sympathetic to the needs of others, he is the most fitting person to reconcile Charlotte to the readers and to her family after the birth of her illegitimate child.

Charitable feelings are drawn out along class lines, however. Although Mr. Temple does not marry Miss Weatherby and thus increase his standing, his position as the son of an earl clearly places him in the realm of British aristocracy. Similarly, Mrs. Beauchamp, who kindly befriends Charlotte and alleviates some of her despair and solitude while she lives outside New York, is the "universally beloved and admired" daughter of an officer of "large unencumbered fortune and elevated rank" (94, 95).

As further proof that charity only resides in those enjoying wealth and rank, Rowson depicts her antagonists, Mademoiselle La Rue and Montraville, as morally corrupt by way of their schemes to marry into money. While at sea and on their way to New York, La Rue, who initiated the chain of events leading to Charlotte's ruin by accepting Montraville's five guineas, endeavors to increase her own financial standing by pursuing Colonel Crayton. "La Rue easily saw his character; her sole aim was to awaken a passion in his bosom that might turn out to her advantage" (95). Sure enough, once they disembark, Crayton announces their engagement and invites the gentlemen who were fellow passengers to witness their marriage. When she has successfully entered society as Mrs. Crayton, she is envied and copied by other women for her fashion sense.

But even at this time of social triumph, when readers would imagine that La Rue has fulfilled her class-climbing desires, she turns a poor, destitute, and supplicating Charlotte out of her home and into the bitter cold. Rowson offers La Rue's motivation for "remain[ing] inflexible" before the "kneeling figure of Charlotte": "She could not think of having her reputation endangered by encouraging a woman of that kind in her house, besides she did not know what trouble and expense she might bring upon her husband by giving shelter to a woman in her situation" (150). Both excuses offered to explain why Mrs. Crayton (formerly La Rue) refused charity to Charlotte refer to the idea of cost, either the figurative loss of social position or the literal loss of domestic income. Thus, it is

only fitting that one of La Rue's servants, a member of the lower class and a character who operates outside the market economy, extends a charitable hand to the fallen Charlotte.

Similarly to La Rue, who consistently abandons Charlotte in pursuit of class-climbing opportunities, Charlotte's seducer, John Montraville, absolves himself of his responsibility to her and their unborn child so that he may woo and win the hand of a wealthy young woman, Julia Fairchild. Montraville's position in the army places him in an ambiguous social standing as clothing was generally a marker for class status and the uniform of an officer could easily elevate a person with no social history or family roots. Rowson expressly warns her young female readers not to be duped by the flattering detailed embellishments of army uniforms.

Clara M. Kirk and Rudolf Kirk, editors of the 1964 Modern Reader edition of *Charlotte Temple*, subscribe fully to the belief that Rowson modeled her novel on the real-life tragedy that befell Charlotte Stanley, the daughter of an English clergyman and the disinherited son of the earl of Derby, and John Montrésor, an officer of the British army (15–16). Kirk and Kirk insist that “Mrs. Rowson heard the story more than a dozen years after Charlotte's death, when the British Army had returned to England” (16). Because they “were actual people of such distinction . . . their identities were not revealed” (16). Moreover, the Kirks identify Montrésor as Susanna's cousin, noting that her younger half brother is his namesake (16). As additional proof that the character of John Montraville had its basis in reality, the Kirks offer a quotation from Rowson's 1795 autobiographical text, *The Trials of the Human Heart*, published the same year as the American edition of *Charlotte Temple*. Rowson avers, “I was myself personally acquainted with Montraville and from the most authentic sources could now trace his history from the period of his marriage to within a very few late years of his death—a history which would tend to prove that retribution treads upon the heels of vice, and that, though not always apparent, yet even in the midst of splendor and

prosperity, conscience stings the guilty” (reported in Kirk and Kirk in Rowson 18).

The biographer Patricia Parker supports the Kirks' assumption that the novel was based on real events by pointing out that Rowson had never before insisted upon the truthfulness of her fiction (50). Further, she delineates the exact nature of the family connection between Montrésor and Rowson: “Lt. John Montrésor was the son of Susanna Rowson's father's sister, Mary Haswell, who married John Gabriel Montrésor” (Parker 51). Absent from her account of the family tie, however, is any mention or support for Kirk and Kirk's claim that Montrésor was indeed Montraville or that he had participated in an illicit affair. Parker also fails to support the Kirks' claim, and the popular belief, that Charlotte Stanley served as the historical model for Rowson's tragic heroine. Charlotte Stanley, Parker points out, was the daughter of the 11th earl of Derby, who eloped with John Burgoyne (51). Father and daughter later reconciled, as indicated by her substantial inheritance upon his death (51). Whether the novel derives from reality or not, it has certainly retained its standing in the United States, where it appeared as the first best seller, to be followed by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Blythe Forcey notes Rowson's deliberate breaking of the traditional epistolary form in her telling of seduction and betrayal. Unlike HANNAH FOSTER WEBSTER in *The Coquette* or the second half of *The Boarding School*, both of which contain letters, Rowson departs from this conventional form of narration through epistles made popular by Richardson's *Pamela*. Forcey argues that the tumultuous nature of post-1776 America made this narrative shift a necessity as one could no longer rely on a homogeneous reading public conversant in the same idiom and literature in the same culture (226). Indeed, Forcey goes so far as to see *Charlotte Temple* as “a parable of this very struggle, as it is a tale of crossing that tears Charlotte Temple from her ‘mother country’ and brings her to a new world where homelessness and foreignness define the conditions of her life” (227).

- georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/rowson.html. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Fichtelberg, Joseph J. "Uncivil Tongues: Slander and Honour in Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human Heart*." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 18 (2006): 425–451.
- Forcey, Blythe. "Charlotte Temple and Epistolarity." *American Literature* 63, no. 2 (1991): 225–241.
- Henderson, Desirée. "The Imperfect Dead: Mourning Women in Eighteenth-Century Oratory and Fiction." *Early American Literature* 39, no. 3 (2004): 487–509.
- Parker, Patricia L. *Susanna Rowson*. Boston: Twayne, 1986.
- Richards, Jeffrey H. *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Rowson, Susanna. *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth*. Edited by Clara M. Kirk and Rudolf Kirk. New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1964.
- Rust, Marion. "What's Wrong with *Charlotte Temple*?" *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (January 2003): 99–118.
- Smiley, Jane. Introduction to *Charlotte Temple*. New York: Modern Library, 2004.
- Tennenhouse, Leonard. "The Americanization of *Clarrissa*." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 1 (1998): 177–196.



CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK

(1789–1867)

Talent and worth are the only eternal grounds of distinction.

(Home)

Catharine Maria Sedgwick was born in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on December 28, 1789. She was the third of six children born to Theodore Sedgwick and Pamela Dwight Sedgwick, who descended from a prominent family of the Connecticut River valley. Theodore gained national prominence as a member of the Senate and the House of Representatives, where he distinguished himself by serving as Speaker. Catharine wrote of her father's political career, "The Federal Party loved their country and were devoted to it as virtuous parents are to their children." Such a glowing sentiment about her own father would surely influence her sense of the connection between politics and the family, which would appear most prominently in her historical novels, *Hope Leslie* and *The Linwoods*. Her relationship to her mother, who critics conjecture suffered from mental illness, which Catharine referred to as "calamitous sickness," was markedly different. The mother's bouts with deep depression would prove hereditary, as Catharine herself would look to her own writing as a means of alleviating her depressive moods. As the renowned critic of American women's writing Nina Baym describes her, Catharine Maria Sedgwick distinguished herself as an early 19th-century author by writing for emotional rather than financial reasons. Through writing, Baym claims, Sedgwick could "alleviate boredom and severe depressions" (54). Her final novel, *Married or Single?*, was written to comfort her after the death of her surviving brother.

From her father and her brothers, Catharine "imbibed a kindred taste" for "their daily habits and pursuits and pleasures [which] were intellectual." Her father's Federalism initially influenced Catharine, who shared her father's views that the masses were not to be trusted with the nation's future, but rather the landed elite should exercise sway over the newly formed republic (Kelley xv). In "A Reminiscence of Federalism," Sedgwick works out her own former prejudices against the Democrats. Her father also instilled a love of reading in her and her siblings. Sedgwick recalls hearing portions of Cervantes and Shakespeare read aloud to her by her father when she was eight years old (Kelley xvii). Her father advised her to incorporate reading into her daily routine: "I hope my love you will find it in your power to devote your mornings to reading—there are few who can make such improvements by it and it would be lamented if this precious time should be lost."

As for the character Fanny Atwood in "A Reminiscence of Federalism," who is the product of her father's second marriage, Sedgwick was the daughter of Theodore Sedgwick's second wife. Unlike in her fictional account of Atwood's younger wife, critics comment on the emotional distance between mother and daughter. In 1807, when young Catharine was 18 years old, her mother passed away. The following year, Sedgwick's father married for a third time. Baym provides no more detail other

than to say that this third wife was “uncongenial” to Catharine (54).

Catharine spent her adult life moving between the households of her four beloved brothers, whose children all adored her as their favorite aunt and surrogate mother. Her decision to remain single was quite unusual for the 19th century, when historians remark that nine out of 10 women were wed. In her letters and journals, Sedgwick hints that the central reason for her resisting marriage resulted from observing the unhappiness of her married family members, especially her sisters. Her sister Eliza “had, I think, a rather hard life of it—indifferent health and the painful drudgery of bearing and nurturing twelve children.” Sedgwick wrote of her sister Frances’s heroic endurance of an uncongenial marriage. On the subject of marriage, Sedgwick told a favorite niece, “So many that I have loved have made shipwreck of happiness in marriage or have found it a dreary joyless condition.”

Sedgwick’s first novel was *A New England Tale*. Published in 1822, the novel grew out of a religious tract penned on her conversion from Calvinism to Unitarianism. With her brother Henry Dwight’s suggestion that she turn it into a novel, she created a tale that presented in fictional form the challenges posed by Calvinist doctrine. Throughout her literary career, Sedgwick was greatly encouraged by her brothers, Henry, Robert, and Charles, who also, as lawyers, acted on her behalf in negotiating contracts with publishing houses. The novel would soon be followed by *Redwood* in 1824 and *Hope Leslie* in 1827. With each successive novel, Sedgwick proved herself to be a literary figure whose presence, a critic from *American Ladies Magazine* projected, would succeed her into the next century: “A hundred years hence, when other and gifted competitors have crowded into the field, our country will still be proud of her name” (reproduced in Kelley x). Indeed, the successful publication of *Hope Leslie* initiated a trend among critics, who began to rank Sedgwick with its central male authors: WASHINGTON IRVING, JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, and WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT. Her con-

nection with Cooper was so great that during his tour of Europe, Cooper was surprised to learn that people assumed him to be the author of Sedgwick’s *Redwood*.

Nina Baym best expresses the enduring and endearing aspect of Sedgwick’s body of work. In Sedgwick’s historical romance, she “establishes the tradition whereby, in the more fanciful setting of a remote time, women are endowed with heroic capacities unrestrained by probabilities” (53). The characters who are given life on the pages of her novels with contemporary settings, on the other hand, “display heroic traits within the limits of nineteenth-century social possibility” (53). Contemporary feminist critics applaud strong and independent female characters like Magawisca and the titular character Hope Leslie. In her lifetime, she was a best-selling author of several novels, short stories, and essays. Her third novel, *The Linwoods*, was published in 1835, and her final novel, *Married or Single?* appeared in 1857.

Hope Leslie, or Early Times in the Massachusetts (1827)

Sedgwick’s tale, although published in 1827, is very much a product of 17th-century New England life and history as the novelist delves into “the character of the times” (5). By revisiting the events of the Pequod War, Sedgwick devises a portal for entry into founding history: “Are so far from being intended as a substitute for genuine history . . . but might stimulate [young countrymen] to investigate the early history of their native land” (6). By titling her novel after its central heroine and focusing on the domestic lives of her and her circle of friends and family members, Sedgwick squarely places the family and its pivotal figure, the true woman, within the scope of national history. Not only are “some liberties” taken in her recounting of the “chronology of the Pequod war,” but Sedgwick also redefines what passes as history, and who should receive attention as a historical agent (5).

The tale of “early times in Massachusetts” begins with the emigration of its patriarch, in this novel a character named William Fletcher. His fiery affection for his cousin Alice, which should have led to a happy marriage and years of conjugal bliss, is cruelly extinguished by his uncle, Alice’s father, when Fletcher refuses to abjure “the fanatical notions of liberty and religion with which [he] had been infected” (10). Despite Alice’s attempts to elope with him on a ship bound for Massachusetts, Sir William arrives with armed men to capture her and, in “less than a fortnight,” marry her to Charles Leslie (13). Disconsolate, Fletcher agrees to marry a ward of Mr. Winthrop and set sail on the famous 1630 voyage aboard the *Arbella* (14). Indeed, it is aboard this very vessel that JOHN WINTHROP delivered the speech that became *A Modell of Christian Charity*. In tying this moment in colonial history to the tragic tale of forbidden love between Alice and William Fletcher, Sedgwick provides readers with a scaled-down version of the impact of religious intolerance. Had his uncle practiced the model of Christian charity as detailed by Winthrop, the voyage to New England might have been more joyously attended by a couple very much in love rather than one thrown together by social convention. As it is, the prohibited union of the two presages the future tales of forbidden or unrequited love and presents a literary model in which what appears on the national scale is replicated, in miniature, in the lives of the novel’s characters.

The figures of Alice and William Fletcher are reunited, albeit indirectly, after the deaths of both Alice and her husband as William becomes guardian of their two daughters, Hope and Faith (21). The extended Fletcher household also embraces the young wards’ tutor, Cradock; an aunt, Miss Bertha Grafton, and “two Indian servants,” Magawisca and Oneco (21). The reader quickly learns of the parallel tragedy suffered by the Leslies and the Mohawk siblings: Both sets of siblings have arrived at the Fletcher household, called Bethel, after the deaths of their mothers. The unnamed mother of Magawisca and Oneco died in captivity resulting from an English raid on their Mohawk village.

During the same raid, their brother Samoset was also killed. As the domestic captives of the Fletchers, Magawisca and Oneco soon form strong bonds with Everell, the Fletcher’s son, and Faith, respectively. These bonds prove their strength when the Mohawk chief and father, Mononoto, leads a retaliatory attack on Bethel. Mrs. Fletcher and her newborn baby are killed, while Faith, Everell, Oneco, and Magawisca are carried off into the forest.

The figure most conflicted by these sudden turns of events is Magawisca, who has begun to love Everell and to crave the maternal affections of Mrs. Fletcher, a surrogate for her own departed mother. Magawisca’s first signs of discomfort caused by conflicting loyalties are reflected in her dejected and sorrowful countenance and her lament “I do not like to see any thing so beautiful, pass so quickly away” (63). She also provides both Everell and the reader with a retelling of the night the English attacked as a forewarning: “When the hour of vengeance comes, if it should come, remember it was provoked” (47). Such a statement not only gives readers a glimpse into the motivation for Mononoto’s raid, but constitutes a means by which Sedgwick honors her initial “design” by providing readers with “the character of the times” (5). The very term Sedgwick uses, *character*, is telling as one must gather and sift through opinions of various people and eyewitnesses in order to arrive at the character of a person or event. And this embrace of a multiplicity of viewpoints seems to be precisely what Sedgwick had in mind when providing alternate histories or “characters,” if you will, of the Pequod War. As Everell and Magawisca converse before her father’s vengeful attack on Bethel, Sedgwick writes: “He had heard [the details of the Pequod War] in the language of the enemies and conquerors of the Pequods; and from Magawisca’s lips they took a new form and hue . . . the new version of an old story” (53). Everell’s willingness to listen to and honor a “new version of an old story” manifests itself in his ability to read and discern symbols and conversations of the Mohawk. He correctly identifies the eagle feather “as a badge of her tribe” and

the specific symbol of her father, their chief, in the token passed from the elderly woman, Nelema, to Magawisca (46). During his captivity, “though [Magawisca’s] words were uttered in her own tongue,” Everell understood that she was interceding on his behalf (75). Despite her love for him and his confession to Digby that he “might have loved her—might have forgotten that nature had put barriers between us,” the couple remain one of several doomed relationships presaged in the sad tale of Alice and William Fletcher (214).

The novel does not altogether shun interracial couples, however, as Hope learns from Magawisca that her sister is Oneco’s “white bird” and that the two are blissfully married (194). Against Everell’s language of “natural barriers” separating races, Magawisca describes the harmonious union of Faith and Oneco: “She and my brother are as if one life-chord bound them together” (191). Sedgwick sanctifies the true romantic tenor of their marriage by contrasting it to the tragic and unsexing seduction of Rosa by Sir Philip Gardiner and the hopelessly one-sided relationship between Esther Downing, niece to Governor Winthrop, and Everell Fletcher.

To address the race question raised by the union of Oneco and Faith, Sedgwick literally removes Faith’s mantle of whiteness. She prepares the reader for such a moment when she states quite plainly in the preface, “The difference of character among the various races of the earth, arises manly from difference of condition” (6). This very argument for the influence of environment on the formation of a person’s character was a central tenet of the cult of true womanhood. The deep and abiding connection between family and nation, which sees the inner workings of the domestic writ large on the canvas of the nation, and vice versa, is a model that Sedgwick employs and promotes in her novel. It is also a cultural and political structure that provides women in their roles as wives and mothers with considerable power and influence. To follow the reasoning behind this theory of family and nation as mutually informing institutions, if women are entrusted with the sacred and

national duty of inculcating their children with the set of morals and values held dear by the state, then their significance and influence are immeasurable. They are charged with the responsibility of creating a domestic environment for their children that will enable them to become forthright and worthy citizens of the nation. Conversely, if the mothers neglect their duties as outlined in the cult of true womanhood, the characters of their children will negatively reflect their formative years spent in a harmful environment.

By reintroducing readers, and Hope Leslie herself, to an entirely transformed Faith, Sedgwick assiduously applies this same theory regarding character and environment to the book’s larger claims about race. In Magawisca’s preemptive speech to Hope in which she attempts to prepare the latter for the dramatic change in Faith in her years with the Mohawk, she employs a simile taken from natural observations: “Some [people] are like water, that retains no mark; and others, like the flinty rock, that never loses a mark” (192). Because Faith has been “so far removed by habit and education,” she is unable to speak to her sister (having forgotten English) and does not exhibit the same emotional response Hope does at their reunion. Thus, it would seem that Magawisca’s simile of the relationship between environment and character applies to Faith’s two cultural environments: She is “like water” and without any marks of her former life among the English, and she is “like rock” in that she “never loses a mark” of her current life among the Mohawk. Tellingly, Hope attempts to use some of the material markers of English domesticity—clothing and jewelry—as well as the language of domesticity, promising to care for her as mother and sister “in sickness and health” (229). Hope’s very language resembles that of a marriage vow, and in overstepping the natural bonds between sisters, Sedgwick is perhaps arguing against the dangers of true womanhood, that it can unnaturally extend beyond its scope or its sphere of influence. Filial rather than conjugal love defines the current of feeling between Magawisca and Everell (330). In Oneco, and in the Mohawk, Faith has created a

new domestic; it does not recognize or desire to be replaced by a former domestic scene that “retains no mark” for her.

Not only does Faith adhere to new and more natural bonds (those between partners naturally supersede those between siblings and parents), she retains the marks of her life as a member of the Mohawk tribe. Hope’s vain attempts to restore her English dress, for which Faith expresses disdain, lead to the removal of her mantle and the appearance of the true extent of the influence of her environment on her character: “Mary threw [the mantle] aside and disclosed her person, light and agile as a fawn’s, clothed with skins, neatly fitted to her waist and arms, and ambitiously embellished with bead work. The removal of the mantle, instead of the effect designed, only served to make more striking the aboriginal peculiarities” (228). Just as Faith’s declaration, “No speak Yengees,” reveals the extent of her environmental influence on her identity, so, too, does the removal of the mantle reveal the internalization of her life with Oneco and Magawisca. If an English girl can become totally transformed and linguistically and culturally removed from her very own sister, then surely one’s environment matters. And, to take Sedgwick’s point a step further, if Faith can be so transformed by environment, then the reverse—the acculturation of American Indians into English society—must also be possible. Finally, if both types of transformation are possible, then the only “barrier” separating the races is environment.

Environment’s significance also plays into the novel’s themes of captivity and release, which not only gloss the actual captivity of Magawisca and Oneco after the raid on their village, and the subsequent capture of Everell and Faith, but also apply to the oppressive social circumstances that characters endure such as forced marriages, education in tyrannical households, imprisonment, trials by religiously intolerant judges, and social conventions that would clip Hope’s wings. It also relates to the dwindling wilderness inhabited by the American Indians. Early in the novel, William Fletcher and

Hope scout future locations for their village (100). When all restrictions on the marriage of Everell and Hope are removed, including Esther Dowlings’s convenient voyage to England and release of Everell’s proposal, the novel concludes with them as the central domestic sphere in New England, with all others as satellites.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Sedgwick’s fictional accounts of captivity with MARY WHITE ROWLANDSON’S and ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA’S. How do they depict cultural difference? How do they recognize cultural similarities?
2. Sedgwick’s novel is singular for the time in its sanctioning of an interracial marriage. Conjecture why Everell and Magawisca’s union must be spoiled while that between Faith and Oneco is celebrated.
3. Sedgwick writes in the 19th century about the 17th century. Nathaniel Hawthorne also employed this historical glance backward. What allure do the Puritans have for 19th-century writers?

“Cacoethes Scribendi” (1830)

Sedgwick opens her tale by setting the scene—a “little secluded and quiet village of H”—that distinguishes itself because of the lack of male residents. As the critic Judith Fetterley imagines, the town is precisely the female version of JAMES FENIMORE COOPER’S towns, abandoned by all men, who are off on adventures or living out extended boyhoods in the forest as does his titular character, Natty Bumppo (42–43). Further, Fetterley links the all-female population of the fictional village of H. to Sedgwick’s own real-life social circles, which were often devoid of male companionship. In a letter written by Frederika Bremer, after her visit to the Sedgwick home during summer 1851, she writes: “I spent four-and-twenty hours with the excellent and amiable Catharine Sedgwick and her family, enjoying her company

and that of several agreeable ladies. There were no gentlemen—gentlemen, indeed, seemed to be rare in social circles of this neighborhood. But they were less missed here than is generally the case in society, because the women of this little circle are possessed of unusual intellectual cultivation—several of them endowed with genius and talents of a high order. . . . The scenery is beautiful; these ladies enjoy it and each other's society, and life lacks nothing to the greater number" (reported in Foster 36). Similarly, the all-female village does not experience many of the characteristic emotions governing women who find themselves as romantic rivals for the same man: "There was no mincing—no affectation—no hope of passing for what they were not—no envy of the pretty and fortunate—no insolent triumph over the plain and demure and neglected" (50). To readers familiar with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the argument is strikingly similar—in the absence of men who would pit women against one another, there are female companionship and friendship uncompromised by emotional barbs.

In such an ideal setting as H. Sedgwick can pursue the development of women as writers outside the concerns of the marriage market. It is not, however, that the women of H. will remain single forever and thus escape the marriage trap; rather, "most of the young men who had abandoned their native soil, as soon as they found themselves getting along, loyally returned to lay their fortunes at the feet of the companions of their childhood" (50). The certainty of future marriage, coupled with the absence of the social events structured by the marriage market, provided the female inhabitants of H. the opportunity to form true and lasting friendships, as well as the freedom of time and thought to pursue their own interests. Mrs. Courland, the mother of four sons and one daughter, discovers her passion for writing when she browses through an annual that her nephew Ralph Hepburn gives the family as a present from his recent visit to Boston. To give the influence of this single gesture epic proportions, Sedgwick likens the annual to a "Pandora's box" (52). Readers familiar with Greek

mythology will recall that Pandora's box contains all of the evils that Zeus wishes to visit on mankind in punishment for Prometheus's overreaching of mortal powers as exemplified by the theft of fire from the gods. When Pandora's box was opened, greed, envy, vanity, and slander were unleashed upon humans. In terms of "Cacoethes Scribendi," these very characteristics, which were almost miraculously absent from the society, are suddenly unleashed after the publication of articles not only by Mrs. Courland, but by her three single sisters as well.

In describing the literary talent of Mrs. Courland, Sedgwick likens the budding author's views of the town of H. and its inhabitants to well-known figures from stories and poems: "A tall wrinkled bony old woman," for example, reminds her of the title character from John Keats's poem "Meg Merrilies." In the poem, Keats details the life of an old Gypsy woman who lives as one with nature, calling the "craggy hills" her brothers and the "larchen trees" her sisters. The town's schoolmaster turns into a figure like Ichabod Crane in WASHINGTON IRVING'S "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." However, her use of daily events in the village of H. becomes unseemly when she delights at the misfortunes of others because they afford her material for her writing: "that a sudden calamity, a death, a funeral, were fortunate events for her. To do her justice she felt them in a two-fold capacity. She wept as a woman, and exulted as an author" (55). The mother's divided sense of self—her role as writer and her role as mother—are finally reunited when her nephew Ralph writes a one-sentence marriage proposal to her daughter Alice. As Sedgwick writes, "She forgot her literary aspirations for Ralph and Alice—forgot she was herself an author—forgot everything but [being] the mother" (59).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Sedgwick's all-female setting with the all-male settings of Cooper's novels. Evaluate the degree to which the absence of the other sex is essential to characters or their development.

2. Sedgwick's setting is central to her story, for it is only in the absence of men that Mrs. Courland and her three sisters are able to pursue their passion for writing. Washington Irving, a contemporary of Sedgwick's, was thought to be the author of some of her works, perhaps because of her attentiveness to setting. Compare the role setting plays in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" with the role of village H. in "Cacoethes Scribendi."

"A Reminiscence of Federalism" (1834)

Sedgwick opens this short story with a backward glance at a human frailty "that should be met with a smile . . . rather than with harsher feeling": the divisive nature of political partisanship. Such contentious issues, whether a presidential election or "the position of a capital city," tend to follow the "common course of human passions": "A snag interposes, and the waters divide, and fret, and foam around it till chance or time sweep it away, when they again commingle, and flow on in their natural unruffled union." In using this metaphor of a stream, Sedgwick presupposes that the natural order is peaceful and free of discord. The snag, a symbol of tension and anxiety, might cause "fret and foam," but such reactions are temporary. Sedgwick's imagery omits human agency from the important task of eliminating the source of conflict as she assigns "chance or time" to fulfill this duty. Examined in light of her metaphor, the political strife between the Federalist and Democratic Parties seems reminiscent of the famous Shakespearean line from *Macbeth* "full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

With this moral lesson firmly planted in her reader's mind, Sedgwick begins with her tale of her personal acquaintance with the village of Carrington and its inhabitants. As "a very young child," Sedgwick was sent to Dr. Atwood's house to receive a proper education. She provides thumbnail sketches of the various occupants of the Atwood household, reserving her detailed

description for Fanny, the youngest member of the family and the narrator's "little friend." In a moment of narrative rupture, Sedgwick second-guesses her decision in making Fanny Atwood the story's heroine, but it seems that the lack of artifice or pretense in this "little rustic favorite" accounts for her being cast into such a central and critical role in the tale. After all, if chance or time will be the agent that undoes the agony and strife brought on by hostile partisanship, a figure who stands in for consideration and who refreshingly lacks the self-aggrandizing personality would be the ideal character to "let nature take its course" and not attempt to interfere with or control the conflict's outcome.

As the character who embodies the antithesis of Fanny, Sedgwick's Squire Hayford possesses and is possessed by "the most unfounded and absurd vanity." His sense of self-importance is so great that he imagines himself "the sun of his system." This sense of grandeur applies to all aspects of Squire Hayford's life and informs not only whom he befriends or despises according to his own political beliefs, but also how he treats his only child when she marries a southerner named Mr. Gordon. Because Squire Hayford expressly refused to consent to such a union, the marriage was deemed an "unpardonable sin" in the squire's eyes, and he punished her accordingly by "permit[ting] his only child to encounter the severest evils, and languish through protracted sufferings, before he manifested the slightest relenting." After her husband's death, and that of all but one of their children, Mrs. Gordon returns to the village of Carrington, but because of her father's unreasonable partisanship, he refuses to speak to either his daughter or his grandson, Randolph, until his daughter is pleading with him on her deathbed to take care of her beloved son. Squire Hayford, in a motion to reverse his daughter's marriage to Mr. Gordon, agrees to care for Randolph on condition that "Randolph must give up the name of Gordon for that of Hayford." An anxious and grieving Randolph acquiesces to his mother's final request to agree to his grandfather's

Gould, Philip. *Covenant and Republic: Historical Romance and the Politics of Puritanism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Kelley, Mary. "Introduction." In *Hope Leslie*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Sedgwick, Catharine Maria. *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journal of Catharine*

Maria Sedgwick. Edited by Mary Kelly. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society; distributed by Northeastern University Press, 1993.

Sedgwick Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.salemstate.edu/imc/sedgwick/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.



JOHN SMITH (1580–1631)

Here every man may be master and owner of his owne labour and land. . . . If he have nothing but his hands, he may . . . by industrie quickly grow rich.

(The Advantages of New England with Historical Reflections)

Literary and historical critics have commented on the fantastical nature of the life and adventures of Captain John Smith. The biographer Everett Emerson admits that “from his own time at least until 1953, when Bradford Smith’s biography appeared, Smith was usually seen as a liar and a braggart” (ix). Even beginning with tales of his early childhood, and his attempts to sell his schoolbooks and equipment in order to apprentice at sea, Smith looms larger than life on the page. We must consider him as a man who cultivated an image of himself, and though he may have exaggerated at times, historians have discovered corroborating evidence to support many of his claims. In *True Travels*, Smith narrates the tale of his own life in third person, and it is primarily from this source that biographers have pulled together the details of this extremely adventuresome man.

As Smith recounts, his desire for adventure on the open sea began at a young age, culminating in his extensive journeys through Europe and parts of Africa by the time that he was 20 years old (35). The deaths of his parents, coupled with the appointment of guardians of the estate “more regarding it than him,” provided Smith with the liberty necessary to allow him literally to set the course for his own life at such a young age (35). Smith’s father, who passed away when Smith was 15, was, according to an inventory of his house, “gentry in all but title.” He had risen in social class

to occupy his own farm, in addition to owning two significant pieces of land. Emerson believes that Smith’s predisposition to be “class-conscious and ambitious” derived in large part from his father’s status. Although his father could have claimed the position of a yeoman, by virtue of his ownership of the farm and lands, Smith referred to himself as “a poor tenant of Lord Willoughby, the lord of the manor” (24).

Although Smith’s father permitted him to leave school at the age of 15, a common practice, he did not allow Smith to seek his fortunes on the high seas. Instead, Smith was apprenticed to Thomas Sendall, a merchant living 35 miles from Willoughby, where Smith was baptized, in King’s Lynn. Smith was not satisfied with the potential for future journeys at sea but wanted them in the present moment. Thus, when his father died, Smith broke his apprenticeship and sought out the means to learn his trade at sea. He initiated his career as a soldier with his first voyage to the Netherlands, where he remained from 1596 until 1599.

When he returned to England in 1599, he was able to gain passage on a ship bound for France as the servant of Lord Willoughby’s younger son, Master Perigrine Barty, who intended to tour the nation. While there, Smith met the Scotsman David Hume, and in exchange for some money, Hume wrote Smith letters of introduction to King James of Scotland, but he was unable to capitalize on the

letters and returned to England. He seems to have first practiced the art of cultivating a public persona when he returned from England. Smith writes of himself in the third person: “He retired himself into a little woody pasture, a good way from town . . . his study was Machiavelli’s *The Art of War*, and Marcus Aurelius, his exercise a good horse, with his lance and ring” (36). Although Smith protests that he selected this secluded spot because of “being glutted with too much company,” his careful detailing of the events that made up his daily activities, down to the food he consumed, makes it difficult to take his notions of seclusion as genuine. Instead, this scene works to craft a sense of Smith that will prevail throughout all of his writings: a man who operates under his own principles, who vocally shuns the very notoriety and fame that he most assiduously seeks, and who images himself to be singular, unlike any other.

Having acquired equestrian skills and a knowledge of arms, Smith desires “to see more of the world” and decides to “try his fortune against the Turks” (36). Accordingly, he gains passage on a ship but is soon thrown overboard once the Catholics sailing the vessel learn that Smith is a Protestant (38). Luckily, he survives by reaching a small island, where he is soon rescued and placed upon a ship engaged in fighting the Holy Roman Empire against the Ottoman Empire. For four years, as relayed in his autobiographical *True Travels*, Smith toured France, Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Austria, Poland, and Germany. He served in Hungary and Transylvania (41). It was in Transylvania that he earned a coat of arms, gruesomely decorated with the heads of the three Turkish soldiers whom he defeated in individual challenges, a feat he details in *True Travels*. He also proves himself a worthy gentleman soldier by devising a plan to create “false fires” that would draw the Turks’ attention, make them believe that they were outnumbered, and thus cause them to retreat. His plan succeeds, and Smith is named captain of 250 horsemen under the command of Colonel Voldo (42). His journey ends with a yearly pension, along with the coat of arms, as just rewards for his services rendered to Sigismundus, king of Hungary.

In December 1606, Smith paid a nine-pound subscription to the Virginia Company of London and boarded one of three ships along with 105 colonists bound for what would become Jamestown. Although Smith was made prisoner by the leaders, presumably because of some disagreement, he arrived in America in April 1607 as one of seven members of a ruling body. He proved himself by undertaking explorations of the James River, in accordance with strict instructions presented to the colonists by the Virginia Company of London. After Ratcliffe’s brief stint as president, during which Smith served as a supply officer, Smith himself was elected president. It was during his time as president that Jamestown suffered some of its most trying events. The additional colonists who were to have arrived from England, including women and children, were shipwrecked in the Bermudas and therefore arrived in the colony more as a burden and less as a source of assistance. Because the stored grain had been eaten by rats and had rotted, Smith was in charge of overcoming what would surely be a food shortage come winter. As Smith relates in *Proceedings*, “sleeping in his boat . . . one accidentally fired his powder bag, which tore his flesh from his body and thighs nine or ten inches square, in a most pitiful manner, but to quench the tormenting fire, frying him in his clothes, he leaped over board into the deep river, where ere they could rescue him, he was near drowned. In this estate, without either chirurgeon or chirurgery, he was to go one hundred miles to Jamestown.” The gunpowder accident incapacitated him, and he was forced to return to England in October 1609.

Not much is known about Smith’s time in England after his return except that he prepared and published *A Map of Virginia* in 1612 and a narrative of his times in Virginia from 1607 to 1610. He also became extremely frustrated and unlucky in his attempts to return to America. When the Virginia colony suffered, as it did immediately after Smith’s departure, Smith became interested instead in the Maine coast. In 1614, Smith was given command over two ships bound for Maine, a journey that he chronicled in *A Description of New England*, which

was published in 1616. Surprisingly, Smith penned this 79-page book while held captive aboard a French ship during summer and fall 1615. He alluded to his difficult condition in the text: “To keep my perplexed thoughts from too much meditation of my miserable estate, I writ this discourse.” Smith details the means by which he effected his own escape, after the men he had traveled with had abandoned him in the French pirate ship:

In the end of such a storm that beat them all under hatches, I watched my opportunity to get ashore in their boat, whereinto, in the dark night, I secretly got, and with a half pike that lay by me, put adrift for Rat Isle, but the current was so strong and the sea so great, I went adrift to sea, till it pleased God the wind so turned with the tide that although I was, all this fearful night of guests and rain, in the sea the space of twelve hours, when many ships were driven ashore and divers split . . . at last I arrived in an oozy isle by Charowne [the Clarente River], where certain fowlers found me near drowned and half dead with water, cold, and hunger.

The detailed description Smith offers, of a hostile environment that he must navigate alone, even as other ships are forced to shore, is very much in keeping with the nature of Smith: As in his escape from enslavement by the Tatars, he seizes an opportunity and uses his skills to the best of his ability.

Of the value of *A Description of New England*, Henry F. Howe believes “neither Pilgrims nor Puritans would have reached Massachusetts when they did had it not been for Smith and [his book]. His was indeed the signal individual achievement in the founding of Massachusetts” (271). Philip Barbour contends that with this pamphlet, Smith “found his true métier [as] this work is in a sense Smith’s first solid opus—the first book in which we see his character as explorer, narrator, and ethnographer merged with his vision, his propagandist bent, and his retrospective self-discovery” (295). Smith provided detailed maps of the coastline and exhaustive

catalogs of flora and fauna and proposed two possible means for colonization: one involving the use of poor people, including children, as laborers in the colony; the other as colony built by soldiers and workmen. His lasting contribution is reflected in the naming of the region as *New England*, because it had previously been called Norumbega and the northern part of Virginia. He is also to be credited with naming Massachusetts, having taken the name from the American Indian tribe of that region.

His attempt to return to America in 1617 was frustrated by strong winds that kept the ships waiting for three months in Plymouth harbor. When the winds died down, as Smith explains, “the season being past, the ships went for Newfoundland, whereby my design was frustrate, which was to me and my friends no small loss.” In the following years, Smith sought financial support for a colony in America, including an appeal to Francis Bacon. According to his biographer Everett Emerson, Smith published two pleas for support, in 1620 and again in 1622 (31).

That same year, 1622, Smith published his *General Historie*. Aside from this publication date, and those of his *Sea Grammar* (1627) and *Advertisements* (1631), little is known of Smith’s life in the years leading up to his death. On June 21, 1631, Captain John Smith died. His epitaph, which is quite fitting for such a man, opens, “Here lies one conquered that hath conquered kings, / Subdu’d large territories, and done things / Which to the world impossible would seem / But that the truth is held in more esteem.”

A True Relation of Virginia (1608)

The publication of John Smith’s *A True Relation of Virginia* deserves some comment as it appears to have been significantly altered by a London press, which hastened to print it. Because it “was the first account of the Jamestown colony’s first year to reach London,” readers were eager for information and investors and potential investors were hopeful that this account from “one of the Counsell there

in Virginia” would dispel some of the disheartening rumors surrounding the colony (5, 24). Chief among those rumors were tales of colonists’ splitting from the local government, including the execution of a colonist for treason; some suffering near-starvation; and John Smith himself being savagely attacked by Powhatan (Barbour 5). The press’s level of haste to see Smith’s letter in print quickly (Barbour reports it appeared six weeks after its arrival in London) led to a confusion over the very identity of the *Relation*’s author as well as the selected omission of material. As the editor I. H. writes in the foreword, “Somewhat more was by him written, which being as I thought (fit to be private) I would not adventure to make it publicke” (24). The editor of Smith’s account, who appears only as I. H. in the preface, is thought to be John Healey, and in his foreword he notes that the printer initially believed the account to have been written by Thomas Watson, whom the scholar Philip Barbour identifies as the recipient of Smith’s letter (5).

The full title of Smith’s account is *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note, as Hath Happened in Virginia, Since the First Planting of That Colony, Which Is Now Resident in the South Part Thereof, Till the Last Return*. Within the first paragraph, Barbour notes several cuts made by Healey related to suspicion of Smith’s attempts at mutiny aboard the HMS *Bounty*, and his exclusion from the council (98). Smith was interrogated to determine his part in the mutiny led by Fletcher Christian against Captain Bligh and found innocent. It is quite likely, and understandable, that the editors would wish to scrub this particular incident from Smith’s account as it detracted from his authority, character, and trustworthiness.

Immediately after their landing in Chesapeake Bay, Smith reports of their “assault with certaine Indians” (27). This attack, even before “the Counsell for Virginia was nominated,” forebodes future violence with the native population (27). Smith seems to temper this initial scene of violence with tales of “the people in all places kindly entreating us, daunsing and feasting us with strawberries,

mulberries, bread, fish, and other of their country provisions whereof we had plenty” (29). He does not consider the natives’ motivations to provide them with food, such as attempts to appease them and broker peace rather than render them bitter enemies. What follow are accounts of their surveys of the land and river, with guides provided by Powhatan. The peace is quickly broken again, however, when their guide, “King of Arseteck,” “altered his resolution in going to our Fort,” leaving the colonists with concern about “some mischief at the fort” (31). Sure enough, the men return to the fort only to learn that it had been attacked the day before by a large number of American Indians (31). Although Smith reports the number as 400, Barbour believes that Smith was not present during the attack and notes that another account, written by Gabriel Archer, places the count closer to 200 (99). Smith attributes the colonists’ ability to fend for themselves and cause the American Indian attackers to retreat to their employment of their ships’ ammunition as a sign of divine intervention (31).

Shortly after this attack, Captain Newport returns to England, “leaving provisions for thirteen or fourteen weeks” (33). Barbour notes that in Percy’s account, Newport departed with the promise of supplies but abandoned the remaining colonists with “verie bare and scantie of victuals, further more in warres [among themselves] and in danger of the Savages” (99). Barbour attributes the amendment to Smith’s account to the editors, who were loyal to Newport and wished to cast aspersions on Smith (99–100). These provisions, however, soon became a bone of contention among the Jamestown colonists, who were angered that they were only fed sturgeon while the president of the colony and “his few associates” received “the sack, aquavita, and other preservations for our health” (33). With the death of the president, Captain Ratcliffe is elected (35). The gift of corn from the Indians “brought us great store,” yet rather than express gratitude to the native inhabitants for saving them from starvation, Smith states, “It pleased God (in our extremity) to move the Indians to bring us corn” (35). Although these additional provisions improved in

the health of many of the ailing men, Smith reports that because of the continued sicknesses of Captain Martin and the colony's president, he was assigned the duty of "Cape Marchant," meaning that he was responsible for setting terms and bartering with the native population (35). This was the beginning of Smith's entry into a leadership role with the colony, and it would prove essential to its survival.

He distinguishes himself in his position of cape merchant by actively participating in the preservation of the colony, unlike "most of our chiefest men [who were] either sick or discontented, the rest being in such despair, as they would rather starve and rot with idleness than be persuaded to do anything for their own relief without constraint" (35). Smith both paints a picture of the discontent circulating in the colony as well as separates himself from these idle men, who would rather starve than labor for the good of themselves and the colony.

Smith details his bartering with the native population and his philosophy of ensuring the colony's survival through his brokering of peace through trade rather than through engaging in open warfare (37–39). One example of this method involves Smith's treatment of indigenous children: "But the children, or any that showed extraordinary kindness, I liberally contented with free gift, such trifles as well contented them" (35). He comports himself to match the reception he receives; if the Indians are kind, he "entertained their kindness and in like scorn offered them like commodities" (35). Thus, it appears that Smith has taken the metaphor of trade and applied it not only to the literal exchange of goods, but also to his demeanor toward the tribal members. He mentions a change in terms between him and the Paspahugh, on whose hunting ground the colony had unwittingly settled, which threatens Smith's system of trade as the Paspahugh attempt to wrestle the weapons away from Smith and his fellow traders (39). The scene presages his later meetings with Powhatan, which speak more deeply to the mutual distrust of colonists and native peoples.

After drawing lots over who should voyage to Powhatan and engage in trade, Smith writes that "the chance was mine," and he is soon fitted with

a barge and a company of eight men to travel up the Chickahominy River. They exchange copper and hatchets for corn as they proceed on their way, but Smith notes that he continued upriver rather than persist in bartering for fear "they should perceive my too great want" (39). He fears that he will jeopardize the terms of his exchange if the natives discover how desperate the colonists are for food and thus terminates his trade rather than give them insight into the dire circumstances animating his travels. His further travels prove fruitful, not only for his geographical understanding of the surrounding area, but also for his acquaintance with additional tribes, who treat them very kindly. As a result, Smith reappears at the fort with "seven hogsheads of corn" to add to their store (41). His return to the Mamanahunt, whom he had described as the most kind and generous of the tribes he encountered, becomes yet another instance of the natives' demonstrating a real curiosity about the colonists' firearms. Smith relates their desire to "hear our pieces, being in the midst of the river, which in regard of the echo seemed a peal of ordinance" (41).

Despite Smith's return to the fort with another "seven or eight hogsheads" worth of corn, the discontent among the colonists had congealed into plans for mutiny. When the smith verbally abused the president and threatened physical harm, he was sentenced to be hanged and only in the moments when he was climbing the ladder to his death revealed a plot to overthrow the president (41). The leader of the conspiracy, Captain Kendall, was likewise condemned by a jury and ordered to be shot (41). Smith offers no comment on this conspiracy plot but proceeds with his third voyage up the river, where he discovers additional tribes and a significantly depleted amount of corn. Nevertheless, Smith returns again to the fort, "our store being now indifferently well provided with corn" (43). When plans for Captain Martin's return to England are reintroduced, Smith joins as a voice of dissent against such a voyage (43). With dissenting voices ruling, Martin remains with the colony, and Smith makes his most famous voyage upriver and finally meets with Powhatan. He admits that

he had postponed his visit in order to ensure that the fort's provisions were adequate. By engaging in his duty as cape merchant on the heels of Captain Martin's frustrated attempt to return to England, Smith indirectly situates himself as the more dutiful member of the colony.

In an uncharacteristic move, Smith directly addresses the reader's or another person's criticism of his behavior when he orders members of his party to remain with the barge and not return to Jamestown without him as he hires a canoe and two Indians to guide him farther up the river, whose shallowness makes the barge's further progress impossible. Smith explains:

Though some wise men may condemn this too bold attempt of too much indiscretion, yet if they will consider the friendship of the Indians in conducting me, the desolateness of the country, the probability of some lake, and the malicious judges of my actions at home, as also to have some matters of worth to encourage our adventures in England, might well have caused any honest mind to have done the like, as well for his own discharge. (45)

Barbour interprets Smith's belabored language as his attempt to justify his actions in light of the deaths of three in his party (101). Shortly after this explanation, Smith, hearing "a loud cry, and a howling of Indians, but no warning [shot]," as he had instructed his seven comrades to fire in case of danger, grabs the guide with him and holds him as he fires with his French pistol (45). Although wounded in the thigh, Smith suffers no further injury from the 200 men accompanying Opeckanough, second in line of succession after Powhatan (47, 102). When they discover that Smith is a captain, his life is spared, for the tribe had a law of not executing a captain, tribal chief, or *werowance*, a chief who owed allegiance to Powhatan (102).

Smith's first encounter with Powhatan occurs with his men dead, himself wounded in the thigh and without any weapons, and yet he appears to use his remaining technology and knowledge of

astrology to create interest, even awe, in the chief. "I presented him with a compass dial, described by my best means the use thereof, whereat he so amazingly admired, as he suffered me to proceed in a discourse on the roundness of the earth, the course of the sun, moon, stars, and planets" (47). Barbour attributes Smith's scheme to his familiarity with Thomas Harriot, who reported in his narrative of items used to mystify the American Indians (102). Smith utilizes another bit of strategy when requested to discharge his pistol and fire at a target placed "at six score." He "broke [the pistol's] cock, whereat they were much discontented though a chance supposed" (51). Smith pretends to have disabled the gun accidentally while Barbour interprets this scene as a further example of the captive's attempts to use his wiles and technology to his advantage. If he were to shoot the pistol as requested, Barbour argues, Smith would have demonstrated the weapon's limitations since pistols at the time were capable of hitting a target only at short range (103).

The spectacle of Powhatan and his entourage, elaborately dressed, garners awe from Smith, who details the costuming of the chief and his high-ranking kinsmen and remarks that "such a grave and majestic countenance drove me to admiration to see such a state in a naked savage" (53). In Smith's description, perhaps, we see the notions of the noble savage at work, for his admiration is lessened, if not reversed, by his labeling of Powhatan as a "a naked savage." What is striking, then, is not Powhatan himself but a non-Englishman so bedecked and garnering so much respect from those around. Further, to Smith Powhatan's majestic affect seems at odds with the chief's racial identity. Such a moment reveals to readers the extent of Smith's culture shock as well as his uneasiness at being powerless in relation to such a figure. Conspicuously absent from Smith's tale of his four-day captivity by Powhatan and his adoption into their tribe is the famous rescue effected by Pocahontas. Because this tale appears in Smith's *Generall Historie* and not in *A True Relation of Virginia*, historians and critics alike have cast doubt on the veracity

of Smith's tale of deliverance at the hands of Powhatan's young daughter.

In its place, Smith offers a brief ethnographic account of the beliefs and customs of Powhatan and his people. This account involves Smith's recollection of a ceremony in which at 10 o'clock in the morning, three of four individuals began singing around a fire, each with a rattle in his hand. They laid down grains of wheat in three concentric circles around the fire. "One disguised with a great skin, his head hung round with little skins of weasels and other vermine with a crown of feathers on his head, painted as ugly as the devil, at the end of each song will make many signs and demonstrations with strange and vehement actions; great cakes of deer suet, dear, and tobacco he cast in the fire" (59). Critics conjecture that Smith was relating the ceremony of his own adoption into Powhatan's tribe. He provides further accounts of consulting a council about the following day's deer hunt, and the means by which they heal their sick and mourn their dead (59).

His next meeting with Powhatan affords Smith the honor of being a *werowance* of him, "and that all his subjects should so esteem us, and no man account us strangers nor Paspahaghans but Powhatans, and that the corn, women, and country should be to us as to his own people" (67). Note that the items listed as gifts or as Smith's entitled resources as *werowance* include land, food, and women. Smith does not comment on the offer of women, however, but alerts readers to the cultural significance of food: "Victuals you must know is all their wealth, and the greatest kindness they would show us" (67). Smith reports the generosity of Powhatan when he first meets Smith's "father," Captain Newport, and prepares for them a feast consisting of bread and venison. In exchange for these signs of friendship, the most crucial of them Smith's naming as Powhatan's *werowance*, Powhatan rightly inquires twice why Smith, Newport, and their fellow colonists appear at each meeting fully armed. In response, a rather cunning Smith refers to their arms as "the custom of our country" (69).

A sense of tentative trust between the Jamestown colonists and the native inhabitants of what would

become Virginia is broken when members of a few tribes, the Paspahagh, Chickahamian, Youghtanum, Pamunka, Mattapanient, and Kiskiack, ambush the fort (91). Smith had previously mentioned enmity among the Paspahagh and Kiskiack but had had favorable trading relations with many of the other tribes. He eventually releases the prisoners captured during the failed ambush, but not before Powhatan sends his daughter Pocahontas to plead for their freedom (93). In Smith's only reference to the famous chief's daughter, he describes her in terms that mark her as exceptional: "a child of ten years old, which not only for feature, countenance, and proportion, much exceedeth any of the rest of his people, but for wit, spirit, the only nonpareil of his country" (93). He treats her kindly, stating that he showered her with the gifts she deemed worthy and returned her to her father, along with the captives.

Smith concludes the narrative in a rather abrupt manner, but he seems to have considered the triumph of the colonists over this attempted ambush as a sign of their perseverance and a means of ensuring future peaceful relations with the land's natives. Smith writes assuringly, "We now remaining being in good health, all our men well contented, free from mutinies, in love one with another, and as we hope in a continual peace with the Indians" (97).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Smith's position as cape merchant in charge of trading compare with ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA's assumption of the same role? How do they imagine themselves and those with whom they trade?
2. How does Smith's use of technology compare with OLAUDAH EQUIANO's narrative of wonder and awe in his autobiography? In what ways do the American Indians awe or inspire Smith?

Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles (1623)

Smith's "most important friend," Samuel Purchas, enabled Smith to publish his *Generall Historie*,

even allowing him access to material that was to appear in Purchas's *Pilgrimes* (Emerson 20). The critic Everett Emerson believes that Purchas's text, along with Richard Hakluyt's *Hakluyt's Posthumus*, served as models for Smith's *Generall Historie* (20). Despite Smith's ability to use these two texts as models, Emerson notes that "little is new" in the *Generall Historie*: Book 1 is a collection of travel accounts edited by Smith, book 2 borrows from *A Map of Virginia*, book 5 relies heavily on both *A Description of New England* and *New England Trials*, and book 3, "the most famous portion of the *Generall Historie*," "is a revision of the account published in *The Proceedings*" (Emerson 21). An even more interesting fact distinguishes these two texts. Although *A True Relation* was specifically about Virginia and his experiences there, Smith does not draw upon it for his *Generall Historie*.

Emerson Everett traces the history of the publication, stating that it originated in April 1621 when a man from Gloucestershire who had invested in the Virginia Company of London requested a "fair and perspicuous history, compiled of that country, from her discovery to this day" (cited in Emerson 55). Although all who attended the meeting approved of John Smith's request, no action occurred until March of the following year, 1622, when American Indians killed roughly 400 colonists. Smith's hopes to be sent with soldiers and reinforcements was denied, but his interest in the cause of American colonization probably prompted him to take up pen and begin writing book 1 of his *Generall Historie*, which he completed by the end of 1623 (Emerson 56).

The massacre of 400 colonists was clearly still on Smith's mind when he compiled the histories necessary for the *Generall Historie*, in part because he felt assured of his own abilities to deal with the American Indians, and in part because he deeply desired to return to New England. For this reason, perhaps, his account of American Indians is significantly heightened in this book over his first account, *A True Relation of Virginia*. He revised his own version of an encounter with American Indians that he reported in *The Proceedings*, turn-

ing what was originally a rather peaceful account of gaining corn from the American Indians to feed the colonists in his care to a gun-filled battle in which they were either felled by bullets or else fled into the woods (cited in Emerson 71–72).

What follows next in book 3 is perhaps the most anthologized portion of any of Smith's works: his capture by Powhatan and rescue, supposedly at the hands of Pocahontas. Smith details the pageantry attending Powhatan: "He sat covered with a great robe, made of Raccoon skinnes, and all the tayles hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of 16 or 18 yeares, and along on each side the house, two rowes of men, and behind them as many as women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red: many of their heads bedecked with the white downe of Birds, but every one with something, and a great chain of white beads about their necks." The purpose of Smith's detailing the costumes of his captors is to help offset his own position as captive. After all, he describes a significant number of people attending Powhatan. After Powhatan's "feast . . . in their best barbarous manner they could," the decision seems to be made to brain Smith with "two great stones."

Pocahontas, "the King's dearest daughter," intercedes on Smith's behalf. Having exhausted all entreaties, "She got his head in her armes, and laid her own upon his to save him." Emerson notes how Smith's description of Pocahontas "has an amusing touch, an anticlimax that distracts the reader's attention from Pocahontas" (73). What is interesting is that Smith does not really comment on what occurs after his rescue: "The Emperor was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper." Scholars familiar with captivity narrative recognize that quite often, captives were adopted into the families who had initially captured them. The exchange of items Powhatan imagines, "hatchets, bells, beads, and copper," seems to point to Powhatan's decision to adopt Smith into his tribe. What is entirely absent from Smith's account is the romance between Pocahontas and Smith that has become the stuff of legend.

In the legend of Pocahontas, her actions become a heroic, romantic rescue, and the landscape is anthropomorphized into a highly sexualized, silent American Indian female. Her act of interposing her head for Smith's is supposedly animated by her young, impulsive love for him. However, Smith makes no claims about a relationship between the two. Indeed, Pocahontas married John Rolfe and traveled with him to England. The pervasive myth that she rescued Smith as an act of unrequited love prevails, despite its historical inaccuracy, because, as critics such as Annette Kolodny note, it perpetuates the gender dynamics of colonization in which the American landscape is feminized and symbolized by American Indian females while the British colonist is characterized as a virile male.

Subsequent interactions between Powhatan and Smith, who has been adopted and renamed *Nan-taquoud*, reveal how politically expedient Powhatan considered this intertribal embrace of Smith to be. By drawing Smith into his tribe, Powhatan clearly anticipated that he would improve trade exchanges with the British colonists. Smith recognizes how clever Powhatan is in the terms he sets for exchanges (such as demanding that Smith and his men not go armed to their meetings since doing so symbolizes intent to invade and conquer). Smith recognizes Powhatan as a "subtill Savage." Despite this backhanded compliment, Smith maintains his same thematic argument throughout the text—he is well versed in the ways of the American Indians, and were he to return to America, he could prevent future events like the massacre of 400 settlers that transpired in his absence.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Smith's description of Pocahontas's deliverance appears in *Generall Historie*, but not *A True Relation of Virginia*. Consider why this most famous passage might appear in one version of his time in the Virginia colony and not in the other.
2. How does Smith's account of his captivity and release compare with those depicted in the works of Cabeza de Vaca and Mary Rowlandson?
3. Consider how the gender dynamics of Pocahontas are replicated in other early colonial texts such as THOMAS MORTON's "Rise of Oedipus" in *New English Canaan*.

The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith (1630)

Fully titled *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America: Beginning in the Year 1593 and Continued to This Present 1629*, Smith's autobiographical text offers a sweeping sense of his life as an adventurous explorer. It is therefore no surprise that his first chapter only briefly details the death of his parents when he was 13, followed immediately by his earliest yearnings for life on the open sea. As the editor Philip Barbour terms it, *True Travels* is Smith's "only outright autobiographical work," but it is also his most "controversial" because of its similarity to the tall tale (125). The odd mixture of truth and fiction is not extraordinary for Smith, however, because of his public persona and his desire to cultivate an image of himself that was hyperbolically heroic. Barbour, however, does not agree with those readers who would dismiss the text whole cloth as a "sheer prevarication"; instead, he points to the fact that many of the claims Smith makes regarding his appearance and actions at various locations such as Venice, Vienna, and Budapest have never been investigated.

In chapter 2, Smith recalls how four "French Gallants" "well attended, feigning to him the one to be a great Lord, the rest his gentlemen" robbed him, leaving him aboard without enough money to pay for his own passage (he had to sell his coat) (157). He soon revenges himself on one of them, Curzianvere, defeating him in a swordfight and forcing him to confess that they had stolen from him (158). He immediately follows the earl of Ployer, who was going to war in France, where he finally embarks for Italy, only to be thrown overboard by a "rabble of pilgrims of diverse nations

going to Rome” who take him as a “Huguenot” and believe “they never should have fair weather so long as he was aboard [with] them” (159). Captain La Roche, also loyal to the earl of Ployer, rescues Smith and sails with him to Egypt, where they deliver their freight, and then on to the Adriatic Sea, where they encounter a sea fight against an argosy from Venice. Captain La Roche’s superior artillery prevails, and they take aboard as spoils of the fight various silver and gold coins along with expensive materials (silk, velvet, and gold cloth) (161). When La Roche allows Smith to disembark in Italy, he provides him with ample funds, and Smith travels to Rome, where he briefly spies Pope Clement VIII ascending a flight of stairs, and then on to Naples and other cities along the coast.

Smith tells of the brilliant military strategy he employed in Olumpagh, which Philip Barbour has confirmed to be Lower Limbach in present-day Yugoslavia (130–131). As a result of his craftiness, which included not only developing a coded system for communication, but also deceiving the Turkish soldiers into believing they had an enormous army, Smith was named captain and given an army of 250 horsemen to command under Colonel Voldo (165). Another victorious battle for the Christians is also attributed to Smith’s skilled use of explosives, this time “fireworks” composed of loose powder, turpentine, and other flammable materials set into earthen pots and fired onto the Turks’ encampments (166). The tale of future battles and a long, brutal winter in which thousands of soldiers perished in the cold seems to deviate from Smith’s own personal tale, as he does not figure as an active agent in any of the events. Barbour and other historians believe that Smith’s narrative at this point drew heavily on the text of Ferneza (172).

In chapter 7, however, Smith does return as the hero and protagonist and recalls his three deadly challenges against Turkish soldiers. Smith provides wonderful detail: His opponent “entered the field well mounted and armed; on his shoulders were fixed a pair of great wings, compacted of eagle feathers with a ridge of silver, richly garnished with gold and precious stones, a janissary before him,

bearing his lance.” Against this opulent image of his opponent, Smith appears “with a noise of trumpets, [and] only a page bearing his lance” (172). Almost immediately after the “sound of the charge,” Smith attacks the Turk through his beaver, the face guard of his helmet, and then swiftly decapitates the fallen soldier (172). Smith’s victory riles a “vowed friend” of the dead captain, and he also challenges Smith to the same form of duel. This second Turkish soldier is wounded in the left arm and thus unable to “rule his horse”; as he falls to the ground and is instantly killed, Smith decapitates him as well and sends his body, “and his rich apparel,” back to the town (173). The following day, Smith dispatches yet a third Turk, this time stabbing him between the plates protecting his back and loins (174). Interestingly, Smith attributes his victory in this last challenge to “God’s assistance,” a religious reference that had not appeared in his descriptions of the first two battles but would have seemed quite natural since the battles were traditionally described along religious lines. As a result of Smith’s successive triumphs over his Turkish adversaries, he is made sergeant major and rewarded with a scimitar and a belt “worth three hundred ducats” (174). At the victorious termination of the battles against the Turks, the duke of Transylvania, Sigismundus Bathor, learns of Smith’s accomplishments and rewards him with “three Turks’ heads in a shield for his arms, by patent, under his hand and seal, with an oath ever to wear them in his colors, his picture in gold, and three hundred ducats yearly for a pension” (175).

Sigismundus’s victory is short lived, however, as Transylvania is soon recaptured by the Turks in a series of bloody battles that leave Smith wounded and a prisoner of war. During their retreat, Smith is captured by the Tatars. He attributes his own survival to his “armor and habit,” which his captors believed were indicators that Smith would fetch a high ransom (186). Shackled with another 19 prisoners, with chains around their necks, Smith was forced to march to Constantinople, where he would become the servant of the young Charatza Tragabigzanda (186). When she sends him to her

brother, a timariot in Tartaria, Smith is stripped, shaved, shackled about his neck, and dressed only in the wool of a big-horned sheep (189). His time among the Tatars is recounted in much the manner of an ethnographer, detailing such aspects of their culture as their diet, clothing, and religious practices (189–195). As Barbour notes, Smith's chapters noting the cultural practices, living conditions, and beliefs among the residents of Tartaria borrowed from Broniovius's "Description of Tartaria" as well as Friar William de Rubruquis's *Itinerarium* (191).

In chapter 17, Smith finally escapes captivity. Although he had strategized with other Christians who were also held as captive slaves, "they could not find how to make an escape, by any reason or possibility" (200). One day, when the bashaw arrived to visit the granges at which Smith was employed as a thresher, Smith "took occasion so to beat, spurn, and revile him, that forgetting all reason, he beat of the tymor's brains with his threshing bat . . . clothed himself in his clothes, hid his body under the straw, filled his knapsack with corn, shut the doors, mounted his horse, and ran into the desert at all adventure" (200). Luckily, Smith is not apprehended along his journey, as he encounters no one who would recognize the iron about his neck as a clear sign of his enslavement (201). Finally, he reaches what Barbour believes to have been Valuiki, where the governor takes pity upon him, removes his irons, and gives him money and food necessary to continue his journey through Russia. When he finally reaches his goal, reuniting with Sigismundus to ensure that his honors are received and that he be given 1,500 ducats to compensate for his losses, Smith leaves for Spain and then for Morocco.

Just as Smith has drawn on the published accounts of others when in new lands, so, too does he weave in John de Leo's *Geographical History of Africa* to augment his details of his travels there (204). Among the marvels he includes in his account are the three golden balls of Africa, which were erected by the daughter of the king of Ethiopia, who was engaged to marry the prince of Morocco, who suddenly died before their wedding. As a memorial to him, the Ethiopian princess "caused those three golden balls to be set up

for his monument, and vowed virginity all her life" (204). He also includes tales of the previous king of Barbary (North Africa from Morocco to the Egyptian border), Mulai Ahmed IV, whose admiration for tradesmen and artisans resulted in the presence of a multitude of English skilled workman, including a watchmaker named Master Henry Archer (205–206).

It is the tale of Master Archer, and the subsequent tale of the lion, that contribute to historians' dismissing the accuracy of Smith's *True Travels*. Archer's craftsmanship is so revered by Mulai Ahmed IV that, when Archer mistakenly boxes the ear of a respected Moslem monk, a crime punishable by the removal of his hand and his tongue, the king intercedes on his behalf and has his guard of 300 men break Archer out of prison (206). Smith concludes his tales of northern Africa by recommending "many large histories of [Africa] in diverse languages, especially that writ by that most excellent statesmen, John de Leo" (207). Barbour believes that Smith relied so heavily on John de Leo's account of Morocco in order to pad this section of the text. "The account in the *True Travels* may consequently be assumed to have been based on Smith's presence in some parts of Morocco at the time. Yet the truth would seem to be that Smith found no opportunity there to enlist as a mercenary and thus filled up his narrative with more or less idle tales gathered on the spot, rounding it all off with an account of a 'piratical' skirmish" (134).

Indeed, the theory that material was used as filler or padding for Smith's *True Travels* seems to explain the abrupt shift that occurs immediately after his participation in a sea battle with Captain Merham against two Spanish men-of-war. Smith's next few chapters are borrowed from his own *Generall Historie of Virginia* (214–220). What holds these several chapters together, Barbour suggests, besides their reliance on Smith's own former work, is their subject matter: British colonization. Although Smith was older, he was still interested in the enterprise of colonization and may have been attempting to gain some position in a different locale by writing of British colonization efforts and thus demonstrating his knowledge of them.

True Travels ends on a rather odd note—the final chapter addresses, as its title suggests, “the bad life, qualities and conditions of pirates, and how they taught the Turks and Moors to become men of war” (238). Smith attributes the increase in the number of pirates to the shift in England’s ruler, from Queen Elizabeth to King James. Because James had grown up in peaceful times, Smith notes, there was no need for the men-of-war who were so well employed under Queen Elizabeth. As a result, the men turned to piracy for a host of reasons: poverty, jealousy of those sailors who were wealthy, revenge, covetousness, vanity, or general ill will (239). The conclusion, however, makes clear why Smith included this account of pirates in his *True Travels*. It serves as a warning for those who do not well reward sailors and seamen with ample pay and thus serves indirectly to request just reward for Smith’s incredible feats as a soldier and a seaman, as cataloged in the first two thirds of *True Travels* (240–241).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Smith’s captivity among the Tatars with his captivity by Powhatan. What details does he give of his captors in each account? How does he imagine himself as captive?
2. Food is often an index of culture. How does Smith’s detailing of the Tatars’ diet compare with MARY WHITE ROWLANDSON’S account of the diet consumed by the American Indians who captured her?
3. Smith incorporates tales of various lands that derive from other sources, and yet these histories are woven into what critics recognize as his “most autobiographical” of all works. Consider other autobiographical works, such as THOMAS JEFFERSON’S or BENJAMIN FRANKLIN’S. How do these modes of self-writing reflect a larger sense of the individual?

Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England, or Any Where (1631)

Smith’s last publication is, according to the critic Everett Emerson, his most attractive work as it

contains some passages that reveal his literary polish, and it is without the braggadocio that obscures many of his earlier works. Smith dedicates his final book to George Abbot and Samuel Harsnett, two archbishops, on the basis of the text’s subject matter: “the Plantation of New England, for the increase of God’s Church, converting Savages, and enlarging the King’s Dominions.” In his address to the reader, Smith introduces the idea of extrapolation: “Apelles by the proportion of a foot, could make the whole proportion of a man.” The notion behind this conceit is that one can deduce a wider view or scope of vision about America based upon Smith’s descriptions of the New England Plantation. Thus, Smith not only advertises for the colonization of America in general, but also squarely places this colony as emblematic of what future inhabitants might fashion themselves after in later years.

Chapter 1 addresses the specter of dissenters, or members of various religious organizations at odds with the Church of England: Anabaptists, separatists, papists, Brownists, and Puritans. Smith attempts to defuse the scandal and “rumor” associated with these settlers by comparing their dissent to the presence of a traitor among Jesus’ 12 apostles. If there was one traitor among the 12 devout followers of Jesus Christ, Smith seems to argue, then “it is more than a wonder” that such dissemblers might exist among the plantation settlers. He warns against painting all of the settlers with the same broad brush, stating that they alone suffer from their own wrongdoing while the king and his kingdom are glorified in their triumphs (270).

In terms of his own experience in Virginia, Smith sarcastically contrasts the luxuries enjoyed by the members of the company still residing in England with the inadequate or scarce materials shipped to his company in Virginia. Smith chastises his successors, who are living off the fruits of his arduous labors. Chapter 1 concludes with Smith’s returning to the familiar subject of the inexperienced tradesmen who formed the majority of the original party of settlers. Clearly, Smith argues, the occupations of the settlers made the company’s single aim “nothing but present profit” (272). A desire for

financial gain not only distracts the colonists from laboring for survival, but it also endangers the Virginia Colony's future by diverting attention from what is best for their present and future. Indeed, Smith vows that "all the world could not have devised better courses to bring us to ruin" than the excessive "doting [over] mines of gold and [routes to] the seven seas" (272).

Chapter 2 continues Smith's defense of his initial venture in Virginia by characterizing the class factions inherent to English society as the culprit for their failure. "Most of them," Smith declares, "would rather starve than work" (273). If the settlers were willing to endure starvation, Smith had no incentive to induce them to labor for their own well-being, much less for the health and welfare of the colony. For those colonists like Smith who were willing to work, their lack of skills in catching fish or hunting game resulted in their subsisting for a time on corn. Those not killed by lack of food might have been among the "three hundred forty seven" slain by the massacre of March 22, 1622 (274). The disgruntled colonists, who returned to England after exhausting the colony's stock, "persuaded King James to call in [their charter]" (274). Smith mentions that these early steps in dissolving the colony transpired "without our knowledge or consent" (274).

Chapter 3 opens with a brief catalog of the abundance of livestock and food sources available in Virginia "since they have been left in a manner, as it were, to themselves" (274). A reversal of the previous conditions that brought about the starvation or near-starvation of some settlers unwilling to work has resulted in sufficient food resources. Smith expresses his hope that they will balance their cash crop, tobacco, with their staple crops needed to sustain life, lest, he seems to imply, they return to their previous circumstances. His desire for the prosperity of England's colonial enterprises in America is not narrowed to the Virginia Colony, but extended to its supposed rival colony, New England, and beyond. Smith wishes to arrest the growth of "the seed of envy and the rust of covetousness [that] doth grow too fast," causing some to pit the

colonies against one another rather than recognize their ability to aid and support one another. Smith further broadens the scope of England's colonial enterprise by noting, "There is vast land enough for all the people in England, Scotland, and Ireland" (275). Because the landscape is so vast, Smith envisions it as large enough to accommodate all of the king's subjects. Further support of this vision of America is found in the series of three plagues in three years that have all but destroyed some native tribes. For details, Smith relies on Governor WILLIAM BRADFORD, thus absolving himself of any discrepancies between Bradford's account of native inhabitants who survived and the tallies of native survivors gathered by others (276).

Chapter 4 covers the "great question" of many good and religiously devout men: whether they may "possess those countries, which are none of theirs, but the poor savages" (276). By referencing God's will, Smith's response to this question anticipates manifest destiny and its justification of western expansion in the mid-19th century. He assumes a priori that "God . . . made the world to be inhabited with mankind." The colonization process enables the conversion of millions to Christianity. However, Smith does not immediately pursue the religious implications of colonialism but instead dwells on the availability of uninhabited land that will prove productive if "manured and used accordingly" (276). For those people in England who endure "such great rents and rates" for land, the promise of fertile soil, purchased for "a copper kettle and a few toys," becomes, as Smith imagines, "a reason sufficient to such tender consciences" (276).

Smith imagines colonization as a great tradition initiated by Adam and Eve, who cultivated the earth to provide for their posterity. Ancient civilizations such as the Hebrews, Lacedemonians, Greeks, and Romans, in their struggles to enlarge their territories and convert all the savages, followed the same pattern established by the first man and woman (277). Thus, Smith proposes that England imitate the virtues of its predecessors. Otherwise, they will not be worthy successors.

In his description of his first voyage to New England, Smith basks in the abundance of fish and fur pelts he and his men were able to acquire with seemingly little effort. “With fifteene or eighteene men at most,” they caught “more than 60,000 in lesse than a moneth” (278). The number of furs taken from beaver, otter, and martin, which amounted to 1,500 pounds, would have been greater had they not had to “content [with] patents and commissions, with such fearfull incredulity that more dazzled our eyes than opened them” (278). In other words, British bureaucracy stymied the efforts to acquire the raw goods that were available. Smith does, however, applaud one gesture made possible by bureaucracy, and that is the naming of the land. Smith had written it on maps and in other documents as *New England*, but the “malicious minds among sailors and others, drowned that name with the echo of Nusconcus, Canaday, and Penaquid” until King Charles “was pleased to confirme it by that title” (278).

Chapters 5, 6, and 8 are largely reworked from Smith’s *Generall Historie*, and he acknowledges this debt to his previous work by referring readers to his “generall history” (278). In chapter 7, revised from *New England Trials*, Smith details some of the bounteous amount of fish caught by two ships from London that sailed to New Plymouth and relied upon “that poore company they found, that had lived two yeares by their naked industry, and what the country naturally afforded” (282). This “wonderfull industry” that Smith celebrates in enterprising colonists pales in comparison to his litany of sufferings and depredations he has endured in his “neere 37 yeares” (285). In a passage that the critic Everett Emerson calls a “vigorous expression” of Smith’s viewpoint in 1631, he provides a spirited recitation of his various adventures and near-death experiences. It is quite unusual for Smith to indulge in retelling “how many strange accidents have befallen . . . [him],” but his point in this chapter seems to be the contrast between his own trials and “the fruits [his] labours thus well begin to prosper” (285). Unlike the settlers he terms the Brownists, who he believes are “pre-

tending onely religion their governour,” who have “most vanished to nothing,” industrious colonists like him seem to prevail because God’s “omnipotent power only delivered him” (286, 285).

Just as Smith contrasts his industriousness and success with the lack of success of the Brownists, he also pits his set of values that would guarantee a laborer rights to land he has improved over a nobleman who merely draws lots to determine which of 20 plots of land should be his possession. On the basis of his own maps of the area, Smith mentions how unfair this system of dividing up the land is because it leaves him with the uninhabitable island now called the Isles of Shoals, while nobles who have never left England’s shores, nor risked their lives to figure the lay of the land, are given patents outright. His unsolicited advice is to encourage servants who leave England for America to “have as much freedome in reason as may be” (287). Specifically, Smith proposes that the patent holders provide 20 to a 100 acres of land after the passage of five or six years in which the laborer has proved that he “extraordinarily deserved” it (287).

When Smith details how the open land in New England might be used, either for farming or for planting trees, it is always with a mind toward utility, further trade, and exploration. He describes how the trees in New England are “commonly lower, but much thicker and firmer wood, and more proper for shipping” (289). He proceeds to offer the services of his own book, a *Sea Grammar*, which he deems “most necessary for those plantations” because it details to “an unskillful carpenter or sailer [how] to build boats and barks sufficient to sail those coasts and rivers” (289). He likens the instructions in his book to the detailed account God gave to Noah in the construction of the ark (290). Subsequent chapters also offer practical advice on how to build houses (detailing the kinds of stones and other raw materials readily available), how to preserve the grasses as hay for the cattle during winter months, and how to plant corn as the American Indians do between trees so that they will act as barricades against the wind (290–291).

- Kupperman, Karen Ordahl, ed. *Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of His Writings*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Lemay, J. A. Leo. *The American Dream of Captain John Smith*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991.
- Montgomery, Dennis. Captain John Smith. Available online. URL: <http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/smith.cfm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Morse, Jarvis M. "John Smith and His Critics: A Chapter in Colonial Historiography." *Journal of Southern History* 1, no. 2 (May 1935): 123–137.
- Price, David. *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Heart of a New Nation*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- Rozwenc, Edwin C. "Captain John Smith's Image of America." *William and Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (January 1959): 27–36.
- Thompson, John M. *The Journals of Captain John Smith: A Jamestown Biography*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007.
- Vaughan, Alden T. *American Genesis: Captain John Smith and the Founding of Virginia*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1975.



EDWARD TAYLOR (CA. 1642–1729)

I am this crumb of dust which is designed
To make my pen unto Thy praise alone.

(“Prologue”)

In 1937 a scholar working in the Yale University Library made a monumental discovery that would forever alter our understanding of Puritan literature: a 400+-page bound manuscript book of poems by the Puritan minister Edward Taylor. Professor Thomas Johnson published a few of these previously unknown poems in an issue of the *New England Quarterly* that same year and edited the first collection of Taylor’s verse in 1939. Eventually, scholars found over 40,000 lines of original verse, a total of 3,100 manuscript pages. Before the revelation of Taylor’s poetry, even the most enthusiastic of literary critics were inclined to dismiss this era’s literature. They could argue that ANNE BRADSTREET’s *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) and Michael Wigglesworth’s *The Day of Doom* (1662) were atypical of the Puritan mind. Until 1937, the common consensus among professors of American literature was that we should value the Puritans for their extensive theological and historical writings, but that they had little interest or talent in poetry. Yet suddenly there appeared in pre-World War II America a body of several hundred poems, rich in imagery and full of spiritual passion, that forced Americans to question their easy dismissal of Puritan poetry. The sheer number and range of Edward Taylor’s poems and the mystery surrounding their 20th-century discovery revitalized studies in early American literature and demanded a reevaluation of the literary canon.

Until 1937, Edward Taylor was viewed as a minor figure in Puritan theological studies. He was notable for his connections to other key Massachusetts figures, the Mather family and Samuel Sewell, for example, and for his long service (1671–1729) as a frontier minister in Westfield, Massachusetts, who dared to attack Solomon Stoddard (1643–1729) for lowering communion requirements. But in studies of the Mathers, Sewell, or Stoddard, Taylor was a footnote figure. The discovery of his manuscript poems had people questioning, “Who was Edward Taylor? And, why didn’t he publish these poems during his life?”

Edward Taylor was born in England, in Sketchley in Leicestershire in 1642, 1643, or 1644 to a family of five sons and one daughter. The first date is generally assigned by critics, but no documentation has yet been found. His parents were strictly nonconformist, and perhaps emotionally distant. There are few references to either in his collected writings. His mother (Margaret) died in 1657, and his father (William) followed her in 1658. Donald E. Stanford’s research uncovered the fact that Taylor received £40 from his father’s estate on his 21st birthday. Taylor acquired a solid education and may have even studied at Cambridge for a time. We know that by 1662 Taylor was teaching at a school in Bagworth, Leicestershire. In that year Charles II’s Act of Uniformity was enacted, and Taylor was dismissed from his position for refusing to sub-

scribe to dictates antithetical to his nonconformist beliefs. We do not know how Taylor supported himself over the next six years; our next confirmed sighting of the future preacher-poet occurs on April 26, 1668, when he left England for the colonies, never to return. Taylor's destination was Massachusetts, site of the great Puritan experiment in the New World. It had been only 48 years since the foundation of the Puritan settlement at Plymouth Plantation, but since then, the communities of Salem (1626), Boston (1630), Sudbury (1638), Framingham (1650), and Lancaster (1653), among others, had been established.

Taylor apparently had some influential connections in England, for when he landed on July 5, 1668, he had letters of introduction to key citizens of Boston, including Increase Mather, the father of COTTON MATHER, and John Hull, a wealthy merchant. These men provided him an introduction to Charles Chauncy, president of Harvard College (founded 1636). Taylor was admitted to the school on July 23, 1668, and awarded the position of college butler. Over the next three years, Taylor studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, logic, rhetoric, and ethics. During these years, he met the prolific diarist, Salem witch trial judge and apologist, and abolitionist Samuel Sewell. These two men roomed together for two years and remained correspondents throughout their long lives. (Simon Bradstreet, the poet's son, was another of Taylor's classmates.) In fall 1671, Taylor had committed himself to remain at the college as a scholar when a leading citizen of Westfield, Massachusetts, Thomas Dewey, appealed to Increase Mather to recommend a minister for the new town. Mather directed him to Taylor. While Taylor was tempted to decline the call, his mentor was in favor of his protégé's leaving the confines of academia and entering the mission field. So, in November 1671 Taylor left Harvard and the intellectual stimulation of eastern Massachusetts for the frontier farming and trapping town of Westfield, founded in 1667.

Westfield, about 100 miles from Boston, was truly an outpost in the early 1670s. Given the distance, Taylor returned infrequently over the next

58 years. Eventually, Taylor gathered a personal library of 220 books plus hundreds of handwritten copies of other texts. But Westfield remained a rural farming community with few educated citizens throughout Taylor's life. This sense of exile is evident in the first sermon Taylor preached in the town on December 3, 1671, when he draws parallels between himself and John the Baptist calling out in the wilderness (Patterson 5). This isolation from other educated men may be partially responsible for Taylor's renewed poetic dedication. Taylor had been a "versifier" from an early age. Five poems from his youth in England survive, as well as five from his time at Harvard. Among these works is a verse declamation delivered on May 5, 1671, "My Last Declamation in the Colledge Hall." J. Daniel Patterson calls this work "a vigorous and complex defense of the English language as well as an early and modest critique of his poetic abilities" (3). But it is not until the late 1670s that we have any evidence of Taylor's crafting the poems upon which his contemporary reputation rests.

Taylor's first years in Westfield were a struggle. The town was small and consistently threatened. The Massachusetts winters were harsh, diseases were virulent, and the Native Americans were unwilling to relinquish their rights to the territory of central and western Massachusetts. After a series of confrontations, the members of the Wampanoag tribe and their allies declared war on the settlers (King Philip's War, 1675–76). According to Jill Lepore, "By August 1676 . . . twenty-five English towns, more than half of all the colonists' settlements in New England, had been ruined" (xii). Yet despite its isolated location, the community of Westfield was never attacked, and Taylor's leadership during the stressful time ensured his tenure as the town's minister. Taylor resigned himself to the daily life of a frontier minister, writing, "But at length my thoughts being more settled, I determined within [myself that] in case things could go comfortably on, to Settle with them" (cited in Patterson 7). Therefore on August 27, 1679, Taylor's church at Westfield was officially organized, and he was ordained as its first minister.

Edward Taylor's personal situation brightened considerably with his November 5, 1674, marriage to Elizabeth (called Elisa) Fitch of Norwich, Connecticut. The daughter of the Reverend James Fitch, Elizabeth appears to have been the object of Taylor's deep devotion. In fact, their love may well rival the other famous Puritan attachment between Anne and Simon Bradstreet immortalized in poems such as "To My Dear and Loving Husband" and "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment." Taylor's love for Elizabeth specifically prompted two poems. The first, a courtship poem in an elaborate alphabet acrostic form, was titled "This Dove & Olive Branch to You." The intensity of their affection can be seen in his wrenching elegy after her death on July 7, 1689, at age 39. This poem, one of a series of elegies Taylor composed, holds the distinction with his elegy for Samuel Hooker (d. 1697) of being Taylor's most mature and well-crafted examples of the genre. Elizabeth's elegy, "Funerall Poem upon the Death of My Ever Endear'd, and Tender Wife," imagines the dead Puritan wife and mother scolding her husband for excessive mourning: "My dear, dear love, reflect thou no such thing, / will grief permit you not my grave to sing?" By the end of this three-part elegy; the poet's grief has been tempered by his gratitude for her memory and his conviction of her salvation.

In addition to his elegies, representative of 17th-century elegies and comparable to those by Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth, John Danforth, and Thomas Shepard, Taylor began to write a series of paraphrases of the Hebrew Psalms in 1674. This project was instigated by his practical need to convey complex theological doctrine to his largely uneducated congregation as well as an admiration of the biblical poet David. This same motive may have instigated a series of occasional poems in the early 1680s. One of these poems, "Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children," was one of only two poems published in his lifetime; the other was the 1712 elegy for David Dewey of Westfield. Two stanzas of "Upon Wedlock" were included in Cotton Mather's *Right Thoughts in Sad*

Hours (1689). Its topic is sadly obvious. From 1675 to 1688, Elizabeth and Edward Taylor had eight children (Samuel, b. August 27, 1675; Elizabeth, b. December 27, 1676; James, b. October 12, 1678; Abigail, b. August 6, 1681; Bathshuah, b. January 17, 1684; Elizabeth, b. February 5, 1685; Mary, b. July 3, 1686; and Hezekiah, b. February 10 or 18, 1688). All of the daughters, except Bathshuah, died in infancy. In "Upon Wedlock" (1682) Taylor celebrates their earthly beauty but protests their painful deaths. Yet the preacher-poet speaker ends the poem with cheerful resignation: "Grief o'er doth flow: and nature fault would find, / Were not thy will my spell, charm, joy, and gem, / That as I said, I say, take, Lord, they're thine."

Other occasional poems dated to this era include "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly," "Upon the Sweeping Flood," and "Huswifery." "Huswifery," one of Taylor's most frequently anthologized poems, is organized around a unifying conceit of the spinning wheel and weaving. His familiarity with this craft may be the result of working in this trade before leaving England. In the poem Taylor parallels the parts of a 17th-century spinning wheel with the physical and spiritual components of a man. The persona pleads with God, "Make me, O Lord, Thy spinning wheel complete." The simple, earthy imagery of these occasional poems may indicate that Taylor read all or parts of these works to his congregation, incorporating them into his sermons to these rural farmers.

Taylor's occasional poems, including the much later "A Fig for Thee Oh! Death" (ca. 1721), raise an interesting question of influence. The scholars who first had the task of integrating Taylor into existing conceptions of Puritan literature most frequently referred to him as the last metaphysical or baroque poet. There are connections between Taylor's verse—his extended metaphors and allusions to the emblem tradition—and the poetry of such British poets as John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, and Thomas Traherne. For example, Taylor's "A Fig for Thee Oh! Death" might be read alongside Donne's "Death, Be Not Proud." Death, the apostrophe of

both poems, is disparaged; neither poet quakes in fear as he addresses death and instead glories that death's approach will mean entry to heaven's joys. Many of the metaphysical writers also felt dual callings as ministers and poets, but despite Taylor's surface level affinities to the group, he should not be classified exclusively with these poets. He was undoubtedly influenced by their poetic techniques and their model of the preacher-poet, but he must be read within the emerging Puritan tradition. Taylor's work is imbued with an intense spirituality and a devotion to the New World project that place him firmly in the late 17th- and early 18th-century American literary tradition. Robert Hass, former U.S. poet laureate, reinforces this opinion. To him Taylor "seems—as Anne Bradstreet does in her private and unpublished poems—an early instance of the solitariness, self-sufficiency, and peculiarity of the American imagination" (46).

As we have seen, before the early 1680s, Taylor's writing falls into four categories: elegies, occasional poems of increasing spirituality, psalm paraphrases, and sermons. His elegies, with two notable exceptions, are typical of his age and largely forgettable. His occasional verses show the influence the British metaphysical poets probably had on his poetic development. Additionally, their simple language and earthy imagery permit us to hypothesize that he may have incorporated their lines, as well as those from his paraphrases, in the estimated 3,000 sermons he wrote over his ministerial career. (Of these, fewer than 100 have been recovered and published.)

The year 1680 was a turning point for Taylor's poetry; as Patterson explains, before this date, Taylor's poetry is often light and playful, but afterward, he demonstrates a "delight in complex poetic elements, such as the pun, the acrostic, and the extended conceit" (25). During 1680–81 he completed a project of passionate spirituality that comprised 35 poems titled *God's Determinations Touching His Elect*. Categorizing this project has presented a problem for critics. As Norman Grabo, Taylor's biographer, summarizes, it has been referred to as "a song cycle, chamber opera, moral-

ity play, or meditation," but he concludes that it "is finally an extended, ambitious literary work, bringing together in one artistic effort all of Taylor's techniques and concerns" (107). Taylor demonstrates his virtuosity in 11 different verse forms, which often use the rhetorical technique of rhyming dialogue. Some of the better-known poems from this project are "The Preface," "A Dialogue between Justice and Mercy," "The Soul's Groan to Christ for Succor," and "Christ's Reply." In the opinion of Thomas Davis, "*God's Determinations* is an uneven poem. The generally high quality of the verse and techniques is often undercut by quite pedestrian lines that are flat and dull and by a shaky development of individual sections of the poem" (32). Yet Taylor's success in constructing a long verse project of multiple parts appears to have given him the confidence he needed to conceive and write one of the most complex and extensive works in early American literature, *Preparatory Meditations before My Approach to the Lord's Supper*.

In May 1682, a few months before the death of his daughter Abigail, Taylor began the ambitious poetic project that would later astound readers in the 20th century. From 1682 to 1725, he crafted a series of 219 meditations, divided into two series, that can be dated with reasonable certainty. Taylor's stanzas generally fall into six lines with an *ababcc* rhyme scheme. They were prompted by the particular biblical verse Taylor took as the subject of the corresponding sermon delivered before the administration of the Lord's Supper. The meditative tradition, with its tripartite structure, was strong in the colonies; Increase Mather had recently published *Practical Truths Tending to Promote Godliness* (1682), a work that may have inspired Taylor to begin his own meditative series.

The shorter first series coincidentally ends in 1692, the year of his remarriage at the age of 50 to Ruth Wyllys of Hartford. Taylor left little information about this marriage; there are neither courtship poems nor love letters in existence. Presumably, the single father of three children remarried for expediency rather than love. Davis explains that the marriage to Ruth included a dowry of

money and property that greatly enhanced Taylor's finances (135). Both of Ruth's grandfathers had been governors of Connecticut; Karl Keller describes the Wyllys family as "for over 140 years the most prominent family in Connecticut government and one of the wealthiest" (47). Ruth and Edward eventually had five daughters and one son (Ruth, b. April 16, 1693; Naomi, b. March 1695; Anna, b. July 7, 1696; Mehetable, b. August 13, 1699; Kezia, b. March or April 1702; and Eldad, b. April 1708), all of whom survived childhood.

Before he began the second series in 1693, Taylor carefully transcribed and bound clean copies of the completed meditations. He may not have been interested in publication, but he clearly wished to preserve the poems. The persona of Taylor's meditations from both series maintains a consistent lowly position. Grabo provides a succinct list of the poet's identities: "He calls himself a dirt ball, a muddy sewer, a tumbrel of dung, a dung-hill, a dot of dung, a varnished pot of putrid excrements, drops in a closestool pan, guts, garbage, and rotteness" (30). The second series, written from 1693 to October 1725, is unified by an interest in Old Testament typology, or the belief that the events and figures in the Old Testament are types that prefigure New Testament events and people. The images and symbols are intentionally unvaried. A close reading of the series reveals the following groups: images of writing, warfare, metallurgy, treasures, gardens, feasts, and needlework (Grabo 93–98). Taylor was not interested in startlingly original imagery; he was concerned with exploring and maintaining a meditative state that would draw him closer to God. However, Karen Rowe credits Taylor with the development of a poetic innovation, the typological conceit that "unites theology with poetics, making spiritual meditation coterminous with poetry" (140). His choice of biblical texts also narrowed markedly; 50 of his last 54 meditations evolve from passages from the Canticles (or the Song of Solomon).

In addition to raising a growing second family, quelling factional disputes in the church, writing weekly sermons, and crafting the second series

of the *Preparatory Meditations*, Taylor somehow found time to commence an ambitious historical work. We believe that from approximately 1690 to 1705 Taylor wrote the 20,000-line *A Metrical History of Christianity*. Comparable to Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1698), the *Metrical History* represents Taylor's only serious attempt to enter the spiritual and poetical debates of the early 18th century. Jane Donahue Eberwein hypothesizes that this work was circulated in manuscript form among contemporary ministers; such transmission might explain the missing first and last pages (350). Perhaps Taylor, now in his seventies, wished to be regarded as a guiding force in Puritan theology and poetics, but unfortunately, this work did not receive acclaim. It was eventually stored and rediscovered by 20th-century scholars.

Around the turn of the 18th century, Taylor rather stridently challenged the church policies of the more famous Solomon Stoddard (grandfather of JONATHAN EDWARDS) of Northampton. Stoddard believed the Halfway Covenant was not enough of a concession to the new generation of Puritan worshippers and began to permit people who had not offered a public confession of sins and faith to receive the Lord's Supper. Taylor was incensed at what he saw as apostasy. In 1694 Taylor preached a series of eight sermons, later collected as *A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper* (1965), attacking Stoddard specifically and the degeneration of Puritan practices generally. It is interesting to speculate as to Taylor's reaction to the 1692 Salem witch trails given his strictly conservative brand of Puritanism and his connection to Samuel Sewell, a judge at the trials. It may be that only family and church commitments prevented him from journeying to Salem to participate in this famous inquisition.

Within the town of Westfield there were other challenges. Some of the small problems with which Taylor contended over these years were salary disputes, challenges to ministerial discipline, expansion of the meetinghouse, arguments over roads and rights-of-way, the hiring of a schoolmaster, and so on (Davis 169–170). At the onset of King William's War (1690–97) a smallpox epidemic killed

10 parishioners (Patterson 29); another smallpox outbreak in 1721 killed several more townspeople (Davis 171). British troops stationed in the town during Queen Anne's War (1701–13) introduced the influenza virus, and another 10 citizens died, including both of Westfield's deacons (Davis 171). During these outbreaks Taylor was often called upon to doctor his congregation, putting to good use the 500-page *Dispensatory*, a handwritten description of the medicinal uses of herbs and plants he compiled while at college. But this medical knowledge could not save his second son. In 1701 Taylor received word that James, a struggling merchant, had died of a fever in Barbados, a death Taylor refers to in Meditation 40 of the second series: "Under thy Rod, my God, thy Smarting Rod: / That hath off broke my James, that Primrose, Why?"

After he received an honorary master's degree from Harvard in 1720, the last decade of Taylor's life was fraught with illness. He suffered serious declines in both 1720 and 1721, writing "A Fig for Thee Oh! Death" and "A Valediction to All the World Preparatory for Death." He apparently began experiencing symptoms of a disease like Alzheimer's over his last four years. The congregation eventually called another minister, Nehemiah Bull, and installed him on October 26, 1726. Edward Taylor died on June 24, 1729. His most distinguished descendant, his grandson Erza Stiles, in 1778 became president of Yale University, the site of the now-famous discovery of Taylor's poetry.

The question all scholars must ask is why Taylor did not publish his poetry. We can speculate that the distance from Boston and its presses made the organization of such a project too arduous. Perhaps Taylor, the frontier minister, felt insecure about publishing his poems; he was no longer associated with intellectual circles. He may have assumed that the elite of eastern Massachusetts would mock his literary efforts. Perhaps, as Davis suggests, Taylor valued his poetry more as "process than product" (105). Or, as Grabo contends, "The writing of poetry was to Taylor a religious act" (56) and to profit financially or personally from its publication

would have been sacrilegious. Conversely, Taylor may simply have been "indifferen[t]" to publication (Eberwein 350). Finally, it may just be that Karl Keller's explanation, that Taylor "simply seems to have lacked the vanity of desiring fame" (83), must suffice. We may never know why Taylor rejected publishing his 40,000 lines of poetry, but we can be grateful that he carefully transcribed most of these works into bound manuscripts and that his descendants donated the collection to the Yale Library in 1883.

Karen Keck

God's Determinations Touching His Elect (1680)

Taylor's text, most probably written in 1680 after his Westfield church was established, is a "series of poems, written in various lengths, meters, and voices, that depicts the gradual progress of several groups of elect souls through conversion and into church fellowship" (Morris 157). The 400-page book contains a number of poems that have been famous in their own right: "The Preface," "The Soul's Groan to Christ for Succor," "Christ's Reply," and "The Joy of Church Fellowship Rightly Attended." The pair of poems "The Soul's Groan" and "Christ's Reply" are considered together as one of several dialogues that appear within the volume. Another, "A Dialogue between Justice and Mercy," contains the dialogue form within one poem, rather than spread out over two. Taylor's unifying theme for these various poems was "prioritiz[ing] spiritual fidelity and identify[ing] this with the structures and teaching of New England Congregationalism" (Morris 157). Morris argues readers must recognize the historical context that animated Taylor's text, the debate raging between Increase Mather and Solomon Stoddard regarding the conditions for admission into the church covenant (158). Stoddard argued that a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit could render one speechless, incapable of discourse, and thus that parishioners should not be impelled to provide

a recitation of their spiritual experience. Taylor's *God's Determinations*, Morris believes, was written in direct contradiction to Stoddard's view (187).

As one reads through the various poems, most particularly the two that directly address this issue of church membership, "The Soul Seeking Church-Fellowship" and "The Soul Admiring the Grace of the Church Enters into Church-Fellowship," one discovers illustrations of Taylor's belief in the importance of the individual's verbal profession of faith and conversion. In "The Soul Seeking Church-Fellowship," Taylor follows the covenant order of the church:

Whereby Corruptions are kept out, whereby
Corrupters also get not in,
Unless the Lyons Carkass Secretly
Lies lapt up in a Lamblike Skin
Which Holy seems yet's full of Sin.
For on the Towers of these Walls there Stand
Just Watchmen Watching day and night,
And Porters at each Gate, who have Command
To open onely to the right.
And all within may have a sight.

According to the church records for Taylor's church in Westfield, candidates seeking membership had their names read aloud, and, if there were no objections, they were asked to provide their accounts of conversion, either orally (if men) or in written form to be read aloud by someone else (if women) (Morris 188–189). Taylor's poem adheres to this very procedure to ensure that "corruptions are kept out" and "corrupters also get not in." The other parishioners, who are called upon to object should they find justified means, function as the "just watchmen." Only those seeking membership who are admitted into the church and testify of their own conversions are the "right" who shall gain church fellowship.

Other works of poetry contained in *God's Determinations* include "Our Insufficiency to Praise God Suitably, for His Mercy," a 48-line poem, written in iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme of *ababcc*. The poem considers the impact

that science has had on religion, in the form of the discovery of atoms. In the first line, Taylor wonders, "Should all the world so wide to atoms fall." In his characteristic fashion, Taylor employs a pun in his use of *atom*, a symbol of science, and the first man, *Adam*, whose Fall affects all of mankind. The pairing of science with the Fall of mankind, detailed in the book of Genesis, seems to indicate Taylor's own sense of science, as perhaps a forbidden source of knowledge, like the reputed apple from the Tree of Knowledge, that does not confer true knowledge but instead keeps humans removed, cast out from their connection to God. The second line, "Should th'Aire be shred to motes," continues the idea proposed in the first that humans gain nothing from the microscope and its new way of seeing except to destroy, or "shred," the very air.

Taylor then compares the number of atoms that make up each man to the number of pious men who exist in the world. Rather than the numberless motes, Taylor wishes for numberless tongues in the mouths of pious men who might sing songs of God's praise. This multiplication would not end with the tongues but would include a host of numberless tunes "most sweet" and "unparalleled." Taylor describes the results of such multiplication as "Our Musick would the world of worlds out ring."

In the penultimate stanza, Taylor returns to the pun from the first line and describes the lowly status mankind holds by virtue of the doctrine of original sin: "Thou didst us mould, and us new mould when wee / Were worse than mould we tread upon" (37–38). Again, Taylor turns to puns, this time *mould* as a verb meaning to "create" or "structure" and as a noun, referring to an insignificant and odious form of life, a bacterium. Although man has discovered the smaller particles out of which objects in the material world are molded, Taylor defers to God as the ultimate creator of these very beings, motes, atoms, and molds. God's forgiveness for humans is characterized in the poem as the removal of the stings from humans, described as the "nettles made by sin."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the poems contained in this book with those from the *Preparatory Meditations*.
2. How does Taylor's treatment of science in "Our Insufficiency to Praise God" compare with COTTON MATHER's in the *Wonders of the Invisible World*? What relationship do the two authors imagine existing between faith and science?
3. Critics repeatedly comment on the various styles Taylor employs in his volume. Examine two poems that employ different poetic forms and consider why Taylor might use various styles to convey his meaning.

Rachelle Friedman

"The Preface" to *God's Determinations Touching His Elect* (1680)

Taylor begins his cycle of poems about the true Christian's journey of salvation by invoking the creation of the world. The 44-line poem is written in iambic pentameter, and its couplets frequently diverge from standard prosody by employing slant and eye rhymes. The nothingness of the world before God's creative word is metaphorically linked to the genesis of the soul, and this in turn serves as a justification for the poet to begin his creative work from the "Nothing" of his own imagination. Taylor uses the word *nothing* 12 times throughout the poem, and its repetition in different semantic contexts playfully demonstrates the range of meaning that this word of absence can contain: "Which All from Nothing felt, from Nothing, All: / Hath All on Nothing set, lets Nothing fall" (ll. 35–36). The first 20 lines of the poem contain numerous rhetorical questions regarding the identity of the world's Creator. Creation is described through a series of similes that liken the earth to a majestic home furnished with "Pillars" (l. 8), "Curtains" (l. 13), and a "Tapestry" (l. 17). By this means, Taylor emphasizes the domestic concern of the Creator as he constructs a home for humanity.

Taylor's playfulness is expressed primarily through wordplay, such as when he repeats the same word in different forms so as to exploit both its sound and multiple meanings; however, he also uses metaphors that humorously deflate the grandeur inherent in the act of creating the world. Besides likening rivers and oceans to handicrafts, the poet asks, "Who in this Bowling Alley bowled the Sun?" (l. 14). The power of "Might Almighty" (l. 27) is thus made less terrifying. The poem ends by contrasting how "Nothing man" has power to "Glorify" God (l. 38), but instead "Nothing man did throw down all by Sin" (l. 41). Man defaces the "Brightest Diamond" (l. 43) within himself and is left with the darkness of a "Coalpit Stone" (l. 42). This darkness symbolizes a return to the nullity out of which Creation began and suggests that humanity's reduction through sin to nothing will be redeemed by the same process of creative play and domestic familiarity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Taylor uses the word *nothing* eight times in lines 35–41. What are the different meanings used in these lines? Apart from individual uses of the word, what message is conveyed through the rapid repetition of the *nothing*? How does this repetition illuminate the point from which Taylor intends to begin his cycle of poems?
2. Compare this poem by Taylor with "The Prologue" by ANNE BRADSTREET. How do these two Puritan poets face the challenge of explaining their qualifications for undertaking the work of poetic creation? What role does humility play in their self-understanding?
3. Taylor's mix of stern theology and linguistic playfulness can make reading his poems a disjunctive experience as the reader's mind attunes itself first to one aspect and then to the other. How does this experience affect your view of Puritans? Which aspect of the poem seems more significant to you: the image of God as home decorator or that of sinful humans as a lump of coal?

Liam Corley

“The Soul’s Groan to Christ for Succor” (1680)

This poem concerns central themes of Taylor’s collection *God’s Determinations*: the Christian’s psychological struggles on the path to salvation and the personal experience of a relationship with God. Moreover, Taylor’s deft wordplay reflects his adoption of some of the techniques of metaphysical poetry. In the opening line, the speaker calls upon God to defend him from a “dreadful enemy” (l. 1) that is at once Satan and the speaker’s own fallible soul (“I confess my heart to sin inclined” [l. 12]). The speaker is thus the “Poor Doubting Soul,” a common figure in religious literature of the period (Haims 89). Satan encourages the Christian to doubt God’s grace, and the rift in the speaker’s soul between the inherently corrupt humanity so often emphasized in Puritan theology and the human’s genuine desire for redemption results in a tormented response: “In my soul, my soul finds many faults” (l. 4). “And though I justify myself,” Taylor writes, “I do condemn myself” (l. 5), punning on the two poles of the Puritan spiritual cosmos: justification (or God’s salvation of the sinner) and condemnation (damnation). As this division of the “I” versus the “I” also illustrates, Taylor represents the speaker’s painful confusion in repetitions of crucial terms, which often change their meaning; thus, the speaker refers to Satan’s prompting to dismiss “Thy grace” and thus “maketh grace no grace but cruelty” (ll. 13, 15).

Taylor also employs pastoral metaphors (understandable, given his church was located in rural Massachusetts), as well as conventional biblical images for God’s mercy. The speaker questions, “Is graces’s honeycomb a comb of stings?” (l. 16) as he experiences the fear generated by a mistaken perception of God as merely cruel. Scholars, however, have disagreed about the extent of Taylor’s agreement with orthodox Puritan beliefs. In this poem, the individual “Soul’s” control over his choice to “accept” salvation in contrast to the “grace” imparted by God in a predeterministic manner are not clearly delineated; Taylor tells us,

for instance, that the speaker’s fear “makes him ready leave Thy grace and run” (l. 17). One way of mitigating this confusion might be to recall the conventional Calvinist perspective that understands all goodness to be the province of God while humans are solely responsible for sin and inherently corrupt (Maddux 16).

By the final stanza, however, the speaker recognizes God from a conventionally Puritan perspective, as absolutely sovereign. He submits to a Christ whom he sees in biblical terms as the shepherd of lost souls. The speaker understands himself as a sheep in “Thy pasture” while Satan is “Thy cur,” Christ’s dog, who “barks” (l. 21) at the sheeps’ heels to frighten them into remaining with the herd. Satan is not an agent independent of God but entirely within the Lord’s power. This final metaphor also demonstrates Taylor’s deft use of literary art to communicate theology; the pun that refers to Satan as a “cur that is so cursed” establishes an imaginative connection between the earthly (the lowly herding dog) and the spiritual (the theological condition of damnation), reminding readers of the perpetual interaction of the visible and invisible worlds in Puritanism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. According to Taylor, what specific threats are made to the speaker’s confidence in God’s mercy? Then, compare Taylor’s discussion of the human soul’s torment and fear with that of JONATHAN EDWARDS’S “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”
2. Edward Taylor’s poetry is often compared to that of his Puritan contemporary ANNE BRADSTREET. Read Bradstreet’s poem “The Flesh and the Spirit” and compare its portrait of a divided self with the one depicted in Taylor’s “The Soul’s Groan to Christ for Succor.”
3. Create an analysis of this poem in which you argue that the speaker either has or does not have the power to choose to accept God’s “grace.” Which stanza of the poem do you believe is most important for advancing your argument?

William Etter

Christ's Reply (1680)

The pretext for the 21 stanzas of “Christ’s Reply” is given in an earlier poem entitled “The Soul’s Groan to Christ for Succor.” In this poem, a human soul is trembling before the accusations of Satan, who is figured in the poem as a barking dog. The dog’s attack implants two fears: First, the Soul has sinned more than God is willing to forgive, and second, those actions of the Soul that appear like graces are also spoiled by sin. It is to these doubts that Christ responds in “Christ’s Reply.” In the poem, Taylor adopts the voice of Christ, who speaks tender words of comfort to the downcast Soul, addressing him as “my Honey” (l. 1), “My Little Darling” (l. 2), “my Pretty Heart” (l. 15), and in numerous other terms of endearment. The use of terms like “my Dove” (l. 4) and “my Chick” (l. 21) raises the question of whether Taylor is representing Christ as a mother or husband to the imperiled Soul. Both relationships are commonly used in the biblical tradition as metaphors of a Jewish or Christian adherent’s connection to God, though Puritan discourse more frequently treats God as an all-powerful father figure. In either case, the tone of the poem’s first 13 stanzas is primarily reassuring.

Christ reframes the “Yelper fierce” (l. 8) of “The Soul’s Groan to Christ for Succor” as a “broken-toothed, and muzzled” (l. 14) sheepdog who serves to “make thee Cling / Close underneath the Savior’s Wing” (ll. 16–17). Christ proclaims that the Soul’s sins are not too many for his grace; nor does the Soul’s predilection toward sin mean that he is sundered from a merciful God. In the 14th stanza, Christ’s tone becomes more triumphant as he begins to press the Soul toward greater endurance in the struggle against sin. Christ boasts that nowhere in the world is there “a God like Me, to anger slow” (l. 80) who “frowns with a Smiling Face” (l. 84). The mingled elements of severity and mercy build in the latter portions of the poem as Christ exhorts the now-comforted Soul to “repent” (l. 88), “decline” (l. 104) to sin, and eventually “fight” (l. 121) Christ’s battles. The Soul who at the beginning of the poem was bidden to “wipe thine eye” (l. 2) of tears is now

challenged to “defy the Tempter, and his Mock” (l. 124). The poem thus enacts the manner in which a Puritan believer could justify moving from depravity and depression to energetic devotion.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the eighth stanza of the poem, Taylor uses the metaphor of a “Beagle” (l. 44) engaged in hunting “games” (l. 45) to describe how the senses can draw the Soul to sin. This use of a traditional English pastime to illustrate the process of sin and temptation is part of a pattern in Taylor’s verse in which the social contexts of his imagery are invested with theological significance. Are there other metaphors or comparisons in the poem in which you can see an implied social critique stemming from Puritan political or sumptuary ideals?
2. When describing the various temptations the Soul faces, Taylor mentions “a wandering mind” (l. 98) during prayer and “Spirits dull” (l. 99) during sermons. These and other descriptions in the poem of spiritual laxity call to mind the many perplexities and doubts regarding her faith that Anne Bradstreet describes in her letter “To My Dear Children.” Why are Puritans so explicit about the ups and downs of their faith life? What is the psychological effect of their frank engagement with seasons of apathy and doubt?
3. In this poem, Taylor imbues Christ with an emotional intensity and language that allow him to speak directly to the fears and experiences of parishioners in Taylor’s Westfield congregation. How do you think it would have affected a discouraged Puritan who heard Taylor read a discouraged Puritan who heard Taylor read the poem from the pulpit? How do you think it affected Taylor to adopt the voice of his God?

Liam Corley

“The Joy of Church Fellowship Rightly Attended” (1680)

The concluding piece of Taylor’s collection *God’s Determinations*, this poem is a joyful celebration

of Christ's salvation of human sinners. Standard interpretations of this poem envision the speaker in heaven watching new souls approaching. An alternative reading might see the poem as depicting a speaker in heaven looking down to a concrete congregation in one of the Puritan churches in Massachusetts; indeed, the repetition of the final two lines of each stanza acts as a refrain, giving the poem a hymnlike quality, as though the congregation were actively engaged in Sunday worship. Regardless, the poem is directed toward the hope of future redemption, expressed by a speaker whose enthusiasm is barely contained in the frequent exclamations of the poem's first two stanzas: "Oh! joyous hearts! enfired with holy flame!" (l. 7). The dominant image of the rushing "coach" implies progression toward the divine after release from the threat of perpetual damnation. At the same time, this image is yet another example of Taylor's preference for using commonplace objects as metaphors for complex spiritual concepts; to the New England Puritan, even the commonplace could be a reflection of God's work upon the world (Murphy 11).

Of particular interest is the reference to humans' continued proclivity to sin, depicted so creatively in the third stanza, "And if a string do slip, by chance, they soon / Do screw it up again" to produce "a diviner harmony" (ll. 13–14, 16). (It is also worth noting that in his prose work *Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*, Taylor refers to the soul as a "glorious Musicall Instrument" played by God when he exercises saving grace upon it.) Though redeemed by God's grace, these individuals retain their inherent human corruption; however, unlike the speaker of "The Soul's Groan to Christ for Succor," whose sins cause him to fear God, the celebrants of this later poem rejoice in their confidence that God will continue to help them remain on "the road that gives them right" (ll. 28).

Assurance of salvation is also a significant theme of the fourth stanza, where Taylor notably imagines these heaven-bound church members as entirely sincere in their religious convictions:

"In all their acts, public, and private, nay / And secret, too, they praise impart" (ll. 19–20). Such a deep and earnest faith was not always so confidently assumed in Puritan culture of early America. Many of Taylor's fellow Puritan writers and ministers worried about hypocritical Christians and sought ways of using external behavior, such as the sacraments, to determine whether or not a church member was truly in a covenant with God, while recognizing that absolute assurance of an individual's internal spiritual condition was impossible for anyone other than God (Maddux 13). Taylor's poem is therefore an ideal vision of pure and sincere faith.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look up the words *melody* and *melodious* in the dictionary. Why might Taylor have chosen to use this musical terminology to describe souls being led to heaven by Christ?
2. In the second stanza Taylor refers to "speech thus tasseled with praise." Consider how we might see Taylor's own poetry as using literary art to glorify God.
3. Write an essay in which you analyze the title of this poem. Who is "rightly consider[ing]" church fellowship? What does it mean to understand this fellowship "rightly"? You may wish to read JOHN WINTHROP's sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* when formulating your response.

William Etter

Preparatory Meditations before My Approach to the Lord's Supper (1682–1725)

Taylor wrote these meditations over a series of years, from 1682 to 1725, whenever he ministered the Eucharist to his congregation. Given the sporadic nature of the publication dates, it is certain that Taylor performed this sacrament at irregular intervals. He used his own ruminations on the Lord's Supper to create sermon series and poems to accompany them. In the prologue, Taylor refers to himself humbly as "a crumb of

dust,” who implores God to inspire him, guide his pen, in his attempts “to prove thou art, and that thou art the best” (27–28). Taylor envisions himself as “designed / To make my pen unto thy Praise alone” (13–14). Indeed, Taylor locates his very being in his ability to praise God in poetic verse: “Inspire this Crumb of Dust till it display / Thy Glory through’t, and then thy dust shall live” (21–22).

Lest readers mistake this gesture of humility in his prologue as a symptom of self-deprecation, the critic Parker Johnson reminds us that Taylor did not suffer from doubt about his own election. Instead, Johnson reads these moments that recur in *Meditations* as “a rhetorical strategy emphasizing a fact of Calvinist theology, that humans are sinful and unworthy. That Taylor doubted his spiritual condition and expressed this doubt in his poems contradicts certain tenets of covenant theology” (85). As proof of Taylor’s recognition of his own certainty regarding the fate of his soul, Johnson notes that Taylor’s *God’s Determinations Touching His Elect* goes to great lengths to argue against needless doubt and fear regarding election (85).

The source of Taylor’s notions of inadequacy in the *Meditations* is language itself. The critic Ursula Brumm agrees with Johnson, noting, “His frequent arguments about language, his despair, repeated in almost every meditation, at the inadequacy of human language, springs from his conviction in an ideal correspondence between the name and the thing. That sinful man is unable to achieve this correspondence in regard to God is the crucial point in every meditation” (201). The following opening stanza from Meditation 43 is a good example of the argument made by Brumm and Johnson:

When, Lord, I seeke to shew thy praises, then
 Thy shining Majesty doth stund my minde,
 Encramps my tongue and tongue ties fast my Pen,
 That all my doings, do not what’s designd.
 My Speeche’s Organs are so trancifide
 My words stand startld, can’t thy praises stride.

God’s majesty proves too much for the poet, whose mind is stunned, tongue cramped and tied. His very means of communication, his pen, his tongue, and this “speeche’s organs,” are all rendered inadequate to the task of singing and praising God’s glory. Similarly, Taylor laments, “My tongue wants words to tell my thoughts, my Minde / wants thoughts to Comprehend thy Worth, alas!” As a result of these failings, Taylor fears “little praise is brought.”

The source for a perfect language is found in the biblical verses that are the occasions for each of the poems. The critic William Scheick argues quite directly, “Taylor found in Scriptures the art he sought to imitate” (106). Johnson views the language of the Bible as a bridge for the two extreme movements that mark all of Taylor’s meditations: They all begin with a lament about the limitations of language to praise God truly but conclude with visions of heavenly praise. Taylor employs biblical language, Johnson argues, to move the poem “from the depravity of human rhetoric to a vision of the perfected, transfigured rhetoric of heavenly praise” (89). Whenever a biblical passage offers a metaphor, such as “If any man sins, we have an Advocate,” Taylor examines the various implications of this comparison by considering attorneys, and others whose roles are central to a judicial system.

Another pattern that develops in Taylor’s meditations on biblical verse is the use of typology, which is a theological practice dating back to medieval times in which aspects of the Old Testament were viewed as prefiguring aspects of the New Testament. One classic example of typology is the belief that the four main prophets of the Old Testament, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel prefigure the four main prophets of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The doctrine of typology is said to have originated in Paul’s letter in the Book of Colossians: “These are a shadow of things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” Taylor compares King Solomon, who appears in the Old Testament, with Christ, in the New Testament:

Did He Gods Temple Build, in glory shown?
Thou buildst Gods House, more gloriously
bright.

Did he sit on a golden ivery Throne
With Lions fenc'd? Thy Throne is far more
White
And glorious: garded with Angells strong.
A streame of fire doth with the Verdict
come.

Did he his Spouse, a glorious Palace build?
The Heavens are they Palace for thy Spouse.
Gods house was by his pray're with Glory filld.
God will for thine his Church in Glory house.
Did Sheba's Queen faint viewing of his glory?
Bright Angells stand amazed at thy Story.
(2.13, 5–6)

The formula that Taylor follows is like a question and answer, where he asks a question of Solomon only to answer it with a surpassing quality held by Christ. In this example, Solomon is the type, and Christ is the antitype. Every quality that Taylor addresses in Solomon (such as the details of his throne) is paralleled to similar qualities in Christ, and Solomon (the type) is used to contrast the glory of Christ, which is far superior.

The critic Michael North sees in Taylor's meditations a metaphorical expression of the Lord's Supper, which Taylor describes as "a seal of the covenant of grace." North contends, "This language of signs and seals is the answer to the covenant theology to the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation" (2). Transubstantiation, which is a doctrine promoted by the Roman Catholic Church, views the bread and wine of Communion as the literal Body and Blood of Christ. After the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of consubstantiation, that Christ is present during the Eucharist but is not the wine and bread, originated. Thus, North is arguing that a central question of theology—how to interpret the wine and bread of the Lord's Supper—is also a central question of Taylor's poetry, which takes the Eucharist as its occasion and subject. For Taylor, the spiritual meal acts as a binding promise between man and God. It is the visible sign of this promise of God's grace:

It's Churches banquet, Spirituall Bread and Wine.
It is the Signet of the Kings right hande,
Seale to the Covenant of Grace Gods bande.
(2.108.34–36)

In this stanza from Meditation 108, second series, Taylor describes the Eucharist in metaphorical terms, as "the signet of the King's right hand." A signet is a ring worn by a king bearing his royal seal. On royal documents or decrees, the signet would be impressed into hot wax, where it would cool and become a permanent marker of the king's voice. In this line, the Eucharist is likened unto another symbol, one that creates binding laws. Thus, Taylor views the Eucharist as a metaphor of the bond or covenant between humans and God, "God's band."

Another recurring metaphor in Taylor's meditations derives from the Books of Genesis and Revelation and involves the Tree of Life. The critic Cecelia Halbert argues that Taylor's use of the tree in Meditation 29 from the first series stems not only from his use of biblical text, but also from his knowledge of the works of the British poet George Herbert. The critic Samuel Eliot Morison agrees with Halbert, arguing that Taylor's Meditations "owe their style as well as their conception to George Herbert" (cited in Halbert 24). It is not surprising that Taylor would be familiar with Herbert's poetry since his school curriculum in Leicestershire included the famed poet. It is Herbert's use of knots in "The Flower" that appears as a recurring image and metaphor for the tree of life in Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations* (Halbert 23).

Taylor's own signature use of the tree of life image, however, also stems from what the critic Roy Harvey Pearce refers to as Ramist influence: "Ramist logic with its stress upon correlating the facts of day-to-day reality with the facts of Revelation was consciously practiced by Puritan writers. This Ramist-Puritan method of discovering, or laying open to view (through meditation), fostered a tightly woven and logically ordered literature, be it sermon or poetry" (Halbert 25). One of these earlyday images was that of a tree. Around this image, Taylor created "clusters," which would

contain more than one referent or meaning and thus render the image complex and more adept at addressing the complexity of God. In Meditation 29, the only poem in which Taylor's image of the tree is complete, he likens God unto a "golden tree" and places "saints and angels bright" along its "branches strong." Lower on the divine hierarchy, Taylor locates himself as a "withered twig, dri'de fit to bee / A Chat Cast in thy fire, Writh off by Vice." He imagines himself as cast off, the most menial part of the tree, which is only fit as kindling for a fire. This image of his own lowly state has been addressed earlier in the entry, and it anticipates God's deliverance, which appears in subsequent stanzas. Taylor pleads with God to "graft mee in this golden stock, thou'lt make mee." The hope expressed with the metaphor of grafting is an incorporation of the lowly twig with the divine and golden tree:

I being graft in thee am grafted here
 Into thy family, and kindred Claim
 To all in Heaven, God, Saints, and Angells there.
 I thy Relations my Relations name.
 Thy Father's mine, thy God my God, and I
 With Saints, and Angells draw affinity.

This union with God disrupts the hierarchy mentioned in prior stanzas and recognizes how God's grace creates a seamless union between humans and God, a common theme of God's covenant with humans, which pervades Taylor's sense of the Lord's Supper. As in all of his meditative poems, Taylor concludes Meditation 29 with the union of God and man producing the poet, who is then dedicated to singing God's praise in his poetry: "Make mee thy graft, by thou my Golden Stock. / Thy Glory then I'le make my fruits and Crop."

Taylor's sermon associated with the implantation image appears in *Christographia*, where he complements his poem by stating, "Let then the awful Consideration that you are in by nature stir you up to endeavor after an implantation into Christ. . . . Christ himself passeth over all unto all that are implanted into Christ. The upshot all life lieth in the United Essentiall harmony of the Same

in the person. . . . O! what then should our endeavours be that we may obtain an Implantation into Christ Jesus that this may be ours?" (reported in Halbert 30).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Recalling the definition of typology provided, search through your book's selections of Taylor's *Meditations* and discover another instance of this theological doctrine, identify the two types, and explain the nature of the correspondence between their parallel features.
2. Consider the Ramist influence in Taylor's poetry compared with that of other Puritan poets such as Anne Bradstreet. Compare the everyday images that Taylor employs in his *Preparatory Meditations* with the images that appear in Bradstreet's poetry.
3. Write your own version of a meditation based on a passage from a religious text in the style of Taylor, remembering to consider the various possible interpretations of the metaphor presented in the religious text and to develop them to their fullest extent.

A Metrical History of Christianity (ca. 1695)

The 19,890 lines of this poem, untitled in the manuscript version, constitute nearly half of Edward Taylor's 40,000 lines of poetry, and the religious subject and themes of this verse narrative are consistent with Puritan thought. The poem, probably written in the late 17th century, relates Christian history from the persecutions and martyrdoms in the first century through the internal and external troubles Christians faced and God endured in succeeding centuries; church history before the Protestant Reformation ends at the 12th century. The poem also recounts the persecutions and martyrdoms of Protestants from 1555 to 1558. Its language, structure, and theology follow closely similar elements in Taylor's sources, *Ecclesiastica Historia Integrum Ecclesiae* (The ecclesiastical history of the whole church; literally, The Magdeburg Centuries, familiarly) by Matthias Flacius

associates and *Actes and Monuments* by John Foxe. Taylor's history in verse was not published in his lifetime, and his descendants preserved the carefully corrected manuscript until the 20th century, when they donated it to the Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, Rhode Island. Donald E. Stanford transcribed the manuscript in 1953 for his doctoral dissertation and in 1962 made other copies of *A Metrical History of Christianity* available because its subject and length seemed to preclude publication as a book. He gave the composition its current title.

Although the poem is consistent in its themes, it features nine types of versification. The most used is the heroic couplet: This form seems to suggest the grandeur of his subject, the history of Christendom, and the range of his narrative, which is not limited to the Christian Church in Europe but includes the history of the church in Asia and in Africa. The main narrative sections of the book-length poem are in heroic couplets. Other forms are generally used in the transitional stanzas, such as those praising churchmen such as Augustine and others who have done or written great things. The ballad stanza also occurs in Taylor's poem; both the epic and the ballad are narrative forms that relate extraordinary events. Seven other unnamed verse types are present in the poem. One of them features two sets of quatrains in which the first three lines have an iambic tetrameter with a final line of iambic dimeter; the rhyme scheme for the octave is *aaab cccb*. A second is also eight lines long, divided into two stanzas of four lines, and the first three lines of each quatrain are iambic pentameter with a last line of iambic dimeter. Its rhyme scheme is the same as that of the previous form. A third is a variant of the ballad stanza with the first and third lines of the four-line stanza in iambic pentameter, while the second and fourth are in iambic tetrameter. A fourth is a five-line verse with a rhyme scheme of *ababb*; the first and third lines are iambic pentameter with the remaining lines in iambic tetrameter. A fifth type of versification is almost identical to the previous form: The difference is that the first, fourth, and final lines are iambic pentameter, while

the second and third are iambic tetrameter. A sixth verse form is simply five lines of iambic pentameter with a rhyme pattern of *ababb*. Finally, *A Metrical History* includes stanzas of six iambic pentameter lines rhymed *ababcc*. Stanford suggests that the use of several forms shows his interest in exploring new possibilities in stanzaic formulas and is consistent with versification in Taylor's other longer works.

The primary structure of *A Metrical History* is not metrical but narrative. After six lines in praise of Christ's victorious and salvific death, the poem describes the martyrdom of Stephen and proceeds to retell the fate of Jesus' disciples; the poem also includes accounts of natural wonders and disasters, such as the eruption of Vesuvius, with commentary that shows how God has worked through them. The history of the Christian world before the advent of Protestantism is organized by centuries, as is *The Magdeburg Centuries*, and the stories proceed chronologically. The narration covers not only European history and figures but also those of the Middle East and northern Africa; the British Isles sometimes receive separate treatment and sometimes are included as a part of Europe. Within the tales of martyrdom, heresies, evangelism, and papal malfeasance are comments on the way that God's mercy and justice shine through the events. The history of the church before the Reformation ends abruptly with the 11th century (possibly because Taylor owned only six volumes of the *Centuries*, whose Latin he paraphrases in verse), and a short section about the reign of Mary Tudor introduces a shorter history of Protestant martyrs, whose stories are presented in as much detail as were tales of early martyrs. The break in the narrative may be an artifact of the manuscript, from which pages are missing, or may suggest that Taylor was writing two poems with parallel subjects and structures.

Taylor's sources include material that is now dismissed as legend, most notably the story of Pope Joan (fl. 13343–13388), which Taylor reports with Puritan invective and a sort of metaphysical word-play. The illegitimate offspring of an English priest, Joan is renamed *Gilbert* and sent to Fulda, where another monk notices that she is female. Sent to

Athens, the woman gains fame as a teacher and a disputant; no one uncovers her secret. She then goes to Rome, where, not surprisingly, she is unanimously elected pope. She fulfills the duties of the papal office and receives the honor due her office: Even the English king kisses her foot. Near a statue Nero erected, she delivers her “Egg and Spawn.” Such diction in *A Metrical History* is a sign that the event is contrary to nature, and passages about negative developments often say ideas or actions are hatched from evil eggs or the eggs of pride. The section about the female pope begins, “Good morrow, Madam! thou art found at last” and ends with the narrator’s wondering whether one should call Pope Joan “dad or Mam.” Taylor uses similar punning in the poem when the speaker relates the story of Hildebrand (Gregory VII), who is figured as Hellbrand who flees to his homeland, hell, a place the pope’s keys will unlock.

Papal lust and corruption are standard themes in Protestant literature, and Taylor’s poem is replete with stories of the evils of the Roman Church. Taylor and his sources condemn the materialism of the Roman Catholic Church, not only because they see it in the greed of bishops and popes but also because it puts too high a value on the physical. Deusdedit, for example, adorns wooden dishes (plain, natural, and good) with gold (ornate, unnatural, and worldly) and encourages people to put holy water on objects as charms against storms. Later popes promulgated similar errors, and men who are supposed to show the truth are practicing deceit and promoting superstition instead of faith. The poem also indicts Roman Catholics for expressing their materialistic desires in adorning churches and using expensive chalices. The Roman Church promotes the worship of statues, not the veneration of saints, and the superstition of intercessory prayer. The poem further condemns the Roman Catholic insistence on clerical celibacy and the forbidding of marriage during Lent as acts that oppose marriage. In spite of these negative departures from the truth of Christianity, the narrator is able to see in them God’s patience and mercy evident in this life because God permits these men to persist in their

ways, although he does occasionally send an earthquake or a comet as an expression of justice.

An additional Puritan theme in *A Metrical History* is that of degeneracy and regeneration. The martyrs of the early church follow Christ’s example and willingly give their lives during the 11 persecutions narrated in the poem. Pope Fabian, who was chosen pope because a dove landed on him as he was handling a dung cart, was a martyr and so is an example of a good pope. John Chrysostom is praised for his bravery in condemning the morals of Eudoxia, but he is a rare example of an upright patriarch of Constantinople. (The poem details fewer stories of their wickedness, but they usually come off little better than their Roman counterparts.) Methodius and Cyril, the ninth-century missionaries to the Slavs, are praised for having created the Cyrillic alphabet and for translating the gospel into a language that people could understand. They seem to be proto-Protestants. The poem also commends the monks of Lindisfarne, although it usually condemns monks, for standing up for the practices of the Celtic Church, which Scots Calvinists saw as similar to the practices of the Protestants, against the encroachments of the Roman Church. Aidan of Lindisfarne is singled out as a man who preaches the gospel in a language common men can understand and who cares for the poor. The Roman Church punishes Cyril and Methodius and triumphs in the British Isles. Eventually, however, the blood of the Protestant martyrs and the reforms of Protestant theologians restore the church to its original fervor and purity.

Scholars find in the poem a typical Puritan fascination with the negative and an excess of gory detail in the descriptions of martyrdom. The poem, nevertheless, follows the example of much hagiography, in which the detailed images of physical suffering emphasize the extent and intensity of the martyrs’ love for Christ. They follow his example in suffering in the flesh, in spite of the fact that their sacrifice can never equal his, and thus become examples of faith for others to follow. Their endurance further underlines the lack of value Christians are supposed to place on the impermanent flesh

- Guruswamy, Rosemary Fithian. *The Poems of Edward Taylor: A Reference Guide*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Haims, Lynn. "The Face of God: Puritan Iconography in Early American Poetry, Sermons, and Tombstone Carving" *Early American Literature* 14 (1979): 15–33.
- Halbert, Cecelia L. "Tree of Life Imagery in the Poetry of Edward Taylor." *American Literature* 38, no. 1 (1966): 22–34.
- Hammond, Jeffrey A. *Edward Taylor: Fifty Years of Scholarship and Criticism*. Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1993.
- Hass, Robert. "Edward Taylor: What Was He Up To?" *American Poetry Review* 31, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 43–55.
- Johnson, Parker H. "Poetry and Praise in Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*." *American Literature* 52, no. 1 (1980): 84–96.
- Johnson, Thomas H. "Edward Taylor: A Puritan 'Sacred Poet.'" *New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 290–322.
- Keller, Karl. *The Example of Edward Taylor*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975.
- Lepore, Jill. *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.
- Maddux, Harry Clark. "Ruling Passion: Consent and Covenant Theology in Westfield, Massachusetts, August 1679" *Early American Literature* 38 (2003): 9–29.
- Morris, Amy M. E. *Popular Measures: Poetry and Church Orders in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005.
- Murphy, Francis, ed. *Diary of Edward Taylor*. Springfield, Mass.: Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, 1964.
- North, Michael. "Edward Taylor's Metaphors of Promise." *American Literature* 51, no. 1 (1979): 1–16.
- Patterson, J. Daniel. "Introduction." In *Edward Taylor's Gods Determinations and Preparatory Meditations*. Edited by Daniel Patterson. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003.
- Pearce, Roy Harvey. *Continuity of American Poetry*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Poems of Edward Taylor. Available online. URL: <http://www.puritansermons.com/poetry/taylor.htm>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Edward Taylor." Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap1/taylor.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Rowe, Karen E. *Saint and Singer: Edward Taylor's Typology and the Poetics of Meditation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Scheick, William. *Design in Puritan Literature*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1992.
- Schuldiner, Michael, ed. *The Tayloring Shop: Essays on the Poetry of Edward Taylor in Honor of Thomas M. and Virginia L. Davis*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997.
- Stanford, Donald E. *Edward Taylor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
- . "Edward Taylor's *Metrical History of Christianity*." *American Literature* 33 (1961): 279–295.
- . "The Parentage of Edward Taylor." *American Literature* 33 (1961): 215–221.
- . *A Transcript of Edward Taylor's Metrical History of Christianity*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1962.
- Taylor, Edward. *A Metrical History of Christianity*. 1962. Reprint, Alexandria, Va.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1996.



PHILLIS WHEATLEY (1753–1784)

In every human breast, God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression and pants for deliverance.

(letter to Samson Occom, 1774)

At the age of seven or eight (her exact birth date is unknown), a young girl arrived in Boston harbor on July 11, 1761. Her age was determined “from the circumstance of shedding her front teeth” (17). She traveled aboard the *Phillis*, a schooner that had sailed to Senegal, Sierra Leone, and off the coast of Guinea to pick up slaves and deliver them to the colonies along the eastern seaboard. The young girl would soon take on the name of the very slave ship that transported her to Massachusetts. Her surname would also be determined on the same day as Mrs. Susanna Wheatley, the wife of a wealthy merchant named John Wheatley, purchased her “for a trifle” and took her home to become a house servant. Susanna and John’s daughter, Mary, began educating the young slave in reading, writing, Latin, and the Bible.

In 1772, Wheatley’s master wrote to testify of Phillis’s intellect and to support her during an inquiry into her capacity to author poems:

Phillis was brought from Africa to America in the year 1761, between seven and eight years of age. Without any assistance from school education, and by only what she was taught in the family, she, in sixteen months time from her arrival, attained the English language, to which she was an utter stranger before, to such a degree, as to read any, most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings to the great Astonishment

of all who heard her. As to her Writing, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a time, that in the year 1765, she wrote a letter to the Reverend Mr. Occom, the Indian Minister, while in England. She has a great Inclination to learn the Latin tongue, and has made some progress in it. This Relation is given by her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives. (reported in Gates 19–20)

The critic Terence Collins remarks on John Wheatley’s statement, “The tone of this letter as well as the indication that she was admitted to the inner circle of family education and religion suggest that hers was not a life typical of American slavery” (148). Wheatley’s experience as a slave was hardly typical, and this fact alone seems to have contributed to the negative criticism regarding her literary representation of a black experience in early America. The abolitionist biographer Matilda Odell wrote that Wheatley was “not allowed to associate with other domestics of the family, who were of her own color and condition, but was kept constantly about the person of her mistress” (reported in Collins 148).

In 1765, four years after her arrival in America and her introduction to the English language, Phillis Wheatley had written her first poem. Her most anthologized and popular poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” was penned

when Phillis was only 14 years of age. Two years later, in 1767, she published a poem in the *Newport Mercury* (20). With the publication of her elegy to the Reverend George Whitefield, who was a popular evangelical preacher who died while on a speaking tour, Phillis Wheatley gained fame, both in the colonies as well as in the motherland of England. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes, “Wheatley shrewdly apostrophized the Countess (Selina Hastings) in the Whitefield elegy, and sent a letter of condolence with the poem enclosed” (22). Wheatley’s familiarity with the countess of Huntingdon deepened the following year, when Wheatley traveled to England to attend to the publication of her first book of poetry, a collection of 28 poems. Gates attributes the publication of Wheatley’s book of poetry in England rather than America to the former country’s more receptive climate toward black authors. The publication of “one of the earliest slave narratives by James Gronniosaw” in England with the aid of the countess of Huntingdon had already paved the way for Wheatley’s book (30). As a result of the efforts of the countess and Susanna Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley’s book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, appeared in print, making Wheatley the first author of African descent to publish a book in the English language.

When attempting to solicit an American publisher for her book of 28, poems, Wheatley faced skeptics in America who convened in autumn 1772 to interrogate her and determine whether she had indeed authored the poems. Eighteen gentlemen, who identified themselves only as “most respectable characters in Boston,” met with Wheatley and over the course of their questions put not only Wheatley on trial, but the whole African race. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues in *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, American views of Africans were greatly influenced by the philosophies of David Hume and Immanuel Kant (23). These two philosophers, among others, published works investigating the true nature of Africans. Hume wrote in 1753 that he believed Africans to be another “species of men.” He deemed them incapable of producing any of the markers of civilization such as the arts or the

sciences. Hume directly addressed the question of African slaves in the British colonies and those in other parts of the Western Hemisphere: “There are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity” (reported in Gates 24). Wheatley’s poetry directly challenged these theories on Africans and their incapacity to produce “anything great in art or science of any other praiseworthy quality,” as Kant wrote in 1763.

Although there are no records of the proceedings or the actual questions put to Wheatley during that October meeting in 1772, we do know for certain that she emerged from the inquiry triumphant. The various members of Bostonian society were satisfied that Wheatley had indeed penned the poems whose authorship she claimed, and they would be published the following year in England. The final formal conclusion of the inquiry took the form of an attestation:

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

Note that the attestation, which was deemed critical and essential to Wheatley’s finding a publisher for her poetry book in America, was not sufficient to fulfill her wish. The prevailing notion of Africans as uncivilized barbarians was too pervasive to be overcome by the signed statement of 18 of Boston’s greatest minds.

While in England, Wheatley met several key figures, whose opinions of her were all positive, even if they revealed the predisposition of some people to discount the young poetess as an erudite, educated black woman. As mentioned previously, Wheatley gained an acquaintance with the countess of

Huntingdon, who was instrumental in the publication of her book of poetry in 1773. She also was introduced to the earl of Dartmouth, who gave her a tour of the Tower of London as well as money to purchase the works of Alexander Pope, whose literary influence has been commented on by several critics in both positive and negative ways. Wheatley's poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth" was written in October 1772 upon her return to Boston and her learning that William Legge had been appointed as secretary for the North American colonies. Thomas Wooldridge, an emissary who met and interviewed Wheatley, delivered her poem and brief introductory letter to the earl of Dartmouth. In his letter to the earl, Wooldridge reveals a predisposition to the theories of Hume and Kant, for he interrogated her to determine that "she was no imposter." Wooldridge describes how he "was present when she wrote [a rough copy of the poem and letter addressed to the earl] and can attest that it is her own production" (reported in Gates 28; Robinson 20–21). Wooldridge expresses his own "astonish[ment]" on discovering Wheatley's natural, seemingly effortless, talent and in so doing places himself squarely with the group of 18 who interrogated before she set sail for England.

Among those key American figures whom Wheatley met were BENJAMIN FRANKLIN and George Washington. In a letter to his nephew, Jonathan Williams, Franklin includes a brief account of his visit with Wheatley: "Upon your Recommendation I went to see the black Poetess and offer'd her any Services I could do her. And I have heard nothing since of her" (reported in Gates 34). Although she did not write a laudatory poem in praise of Franklin, Wheatley's advertisements in 1779 for a second volume of poetry all included the fact that she intended to dedicate the volume to Franklin. Wheatley did meet and write about General George Washington, however. On October 26, 1775, she sent a letter as well as a poem written in honor of Washington to his headquarters in Cambridge. He responded on February 28 of the following year, 1776, having been

understandably delayed by the events of the Revolutionary War that had begun six months prior to her correspondence. In his response, Washington "apologize[d] for the delay" and expressed sincere gratitude for "the elegant lines." He praised her "poetical talents," citing "the [poem's] style and manner" (reported in Gates 37–38). Washington attributes the absence of the poem from newspapers to his own humility, writing, "had I not been apprehensive, that, while I only meant to give the world this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to give it place in the public prints" (38). Washington ends his epistle by inviting Wheatley to Cambridge, adding graciously, "I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations" (38). The biographer Benson J. Lossing reports that the meeting of George Washington and Phillis Wheatley did take place in Cambridge just days before the evacuation of Boston. In March 1776, Washington had Wheatley's panegyric poem published in the *Virginia Gazette*.

Some critical figures who formed opinions on Wheatley, however, were not so impressed. The central critic, whose opinions on the young poetess continue to appear in criticism but who never met her, was none other than THOMAS JEFFERSON. Gates believes that Francois, the marquis de Barbé-Marbois, occasioned Jefferson's criticism of Wheatley's poetry when he requested statistical information on the various states in the republic, which became Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (40). Marbois read Wheatley's book of poetry in 1779 and wrote in his journal about "read[ing] [her poems] with some surprise." In her writing, Marbois discovered "imagination, poetry, and zeal" (reported in Gates 42). Jefferson vehemently disagreed with Marbois's praise, stating, "The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism." In his response, Jefferson alludes to the commonly held belief made popular by Hume and Kant that Africans were incapable of producing the cultivated arts. His response even calls into

question Wheatley's authorship by referring to her poetry as "published under her name" rather than "published by her."

Jefferson does seem to concede her authorship, however, when he writes more specifically of her lack of love, which kindles the imagination rather than merely the senses. In his most famous and often cited critique of Wheatley, Jefferson avers, "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Whatley [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet." The argument Jefferson makes is that Africans like Wheatley have souls and are capable of being converted to Christianity, but their imbibing of biblical verse results in merely imitative and wooden poetry rather than verse capable of inspiring higher thought or finer feeling in her reader.

Upon her return to America, the Wheatleys manumitted Phillis Wheatley. Critics attribute the Wheatleys' granting of her freedom to both her time in England and the passage of an English law in 1772 that made it illegal for slaves to be forcibly returned to the colonies after their stay, however brief, in England. It would be a wonderful ending to her life to say that Wheatley's freedom improved her daily living, but the truth is sadly different. When she returned to America, she was faced with the daunting task of having to make a living. As an indication of the tenuous financial position she held as a freed slave in Boston, critics point to her letter written in mid-October 1773 to the customs collector in New Haven, David Wooster. In her letter, Wheatley poignantly refers to her dependence upon book sales to put food on her table: "Use your interest with Gentlemen and Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also, for the more subscribers there are, the more it will be for my advantage as I am to have half the Sale of Books. This I am the more solicitous for, as I am not upon my own footing and whatever I get by this is entirely mine, and it is the Chief I have to depend upon. I must also request you would desire the Printers in New Haven, not to reprint that Book, as it will be a great hurt to me, preventing any further Benefit that I might receive from the Sale of my Copies from England" (reprinted in Gates 35–36). As indicated

in the letter, Wheatley relied upon the sale of her book to make a living, and she feared that reprints of the English edition, for which she would receive no payment, might ruin her financially.

Shortly after the death of Susanna Wheatley in spring 1774, and the British occupation of Boston in anticipation of the Revolutionary War, Phillis moved to Providence, where Mary, the Wheatley daughter who provided Phillis with an education, was living with her husband, the Reverend John Lathrop, who was known as "the Revolutionary Preacher" and the pastor of the Old North Church, a position that both Increase and COTTON MATHER had previously held. The outbreak of the Revolutionary War in April 1775 diverted people's attentions from the African prodigy, and her prospects seemed rather bleak. Phillis returned to Boston in late 1776, and it was there, two years later, that she met and married her husband, a free black named John Peters. Not much is known of Peters, but we do know from records of his petition to sell spirits in his store that he was a grocer and sometimes functioned as a lawyer, an indication that he was well educated. The couple had three children, all of whom died in infancy. During her pregnancy with her third child, Peters abandoned Phillis. She died alone at the young age of 30 with her fatally ill child lying next to her. Her third child passed away a day after Phillis's death.

Her literary legacy has been somewhat uncertain as she was treated unkindly or forgotten by black nationalists as early as the 19th century. Cultural critics of her work point to her use of neoclassical style, the absence of rage or protest against the institution of slavery in her prose, and her poor imitation of the style of the British poet and essayist Alexander Pope. Gates sees the criticism launched against Wheatley from the late 19th century to the present as a continuation of the trial Phillis Wheatley endured in 1772 when 18 preeminent men of Boston interrogated her to determine whether she was capable of writing poetry. He also sees the reemergence of Thomas Jefferson's demeaning statements against Wheatley "recuperated and recycled by successive generations of black writers

and critics. Too black to be taken seriously by white critics of the eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth" (Gates 82). Terence Collins believes that Wheatley's difficult status of living in between races was reflected in her life. "She was not in any real way a part of the dominant culture: although she mixed with white society, it was always as an exception, as a guest, as a showpiece novelty. As a result, one must guess that she lived in a neutral zone, neither black nor white—and her poems stand as a record of this ambivalence, as an indication that the slave mentality went deeper than the surface of her life" (149).

"On the Death of Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, 1770" (1773)

This poem, widely reprinted in Boston, Newport, New York, and Philadelphia in 1770, also appeared in newspapers in London and provided Wheatley international recognition. The critic Carla Willard believes "the elegy was perhaps the most widely circulated of the poet's newspaper poems" (244). Within the poem, Wheatley's elegy of this popular evangelist serves two purposes: It re-creates, through use of apostrophe, the strong, heroic figure and fashions him into the ideal speaker for the abolition of slavery on the basis of the savior's impartiality as well as egalitarianism purchased through the sacrament of baptism.

In Wheatley's poem, Whitefield appears as a "happy saint" whose "music of thy tongue" produced powerful effects on his audiences by "inflam[ing] the heart, and captivat[ing] the mind" (8). His eloquence and oratory skills were capable of enrapturing the confirmed deist Benjamin Franklin, who recalls his own experience of attending one of Whitefield's sermons and finding himself entranced by the evangelist (reported in Willard 244–245). The persuasive and penetrating reach of Whitefield's sermons that appear here, hyperbolically represented as "in unequal'd accents" capable of making "ev'ry bosom with devotion glow," will

be harnessed by Wheatley in the latter half of the poem to lobby on behalf of the equality of Africans. This message of freedom for all, spoken as if from beyond the grave by a popular and widely respected man of the cloth, gains even further cultural authority with Wheatley's hyperbolic representation of his religious and psychological effect on all who hear him speak.

The democratic sweep of Wheatley's hyperbole appears again in the pivotal second stanza, in which she casts Whitefield as an advocate of the belief in an "impartial Saviour" (35). Wheatley sets up a parallelism: Just as Jesus reaches out to save all humans regardless of race, so too did Whitefield himself reach out to save all his parishioners. "Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood," Africans gain not only equality with Anglo Americans, but also the ability to achieve positions of equal and greater social status than currently available (36). Wheatley declares, "You shall be son, and kings, and priests to God" (37). Because Wheatley has employed the rhetorical strategy of apostrophe, she can boldly make statements for the emancipation of Africans that she can only hint at in more subtle ways when writing in her own voice. The irony of having Whitefield as a strong voice for the emancipation of slaves most undoubtedly was a shock to Wheatley as well as to supporters of Whitefield, who learned by reading the newspaper that owned 50 slaves at the time of his death whom he did not free but willed to the countess of Huntingdon.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Wheatley's praise of Mr. Whitefield and her poem dedicated to George Washington. What qualities does she revere in these two figures? On the basis of these qualities, what larger issues does she address in their poems?
2. Consider Wheatley's treatment of the liberating effects of baptism on Africans and the legal status that baptized persons held, as evidenced in OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S autobiography. Explore how this sacrament might aid abolitionists in their call for the end of slavery.

“To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth” (1772)

During her trip to England, Wheatley was introduced to William Legge, the earl of Dartmouth, who was to assume a position in America as secretary for the North American colonies. Legge’s emissary, Thomas Wooldridge, personally interviewed Wheatley, who composed both an introductory letter as well as this laudatory poem in October 1772. In her letter, Wheatley identifies herself as “an African,” signaling a racial self-consciousness that was common in her writing in general. Wheatley does not see her status as “African” as being mutually exclusive with her identity as an American, however, as she writes collectively of the “(now) happy America, [that] exults with equal transport in the view of one of its greatest advocates.”

In the opening stanza of the poem, Wheatley imagines a personified Freedom, a goddess who accompanies the earl of Dartmouth on his much-anticipated arrival in America. His appearance is transformative: “Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns” (6). These references to finer feelings are due to the earl’s proclivity to rule in America with “silken reins” (8). In other words, because he will be a kind secretary of state, Americans will respond positively to his rule. The “silken reins” are contrasted two stanzas later when Wheatley writes of the “iron chain” of former rulers.

The connection between America and Wheatley is deepened in the fourth stanza when the poem’s focus shifts to her personal story of kidnapping and enslavement. “I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” (24–25). America does not appear in this particular line as a site of freedom but rather as a kidnapper who snatches children from a happy life. As this has been her own experience, which she recites for both the earl of Dartmouth and all other readers, she poses the rhetorical question “And can I then but pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway?” (30–31). The inherent argument laid out in this stanza is that Wheatley’s status as a slave, precisely the condition that would place her outside Ameri-

can society and culture, becomes the very means by which she gains an authority to speak out on behalf of the need for freedom in America. Who would love freedom and pine for it more than a slave who has been denied it?

The critic Carla Willard argues, “Wheatley’s praise, which takes the names of the most powerful political and religious figures of her age, does not attempt to give a ‘true’ picture of the hero at all” (239). Instead of imagining the earl of Dartmouth as a lifelike figure with foibles and flaws, she creates a hyperbolic version of him that makes him more heroic and calls upon him to live up to the praise immortalized in her verse.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the other poems Wheatley dedicates to living persons such as George Washington. Does she see similar traits in these figures? Is her language of praise similar?
2. How does Wheatley’s description of her own kidnapping and enslavement register in a poem of praise to the earl of Dartmouth? Does it change the poem’s tone? How does it compare with her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America”?

“To Maecenas” (1773)

Wheatley dedicates her poem to the dear friend and patron of Horace, author of famous odes, and Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*, and in doing so creates a poetic occasion on which she can both display her extensive knowledge of classical literature and mythology and carve out a tradition for her own voice.

She opens the poem with praise for the strength of poets and shepherds, whose lines generate a sympathetic response in their readers. Homer’s epic tale of the Trojan War, its tragic characters such as Patroclus and Pelides, and even its descriptions of natural phenomena like thunder and lightning all reflect a direct connection between the poet’s lines and the emotional realities experienced by his readers. They

are moved to tears “when great Patroclus courts Achilles’ aid” and “feel the pangs of love” when Achilles mourns the death of Pelides, a great man and warrior. Even phenomena as banal as lightning and thunder, which served as signs or messages from the Greek gods but seem less emblematic in Wheatley’s day, produce a “deep felt horror . . . through all [her] veins” (14).

And yet, even within this second stanza that turns its grateful eye in adoration of Homer, Wheatley provides readers with an introduction to her own poetic talent. In the rhyming couplet “When gentler strains demand thy graceful song / The length’ning line moves languishing along,” Wheatley reveals her ability to produce the very pacing she praises in another. The word *languishing* draws out the line and slows the reader’s pace.

Not surprisingly, Wheatley turns in the following stanza to the subject of her own poetry and its place in this classical tradition: “O could I rival thine and Virgil’s page” (23). The grand hope expressed in this line seems, at the stanza’s close, to be sadly in vain: “But here I sit, and mourn a grov’ling mind / That fain would mount and ride upon the wind” (29–30). The syntax of the first line renders the “grov’ling mind” an obstacle to the poet’s wishes but does not clearly identify the person possessing this mind. It seems, on a metatextual level, to be a veiled complaint against those who prevent her from attaining the poetic and actual freedom akin to riding on the wind.

Similarly, the final two lines of the subsequent stanza contain a double meaning: “But I less happy, cannot raise the song, / The fault’ring music dies upon my tongue” (35–36). The rhetorical ambiguity of the phrase “but I less happy” lends itself to two different but not incompatible interpretations: that the poet’s unhappiness can be attributed to her failure at meeting the task or that the poet’s unhappiness, which stems from an unknown but easily guessed cause, prevents her from raising her song. The second interpretation is in keeping with that provided in “grov’ling mind.” The second line of this couplet likewise provides for more than one meaning. It may be that Wheatley’s tongue is better suited for another genre of poetry, and thus

the attempts at classical form die on her tongue, or it may be that the larger forces, such as slavery and racism, that prey upon her cause the music, or inspiration, to falter.

Wheatley concludes the poem by noting the immortality of Maecenas and requesting that such a worthy reader, who recognized and was moved by the greatness of Horace and Virgil, will “hear [her] propitious, and defend [her] lays.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wheatley references Terence in her poem, providing her contemporary readers with a note that he was an African by birth. Consider his placement in a poem that praises Greek and Roman poets. How does he stand in for Wheatley herself?
2. The poets praised are all male. In what manner does gender make a difference in Wheatley’s ability to enter into this genre of poetry?

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773)

Perhaps the most anthologized and reprinted of all of Wheatley’s poetry, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” turns Christians’ view of Africans and biblical sanctioning of the institution of slavery on their heads in very subtle and indirect, but nevertheless powerful ways. Wheatley was 14 years old when she wrote it.

The notion expressed in the first line, “’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,” contains the two strands of meaning that are interwoven throughout the poem. When one considers the circumstances of Wheatley’s kidnapping and sale into slavery that characterize her movement from “pagan land” to America, it is difficult not to read her use of *mercy* with a bitter irony. Her reference to Africa as a “pagan land,” however, tempers this tone of bitterness as she contrasts the land of her birth with the predominant Christian belief lauded in America. America is personified in the second stanza as an able religious guide who “taught [her] benighted soul to understand” (2). Wheat-

ley's choice of the adjective *benighted* is especially apt as this term maintains the double movements of praise and critique introduced in the preceding line. Wheatley expresses appreciation for this knowledge of God and Christ, yet her use of the word *benighted* to define herself belies Anglo Americans' racially charged notion of Christianity. The term means "characterized by night," but an alternate definition is "lack of enlightenment." In this single word, then, Wheatley encapsulates the racist thought of some Christians in America: that blackness equates with ignorance or, in the context of the poem, paganism.

Wheatley directly addresses this topic of racist Christians, which has appeared in indirect and subtle form in the first four lines, in the fifth line of the poem: "Some view our sable race with scornful eye." Wheatley's use of the first-person plural pronoun *our* might seem insignificant, but it creates a weighted version of the binary between races that favors Africans over Anglo Americans. Those who view "with a scornful eye" effectively become "them," a group whose members include neither Wheatley nor her readers. This distancing of reader and narrator from the white Christians who hold racist views is made even more evident in the following line, "Their colour is a diabolic die" (6). Wheatley employs quotation marks effectively to set off this other belief in a visible manner, which is itself ironic since this prejudice is based on a skewed reading or interpretation of skin color, or what is visible. Wheatley indirectly alludes to the mark of Cain, a passage from the Book of Genesis in which God places a visible mark on the sibling who murdered his own brother and punishes his sin of fratricide by condemning his progeny to serve those of his slain brother. Slave-owning Christians frequently referred to this biblical passage as sanctioning the institution of slavery.

Wheatley concludes this short but compelling poem with a firm tone and a direct address to her readers that seems to be a reminder and a rebuff.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Wheatley's tale of arriving in America compare with Olaudah Equiano's?
2. Consider the role that religion plays in Wheatley's poem and compare it to JUPITER HAMMON'S. Is it the same? Are there differences in their treatment of the institutions of Christianity and slavery?

"To the University of Cambridge in New England" (1773)

Wheatley opens her poem by expressing an "intrinsic ardor to write," but she does not immediately identify either the source of her desire or the direct recipient of the message she wishes to convey. Rather, by describing the ardor as "intrinsic," Wheatley allows herself a bit of an indulgence not common in her poetry. The first stanza ends with the conventional reminder present in most of her verse that she is African: "I left my native shore / The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom" (3–4). Africa appears disparagingly as a "land of errors," a continent that Wheatley was delivered from by the "Father of mercy," and in this version of her journey to America, she deals only with her conversion to Christianity and not with her enslavement (4–5). In defining herself in such a manner, Wheatley is able to be both an African and a poet. And in crafting herself as a muse-aided poet, Wheatley creates a position of authority from which she can launch her real purpose—to chastise the privileged students of Harvard College for not capitalizing on their opportunities.

Because the first stanza ends with God's deliverance of Wheatley from "those dark abodes," the responsibilities and types of knowledge available to Harvard students can refer to astronomy and a reckoning of the celestial bodies but can also pertain to a higher calling of religious study. Students are given the ability to "scan the heights / above, to traverse the ethereal space / and mark the systems of revolving worlds" (7–9). The outer reaches of space are available for study and mastery by Harvard students. The transcendent nature of academic investigation is not only the purview of these students, however, as Wheatley has already established herself in the first stanza as a poet, a voice inspired

and supported by a muse. Her conversion to Christianity, afforded by her transplantation from Africa to America, provides her with the opportunity to explore ethereal spaces in her verse and with additional authority by which to offer advice to the Harvard students.

Her final stanza is written in the tone of a Christian woman offering the sage advice of an elder to the young. She commends them to perform good acts, to rebuke sin, and to remain on their guard against temptations and possible moral fall. When Wheatley writes, "Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg," she acknowledges that humans have sin or evil within them that needs to be suppressed; this theory of man's fallen state equalizes all the figures who appear in the poem, most especially those from Africa's "land of errors" and those with the "privileges" of a Harvard education.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wheatley equates Christianity with academic endeavors. How does her notion of a moral education relate to COTTON MATHER's definitions of education expressed in *The Christian Philosopher* and *Bonifacius*?
2. Compare Wheatley's concept of an education with that of HANNAH FOSTER WEBSTER in *The Boarding School*. What impact does gender have in each writer's definition of a commendable education?

"A Farewell to America" (1773)

Wheatley's poem is occasioned by both her personal retreat to England for health reasons and the more politically charged reason why a journey to England might allow her to escape from the bonds of slavery.

The poem begins with the dissonance between the new life of spring in America and Wheatley's own lack of health. America is filled with "smiling meads" and "flow'ry plain," whose charms appear in vain for Wheatley. Although she records these signs of new life in New England, they remain in contrast to the poet's own feelings and physi-

cal disposition, which are never fully expressed in the poem. Instead, Wheatley connects her hope for renewed health to classical Greek notions of dawn, referring to health itself as a "Celestial maid of rosy hue" (9). The "rosy hue" describes the ruddy complexion often reflected on the face of a healthy and natural figure. Wheatley opines that she may "feel thy reign" (10). The language of being ruled by a monarch or a goddess, someone who can "reign," is particularly telling as the despotic rule of either is usually the cause for Americans to cry out for their freedom. In the context of Wheatley's journey from America to Britain, the return to a monarch's reign, in this case, that of George III, seems counterintuitive, a movement not toward liberty but to the very chains that imprisoned America. Because Lord Mansfield had recently provided asylum for all Africans forced to leave England, Wheatley's phrase "feel thy reign" might easily apply to her desire to enjoy the privileges of freedom afforded under England's recent law. Mansfield was involved in passing such a proposal only months prior to Wheatley's journey.

The next two stanzas are dedicated to the emotional turmoil created by Wheatley's departure from her mistress, Susanna Wheatley, who purchased her in Boston when she was roughly seven years old and released her from the bonds of slavery upon her return from England in late 1773. Wheatley does not dwell lightly on the feelings of mourning that pervade her mistress's frame on her departure. It is in these two stanzas, in which she not only remarks upon her mistress's grief and mourning at her departure from New England but also expresses hope that Susanna Wheatley "let no sight, nor groan for me / Steal from her pensive breast," that Wheatley's conflicted emotional response to her journey rests and her references in the final two stanzas to temptation make sense (19–20).

London itself constitutes a temptation for Wheatley for the reason that her time there might afford her rights and privileges denied her in America. And yet one would imagine the prospect of freedom to be less a temptation than a promise, a reward for years of toil and loyal service to the

Wheatleys. Her conflicting response to the journey to London is indicative of the paradoxical feelings held by many slaves who grew up in conditions that made family of slave masters.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Wheatley's depiction of America compare to that in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America"?
2. The classical references to Aurora, Apollo, and Hebe appear early in the poem when Wheatley refers only to the restoration of her health. By the poem's end, when she indirectly explores the possibility of freedom, all classical references disappear. How might you account for the absence of classical references?

"To the King's Most Excellent Majesty" (1773)

Wheatley altered the title of this poem, "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty, On His Repeal of the Stamp Act," for English audiences, making the reference to the Stamp Act a mere footnote rather than the occasion for the poem (Willard 239). Created in 1765 to raise money for England by taxing all printed paper in the colonies, the Stamp Act appeared to the colonists the first in a series of actions in which they were taxed without their consent or legislative consultation. Without a direct reference to the act's repeal in 1768, Wheatley's poem seems to call indirectly for the king's compassionate rule. The only reference to the act's repeal in her poem is in line 8, when she writes, "thy favours past."

As in her panegyric to George Washington, Wheatley's poem in praise of King George III makes no reference to the poet's African identity. She appears instead to be one of the nameless "subjects" of the king; and in so identifying herself with American colonists in general, Wheatley creates a chorus of people pleading in the most gentle of terms for their own emancipation (1). "It is through her celebration as a 'common' subject that the speaker . . . gathers an audience to

the poet's own emancipatory cause" (Willard 240). Only those familiar with Wheatley would recognize the paradox presented in the poem's final line: "A monarch's smile can set his subjects free!" (15). Wheatley celebrates a freedom that she herself does not enjoy.

Rather than provide portraiture of King George or follow the Puritan genre of "occasional" poetry, the critic Carla Willard believes, Wheatley "avoided the perspective that would frame the king in the material world" (240). King George appears as an amalgam of parts: crown, brows, arm, smile, and head. They do not compose the whole of him; nor are they specific to him alone. In this manner, Willard believes that Wheatley maintains the pattern of her celebratory poetry and constructs an ideal and abstract image of a leader such as George III so that readers and the subject of the poem himself will be forced to compare the stark contrast between the ideal figure of the poem and the fallen figure of real life.

In her appeal to God to "direct and guard him from on high / And from his head let ev'ry evil fly," Wheatley undermines both her praise of George III as well as his authority. "On high" might refer to either God's position of authority over George III as well as the king's throne. The benediction in line 13 both blesses him with a head without evil thought and assumes that the king is prone to such thoughts and may only be rid of them by God's divine intervention.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the two panegyrics for George III and George Washington. How does Wheatley subtly distinguish between the two leaders?
2. How does Wheatley balance the two types of power at work in her poem: monarchy and God?

"Thoughts on the Works of Providence" (1773)

In this devotional poem, Wheatley compares God to the Sun, for its dazzling radiance, its ability to

control the weather and the tides, its enormous presence in the sky, and its position as the celestial body that centers and orders the planetary system. The 18th-century sublime poet John Dennis employs the same metaphor of the Sun and God: "The Sun occurring to us in meditation gives the idea of a vast and glorious body . . . and the brightest material image of the divinity" (reported in Shields 193). To compare the "solar rays" with God's love and benevolence, Wheatley imagines the effect of their absence: "Without them, destitute of heat and light, / This world would be the reign of endless night" (33–34). "Endless night" refers not only to the literal consequence of the Sun's absence but also to a metaphorical result, a state of spiritual depravity. In the absence of God and the Sun, Wheatley considers cataclysmic results: "What pestilential vapours, fraught with death / Would rise, and overspread the lands beneath?" (39–40). The "limitless vision" of Wheatley's extended metaphor parallels Joseph Addison's definition of *grandeur* expressed in the *Spectator*: "Our imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at any thing that is too big for its capacity" (reported in Shields 190).

The critic John C. Shields believes that "Thoughts on the Works of Providence" participates in the 18th-century notion of the religious sublime, "the expression of the enthusiastic passions in predominately Christian language and images" (189). The means to attempt an understanding or knowledge of God occurs in the poem through the power of reason: "As reason's pow'rs by day our God disclose" (83). "As she construes them, the faculties of imagination and reason are virtually synonymous" (Shields 196–197). It is Wheatley's definition of imagination that provides her with the faculty of perceiving the sublime, in this case, the overwhelming power and presence of God. Shields makes careful note of Wheatley's separation of "imagination" from "fancy," which appears in the poem in the speaker's dream state "when action ceases and ideas range / licentious and unbounded o'er the plains" (86–87). Because the stuff of dreams is mundane and taken up with

earthly rather than heavenly love, it is relegated to "Fancy."

To train the mind to contemplate the religious sublime, Wheatley recommends that upon waking from Fancy's "giddy triumph," one should "let thy first thoughts be praises to the skies" (98). This act of devotion might lead one to a more profound contemplation of God. Shields compares Wheatley's use of the sublime to Immanuel Kant's, stating, "Both in Kant and in Wheatley, the inexorable attempt of the human mind to grasp totalities and the equally inexorable failure to do so incites the feeling of the sublime" (197).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wheatley writes "Ador'd for ever be the God unseen" in the first stanza of her devotional poem. Consider why an unseen God contributes to the poem's sublime quality.
2. How does the absence of any self-identifying line or phrase in the poem contribute to or impede the poem's sublimity?
3. Compare Wheatley's devotional poem to those of ANNE BRADSTREET, who likewise professes her religious faith in her poetry.

"To S. M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works" (1773)

Critics and historians alike have identified the subject of this occasional poem, S. M., as Scipio Moorhead, the slave of the Reverend John Moorhead. Moorhead, who was pastor of the Church of the Presbyterian Strangers, was one of the reputable men of Boston who held the investigation of Wheatley that ended in an attestation of her authorship of the poems that were subsequently published in England. Encouraged by his mistress, Sarah Moorhead, who taught art and drawing, Scipio Moorhead pursued art and was commissioned to draw the likeness of Phillis Wheatley that appears on the frontispiece of her book of poetry. This poem appears in Wheatley's 1773 publication *Poems on Various Subjects*.

What differentiates this occasional and celebratory poem from others that Wheatley penned is its subject, a fellow African. As Carla Willard has deftly argued, Wheatley employs praise in a paradoxical manner when her subject is an Anglo-European or Anglo-American figure of authority such as George III or the earl of Dartmouth. How does one consider a poem written to a fellow African in light of Mary McAleer Balkun's theory that Wheatley was keenly aware of her reading audience and had "designed [rhetoric] to manipulate this audience in very specific ways"? (122). One can either imagine that this structure breaks down once she creates the specter of an African audience (presumably Scipio Moorhead would read the poem written to him, or else would hear it from his master or mistress) or that it adheres, and the intended white audience is, perhaps for the first time, excluded from the poem's collective pronoun, *we*.

Wheatley praises Moorhead for creating life with paint and pencil and generating an emotional stir in those like Wheatley whose "soul[s] delight" on viewing his "new creation" (3, 2, 5, 6). She seems to suggest that if Moorhead maintain an "ardent view" on "deathless glories," he will continue to receive inspiration, or "fire" for his artistic endeavors, both as a painter and as a poet (8–10). In the poem's fusing of arts, poetry and painting, Wheatley creates a conspiracy of "we," who will join together in heaven, "landscapes in the realms above," and throw off classical references to Aurora and Damon for "nobler themes" (26, 31). As Wheatley's own poetry is heavy with classical allusions, especially poems like "To Maecenas," it is tempting to read a complaint about the constraints placed upon her own artistic expression. The joining of the two artists in heaven supports this reading, as Wheatley imagines them for most of the poem. She imagines Moorhead's receiving "immortal fame" that he can enjoy in "that splendid city" of heaven (12, 16).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although Wheatley identifies Scipio Moorhead as an African painter in the title of the poem, nowhere in the poem itself does she mention race or ethnic identity. How might you locate other images or references to race in the poem?
2. Wheatley ends the poem with a hope for "purer language." How might one interpret this desire? Does it have political implications? Does it have artistic implications?
3. Compare Wheatley's poem to a painter with WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT's praise of another artist in "To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe." How do the two poets imagine the duty of painters? Are their expectations for painters patriotic or religious?

"Letter to Samson Occom" (1774)

Phillis Wheatley's 1774 letter to her longtime friend the Reverend SAMSON OCCOM, a Mohegan who converted to Christianity and became a minister, first appeared in the *Connecticut Gazette* on March 11, one month after it was initially sent. Its historic significance might be demonstrated by its republication in nearly a dozen newspapers in New England. Critics familiar with Wheatley's body of literature recognize its literary significance as the source of her "most scathing criticism" (Willard 236). Within the brief but nevertheless powerful epistle, Wheatley argues for the "natural rights" of "negroes," employing a language rife with revolutionary portent, as the Whigs would argue for their separation and independence from Britain in terms of the very same principle.

Indeed, the pleas of Wheatley and others for deliverance from the oppression of slavery, which they meant quite distinctly to refer to the enslavement of Africans, were coopted by revolutionary thinkers and editors as an apt metaphor for their own experiences under George III's despotic rule. The critic Carla Willard reminds readers, "Phillis Wheatley lived in a time when the most fervent advocates of individual freedom—as well as many of the Royalists lambasting the 'tyranny' and 'slavery' of the Continental Congress—were slave owners themselves" (236). The paradox of freedom-seeking slave owners was not lost on Wheatley, who closes her letter

with the following: “How well the cry of liberty, and the reverse disposition for the exercise of oppressive power over others agree—I humbly think it does not require the penetration of a philosopher to determine.” Within her statement she notes ironically how these two incongruous beliefs appear in Whigs advocating political separation from Britain and Tories complaining of the undue power exercised by the Continental Congress, because both parties, despite political differences, maintain their “rights” to own slaves. Indicative of the pervasive practice of slave owners’ employing metaphors of enslavement in reference to their own political positions, Wheatley’s letter “elicited enthusiastic applause, not denunciation, from *both* sides of the revolution” (Willard 236).

The letter also draws upon the biblical tale of slavery in Exodus in which the Israelites were released from bonds held by the Egyptians. To make this biblical reference pertinent to her day, Wheatley labels contemporary slave owners as “our modern Egyptians.” Biblical precedent for the abolition of slavery aside, Wheatley invokes God, proclaiming that “in every human breast God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom.” In her use of Christianity, readers familiar with Wheatley’s poetry would recognize the voice that spoke less directly but no less fervently for the end of slavery.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wheatley’s bitingly ironic statement appears in a letter to Samson Occom, a friend. How does this form influence the letter’s content?
2. Compare Wheatley’s argument of the paradoxical use of slavery metaphors by slave owners with the appearance of this trope in PHILIP MORIN FRENEAU’s political poems such as “On the Causes of Political Degeneracy” and his antislavery poem “To Sir Toby.”

“To His Excellency General Washington” (1775, 1776)

Wheatley’s celebratory poem to General Washington, written in 1776 at the height of the Revolu-

tionary War, is prefaced with a conventional note expressing the poet’s humility and her sincere hope that the subject and intended reader of her poem, George Washington himself, would forgive her for “tak[ing] the freedom to address your Excellency” and for producing “inaccuracies” in the poem, which can be accounted for by the sensations generated by Washington’s own accomplishments. While it is true that Wheatley’s prefatory note follows literary convention, her employment of the term *freedom* certainly carries a double meaning that presages the poet’s more earnest aim—to turn the very symbol of America’s romantic and worthy fight for freedom into a figure who might also champion the cause of emancipating the slaves of this land. Wheatley’s employment of revolutionary rhetoric of freedom places her in the paradoxical position that W. E. B. DuBois stated was that of all African Americans: to be in but not of American ideology.

As a nod to the neoclassical convention of the time, Wheatley invokes the muse’s assistance in describing the epic battles between armies. Within this stanza, she offers two metaphors for the armies: “refluent surges [that] beat against the shore / Or thick as leaves in Autumn’s golden reign” (18–9). Both images naturalize the bodies of soldiers, yet neither bears an emotional charge. It is striking to note that it is not until line 23 that Washington himself appears as the singular subject set into relief against the waves of armies clashing on the battlefield. Tellingly, at this moment of his magnificent arrival in the poem, with an ample military backdrop already detailed, Wheatley hesitates and wonders, “Shall I to Washington their praise recite?” (23). The question is, naturally, rhetorical, as Wheatley proceeds to praise his “valour, for thy virtues more” (27). And yet, the moment’s hesitation might make readers take pause in considering what on the surface appears to be a rather conventional poem in honor of Washington.

The critic Carla Willard argues that Wheatley’s use of the convention of praise in her poetry has traditionally been misunderstood as “a blundering choice of heroes: colonial men praised for heroic acts instead of blamed for ominous or ridiculous ones”

(234). On the contrary, Wheatley creates ideal images of the subjects of her poetry and, as her preface to Washington's poem suggests, "does not attempt to give a 'true' picture of the hero at all" (Willard 239). Thus, the Washington of the poem is not a reflection of the real man, but rather the image of a "great chief" deserving of "a crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine / With gold unfading" (41–42). The hyperbolic nature of the gifts that should be bestowed on Washington, such as a throne with unfading gold, gives credence to Willard's interpretation of the nature of Wheatley's praise. Further, the items all represent the very symbols of British imperialism that America is fighting.

For Discussion or Writing

Compare Wheatley's idea of rewarding Washington's efforts in the Revolution with a crown and a throne with Philip Morin Freneau's interpretation of these symbols in his poetry, most especially "On the Causes of Political Degeneracy."

"Liberty and Peace" (1784)

In contrast to her other poems, even those written in praise of living and dead figures, Wheatley's "Liberty and Peace" distinguishes itself by appearing after the Revolutionary War and thus addressing the achievement of the freedom that the republic longed for in her prior poems. Written in 1784, this poem celebrates the achievements of the Revolutionary War and praises France for assisting America in its struggle to overcome "the Tyrant's Law" (38). In prior poems, Wheatley was able to draw upon the double sense of freedom that referred both to her personal desire for freedom from the bonds of slavery and to America's desire for political freedom from British rule. After 1776, however, this double sense of freedom no longer registered in her poetry. Many critics attribute the lack of interest in a second volume of her poetry, which would have included "Liberty and Peace," to the triumphant termination of the war. No longer clamorous for liberty from England, American readers did not envision them-

selves in the soulful pleas for freedom that echoed from the pages of her verse.

In the poem, Wheatley makes no reference to herself or to her former status as a slave (she had been manumitted in 1773). Critics like Angelene Jamison who are prone to see Wheatley as "an eighteenth century poet who supported, praised, and imitated those who enslaved her and her people" examine this particular poem and take note of the absence of slavery or the plight of slaves in its celebration of America's independence. Jamison writes, "Phillis saw the very country which enslaved her and other Blacks as one deserving some heavenly protection. How could she be so removed from the plight of her people and the attitude towards her people as to glorify those who were responsible for that wretched condition of slavery?" (133). The critic Carla Willard sees the omission of Wheatley's own racial identity as well as any direct reference to slavery as another indication of the poet's subtlety. "There is no reference to the speaker's African identity; it must be drawn from outside the poem" (239).

Within the poem, Wheatley and Columbia mourn the "mutual deaths" of Americans and Frenchmen who fought "on hostile fields" (40, 39). She compares the peace resounding in the land to the rising sun, "as from the East th'illustrious King of Day / With rising Radiance drives the Shades away" (53–54). *Shades* is an interesting term as it implies both those who have died during the war and the absence of light, or the darkness that existed during and before the war. The poem concludes triumphantly with "Heavenly Freedom spread[ing] her golden Ray" (64). Perhaps this final line is, as some critics have suggested, a capitulation to America after Wheatley gained own freedom, or perhaps it is, as others have argued, a ray of hope for the slaves who yearned for their freedom after the war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Wheatley's depiction of the Revolutionary War compare with that offered by Philip Morin Freneau? How do the two poets envision a future for America? How do they imagine Britain?



JOHN WINTHROP (1588–1649)

... men shall say of succeeding plantations “the lord make it like that of New England.” For wee must consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill.

(A Modell of Christian Charity)

On January 22, 1588, John Winthrop was born. The year that witnessed his birth was also the year in which England defeated the greatest naval power in Europe, Spain, clearing the way for England to begin colonizing the New World, Winthrop’s future home. This was just after the time in England when the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, occasioned by Henry VIII, created a new class of landowners, who purchased estates that were formerly the property of Catholic monasteries. John Winthrop’s paternal grandfather purchased the manor of Groton, formerly the Abby of Bury St. Edmunds, and his father, Adam Winthrop, added to the family’s landholdings so that by the time of young John’s infancy, the Winthrops occupied a position among the elite.

He entered Trinity College at Cambridge when he was 15, having been trained for the previous four years by John Chaplyn. He seems to have ostracized himself from his fellow classmates, however, because of his religious devotion, which caused him to draw attention to the mundane sins of his classmates such as cursing. In his papers, Winthrop first mentions his “notions of God” when he was 10 years old. Such devotion was uncommon at such a young age, and it is quite likely that Winthrop’s conscientiousness was rather off-putting to young students more interested in pranks and nightly visits from a prostitute. Two years after his entrance at Cambridge, Winthrop returned home to Groton.

In 1605, when he was merely 17 years old, Winthrop married Mary Forth in a union arranged by his father and hers, John Forth (3). As the only heir to the Forth estate in Great Stambridge, Mary, who was four years older than her husband, guaranteed the future prosperity of their family. Through Mary, Winthrop met the Puritan minister Ezekiel Culverwell and forged a lifelong devotion to the religion that would shape his sense of the New World and his role as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. During their 10-year marriage, Mary bore six children, four of whom survived past infancy. She died in June 1615 at the age of 31. Six months later, in December, Winthrop married his second wife, Thomasine Clopton, who died in childbirth after only one year of marriage. Their infant girl, who was Winthrop’s seventh child, perished two days later. In April 1618, Winthrop wed his third wife, Margaret Tyndal, who would follow him to the New World.

Unlike the separatists whom WILLIAM BRADFORD followed, Puritans like Winthrop did not seek to leave England or its church, but rather to effect its reform. In his daily dealings in London as a lawyer, Winthrop wrote to his brother-in-law of his repulsion at the moral corruption he witnessed there, referring to it as “this sinful lande” (6). He expressed his desire for national and religious reform in 1624 when he drew up a list of “Common Grievances Groanings for Reformation” (7). From January 1627 to June

1629, Winthrop worked as an attorney at the Court of Wards and Liveries. At that time, Winthrop wrote to his wife, "My office is gone." Critics do not know whether he resigned his position as a lawyer or he was forced to leave because of his religious beliefs. It is clear, however, that he had been considering emigration to New England at the time, for he wrote to his wife, "The Lorde hath admonished, threatened, corrected, and astonished us, yet we grow worse and worse. . . . He hath smitten all the other Churches before our eyes. . . . I am very persuaded, God will bring some heavy Affliction upon this land, and that speedlye" (2:91–92).

Soon afterward, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was formed, and in October of the same year, Winthrop was elected as their governor. He wrote of his own responsibility in this role: "The welfare of the plantation depends upon my assistance: for the maine pillars of it beinge gentlemen of highe qualitye, and eminent partes, bothe for wisdom and godlinesse, are deteremined to sitt still, if I deserte them" (reported in Schweninger 8). Winthrop, accompanied by his son Henry, set sail for the New World in spring 1630 aboard the *Arbella*. Because his wife, Margaret, was far along in her pregnancy, she remained temporarily behind to see to the sale of the estate at Groton and to deliver her child before sailing with Winthrop's eldest son, John, Jr., who also remained behind (9).

As detailed in his journal, Winthrop's 19 years in New England, ending in his death in 1649, were challenging, physically, fiscally, and spiritually. The severity of New England weather, coupled with the need for good, wholesome food, were early threats to the colony, but these were followed by theological divisions that threatened to tear the young colony apart. The separatist Roger Williams, who did not believe in Winthrop's notion of reform within the Church of England but, as did Bradford, lobbied for the Colony's separation from the nation and its corrupt church, was the first outspoken figure to threaten the colony's peace. His call for the colony to break from the Church of England, following the need to replace Pastor Wilson at Boston's church, caused him to be banished from the

colony in October 1635. He also faced political threats to his authority as governor from the young colonist Thomas Dudley, father of ANNE BRADSTREET, who would challenge Winthrop during the election in 1634 and defeat his bid for governor. From 1634 to 1637, Winthrop remained outside the political sphere in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but he was soon back in the thick of it after the next election.

Dudley served as deputy governor during the first years of settlement, and it is quite likely that Winthrop's decision in locating the colony might have initially sparked friction between the two. Dudley built his home in Newtown (present-day Cambridge) with the impression that it would be the center of the colony. However, he was alarmed to discover that Winthrop chose to settle on the peninsula, on the other side of the Charles River, in Shawmut (present-day Boston). The river became both a physical and a symbolic barrier between the two. As the historian Edmund Morgan suggests, "Dudley, as deputy governor, was close enough to the throne and piqued at not occupying it" (104). Dudley's ire over the governor's powers was made public in a series of complaints lodged against Winthrop for overstepping his bounds. In addition to an incident with the fishing weir, Dudley accused Winthrop of assuming too much authority in erecting a fort, sending gunpowder to Plymouth, and not forcing two banished men from the community (73).

Winthrop's second term as governor saw him facing his greatest threat—Anne Hutchinson. Supported by John Wheelwright, a radical minister, and Henry Vane, Hutchinson was an outspoken proponent of antinomianism, which challenged Winthrop's political and theological authority. Although she emerged as a threat prior to his return to the governorship, Hutchinson was supported by the then-governor, Henry Vane, and was only banished once Winthrop took office again and had the authority to remove her and Wheelwright (12). Winthrop described Hutchinson as having "ready wit and bold spirit," claims that indicate, albeit in a negative light, her articulateness and intelligence (11).

Personally, Winthrop's devotion to matters of the colony took his attention away from the affairs of his own household. And 10 years after settling in New England, Winthrop learned that Thomas Luxford, whom he had hired to manage his property and business, had run the governor into such debt that he was forced to sell off much of his land and live in a more modest home. The critic Lee Schwenger considers the amount of time it took Winthrop to become apprised of the dire state of his finances under Luxford's mismanagement as indicative both of the governor's devotion to colonial affairs and of his naive trust in Luxford (12).

In addition to Thomas Dudley, Winthrop faced other figures and charges that undermined his authority as governor. His first term as governor ended in part because of an event like that which occurred in 1632. When fishermen appealed to the governor for the construction of a fishing weir, Winthrop decided to act, instead of defer, as he should legally have done, to the decision of the General Court. He defended his overstepping of the court's authority by arguing that since they only met once a quarter, and the fishermen needed permission to construct the weir in a timely fashion, he decided for their benefit. Similar charges of the governor's exceeding his authority would emerge again when he attempted to exercise a veto in the case of ownership of a sow. Winthrop, who detested the notion of democracy, believed that the deputies might exercise their authority together and overthrow the governor, whom he believed most qualified to govern.

Winthrop's beliefs regarding rule and obedience were fundamentally shaped by his Puritan faith. Once elected to the position of governor, Winthrop believed that whoever occupied the position was operating with an authority from God. Prior to the birth of his first son, Winthrop began keeping a journal to record his religious experiences, as was customary for Puritans such as COTTON MATHER and Anne Bradstreet. The original document was destroyed by his ancestor, Robert C. Winthrop, Jr., who recorded sections of the spiritual diary and published them as *The Life and Letters of John Win-*

throp. Robert C. Winthrop, Jr., readily admits that he purposefully deleted a list of sins that Winthrop included in his journal, stating that they were written in cipher, were abbreviated, and were thus "quite unintelligible to any eye but his own" (1:16). A common theme that emerges from the journal is the author's worldliness: "Worldly cares thought not in any grosse manner outwardly, yet seacretly, together with a seacret desire after pleasures and itching after libertie and unlawful delights, had brought me to waxe wearie of good duties and so to forsake my first love, whence came muche trouble and danger" (1:161–162). In addressing his first love, Winthrop is referring to his love of Christ and confessing to the various desires he has for things of the world that prevent him from attaining a true covenant with God.

Winthrop wrote of the dangers inherent in being too much of this world, "The love of the worlde even in a small measure, will coole, if not kill, the life of sinceritye in Religion, and will abolishe the veye memorye of heavenly affections" (1:212). As an indication of Winthrop's sense of his own sins, he includes such activities as using tobacco, hunting, sitting up late, eating for pleasure rather than sustenance, and being impatient (17). He resolved in his spiritual journal to give up the sport of hunting, having offered up a list of various reasons why it was sinful and a practice not to be pursued (17–18). He further worried over his own propensity to overeat and to be lazy or indolent (18). To assist him in ridding himself of these sins, Winthrop forms a covenant with God, which includes a list of resolutions on his part (18). Schwenger considers the personal covenants Winthrop forges with God in his spiritual journal to adumbrate his call for a covenant with the members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which bound them to a moral code (19).

Originating as a fishing and trading company, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, organized in 1623, had become defunct. When the company's governor, John Endicott, petitioned the Crown for a new royal charter, King Charles I responded with a document that created the Massachusetts Bay

Colony, which, like its predecessor, was intended to be a trading company (31). Winthrop believes that the omission of England or London as the place for the company to hold its quarterly meetings, which made the charter unique, allowed them to erect their entire government in New England and thus afforded the colonists unbounded freedom (31).

In justification for his membership in the colony and his departure from England, Winthrop began writing and editing "Arguments for the Plantation of New England." The document, which had five sections, opens with religion as the first reason for emigration: "propagation of the gospel to the Indians." Thus, Winthrop foregrounds his Calvinist faith, and his national desire for the colony, as subject to the British Crown, to rival Spain's spread of Catholicism (33). Winthrop follows the Elizabethan promotional tracts in the second section, where he lists the abundance of flora and fauna to be found in the New World as reason for their emigration to New England (33). Schweninger believes Winthrop availed himself of Captain JOHN SMITH's *Description of New England* in writing the text's second section (33). He calls for skilled craftsmen to emigrate, as well as saints, as the Puritans referred to themselves, believing that they could not accomplish their goal of religious conversion of New England's native population without "persons meete for such a worke" (2:133).

Winthrop also addresses possible criticisms of his emigration, chief among them the encroachment on natives' land, the need for such stellar individuals to remain in England during its theological crisis, and the tangible rewards being forfeited for the unknown climes of the New World. Reflecting the feeling of the times, Winthrop believes that the natives, who do not have a crop-based living, are not using land that would be made more profitable in the hands of the colonists. Further, he argues that the colonists' presence as Christians who can convert the heathens also justifies their occupation of native lands. Finally, Winthrop mentions the plagues that have recently killed a significant number of natives, reading such a disaster as a sign from God that American Indians are not favored

by God. In response to his own friend, Robert Ryece, who argues that the nation needs Puritans to remain in England and effect positive reform within the nation, Winthrop anticipates his own famous sermon preached aboard the *Arbella*, that the colony would be a model for others to turn away from their wickedness (38).

Winthrop's own justifications for emigration were also enhanced by other documents and sermons that commended the colonists to God and acknowledged their risks in leaving the motherland for New England. One of these documents was the "Agreement at Cambridge," which was drafted in summer 1629 and signed by all those who boarded the 12 ships headed for Massachusetts. This document afforded the colony its economic independence by turning over the stock to 10 underwriters, with Winthrop as one (39). He reiterates his belief that the colony will serve as an example for other Christian societies to follow: "Consider your reputation, the eyes of all the godly are upon you, what can you do more honorable for this Citye, and the Gospell which you profess."

The biographer Lee Schweninger believes that Winthrop best expressed his views on government in his "Little Speech on Liberty," a response to accusations by the people of Hingham that he had once again exceeded his authority by appointing a military captain unpopular with the people (113). Despite Winthrop's initial position of humility, confessing that he is a person and therefore subject to making mistakes as all people are, he goes on to justify his authority as proceeding from God himself. In Winthrop's reasoning, since the people are Christians and they elected him to the position of governor, then his authority is from God: "It is yourselves who have called us to this office, and being called by you, we have our authority from God." Further, in regard to their accusations against him, Winthrop seems to evoke the well-known biblical passage from John, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7). Winthrop states that any "infirmity" they witness in him should occasion their own reflection on their frailties. Thus, Winthrop argues, the colonists will be less likely to complain about their leaders

when they recognize that they, too, commit similar errors (113–114).

On the issue of liberty, Winthrop distinguishes between natural liberty and civil or federal liberty. The first category he likens unto beasts: “By this, man, as he stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to evil as well as to good. This liberty is incompatible and inconsistent with authority, and cannot endure the least restraint of the most just authority” (2:238). Thus, the notion of democracy, in which the people decide by a majority, would fall under the category of natural liberty for Winthrop as it stands in direct opposition to authority. The notion of civil or federal liberty, however, is morally sound as it refers to “the covenant between God and man.” Civil liberty is exercised in complete subjection to authority. He ends his speech by summarizing the essential difference between the two concepts of liberty: “If you stand for your natural corrupt liberties, and will do what is good in your own eyes, you will not endure the least weight of authority, but will murmur, and oppose, and be always striving to shake off that yoke; but if you will be satisfied to enjoy such civil and lawful liberties, such as Christ allows you, then will you quietly and cheerfully submit unto that authority which is set over you” (2:238–239).

These concepts of authority and civil liberty were key elements in Winthrop’s own life, as well as his reign as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They were leading principles of the Puritan faith that so guided and directed his life and his decisions, such as abandoning his wealth and position in London to set out for the New World and the creation of a colony that would be a beacon for England and other societies worldwide. Winthrop died in his colony on March 26, 1649.

A Modell of Christian Charity (1630)

Winthrop’s lay sermon, which contains the most famous of all lines, “a city on a hill,” was delivered aboard the *Arbella* and outlines his hopes

for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It opens with a justification of the class structure inherited from England: “Some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie, others means and in subjeccion.” These apparent differences in class and character were ordered by God and are thus inherent. Because these differences are organic and sanctioned by God, Winthrop argues, it is necessary for those in power to practice “love, mercy, gentleness, and temperance” while those of the “poore and inferiour sorte” should be ruled by “faihte, patience, and obedience.” Winthrop concludes that divine providence has ranked humans in these two categories so that they might knit together as a colony in their mutual need and affection for one another. In other words, rather than that these divisions in wealth create divisiveness among the settlers, Winthrop considers the hierarchy to unite them as “every man afford his help to another in every want or distress.” The concept seems similar to noblesse oblige, whereby the wealthy members of the aristocracy are morally bound to aid those who are less fortunate than they in rank and material possessions. Winthrop’s family status as landed gentry would certainly have predisposed him to maintain the social ranking system inherited from England when traveling to the New World. Schwenger disagrees with the view that Winthrop perpetuates England’s hierarchical social structure, believing instead that he “was willing to circumvent the conventional class structure insofar as the success of the plantation depends on all men and women working together, rich and poor alike” (42).

Winthrop advocates the golden rule in guiding the encounters among colonists, quoting from Matthew: “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you” (5:43). Although on the surface, this concept appears to advocate a democratic blurring of class lines with all treating each other as equals, Winthrop has already dispelled the accuracy of such an interpretation from the opening lines of the sermon in which he deems these class differences to be innate and ordained by God. Later, when he likens the colony unto a body with its

various parts, he maintains the concept of difference, for each part has its own labor to perform for the good of the whole. For Winthrop, difference should be accepted among the colonists and instead of attempting to surmount it, the settlers should unite as Christians against nonbelievers. Yet even this difference does not endure, for Winthrop's sermon, which is on the topic of charity, calls for the Christians to give food to the enemies who hunger and love to the enemies who hate. Withholding charity, even under trying times, is not excusable, Winthrop argues, because it might "tempt God, in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary means."

The "bond" or "ligament" holding the various parts together and knitting them into a functioning whole is, Winthrop believes, love. By way of defining the binding characteristic of this love, he references the love of Christ for mankind and the one body formed by all Christians and the church. He then moves from the scriptural references to the body to project the dynamic that he hopes will prevail among the colonists. "All the parts of this body being thus united are made soe continguous in a speciall relacion as they must needes partake of each others strength and infirmity, joy, and sorrowe, weale and woe." Again, Winthrop cites a scriptural passage, from Corinthians, echoing the same sentiment. The relationship of the part to the whole follows a pattern established by Christ and his disciples where those called "servants of the Church" performed their labor out of love.

Winthrop next addresses the source of this love, stating that Adam "in his first estate was a perfect model of mankinde . . . and in him this love was perfected in regard of the habit." Thus, Winthrop traces the history of love within humans back to the original human described in the Book of Genesis. Adam's fall from grace does not only occasion his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, but, more to Winthrop's purpose, creates in him, and thus in all subsequent generations, a desire "to love and seeke himselfe onely." In other words, the uniting and selfless love that defined mankind in its perfect and innocent state turns to the dividing and selfish

love of mankind in its fallen state. The love of self and a pursuit of self-interest defined humans in the postlapsarian world until the coming of Christ. For Winthrop, Christ's works were in taking possession of the soul and infusing it with love of God and love of one's fellow human being. The love between and among Christians is continually supplied by Christ. Thus, for Winthrop, acts of charity that exhibit love, mercy, and kindness toward another human being are made possible through the death and resurrection of Christ and are thus reaffirmations of the bond that humans have with Christ. In Calvinist thinking, acts of charity do not guarantee one's redemption after death, but they are nevertheless visible signs of one's faith and devotion.

In further exploration of the dynamics of love as a uniting principle drawing Christians together through Christ, Winthrop considers the importance of sameness or recognized similarity. He likens the love that a mother has for her child "because shee thoroughly conceives a resemblance of herselfe in it" to God's love for those privileged few who are members of the elect. Winthrop returns again to the prelapsarian scene of Adam and Eve to reiterate his point that a sense of similarity fosters love, and a desire to aid and care for "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone."

Readers might glimpse Winthrop's own idealized sense of a Puritan wife in his portrayal of Eve's demonstrations of love for Adam: desiring to be near him, confessing the "inmost closet of her heart," sighing and moaning in sympathy, and rejoicing in his happiness. Further, to reiterate to readers the selfless nature of the love motivating these actions and emotional responses, Winthrop states, "She finds recompence enoughe in the exercise of her love towards it." Other biblical examples of people's hazarding their own lives to remain with those whom they love include David and Jonathan, and Ruth and Naomi. Winthrop hastens to clarify lest this form of love be mistaken for unrequited love. He returns to his prevailing metaphor of a body and its various parts and focuses specifically on the mouth. Although the mouth is taxed with receiving and mincing the food that

will provide nourishment for the entire body, Winthrop argues, “it hath no cause to complaine” and presents two reasons: The mouth enjoys the pleasure, and contentment of performing this function exceeds the pains of labor. He seems quickly to abandon this metaphor to return to the scenario of Christians’ loving fellow Christians. The mere discovery of an object of affection “that which it may love fervently” is in itself a source of “pleasure and content.” The mutual aspect of love, of loving and being loved, is deemed “a soul’s paradice both heere and in heaven.”

Having secured the specific principles and definitions of this form of love, Winthrop proposes to apply “this discourse by the present designe which gave the occasion of writeing of it.” He begins by defining the people who compose the Massachusetts Bay Colony through their mutually shared identities as Christians and advocates following the model of an early French reformer, Peter Valdes, in loving one another as Christians even before they have become acquainted with one another. It is telling that Winthrop would look to Peter Valdes as a figure worthy of emulation since this wealthy man dedicated his life and his material possessions to denouncing the Catholic Church. In the 12th century, Valdes founded the Society of the Poor Men of Lyons and the followers, whom Winthrop refers to as “Waldenses.” A wealthy man, Peter Valdes gave away his riches to the poor, dedicated himself to the Gospels, and generated a group of proselytes to travel the world and denounce the Catholic Church. This sense of Christian love, then, unites the disparate members of the colony, for as Winthrop writes, they have lived and worked apart from each other prior to their membership in the colony.

Building on this foundation, Winthrop stresses that “for the worke wee have in hand,” it is essential for the colonists to seek out a settlement where they may all live under a government that is “both civill and ecclesiasticall.” In other words, their religious identities, and their religious goals, necessitate that the government formed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony address not only civil policy, but ecclesiasti-

cal matters as well. The greater good is the ultimate goal of the colony, and thus every member is called to sacrifice private gain willingly for public good. In his third point, he continues his argument for acting in concert. If the colonists “doe more service to the Lord [to] the comforte and encrease of the body of Christ,” then they will not only improve their lives but also provide for their posterity a society that has preserved itself from the corruptions of the evil world. Further, they will have increased the body of Christ through their efforts in converting American Indians.

Charged as the colonists are, Winthrop believes, they must devote themselves to their task not “with usuall ordinary meanes,” but with “familiar and constant practise” and “without dissimulation.” The tension Winthrop creates here is plainly between England and the New World, between “theire Churches” and “ourselves.” Although he does not necessarily denigrate the Church of England, and unlike separatists like Bradford he does not openly express a desire to leave the church, Winthrop nevertheless makes clear his position on the superiority of the religious beliefs and practices of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Indeed, Winthrop lists three principles explaining why the pressure for the colony to keep their covenant with God is more intense than for those in England, “among whome wee have lived.”

The first reason he offers is a parallel of the special dynamic the colonists have with God and the biblical example of God’s targeting the Israelites especially for punishment because they are the only people he has known “of all the families of the Earthe.” The second reason, similar to the first, is to distance themselves from others who “corrupted the service of the Lord” by using incense and offering a “strange fire.” Winthrop offers the tale of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, who, as depicted in Leviticus, made such offerings to God and were devoured (Leviticus 10:1–2). The principle behind these two biblical references seems to be the same: Chosen people suffer a greater punishment from God for flouting his principles or their covenant with him. Third, Winthrop recites

the tale of Saul, whom God charged with the task of destroying the Amalekites. Saul disobeyed God by sparing the sheep and oxen, and for this reason, he was not made king (1 Samuel 15:1–34). As Winthrop advises, “When God gives a special commission he lookes to have it stricktly observed in every Article.” Thus, the colonists will need to be mindful of every aspect of their covenant with God and ensure that they are obeying them.

Winthrop applies the promises or contracts existing between God and the various figures cited from the Bible to himself and his fellow colonists. Similarly to these other people, Winthrop writes, the members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony “are entered into Covenant with him,” and in exchange for God’s “favour and blessing,” they must strictly adhere to the articles that they themselves composed. What is worthy of comment is that Winthrop gives himself and the colonists the power to negotiate their own behavior in the form of their own articles. Following the “Counsell of Micah,” Winthrop proposes a strict adherence to this biblical passage: to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Humility is a central principle that Winthrop stresses, and it introduces a point of tension because at the same time that the colonists wish to receive God’s special blessing and favor, they must also be mindful not to seek out greatness for themselves or their posterity. In other words, although Winthrop and his colonists enter into a covenant with God in the hope of differentiating themselves from others, they must not gloat about their privileged state.

The articles Winthrop proposes also include many of the central themes of his lay sermon: to care for the good of the whole and sacrifice personal gain for the community, to act together in concert, and to share in suffering, labor, mourning, and rejoicing. The Lord will be among them, and they will “see much more of his wisdom, power, and goodness, and truthe then formerly wee have bene acquainted with.” Fortified with God’s favor, Winthrop writes of how the colony will be viewed in the future: “Men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England:

for wee must consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill.” Thus, Winthrop concludes his sermon with the most famous and enduring image of Puritan colonialism: the notion that the colony will endure in people’s minds as a shining example of God’s elect. The Massachusetts Bay Colony is destined for greatness, to be “made a story and a byword through the world.” Others are thus expected to look to the plantation as a model to follow. Winthrop warns that all of this glory and praise can just as easily be undone if the members do not obey and are seduced by the pursuit of earthly pleasures and profit.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Keeping in mind that Winthrop delivered this sermon sometime aboard the *Arbella* before they reached New England, consider how it gives insight into Winthrop’s vision for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Why begin with a discussion of class structures?
2. Winthrop’s phrase “We shall be as a city upon a hill” created an enduring image in American literature and culture. Consider other authors and images that are similar to Winthrop’s.

The Journal of John Winthrop (1630–1645)

With his first entry dated Easter Monday 1630, John Winthrop began his journal while aboard the *Arbella*, making its way to New England. What would follow, in his 19 years of faithful and sporadic entries on the events concerning the Massachusetts Bay Colony, would become invaluable primary material for historians and subsequent colonists in North America. Cotton Mather, William Hubbard, Thomas Prince, Ezra Stiles, Jonathan Trumbull, and Jeremy Belknap all had access to Winthrop’s three-volume journal, courtesy of the Winthrop family. Currently, the first and third volumes of the original journal are housed in the Massachusetts historical society, but the second, in its original form, is lost forever, having been consumed in a fire at James Savage’s office while the

librarian of the historical society was reading and transcribing it. For all of the figures who recognized the importance of Winthrop's journal as an early account of colonial life in North America, it is surprising that it was not published until 150 years after Winthrop's death (Dunn 186). The critic Richard Dunn remarks that the journal takes on different levels of detail and subject matter depending upon a variety of factors including whether Winthrop was in a position of power. When he was functioning as governor, the entries are tempered, so that controversies are easily remedied, and evidence of dissent is silenced. Gathering materials from other documents and comparing them to Winthrop's journal, Dunn notes that the governor does not mention the 200 people who died within the first year, or the additional 200 who departed from the colony and returned to England (194). Further, when Winthrop remarks on the joyous return of the *Lyon* carrying much-needed food and other supplies to the settlers, he omits that the ship returned to England carrying more than 80 unhappy colonists (195). Dunn attributes these calculated omissions or silences to Winthrop's sense of the journal as a "semipublic statement by the leader of the colony" (194). Editors of the journals also participated in the removal or silencing of certain topics addressed by Winthrop such as the tale of Anne Hutchinson's monstrous birth or the charges of bestiality filed against the colonist William Hatchet (Dunn 187).

Winthrop seems to have looked to William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* and the Old Testament tales of backsliding and divine punishment as models for his journal (Dunn 196). Further, Dunn believes that the early entries detailing specific nautical information were modeled after Francis Higginson, who penned a sea journal when he crossed the Atlantic for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop sent for Higginson's journal and requested that his son Forth make copies of certain passages, which would then be distributed to neighbors interested in emigration to the New World (191–192). Thus, Winthrop's journal provides future colonists with assurances about the

relative safety of the ocean voyage. In this respect, one might see the early sections of the journal performing a similar function to Captain JOHN SMITH's promotional tracts. It is a public document that is made by a private man who assumes a public persona, as evidenced by his use of the third person pronoun *we* and his limited reference to himself in the first person. In fact, he refers to himself in the third person as "the governor."

The tension between the intended public nature of the journal and the private man who was writing its entries becomes most apparent in years of strife and controversy. After the return of more than 80 settlers to England, Winthrop developed a strategy to treat all instances of colonists' departing from Massachusetts or quarreling with the government as people destined to suffer God's wrath for their wickedness and their departure from the covenant outlined in *A Modell of Christian Charity* (Dunn 195). Such a strategy proves key to the sentencing and banishment of Anne Hutchinson and the removal of THOMAS MORTON, two of Winthrop's most threatening neighbors. As justification for his actions, Winthrop draws upon the Old Testament tales of figures who incur God's wrath for their wicked acts. He does not hesitate throughout the journal's three volumes to document tales of hardship and death visited upon those who defy the Massachusetts church-state system, such as Anne Hutchinson, John Humfrey, and Dr. Child.

Beginning in late October 1636, Winthrop makes his first entry on the figure whom Richard Dunn believes to have been "an even more dangerous adversary than the Pequots" (201). Winthrop calls Hutchinson a "woman of ready wit and bold spirit" and thus in his own indirect manner recognizes the attributes that might call others to listen to her speak, as many did. Hutchinson, Winthrop reports, "brought over with her two dangerous errors: 1. That the person of the Holy Ghost dwells in a justified person. 2. That no sanctification can help to evidence to us our justification." Such theories are radically dangerous because they challenge the foundations of Winthrop's own religious beliefs

and, in doing so, threaten his authority over the colony and his vision for its destiny. In the first statement, Hutchinson sees the elect as having the spirit of God within them. This anticipates Quaker belief regarding an "inner light" that allows every person the ability to communicate with God, without the intervention of priests or ministers. Thus, it rids the colony of its central structure, the Calvinist church. It differs from Calvinist thinking, in which the elect commune with the Holy Spirit only after their death, when they alone are given entry into heaven while all others suffer eternal damnation in hell. Taken to its extreme, Hutchinson's first theory of the divine's existing within humans would, naturally, lead to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit dwells within everyone, and thus all are destined for heaven. This belief confronts the Calvinist concept of predestination, in which a select few are among the elect, or "justified," people. Winthrop's vision for the colony as a "city upon a hill" is based on the Calvinist doctrine of predestination by asserting that the colonists are God's chosen people. Hutchinson's statement leads to an egalitarianism that is spiritually and politically offensive to Winthrop.

Further, Hutchinson's beliefs might have led Puritans to dispense with the Bible and other tools of learning about God since they were filled with the Holy Spirit and were thus endowed with enlightened minds. Hutchinson herself proclaimed that she had received a message from God telling her the veracity of her theories, and, most important, that she was destined for heaven. The Puritan culture revolved around ministers and other officials interpreting signs from the Bible and from events in everyday life as divine revelations. To have a layperson, and a woman at that, declare her own salvation as assured through a direct message from God dismantled the patriarchal order of the church and challenged the central tenet of the religion.

Hutchinson's second point is that "no sanctification can help to evidence to us our justification." This concept also directly challenges Calvinist thought regarding the signs God provides in the world of his favor or disfavor. Winthrop has written,

as has William Bradford, of signs that he witnesses that demonstrate God's favor on the colonists. Similarly, the two early settlers recite numerous tales in which their enemies' hardships or deaths are considered to be signs of God's harsh judgment. When John Humfrey deserted the Massachusetts Bay Colony for the West Indies, Winthrop considers the fire that burned his barn and its contents, hay and corn, as just punishment for breaking the covenant with God. Similarly, when Hutchinson suffers a miscarriage, what Winthrop describes in his journal as "a monstrous birth," he writes of it as a sign of "her error in denying inherent righteousness." Thus, ironically, he views her miscarriage as God's punishment specifically for her second theory that the elect cannot look to the world for evidence of their election, or "justification."

Given Winthrop's predisposition to abide by God's laws and to read the tragedies or triumphs of others in terms of God's judgment, it is understandable that he would engage in a 20-year debate with the deputies over the creation of judicial power in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and a code that would prescribe specific punishments for a variety of crimes. Key to the freemen's attempts to create a set of laws was the fear that magistrates held too much power and could use it at their own discretion to create harsh and uneven punishments for individuals who committed the same crimes but who were held in strong contempt by the magistrates on a personal level. To Winthrop, "God have provided all the rules that were needed to govern" (Cahn 108). Further still, the Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company provided magistrates with legislative and judicial functions to "make laws and ordinances for the good and welfare of the said company" (reported in Cahn 112). In his journal in 1639, Winthrop wrote, "The people had long desired a body of laws, and thought their condition very unsafe, while so much power rested in the discretion of the magistrates." His fear was that this "body of laws" would become a public declaration by the members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony that they were not, as he had so powerfully projected en route to the colony, a "city upon a hill."

- Morgan, Edmund S. *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1958.
- Reuben, Paul P. "John Winthrop." Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap1/winthrop.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Schaar, John H. "Liberty/Authority/Community in the Political Thought of John Winthrop." *Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (1991): 493–518.
- Schweninger, Lee. *John Winthrop*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Winthrop, John. *A Modell of Christian Charity*. Available online. URL: <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Winthrop, Robert C. *Life and Letters of John Winthrop, second edition*. 2 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, 1869.
- Winthrop Papers: A Project of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.millersville.edu/~winthrop/>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Winthrop Papers*. 5 vols. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929–47.

APPENDIX I

Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Adams, Henry	1838–1918	Volume 2	Collins, Billy	1941–	Volume 5
Adams, John, and Abigail Adams	1735–1826 1744–1818	Volume 1	Columbus, Christopher	1451–1506	Volume 1
Albee, Edward	1928–	Volume 4	Cooper, James Fenimore	1789–1851	Volume 1
Alcott, Louisa May	1832–1888	Volume 2	Crane, Hart	1899–1932	Volume 3
Alvarez, Julia	1950–	Volume 5	Crane, Stephen	1871–1900	Volume 2
Anaya, Rudolfo	1937–	Volume 5	Crèvecoeur, J. Hector	1735–1813	Volume 1
Anderson, Sherwood	1876–1942	Volume 3	St. John de Cullen, Countee	1903–1946	Volume 3
Angelou, Maya	1928–	Volume 5	Cummings, E. E.	1894–1962	Volume 3
Baca, Jimmy Santiago	1952–	Volume 5	Davis, Rebecca Harding	1831–1910	Volume 2
Baldwin, James	1924–1987	Volume 4	Dickinson, Emily	1830–1886	Volume 2
Bambara, Toni Cade	1939–	Volume 5	Dos Passos, John	1896–1970	Volume 3
Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Douglass, Frederick	1818–1895	Volume 2
Bellow, Saul	1915–2005	Volume 4	Dove, Rita	1952–	Volume 5
Bierce, Ambrose	1842–1914?	Volume 2	Dreiser, Theodore	1871–1945	Volume 3
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911–1979	Volume 4	DuBois, W. E. B.	1868–1963	Volume 3
Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Dunbar, Paul Laurence	1872–1906	Volume 2
Bradbury, Ray	1920–	Volume 4	Edwards, Jonathan	1703–1758	Volume 1
Bradford, William	1590–1657	Volume 1	Eliot, T. S.	1888–1965	Volume 3
Bradstreet, Anne	1612–1672	Volume 1	Ellison, Ralph	1914–1994	Volume 4
Brooks, Gwendolyn	1917–2000	Volume 4	Emerson, Ralph Waldo	1803–1882	Volume 2
Brown, Charles Brockden	1771–1810	Volume 1	Equiano, Olaudah	1745–1797	Volume 1
Bryant, William Cullen	1794–1878	Volume 1	Erdrich, Louise	1954–	Volume 5
Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez	1490–1556	Volume 1	Faulkner, William	1897–1962	Volume 3
Capote, Truman	1924–1984	Volume 4	Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	1920–	Volume 4
Carver, Raymond	1938–1988	Volume 5	Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Cather, Willa	1873–1947	Volume 3	Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1896–1940	Volume 3
Champlain, Samuel de	1570–1635	Volume 1	Forché, Carolyn	1950–	Volume 5
Cheever, John	1912–1982	Volume 4	Foster, Hannah Webster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Chesnutt, Charles	1858–1932	Volume 2	Franklin, Benjamin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Child, Lydia Maria	1802–1880	Volume 2	Freeman, Mary Eleanor	1852–1930	Volume 2
Chopin, Kate	1850–1904	Volume 2	Wilkins		
Cisneros, Sandra	1954–	Volume 5	Freneau, Philip Morin	1752–1832	Volume 1
Cofer, Judith Ortiz	1952–	Volume 5	Frost, Robert	1874–1963	Volume 3
			Fuller, Margaret	1810–1850	Volume 2
			Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	1860–1935	Volume 2

Ginsberg, Allen	1926–1997	Volume 4	McCarthy, Cormac	1933–	Volume 5
Giovanni, Nikki	1943–	Volume 5	McKay, Claude	1890–1948	Volume 3
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	McMurtry, Larry	1936–	Volume 5
Haley, Alex	1921–1992	Volume 4	Melville, Herman	1819–1891	Volume 2
Hammon, Jupiter	1711–1806	Volume 1	Millay, Edna St. Vincent	1892–1950	Volume 3
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Miller, Arthur	1915–2005	Volume 4
Hansberry, Lorraine	1930–1965	Volume 4	Momaday, N. Scott	1934–	Volume 4
Harjo, Joy	1951–	Volume 5	Moore, Marianne	1887–1972	Volume 3
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins	1825–1911	Volume 2	Mora, Pat	1942–	Volume 5
Harris, Joel Chandler	1848–1908	Volume 2	Morrison, Toni	1931–	Volume 5
Harte, Bret	1836–1902	Volume 2	Morton, Thomas	1579–1647	Volume 1
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	1804–1864	Volume 2	Murray, Judith Sargent	1751–1820	Volume 1
Hayden, Robert	1913–1980	Volume 4	Oates, Joyce Carol	1938–	Volume 5
Heller, Joseph	1923–1999	Volume 4	O'Brien, Tim	1946–	Volume 5
Hemingway, Ernest	1899–1961	Volume 3	Occom, Samson	1723–1792	Volume 1
Howells, William Dean	1837–1920	Volume 2	O'Connor, Flannery	1925–1964	Volume 4
Hughes, Langston	1871–1967	Volume 3	Oliver, Mary	1935–	Volume 5
Hurston, Zora Neale	1891–1960	Volume 3	O'Neill, Eugene	1888–1953	Volume 3
Irving, Washington	1783–1859	Volume 1	Ortiz, Simon J.	1941–	Volume 5
Jackson, Shirley	1919–1965	Volume 4	Paine, Thomas	1737–1809	Volume 1
Jacobs, Harriet	1813–1897	Volume 2	Piatt, Sarah M. B.	1836–1919	Volume 2
James, Henry	1843–1916	Volume 2	Pinsky, Robert	1940–	Volume 5
Jarrell, Randall	1914–1965	Volume 4	Plath, Sylvia	1932–1963	Volume 4
Jefferson, Thomas	1743–1826	Volume 1	Poe, Edgar Allan	1809–1849	Volume 2
Jewett, Sarah Orne	1849–1909	Volume 2	Porter, Katherine Anne	1890–1980	Volume 3
Kerouac, Jack	1922–1969	Volume 4	Potok, Chaim	1929–2002	Volume 4
Kesey, Ken	1935–2001	Volume 4	Pound, Ezra	1885–1972	Volume 3
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4	Rand, Ayn	1905–1982	Volume 4
Kingsolver, Barbara	1955–	Volume 5	Reed, Ishmael	1938–	Volume 5
Kingston, Maxine Hong	1940–	Volume 5	Rich, Adrienne	1929–	Volume 5
Knowles, John	1926–2001	Volume 4	Robinson,	1869–1935	Volume 3
Komunyakaa, Yusef	1947–	Volume 5	Edwin Arlington		
Larsen, Nella	1891–1964	Volume 3	Roethke, Theodore	1908–1963	Volume 4
Lee, Chang-rae	1965–	Volume 5	Roth, Philip	1933–	Volume 4
Lee, Harper	1926–	Volume 4	Rowson,	1762–1824	Volume 1
Levertov, Denise	1923–1997	Volume 4	Susanna Haswell		
London, Jack	1876–1916	Volume 3	Salinger, J. D.	1919–2010	Volume 4
Longfellow,	1807–1882	Volume 2	Sandburg, Carl	1878–1967	Volume 3
Henry Wadsworth			Sedgwick,	1789–1867	Volume 1
Lowell, Robert	1917–1977	Volume 4	Catharine Maria		
Malamud, Bernard	1914–1986	Volume 4	Sexton, Anne	1928–1974	Volume 4
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4	Silko, Leslie Marmon	1948–	Volume 5
Marshall, Paule	1929–	Volume 4	Smith, John	1580–1631	Volume 1
Mather, Cotton	1663–1728	Volume 1	Snyder, Gary	1930–	Volume 5
			Soto, Gary	1952–	Volume 5

Stein, Gertrude	1874–1946	Volume 3	Walker, Alice	1944–	Volume 5
Steinbeck, John	1902–1968	Volume 3	Warren, Robert Penn	1905–1989	Volume 4
Stevens, Wallace	1879–1955	Volume 3	Washington, Booker T.	1856–1915	Volume 3
Stowe, Harriet Beecher	1811–1896	Volume 2	Welty, Eudora	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Wharton, Edith	1862–1937	Volume 3
Swenson, May	1913–1989	Volume 4	Wheatley, Phillis	1753–1784	Volume 1
Tan, Amy	1952–	Volume 5	Whitman, Walt	1819–1892	Volume 2
Taylor, Edward	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Wilbur, Richard	1921–	Volume 4
Thoreau, Henry David	1817–1862	Volume 2	Wilder, Thornton	1897–1975	Volume 3
Toomer, Jean	1894–1967	Volume 3	Williams, Tennessee	1911–1983	Volume 4
Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2	Williams, William Carlos	1883–1961	Volume 3
Updike, John	1932–2009	Volume 4	Wilson, August	1945–2005	Volume 5
Viramontes, Helena María	1954–	Volume 5	Wilson, Harriet E.	1825–1900	Volume 2
Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4	Winthrop, John	1588–1649	Volume 1
			Wright, Richard	1908–1960	Volume 3

APPENDIX II

Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, by Birth Date

Note that authors are placed in the volume that covers the period during which they published their most important works. Some authors published their works relatively early or relatively late in their lives. This explains why, for example, certain authors placed in volume 3 were actually born before certain authors placed in volume 2.

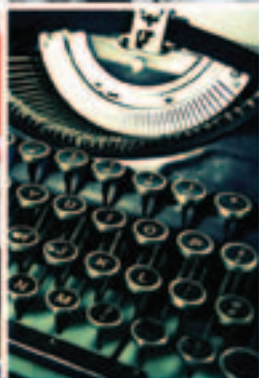
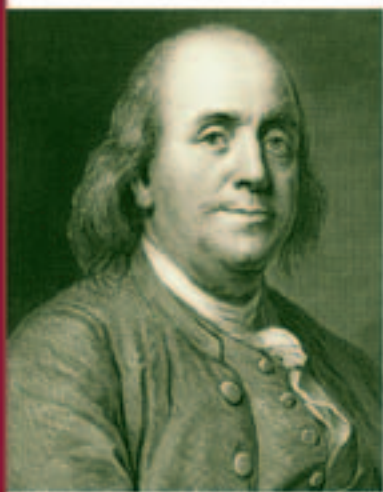
Christopher Columbus	1451–1506	Volume 1	William Cullen Bryant	1794–1878	Volume 1
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	1490–1556	Volume 1	Lydia Maria Child	1802–1880	Volume 2
Samuel de Champlain	1570–1635	Volume 1	Ralph Waldo Emerson	1803–1882	Volume 2
Thomas Morton	1579–1647	Volume 1	Nathaniel Hawthorne	1804–1864	Volume 2
John Smith	1580–1631	Volume 1	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	1807–1882	Volume 2
John Winthrop	1588–1649	Volume 1	Edgar Allan Poe	1809–1849	Volume 2
William Bradford	1590–1657	Volume 1	Margaret Fuller	1810–1850	Volume 2
Anne Bradstreet	1612–1672	Volume 1	Fanny Fern (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Edward Taylor	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Harriet Beecher Stowe	1811–1896	Volume 2
Cotton Mather	1663–1728	Volume 1	Harriet Jacobs	1813–1897	Volume 2
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	Volume 1	Henry David Thoreau	1817–1862	Volume 2
Benjamin Franklin	1706–1790	Volume 1	Frederick Douglass	1818–1895	Volume 2
Jupiter Hammon	1711–1806	Volume 1	Herman Melville	1819–1891	Volume 2
Samson Occom	1723–1792	Volume 1	Walt Whitman	1819–1892	Volume 2
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	1735–1813	Volume 1	Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	1825–1911	Volume 2
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Harriet E. Wilson	1825–1900	Volume 2
John Adams	1735–1826	Volume 1	Emily Dickinson	1830–1886	Volume 2
Thomas Paine	1737–1809	Volume 1	Rebecca Harding Davis	1831–1910	Volume 2
Thomas Jefferson	1743–1826	Volume 1	Louisa May Alcott	1832–1888	Volume 2
Abigail Adams	1744–1818	Volume 1	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Olaudah Equiano	1745–1797	Volume 1	Bret Harte	1836–1902	Volume 2
Judith Sargent Murray	1751–1820	Volume 1	Sarah M. B. Piatt	1836–1919	Volume 2
Philip Morin Freneau	1752–1832	Volume 1	William Dean Howells	1837–1920	Volume 2
Phillis Wheatley	1753–1784	Volume 1	Henry Adams	1838–1918	Volume 2
Hannah Webster Foster	1758–1840	Volume 1	Ambrose Bierce	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Susanna Haswell Rowson	1762–1824	Volume 1	Henry James	1843–1916	Volume 2
Charles Brockden Brown	1771–1810	Volume 1	Joel Chandler Harris	1848–1908	Volume 2
Washington Irving	1783–1859	Volume 1	Sarah Orne Jewett	1849–1909	Volume 2
James Fenimore Cooper	1789–1851	Volume 1			
Catharine Maria Sedgwick	1789–1867	Volume 1			

Kate Chopin	1850–1904	Volume 2	Countee Cullen	1903–1946	Volume 3
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	1852–1930	Volume 2	Ayn Rand	1905–1982	Volume 4
Booker T. Washington	1856–1915	Volume 3	Robert Penn Warren	1905–1989	Volume 4
Charles Chesnutt	1858–1932	Volume 2	Richard Wright	1908–1960	Volume 3
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	1860–1935	Volume 2	Theodore Roethke	1908–1963	Volume 4
Edith Wharton	1862–1937	Volume 3	Eudora Welty	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Elizabeth Bishop	1911–1979	Volume 4
W. E. B. DuBois	1868–1963	Volume 3	Tennessee Williams	1911–1983	Volume 4
Edwin Arlington Robinson	1869–1935	Volume 3	John Cheever	1912–1982	Volume 4
Stephen Crane	1871–1900	Volume 2	Robert Hayden	1913–1980	Volume 4
Theodore Dreiser	1871–1945	Volume 3	May Swenson	1913–1989	Volume 4
Langston Hughes	1871–1967	Volume 3	Randall Jarrell	1914–1965	Volume 4
Paul Laurence Dunbar	1872–1906	Volume 2	Bernard Malamud	1914–1986	Volume 4
Willa Cather	1873–1947	Volume 3	Ralph Ellison	1914–1994	Volume 4
Gertrude Stein	1874–1946	Volume 3	Saul Bellow	1915–2005	Volume 4
Robert Frost	1874–1963	Volume 3	Arthur Miller	1915–2005	Volume 4
Jack London	1876–1916	Volume 3	Robert Lowell	1917–1977	Volume 4
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Gwendolyn Brooks	1917–2000	Volume 4
Sherwood Anderson	1876–1942	Volume 3	Shirley Jackson	1919–1965	Volume 4
Carl Sandburg	1878–1967	Volume 3	J. D. Salinger	1919–2010	Volume 4
Wallace Stevens	1879–1955	Volume 3	Ray Bradbury	1920–	Volume 4
William Carlos Williams	1883–1961	Volume 3	Lawrence Ferlinghetti	1920–	Volume 4
Ezra Pound	1885–1972	Volume 3	Richard Wilbur	1921–	Volume 4
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	Alex Haley	1921–1992	Volume 4
Marianne Moore	1887–1972	Volume 3	Jack Kerouac	1922–1969	Volume 4
Eugene O'Neill	1888–1953	Volume 3	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4
T. S. Eliot	1888–1965	Volume 3	Denise Levertov	1923–1997	Volume 4
Claude McKay	1890–1948	Volume 3	Joseph Heller	1923–1999	Volume 4
Katherine Anne Porter	1890–1980	Volume 3	James Baldwin	1924–1987	Volume 4
Zora Neale Hurston	1891–1960	Volume 3	Truman Capote	1924–1984	Volume 4
Nella Larsen	1891–1964	Volume 3	Flannery O'Connor	1925–1964	Volume 4
Edna St. Vincent Millay	1892–1950	Volume 3	Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
E. E. Cummings	1894–1962	Volume 3	Harper Lee	1926–	Volume 4
Jean Toomer	1894–1967	Volume 3	Allen Ginsberg	1926–1997	Volume 4
F. Scott Fitzgerald	1896–1940	Volume 3	John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
John Dos Passos	1896–1970	Volume 3	Edward Albee	1928–	Volume 4
William Faulkner	1897–1962	Volume 3	Maya Angelou	1928–	Volume 5
Thornton Wilder	1897–1975	Volume 3	Anne Sexton	1928–1974	Volume 4
Hart Crane	1899–1932	Volume 3	Paule Marshall	1929–	Volume 4
Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961	Volume 3	Adrienne Rich	1929–	Volume 5
John Steinbeck	1902–1968	Volume 3	Martin Luther King, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
			Chaim Potok	1929–2002	Volume 4
			Gary Snyder	1930–	Volume 5
			Lorraine Hansberry	1930–1965	Volume 4
			Toni Morrison	1931–	Volume 5

Sylvia Plath	1932–1963	Volume 4	Alice Walker	1944–	Volume 5
John Updike	1932–2009	Volume 4	August Wilson	1945–2005	Volume 5
Cormac McCarthy	1933–	Volume 5	Tim O’Brien	1946–	Volume 5
Philip Roth	1933–	Volume 4	Yusef Komunyakaa	1947–	Volume 5
N. Scott Momaday	1934–	Volume 4	Leslie Marmon Silko	1948–	Volume 5
Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Julia Alvarez	1950–	Volume 5
Mary Oliver	1935–	Volume 5	Carolyn Forché	1950–	Volume 5
Ken Kesey	1935–2001	Volume 4	Joy Harjo	1951–	Volume 5
Larry McMurtry	1936–	Volume 5	Jimmy Santiago Baca	1952–	Volume 5
Rudolfo Anaya	1937–	Volume 5	Judith Ortiz Cofer	1952–	Volume 5
Joyce Carol Oates	1938–	Volume 5	Rita Dove	1952–	Volume 5
Ishmael Reed	1938–	Volume 5	Gary Soto	1952–	Volume 5
Raymond Carver	1938–1988	Volume 5	Amy Tan	1952–	Volume 5
Toni Cade Bambara	1939–	Volume 5	Sandra Cisneros	1954–	Volume 5
Maxine Hong Kingston	1940–	Volume 5	Louise Erdrich	1954–	Volume 5
Robert Pinsky	1940–	Volume 5	Helena María Viramontes	1954–	Volume 5
Billy Collins	1941–	Volume 5	Barbara Kingsolver	1955–	Volume 5
Simon J. Ortiz	1941–	Volume 5	Chang-rae Lee	1965–	Volume 5
Pat Mora	1942–	Volume 5			
Nikki Giovanni	1943–	Volume 5			

STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS





**STUDENT'S
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
GREAT AMERICAN
WRITERS**

VOLUME II: 1830 TO 1900



STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

VOLUME II: 1830 TO 1900

PAUL CRUMBLY

PATRICIA M. GANTT, GENERAL EDITOR

 **Facts On File**
An imprint of Infobase Publishing

Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers, 1830 to 1900

Copyright © 2010 by Paul Crumbley

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Student's encyclopedia of great American writers / Patricia Gantt, general editor.

v. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: [1] Beginnings to 1830 / Andrea Tinnemeyer — [2] 1830 to 1900 / Paul Crumbley — [3] 1900 to 1945 / Robert C. Evans — [4] 1945 to 1970 / Blake Hobby — [5] 1970 to the present / Patricia Gantt.

ISBN 978-0-8160-6087-0 (hardcover: acid-free paper) ISBN 978-1-4381-3125-2 (e-book) I. Authors, American—Biography—Encyclopedias, Juvenile.

2. American literature—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. I. Tinnemeyer, Andrea. II. Gantt, Patricia M., 1943–
PS129.S83 2009

810.9'0003—dc22

[B]

2009030783

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Excerpts included herewith have been reprinted by permission of the copyright holders; the author has made every effort to contact copyright holders. The publishers will be glad to rectify, in future editions, any errors or omissions brought to their notice.

Text design by Annie O'Donnell

Composition by Mary Susan Ryan-Flynn

Cover printed by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Book printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Date printed: June 2010

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

List of Writers and Works Included	vi	William Dean Howells	283
Series Preface	xi	Harriet Jacobs (Harriet Ann Jacobs)	292
Volume Introduction	xii	Henry James	303
		Sarah Orne Jewett	322
Henry Adams	1	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	338
Louisa May Alcott	14	Herman Melville	350
Ambrose Bierce	32	Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt	373
Charles Waddell Chesnutt	44	Edgar Allan Poe	388
Lydia Maria Child	57	Harriet Beecher Stowe	420
Kate Chopin	68	Henry David Thoreau	431
Stephen Crane	81	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	460
Rebecca Harding Davis	105	Walt Whitman	483
Emily Dickinson	114	Harriet E. Wilson	505
Frederick Douglass	131		
Paul Laurence Dunbar	144	Appendix I: Alphabetical List of	
Ralph Waldo Emerson	152	Writers Included in All Volumes of	
Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis Parton)	174	the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great</i>	
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	183	<i>American Writers</i>	512
Margaret Fuller (Sarah Margaret Fuller)	194	Appendix II: Chronological List of	
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	210	Writers Included in All Volumes of	
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	223	the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great</i>	
Joel Chandler Harris	238	<i>American Writers</i> , by Birth Date	515
Bret Harte	246		
Nathaniel Hawthorne	259		

LIST OF WRITERS AND WORKS INCLUDED

- Henry Adams (1838–1918)** 1
Democracy: An American Novel (1880)
Esther (1884)
History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison (1891)
Mont Saint Michel and Chartres (1913)
The Education of Henry Adams (1918)
- Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888)** 14
Hospital Sketches (1863)
Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott (1862–1866)
 “My Contraband” (“The Brothers”) (1863)
 “An Hour” (1864)
A Long Fatal Love Chase (1866)
Little Women (1868)
 “Transcendental Wild Oats” (1872)
Work (1873)
- Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914?)** 32
 “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890)
 “Chickamauga” (1889)
 “The Death of Halpin Frayser” (1891)
 “The Damned Thing” (1893)
- Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858–1932)** 44
 “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887)
 “What Is a White Man?” (1889)
- “The Wife of His Youth” (1897)
 “The Passing of Grandison” (1899)
- Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880)** 57
An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833)
History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations (1835)
Letters from New-York (1843)
An Appeal for the Indians (1868)
- Kate Chopin (1850–1904)** 68
The Awakening (1899)
 “At the ’Cadian Ball” (1892)
 “Désirée’s Baby” (1893)
 “The Story of an Hour” (1894)
 “A Night in Acadie” (1897)
 “The Storm” (1898)
- Stephen Crane (1871–1900)** 81
Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893)
The Red Badge of Courage (1894)
 “The Open Boat” (1897)
 “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1897)
 “The Blue Hotel” (1899)
 “An Episode of War” (1902)
 “God Lay Dead in Heaven” (1895)
 “Do Not Weep, Maiden, for War Is Kind” (1896)
 “The Impact of a Dollar upon the Heart” (1898)

- “A Newspaper Is a Collection of Half-Injustices” (1899)
 “A Man Said to the Universe” (1899)
 “There Was a Man with Tongue of Wood” (1899)

Rebecca Harding Davis (1831–1910) 105

- “Life in the Iron-Mills” (1861)
 “The Wife’s Story” (1864)

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) 114

- “Success is counted sweetest” (1859)
 “I taste a liquor never brewed – ” (1861)
 “Wild nights – Wild nights!” (1861)
 “I like to see it lap the Miles – ” (1862)
 “The Soul selects her own Society – ” (1862)
 “They shut me up in Prose – ” (1862)
 “Because I could not stop for Death – ” (1862)
 “This is my letter to the World” (1863)
 “Much Madness is divinest Sense – ” (1863)
 “What Soft–Cherubic Creatures – ” (1863)
 “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (1865)
 “My life closed twice before it’s [*sic*] close” (undated)

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) 131

- Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (1845)
 “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (1852)
My Bondage and My Freedom (1855)
The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself (1891, 1892)

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) 144

- “When Malindy Sings” (1896)
 “Frederick Douglass” (1896)

- “We Wear the Mask” (1896)
 “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” (1896)
 “Little Brown Baby” (1896)
 “Sympathy” (1899)
 “Mister Cornelius Johnson, Office Seeker” (1899)

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) 152

- Nature* (1836)
 “The American Scholar” (1837)
 “Self-Reliance” (1841)
 “An Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies” (1844)
 “Experience” (1844)
 “The Poet” (1844)
Representative Men (1850)
 “An Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law” (1851)
 “Fate” (1860)
 “The Sphinx” (1847)
 “Each and All” (1839)
 “Hamatreya” (1847)
 “The Rhodora” (1834, 1839)
 “The Snow-Storm” (1835, 1841)
 “Merlin” (1847)
 “Concord Hymn” (1837)

Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis Parton) (1811–1872) 174

- Ruth Hall* (1854)
Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio (1853)
Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio, Second Series (1854)
 “Hints to Young Wives” (1852)
 “Independence” (1859)
 “The Working-Girls of New York” (1868)

- Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930)** 183
“A New England Nun” (1891)
“The Revolt of ‘Mother’” (1890)
“Luella Miller” (1902)
- Margaret Fuller (Sarah Margaret Fuller) (1810–1850)** 194
“Letter to Sophia Ripley” (1839)
Summer on the Lakes, in 1843 (1844)
Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845)
“American Literature, Its Position in the Present Time, and Its Prospects for the Future” (1846)
Things and Thoughts in Europe (1850)
“Autobiographical Sketch” (1852)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)** 210
Herland (1915)
“The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892)
Women and Economics (1898)
The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an Autobiography (1925)
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)** 223
“The Slave Mother” (1854)
“On the Twenty-fourth Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society” (1857)
“The Two Offers” (1859)
“Bury Me in a Free Land” (1864)
“President Lincoln’s Proclamation of Freedom” (1865)
“Vashti” (1870)
“An Appeal to the American People” (1871)
“Aunt Chloe’s Politics” (1872)
“Free Labor” (1874)
- “Woman’s Political Future” (1893)
“An Appeal to My Country Women” (1894)
“A Double Standard” (1895)
- Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908)** 238
“The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” (1881)
“How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox” (1881)
“Free Joe and the Rest of the World” (1884)
- Bret Harte (1836–1902)** 246
“The Luck of Roaring Camp” (1868)
“The Outcasts of Poker Flat” (1869)
“Miggles” (1869)
“Tennessee’s Partner” (1869)
“The Idyl of Red Gulch” (1869)
“The Iliad of Sandy Bar” (1870)
“Plain Language from Truthful James” (1870)
“Wan Lee, the Pagan” (1874)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)** 259
“My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1831)
“The Minister’s Black Veil” (1835)
“Wakefield” (1835)
“Young Goodman Brown” (1835)
“The Artist of the Beautiful” (1844)
“Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844)
“The Birth-mark” (1846)
The Scarlet Letter (1850)
Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)
The House of the Seven Gables (1851)
- William Dean Howells (1837–1920)** 283
The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885)
“Editha” (1905)
Criticism and Fiction (1891)

- Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897)** 292
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
 “A True Tale of Slavery” (by John S. Jacobs) (1861)
 “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855)
 “The Portent (1859)” (1866)
 “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight” (1866)
Billy Budd (1924)
- Henry James (1843–1916)** 303
Daisy Miller (1878)
The Portrait of a Lady (1881)
 “The Lesson of the Master” (1892)
 “The Real Thing” (1892)
The Turn of the Screw (1898)
 “The Beast in the Jungle” (1902)
 “The Jolly Corner” (1908)
The Art of the Novel (Henry James’s prefaces) (1905–1909)
- Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909)** 322
A Country Doctor (1884)
 “A White Heron” (1886)
The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896)
 “The Foreigner” (1900)
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882)** 338
 “Hymn to the Night” (1839)
 “A Psalm of Life” (1839)
 “The Wreck of the Hesperus” (1841)
 “The Arsenal at Springfield” (1844)
 “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” (1852)
 “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1861)
 “Killed at the Ford” (1867)
 “Nature” (1878)
- Herman Melville (1819–1891)** 350
 “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850)
Moby-Dick (1851)
 “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)
 “Benito Cereno” (1855)
- Sarah M. B. Piatt (1836–1919)** 373
 “The Fancy Ball” (1866)
 “Army of Occupation” (1866)
 “Mock Diamonds” (1872)
 “The Funeral of a Doll” (1872)
 “The Palace-Burner” (1872)
 “Her Blindness in Grief” (1873)
 “The Witch in the Glass” (1880)
 “The First Party” (1882)
 “A Child’s Party” (1883)
- Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)** 388
 “Sonnet—To Science” (1829)
 “Romance” (1829)
 “Israfel” (1831)
 “The City in the Sea” (1831)
 “To Helen” (1831, revised 1845)
 “The Sleeper” (1831)
 “Sonnet—Silence” (1840)
 “The Raven” (1844)
 “Ulalume” (1847)
 “The Bells” (1848)
 “Annabel Lee” (1849)
The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (1837)
 “Ligeia” (1838)
 “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)
 “The Black Cat” (1843)
 “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843)
 “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845)

- "The Purloined Letter" (1845)
- "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846)
- "The Man of the Crowd" (1850)
- "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846)

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) 420

- Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* (1852)
- "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl" (1863)

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) 431

- "Civil Disobedience" ("Resistance to Civil Government") (1848)
- A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849)
- "Walking" (1851)
- "Life without Principle" (1852)
- "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854)
- Walden* (1854)
- "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859)
- "Martyrdom of John Brown" (1859)
- "The Last Day of John Brown" (1860)
- The Maine Woods* (1864)
- Cape Cod* (1864)

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) (1835–1910) 460

- "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865)
- Roughing It* (1872)
- The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)

- The Prince and the Pauper* (1881)
- The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1883)
- Life on the Mississippi* (1883)
- Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)
- A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889)
- "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1898)

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) 483

- "Song of Myself" (1855)
- "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856)
- "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1859)
- "From Pent-Up Aching Rivers" (1860)
- "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me" (1860)
- "Beat! Beat! Drums!" (1861)
- "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" (1865)
- "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest and the Road Unknown" (1865)
- "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865)
- "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado" (1865–1866)
- "Reconciliation" (1865–1866)
- "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (1865)
- "Passage to India" (1871)
- "The Dalliance of the Eagles" (1880)

Harriet E. Wilson (1825–1900) 505

- Our Nig* (1859)

SERIES PREFACE

The *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* is a unique reference intended to help high school students meet standards for literature education and prepare themselves for literature study in college. It offers extensive entries on important authors, as well as providing additional interpretive helps for students and their teachers. The set has been designed and written in the context of the national standards for English language arts, created by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, the two professional organizations that have the most at stake in high school language arts education (see <http://www.ncte.org/standards>).

The volume editors and many of the contributors to this set not only are university scholars but also have experience in secondary school literature education, ranging from working as readers of Advanced Placement examinations, to developing high school literature curricula, to having taught in high school English classrooms. Although the volume editors all have extensive experience as scholars and university professors, they all have strong roots in high school education and have drawn on their experience to ensure that entries are stylistically appealing and contain the necessary content for students.

The set's five volumes are organized chronologically, as many literature textbooks and anthologies are. This system is convenient for students and also facilitates cross-disciplinary study, increasingly common in high schools. For example, a section on the Civil War in history class might be accompanied by the study of Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane in English class. To help students find what they need, each volume contains two lists of all the authors included in the set: one organized chronologically and the other alphabetically.

Within each volume, authors are presented alphabetically. Each author entry contains a biography

and then subentries on the author's major works. After each subentry on a work is a set of questions for discussion and/or writing. Another set of broader discussion questions appears near the end of each author entry, followed by a bibliography. The entire five-volume set therefore contains more than 1000 discussion questions. These questions make up perhaps the most important and useful features of the set, encouraging further creative thought and helping students get started on their own writing. Many of the questions reference not only the subject literary work or author but also related works and authors, thus helping students to make additional literary connections, as emphasized by the literature standards.

The authors and works included in the set were selected primarily from among those most popular in the high school classrooms—that is, those often featured in secondary-school literary anthologies and textbooks; those often appearing on age-appropriate reading lists; and those most often searched for in Facts On File's online literary database Bloom's Literature Online, used primarily in high schools. In addition, we have endeavored to include a range of writers from different backgrounds in all periods, as well as writers who, though not perhaps among the very most popular today, appear to have been unjustly neglected and are gaining in popularity. No selection could be perfect, and those writers favored by scholars and critics are not always as popular in the high school classroom, but the general editor and volumes editors have attempted to make the set's coverage as useful to students as possible.

Above all, we hope that this set serves not only to instruct but also to inspire students with the love of literature shared by all the editors and contributors who worked on this set.

Patricia M. Gantt

VOLUME INTRODUCTION

The 33 authors included in this volume reflect the many dramatic changes that transformed American culture between 1830 and 1900. These years begin with the populist democratic fervor that surrounded the 1828 election of Andrew Jackson and conclude with the period of Gilded Age prosperity that followed the cataclysmic upheaval that was the Civil War. During these same years, the United States expanded its western territories from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, absorbed waves of European immigration, waged wars with Mexico and the indigenous peoples of North America, eradicated slavery, completed the transcontinental railroad, and witnessed the rise of the women's rights movement. America's literature quite understandably engages with the full range of these changes, chronicling the multitude of responses that registered in the conduct and national consciousness of the citizenry.

Literary scholars have found it useful to identify key movements, such as the shift from Enlightenment rationalism that characterized the end of the previous century to romanticism and the flowering of the American renaissance, out of which emerges realism with its attendant outgrowths of naturalism and regionalism. Contributors to this volume acknowledge the continued value of this traditional framework but are also sensitive to the extent that 19th-century writers did not live the lives and compose the works that so interest us today with these categories in mind. Discussions of individual authors for this reason demonstrate that writers most worth studying defy easy generalizations and frequently move in and out of the norms associated with periods and movements. As the selection of authors included in the volume shows, writers currently considered most instrumental in the development of American literature were not always the authors who attracted the greatest attention during their lifetimes. The most prominent examples

would be Herman Melville, who ended his life in obscurity; Walt Whitman, whose forthright language alienated many conventional readers; and Emily Dickinson, whose 1,789 poems were not discovered by the public until after her death in 1886. We have also included writers such as Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis Parton), Sarah M. B. Piatt, Charles Chesnutt, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, who are far less well known than these canonical figures but whose writing has recently attracted sufficient scholarly and public interest to begin appearing in standard anthologies and on the lists of required authors regularly taught in English classes. Readers of this volume will encounter the classics of 19th-century literature along with less familiar works now considered essential to a full understanding of the century.

One of the most compelling motives for writers in the first half of the 19th century was the pressing need to establish a distinctively American literary tradition, replete with a mythology, a history, and a cast of characters appropriate to the bold landscape and the unique challenges posed by democratic culture. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed his interest in this project as early as 1825, when he dedicated his commencement address at Bowdoin College to the defense of American authors. Longfellow drew largely on classical verse forms to elevate early American history and celebrate native experience. His *Poems on Slavery* (1842) attacked America's "peculiar institution," but his extraordinary fame grew from a mastery of poetic form best seen in his romantic depictions of American life presented in such works as "The Village Blacksmith" (1842) and such lengthy narrative poems as *Evangeline, a Tale of Acadie* (1847), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), and *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858). Lydia Maria Child expressed a similar interest in claiming America's colonial past through her early novel *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times* (1824). Child,

like Longfellow, was wildly popular in her own day but seldom read in the century following her death in 1880. Best known by contemporaries for *Letters from New-York* (1843) and her best-selling advice books, *The Frugal Housewife* (1829) and *The Mother's Book* (1831), she contributed to reform efforts that were gathering steam in the second quarter of the 19th century that have captured the attention of modern readers. Child's *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), *History of the Condition of Women* (1835), and *An Appeal for the Indians* (1868) contributed significantly to those causes but cost her the popularity she had earned with her less controversial works. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who knew Longfellow at Bowdoin, dedicated many short stories to exploring the dark side of America's Puritan past, a subject he investigates extensively in his most widely read novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Hawthorne also incorporated unreliable narrators and loaded his narratives with multiple levels of allegorical and symbolic significance, placing at the forefront of American letters an effort to instill the country's dedication to democratic principles. By requiring readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of his speakers and to make up their own minds about the true meaning of his narratives, Hawthorne positioned his audience as independent thinkers who had to develop the habit of relying on their own judgment. Doing so inculcated a healthy distrust of authority and promoted the personal independence so crucial to democratic sociality. In stories such as "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1831), "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), and "The Birth-mark" (1846), Hawthorne challenged his readers to look beneath the surface for elusive sources of meaning. Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and many others would incorporate similar devices to keep readers on their toes and encourage democratic habits of thought. Poe joined Hawthorne in not only incorporating unreliable narrators but also drawing on the gothic tradition to invest his short stories and poems with a sense of mysterious forces at work in a universe that exceeds the capacity of reason. Poems such as

"The Raven" (1844) and "Annabel Lee" (1849) urge readers to question the voracity of speakers and seek psychological and spiritual explanations for the actions described, while short stories such as "Ligeia" (1838) and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) require that readers also consider the possibility that aristocratic pretensions contribute to decadence and mental degeneration.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau present a more optimistic expression of romanticism's focus on the individual and the quest for ultimate sources of spiritual truth taken up in Hawthorne and Poe. In *Nature* (1836), Emerson expressed his belief in idealism, arguing that divine impulses flow through the individual, potentially making each person the unique expression of an unfolding cosmic order. Hugely influential essays such as "The American Scholar" (1837) and "Self-Reliance" (1841) advocated the spontaneous expression of individual genius that would become a hallmark of transcendentalism. Thoreau most brilliantly embodied Emerson's transcendental idealism in *Walden* (1854), his meditation on the natural world that would contribute significantly to the growth of environmental writing in the United States. Both Emerson and Thoreau knew Margaret Fuller, who played an instrumental role in the transcendental movement as editor of the journal the *Dial* but achieved her greatest fame through her contributions to the nascent women's rights movement. Most notably, her book-length argument advocating an expansion of female rights, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), contributed directly to the 1848 Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention and helped launch the national struggle for sexual equality. At the century's end, Charlotte Perkins Gilman would further explore themes of female cultural subordination in *Women and Economics* (1898), though modern readers know her best for "The Yellow Wall-Paper," her short story critiquing marriage and the medical establishment. Closer to Fuller's day, Fanny Fern (the pen name for Sara Payson Willis Parton) won widespread public approval for her popular newspaper columns that humorously satirized

conventional female expectations and broached taboo topics such as prostitution and divorce. Despite the criticism she received for her unvarnished depiction of marriage and family life in her autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall* (1854), she went on to become the most highly paid newspaper writer of her day and was the first woman to praise Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Whitman shared Fern's willingness to address topics deemed unseemly and risk public censure while drawing directly on Emerson's belief in the individual. In his groundbreaking volume of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman poetically promoted sexual equality and presented himself as the voice of democracy. Whitman's break from fixed poetic forms and his free verse representations of speech cadences that honor the sounds of real people talking, singing, and orating have since inspired poets in the United States and elsewhere to proclaim the majesty of average people.

Whitman's populist celebration of equality and the divinity of the individual coincided with a pervasive public confidence in America's ability to overcome political and social ills that found expression in the many reform movements that animated antebellum culture during the years drawing near to the Civil War. Frederick Douglass contributed significantly to the abolitionist cause through his skill as a public speaker and the publication of his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (1845). Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) opened America's eyes to the abuses inflicted on slave women and helped to solidify a uniquely American genre, the slave narrative. During the years preceding and following the war, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, herself a freeborn African American, produced a body of poems and essays that forcefully called the evils of slavery to the attention of the American public through plain language that she delivered with dramatic flare during lecture tours and poetry readings. Through such poems as "The Slave Mother" (1854) and "Bury Me in a Free Land" (1864), Harper powerfully expressed the slave's depth of family feeling and love of freedom, the denial of which compounded their suffering.

Harriet E. Wilson's autobiographical novel, *Our Nig* (1859), describes the life of a domestic servant in New England whose experiences as a girl of African and white parentage reveals the racism of the North. These varied works reflected a growing hostility to slavery that Harriet Beecher Stowe famously expressed through *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* (1852), the best-selling novel of the 19th century. This important work was triggered by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which legally obligated residents of free states to assist in the apprehension of escaped slaves, thereby making even those who abhorred slavery complicit in its continuation. Stowe so effectively galvanized anti-slavery sentiment that her book is frequently considered a major force in heightening the tensions that would erupt in the Civil War.

Not everyone enjoyed the optimistic vision of progress so effectively voiced by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and reformers like Douglass and Stowe; scholars have argued that even the confidence of these writers waned as the century wore on. Melville joined Hawthorne and Poe in presenting the dark side of the human condition, composing works that probed the deepest recesses of human thought and feeling, exposing unfathomable reaches of the self not clearly connected to any divine purpose. In *Moby-Dick* (1851) Melville challenged the idealistic framework upon which transcendentalism rested while praising the vigor and daring of American character as revealed through the bravery and open defiance of received knowledge expressed by Captain Ahab. Melville would go on to critique transcendentalism even more pointedly in *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Through later works such as "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), "Benito Cereno" (1855), and *Billy Budd* (posthumously published in 1924), Melville turned his attention to social, political, and economic forces that threaten to strip individuals of dignity by transforming daily life into a struggle for individual dominance, prestige, and power. His focus on social forces and the influence they exert over individual lives reflected a version of the social determinism that would play a central role in the development of American realism.

Widely viewed as an effort to depict American life as accurately as possible, realism paid special attention to average people and to cultural forces that threatened the individual's freedom of choice. Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Stephen Crane are the primary figures traditionally associated with this movement, which began around 1870 and extended to roughly the end of the century. They are often presented as emerging after the chief writers of the American renaissance—Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville—had successfully given birth to a uniquely American body of literature. Current scholarship readily acknowledges that the Civil War (1861–65) did indeed mark a sea change in U.S. culture but questions the clarity with which authors can be assigned to specific movements. For instance, Louisa May Alcott, whose *Little Women* (1868) was once viewed within the sentimental tradition, can now also be viewed as part of the shift to realism. Doing so gives particular emphasis to the financial circumstances of the March family and influence of the Civil War.

Mark Twain's Huck Finn in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) stands as one of the most fully developed unreliable narrators in all of American letters, not because Huck's sincerity is in question, but because he too unquestioningly accepts the dictates of the culture he inhabits. Readers quickly learn to distrust the self-condemnation Huck directs at himself for assisting in the escape of Jim, the slave whose exemplary humanity becomes a central theme of the novel. Through Huck, Twain exposes the extent to which prejudices promoted by slave culture undermine and restrict the expression of individual potential that is so central to the democratic proposition that national strength depends on the fullest development of all its members. When Huck decides at the end of the novel that he must "light out for the Territory," we see his decision as reflecting Twain's realistic assessment of America as a country in danger of betraying its most deeply held values.

Emily Dickinson might also be positioned as one of the most influential writers in this group.

Her famous dashes, her unusual capitalization, and her reliance on slant rhyme have been interpreted as efforts to disrupt the predictable patterns of ballad and hymn meter with the aim of revealing that American culture is not as harmoniously integrated as our religious and social institutions would have us believe. Poems such as "Success is counted sweetest" (1859), "They shut me up in Prose –" (1862), "Much Madness is divinest Sense –" (1863), and "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (1865) demonstrate a persistent impulse to identify the uncertainties, delights, and ironies that lie beneath the surface of conventional experience. In her own way, Dickinson could be as caustic as Twain.

As a general rule, realist writers wrote about the part of the world they knew best. Kate Chopin focused her energies on Louisiana Delta culture, and through short story collections such as *Bayou Folk* (1894) and her most famous novel, *The Awakening* (1899), she became associated with that region. As a consequence, she has been frequently described as a "local color" or "regional" writer. Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett have been similarly described because of their concentration on New England in such popular short stories as Freeman's "A New England Nun" (1891) and "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1890) and Jewett's "A White Heron" (1886). The American public was interested in learning more about the dialects and customs of the country's various regions, so there was a ready market for these works; the problem was that the total output of some authors was diminished through narrow association with a particular time, place, or style. The poet Paul Laurence Dunbar struggled throughout his life to escape the fame he achieved early as a master of African-American dialect poems. In his introduction to Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), William Dean Howells praised his dialect poems but gave little attention to poems in standard English. Today, Dunbar is best known for a combination of dialect and standard English poems such as "When Malindy Sings" (1896) and his justly famous "We Wear the Mask" (1896). Other writers, including Bret Harte, Joel Chandler Harris, and Ambrose Bierce, were also closely identified with distinct styles and

regions but never felt cramped by these labels in the way Dunbar did. Through short stories like "Tennessee's Partner" (1869) and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (1869), Harte deliberately linked his name to the American West; Harris cultivated his stature as a popular southern writer best known for his command of slave dialect in the Uncle Remus stories; Bierce is now most famous for highly atmospheric and biting satirical works, such as "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890) and "Chickamauga" (1891), that established him in public memory as an important Civil War writer. Charles Waddell Chesnutt, who gained early fame for his representations of African-American dialect as Dunbar did, made use of inaccurate stereotypes to satirize and expose the failure of Reconstruction. In short stories such as "The Goophered Grapevine" (1887) and "The Wife of His Youth" (1897), Chesnutt humorously incorporated dialect in the creation of trickster figures who repeatedly reveal the devastating consequences of continued racial prejudice in the American South.

During the last quarter of the century, many writers directed their attention to the social complacency, political intrigue, and rampant materialism of Gilded Age America. Twain partnered with Charles Dudley Warner to produce *The Gilded Age* (1873), a satirical novel that drew loosely on people the authors knew and actual news events to magnify the foibles of the period. Henry James would probably do more than any other U.S. writer to communicate the psychological, aesthetic, and romantic preoccupations of the cosmopolitan elite. In works such as *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), James brilliantly illuminates American character by situating wealthy Americans in European settings. Works such as *The Turn of*

the Screw (1898) and "The Beast in the Jungle" (1902) explore the way reality itself is subject to fluctuations in perception and point of view. Henry Adams, also writing from the point of view of America's upper class, uses his personal experience as the privileged descendant of U.S. presidents to provide an insider's assessment of American politics and social change. His fictional works *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880) and *Esther* (1884) and his autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) examine threats to American culture and identify prevailing values that characterize the historical moment. William Dean Howells shared with James and Adams an interest in politics and economic influences but tended to concentrate his attention on the experiences of middle-class Americans. He dared to explore the issue of divorce in *A Modern Instance* (1882), and in his most famous novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), he traces the social ascent of a self-made businessman. Stephen Crane's short novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) unflinchingly depicts the harsh living conditions experienced by impoverished denizens of New York's Bowery. In this work Crane presents an extreme version of environmental determinism consistent with the worldview promoted by naturalist writers. Crane's presentation of experience as dictated by indifferent external forces also pervades *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894), the novel Crane wrote to combat nostalgic glorifications of the Civil War. Crane's gritty language and interest in the struggles of the poor round out the full range of race, class, and gender interests that engaged the imaginations of the realist writers whose works dominated the closing decades of the century.

Paul Crumbley



HENRY ADAMS (1838–1918)

Thus far, since five or ten thousand years, the mind had successfully reacted, and nothing yet proved that it would fail to react, —but it would need to jump.

(*The Education of Henry Adams*)

Henry Adams is best remembered as the author of *The Education of Henry Adams*, privately printed and circulated in 1907 and published posthumously in 1918. A book that combines autobiography with social, historical, and philosophical speculation, *The Education* became a best seller and won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. This work, however, appears toward the end of a remarkably prolific career that generated three biographies, *Life of Albert Gallatin* (1879), *Life of John Randolph* (1881), *Life of George Cabot Lodge* (1911); two novels, *Democracy* (1880) and *Esther* (1884); a nine-volume grand historical narrative, *The History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* (1889–91); a short genealogical history of Tahiti, *Memoirs of Arii Taimai* (1901); and a study of Gothic architecture and medieval culture, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1913). In addition to these published works, Adams was the author of a large body of letters, fascinating for their inside view of American politics as well as for their account of Adams's world travels.

Henry Brooks Adams was born February 16, 1838, “under the shadow of Boston State House,” as he writes in *The Education*'s first line, and grew up a member of Boston's political and social elite. On his father's side he was the descendant of two presidents, John Adams and John Quincy Adams. During Henry's early childhood, John Quincy

Adams represented his district in the U.S. House of Representatives and spearheaded a growing resistance to the Southern slave power. Henry's father, Charles Francis Adams, also served in the House of Representatives. He ran unsuccessfully for president as the candidate of the Free-Soil Party; his appointment as ambassador to Great Britain from 1861 to 1868 marked the culmination of his public career. On his mother's side Henry was the descendant of Peter Chardon Brooks, a wealthy merchant. His immediate family thus united two distinct and not always compatible strains of Boston society: The Adams side reflected a commitment to political ideals irrespective of private interest, whereas the Brooks reflected a willingness to do business with an unregenerate world. The Adamses frequently clashed with the regional perspective of commercial Boston, and it is not surprising that early in life Henry determined that he would escape the provinciality of his native city.

In the manner of elite Bostonians, Adams attended Boston Latin School and thereafter Harvard University. Upon graduation in 1858, he embarked on what for young men of his class was the customary postbaccalaureate year abroad. Settling at first in Berlin with the intention of studying civil law in Germany (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and, afterward, RALPH WALDO EMERSON and MARGARET FULLER had commended the land of Goethe to English and American youth), Adams

traveled widely in central and southern Europe, observing the tumult of Italy's challenge to Austrian rule, before returning to the United States in fall 1860 to a growing secessionist crisis. By May 1861 the South had seceded and Charles Francis Adams had been dispatched to England with the immediate charge to forestall British recognition of the Confederate States of America. Henry Adams's life was about to change.

During the next seven years, Adams resided in London, attached to his father in the unofficial capacity of private secretary. His position lacked the formality of a government appointment. Still, he was responsible for a large portion of the mission's correspondence and played an important role in representing the mission to a British public. These years would prove the most formative of Adams's life. From 1861 to 1865, the young men of his generation fought and died on the battlefields of his homeland, an experience that would confer on the survivors, Union and Confederate alike, a lifelong generational identity. Adams meanwhile worked at the American legation, attended social functions in an attempt to foster pro-Unionist sentiment in British society, and accompanied his mother and siblings on their various travels, often feeling deeply humiliated by his absence from the battlefield. On his own time he studied the great European prophet-theorists of future democratic societies: John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, Auguste Comte. Unable to participate militarily in this war, which from a Northern viewpoint would purge the American nation of slave-power corruption, thus fulfill the 1776 revolution, Henry Adams endeavored to foresee the prospects of a post-Civil War United States. His most frequently quoted observation of this period occurs in a letter to his brother, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., an officer in the Union Cavalry. Assuming the war must soon be decided and probably in the Union's favor, Henry calls for the formation of a brain trust, a set of "young men like ourselves or better," who would act as a clearinghouse of reformist ideas and set a new tone in politics and culture (Adams, *Letters* 1:315). At the same time that Adams performed indispensable services to a crucial overseas legation and pre-

pared himself for a role in postwar America, he was becoming European in culture and upper-class British in manner. Beneath the ever-more polished surface, he was a fervent American, whose frame of reference had become unusually cosmopolitan. Upon returning to the United States in 1867, he had enormous adjustments to make.

Adams's career as an author dates from the years in London, where he wrote articles on varied topics. His first substantial publication was an essay review of a biography of John Smith; this was soon followed by articles on currency and civil service reform and an essay review of the 10th edition of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. The early writings evince diverse interests and an unusual capacity to participate in a range of specialized discussion. They reflect the pursuits of an intellectual for whom the life of the mind involved rigorous and ongoing self-education with a view to becoming conversant in multiple fields of inquiry. In the years ahead Adams would pursue his multiple studies with the aspiration of formulating a predictive science of history. His immediate postwar concern, however, focused upon retrieving the American government from the choke hold of special interests, restoring the country's currency and credit, and otherwise reviving the vision of a republic in which citizens placed public good over private interest. First as a freelance political journalist (1868–69) and then as the editor of the *North American Review* (1870–77), Adams strove to expose the abuses of the Ulysses S. Grant administration and facilitated efforts to pass laws in support of currency and civil service reform. But, what Adams looked upon as the chief menaces of postwar public life—the political party with its well-oiled machine and the giant corporation with legislators on secret payroll—proved to be formidable opponents for a man of gentlemanly ambition whose attraction to the world of politics was countered by a temperamental aversion to the brutal ways of public life.

From 1870 to 1877, Adams was an assistant professor of history at Harvard University, where he taught medieval and American history. During these years, he also edited the *North American Review*. While he continued to participate in debates over public policy, he turned his attention

to the European past; in researching arcane topics such as Anglo-Saxon law, Adams sought clues to the long-term development of democratic institutions. By the end of this period, he was ready to begin theorizing the emergence of an American nation and the formation of a national character. In 1877 the heirs of Albert Gallatin, Thomas Jefferson's treasury secretary, invited Adams to organize Gallatin's papers. With the idea of writing a biography of Gallatin that would serve as prelude to a larger study of the administrations of Jefferson and James Madison, Adams resigned from Harvard and moved to Washington, D.C., accompanied by his wife, Marian Hooper (Clover) Adams.

Arriving in Washington as a financially independent gentleman scholar, Adams cultivated important friendships with a variety of intellectuals, artists, statesmen, and diplomats. He and Clover established a residence in the neighborhood directly across from the White House, and their house became a powerful Washington salon. With his friends Clarence King and John and Clara Hay, Henry and Clover formed a clique that became known as the "Five of Hearts"; Elizabeth Sherman Cameron, the second wife of Senator J. Donald Cameron, soon became part of this tight-knit set. In 1879 Adams published *The Life of Albert Gallatin*, a life-and-letters biography, and the following year *Democracy: An American Novel* appeared anonymously. By the early 1880s Adams was already at work on a history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations. In 1884, under the pseudonym *Frances Snow Compton*, Adams published *Esther*, a novel that reflects much of the ongoing discussion of Adams's inner circle on subjects ranging from the validity of religious and scientific truth to what it means to be an American man or woman.

In 1885, after suffering a long depression following the death of her father, Clover took her own life. Adams would spend the next 33 years in a state of mourning, yet these were years of great productivity, travel, and friendship. Avoiding European sojourns that would stir memories of his life with his wife, he toured Japan in 1886 in the company of the artist John La Farge and, in 1890, after completing his history of the Jefferson and Madison administra-

tions, embarked on a year-long journey to Hawaii, Samoa, and Tahiti, again taking La Farge as a companion. Bereavement only intensified Adams's restlessness. Upon returning from the South Seas, he established a pattern of wintering in Washington and spending summer and autumn in Paris. Before the turn of the century he would travel in the American West, Mexico, Cuba, the Caribbean, Egypt, Syria, the Balkans, Russia, and Scandinavia. Adams bore witness throughout his travels to destabilizing geopolitical conditions: great concentrations of wealth and armaments, rising nationalist and colonial ambitions, tyranny of states and large corporations. With inveterate suspicion of banking interests, he exhibited an almost populist attitude toward the financier; an anti-Semitism that ascribed global economic volatility to the Rothschilds and other Jewish bankers disfigures his writings of this period. Beneath a veneer of cynicism he remained highly idealistic about republican institutions and thus looked with alarm upon his nation's acquisition of overseas colonies in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. As the intimate of John Hay, ambassador to Great Britain and afterward secretary of state under William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, Adams was privy to the turbulent events of the 19th century's closing years.

Adams would remain an eager student of social and scientific thought. He recognized that Karl Marx offered a powerful response to concentrations of wealth, and he saw that the discovery of radium spelled the end of the old Newtonian universe. Sociopolitical and epistemological crises were menacing enough, but Adams became increasingly alarmed by the rapid development of technologies that placed unprecedented power in human hands at a time when greed and national belligerence had never run so high. The philosophical and spiritual fragmentation of the world provided the theme of the two masterworks of his later years, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1913) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907, 1918).

Adams remained productive well into his seventies, but in April 1912 he suffered a stroke that effectively ended his scholarly output. The stroke occurred a few days after the sinking of the *Titanic*,

the ship on which Adams had booked passage for what had become his yearly retreat to Europe. His recovery was a slow process, through the course of which he was aided by his live-in assistant, Aileen Tone, with whom he studied medieval madrigals and chansons de geste. With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, his trips to Europe were forever curtailed, and he nervously observed from afar the events of that catastrophic conflict, which appeared to justify his dire predictions about the course of human history.

Adams died in his sleep in the early morning hours of March 27, 1918. After a simple ceremony in his home the next day, he was laid to rest beside his wife in Rock Creek Cemetery beneath the magnificent bronze statue he had commissioned Augustus Saint-Gaudens to design after Clover's death.

As the member of a highly educated and materially privileged elite, Adams represents a narrow range of American social experience. He had no understanding of the urban poor and little sympathy for the laboring classes; he formed virtually no conception of the lives led by African Americans and other minorities. It is possible nevertheless to speak of Adams as a major oppositional voice. Throughout his long career he preserves an 18th-century idea of republican citizenship zealously opposed to concentrated power, and his late works recognize that power, in the modern era, is militant, imperial, and resolved to operate in open violation of the letter and spirit of Western constitutional democracy. Adams affords great insight into the twin phenomena of state tyranny and terror insurgency. Inasmuch as his writings mirror the anxiety of late modern global culture, his readership accordingly extends well beyond the confines of a materially privileged class.

***Democracy: An American Novel* (1880)**

Adams is the author of two novels, *Democracy: An American Novel* and *Esther*, both undertaken as diversions from his work on the nine-volume *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, and both undertaken as

self-conscious experiments. At the time of publication, Adams acknowledged neither as the work of his hand, and *Democracy* appeared anonymously. Adams's idea of an experiment in fictional narrative did not mean expanding the range of experience represented in the novel or pressing the genre's aesthetic boundaries, as it would with such contemporaries as HENRY JAMES, MARK TWAIN (Samuel Longhorne Clemens), and KATE CHOPIN. Rather, he was intent on discovering whether the novel could serve as a vehicle of ideas and the stimulus for discussion within the complacent upper-class circles among which he moved. *Democracy* takes on the task of representing the corruption and abuse of power associated with Ulysses S. Grant's administration and challenging the readership to assess the republic's failure to live up to its stated ideals. Over time, as the topical references to Grant-era events and personalities have faded, the novel has become most memorable for its treatment of gender issues. Influenced by Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*, Adams had already shown interest in the status of women in early cultures, a theme he explored in his essay "The Primitive Rights of Women," delivered as a Lowell Institute lecture in 1876; he would return to the theme in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. Accordingly, *Democracy* and *Esther* both feature female protagonists who are intent upon understanding and reinventing their role in society.

Democracy is what is known as a roman à clef, a novel whose characters bear such close resemblance to prominent contemporary figures that the readership is drawn into the game of matching fictional character with "real life" counterpart. The book's publication history suggests that Adams succeeded in engaging his audience in just such a game, one that naturally extended to efforts to identify the novel's author. Marian Adams, his acerbically opinionated wife, was often credited with its authorship. The plot of *Democracy* concerns the adventures of the affluent New York widow Madeleine Lee, who at age 30, having lost her husband and infant and having sought distraction in travel abroad, readings of German philosophy, and assorted genteel philanthropies, moves to Washington, D.C., to study

at close range the sources and tendencies of power in the post-Civil War republic. There, as a rich and stylish woman, she rapidly assembles a salon habituated by aristocratic foreign diplomats, a former Confederate gentleman officer, a defeated Connecticut reform congressman, a world-weary Massachusetts historian, and an Illinois senator. Master of the back-room deal, the senator begins courting Madeleine aggressively as part of his quest for presidential office. Madeleine initially regards Ratcliffe as a coarse western politician of dubious character and is able to resist his advances. But, as he succeeds in drawing her into his confidence and tantalizing her with the idea of the power she might wield through her association with his rising star, Madeleine very nearly succumbs to his marriage proposal, and it is only through the southerner John Carrington's 11th-hour confirmation of Ratcliffe's rumored corruption that Madeleine pulls back from the abyss. The novel thus serves as a parable concerning the allure of power and the price at which power is attained. Madeleine's story is clearly a variation on the theme of *Faust*, always a favorite with Adams. In reaction to her nearly disastrous seduction by the allurements of power, Madeleine flees to Egypt and seeks restoration of her shattered composure in contemplation of the pyramids.

Democracy accomplishes various objectives. It offers a portrait of a federal government in which a weak executive branch takes marching orders from a Senate dominated by special interests: In 1880 readers would note pronounced resemblances between Senator Ratcliffe and the real-life senator James G. Blaine, as well as between the novel's weak-minded president and Grant. It presents a composite of regional types and suggests ways in which sectional identities have become antiquated. Madeleine Lee, half-Bostonian and half-Philadelphian, has been married to a Virginia Lee, and although her husband has died and the child of their cross-regional alliance has not survived, Madeleine turns to her southern confidant Carrington for advice and support. While the Massachusetts historian and the Connecticut former congressman represent receding national influences, the corrupt but powerful senator Ratcliffe incarnates the crude

but formidable West, domain of the railroad and big corporation, an ascending influence little interested in republican ideals and public ethics. To the degree that Adams's narrative prophetically anticipates the rise of western influences unchecked by republican idealism, *Democracy* augurs a dystopian national future. But, the novel stops short of conclusively identifying one region as a source of the republic's virtue or corruption. And, although it proceeds on the assumption that women possess a moral sense superior to that of men, neither does it affirm that women must lead in moral reform: High on this book's agenda is a reconsideration of the role of women, traditionally the repository of civic virtue, in a postwar world in which domestic scenes no longer circumscribe the woman's sphere of direct influence. In fact, prior to the novel's opening, Madeleine's domestic world has collapsed. In quest of a productive life as a widow, she obtrudes upon a world of male intellectual and political pursuits. The closer she is to possessing power, the more her moral vision blurs. Disabused of what an alliance with Ratcliffe would entail in the way of moral compromise, Madeleine flees as far as she can from the scene of her near-seduction and the proximity of that scene to real political power. In the closing passages there is some suggestion that she might return, but the terms of her homecoming are far from clear.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain how Adams identifies specific regions of the United States and links these regions to particular types. To what extent do Adams's depictions of different regions of the United States still apply today? Can you identify contemporary politicians who bear a resemblance to Ratcliffe?
2. What does Adams present in this novel as the greatest threat to American democracy? Select three central scenes that clearly demonstrate an erosion of democratic values and explain how they support your position.
3. Identify key parallels linking Madeleine Lee's story to the temptation of Faust as written about by Christopher Marlowe. Explain how Adams adapted the Faust story so that it applies to the

circumstance of an American woman in the 19th century. What would you say Adams's primary aim was?

***Esther* (1884)**

In 1884, under the pseudonym *Frances Snow Compton*, Adams published *Esther*, a novel that reflects much of the ongoing discussion of Adams's inner circle on subjects ranging from the validity of religious and scientific truth to what it means to be an American man or woman. Less overtly political than *Democracy*, *Esther* engages the issue of belief and the capacity of religion, science, and art to articulate absolute truths. The heroine of *Esther* is an unmarried woman who is thrown into an existential crisis at the death of her father. At age 25 Esther Dudley, a New Yorker with paternal Bostonian ancestry, straddles the line between marriageability and spinsterhood, but her need of a husband is less her concern than that of her family and social circle. Nevertheless, she is not without a suitor: The Reverend Stephen Hazard, minister of a newly opened Neo-Gothic Episcopal church on Park Avenue, has wealth, social standing, and good looks to commend him. As well, he possesses a literary and artistic sensibility that makes him very compatible with the sophisticated and intellectually minded Esther. Needing little encouragement, Esther falls in love with Hazard, but when the suitor-as-theologian attempts to make a conquest of what he regards as her unregenerate soul, tempting her with images of an afterlife in which she reunites with her recently deceased father, Esther feels compelled to break off relations on the grounds of emotional and intellectual integrity. Indeed, Hazard attempts to convert Esther at a moment of signal weakness just after she has lost her father. As with *Democracy*, *Esther* tells the story of a courtship that culminates in ruptured relations. If marriage is narratologically required for the renewal of a social order, both novels must be assessed as refinements of a pessimistic social vision.

Esther, as does *Democracy*, has its full complement of period types. In addition to Hazard, the entrepreneurial minister of a prestigious church,

are his male friends, George Strong, geologist and exponent of a post-Darwinian scientific outlook, and Wharton, a painter whose most recent project has been the interior of Hazard's church. Whereas Hazard's orientation to the question of truth is theological and intellectual, Strong's is abidingly scientific and skeptical, while Wharton's approach is artistic and emotional. The male positions are thus quite schematic and predictable. The same cannot be said, however, of Esther's: Fiercely resistant to what she regards as customary male appeals to her emotional fragility, her fear of death, and loss of loved ones, she marks out a space that is simultaneously intuitive and critically minded, emotionally responsive and insistently agnostic. Celebrated by her male observers as a new American type, a female variation only possible in the fluid family and social conditions of America, Esther languishes for lack of a partner who can requite her intellectual audacity and her need for emotional support. In the final scenes, set at a Niagara Falls depicted less as the traditional honeymoon setting and more as the image of ultimate force, Esther dismisses the final appeals of an implacable Hazard only to face prospects of a life that finds no use for her distinct gifts. Her life is at an impasse.

Adams instructed Henry Holt, publisher of *Esther* as well as *Democracy*, not to advertise the second novel's publication. Part of this novel's experiment was to see whether it would quietly attract a readership. In fact, it did not. The following year Marian Adams, whom Esther in many details closely resembles, took her own life in the midst of a depression triggered by the death of her father, and Adams thereafter was content for the book to slip into the obscurity that shielded it from the public gaze until well after his death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In these fictional narratives of his middle period, what does Adams identify as the strengths of American society and culture? What does he identify as its weaknesses? Do you consider him an optimistic writer who sees a bright future for America or a realistic writer who sees a troubled future for the country he loves?

2. What accounts for Adams's interest in women's status and issues? What specific women's issues does he address through the female protagonists of *Democracy* and *Esther*?
3. Consider the ways that Esther Dudley's experiences parallel those of Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Look especially at the role of class status and the difficulty an independent woman faces when confronting a male-dominated society that defines female achievement in terms of marriage.

***History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (1891)**

As a mature historian, Adams was a bridge figure between traditional methodologies that sought to tell the story of the transformation of a people—the emergence of a mythic group psychology—to a more modern historical approach built on archival research and focused on individuals as exemplary national types. Unlike more modern social historians, however, he was never particularly interested in the lives of commoners. Diplomatic history and behind-the-scenes details of policy making were his forte. He routinely sought to establish a baseline of concrete data from which to determine the extent of historical progression. When he was an older man, his perspective became more pessimistic and, as with Oswald Spengler, his narratives began to tell of decline rather than progress.

Beginning with the Albert Gallatin papers, Adams's approach to historical writing was to immerse himself in archival material in order to relate the political transformations of an era in terms of the actions of select individuals. The masterwork of this phase of his life was his multivolume *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, completed in 1891. Beginning with the year 1800 as a baseline—physical conditions, characteristics of the people, intellectual issues—that he used to calculate the energy of the age, Adams traced the material and political transformation of the early republic at a time of dramatic

change, complete with quotations from official documents gleaned from his research. His predilection for character types recurred here as he distinguished among the intellectual mind-sets of New England, the middle states, and the South.

This method of developing his historical narratives beginning with an established set of material and intellectual conditions served Adams well through much of his career, since these factors often related a culture's growth and evolution, whereas in his late works devolution better suited his cosmic dyspepsia. Unlike Michel Foucault's attempts to unearth an archaeology or genealogy of historical movements, Adams's approach, like those of most 19th-century thinkers, was to search for a totalizing theory that would encompass the entirety of historical development. To the very end, this search for a universal key to history intrigued him, and he repeatedly turned to science for a master narrative that could be applied to historical development.

The opening picture that Adams paints in *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* is of a fledgling country united in name only. Communication and commerce in 1800 were inhibited if not prohibited by a landscape more suitable for romantic contemplation than easy transportation of goods. Few rivers were navigable, and mountain ranges that would become by the 1880s an easy train ride remained an arduous journey of many days via stagecoach. Economic exchange occurred almost wholly on the local level, with very little sale of goods outside one's immediate region. It is no wonder, then, that Adams was inclined to categorize the inhabitants of the young nation according to regional characteristics. Thus, he contrasted the southern type (exemplified by Virginia) that dominated the years his history surveyed with the New England type (exemplified by Massachusetts) that not only included the Hartford Convention secessionists but also his more temperate ancestors, removed from power by those same Virginians. Both types looked to past ideals as guides to current actions—Massachusetts to the 18th-century Enlightenment, Virginia to an even earlier aristocratic England—yet between them stood the middle states, primarily

New York and Pennsylvania, that exhibited a kind of pragmatism and political efficacy that would enable them eventually to assert a more powerful influence on American politics than either of their backward-looking neighbors. Adams would return to that analysis of American politics in *The Education of Henry Adams*.

Adams's focus in *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* comprised both domestic and international spheres, and he was particularly interested in the interplay of international relations and domestic policies. The period covered by his narrative saw dramatic developments in both: the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson's attempt to avoid war with England through the imposition of an embargo, the War of 1812 and its aftermath. In the conclusion of the narrative, Adams surveys the status of the country in 1817 and finds a nation decidedly wealthier, a nation more confident in its status on the world stage, and a nation witnessing the emergence of distinctly national schools of thought and artistic production. The historian was well aware, however, that the sectional tensions he identified early on would continue to simmer before exploding in the 1860s.

The volumes bristle with a cast of characters that includes the infamous (Aaron Burr), the heroically diplomatic (Gallatin), and the larger-than-life (Jefferson and Napoleon). Adams's skill as a biographer is readily in evidence in *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* as he brings these and many other characters to life in a manner that transcends the diplomatic history that so clearly fascinated him. It is not extravagant to argue that he conceived of writing history as novelistic: That is, he sought to tell a good story with rounded characters who exhibit human emotions and eccentricities. Adams's portrait of Jefferson is particularly interesting since he was the man who sent Adams's great-grandfather back to Quincy after a first term as president. Yet the astute reader senses in Adams a grudging admiration of the third president that at times breaks into open if ever circumspect celebration.

Adams's production of this enormous historical overview is a bittersweet chapter in his life. On the

one hand, it represents an enormous intellectual endeavor that dramatically narrates the most crucial years in the early development of the United States. The process he undertook to research the book involved deep archival work in libraries around the globe that he traveled to with Marian Hooper Adams. But her suicide in 1885 robbed him of the joy that the process provided, even as writing provided a temporary stay against his profound grief. When the final volumes appeared in 1891, the reception was lukewarm. Historians recognized its importance and responded by electing him president of the American Historical Association in 1893. But the general reading public was largely uninterested.

The failure of *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* to garner significant approbation—Adams fantasized about being heralded the American Gibbon—deepened his increasingly bitter perspective. As a consequence, he abandoned traditional history and focused his energies on travel and the composition of experimental works that defy ready categorization.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What advantages of family background does Adams bring to the task of analyzing American society? In what ways do those advantages enhance but also limit his analysis?
2. In what ways does the work of Adams's middle period (*Democracy, Esther*, and *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*) reflect the view that the American nation divides into culturally distinct regions? In what ways does Adams account for change within and among American regions?

Mont Saint Michel and Chartres (1913)

The first of Adams's major late works is *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, which originated from his yearly retreats to France to escape the summer heat in Washington, D.C. He rediscovered the majesty of Gothic cathedrals in the late 1890s and

delighted in taking friends and family members on tours of them. That avuncular approach—his traveling companions were often his nieces—gives rise in the book to the elderly narrator guiding the reader through the history of medieval French culture as he expounds the iconography of cathedrals and relates them to literature produced during the same era. At the outset the narrator admonishes his reader that his approach to history is not conventional. To understand the cultural transformation represented by Mont-Saint-Michel and the cathedral at Chartres, we need “not technical knowledge; not accurate information; not correct views either on history, art, or religion; not anything that can possibly be useful or instructive; but only a sense of what those centuries had to say, and a sympathy with their ways of saying it” (66). Facts gave way to sensitivities. Unconcerned with the book’s marketability, Adams produced in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* at once his most lyric and most philosophical statement to date. Although he completed the book in 1903 and circulated a privately printed edition among friends and professional colleagues, not until 1913 would he consent to its public release.

Beneath the narrative frame in which the uncle serves as eloquent docent, Adams is seriously intent on defining a historical sequence. Starting with the dominance of “the church militant”(8), symbolized by the fortresslike Mont-Saint-Michel, Adams traces how a patriarchal hierarchy gave way to a matriarchal one, identified with the power of the Virgin as a religious, economic, and artistic force. Her power was evident in the numerous cathedrals dedicated to Our Lady, and the transition Gothic architecture of Chartres best emblemizes her reign. Adams also argues that this historical moment indicated that the masculine Trinity was in some ways supplanted by the feminine mother figure. In the process of relating this transformation from masculine to feminine culture, Adams valorizes stereotypical attributes ascribed to women: intuition, irrationality, a forgiving nature, a capricious thought process. From this feminine culture arose the great cathedrals, emblems of the creative power affiliated with women’s fecundity

and inspired by a feminized culture. The Virgin, as idealized by Adams, had little to do with systematic or scientific thinking, nor had she any place for an emergent financier class, precursors to what Adams views in his own time as the usurious “gold bug.”

But, the Virgin’s moment was short lived. The moneyed powers that she disdained united to overthrow her, and they were aided by the philosophical program of Thomas Aquinas, who effectively demoted the Virgin to a lesser position in the Christian pantheon. The domineering power of masculinity reasserted itself, overshadowing her loving reign of irrationality, and the High Gothic architecture of the cathedrals at Amiens and Beauvais symbolized that retrenchment of masculine power.

Aside from the church architectural, Adams constructed his version of the church intellectual, particularly as it related to the debate between universalism and nominalism. For each group, Adams assigned a primary figure: William of Champeaux for realism; Abélard for nominalism; Aquinas for moderate realism. In an imaginative connection between the lyric and philosophical sides of the book, Adams declared that “realism was the Roman arch—the only possible foundation for any Church; because it assumed unity, and any other scheme was compelled to prove it, for a starting point” (335). Likewise, conceptualism “was a device, like the false wooden roof, to cover and conceal an inherent weakness of construction” (337).

But the Scholastics failed to reason their way to God, opening up the opportunity for another avenue, explored by the mystics. Continuing his metaphorical connection between architecture and theology, Adams notes that the “transition is the equilibrium between the love of God—which is faith—and the logic of God—which is reason; between the round arch and the pointed” (356). The mystical approach of St. Francis of Assisi was connected to the irrational love of the Virgin, both of whom stood counter to the reason of the Scholastics. It should not be surprising that the intellectual rigor and near-empiricism of Aquinas led, in Adams’s perspective, to the downfall of the Virgin and the mystics associated with her. Nothing intervened between God

and the individual in Aquinas's world, thus enabling his fusing of the universal with the particular and his placing of the Virgin in an ornamental position. Adams concluded his comparison between architecture and theology with the comment that "the 'Summa Theologiae' and Beauvais Cathedral were excessively modern, scientific, and technical, marking the extreme points reached by Europe on the lines of scholastic science" (419). A part of Adams's research for the book involved reading Benedict de Spinoza and Blaise Pascal, and though the latter offered him a means to unite skepticism with mysticism, he could not solve for the skeptical American thinker the problem of subject/object duality.

Adams anticipated the direction of *The Education of Henry Adams* when he turned to the image of the modern dynamo as the expression of force in the modern world, comparable to the image of the Virgin as expression of force in her own. In doing so, he connected the lack of human free will underlying Aquinas's theology with the agentless power of the dynamo, which apparently functions outside the pale of human control. This move affiliated Adams with the naturalistic thinking of his time and reflects the debates raging in the 19th century over the effect of Darwinian biology on the social sciences.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In what ways does *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* extend the inquiry into women's place in history and society that Adams develops in his novels?
2. Select passages from *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* that best demonstrate Adams's efforts to combine a presentation of historical facts with novelistic features. How does his doing so inform your sense of the periods he discusses?
3. In his essay titled "History," Ralph Waldo Emerson dedicates a paragraph to outlining the manner in which people of his age can understand the Gothic cathedral. One of his first recommendations is that "we put ourselves into the place and state of the builder." To what extent do you think Adams follows Emerson's advice when he states that to understand, we need "not technical knowledge; not accurate information; not correct views either on history, art, or religion; not anything that can possibly be useful or instructive; but only a sense of what those centuries had to say, and a sympathy with their ways of saying it"? Explain what makes Adams's approach both similar to and different from Emerson's.

The Education of Henry Adams (1918)

In *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* Adams creates a picture of 13th-century France as a society that was united in faith despite its social and political conflicts and that erected the great cathedrals as the material expression of unity in a spiritual ideal. In *The Education of Henry Adams* he traces the course of a world falling into perilous disunity and limns the portrait of a Henry Adams who throughout life strove unsuccessfully to educate himself for the purpose of understanding that world. This book, an autobiographical narrative in which the protagonist appears as a third person, provides a detailed view of life inside a prominent American political family together with fascinating portraits of an array of celebrated figures (John Quincy Adams, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Stuart Mill, Robert Louis Stevenson, Theodore Roosevelt, to name a few). The narrative withholds a direct account of the life's middle 20 years and thus does not discuss Adams's marriage, his wife's suicide, or his accomplishments as a historian. By turns satiric and somber, the book presents the thesis that the human race may not possess sufficient intelligence to control the vast stores of power that technology has placed in its hands and must therefore face the possibilities of its self-destruction. Completed in 1907 but not published until after Adams's death in 1918, the argument spoke urgently to a world that had just passed through World War I. In the century to follow, as the world became ever more vulnerable to human munitions and malevolence, the book would fully retain its appeal.

In his introduction to *The Education* Adams acknowledged that two of his models in writing the

book were Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, he identifies his protagonist as a “manikin” upon which alternate wardrobes would be draped. Far from the transcendent individual of the romantics, Adams’s object—ostensibly himself—seems little more than a cipher. Little wonder, then, that he chose to write the book in third-person narrative. That narrative displacement of self has led to numerous debates over what genre the book represents. Is it autobiography? Adams himself avoided the word when describing the book, and from one perspective the book is less about Henry Adams than it is the world he inhabits and the ways in which the traditional, Enlightenment values and knowledge with which he was armed as a young man ill prepare him for the world he surveys at the dawn of the 20th century. The story of Henry Adams’s attempt to grasp the transformations the United States was undergoing combined with his unique insider’s view into American politics to create a narrative of personal and social change in which the macrocosmic perspective of the larger social order is refracted in the microcosmic person of Henry Adams. His status as a member of the first American aristocracy might disqualify him from serving as a modern Everyman, but his quizzical reaction to modernity continues to speak to generations of Americans attempting to understand the increasingly dramatic changes their world is undergoing.

The dramatic pose that Adams strikes in *The Education* is one of failure. For reasons of temperament he is incapable of living up to his family’s political heritage, rendering him instead an observer and commentator on governmental intrigues rather than an actor on the political stage. He recounts early in the book his service as the private secretary for his father, Charles Francis Adams, during his tenure in Congress and more important as the American ambassador to Great Britain during the U.S. Civil War. The elder Adams is the recipient of great praise from his son for diligently working to prevent Britain from intervening in the Civil War at a time when intervention would have meant the success of the Southern secession. Those six years absorb approximately one-fifth of a book that theoretically spans

almost 70 years. Adams has praise for few other American politicians, excepting toward the book’s end, his tribute to his closest friend, John Hay, who served as secretary of state under Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Hay, like Adams’s father, is deserving of Adams’s praise for selflessly seeking to advance policies that were, in Adams’s view, in the best interest of the nation at large rather than those of narrow special interests.

His supposed failure extends beyond the arena of politics. His years spent as a professor of history at Harvard (1871–77), for instance, are recounted in a chapter entitled “Failure,” and in fact his entire education proved to be, Adams claims, tongue in cheek, one disappointment after another. When addressing the concept of education, Adams often refers to a practical education, the kind that prepares a person to function instrumentally in the world. His classical education was, when confronted with the modern world, thus impractical. Education as a concept for Adams also extends beyond the formal mechanism of instruction. One gains knowledge and experience from any number of venues: world’s fairs, Gothic cathedrals, scientific experiments. Adams is eclectic in the sense that he is questing for any type of understanding that will aid him in comprehending the modern world and the forces driving it.

Underlying Adams’s investigation is the desire to understand what forces function in a culture at a given moment, culminating in the chapter “The Dynamo and the Virgin.” There Adams looks at the modern machine—symbolized by the electric dynamo—as an agent of force and compares the culturally transformative power it possesses to the religious power he reads in Gothic cathedrals, all of which were dedicated to Notre Dame, the Virgin Mary. Her power was beyond reason and empiricism; it was abstract or supersensual, in Adams’s terms. As he surveys the modern world, Adams sees no force of comparable power except in the realm of modern science and technology. Just as the Virgin effected change in her world, modern technology has become the driving force in our culture, transforming and transmogrifying at increasingly dizzying speeds. As the Virgin does, technology functions quietly beyond our cognitive grasp, leaving us in a

you characterize Adams's view of technology? Do you think he actually believes in the possibility of technological progress?

5. What examples of contemporary technology does Adams anticipate? To what degree does he also anticipate the ways in which technology has shaped culture?
6. In what ways does Henry Adams provide insight into the geopolitical alignments and confrontations of the past century?
7. For what audiences does Adams, early and late, write his books? Do his works betray a class identity that limits his readership?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Adams, Henry. *Democracy, Esther, Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, The Education of Henry Adams, Poems*. Edited by Ernest Samuels and Jayne N. Samuels. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- . *History of the United States during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson*. Edited by Earl N. Harbert. New York: Library of America, 1986.
- . *The Letters of Henry Adams*. Edited by J. C. Levenson, Ernest Samuels, Charles Vandersee, and Viola Hopkins Winner. 6 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982–88.
- Blackmur, R. P. *Henry Adams*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.
- Decker, William Merrill. *The Literary Vocation of Henry Adams*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Decker, William Merrill, and Earl N. Harbert. *Henry Adams and the Need to Know*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society; Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005.
- Harbert, Earl N. *The Force So Much Closer Home: Henry Adams and the Adams Family*. New York: New York University Press, 1977.
- . *Henry Adams: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978.
- Jacobson, Joanne. *Authority and Alliance in the Letters of Henry Adams*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.
- Levenson, J. C. “The Etiology of Israel Adams: The Onset, Waning, and Relevance of Henry Adams’s Anti-Semitism.” *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 569–600.
- . *The Mind and Art of Henry Adams*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.
- O’Brien, Michael. *Henry Adams and the Southern Question*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Orr, John C. “‘I Measured Her As They Did with Pigs’: Henry Adams as Other.” In *Henry Adams and the Need to Know*, edited by William Merrill Decker and Earl Harbert, 273–299. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2005.
- Reuben, Paul P. “Perspectives in American Literature.” Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap5/adams.html>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Rowe, John Carlos. “Henry Adams.” In *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, edited by Emory Elliott, 645–667. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- . “Introduction.” In *New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams*, edited by John Carlos Rowe. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Spiller, Robert E. “Henry Adams: Man of Letters.” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 22 February 1947, pp. 11–12, 33–34.
- Weinstein, Cindy. “From True Woman to New Woman to Virgin.” In *Henry Adams and the Need to Know*, edited by William Merrill Decker and Earl Harbert, 300–314. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2005.
- Whittemore, Reed. *Three Literary Lives: The Shared Impiety of Adams, London, Sinclair, Williams, Dos Passos, and Tate*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993.
- Wills, Gary. *Henry Adams and the Making of America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

William Decker and John Orr



LOUISA MAY ALCOTT (1832–1888)

I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle—something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. . . . I think I shall write books and get rich and famous.

(Little Women)

Jo's declaration, in the epigraph above, is taken from the book that made Louisa May Alcott "rich and famous." Because Alcott's father, the education philosopher and transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, never made enough money for his family's needs, Louisa May spent most of her 56 years producing at least 270 richly varied works. She is best known for the one that features her thinly disguised sisters—Meg (Anna), Beth (Lizzie), Amy (Abba May); her absent father, made heroic; her well-educated, long-suffering mother; and the center of interest, Josephine (Louisa/Louey herself). In that particular book, as in many of Alcott's others, the protagonist yearns for adventure for herself and for harmony and success for her family. The last of those goals was the most challenging. The family would have a full portion of suffering and loss.

Born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Louisa May Alcott moved dozens of times over the course of an often stressful life. She was the second daughter of two strong-minded dreamers: a clergyman's daughter, Abba May, who was descended from the Sewall and Quincy families of Massachusetts, and Bronson Alcott, who had already written books on his progressive educational theories and had (unsuccessfully) tried them out in several classrooms—and later on his own children (the four daughters and a boy who died in infancy). Bronson Alcott's keen observations of every detail of their infancy, toddlerhood, and childhood went

into his remarkable journals. Adding up to some 2,500 pages, these observations have been called "the first work of child psychology in the United States" (Bedell 58). Abba gave to the family her own strong will and the influences of such women as her friends LYDIA MARIA CHILD, Elizabeth Peabody, and MARGARET FULLER. About the time of their marriage, Bronson Alcott, drawn to the writings of RALPH WALDO EMERSON, became part of the transcendentalist circle; he also became an active abolitionist. By 1835, when Louisa May was three, Bronson had made his own home a stop on the Underground Railroad, had been threatened by mobs, and had become an officer in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Before HENRY DAVID THOREAU did so, Bronson Alcott refused to pay his taxes for similar principles. The family lived intensely. "The secret of the Alcotts," said their biographer Madelon Bedell, was "their largeness, their ability to live life with flair and a boldness of gesture, to see it as theater in which they might play out their role as actors and heroes in some grand drama" (xv).

Such a heritage had its drawbacks. Before 1843, when the family bought into Fruitlands, the transcendentalist communal farm experiment that failed, they had moved 10 times in 13 years. Son of farmers, Bronson Alcott could work so hard on little bits of land that Ellery Channing dubbed him "Orpheus at the Plough," but he also spent

long periods not working. Louisa May witnessed her father's bouts with depression when the model Temple School in Boston and later education experiments failed because, for example, Bronson insisted on introducing sex education into the classroom and—once—because he admitted a black student. His own children were well, if idiosyncratically, educated by Bronson, Abba, and such others as Sophia Hawthorne, who taught Louisa her alphabet, and Thoreau, who taught her botany. The girls read popular moralistic fiction, but they also read and quoted Plato, Thucydides, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and volumes of others. This was the more remarkable because of the family's almost constant poverty. Abba actually took in sewing work and (in 1848) attempted to support the four girls and herself on the \$25 a month she received for distributing goods to the poor on behalf of a charity. For a time, too, the family rented out one of the rooms in their small quarters. It was therefore no wonder that Louisa May cared so deeply about the poor: the Hummels, for example, in *Little Women*, the beautiful Edith Adelon in *The Inheritance*, and Christie Devon in *Work*. Perhaps the worst time, especially for the women in the family, was the seven-month failed communal farm experiment at Fruitlands, which Alcott bought in 1843 with Charles Lane. The daughters disliked Lane and the rural hardships that caused their mother to say the experiment demonstrated “the yoke on women” (Bedell 223). The Alcott family, poor enough already, was stuck with the freezing cold, needy house and surroundings after the other members bailed out. Bronson and Abba discussed the possibility of divorce, and, as Louisa remembered, “Anna and I cried in bed, and I prayed to God to keep us all together” (Saxton 165).

Thirty years later, after publishing her now-famous domestic stories for young people and, under pseudonyms, thrillers for magazines, Louisa May Alcott reflected on the Fruitlands experiment in the sharply satiric “Transcendental Wild Oats” (1872): “These modern pilgrims” who “journeyed hopefully out of the old world to form a new one

in the wilderness,” she implied, were woefully improvident. When the fictive family had no oil for lamps, for example, the fictive leader of the community said, “Go without until we have discovered some vegetable oil” (*Alternative Alcott* 268). The desperate humor of these passages turns simply desolate when the partner deserts and Abel (Bronson) tells Hope (Abba) that “all I have must be sold to pay the debts” (*Alternative Alcott* 376). The essay/short story ends, however, on a consolatory, Candide-like note: “Cheer up, dear heart, for while there is work and love in the world, we shall not suffer” (*Alternative Alcott* 379).

In spite of the failed communal living experiment, Bronson Alcott's work for the *Dial*, his educational theories, and his courage made him one of the central figures in New England transcendentalism. Emerson, who helped steer Bronson to his own lecture circuit and, with the May family, helped him financially, lived across from the Alcotts during one of their happy Concord tenures and was such an influence on Louisa May that he appears, greatly changed, as *Little Women's* wise and shy Professor Bhaer. Emerson's help was especially important at the time of Lizzie's death. The sad event that became the lachrymose center of Alcott's famous book and the movies based on it was grim, even ugly. It took two years between Lizzie's contracting of scarlet fever from a charity case of Abba's to the 23-year-old's burial in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Louisa watched “with stark horror” as the disease ravaged Lizzie's small frame, by then dependent on opium and morphine (Saxton 237). Though the last moments were relatively peaceful and though Louisa May told herself that she must learn the lesson of this first break in the family, she fell into a deep depression after her sister's death.

Unlike the thinly veiled Marches, in real life the Alcott family did not move to Orchard House (Louisa May called it “Apple Slump”) until 1858, when 26-year-old Louisa and her family were recovering from Lizzie's death. Some of the family would live there until 1877, making it the longest tenure for the family in any dwelling. There in 1860 Anna and John Pratt were married; there Bronson

and Abba aged; there *Little Women* was written. Still, the family suffered financial straits. Abba May (now called May) worked at Dr. Wilbur's Asylum, and Louisa (Louey), who had taken her turn as, among other things, a domestic worker ("in service," earning \$4 for seven weeks of labor) and a teacher, signed on for perhaps the greatest adventure of her life: as a nurse during the Civil War. Later she became a tutor-companion for a family who traveled with two children on what would be Alcott's first trip to Europe. That year abroad (July 1865–July 1866), for all its difficulties with the family, allowed Alcott to meet Dickens (she was unimpressed) and the Italian patriot and revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini, and to form a friendship with young Ladislav Wisniewski, who became part of the portrait of Laurie. Such jobs made their way into *Work* (1873).

Alcott's writing life, which continued through all her other labors, began as a child with her diary, the book in which she reflects such Alcott everyday occurrences as cold water baths and sibling squabbles. The journal, edited by Cory Ryan, provides an early glimpse of Alcott's lifetime concerns: her ambition, her own morality, and her love of literature. At 15 Alcott wrote her first short story, "The Rival Painters, a Tale of Rome," published four years later in the *Olive Branch*, a family journal. At 19 Alcott began to find presses for her poems and stories; the first was "Flora Fairchild" in *Peterson's*. Her first book, *Flower Fables*, appeared three years later. *Little Women* dramatizes Alcott's flair for melodramas, but what was not known for almost 100 years was that she actually was writing stories as lurid as Jo's. A few were published under Alcott's own name, but many more were not. In the 1940s Madeleine B. Stern and her partner discovered the pseudonym *A. M. Barnard*, beginning the quest for a mother lode of thrillers, written between 1862 and 1867. Two later discoveries of earlier works—in this case, full-length novels—caused even more excitement.

The earliest-written but the last to be discovered (by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy in 1994) was *The Inheritance*. Written when Alcott was only 16, the novel had been hiding, clearly marked by

Alcott but apparently never read and certainly never published, until the scholars presented it in 1997. Once published, it became a television melodrama. This very early book introduces readers to characters who will appear in other guises in the other melodramas: a beautiful, sweet, and lonely girl; two Scottish children who turn out to be half siblings of the "orphan"; a widowed mother; an ugly, nasty cousin; plus two different admirers of the young girl. Virtue and luck combine to help this innocent Amy be both self-sacrificing and rich by the end of the novel. In 1860, some 15 years after she concocted the story of the three young people and their "inheritance," Alcott had a tiny bit more of the success she so craved when the *Atlantic* accepted "Love and Self Love," and two years later "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" won a \$100 prize. As "Pauline" began serialization in 1863, Alcott's 30th year, her life became a great adventure, one that would quickly be transformed into a well-received publication.

On a cold December night in 1863, Alcott made an arduous trek to Washington, D.C. (via coach, train, and boat) to nurse in one of the city's worst hospitals for wounded soldiers. *Hospital Sketches*, her not-very-fictionalized report on this journey and her brief nursing career, recounts the challenges of being thrown into an intensely physical male world in a strange city in the early stages of a war that mattered so much to her family's principles. Tribulation Periwinkle stands in for Alcott. Her work at the "Hurly Burly," like Alcott's, at the Union Hotel Hospital, was cut short by her own serious illness. Within a week after she was struck by typhoid pneumonia, Alcott's father took her home. She would never fully recover from the calomel (mercurous chloride) with which she was dosed. As soon as she was able, however, she turned to her account of the challenges of wiping the brows, cleaning the bodies, and writing the mail for soldiers—both Union and Confederate—for serialized publication in the spring 1863 *Commonwealth*.

Two months later *Hospital Sketches* found wide readership, and Alcott soon published two more books, *The Rose Family* and *On Picket Duty and Other Tales*. Within another year she had pub-

lished a novel on which she had worked during the busy preceding four or five years, *Moods*. She had also become the editor of *Merry's Museum*. About the same time, the editor Thomas Niles asked her to write a girls' book. She wrote part 1 of that girl's book, *Little Women*—destined for translation into most languages, into drama and film form, even into opera form—in six weeks. Her life had turned a corner. Before *Little Women* Alcott had had mixed success with publishing. Although *Hospital Sketches* and *Moods* had been well received, *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, written in 1866, had been rejected. It is poignant to consider that although it created a sensation in 1995 when it was finally published through the efforts of the book collector and educator Kent Bicknell, who bought the manuscript of *Love Chase* for \$50,000 and sold it to Random House for \$1.5 million, the Alcott family was in almost abject poverty when Alcott wrote the book. The early gothic thriller involved the lust not only of the "chaser," Phillip Temple, but also of the female protagonist, Rosamond. Her opening challenge is portentous: "I tell you I cannot bear it! I shall do something desperate if this life is not changed soon. It gets worse and worse, and I often feel as if I'd gladly sell my soul to Satan for a year of freedom"(1). In the end, the chase is, indeed, fatal; even the modern reader keeps turning pages for the "who, what, and how" of the complex plot development. Although Alcott had no success with *Love Chase* in her own lifetime, she did sell (under pseudonyms) stories that were equally melodramatic.

Published in England and serialized in American publications, these stories included "Behind a Mask, or, A Woman's Power," which earned her \$65, and "The Abbot's Ghost, or Maurice Treherne's Temptation." Of these stories, Alcott reported with pleasure, "Mr. L. [Frank Leslie] says my tales are so 'dramatic, vivid, and full of plot,' they are just what he wants" (Stern, "Introduction"). Like Alcott behind her pseudonym, the slippery protagonist Jean Muir is "behind a mask" as she evolves from a scorned governess to the wealthy wife of Sir John Coventry. Creator and protagonist are also alike in Jean Muir's early humiliations, her

determination not to be poor, her cleverness, and her way with words. One of the most shocking of these early Alcott stories is "Perilous Play," in which young women and a doctor experiment with pellets of hashish. Again the opening lines of this story are prophetic: "If someone does not propose a new and interesting amusement, I shall die of ennui!" (*Plots and Counterplots* 304). This story's Belle and her friend Rose St. Just, who is reading—of all things—"The Lotus Eaters," find "interesting amusement" easily. Their doctor friend tells them what will happen if they try the hashish bonbons—"Your pulse will rise, heart beat quickly, eyes darken and dilate"—but they continue their "perilous play." Of the nine stories published between 1863 and 1869 Madeleine Stern notes that two were published anonymously; one bears the line "by a well known author"; three are "by A. M. Barnard"; and the last three, "Skeleton in the Closet," "The Mysterious Key," and "Perilous Play," were published under Alcott's own name. Topics include mind control, the manipulatory heroine, madness, and the use of hashish.

Much more frankly autobiographical and certainly more successful was the book that changed her life. After Thomas Niles invited her to write "a book for girls," and in spite of her job editing *Merry's Museum*, she completed the first half of *Little Women* in six months. Although both Niles and she thought book 1 "rather dull," it was published on October 1, 1868; book 2 was published six months later. Alcott took some time to try to help her parents, to try to get relief from her own health problems, and to take a trip to Maine. By the time she checked on the book's success in August, she learned that Roberts Brothers had sold 23,000 copies and she was an honored authoress, well on her way to that wealth and fame her character Jo so fervently desires. Although it has some saccharine scenes and some silliness, it bears rereading. Alcott's genuine interest in the women's movements of her century shows in Jo, who is a thoroughly modern woman. Alcott had shown an interest in women's rights throughout her life. The family friend and activist Margaret Fuller influenced the whole family. When she drowned, Bronson Alcott said that Fuller

was “more to many women, and to many men, I may add, than any woman else, of these last years, nor is there any to fill and make good her place” (Saxton 205). Louisa kept up with the results of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention. At about the time she was writing *Little Women*, she attended meetings rallying for the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, and she participated in the lively debates of leaders such as Julia Ward Howe, Lucy Stone, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Later she was one of seven women to vote at a town meeting.

Alcott’s “girls’ book” reflects such interest in women’s rights. Each March sister, as does her Alcott counterpart, has and uses her talent: The eldest sister, Meg, has wisdom, moderation, and housewifely talents; Jo writes stories, directs plays, and generally acts as recreation leader; Amy is an artist; and Beth, as does “Marmee,” cares for the sick and poor in the community. Late in book 1, as the family rallies to afford a ticket for Mother to travel to wounded Father, each makes a sacrifice, Jo most famously selling her long hair. As is Alcott, Jo is a tomboy and a dramatist; as Alcott does, early on, she takes a turn at being in service as a tutor; as is Alcott, Jo is a writer. As Alcott does, Jo samples big city pleasures; and she becomes fast friends with a European man. As Alcott took on the vocation of inspiring and educating children—she was called “the children’s friend”—so Jo declared that she would use Plumfield, the large home the dreaded (but secretly loved) Aunt March left them, to raise a profitable “crop”: boys. Her goal is “to open a school for little lads—a good, happy, homelike school, with me to take care of them, and Fritz to teach them.”

Louisa May Alcott also sacrificed for her family and, through moralistic works, cast herself in the role of teacher of children. Although constantly plagued by health problems, she followed her famous book with a series of similar books, for example, *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Little Men* (1871), *Eight Cousins* (1875), and *Jack and Jill* (1880). She also revised *Work*, a book that records some of her own early harrowing adventures. By 1882 she recorded such troubles in her journal as her father’s illness and “much trouble with nurses”; her concern that Anna, now a widow, was tired;

and the support of her new charge, Lulu, orphaned at May’s death. Most of all, she felt hedged in, worrying that “I shall never lead my own life” (Cheney 353). She never—or rarely—did, writing until her illness forced down her pen. Her mother died in 1876; her father, whose care was her late-life burden, outlived her by only two days. She cared for Little Lulu Nieriker and helped the fatherless Pratt household. “Work is and always has been my salvation,” she had said, “and I thank the Lord for inventing it” (Saxton 353). *Work*’s protagonist Christie Devon adds to this sentiment, “There is so much to be done, and it is so delightful to help do it, that I never mean to fold my hands till they are useless” (chapter xx). But Alcott did wear herself out. Thirteen years after she published *Work*, she had to admit that she had folded her hands, saying that she was “quite out of the world, with its work and pleasure, laid up on the shore where so many wrecks lie” (Smith and Scharnhorst, 22).

One year after Alcott’s death, Ednah Dow Cheney’s hagiographic biography was published, beginning the mythmaking of “the children’s friend.” In 1893, five years after Alcott’s death, the last of the Little Women, Anna Pratt, died. Her sons would become executors of the estate. Little Lulu, born in 1879, a month before her mother May’s death, was sent back to live with her father, where, at a very old age, she brightly answered the questions of a biographer. Alcott would continue to be relished by young people. College classrooms and textbooks would celebrate her as a woman who gave eloquent voice to her awareness of the needs and rights of women. She had, perhaps, prepared for all of that in the preface to *Little Women*, paraphrasing John Bunyan: “Go then, my little book, and show to all / That entertain and bid thee welcome shall / . . . To them for good, may make them choose to be / Pilgrims Better, by far, than thee or me.”

***Hospital Sketches* (1863)**

Thinly disguised as a novel, this account of Alcott’s venture to the Union Hotel Hospital in Washington, D.C., in the early stages of the Civil

War details the young untrained woman's new challenges: wiping the brows, cleaning the bodies, and writing the mail for soldiers—both Union and Confederate. Printed first in serialized form in the *Commonwealth* during May and June 1863 (within the year of Alcott's experience), it was published in book form two months later. Influenced by Dickens's *Bleak House*, Alcott blends the tragedy of those who fill the messy hospital beds in the middle of Washington with satiric thrusts at many of the characters, particularly the central Tribulation Periwinkle, whose adventures mirror those of Alcott. "I want something to do," declares Trib in the book's opening. Indeed, she finally has a great deal to do, but first and for many pages she takes us swiftly through a burlesqued version of the Alcott family and the tribulations of Trib in actually reaching Hurly-Burly Hospital. The Periwinkles, she says, "are a hopeful race. . . . They all wear rose-colored spectacles and are lineal descendents of the inventor of aerial architecture" (4). So much for Bronson's lofty pronouncements. Periwinkle/Alcott is also humorous about herself. The minute she signed up—not an easy task—"I turned military at once, called my dinner my rations, saluted all comers, and ordered a dress parade that very afternoon" (6).

The trip itself she compares to Christian's pilgrimage in *Pilgrim's Progress*, especially his crossing of the "Slough of Despond," but finally she reaches Baltimore—"a big, dirty, shippy, shiftless place, full of goats, geese, colored people, and coal" (16). The reference to "colored people" is one of many in the book; her father may have braved an angry mob to help a slave, but Alcott's racial attitudes bear some scrutiny:

But more interesting than officers, ladies, mules, or pigs, were my colored brothers and sisters, because so unlike the respectable members of society I had known. Here was the genuine article . . . the sort of creatures generations of slavery have made them: obsequious, trickish, lazy and ignorant, yet kind-hearted, merry-tempered, quick to feel and accepted the least token of . . . brotherly love. (57–58)

Alcott's attitudes toward race, toward the city of Washington, toward wounded men she found (mostly) so sweet, and toward her own development as a woman at work in a critical job make *Hospital Sketches* one of Alcott's most interesting books.

For her first two days Trib, who knew nothing of medicine or, for that matter, of men, ran from bed to bed in a 40-bed ward nursing pneumonia, diphtheria, and typhoid victims. On the third day 40 ambulances arrived from Fredericksburg to overflow the 80 available beds. They were announced by "a little wooly head," Joey: "Miss Blank is jes' wild fer ye, and says fly around right away. They's comin' in, I tell yer, heaps on 'em—one was took out ded, and I see him—Ky! warn't he a goner!" (21).

The book moves from high adventure and satire to serious reflection. Alcott praises the stoicism and silence of the suffering men, their reluctance to let her witness the worst of their suffering or to labor over them. Half an hour after the death of a man she had attempted to help, the bed had been emptied. "It seemed," she said, "a poor requital for all he had sacrificed and suffered . . . no familiar face for him to look his last upon . . . no hand to lead him gently down into the Valley of the Shadow" (28). Tribulation Periwinkle says of the letters she writes to mothers, sisters, and wives from their gravely wounded relatives that they are "an excellent chapter for some future history of the war" (30). *Hospital Sketches* is, itself, "an excellent chapter" on the Civil War—and on the development of Alcott. Her work at "Hurly-Burly" (Union Hotel) Hospital was cut short by her own serious illness, typhoid pneumonia. She recovered from the disease but never from the treatment—the poisonous calomel (mercurous chloride) with which she was dosed—or from the jarring images of hell she witnessed.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you make of the blend of satire and raw remarks Tribulation directs at herself and others and the sudden shifts to genuine sadness and tragedy?

2. What are Tribulation's strengths and weaknesses? Does she seem interested in others in her new little world? Which character would you nominate for second in importance to Tribulation herself?
3. Research Civil War hospitals. How many of the wounded arrived alive at such hospitals? How many of those who did were saved to live full lives? What was the role of such "nurses" as Tribulation/Louisa?

***Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (1862–1866)**

One of several collections of Alcott's stories, written largely between 1862 and 1866, this collection of four stories should be considered a sampling of others similarly published in the 1970s and 1980s by Madeleine B. Stern. The stories of passion, vengeance, drug use, and other plot developments totally unlike those of Alcott's better-known children's stories and novels caused much discussion among scholars, particularly among feminist scholars such as Stern, who calls "Behind a Mask or A Woman's Power," the title story, "a narrative meditation on the possibilities for feminist subversion of patriarchal conceits" (Introduction xxix).

If Alcott drew on *Pilgrim's Progress* for *Little Women*, these stories owe more to *Jane Eyre*, to "blood and thunder tales," and to the melodramatic stage Alcott loved to replicate. In the title story we meet Jean Muir walking from the station to the aristocratic household of the Coventrys. The story will end with her leaving that estate in a carriage as Lady Coventry, but first she must struggle. She must charm the gallant Sir John. Although he is expected to marry a cousin, he is smitten with the tricky Jean. He is probably also confused as, within two pages, Jean gives "a sweet, submissive intonation, which made it expressive of the respect, regard, and confidence which men find pleasantest when women feel and show it," along with a look that "was angry, hurt, and haughty" (44–45).

As Edith does in *The Inheritance*, Jean takes part in a *tableau vivant*. In these scenes she is liter-

ally "behind a mask," first as Judith to Coventry's Holofernes, then as Queen Elizabeth to Coventry's knight on bended knee. Her metaphoric masks include purporting to be younger than she is. She burns letters proving that she is not the person she has been pretending to be, saying, "I laugh at the farce"(101). The reader knows that at night she removes her braids, wipes off her rouge, and takes out several teeth, appearing as "a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least" (12). She plays many tricks, including destroying evidence of her true identity, before the neatly sardonic ending. If *The Inheritance* had ended with virtue rewarded, "Behind a Mask" ends with trickery, sarcasm, and downright evil rewarded. In both cases much property is involved. As she wrote these stories, Alcott might herself have hidden behind many a mask deploring the little property that was hers in real life. In writing under pseudonyms Alcott masks her actual circumstances.

"Pauline's Passion and Punishment," written in 1862, not only won a \$100 prize but earned an invitation from E. G. Squier at Mr. Leslie's newspaper to send more stories. Gradually publishers all but clamored for these dramatic stories. Pauline Valery's story opens with the title character pacing in exotic Cuba "to and fro, like a wild creature in its cage" as "some mental storm, swift and sudden as a tempest of the tropics" has her in its grip (107). Her lover, Gilbert Redmond, has written her a "Dear Pauline" letter. When Manuel, a Creole "boy" of 19, offers to kill Gilbert, Pauline gathers herself into a frightening posture and says, "There are fates more terrible than death. . . . Women use such, and work out a subtler vengeance than men can conceive. Leave Gilbert to remorse—and me" (110). Masquerading as husband and wife, Pauline and "this young lover, half boy" (115) set out to make Gilbert and his new wife, Barbara St. Just, jealous and distressed. Beyond that, the goal is for Manuel to seduce the new Mrs. Redmond, whom he calls "Babic." The story takes a number of rather lurid turns before its horrifying ending, when, during the final showdown of the four crossed lovers, one takes "a heavy plunge into the black pool" beneath a "hoary cliff" (152) where they had gathered. The fast horrible plunge

leaves two figures where four had stood, “And with that moment of impotent horror, remorse, and woe, Pauline’s long punishment began”(152). So ends the prize-winning story. Readers of the good little Alcott women will be startled by the intensity of the woman’s passion with its undercurrent of sexual desire, by the nod to miscegenation, and by the physical violence of the story. All of those would be present in the *Long Fatal Love Chase*, written (but not published) soon thereafter.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Write a character study of Pauline as her analyst, had she had one, might have, or cast her in a television talk show and assess her effect on an audience.
2. Regarding Gilbert and “Babie,” in what ways does Alcott make them well-rounded people, not simply the demons who have robbed Pauline of what she desires?
3. Read further in the story collections to see whether you agree with Stern’s grouping of themes into “Manipulation by a Woman,” “Drug Use,” “Madness,” and “Mind Control.” What themes would you add to this list?

“My Contraband” (“The Brothers”) (1863)

“My Contraband” is one of a number of impassioned stories Alcott composed during the Civil War that Madeleine Stern has described as combining the “lurid” and the “melodramatic” with “threads of realism.” Despite being called “one of the most dramatic and powerful stories [Alcott] ever wrote” by the Alcott friend and contemporary Edna D. Cheney (139) and praised by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Stern, *L. M. Alcott* 123–124), “My Contraband” can present problems for modern readers. W. E. B. DuBois called it a “tribute to ignorance and religious hypocrisy” because “in the minds of most people, even liberals, only murder makes men” (Fahs 169). As a Civil War story, the work may trouble today’s readers less for its association of murder with the assertion of manhood than with its use of stereotypes.

“My Contraband” involves four representative actors in the Civil War: a nurse, a doctor, a rebel soldier, and a newly freed slave. The first of these, the Yankee Miss Faith Dane, who narrates the story, is so given to moralizing that readers begin to question her judgment, if not her reliability. Asked by the overworked Doctor Franck, whose good sense and objectivity balance the nurse’s impetuosity, to care for “a Reb, sick with Typhoid,” Nurse Dane agrees to do so, saying, “I should rather like to show them [Rebs] that, though I cannot quite love my enemies, I am willing to take care of them” (Elbert 69). Soon, however, “the Reb,” Captain Fairfax, is displaced in Nurse Dane’s eyes by the fourth member of the cast, Robert, the “Contraband” slave newly freed by Union forces. Described as a “strong-limbed and muscular” man, “more quadron than mulatto,” Robert is offered to Miss Dane by the kindly doctor as a helper. Her initial attitude toward him is disturbing: “These black boys are far more faithful and handy than some of the white scamps” (70), but it soon becomes clear that Nurse Dane sees beyond this racially dubious generalization.

The story, then, is largely that of the narrator’s attitude change as she nurses Captain Fairfax, whom Robert immediately recognizes as his half brother, “Marster Ned.” In an emotional scene, Robert tells Nurse Dane that the gravely ill Captain Fairfax had “taken” the wife of his black brother, for which Robert now seeks revenge. In a twist of fortune (and plot) that strains credulity, Robert now helps to nurse him while trying to kill him. The goodness and sharp observation of Nurse Dane interrupt Robert’s plan, saving him from that sin and liberating him to die nobly at Fort Wagner. Nurse Dane becomes a teacher of other “contraband,” but she returns to nurse the Fort Wagner black troops, including Robert, and the melodrama continues.

Contemporary readers might easily agree more with DuBois’s condemnation of the story than with Higginson’s praise. Final assessment may depend in large part on how readers judge the story’s sentimental ending, as in the final lines of the story, Nurse Dane witnesses Robert’s death and

declares, “My contraband found wife and home, eternal liberty and God” (86). Despite such cloying sentiment, however, it is difficult to doubt Alcott’s sincerity of motive.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Develop an analysis of “My Contraband” that supports either the position expressed by DuBois or that of Higginson. This means you will have to decide whether Alcott’s sincerity outweighs her use of stereotypes and predictable sentiment.
2. Explain the importance of Nurse Dane in this story. Select a particular scene and explain how her conduct draws out features of other characters that illuminate key themes.
3. Compare the way Alcott presents Robert’s death in this story with the way HARRIET BEECHER STOWE presents the death of Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Explain how each author uses the death of a character to make a point about the inner life of that character.

“An Hour” (1864)

Alcott reverses the gender but not the racial relationships that were at the center of “My Contraband” in this equally complex and even more melodramatic story. The protagonist, Gabriel, who is the white male heir to a substantial plantation, has returned from the North to his Southern home, where his father is dying. The story concerns Gabriel’s need to decide between loyalty to his stepmother and stepsisters and his attraction to and admiration for a witty, beautiful young slave, Milly. Although Gabriel first sees Milly as “only a servant with the blood of a despised race in her veins,” he immediately recognizes not only that she is “more beautiful than either of her young mistresses” (his stepsisters) but also that her apparent serenity masks a “mingled triumph and abhorrence” (Elbert 48–49). Although she has been promised freedom by Gabriel’s father, Milly risks all to act as a messenger between the white household and the many slaves scattered across the island plantation who are poised to rebel.

As Gabriel begins to understand the dangers posed by the numbers of slaves waiting to kill their tormentors, and as he learns about their suffering, most of it the result of his own father’s management, the story grows beyond the brief hour of its title to embrace a far more extensive and tragic history of the abuses of slavery. During his crucial hour of discovery, Gabriel not only hears all the bad news but meets a series of black saint figures who help him (and his family) survive. Among them, introduced by the lovely Milly, are an old Uncle Tom–like character named “Mose” and a fierce Sojourner Truth–like old woman, Cassandra or “Sandra.” With such help Gabriel is able to quell the rebellion so that only the cruel overseer is killed. As in “My Contraband,” the black characters avoid killing their owner, Gabriel’s father, who dies of other causes. As Gabriel requests, Milly decides to “sweeten [her] liberty with the memory of this act” of active engagement in the slave revolt (56). Gabriel, repentant on behalf of his race, is dramatically depicted in the final sentence of the story: “Through widening rifts in the stormy sky the moon broke clear and calm, gliding, like a visible benediction, from the young man’s bent head to the dusky faces lifted toward the promised light; and in that momentary hush, solemn and sweet, across the river a distant clock struck twelve” (68).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Where in the story does it become clear that Gabriel fully appreciates the dilemma he faces? How and where does his understanding of his own family change? What values does Gabriel respond to as most central to his life?
2. Look closely at the way Milly is described. Which of her features receive the greatest emphasis? How important do you think her physical attractiveness is to this story? Do you think that the story could have succeeded if she were not an attractive woman? In what ways do you think your response to Milly might differ from that of readers in Alcott’s day?
3. What are the benefits of confining the events of a short story within an extremely limited time

frame? KATE CHOPIN also uses a limited time frame and a character's response to death in "The Story of an Hour." Even though the subjects addressed in these stories are very different, both stories examine the way characters make important decisions. Explain how the brevity of time and the revelation of internal thought processes go together in these stories.

***A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1866)**

Written in 1866, rebuffed by early editors but saved by Alcott, and bought at auction by Kent Bicknell more than a century later to be published in 1995, this thriller (as its name suggests) is a spicy page turner. The first words of its protagonist, Rosamond Vivian, "I tell you I cannot bear it! I shall do something desperate if this life is not changed soon" (1), presage the difficulties she will have throughout the sad story. The passionate restless girl is speaking to her grandfather, but she will feel far more trapped when she enters what she thinks is marriage with the visitor who arrives within two pages, Phillip Tempest. Again presaging his character, he appears to Rosamond (later Rose) as "the very image" of Mephistopheles, the picture in the drawing room that will appear prominently, too, in the final chapter, when the likeness is unmistakable. He is 35 to her 18. She tells him, "I don't understand how one can ever tire of pleasure," but he appears to warn her, "There is very little real liberty in the world; even those who seem freest are often the most tightly bound" (8). Tempest, sick and obsessive, is not the only character in chase mode. Rosamond is also desired by a priest, who rejects his vows because of her, and a comte, who is willing to fight for her and almost loses his life in the fight. In the chase she moves through large castles, a theater company, a convent, and a madhouse.

The life that Rose wishes to flee is fired by books. Had she been heeding the warnings in gothic romances, she might have worried at the "peal of thunder and vivid flash of lightning" (14) that crashed into their introductions. Thinking of

such pairs as Hero and Leander, Miranda and Prospero, Rose walks onto Tempest's yacht, *The Circe*, and then into a dangerous union with him. The 14-year-old boy, Ippolito, who assists Tempest, tries to warn her, but when Tempest "wins her" in a game with her grandfather, she goes off on the yacht for "the shortest and happiest year" the couple will know. Back at Tempest's Valrosa, Rose, now wearing opulent, mature clothing and jewels, meets two visitors, Grammont and Willoughby.

Readers cannot miss what Rosamond does miss: that Willoughby looks at her oddly, blushes, and says strange things about the boy Ippolito (Lito). In the following chapter (chapter 5), the reader watches as Tempest prepares a death serum (a cholera germ) for Willoughby, who is lured to death in such a way that Tempest is free of blame. He is not without a conscience, however. Just before he learns that his scheme has worked and Willoughby has died, Phillip tells his trusting wife, Rose, "You do not know what I am, and there may come a time when you will cease to hope" (62). That mistrust begins as Rose witnesses Phillip's cruelty to the boy Lito, whom he casts from the ship. Still she seems to the contemporary reader infuriatingly dense: "She never had been blind to the fact that Tempest was no saint, but like many another woman she hoped to save him through her love" (75).

There are other signs of danger: Rose sees a mound like a new grave on the Nice property; she sees a woman in profile at the opera (*Medea*) to which Tempest takes her; she sensed a woman near her as she walked in a grotto and learned of "a tall pale lady, all in black with a veil about her head [who] walks there" (85). Like Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's novel, she is wakened one night by a noise. Following the shadow of the woman who made the noise, she overhears a conversation between her husband and the woman, Marion. Out of Marion's mouth she hears, "I gave up all hope of [justice for myself] long ago; I do claim it for this poor girl [who] passes for your wife" (89). So begins the "long fatal chase." Frightened and sick, Rose rushes to the train, on which, unbeknownst to her, the first (and real) Mrs. Tempest is also traveling. Phillip pursues her to Paris.

Denying Marion's tale of cruelty and exploitation at his hand, he tells her that what she overheard was not true, and he drags her back, seeming to enjoy her spunky spirit. The chase continues, Lito playing an important role in the motivations of Marion, Tempest, and Rose. Rose must hide behind a number of masks and change her name. The last is particularly gothic as the transformation depends on her finding a dead woman's body and leaving her own name on the corpse.

Even at the convent to which she flees under an assumed identity, she is not safe. When she admits during confession—to the astonishment of the reader—that she still loves Tempest and wishes to save his soul, the grate in the confession booth opens, and Phillip's laughing face appears. "Like a bird held by the terrible fascination of a serpent's eye, Rosamond knelt motionless and mute, gazing at that familiar face as if it were a Gorgon's head which had turned her to stone" (130). Tempest tells Rose that she may go where she wishes on two conditions: that she must not die or marry. He likes the chase, he tells her, so he will pursue her everywhere. The chase continues, as Rose meets Natalie and her father, the comte de Luneville, who woos Rose. That plan for escape is foiled too. En route to her wedding with the comte, she spies Tempest's lackey, Baptiste, and in the crowd at the wedding is Tempest, who tells her she has disobeyed him. She returns, "You have no right to forbid me anything." "Perhaps not," he says, "but I have the power" (155). Their debate is spirited, but when he threatens to kill the comte, Rose argues and negotiates. Tempest will allow her freedom until he can procure a divorce and actually marry Rose.

In the climax of the book, Rose intercedes between the comte and Tempest and receives a bullet wound in her side. There is more—a madhouse, a boat ride, and dizzying plot twists—before Phillip falls (not quite to his death) over a steep path. Rosamond and Ignatious go to the real Mrs. Tempest, living now in comfort with her son, Lito, but the unrelenting Phillip appears again. Lito hides in the closet. He locks Rosamond in a boat that is damaged in a storm as he takes laudanum and sleeps away in his own *Circe*. When Phillip returns

to the old grandfather's house where he first saw Rosamond, he finds her again—this time dead. For all the adventures the wicked people encountered, the one good character dies. With Ignatious and Tempest around her, loving her still, Rosamond's body is laid out on a sofa with her grandfather. While Tempest mourns, his image is reflected in the mirror; as in the first chapter, that reflection resembles Mephistopheles.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Review the Mephistopheles tale in the Faustian legend. Why does such a figure frame this novel?
2. This novel was rejected for publication in its own day. If it had not been by the famous Louisa May Alcott, would it have been published in our own day? Under what advertising campaign?
3. The first (the real) Mrs. Tempest has quite a story of her own. What do you make of her motivations?

Little Women (1868)

Little Women's famous opening is "'Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents,' grumbled Jo, lying on the rug." The line establishes the concerns of this novel: the March family's fight against poverty, their place in a Christian community, and Jo's feistiness and honesty. This initial conversation continues by defining family members. Amy establishes herself as wanting the pretty things other girls have; Beth establishes herself as self-sacrificing and needy only of the love of family; and Meg establishes herself as the leader of the band of "little women" and failed elder adviser to tomboy Jo: "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better" (6).

When the book begins, the sisters are 16 (Meg, based on Alcott's sister Anna), 15 (Jo, based on Louisa May and described at length with a blend of bravado and self-criticism), 13 (Beth, based on Lizzie, whose hagiography much of this book is), and 12 (Amy, whose real-life name was an anagram: *May*). As "Marmee" returns from doing

good deeds in the neighborhood, carrying a letter from their father, the household emerges even more fully as one that loves fun (acting in melodramas, usually of Jo's authorship), values high literature (John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the book Marmee promises them for Christmas, which is a gloss for the whole book), and fosters the spiritual and intellectual improvement of its "little women."

Father is off to the Civil War front. Jo wishes she could go, too, as a drummer or a nurse; in real life, her creator and alter ego, Alcott, had already done just that in nursing wounded soldiers in Washington. Except in letters and in the girls' conversations, Father does not appear in book 1 until its penultimate chapter. That chapter forms a symmetrical frame for the 20 chapters between them. Mr. March, wounded and weak, surprises the family on the next Christmas Day, and book 1 ends with harmony and wholeness. All the characters gather around the little women: their parents and others, who are harbingers of book 2. The dinner includes the kind neighbor John Brooke, who will marry Meg in the opening pages of book 2; Aunt March, who will break Jo's heart and undertake the makeover of Amy; Laurie, who will declare his love for Jo and be rebuffed; and his father, Mr. Laurence, who will befriend them all. In and out of the kitchen carrying the fat turkey is Hannah, the faithful servant, who cries copiously, as does the young reader of the book.

As the story unfolds, the reader, particularly the feminist scholar, discovers models of various kinds of Victorian womanhood merging into modernity and, particularly in the case of Jo, the model of the self-discovering artist. Chapter 2 takes the girls shopping for presents and, in self-sacrificial balance to that, visiting the poor and the sick. Called "angel children," they are moved to give up their breakfasts for the needy Hummels, and on that same night they make their own entertainment: a five-act "Operatic Tragedy" set in a "gloomy wood," occupied by a witch, a villain, and lovers. Grown-up Jo (Louisa May) had already written such potboilers under an assumed name. The chapter ends with a link to the next when a generous gift from the next-door neighbor, Mr. Laurence, arrives, laden with hints about the grandson of the donor, young

Laurie. He appears at a party to which the two older March girls are invited, and he and Jo immediately find much in common: Both dislike their true names, both are outsiders in the little community, and both have a zest for new experiences.

Bunyan's story of Christian's quest for spiritual perfection, *Pilgrim's Progress*, frames the novel and runs as a refrain from start to finish. "Pilgrim's" invocation is the inscription to the combined books. Each chapter unfolds as a New England setting for the stages of Christian's journey. In the spirit of John Bunyan's pilgrims, chapter 4 begins with the girls bewailing the passing of Christmas and "how hard it seems to take up our packs and go on" (47). In chapter 5, Jo explores the big house and library next door; in chapter 6, it is Beth's turn. She plays the Laurence piano and wins the old man's heart. During the visits we learn that Laurie is the son of Mr. Laurence's son and an Italian woman of whom the father disapproved, a plot Alcott had used before—in her first novel, *The Inheritance*. Another parallel with that early novel is chapter 7, in which Amy has a hard lesson. The Bunyanesque title, "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," sets up chapter 8, "Jo Meets Apollyon," modeled on the monster of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Amy's jealousy of her sisters' trip to the theater and Jo's anger over Amy's burning Jo's book, her act of retaliation, provide high drama. As chapter 8 ends, Jo saves her sister Amy from drowning under thin ice (yet another parallel with the earliest of the Alcott's books, in which one girl rescues another). The chapter ends with remorse and forgiveness all around, but there is more wickedness for the little pilgrims, or the little women. In "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair," or chapter 9, the hardworking governess has time off while her charges recover from measles, so, furnished with all the best the family can provide, she goes off to a party at the home of rich friends, learning a lesson paraphrased from Bunyan's book with a little marital advice thrown in. It is a surprising lesson from the protofeminist Alcott: Mrs. March says, "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman" (127).

However, in the next chapter Alcott returns to the development of the artist: herself as an aspiring

young writer. By now—almost halfway through book 1—it is spring; as the flowers blossom, so do the literary ambitions of the March girls and their ally, Laurie. Alcott inserts a text within her text; it is one with a title stolen not from Bunyan this time but from another favorite Alcott author, Charles Dickens: “The Pickwick Portfolio.” The novel reverts to the pattern of mistakes summed up by and moralized on by Marmee in chapter 11 at the end of her “Experiment” in allowing the girls to cook and care for themselves on their summer outing. It is a long, lively, and heavily populated chapter: a midsummer romp followed by a quieter September meditation. Laurie joins the sisters as they discuss their “Castles in the Air.” Meg’s, for example, would “have a splendid, wise, good husband, and some angelic little children”; Jo’s, on the other hand, would have Arabian horses and space to “write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works could be as famous as Laurie’s music. I want to do something splendid before I go to my castle” (185). It is October in chapter 14 (“Secrets”), a time of separations and loss. Jo has premonitions about her sisters, but her real secret is that she is not only writing but trying to be paid for her work. She has, in fact, managed to get two pieces in print but with no monetary advantage because the editor did not pay “beginners” (203).

In the windy days of November (chapter 14) the family receives a telegram. Father has been injured. The whole family bustles to support Marmee as she goes to Washington (as Alcott had); this is the famous moment when Jo cuts off her hair—a supremely self-sacrificial action—to help pay for her mother’s trip. While their father recovers, the little women take on some of Marmee’s charitable work. Beth becomes ill. Amy is required at the home of Aunt March for what seem to be maid’s duties there. In “Dark Days,” chapter 18, set in the chill and despair of winter, Beth nearly dies and Jo nearly loses her heart to her chief comforter, Laurie. As the chapter ends, however, Beth’s fever breaks and the news that Father and Mother are both returning lightens the dark December day. Out of boredom and despair with Aunt March, Amy writes her will. A tragic irony her creator and

big sister could not imagine was that a little over 10 years after she penned this novel, Amy’s real life prototype, May, would die and in her will request that her child Louisa (Lulu) May Nieriker be raised by her aunt, Louisa May. As book 1 ends, even as the family gathers for a happy Christmas, Jo is distressed about the future. Meg will marry John in three years, tearing the little women apart. Beth still hovers in death’s shadow.

The last chapter (23) provides a bridge to book 2. So involved in the March girls’ story was Alcott that she completed book 2 in only six months after the first was published. Book 2, published within the same year, picks up the March family after the gap of three years in which Meg became old enough in her parents’ eyes to marry John Brooke. All the little women now seem fixed in their roles: Meg as wife (and later as mother), Amy as companion to Aunt March and ready for great adventures, Beth as invalid, and Jo as author of “rubbish” that she sold to the “Spread Eagle.” The first two chapters of book 2 involve the wedding, which everyone seems to have attended; the third (chapter 26) dwells on Amy, as she practices her art and plans a luncheon, which only one of her hoped-for 14 guests attends. The family bundles up the extra food to take to the Hummels. Chapter 27 turns to Jo’s artistic pursuits. Little bits of money from the stories help the family, but, says Alcott, “one of the sweet uses of adversity is the genuine satisfaction which comes from hearty work of head or hand” (350). Jo is happy in preparing the book, which earns \$300 and “plenty of praise and blame.” Meanwhile, Meg is trying her hand at jelly making in her new domesticity; what she produces that calls for a yelp from Jo is “Twins, by Jupiter!” In chapter 29, the remaining March girls prepare to go calling because, as Amy tells Jo, “Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no way of repaying the kindnesses they receive” (384). Amy seemed to take her own advice; in fact, she was so agreeable that Aunt March invited her on the extended European visit, rather than Jo, whom everyone expected her to take.

The disappointed tone continues in the next chapter (33): “Jo’s Journal” presents Jo in New

York at her job with Mrs. Kirke. She has a new friend, Professor Bhaer, a “regular German—rather stout, with brown hair tumbled all over his head; a bushy beard” (430). A courtship develops, appropriately, around literature. The professor, whom Jo has begun to respect as a wise man, berates the stories she has written for Mr. Dashwood, the editor of thrillers, for their corrosive effect on young people. Jo returns home, with the professor, deciding “It’s not for me; I must not hope it now” (468). She has lost Laurie, too, but much worse than disappointed romances is Beth’s health. Beth confides that she is resigned to dying because “I’m not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I’d do when I grew up. . . . I’m not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven” (489). The rest of the novel unfolds from all that has occurred before. Amy and Laurie meet in Europe and become close friends—and later become engaged. The Brooke twins (who have not appeared since their birth 10 chapters earlier) grow, having “tyranny” over their mother, who is trying hard to be both a good mother and an excellent wife. And in chapter 40, “The Valley of the Shadow,” Beth finally dies, her sisters and mother gathered around her. As the last portion of book 1 set up necessary tensions and situations for book 2, so Alcott hints at the follow-up book to this one, *Little Men*, in the final chapters of book 2. Laurie tracks down Amy, proposes to her, and takes her home in stylish European fashion. Jo does not have long to feel sad, for soon a rain-bedraggled Professor Bhaer arrives to ask for Jo’s hand, and the book ends with a great piece of news and a plan to go with it: land and money for a great school. Aunt March wills Plumfield to Jo; she and her professor decide to marry and establish the school for “a wilderness of boys” (634).

The book ends with the March family in harmony as Marmee says, “Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish a greater happiness than this” (643). Readers of the entire Alcott opus will know that the happiness of the fictive March family diverged from that of the actual Alcotts when Jo and Mr. Bhaer build the school in *Little Men* and those boys grow and make their own trips

to Europe and have their own adventures. As we know, the success of *Little Women* was so great that Alcott never went back to her spicy sensational stories. Rather, she turned to the last books of her career, books that made her “rich and famous” as she—and Jo—had always wanted.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and trace the many ways this book serves as a gloss to the actions of the March family.
2. Notice how many other literary works appear in the novel: the “Operatic Tragedy” by Jo March on the first Christmas, the full edition of “The Pickwick Portfolio” with its “Anniversary Ode” in ballad stanza by “A. Snodgrass,” *Ivanhoe*, and others. What do these tales tell of the tastes and interests of the girls?
3. What force or person is surprisingly absent (though alive and interested) from *Little Women*? What do you deduce about Alcott’s attitude toward men in light of this whole book? Consider whether some of them initiate actions that move the plot forward or are simply props to help the women characters, especially Jo.

“Transcendental Wild Oats” (1872)

Although “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the pamphlet Alcott wrote 10 years before her death, is part memoir, part parody, and other things as well, it is also a strong protest against the situation of women that was so central to the female reform efforts Alcott experienced throughout her life. Of the two primary causes of her day, abolition and women’s suffrage, she said, “After a fifty year acquaintance with the noble men and women of the Anti-slavery cause, and the sight of the glorious end to their faithful work, I should be a traitor to all I most love, honor and desire to imitate, if I did not covet a place among those who are giving their lives to the emancipation of the white slaves of America” (Saxton 406). Hope Lamb, who in “Wild Oats” stands in for Alcott’s mother, Abba, changes from an essentially passive and peripheral

figure to a central agent of change. This change takes place over the course of a narrative in which Alcott shines an almost lurid light on the men in one of the more radical manifestations of the transcendental movement.

This story, “the only eyewitness account” of the Fruitlands Community (Petrulionis 71), levels heavy satire on the heady ideals of Bronson Alcott and his partner Charles Lane but loving if amused respect for Abba Alcott, for whom the move to the large farm near Harvard, Massachusetts, was her 10th in 13 years (Petrulionis 75). As Elaine Showalter, Sandra Petrulionis, and others point out, the real-life disastrous experiment, during which the members almost starved and at the end of which Bronson Alcott suffered a nervous breakdown, ended with a fundamental shift in the balance of power within the Alcott family. Abba Alcott’s efforts saved them, and from the day they left, poorer than when they went, she was the executive and often even the breadwinner. All of that happened in 1843. Thirty years later, Alcott gave the participants telling sobriquets: Bronson Alcott became Abel Lamb; his wife became Hope Lamb; the evil British partner, Charles Lane, became Dictator Timon Lion; and so on. She surrounded them with a clutch of comic bit parts: a colloquial old Moses, called “Mose”; a man named Absalom, who will help Hope later in the story; and John Pease.

At one point, Alcott carefully sketches a parody of Thoreau’s *Walden* that illuminates the ethereal concerns of the men while underscoring Hope Lamb’s role as the practical provider. Drawing especially on Thoreau’s advice about diet in the “Higher Laws” section of *Walden*, she describes the “Consociate Family” trying “to build castles in the air till the fire went out and the symposium [forced serious conversation after dinner] ended in smoke” (Showalter 369). While Lamb and Lion persist in feckless, fruitless plans and conversations, Hope Lamb, the only real worker, labors on, with the help of her little daughters, washing, baking, even harvesting the meager produce. Alcott’s wit is merciless. The Brethren, she says, “were so busy

discussing and defining great duties that they forgot to perform the slow ones” (Showalter 372), observing further that they “said many wise things and did many foolish ones” (375). However, when she describes Bronson/Lamb as he “turned his face to the wall, and waited, with pathetic patience for death to cut the knot” (377), the wit turns to sadness. Finally, the mood turns, as in so many Alcott stories, to what might seem an overly sentimental and all too predictable happy ending. As the family leaves, Hope smiles and makes a joke over the perhaps symbolically rotten fallen apples. Metaphorically, in other words, the clouds part and the characters move toward presumptive new beginnings, where the apples of Eden remain unpicked and the world is full of promise.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Identify passages in this narrative where Alcott uses irony to reveal the ineptitude of the male characters. What does this story tell us about the relationship between intellectual life and the demands of daily existence?
2. Compare the way Alcott presents women’s roles in this work with MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN’s presentation in “The Revolt of ‘Mother.’” In what ways might Alcott’s narrative be read as a milder and more intellectual version of that story?
3. Look closely at the “Higher Laws” section in *Walden* and identify the ways Alcott parodies Thoreau in this short piece.

Work (1873)

Between *Little Women* and *Work* Alcott wrote other domestic novels for young people, cashing in on the success of her “dull” book. Each has its own charms. Several are continuations of the March family: *Little Men* (1871) follows Jo’s teaching at Plumfield; *Jo’s Boys* (1886) follows the boys and their lady friends and spouses as they grow up. *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870) follows “a country mouse and a city mouse,” Polly and Fanny—and

their friends—through six years of travels, education, parties, and love affairs. There were others as well (270 in all). As with *Little Women*, in *An Old Fashioned Girl*, Alcott presents alternative lifestyles; some succumb to the “matrimonial epidemic”; some have other “talents.” *An Old Fashioned Girl* includes stories from the May side of the family to please her mother. However, it was the book she wrote twice—once as *Success* and, in 1873, as *Work*—that she dedicated to her mother, “whose life has been a long labor of love.” The book itself is a labor of love to working women in Victorian America; it was so accurate that there is a story of a poor working woman who appeared on Alcott’s doorstep to ask for a job—and to investigate the sincerity of the creator of Christie Devon. It was real. By the end of the novel Christie would have the praise she so desired. Working in a hospital as Alcott had a decade before, she says, “I never discovered what an accomplished woman I was till I came here” (385). Along with success—finally—in the workforce, she has a husband, though he dies just before the book’s last page, freeing her to enter a women’s community whose business it is to help others. The road toward such rewards is rocky and varied. Although other Alcott novels have been episodic, this one might be called “picaresque.” Each chapter almost stands alone as a separate story with characters who do not intersect the action of other chapters; nor is there a consistent movement from worst to best, though the first jobs are pretty bad and the last is indeed a fine resolution and a reward.

As is Alcott’s pattern, the first line is key to the rest: “Aunt Betsey, there’s going to be a new Declaration of Independence” (2). At age 20, Christie is ready to act like “a boy” and take off before her uncle asks her to leave. Toward the end of that first chapter, after a long talk with her aunt, Christie has a long night of the soul. She thinks of her mother, “who had borne the commonplace life of home till she could bear it no longer” (9), had met, married, and, soon after Christie’s birth, died. Christie looks back on herself as the child who “had tried to appease [a] hunger [for love]

in many ways” (9). She considers her sad and desperate alternatives if she does not leave, so, knowing that “she is moderately endowed with talents” (8), she does. By the second chapter she has found employment with a Mrs. Stuart, who is as imperious as “Victoria . . . restoring a granted petition” (14). In spite of the advice of the black cook, Christie declares, “I won’t submit” (16). Christie unwisely laughs at her new employers, is fired, but is undiscouraged. She lives at the appropriately named Mrs. Flint’s and begins to make a career on the stage. In spite of her modest success as an actor, Christie soon turns up as a governess in the Saltonstall family. When her employer offers Christie an unwelcome proposition, she becomes a companion in the home of “a worn out child” named Helen.

And so Christie struggles through the next six chapters. Almost halfway through the book she finds it possible to send \$100 to her aunt and uncle. It is hard to separate Christie’s joys from those of Alcott, although some of the problems may have been complete fiction. After many disappointments, she is ready to end her life; saved at the last minute by her friend Rachel, Christie says, “I have been ill; I worked too hard; I’m not myself tonight; I owe money. People disappoint and worry me” (160). We see that Rachel saved Christie’s life physically and with moral support. Rachel’s kindness mitigates the grimness, as does her friendship with a great man, Mrs. Wilkins’s minister, Mr. Power, modeled perhaps on the Alcott family friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. He especially seeks out Christie and asks her to take on important work: to help the Sterling family. Much of the rest of the book concerns her “work” for David and Mrs. Sterling. By the end of the book, Christie’s battle for independence, announced at the beginning, has been won, and, although Christie loses David, she has gained a meaningful life. The book could just as easily have been printed under its original title, “Success,” for that is what the life of Christie Devon, standing in for her hardworking and courageous, creator, achieved.

- Petrulionis, Sandra Herbert. "By the Light of Her Mother's Lamp; Women's Work Versus Men's Philosophy in Louisa May Alcott's 'Transcendental Wild Oats.'" *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1995): 69–81.
- Ryan, Cory, ed. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Girlhood Diary*. New York: Bridge Water Books, 1993.
- Saxton, Martha. *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott*. New York: Avon Books, 1977.
- Shealy, Daniel, ed. *Alcott in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005.
- Showalter, Elaine, ed. *Alternative Alcott*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989.
- Smith, Andrew, and Gary Sharnhorst. "Louisa May Alcott's Last Week: A Valedictory Letter." *ANQ* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 2–23.
- Stern, Madeleine. *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984.
- . Introduction to *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Madeleine Stern. New York: Quill, 1975.
- . *Introduction to Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Madeleine B. Stern. New York: William Morrow, 1976.
- . *Louisa May Alcott*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- , ed. *L. M. Alcott: Signature of Reform*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002.
- Eleanor Heginbotham



AMBROSE BIERCE (1842–1914?)

Cynic, *n.* A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be.

(*The Devil's Dictionary*)

In some ways, Ambrose Bierce has become a caricature in the realm of American literature. Customarily known as “Bitter Bierce” or “the wickedest man in San Francisco,” he is often considered the epitome of the cynic, the misanthrope, and the pessimist. While there are kernels of truth in these characterizations, they fail to account for the profound moral concerns that led Bierce to his oftentimes harsh depiction of a human species that, in his view, was the victim of its own follies, duplicities, and hypocrisies. Bierce, while making numerous enemies with the rapier wit of his prose, also attracted a small cadre of devotees, who professed to his moral uprightness, strength of character, and mental and physical courage in the face of battles both literal and figurative.

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce was born on June 24, 1842, in Meigs County, Ohio, the youngest of 10 surviving children of Marcus Aurelius and Laura Sherwood Bierce, all of whose names began with the letter *A*. The family moved in 1846 to Indiana, settling in Warsaw, where Bierce attended school and worked as a printer’s devil for an abolitionist paper, the *Northern Indianan*, thereby gaining his first taste of journalism. In 1859 he enrolled in the Kentucky Military Institute but dropped out after a year.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Bierce was one of many who immediately enrolled for a three-month stint (the war was not expected to last

much longer than that) with the Ninth Indiana Volunteers. During his nearly four years of service (1861–65), Bierce saw action in many of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. Initially stationed in western Virginia, he was later under the command of General William B. Hazen, to whom he would remain loyal for the rest of his life. He fought in the Battles of Shiloh (April 6–8, 1862), Stone’s River (December 31, 1862), Chickamauga (September 19–20, 1863), and Missionary Ridge (November 23–25, 1863), gaining expertise as a topographical engineer. Returning home on furlough, he became engaged to Bernice Wright, whom he called Fatima, but later, for unknown reasons, the engagement ended. By February 1864 he had returned to the front, fighting in Georgia at the Battles of Resaca (May 14–15, 1864), Pickett’s Mill (May 27, 1864), and Kennesaw Mountain (June 27, 1864), where he was seriously wounded by a shot in the head. Nevertheless, after some months he had recovered sufficiently to return to the front. He was briefly captured by Confederate forces near Gaylesville, Alabama, but escaped after a few days. In early 1865 he was declared unfit for military service because of his head wound.

After the war, Bierce briefly worked in Alabama as an aide to the Treasury Department, responsible for “the collection and custody of ‘captured and abandoned property’” (*Sole Survivor* 68). In July 1866 he accepted Hazen’s offer to join him

in an exploration of western forts, where he experienced some fighting with Native Americans in Wyoming and Montana. In 1867 he determined to make a career in literature, or at least in journalism: Obtaining a sinecure at the U.S. Mint in San Francisco (as BRET HARTE had earlier), he began writing brief sketches for the *Californian*, *Golden Era*, and other local papers. His work was so well received that in late 1867 he was hired as a regular columnist for the *San Francisco News Letter and California Advertiser*, quickly becoming a towering figure in the vibrant literary scene in California. He became friends with Harte (to whose *Overland Monthly* he occasionally contributed), Ina Coolbrith, and other well-known California writers. In late 1871 he married Mary Ellen (Mollie) Day, the daughter of a wealthy San Francisco businessman.

In early 1872 Bierce decided to seek his literary fortune in England, as MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), Charles Warren Stoddard, and other western American writers had. He plunged into literary and journalistic work, writing regular columns for several British papers, chiefly *Fun*, edited by Thomas Hood the Younger, and *Figaro*. Much of this work was comic in nature, and humor, satire, and repartee remained staples of Bierce's work throughout his life. It was in England that his first books were published: *The Fiend's Delight* (1873), *Nuggets and Dust* (1873), and *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull* (1874), containing material either from his *News Letter* columns or from his British journalism.

Bierce probably thought that his move to England would be permanent, but with his wife caring for two small children and a third on the way, he acceded to her wishes and returned to San Francisco in 1875. For the next two years his life is largely a blank: He apparently resumed his work at the U.S. Mint, but very little literary work from this period has come to light. His father died in 1876, his mother in 1878. In early 1877 he was hired as editor and columnist of the *Argonaut*, a well-known weekly paper in San Francisco, where he commenced what would become his long-

running "Prattle" column, full of pungent comment on local, national, and international affairs. But, two years later he abruptly resigned from the *Argonaut* to pursue what he felt was a promising financial opportunity, becoming general agent of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company in Rockerville, Dakota Territory. Bierce expected this well-financed venture to be richly rewarding, but in the event it proved disastrously frustrating: Plagued by mismanagement and lack of communication between the New York office and the local administration, the company rapidly fell into disarray, leaving Bierce to bear the brunt of the hostility of the miners under his orders. Litigation arising from the debacle enmeshed Bierce for years thereafter.

By 1881 Bierce had returned to San Francisco and was quickly hired as a columnist for the *Wasp*, a satirical weekly where he revived his "Prattle" column. To date he had written little fiction: Both *The Fiend's Delight* and *Nuggets and Dust* had contained short satirical squibs, and he had published a long, atmospheric story, "The Haunted Valley," in the *Overland Monthly* (July 1871), but the great majority of his literary efforts were expended in journalism and poetry. During his five years with the *Wasp* he published only a handful of tales, among them "A Holy Terror" (December 23, 1882) and his first Civil War story, "George Thurston" (September 29, 1883).

This situation changed dramatically when Bierce, having resigned from the *Wasp* in 1886, was hired by the young William Randolph Hearst—whose father had just given him the newly founded *San Francisco Examiner* to play with—as leading editorial writer. Bierce began work for the *Examiner* in early 1887, once again reviving his weekly "Prattle" column but also producing a flood of short fiction that would cement his reputation both locally and internationally. Such tales as "A Son of the Gods" (July 29, 1888), "Chickamauga" (January 10, 1889), "A Horseman in the Sky" (April 14, 1889), "The Affair at Coulter's Notch" (October 20, 1889), "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (July 13, 1890), and "The Middle Toe of

the Right Foot" (August 17, 1890) all appeared first in the *Examiner*, usually in the features section of the Sunday issue. In 1891 he also contributed to the well-known literary journal the *Wave*, where "Haïta the Shepherd" (January 24, 1891) and "The Death of Halpin Frayser" (December 19, 1891) first appeared.

By 1891 Bierce believed that he had written enough tales to assemble a volume. He claimed that he shopped the book around to leading New York publishers and that it was uniformly rejected, but there is little evidence in his surviving correspondence that he was vigorous in marketing the book. In any event, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (dated 1891 but actually published in February 1892) bore the imprint of a San Francisco businessman, E. L. G. Steele, whom Bierce had befriended as a result of his Black Hills involvement. It at once established Bierce as a powerful voice in American literature, and his tales of the Civil War were praised by some and condemned by others for their unflinching realism and grimness, along with their unflinching revelation of the effects of fear upon the human psyche. Two years later Bierce assembled another volume of short fiction, *Can Such Things Be?* (1893), which contained many of the tales of supernatural and psychological horror for which he would also become known.

But, journalism remained in the forefront of Bierce's attention. By 1896 he had become such a feared journalist, flaying local and national figures with satire in both prose and verse, that Hearst sent him to Washington, D.C., to lobby against the efforts of one of the most notorious of the railroad barons, Collis P. Huntington, for a long extension on his repayment of government loans for the building of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Bierce's dozens of articles definitively turned the tide of public opinion against Huntington, whose attempts to ram bills favorable to him through Congress failed ignominiously. It was Bierce's greatest triumph as a journalist, but the unremitting effort took its toll on his health, and he was forced to spend months recuperating in New Jersey. By 1898, however, he had revived and provided a sharp antidote to the

warmongering of his employer, Hearst, whose campaign to involve the United States in a war to pry Cuba away from Spanish control proved all too successful. Yet, for all Hearst's addiction to yellow journalism, he at least deserves credit for allowing Bierce a free hand to criticize him and his policies openly and forthrightly.

In 1899 *Fantastic Fables* appeared, a volume of nearly 300 satirical fables that had previously appeared in various installments in the *Examiner*. Later that year his asthma made it impossible for him to live in the foggy climate of San Francisco, and Bierce bid farewell to the West Coast, which had made his literary reputation, and moved to Washington, D.C., where he would remain for the rest of his life. Although closer to the corridors of political power, Bierce was experiencing fatigue both physically and mentally. Matters were not aided by the death of his younger son, Leigh, of pneumonia on March 31, 1901. (His elder son, Day, had died on July 27, 1889, in a duel over a young woman; a few months earlier Bierce had separated from Mollie over the discovery of what he believed to be love letters to her from another man.) In 1905 Hearst, having purchased the *Cosmopolitan*, asked Bierce to write a regular column of commentary and fiction for it, but his work appeared irregularly and Bierce was in constant disagreement with the editorial staff over his contributions. Nevertheless, such significant stories as "The Moonlit Road" (January 1907) and "A Resumed Identity" (September 1908) first appeared there.

In 1906 *The Cynic's Word Book* was published. This quintessence of Biercian cynicism, begun as early as 1881 in the *Wasp*, was the volume that Bierce would have preferred to call *The Devil's Dictionary*. The rest of Bierce's literary career was fueled by his friends: S. O. Howes assembled a volume of Bierce's newspaper columns under the title *The Shadow on the Dial* (1909), and the Washington publisher Walter Neale persuaded Bierce to compile an immense 12-volume edition of his *Collected Works* (1909–12). In the course of assembling and revising his work, Bierce undertook notable revi-

sions to his two short story collections, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (now called *In the Midst of Life* after the 1892 London edition) and *Can Such Things Be?* as well as preparing definitive versions of such other volumes as *The Devil's Dictionary* and *Fantastic Fables*. But, the edition was criticized for containing an excess of ephemeral and frivolous material, and Bierce ultimately soured on the entire enterprise.

By late 1913 Bierce was becoming bored with his sedate life in the nation's capital. Having resigned from Hearst's employment in 1909, he did little but work on the *Collected Works* and make lengthy return trips to California in 1910 and 1912. He expressed an interest in going somewhere where "something worth while is going on" (*Sole Survivor* 295), and he chose Mexico, in the throes of revolution. His last surviving letter is dated December 26, 1913, from Chihuahua, Mexico, and it ends ominously: "I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination" (*A Much Misunderstood Man* 246). The rest is silence. It is probable that Bierce was caught up in a battle in early January and killed, whether by design or accident. It is a fittingly ambiguous end to a writer whose own work exposed the horrors and ambiguities of war.

Bierce's ferocious wit has frequently been misunderstood as unthinking or knee-jerk misanthropy, but it becomes clear that his satirical barbs were directed at those figures—whether it be bad poets or crooked politicians—who he thought were undermining the honesty and decency that ought to be the pillars of a civilized society. When a correspondent wrote to him that his work lacks "soul," Bierce replied forcefully: "Maybe, as you say, my work lacks 'soul,' but my life does not, and a man's life is the man. Personally, I hold that sentiment has a place in the world, and that loyalty to a friend is not inferior as a characteristic to correctness of literary judgment" (*A Much Misunderstood Man* 176). The satire that Bierce so vigorously launched against stupidity, corruption, and hypocrisy plainly carries the implication that he advocated their opposites, and there is every reason to believe that, in his own personal and professional

life, he embodied these opposite attributes to the best of his ability.

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890)

Unquestionably Bierce's signature story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" was first published in the *San Francisco Examiner* July 13, 1890, and included in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). Even within Bierce's lifetime it was recognized as a masterpiece. STEPHEN CRANE said of it in an undated letter, "Nothing better exists. That story has everything" (Stallman and Gilkes 139–140n94). Its inclusion in WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS's anthology *The Great Modern American Stories* (1920) has ensured it a place in the canon of American literature.

At the outset we are introduced simply to "a man" who "stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama." But, this man is no ordinary sight-seer: He is in fact a Confederate spy and is about to be hanged. Bierce spells out in meticulous detail the elaborate procedure for a military hanging, with soldiers arrayed on either side of the banks of the creek over which the bridge runs. A federal sergeant stands on one end of a plank; the condemned man on the other. As soon as the sergeant steps off the plank, the plank will tilt upward, plunging the condemned man downward and, presumably, either breaking his neck or choking him with the noose.

The second section gives us the meager background that Bierce deigns to provide on the spy. He is Peyton Farquhar, a "well-to-do planter" (*Short Fiction* 2.727) from Alabama and "ardently devoted to the Southern cause" (2.727). For an unspecified reason he is unable to serve in the regular Confederate army, but he is tempted to help the South in other ways: Hearing that the bridge over Owl Creek is poorly defended, Farquhar wishes to set it afire, but as he is attempting to do so, he is captured—and will face the ultimate penalty.

Yet, something appears to go awry. As the federal sergeant steps off the plank, Peyton Farquhar

plunges into the creek. The rope has broken. Although partially strangled by the noose and in danger of drowning, he manages with great effort to free himself from the bonds that had tied his hands behind his back; he similarly unties the bonds around his ankles and the noose around his neck. He surfaces, “and with a supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!” (2.729). The Union soldiers on each side of the bank begin shooting at him. He hears the lieutenant giving the grim orders: “Attention, company! . . . Shoulder arms! . . . Ready! . . . Aim! . . . Fire!” (2.730). Farquhar dives into the water and is carried along by the flowing stream. He is caught up in a vortex, spinning giddily. Finally, he reaches a bank far away from the bridge; he has apparently escaped. He trudges all day and into the night, seeking to return to his home. Presently, after traversing a forest, he enters a clearing: “He stands at the gate of his own home” (2.731). He sees his wife, “looking fresh and cool and sweet” (2.731–732), walking down the steps to greet him. Then, suddenly, he feels a hideous pain around his neck: “Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge” (2.732).

Without having to state it outright, Bierce has provided all the clues to the solution of this psychological drama: Farquhar, in the split second between his plunging off the wooden plank to the breaking of his neck, has hallucinated his escape and return home. Bierce’s remarkably acute perception of the subjectivity of time, especially in moments of great stress, has been immensely influential: A number of later stories by other writers have borrowed this device directly, and even films such as *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) have made use of it. Bierce cleverly anticipates the hallucination by noting Farquhar’s sensory disturbance prior to his plunge. As he is standing on the bridge waiting to die, he looks down on the river: “A piece of driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!” (2.726). Shortly thereafter he hears “a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion

like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil” (2.726). It is the ticking of his watch, and perhaps this sound suggested the firing of the Federal soldiers’ guns during his hallucination.

In the original publication of the story, Bierce was much more precise as to the date of the tale’s occurrence. The *Examiner* version begins: “One morning in the summer of 1862 a man . . .” (*Short Fiction* 2.879). Bierce habitually pruned such details when republishing his Civil War stories in book form: He clearly wished to render them more timeless as the details of the conflict faded from collective memory. A later mention of the “fall of Corinth” (2.727)—referring to Corinth, Mississippi, which had been occupied by the Union army in early June 1862 after being abandoned by General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard’s Army of Tennessee—firmly dates the story to a period when the South was desperately seeking to turn the tide of war to its favor, making Farquhar’s actions the more understandable. And yet, Farquhar was, in effect, the victim of a sting operation: A Federal scout had deliberately tempted him to destroy the Owl Creek bridge, and Farquhar would be right in thinking that the Federals had engaged in a bit of conscious malice in luring him to fall into their trap.

Bierce himself, true to his satirical bent, directs a bit of malice toward Farquhar. In the midst of his hallucination, as Farquhar is struggling (in his own mind) to free himself from his bonds, Bierce produces this remarkable bit of authorial exposition: “What splendid effort!—what magnificent, what superhuman strength! Ah, that was a fine endeavor! Bravo!” (2.728). This would be bad enough if addressed to someone actually struggling in this manner; it is much worse when we recognize that it is addressed to a man caught in a hallucinatory fantasy. Bierce, in the original version of the story, expressed one further piece of malice at Farquhar’s expense: In the very last sentence of the story (as quoted), after the words “with a broken neck,” Bierce had added in the *Examiner* appearance: “and suspended by as stout a rope as ever rewarded the zeal of a civilian patriot in war-time” (2.733n9). Bierce was probably wise to delete this phrase in book publications: It is a little too cheaply

sarcastic to provide a fitting end to this otherwise masterful tale.

David M. Owens has written a penetrating article identifying the precise locale of the story. It was memorably adapted into a short film (1962) by the French director Robert Enrico, starring Roger Jacquet. This film was shown as an episode of Rod Serling's "The Twilight Zone" (February 28, 1964).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Does Bierce "take sides" in this story? Are his sympathies directed toward the Confederate, Peyton Farquhar or the Union army seeking to execute him? Bierce, although a Federal (Union) soldier, frequently expressed sympathy with the Confederate cause. Has Farquhar been unfairly singled out for punishment?
2. What does the content of Farquhar's hallucination tell us about the way he views himself as a man and the way he thinks about his decision to play an active role in the war, even though he is a civilian?
3. Compare Bierce's depiction of war with that of Stephen Crane, in regard to the main character's attitude.
4. In this story, Bierce slows time to reveal the interior experience of the central character, which is suddenly cut short by real events in the outside world. Doing so draws sharp contrasts between desired experience and the makeup of actual life. Compare Bierce's use of this technique in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" with KATE CHOPIN's in "The Story of an Hour."

"Chickamauga" (1889)

One of the most poignant of Bierce's Civil War stories, "Chickamauga" was first published in the *San Francisco Examiner* on January 20, 1889, and collected in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). It was apparently written nearly a decade before Bierce's memoir of the battle, "A Little of Chickamauga" (*San Francisco Examiner*, April 24, 1898), which should be read in close conjunction with the story. Bierce of course fought in the Battle of

Chickamauga, in northwestern Georgia and southern Tennessee (September 19–20, 1863). The battle was distinguished not only by its bloodiness but also by the peculiar topography of the area: vine-choked woods interspersed with open farmland.

In the story, less than 3,000 words in length, we are introduced to a small boy playing soldier with a wooden toy sword near his farmhouse. Frightened by the sudden appearance of a rabbit, the boy dashes heedlessly into the nearby woods, wandering there for more than an hour before finally falling asleep. (We learn that he is the son of slave-owning parents: After the discovery of his absence, "white men and black were hastily searching the fields and hedges in alarm" [*Short Fiction* 2.649]).

Awaking, the boy wanders into a clearing, where he sees "a strange moving object which he took to be some large animal—a dog, a pig—he could not name it; perhaps it was a bear" (2.649). In fact, it is a man crawling on all fours, severely wounded and accompanied by many others in the same condition. Their injuries are horrific: "All their faces were singularly white and many were streaked and gouted with red" (2.650). Underscoring the animal imagery, the little boy leaps onto the back of one of the crawling men, thinking it an entertaining game—after all, "he had seen his father's negroes creep upon their hands and knees for his amusement—had ridden them so, 'making believe' they were his horses" (2.650). But, the man whom the boy is riding brusquely throws him off, "then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw—from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone" (2.650). Undeterred, the boy moves in front of the band of crawling soldiers as if he is their leader ("Surely such a leader never before had such a following" [2.651]). They approach a stream and attempt to drink; some of them do not rise from their prone position.

The boy then goes through the woods and back to his plantation but is horrified by what he sees: "Desolation everywhere! In all the wide glare not a living thing was visible" (2.652). His house is ablaze, and he comes upon the dead body of a woman—his mother. The child, now revealed to be

a deaf-mute (the reason he never heard the sounds of battle while he slept), can only utter “a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries” (2.652).

What Bierce has accomplished in this story is to encapsulate the titanic suffering and death of an immense battle into the figure of a small boy and his band of broken companions. The name *Chickamauga* is never mentioned in the text of the story, and there is scarcely any description of the battle itself; all we read is the following: “A few hours before, these desperate, stricken men, with their more fortunate and now distant comrades, had penetrated the forest in thousands. Their successive battalions, breaking into swarms and reforming into lines, had passed the child on every side” (2.651). Bierce frequently noted that, to a common soldier, and even to an officer like him, a battle is largely an incomprehensible sequence of confused movements, with death and injury on all sides; soldiers are rarely aware of any strategy planned by their generals. In “Chickamauga” all we see is the grotesque aftermath of the battle—the appalling injuries that, in many cases, led to permanent disfigurement or death through lack of timely medical attention. The image of the soldier with the missing jaw, to say nothing of the deaf-mute boy himself, underscores the fact that not a single word is uttered in the story. The horrors of this battle, and of war generally, transcend human speech: They can only be displayed in a succession of loathsome images.

Some telling comparisons can be made between the story and Bierce’s account of the battle as he saw it. At one point Bierce rode to the top of a ridge, where “to my astonishment I saw the entire country in front swarming with Confederates; the very earth seemed to be moving toward us!” (*Sole Survivor* 31). In the story the march of hundreds of wounded soldiers to the stream is similarly described: “The very ground seemed to be in motion toward the creek” (2.650). The grisly disfigurement of the soldiers is echoed in Bierce’s description of a crazed charge by Confederate soldiers attempting to take out some Union artillery, with tragic results: “When all was over, and the dust

cloud had lifted, the spectacle was too dreadful to describe. The Confederates were still there—all of them, it seemed—some almost under the muzzles of the guns. But not a man of all these brave fellows was on his feet, and so thickly were all covered with dust that they looked as if they had been re clothed in yellow” (*Sole Survivor* 30).

While Bierce delivers a pungent commentary on the dehumanization of African slaves when he describes the little boy’s riding them as horses, his broader point is that war dehumanizes all whom it touches, as the crawling wounded indicate, and those final “inarticulate . . . cries” suggest that all humanity, embodied in the figure of a small boy heedless of what has gone on around him, is rendered speechless by the horror of war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Does Bierce’s use of horror and gore (particularly the image of the soldier whose jaw has been shot off) go beyond the needs of the story? Is he indulging in gruesome detail merely for its own sake, as the directors of many schlock horror films do?
2. Look particularly at the manner in which Bierce delays the reader’s and the boy’s full awareness of the horror presented by war. In what ways is the story both about the young boy’s coming of age and about America’s coming to terms with the grim reality of the Civil War?
3. View the black-and-white film *Chickamauga* (1962) and make a comparative study of the short story and the film. What changes do the filmmakers make? How do they add or detract from the story as written? Explain your answer.
4. Compare Bierce’s use of sleep in “Chickamauga” as a means to focus attention on the experience of awakening to cultural realities with Washington Irving’s use of sleep in “Rip Van Winkle.”

“The Death of Halpin Frayser” (1891)

This story was first published in the *Wave* on December 19, 1891, and collected in *Can Such*

Things Be? (1893); the poem that appears toward the end of the story first appeared, with significant textual variations, in a “Prattle” column in the *San Francisco Examiner* (June 12, 1887). It has elicited the widest responses from critics and scholars, many of whom cannot even agree on its basic plot. One of the dominant interpretations is that of Cathy N. Davidson (*Experimental Fictions*), who maintains that the story’s plot is deliberately incoherent and is designed as a hoax to tease the reader. However, a careful reading of the story might reveal that, while indeed being a puzzle, the tale is one that Bierce expected the intelligent reader to piece together.

A man named Halpin Frayser finds himself “waking from a dreamless sleep” in a forest in central California, uttering the words *Catharine Larue* (*Short Fiction* 2.804). He falls asleep again, but this time he has a hideous dream of being attacked by the reanimated corpse of his own mother, “standing white and silent in the garments of the grave!” (2.807). At this point, background information on Frayser clarifies his relationship with his mother: He had lived in Tennessee and had had an unusually close relationship with his mother, whom he called Katy. Over her protestations he decided to go to California, settling in the town of St. Helena. The narrative shifts back to the present, where Frayser, caught in his dream, “dreamed that he was dead” (2.810).

Abruptly we are introduced to two detectives, Holker and Jaralson, who are pursuing a fugitive from justice named Branscom, who is accused of cutting his wife’s throat. They find Branscom (not his real name, as they are aware), dead on the very grave of the woman he killed. That woman is Catharine Larue. At that point, Holker remembers that the “murdered woman’s real name had been Frayser!” (2.815). Jaralson comments, “There is some rascally mystery here” (2.815).

Bierce has slyly provided all the clues to the piecing together of a complex supernatural detective story. Frayser had gone west; he was later joined by his mother, Catharine (Katy), after the death of her husband. They had married and lived in St.

Helena under the name of Larue. Later, appalled by this violation of societal norms, Frayser killed his mother, then going by the name of *Catharine Larue*. He had later suffered amnesia (in the dream Frayser notes that “it seemed to him that it was all in expiation of some crime which, though conscious of his guilt, he could not rightly remember” [2.805]) and therefore was unaware of why he had uttered the name *Catharine Larue* at the outset of the story. It is at this point that the epigraph—from an imaginary sage named Hali—comes into play. According to Hali, sometimes the dead return to life; but in these circumstances, “a lich so raised up hath no natural affection, nor remembrance thereof, but only hate” (2.804). The “lich” (reanimated corpse) of Katy Frayser/Catharine Larue rises up from the dead and kills her son/husband—not in revenge but purely out of “hate.” The phrase *natural affection* is a pun, anticipating the unnatural affection that led Frayser and his mother to live as husband and wife.

The story is rich in topographical and autobiographical features. Not long after his arrival in San Francisco, Bierce sought refuge from the city’s unhealthy fog, so harmful to his asthma, by residing in various locations in the Napa Valley; the area where Frayser has his dream was, accordingly, well known to him. Of course, Bierce had no unnatural affection for his mother; indeed, his relations with his parents and many siblings were markedly hostile, and he retained a fondness only for an older brother, Albert. But, the oppressively cloistered home life of the young Frayser, whose artistic ability (he fancied himself a poet) was scorned by the rest of his family, may have found echoes in Bierce’s early upbringing.

The long and complex dream that Frayser experiences at the beginning of the tale is a substantially altered version of a dream that Bierce himself admitted to once having, as recounted in his essay “Visions of the Night” (1887). In this essay Bierce notes: “What is a dream? A loose and lawless collocation of memories—a disorderly succession of matters once presented in the waking consciousness. It is a resurrection of the dead, pell-mell—ancient and

modern, the just and the unjust—springing from their cracked tombs, each ‘in his habit as he lived’ [*Hamlet* 3.4.135], pressing forward confusedly to have an audience of the Master of the Revel, and snatching one another’s garments as they run” (Sole Survivor 307–308). In Bierce’s own dream, he was walking through “a great forest of unfamiliar trees” (308), “obsessed by some awful spell in expiation of a forgotten crime committed, as I vaguely surmised, against the sunrise” (309). He comes upon a brook, which he sees is flowing with blood; he soon finds that this blood is emerging out of “a deep tank of white marble” (310) in a clearing. Around this tank are arranged the naked bodies of a score of men; they have something to do with his “crime,” but he cannot remember what. Bierce could not recall anything further of the dream, but he has masterfully reshaped it to reflect Frayser’s own sense of guilt at his hideous crimes of marrying, then killing, his mother.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Throughout the story, Bierce refers to Myron Bayne, an ancestor of the Fraysers who was a poet. What is the significance of the poem quoted toward the end of the story, which one of the detectives believes is a lost poem by Bayne? Is the poem actually by Bayne, or is it by Halpin Frayser?
2. How does the West function in this story? For example, would the unnatural union of mother and son have been possible in Tennessee? In what ways does Bierce use the West as a location for the free expression of psychological urges never openly acknowledged in polite eastern or southern society? After reading Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, discuss how the two tales are distinct from each other.
3. In “The Death of Halpin Frayser” Bierce uses the supernatural return from the dead of a female character to illustrate the power of deep psychological forces that conflict with conventional social codes. Compare Bierce’s use of the return of a female character with EDGAR ALLAN POE’s use of this device in either “The Fall of the House of Usher” or “Ligeia.”

“The Damned Thing” (1893)

One of the most imaginative and innovative of Bierce’s tales, “The Damned Thing” was first published in a New York society magazine, *Town Topics*, on December 7, 1893, and was gathered in *In the Midst of Life* (1898), a revised version of *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). The story opens at a coroner’s hearing in an unspecified rural setting, with a group of “farmers and woodsmen” (*Short Fiction* 2.857) as the jury. The coroner is attempting to determine how one Hugh Morgan died. Morgan’s friend, William Harker, a writer, tells a remarkable story: He had gone to visit Morgan, ostensibly for some hunting, but in fact Morgan was pursuing an entity he could only identify as “That Damned Thing!” (2.860). The nature of the entity is suggested by Harker’s description of what he witnessed: “I observed the wild oats near the place of the disturbance moving in the most inexplicable way. I can hardly describe it. It seemed as if stirred by a streak of wind, which not only bent it, but pressed it down—crushed it so that it did not rise; and this movement was slowly prolonging itself directly toward us” (2.860). It becomes evident that the two men are faced with an invisible creature. Morgan fires his gun at the entity, possibly hitting it (“I heard a loud savage cry—a scream like that of a wild animal” [2.860]); then, as Morgan suddenly flees from the spot, Harker is pushed aside by some invisible force and Morgan is torn to bits before his eyes.

As Harker tells this story to the unbelieving coroner and jury (one jurymen asks pointedly, “What asylum did this yer last witness escape from?” [2.861]), the coroner consults a diary written by Morgan. He had been attempting to identify the nature and attributes of the entity he calls “the Damned Thing,” recognizing that human beings do not necessarily have the most acute senses: Dogs, birds, and other creatures seem to utilize keener or different senses in their daily lives, and so it is conceivable that a creature that is entirely invisible to human eyes could exist. Morgan concludes: “The human eye is an imperfect instrument; its range is but a few octaves of the real ‘chromatic scale.’ I

am not mad; there are colors that we cannot see. And, God help me! the Damned Thing is of such a color!" (2.863).

It is difficult in small compass to convey the intellectual richness of this story. Whereas many of Bierce's other tales of supernatural horror involve relatively conventional figures from myth and legend (the ghost in "Beyond the Wall," the reanimated corpse in "The Death of Halpin Frayser," the doppelganger in "One of Twins"), the creature in "The Damned Thing" is highly original. Bierce himself, however, was aware of a celebrated predecessor in the use of an invisible monster: Fitz-James O'Brien's story "What Was It?" (*Harper's Magazine*, March 1859). In a "Prattle" column (*San Francisco Examiner*, May 27, 1894), Bierce defended himself against accusations that he had borrowed the central conception from O'Brien's story, noting the significant differences between the two: "In O'Brien's story a man is attacked by, and overcomes, a supernatural and impossible being, invisible because transparent; in mine a man is attacked and killed by a wild animal that cannot be seen because, although opaque, like other animals, it is of an invisible color" (*Sole Survivor* 254). Bierce emphasizes the theoretical possibility of such an entity by remarking provocatively in the story, "We so rely upon the orderly operation of familiar natural laws that any seeming suspension of them is noted as a menace to our safety, a warning of unthinkable calamity" (2.860). This suggests that what we assume to be "natural laws" are merely a product of our current state of knowledge; future advances in science might reveal "natural laws" of whose existence and operation we are unaware.

"The Damned Thing" is noteworthy in its mixture of humor, both genial and ferociously cynical, and horror. Harker and the coroner engage in amusing banter at one point: Harker says, "I sometimes write stories," and the coroner replies, "I sometimes read them." Harker: "Thank you." Coroner: "Stories in general—not yours" (2.859). Much more pungently, Bierce has devised fiendish subtitles for two of the four sections of the story: "One Does Not Eat What Is on the Table," referring to Morgan's corpse laid out on a table, and

"A Man, Though Naked, May Be in Rags," referring to Morgan's mutilated body after the Damned Thing has killed him. While in some senses fostering the caricature of Bierce as a cheerless misanthrope, humor of this sort both underscores the grisly events of the story and embodies Bierce's awareness of death as the final indignity suffered by a hapless human race. He defined the word *dead* in *The Devil's Dictionary* with a piquant quatrain: "Done with the work of breathing; done / With all the world; the mad race run / Through to the end; the golden goal / Attained and found to be a hole!" (*Unabridged Devil's Dictionary* 49).

The story has had a wide influence on subsequent supernatural literature. There is little question that Guy de Maupassant's "The Horla" (1886), Algernon Blackwood's "The Wendigo" (1907), and H. P. Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space" (1927) and "The Dunwich Horror" (1928) all drew upon Bierce's tale in their depiction of invisible entities. "The Colour out of Space" in particular makes note of the fact that the mysterious creatures found in a meteorite are of an indefinable color ("The colour . . . was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all" [*Dunwich Horror* 59]), echoing the last line of Bierce's story.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the story closely and determine whether it is possible to ascertain the precise physical or other qualities of the invisible monster in the story. Does Bierce provide enough clues for the reader to have an approximate idea of the nature of the entity? In what ways do the reader's efforts to see the thing described contribute to the story?
2. Look closely at those points in the story where Bierce interjects humor. Explain how Bierce's use of humor creates certain effects that contribute to the story. Does his use of humor diminish the threat posed by the mysterious entity and the events surrounding it, or does it provide momentary comic relief that ultimately sustains interest in the possibility of a supernatural presence? Explain your answer.

- McWilliams, Carey. *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*. New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1929.
- Morris, Roy, Jr. *Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company*. New York: Crown, 1995.
- Owens, David M. "Bierce and Biography: The Location of Owl Creek Bridge." *American Literary Realism* 26 (1994): 82–89.
- . *The Devil's Topographer: Ambrose Bierce and the American War Story*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006.
- Schaefer, Michael W. *Just What War Is: The Civil War Writings of De Forest and Bierce*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997.
- Stallman, R. W., and Lilliam Gilkes, eds. *Stephen Crane: Letters*. New York: New York University Press, 1960.
- Wilson, Edmund. "Ambrose Bierce on the Owl Creek Bridge." In *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.

S. T. Joshi



CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT

(1858–1932)

The object of my writings would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites. . . .

(*Journals*)

In 1880, at the age of 22, Charles Waddell Chesnutt declared in his journal that he was ready to lead a crusade that would effect a radical change in America:

The object of my writings would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people, and I would be the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. Not a fierce indiscriminate onset, not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect, but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner. (*Journals* 139–140)

Chesnutt's commitment is clear: His writings will nurture a "desired state of feeling" that will allow whites to accept African Americans as equals (*Journals* 140). Chesnutt believed that in some instances indirection would be the best strategy, and many of his short stories use irony and humor to address politically sensitive racial issues. Chesnutt was also, however, willing to speak directly, and his novels, essays, and speeches vigorously denounce prejudice

and injustice. During his life Chesnutt wrote and spoke about a wide range of topics, but his passions were most often directed toward the crusade he embraced at 22—a moral revolution in the nation's understanding of race.

Chesnutt knew from his own family history that the claim that deep differences, even biological differences, divided blacks from whites was a lie. Both of Chesnutt's grandfathers were white, and both of his grandmothers were of mixed race. Chesnutt's father was the child of Anna M. Chesnutt and the man for whom she kept house, Waddell Cade, a prosperous white farmer, slave owner, and tobacco inspector. His mother was the child of Chloe Sampson and the white slaveholder Henry E. Sampson.

Chesnutt's parents grew up in the free black community of Fayetteville, North Carolina. They may have met or known of each other in Fayetteville, but in family lore they first met in 1856 when they were both leaving Fayetteville. Although free blacks in North Carolina did not have basic civil rights (they could not vote or hold political office), they played important roles as artisans, business owners, and laborers in local economies. By the 1850s, however, free blacks were increasingly subject to harassment by slavery supporters who were angered by abolitionists' efforts to end slavery. Some states made it illegal to emancipate slaves, work and economic opportunities began to disappear as free

blacks were suspected of helping fugitive slaves, and free blacks grew to fear the real possibility of being mistakenly arrested as escaped slaves. As a result, free blacks began leaving the South, and in 1856 Chesnutt's parents met on a wagon headed north. Chesnutt's father planned to live with an uncle in Indiana who was passing for white, and his mother was bound for Cleveland, Ohio. But, within a year of parting ways on the trip north, Chesnutt's parents were reunited and married. They moved in with Chesnutt's maternal grandmother, settling in a German neighborhood in Cleveland. Chesnutt was born the following year, June 30, 1858.

Chesnutt and his parents stayed in Ohio through the Civil War, living briefly in Oberlin, where Chesnutt's father worked in a shop making wheels. In Cleveland, Chesnutt's father worked for the Union army during the war as a teamster driving supply wagons. After the war the family returned to Fayetteville. Chesnutt's mother opposed the move, but her husband had an opportunity to open a grocery store in the center of town with the help of his father, who worked throughout his life to support the five illegitimate children he had by Ann Chesnutt, as well as the legal children he had by his wife. The store was successful for several years, and Chesnutt's father was active in public affairs. He served for two years as a county justice of the peace, and he joined with six other African-American men to secure federal funds from the Freedmen's Bureau in order to purchase land and establish a school, the Howard School, for black children.

Chesnutt started at Howard when he was nine, and at 14, when the family moved to a farm outside Fayetteville, he was expected to leave school and work on the farm full-time. But, the principal at Howard invited Chesnutt to stay on as a pupil-teacher, allowing him to earn money and continue his studies. Over the next several years, Chesnutt taught at a variety of schools in the region, including one in Charlotte. At 19 he became an assistant principal at the State Colored School in Fayetteville, a school for training African-American schoolteachers. The next year he married

Susan W. Perry, and when he was 22 his first child, Ethel, was born.

Throughout these years, Chesnutt studied on his own. He spent his modest income on books, often novels, and he became friends with a white bookstore owner in Fayetteville, who welcomed this avid reader as a patron and regular visitor. Chesnutt held himself to a strict schedule of studies, including Latin, German, algebra, and history. He also became sufficiently proficient on the piano and organ to serve as a church organist and to give lessons. Not surprisingly, as a successful and much admired citizen, Chesnutt was also encouraged to run for office, but he preferred to focus on education—his and others'. He may also have worried that working in the political arena would cause repercussions, including problems for black schools in the region. By 1880 Chesnutt could see that the modest gains achieved by African Americans during Reconstruction were rapidly disappearing. As the federal government withdrew its support and protection and as Southern states began adopting Jim Crow laws that made it difficult for blacks to vote, hold office, or succeed economically, Chesnutt may have concluded that holding political office would not provide much opportunity for making the social changes he envisioned.

By the time he was 23, Chesnutt was the principal of the State Colored Normal School and weary of racial prejudice. In his journal he notes:

I get more and more tired of the South. I sometimes hesitate about deciding to go, because I am engaged in good work, and been doing, I fondly hope, some little good. But many reasons urge me the other way; and I think I could serve my race better in some more congenial occupation. And I shudder to think of exposing my children to the social and intellectual proscription to which I have been victim. (172)

Three years before this entry, Chesnutt visited Washington, D.C., to look for a job, and a year after this entry, at the age of 25, he found work in

New York City with the Dow, Jones and Company news agency and the *New York Mail and Express*. Six months later, concern for his family, whom he had left in Fayetteville, led him to move to Cleveland and to arrange for his wife, Susan, and their three children, Ethel, Helen, and Edwin, to join him there. Here Chesnutt found work as stenographer in the law department of a railroad company, where he was also able to study law with a judge working in the same department. Within a few years Chesnutt passed the Ohio bar exam with the highest score in his group.

Throughout these years, Chesnutt was writing. At 14 and at 16 he published short pieces in the Fayetteville newspaper, at 28 he sold a story to a newspaper syndicate, and at 29 he sold a story to the *Atlantic Monthly*. "The Goophered Grapevine" was the first story by an African American to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*, one of the most prestigious literary magazines in the nation, and over the next 12 years Chesnutt published five more stories in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Chesnutt also placed stories in other magazines and wrote political essays for such acclaimed newspapers as the *New York Independent* and the *Boston Evening Transcript*.

Chesnutt's first successful stories were dialect stories in which a former slave tells colorful tales of southern folk traditions, including conjuring. Reviewers were impressed with Chesnutt's use of dialect, and the reviewer for the Washington, D.C., *Times* described Uncle Julius McAdoo as a "shrewd, wily, picturesque, ingratiating" storyteller, a "distinct addition to American literature" (Browner n.p.). But, the dialect stories are not only quaint stories of bygone days. Uncle Julius is a trickster, though a particular kind of trickster. Typically the trickster uses humor, indirection, disguise, and language to disrupt the status quo. In African-American literature, the trickster challenges racism through wily parody and survives by his wits. As Annette White-Parks notes, tricksterism can be "a survival strategy through which oppressed groups or individuals may attain a certain degree of personal and political autonomy within the restrictions of an oppressive dominant system" (3). Uncle Julius's trick is storytelling, and he uses his stories

to resist the economic and cultural domination of the white northerner, John, who buys the vineyard where he has been living. And although Uncle Julius rarely succeeds in stopping John's entrepreneurial plans for improvements, he does survive and craft at least a modest place for himself in the new South.

Uncle Julius's stories challenge postwar nostalgia for a mythic plantation life and for the "happy laughin' darkey" (title of a popular song in the 1880s). His stories of slave times include entertaining accounts of conjuring, but they also testify to the cruelty of a labor system that used human bondage to ensure the efficient and cheap production of cotton (as well as tobacco, rice, and indigo), the cornerstone of southern economic prosperity and a significant contributor to national economic growth between 1830 and 1860. The Uncle Julius tales also bear witness to the desperate measures slaves took to maintain their lives, their dignity, and the lives of their loved ones. Uncle Julius may seem to be a stereotypical "darkey" who is happy to spend his days sitting on a log eating grapes, but his stories reveal the pain, horrors, losses, and cruelty of slavery, and they make it clear that this past must not be forgotten or rewritten into nostalgic tales of plantation life.

At the same time that Chesnutt was writing dialect stories about the nation's past, he was turning his attention to contemporary race issues. In novels, color line stories, and essays, Chesnutt insists that racial purity is a myth and that the real difference between whites and blacks is a cruel and sometimes crippling difference in opportunities. "To be white meant opportunity," the narrator notes in *Mandy Oxendine* (a novel never published in Chesnutt's lifetime). By contrast, being black, even in the North, meant "some scorn and some isolation." *The House behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt's first published novel, also considers the better opportunities available to a light-skinned African American who decides to pass as white. In this novel Chesnutt makes it clear that there are no innate racial markers and that it simply is not true that African heritage will always make itself known. But, he also acknowledges the emotional consequences of passing, including the

pain of denying one's past and family. Chesnutt never condemns those who pass. Rather, he writes about characters who cannot be easily categorized visually as black or white in order to show that racial identity and the idea that everyone is either black or white are absurd fictions, even as these were the fictions that propped up Jim Crow laws and created a society that FREDERICK DOUGLASS decried in 1886 as not much better than slavery: "Though no longer bought and sold in the market we are still a proscribed, oppressed and maltreated race at nearly all points" (Levine 2).

In Chesnutt's second published novel, which lost him the support of many of his white colleagues in the elite literary world, Chesnutt challenges whites to accept their relations—be they familial or economic—with those who are black. *The Marrow of Tradition* is based on the antiblack Wilmington riots of 1898. Before the riot African Americans worked closely with whites and played important roles in the city: Three African Americans were aldermen; many served as lawyers, judges, and school committee members; and half the police force was black. After the riots, at least 10 (and perhaps hundreds) of African Americans were dead, and those who were able (including many of the professionals) left the city. Chesnutt was despondent when he heard news of the riots, and within two years he had drafted a novel that explores the ties that bind whites to blacks. The novel focuses on two families—one white and one black—who are linked, despite the white family's denials, through kinship, violence, and need. The women are half sisters, sharing the same white father; the white man instigates the riot that kills the black family's son; and the black man is the only doctor who can perform emergency surgery on the white family's son. Acknowledging the bonds—past and present, violent and healing—that cross the color line was essential for the nation's future, according to Chesnutt.

Although Chesnutt's fiction writing slowed after the flurry of activity between 1887, when his first story appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and 1905, when his third novel was published, he continued to write and to speak, often about racial

issues, until his death at 74 in 1932. He supported women's right to vote, protested laws prohibiting interracial marriage, spoke out against the treatment of black soldiers in training camps during World War I, and protested segregation in labor unions and in Harvard's dormitories and dining halls. Chesnutt grew up in the South when racial equality seemed a possibility, and he moved north when Reconstruction ended and white supremacists began shaping a political world that would deny African Americans the vote and other basic civil rights. In focusing on the color line, Chesnutt exposed the myth of racial identity and challenged white supremacy in ways we are only now beginning to appreciate as scholars focus on whiteness and the history of how it has been used to include and exclude people. Chesnutt was always aware of the complexity of his own racial status. Six of eight of his great-grandparents were white, and he could easily have called himself white, though he did not. At 22 he wrote in his journal that he was "neither fish, flesh, nor fowl—neither 'nigger', poor white, nor 'bucknah'" (*Journals* 157). This personal sense of defying traditional racial categories, plus years of thinking about the nation's racial obsessions, may have been why, as one critic has noted, "Chesnutt viewed both black and white identities as contingent historical constructs" (Wilson 17).

"The Goophered Grapevine" (1887)

"The Goophered Grapevine" was Chesnutt's first conjure tale, and it established the formula that Chesnutt followed in many subsequent tales, what one critic describes as the "the plot of cultural tourism" (Brodhead 2). John and his wife are white Northerners who go south after the Civil War, in part because her health is delicate and in part because he is an opportunist who sees business possibilities in the ravaged economy of the South. In fact, as he proudly notes, his success is often mentioned "by the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries" (17). Annie has no interest in economic opportuni-

ties, but she is interested in the cultural traditions, and her responsiveness bespeaks a sensitivity to the local color of the region, including its past, that her business-minded husband lacks. Uncle Julius is a former slave who serves as a kind of local tour guide as he regales John and Annie with tales that he hopes will slow their entrepreneurial efforts so he can go on doing what he has done for years—living in a small cabin on land that John wants to buy and from which Uncle Julius has “derived a respectable revenue” (17). By the end of this story, the first of several featuring Uncle Julius, John will have bought the land and turned Uncle Julius from a self-sustaining squatter to a coachman.

As scholars have noted, the plot of cultural tourism was particularly common in post-Civil War local color fiction, often called plantation fiction, that romanticized the South before the war. Thomas Nelson Page, for example, published a collection of stories entitled *In Ole Virginia* that feature tales told in dialect by a former slave who misses “dem good ole times.” Chesnutt’s dialect stories are similar to Page’s, and Chesnutt seems to be working directly within the tradition of plantation fiction. But, this is the craft of the trickster—his challenge to the status quo is masked by seeming conformity. And so, although “The Goophered Grapevine” and Chesnutt’s other dialect stories seem to offer no resistance to the conventions of plantation fiction, Chesnutt makes this form carry messages other than those it usually carried, messages “obliquely conveyed behind an elaborate show of conformity” (Brodhead 6).

Elaborate shows of conformity are the trademark of the trickster in the African-American tradition who protects himself by playing to racist assumptions. In William Wells Brown’s novel *Clotel: Or the President’s Daughter* (1853), for example, two slaves escape by posing as a master and slave, an image that would never arouse suspicion. Uncle Julius similarly conforms to racist images of Southern blacks after the war. John and Annie come upon this “venerable-looking colored man” sitting upon a log and “smacking his lips with great gusto” as he eats a pile of grapes (8). Lazy, unconcerned with anything other than the pleasure of eating

and storytelling, Julius seems to be appropriately renamed by John as *Uncle Julius*. He is, it would seem, as gentle as the kindly Uncle Tom of HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and as likely to tell an amusing story of the past as Uncle Remus in JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS’S stories (Woham 11). But, Uncle Julius uses his storytelling to resist John’s business plans, and, perhaps more important, to dupe the unsuspecting white reader into listening to tales that are more subversive than is initially apparent.

At one level “The Goophered Grapevine” is simply an entertaining tale of conjuring. Mars Dugal (Master Douglas) is a plantation owner who turns to the local conjure woman when he wants to stop the pillaging of his grapes by slaves who “did n’ mine goin’ fi’ er ten mile in a night, w’en dey wuz sump’n good ter eat at de yuther een” (10). The master pays her to put a spell on the grapes, a strategy that not only increases the yield of his vineyard but also allows him to profit by selling every spring and buying back every winter a slave who, because of still more conjuring, grows old each winter and young each spring. But, Mars Dugal’s greed is his undoing when he follows the advice of a Yankee trickster who claims to know about grapes. In return for his agricultural advice, the Yankee is welcome at Mars Dugal’s table for a week and invited to a nightly game of cards, which the Yankee always wins.

The tale is a version of Aesop’s fable of the goose that laid the golden egg in that Mars Dugal ultimately destroys his profitable goose—the vineyard—because he thinks he can force the vines to produce more grapes. But, Chesnutt sets this traditional tale on a Southern plantation, and the lessons are about slavery as well as greed. In part, the eagerness of the slaves for the grapes plays to the stereotypes of food-loving “darkeys,” but their willingness to walk miles also testifies to a life barren of pleasures, and the long walk to get food or to be with a loved one was a fact of slavery recounted in many slave narratives. Significantly, local slaves fail to tell Henry not to eat the grapes because they are worried about a runaway slave who “tuk ter de swamp” and is being chased

by “ole Mars Dugal’ en some er de yuther nabor w’ite folks” with “dere guns en dere dogs” (11). This is a very different portrait of slavery than that offered in plantation fiction, in which slaves are happy and never have to walk far for food or flee from dogs and guns. In this portrait of plantation life, slavery is not a kindly institution that cares for those who work the land but rather a greedy, destructive practice that in its eagerness for profits kills not one golden goose, but two—the vineyard and the slave. The master’s greed kills the vines, and Henry, through whom the master was able to profit doubly—by his labor and by selling him in the slave market. Notably Chesnutt does not make Henry’s death tragic. But, his death is a powerful symbol of the exploitation of all slaves, who, like Henry, were profitable both because they worked the land and because they might be bought and sold on the auction block.

The tale offers a critique of contemporary economic arrangements as well as a critique of slavery. As a Northerner who is successful in the South, John is the quintessential carpetbagger who combined hopes for quick economic gains with a commitment to helping the South modernize. Middle-class whites moved south, bought large tracts of land, and believed that their Yankee energy would provide the South with the regeneration they believed it desperately needed. John’s views of the land reflect these assumptions. He laments the “shiftless cultivation” that allowed the vineyard to lapse into “utter neglect,” and at the end of the story he believes that the wages he pays Julius as a coachman are “more than an equivalent for anything he lost by the sale of the vineyard” (6, 18). It is a smug conclusion, and one that might be endorsed by some readers. More discerning readers in 1887, however, might have understood the story as a critique of the federal government’s retreat from laws that protected the civil and economic rights of African Americans in favor of laws that promoted the economic ambitions of white capitalists.

It is worth noting that Uncle Julius’s account of Henry is based on an old folktale in which an old slave oils his head with vine sap and becomes virile and especially attractive to women. Chesnutt side-

steps the sexual overtones of the traditional tale, preferring instead to write a tale that combines politics, tragedy, and comedy. One critic has suggested that the politics of the tale caution against “the misguided and ultimately destructive effort to profit through the disfranchisement of blacks” and that the emotional effect of the tale is similar to that of the blues, in which the suffering of the past is turned into a lyrical dialect tale sung by Uncle Julius (Wonham 17).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Identify details about slavery that Uncle Julius includes in his tale of conjuring and decide whether these details conform to or challenge nostalgic myths about the good ole days on the plantation.
2. Dialect can be difficult to read, and there may be words or passages you cannot decipher. Work in groups to “translate” any difficult words or passages into standard English, and discuss why Chesnutt was committed to using untraditional spellings to capture Uncle Julius’s speech.
3. Contrast the language, attitudes, and values of John with those of Uncle Julius.

“What Is a White Man?” (1889)

“What Is a White Man?” first appeared in 1889 in the New York *Independent* and was Chesnutt’s first essay to be published in a major newspaper. Before this he had delivered a handful of speeches and published a couple of short pieces. In North Carolina he delivered three speeches to the Normal Literary Society. The first speech summarized etiquette rules, including appropriate dress, table manners, and the way to conduct a proper conversation. The second outlined what might be gained by joining a literary society—recreation, practical business knowledge, and speaking and debating skills. The third celebrated the self-made man, offering Frederick Douglass and Horace Greeley as examples. All three of these speeches were delivered to African-American groups, and they reveal Chesnutt’s sense that success

for African Americans required what he called in another speech character education. A fourth speech that Chesnutt delivered in Fayetteville dared to raise political issues and to note that African Americans “suffered many unjust discriminations” (Chesnutt, *Essays* 29). But, the primary concern is not with those injustices but with what African Americans can do to win the respect of whites and thus reduce the daily humiliations of racial prejudice. He calls for African Americans to pursue book learning: “We must know how to read and understand the laws.” And, he continues, “We must also be educated in character.” This means, according to Chesnutt, that the “colored man” must “learn to respect himself,” which includes being punctual, wearing clean clothes, working hard, and living economically (30).

Chesnutt remained committed throughout his life to the importance of self-respect and manners, as well as to formal education. But, within a few years Chesnutt's speeches and essays turned from self-improvement to politics. In an unpublished essay, “An Inside View of the Negro Question,” Chesnutt set himself the task of answering a question that had been posed in a popular magazine: “Is the Negro contented and prospering?” (*Essays* 57). His answer is a resounding no. Chesnutt observes that rights are “grudgingly conceded, and often require the aid of special legislation to enforce them” (30). He sees “a powerful faction” trying to perpetuate a “system of caste” that is destructive of the social fabric. In this essay Chesnutt addresses whites directly, making it very clear in an itemized list that African Americans want “an equal share in all public benefits, and an equal right to share in the exercise of every public function” (59) and that they want equality now. Chesnutt explains that African Americans do not want admission to private white society, but he also scoffs at the claim that by nature there is a deep antipathy among whites toward any intimate contact with African Americans. He points out that intimacy across the color line was “freely condoned” (59) during slavery, and it is only now that white supremacists invoke the laws of nature. Scathingly, Chesnutt notes that if there is a natural disgust among whites for contact

with African Americans, then “there is surely no ground for this fear that equal rights for the Negro means the pollution of the pure Caucasian stream which courses through the veins of Southern white people” (59).

Chesnutt takes up this same issue in “What Is a White Man?” He begins by suggesting that if the “all-pervading, all-conquering Anglo-Saxon race” must have “exclusive control and direction of the government,” then the nation must know who is a member of this innately superior race and who is not (*Essays* 68). Right away Chesnutt notes that no one really believes that political power should be restricted only to Anglo-Saxons. At the end of the 19th century, Celts, Gauls, Slavs, and Jews were all allowed to vote and hold office, but that had not always been true. The Irish were often depicted as nonwhites before the Civil War and denied basic civil rights on the basis of their ethnicity. Thus, early in the essay Chesnutt challenges whiteness as a stable category by reminding his readers that the definition of whiteness has been adjusted more than once. With this coy beginning, Chesnutt proceeds to review current definitions of racial identity as articulated in the statutes of several states. He finds some general patterns: In most states if one is “fifteenth-sixteenth white,” then one is white, but if one is only three-fourths white, one is black.

Chesnutt offers this survey of state laws with a straight face, but his essay exposes the farce of attempts to define race by fractions. In Ohio, he observes, the law used to define one as white if one had a preponderance of white blood, but in 1887, the state went even further and repealed all laws that defined race. He notes that in South Carolina, there is a fractional definition, but there is also license to decide the contested race of an individual by reference to appearance, reputation, and social relations. A few years later, in *The House behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt quotes directly the South Carolina law when a young mulatto boy insists to a lawyer that he is white, holding out his arm as evidence. The lawyer tries to explain the one drop law to the boy, “One drop of black blood makes the whole man black,” but the boy retorts, “Why shouldn't it be the other way, if the white blood is

so much superior?” The lawyer’s answer, “Because it is more convenient as it is—and more profitable,” acknowledges that racial categories are constructs that have been used to justify slavery. The lawyer further acknowledges that even within the United States all are not in agreement about the color line, and he proceeds to explain the South Carolina law, under which the boy “need not be black” (379–380).

Before the Civil War, the color line regulated one’s civil status, as the lawyer in *The House behind the Cedars* explains to the boy: If you are black, you “cannot travel without your papers; you cannot secure accommodations at an inn; you could not vote, if you were of age; you cannot be out after nine o’clock without a permit. If a white man struck you, you could not return the blow, and you could not testify against him in a court of justice” (379). But, since the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the “black laws” primarily regulate social arrangements—marriage, housing, and education. The marriage laws particularly trouble Chesnutt in “What Is a White Man?” because by barring interracial marriage they lead many to believe that light-skinned African Americans must be the “offspring of a union not sanctioned by law” (*Essays* 73). Perhaps because Chesnutt was light skinned and the child of legally married mixed-race parents, he is eager to explain that the “presumption of illegitimacy” is no longer appropriate since so many African Americans are of mixed blood and there are now many children of legally married light-skinned African Americans (*Essays* 73).

Chesnutt went on to write more than 77 speeches and essays, and throughout his life he fought color line laws. In 1908 he wrote an essay about a variety of Supreme Court decisions that failed to overturn segregation laws, including a Kentucky statute that banned interracial education, and in 1913 he helped persuade the Cleveland mayor to oppose a bill prohibiting interracial marriage in Ohio.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Remembering that Chesnutt studied law and passed the Ohio bar exam with the highest score in his group, describe Chesnutt’s attitude toward the various state laws he reviews and toward laws in general. Does he seem hopeful that the federal laws and the Supreme Court will provide for equality for all?
2. Create a list that paraphrases the state laws on race that Chesnutt discusses, and write a summary of how they differ from each other.
3. This is Chesnutt’s first overtly political essay and his first essay to appear in a newspaper read primarily by whites. Describe his tone, and identify distinct moments when you hear a shift in tone. Pay attention to the challenges he faced in writing about this topic for a white audience, and bear in mind that his own racial identity was probably not known to most readers of this article.

“The Wife of His Youth” (1897)

“The Wife of His Youth” was the fourth story Chesnutt published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and the first that did not feature Uncle Julius. The first three *Atlantic Monthly* stories appeared between 1887 and 1889; “The Wife of His Youth” appeared eight years later, in 1897. During these years Chesnutt pushed forward in several directions. He published his first essay, “What Is a White Man?” in which he provides a hard-hitting survey of state laws that seek to define who is white and thus who is exempt from the black codes, laws that restricted the civil rights of African Americans. He also published “The Sheriff’s Children.” In an 1889 letter Chesnutt admitted it was another “southern story,” but went on to note, “It is not in dialect,” and that it deals with “a tragic incident, not of slavery exactly, but showing the fruits of slavery” (“*To Be an Author*” 44). Both “The Sheriff’s Children” and “What Is a White Man?” appeared in the *Independent*, a newspaper committed to addressing tough political issues. Chesnutt had been pleased with the success of the Uncle Julius tales, and he would write three more dialect stories, but he also wondered whether he had “used up the old Negro who serves as a mouthpiece” (“*To Be an Author*” 44). In fact, he felt that in his latest Uncle Julius tale, he

had moved in a direction that interested him, “out of the realm of superstition and into the region of feeling and passion” (“*To Be an Author*” 44).

Chesnutt spent several of these years working on a short story that would eventually become his first published novel. “Rena Walden” was Chesnutt’s longest and most ambitious story to date, and, as did “The Sheriff’s Children,” it offered a dark portrait of the South after the Civil War. Both stories provide realistic and disturbing representations of contemporary racial issues, in contrast to the dialect tales, which make only indirect critiques of contemporary affairs and the slave past through fantastic tales of conjuring. In “Po Sandy,” for example, a slave who has been turned into a tree in an effort to stay close to his wife is cut down and turned into lumber. This is a moving account, but the tale does not provide the visceral narrative of racial violence that Chesnutt uses in “The Sheriff’s Children,” which features a mob eager to lynch a mulatto and a sheriff who learns that the mulatto is the illegitimate son he sold years ago.

In “Rena Walden” Chesnutt’s exploration of mixed-race histories is sharp and unsparingly critical of white supremacy. Chesnutt offered “Rena Walden” to the *Atlantic Monthly*, but the magazine rejected it. One editor found the writing to be excellent but complained of “a lack of humor in the author, or a brutality in the characters, lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous imaginative life in the people, lack of outlook—I don’t know what—what makes them, as here depicted, uninteresting” (Andrews 27). Another editor recommended to Chesnutt that he should “yield all the ground you honestly can to the possible prejudices of your reader” (Andrews 25). Chesnutt wrote a scathing response, suggesting that such criticism only revealed that too many people believed that mixed-race people were unnatural and of little human interest. Chesnutt continued to work on “Rena Walden” and included a revised version of that story, as well as “The Sheriff’s Children” and his conjure tales, when he asked the editors at Houghton Mifflin whether they would want to publish a collection of his stories. His proposal was rejected, and over the next six years, Chesnutt published only

one story—an Uncle Julius tale—and one essay. These years were a time of reflection, increased political activity, and travel. Chesnutt attended the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, he visited Paris, and he toured England. He also continued to write. He drafted a novel about two southern mulattoes, one who chooses to pass and the other who attends a “negro college,” and he continued to work on “Rena Walden.”

“The Wife of His Youth” was Chesnutt’s first publication after a four-year dry spell, and it was the first story the *Atlantic Monthly* accepted that was not a dialect tale. It was also the first time Chesnutt published a story about the North. The story depends on a familiar plot in which a man who believes he is superior to others is challenged to set aside his social ambitions. As William Andrews notes, Mr. Ryder rises to the stature he claims for himself only when he “sacrifices a narrow notion of public success for a more private responsibility” (Andrews 115). As does WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* or Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, “The Wife of His Youth” critiques class aspirations and exposes the snobbish exclusivity of those who want to distance themselves from others.

“The Wife of His Youth” provides a new version of this familiar tale, however, by linking questions about exclusivity to anxieties about color and race. In *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt boldly suggests that these anxieties plague whites as much as or even more than mulattoes, but in “The Wife of His Youth” he limits his exploration to color prejudice within the African-American community. In developing this theme Chesnutt draws on his own experiences in the North. After settling in Cleveland, Chesnutt and his family joined the Cleveland Social Circle, an elite cultural club that Chesnutt’s daughter described as “a very exclusive organization” of “young colored people who wanted to promote social intercourse and cultural activities among the better-educated people of color” (Helen Chesnutt 61). Chesnutt’s story begins by satirizing such societies, noting that although the society had a “longer and more pretentious name,” it had become known as the “Blue Vein Society”

because it seemed to admit only those who were white enough to show blue veins (*Stories, Novel, and Essays* 101).

The story's satire, however, is more gentle than biting. Mr. Ryder may have adopted the Blue Vein Society's fondness for whiteness, and he is a bit absurd when he must decide whether Tennyson's poem "A Dream of Fair Women" will be appropriate for a woman who has a "rather ruddy complexion" (105). But, in this scene, what is more important than his naiveté is the fact that Mr. Ryder has the capacity to respond both to Tennyson's poetry and to the dialect of his youth. In part, the story is about language and the possibility that southern U.S. black dialect and Victorian poetry may be equally powerful, and equally powerful to an African American. Liza Jane appears just when Mr. Ryder has jettisoned the Tennyson lyrics about "sweet pale Margaret" in favor of a description of Queen Guinevere, which focuses only on love and passion and makes no mention of pale skin. Later, after hearing Liza Jane tell of her search for her husband, Mr. Ryder retells her story in "the same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips" (110).

The story gives all the members of the Blue Vein Society the same sympathetic treatment as it gives Mr. Ryder. Despite their snobbery, they respond to Mr. Ryder's story and to the dialect of the past with a "responsive thrill" (110) that echoes Mr. Ryder's appreciative thrill at the moment he reads Tennyson and hears the gate latch open. At both of these moments, language and sounds move the past into the present. As Uncle Julius does, Mr. Ryder tells a tale of the past, and his listeners feel that shadow of the past still hanging over them. But, they do not completely reject it, not when they hear a story told in dulcet tones. In acknowledging that past, Mr. Ryder and the Blue Veins recover a fuller sense of themselves. As Andrews suggests, in this story and in other color line stories, Chesnutt calls for "a bond of unity based on human sympathy between the small Afro-American group which had risen in American society and the large mass which had hardly been touched by new opportunities since emancipation" (116).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Study the dialect in the story carefully, and compare it with the poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson that is quoted in the story and with the narrator's style. What emotions does each convey? Is each one particularly well suited for evoking a certain mood, image, or scene? Are there stereotypes and judgments associated with the kind of person who might use such language? Does Chesnutt endorse or challenge those stereotypes about each style of language?
2. Some critics have complained that this story is too much like a predictable Sunday school sermon because it is obvious that Mr. Ryder will do the right thing. Do you agree or disagree?
3. This is a story that contrasts the North and the South. Discuss which values, habits, and ideas seem to be associated with the North and which with the South. Does the story prefer the traditions of either place?

"The Passing of Grandison" (1899)

"The Passing of Grandison" was one of 20 stories Chesnutt handed Walter Hines Page, an editor at the *Atlantic Monthly* and at Houghton Mifflin in 1897, when Page asked for more stories along the lines of those the *Atlantic* had already published. Years later Chesnutt gave some credit to Houghton Mifflin for his success. In a 1931 essay Chesnutt noted that when he "first broke into print seriously, no American colored writer had ever secured critical recognition except Paul Laurence Dunbar, who had won his laurels as a poet" (*Essays* 544). Houghton Mifflin, he noted, was unique among publishing houses at the time in its openness to African-American writers and issues. In addition to Page, the firm included the son of the ardent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Ultimately, Houghton Mifflin published four works by Chesnutt. The first, *The Conjure Woman*, was published in March 1899, and in November of the same year Houghton Mifflin published *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*.

“The Passing of Grandison,” as William Andrews notes, is “the only story in *The Wife of His Youth* to deal with slavery, and in some ways it is closer thematically to the Uncle Julius tales in *The Conjure Woman*” than to the color line stories in the later collection (93). The story satirizes several stereotypes. The white characters are parodies of southern landowners: The self-made father indulges the son, who has been raised to expect the affluence that his father had to work for, while the southern belle refuses to marry until the young man does some heroic and noble deed. The story also parodies the claim made in some southern fiction at the end of the 19th century that sought to represent southern plantation life as akin to the old Arthurian world of heroic knights, genteel damsels, and devoted servants. Colonel Owen believes his slaves are happy, while his son decides that freeing a slave would be just the noble deed necessary to persuade Charity Lomax that he is worthy of her hand in marriage. In this story Chesnutt does not use subtle references to slavery’s cruelties to expose the absurdity of romanticized stories of the plantation, as he does in the Uncle Julius tales. Rather, Chesnutt suggests that nostalgia for plantation life requires a gullibility as absurd as Dick Owen’s and his father’s. Dick Owen and his father never doubt the over-the-top professions of loyalty offered by Grandison, and they cannot imagine Grandison is capable of wanting or planning to escape. In other words, “The Passing of Grandison” coyly suggests that those who would believe or enjoy romantic images of plantation life are as naive and self-deceiving as the colonel and his son.

Images not much different from the faithful Grandison were common at the end of the 19th century. Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and others imagined for a nation that was eager for reconciliation an antebellum past when slaves were happy and masters were kind. This myth suggested that there was no need for Reconstruction, that there was no need for reparations to former slaves, and that there would be no future race enmity. In one short story by Page, a former slave reminisces:

Dem wuz good ole times, marster—’bes Sam ever see! Dey wuz in fac’! Niggers didn’ hed nothin’ ’t all to do—je’hed to ‘ten’ to de feedin’ an’ clean’ de hosses, an’ doin’ what de master tell em’ to do; an’ when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont ’em out de house, an’ de same doctor came to see ’em whar ‘ten’ to de white folks when dey was po’ly. Dyar warn’ no trouble nor nothing. (10)

Grandison similarly praises the advantages of slavery, but Grandison’s devotion to his master and to the institution of slavery is all performance. It is, of course, an ironic performance, a performance that makes a mockery of the myth of the loyal slave. If runaway slaves traveled at night with their eyes on the North Star, Grandison must do the reverse, return to the South, with his back “steadily to the North Star” (*Stories, Novels, and Essays* 203).

The concluding image of Grandison, waving “his hand derisively” (205) at Colonel Owen, who stands on a wharf watching Grandison and his family on a steamboat headed across Lake Erie to Canada, may well be an image of Chesnutt waving derisively at the myths of plantation fiction, myths that exonerated slavery and served to prop up theories of African-American inferiority. Grandison is undoubtedly a trickster figure, but like many such figures in African-American literature, he is not merely a clever actor: He is an intelligent man dedicated to developing a successful escape that will gain freedom for his entire family.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Chesnutt was a master of irony. Look up a definition of irony and then identify several instances in “The Passing of Grandison” in which Chesnutt uses irony. When is Grandison’s speech ironic? Is the narrator ever ironic? In what ways is the plot ironic? When you first read the story, at what point did you begin to suspect that the story would end with an ironic twist, and what clues made you suspect this? Did you suspect Grandison’s loyalty before the end? Why is irony so effective, and why was it a technique that was so valuable to Chesnutt?

- Hemenway, Robert. "The Functions of Folklore in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13 (1976): 283–309.
- Knadler, Stephen. "Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness." *American Literary Realism* 8 (1996): 426–448.
- Levine, Robert S. "Road to Africa: Frederick Douglass's Rome." Summer 2000. *African American Review*. Available online. URL: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Library of America Presents: Charles Chesnutt. Available online. URL: <http://www.charleschesnutt.org/>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Page, Thomas Nelson. *In Ole Virginia*. New York: Scribner, 1895.
- Render, Sylvia Lyons. *Charles W. Chesnutt*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.
- . Introduction to *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Edited by Sylvia Lyons Render. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981.
- Slote, Ben. "Listening to 'The Goophered Grapevine' and Hearing Raisins Sing." *American Literary History* 6 (Winter 1994): 684–694.
- White-Parks, Annette. Introduction to *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Annette Whites-Park. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994.
- Wilson, Matthew. *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004.
- Wonham, Henry B. *Charles W. Chesnutt: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1998.
- Stephanie Browner



LYDIA MARIA CHILD (1802–1880)

I do not feel so much interest in *any* subject as I do in melting down all the barriers that separate different portions of the human family.

(Letter to Francis Alexander, July 1, 1877)

For half a century *Lydia Maria Child* was a household name in America, as familiar to the public then as her Thanksgiving song, “Over the river, and through the wood, / To grandfather’s house we go,” remains today. The famous antislavery editor William Lloyd Garrison hailed Child as “the first woman in the republic.” An African-American correspondent of Garrison’s newspaper, the *Liberator*, proposed enshrining her alongside John Brown in the pantheon of his people’s white benefactors. The abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, converted by Child’s *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, paid tribute to it as the “ablest” and most comprehensive antislavery book “ever printed in America.” The Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner credited Child with inspiring his career as an advocate of racial equality and sought her advice on Reconstruction policy. A newspaperman ranked her popular weekly column of the 1840s, “Letters from New-York,” “almost at the head of journalism in America.” The women’s rights leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton cited Child’s encyclopedic *History of the Condition of Women* (1835) as an invaluable resource for feminists in their battle against doctrines of male superiority. The theologian Theodore Parker pronounced Child’s monumental comparative study of the world’s religions, *The Progress of Religious Ideas* (1855), “the book of the age; and written by a woman!” EDGAR ALLAN POE praised her novel *Philothea* (1836) as “an

honor to our country, and a signal triumph for our country-women.” And the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* proclaimed her *Romance of the Republic* (1867) “one of the most thrilling books . . . ever written, involving the rights of the colored people—not excepting Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (all quotations from *A Lydia Maria Child Reader* 1).

This litany barely begins to suggest the scope of Child’s contributions to 19th-century U.S. culture. Merely to total up her output—47 books and pamphlets, enough uncollected fiction and journalism to fill one or two more volumes, and more than 2,000 surviving letters—is to recognize the magnitude of her achievement. Her professional career, which lasted some 55 years, spanned one of the most turbulent eras in American history and encompassed nearly all the intellectual and social movements of her time.

In the literary sphere, Child helped shape the American historical novel and the short story in the 1820s, just as these genres were emerging, and she specifically oriented them toward envisioning alternatives to racial conflict. Her “Letters from New-York” adapted the mode of transcendentalist essay writing to the city and its social problems. She also created American children’s literature and wrote the earliest advice books to address the needs of middle- to low-income housewives and mothers.

An activist as well as a woman of letters, Child pushed for justice toward Native American peoples,

publicized the plight of the urban poor, called for fair sentencing and humane treatment of prisoners, spoke out against capital punishment, pleaded for religious tolerance, campaigned for women's suffrage, and led the vanguard of the struggle against slavery and racial prejudice, to which she left her greatest legacy.

Born in Medford, Massachusetts, to Convers Francis and Susannah Rand on February 11, 1802, the youngest of five surviving children, Lydia Francis grew up among "hard-working people, who had had small opportunity for culture" (*Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters* 425). Lydia's father owned a thriving bakery, which enlisted the labor of the entire family. Convers and Susannah taught their children the values they saw as the cornerstone of their own prosperity: industriousness, frugality, plain living, avoidance of debt, financial independence, a sense of obligation toward poorer neighbors, and a vision of community they expressed by inviting their workers for a festive meal every Thanksgiving Eve. Her parents' values pervaded Child's best-selling advice book *The Frugal Housewife* (1829), and the example of community her parents provided influenced her concept of her mission as a reformer: "to help in the breaking down of classes, and to make *all* men feel as if they were brethren of the same family, sharing the same rights, the same capabilities, and the same responsibilities" (*LMC: Selected Letters* 484). "All men" for Child included African Americans—a fact that differentiated her sharply from the majority of her contemporaries, including her siblings, but again reflected her parents' beliefs.

It was Child's elder brother, Convers, rather than her parents, however, who fostered her literary career. He directed her reading of the English literary classics, procured manuscripts and books for her from libraries barred to women, and introduced her to RALPH WALDO EMERSON, with whom he founded the Transcendental Club in 1836. Convers's encouragement of Child's literary bent is reflected in the preface to her first novel, *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times* (1824), which she wrote in his study when she was 22 years old.

Yet unlike Convers, who attended Harvard and became a Unitarian minister, Child received no for-

mal education beyond Medford's public school and a year at its ladies' academy. "Alarmed at her increasing fondness for books" (*A Lydia Maria Child Reader* 7), her father sent her at age 13, after her mother's death, to learn domestic arts from her married sister, Mary Francis Preston, in Norridgewock, Maine. This early experience of gender discrimination sowed the seeds of a feminist consciousness in Child and helped predispose her to identify with other victims of injustice. Equally formative, her self-education liberated Child from dependence on the authority of the conservative professors who dominated the universities and vocally opposed the radical reforms she would promote.

Child's six-year sojourn on the Maine frontier (1815–21) aroused her sympathy for Maine's dispossessed and impoverished Abenaki and Penobscot, the first of the many oppressed peoples she would champion. Her contact with Native Americans and her exposure to a non-European culture fired her literary imagination, laid the foundation for the cross-cultural approach she took as a reformer, and inspired the novel that launched her career. *Hobomok* shocked Child's contemporaries by dramatizing the marriage of a Puritan woman with a Wampanoag native, but its lively depiction of Puritan society received favorable comment from reviewers, who recognized her literary promise. Child followed up her success by publishing a patriotic children's book, *Evenings in New England* (1824); a second historical novel, *The Rebels, or Boston before the Revolution* (1825); and a series of well-regarded short stories on Native-white relations. Her popularity soared when she founded the country's first major children's magazine, the *Juvenile Miscellany* (1826–34), which showcased her own work along with that of other women writers. Some of the *Miscellany's* young subscribers went on to become antislavery activists.

Child's literary talent attracted the attention of the newspaper editor David Lee Child. The two married in 1828 and began working together as reformers, first by protesting the U.S. government's policy of uprooting the Cherokee from their ancestral land, later by joining the antislavery movement. Unfortunately, David proved incapable of manag-

ing money or earning a living, and Child found herself obliged not only to support them both but to pay her husband's debts, which already totaled \$15,000. To meet this need Child turned to writing domestic advice books. *The Frugal Housewife* (1829) sold 6,000 copies the first year and went through 33 U.S. editions. *The Mother's Book* (1831) initially sold even faster but succumbed to the boycott Child faced once she publicly identified herself with the crusade for the "immediate abolition" of slavery led by the fiery William Lloyd Garrison.

Impressed by Child's "versatile" and "brilliant" writings, Garrison had determined to recruit her as a propagandist (Karcher, *First Woman* 173). At his instigation Child started research on *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, which appeared in August 1833, a month after the top journal of American letters, the *North American Review*, crowned her with its laurels as the nation's leading woman writer. It took enormous courage for Child to forfeit her hard-won literary reputation—and her means of livelihood—by embracing a politically unpopular cause. *An Appeal* destroyed Child's literary career and alienated her former patrons but converted a number of men who became prominent antislavery orators, politicians, and clergymen. The book also propelled Child to the forefront of the abolitionist movement. Over the next few years, she published four more abolitionist works, besides threading protest against slavery and racism into her *History of the Condition of Women* and her novel *Philothea*.

Child's influence as an abolitionist reached a peak during her 1841–43 editorship of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the weekly newspaper of the American Anti-Slavery Society. While she ran the *Standard* from its headquarters in New York, David remained in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he had started growing sugar beets in 1838, with the aim of providing a substitute for the cane sugar produced by slave labor. The couple's informal separation stretched into eight years as the strains on their marriage caused by David's financial irresponsibility rose to the surface. The Childs' marital difficulties coincided with a schism between Garrisonians and evangelical abolitionists.

As editor of the *Standard*, Child sought to heal the split between warring factions, refocus abolitionists on fighting slavery rather than each other, and reach out to a broader audience. Her main vehicle for achieving these goals was her "Letters from New-York" column, through which she established a personal connection with readers and doubled the circulation of the *Standard*. Published alongside her editorials, the column integrated abolitionism into an all-encompassing philanthropy that linked slavery with other social ills.

Despite Child's efforts, abolitionist infighting continued, and she finally resigned from both her editorship and the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1843. To reestablish her standing in the literary world, she issued her popular *Letters from New-York* in book form (1843) and resumed writing for mainstream periodicals. Within five years, she produced a second series of *Letters from New York* (1845), three volumes of children's stories (*Flowers for Children*, vols. 1, 2, and 3, 1844–47), and a collection of innovative short stories, *Fact and Fiction* (1846). These works restored a measure of her previous fame and won her a place among such New York writers as Poe, the poets James Russell Lowell and William Cullen Bryant, and the feminist cultural critic MARGARET FULLER.

An emotional crisis in 1847 prompted Child to undertake a study of religion that bore fruit eight years later in her three-volume *Progress of Religious Ideas* (1855). Its respectful description of such non-Christian faiths as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam was almost unprecedented for the time.

Reconciling with David in 1850, Child moved back to rural Massachusetts, eventually settling in Wayland, where she inherited her father's cottage in 1856. Another burst of creativity followed, generating Child's best book for young folk, *A New Flower for Children* (1856), and a collection of powerful stories marked by a new realism, *Autumnal Leaves* (1857). Simultaneously, Child threw herself back into the antislavery movement as the country headed toward civil war. Through articles, stories, and letters to politicians published in such mainstream newspapers as the *New York Tribune*, and through several pamphlets mailed to key opinion makers,

congressmen, senators, and Massachusetts state legislators, Child urged the Northern public to take an uncompromising stand against slavery, whatever the cost. Her most widely circulated pamphlet, *Correspondence between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia* (1860), sold 300,000 copies. In addition, Child edited HARRIET JACOBS's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and collaborated with Jacobs in distributing the book.

During and after the Civil War, Child promoted educational programs for the emancipated slaves and a constitutional amendment granting African Americans the vote. She consummated her long career as a writer-reformer with three visionary works: *The Freedmen's Book* (1865), a school reader for the former slaves featuring selections by or about people of African descent; *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), a novel holding up interracial marriage as America's destiny; and *An Appeal for the Indians* (1868), a pamphlet advocating bilingual school readers to cultivate Native American students' pride in their identity while encouraging assimilation. After Child's death on October 20, 1880, her friends published an edition of her letters that became her last best seller, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child* (1882).

***An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833)**

Child's *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, published two and a half years after William Lloyd Garrison started his militant antislavery newspaper the *Liberator*, provided the abolitionist movement with its first and most comprehensive book-length analysis of the slavery question. While owing debts to Garrison and his Quaker, British, French, and African-American predecessors, Child synthesized their arguments into an all-encompassing study that examined the problem of slavery and the prospects for emancipation from nearly every angle: historical, legal, political, racial, moral, and practical.

Child's carefully worded title announces her book's central thesis—that people of African

descent belong to an oppressed “class,” not to a biologically distinct “race,” and that they are Americans, hence entitled to the fundamental rights of other Americans. *An Appeal's* eight chapters survey the history of the African slave trade and point out its evil effects on participants as well as victims (chapter 1); compare the United States with other slave societies, ancient and modern, and prove that American slave law is the harshest in the world (chapter 2); demonstrate that emancipation can be accomplished safely without unleashing slave rebellions, and that slavery is economically more wasteful and less profitable than “free” (that is, wage) labor (chapter 3); identify the ways in which the Constitution allows slaveholding states to dominate Congress and govern national policy (chapter 4); contrast the American Colonization Society's scheme of promoting voluntary emancipation by sending freed slaves to Africa with the Anti-Slavery Society's commitment to abolishing slavery in the United States and obtaining for blacks “equal civil and political rights and privileges with the whites” (*Appeal* 130; chapter 5); refute claims that Africans are intellectually inferior (chapter 6) and morally debased (chapter 7); and condemn all forms of racial prejudice and discrimination practiced in the North, including employment bans, segregated facilities, and laws against interracial marriage (chapter 8). The far-reaching indictment of racism that occupies more than half of *An Appeal* makes it unique among white-authored antislavery works.

Throughout *An Appeal*, Child also pays special attention to women. She comments on the sexual exploitation of slave women, highlights the brutalizing effects of slavery on the character of slaveholding women, showcases the achievements of the 16th-century Angolan queen Zhingá, emphasizes the kindness of African women toward the Scottish traveler Mungo Park, and cites examples of how African-American and white women in New England have challenged racial prejudice.

Child nevertheless addresses *An Appeal* to a gender-mixed rather than a female audience. Cultivating a rhetoric of rational rather than emotional persuasion, she orients her rhetorical strategies toward winning over hostile readers. Thus, she

often lets the facts speak for themselves, deploys quotations to advance controversial views through the mouths of reputable spokesmen, frames arguments as rhetorical questions, disarms readers through humor, unsettles them with irony, admits to having held some of the biases and misconceptions she asks readers to renounce, and uses analogies to break down accustomed modes of thought, for example, by undermining distinctions between white Americans and cultural Others.

An Appeal's broad scope, scholarly thoroughness, intellectual depth, and literary excellence won it an influence unparalleled by any other antislavery tract of its time. It converted a host of political and religious leaders to the abolitionist cause, emboldened many women to assume public roles in the antislavery movement, inspired a number of other abolitionist tracts, encouraged hitherto reluctant literary figures to speak and write against slavery, and offered a beacon of hope to African Americans.

In our time *An Appeal* remains relevant in new ways. As a work of pioneering scholarship, it anticipates comparative approaches to the history and sociology of slavery and race, legal analyses of slavery's centrality to the U.S. Constitution and political system, interdisciplinary studies of European culture's African origins, and Afrocentric methodologies. In sum, Child's groundbreaking *Appeal* still has much to teach 21st-century readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Find examples in *An Appeal* of the following rhetorical strategies: letting facts speak for themselves, speaking through quotations from other authors, asking rhetorical questions, using humor and irony, telling anecdotes, drawing analogies, exhorting readers to think, admitting to having previously held wrong opinions. Explain the effect each of the examples you have identified may have on a hostile or skeptical reader.
2. What patterns do you perceive in the way Child structures her chapters? How does she generally begin? At what point does she usually shift into an argumentation mode? How does she structure her arguments?
3. What are the various arguments Child uses to refute then-prevalent claims that Africans were intellectually and morally inferior to whites? To what extent do Child's views or those of her opponents remain relevant today?

***History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations* (1835)**

Lydia Maria Child's two-volume *History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations* originated as the capstone of a five-volume Ladies' Family Library that included biographies of famous intellectuals and revolutionaries, exemplary Christians, and "good wives." Child conceived the series with several aims: promoting women's education through informal channels at a time when most women did not have access to institutions of higher learning, offering a range of role models to emulate in a period of social ferment that heralded new opportunities for some women, familiarizing women with their own history, and prompting readers to rethink conventional ideas about women's inborn "nature" and proper place in society.

Published two years after Child's *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), her *History of the Condition of Women* exhibits the same encyclopedic research and comparative methodology. The project entailed sifting through innumerable travel accounts, treatises, histories, and missionary reports, most of which mention women only in passing. Child's pioneering book anticipates today's multicultural approach to women's studies by exploring commonalities and differences in the status of women across the globe, from ancient times to the mid-19th century, from the remotest tribes of Siberia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific Islands to the modern nations of Europe and the United States. The long sections Child devotes to Native American and African women reflect both the formative influence that her youthful exposure to Abenaki and Penobscot culture exerted on her consciousness and the commitment to combating racism that led her to counter the myth of the "dark continent" with detailed

descriptions of African societies. Child situates African women in complex cultures and depicts them as practicing many artisanal crafts, accompanying their labor with songs, performing elaborate dances, and participating in political discussions, hunts, and battles.

To judge the “condition of women” in a society, Child examines such indicators as marriage customs that show how wives are valued (for example, as drudges, sexual objects, reproducers, child rearers, or simply property); laws that regulate virginity, adultery, concubinage, polygamy, prostitution, and divorce—and the ways such laws differentiate between women and men; whether a society traces ancestry through the father or the mother, awards custody of children to the father or the mother, or disposes of surplus female children through infanticide or sale; women’s occupations in relation to men’s; their access to education, moneymaking activities, political power, the priesthood, and other avenues to prestige; and the degree of personal freedom or confinement women experience.

Rather than draw explicit conclusions, Child lets the facts she assembles speak for themselves—a strategy she hints at in her 1845 preface. These facts suggest that the world’s gender and sexual arrangements are much too diverse to allow for generalizing about what roles “nature” intends women to perform. The feminist theorists Sarah Grimké, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton would rely extensively on Child’s research in developing arguments for women’s emancipation that she leaves unstated.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the preface she added to the 1845 edition of *History of the Condition of Women*, Child hints that “theories” and “materials for argument” are “incidentally implied by the manner of stating historical facts.” What theories or arguments do you find implied in Child’s *History*?
2. Compare Child’s *History of the Condition of Women* with her *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. What similarities and differences do you find between the two works? Consider especially their organization, method, rhetorical style, and argument.
3. Read either Sarah Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman* (1838) or Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Look for passages that quote from or build on Child’s *History of the Condition of Women*.

Letters from New-York (1843)

Letters from New-York, now regarded as Child’s greatest literary achievement, originated as a column in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the weekly newspaper she edited from 1841 to 1843. Child introduced the column as a means of wooing readers to the antislavery cause “with the garland of imagination and taste” (*LMC Reader* 297). Placed strategically beside Child’s editorials, her “Letters from New-York” invited fans who purchased the paper for the sake of its main literary attraction to read her antislavery commentary, too, and thus gain insights that might undermine their biases. Conversely, “Letters from New-York” prompted abolitionists to connect slavery with other social problems: urban poverty, an unjust prison system, capital punishment, the oppression of women, prostitution, alcoholism, and prejudice against Jews, Catholics, Irish, and Native Americans. Child succeeded so well at appealing to dual audiences that the subscription list of the *Standard* doubled from 2,500 to 5,000—a record for an antislavery newspaper at a time when the abolitionist movement was still facing widespread public hostility.

Taking the form of letters addressed to an unspecified “you,” the column owed its popularity chiefly to Child’s ability to give readers the illusion that she was speaking personally to each of them, that she was guiding them into a world beyond their horizons, that she was articulating their anxieties about the rapid changes taking place in their society—the mushrooming of cities, the influx of immigrants, the increase of crime—even while she was teaching them to embrace rather than fear the new polyglot, multiracial America. Child’s cultivation of a confessional voice further enhanced

the intimate relationship she established with the reader she called “you.” The structure of the letters also charmed readers. Characteristically, these freewheeling journalistic sketches would begin by describing one of the tourist sights, institutions, or human “types” of New York. They would then slide from the material into the moral and spiritual realms, from pictorial representation into social criticism and philosophical speculation.

The literary style of *Letters from New-York* received much praise from Child’s contemporaries, among them Thomas Wentworth Higginson (best known to literary scholars today as EMILY DICKINSON’s “preceptor”). “It is a perfect encyclopedia of anecdotes and interesting realities, in endless variety,” he marveled (*LMC Reader* 298). Higginson also recognized Child’s affinities with the transcendentalists. As did her transcendentalist peers Ralph Waldo Emerson, HENRY DAVID THOREAU, Margaret Fuller, and WALT WHITMAN, Child favored a spontaneous literary style that elevated the unconscious over the conscious mind, the intuitive over the rational, the natural over the contrived. Carrying this style to new heights, Child perfected a mode of free association that verges on stream of consciousness. “I seldom can write a letter without making myself liable to the Vagrant Act,” she commented about her literary practice. “My pen . . . paces or whirls, bounds or waltzes, steps in the slow minuet, or capers in the fantastic fandango, according to the tune within” (*Letters from New York*, Second Series 28:257). “Flibbertigibbet himself never moved with more unexpected and incoherent variety” (*Letters from New-York* 44).

Child took transcendentalism in an untrodden direction, however, by describing urban streets and slums, rather than rural nature. Unlike Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) and Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), *Letters from New-York* celebrated not the lone individual but the community, not “Life in the Woods” but life in the city. The transcendental ideal of “the Beautiful,” as Higginson put it, “does not exist for her only in the moonlight trembling on the quiet water . . .; she finds it equally in the dark gray city, where beats the sorrowing, striving heart of man” (*LMC Reader* 299).

Child’s vivid picture of the modern city, with its glaring contrasts between wealth and poverty, remains extraordinarily relevant in our own time, as homeless derelicts again line urban streets. *Letters from New-York* is filled with haunting scenes that provoke a shock of recognition in 21st-century readers: a “blind negro beggar, with horny hand and tattered garments,” camped “amid the splendour of Broadway” (9); “a ragged, emaciated woman” sitting in front of a store window displaying “large vases of gold and silver, curiously wrought” (61); a woman “with garments all draggled in New-York gutters,” lying in the street where she has “fallen in intoxication” (62).

While seeking to awaken sympathy for a class of people commonly viewed with disgust and fear, if seen at all, Child takes readers on a tour of the institutions designed to segregate the poor from the rich and to punish any transgression of boundaries: prisons, insane asylums, almshouses, and orphanages. In the process she questions the moral distinctions between the inmates of these institutions and the respectable men and women who look down on them from their comfortable social sanctums. The “shrewd business man” who has amassed his wealth through “good bargains” and shady transactions is as much a thief as the prisoner in jail for stealing, Child contends. Both have derived their false values from “the maxims of trade, the customs of society,” and the gospel of money-making (127). The only difference is that one has succeeded and the other has failed. Child applies the same analysis to the “street-walkers” who form such a large proportion of the penitentiary inmates on Blackwell’s Island. Challenging readers to reject the double standard of gender and class, she points out that the men who have led these women into prostitution live in mansions on Broadway, occupy offices in City Hall, and “pass ‘regulations’ to clear the streets they have filled with sin” (126).

The real criminal, Child insists, is the society that “make[s] its own criminals.” Anticipating a debate still raging in the 21st century, she argues that the cure is not to build more “penitentiaries and prisons,” but to “change . . . the structure of society” so as to redistribute its benefits more

equitably: "If we can abolish *poverty*, we shall have taken the greatest step towards the abolition of *crime*" (127). Meanwhile, she asserts, the prison system actually tends to "*increase crime*" by hardening criminals and convincing them that the laws operate unjustly (127). Child extends this logic to capital punishment as well. When the state commits "legalized murder, in cold blood," she argues, it sets a bad example: "For every criminal you execute, you make a hundred murderers *outside* the prison, each as dangerous as would be the one inside" (138, 139). Child also notes "the danger of convicting the innocent" (141)—a danger recently brought home to us by the number of death-row prisoners exonerated by DNA analysis.

Other issues Child tackles in *Letters from New-York* likewise continue to engage 21st-century activists. Despite all the progress women have made since Child wrote her letter on women's rights, for example, fear of rape still keeps many "afraid to go out in the evening without the protection of a man" (153), stereotypes that pervade the media still demean women as sex objects and "gilded toys" (154), and the double standard still prescribes different behavior for men and women and judges women more harshly than men for the same infractions. Similarly, although Catholics and Jews no longer suffer from the discrimination they met in the 1840s, Child's pleas for religious tolerance sound as timely as ever. In the same vein, the Irish and Italian immigrants Child championed have long since assimilated into American society, but her embrace of the immigrants her contemporaries wanted to exclude speaks eloquently to current disputes over immigration.

The radical positions Child took on all the issues she covered in her column did not prevent "Letters from New-York" from winning a readership that extended far beyond the *Standard's* subscription list. Indeed, even editors of mainstream periodicals urged her to collect and reissue her newspaper sketches in book form. Thus, when she decided to quit the *Standard* and resume her literary career in May 1843, she set about adapting such a book to the tastes of the general public. This entailed dropping three letters that would

have alienated nonabolitionist readers. Nevertheless, Child retained nine letters containing significant antislavery commentary, of the 40 that she chose to reprint.

Notwithstanding her self-censorship, no commercial publisher would touch the manuscript unless she expurgated all the antislavery material, a demand Child considered unacceptable. She ultimately had the book published (intact) at her own expense by the firm of a distant cousin, C. S. Francis.

To the mutual astonishment of Child and her publisher, *Letters from New-York* sold out its first print run of 1,500 copies within four months and went through 10 more printings in seven years. It also garnered excellent reviews. "Here is a woman who knows 'how to observe,'" exclaimed the conservative *Knickerbocker* with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. "When we close the book, we feel we have found a new friend, whose character we know thoroughly and trust entirely . . . one who looks keenly, thinks deeply, feels earnestly, and speaks fearlessly," wrote Higginson. Fuller paid *Letters from New-York* the ultimate compliment in the transcendentalist journal the *Dial*: "It is, really, a contribution to *American* literature, recording in a generous spirit, and with lively truth, the pulsations in one great center of the national existence" (all quotations from Karcher, *First Woman* 309).

Letters from New-York started a school of women's journalism. Soon Fuller, Grace Greenwood, FANNY FERN (Sara Payson Willis Parton), Gail Hamilton, and a host of lesser-known writers were developing variants of the genre Child had invented. As editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and as a journalist who published articles in reform and mainstream newspapers until shortly before her death in 1880, Child also set standards of integrity and literary quality for the craft as a whole. An obituary tribute by the Boston correspondent of the *Springfield Republican* best sums up Child's legacy to the journalistic profession: "She had that independence of character and that general cultivation of mind which are now recognized, though they were not then, as the indispensable and distinguishing traits of a good journalist" (*LMC Reader* 297).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Choose one of Child's "Letters from New-York" and analyze its style. Pay close attention to its structure, patterns of free association, ways of establishing a personal relationship with the reader, and use of metaphors, analogies, anecdotes, allusions, and other literary devices. Explain how the style contributes to winning the reader's support for the argument Child is making.
2. How does Child integrate criticism of slavery and racial prejudice into *Letters from New-York*? Answer this question either by doing a close reading of a letter that addresses issues of slavery and race or by examining the overall pattern of allusions to these issues in the letters.
3. Read Child's story "Rosenglory" in conjunction with letters 14 and 19. Compare the ways in which Child uses fiction and journalism to win sympathy for poor women who resort to prostitution and go to prison.
4. Read Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*. How does Child's *Letters from New-York* reflect transcendentalist views of nature? How does Child's view of nature differ from Emerson's? What similarities and differences do you find between Emerson's and Child's literary styles?
5. Read Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" in relation to *Letters from New-York*, focusing especially on letters 1, 3, 14, and 29. Compare Emerson's social philosophy with Child's. How does his criticism of reformers hold up in the light of Child's writings?

An Appeal for the Indians (1868)

Though written near the end of Child's career as a reformer, *An Appeal for the Indians* returns to the theme that first engaged her literary imagination in her novel *Hobomok* (1824). During the intervening decades, Child had continued to express her sympathy for Native Americans in her short fiction, journalism, and children's literature. She had also included Native Americans in her *History of the Condition of Women* (1835) and woven

them into her antislavery works. *An Appeal for the Indians* represents Child's most complete statement of her thinking on the "Indian question," as it had matured over 44 years. It also illustrates the strengths and limitations of the abolitionist approach toward solving America's race problem.

First published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* under the title "A Plea for the Indian" (April 11 and 18, 1868) and reissued as a pamphlet later that year, *An Appeal for the Indians* urged Child's fellow abolitionists to take up the cause of Native Americans while maintaining "vigilant watch over the rights of black men" (*LMC Reader* 88), who had just been granted freedom, citizenship, and the vote. The Civil War (1861–65), which had culminated in liberating African Americans from slavery, had displaced thousands of Native Americans, including some whose nations had already been uprooted in the 1830s and 1840s. The accelerating pace of road and railway construction across tribal lands was threatening the buffalo herds on which the Plains Indians depended for food and was causing frequent clashes between them and white settlers. Major Indian wars had broken out in 1862 and 1864–65 among the Minnesota Santee Sioux and the Colorado Teton Sioux and Cheyenne. In the infamous Sand Creek massacre of 1864, U.S. troops had butchered and mutilated 105 Cheyenne women and children, "cut off and displayed as trophies the sexual organs" of their victims, and ripped fetuses out of pregnant women, according to eyewitness testimony presented in Congress (Slotkin, *Fatal Environment* 401–402). To investigate and end the unrest Congress had appointed an Indian Peace Commission, which had issued its report on January 7, 1868. The commission recommended confining Native American tribes to reservations governed by benevolent, but firm, white authorities; weaning them from hunting to "agriculture and manufactures," from collective to individual modes of life; and compelling them to abandon their cultural and tribal identity by "blot[ting] out" tribal languages and fusing diverse nations into "one homogeneous mass" (*LMC Reader* 29–30).

It is this report that Child quotes and evaluates in the opening section of her *Appeal for the Indians*.

- . *Letters from New York*, Second Series. New York: C. S. Francis, 1845.
- . *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*. Edited by Carolyn L. Karcher. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997.
- . *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880*. Edited by Milton Meltzer, Patricia G. Holland, and Francine Krasno. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.
- Clifford, Deborah Pickman. *Crusader for Freedom: A Life of Lydia Maria Child*. Boston: Beacon, 1992.
- Goodwin, Joan. “Lydia Maria Child.” Available online. URL:<http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/lydiamariachild.html>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Karcher, Carolyn L. *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994.
- Mills, Bruce. *Cultural Reformations: Lydia Maria Child and the Literature of Reform*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
- Slotkin, Richard. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Carolyn L. Karcher



KATE CHOPIN (1850–1904)

A friend who knows me as well as anyone is capable of knowing me . . . told me that I had a way in conversation of discovering a person's characteristics . . . while they knew no more about me at the end than they knew at the beginning of the conversation.

(*Commonplace Book*)

Kate Chopin's fortunes as an author fluctuated wildly, both in her own era and later. She began writing rather late in life but soon experienced impressive success, quickly winning admiration for vivid, well-crafted stories. These works were often populated by memorable characters and often set in the ethnic melting pot of Louisiana (especially New Orleans), where Cajun, Creole, American, and African-American cultures mixed and where a variety of fascinating dialects were spoken. Women are often crucial and intriguing figures in Chopin's stories, but it was her great but highly unconventional novel *The Awakening*, which focused on one unconventional woman, that effectively destroyed Chopin's career just when she was nearing the summit of success. In the five years after the publication of that "scandalous" book, her productivity radically decreased, and in the decades that followed her death she was largely forgotten. By the mid-20th century, however, scholars began paying her increasing attention, and it was *The Awakening*, ironically, that excited the most interest. A novel that had once been condemned as shocking and immoral was now often praised for its subtle skill and its frank honesty, especially in portraying the often constricted lives of women. Thus, the very book that had helped wreck her career was now responsible for its revival, and since the mid-1960s Chopin has increasingly been recognized as one of the finest American women

authors and indeed as one of the most significant writers of her time.

Chopin's life began in St. Louis, Missouri, where she was born on February 8, 1850, to Thomas O'Flaherty, a successful businessman who had emigrated from Ireland, and Elizabeth Faris, the descendant of an old and once-prominent family of French-speaking Creoles. In 1855 young Kate, whose family was Catholic on both sides, began attending school at the Sacred Heart Academy, where she was strongly influenced by her curriculum, teachers, and friends. In November 1885, however, tragedy struck when her father was one of many people killed in a train wreck caused by a bridge collapse. Kate's mother never remarried, choosing instead to raise young Kate in a house managed by women, where she was greatly influenced by female relatives, including a great-grandmother who was a great storyteller. When the Civil War began in 1861, the O'Flahertys were sympathetic to the South, and indeed Kate's half brother George enlisted in the Confederate forces, eventually dying in captivity in 1863. After St. Louis was occupied by Federal troops, Kate herself ripped down a Union flag hung on her family's porch and was nearly apprehended by local authorities before a family friend interceded on her behalf. When another flag was hoisted over the O'Flaherty home, the slaves who had previously served the family seized their freedom (Gilbert 1,043–1,044).

Even as a teenager Kate O'Flaherty was a bright, well-read, independent thinker; a notebook of her readings and thoughts sometimes expressed impatience with the shallow social life she was often expected to lead, including frivolous parties and courtships. In 1869, however, she met Oscar Chopin, a young Creole from New Orleans, who would soon become her husband. Kate herself visited New Orleans that same year, and on June 9, 1870, she and Oscar were married, leaving shortly thereafter for a honeymoon that took them to Philadelphia and New York and then to Europe, where they traveled in Germany, Switzerland, and France just as war was breaking out between the Prussians and the French. Returning to New Orleans by fall 1870, the young couple seemed to have been genuinely happy; Oscar worked as a cotton merchant, and Kate spent much of her time tending to the children (eventually six in all) who now began arriving with impressive regularity. Kate loved to walk, observe, and think, although most of her writing at this time seems to have been confined to personal letters. Oscar, meanwhile, tended to his business while also becoming involved in the White League, an organization opposed to Reconstruction. The group actually seized brief control of New Orleans in 1874, and although Oscar fought in the resulting battle, over the next few years his main concern was with his failing business rather than with racial politics. By 1879 he and Kate had relocated to rural Natchitoches Parish, where Oscar opened a general store in tiny Cloutierville. Kate's independent, sophisticated ways raised eyebrows among the locals, but despite her remote location she continued reading "advanced" authors and thinking for herself. Tragedy struck again, however, when Oscar died of malaria in December 1882, leaving Kate with a large family and many debts. Nevertheless, she coped well; she settled the debts, took over the store, and apparently even began an affair with an attractive but abusive married man who may well have provided the model for various characters in her later fiction (Gilbert 1,047–1,048; Toth 163–175).

By 1884, however, Chopin had left Louisiana for good (except for occasional visits), returning to St.

Louis. Her beloved mother died in 1885. Chopin now began to associate with some of the leading intellectuals and writers of the city. She also began to write, hoping for publication and encouraged in part by her doctor, who had recognized her talent in her letters from Louisiana. Her style was notably influenced by the great French author Guy de Maupassant, whose stories she admired for their honesty and unconventionality. By 1889 her own stories and poems had begun appearing in print, and by 1890 she had finished *At Fault*, one of her two surviving novels, which she paid to have published. She also soon began work on another novel (which she eventually destroyed), but her real talent during this early period lay in her splendid short stories, which attracted critical praise and an increasing readership. Most are set in Louisiana; most show the influence of Maupassant in their clarity, subtlety, and "slice-of-life" realism; and many use regional dialects to wonderful effect. In short, Chopin was establishing a growing reputation as one of the best "local color" authors in the country: She was giving her fellow Americans a glimpse into the life of a region many found colorful and fascinating. Chopin, however, was never merely a dabbler; her stories are rarely superficial or merely local; they are sometimes funny, sometimes sad, and sometimes tragic; and they are almost always written with a sure touch and almost never with a heavy hand. Even the stories ostensibly composed for children or adolescents can be thoughtful and probing, and it was not long before Chopin had the respect of some of the country's top editors. By 1894 her first collection of stories, *Bayou Folk*, was issued by a leading publisher and was well reviewed all over the country (Gilbert 1,048–1,050; Toth 223–229).

During the next few years Chopin continued to publish stories, poems, reviews, and essays. Supported by loyal friends in St. Louis, she was increasingly seen as a leading local figure. Inevitably she faced the disappointments any writer encounters (especially in finding a willing publisher for her second novel), but on the whole her career and reputation were steadily improving. In 1897 a second collection of stories, *A Night in Acadie*, appeared,

and although it was less widely and enthusiastically reviewed than *Bayou Folk* had been, Chopin by this time possessed the self-confidence to realize that she was writing remarkably well. In any case, during that same year, having destroyed her second novel, she was hard at work on a third, which she intended to call "A Solitary Soul." The title was oddly prophetic, for when the book was eventually issued in spring 1899 as *The Awakening* (an apt name, but one suggested by her publisher), Chopin suddenly found herself increasingly isolated and publicly attacked. The book was sometimes praised for its style, but far more frequent were condemnations of its themes, attitudes, tone, and central character. The novel describes a young wife and mother, Edna Pontellier, who becomes disenchanted with her unfulfilling life and her unexciting marriage. She becomes infatuated with a handsome, sensitive young bachelor (Robert Lebrun), but, when he grows uncomfortable and departs for Mexico, she eventually drifts into a sensually exciting but romantically barren affair with a local ladies' man. When Robert unexpectedly returns, he and Edna declare their mutual love, but Robert soon regrets his boldness and departs again, leaving Edna feeling utterly alone. In the powerful last chapter, she walks into the Gulf of Mexico (near a resort where their relationship had begun) and never returns.

If Chopin had clearly condemned Edna's behavior, or if she had made Edna's death a kind of obvious punishment, her book might have been differently received. Remarkably, Chopin did nothing of the sort. Her attitude toward Edna was seen by many as neutral and objective, possibly even sympathetic, and although Chopin herself would later claim that Edna was responsible for her own behavior, the author never explicitly censured her protagonist. Edna was condemned by many reviewers as a self-indulgent adulteress, an irresponsible mother, and an ungrateful wife; more than one reviewer wondered why Chopin had even bothered to create such a character and such a book. The novel was frequently castigated as immoral, and despite Chopin's best efforts to make light of the attacks, obviously she was hurt. (Little did her critics know that by this time she had already written an even

more shocking story—"The Storm"—which is also about adultery and which she never tried to publish [Gilbert 1,048–1,050; Toth 317–335].)

Chopin's plans for a third collection of stories never came to fruition, and in her remaining years she published far less often than in the decade of her greatest productivity (1889–99). Some of her later works are excellent and adventurous, but some also seem slightly timid, and although neither she nor *The Awakening* was ever as ostracized or censored as later legend would sometimes suggest (Toth 367–369), it seems clear that in her final years she increasingly lost her voice and self-confidence. She died suddenly in 1904, although her health had been declining for some time. Her passing was noted in various obituaries and articles, which tended to praise her as a learned, gracious, intelligent woman and as the author of superb short stories—stories that had not only captured the life of Louisiana but also gained recognition for St. Louis.

In the decades immediately after her death she was remembered (when remembered at all) for her tales, especially a few favorite "anthology pieces" (such as "Désirée's Baby"), which were continuously reprinted. *The Awakening*, however, generally fell from sight, and even Father Daniel Rankin, the author of the first critical biography of Chopin (published in 1932), paid less attention to the novel than to the stories. By the 1940s, however, the French scholar Cyrille Arnavon had not only translated the book into his native tongue but written an enthusiastic introduction. And when Arnavon taught the novel at Harvard, one of its most avid readers was a young Norwegian scholar named Per Seyersted, who in 1969 published a fine biography of Chopin and edited her collected works. By this time, of course, many American scholars had also begun to appreciate her writings, but it is one of the many ironies of Chopin's career that her resurrection as a feminist icon depended so much on the efforts of a Frenchman and a Norwegian. Today Chopin's status as a major American writer seems unalterably secure. Few authors of her time (male or female) wrote as well as she or had a surer command of their craft.

***The Awakening* (1899)**

Edna Pontellier (a young, attractive, sensitive mother of two small boys) is vacationing at Grand Isle, Louisiana, with her husband, Léonce (a staid, steady, somewhat older businessman), when she meets and begins to fall in love with Robert Lebrun (a young, attractive, sensitive bachelor). When Robert realizes that his growing closeness to Edna may cause a scandal, he suddenly departs for Mexico; meanwhile, Edna and Léonce return to New Orleans, where Edna's dissatisfaction with their marriage becomes increasingly obvious and where she eventually begins an affair with Alcée Arobin, whom she finds sexually exciting but does not love. When she unexpectedly meets Robert in New Orleans, they declare their love, but once again Robert shrinks from the consequences of adultery and leaves Edna, who, despondent, finally drowns herself.

The Awakening opens with a chapter that typifies the skillful construction, incisive characterization, subtle symbolism, and economical style of the novel as a whole. The “green and yellow parrot” (521) who appears in the very first sentence symbolizes not only the exotic opening setting but also the colorful, romantic nature of Edna, the protagonist. Before meeting Edna, however, we meet her husband, Mr. Pontellier, who is characteristically disgusted by both the parrot and a mockingbird and who seems to be working even on Sunday, the proverbial day of rest: He has been applying himself “to the task of reading the newspaper,” paying special attention to the “market reports” (521). His appearance implies his practical, serious nature, as well as the physical limitations of a middle-aged man. He is a businessman whose life revolves around his business—a man whose economic success not only allows him to treat his wife and children to summer vacations at comfortable resorts but also permits him to employ a cook, a butler, and even a nurse to look after his children. All these servants are either black or of mixed race; in relegating them to the periphery Chopin accurately describes their place in the racially segregated society she knew and had observed, especially in Louisiana, where status depended as much on eth-

nic background as on wealth. Mr. Pontellier's white race, male gender, and financial comfort give him power (symbolized by his large cigar) over his wife, his children, his servants, and many other characters in the novel.

Our first glimpse of Mrs. Pontellier is, significantly, through the “gaze” of her husband, who sees her walking up from the beach with her new young friend, Robert, whom she resembles both physically and in her playful, imaginative temperament (522). In describing the interactions of husband, wife, and wife's friend, Chopin typically makes every word count: Surveying his sun-burned wife, Mr. Pontellier (whose first name, *Léonce*, we do not learn until later) looks at her “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (522). He cannot understand the joke she and Robert share, and when he invites Lebrun (he characteristically addresses Robert by his last name) to join him at billiards with other men, he cannot understand why Robert would prefer Edna's company or why Edna might be interested in Robert. Speaking to his wife about Robert, Léonce instructs her to “send him about his business when he bores you, Edna” (523), not realizing the irony of his words: Edna is far more likely to become bored with Léonce than with Robert, despite Léonce's wealth, status, and genuine (if generally undemonstrative) regard for her and their children. By the end of the opening chapter, we have been introduced to three central characters, many central themes and images, and much of the essential tension of the book. Chopin, as always, sketches quickly but deftly: No word is wasted, and no detail fails (on close examination) to add meaning or symbolic significance.

Chapter 2 introduces, in more detail, Edna and Robert themselves, who not only resemble each other in looks, personalities, and outlooks but also jointly contrast in nearly every way with Léonce. Whereas he seems humorless, they can laugh and joke (at least when he is absent); whereas he is prim, proper, and practical, they are relaxed and playful; whereas Léonce tends to issue censures or offer instructions, Edna and Robert can talk comfortably, both with each other and about themselves.

Whereas the wealthy Léonce smokes cigars, Robert, who is much less well off, must roll his own cigarettes. Yet, whatever Robert lacks in money he more than makes up for in his genuine interest in Edna and her children, and although he is a Catholic Creole and she is from Kentucky Presbyterians, their mutual attraction becomes increasingly obvious to the reader, if not at first to the couple themselves. They drift into intimacy, partly because Léonce is so often physically and emotionally absent—whether he is away in New Orleans at his work or is off playing billiards with his male friends. By the end of the second chapter it is clear why Edna and Robert are becoming mutually attracted and why trouble is probably in store for the Pontellier marriage.

That trouble erupts openly in chapter 3, when Léonce (tipsy, full of himself, victorious at billiards, and perhaps sexually aroused) returns home and awakes Edna from a sound sleep. Her literal awakening here is just the start of a more profound process of inner transformation that begins after she and Léonce argue and she stays awake, crying, long after he has gone to bed. She starts to realize that she is increasingly dissatisfied with her present life. Although her routine with Léonce soon seems to return to normal, the chapter ends with superb irony: The other wives at the resort, delighted with presents Léonce has sent from New Orleans, declare that “Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world,” upon which Chopin immediately notes, “Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (528). Edna is becoming disenchanted not only with Léonce but with marriage itself and all the other social conventions that marriage symbolizes and enforces.

In chapter 4 we meet another of the book's central characters, Adèle Ratignolle, a beautiful, amiable “mother-woman” (529) who has become Edna's good friend even though they increasingly differ not only in their attitudes toward maternity and marriage but also in their domestic circumstances. Adèle is happily married and continuously pregnant; indeed, she derives much of her identity and self-worth from her roles as wife and mother. She enjoys Robert but does not take him seriously;

she admires Edna but grows more and more worried when she realizes that Edna is starting to drift away from Léonce and toward Robert. Later, in chapter 8, Adèle even warns Robert to keep his distance from Edna and not mislead her, but, before that happens, Chopin inserts in chapter 6 some of most famous paragraphs she ever composed as she lyrically describes the transformation now beginning to occur within Edna:

. . . The beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (535)

Although these sentences are not entirely typical of Chopin's style (they lack the humor, irony, wit, and sardonic bite that so often prevent her works from seeming sentimental, trite, or unwise), they do exemplify many common features of her writing and many particular traits of this specific novel. They illustrate, for instance, her careful attention to design and her skillful use of foreshadowing: Much of this same phrasing will reappear at the end of the book, just before Edna drowns herself, and the echo of the present passage at that later moment is a brilliant effect. The present sentences also suggest (especially in the first quoted paragraph) the vagueness and imprecision of many of Edna's thoughts and feelings. Indeed, it seems important to emphasize that these are Edna's thoughts and emotions, not necessarily Chopin's. Edna is a romantic; Chopin could appreciate the beauties of romanticism without overlooking its flaws, and in the present passage she seems to be warning us that Edna's longings for love, enchantment, pleasure, and fantasy may lead ultimately to disaster. The passage is

typical, too, in its sure sense of rhythm and sound, as Chopin re-creates the experience of the sea itself in her surging verbs, her alliterative use of *m* and *s*, and the clauses that seem to roll in relentlessly, one after the other. The key themes of solitude, loss, the soul, and sensuality are all mentioned, and the passage is one of many in which the ocean obviously functions in symbolic ways. Chopin's debt to WALT WHITMAN and other romantics is evident in passages like this, but so are her own precision, economy, clarity, and craft. Here as elsewhere she displays admirable reticence: She never openly judges Edna, instead giving us enough information to draw our own conclusions.

Chapter 7 is especially important. In it we learn (through Edna's beach-side conversation with Adèle) much about Edna's childhood and adolescence, including the early death of her mother, the authoritarianism of her father, her estrangement from her sisters, her detachment from conventional religion, her fundamental isolation, her love of nature, and her series of unspoken infatuations with attractive but unavailable men (including a dashing soldier, a distinguished young gentleman, and an accomplished actor, whose portrait she would secretly kiss). Her eventual marriage to the dull but dependable Léonce was partly inspired, ironically, by rebellion against her father and older sister, whom she shocked by marrying a Catholic. Moreover, as "the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (541). Those portals, of course, have now reopened through her closeness with Robert, who can now be seen as merely the latest in a long series of Edna's romantic obsessions. Little wonder, then, that in chapter 8 Adèle warns Robert to leave Edna alone—advice Robert at first resents and does not heed. Later, for instance (in chapter 9), we see Robert encouraging Edna to listen to seductive music of Mademoiselle Reisz, an accomplished pianist, who, in her physical unattractiveness, assertive personality, lack of a husband or children, and total devotion to her art, is in many respects the polar opposite of Adèle Ratignolle. Reisz is another of the novel's

central figures, and she and Edna soon establish a close if complex friendship; as Edna becomes closer to Reisz, she loses much of her earlier intimacy with Adèle. It is typical of Chopin's practice in this book to create opposed pairs—Adèle and Reisz, Robert and Léonce, Robert and Alcée, young lovers and an old "lady in black" (559)—and to position Edna between them. Edna is drawn now in one direction, now in another, until finally she withdraws from life altogether.

Crucial to Edna's development is the scene, in chapter 10, in which she finally, after weeks of effort, learns to swim during a late-night excursion to the beach. Léonce, characteristically, minimizes her achievement, and his condescension is significantly juxtaposed with Robert's lyrical attentions. Edna's new sense of achievement leads to another argument with Léonce (in chapter 11), which recalls their disagreement in chapter 3. Now, however, Edna is much more confident and even dismissive. The contrast between the two chapters is typical again of Chopin's sure sense of structure and design. That same talent for design is on display once more in chapter 13, when Edna, having sailed to a nearby island with Robert to attend church, becomes faint during the service, retires to an old woman's cottage, sleeps for a time, and then reawakens in a scene full of sensuous detail that emphasizes her new appreciation of her own body, her renewed comprehension of the beauty of nature, and her growing intimacy with Robert. Thus, she is all the more shocked when she learns, in chapter 15, that he has suddenly decided to leave for Mexico on business. She argues with him but to no avail; off he goes, and she again feels isolated, especially after she, Léonce, and the children return (in chapter 17) to their stately New Orleans home. However, though Edna returns back to her old house, she never returns to her old routine: She dresses as she likes; she begins to devote more and more time to her painting; she ceases her former habit of staying home once a week to greet visitors (including the wives of Léonce's business associates); and she fails (in Léonce's view) to supervise the hired help properly. Inevitably they quarrel again, and when Léonce departs angrily for dinner at his "club" (580), Edna smashes a vase, throws

her wedding ring on the floor, and tries to crush it. However, “her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the glittering circlet” (581). Yet, despite the ring’s apparent imperviousness, the Pontellier marriage is increasingly damaged. Edna and Léonce communicate less and less, and she begins to spend more time with Mademoiselle Reisz, the pianist whose powerful music excites Edna’s passions and whose ongoing correspondence with Robert allows Edna to learn of his doings and thoughts in distant Mexico.

Meanwhile, even Léonce has begun to notice that his wife now differs fundamentally from the person she once was, and so he seeks advice from an old physician, Doctor Mandelet. Mandelet is the male counterpart of Mademoiselle Reisz: Both are older; both possess distinct modes of wisdom (Reisz’s is associated with art, while Mandelet’s is associated with science); and both are figures in whom Edna can confide. Although Mandelet advises Léonce to leave Edna alone, he secretly fears that she may be having an affair. Ironically, his fears prove accurate when Edna meets and eventually becomes involved with Alcée Arobin, a well-known rake whose interests in women are mostly physical and usually successful. When Léonce leaves New Orleans on extended business, Edna takes the opportunity not only to set up house in a small cottage but also to consummate her affair with Arobin. The experience, however, leaves her fundamentally dissatisfied. Not until she unexpectedly meets Robert at Mademoiselle Reisz’s does her original passion reignite, but when Robert expresses the hope that Léonce may somehow be persuaded to release her so that she can become Robert’s wife, Edna informs her astonished lover that she now rejects all male authority (even Robert’s) and will make her own choices. However, just as the couple reach this crucial turning point, a knock at the door summons Edna to keep a promise to Adèle, who is about to give birth to her latest child. When Edna eventually returns from this “scene of torture” (648), she finds a note from Robert, expressing affection but telling her good-bye. Depressed, she soon returns to the seashore, where her transformation began and, with calm deliberation, walks into the sea.

The Awakening is short and extremely powerful. Edna excites both interest and debate, and Chopin never reveals whether she approves of Edna’s choices, especially her final decision. Each secondary character is vividly sketched, yet each also serves his or her role in the larger design. The novel potently blends romanticism and irony, sympathy and detachment, tragedy and humor, local color and universal themes. Edna has been seen as both a heroine and a victim, and her death has been interpreted by some as a triumph, by others as a defeat. Some readers commend her independence; some condemn her alleged selfishness; some praise her pursuit of authenticity; others consider her a deluded fool. What seems undeniable, however, is the skill with which the book is written: In its imagery, structure, diction, dialogue, tones, and characterization, it rarely makes a misstep. Every word works, no detail is superfluous, and the book stands as a nearly perfect gem of American literature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace a particular pattern of imagery—such as the imagery of sleep and awakening—throughout the novel, showing how each new appearance of the pattern contributes to the larger meaning of the whole work. How, for instance, does Edna’s literal awakening in chapter 3 resemble and/or differ from her awakening in chapter 13?
2. Compare and contrast the transformations experienced by Edna with those experienced by the central figure of ZORA NEALE HURSTON’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How are the experiences of the two women affected by their different circumstances, including their differences in race, class, physical appearance, and regional backgrounds? How do their ultimate fates differ, and why?
3. Research some of the varied reactions to, and interpretations of, the final chapter of *The Awakening*. How and why do different critics arrive at such distinct, and often contradictory, interpretations? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their varied arguments? Which argument do you finally find most persuasive, and why?

4. Compare and contrast Edna with the title character of one of Chopin's longest stories, "Athénaïse." How are the two women both alike and different, especially in their attitudes toward marriage, in their class backgrounds, and in their ultimate fates?
5. Closely examine the final chapter of the novel and then explore all the ways in which details of that chapter are prepared for, or foreshadowed by, details earlier in the book. In particular, discuss the phrasing of the final paragraph; how does that paragraph allude to or echo earlier passages from the novel, and why?
6. Compare and contrast *The Awakening* with Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*. In particular, discuss the two works in terms of the effectiveness of their use of characterization, style, imagery, symbolism, and theme.
7. To what degree is Edna in *The Awakening* passive or active, driven by impulse or motivated by conscious choice, and justified or unjustified in her final behavior?
8. Compare and contrast Edna, in *The Awakening*, with Hester Prynne in NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *The Scarlet Letter*. In particular, discuss the women in terms of their fundamental motives, their attitudes toward their children, their involvement in illicit romance, and any strengths or weaknesses of character each displays.
9. At least two films have been made of *The Awakening*; one is called *Grand Isle*, and the other is called *The End of August*. Compare and contrast the novel with either or both of these films. In particular, discuss the faithfulness of the film(s) to the book and the effectiveness of the acting, directing, cinematography, music, and presentation of theme(s).
10. Compare and contrast *The Awakening* with Walt Whitman's *The Song of Myself*. In particular, discuss their symbolism, imagery, themes, and tones, especially as these relate to their depictions of the sea.
11. Compare and contrast *The Awakening* with Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. In particular, discuss the two writers in terms of

their tones, their styles, their conclusions, and the degree to which the lead characters seem appealing or unappealing.

"At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892)

Bobinôt is a large, hardworking man who loves the beautiful but fiery Calixta, although she at first shows little interest in him; likewise, Alcée Laballière is a handsome planter whose passion for the attractive Clarisse is initially both unrequited and resisted. Bobinôt fears that the alluring Alcée may successfully court Calixta at a festive dance sponsored by some local Acadians (Cajuns), so Bobinôt attends the affair, where Alcée is indeed paying amorous attention to Calixta. However, when Clarisse arrives unexpectedly and makes it clear that she loves Alcée after all, Alcée quickly abandons Calixta, and she, disappointed and unenthusiastic, finally consents to marry Bobinôt.

This story, which involves the same characters as Chopin's later tale "The Storm," is typical of the "local color" writing on which she built her initially successful career. It takes readers to a picturesque locale full of apparently strange and exotic people who speak in striking dialects and who act in ways that are at once odd and familiar. In a few pages Chopin manages to sketch an entire society, with its own customs, its unique history, and its distinct ethnic and economic subgroups. We see Acadians (descendants of French Canadians who were forced to leave the north and migrate to Louisiana), Creoles (descendants of the mostly French but sometimes Spanish settlers of Louisiana), and African Americans (still mostly slaves or servants), and we even catch distant glimpses of white "Americans" (immigrants or longer-term residents from other parts of the United States). In short, Chopin presents Louisiana as a cultural gumbo in which many cultures met, mixed, and sometimes melted together—a society in which one's economic and ethnic background was at least as important as one's personal character, but in which distinctive, often assertive personalities were also found in abundance. As so often in her

fiction, Chopin describes her characters' behavior with detached objectivity but also with occasionally amused irony, as when she describes a fight between two women on the steps of a church or when she reports with a slight smile that the other "women did not always approve of Calixta" (307). Chopin's attitudes toward her characters almost always reflect genuine sympathy and interest, but she rarely sentimentalizes human behavior. Alcée's sudden abandonment of Calixta for Clarisse, like Calixta's sudden decision to settle for Bobinôt after losing the more glamorous Alcée, may seem harsh but also realistic. Here, as in so many of her stories, Chopin succeeds in giving us a quick but vivid and convincing slice of life, revealing characters whose speech, customs, and locales may seem remote but whose thoughts, motives, and feelings are recognizably human.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with its sequel, "The Storm." In particular, how are the characters' personalities and motives consistent from one story to the next? How do events in the first story help explain actions in the later one?
2. Discuss the use of dialect(s) in this story. How do the different kinds of speech contribute to the tale's success? Is the use of dialect ever ineffective or excessive? Discuss the distinct kinds of speech Chopin gives to different kinds of characters.
3. How do the women in this tale sometimes reinforce and also sometimes violate our standard notions about the behavior of 19th-century females? In particular, how is the behavior of the women affected by issues of class and ethnicity?
4. Do some research into life in Louisiana during the period in which this story is set. How accurate is Chopin's depiction of the society at that time, particularly life among the Cajuns?
5. Compare and contrast the women in this story with the title character of Chopin's tale "Caline." In particular, how are the fates of these women affected by their upbringings, their social circumstances, and their distinct personalities?

"*Désirée's Baby*" (1893)

Désirée was abandoned as an infant outside the home of the Valmondés, a loving childless couple who raised her as their own until she grew into a beautiful and virtuous young woman. She eventually attracts the eye of wealthy young Armand Aubigny, who soon persuades her to marry him despite her mysterious background. Not long after the birth of their first child, Armand becomes more and more hostile to both the mother and the dark-complexioned baby; he suspects that Désirée's ancestry is racially mixed, and when Désirée asks him whether she and the baby should leave, he tells her to go, and she is never seen again. Later, as Armand burns Désirée's possessions and letters, he also burns another letter he has recently discovered—one to his father from his mother, whom he had not seen since he was a young boy, in which she thanked God that her son would never discover her African ancestry.

For years this was Chopin's best known and most often reprinted story, and it is easy to see why. It is economical both in structure and in style, managing to convey a complex situation and its background in relatively few words. The characters and their motives are deftly sketched; the dialogue is well handled; the suspense (as it begins to occur to nearly everyone else in the story except Désirée that the baby is racially mixed) is effectively built and sustained; the subtle details of phrasing are typically expert; and the irony of the final revelation is powerful, especially on first reading. The story does not depend, however, on cheap surprise, for when it is reread, one notices all the ways in which the ending and the ultimate irony have been carefully foreshadowed. The tale shows the influence of Maupassant (especially in the final twist), but it is masterful in its own right, especially in its imagery (particularly of light and darkness), its symbolism (as in the references to trees and fire), its characterization (especially of Armand), and its psychological shrewdness (as when Désirée's adoptive mother, suspecting the truth about the baby, looks over at a black nurse, who has the same suspicion but will not confront the grandmother's gaze). Here, as so often in Chopin's short fiction, we realize the

crucial and distorting influence of racism (and also sexism) on human relations, and we see her typical ability to deal with universal problems within a strong “local color” context.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with Chopin’s powerful tale “La Belle Zoraïde.” In particular, discuss the presentation of motherhood and the use of irony in both works and discuss which work holds up better after repeated rereadings.
2. Do some research into the kinds of racial and ethnic classifications that existed in Louisiana during the era in which this story was set. How does an understanding of those classifications and that historical background help to make this story more comprehensible and more credible?
3. Explore the social roles and legal status of women, especially wives, in Louisiana during the era in which this tale is set. How does this historical context help explain Désirée’s behavior at the end of the tale? What do you think happens to Désirée after she leaves Armand? What realistic options are open to her at the end of the story?
4. Discuss why, of all the stories Chopin composed, you think this one in particular proved most popular and was most often reprinted in the decades after her death. What particular elements do you think contributed to the long-term survival and success of this story?
5. Do some research into the typical features of fairy tales, and then discuss some ways in which this story uses and transforms those features. For example, what usually happens to a beautiful young woman in a fairy tale when she marries a handsome young man?

“The Story of an Hour” (1894)

Because Mrs. Louise Mallard suffers from a heart condition, her friends and sister are careful to break the news gently that her husband, Brently, has been killed in a train wreck. Even so, they are shocked by Louise’s reaction: She rushes upstairs, locks herself in her room, and refuses for a time to emerge. As she

sits in her chair, staring out the window, she gradually begins to realize that Brently’s death means her own freedom, for although he had loved her and she had loved him, their relationship had nevertheless denied her the kind of independence she has subconsciously craved, although she never really knew how much it would mean to her until now. When she finally leaves her room and begins to descend the stairs, she feels like a “goddess of Victory” (758)—until, that is, Brently, whose death had been mistakenly reported, abruptly walks through the door, causing Louise to collapse and die (presumably, the doctors speculate, because of an overpowering joy).

Because of its extraordinary brevity and stunning final irony, this tale has quickly become Chopin’s most-read work and one of her most frequently discussed stories. It illustrates, even more than most of her fiction, her gift for subtle, ambiguous, and economical phrasing and swift characterization. No word or detail fails to pull its weight in contributing to the overall effect. Mrs. Mallard’s “heart trouble” (for instance) is both physical and (we learn later) emotional. Meanwhile, the haste of her male friend to tell her tenderly of her husband’s death actually contributes to the shocking conclusion: If he had taken more time to ascertain the truth of the report, Louise might never have experienced either her abrupt awakening or her more abrupt death. Symbolism and imagery are used expertly in this tale (as they often are in Chopin’s writing), especially as Louise sits in her chair and sees signs of life (which symbolize her own renewed sense of vitality) outside her window. As in most of her works, Chopin refuses to judge her main character explicitly, so that some readers find Louise sympathetic while others condemn her as pampered and selfish. The style is typical in its clarity, simplicity, and directness, although it lacks the heavy emphasis on Cajun or Creole dialect that makes so many of Chopin’s tales “local color” fiction. The irony (especially of the final four words) is more brutal than in many of her other works, but the sudden appearance of Brently almost always surprises first-time readers as much as it does Louise, and it is hard not to admire the gruesome wit of the final reference to the doctors’ judgments.

For Discussion or Writing:

1. Compare and contrast this story with another famous tale featuring a surprise ending, AMBROSE BIERCE's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." In particular, how do both authors manage to make the surprises seem more than merely cheap tricks? How do the surprises contribute to larger themes, and how are the endings carefully anticipated?
2. This tale has been filmed several times, perhaps most interestingly in the 1988 movie *Five Stories of an Hour*, which presents multiple versions of the same basic plot. Compare and contrast Chopin's story with the five film versions, discussing in particular which of the five versions strikes you as most effective (and why), whether any of the five versions is as effective as the story itself (and why), and which of the five versions strikes you as least effective (and why).
3. Compare and contrast this tale with Theodore Dreiser's short story "Free," which is considerably longer and which deals with a male who desires liberty. Which of the tales strikes you as more effective and plausible? Explain why, considering such matters as characterization, style, structure, imagery, and symbolism.
4. Discuss how this story is a compressed version of *The Awakening*. In particular, pay attention to such matters as theme (especially the themes of marriage and awakening), characterization, structure, and the conclusions of both works.
5. Discuss all the details of the story that may make Louise seem sympathetic. Then discuss all the details that may make her seem unappealing. In particular, pay attention to details that can be used to support both arguments. How and why might such ambiguity contribute to the effectiveness of the tale?

"A Night in Acadie" (1897)

Telèspore is a young man with a roving eye who is nonetheless ready to settle down. To distract himself from the various attractive women who live near him, he decides to go on a trip; on the train he

meets a beautiful young woman named Zaïda, who is traveling to a ball. Intrigued, Telèspore decides to attend the party, where he spends much time dancing with Zaïda; later that night, he accompanies her as she heads off to a secret rendezvous with a disreputable but handsome man named André, whom she intends to marry (much to Telèspore's disgust). When a drunken André treats Zaïda with disrespect, Telèspore attacks him, the two men fight, Telèspore wins, and he and Zaïda seem happy and close as the story ends.

This story is typical of Chopin in its emphasis on Louisiana local color, in its depiction of distinct ethnic groups (in this case, especially Cajuns and blacks), in its focus on passionate characters (including a self-assertive woman), and in its stress on the power of erotic impulse. As in many of her tales, Chopin's tone here is not only objective but also subtly amused and slightly ironic; she obviously enjoys her characters, and when she smiles at them she smiles with affection rather than disdain or superiority. Although she zeroes in on two (or, at most, three) main characters, she nonetheless manages to create a vivid sense of an entire society, whose customs seem both exotic and familiar. Male—and female—competitiveness is strongly featured, and the final battle is nearly Darwinian. If in the final scenes Zaïda seems a more compliant figure than during most of the rest of the story, this is because male editors insisted that Chopin tone down the finale to make the heroine more conventionally and passively "feminine." As so often in Chopin's writings, however, the final paragraphs are open ended, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions about the characters' ultimate fates. Chopin's job is done: She has given us a quick but convincing slice of life that takes us inside the vital minds and emotions and the lively society of people rarely presented in fiction before.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does this story imply about human affection? In particular, what does it suggest about the nature of love?
2. To what degree, and in what ways, does the story both challenge and reinforce stereotypes

about ethnic groups, about racial groups, and about relations between the sexes?

3. Compare and contrast the use of humor in this story and in “At the ’Cadian Ball.” Choose some specific instances or phrases and try to explain what, exactly, makes them comic and how the comedy enhances the overall effectiveness of the two works.
4. Compare and contrast the endings of this story and “The Storm.” In particular, discuss how and why the ending of this tale would have been acceptable to Chopin’s editors and first readers in ways not true of the conclusion of “The Storm.”
5. Compare and contrast this story with the work of a New England “local color” writer, such as SARAH ORNE JEWETT. In particular, discuss the ways relations between the sexes are presented in this tale and in Jewett’s story “A White Heron.”

“The Storm” (1898)

When a violent storm suddenly approaches, Bobinôt and his young son Bibi must wait it out in a country store, where they worry about Calixta, Bobinôt’s wife, who is home alone, waiting for their return. Meanwhile, just before the storm hits, Calixta sees Alcée Laballière (who had once courted her) approach her house, where he asks for shelter. As the storm lashes the house, Calixta and Alcée feel drawn to each other and have passionate, satisfying sex before Alcée departs. When Bobinôt and Bibi return, they are happy, Calixta is happy, and Alcée is so happy that he writes a letter to his wife, Clarisse, who has been away; he urges her to take her time returning, and, so, Clarisse is happy as well.

Partly (no doubt) because of this story’s graphic sexuality and its failure to condemn explicitly the adultery it describes, Chopin never tried to publish it; surely this tale, if it had ever been released, would have created even more controversy than *The Awakening*. The story is a heavily ironic sequel to “At the ’Cadian Ball,” and in that sense it illus-

trates Chopin’s tendency to create characters who recur from one tale to another. As did William Faulkner, Chopin crafted a distinct fictional world in which many of the same settings, people, and events are often described first in one work and then in another. In the present case, through a subtitle, she explicitly invites us to read “The Storm” in relation to the earlier work, and the connections between the two tales imply that life is even more complicated than the first story had already implied. Some critics have argued that Chopin, in the second tale, offers a nonjudgmental approach to pleasurable (even adulterous) sex, implying that it (like the storm itself) is a powerful natural force that is disruptive but perhaps also beneficial, even if the final sentence of the story may be partly ironic (Seyersted 166–167). At least one critic (Lawrence Berkove), however, argues that here as in some of her other works, Chopin’s irony is far more corrosive than it seems at first and that Chopin does not endorse the immoral conduct of characters driven by loveless lust and selfish motives. The fact that the story lends itself to such debate is due to the complexity and skill with which it is written, and the final sentence typifies the ways Chopin can communicate complicated and even conflicting tones in language that seems transparently simple.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In your view, what is Chopin’s attitude toward the behavior of Calixta and Alcée? Support your argument with evidence from the text, and pay special attention to any pieces of evidence that might lend support to contrasting claims.
2. Discuss the use of implication and connotation in this story; how does Chopin manage to suggest more than she explicitly says? In particular, pay attention to the opening and closing sentences of each of the story’s five sections.
3. Compare and contrast the use of storm imagery here and in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In particular, how do the storms in the two works lead to radically different results?
4. How would the effect of the story differ if Bibi were not included? Compare and contrast his



STEPHEN CRANE (1871–1900)

He was an explosion of color in a gray age.

(Linda Davis, *Badge of Courage: The Life of Stephen Crane*)

When he was 25 years old, Stephen Crane wrote, “I AM MINDED to die in my 35th year. I think that is all I care to stand” (McCartney 54). Four years later Crane was dead. Famous today for his brief life as a hard-living writer who sought to create a bold new language that would capture the unvarnished facts of real life, Crane was in his own day one of the most widely recognized, revered, and admired authors of his generation. From the vantage of the present, we can see how Crane incorporated the plain language of average people, the use of dialect, and the skeptical view of American culture that were so central to literary realism and so evident in the work of contemporaries such as MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens). We can also begin to see more clearly how Crane’s concentration on linguistic brevity, sharp images, and careful use of symbols paved the way for future writers such as Ernest Hemingway, who would develop his own pared-down language to describe for his generation the harsh reality of war and the deep ironies that accompany America’s quest for spiritual certainty.

Stephen Crane was born November 1, 1871, in Newark, New Jersey, the 14th and last child of Mary Helen Peck Crane and the Reverend Dr. Jonathan Townley Crane. His father was a Methodist minister who wrote pamphlets condemning drinking, card playing, smoking, and dancing. Stephen, a rebel in his life as well as his writing, reacted by cultivating all of these vices. He even rejected orga-

nized religion, though he did not necessarily reject God. His thoroughgoing rebellion may have at least in part been a reaction to great losses in his young life: His father died when he was seven; his sister Agnes Elizabeth died when he was 12; and his older brother Luther Peck died two years later. Within two years of his brother’s death, Crane had purchased his first beer at the exhibition grounds outside Asbury Park, the community on the New Jersey coast where the Crane family moved in 1883, after Stephen’s father’s death. Responding to the astonishment of his friend George Wheeler, who was with him at the time, Crane asked, “How you going to know about things at all less’n you *do* ’em?” (Stallman 12).

Crane’s life moved quickly. After completing school in Asbury Park and Pennington Seminary in New Jersey, Crane attended Claverack College for a time, spent a semester at Lafayette College, and studied for one semester at Syracuse University, where he wrote the first draft of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. By the time he was 20 he had entered a love affair with Helen Trent that ended when he found out that she was going to marry someone else. His mother died that same year. He had another failed love relationship the next year, with Lily Brandon Monroe, a married woman.

He had begun work at the *New York Tribune* when he was 16 years old, but he lost this job in 1892 after writing “On the New Jersey Coast—

Parades and Entertainments,” an unflattering account of the American Day parade (a patriotic parade of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics). He finished *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* the following year, but it was rejected by publishers because of its lurid, shocking scenes. About his rejection Crane is quoted as saying, “You’d think the book came straight from hell and they smelled the smoke” (Chowder 110). Crane borrowed money and self-published the book; however, fewer than six copies were sold. Despite these abysmal sales, the book (somewhat miraculously) captured the attention of the writers Hamlin Garland and WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, who helped launch Crane’s career. Garland recommended Crane’s poems to Howells, who in turn sent them to Henry Mills Alden, editor of *Harper’s Magazine*. Alden rejected the poems, but others took note of the attention paid by Howells. Later, Garland edited *The Red Badge of Courage* and recommended it for publication. It eventually appeared in serial form in the *Philadelphia Press*, December 3–8, 1894, and was published as a book in 1895.

The early 1890s were tumultuous years marked by bouts of poverty and spates of heady creativity, out of which Crane struggled to establish himself as a writer. He dedicated his energies primarily to poetry and fiction during this time, but in order to eke out a living went back to journalism, applying for a job at the *New York Press*. However, the editor, Edward Marshall, reportedly thought that full-time journalism would squelch Crane’s creativity and refused to put him on the staff. He told Crane, “I’ll take all the special articles you can do, Steve, but you are made for better things. Don’t waste your time” (Stallman 84). Crane did have a few pieces published, but he was not able to escape financial hardship (Davis 76). Difficult as these years were, Crane persevered and managed to complete *The Red Badge of Courage*, the work for which he is best known today. Crane began writing his famous Civil War novel in about 1893, though he had never seen an actual battlefield. By the time he completed the work in 1894, he had published enough poems and occasional short stories to attract the attention of the publishing world.

The Red Badge of Courage is the story of one boy’s journey of initiation in the fratricidal conflict that was the U.S. Civil War. In *The Red Badge* Crane achieves a realistic depiction of the ugliness and cruelty of war as he follows the psychological journey of Henry Fleming, a young private who moves from awe and anticipation to fear, outrage, and finally acceptance. In this novel Crane uses vivid colors and animal imagery to put the battlefield in focus. Although it is often referred to as an antiwar novel, many critics consider that characterization a misinterpretation. One critic, Ken Chowder, points out, “Later Crane would write, ‘war is neither magnificent nor squalid: it is simply life.’ But it is intensified life, complete with stupidity and evil; courage, for Crane, is a magnificent thing all the same—absurd, yet magnificent” (113).

As a book devoted to removing the romantic sheen from war, especially the belief that manhood is somehow proven on the field of honor, the book is decidedly antiwar, but that is not its only message. Perhaps because it addressed war from so many perspectives—esthetic and political, as well as theological and psychological—the novel spoke powerfully to many readers, becoming a best seller and in the process making Crane a celebrity on both sides of the Atlantic (Dooley 14).

In January of the following year, when Crane was 23, the *New York Press* sent him to a totally new frontier—the American West—“for new color,” the publisher said (Davis 99). The last stop was to be Mexico City. This trip renewed Crane’s faith in man’s ability to make a difference and tempered the earlier more pessimistic tones in his works. Short stories that grew out of this period but were published much later include two of his most admired works, “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1897) and “The Blue Hotel” (1899).

In late December 1896 Crane was dispatched on the steamship *Commodore* to Cuba to report on the Cuban revolution. The *Commodore* never arrived at its destination. It struck a sandbar when leaving the port of Jacksonville, Florida, on New Year’s Eve; it began to take on water and sank two days later. After all of the lifeboats were taken, Crane escaped in a dinghy with three other passengers. After

30 hours of exposure and exhausted after rowing nonstop against high seas, the men lost control of the vessel while trying to go ashore. The dinghy capsized, and the four were forced to swim half a mile before reaching land, arriving on the beach at Daytona, Florida, on January 2, 1897. The original news story was published as “Stephen Crane’s Own Story”; later, the experience was enhanced and developed into “The Open Boat.” This story is generally considered to be naturalistic and somewhat pessimistic in its depiction of the men’s struggle to survive because of its emphasis on battle with an unyielding sea and its prevailing sense of divine indifference, but Patrick Dooley believes that interpretation to be unfounded: “A consummate ironist, Crane was neither a pessimist nor an optimist; he was, rather a meliorist who believed that improvement was possible” (6). Other critics agree, saying the story depicts the power of solidarity as shown through the coordinated efforts of the men while struggling to survive on the dinghy.

Even after the shipwreck Crane remained fascinated with the experience of war. Hearing of the struggle for independence taking place on the Greek island of Crete, he traveled to Greece in 1897 as war correspondent for the *New York Journal*. His current love, Cora Taylor, accompanied him with the aim of becoming one of the first female war correspondents. Crane had fallen in love with Taylor in Jacksonville, where she was the owner and hostess of a house of ill repute called the Hotel de Dream. When the Greco-Turkish War ended later that year, the couple moved to England, where they lived as husband and wife, though they were never married. During this period Crane began a close friendship with the writer Joseph Conrad that would endure until the end of Crane’s life.

The war over Cuba continued, and Crane wanted to be part of it. In April 1898 he left Taylor to return to the United States, where he tried to enlist in the navy. He failed the physical exam but found work in Cuba as a war correspondent for the *New York World*, for which he completed 20 dispatches on the Spanish-American War, including one on the Battle of San Juan. After spending nine months in Cuba, Crane returned to Taylor, who

had purchased a huge, dank castle and incurred a substantial debt. Nevertheless, he and Taylor lived lavishly, even though he knew his health was failing from tuberculosis (TB). Toward the end of an all-night party shortly after Christmas 1899, he leaned over a guest and coughed up blood. He still refused to give up. With the coming spring he moved to a TB sanitarium in Germany, but he was past hope. He died on June 5, 1900, at the age of 28. Nevertheless, in his few short years of writing, Stephen Crane had made an indelible impression on American literature.

Crane began writing short stories at the age of eight. He was mostly self-taught, though his mother and father were both published writers and he grew up in a home where writing was seen as a noble vocation and the written word highly valued. He flunked out of Lafayette College in 1890 (he spent most of his time cutting classes and playing baseball) and the following year dropped out of Syracuse University (where his maternal godfather was president) after just one term. However, it was while at Syracuse that he drafted *Maggie* and met Garland, who encouraged Crane. Garland and another writer friend, Howells, were both early writers of realism whose work influenced Crane’s style.

Crane’s profession as a journalist demanded a keen eye for detail and an ear for dialect that contributed to an already avid interest in persons from all walks of life. He said that his favorite part of the job was going to police court. There, he encountered all types of people. His sensitive eye and ear registered every appearance, action, and accent. Given his interest in police court, it did not take him long to discover the seamier side of town. He was impressed by the efforts of simple men who fought for their livelihoods in the crowded streets of New Jersey shore towns and Manhattan; perhaps in rebellion against his strict moral upbringing, he was enticed by the more negligent ways of life he discovered there. One biographer points out that these streets became Crane’s new university:

He began making trips into New York, wandering into the tenements and exploring the

bowery, the brazen, mile-long strip of saloons and dance halls, brothels, flophouses, and dirty, unlighted alleyways lying east of Broadway, from Worth Street to about East 4th Street. A university unto itself, the Bowery was a place of lost souls and souls for sale, Manhattan's ragged, gaudy edge, where the show went on dependably each night. (Davis 42)

Crane took in every sight and sound. Even the most commonplace objects caught his eye: the cast-aside furniture, the blowing papers, the grimy children on the sidewalk, and the colors—the expected gray and brown of the slums, but also red and yellow and green. He heard the horses grunting, the feet shuffling, the newsboy hawking his papers, the landlord cursing a tenant, the children laughing. He stored these memories and drew on them for color, metaphor, and imagery in his writing, especially *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which he began when he was just 19. His biographer Linda Davis described Crane as “an explosion of color in a gray age” (xi).

Realistic literature aims to show life “as it really is,” much as an untouched photograph that reveals all the detail, both the good and the bad. Realists like Crane challenged romantic belief in the existence of a divine order that informed human history and enabled people to trust that civilization was progressive and would ultimately contribute to the fulfillment of a grand spiritual purpose. Crane lived in a time of great change in the United States, when many inventions, such as the camera, were reshaping American culture, accelerating the pace of change, and creating the impression of cultural advance. The transcontinental railway, the transatlantic cable, the electric lightbulb, the telephone, all suggested that a new era of enlightened thought was dawning in America. The steam engine and the internal-combustion engine opened up vast areas for development and increased factory production but also contributed to the spread of the assembly line that meant machinery replaced skilled craftsmen with faceless line workers. As the factories grew, so did the numbers of child and women

laborers. The cities became crowded with workers looking for employment, and the competition for jobs intensified. For many the inner city became its own special form of battlefield. Crane's realism recorded these sweeping changes.

Naturalistic literature—often confused with realism—also emerged in the second half of the 19th century and can be thought of as a particularly gritty outgrowth of realism that plays an important role in Crane's writing. Naturalists, as do realists, depict real-life situations, but they tend to place greater importance on the influence of external forces that dictate individual behavior, such as heredity and environment, sometimes giving special attention to the role of chance. The forces at play in Crane's writing included nature, as in “The Open Boat,” or war, as in *The Red Badge of Courage*, or poverty and abuse, as in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. In these works Crane questions the ability of individuals to make choices that alter the course of their lives, suggesting instead that people are determined by their surroundings.

Crane's training as a journalist would serve him well in the realistic sections of his two most famous works, *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. For example, *Maggie*, his first novel, begins, “A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil's Row who were circling madly around the heap and pelting at him.” Thus, the novel begins with a graphic description of the kind of squalor Crane was to know as a reporter; it also depicts the violent efforts of a small and insignificant person who is threatened by poverty, as well as the human antagonists who compete with him for physical dominance. Similar scenes would appear throughout the body of work he would create over the course of his life. He is often cited as saying that all of life is war, and his protagonists often react to that war violently. Maggie's war zone is the Bowery district of New York City, an area of urban slums where she battles against an abusive family and an uncaring community of adults who take advantage of her. Maggie's inability to overcome the odds

stacked against her meant that she had to fall back on whatever resources she had, including the sale of her body through prostitution. When she dies, the reader is unsure whether it is suicide or murder.

One critic points out that though Crane often wrote about experiences he had not lived through himself, he was often dangerously close to those experiences afterward: “He began *The Red Badge of Courage* at 21, before he’d been within a thousand miles of war; a few years later, he became a daring war correspondent. He wrote about a prostitute, then fell in love with a real-life madam. He wrote stories about shipwrecks and subsequently found himself in one” (Chowder 109). There was a degree of recklessness that went along with Crane’s determination to discover for himself the full range of human emotion and physical sensation. As Chowder puts it, “Most of the spectacularly theatrical events of his life have one thing in common. In each of them, Crane was engaged in fierce struggle—against the police, the press and standards of public morality, against the cruel sea, enemy bullets and incurable disease, against violence, nature and death” (115). His great achievement, though, was not brought about by the extremes and bizarre twists that characterized his biography, or by his choice of unconventional subject matter; rather, it was the skill with which he crafted highly structured texts rich in symbolic significance that probed the deepest mysteries of human experience. His single greatest and most pervasive theme may have been finding a way to arrive at a sense of moral purpose in a universe that projects a vast indifference and all too frequently limits the scope of human action.

Although he is best known for his prose, Crane also published two important volumes of experimental poetry: *The Black Riders* (1895) and *War Is Kind* (1899). His poetry echoes his questioning of primary cultural assumptions and the investigations into the meaning of human life that are so prominent in his prose. He also adapts the vivid imagery; bold, stark detail; memorable metaphors; and abundant symbolism. In poetic form, however, Crane’s rejection of conventional answers to questions about the aims of war, the nature of

love, or the indifference of the universe is expressed even more directly. Poems like “God Lay Dead in Heaven” and “A Man Said to the Universe” draw on the free verse Crane discovered in WALT WHITMAN and the highly compressed lyric form that he encountered in EMILY DICKINSON to reveal a vision void of easy answers and often anarchic in its implications. In many ways Crane’s poems speak more directly to readers today than they did when Crane was alive. Our present-day awareness of the dehumanizing force of war, the impersonality of drought, epidemic disease, global warming, opportunistic dictatorships, and greed on a global scale have made Crane’s stance seem less radical. His poems, especially, have attracted new readers in recent years and may in future years match or even eclipse in popularity his prose works.

***Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893)**

In this short novel *Maggie*, a young woman trapped in the poverty of the Bowery district of New York City around the end of the 19th century, grows up in a family whose members abuse her until she escapes with her boyfriend. When he abandons her to the streets, she is forced into prostitution in order to survive. In the end *Maggie* dies, although it is unclear whether her death is by suicide or murder.

Because of the mature subject matter and abundance of profane language, even today this short novel remains on many lists of banned books. One trait of Crane’s writing is that he was determined to speak his mind, no matter who disagreed with him. It is thought that Crane wrote the following inscription—which appeared on the cover of *Maggie*—to Hamlin Garland: “It is probable that the reader of this small thing may consider the Author to be a bad man, but, obviously, this is a matter of small consequence to the Author.” Nevertheless, *Maggie* was rejected by publishers when Crane first submitted it in late 1892 and early 1893. Determined to have it published, Crane borrowed money and published it himself; however, to avoid

embarrassing his family, he published first under an alias, *Johnson Smith*. He printed more than 1,000 copies but sold only six (Chowder 110).

This is Crane's earliest novel, and it is said to be an example of both gritty realism and naturalism, or environmental determinism. Two characteristics of realism that Crane employed to great effect are his choice of subject matter and his rich infusion of dialect. Realists sought to awaken readers to the lowest levels of society, rather than concentrating attention solely on the lives of the elite, and they used dialect as a means of lending "local color" to particular regions and communities of speakers. Examples of dialect presented in coordination with a specific sense of place and a palpable atmosphere of menace are easy to find:

Jimmie was determined. "He t'inks he kin scrap, but he'll find out diff'ent."

"Gee," remonstrated the friend, "What deh hell?" (Massie 86)

Realistic detail helps to evoke the squalor of poverty:

When Pete arrived Maggie, in a worn black dress, was waiting for him in the midst of a floor strewn with wreckage. The curtain at the window had been pulled by a heavy hand and hung by one tack, dangling to and fro in the draft through the cracks in the sash. The knots of blue ribbons appeared like violated flowers. The fire in the stove had gone out. The displaced lids and open doors showed heaps of sullen grey ashes. The remnants of a meal, ghastly, like dead flesh, lay in a corner. Maggie's red mother, stretched on the floor, blasphemed and gave her daughter a bad name. (51)

The preceding passage notably illustrates two other important techniques typical of Crane: use of color imagery and careful deployment of vivid metaphors. The blue ribbons that "appeared like violated flowers" foreshadow Pete's sexual exploitation of Maggie, and the fireless stove points to the absence of a maternal presence whose dutiful

maintenance of a glowing hearth ought to make the home a place of love, comfort, and nurture for all members of the family. When Maggie's florid mother gives "her daughter a bad name," the language points to the literal curse hurled at Maggie, plus the symbolic weight of a corrupt family whose degradation proves a significant drag on Maggie's efforts to improve herself.

Naturalism enters the novel through Maggie's struggle for survival in a threatening environment that continually assaults her sense of self-worth and impedes her efforts to believe in the possibility of virtue. Darwinism's idea of the survival of the fittest combines with Marxism's social Darwinism in Crane's blunt descriptions of the brutality and ceaseless competition that batter Maggie through each phase of her life. Naturalist writers, as did Crane, viewed humanity as subject to the same forces and fates that influenced any other natural creation, and they presented the environment as indifferent to human striving. We see this when Maggie's mother wails over the corpse of her daughter, belatedly offering Christian forgiveness long after it would have made a difference. Her indulgent wallowing in false sentiment undermines the efficacy of Christian virtues that in this instance prove misplaced and ineffectual. Like other naturalists, Crane presented life as a "vicious trap" and sought to be "frank in the portrayal of human beings as animals driven by fundamental urges—fear, hunger, and sex" (Holman and Harmon 310). Maggie's mother, Mary Johnson, has descended to the level of brute appetite, repeatedly seeking escape through intoxication and denying the most fundamental of all civilizing bonds—the love of a mother for her child. Crane's decision to give her the same name as the Virgin Mary may represent the darkest irony in an already dark book.

Maggie is indeed caught in a vicious trap that few could escape. She lives in poverty with an abusive, alcoholic mother until she is forced to leave. Her only way out is with her 16-year-old lover, Pete, a bartender who quickly proves unreliable and abandons her to the streets. She has an older brother, Jimmie, but he, too, turns his back on her. In desperation she turns to prostitution for sur-

vival. If Maggie is seen as a victim of her environment, then naturalistic elements of environmental determinism are clearly at work (Dooley 15). However, Maggie is not the only character living in the stressful circumstances she so unfortunately faces, and other characters survive. Crane's purpose is not to promote surrender but to equip readers with an accurate sense of the world so that they can more effectively do battle with it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the development of Maggie's character from beginning to end. In what ways does she change? In what ways does she remain the same? How does her development or lack of it contribute to what Crane is saying about urban poverty?
2. How does Crane convey to the readers the profession that Maggie falls into without actually naming it? Explain why he uses this indirect method.
3. What is the role of Jimmie Johnson in the novel? In what ways can Jimmie be compared and contrasted to George Hurstwood in Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*? Both works present naturalistic accounts of city life in The United States, but these characters respond to the brutal demands of life very differently.
4. Explain how Crane develops a sense of the oppressive force of poverty. Consider especially his use of graphic description and metaphor.
5. Would you consider *Maggie* a naturalistic novel? Why or why not? How does thinking of it as a work of naturalism lead to certain interpretations of its meaning?

***The Red Badge of Courage* (1894)**

The Red Badge of Courage is the coming-of-age story of a young man who, against his mother's wishes, joins the army in order to achieve the glory and adventure he has been told about through the stories about war that he hears while growing up in his hometown. Much to his shock and dismay, he discovers—as he witnesses his comrades fall in

battle—that war is dirty, dangerous, exhausting, and a source of despair. In the heat of battle his courage is tested, and he fails. Fortunately, he is given a second chance, and he summons the courage to fight bravely and to present himself in his own eyes and the eyes of others as a “good man.” Crane presents a story of challenges, outrages, despair, and courage.

Written from the third-person limited point of view, the novel follows the youth and shares with us his shock and confusion at discovering the terror and ugliness of battle. We witness his self-doubts, his running away, and his final ascension into manhood. Early in the novel the youth, Henry Fleming, feels self-doubts that fill him with fear: Will he stand brave and fight in battle, or will he run? He hints at these fears in conversations with his comrades, hoping to find a companion with whom he can commiserate. However, the other soldiers scoff at the idea, and the youth feels alone:

His failure to discover any mite of resemblance in their view points made him more miserable than before. No one seemed to be wrestling with such a terrific personal problem. He was a mental outcast. (*Red Badge* 30)

His greatest fear is then realized when he enters combat and flees from the line of battle. The reader runs with the youth and follows his feelings from fear of mortal suffering and destruction to a desperate rationalization of his actions. He throws a pinecone at a squirrel, and the squirrel runs: “There was the law, he said. Nature had given him a sign” (78). He then meets up with wounded soldiers of another regiment and faces his fear of being discovered: “He was continually casting sidelong glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow” (91). He becomes envious of the wounded: “He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage” (91).

The youth does get his red badge, but, ironically, it occurs outside combat. Although he is still fearful, the youth's curiosity and sense of duty keep him near the front lines. Soldiers are running “hither and thither” (210). He pulls the arm of one soldier to ask

for information about the course of the combat, and when the frantic man swings around, his rifle catches the youth's head and knocks him to the ground. The youth's first thought is concern about his wound, but then he is surprised and comforted by the assumption of other soldiers that he received the wound in battle. One ties up his head in a large handkerchief, but a red stain from the wound bleeds through. He has his badge of courage: "He was a picture of an exhausted soldier after a feast of war" (134).

Irrationally bolstered by the confidence others have expressed in him, the youth determines to stand firm in his next battle: "He was not going to be badgered all of his life, like a kitten chased by boys, he said" (164). Unlike his previous encounter with battle, when he was altogether too conscious of peril, on this occasion he descends into a semiconscious, brute state where he is consumed by primal fury, "his eyes burning hatefully, and his teeth set in a cur-like snarl" (164). In this fierce frame of mind, he loses himself in battle; he is "not conscious that he is erect upon his feet" (166). He continues shooting even after the others have ceased. The youth considers himself a "barbarian" and a "beast"; these observations are cut short, however, when he and a friend overhear an officer calling his regiment, dismissing them in degrading terms as "mule drivers" (191). Nevertheless, this affront increases the youth's resolve to prove the officer wrong.

The youth becomes caught up in the emotional madness of the next encounter with the enemy: "Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness, for this flag which was near him" (187). When the color sergeant falters, the youth and his friend grab the flag and grapple for it. The youth wrenches it and carries it forward in battle. His posture suggests patriotic zeal and dedication to his fellows, but in reality he is motivated by a wish to change the attitudes of his comrades. Most specifically, he wants to prove his worth in the eyes of the officer who had called his regiment a mule driver, but his regiment pulls back too soon, and their retreat is "a march of shame to him" (191). The larger principles of the conflict are lost to him, and he fights purely to prove his mettle in the moment. For him,

the minuscule details of his present circumstance become all-encompassing.

Looking over the landscape traversed in the battle, the youth is astonished at its meager size: "He discovered that the distances, as compared with the brilliant measurings of his mind, were trivial and ridiculous" (201). Nevertheless, the youth soon hears that his lieutenant had commended him as a "very good man t' have," and the youth feels a "serene self-confidence" (209). This self-confidence slowly hardens into savage determination: "He himself felt the daring spirit of a savage religion-mad. He was capable of profound sacrifices, a tremendous death" (219). He puts his passion to the challenge in the next battle when he carries the colors into battle and captures the enemy flag: "He plunged like a mad horse at it. He was resolved it should not escape if wild blows and darings of blows could seize it" (221).

After the battle settles, the youth reflects on his new understanding:

He understood then that the existence of shot and counter-shot was in the past. He had dwelt in a land of strange, squalling upheavals and had come forth. He had been where there was red of blood and black of passion, and he was escaped. His first thoughts were given to rejoicings at this fact. (228)

Crane's language encourages the perception that survival is primary and that conduct on the field of battle has little to do with moral principles or service to a glorious cause.

Finally, as the troops march slowly toward other possible battles, the youth feels a "quiet manhood" (232). He shares with the reader a new acceptance of himself:

He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace. (233)

Manhood, as described here, is not a noble state achieved through the crucible of war, but the endurance of a “red sickness” that reduced Henry to brute instinct (232). Similarly, the peace for which he has discovered new appreciation is not a vision founded on enhanced moral sensitivity, but a nostalgic yearning for life he risked losing by putting his safety in jeopardy. This is not a bold new world with enhanced rights for all citizens or the dream of a newly unified nation but a wish to regain the calm he knew before the storm of war. Crane gives little evidence of personal growth or cultural progress.

Crane was trained as a reporter and, as such, was practiced in third-person objective point of view. A reporter’s point of view could have named the battles and troop movements and enumerated the lists of casualties. However, it is the expanded third-person *limited* point of view that allows us access to the youth’s thoughts and fears. It is access to these thoughts that allows our identification with the youth and our ability to see the confusion, terror, and ugliness of battle, and that allows us to experience the change in the youth as he accepts himself and the imperfections of his world. Our awareness of the limited scope of his thought compels us to arrive at our own independent assessment of his true moral condition.

As stated previously, realism, in its most basic sense, attempts to depict life as it really is. It shows the blemishes as well as the goodness that life offers. Consider the following passage from *The Red Badge of Courage*, in which young Henry announces to his mother that, against her wishes, he has joined the army:

When he had returned home his mother was milking the brindle cow. Four others stood waiting. “Ma, I’ve enlisted,” he said to her diffidently. There was a short silence. “The Lord’s will be done, Henry,” she had finally replied, and had then continued to milk the brindle cow. (7)

Henry joined the army with visions of grandeur and patriotic zeal, to which his mother’s simple,

resigned reply is not the response he has hoped to evoke. A few sentences later, he is further disappointed in the mundane atmosphere of his own departure from home:

Still, she had disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it. He had privately primed himself for a beautiful scene. He had prepared certain sentences which he thought could be used with touching effect. But her words destroyed his plans. She had doggedly peeled potatoes and addressed him as follows: “You watch out, Henry, an’ take good care of yerself in this here fighting business—you watch out, an’ take good care of yerself. Don’t go a-thinkin’ you can lick the hull rebel army at the start, because yeh can’t. Yer jest one little feller amongst a hull lot of others, and yeh’ve got to keep quiet an’ do what they tell yeh. I know how you are, Henry.” (8)

This quiet scene may seem superfluous within a story of battles fought for national glory and individual rights, but it puts the main character and protagonist Henry in context. As readers, we see how inflated his expectations are, and we sense that his imaginative life has not prepared him for what lies ahead. These realistic details, including the use of dialect, show Henry to be a simple, young boy with unrealistic dreams and a romantic vision of war. They also foreshadow the discoveries that he will soon make regarding the chaos of war and his small role in it.

Toward the middle of the novel, Henry wanders into a circle of trees that arch above him and form a sort of chapel in which he finds a dead soldier. Here Crane uses objective description to intensify not the glory of dying courageously but the horror of dying alone:

The corpse was dressed in a uniform that had once been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen

on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open.
Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants.
One was trundling some sort of a bundle along
the upper lip. (88)

Henry discovers more images of death, and these are also expressed with simple, realistic language:

He came to a fence and clamored over it. On the far side, the ground was littered with clothes and guns. A newspaper, folded up, lay in the dirt. A dead soldier was stretched, with his face hidden in his arm. Farther off was a group of four or five corpses keeping mournful company. A hot sun had blazed upon the spot. (85)

Scenes like these confirm the observation that writers in the realist tradition describe the “common, the average, the everyday” (Holman and Harmon 391). Realistic detail in *The Red Badge of Courage* allows Crane to portray not the glory of war but the impact of the horror of war on the common man.

Although realistic in many aspects, *The Red Badge of Courage* is not known simply as a realistic novel. Crane goes beyond realism to develop a form of writing new to his generation: impressionism. An approach first developed by painters such as Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir, impressionism entered literature as a manner of writing concerned not just with the objective observation of a subject but with the way the world is “*seen* or *felt* to be by the impressionist or character in a single moment. The impressionistic writer employs highly selective details, the ‘brush strokes’ of sense-data that can suggest impressions” (Holman and Harmon 244). Crane achieves this sort of impressionism when he selects a few soldiers and battles, mostly unnamed, to represent the Civil War in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Selective marches and battles are seen through the eyes of one soldier, Henry Fleming, who is most often referred to as simply “the youth.” Although realistic detail is also provided, Crane often makes use of vivid imagery and metaphors and similes to suggest the impressions the war makes upon the youth.

This is perhaps most vividly seen through Crane’s use of animal imagery to portray the savage aspects of war. At a particularly memorable moment he describes the regiment as “one of those moving monsters wending with many feet” (22). The campfires are seen as “red eyes across the river . . . growing larger, as the orbs of a row of dragons advancing” (22). The onslaught is described in terms of “redoubtable dragons.” The enemy advance is “like a ruthless hunting.” Individual fighters are similarly described: “The tormentors were flies sucking insolently at his blood,” and “the fighters resembled animals tossed for a death struggle into a dark pit” (105). The four prisoners of war are “trapped strange birds.” The youth’s own columns of infantry are “huge crawling reptiles” like “two serpents crawling from the cavern of the night” that move with “the sinuous movement of a serpent” (108). As the youth’s regiment pummels the enemy in one skirmish, the opposing line is described in similarly impressionistic fashion: “The blue smoke-swallowed line curled and writhed like a snake stepped upon” (165). War itself is repeatedly referred to as an evil, beastlike god: “War, the red animal, war, the blood-swollen god” (119).

When the youth runs from battle, it is with animal-like imagery: “He ran like a rabbit” and “he was like a proverbial chicken” (69). The youth’s later determination to stand against the enemy is described in catlike images: “He was not going to be badgered of his life, like a kitten chased by boys, he said. It was not well to drive men into final corners; at those moments they could all develop teeth and claws” (164). His lieutenant uses similar images to describe him after the battle: “By heavens, if I had ten thousand wild cats like you I could tear th’ stomach outa this war in less’n a week!” (168).

In addition to the animal imagery, Crane occasionally uses the imagery of machinery to describe the war’s unfeeling, dehumanizing production of corpses: “The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses” (85).

Finally, Crane’s verbal brushstrokes use color imagery to evoke the ugliness of battle and the

mourning of nature at the outrageousness of man's ventures into war. Red, of course, evokes images of danger, death, and bloodshed. The war is described as "the red animal—war, the blood-swollen god," and battles are "crimson blotches on the pages of the past" (5). On the first page of the novel, the youth sees the "red, eyelike gleam of hostile campfires" (1). Later on, these "red eyes" peer through the night. At best, the campfires are "red, peculiar blossoms" (26). When the youth fires his weapon in battle, he falls into the "red rage" of a "driven beast" (57). The bloodshed seems to block the very color of the sun: "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer" (99). Later, when the fighting ceases, the sun shines "bright and gay in the blue, enameled sky" (170).

The color yellow appears frequently (17 times) in the novel, almost always associated with the sickness, decay, and sorrow of war. "From across the river, the red eyes were still peering. In the eastern sky there was a patch of yellow rug laid for the feet of the coming sun; and against it, black and patternlike, loomed the gigantic figure of the colonel on a gigantic horse" (21). Later, "the clouds were tinged an earth-like yellow in the sun rays and in the shadow were a sorry blue" (67). In the chapel scene with the dead soldier, yellow is used to express the decay of the soldier's mouth: "Its red had changed to an appalling yellow" (80). The musketry is described as "level belchings of yellow flame that caused an inhuman whistling in the air" and later as "yellow tongues" (186).

When the youth leaves for war, he goes with visions of adventure and glory. Gold and purple have been traditionally associated with images of glory and royalty, but in this novel they evoke darker emotions. In his first march the youth notices that the uniforms "glowed a deep purple hue," and at night the "columns changed to purple streaks" (32). "The lines of the forest were long purple streaks" (32). One huge soldier was "quite purple with rage" (146). After their victory in battle, Henry views his triumphant fellow soldiers' marching "in wide purple and gold," but privately, "this vision of cruelty brooded over him. It clung near him always and darkened his view of these deeds in purple and gold" (230).

One of the more prominent colors used in the novel is blue; this is seen especially through the description of the Union army as a "blue demonstration" (18). On one level, the blue demonstration is simply the marching in formation of the Union army. On another level, however, it enforces the sense of hope—of clear blue skies that reflect a sense of shared purpose and the unified effort to bring about positive change that will soon be contrasted with the ugliness of actual war. As the youth's anticipation of adventure and glory diminishes and he begins to see the war in its all ugliness, the blue of the uniforms changes. At first the "blue of the line was crusted with steel color, and the brilliant flags projected" (72). Then, after weathering the enemy onslaught, the blue is suddenly brittle: "The brittle blue line had withstood the blows and won" (76). As the battles wear on, Crane presents the blue of the uniform as fading in proportion to the youth's disenchantment: "The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green" (79) and "the flap of the blue jacket fell away from the body" while a "blue desperate figure" led "lurid charges," a "blue, determined figure standing before a crimson and steel assault" (109). Later, when victory is uncertain, the enemy "began briskly to slice up the blue men," and "grunting bundles of blue began to drop." In desperation, "It was a blind and despairing rush by the collection of men in dusty and tattered blue" (218). Other references to blue refer to a clear sky, seen only in lulls between battles, or to the solemn business of war and bloodshed: "The blue smoke-swallowed line curled and writhed," (186) and "Behind them blue smoke curled and clouded above the treetops" (118).

The color blue also contributes to Crane's naturalistic scenes where he magnifies the indifference of nature that receives particular attention between and after pivotal skirmishes. For example, after one battle, "As he gazed around him the youth felt a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleaming on the trees and fields. It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (63). At the end of the novel it seems that nature

wants merely to wash away the remembrances of the war and then return to its more ordinary condition: "Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds" (233). What then, has been accomplished by the war?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider Crane's use of color and animal imagery as expressed in a particular scene. Interpret the scene on the basis of this imagery and state what the scene tells about the Civil War.
2. Would Crane's impression of war be as clear if this story were written in third-person objective point of view? Why or why not?
3. What is accomplished by having most of the soldiers remain unnamed and referred to as simply "loud soldier," "tattered soldier," "friend," and so on?
4. Critics have speculated that Crane, who never actually served in the army, wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* because he wanted to know what it was like to be in battle. Do you think Crane succeeded in this? Why or why not?
5. Compare Henry Fleming's state of mind after he flees from his first encounter with combat with the sentiment expressed in Emily Dickinson's poem "Success is counted sweetest." Do you think Dickinson would have agreed with Crane's assessment of war?

"The Open Boat" (1897)

In this short story four shipwrecked men (the injured captain and the oiler, cook, and correspondent) float in the wave-crested sea in their small dinghy. The four characters take turns rowing and bailing water when the waves crash into their boat. They soon see land and even possible rescuers on shore, but the waves are too big to attempt to reach shore, and they go back out. After two nights on the lifeboat, they make another attempt to go ashore; their boat is swamped, and they swim to the beach. However, the oiler, the most able-bodied of the four, drowns in the attempt.

This story is based on Crane's own real-life experience, when he was sailing to Cuba and his ship, the *Commodore*, sank in high seas off the coast of Florida. He was a war correspondent for the *New York Journal*, on his way to write about problems that led up to the Spanish-American War in 1898. In the classic man-versus-nature tale he weaves out of his own experience, Crane uses an omniscient narrator but focuses primarily on the perspective of the fictional correspondent. The four characters row ceaselessly for two days and nights, battling cold, crashing waves, fatigue, and sharks. At one point they almost give up hope and exchange addresses of next of kin in case anyone survives to tell their families.

This story is often discussed as an example of naturalism, a literary movement Crane experimented with in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, incorporated in portions of *The Red Badge of Courage*, and wove into other short stories and some of his poems. In this story naturalism is clearest in the indifference of nature to the plight of the men and the clear sense that there is no divine order that invests experience with spiritual significance. In the first line of the story we learn of the limited vision of the characters: "None of them knew the color of the sky" (*Prose and Poetry* 885). On one level they simply could not see the sky because of the great waves and sea spray crashing over them. On a second level an adherent of naturalism may claim that they could not yet recognize the futility of fighting against the greater force of nature. A third interpretation, however, could be that they did not yet recognize the unity of purpose and necessity of working together that they would discover over the course of their torturous ordeal.

In the second part of the story the crew grows closer. The captain, although injured, tries to encourage the others: "'Oh, well,' said the captain, soothing his children, 'we'll get ashore all right'" (888). The indifference of nature is evident in this section in the comment that, although the crew was in no position to recognize it, "It was probably splendid, it was probably glorious, this play of the free sea, wild with lights of emerald and white and amber" (887). The crew does, however, notice the carefree birds nearby:

“The birds sat comfortably in groups, and they were envied by some in the dinghy, for the wrath of the sea was no more to them than it was to a covey of prairie chickens a thousand miles inland” (888). Their envy turns to aggravation, however, when one of the birds lights on the captain’s head and he has to brush it away. The cook and the correspondent curse the bird, and we are told that to all four men the bird seemed “somehow gruesome and ominous” (888). The solidarity of the crew grows during this section; the captain speaks “serenely” and is answered by the “cheerful cook” (890).

Part 3 opens by confirming the sense of unity now felt by the four characters: They have developed a “subtle brotherhood” (890). No one speaks about it, but it “dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him” (890). This sense of brotherhood encourages the crew, but their hopes are soon dashed. After spending all night rowing against crashing waves, they approach a lighthouse. They are hopeful that it is a rescue station and manage to break out and share some cigars.

In part 4 we learn that their hope was unfounded. The waves increase in intensity as they head for the shore, and they prepare for the worst. At this point they begin silently to question why they were allowed to last this long if nature had intentions of drowning them all along: “If I am to be drowned—if I am to be drowned—if I am to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate the sand and the trees?” (894). At last the waves are too strong for them to overcome, and they turn back to sea before they are close enough to the shore to risk swimming the rest of the way.

After a long afternoon of rowing, they see a man on shore, running and waving his coat over his head as if signaling, and their hopes are again enlivened. Others join the signaler on the beach, but the men on the boat are at an impasse; the waves will not allow the dinghy to move closer to shore, and they begin another long night of rowing. They again question the purpose of their ordeal: “If I am to be drowned—if I am to be drowned—if I am to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods

who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate the sand and the trees?” (898).

In part 5 the men are physically as well as emotionally connected. They squeeze their feet underneath one another for warmth. As they sleep, the “cook’s arm was around the oiler’s shoulder”; they are described as “babes of the sea” (900). The correspondent, the only one awake, silently swears at the dark fin of a shark circling the boat. The shark, however, like nature in general, appears indifferent to the fears of the correspondent and departs without incident.

Part 6 begins with the thrice-repeated nagging question: “If I am to be drowned—if I am to be drowned—if I am to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate the sand and the trees?” (901). Then the narrator provides an explanation not so much of nature’s indifference as of the reasons the men might have for responding with strong emotion to absence of sympathy that they attribute to nature: “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and feels that she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw sticks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temple” (902). Given this circumstance, humanity then feels the need for supplication: “Yes, but I love myself.” To which there is no response: “A high cold star on a winter’s night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation” (902). Here, as clearly as anywhere in Crane’s writing, we are told that it is the plight—the pathos—of humanity to perceive its own insignificance. There is no divinity that takes an interest in the sufferings of humanity. The vast universe is neither malevolent nor benevolent; it merely exists, and humanity is condemned to make the most of it.

In part 7 the crew again sees land and the tower of the lighthouse, but they are not as jubilant as before. Rather, as seen through the eyes of the correspondent, their behavior represents a set of perfectly natural responses: “the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and

nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. She was indifferent, flatly indifferent" (905). A true adherent of naturalism would perhaps end his tale with the crew drifting in the sea, but Crane does not leave us without hope. The men have bonded together now, and perhaps their joint efforts will be sufficient to overcome the waves.

They attempt a last desperate effort to row through the "monstrous inshore rollers" (906). They are swamped and thrown into the icy January waves, where they surface, look around for one another, and swim for shore. The captain, hanging on to the capsized dinghy, motions for the correspondent to join him. Under the law dictating survival of the fittest, the able oiler should have been the first to the shore, but he succumbs to a monstrous wave and drowns. The others are rescued at the shore. Thus, three of the men survive their ordeal at sea; and while they do not feel like conquerors, they at least feel like "interpreters" of the sea's great voice. A critic, Patrick Dooley, points out that "through their confrontation with the indifferent universe, the survivors appreciate both the limits and the possibilities of human effort and human community" (16).

The personal experience leading to this story, Crane's own shipwreck in 1898, was a defining moment in his life. This event, and his prior journeys to the American West and Mexico, helped him to confirm his belief in "the value of human effort and the importance of human solidarity in an indifferent universe" (Dooley 15).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Contrast Crane's representation of the storm in "The Open Boat" with HERMAN MELVILLE's presentation of a violent storm in the chapter titled "The Candles" in *Moby-Dick*. Identify key characteristics of Crane's writing about turbulent weather that distinguish him from Melville as a naturalist writer.
2. Look closely at the way Crane creates suspense by repeatedly describing the men on the boat as actually quite close to shore. Where is this sense of suspense most pronounced? Do you think that Crane's use of suspense contributes significantly to the story? How might the story have differed if it were written in the straight journalistic style of a newspaper reporter?

"The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1897)

A western marshal, Jack Potter, timidly takes home a new wife, unannounced, to the small town of Yellow Sky. About the time he arrives in the sleepy town, the local has-been gunfighter, Scratchy Wilson, gets drunk and shoots in the empty streets. Almost as a second thought, he ventures to the marshal's empty house and challenges him. He is surprised when an unarmed Potter walks up with his wife. Taken aback by the idea of the marshal's being married, Wilson holsters his gun and goes home.

Realism and subtle humor figure into this short story of the U.S. Southwest. Crane uses realistic detail, such as when he describes the marshal on the train to Yellow Sky, accompanied by his new wife and dressed in his wedding clothes: "The man's face was reddened with many days in the wind and sun. . . . From time to time he looked down respectfully at his attire. . . . The glances he devoted to other passengers were furtive and shy" (*Prose and Poetry* 787). He is clearly an unpretentious man out of his element who feels alienated from even the clothes he is wearing. In a symbolic sense he represents the uncertain identity of the westerner, who recognizes the necessity of welcoming the advance of civilization but has trouble adjusting to it. His greatest concern is that he is taking home a new and unannounced wife, an act that he thinks "could only be exceeded by the burning of the new hotel" (789). His companion, his new wife, is similarly uncomfortable: "She continually twisted her head to regard her puff sleeves, very still, straight, and high. They embarrassed her" (787).

Crane uses more realistic detail, such as the description of the "bartender's dog [that] lay on the boardwalk that crossed in front of the door. His head was on his paws, and he glanced drowsily here and there with the constant vigilance of a dog

that is kicked on occasion" (791). This together with the sketch of a man "without a coat" who sat at "the cooler end of the railway station . . . in a tilted chair and smoked his pipe" (791) evoke the image of an average, unassuming, perfectly ordinary, drowsy, simple town.

Into this sleepy setting a recurring annoyance erupts: Scratchy Wilson, "the last one of the old gang," is drunk and, as he usually does when he is drunk, he shoots up the town. Crane uses humorous understatement to show the town's grudging acceptance of this rite. The men in the saloon bolt the door but continue to drink whiskey; the bartender merely sits low behind the bar and advises a visitor to stay low when the shooting starts. He notes, "For the next two hours this town won't be a health resort" (792).

When Scratchy Wilson first appears, it is as a caricature of the western gunfighter. He wears a maroon-colored shirt, "purchased for purposes of decoration"; in each hand he wields a "long, heavy, blue-black revolver"; and he yells "ferocious challenges" (796) to a town that has emptied the street and shut its doors to him. He swaggers to the saloon and threatens the sleeping hound at the door, making it scream and wheel in terror while Wilson laughs. As if he has performed these actions before, he moves to the house of the one man who can put a stop to his rantings, the marshal, Jack Potter.

The newlyweds round the corner at that very moment and come face to face Wilson in the street. Wilson is "livid" to find Potter unarmed and accuses him of having been to "Sunday School." He is stunned by the idea that Potter has married and struggles to come to terms with this unexpected development. At first he denies what he believes to be impossible, saying "No!" in apparent refusal to accept this departure from established practice. At this point the atmosphere shifts dramatically when Crane uses the following words to establish Wilson's awakening: "He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world" (798). Wilson's next words, "I s'pose it's all off now," reflect his recognition that a change has occurred in Yellow Sky, and the old patterns must yield to the new. His departure signals the end of the Wild West. Crane makes

this clear in his final words, as Wilson's footsteps leave "funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand." We have the strong impression that the hourglass that measures his moment in history has run out of sand and that his tracks will quickly disappear.

This story grows out of Crane's journeys through the American Southwest and Mexico and, unlike his more naturalistic stories, focuses more on competence, optimism, and human initiative. Even though Wilson is forced to acknowledge that time has passed him by, he has the capacity to understand the change that has taken place, and he is able to communicate his new understanding to the marshal. The indifference of history is tempered by the fact that it has a comprehensible logic. The appearance of incongruence within the simple life of Yellow Sky often allows for subtle humor that provides comic relief from the violent change that restructures town life and suddenly casts Wilson as part of the past. Even the characters' names are incongruent with their titles and provide subtle humor. In this gunslinger versus town marshal tale, our gunslinger's name is *Scratchy* and his nemesis has the nonthreatening name of *Jack Potter*.

Situational irony figures into the story when the timid small town marshal returns home expecting to be the center of attention when he arrives with an unannounced bride but instead confronts a gun-wielding drunk looking for a fight. Similarly, the gunslinger swaggers to the home of his nemesis, the town marshal, looking for a shoot-out, only to find the marshal unarmed, still dressed in his wedding attire and accompanied by his bride. Such unanticipated events significantly heighten the tension. Will the gunslinger shoot Marshal Potter and leave his bride a new widow in a strange place, or kill the bride and eliminate Jack's trepidation at taking a unapproved wife back to town? Neither happens. Scratchy goes home, and the town, presumably, becomes safer and more attractive to families like the one we can imagine Jack Potter establishing.

"The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" may be viewed as the typical "Wild West meets civilization" short story but with a twist. The story could have ended tragically, but Crane saves us that pathos. Nonetheless, the town never will be the same. Civilization

(marriage, family, and decorum) has come to the Wild West, and even Scratchy Wilson grudgingly admits the fact.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What stereotypes of the old West are shown in this story? What is Crane's attitude toward the old West? How does he develop that attitude in this story?
2. How do you think that *Yellow Sky* will change now that the bride has arrived?
3. Much is made of Crane's use of color imagery in his other stories. Do you think it is significant that the town's name is *Yellow Sky*? Why? What other examples of color do you find in this story? What significance do you think Crane might have intended in using these colors?
4. "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning" both deal with the entry of civilization and the way certain key figures resist the changes they see taking place around them. Compare the way each story uses a combination of violence and humor to illuminate the pride and dignity of those who resist the forces of civilization.

"The Blue Hotel" (1899)

Pat Scully, an eager innkeeper in a small Nebraska town, meets the train and nimbly lures to his hotel three travelers: a loud cowboy, a quiet easterner, and an overly suspicious Swede. During a card game at the hotel the Swede accuses the innkeeper's son, Johnnie, of cheating and pummels him in a fight. The Swede then goes to the town saloon, gets drunk, and picks a fight with the local card shark, who stabs him to death.

As in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," Crane uses realism and subtle humor in this short story set in Nebraska. Realistic detail is shown in the following passage:

Beside the stove Scully's son Johnnie was playing High-Five with an old farmer who had whiskers both gray and sandy. They were quar-

reling. Frequently the old farmer turned his face toward a box of sawdust—colored brown from tobacco juice—that was behind the stove, and spat with an air of great impatience and irritation. (*Prose and Poetry* 800)

Crane uses realistic detail to paint a picture of a typical western small town hotel. However, some of the details he chooses also allow for subtle humor and a gentle jab at an innkeeper who perhaps tries too hard to please. For example, he describes the color of the hotel as "a light blue, the shade that is on the legs of a kind of heron" (799). The intention of the color was to attract attention and patrons, but, the narrator tells us, "the cult that knows the brown-reds and the subdivisions of the dark greens of the East expressed shame, pity, horror, in a laugh" (799).

The three guests at the hotel are described as stock characters of the western tale: "One was a shaky and quick-eyed Swede, with a great shining cheap valise; one was a tall bronzed cowboy, who was on his way to a ranch near the Dakota line; one was a little silent man from the East, who didn't look it, and didn't announce it" (799). The innkeeper, Scully, is the stereotypical overeager sycophant: "He was so nimble and merry and kindly that each probably felt it would be the height of brutality to try to escape. . . . He wore a heavy fur cap squeezed tightly down on his head. It caused his two red ears to stick out stiffly, as if they were made of tin" (800). The suspicious Swede laughs nervously at first and finally blurts out that the others, the "wild Westerners" he has heard about, are planning to kill him, at which point the innkeeper takes him upstairs and tries to convince him of their civility: "'Why, man, we're goin' to have a line of ilictric streetcars in this town next spring'" (806). The others feel insulted that the Swede thinks that they are so uncivilized: "'This man has been reading dime novels . . . the shootin' and stabbin' and all'" (809). Johnnie wants simply to "'thrown 'im out in the snow'" (810).

The Swede rejoins the others, and the tables turn. Suspense mounts as the Swede grows more and more menacing. He "fizzled like a fire-wheel," to the point of "bursting into riotous song" (811). At supper he

has the “appearance of a cruel bacchanal” (811). He seems much larger and “gazed, brutally disdainful, into every face.” (807) He jabs “harpoon-fashion” (812) for a biscuit and almost stabs the easterner’s hand. He intimidates even the loud cowboy and reverses roles with him when they begin another card game. Instead of the cowboy, “the Swede had adopted the fashion of board-whacking” (812). The air becomes increasingly tense as the Swede accuses Johnnie of cheating: “This little den was now hideous as a torture chamber” (813). Johnnie can stand it no longer and challenges the Swede to a fight.

Rather than defending his son, as might be expected, Scully actually arranges the fight and tries to maintain an air of decorum, even while it takes place. The men enter into the violent blizzard that is raging outside so as not to destroy the hotel lobby. Scully assures the Swede, “You’ll not have to whip all of us” (816), only his son, Johnnie. When Johnnie is beaten and thrown to the ground, his father picks him up and pushes him back into the fight. As expected, the cowboy cheers on Johnnie with shouts of “Kill him! Kill him!” while the easterner considers the fighting over cards “abominable” (817). As is typical of western tales, the women in the story, Scully’s daughters, admonish him: “Your own son, too. Shame be upon you!” (820).

The Swede pummels Johnnie severely, taunts the cowboy, moves to the town saloon, and drinks to excess. A reader looking for foreshadowing will note the color imagery as the Swede arrives at the saloon: “In front of it an indomitable red light was burning, and the snowflakes were made blood-color as they flew through the circumscribed territory of the lamp’s shining.” (822)

The narrator digresses at this point to describe another character in the saloon, the local professional gambler. Ironically, this character is much admired by the townspeople:

He was, in fact, a man so delicate in manner, when among people of fair class, and so judicious in his choice of victims, that in the strictly masculine part of the town’s life he had come to be explicitly trusted and admired. People called him a thoroughbred. . . . It was irrefutable that

in all affairs outside his business, in all matters that occur eternally and commonly between man and man, this thieving card-player was so generous, so just, so moral, that, in a contest, he could have put to flight the consciences of nine tenths of the citizens of Romper. (825)

It is with this most-unlikely-to-be-violent character that the Swede starts another fight. The fight is short lived, however, when the gambler draws a knife and stabs the Swede, killing him instantly. The gambler is convicted of murder but receives a lenient sentence of just three years and garners the sympathy of the townspeople. The cowboy opines, “‘He don’t deserve none of it for killin’ who he did’” (827). Only the easterner acknowledges the guilt all of them share in the Swede’s death: “Listen! Johnnie was cheating!” He tries to explain: “This poor gambler isn’t even a noun. He is kind of an adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede . . . and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment” (827). The cowboy is unable to understand the moral implications of his behavior and cries out “blindly,” “Well, I didn’t do anythin’, did I?” (828).

A central symbol in the story is the “enormous” stove, which is “humming with godlike violence”(800). It represents the men and their simmering violent natures. Its glowing points suggest that, like the men, it is about ready to burst through the thin iron covering. The heat of a stove is normally associated with peace and security, but in this case it functions ironically, not as a comfort but as a portent of violence, like the extreme cold of the blizzard. It is a god not of peace but of violence, the violence within the hotel that matches the violent storm outside.

This story exposes the false faces we put on to impress our fellow beings, our reliance on stereotypes, and our reluctance to admit our contributions to community mischief. Crane twists the format of the western tale to play with our preconceived notions of characters as well as to prick our consciences by pointing out our own frailties.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Which qualities of the characters in this story appear believable and which appear merely stereotypical? Explain how the use of stereotypes expands the symbolic significance of this story.
2. How does Johnnie feel about the Swede? Why do you think he really wants to fight him? How does Johnnie's action contribute to what you see as the underlying meaning of the story?
3. What do you think about the relationship between Scully and Johnnie? Is one of these characters more admirable than the other?
4. Is there a villain in this story? If so, who is he? Why is he a villain?

“An Episode of War” (1902)

In this very short story an unnamed lieutenant stands behind the lines of a Civil War battle meticulously measuring his company's supply of coffee when he is struck in the arm by a stray bullet. He appears stunned and, as he is escorted over to the makeshift hospital, seems able to see the greater picture of the battle and war. He then has a brief and terse conversation with the field surgeon, who tells him he will not amputate his arm but does so anyway. The lieutenant then goes home.

Through tight, concise writing and an impartial third-person narrator, Crane presents a picture of war as cold and impersonal, highlighting the insignificance of the individual soldier. When the story begins, the lieutenant stands tall before “grimy and hot-throated” (*Prose and Poetry* 671) men of other squadrons as he equally divides the coffee rations. He sees that he “was on the verge of a great triumph in mathematics, and the corporals were thronging forward” (671). About that time the war breaks in, and he is hit by a stray bullet. The other soldiers appear stunned, as if they have forgotten why they are in the battlefield in the first place, “as if their minds were fixed upon the mystery of a bullet's journey,” and are reluctant to help him. Then the soldiers awake from “their stone-like poses and crowded forward sympathetically” (672) to provide assistance.

The wounding of soldier seems a new experience to the squadron, and they study him in awe. Crane's language draws attention to the confusion the men experience and suggests that war is no more significant than any other natural event. The following passage clearly demonstrates Crane's interest in stripping war of romantic conceptions and revealing that no great truths illuminate the experiences of soldiers:

It is as if the wounded man's hand is upon the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence—the meaning of ants, potatoes, wars, cities, sunshine, snow, a feather dropped from a bird's wing; and the power of it sheds radiance upon a bloody form, and makes the other men understand sometimes that they are little. His comrades look at him with large eyes thoughtfully. (672)

For the wounded soldier, the experience is also surreal, at least at first, and here the author makes use of a simile to capture the soldier's peculiar sense of both wonder and detachment:

He saw a general on a black horse gazing over the lines of blue infantry at the green woods which veiled his problems. An aide galloped furiously, dragged his horse suddenly to a halt, saluted, and presented a paper. It was, for a wonder, precisely like an historical painting. (673)

The movement of the battery is also cast in a peculiar dreamlike splendor, and Crane again communicates the sense of unreality with similes:

The battery swept in curves that stirred the heart; it made halts as dramatic as the crash of a wave on the rocks, and when it fled onward, this aggregation of wheels, levers, motors, had a beautiful unity, as if it were a missile. The sound of it was a war chorus that reached into the depths of man's emotion. (673)

Here, as with the description of the general, human perception seems incapable of grasping the

simple reality of the actions taking place. Crane shows that the imagination is not prepared to see events directly, suggesting that the experience of war is a kind of delirium that finally escapes comprehension.

The two impersonal caregivers who now appear on the scene present a sharp contrast with the experiences of the soldiers, further demonstrating how varied the experience of war can be and how thoroughly this experience is shaped by individual perspective. These men are not touched by the surreal quality of the moment, nor do they find the scene awe-inspiring. They are accustomed to the presence of death and bored by the concerns of those wounded in battle; they are businesslike in their impatience to pass through the drudgery of another day. The first one haphazardly wraps the lieutenant's arm to stop the bleeding, "scolding away in the meantime" (679). As "an interminable crowd of bandaged men" come and go, the busy surgeon seems annoyed that he must contend with critically wounded soldiers merely to placate an officer. He patronizes the officer, saying whatever the lieutenant wishes to hear, in this case, "I guess I won't have it amputated" (674).

In the next scene, however, the reader learns that the surgeon has given an empty promise and has, in fact, amputated the arm. Whether it really needs to be amputated or is removed simply because that is the most convenient thing to do is never made clear. This sequence of events contributes to the story's function of undermining the romantic notion that war is a proving ground for manhood where the direct confrontation with death provides clarity about what is truly important in life. Instead, this story presents war as a source of confusion during which individual experience is fragmented and identity confused. When the lieutenant suddenly finds himself home from the war and forced to confront the loss of his arm, he simply says, "shamefaced" amid the tears of the women of his family, "I don't suppose it matters so much as all that" (675).

The lieutenant remains unnamed throughout the story. This absence of specificity enlarges the scope of reference so that the theme of war's imper-

sonal and dehumanizing power applies to all the victims, too numerous to name.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When the lieutenant is first shot, the other soldiers silently "stared at the wood, then at the departing lieutenant—then at the wood, then at the lieutenant" (672). Why do you think the soldiers do this?
2. Why do you think the lieutenant is "shamefaced" at the end of the story when he receives attention from his family for his war wound?
3. How has the lieutenant's view of himself changed from the dividing of the coffee to the reunion with his family?
4. Consider the ways that this extremely brief short story touches on some of the themes central to Walt Whitman's poem "The Wound-Dresser." Pay particular attention to the way Whitman's speaker differs from the surgeons in Crane's story yet conveys a similar message about war.

"God Lay Dead in Heaven" (1895)

The speaker of this 18-line poem visualizes God dying in heaven while angels mourn. This is followed by the rising of demons from "far caverns," who then struggle for power. But far sadder to the speaker is the image of a mother holding the head of her dying son.

This short, free verse poem uses vivid imagery and juxtaposition to paint an image of the unthinkable: the death of God. In the beginning the angels sing not hallelujahs but hymns of sadness with wings "drip-dripping" blood from battle. Instead of purple robes of majesty, we are given the moaning of purple winds. The "It" in line 7 is ambiguous: Is it God? Is it man's hope? Or both? Or perhaps "It" is Earth itself, now without hope, sinking into the black abyss. In line 11 the monsters of the deep seize this opportunity to rise and "wrangle" selfishly for the remains of the world, now reduced to a morsel.

The speaker switches to a different, sadder image in line 16. Here, the poem suddenly makes

its most dramatic transition as it shifts focus from the cosmic context of God's death and the Earth's demise to a single isolated scene. The death of God becomes personal: A woman holds the head of a dying man, trying to shield him from the beast. This could be seen as a final view of the Madonna, mother and child, or it could simply be any mother shielding her son from the opportunistic beasts that have emerged. In the latter view there could be some hope in this poem. Perhaps the son is not dying at all but merely sleeping, and the mother wishes not to wake him—he could be the messiah, whose time to rise has not yet come, or perhaps the mother has hope that the current battles will not be eternal and that her son will sleep until a more peaceful time. However the scene is interpreted, it reinforces the poem's movement from the cosmic to the particular, perhaps suggesting that all events, no matter how vast their scale, finally make sense in terms of the way they provoke individual actions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. If you were to divide the poem into sections, where would you divide it? Pay attention to such matters as the way Crane controls the sequence of images and observations his speaker describes. How would you describe the logic linking one section of the poem to another? Is it chronological, or is there another explanation for the way one section of the poem connects to another?
2. In what ways does this poem explore the same themes that EMILY DICKINSON expresses in "Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—"? Consider Crane's wish to provoke thought by exploring the unthinkable and Dickinson's treatment of the unthinkable as exerting its own form of fascination.

"Do Not Weep, Maiden, for War Is Kind" (1896)

The speaker in this poem addresses three women who have lost loved ones in war, telling each not to weep. The first addressed is a young maiden, whose lover is shot from his horse. The second is a young

child whose father died in the trenches. The third is a mother at the coffin of her dead son.

Crane uses irony, juxtaposition, vivid imagery, and repetition in this poem about the victims of war. The poem begins with the speaker telling a maiden not to weep because war is kind. This seemingly insensitive and clichéd directive alerts us to Crane's irony, not only because it is hard to imagine war as kind even if fought for the noblest of purposes but because it is directed at a weeping maiden. This first line is then followed by vivid imagery of the lover's death, images proving the opposite of the first line: "your lover threw wild hands toward the sky / And the affrighted steed ran on alone" (lines 2–3).

The next, indented stanza describes a patriotic march. "Hoarse, booming drums" call for glory-eyed youth: "Little souls who thirst for fight." These youth are described as unthinking and easily led: "These men were born to drill and die." They do not question the rightness or the purpose of the war: "The unexplained glory flies above them." One is reminded of the lines from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade": "Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die." The fallen soldiers then become subjects of the kingdom of the "battle-god," a kingdom where "a thousand corpses lie." The speaker seems to see war as a god who merely toys with men, unfeeling and impersonal.

The first line ("Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind") is repeated at the beginning of the second section, changing only the person addressed (*maiden* becomes *babe*). Just as he did in the first stanza, Crane follows this ironic statement with vivid imagery of the cruelty of war. Here, the babe's father "tumbled in the yellow trenches, / Raged at his breast, gulped and died." The following stanza—the fourth—opens with the symbols and colors of patriotism ("blazing flag" and "Eagle with crest of red and gold") then repeats a line from the second stanza, as if to drum home the senselessness of the actions described. This is followed by the speaker's command that a purpose be supplied to justify the slaughter that is described in the final line of the stanza. The phrase "where a thousand corpses lie" repeats the closing words of the second

stanza, further underscoring both the futility of war and the impossibility of justification.

The last stanza is shorter, simpler, and more poignant. We have the simple image of a mother at the coffin of her son, a fallen soldier, now in his dress blues with shining brass buttons: the military's way to paint an aura around its loyal soldiers (Halliburton 300). Her sadness is emphasized with alliteration, "heart hung humble." She is admonished with the impossible: "Do not weep." The falseness of the last three words sticks in one's throat: "War is kind."

This poem has strong parallels with Crane's novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, where a youth, enrapt with stories of adventure and glory, joins the army during the Civil War. Not long after joining, the youth also learns of the cruelty of war. As in the novel, the mood of the poem is plainly dark and the speaker is disillusioned by the war. Through irony and sharp imagery, the speaker rejects the option of unthinking allegiance to a country's war decisions, right or wrong.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain Crane's rationale for beginning his poem by focusing on a maiden and then moving to a baby and a mother. Explain whether or not you see this ordering of events as adding to the power of the poem.
2. Pay particular attention to Crane's deliberate use of repetition. Why does it make sense to use this much repetition in a poem about the victims of war?

"The Impact of a Dollar upon the Heart" (1898)

In this poem the importance a single dollar has for a simple family for whom it produces smiles is contrasted with the impact of a million dollars in a rich, superficial family concerned only with "wine and chatter," baubles, and hats. By means of this contrast Crane communicates his interest in the common man through language that speaks powerfully for a country that was fighting hard to maintain its independence from old money and power.

Feelings of solace and simplicity are evoked in the first stanza, where the arrival of a single dollar provokes smiles in "warm red light" that radiates from a glowing hearth. The setting is a simple room furnished with a plain white table alongside which "cool velvet shadows / Move softly upon the door." The family who lives here wants only the simple things in life and feels happy about the arrival of a single dollar.

The situation described in the second stanza could not be more different. Encompassing over three times as many lines as the first stanza, it catalogs multiple images of opulence, excess, and self-absorption. There are no smiles here, merely yawns, even in the presence of \$1 million. Crane conveys the image of nonearned, inherited riches that correspond to royalty ("emblems of Persia") or nobility from a time of wars gone by ("France and a sabre"). The mention of a sabre rather than a musket suggests that if any relatives of this group had fought in wars past, they were officers behind the lines and not common soldiers.

The aging beauty of spoiled rich women is evoked along with images of pandering merchants who flatter the women with "wine and chatter" in order to sell their baubles and hats. Instead of the simple white table mentioned in the first stanza, the rooms are carpeted and display the trophy pelts acquired during the big game hunts of gentlemen. The easy life of serving the rich has contaminated even the slaves, who have forgotten "place, multitude, work and state." Rather than crying out against injustices, they are content to "squeak of hats." The repetition of the word *hats* in the final line indicates the speaker's disdain for the corrupting influence riches exert upon the hearts and values of men and women, rich and slave alike. Crane implies that those who bow before wealth in this manner are reduced to the status of vermin, whose "ratful squeak of hats" symbolizes their complicity in the decay of civilization.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you think Crane foresees the implications of global economies when he describes the "impact of a million dollars" as "a crash of flunkys"? Is he simply referring to the obsequious behavior of

money-grubbers, or does he see how the appetites and actions of the wealthy, even if immediately linked to simple-seeming commodities like hats, can still transform the lives of the masses?

2. Construct an argument in which you make the case that Edward Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" represents the interior experience of the wealthy class that Crane looks at from the outside.

"A Newspaper Is a Collection of Half-Injustices" (1899)

Crane uses a collection of metaphoric declarations in this short poem to catalog the impact, for good or ill, of the main source of his early income and travels—the newspaper. His speaker's openly cynical and caustic observations about the reading public become increasingly pronounced as the poem advances, as if he is more and more disgusted by what he reports.

The poem's first declaration, that a "newspaper is a collection of half-injustices," is ambiguous. Are the injustices reported only marginal but exploited for headlines to be hawked by newsboys for sales? Or, are the subjects of the stories treated half-unjustly because the paper is biased? Are the half-injustices the biased reactions of the reading audience, "merciful" (believing) men sneering at the frailties and misfortunes of others while their families "cuddle" in their own sense of security and superiority? The idea of half-injustices or half-truths is echoed in the second assertion—"a newspaper is a court"—in which the subjects on trial are supposedly treated fairly ("kindly") but the jurors, the readers ("honest men"), are in no position to possess the full body of facts critical to judging them fairly.

The third direct assertion addresses the newspaper as "a market," where the writing is pursued for financial gain and where "wisdom" is for sale like melons to a crowd. It is a financial game, as is made clear in the next metaphoric pronouncement: "A newspaper is a game." Half-truths or errors provide financial victory for one, while another's skill in writing truth nets financial death.

In the following lines, the speaker declares the newspaper to be "fetless life's chronical," in which nonevents are blown to "loud tales" playing to the "eternal stupidities" that have dictated public sentiment through the ages. Perhaps the most bitter of Crane's observations in this poem is this: that the press is not after all a symbol of human progress but instead a tool enabling people to feel more complacent than ever before about the same injustices that have defined human experience in the distant past.

In this cynical attack on his own profession, Crane slaps back at the publishing world that routinely censored his writing while also taking a swipe at the selfish, judgmental readership that demands writing that confirms their own prejudices and complacency.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Write a brief essay in which you argue that Macbeth's famous observation about life—that it "is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing"—could serve as an epigraph for Crane's poem.
2. Explain what you think Crane has in mind when his speaker states that "a newspaper is a symbol." In terms of what the rest of the poem tells us, what is the meaning of the symbol that the newspaper has become?

"A Man Said to the Universe" (1899)

This extremely short poem is often quoted as an expression of naturalism primarily because it so clearly presents the universe as indifferent to human experience. Crane's familiar short, blunt lines and stark images effectively communicate the absence of sympathy that is at the heart of the poem. His language lacks the vivid images that we are accustomed to seeing in Crane's work, but the lack of a visual context for the universe suggests its vastness and the inability of humans to fathom its reaches physically. The speaker proclaims his existence loudly to the personified Universe, provoking a denial of obligation that seems like a colossal yawn. The unmistakable indifference expressed by the universe

his “battle wound” behind the lines of combat, after he has fled from battle. The events of Crane’s short story “An Episode of War” similarly occur behind the front lines of battle. Why, then, do you think Crane decided to name his story “An Episode of War”? How is this short story similar to the novel? What connecting theme can you see as linking the two works?

3. Imagine that the poem “God Lay Dead in Heaven” is an epigraph for one of Crane’s novels or short stories. Explain which work it best suits and which events in that work it best illuminates.
4. Why do you think Crane concluded “God Lay Dead in Heaven” and “Do Not Weep, Maiden, for War Is Kind” with images of a woman with a man who is incapable of protecting himself? In the first instance the woman tries to shield a sleeping man, while in the second the woman observes her son’s corpse. What is Crane saying here about women and their relationship to the events that threaten their happiness?
5. Discuss the ways in which “The Impact of a Dollar upon the Heart,” “A Newspaper Is a Collection of Half-Injustices,” and “There Was a Man with Tongue of Wood” are all efforts to rouse readers to action. Identify the key social issues that run through these poems, and explain how these poems define the reader as part of the problem that each poem frames.
6. Crane often wrote about situations before he actually experienced them. What are examples of these, and how do you think his writing about them before experiencing them affected his writing? How might the stories have been different if he had experienced them first? How do his successes in writing about the unknown jar with the dictum to “write what you know”?
7. How do you think Crane’s personal experiences affected the pessimism or optimism in his writing? Support your answer with evidence from at least three of his writings.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bender, Bert. “Hanging Stephen Crane in the Impressionist Museum.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (September 1976): 47–55.

- Blair, John. “The Posture of a Bohemian in the Poetry in Stephen Crane.” *American Literature* 61 (May 1989): 215–229.
- Chowder, Ken. “A Writer Who Lived the Adventures He Portrayed.” *Smithsonian*, January 1995, pp. 109–122.
- Crane, Stephen. *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*. New York: Appleton, 1896.
- . *Prose and Poetry*. New York: The Library of American: 1984.
- . *The Red Badge of Courage*. New York: Appleton, 1917.
- Davis, Linda H. *Badge of Courage: The Life of Stephen Crane*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- Dooley, Patrick. “The Humanism of Stephen Crane.” *Humanist* 56 (1996): 14–17.
- Halliburton, David. *The Color of the Sky: A Study of Stephen Crane*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Hayes, Kevin J. “How Stephen Crane Shaped Henry Fleming.” In *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: The Red Badge of Courage*, vol. 15, 129–141. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publications, 2004.
- Hoffman, Daniel. “Many Red Devils upon the Page: The Poetry of Stephen Crane.” *Sewanee Review* 102 (Fall 1994): 588–603.
- Holman, C. Hugh, and William Harmon, eds. *A Handbook to Literature*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.
- McCartney, George. “The Only Impressionist.” *National Review* 40 (September 30, 1988): 54–56.
- Sorrentino, Paul. *Student Companion to Stephen Crane*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Stallman, R. W. *Stephen Crane: A Biography*. New York: George Braziller, 1968.
- Stephen Crane Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/crane>. Accessed April 30, 2009.
- Wertheim, Stanley. *A Stephen Crane Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- Wertheim, Stanley, and Paul Sorrentino. *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- , eds. *The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane 1871–1900*. New York: Hall, 1994.

Diane R. Weber



REBECCA HARDING DAVIS

(1831–1910)

I want you to dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see what is in it. Sometimes I think it has a new and awful significance that we do not see.

(Margaret Howth)

Rebecca Harding Davis developed a realistic style of writing in the mid-19th century that anticipated by some 20 years the full flowering of realism in America, as witnessed in the work of WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS and HENRY JAMES. The 1861 publication of her first major artistic statement, the short story “Life in the Iron-Mills,” marked the national debut of a writer who was to go on to produce around 500 published works. She wrote a large body of fiction—hundreds of sketches and short stories, children’s literature, 11 novels, 16 novels in serial form—and a significant collection of nonfiction—including insightful commentary on literature, gender, education, labor, race, war, and imperialism, to name a few topics. In her fiction Davis cast an unblinking eye upon social ills and questions of great importance: the predations of capitalist industrialism, the legacy of slavery, the shuttered lives of women. Throughout her career she brought out the “commonplace,” believing that the everyday often discloses the deepest meanings.

Although a well-known and well-respected writer in her day, Davis failed to attract scholarly attention for most of the 20th century, that is, until the late Tillie Olsen’s edition of *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories* in 1972. Davis then began to emerge from an undeserved obscurity, yet it was not until the 1990s that Davis became the figure of central concern to scholars of American literature that she is today, heralded by the

publication of notable biographies and literary studies of her work by Sharon M. Harris, Jane Atteridge Rose, and Jean Pfaelzer, as well as various editions of Davis’s work. Now Davis’s “Life in the Iron-Mills” is a fixture in American literature survey courses in secondary schools and colleges, alongside works by NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, Henry James, and other long-standing canonical figures in American literature. No discussion of American realism would be complete without an exploration of her writing.

The eldest child of five surviving children of Rachel and Richard Harding, Rebecca Blaine Harding was born on June 14, 1831, in Washington, Pennsylvania; she spent her early years in Florence, Alabama, and grew up in Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), where she lived until her marriage at 31 years of age to L. Clarke Davis in 1863. Early biographical treatments of Rebecca Harding Davis located her in either Huntsville or Big Spring, Alabama, but recent scholarship by Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris conclusively demonstrates that Florence is the town in which the Hardings had their home (3–4). Growing up in a family known for its scholarly and imaginative cast, Rebecca Davis read much on her own as a child, from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* to popular romances of the day. In *Bits of Gossip*, an autobiography she wrote in 1904, she speaks of a special attachment to three unsigned stories from a cheap

two-volume collection of stories she devoured in her favorite reading spot, a tree house:

One was a story told by a town pump, and another the account of the rambles of a little girl like myself, and still another a description of a Sunday morning in a quiet town like our sleepy village. There was no talk of enchantment in them. But in these [stories] the commonplace folk and things which I saw every day took on a sudden mystery and charm, and, for the first time, I found that they, too, belonged to the magic world of knights and pilgrims and fiends. (37)

Davis was to discover years later that these seemingly anonymous stories were actually written by Hawthorne, whom she was later to meet and whom among the earlier generation of American writers she revered most highly. Hawthorne, the preeminent American romance writer, had paradoxically awakened the young Davis's fascination with the things of everyday life, developing her realist perspective at an early age.

After an education at home and with private tutors, Davis attended Washington Female Seminary at age 14, graduating as valedictorian in 1848, having digested a "standard" female seminary curriculum of "geometry, literature, music, and drawing" (Harris 23), plus theology and French (Rose 5). She continued her education at home in Wheeling, despite domestic duties including tutoring her three youngest siblings. She learned German and studied philosophy with the help of her younger and very close brother, Wilson, a Washington College student who would share his books during his breaks from school. Rebecca and Wilson worked through "not only the classic literature of France, Germany, and England but also contemporary European and American literature" (Harris 24). Davis also served an important apprenticeship during the late 1850s as a contributor—of reviews, opinion pieces, poems—to the Wheeling *Intelligencer*, a newspaper whose editor, Archibald W. Campbell, deliberately cultivated Davis's skills as a writer and editor (Harris 24–26).

In 1861, at 30 years of age, Davis escaped the literary orbit of Wheeling with the publication of "Life in the Iron-Mills" in the *Atlantic Monthly*. She followed this piece with a serialized novel, published as *Margret Howth: A Story of To-day*, which appeared by installments in six issues of the *Atlantic*. Originally, Davis had entitled the piece "The Deaf and the Dumb" (Rose 25) to suggest the way in which people who might do something about conditions in factory towns remain deaf to the cries of those in need of help and the ways in which those in need of help remain dumb, unable to voice their condition. In the novel Margret Howth, having been left by her lover, Stephen Holmes, who has become betrothed to another woman, takes to working as a factory bookkeeper in order to support her family after her father becomes ill. Having selflessly released Holmes from his obligation to her, she appears to accept her dull lot in life, but not without feeling deeply the unfairness of it all. The novel also traces the fortunes of Dr. Knowles, a philanthropist who runs a "house of refuge" for outcasts, and Stephen Holmes, Margret's former lover. Margret, Dr. Knowles, and Stephen, however, all learn a lesson of humility and sacrifice from Lois Yare, a mulatto in her teens—stunted and deformed by years of hard factory labor—who rushes into a burning mill in order to save Stephen.

Over the years, Davis published more than 20 pieces of fiction in the *Atlantic*, including the story "The Wife's Story." While many of these developed her realism in fiction, as Jane Atteridge Rose points out, many also anticipate her later "journalistic and satiric realism," and "in a few she began to incorporate conventional sentimental motifs" (42). Davis's artistic range clearly extended beyond her realist experiments in fiction, as can also be seen in her contributions to *Peterson's Magazine*, a popular women's monthly published in Philadelphia. Her early *Peterson's* stories—she was to write 29 short stories and five serial novels in the 1860s alone (Harris 73)—experimented with gothic, mystery, and horror themes. She wrote for *Peterson's* even while under an informal agreement with James Fields, a friend and the editor of the *Atlantic*, that she publish only in that journal.

The latter paid poorly, and Davis needed money to contribute to her family, which was suffering financially as a result of her father's illness. Every piece that Davis published before 1866, for either journal, was unsigned, so there was slight chance that Fields would know of her early work for *Peterson's*, although he did eventually become aware of it, and in 1868 the *Atlantic* dropped her in retaliation for publishing elsewhere. Her dual publishing life at this point in her career suggests an important struggle in Davis's life between her desire to create art certified by an audience of high tastes, such as the *Atlantic's*, and the necessity to make a living through writing that appealed to the masses.

In March 1863 Rebecca married L. Clarke Davis, a law student in Philadelphia, who had been corresponding with her ever since he read "Life." The Davises remained married until Clarke's death in 1904 and had three children, Richard Harding, named after Rebecca's father; Charles Belmont; and Nora. Richard Harding Davis would go on to become a famous writer and celebrity in his own right at the turn of the 20th century. Rebecca Harding Davis biographer Rose says that the two, Clarke and Rebecca, were in love and that Clarke, "on a personal level . . . appears to have been an ideal spouse" (37). Yet Sharon Harris, another biographer, suggests that Clarke had a negative effect on Davis's literary career: Clarke "identified her work as secondary to his own and secondary to her roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper" (17). Moreover, according to Harris, Clarke "never understand[ed] Rebecca's need to write for a reputable journal regardless of the pay. Even before their marriage, Clarke regarded her writing career as financially based. Though he was proud of his wife's talents, he did not understand her artistic vision" (104).

Whatever the precise nature of their marriage and the effects it might have had on Davis's literary trajectory, she still managed to write short fiction and novels that made powerful social and literary statements. Notable among her novels is *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868), a realistic novel about the Civil War and its aftermath, published at a time when the recent violence was all too fresh in the

nation's consciousness. Davis's novel, described by scholars as among her best, dares to take on racial mixing through dual plots in which the hidden black ancestry of white-appearing characters generates racial confusion and ethical dilemmas. Her critique of racial issues ties the novel to both her earlier story "Blind Tom" (1862), based on a blind slave child who was a musical genius, played classical piano, and was exploited and displayed as such, and Davis's later "Some Testimony in the Case" (1885), an essay growing out of a tour she made of the Deep South that calls for education to help solve the "Negro problem." In *Waiting* the Civil War and nascent Reconstruction have not, ultimately, solved the question of how freed blacks will merge into a society thoroughly preoccupied with racial differences. And so, at the novel's end nothing is truly wrapped up: We still wait for the verdict. While Rose notes that the novel ends with a "sentimental domestic vision," she also argues that the novel's refusal to settle many of its "unresolved issues" is a real testament to the "book's power" (73).

Davis's other novels, short fiction, and essays often take on similar hard-hitting social and political issues. An 1870 novella, *Put Out of the Way*, for instance, details abuses in the way the mentally ill are institutionalized and treated, especially the graft involved, while a novel published two years later, *John Andross* (1874), boldly explores political corruption through a fictionalization of the workings of the infamous Whiskey Ring and the corruption of the Ulysses S. Grant administration. While institutional reform had been on Davis's mind from the very beginning, she also frequently returned to issues of gender, and this has been of special interest to scholars keen to know where Davis stands in relation to feminism. She published a number of pieces that might serve to illustrate her position, including the short stories "The Wife's Story" (1864), "In the Market" (1868), and "Anne" (1874); an essay humorously entitled "Men's Rights" (1869); a seven-part serial, *Earthen Pitchers* (1873–74); and the novels *Kitty's Choice* (1876) and *A Law unto Herself* (1877). Harris notes that Davis's work is best understood within

the “tradition of conservative feminism” (5). As it did in the thinking of her literary forebears HARRIET BEECHER STOWE and Catherine Sedgwick, women’s power, for Davis, emerged from the domestic setting, and so she walked a tenuous line between 19th-century women’s domestic ideology, characterized by separate male and female spheres, and the greatly expanded range of women’s roles advocated by the notion of the “New Woman.” As an illustration of this ambivalence, Harris notes of Davis, “she advocated woman’s suffrage, but she often demeaned the ‘New Woman’” (5).

Davis’s career is difficult to sum up in an encyclopedic entry, for it spanned so many years and covered so much of American literary history. She pioneered realism, but she also wrote sentimental and gothic fiction, journalism, mock-travelogues, local color and regional fiction, satire, children’s fiction, and political commentary. She even wrote an autobiography in which, as she was to do with much of her writing, she stretched the limits of the genre. As Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris note in their recent edition of Davis’s *Bits of Gossip*, Davis writes not a personal or self-centered account of her life but rather a “cultural autobiography” more than anything else. As with much of her work, in this last important piece of her career she sought to approach the largest issues of her day. Davis died in 1910.

“Life in the Iron-Mills” (1861)

The story opens as the narrator is speaking to the audience in direct address, asking them to step out of their relatively comfortable existences and into the realities of life in a “town of iron-works” where a “greasy soot” clings to everything: trees, houses, even “the faces of the passers-by” (39). The narrator speaks from a house once occupied by two of the story’s chief characters, a stunted Welsh ironworker, Hugh Wolfe, and his hunchbacked cousin, Deborah, who works in a nearby mill. Particular attention is given to soot that clots even the house’s interior, its ornaments, and a canary, which “chirps desolately in a cage” (40): symbolic of the unlikelihood in such a town that anything can remain clean

and untouched by the industrial system. The narrator questions the readers, even confronts them directly, about the intellectual penchants that may have distracted them from the real plight of the immigrant underclass in America, accusing them of “lazy and *dilettante* way[s]” and of being “busy in making straight paths for [their] feet on the hills.” The narrator begs these readers to set aside their potential disgust and to follow her or him (there is some critical debate about the narrator’s gender, which the story does not make clear) “into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia” to hear Hugh’s story (41).

Hugh Wolfe works six nights a week in Kirby & Johns iron mill as a puddler, a person who stirs molten iron in order that the impurities that rise to the surface might be raked off. The mills are a veritable “city of fires,” replete with “pits of flame waving in the wind; liquid metal-flames writhing in tortuous streams through the sand; wide cauldrons filled with boiling fire, over which bent ghastly wretches stirring the strange brewing. . . . It was like a street in Hell” (45). One of these wretches, Hugh, has “lost the strength and vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, woman’s face) haggard, yellow with consumption” (47). But Hugh has a “thirst for beauty,” which results in an unusual habit of spending his precious spare time carving the flesh-tinged refuse of the puddling process—what is called “korf” in the story—into “sometimes strangely beautiful sculptures,” which he crafts sometimes for months at a time before eventually destroying them (48). A sculpture that Hugh has not yet destroyed—“a woman, white, of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning” (52)—becomes a focal point in the plot of the story.

On the Saturday night narrated in the story, Deborah, who is enamored of her cousin and concerned about his health, takes supper down to the mill for Hugh, despite having herself just worked a 12-hour shift at a cotton mill. Exhausted, she falls asleep on a still-warm heap of iron-ore refuse, while some visitors enter the scene, a party that includes Kirby, a son of one of the mill owners; Dr. May, a

town physician; and Mitchell, Kirby's brother-in-law. These men "linge[r], smoking and talking in a desultory way" before heading out and running nearly smack into Hugh's korl woman (51–52). Initially frightened by the flesh-colored figure, which Mitchell thinks at first glance is alive, the visitors soon turn attention to the sculpture as a piece of art, to the mystery of who the artist might be, and finally to larger questions of labor, class, and reform.

Hugh, when asked the meaning of his korl woman, replies tentatively in his Welsh-inflected English that "she be hungry" but further qualifies that it is not a hunger "for meat" (53–54). Kirby laughs off Hugh's efforts at explaining his work, but Mitchell intuits Hugh's intention, correcting May, who narrowly criticizes the sculpture as not representing bodily starvation accurately: "'May,' he broke out impatiently, 'are you blind? Look at that woman's face! It asks questions of God, and says 'I have a right to know.' Good God, how hungry it is!'" (54). The marvel of Hugh's brilliant artistry, which depicts what the narrator earlier calls "a reality of soul starvation" (54), impels further questions of what should be done with people like Hugh, who make up an underclass but are manifestly capable of great human achievements, even under the worst conditions.

Kirby, representing business interests in the story, argues that his factory hands are just that, nothing but "hands," and that it would be better, still, if they were machines, with none of the deeper sensitivities Hugh clearly displays. Kirby echoes Pontius Pilate in refusing any personal responsibility in allowing Jesus' execution: "I wash my hands of all social problems" (55). May, on the other hand, makes it a point to assure Hugh that there is some hope for him: "Do you know, boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man? Do you understand? . . . A man may make himself anything he chooses" (56). May's Benjamin Franklinesque appeal to the self-made man, however, smacks of condescension, and when Hugh asks May whether he will help him to become a great man, May excuses himself of any obligation by saying he has no money with which he can help him. Of Kirby

and May's responses to Hugh, Mitchell, who classifies them as the voices of the pocket and the heart, respectively, offers biting critique, easily exposing the flaws in both Kirby and May's thinking. A bit miffed at Mitchell's easy dismissal of his notions of class mobility, May demands that Mitchell offer his solution to the dilemma of Hugh. Mitchell's reply amounts to another evasion of the problem: He claims that he could not help even if he wished to because reform needs to begin with the underclass itself, from their needs and not from the pity of the powerful.

Almost as soon as these visitors have entered Hugh's life, they leave, but their brief visit exposes the tremendous differences between what he might be and what he is, between the life of someone like Mitchell and his own life, and the differences drive him to near madness, leaving him crying out for justice: "'Look at me!' he said to Deborah, with a low, bitter laugh, striking his puny chest savagely. 'What am I worth, Deb? Is it my fault that I am no better? My fault? My fault?'" (59). Little does Hugh know, however, that Deborah was awake during May and Mitchell's talk of money, and in a misguided attempt to help Hugh, seizing on money as the answer to his problems, she picked Mitchell's pocket. Once home, she presents Hugh with the pocket book, which contains a few gold pieces and "a check for an incredible amount" (61). Deb tells Hugh that it is his right to keep the money, but Hugh clearly knows the theft is wrong. Still, he is tempted and begins imagining a life of personal and artistic freedom, as he wanders the town. Eventually, however, Hugh is apprehended, the narrator withholding the details, saying understatedly, "The trial-day of this man's life was over, and he had lost the victory" (65). He is sentenced to 19 years of hard labor as an example to other mill hands, and Deb receives three years as his accomplice.

Withering away in prison, Hugh has no hope of reprieve, but he claims nonetheless to his captor, "I think I'll get out" (66), and he does just that, by committing suicide, opening his veins with a piece of tin "not fit to cut korl with" (69). Deb assists a Quaker woman in preparing Hugh's body for burial in the country, beyond the stifling confines

of the mill-town, and when her sentence ends, Deb joins the Quakers.

The long story closes with a noteworthy framing device. The narrator speaks again from the present day and as before from the confines of the Wolfe house, where, in the corner of its library, the narrator keeps hidden behind a curtain Hugh's kohl woman, who "speaks" as clearly in the present frame as in the past: "Its pale, vague lips seem to tremble with a terrible question. 'Is this the End?' they say,—'nothing beyond?—no more?'" (74). Despite this sculpture's bleak plea, however, the story closes with a modicum of hope that, ultimately, God will intercede for the good: "While the room is yet steeped in heavy shadow, a cool, gray light suddenly touches [the kohl woman's] head like a blessing, and its groping arm points through the broken cloud to the far East, where, in the flickering, nebulous crimson, God has set the promise of the Dawn" (74).

Certainly "Life in the Iron-Mills" presented something new in 1861. Stretching beyond the confines of the sentimental and romantic fiction that dominated much writing of the day, Davis infused her story with an unexpected realism, unexpected because as a literary historical movement, realism would not be under way in the United States until much later in the 19th century. Realism abounds in the text in the form of unsparring description, such as that of the Wolfes' cellar domicile: "It was low, damp,—the earthen floor covered with a green, slimy moss,—a fetid air smothering the breath" (43). In its descriptions of the general conditions of life for the Wolfes and other immigrants, we might even see "Life" as a first in the tradition of "critical realism," realism "impelled by the motive to reform," as does the critic Jane Atteridge Rose (11). Davis's realism also might be seen in her dialect writing in the story, a device that Howells and realists of the regionalist/local color stripe, such as KATE CHOPIN, would frequently employ as well. Another central realist tactic employed by Davis in "Life" is the placing of characters in situations in which they must make ethical choices, keeping in mind that failures to make a choice at all, such as we see in Mitchell's feelings on reform, also consti-

tute a kind of choice. But, to classify Davis's novella as realist may ultimately be somewhat limiting: "Life" melds its realism with some of the concerns of sentimentalism (such as its Christian reformist rhetoric), romanticism (as in the hell-like imagery of the iron mill), and naturalism, a determinist form of realism (in the pervasive feeling of Hugh's entrapment within his life as a puddler). For this reason, Sharon M. Harris calls Davis not a realist but a "metarealist," a writer who "synthesize[s] several modes" of writing but keeps her "explicit focus" on realism and uses realism to value and explore everyday experience (19).

A central theme in "Life" is the predation of systematic industrial work on laborers. Workers, according to Kirby, are "hands," a common figurative expression in which the part stands in for the whole. A "hand" is a person; however, when Kirby employs the figure of speech, he makes it clear that he would rather do away with the whole person and keep the part that does the work. In fact, Kirby already acts as if his workers are machines, and as the narrator observes, the mill system is itself one giant and controlling machine: "Not many even of the inhabitants of a manufacturing town know the vast machinery of system by which the bodies of workmen are governed" (45). Thus, just as the pervasive, greasy soot of the town penetrates all spaces, no one escapes the industrial system.

The reality of class stratification for workers like Hugh marks another theme that Davis explores in "Life." Hugh is fascinated by the idle visitors to Kirby & Johns, and we are told that "he seized eagerly every chance that brought him into contact with this mysterious class that shone down perpetually with the glamour of another order of being. What made the difference between them?" (49). But class, for Hugh, is not merely something impalpable, ethereal. He takes the difference to be almost physical in its embeddedness, as when Hugh listens in as the visitors talk, feeling "more and more like a dumb, hopeless animal, . . . glancing now and then at Mitchell, marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul" (52). While men like Dr. May windily expatiate on

boundless upward mobility, on pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, in the example of Hugh, Davis shows us how firmly entrenched class differences actually are.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics disagree over whether the story's narrator is female or male. Our knowing in advance that the story was written by a woman may sway us, but the original audience would not have known the author's gender as the story was published unsigned. What do you think? What difference, if any, does the gender of the narrator make?
2. How would you describe—in terms of class, education, literary taste, and other characteristics—the original audience for this story? What details from the text help you make your determination? Does Davis run the risk of offending her audience in any way? How so?
3. Critics have called the story's ending—Hugh's suicide, Deborah's joining the Quakers, the closing invocation of the “promise of the Dawn”—passive in nature and, thus, not in line with the strident attitude asserted by the narrator throughout the story. Can the ending be brought into agreement with the rest of the story? Why or why not?
4. Compare Davis's kind of realism in this story to that in Chopin's *The Awakening*.

“The Wife's Story” (1864)

“The Wife's Story” begins, as does “Life in the Iron-Mills,” with a direct address to the reader: “I will tell you the story of my life, since you ask for it,” promising to disclose the events that have made her the person she is today (112), a story of “terror and temptation” that threatened her married life (113). The narrator, Hester Manning, is a young wife married to an older man, Dr. Daniel Manning, who has several children from a previous marriage and who has suffered a terrible financial loss that requires that the family leave New York and return to his old home of Newport so that he can take up his

former occupation of teaching. While Manning and his niece, Jacky Monchard, who helps look after the youngest boy, Teddy, find in the impending move a potential return to a simpler life, Hester cannot bear the thought of the struggle that might be required for the family to thrive and what it might do to her. Much of her misgiving she attributes to her own upbringing, intelligence, and significant artistic talents. She was raised by a New England family that nurtured her talents, and she feels as if “God had made [her] with a different, clearer insight into life” than others (120). Accordingly, she asks herself, “What would taste or talent be worth in the coarse struggle we were about to begin for bread and butter?” (114). Her unease soon becomes a loathing of her husband's family; she especially dreads contact with Jacky, whom she sees as insipid.

Hester fondly remembers early days in her marriage to Dr. Manning, when the two would go on drives together, and she could occasionally induce him to talk to her about his past. His openness, though, is generally rare, and he refuses to discuss his previous marriage. Though she knows no details, Hester gets some sense of the failed marriage from Robert, another of Dr. Manning's sons: “You do not know my father. If he wakens to find his wife is not what he thinks her, it will be too late for me to warn you then. He has been hurt sore and deeply in his life. Your chance is but once” (118). Although Hester continues to press her husband for more detail, he will give none. The lightsome air of the first few months of marriage dissipates with Daniel's reticence and with the arrival of Daniel's children and Jacky.

We find out in the course of Hester's discussion of how loathsome home life has become for her that in the year after her marriage she bore a child, and the aftereffects have been unpleasant: “Since my baby was born, my soul as well as my body has been weak and nauseated” (120–121). Seemingly incapable of caring for the child, whom she calls “an animal” that wears her down (121), she has the child sent away to be raised elsewhere.

As a reflex reaction to what is happening at home, Hester begins a mental process of pulling apart from her husband: “If I remained with Dr. Manning, my

rôle was outlined plain to the end: years of cooking, stitching, scraping together of cents: it was the fate of thousands of married women without means, to grovel every year nearer the animal life, to grow niggardly and common" (122). The alternative, she believes, is to cultivate her own gift for music, returning to and reworking the score of an opera she had written prior to her marriage. While still in New York, she secretly engages with an opera producer, M. Vaux, to stage the opera and to take a singing role in it. She also plans to leave her family once they arrive in Newport and to return to New York.

En route via steamer to Newport, Jacky speaks frankly with Hester about Daniel's previous marriage. Showing Hester a daguerreotype picture of Manning's first wife, Jacky says of the wife, "She was an opium-eater" and "she, the foul vampire, sucked his youth away," leaving him with "but the husk of life" remaining (127). Dramatically casting the picture overboard, Jacky leaves Hester with her thoughts, which vacillate between the options before her: to nurture her husband or to nurture her own talents. She decides for the latter and once in Newport commits herself to telling her husband she is leaving him. She seeks to do so, seating herself on the cliff adjacent to the beach where she intercepts him and Robert, but she cannot bring herself to do it.

The story here skips forward to the first performance of Hester's opera, in which she plays a central part. Her now-estranged husband and his son, Robert, are in the audience, witnessing firsthand the embarrassing, miserable failure that it is: "As the curtain fell, it was stopped by a faint, dismal hiss that grew slowly louder and more venomous, was mingled with laughs and jeers from the gallery, and the play was damned" (132). Having nowhere to go after the grotesque failure, and no family, only her "Self" (133), Hester wanders about the street and joins a crowd of onlookers at a corner pharmacy, only to discover that the crowd has formed around the body of a man, her husband, collapsed and dead of "nervous excitement" brought on by the opera (134).

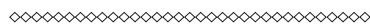
Hester wakes to discover that the entire sordid opera affair has been but a fever-induced dream, and that she had never actually executed her plans

to leave, having instead fallen prostrate on the cliff at Newport, a victim of "brain fever" (135). She discovers that the family has settled on a farm that Daniel's son, Robert, has given them. The atmosphere is rejuvenating, and Hester is, to her delight, reunited with her baby to begin life anew with Daniel and Teddy (Daniel's older sons have gone west). Although Hester wishes Jacky to remain with them, too, Jacky leaves with Robert to be married to him.

"The Wife's Story" has an important biographical context. When Davis wrote it, she was suffering from a very deep depression, which began about the time she discovered she was pregnant with her first child. The story was published in the *Atlantic* "just three months after the birth of her son and about five-months before the date usually associated with the lifting of her depression" (Lasseter and Harris 5). To some extent Davis was writing from experience when she narrates Hester's postpartum depression. The story is also clearly rife with feminist connotations, which might be investigated by taking Sharon Harris's observations on Davis's feminism mentioned earlier as a starting point.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does this story seem to be saying, explicitly and implicitly, about gender roles?
2. Hester relates that in her dream, when she leaves the failed opera and wanders the street, she observes that while others have family to go to, she has none: "I—I had my Self. I had developed that." What danger is there, according to the story, in developing one's self?



FURTHER QUESTIONS ON DAVIS AND HER WORK

1. How do Davis's thematic concerns with female creativity and marriage compare to those of other women writers of the 19th century, such as FANNY FERN (Sara Payson Willis Parton), SARAH ORNE JEWETT, Kate Chopin, or CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN?

2. How does Davis's use of dialect writing compare to the uses of it by regionalist and realist writers such as MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), Mary Noailles Murfree, CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT, or Sarah Orne Jewett?
3. How does Davis's realistic technique compare to that of established realists and naturalists of the late 19th century, such as STEPHEN CRANE, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, or Jack London?

WORKS CITED AND WORKS RECOMMENDED

- Davis, Rebecca Harding. *Bits of Gossip*. 1904. In *Rebecca Harding Davis: Writing Cultural Autobiography*. Edited by Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001.
- . *Life in the Iron-Mills*. Edited by Cecilia Tichi. 1861. Bedford Cultural Editions. Reprint, Boston: Bedford, 1998.
- . *Margret Howth: A Story of To-day*. 1862. Reprint, New York: Feminist Press, 1990.
- . "The Wife's Story." 1864. In *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*. Edited by Jean Pfaelzer. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.
- Harris, Sharon M. *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- Lasseter, Janice Milner, and Sharon M. Harris. Introduction to *Rebecca Harding Davis: Writing Cultural Autobiography*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001.
- Olsen, Tillie. "A Biographical Interpretation." In *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories*. 2d ed. New York: Feminist Press, 1985.
- Pfaelzer, Jean. *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996.
- . *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap5/davis.html>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Rose, Jane Atteridge. *Rebecca Harding Davis*. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Tichi, Cecelia, ed. *Life in the Iron-Mills*. Bedford Cultural Editions. Boston: Bedford, 1998.

J. Michael Duvall



EMILY DICKINSON (1830–1886)

Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?

(first line of poem by Emily Dickinson [Franklin, ed., *Poems* 345])

The outline of Emily Dickinson's life at first seems to be uncomplicated and relatively bare, leading to sweeping generalizations that often reduce her existence to a series of overly simplified phrases—for example, that she was a recluse, that she always wore white, that she never published her poetry during her lifetime. It is true enough to say that she was born in a house her grandfather built, that she died in that same house, and that she spent almost her entire life in the rural township of Amherst, Massachusetts. These scant facts give an impression of a staid, provincial existence secured by the successful legal practice of her father, Edward. What such a meager portrait of placid stability overlooks are the several complexities of Dickinson's actual life—the financial turbulence that forced her family to relocate to another house in Amherst from 1840 to 1855; the social stigma Dickinson bore as a highly educated, middle-class woman who never married; her resistance to conventional religious belief; and her achievement as a pathbreaking writer who earned a reputation for original thought while rarely leaving the grounds of her family home.

Perhaps more than any other single aspect of Dickinson's biography, her inclination to privacy, which became particularly pronounced in her thirties, has given rise to multiple misperceptions, most notably the belief that Dickinson turned to poetry as compensation for her inability to engage the larger world. What the actual details of her private

life show, however, is that Dickinson's reclusion freed her to lead an extraordinarily active mental and emotional life that included a broad knowledge of literature and current events, a voluminous correspondence, and the artistic discipline to produce and preserve nearly 1,800 poems.

Born December 10, 1830, in the Federal-style two-story brick home known as the Homestead, Emily Elizabeth was the second of three children born to Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross. Her brother, William Austin (Austin), was born in April of the previous year, and her sister, Lavinia (Vinnie), was born in February 1833. The Homestead, located on Main Street in Amherst, was built by Edward's father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, in 1813. Samuel Fowler was a successful attorney and leading Amherst citizen who had joined Noah Webster in establishing the Amherst Academy in 1814 and contributed a great deal of his personal fortune to the founding of Amherst College in 1821. By the time Edward had purchased half of the Homestead from his father in April 1830 and had moved in with his young family in the months prior to Emily's birth, Samuel Fowler was already experiencing the financial strain that would eventually lead him to sell his half of the house to General David Mack and move to Ohio in 1833. He would die in Hudson, Ohio, in April 1838, never having recovered from the losses he willingly shouldered in order to make Amherst College a center for

the training of conservative Trinitarian ministers. Edward also experienced financial hardship—in his case due to the failure of investments—forcing him to sell his half of the Homestead in 1840. He moved his family to a roomy wooden house that stood in front of the town cemetery on what would later become North Pleasant Street, Amherst, until he could afford to purchase the entire Homestead from General Mack in 1855 and return there with his family. With the notable exception of trips to Washington, D.C., and Boston, Emily was to remain at the Homestead for the rest of her life.

Emily Dickinson received an excellent though uneven education, proving herself an apt student who enjoyed her teachers and her classmates. Along with Austin and Vinnie, Dickinson completed the first phase of her formal education at Amherst Academy, which her grandfather helped establish. Females were first admitted to the academy in 1838, and the course of study was demanding, though the rigor espoused in the curriculum was not uniformly enforced. During her years as a student there, from 1840 to 1847, Dickinson studied Latin, botany, geography, history, and rhetoric, in addition to attending chapel and absorbing a considerable volume of Congregationalist doctrine.

In an effort to demonstrate her mastery of grammar and her maturity as a writer, Dickinson ceased to use the dash as the primary form of punctuation in her correspondence. The dash that had been so prominent in her first letters all but disappeared from 1844 to 1849, when Dickinson steadfastly employed conventional punctuation. Dickinson was very fond of her teachers and may have been seeking to please them, as well as her older brother. Dickinson stated in a letter written to her close friend Abiah Root in her last year at the Amherst Academy, “You know I am always in love with my teachers” (*Letters* 45). Abiah was but one of many close friends who made this period of Dickinson’s life particularly happy.

One incident that troubled Dickinson’s early years was her direct observation of her second cousin, Sophia Holland, who succumbed to typhus in April 1844. Dickinson was already familiar with the fact that disease was a common cause of death:

According to one estimate, 22 percent of the deaths in Massachusetts in 1850 were due to tuberculosis alone, and at least 30 of Dickinson’s friends, relatives, or acquaintances perished as a result of tuberculosis (Habegger 640–641). What set Sophia’s death apart was their similarity in age, Dickinson’s close identification with Sophia, and her witnessing of Sophia’s declining moments. In her account of this event in a letter written two years afterward, Dickinson described Sophia as a “friend near my age & with whom my thoughts & her own were the same” (*Letters* 32). Stating that she “visited her often in sickness & watched over her bed,” Dickinson recalled that Sophia’s “pale features lit up with an unearthly—smile” and that she herself “looked as long as friends would permit & when they told me I must look no longer I let them lead me away.” When Sophia was “laid in her coffin,” Dickinson was overcome with “a fixed melancholy” so deep that her parents sent her away to recover at the home of her aunt Lavinia in Boston. This experience and her attendance at the funeral of Martha Dwight Strong, an acquaintance of the Dickinson family who took her own life shortly after Emily returned from Boston, may have contributed to the fascination with death and the way American culture copes with it that would later emerge in and pervade Dickinson’s poetry.

Upon completing her studies at Amherst Academy, Dickinson entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in nearby South Hadley, where she would conclude her formal education. During the year she spent at Mount Holyoke, from late September 1847 to early August 1848, Dickinson roomed with her cousin Emily Norcross. Dickinson enjoyed her studies and worked hard to excel in a curriculum heavily weighted with courses in the sciences. She also had an opportunity to think carefully about the role religious faith would play in her life. This reflection was occasioned by the wave of religious revivals known as the Second Great Awakening that surfaced at the seminary in the form of personal professions of faith. Students became identified as those who had professed faith, those who hoped to profess, and those who had no

hope. Within a student population of 235, Dickinson began her year as one of 80 “no hoppers”; by the end of the academic year, she would be one of 29. In January 1848 Dickinson joined 16 other students who were sufficiently concerned about their faith to seek guidance from the founder and principal, Mary Lyon. Having seriously weighed the matter and searched her soul, Dickinson decided she would not profess but rather adopt the practice of religious questioning that would become a central feature of her poetry and lead her to cease attending church. Dickinson's departure from the seminary at the end of a single year was not unusual and did not result from her religious stance. Of the 115 students who entered with her, only 23 returned. Her father wanted her to rejoin the family, perhaps because she had been ill during the course of the year. A more likely explanation for her departure from formal education was the fact that her family had the means to support her and she did not need additional education for the purpose of earning a living.

The years immediately after Dickinson's return to Amherst were characterized by a vibrant social life, increased dedication to literature, and the first inklings of her own identity as a writer. Benjamin Newton, a law student who worked in her father's office from 1847 to 1849, discussed poetry with her and sent her a volume of RALPH WALDO EMERSON's poems in 1850. Dickinson would later write to Thomas Wentworth Higginson that Newton was an early mentor. Also during this period Dickinson established her most enduring friendship, that with Susan Huntington Gilbert, who would marry Austin in 1856 and take up residence in the Evergreens, the home Edward built for the couple on a lot adjacent to the Homestead. Emily had known Susan at Amherst Academy, but it was during these years that they developed the intimacy that would make Susan a lifelong friend, who not only knew of Dickinson's life as a poet but participated in that life more directly than any other person. Given these burgeoning friendships, it is no surprise that Dickinson would declare in a letter to her uncle Joel Warren Norcross in January 1850 that “Amherst is

alive with fun this winter” and describe a hectic round of sleigh rides and parties (*Letters* 80).

At the same time that her social life was so sunny, however, Dickinson was experiencing another round of religious soul searching that contributed to her formulation of an independent, potentially artistic point of view. The revivals of the Second Great Awakening that had touched her time at Mount Holyoke forcefully reentered Dickinson's Amherst life in 1850. That was the year that Lavinia, Susan, and even her father, Edward, would all profess their faith, prompting Dickinson to write in April, “Christ is calling everyone here . . . and I am standing alone in rebellion” (*Letters* 94). This dawning sense of isolation coincided with the 1849 return of dashes in Dickinson's letters and her increasing immersion in literature and the life of the mind. The dash would remain a constant feature of her letters and a distinguishing characteristic of her poems. When Dickinson proclaimed to Susan that “we are the only poets” in an 1851 letter filled with literary references (*Letters* 144), she may well have been acknowledging her own literary vocation.

Scholars now agree that Dickinson's most prolific period of poetic production probably began in 1858 and continued through 1865 (Franklin, *Poems* 1,533). When Dickinson first began to write poems is unclear; she may have started as early as 1845. At that time she described herself directly as “poetical” (8) in a letter to Abiah Root. Her earliest known poem was a Valentine greeting sent to Elbridge Bowdoin in 1850.

What is certain is that once she started, Dickinson continued to write at varying rates until her death in 1886, though never again producing poems at the levels achieved between 1858 and 1865. Precise dating of the poems is frequently impossible, as she commonly prepared as many as three rough drafts of poems, all of which she customarily destroyed, leaving only the final version. As a consequence, composition dates for most poems are best considered probable rather than certain. Even so, scholarly research suggests that during this eight-year period Dickinson completed

1,116 of her 1,789 poems, producing as many as 295 poems in 1863 alone.

During these years Dickinson bound most of her poems in little handmade booklets that would later be known as “fascicles.” She made 40 of these books by copying final drafts of poems onto special paper that she purchased already folded by the manufacturer, stacking four to seven folded sheets on top of one another; punching two holes on the left, folded edge, and binding the sheets with thread. Dickinson was extraordinarily scrupulous, going about her writing mostly at night and carefully destroying early drafts so that even members of her family were unaware of her efforts at self-publication. Although her family was well aware that Dickinson wrote poems, they did not know until after her death how many she wrote or that she had produced numerous booklets containing them.

Dickinson’s family and friends knew that she wrote poetry because she sent poems in letters, openly discussed her interest in poetry, and even recited her poems in the home. That Dickinson did not seek to publish her poems is more mysterious today than it would have been in the poet’s day, when many women included poems in their correspondence without seeking publication. What would have been unusual was the sheer number of poems Dickinson sent and the correspondence she maintained with persons well positioned in the literary world. On the basis of existing letters scholars know that Dickinson sent around 500 poems through her correspondence. The actual number could be much higher, as there is no way of estimating how many poems were sent in letters subsequently lost or destroyed. This number suggests that Dickinson was dedicated to distributing her poetry to a select audience. It also indicates her wish to have a measure of control over her poems that she would not have enjoyed had she submitted them to the editorial standards of the day. Editors would almost certainly normalize Dickinson’s capitalization, “correct” her unconventional rhymes, and replace her dashes with standard forms of punctuation. We know this to be the case because these editorial norms were imposed on the 10 poems published without her permission

during her lifetime. Dickinson’s desire for control may help explain why she so deliberately created and preserved her 40 fascicle books.

Of Dickinson’s nearly 100 known correspondents, three are particularly significant in terms of her life as a writer. The first of these, Higginson, was a prominent writer, Unitarian minister, political activist, and colonel in the first regiment of black soldiers to serve in the Civil War. Dickinson opened her correspondence with Higginson in April 1862, after reading his essay “A Letter to a Young Contributor,” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The essay offered practical advice to aspiring writers who were considering print publication.

Dickinson sent Higginson four poems in her first letter, apparently seeking his opinion about her poems without necessarily desiring his assistance with print publication. In a now-famous passage that appeared in her third letter to him Dickinson wrote: “I smile when you suggest that I delay ‘to publish’—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin” (*Letters* 408). Despite differing views on publication and a great many other issues, a friendship developed, and Dickinson sustained her correspondence with Higginson for the balance of her life. Higginson visited Dickinson twice, in 1870 and 1873, and later coedited the first posthumous volume of poems in 1890. Helen Hunt Jackson, the well-known poet and advocate of Native American rights, tried through a series of letters to convince Dickinson to publish during her lifetime, stating in an 1875 letter, “You are a great poet” (*Letters* 545). Jackson, who was born in Amherst the same year as Dickinson and also sought literary advice from Higginson, did manage to publish one Dickinson poem anonymously, “Success is counted sweetest” (Franklin, *Poems* 112), in *A Masque of Poets* in 1878. The correspondent with whom Dickinson shared more of her thoughts about poetry than anyone else was her sister-in-law, close friend, and neighbor, Susan. Susan, who was born a mere nine days after Dickinson, received more letters than any other correspondent and is the only person known to have influenced a Dickinson poem. The letters exchanged between the two women in

summer 1861 (*Letters* 238; Franklin, *Poems* 159–162) show Susan's influence on Dickinson's revision of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Franklin, *Poems* 124C), one of the four poems Dickinson sent Higginson in her first letter to him.

During the 1860s, Dickinson would make two trips to Boston for eye treatments, in 1864 and 1865, but wrote to Higginson in 1869, "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (*Letters* 460). Despite the increasing seclusion of her life, which included her ceasing to attend church around 1860, Dickinson's life was certainly not cut off from the world. Her family subscribed to a dozen newspapers and periodicals, most of which Dickinson read avidly, and her father and brother were actively involved in public life. Her father was elected to the United States Congress in 1853 and served the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1838–39 and 1873–74. Emily and Lavinia visited him in Washington, D.C., in 1855, while he was a member of Congress. Austin was busy with his own legal career and took over for his father as treasurer for Amherst College in 1873, assuming the post Edward had held for 38 years. The family was also socially active, hosting many gatherings related to civic projects and Amherst College; Susan and Austin provided lodging for Emerson when he lectured in Amherst in 1857. It is worth noting that even during the years of greatest withdrawal Dickinson sustained her correspondence, projecting a public presence founded on a brilliant and original use of language. Mabel Loomis Todd, who moved to Amherst in 1881 and would later coedit the first volume of Dickinson's poems with Higginson, remarked on what she considered a striking combination of seclusion and intense contact with the world: "Emily is called in Amherst 'the myth.'" Todd would write in 1882, "She writes the strangest poems, & very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius" (Sewall 217).

Dickinson died in Amherst on May 15, 1886. Her death has been attributed to Bright's disease but might easily have been the result of hypertension aggravated by recent family losses. Her father had died in Boston in 1874, her mother passed away at the Homestead in 1882, and her beloved

nephew, Gilbert, died next door in 1883. These departures left Lavinia the sole female heir and therefore responsible for collecting and storing Dickinson's possessions after her death.

While going through her sister's belongings, Lavinia made what is perhaps the greatest discovery in American literary history: She opened the locked box that contained the poet's handmade books of poems, the fascicles. "I found," Lavinia would later write, "(the week after her death) a box (locked) containing 7 hundred wonderful poems, carefully copied—" (Johnson, *Poems* xxxix). This discovery effectively launched the public life of Dickinson. Turning first to Susan, then to Todd and Higginson, Lavinia initiated a publication history that led immediately to three editions of Dickinson's poems in 1890, 1891, and 1896.

Since their discovery, Emily Dickinson's poems have had a constant presence in anthologies of American literature. In fact, at times Dickinson's writing has been the only woman's work included in such volumes. Considered to be both of their time and ahead of it, these brief lyrics have enjoyed widespread public popularity, as well as consideration in almost any serious study of the genre or of American writing. This acclaim continues today.

As a result of complications surrounding the ownership of the manuscripts and editorial resistance to nuances of Dickinson's handwriting, no complete edition of her poems appeared until 1955, the year the first variorum, or standard scholarly edition, was published. Ralph W. Franklin produced a groundbreaking facsimile edition of the fascicles in 1981 so that readers could see Dickinson's own arrangement of the poems through photocopies of her handwritten fascicles. In 1998 Franklin edited the second variorum edition, demonstrating the need for an up-to-date scholarly edition that could incorporate scholarship continuously emerging in the field of Dickinson studies.

NOTE ON POEM TITLES AND CITATIONS FOR POEMS AND LETTERS

Of the 1,789 poems that are now part of the official Dickinson canon, Dickinson attached titles only to nine. She provided language that characterized spe-

cific poems in references to 17 additional poems, as with her phrase “my Snake,” which appears in an 1866 letter to Higginson (*Letters* 450) when she is discussing “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (Franklin 1,096). In the absence of titles, editors have done their best to number the poems according to the order in which they were written. The standard procedure for identifying Dickinson poems is to cite the first line or refer to the number assigned the poem in the standard scholarly edition. At this moment, the standard scholarly edition of the poems is the 1998 variorum edited by R. W. Franklin. The *Franklin* that appears before the number 1,096 in the preceding reference to “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” indicates that the number is taken from the Franklin edition. The date given to each poem is an estimate of when the poem was written. Citations for Dickinson letters are all from the single standard edition, that by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. Although the standard citation practice among Dickinson scholars is to represent this edition with a single, underlined capital (L), followed by the page number on which the quotation appears, in this source you will find *Letters* instead. A standard reference to Dickinson’s 1866 letter to Higginson, (L 450), would indicate that the phrase “my Snake” appears on page 450 of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Johnson and Ward.

“Success is counted sweetest” (1859)

(Franklin 112)

This is the poem that Dickinson’s friend the well-known poet Helen Hunt Jackson published in *A Masque of Poets*, an 1878 volume made up of anonymous poems. Many of those who read the poem guessed that Ralph Waldo Emerson was its author. This conjecture makes sense in light of the way the poem contrasts mortal victory, as that which is won on a battlefield, with spiritual victory, which is eternal. The poem’s focus on the internal reality of those society judges to be life’s losers can be read as an extension of the self-reliant individualism Emerson so famously advocated. The philosophi-

cal opening stanza of the poem, which presents the experience of failure as serving to sharpen and vitalize the individual’s vision of ultimate success, is given concrete embodiment in the two succeeding stanzas. There, the victorious army, signified by the “purple Host / Who took the Flag today” (lines 5–6), is rooted strictly in the mortal present, the fleeting moment that is “today.” He who is “defeated – dying” (l. 9), on the other hand, hears “distant strains of triumph” (l. 11) that beckon him to an ultimate and never-ending success. The curious phrase “forbidden ear” (l. 10) points to the way the fallen soldier’s spiritual victory violates the commonplace social view that associates divine approval only with the side that wins. Conventional wisdom would have “forbidden” his hearing the strains of heaven. American readers first confronting this poem just before, during, or after the Civil War would have associated Dickinson’s words with that conflict. When the poem first appeared in print, in the April 27, 1864, issue of the *Brooklyn Daily Union*, the defeated soldier would probably have been considered a Confederate. Granting spiritual triumph to the enemy who so clearly threatened the union and cost so many lives would have been understood to be daring, perhaps even rebellious. For readers today, the poem’s resonance with the Civil War is less vivid, although the statement it makes about success and defeat is no less challenging or apropos. Americans continue to view war as the ultimate testing ground for national character and are as reluctant to see the spiritual achievement of our defeated enemy today as Dickinson’s readers—and perhaps Dickinson herself—would have been in her day.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” and his poem “The Rhodora.” See whether you can find the sorts of parallels with Dickinson’s poem that might have led readers of *A Masque of Poets* to speculate that Emerson was the author. Point to specific lines or word choices, as well as to philosophical underpinnings.
2. Compare this Dickinson poem with WALT WHITMAN’S “Reconciliation” and “As I Lay

with *My Head in Your Lap Camerado*,” both poems that appear in the “Drum-Taps” section of *Leaves of Grass*. In what ways do both poets reflect similar understandings of philosophical and cultural problems associated with war and the achievement of political equality?

3. Identify experiences in your own life when you discovered that failure provoked an increased appreciation for the object of your desire. Or, describe an experience when you were disappointed by success and looked back longingly on the moments of greatest anticipation. Relate both these experiences to the emotions depicted in this poem.

“I taste a liquor never brewed – ” (1861)
(Franklin 207)

This is one of the 10 Dickinson poems published during the poet's lifetime. It first appeared in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on May 4, 1861, under the title “The May-Wine” and was probably sent to the newspaper by Susan Dickinson. One of the poem's primary sources of appeal is its playful treatment of alcohol and intoxication as a metaphor for the speaker's delight in nature's many splendors. The idea that intoxication could figuratively describe poetic inspiration is central to the poem, particularly in respect to the speaker's extravagant exclamations proclaiming the quality of the “liquor” (l. 1) and her capacity for consumption. “Frankfort Berries” (l. 3) could not have yielded such a vintage, the reader is told. The speaker claims she will continue to drink until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, when “Saints – to windows run” (l. 14). The poem's final lines even suggest that the speaker herself merges with the deity on Judgment Day, when the saints at their windows are joined by “Seraphs” who tip their hats in honor of “the little Tippler / Leaning against the – Sun!” (ll. 15–16). The practice of deifying the intoxicated poet has ancient origins in the myths of Bacchus but would have reminded many of Dickinson's contemporaries—and perhaps Dickinson herself—of Emerson's essay “The Poet,” in which he similarly refers to the poet's intoxica-

tion. The title given the poem by the *Springfield Daily Republican*, “The May-Wine,” reflects a certain logic, given the many spring features of the poem: the springlike exuberance of the speaker, who describes herself as the “Debauchee of Dew” (l. 6) and anticipates “endless summer days” that lead forward to her apotheosis. At the same time, however, the hyperbolic overstatement that is so consistent from start to finish can also point to a kind of giddy exaggeration that has the effect of undermining the high seriousness of poetic art, as if the poem were cautioning readers not to place poets on a pedestal or treat as literal the high-blown rhetoric of the romantics.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Locate the references to intoxication in Emerson's essay “The Poet” and decide whether Dickinson's poem matches his in tone and meaning. Then state how and why this poem might be a response to Emerson.
2. Identify the ways this poem violates the social decorum of Dickinson's day and might represent a daring statement for a 19th-century woman writer. Consider the details of Dickinson's biography that might predispose readers not to expect this sort of poem from her.
3. Weigh the innocent delight expressed by the speaker against the speaker's overblown rhetoric and decide whether you interpret this poem as a celebration of poetic inspiration or a warning not to take the poet's assertions of transcendence too seriously.

“Wild nights – Wild nights!” (1861)
(Franklin 269)

This poem is perhaps Dickinson's most extravagant expression of passionate desire. Repetition of the opening pair of words, “Wild nights – Wild nights!” in combination with the concluding exclamation point makes the first line an emphatic yearning for sexual abandonment. Yet, in classic Dickinson fashion, the lover, who is the object of such intense devotion, is not present except in

the speaker's imagination. The second line of the first stanza, "Were I with thee," introduces the subjunctive case that is so common in Dickinson's poems in order to situate the wished-for consummation in the indefinite future. That much-anticipated future is suddenly seized in the next stanza when the speaker imaginatively transports herself to the moment of union with the lover. A "Heart," which could represent both the speaker and the lover, is described as being "in port," oblivious to "winds" that swirl outside their protected mooring. This sense of total immersion in the object of desire is then further magnified when the speaker declares that they are "Done" with the "Compass" and the "Chart," as if to say that this experience is completely off the map of familiar experience. The third stanza begins with what may be the most daring language of the poem by using the sexually suggestive verb "Rowing" to describe the action of the lovers. In the same breath, however, the speaker counters the earthy sexuality associated with the movement of rowing by asserting that such rowing takes place "in Eden," thus investing the experience with the innocence of Eden before the Fall. The language that concludes the poem reinforces this quality of ultimate innocence through a return to the subjunctive case by means of the word *might*, indicating that the preceding intimacy is both intensely anticipated and at this point merely imagined.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Construct two opposing interpretations of the poem: one arguing that the speaker maintains the appearance of innocence in order to justify a frank discussion of sexual desire and one arguing that the poem is actually about Christian union with Jesus. You may want to compare this poem with "Come slowly – Eden!" (Franklin 205).
2. In what ways does Dickinson's combination of sexual and religious themes in this poem resemble Whitman's fusion of body and soul in "I Sing the Body Electric"?
3. Look up a definition of the subjunctive case and compare the way Dickinson uses it in this poem to the way she uses it in "I never felt at Home – Below –" (Franklin 437) or "The Poets light but Lamps –" (Franklin 930).

"I like to see it lap the Miles –" (1862) (Franklin 383)

This poem was probably written in 1862 but may reflect a special interest in railroads and trains prompted by the central role Dickinson's father played in introducing the first train line to Amherst in 1853. Edward Dickinson saw the arrival of the railroad as signaling a major turning point in Amherst history when the economy would boom and the town would more fully share in the scientific and cultural advances that were reshaping the United States. In a letter to Austin, Edward described the advent of the railroad as "one of two great eras in the history of Amherst," the other being the establishment of Amherst College (Habegger 289). Dickinson's use of the word *Boanerges* in the poem's last stanza may point to the transforming power of the railroad by alluding to the apostles James and John, both of whom Jesus referred to as *Boanerges*, which means "sons of thunder" or "wrath" or "tumult" (Mark 9:38 and 10:37; Luke 9:54). Read as a celebration of trains, then, the poem describes the catlike grace of this powerful new machine that travels through valleys and over mountains, uniting the humble "Shanties" (l. 7) of the laborer with the "Quarry" (l. 8) from which the marble of national monuments is carved. The emergence of the train from the quarry in the third stanza is described in language suggestive of the birth of a new and powerful monument to America that is worthy of poetic expression. Having "pare[d]" the quarry "To fit it's [*sic*] sides," the train must "crawl between / Complaining all the while / In horrid – hooting stanza –" (ll. 8–12). The "horrid – hooting stanza" expresses both the birth cries of this new creature and the train's power to evoke the sublime, calling forth the poet's skill to harness its horrifying majesty in artful stanzas. The final stanza does precisely this by metaphorically transmuting the train from an

unpredictable catlike beast to a far more tractable horse that stops, “docile and omnipotent / At it’s [sic] own stable door – ” (ll. 16–17). Allusions to the Christ story, as in the mention of a “Star” (l. 15) that stops at a “stable” (l. 17), further establish the poem’s veneration of the train by connecting the birth of the train to the incarnation of the Holy Spirit in the person of the baby Jesus.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In what ways does this poem embody the optimism of the romantic period in the United States? Consider the way the poem presents a portrait of the machine as a positive contribution to the landscape of America.
2. Consider the possibility that the poem actually mocks the symbolic significance of the railroad and is designed as a satire rather than an earnest celebration of its power. Can you produce an interpretation that treats the biblical references as a critique of America’s tendency to invest mechanical inventions with spiritual significance?
3. Is it possible to read this poem as a commentary on the displacement of human beings by machines, which at times seem to take on a life of their own and diminish the role of human labor? Look particularly at the use of the word *supercilious* in the second stanza.

“The Soul selects her own Society – ”

(1862) (Franklin 409)

This poem is often read as an expression of exclusivity strongly rooted in antidemocratic class privilege. Readings that support this interpretation draw heavily on Dickinson’s biography, citing her family’s social position and the financial affluence that enabled Dickinson to live an unmarried, solitary life in the family home, where she enjoyed the support of domestic servants. The “Soul,” who is described in the first stanza (ll. 1–3) as “select[ing] her own Society” and “shut[ing] the Door” to all others, does indeed lend credence to such assertions of exclusivity.

This sense of detachment is then invested with distinctively political significance when the Soul affirms “her divine Majority,” thus appearing to assume the divine right of monarchs, further elevating her above the will of America’s democratic masses. Dickinson’s use of aristocratic language in the second stanza appears to reinforce these opening assertions of privilege by presenting the Soul as “Unmoved” even by “an Emperor . . . kneeling / Opon [sic] her Mat” (ll. 7–8). The repetition of the word *Unmoved* in lines 5 and 7 further magnifies the Soul’s detachment. The concluding stanza then builds on this growing sense of the Soul’s isolation by presenting her as selecting the smallest possible society: “I’ve known her—from an ample nation – / Choose One – ” (ll. 9–10). Here, the lifting of one from “an ample nation” seems an unmistakable rejection of America’s democratic veneration of the common man. The final lines then seal the Soul in isolated splendor by describing her as vanishing behind “Valves” that close with the finality of “Stone” (ll. 11–12).

Alternative readings of the poem arise from thinking about the speaker’s precise relation to the Soul and carefully considering the tone appropriate to the language of extreme indifference that the speaker projects onto the Soul. Close examination of the final stanza clearly reveals that the speaker may in reality be entirely separate from, and perhaps even hostile to, the Soul. To have “known” the Soul to “Choose One – / Then – close the Valves of her attention – / Like Stone” suggests the sort of knowledge that results from being left on the outside. This perception opens the possibility that the poem is not a celebration of the Soul’s majesty, but rather a critique of economic privilege or even the prerogative of the romantic artist, whose single-minded quest for spiritual truth necessitates a disregard for others. The speaker’s repetition of the word *Unmoved* in the second stanza can now be read as expressing an attitude of extreme displeasure, a displeasure that results from being repeatedly excluded from the Soul’s presence. According to this reading, the poem performs as a condemnation of social privilege precisely because

such privilege yields an aristocratic disdain for the ideals of democracy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Dickinson's poem "The Soul should always stand ajar" (Franklin 1,017) seems to advocate a position very different from that assumed by the Soul at the beginning of this poem. How does knowledge of this other poem affect your interpretation of "The Soul selects her own Society –"??
2. Create an analysis of this poem in which you argue that the value of the poem arises from its ability to support two extremely different positions: one that celebrated privilege and one that despises the indifference of the privileged classes.

"They shut me up in Prose –" (1862) (Franklin 445)

The dazzling chain of metaphoric linkages that map the poem's central narrative of escape from linguistic, physical, and imaginative confinement has made this one of Dickinson's most popular poems. We watch with delight as the "little Girl" of the second line acquires the freedom of the "Bird" mentioned in the second stanza and at last achieves the stature of the "Star" that looks "down upon [*sic*] Captivity," as if it were laughable. This sequence of figurative transformations tells us that the speaker is a woman reflecting on her past and that she is probably a poet who has discovered in her art the power to rise above the restrictions imposed by the "They" who represent social control. The "Prose" of the speaker's present is associated with the "Closet" of her past, suggesting that the confinement is both physical and imaginative and that it remains a force the speaker must contend with even though she is now grown. The fact that the speaker uses the word *Prose* to label the captivity she scorns as a mature woman provides a foundation for her connection with the bird in the second stanza, where she clearly draws on the symbolic association of poets with birds. In

this way the poem sets up an opposition between poetry and prose, even though the word *poetry* is never mentioned. As in "I dwell in Possibility –" (Franklin 466), where the speaker refers to possibility as "A fairer House than Prose," prose again operates as a limiting force that fails to contain the speaker. Both poems for this reason can be understood as affirmations of each speaker's vocation as poet while also describing that vocation as a triumph over limitations.

The appearance of the word *treason* in the last line of the second stanza suggests that for this particular speaker "They" can perceive the assertion of poetic power as a form of betrayal for which the punishment is severe. A hint as to the nature of this treason is given in the final stanza, where the female speaker conspicuously identifies the bird as male and then invests him with a power that she claims for herself. By first stating, "Himself has but to will" and then concluding, "No more have I –," the speaker assumes the potency of the male poet, thus violating her proper cultural role as a woman. The haughty, defiant tone of the poem is consistent with the boldness of this gesture. This attitude is especially apparent at the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second, where the word *still* is repeated, initially as a mocking quotation of the word as used by others and then in the speaker's own voice. The effect is a sarcastic rejection of the possibility of stillness when viewed in light of unrestrained mental activity. The rest of the poem mockingly dismisses those who would impose limits while also acknowledging that the struggle against captivity is ongoing. In this way the poem ends where it begins: with the speaker's admission that she must combat the repressive containment of "Prose."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the ways that this poem and "I dwell in Possibility –" (Franklin 466) make the argument that freedom is realized through exercise of the imagination.
2. Examine the way dashes appear in this poem at points where the speaker seems most disdainful of efforts "They" make to confine her mental and

- physical freedom. How might this poem function as a reflection of Dickinson's own girlhood experience of removing dashes from her writing?
3. Contrast the speaker in this poem with the speaker in Emerson's poem "Days." Consider especially the way the speakers in both poems must overcome obstacles in order to lead productive lives.

"Because I could not stop for Death – "

(1862) (Franklin 479)

This is one of Dickinson's most famous death poems. Here, as in many of her poems that explore the process of dying and the nature of death, she presents a speaker whose voice emerges from beyond the grave. In this case the speaker challenges the primary cultural assumption that death is a transition to new life beyond the grave by recalling an experience that appears to advance through familiar stages but ultimately leads nowhere. The opening stages of the poem make use of conventional Victorian death imagery that presents death as a union with Christ, often characterized as a spiritual marriage. In the first stanza "Death" appears in a "Carriage," as if an aristocratic suitor who "kindly" stops for the speaker. "Immortality" completes the romantic picture by waiting inside the carriage, fulfilling the role of chaperone in a formal courtship. The second stanza sustains the courtly dignity of the first by stressing Death's "Civility" and absence of "haste," in recognition of which the speaker courteously sets aside "My labor and my leisure too." In keeping with the strong sense of formal patterning that casts the speaker within a comfortable and highly predictable preordained order, the third stanza shows the speaker's life symbolically passing before her eyes: She sees childhood as "the School, where Children strove"; middle life, as the season of maturation represented by "Fields of Gazing Grain"; and life's conclusion, as captured by "the Setting Sun – ."

At this point, however, the poem abruptly departs from all sense of preordained order, taking a dramatic turn in the direction of the gothic. The

Sun that the speaker had just passed now passes her, forcing her to reverse her previous observation: "Or rather – He passed Us – " (l. 13). This acknowledgment of misperception initiates the second half of the poem by opening a wholly unanticipated realm of experience. The speaker suddenly feels a chill, compelling her admission that a "Gossamer" gown and "Tulle" tippet (ll. 15–16)—gauzy garments suitable for a wedding—do not meet her present needs. With this chill is a nightmarish cessation of time that begins with a pause before a sunken tomb and ends with the speaker's disclosure that even though centuries have passed, the time "Feels shorter than the Day / I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity – " (ll. 22–24). The poem's vivid illumination of death as an experience for which the speaker was not prepared casts serious doubt on the accuracy and usefulness of imagining death in terms of courtship and romantic union. Perhaps the greatest challenge the poem poses for readers is its implied message that culture cannot adequately prepare people for death. When readers contemplate the extent that mortal life may be structured according to a false vision of eternity, they glimpse the unsettling, uncanny universe of the gothic that begins where the ordering principles of culture end.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the many ways in which people today structure their lives according to received notions of what life beyond the grave might actually be like. To what extent does this poem expose the fairy-tale quality of myths about the next life that are allowed to persist largely because they are unexamined?
2. Consider the way the second half of the poem challenges the events described in the first half. How does the fact that the speaker shifts from dying to being dead influence the content of the poem?
3. To what extent does the poem provide a commentary on the way class status and financial well-being shape our vision of eternity? Does American culture share a common vision of the afterlife, or do all U.S. subcultures and

classes imagine eternity in terms unique to their circumstances?

“This is my letter to the World” (1863)
(Franklin 519)

This is one of the best known and most anthologized of Dickinson’s poems. In their 1890 first edition of Dickinson’s poems, Higginson and Todd even went so far as to title this poem “Prelude” and place it at the beginning of the volume so that it performed as an epigraph, setting the tone for the writing to follow. Their reasons for doing this are related to the way the poem can be read as expressing sentiments readers would have automatically associated with 19th-century womanhood. To be precise, Higginson and Todd were concerned that readers would not immediately accept the unconventional nature of many Dickinson poems; they wanted to introduce her writing in a manner that would win greater reader confidence. This poem accomplished that end by presenting a speaker who states immediately that “the World . . . never wrote to Me” (ll. 1–2), thereby proclaiming her conformity to the 19th-century cultural expectation that women inhabit the private sphere of the home and do not aspire to public lives. When the speaker goes on to explain that her “letter to the World” (l. 1) is important because it conveys “The simple News that Nature told” (l. 3), she further defines herself as a passive transmitter of nature’s wisdom and not herself the source of original knowledge. This assertion of passivity reinforces the speaker’s reluctance to address the larger world; she merely transmits the authority that remains nature’s. The speaker’s statement that nature’s message “is committed / To Hands I cannot see” (ll. 4–5) appropriately indicates that she has no sense of who might constitute her audience, as she is incapable of comprehending the way poetry reaches a public reading audience. Her final request that readers “Judge tenderly – of Me” (l. 8) provides a fitting conclusion by acknowledging her own sense that what she is doing is suspect. The collective impact of the poem is that it presents readers with a highly reticent female speaker who dares

to address the public only because doing so is her way of serving nature.

Contemporary readers arrive at much different, often contradictory readings of the poem. Instead of interpreting the opening lines as the expression of a shy woman who sought no contact with the larger world, they often see the speaker as firing off an angry “letter to the World” that expresses her outrage at not having ever been written to by that world. This position is supported by the absence of terminal punctuation at the end of the first stanza, which enables a reading of lines 3 through 6 that dissociates the speaker from nature. According to this reading, “The simple News that Nature told” (l. 3) never reached the speaker but instead registered only with “Hands I cannot see” (l. 6), which is to say, with people the speaker does not know. The speaker’s concluding request “Sweet – countrymen – / Judge tenderly – of Me” (ll. 7–8) is viewed as highly ironic, even sarcastic. Interpreting the speaker in this way—as angry and defiant—leads to the conclusion that the poem condemns the social system that confined women within the narrow sphere of the home. The central role of nature in the poem serves to drive home the point that women whose lives are so narrowly restricted have no connection with nature and therefore are condemned to lead unnatural lives. This reading of the poem presents a speaker very nearly the opposite of the one Higginson and Todd may have intended Dickinson’s first readers to encounter. One of the joys of reading Dickinson’s poems is that they so frequently support disparate interpretations.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does it say about the reader’s role in the creation of a poem’s meaning when a single poem can support such dramatically different interpretations?
2. Look up the “cult of true womanhood” in a reference book that deals with 19th-century U.S. culture. Decide how this poem conforms to the social virtues central to that code of conduct.
3. In your analysis of this poem, see whether you can find reasons why a female speaker might feel

both empowered by nature and entrapped by it. Consider the way society uses definitions of what is “natural” to determine whether behavior is either acceptable or unacceptable.

“Much Madness is divinest Sense – ”

(1863) (Franklin 620)

This poem is one of Dickinson's boldest declarations of independence. In addition to celebrating nonconformity, the poem provides implicit advice about how to negotiate social pressures imposed by the political majority. The “discerning Eye” mentioned in the second line immediately identifies the desired audience for the poem as those readers capable of recognizing that “Much madness” can indeed be “divinest Sense” (l. 1). The language of the poem takes advantage of the aural eye/I pun, embedded in the reference to a “discerning Eye,” to conflate visual discernment with the temperamental discernment that enables certain “Is,” or personalities, to identify with the experience of those who feel oppressed by social norms or political policies and are considered mad by the majority. As a consequence, the finality of the “Chain” reference that concludes the poem would have a special resonance for this audience, metonymically reminding them of jails or other forms of punishment that could await them if they do not carefully monitor public awareness of their own dissent from the majority position. To avoid being “handled with a Chain” (l. 8), the poem advises, be careful not to “Demur” too loudly. The safer course—implied by the knowledge that those who “Assent” are judged “sane” (l. 6)—would be to act with duplicity, giving the appearance of assent while persevering in nonconformity.

The attention given to “Assent” in line 6 combines with the previous reference to “the Majority” in line 4, to establish the poem's concern with democratic politics, according to which government is authorized by the “consent” of the people. As a poet who wrote with keen awareness of dictionary definitions, Dickinson would have known that *assent* and *consent* share the same Latin root,

sentio and function interchangeably in common usage. Politically speaking, then, the poem illuminates the way democracies necessitate communities of dissenting minorities who are always on the watch for like-minded allies. One of the possible meanings conveyed by the poem is that the best interests of democracy are served by nonconformists who silently stand by their convictions when thwarted by the majority, awaiting the appropriate moment to express their views in concert with others and perhaps shape a new majority position. By that means, democracy can ultimately serve all of the people, even though at any given moment a dissenting minority will be quietly looking for allies.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In Dickinson's day women who became involved directly in public life were considered unnatural or psychologically suspect. Their “natural” role in life was to raise children and maintain a virtuous home. Therefore, to depart from the home could be interpreted as a sign of mental instability and might lead to a woman's being institutionalized. How does this knowledge influence the way you interpret the poem?
2. How might a poem such as this function as an apology or explanation for Dickinson's own life? Bear in mind that Dickinson wrote 1,789 poems, many of which were sharply critical of her culture, while leading a reclusive life. Can you explain why she might have sent so many poems in letters and carefully preserved her poems, as if for future readers?
3. Does Dickinson's analysis of the status of nonconformists in a democracy apply to America today? Do you silently bide your time when your views are out of favor? Do you weigh the consequences of your public actions and act only when you think you have the support necessary to succeed?

“What Soft – Cherubic Creatures – ”

(1863) (Franklin 675)

This poem may well represent Dickinson's most direct critique of the conventional 19th-century

American ideal of womanhood. One of the most interesting and skillful features of the poem is the way Dickinson exposes the failure of domestic female culture to achieve its central aim of nurturing Christian values. With language that is unusually condemnatory for Dickinson, the poem issues a scathing rebuke of female compliance within a highly materialistic, class-based social system that replaces spiritual vitality with a pampered life characterized by sterile self-absorption. The disdainful tone of the poem is established in the opening lines, where the speaker observes with considerable amazement the current condition of middle-class womanhood: “What Soft – Cherubic Creatures – / These Gentlewomen are – ” (ll. 1–2). Such women have indeed aspired to be angelic but settled for an infantile expression of it, as though suffering from arrested development that has made them soft and excessively innocent. “One would as soon assault a Push— / Or violate a Star” (ll. 3–4), the speaker declares, accusing these women of having become indistinguishable from the luxurious velvety comfort achieved through lives as remote from events in the real world as a star is from the Earth. The second stanza concentrates on the way the external, domestic environment women inhabit has penetrated and transformed the inner self so that even their “Convictions” acquire the quality of “Dimity,” a finely woven cotton fabric (l. 5). The speaker quickly points out that this transformation yields a profound alienation from both self and God by encouraging women to feel “Ashamed” (l. 8) of their own “freckled Human Nature” (l. 7) and by implication the “Deity” (l. 8) who created such an imperfect nature. The final stanza then opens by expanding on the cherubic woman’s alienation from deity, enacting her dismissal of the life modeled by Jesus and the disciples: “It’s such a common – Glory – / A Fisherman’s – Degree – ” (ll. 9–10). With extraordinary rhetorical flourish, the poem then concludes as a sermon might, with the speaker acting as the minister who gives voice to God’s judgment of the sinner: “Redemption – Brittle Lady – / Be so—ashamed of Thee – ” (ll. 10–11). The final word, *Thee*, resoundingly proclaims the scriptural foundation for the speaker’s thunderous condemnation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the fact that this poem was probably composed around 1863, while the Civil War was raging and the Emancipation Proclamation was about to be or had just been written. Does this knowledge influence the way you interpret the reference to freckles that appears in the second stanza? Why might Dickinson want to make skin pigmentation a central feature of a poem about middle-class white women?
2. Notice that for the first two stanzas the speaker expresses her own perceptions but in the final stanza adopts the point of view of both the “Gentlewomen” whose lives she is examining and God. What rhetorical purpose does Dickinson achieve by shifting point of view in this manner?
3. See whether you can identify all the features of the poem that define its class orientation. Can you also specify the probable race and ethnic heritage of the speaker? How do these cultural markers influence your understanding of Dickinson as a U.S. writer? Does she speak for all Americans or represent a distinct community within U.S. culture?

“A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (1865) (Franklin 1,096)

This is one of 10 Dickinson poems published during her lifetime. Scholars speculate that Susan gave a copy of the poem to the *Springfield Daily Republican*, in which newspaper the poem first appeared on February 14, 1866, titled “The Snake.” Dickinson herself was sufficiently irritated by editorial alterations of the poem to express her dissatisfaction to Higginson in a March 17, 1866, letter. There she tells Higginson that the poem “was robbed of me,” that she was unhappy about the imposition of a question mark at the end of line 3 (where she had no punctuation), and she reaffirms her resistance to print publication: “I had told you I did not print” (*Letters* 450). With these words Dickinson expresses both her deliberate avoidance of print publication and her unhappiness with editorial interventions in her poems.

A central reason for this poem's popularity is its immediate accessibility. In an easy-to-follow narrative the poem presents a male speaker who recollects his boyhood encounters with snakes, repeatedly asserting the sense of surprise and excitement that attended these confrontations. An intriguing feature of the poem is the fact that the speaker carefully frames four different meetings with snakes, two that are set in the past and characterized by mostly abstract language and two that are richly detailed and place the encounters in the present. The first is directed to a second person "You": "You may have met him?" (l. 3). The second reference quickly follows this one, shifts from past to present tense, provides abundant imagery, and places the snake very close to the "You": "Grass divides . . . / A spotted Shaft is seen, / And then it closes at your Feet" (ll. 5–7). The third encounter remains in the present tense, shifts from second to first person, provides even more concrete detail, and describes an experience the speaker has repeated several times: "I more than once at Noon / Have passed I thought a Whip Lash" (ll. 12–13). The concluding two stanzas shift from present back to past tense and place the now-generalized experience of meeting snakes in the larger context of all natural creatures the speaker has come to know: "Several of Nature's People" (l. 17). When the final two lines describe "a tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone –" (ll. 23–24), the distance between past and present suddenly collapses, capturing the unexpected and startling appearance of the snake that has characterized all four meetings while also conveying the impression that the speaker is somehow haunted by these encounters. Interpretations of the poem account for the movement into and out of the present tense and explain the speaker's apparent fascination with snakes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain what the significance might be of this particular poem's appearance under the title "The Snake" in a newspaper published on Valentine's Day?
2. See whether you can explain the significance of pacing in this poem, particularly in terms of the way punctuation and diction combine with the appearing and disappearing of snakes.
3. Take into consideration the symbolic significance of snakes and see whether you can explain why Dickinson might have chosen to provide a male speaker for this poem.

"My life closed twice before it's [*sic*] close" (undated) (Franklin 1,773)

Considerable critical attention has been given to discovering biographical origins for the two closings of life that Dickinson refers to in this poem. However, the absence of a clear date for the composition of the poem makes even more difficult the already thorny problem of positioning the poem within the poet's life. Scholars have speculated that Dickinson could have in mind the deaths of her father in 1874 and her mother in 1882, provided that the poem was composed after her mother's death. Other possibilities include the death of Sophia Holland in 1844, the death of Benjamin Newton in 1853, the death of the family friend and publisher Samuel Bowles in 1878, the death of Dickinson's personal friend the Reverend Charles Wadsworth in 1882, or the death of the family friend and Dickinson suitor Judge Otis Phillips Lord in 1884. To complicate matters even further, Dickinson's use of abstract language, like "event" and "Parting" (ll. 4, 7), to describe the speaker's loss opens the possibility that the losses referred to could apply to the ending of friendships, or even the failure of romantic relationships. Fortunately, sure knowledge of biographical origins is not essential to a clear understanding of the poem.

The crucial lines of the poem are the two that end it: "Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell" (ll. 7–8). The point here is that any sense we have of what heaven and hell are like results from our experience on earth. The loss of those we love prompts the hope for reunion in eternity, just as the devastation of life without loved ones becomes the basis for imagining the horrors of hell. There is no dependence on outside

- . *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. 3 vols. Edited by Ralph W. Franklin. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Dobson, Joanne. *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985.
- , ed. *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Farr, Judith. *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Grabher, Gudrun, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller, eds. *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.
- Habegger, Alfred. *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Johnson, Thomas, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Longworth, Polly. *The World of Emily Dickinson: A Visual Biography*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Martin, Wendy, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- McIntosh, James. *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Miller, Cristanne. *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Petrino, Elizabeth A. *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820–1885*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998.
- Pollak, Vivian, ed. *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- St. Armand, Barton Levi. *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.
- Small, Judy Jo. *Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.
- Smith, Martha Nell. *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.
- Webster, Noah. *Noah Webster's First Edition of an American Dictionary of the English Language*. San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1995.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Knopf, 1986.

Paul Crumbley



FREDERICK DOUGLASS (1818–1895)

In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death.

(Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass)

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born a slave in February 1818 at Holme Hill Farm, near Tuckahoe Creek in Talbot County, Maryland. Frederick was raised until he was five by his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, because his mother lived on another farm, where she was a field hand. When he was grown up, he remembered that he had seen his mother, Harriet, only a few times when he was a little boy, when she would sneak away at night to visit him. Had she been caught, Harriet would have been beaten severely for sneaking out. He never knew the actual date of his birth, but when he grew up, Frederick celebrated his birthday on February 14 in memory of his mother, who had given him a heart-shaped cake on the last night that he saw her. He was only about seven years old when his mother died. Frederick never knew who his father was, though he was certainly a white man, possibly his master, Aaron Anthony.

For the first seven years of his life, Frederick lived among many slaves who were his relatives. He lived at Holme Hill with his grandparents until late summer 1824, when he was taken to live at Wye House, the plantation of Edward Lloyd, 12 miles away from Holme Hill. Although his grandparents continued to live at Holme Hill, Frederick was now living with his older brother and sisters and his mother's cousin, "Aunt Katy." He became the companion of his master's son, Daniel Lloyd, who was 12, and learned "'white' habits of speech from

him" (Gates 1,050). Understanding and using "'white' habits of speech" would serve Frederick well as an adult, when he was speaking to white audiences about the horrors of slavery and the need for abolition.

In 1827 Aaron Anthony died and his property was divided among his family and creditors. As Anthony's property, Frederick and his sister, Eliza, were sent to live in Baltimore with Hugh and Sophia Auld. Sophia was one of Anthony's daughters and was more kindhearted than her father or husband. Whether or not she was aware of the consequences that could ensue, she made a favorite of Frederick and began to teach him to read. When he realized what was happening, Hugh Auld demanded that his wife stop. His reasons stemmed from fear and practicality: Slave owners knew that if slaves learned to read, they would discover that the Bible did not condone their enslavement; they would be able to communicate with other slaves and free people more easily, so escape would be easier; and once slaves could read, they would be restless because their knowledge would be increased and slave owners would not be able to control them through limiting what the slaves knew. Although Frederick's semiformal education was stopped at that time, his learning process had just begun. He was given just enough tools to excite his imagination and would soon demonstrate that he had the motivation to learn on his own.

The Aulds gave Frederick sufficient freedom to roam so that he was able to go down to the dockyards, where he was fascinated by shipbuilding. Between watching the men write letters of the alphabet on the boards used to construct the ships and looking at the books the Aulds' son Tommy took home from school, Frederick continued to teach himself to read. As his literacy grew, he secretly read newspapers, which had articles about petitions in Congress to abolish slavery. From these articles, he realized what abolition was and paid particular attention whenever it was mentioned. Perhaps even more significantly, he discussed what he learned with his enslaved playmates and felt hopeful that he would not be a slave forever because he knew there were people in the country working to end slavery (McFeely 33).

During this time, Frederick bought a book titled *The Columbian Orator*, a compilation of important and famous speeches collected by Caleb Bingham. Of all of the books Frederick owned during his lifetime, this single volume had the greatest influence on him. He learned the value of rhetoric through the speeches as he recited them secretly, not knowing that within 15 years he would be delivering speeches of his own. From the classical rhetoric of Cicero and Cato to George Washington's farewell to his officers, Frederick gained an understanding of the value and impact of language. During this time, he also developed a strong religious belief; he spent a lot of time reading the Bible and discussing it with ministers from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which the Aulds allowed him to attend. While he had not received a formal education, Frederick was becoming an educated young man, as Hugh Auld must have noticed, and that was probably the reason he sent Frederick away from Baltimore to Thomas Auld when Frederick was 15.

Thomas Auld did not keep Frederick with him for very long at St. Michael's, where Thomas lived. Some months later Frederick was hired out to Edward Covey, "an ambitious man trying to scratch a farm out of land he rented about seven miles from St. Michael's" (McFeely 44). Frederick's time with Covey was awful. For six months he

was constantly beaten, berated, and generally mistreated. At one point, covered in blood after being kicked in the head, Frederick ran away from Covey back to Thomas Auld. Auld would not hear Frederick's pleas and made him return to Covey's farm. In an incident that is now famous, Covey attacked Frederick when he found him in the barn the following workday, and Frederick, unwilling to be mistreated any longer, fought back; the free white adult and the enslaved black teenager engaged in battle for two hours. Covey attempted to get help from Bill, another hired slave, and Caroline, his own slave. Both defied Covey and refused his pleas and demands for help. In the end Frederick emerged with only a partial victory: He had defeated Covey this time, but he was still a slave and had to stay with Covey for another four months. Later, Frederick realized the true significance of this incident; he would describe this fight as the defining moment in his life as a slave: It was the point at which he became a man and determined that he would do what he had to do to become free.

By 1836 Frederick had been sent back to Hugh Auld to learn a trade in Baltimore. That year he attempted an escape with a group of slaves, but they were captured; Thomas Auld allowed Frederick to sit in jail for almost a month as punishment and then took him home. He was aware that Frederick was restless and would probably attempt another escape, which might well succeed. He told Frederick that if he returned to Hugh Auld in Baltimore, learned a trade, and behaved well, he would be freed when he reached the age of 25. For the young man of 18 the wait of seven years proved to be too much. Frederick spent the next two years working on the wharves and shipyards, getting to know a variety of people, including free persons of color. One of these was a woman five years his senior, Anna Murray. Anna and Frederick fell in love, and in three weeks she helped him plan and execute his escape from slavery.

On September 3, 1838, at just 20 years of age, Frederick Bailey found himself dressed to look like a seaman with the papers of a freeman in his pocket, which he had either bought or been given. He used the papers to journey north by train to

Philadelphia and then by ferry to New York City. There he met David Ruggles, an abolitionist, who helped Frederick by providing food, shelter, and space to plan what to do with his life. Frederick changed his last name to *Johnson* and sent for Anna. She arrived soon after, and they were married; Ruggles gave the newlyweds five dollars and letters of introduction and saw them off as they traveled even farther north, to New England and a new life.

For the next six and a half years Frederick's life was a whirlwind. Within the first year after his escape he was married, became a father, worked as a free man, and became involved with the abolition movement. It had been suggested that he change his name once again, and he took the surname *Douglass* from a poem by Sir Walter Scott titled "The Lady of the Lake." As Frederick Douglass, the name by which history will forever recall him, he met the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and thus was inspired to put to good use what he had learned from Bingham's *Columbian Orator*: With Garrison as his mentor Douglass began speaking about his experiences as a slave, and drawn to his story, audiences were enraptured by his oratory.

In his early days as a speaker for the Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass was one of very few fugitive slaves (for so he was, technically speaking) who lectured, especially in public. Doing this was very risky because he could have been kidnapped by slave catchers who traveled the country in search of fugitives; slave masters would pay generously for the return of their "property." He was careful not to reveal too much about where he was from or who had enslaved him, but eventually his friends and audiences wanted to hear the details of his life. In 1845 he finally complied and wrote what is now the most famous American slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. The *Narrative* was a short volume, but its impact was huge. In clear, careful prose Douglass described his life as a slave with detail that was sometimes shocking to his audience. He revealed not only the names of his enslavers but also details of the abuse they inflicted

on the enslaved men and women they controlled. Douglass did not reveal how he escaped, in order to protect those who had helped him and to protect the slaves who were still attempting escapes via the route he had taken at the time the book was published.

Because the narrative revealed particulars about his life, Douglass was at risk. As a consequence, he spent the next 21 months touring and lecturing in Great Britain and Ireland. Douglass's success was almost immediate, and he made many friends, who supported him in every way. Their loyalty was so great that, in a very controversial move, they raised the funds to purchase Frederick's freedom from the Aulds so that he could return home a free man and live his life as he wanted. With money to get him started and the promise of more from his supporters, Douglass moved to Rochester, New York, to start an abolitionist newspaper, the *North Star*.

Douglass was a very busy man. Not only did he write for and edit his paper, he also still lectured, and in 1848 he became involved with the newly emerging women's movement, supporting the women in their desire for universal suffrage. He attended the Seneca Falls convention that summer and was one of the signatories of the Declaration of Sentiments calling for women's right to vote.

With his position as a women's rights advocate declared and his work as an abolitionist unceasing, Douglass became increasingly more political. He was comfortable pursuing politicians to press them into considering the abolition of slavery and was soon known to many of them. In 1852 the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society asked him to speak on July 4. He refused to speak on the Fourth but said he would speak on the Fifth. This now-famous speech is known as "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" In the speech Douglass accused the audience of mocking him by expecting him to rejoice in American liberty while millions of his brothers and sisters remained enslaved in the South. He warned the nation of what would occur with the continued oppression of its citizens and with the denial of rights guaranteed by the Constitution. The speech is still seen as possibly the greatest abolitionist speech ever delivered. That same year Douglass

contributed a novella, *The Heroic Slave*, to the fund-raising efforts of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. This is his only work of fiction and is loosely based on his own life. The protagonist, a slave named Madison Washington, is followed through various difficulties and eventually leads a successful slave revolt. The novella alludes to Nat Turner's revolt in 1831 and the *Amistad* mutiny of 1839.

Douglass produced a second version of his slave narrative in 1855, titled *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which gave more details about his life and expanded his abolitionist message. As time passed, Douglass and Garrison had a falling out, although both men continued to fight for their shared cause. The *North Star* folded, and Douglass published other abolitionist papers, but they, too, failed. During the years of the Civil War, Douglass pressed President Abraham Lincoln and Congress on a variety of issues, especially focusing on the need to "turn the war into a crusade to rid the land once and for all of the hated institution" of slavery (McFeely 213). With the joyous news that Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Douglass knew there was no turning back. He argued for the recruitment of black soldiers at a fair wage and devised a plan to infiltrate the South with agents who would help slaves escape north and thereby deplete the South and shore up the North. He and Lincoln developed a warm relationship; when Lincoln was assassinated, Douglass knew he had lost a great advocate and friend.

The end of the war in April 1865 produced great joy in many ways, but Douglass's work was not finished. He dedicated himself to achieving the aims of the Freedmen's Bureau, whose mission was to help the former slaves build their lives. Douglass wanted to be part of what he saw as a "new" America. During the remaining 30 years of his life, he was as active as he could be supporting causes dear to him, visiting Africa, and, at the age of 71, acting as the United States's minister to the nation of Haiti. In 1881 he published another version of his autobiography, this time titled *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. This version included his reflections on the Civil War and his life after Emancipation. It also

included, significantly, a detailed description of the escape he had not dared to describe in 1845. Douglass's ministry to Haiti ended in 1891, and a second edition of *Life and Times* appeared in 1892 but did not have the impact of the earlier versions.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass attended a women's rights rally, where he was seated on the platform. He spent the day engaged in discussion, went home for supper, and prepared to go to a meeting at a local church. Just before they were to leave for church, while talking with his wife, Douglass collapsed and died. His death was widely mourned.

***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (1845)**

Between 1760 and 1860, about 70 slave narratives were published in England and the United States. A slave narrative tells the story of a former slave's life, usually from birth to escape and settlement in free territory. What makes a slave narrative significant is that it was written or dictated by the former slave, is a first-person narration, and reveals the details of what the slave endured. William L. Andrews, the foremost scholar of American slave narratives, explains:

Usually the antebellum slave narrator portrays slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Precipitating the narrator's decision to escape is some sort of personal crisis, such as the sale of a loved one or a dark night of the soul in which hope contends with despair for the spirit of the slave. Impelled by faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity comparable (the slave narrative often stresses) to that of America's Founding Fathers, the slave undertakes an arduous quest for freedom that climaxes in his or her arrival in the North. In many antebellum narratives, the attainment of freedom is signaled not simply by reaching the free states, but by renaming oneself and dedicating one's future to antislavery activism. (n.p.)

In 1789 a free black man living in England named Olaudah Equiano (also known as *Gustavus Vassa*) published what is acknowledged to be the first slave narrative in English: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Equiano's narrative was instrumental in the British abolition movement and inspired antislavery efforts on both sides of the Atlantic. The impact of the book was such that the format of later slave narratives is fairly consistent with and parallels Equiano's. His format was influenced by the spiritual autobiography (in which a person describes a conflict with his or her religious faith that results in an epiphany that resolves the struggle), an old literary genre that was familiar to his audience. The slave narrative starts with a discussion of the narrator's birth and birthplace, who his or her family was, and how he or she lived as a child and details the difficulties encountered in a life of slavery, including the struggle to become literate, the cruelties of slave masters, the harshness of slave traders who separate families, and the event or situation that makes him or her determined to seek freedom. The narrators do not often describe their escapes, but they do indicate where they are currently living, to show readers that not only was their escape a success but they have become active members of free societies. While some narratives were authored by women, most were written by men. The two most famous American narratives are *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Woman* by HARRIET JACOBS and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*.

In May 1845, at the urging of friends and audiences who wanted to know more about his life's story, Douglass published his *Narrative*. Already well known as an orator, Douglass became the most famous black person in the world through the *Narrative*. Douglass's story is a compelling mixture of horror, good luck, ingenuity, wit, and fierce determination. Within four months of publication more than 5,000 copies of the book had been sold, indicating the fascination the public had with the stories of fugitive slaves generally and Douglass's particularly.

Despite the fame he had already achieved through his speeches, Douglass, his friends, and his publisher were aware that the public would be skeptical of his authorship because the popular, albeit racist, opinion among white society was that slaves were not capable of producing intellectual work. It was either forbidden or strongly discouraged for slaves to become literate in the Southern states, so Douglass might have had a difficult time proving to the public that this narrative with his name on it was, indeed, written by him and was truly his own story told in his own words. To help ensure that the public would accept his narrative as his own, Douglass included two prefatory pieces written by well-known white abolitionists who could attest to Douglass's intelligence and could say with certainty that he was the author of the book. The first is a preface written by William Lloyd Garrison, arguably the most famous and staunch abolitionist of his day. Garrison and Douglass had been colleagues for four years when the *Narrative* was published, and they had spent many hours together, talking, lecturing, working. Garrison indicates that he was among those who encouraged Douglass to write and declares, "It is certainly a very remarkable fact, that one of the most efficient advocates of the slave population, now before the public, is a fugitive slave, in the person of Frederick Douglass" (5–6). Garrison's support would have helped convince those whites who were not quite ready to favor abolition to read the narrative and then be convinced that what Douglass reported was true. "Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else," says Garrison (7), perhaps to convince the skeptical or to reassure the reader who was familiar with the narrative of Mary Prince, a former West Indian slave who dictated her narrative because she was illiterate. Garrison ends his preface with a challenge to the reader to become active: "Come what may—cost what it may—inscribe on the banner which you unfurl to the breeze, as your religious and political motto—'NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!'" (10).

After Garrison's preface, there is a letter written to Douglass by Wendell Phillips, another staunch abolitionist and close friend of Douglass's. In the letter, Phillips praises Douglass for telling his story, which he sees as not the story of just one man but as a representation of what all slaves endured. He writes, "Every one [*sic*] who has heard you speak has felt, and, I am confident, every one who reads your book will feel, persuaded that you give them a fair specimen of the whole truth" (12). Phillips's preface is written as a letter to give it a more personal feel, to help persuade the reader to feel sympathetic to Douglass before he or she even begins to read. He cleverly relates Douglass's courage in taking his shocking, awful story before the public to the courage of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, who could have been hanged by King George III for treason. Few Americans could fail to understand how groundbreaking and brave Douglass's storytelling was, yet there was no guarantee it would be accepted when it was newly published. With Phillips's and Garrison's support Douglass had great strength behind him.

David W. Blight has pointed out that the *Narrative* is a kind of jeremiad, a literary form adopted in slave narratives and used, according to Wilson Moses, as "constant warnings issued to white audiences concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery" (qtd. in Blight 9). It is apparent early on in the narrative that Douglass is building to a condemnation of white audiences without ever quite issuing the accusation. From the very first paragraph, the reader would have been aware that the story he or she is about to read is unlike any other. The first several paragraphs of the *Narrative* warrant discussion because with them Douglass was able to establish a relationship with his readers.

In the first few lines of the first paragraph Douglass points very specifically to the exact location of his birth. Whether it was to give credence to his story, to warn other fugitive slaves to stay away from the place, or to highlight the activities of the slaveholders there, Douglass's pinpointing helps to identify him as having belonged to a specific place. This is an important gesture because

from the very beginning Douglass is establishing a connection with his reader, for his reader, whoever he or she may be, has also belonged to a particular place. The rest of the paragraph seeks to establish an empathy between reader and author as Douglass reveals he does not know his age or birth date because slave masters want "to keep their slaves thus ignorant" while the white children all know their ages: "A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood" (15). Douglass's white readers would, of course, know their own ages and feel a pang of guilt or sympathy. He could estimate his age at about 27 or 28, but never knew for certain.

The next paragraph is very short but very significant. Here the reader learns that Douglass's mother was Harriet Bailey and her parents were Isaac and Betsey Bailey. These are important facts not only because they were his relations but because in naming them, as any white reader would name his or her own parents, he establishes an identity for himself and, perhaps, forever establishes the identity of these three slaves so they will not remain anonymous forever, unlike the millions of slaves whose names will never be known to history. Douglass was quite aware that his narrative would hold a place in history, and he ensured that those he loved would not be forgotten.

The third paragraph provides a short, sharp twist to the narrative by bluntly declaring central depravations that plagued Frederick's childhood. Immediately, Douglass declares that he never knew his father, who "was a white man." No name, no description, no desire for remembrance is suggested. His disgust for the man, whoever he was, is evident in the sentences that follow, as Douglass relates that he and his mother were separated when he was an infant and his contact with her was minimal. In this and the next paragraph his pain is obvious, as he reveals how she would sneak out at night and walk the 12 miles to sleep with him for just a few hours before she would have to return to her plantation. There was little communication between them, and she died when her boy was just seven years old. Although Douglass writes, "Never having enjoyed, to any

great extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (16), his sentiment is sincere: Even though he spent little time with her, Douglass’s care in telling of his mother belies his deep attachment. A great deal of empathy could be created between reader and author if the reader could associate his or her own mother with Douglass’s and imagine a seven-year-old boy orphaned in slavery with few memories of his mother and no knowledge of his father. Douglass’s is an absolutely true story and told in such a way that the reader will never forget it. Even modern readers of the narrative are touched and saddened by this story.

As the narrative progresses, Douglass details events that the vast majority of his readers would have found horrifying. He describes hiding in a closet at the age of eight while his aunt Hester is stripped naked to the waist and whipped to the point that blood streams down her body. She was being punished for sneaking off the plantation and visiting her “young man” after being ordered to stay away from him. Douglass tells of the jealousy and rage plantation mistresses felt and the cruelty they exhibited when they saw slave children whose physical features resembled those of their own children; he talks about overseers who would lash out and strike women on their heads or masters who would tie up women in the middle of the night and whip them, the force becoming greater the more they screamed. He describes the lives of slaves more generally, too, as he tells what their clothes were like, how they celebrated holidays, how their days were spent. He gives as full a picture of slavery as he can, carefully selecting what is safe to reveal but giving an accurate account of the life of a slave.

Frederick Bailey (as Douglass was known then) was legally the property of two men. First was Captain Anthony, whose home was situated on the plantation of Colonel Lloyd and whose daughter was married to Thomas Auld, who was later Frederick’s second owner. It was there that Frederick learned what it meant to be a slave: get-

ting up early, working late, and receiving little in exchange. With careful diction, Douglass crafts descriptions of the plantation overseers meant to chill and frighten the reader while showcasing the cruelty slaves endured. He names every slave master and overseer by first and last name so that they and their families are clearly identified for not only Douglass’s 19th-century audience but every future audience. This documentation lends weight to his story and helps create an archive of facts about slavery.

In 1826 Frederick was sent to Baltimore to live with Thomas Auld’s brother, Hugh. Of this event he wrote, “It is possible, even quite probable that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation . . . I should have to-day [*sic*], instead of [being in my own home] . . . , been confined in the galling chains of slavery” (35). Hugh and Sophia Auld had no way of knowing how much they would contribute to Frederick’s education and eventual escape. Sophia, finding Frederick sweet and bright, began to teach him to read until her husband made her stop. She thought it was an enjoyable game, but Hugh Auld knew that if Frederick became even a little educated, he would desire freedom and become difficult to control. They did not realize that the few letters Frederick learned from Sophia were enough to spark his interest and that during the next year or two, he would find cunning ways to educate himself; he even bribed white boys in the street to tell him how to spell words or cajoled them into revealing how to read words. He acquired a book or two secretly and stole newspapers when he could. As he grew older, he was allowed to spend time in the shipyard, where he watched the laborers label the various parts of the ships prior to assembling them; he learned what the words meant by watching where the parts were placed. Frederick’s life with the Aulds was relatively easy compared to what he had experienced on the plantation, but after seven years in Baltimore, he was forced to return to the plantation. Thomas Auld had become his rightful owner after the death of Captain Anthony, and he and his brother had had a falling out. To punish Hugh, Thomas took Frederick back in 1832.

Thomas Auld is described by Douglass as having become a cruel, almost heartless man who felt the 16-year-old boy was “unsuitable to his purpose. My city life, he said, had had a very pernicious effect upon me” (53–54), and he hired Frederick out to Edward Covey, another cruel man, known as a “slave breaker,” to knock the city out of him. On Covey’s farm Frederick was whipped and treated worse than he had ever been. For the first six months he was there Frederick was whipped or beaten weekly. One day at the end of the first six months, Covey kicked Frederick in the body repeatedly and caused a large gash in his head from which the blood ran freely. Frederick ran away from Covey’s home to Thomas Auld, who was uninterested in Frederick’s plight and forced him to return to Covey. Upon Douglass’s return Covey tried to whip him, but Frederick ran off into the woods and Covey did not follow. An old slave he knew counseled Frederick to return to Covey and gave him a talisman that was supposed to ward off danger. When Covey approached Frederick to punish him for running off, “from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight” (64), and for two hours the two men fought. Covey called other slaves to help him, but they refused, and in the end Frederick was the victor. Covey never turned Frederick over to the authorities, presumably because of the embarrassment he would have suffered had he admitted a slave bested him, and he did not touch him again during the last six months Frederick lived with him.

The fight with Covey was a turning point in Frederick Bailey’s life. Although he was hired out to another farmer, Frederick began to yearn for his freedom. The incident with Covey made him aware of his own strength, both physically and mentally, and he knew through his reading that freedom was his by right. Douglass writes that during this time he found himself drawn to religion and even found the means to hold a sabbath school that was attended by black men and women. After his departure from Covey’s he was hired out to the ironically named William Freeland, a kinder man than either Covey or Thomas Auld. Kind as Freeland was, Frederick wanted to own his own land, to be his

own man. He and a group of other enslaved men tried to escape to the North but were caught and put in jail. Thomas Auld got Frederick out of jail and threatened to send him south to Alabama, but for reasons Frederick never knew, he sent him back to Baltimore, back to Hugh and Sophia Auld.

Hugh Auld hired Frederick out to a shipbuilder, and he learned to be a caulker. He worked among 75 or so carpenters, white and free black, until the white carpenters went on strike, declaring that the free blacks “would soon take the trade into their own hands and poor white men would be thrown out of employment” (80). A huge fight ensued, in which Frederick was involved; one of the white dock workers kicked him in the left eye, almost blinding him. He was right to defend himself but doing so was risky; as he tells it, “To strike a white man is death by Lynch law” (81). He was moved to a different shipyard, where, once again, Hugh Auld failed to foresee either the depth of Frederick’s wish for freedom or the way shipyard life would contribute to Frederick’s final and successful attempt to escape.

For working at the shipyard Frederick was paid a small sum each week, every penny of which he had to give Hugh Auld. After about two years of this, Frederick became restless and indignant that the money he earned had to be given to a man who did not deserve it. He convinced Auld to allow him to hire himself out; that meant that Frederick would work and earn a wage; he would give Auld a certain amount each week and pay for his own clothes and caulking tools. It was a difficult thing to do, but he was able to meet his expenses and put a tiny amount of money away each week. When he was one week late with a payment because he attended a church camp meeting, the two men had a disagreement. Having lived his 20 years slaving for other men and having no control over his own life, Frederick Bailey “finally resolved upon the third day of September, as the day upon which I would make a second attempt to secure my freedom” (88).

How he escaped and what he endured are not described of Douglass’s *Narrative*. (Not until 1881 in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* would he share these details.) Other slaves were using the

same or similar means of escaping, and he did not want to jeopardize their chances. Douglass was aware that the details of his escape were of great interest to his readers, but he states that he would prefer to hurt himself by remaining silent “rather than exculpate myself, and thereby run the hazard of closing the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery” (85).

To conclude the *Narrative* Douglass does reveal a few details about his arrival in New York and the friends he found there to aid him. He refers to Anna, a free woman who was “my intended wife,” who followed him north. They were married in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He had changed his name to *Frederick Johnson* as a means of hiding, but there were so many Johnsons already that it was suggested he change it again. A friend suggested he take *Douglass* after a character in Sir Walter Scott’s poem “The Lady of the Lake,” and it is by this name that he is now known. He describes how it felt to work as a free man, to be in charge of his own body and not fear the lash. Not long after his arrival in New Bedford, he joined the antislavery movement. It would seem that at that moment the narrative would be complete, but he had one last point to make.

In a brief appendix Douglass vents some of the anger that had built up within him by hurling an accusation at the American people. He accuses Christian America of hypocrisy, declaring that those who call themselves Christians and allow slavery to continue “are they who are represented as professing to love God whom they have not seen, whilst they hate their brother whom they have seen” (100). He ends with the parody of a hymn, showing contempt for Southern “Christians” whose lives are built on duplicity, and the expression of his hope that his book will help to “[hasten] the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds” (102).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Sometimes Douglass describes a slaveholder as “kind.” Is it really possible for a slaveholder to have been kind? What reason would Douglass have for talking about slaveholders this way when his purpose was to show the cruelty of slavery?
2. What would the consequence have been if Douglass had described his escape in specific detail?
3. Imagine you are a white person living in New York who is not sure whether or not slavery should be abolished. What would you learn from Douglass’s narrative? How would your opinion about slavery change after reading the narrative?
4. Imagine you are a slaveholder in the South. What is your reaction to the *Narrative*?
5. Compare the *Narrative* to other antislavery works, such as HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Which is more effective as a political work? As literature?

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (1852)

Delivered on July 5, 1852, this speech is at once a condemnation of racism and slavery in the United States and a demand for the emancipation of slaves. Douglass was invited to speak at the Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. The speech is artfully crafted, as Douglass uses his careful prose to pull the audience into comfortable listening and then surprises it with startling statements it does not expect to hear.

Douglass begins the speech humbly, expressing gratitude for being asked to speak. He declares that “the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable . . . [and] with little experience and with less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together” (117). Anyone in that audience who had read his narrative would have known that Douglass was being slightly disingenuous with this claim; he wanted the audience to feel comfortable at first so that as they listened and took in what he said, they would become gradually more uncomfortable as he made the case that celebrating

America's independence was inappropriate while 2 million Africans remained enslaved in the South.

As the speech progresses, Douglass speaks about the Fourth of July as an important occasion; he addresses the audience directly, saying that the holiday is “the birthday of *your* National Independence” (117, emphasis added). He put some distance between the members of the audience, who are mainly white, and himself, as the representative of slaves who cannot speak for themselves. He recounts the story of the war for independence that ended barely more than 70 years previously, noting the courage of “your” Founding Fathers and making the point that they wanted independence from British fetters to establish their own freedoms. While we do not know how the audience reacted to this, they would almost certainly have been struck by Douglass's position as a former slave who speaks with authority about the liberty that is the founding principle of the nation, a principle that supports core rights granted members of the white audience listening to him, whom he calls “Fellow Citizens” when, in fact, he was not legally recognized as a citizen even while he stood at the podium speaking these words.

Just as he reaches the midpoint of the speech, Douglass asks, “Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?” (123). The tone of the speech becomes more stern, more angry as he firmly asserts that this day is not a celebration for him; it is a day to celebrate the freedom of white Americans and therefore does not include him. With an anger that is fully justified, Douglass demands, “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?” (124). And to add to the shock many members of the audience must have felt at this point, Douglass launches into a logical, heartfelt tirade against the injustice being done to slaves throughout the Southern United States.

Although he was addressing an audience who had invited him to speak, Douglass took the opportunity to use his speech to condemn American citizens more widely. He attacks American clergymen whom he sees as hypocrites, saying, “The

American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in connection with its ability to abolish slavery” (125). He points out that the Church of England assisted in abolishing slavery even after it took part in the slave trade, but the American churches “are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America” (126).

To end the speech Douglass asks, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim” (127). He tells the audience that no matter where in the world they travel, “for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival” (127). After he delivered his last word, the audience rose to its feet and gave Douglass a long standing ovation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Why did Douglass think that these documents did not apply to him? How do these documents aid his plea for emancipation of the slaves? What effect do you think this speech had on its live audience? What effect would it have had on reporters covering the speech?
2. Read William Lloyd Garrison's editorial, published in his antislavery newspaper the *Liberator*, titled “John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, and the Compromise of 1850” (published March 15, 1850). Compare this editorial with Douglass's speech. Are both pieces written for the same audience? Which do you think would have been more effective in the cause of abolition?

***My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)**

My Bondage and My Freedom is a later version of Douglass's narrative of his life as a slave. Expanded and told in more detail than the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), this second of three autobiographies had been somewhat

neglected until the 20th century, when scholars such as William L. Andrews made the case that this volume is an even deeper look at the heart of American slavery than the first.

During the 10 years that separated the publication of his two narratives Douglass had become a celebrity, so when *My Bondage and My Freedom* was published, there was no need to include the letters from Garrison and Phillips that confirmed Douglass had actually written his book by himself. Also, in the meantime, Douglass had distanced himself from Garrison's band of abolitionists because they were too controlling. Instead of letters of authenticity from abolitionists, Douglass included a lengthy introduction by James M'Cune Smith, a black New York doctor and activist who was "the son of a self-emancipated bond-woman" (137), who lauded Douglass and declared the work "an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea" (137).

The difference between this version of Douglass's narrative and the original is apparent from the first few paragraphs. He writes richer prose that provides greater detail, especially when he is establishing his family lineage and describing the conditions of his childhood. Particularly striking are passages such as this, in which Douglass makes it clear that although they are children, young slaves are still slaves: "Children have their sorrows as well as men and women. . . . Slave-children *are* children, and prove no exceptions to the general rule [of how slaves could be treated and sold]. The liability to be separated from my grandmother, seldom or never to see her again, haunted me" (143).

My Bondage and My Freedom was not a shocking book for audiences because they were already familiar with Douglass's *Narrative*, but, in the words of Douglass biographer William McFeely, it was "its author's declaration of independence. . . . The reader . . . will find a Frederick Douglass of a far more critical and analytical mind than the one in the *Narrative*" (181). Douglass retells most of the events of the previous narrative and includes details that make the people and circumstances seem even more real. Readers might have wanted to know more about Douglass's escape from Balti-

more to the North, but, as in the original narrative, he was unable to reveal more because of the risk to other slaves who were using the same route and the risk to the whites and free blacks who were helping them escape. This is nonetheless a more active autobiography than the original *Narrative*, as Douglass discusses more about how he felt and addresses the reader directly many times to plead for the rights of blacks in the United States. He answers many of the questions readers of the 1845 narrative must have had but still strongly advocates the cause of abolition. Douglass included other writings and speeches in an appendix that demonstrate not only what he had been doing for the past 10 years but also how he had become a leading abolitionist voice in both the United States and abroad.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Who was the intended audience of *My Bondage and My Freedom*? Is it the same audience as that of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*? How do you know this?
2. Read the speeches in the appendix of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s one-volume edition of Douglass's narratives. Can you imagine how the audience for this book would have reacted when they heard Douglass speak? Explain your response.
3. What do you think would have been more effective in the fight against slavery: Douglass's books or speeches? Why?

***The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself* (1881, 1892)**

The third and final version of Frederick Douglass's autobiography was published in 1881. A second edition with an introduction by George L. Ruffin, the first African American appointed to the Massachusetts judiciary (1883), appeared in 1892. Ruffin's differs from the introductions of the other narratives of Douglass's life in that it is the first written after the abolition of slavery and so is able to assess Douglass's experience in a very broad context. Ruffin celebrates the fact that Douglass's "rank as a writer is high, and justly

- . *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In *Autobiographies* by Frederick Douglass. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- . “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Edited by William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress. Available online. URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., ed. *Autobiographies*. By Frederick Douglass. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- Massachusetts Historical Society. “The Long Road.” Available online. URL: http://www.masshist.org/longroad/05ruffin/ruffin_old.htm. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Olney, James. “The Founding Fathers—Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington.” In *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, edited by Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, 1–24. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Stepto, Robert. *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narratives*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Thomas, Sandra. “Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist/Editor.” Available online. URL: <http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/douglass/home.html>. Accessed May 5, 2009.

Marcy Tanter



PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

(1872–1906)

He sang of love when earth was young,
And Love itself was in his lays.
But, ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.

(“The Poet”)

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first African-American writer to make an impression on the literary establishment of post-Civil War United States. Unlike most of his predecessors and contemporaries, Dunbar was able to make his living primarily from his writing. In a historical moment when U.S. culture denied depth of feeling and dignity to African Americans, Dunbar’s work spoke for the value of African-American culture.

Dunbar represents the first generation of African Americans born after the Emancipation Proclamation. His parents were both born into slavery. His father, Joshua Dunbar, a slave in Kentucky, had escaped to Canada and then returned to serve in the Massachusetts Fifty-fifth Infantry Regiment and later the Fifth Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment during the Civil War. Dunbar’s mother, Matilda, was also born in Kentucky and was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Paul was born in Dayton, Ohio, on June 27, 1872. Joshua was 20 years older than his wife, and the marriage did not last; they divorced in 1874, leaving Matilda with Paul; his baby sister, Elizabeth (who did not survive the year); and Robert and William, two children from her previous marriage. Paul continued to see his father occasionally until Joshua’s death in 1885. Both parents were literate and loved books. Parental influences on Dunbar’s writing included a love of storytelling, received from both parents, and a love of music and poetry instilled by

his mother. Dunbar began reciting poems as early as age six and gave the first public reading of his own poems at age nine.

Though Dunbar’s mother was their washerwoman, Paul made friends with the brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright. They both attended Dayton’s Central High School and were prominent in school activities. Despite being the only black student in the school, Dunbar was a member of the debating society, the editor of the school newspaper, and president of the literary society. With the Wright brothers’ help, Dunbar published his first poems in a community newspaper. While he was still in high school, Dunbar and Orville would work together to publish the *Dayton Tattler*, a community newspaper directed at African Americans.

Dunbar was unable to attend college after graduating from high school in 1891. He worked as an elevator operator in a Dayton office building, using his free time to work on poems. Through a former teacher, Dunbar was invited to speak at the meeting of the Western Association of Writers when they met in Dayton in 1892. This exposure, and the scattered publication of poems in newspapers like the *Dayton Tattler*, caught the attention of patrons such as James Newton Matthews, who penned a letter praising Dunbar’s poetry that was reprinted by a number of regional newspapers. James Whitcomb Riley, a popular midwestern writer of poems in dialect, took notice of Dunbar and helped spread

awareness of his work. Matthews and other white patrons helped Dunbar get his first book, *Oak and Ivy*, published later in 1892. He continued to work as an elevator operator and sold his book to customers. He was invited to recite his work at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. There he met FREDERICK DOUGLASS, who praised Dunbar as “the most promising young colored man in America” (Wiggins 40). He also met James Weldon Johnson, a recent graduate of Atlanta University, with whom he would have a lifelong friendship.

Dunbar moved to Toledo, Ohio, in 1895. His patrons, Charles A. Thatcher, an attorney, and Henry A. Tobey, a physician, brokered readings for him at local libraries and literary clubs. They also provided funds for the publication in 1896 of his second book, *Majors and Minors*. Dunbar attempted with this title to escape the clutches of dialect—his “majors” were poems in standard English influenced by Robert Burns, John Keats, and Robert Browning, while “minors” were the poems in Negro dialect, influenced by HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Whitcomb Riley, and other popular American rhymers. When *Majors and Minors* attracted to the attention of WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, the novelist, critic, and editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, he praised it in an editorial column, coincidentally on Dunbar’s birthday in 1896. Overnight Howells’s review raised Dunbar’s visibility to the highest literary circles. Dodd, Mead and Company published *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, also in 1896, a volume combining *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors* with an introduction by Howells. Though Howells’s laudatory introduction all but ignored Dunbar’s “majors,” his praise for Dunbar’s verse in black dialect made the young writer a literary star.

In 1897 Dunbar took a trip to England to promote his work there. Although the tour was disappointing—he was presented as an exotic figure, often on a program including such novelties as the dwarf Tom Thumb—he met the Anglo-African composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who set seven of his poems to music as *African Romances*. Dunbar discussed African-American spirituals with him

and probably influenced Coleridge-Taylor’s absorption of African, African-American, and Afro-Caribbean elements into his compositions. In 1898, when the composer visited the United States, they would again work together on *Dream Lovers, an Operatic Romance*, for which Dunbar provided the lyrics.

When he returned home in spring 1898, Dunbar took up residence in Washington, D.C., where he worked as a reading room clerk in the Library of Congress. A short time later, on March 6, 1898, he married Alice Ruth Moore, whom he had begun courting by correspondence in 1895. Dunbar had proposed to her before his trip to England. Their marriage was filled with tensions. Alice was a writer also, but unlike the dark-skinned northerner Dunbar, she was a light-skinned southerner from Louisiana and a college graduate. Her family disapproved of the marriage, and Alice disapproved of Dunbar’s dialect poetry. In addition, Mother Dunbar lived with them. The couple struggled financially, neither generating sufficient income from writing alone. The dusty atmosphere at the library exacerbated Dunbar’s poor health, and he resigned his position there in late 1898, relying thereafter on his readings, occasional articles, and sales of his books for income.

Dunbar moved his family to Denver, Colorado, in September 1899 and took a job at a newspaper. But his growing dependence on alcohol to deal with what was soon diagnosed as tuberculosis made it impossible for him to carry out his duties, and after a few months they moved back to Washington. Despite these health problems and marital tensions, Dunbar continued to write, producing poetry, essays, and fiction prolifically. He wrote four novels: *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Laundry* (1900), *The Fanatics* (1901), and *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). He collected his short fiction in *Folks from Dixie* (1898), *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories* (1900), *In Old Plantation Days* (1903), and *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904). He wrote three plays (unpublished) and completed lyrics for two of the earliest black ragtime musicals, *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898)

and *In Dahomey: A Negro Musical Comedy* (1902), both produced successfully in New York. And all of this was in addition to the steady composition and publication of books of his poetry: *When Malindy Sings* (1896); *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899); *Candle-Lightin' Time* and *Poems of Cabin and Field* (1901); *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903); *Li'l Gal* (1904); *Chris'mus is A-Comin' and Other Poems, Howdy, Honey, Howdy*, and *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* (1905); *A Plantation Portrait* and *Joggin' Erlong* (1906). During his career, Dunbar was published in the most prominent literary journals, such as *Harper's Weekly*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, as well as in newspapers like the *Denver Post*, the *New York Journal*, and African-American journals and newspapers.

In his short lifetime Dunbar produced about 500 poems, less than half of which were in dialect. Major frustrations in his life were the insistent preference of critics, readers, and audiences for these “minors” and their underappreciation of the poetry in standard English into which he poured his deepest feelings. Howells, whose judgment was echoed by other critics, had praised his “minors” and helped launch his career. But, Dunbar early on realized the two-edged quality of white writers' evaluations of his “authentic” dialect poetry. He wrote in a letter, “One critic says a thing and others hasten to say the same things, in many cases using the identical words. I see very clearly that Mr. Howells has done me irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse” (Braxton xvii).

Dunbar represented a counterargument to the racist ideas then in circulation. He was evidence that African Americans could express the most refined human emotions in the most disciplined expression of language: poetry. He was a counterimage to the working-class, ignorant, uncomplicated, and unsophisticated figure of the black American that dominated public discourse in that day and remains a significant part of it in our day as well. He was especially praised as a man of apparently unmixed African heritage who could master the power of language, thereby contradicting the racial wisdom of the day that cast only African Americans of mixed

heritage as capable of approaching such cultural mastery. Dunbar became a symbol of black ability, a potential force of inspiration for black Americans, and a reproof to post-Reconstruction ideas of black intellectual and spiritual incapacity.

Tragically, the tensions in Dunbar's marriage could not be sustained. Recent research reveals that under the influence of alcohol he was abusive and violent to Alice on more than one occasion. When, after four years of marriage she could no longer endure it, he moved out of their Washington house. Alice refused to see him ever again despite his repeated written entreaties. After the separation from Alice in 1902, Dunbar traveled to Chicago with his mother to visit his half brother Robert, returning at last to Dayton in 1904. Depressed over the failure of his marriage and increasingly alcoholic, Dunbar died of tuberculosis on February 9, 1906, at the new home he had bought for his mother. He was not quite 34 years old.

“When Malindy Sings” (1896)

In what is arguably his finest dialect poem, Dunbar presents a speaker who analyzes the aesthetic experience. In the voice of an uneducated African American, he compares the “natural” production of African American art—Malindy's singing—to that of the musically literate white mistress that is derived from book learning. The poetic burden—that is, the weight and value of poetic creativity—is a major theme in Dunbar's work, both dialect and nondialect. The speaker in this poem asks the listeners to acknowledge not only the superiority of Malindy's singing but also the spiritual superiority of Malindy's black cultural production over Miss Lucy's European music making.

This poem is, like many works by Dunbar's favorite writers—Robert Burns; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Robert Browning—a dramatic monologue. The poem dramatizes, in the voice of a participant, a dramatic situation, in this case, the speaker's experience of and commentary on Malindy's singing. While most dialect poetry in the late

19th century presented the speaker of dialect as the sole voice of the poem, not many put the speaker into a dramatic situation that, as in this poem, tells a story of its own.

In “When Malindy Sings” Dunbar celebrates the artist, Malindy the singer, who produces transports of the religious sublime in her audience. Many 19th-century poems celebrated the aesthetic experience of landscapes (William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”) and ancient artifacts (John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”), but also of art and music. Dunbar’s exploration of the transcendent effect of Malindy’s art is thus another expression of his own artistic insistence that African Americans are fully capable of the highest sort of spiritual and artistic feelings.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Describe the dramatized situation: To whom is the narrator speaking? Is this a pre–Civil War or post–Civil War moment? What are the speaker’s feelings toward Malindy? Toward Miss Lucy? What passages reveal these feelings?
2. How many figures of the artist, other than Malindy and Miss Lucy, are presented in the poem? Explain how this adds to the poem.
3. How does the speaker connect art and religion? What elements of the poem are most dramatically realized? What elements seem most sentimental? Explain your answer.

“Frederick Douglass”(1896)

Dunbar’s poem memorializes the African-American leader Frederick Douglass, who died in 1895. Dunbar corresponded with and met Douglass a few years before his death and respected him greatly for his generosity and sincere interest in furthering his career.

Dunbar’s poem takes the form of an elegy, a poem of mourning that celebrates the survival in fame and honor of the deceased. Literary models for this kind of poem include John Milton’s “Lycidas” and WALT WHITMAN’S “Oh Captain! My Captain!” Dunbar’s poem exhibits the three

traditional movements of the elegy: a lamentation for the deceased, a praise song for his accomplishments, and a declaration of solace for the reader-survivor because of the spiritual immortality of the deceased. “Frederick Douglass” balances its two opening stanzas of lamentation against six stanzas of praise and ends with two stanzas of solace.

In his long life Douglass had been, among other things, an escaped slave, a fiery abolitionist speaker, an author, and a newspaper editor. Before the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington, he was undoubtedly the best-known African-American leader. Dunbar reminds the reader that it is Douglass’s people, poetically figured as “Ethiopia,” who mourn his passing. He then goes on to detail the vigorous spirit of Douglass’s resistance to racial injustice.

Douglass is presented throughout the poem as a warrior, a hero engaged in metaphorical physical combat “who died in action with his armor on!” In the final stanzas the military warrior spirit is transferred to the African-American people, and Douglass is imaged less literarily and more literally, as a powerful public speaker and writer who inspired others “to seek the heights, nor faint, nor fail.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Dunbar apparently thought that such a serious subject called for poetic techniques hallowed by ancient usage. The poem is full of not only old-fashioned martial spirit but also old-fashioned figures of speech and diction. Locate and evaluate what you think are some of these archaic words, expressions, and sentence structures. Do they work to make the poem especially effective? How or how not?
2. Research Douglass’s life and accomplishments. Does Dunbar do justice to his subject? Explain your response.
3. Compare “Frederick Douglass” with Whitman’s “Oh Captain! My Captain!” Notice particularly how the diction differs and how each poem positions the reader in relation to the death the poem laments. Explain how these differences relate to the aims of the poem and the audience for which the poem was written.

“We Wear the Mask” (1896)

Dunbar's poem addresses the situation of African Americans who were forced by U.S. racism to wear the mask of accommodation to the system that tried to reduce them to mindless smiling automatons.

Unlike so many of Dunbar's other nondialect poems, “We Wear the Mask” is straightforwardly modern in its poetic manner. The diction mainly avoids inversion of word order for the sake of rhyme and does not use the archaic *thee*, *thy*, and *thou* of poems like “Frederick Douglass.” And while the poem never names the cause of the shame and dissembling it describes, Dunbar's audiences recognized the African-American face as the one behind the mask and “the world” as their white fellow citizens. The poem proceeds from bitter observation to anguished outcry, reinforced by the insistent *i* rhyme and the title phrase used as a refrain.

From far back in the history of African-American enslavement, slaves were constrained in expressing their anger and resentment at their condition. Revealing such emotions might lead to painful punishment at the hands of their masters. In post-Emancipation America, with the increasing pervasiveness of race prejudice and segregation sanctioned by law as well as custom, African Americans prudently covered their resentment, anger, and anxiety from whites—and from one another. Dunbar's poem ironically wears a mask itself; the poem never explicitly addresses the issue of race prejudice. The bitterness and anger grounded in racial experience can thus be embraced or sidestepped by the reader, who can put a “universal” interpretation on the poem.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the tight rhyming of the poem (*lies/eyes, guile/smile*, etc.) add to its effectiveness?
2. Notice how many one- or two-syllable words there are in the poem. Explain why you think Dunbar may have placed two polysyllabic words so close together in the final line of the first stanza.
3. Compare this poem to STEPHEN CRANE's poem “Do Not Weep, Maiden, for War Is Kind.”

Describe the way each poet makes use of irony and the way each evokes powerful emotions.

“An Ante-Bellum Sermon” (1896)

The speaker in this poem is a pre-Civil War African-American preacher. In proper preacherly fashion he illuminates a passage from the Bible, making it relevant to the condition of his audience.

While poems like “Little Brown Baby” and “When Malindy Sings” are somewhat ambiguous about their historical setting, allowing the reader freedom to consider them as addressing pre- or post-Emancipation life, “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” is specifically addressed to pre-Emancipation experience. At the time of the poem's composition in the late 19th century, African-American religion was considered naive and childlike, with no relation to the politics of liberation pursued by such African-American leaders as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois. Dunbar's poem develops insight into how an African-American leader, in the period before the Civil War and Emancipation, might have conveyed the message of the Bible but also inspired his listeners with the hope of liberation. Dunbar's speaker repeatedly disavows that he is “preachin' discontent” and insists that he is “talkin' bout ouah freedom / In a Bibleistic way.” He must be careful not to alarm the slave masters. But, the ironic subtext is clear: As a just God sent Moses to defeat Pharaoh's slavery, he will send a Moses to free the African-American slaves.

Another example of Dunbar's use of the dramatic monologue, “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” is rich with ironies that lie in the presupposition of the stereotypical ignorance of the speaker, which is revealed to be both spiritual wisdom and practical prudence.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Locate the sources of humor in this poem. There are no jokes, but the poem does make the reader smile. How? How does the poem indicate the preacher's intelligence?

2. Research the Bible story and discuss the ways the preacher adds to it or otherwise changes it in his retelling. How is the preacher's version here like or unlike the version of the Negro spiritual "Go Down, Moses"?
3. In what ways does the preacher in Dunbar's poem make use of a rhetorical strategy similar to that which William Shakespeare used to structure Mark Antony's speech after the death of Julius Caesar in act 3, scene 2 of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*?

"Little Brown Baby" (1896)

In this poem in African-American dialect a father teasingly plays with an infant, a child seemingly old enough to walk and play outside the house but not yet able to talk. The speaker first praises and then frightens the child before putting him to bed with final reassurances of his security in his father's love.

"Little Brown Baby" is one of Dunbar's poems that most effectively subvert the idea of African-American inferiority that was so widespread at the time of its composition in the 1890s. The loving relationship between the father and child, the apparently intact and happy family, the recognizable human psychology, and the gentle good humor of the poem work to dispel the notion that blacks differed significantly from whites in the depth and breadth of their humanity. The poem portrays a common American family moment: a father returned home from work, dirty and tired, but pleased to play with his child—"pappy's pa'dner an' play-mate an' joy"—before putting him to bed.

In a historical period when small children often died of fevers and infections, poems about children were very popular. Dunbar wrote many poems involving children, some clever and funny, such as "The Making Up," and some conventional and maudlin, such as "Two Little Boots." Several of his poems about children feature adoring or mourning fathers, a rarity in the context of the mother-focused work of his contemporaries.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The reader must infer the speechless infant's response from the father's behavior toward it. How does the infant respond to the threat of the "buggah-man" (bogeyman), a traditional figure of fairy tales and children's stories? Do you think the father is too free with his emotional teasing? Why?
2. What do you imagine the father foresees for his "little brown baby" in the last three lines of the poem?
3. Compare this poem to "Death of an Infant" by Lydia Sigourney. How do the poets communicate the contrasting emotions of their speakers?

"Sympathy" (1899)

In "Sympathy" Dunbar expressed one of his most constant themes: the obstruction of the free expression of feeling by social forces of limitation and control. In figuring the speaker as an observer of a situation he apparently cannot change, "Sympathy" speaks of both Dunbar's frustration as a poet and his frustration as a citizen.

"Sympathy" is typical of much of Dunbar's poetic work that is not written from behind the mask of dialect. He was heavily influenced by the English romantics of the early 19th century, John Keats in particular, from whom he adopted his nature imagery and poetic diction. Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley used songbirds as symbols of the poet; Dunbar here uses the caged bird as both a symbol of the poet and a symbol of his people. The first two stanzas speak of the general oppression of African Americans in the period, while the third stanza more specifically addresses the situation of the poet, whose work is presumed to be "carol[s] of joy and glee" that will be consumed by the majority reader. Dunbar, in fact, wrote dialect verse that seemed to many to maintain the white minstrel and plantation traditions of portraying African Americans as mindless and artless. Dunbar was often thought to demean the African-American image in his dialect poems and stories. But, in poems like this that speak "from his heart's core," he is clearly critical of the social

larities and differences between the two works. Is Dunbar making similar statements about art?

2. Consider the similarities and differences between “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy.” How does the *we* of the first poem differ from the *I* of “Sympathy”? Do you think Dunbar read these poems only to African-American audiences? Or, do you think white audiences interpreted them differently?
3. Compare the view of poetry and poetic creativity expressed in Dunbar’s poem “The Poet and His Song” to the view of music and musical creativity in “When Malindy Sings.” Is it the poet or the singer who is more richly rewarded for his or her art?
4. Compare the rhetorical strategy of Dunbar’s poem “The Debt” to that of “We Wear the Mask.” What else do these two poems have in common? Are these characteristics common in other poems by Dunbar?
5. Dunbar composed a number of poems about celebrated individuals. Some of them are elegies for the dead; others celebrate fellow artists. Compare “Frederick Douglass” to Dunbar’s poems about Alexander Crummell, John Greenleaf Whittier, John Boyle O’Reilly, or HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alexander, Eleanor. *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore, a History of Love and Violence among the African American Elite*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Best, Felton O. *Crossing the Color Line: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1996.
- Braxton, Joanne, ed. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1913.
- . *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Containing His Complete Poetical Works, His Best Short Stories, Numerous Anecdotes and a Complete Biography of the Famous Poet*. Edited by Linda Keck Wiggins, with an introduction by William Dean Howells. Napierville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols, 1907.
- Gayle, Addison. *Oak and Ivy: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971.
- Martin, Herbert Woodward, and Ronald Primeau, eds. *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002.
- Martin, Jay, ed. *Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975.
- Metcalf, E. W., Jr. *Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975.
- Paul Laurence Dunbar Digital Collection. Available online. URL: <http://www.libraries.wright.edu/special/dunbar/>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap6/dunbar.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009.
- Revell, Peter. *Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Boston: Twayne, 1979.
- Turner, Darwin T. Introduction to *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories*. New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- University of Dayton’s Paul Laurence Dunbar Web Site. Available online. URL: <http://www.dunbar-site.org/>. Accessed May 5, 2009.
- Wiggins, Linda Keck, ed. *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Containing His Complete Poetical Works, His Best Short Stories, Numerous Anecdotes and a Complete Biography of the Famous Poet*. Introduction by William Dean Howells. Napierville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols, 1907.

Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr.



RALPH WALDO EMERSON

(1803–1882)

Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.

(“The American Scholar”)

Ralph Waldo Emerson is commonly regarded as one of the most significant intellectual and literary figures in the whole history of the United States. A prolific essayist as well as a tireless and extremely popular public speaker, he literally gave voice to many of the key ideas of his era—ideas that at first were controversial but later became enormously influential. Early in his career, for instance, one of Emerson’s speeches so offended the sensibilities of opinion leaders at Harvard College that he was not invited to speak there again for another three decades; nevertheless, by the end of his life Harvard had given him an honorary degree and had made him a member of its Board of Overseers. Emerson was a major figure in the American transcendentalist movement, and his essentially romantic, optimistic emphasis on lofty emotions, the intimate bonds between man and nature, and the importance of individual self-reliance influenced many other significant writers (especially HENRY DAVID THOREAU and WALT WHITMAN).

Many of the most important details of Emerson’s life are helpfully laid out in the comprehensive “Chronology” prepared by Harold Bloom and Paul Kane (in their edition of *Ralph Waldo Emerson*), which can be usefully supplemented by the “Illustrated Chronology” and biographical essay printed in Joel Myerson’s *Historical Guide* (252–290). Emerson was born in Boston on May 25, 1803—near the very beginning of the century he did so

much to influence. His father, William Emerson, was a prominent minister who also edited a significant magazine, while Emerson’s mother was the daughter of successful merchants. Emerson, then—along with his five brothers and two sisters—was born into circumstances that were economically and socially fortunate, but his life took an unlucky turn when his father died in 1811. The Emerson children, moreover, were afflicted with various forms of ill health: Emerson himself would later suffer from poor eyesight, rheumatism, and lung problems, and a number of his siblings would die of tuberculosis. Nevertheless, Ralph, or Waldo, as he later preferred to be called, grew up with multiple advantages. He was able, for instance, to attend the Boston Latin School (which he entered in 1812), he had the time and opportunity to read widely, and in 1817 he was able to enter Harvard College, where he received assistance in paying his tuition. Although never an especially distinguished student (he graduated in almost the exact middle of his class), he nonetheless had already begun to write and think seriously while still in college, and he would eventually become far more distinguished than his higher-ranking classmates.

After graduating in 1821, Emerson taught and later supervised a girls’ school until the end of 1824; then, early in 1825, he himself entered the Divinity School at Harvard, although problems with his eyes soon interrupted his studies.

By fall that year he was teaching school yet again; by fall 1826 he had become licensed to preach by the Unitarian Church, one of the most liberal branches of American Christianity. Health problems, however, intervened once more, leading him to spend several months in the warmer climate of South Carolina and Florida, but by spring 1827 he was back in Boston, had resumed his preaching career, and by December had also met a captivating 16-year-old, Ellen Louisa Tucker, who would soon become his wife. They became engaged a year later and were married on September 30, 1829, even though it was already clear by this time that Ellen was afflicted with tuberculosis. By this time, too, Emerson had become an ordained Unitarian minister, serving the congregation of the Second Church in Boston. When Ellen died on February 8, 1831, Emerson was devastated, and this crisis in his personal life was soon matched by one that affected him both spiritually and professionally: By 1832 he had become increasingly disenchanted with traditional forms of religious thinking and traditional forms of worship, and in September that year he offered his church his resignation because he was no longer willing to serve communion. Although many members of the congregation wanted him to remain as their leader, a majority voted to accept his resignation. Suffering once again from poor health, he departed for Europe on Christmas Day 1832.

Emerson's trip to Europe was good both for his physical well-being and for his psychological health. He traveled in Italy and France, but his most fruitful experiences occurred in England, where he met many of the country's most important writers and began a long friendship with Thomas Carlyle, one of the masters of 19th-century English prose. Returning to the United States in September 1833, Emerson began a new career as an itinerant preacher and lecturer. In 1834 a financial settlement from the estate of his late wife helped ease his financial worries, but the death of a beloved brother of tuberculosis in that same year stung Emerson deeply. Meanwhile, he continued to develop a reputation as a popular lecturer on literary and intellectual topics, and he continued to

preach independently, declining an offer in 1835 to become a regular pastor. Additionally in 1835 he bought a house in Concord, Massachusetts—the town near Boston with which he would become so much identified—and he also married his second wife, Lydia (whom he called *Lidian*) Jackson, on September 14. Although their relationship was less romantically intense than his marriage to Ellen, Emerson and Lydian lived a long and quietly happy life together. Unfortunately, however, this new happiness was temporarily offset by the death of another of Emerson's brothers, who succumbed to tuberculosis on May 9, 1836.

Yet, 1836 also saw the publication of *Nature*, one of Emerson's most important books and a key to much of his so-called transcendentalist thinking. As the title of this work suggests, Emerson and other transcendentalists—some of whom now began meeting as an informal group—were struck by the beauty and harmony of the physical universe and by the supposedly close bonds among God, man, and the totality of God's creation. Humans, these thinkers believed, could rely on instincts and on highly personal insights as reliable guides to truth; these transcendentalists also tended to deemphasize older Christian ideas about the pervasiveness of sin and innate human corruption, replacing them with a more optimistic view of human nature and human potential. Emerson was a leading figure in this new movement, and, indeed, he was now becoming an increasingly well-known intellectual. Nevertheless, his Phi Kappa Kappa oration at Harvard in 1837—an address in which he issued a call for intellectual independence from slavish devotion to dead or dying traditions—offended many, as did a subsequent lecture given at Harvard's Divinity School. In general, listeners to Emerson's speeches over the years had varying reactions: Many felt inspired and enlightened, some were angered, and some were simply confused.

In 1840 Emerson, along with his friend MARGARET FULLER, began publishing a magazine called the *Dial*; its first issue included work not only by its two editors and other transcendentalists but also by Thoreau, whose writing Emerson would

encourage and whose career he would help promote. In the meantime, Emerson's own career took a major step forward in 1841 with the publication of his first set of *Essays*, in which he laid out many of his key ideas. This piece of good fortune was soon followed, however, in 1842 by the death of his young son, Waldo—an especially painful loss. Waldo's death contributed to the darkened tone of some of the pieces included in the second set of *Essays* Emerson published in 1844, and throughout the 1840s Emerson's thinking was also becoming increasingly troubled by the dark and sickening spectacle of American slavery. By the end of the decade he had become a more and more fervently outspoken abolitionist, but he had also—with the publication of his *Poems* in 1846—won attention as a significant writer of verse. Thus, by the time he set sail once more for England in 1847, he was recognized both at home and in Britain as a leading American “man of letters,” and during his time abroad he met and mingled with some of the most prominent of his fellow intellectuals in Victorian England.

After returning from Europe in summer 1848, Emerson resumed his active career as a writer and as a popular figure on the U.S. lecture circuit. A new book, titled *Nature; Addresses and Lectures*, appeared in 1849, followed in 1850 by *Representative Men*. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in that latter year, Emerson also became an especially vigorous and eloquent opponent of slavery, and his attacks became more frequent as the 1850s wore on. Politics, however, was neither his sole nor even his main interest; his reading, thought, and writing were all wide-ranging. It was Emerson, for instance, who in 1855 was one of the first to hail Whitman as a major new voice in American poetry. Meanwhile, in 1857 he himself published a significant new prose work titled *English Traits*, which was followed in 1860 by a work called *The Conduct of Life*. By this time, of course, the Civil War seemed plainly imminent, and Emerson actually welcomed the conflict, seeing it as an opportunity to end slavery in the United States once and for all.

In the years after the war Emerson was increasingly recognized as one of his country's leading

public figures. Harvard granted him an honorary degree in 1866, his career as a lecturer was at its height, a new book of poems was issued in 1867, and in the latter year he was also (ironically enough) appointed to Harvard's board of supervisors. His career as a lecturer continued throughout the 1860s. A new book, *Society and Solitude*, appeared in 1870, and although his health weakened in the ensuing decade, his social status and public fame continued to grow. In 1872–73 he traveled abroad for the last time, visiting not only Europe but Egypt, and in 1875 he brought out a book of prose, *Letters and Social Aims*, while also continuing to revise his poetry. By the late 1870s, however, both his physical health and his mental strength were in decline, and when he died on April 27, 1882, his best days had long been behind him. Nonetheless, during his lengthy and highly productive lifetime he had not only won respect for himself but also contributed substantially to the developing intellectual life of the young but increasingly self-reliant nation his thinking had helped shape and transform.

***Nature* (1836)**

In this early and somewhat lengthy essay (consisting of an introduction and eight chapters), Emerson discusses many of the core ideas of his transcendentalist philosophy, especially his notions about the intimate connections among humans, nature, and God. In one of the most famous passages he ever wrote, Emerson claims that when a person truly contemplates nature, “all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (*Portable* 11). The essay discusses nature in terms of its “commodity” (or usefulness), its beauty, its function as a kind of language, its value of as a source of discipline, and its relation to idealism and spirit.

Emerson begins characteristically by rejecting his era's alleged overemphasis on the traditions of the past. He calls instead for a more immediate, more personal approach to knowledge and life: “The foregoing generations beheld God and

nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? . . . Let us demand our own works and laws and worship" (*Portable* 7). Crucial to the kind of worship Emerson has in mind is a direct, unmediated approach to the physical universe, which is also, he thinks, a universe imbued with spirit and meaning—a universe to which each thoughtful person feels intimately connected: "The lover of nature is he who whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood" (*Portable* 10). Humans are at home in a universe created, and presided over, by a benevolent spirit: "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable" (*Portable* 11). Nature, moreover, is also useful to man: "Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him" (*Portable* 12). Yet, nature is beautiful, too, and its beauty contributes to our physical, mental, and spiritual health: "The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough" (*Portable* 14). But, the relationship between humans and nature is not one-sided: "Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness" (*Portable* 17). God creates nature; nature's beauty stimulates man; man creates art, inspired by nature's beauty; and thus the "beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation" (*Portable* 18).

Nature, indeed, is full of meaning if we know how to read it correctly, and all vital language has its roots in natural things or facts. Yet, in addition, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting the natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch" (*Portable* 20). Nature, however, not

only inspires our thoughts and shapes our language but also disciplines our understanding and conduct by imposing real limits on our assumptions and behavior. It thereby forms our common sense and teaches us practical lessons: "Water is good to drink, coal to burn, wool to wear, but wool cannot be drunk, nor water spun, nor coal eaten" (*Portable* 26–27). Nevertheless, nature not only imposes limits but "is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful" (*Portable* 28). Here, as always in Emerson, the relationship between man and nature is close, but this, finally, is simply because the "world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious" (*Portable* 43). Thus, to know nature is to know oneself as well as the origin of both.

Nature is a more carefully structured piece of writing than many of Emerson's works of prose, although it is also more abstract (and at times more turgid and obscure) than some of his more "popular" works, such as "Self-Reliance." Emerson himself considered it flawed, or "cracked," since it never quite makes clear whether (or how) we can know that nature exists independently (that is, outside our own perceptions). More "realistic," "analytic," or "logical" thinkers of all stripes are likely to see problems in the piece if it is considered as a serious work of philosophy, although other thinkers (especially those in the "idealistic" or "pragmatic" schools of thought) have found the work genuinely stimulating and valuable, and certainly its influence on the thinking, mood, and intellectual and literary culture of the 19th-century United States was immense. Stylistically it is highly typical of Emerson: It proceeds mostly by rhapsodic pronouncement rather than by careful, painstaking logic. It is hard to imagine how one might rationally dispute much (if anything) that Emerson says, because little of the essay seems to engage in deliberate, discriminating argumentation. Emerson never indicates how his "arguments," which are really little more than bald assertions, might possibly be falsified;

although definitive in tone and rhetoric, his claims seem mostly and simply suggestive. His assertions about God, for instance, would never be taken seriously by any thoughtful atheist, and many of his more mystical pronouncements about nature would seem literally nonsensical to anyone who did not already share his basic premises or assumptions.

As a work of literature—that is, as an artfully crafted piece of language—*Nature* is typical of Emerson's style. It is frequently poetic in its vivid use of metaphors, similes, imagery, and rhythm. It moves swiftly, with sudden shifts, and despite its numbered, titled sections, it is not nearly as logically or clearly organized as one might hope or expect of a traditional "philosophical" essay. Emerson rarely develops carefully structured trains of logical thought; instead, he offers flash after flash of abrupt, intuitive insight, which one can either take or leave. Not surprisingly (especially given the fact that many of his essays began as notes for lectures), he writes as if speaking from a pulpit or a stage, and his sentences are full of aphorisms, epigrams, and self-coined proverbs. He wanted his works to develop organically and seem spontaneous, as does nature itself, and he deliberately rejected stodgy, conventional, and predictable structures or phrasing. In *Nature* as in so many of his works, he functions less as a philosopher than as a poet, prophet, or priest; his purpose is less to argue than to rhapsodize, celebrate, and excite.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Emerson's portrayal of city and countryside. Does he show a bias? Is he fair?
2. Compare and contrast Emerson's thoughts about nature with the way nature is presented in Wallace Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning." How does Stevens's poem seem to reflect some of Emerson's ideas? How does the poem try to guard against the allegedly simplistic or excessively optimistic aspects of Emerson's influence? How, in other words, does Stevens try to make his poem at least partly unsentimental and realistic? Does Emerson himself ever try to do the same thing?
3. Read Emerson's *Nature* alongside Thoreau's *Walden*. What assumptions do they seem to have

in common? How are they comparable or different in style, method, tone, and genre? Explore the meanings of the word *romantic* as it applies to 19th-century literature, and then discuss the ways in which both works seem romantic. Does one work strike you as being more effectively written than the other? If so, explain why, and provide specific examples.

"The American Scholar" (1837)

Delivered as the Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard University in 1837, this famous lecture has often been seen as a declaration of intellectual independence from the excessive influence of Europe in particular and the past in general. Emerson rejects any view that scholars should rest content as uninspired and unoriginal bookworms: "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books" (*Portable* 56). "Books," he declares, "are the best things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? . . . They are for nothing but to inspire" (*Portable* 56).

Written in a clear, direct, and much more consistently coherent and accessible style than *Nature*, this lecture was highly controversial at the time but also proved enormously influential. It memorably enunciates many of Emerson's most typical ideas. It is, in a sense, a call for intellectual self-reliance; thus Emerson declares that "the one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn" (*Portable* 56). Skeptics, of course, will and did question Emerson's apparently blithe, undefended, and unqualified confidence that the "soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates" (*Portable* 57), and it is when he issues broad-brush statements such as this that it becomes hard to take him nearly as seriously as he apparently took himself. It would be one thing if he had suggested that an active soul may see *part*

of the truth, or merely a partial truth; instead he claims (without explaining why or how) that such a soul sees “absolute truth”—a claim that risks sounding especially irresponsible when delivered by a “scholar” to a scholarly audience. “Books,” Emerson asserts, “are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly”—by contemplating nature or engaging in self-reflection—“the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (*Portable* 57). Yet, he concedes that the best books do have real value: “They impress us with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads” (*Portable* 57). In other words, they convince us that all people share fundamentally identical characters and perceptions and that this essential identity is rooted in their common origin as creatures of nature, which itself is a creation of God. Thus, man, nature, and the “best” books all reflect the mind of God so that the reading of such books, as does the contemplation of nature, promotes not simply knowledge of the universe but knowledge of oneself: “The world—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*—lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself” (*Portable* 59).

For Discussion or Writing

1. This essay is sometimes cited as being the starting point for a truly U.S. literature. What is American about “The American Scholar”? Where is Emerson being notably nationalistic? What for Emerson constitutes being “American”?
2. Compare and contrast Emerson’s essay with T. S. Eliot’s work “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” How does each man approach the cultural heritage of the past? What assumptions do the two men share? How do their attitudes and arguments differ?
3. Do some research and reading about the scientific method, and then discuss Emerson’s essay in relation to that method. How is Emerson’s understanding of scholarship different from and/or comparable to the kind of scholarship implied by the scientific method? What guidance, if any, might a modern scientist (or even a modern writer of history) find valuable or useful in Emerson’s essay?

“Self-Reliance” (1841)

“Self-Reliance” is perhaps Emerson’s most popular and influential essay. In it he encourages readers to trust in themselves rather than in traditions or institutions—to discern and develop their own individual connections to and understandings of God, nature, society, and the universe. “Whoso would be a man,” he says, “must be a nonconformist” (*Portable* 141).

Emerson’s essay is one of the most uncompromising assertions of individualism in the English language, and perhaps the best way to convey its meaning and capture its tone is by offering a few representative quotations. “To believe in your own thought,” Emerson declares, “to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius” (*Portable* 138). “Trust thyself,” he counsels; “every heart vibrates to that iron string” (*Portable* 139). “Society everywhere,” he asserts, “is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind” (*Portable* 141). In a passage that can easily shock (or even disgust) readers with more traditional notions of morality, Emerson avows, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it” (*Portable* 141–142). In a passage that ironically echoes the Christian gospels, Emerson maintains that “the doctrine of hatred must be preached, as the counteraction of the doctrine of love, when that pulses and whines. I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me” (*Portable* 142). He even condemns indiscriminate charity (*Portable* 142–143), and he rejects any idea of virtue as a means of atonement for imperfection: “I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is not an apology, but a life” (*Portable* 143). Discussing the various inhibitions that prevent people from living autonomous

existences, he mentions their fear of being inconsistent, and in one of the most famous sentences he ever wrote, he sweepingly maintains that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (*Portable* 145). He proclaims that “the essence of genius, the essence of virtue, and the essence of life” is “Spontaneity or Instinct” (*Portable* 149). “Insist on yourself,” he advises; “never imitate” (*Portable* 160). And then, in the final two sentences of the piece he announces, “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (*Portable* 164).

That final word—*principles*—is important, because it implicitly helps qualify and limit the extreme egotism and adolescent narcissism seemingly endorsed by much of the rest of the essay. Emerson believed that the independent, self-reliant person would somehow also be virtuous; he felt that the true individual should (and would) act in accordance with the will of God and in line with the dictates of an ultimately benevolent nature. Exactly how and why this would happen are never spelled out very fully or explicitly, and it is easy to see why so many critics of Emerson have regarded him as an amoral (if not actually immoral) defender of the unbridled ego—a kind of New World Nietzsche. His essay is not a reasoned piece of careful argument, nor does it really invite or facilitate a rational response: One either agrees or disagrees with his claims, depending on one's personal temperament. Emerson offers little in the way of “proof” or “demonstration” as those terms are conventionally understood, nor does he really take the time to dispute potential objections. The essay is mainly a series of aphoristic assertions, often memorably and vividly phrased, and certainly they have long appealed—and are always likely to appeal—to self-respecting, self-regarding readers everywhere.

Thematically the essay is typically Emersonian: It extols individualism, it endorses both democracy and heroism, it celebrates instinct and intuition, it brims with optimism, it rejects authority, and it dispenses with traditional ideas about the inherent sinfulness and potential evil of man. Some readers will inevitably find the essay's ideas juvenile and

naive and will regard its tone as pompously bombastic—the secular sermon of a self-appointed sage, a supremely self-confident man intent on tossing overboard most traditional ideals of humility, self-doubt, self-questioning, and adherence to exacting standards of reason, logic, and conventional ethical behavior. Other readers, in contrast, will find the essay exciting, liberating, and inspiring—a welcome declaration of independence from bothersome constraints imposed by past ideas, present institutions, and even other people.

Whatever the essay's strengths or defects as a work of philosophical argument, there is no denying its power as an artistic rendering of language. It is full of lively phrasing, memorable imagery, striking sentences, and robust rhythms. Defending the virtues of inconsistency, for instance, Emerson in a single paragraph employs many of the most potent weapons in the arsenal of rhetoric. He uses a concrete analogy and metaphor: “The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks.” He directly addresses the reader he is trying to persuade: “Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions.” Sometimes his phrasing is aphoristically brief: “Greatness always appeals to the future.” Sometimes it bubbles with alliteration: “The force of character is cumulative.” Other times Emerson asks questions and then immediately answers them: “What makes the majesty of the heroes of the senate and the field, which so fills the imagination? The consciousness of a train of great days and victories behind.” Sometimes he uses repetition and reversal: “We worship [honor] today because it is not of today.” Sometimes he employs balanced syntax: “We love [honor] and pay it homage because it is not a trap for our love and homage.” And, sometimes he indulges in paradox: Honor is “of an old immaculate pedigree, even if shown in a young person” (*Portable* 146–147). Reading Emerson's individual sentences is rarely a boring experience; usually there is something striking, surprising, memorable, or even unforgettable around every turn—however abrupt those turns often seem. Emerson had a gift for coining epigrams and for inventing metaphors, similes, and maxims; he was rarely at a loss for the

right word or the right rhythm. Taken as a series of startling and refreshing suggestions designed to provoke thought, “Self-Reliance” can be exhilarating. Taken as a work of literary art, it seems vital and energetic. Taken, however, as a rational argument or as a prescription for actual living, it raises far more questions (some of them quite morally troubling) than it ever actually answers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Emerson’s essay closely, and then ask yourself how Emerson could logically condemn the “self-reliance” of a person such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, or even some less dangerous egotist, such as an obvious bully in the local school. By what standards or criteria could Emerson validly criticize the actions or characters of such people?
2. The literary critic Yvor Winters commented negatively on “Self-Reliance” in his book titled *In Defense of Reason*. Track down that book, read its discussion of Emerson, and then explain whether or not you think Winters’s criticisms of Emerson seem fair or justified. How might Emerson defend himself against Winters’s charges?
3. Compare and contrast the ideas Emerson expresses in this essay with the ideas that underlie Whitman’s poem “The Song of Myself.” In what specific ways does Whitman seem to have been influenced by Emerson? Are there any significant differences between Whitman’s thinking in that poem and Emerson’s thinking in this essay?
4. Youth is an important concept in “Self-Reliance.” What does youth represent for Emerson? What favors youth over age?

“An Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies” (1844)

Delivered to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire, this address is one of the earliest and most important of Emerson’s attacks on slavery—an

institution whose continued existence in the United States increasingly disgusted not only him but also a growing number of other Americans. Emerson recounts the rise and eventual triumph of abolitionist ideas among the British public and governing class, especially as the British became more and more familiar with the actual horrors of slavery. Clearly, Emerson hopes that abolition will occur in the United States as well, and in fact he expresses confidence that slavery must eventually be defeated, since it so fundamentally contradicts the laws of God and the moral qualities of human nature.

As in some of his other pronouncements on slavery, Emerson manages in this address to combine intense moral indignation with a confident trust in the eventual triumph of right over might. Both slavery and the defense of slavery were rooted, he thought, in the basest, most materialistic, and least noble of motives, and he believed that slavery was not only abusive to the slaves but corrupting and degrading to the slave owners themselves. His speech vividly describes the inhumane and indeed inhuman treatment of the slaves, but it also shows how slavery has caused the slaveholders to live in fear of violent revolts and how it has robbed their children of the traits of initiative, hard work, and moral self-respect. Although he shows again and again that the impulse to own slaves results from monetary greed, he also suggests that the institution continues, in part, because of an even more sinister element in human nature: a love of power that leads people to enjoy the idea of completely dominating and controlling others. Nevertheless, he also argues that slavery contradicts the best and strongest aspects of human character, and so, for that reason alone it must eventually die out as the inevitable (if sometimes slow and unsteady) march of human progress proceeds. Emerson marshals plenty of evidence to argue that slavery is not only unethical but also impractical, uneconomical, inefficient, self-destructive, and self-degrading.

One of the most interesting sections of the address is near its end, when Emerson describes the emancipation of blacks in the British West Indies, praises their dignified and astonishingly

nonviolent response to their new freedom, and welcomes blacks in general into the broader narrative of human progress. Emerson expresses enormous confidence in the contributions that freed blacks will now be able to make to the advancement of humankind in general, and he also expresses deep admiration for the generosity of spirit and the lack of vindictiveness they demonstrated in the immediate aftermath of their emancipation. Despite the ugly abuses they suffered, they emerged from the ordeal of slavery with their own dignity and decency intact.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the account of slavery offered in Emerson's address with the description provided in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, one of the greatest autobiographies ever written by a former slave. Does FREDERICK DOUGLASS's book provide any evidence to support and/or qualify any of Emerson's claims?
2. Examine Emerson's confidence about the future of freed blacks by comparing his views with those later expressed by Booker T. Washington (especially in his autobiography *Up from Slavery* and in his "Atlanta Compromise Speech"). How do you think Emerson would have reacted to Washington's ideas and to Washington himself as a human being? Provide evidence from Emerson's essay to support your views.

"Experience" (1844)

This essay, written in the aftermath of the death of Emerson's young son, seems darker and less optimistic in tone than some of his earlier writings; as its title implies, it is often seen as more "realistic" than certain of his other works. "Every roof," Emerson notes, "is agreeable to the eye until it is lifted; then we find tragedy and moaning women and hard-eyed husbands and deluges of lethe, and the men ask, 'What's the news?' as if the old were so bad" (*Portable* 268). The tone of the work is not entirely bleak, but in general this essay will provide

a welcome relief to anyone who occasionally tires of Emerson's more Pollyannish writings.

"Experience" will strike many readers as one of the wisest works Emerson ever penned; it seems rooted in the actual ups and downs (especially downs) of life in ways that seem less true of some of his more famous and more fanatical works, and it can be profitably read for the sensible advice it offers about how to live a satisfying (if somewhat stoic) life. The essay lacks the sometimes embarrassing enthusiasm of many of Emerson's better-known texts (such as *Nature* or even "Self-Reliance"); it seems more sober, more settled, and in general more sensible. Emerson acknowledges the brevity and distractions of ordinary human existence: "So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each man's genius contracts itself to a very few hours" (*Portable* 268). If Emerson had been writing these words at a different time in his life or in a different mood, he might now launch into an exuberant, enthusiastic celebration of the power of the exceptional spirit to lift us out of such doldrums, and indeed at one point he seems close to doing exactly this: "The intellect, seeker of absolute truth, or the heart, lover of absolute good, intervenes for our succor, and at one whisper of these high powers we awake from ineffectual struggles with this nightmare. We hurl it into its own hell, and cannot again contract ourselves to so base a state" (*Portable* 272). For the most part, however, Emerson in this essay avoids such exalted (and exulting) rhetoric, and in its place he instead usually offers more modest, more practical advice: "To fill the hour,—that is happiness; to fill the hour and leave no crevice to a repentance or an approval. We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them" (*Portable* 275). Or this: "To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom" (*Portable* 275). Or especially this: "I compared notes with one of my friends who expects everything of the universe and is disappointed when anything is less than the best, and I found that I begin at the other extreme, expecting nothing, and am always full of thanks for moderate goods" (*Portable* 276). It is, indeed, the very moderation of this essay—in

its assumptions, in its thinking, and in its tone and rhetoric—that will make it appealing to readers who find the more enthusiastic Emerson hard to take. The Emerson of “Experience” is a man who seems aware of his own (and of humanity’s) limitations and who even seems aware of man’s flaws, hypocrisies, selfishness, and sins (*Portable* 286). There is a humility in this essay that often seems missing from some of his other, more famous works, and for that reason alone “Experience” should be high on the list of the essays by Emerson that are most worth reading.

For Discussion or Writing

1. At one point in this essay Emerson suggests that we are often far more prone to find fault with others than with ourselves (*Portable* 286). Do you agree with this? Why or why not? You might examine this idea in relation to stories by NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, such as “The Birthmark” and “Young Goodman Brown.”
2. Read this essay in conjunction with Emerson’s more famous essay titled “Self-Reliance.” How are they comparable and/or distinct? In what specific ways does the present work correct or modify the earlier one?

“The Poet” (1844)

Emerson considers the ideal poet not simply a talented writer or even merely a kind of secular prophet or priest but as a kind of representative human being: “He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth. The young man reveres men of genius because, to speak truly, they are more himself than he is” (*Portable* 242). The best poets, in other words, are the best persons because they reveal most fully the potential of humanity and because they allow other persons to glimpse and appreciate the beauty, truth, and goodness of the universe.

Emerson values great poets (as opposed to mere wits or versifiers) not only because they reveal eternal truths but also because they capture, and give expression to, the spirit of the particular eras in

which they live: “The experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (*Portable* 245). Indeed, historical periods are remembered not so much for their political, economic, or scientific achievements as for the great writers they produce so that “all that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology. Man, never so often deceived, still watches for the arrival of a brother who can hold him steady to a truth until he has made it his own” (*Portable* 246). The true poet frees our minds and liberates our souls and emotions, and the day on which a great poet is born is “better than my birthday: then I became an animal; now I am invited into the science of the real” (*Portable* 247). Emerson, then, associates the great poet both with timelessness and with the fullest expression of contemporary life, but he also makes it clear that the arrival of a great poet is a rare event—an event, he felt, that had not yet occurred in the America of his time. Part of the purpose of his essay, in fact, seems to be to summon forth such a bard—to encourage any American writers who might aspire to such a role and to prepare Americans to welcome properly such a figure if and when he does arrive. (Emerson would later feel confident that such a poet/prophet had indeed appeared when he first read the works of Walt Whitman.)

Clearly the kind of poet Emerson hopes for is a writer like him—an enthusiast, a romantic, indeed a “transcendentalist”: “I think nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary. If a man is inflamed and carried away by his thought, to that degree that he forgets the authors and the public and heeds only this one dream which holds him like an insanity, let me read his paper, and you may have all the arguments and histories and criticism” (*Portable* 258–259). At the same time, while Emerson values an exalted, elevated, and almost crazed or irrational spirit, he endorses the idea that a great poet can (and should) write about topics that might otherwise seem quite “common” or “ordinary”: “Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy

and the temple of Delphi, and are as swiftly passing away" (*Portable* 262). The great poet Emerson calls for, predicts, and partly aspired to be would reveal the fullness of life, truth, and beauty in all these things and thus help them all live into the future.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Emerson's essay with two essays by EDGAR ALLAN POE—"Philosophy of Composition" and "The Poetic Principle." How are the works of these two writers similar and/or different in their basic assumptions, purposes, styles, and methods? Which of the essays might be most useful to a practicing poet and why?
2. Read some of Emerson's poems. Does he live up to his own ideals as expressed in this essay?
3. Read some poems by Whitman. How does Emerson's essay seem to anticipate and justify the kind of poetry Whitman wrote and the kind of poet Whitman wanted to be?

Representative Men (1850)

In this series of essays Emerson discusses six historical figures whom he considers "representative" not only of their specific eras, cultures, and nations but also of particular potentials latent within the human race as a whole. The figures he chooses to discuss lived during the ancient period, the Renaissance, and the quite recent past, and the nations represented include Greece, Sweden, France, England, and Germany. Each figure illuminates various aspects (often positive, sometimes negative, and usually some combination of both) of human possibilities: Plato, the philosopher; Emmanuel Swedenborg, the mystic; Michel de Montaigne, the skeptic; William Shakespeare, the poet; Napoléon Bonaparte, the man of the world; and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the writer.

In these essays Emerson writes in the more lucid, logical style he was capable of employing when he was not being excessively lyrical, high-flying, or "transcendental." At the same time, the essays clearly express the same fundamental ideas he explored and developed elsewhere. The essay

"Plato" is a good case in point. He considers Plato the most important and influential philosopher who ever lived—a man who managed to combine the best thinking of the various cultures and traditions available to him (including the thought of both the West and the East), to transform it through his own individual genius, and in the process to make it relevant to practically every issue or problem that has ever interested mankind in all the centuries since he lived. Emerson argues that Plato everywhere dealt with the fundamental perception that lies at the base of all philosophy: the fact that the universe is somehow both enormously varied and ultimately unified. "These two principles," he says, "reappear and interpenetrate all things, all thought; the one, the many" (*Portable* 302). Plato managed to grapple with this problem more persistently and consistently, and across a wider intellectual landscape, than anyone else who has ever lived, and he combined an exceptional range of intellectual and rhetorical gifts with a powerful common sense. If his works are defective in any ways, it is perhaps because his expression is too literary and his thinking is insufficiently systematic. It is hard to resist the temptation to conclude that in describing Plato, Emerson is also attempting to describe himself.

Emerson's admiration for Plato could easily have been predicted, but his many positive comments about Napoleon are more surprising. He seems to have admired Napoleon as an opponent and underminer of the dead, conservative past—a revolutionary figure who symbolized the rise of a more vigorous, more inventive, more democratic age. Napoleon knew what he wanted to accomplish and knew how to achieve his goals, and he demonstrated a kind of pragmatic energy that Emerson clearly admires. Unfortunately, however, Napoleon—as did the middle class he was from and represented—pursued goals that were ultimately materialistic and therefore superficial. We can admire his determination, his skill, his competence, his commitment, and even many of his practical accomplishments, but in the final analysis his spirit was "the spirit of commerce, of money and material power" (*Portable* 326). To make matters

worse he lacked the nobility that makes a person truly admirable: “He was thoroughly unscrupulous. He would steal, slander, assassinate, drown and poison, as his interest dictated. He had no generosity, but mere vulgar hatred; he was intensely selfish; he was perfidious” (*Portable* 343). He was, in short, a man who exercised far greater worldly power than Plato, but he was a man whose character was less nobly human and humane than Plato’s and whose accomplishments were therefore finally less admirable and less permanent.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do Emerson’s accounts of the persons discussed in *Representative Men* resemble and/or differ from Benjamin Franklin’s account of his own life in his *Autobiography*? What traits of Franklin’s life and character would Emerson have admired and why? Which aspects of Franklin’s achievements would Emerson have been less likely to extol and why?
2. In his book titled *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau (as does Emerson in *Representative Men*) comments on Goethe, but he also offers an extended discussion of the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. How does Thoreau’s thinking about Goethe resemble and/or differ from Emerson’s? How does Thoreau’s discussion of Chaucer resemble and/or differ from Emerson’s discussion of Shakespeare, especially in its topics, tones, and underlying assumptions?
3. Many scholars find the section on Montaigne to be especially interesting. How was Montaigne similar to Emerson as a writer?
4. Which figure profiled in this series does Emerson seem to admire most? Why?

“An Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law” (1851)

The Fugitive Slave Law, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1850, required legal authorities in all states (including in the North, where slavery had long been outlawed) to cooperate in the capture

and return of any slaves who had managed to escape and flee from their Southern masters. The law highly inflamed many Northerners, including Emerson, who considered it immoral and felt contempt for the previously much-admired Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster, who had lent his support and prestige to the passage of the bill. Emerson attacked the law as unethical, illegal, and unnatural; he declared that all good persons should and would disobey it; and he proposed that the nation abolish slavery as soon as possible, even if doing so involved enormous monetary expense.

As does an even more powerful address he delivered on the same topic in 1854, this speech demonstrates Emerson’s exceptional effectiveness as a public speaker; the address is clear, direct, coherent, and well argued (in ways that are not always characteristic of some of his more abstract and abstruse published essays). Lucidly structured and rhetorically compelling, the address poses none of the problems to simple comprehension occasionally raised by some of the essays: Transitions are clear, arguments and reasoning are transparent, and what the address may lack in figurative language (when compared to various essays), it makes up for through its strong ethical passion. Emerson argues that the law will ironically hasten the end of slavery, since Northerners like him will no longer be able to avert their eyes from such an abominable institution; by attempting to force Northerners to assist in kidnapping, the South would, he predicted, vastly increase the number of committed abolitionists. Central to Emerson’s argument is the contention that no person is obligated to obey an immoral law and that no law can truly be considered a law if it is in fact immoral. Emerson expresses disgust for anyone—especially any self-proclaimed Christian—who could approve, obey, or assist in implementing such a law, although he recognizes that a desire by some Northerners for good commercial relations with the South may lead people to cooperate with evil. Even a desire to preserve the Union should not, he insists, lead people to obey or acquiesce in such an affront to justice, humanity, and human nature. Instead, the people of the North should be willing to sacrifice financially to help transfer enough income to the South so that

Southerners can emancipate their slaves, who might perhaps be encouraged to immigrate to Liberia. Any money spent to buy the freedom of one's fellow men would be a small price to pay, Emerson suggests, not only for the liberty of the slaves but for the self-respect and integrity of free men in both the North and the South.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this speech alongside Thoreau's 1849 essay titled "Civil Disobedience." What principles do the two works share? Compare and contrast the circumstances that prompted each work. How are they similar in method and tone?
2. Read Emerson's "Address" of 1851 in conjunction with his speech of 1854 on the same topic (*Portable* 541–557). How are the two works similar and/or different? What factors prevent the later speech from being a mere echo of the earlier address? How, if at all, had Emerson's thinking evolved over the course of the intervening three years?
3. What makes the writing in this address more direct than Emerson's writing elsewhere? Provide and analyze specific examples.

"Fate" (1860)

In this carefully balanced essay Emerson at first stresses the darker aspects of existence before ultimately emphasizing a more typically optimistic note. The first half of the piece explores the many inflexible, harsh, and often even fatal constraints the universe imposes on all forms of existence; "Nature," Emerson concedes, "is no sentimentalist,—[it] does not cosset or pamper us. We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman, but swallows your ship like a grain of dust" (*Portable* 349). Later, however, he emphasizes that human freedom is as much a part of the universe as human limitations and that our liberty, imagination, and creativity allow us to shape life and nature at least partially to our advantage.

"Fate" resembles the essay titled "Experience" in its bluntly realistic assessment of the grimmer aspects of life, and for that reason alone it is likely to appeal to readers who find Emerson's more usual cheerfulness naive and sentimental. Emerson pulls no punches (at least in the first half of the essay) in describing the risks, dangers, and sternness of life not only for humans but for all living creatures. If his more usual rhapsodies about nature can seem excessively romantic, here he instead describes a universe that is dripping with blood from tooth and claw; nor does he shy away from implicating human beings themselves in the general carnage: "You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity, expensive races—race living at the expense of race" (*Portable* 349). Nor is the nonliving universe any less harsh: "At Lisbon an earthquake killed men like flies. At Naples three years ago ten thousand persons were crushed in a few minutes" (*Portable* 349). Humans are limited by many facts and factors, including their genetic inheritance, and indeed, Emerson himself can seem quite harsh in assessing the alleged flaws of his fellow men. Thus, for the person born with a "little fatty face, pig-eyed, and [with a] squat form," all "the privilege and all the legislation of the world cannot meddle or help to make a poet or a prince of him." Likewise, some people are born merely to eat and breed, and the "more of these drones [who] perish, the better for the hive" (*Portable* 351). There are times and places in this essay when Emerson sounds like a social Darwinist (and in fact like a Darwinist in general) at a time when Darwin's key book had only just been published.

In the second half of the essay, however, Emerson returns to his more typically upbeat tones and ideas, confidently declaring that "intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free" (*Portable* 358). By exercising their intelligence, creativity, and inventiveness, humans can at least partially overcome the limits the universe imposes on them, and the whole history of humankind is a history of material and intellectual progress—a history of humanity's growing freedom from the constraints of fate: "The water drowns ship and sailor like a

grain of dust. But learn to swim, trim your bark, and the wave which drowned it will be cloven by it and carry it like its own foam, a plume and a power” (*Portable* 363). Fate is thus tamed by the very fate that produced the human mind.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Emerson’s view of the human condition with the view implied in Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” What role does God play in the universe as Edwards imagines it, and what role does God play in the universe as conceived by Emerson? What kinds of “fate” does Edwards stress that are relatively ignored by Emerson?
2. How does the present essay complicate and darken the picture Emerson offers in *Nature*? Are the darker aspects of “Fate” anywhere foreshadowed in that earlier work? What changes in Emerson’s own life may have influenced the less sunny view of existence offered in “Fate”?
3. Is fate unavoidable? If not, can we say that Emerson does not believe in free will? Is Fate compatible with ideas of freedom?

“The Sphinx” (1847)

In Greek mythology the sphinx was a creature with the face of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird; she posed a perplexing riddle to passersby and killed anyone who could not solve it, but when Oedipus correctly answered her puzzling question, the frustrated sphinx killed herself. Emerson obviously alludes to this myth in the title, plot, and conclusion of his poem, although the final meaning of his work has been much disputed. Emerson’s sphinx poses riddling questions (apparently about man’s imperfection); she is answered by a confident, assertive poet; she responds to him in turn; and then she disintegrates and is transformed into various natural phenomena.

This poem about a literally puzzling creature has always seemed something of a puzzle itself. Even some readers who otherwise admire Emer-

son’s poetry have dismissed this lyric as unclear or even incoherent, arguing that Emerson made many of the same points more lucidly in other works, such as “Each and All.” Other readers, however, have greatly admired the poem, and clearly Emerson himself highly valued it, as is clear from the fact that he chose it as the lead work for his first published collection of verse. Obviously much of the obscurity of the work is deliberate and was probably meant to be thought-provoking, mysterious, and intriguing, although many readers will probably think that Emerson went too far.

There are at least four separate voices in this poem (*Collected* 5–8): the voice of the speaker-observer; the voice of the sphinx; the voice of a “great mother” (line 57), who seems to be Mother Nature; and the voice of the poet, who is a character within the poem. The speaker begins by introducing and describing the sphinx in the poem’s first four lines, which are straightforward and clear. The sphinx herself begins to speak in line 5, and her phrasing soon brims with paradoxes and oxymorons; the complexity of man, nature, and man’s relations *with* nature is quickly implied as the sphinx suggests the standard Emersonian theme that existence is a concordance of opposites—an abundance of individual multiplicities that nonetheless reveal an underlying unity. Only humans (or at least human adults) seem somewhat out of tune with this universal harmony, and when the voice of the “great mother” briefly enters the poem (she is quoted by the sphinx), she laments that humans seem to have lost some of their original innocence (ll. 61–64). The speaker of the poem then quotes “a poet” (l. 65), who is also a character within the poem. This poet-within-the-poem seems full of optimism and self-confidence, he seems to be able to find a silver lining within any possible dark cloud, and he also seems to emphasize the innate desire of humans to pursue what is perfect, even if that pursuit is never quite satisfied or fulfilled. He emphasizes love as a basic human impulse, and he finally dismisses the sphinx as slow-witted, tedious, and imperceptive. The sphinx, however, gets the last word, although the exact meaning of her response is (as usual) difficult to decipher. So is the precise significance of her

final transformation. Some critics have argued that Emerson sympathizes with the cocky poet; others think he endorses the final views voiced by the sphinx; still others are not sure what, if anything, the poem ultimately signifies. This is a poem that is always likely to have detractors as well as admirers; it is a work that is always likely to stimulate a perhaps irresolvable debate.

For Discussion or Writing

Do some research into the Greek legends of the sphinx and discuss the ways in which Emerson draws upon, modifies, and/or subverts those legends. Why do you think Emerson wanted the phrasing, tones, and meanings of this poem to be so riddling and ambiguous? Why did he not express his ideas with more obvious clarity? What advantages, if any, are there to the obscurity of this poem?

“Each and All” (1839)

This poem argues that we value individual aspects of experience best and most when we relate them to other aspects of experience—that is, when we see the part (“each”) in relation to the whole (“all”) (*Collected* 9–10). The speaker gives example after example to prove that “All [things] are needed by each one; / Nothing is fair or good alone” (ll. 11–12). By the end of the poem, when he is tempted to reject variable beauty in favor of apparently permanent truth, he ultimately realizes that the two are finally inseparable.

The poem begins by seeming to emphasize separateness and distinctions, but already it also implies connections: The “red-cloaked clown” (or peasant) may not realize that he is being observed, but he is nonetheless making an impact on the observer (ll. 1–2); the cow is not aware that it is charming a distant hearer when it “lows” (l. 4), although it nonetheless has that effect; nor is the church sexton in the Alps conscious of the fact that the bell that he rings delights Napoleon (the great conqueror) as the latter leads his troops through the mountains. Yet, peasant, cow,

and sexton all have an impact on others, even if it is an impact none of them deliberately intends. After establishing that everything in the universe inevitably has some relation to and impact on other things, the speaker in the second part of the poem (ll. 13–36) shows repeatedly that each thing diminishes in charm or interest when it is abstracted or separated from its original context or environment. A bird (for instance), when taken home from the natural surroundings where it was originally found, continues to sing, but its song no longer seems as compelling as it seemed at first, “For I did not bring home the river and sky;— / He [i.e., the bird] sang to my ear,—they sang to my eye” (ll. 17–18). In the very memorable second half of line 18, Emerson effectively employs the techniques of paradox and synesthesia (the latter a technique in which one kind of sensual response is described in terms of another—in this case, the paradoxical idea of an eye’s being able to hear). These techniques themselves embody the very kind of union they describe, and so they are especially appropriate to this poem. For the most part, however, Emerson works his way through the rest of his examples in a more straightforward fashion; the poem lacks the kind of vivid imagery found in “The Snow-Storm” or the kind of complex texture evident in “Hamatreya.” “Each and All” seems, finally, a poem in which Emerson states fairly plainly some of the basic elements of his transcendental philosophy—a philosophy that stresses the unity and interconnectedness of all things.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Emerson’s discussion of Plato in *Representative Men*, and then explain how that essay may help illuminate this poem, and vice versa. Which problem did Emerson consider the key to Plato’s entire philosophy, and how is that problem relevant to “Each and All”?
2. Read Emerson’s poem in conjunction with Whitman’s poem “There Was a Child Went Forth.” How are they similar in the assumptions they make and the ideas they express? How do they differ in form, tone, and technique?

3. How does “Each and All” define transcendentalism? Is it more effective in doing so than Emerson’s essays?

“Hamatreya” (1847)

The meaning of the title of this poem is much discussed and much disputed. Some critics think the title refers to the name of a Hindu god who warned against human pride; others think it may derive from the Greek words for “Earth-Mother”; still other critics have suggested additional possibilities. In any case, the basic meaning of the work itself is clear enough: The poem emphasizes the immortality of the earth, the mutability of humanity, and the foolishness of human claims to own or possess nature.

This splendid poem opens by listing the names of various early settlers of Concord, Massachusetts (*Collected* 28–29). The fact that their precise identities are presently unknown or largely forgotten is, of course, part of Emerson’s ironic point: Men who were once important landowners are now mere historical footnotes (if they are remembered at all). Emerson is not entirely dismissive of such men; he does, after all, acknowledge the real productivity of their genuine “toil” (l. 2). Nevertheless, he implicitly mocks their arrogance in lines 5 through 10, when he quotes a representative of one of these “landlords” (l. 4) at length as he declares his supposed lordship over the land he thinks he permanently possesses. Words such as *mine*, *my*, *I*, *me*, and *we* proliferate in these six lines, inevitably making them “smack” of egotism (l. 10). The quoted landlord regards nature almost as a domesticated, obedient “dog,” and although he claims to “sympathize” with the earth (l. 10)—and thus might expect to win Emerson’s approval—in fact he regards the land and everything on it as mere possessions and thus earns Emerson’s contempt.

After offering these six quoted lines of excited, exclamatory egotism, Emerson abruptly shifts to a new stanza and just as abruptly pricks the landlord’s balloon with four mere monosyllabic words: “Where are these men?” (l. 11). They are, he imme-

diately answers, “asleep beneath their grounds,” but the word *their* suddenly seems ironic: The men who once believed they possessed the earth now lie within it, and, as if to enhance the irony, “strangers, fond [foolish] as they, their furrows plough” (l. 12). Once more the word *their* is double-edged: Does it refer to the previous “landlords” or to the present owners? The answer does not really matter, since the present owners will soon be as dead as the owners they succeeded. All persons who think they actually own the earth are merely “boastful boys” (l. 13)—a phrase whose alliteration mocks the immaturity it describes. And, with equal cleverness, just when Emerson mentions “the grave” (l. 15), a large gap opens in the line, violating the regular, expected pentameter design, much as the grave itself puts all our expected routines and rhythms at a sudden end.

“Hamatreya” is full of these kinds of effective local details. In lines 19 and 20, for instance, the arrogant landlords are quoted once again: “We must have clay, lime, gravel, granite-ledge, / And misty lowland, where to go for peat.” Line 19 echoes the earlier line 3: Both of them list the ways the earth can be treated simply as a source of economic productivity. The first half of line 20, then, is initially a bit of a surprise: The emphasis on “misty lowlands” seems at first to suggest an appreciation of nature’s beauty, but then the second half of the line undercuts that impression in turn: The lowlands are merely a place “to go for peat.” “Hamatreya” is a carefully crafted work, and the craftsmanship continues into its intriguing second half, when the meter, tone, diction, and syntax all shift as the earth itself begins to speak. Ambiguity is effectively used in lines 28 and 29; alliteration is skillfully employed in line 43; and lines 50 and 51 move logically from the very specific (“The lawyer”) to the more general (“the laws”) to the even more general still (“the kingdom”) as Emerson emphasizes the inevitable march of everything human into “the grave,” the poem’s appropriately final words (l. 63). Did Emerson know that the number 63 was historically associated with the “grand climacteric” and was thus linked with mortal danger? Is he, in line 63, perhaps also echoing a famous passage (ll.

30–32) from Andrew Marvell's famous poem "To His Coy Mistress"? No discovery concerning the artfulness, subtlety, or skill of "Hamatreya" would seem very surprising. Surely it is one of Emerson's most genuinely accomplished poems.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Emerson's lyric with the poem titled "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. How are they similar in theme, tone, and technique? Discuss their differences in length; how is the very brevity of Shelley's poem effective? Discuss the use of multiple points of view in each poem.
2. Read Emerson's poem alongside the poem titled "Thanatopsis" by William Cullen Bryant. Discuss the tones of the two works. How are their purposes similar and/or distinct? Which is more consoling? Which is more sarcastic? What do both works suggest about the inevitability of death?
3. Why does Emerson begin his poem by listing the settlers of Concord? What effect does this have on the reader?

"The Rhodora" (1834)

In this poem—whose perhaps unnecessary subtitle is "On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?"—the speaker describes his encounter with a beautiful shrub, related to the rhododendron, which he found blooming in an isolated part of the woods (*Collected* 31). Why, he wonders, does such beauty exist where few people are likely to see or appreciate it? He responds by answering that beauty is its own justification and that the same power responsible for creating humankind and revealing the flower is also responsible for creating the flower and putting the speaker and flower together.

This work is built around a series of apparent opposites—opposites that the poem attempts to reconcile and harmonize. The opening words—"In May"—immediately suggest a peaceful springtime setting, yet the rest of the line ("when sea-winds pierced our solitudes") immediately complicates

the tone. Nature (those ensuing words suggest) can sometimes be active and forceful, and indeed the whole first line sets the tone for the rest of the work by implying its main theme: the interaction and connections between nature and man. In the first line nature makes contact with man; in the second line man makes contact with nature. In the first line nature seems full of force and power; in the second line its calm pastoral beauty is emphasized. With the appearance of the verb *to please* in line 3, Emerson already begins to personify nature, implying that the flower, as man (and, most specifically, as the poet), desires to share its beauty. The next few lines are filled with colors, sensations, and further personification, and at the exact midpoint of the work, as the lyric shifts from its first half to its second, the speaker directly addresses the shrub as if it were not merely alive but also capable of thought.

This heavy use of personification helps prepare for the conclusion of the work, in which the speaker emphasizes the intimate bond between man and nature by stressing their common source: "The self-same Power that brought me there brought you" (l. 16). The word *brought* is double-edged, since it refers not only to the coming together of this speaker and this flower, but also to the creation of both as representatives of all humans and all of nature's beauty. Typically, Emerson does not explicitly identify the "Power" as God (as an earlier, more orthodox Christian poet might have); instead, he simply implies that there are a design and meaning to the universe, and that central to both is the close connection of humans and their environment. Thus the speaker addresses the flower as if it were simply another member of the family (see esp. line 11). "Beauty," the speaker memorably declares, "is its own excuse for being" (l. 12)—a declaration that justifies not only the existence of the isolated flower but also the existence of poetry itself. By the end of the poem, Emerson has linked land and sea, woods and flowers, plants and birds, profound wisdom and a deceptively "simple ignorance" (l. 15); he has linked man and nature, and, above all, the entire human and physical universe and the "Power" responsible for it all.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What are Emerson's views of the relationship between man and nature and their creator, as expressed in this poem? How (if at all) does Emerson prevent his views from seeming naïve and sentimental?
2. What does Emerson's poem have in common with William Cullen Bryant's lyric titled "The Yellow Violet"? How are they similar in theme, tone, techniques, and purpose? Is one work more effective than the other? If so, why and how? In addition, discuss Emerson's poem by comparing and contrasting it with Philip Freneau's lyric titled "The Wild Honey Suckle."

"The Snow-Storm" (1835)

The speaker describes the onset, results, and aftermath of a snowstorm, which quickly creates a world of astonishing new appearances—a world the speaker describes by using architectural metaphors. When the storm has passed, man is left to contemplate its wonderful effects and feels inspired to attempt to imitate them (however slowly and imperfectly) in architectural creations of his own.

The poem begins on a literally majestic note: The arriving snowstorm is implicitly compared to an arriving king or demigod (*Collected* 34). Both literally and figuratively the storm descends from above, and the first line and a half is particularly effective in the way it delays the appearance of the word *snow*, thus giving that noun maximal emphasis. The first five lines describe the effect of the falling snow on nature. Then, the next four describe its effects on the humans who have shut themselves inside, "enclosed" (as the speaker puts it in a nicely paradoxical phrase) "in a *tumultuous privacy* of storm" (l. 9; italics added). The storm disrupts normal human activity, but it thereby also promotes human intimacy and togetherness: "all friends" are "shut out," but "the housemates sit / Around a radiant fireplace" (ll. 7–9). The storm thus transforms the external landscape even as it

encourages (in fact, forces) humans to renew their attentions both to each other and to nature.

Indeed, the second stanza begins by establishing an explicit bond between speaker and readers: The speaker addresses us directly ("Come see"; l. 10), as if he and we are among the "housemates" who look out and witness the storm's effects. The speaker paradoxically compares snow (soft, delicate, and ultimately impermanent) to masonry and hard white marble. The common, everyday features of a normal farm are transformed, by the snow's effects, into a kind of architectural wonderland, so that the storm becomes a symbol of the larger creative (and re-creative) powers of nature itself. Emerson, through his use of metaphors, similes, images, and other kinds of figurative language, demonstrates his own creativity—a creativity inspired by the storm whose results he so vividly describes. Fittingly, then, the poem itself exemplifies the very process it calls for and predicts in its final lines: The speaker there suggests that man, inspired by nature, will now attempt to "mimic, in slow structures, stone by stone, / Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work" (ll. 26–27). Man will thereby re-create, in a more permanent fashion, what the speaker calls (in a memorable oxymoron) "the frolic architecture of the snow" (l. 28). In the meantime, the poem itself has re-created the beauty of the storm; Emerson himself thus fulfills his prophecy even as he issues it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the relationship between man and nature as it is depicted in this poem and in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." How does Frost's use of snow as a symbol both resemble and/or differ from Emerson's? How are the tones and ultimate meanings of the two poems similar and/or different? Which poem is more obviously "romantic"? Which is more obviously "stoic"? Explain these distinctions.
2. How is winter imagery used in this poem? What is its effect on the reader? You might also discuss the use of sound effects.

“Merlin” (1847)

Emerson actually wrote a pair of poems with this same basic title—“Merlin I” and “Merlin II” (*Collected* 91–94). In both works poetry itself is the major subject, and both lyrics offer Emerson’s typically exalted view of the powers and responsibilities of the bard. In “Merlin I” Emerson calls for a kind of lofty verse that goes far beyond mere versifying; in “Merlin II” he emphasizes the complex but ultimately balanced contrarities that pervade every aspect of existence.

“Merlin I” opens by rejecting poetry that is trivial in subject matter and routine or mechanical in form; instead, he celebrates a kind of verse whose power resembles the power of nature—a kind of verse that is capable of stirring the deepest human emotions. “The kingly bard,” the speaker proclaims, “Must smite the chords rudely and hard” (ll. 9–10), and Emerson, in line 10, obviously tries to imitate rhythmically the very sort of force he praises. Great poetry will provide insights into every aspect of existence, from the natural to the human, from the earthly to the supernatural. The greatness of the poet’s art reflects (and depends on) his own greatness of character, and his transcendent thoughts allow him to rise to a heavenly height and dispense with the tired, uninspired mechanical rules of conventional verse. Through the power of his poetry he spreads joy, tames tempests, soars above common limits, and creates with almost godlike force. His sublime skill makes him almost a supernatural (and certainly in some ways a superhuman) being.

“Merlin II” begins by emphasizing once more the powers of the ideal poet, but it quickly announces its own major theme: “Balance-loving Nature / Made all things in pairs” (ll. 3–4). For many of the ensuing lines, the speaker lists example after example to illustrate this claim: Things both on and above the Earth reveal an all-pervasive balance, and this trait of the universe is found even in human thoughts and thinking. In this sense all of existence “rhymes”; symmetry is everywhere—from the shape of the human body to the generative combination of male and female. In this poem, therefore, as in so many of his other writings, Emerson emphasizes how the many combine

to form the one—how each is part of a greater all. Male and female, man and nature, nature and the supernatural, creation and creator—all are part of a complex harmony. Every aspect of existence has its complementary opposite, without which it would be incomplete and unbalanced. “Merlin I” exists side by side with “Merlin II,” and the poet, more than any other mortal, is the being who celebrates the balanced harmony that underlies the whole.

For Discussion or Writing

Discuss these two poems in connection with Emerson’s own essay titled “The Poet.” What do these poems and that prose work have in common, particularly in terms of their ideas, imagery, aspirations, and tones? How does Emerson himself, in the “Merlin” poems, try to live up to the ideals announced both in the essay and in the poems themselves? To what extent does he succeed and/or fail to function, in these poems, as the kind of poet he himself celebrates?

“Concord Hymn” (1837)

This poem—also titled “Hymn: Sung at the Completion of the Concord Monument, April 19, 1836”—was written to commemorate the establishment of a permanent memorial to the Battles of Lexington and Concord, which occurred on April 19, 1775, and were crucial events in the American Revolution (*Collected* 125). The speaker alludes to the battles, notes that the men on both sides are long dead, but expresses the hope that the monument erected in honor of the American patriots will long endure, despite the ravages of time.

The speaker begins by mentioning the “rude” (that is, primitive or rudimentary) bridge that once stood near the battle site in Concord. This emphasis on an unsophisticated structure sets the tone for the entire piece, for Emerson wants to stress, especially in the first stanza, the fact that “common” or “ordinary” men nevertheless once performed an extraordinary deed. Just as the “rude bridge” once “arched the flood” (l. 1), so these amateur, relatively untrained soldiers—these

3. Examine two different passages from two different prose works by Emerson. Choose one passage that you consider rhetorically effective and one passage that you consider rhetorically less effective. How do you explain the differences between the two passages? What particular elements make one passage powerful and the other less powerful? Discuss such matters as imagery, word choice, sentence length, sentence structure, and figurative language.
4. Consult a number of different reference sources—including encyclopedias, dictionaries of literary terms, and *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (available online)—and read their definitions and discussions of transcendentalism. Then choose one work by Emerson and discuss the degree to which (and the ways in which) it exemplifies transcendentalist ideas.
5. Read Emerson's essay titled "The Poet," and then discuss the ways in which the essay seems relevant to several of his own poems. How does Emerson try to practice in his poems what he preaches in his essay? To what extent, and in what ways, does he succeed and/or fail?
6. Choose one of the titular topics of one of Emerson's essays—such as "Love," "Friendship," "Prudence," "Art," or "Politics,"—and then trace the appearance of that idea in the *Essays* as a whole. What consistencies and/or inconsistencies emerge in Emerson's various discussions of the chosen topic?
7. Choose a particular year in Emerson's adult life, and then try to track down as many different examples of Emerson's writings from that year (such as poems, essays, lectures, notes, letters) as you can find. What historical events or conditions were important during the chosen year? How do Emerson's writings from that year seem connected to those events or conditions?
8. Explore the history of Emerson's reputation. During certain eras he has been highly praised, and during other eras he has been vigorously mocked or criticized. What kinds of factors seem to have influenced the praise and criticism he has received? Should a writer's literary reputation be affected by whether a reader agrees or disagrees with the writer's ideas?
9. Read an essay (such as the one in Myerson's *Historical Guide*) that discusses various biographical treatments of Emerson's life. How have biographers disagreed in their basic views of Emerson? How and why are their disagreements important in affecting the ways we read Emerson's writings? Is biographical information about an author really important to an understanding of his literary works?
10. Read through Emerson's *Essays* and then discuss his comments about women in particular and what it means to be female in general. (For instance, does he tend to describe nature in male or female terms?) What do his comments reveal about the status of women in his own society and era? Is there any consistency to his comments? Do his comments in any way suggest or reflect changes that may have been taking place in the role of women in his time? What were his explicit views about the rights and responsibilities of women?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, and Paul Kane. "Chronology." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Collected Poems and Translations* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, 553–569. New York: Library of America, 1994.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Burkholder, Robert E., and Joel Myerson, eds. *Critical Essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1983.
- Cady, Edwin H., and Louis J. Budd, eds. *On Emerson: The Best from American Literature*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1988.
- Carpenter, Frederick Ives. *Emerson Handbook*. New York: Hendricks House, 1967.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Collected Poems and Translations*. Edited by Harold Bloom and Paul Kane. New York: Library of America, 1994.
- . *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 10 vols. Edited by Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanore Tilton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–95.
- . *The Portable Emerson*. Edited by Carl Bode and Malcolm Cowley. New York: Viking, 1981.

- Garvey, T. Gregory, ed. *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001.
- Myerson, Joel, ed. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Packer, B. L. *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays*. New York: Continuum, 1982.
- Porte, Joel, and Sandra Morris, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson. Available online. URL: <http://www.transcendentalists.com/1emerson.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- The Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available online. URL: <http://plato.standard.edu>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Winters, Yvor. *In Defense of Reason*. Denver, Colo.: Swallow Press, 1947.
- Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Available online. URL: <http://www.rwe.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Yannella, Donald. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston: Twayne, 1982.

Robert C. Evans



FANNY FERN

(SARA PAYSON WILLIS PARTON)

(1811–1872)

I want all women to render themselves independent of marriage as a mere means of support.

(*New York Ledger*, June 26, 1869)

In 1855 the *New York Ledger* broke newspaper salary records by hiring a regular columnist at the unprecedented rate of \$100 per column. Surprisingly, the sum went not to a man but to the first woman newspaper columnist in the United States Sara Payson Willis Parton, who wrote under the pseudonym *Fanny Fern*. Fern's columns, novels, essays, and children's books established her as one of the best-known female authors, feminist voices, and social critics of the mid- to late 19th century. Her columns ran for 21 years and were the most widely reprinted of the 1850s. Her final article appeared on October 12, 1872, two days after her death.

Fern's work was both wildly popular and controversial during her lifetime. Her columns were widely read, but contemporary critics attacked her for her unfeminine frankness, for her unfavorable depictions of her family members, and for her outspokenness about social issues. Ironically, scholars in much of the 20th century attacked her for the opposite reason, often dismissing her writing as too sentimental, too domestic, and too short of serious substance. One critic called her "the grandmother of all sob sisters" (Fern, *Ruth Hall* x). While some of Fern's work may be classified as sentimental, she dedicated the majority of her career to condemnation of hypocrisy and discrimination against women. Fern may well have engaged in sentimental writing because it was seen as an "appropriate"

genre for women and thus helped her get a foot in the door of the publishing world. Some of Fern's works that have been misread as purely sentimental, most notably her first novel, *Ruth Hall*, actually contain significant undertones of feminist criticism and early realism. Most recently, literary scholars have resurrected Fern's work and reestablished her reputation as an outspoken activist and satirical voice with regard to 19th-century political and social institutions. Many of her texts contain analytical observations about issues such as marriage, employment, motherhood, family, publishing, religion, law, education, women's suffrage, sexuality, class, and, most important, financial independence for women.

Born on July 9, 1811, in Portland, Maine, Sara Payson Willis was the fifth of Hannah and Nathaniel Willis's nine children. The family soon moved to Boston, where her stern Calvinist father founded the first religious newspaper in the United States, the *Recorder*. After an education at Catharine Beecher's Female Seminary, where she was a lively and spirited student, Sara returned to Boston, where she worked (without pay or acknowledgment) writing articles and helping edit her father's paper. In 1837 she married a banker, Charles Eldridge, and the happy union produced three daughters, Mary, Grace, and Ellen. Misfortune overturned her happy life from 1844 to 1846, when Sara experienced a series of personal tragedies: Her mother, sister,

daughter Mary, and husband all died within two years. Eldridge died burdened with massive debts that left Sara and her two remaining daughters in financial ruin.

Left with no means of support, Sara married her second husband, Samuel Farrington, in 1849 at the urging of her father, but her new husband was jealous and abusive, and Sara immediately regretted marrying out of necessity rather than for love. In a move highly atypical for a mid-19th-century American woman, Sara left Farrington in 1851, incurring the wrath of her husband, his family, and her own father, who had presumed her marriage would absolve him of responsibility for her welfare. The scandal surrounding Sara's exit from the marriage caused her husband and his brother to strike back by spreading false malicious rumors about her character, although the brother later recanted. Sara's father refused to help financially, tried to bribe her by threatening to take away the children, and attempted to force her back to her husband. Farrington obtained a divorce two years later on the grounds of desertion, ironically voiding any claim he might have had on Sara's subsequent earnings as Fanny Fern.

Desperate to keep her children, Sara attempted to provide for her family on her own. After failing to secure a job as a teacher and finding seamstress work inadequate to support herself and her daughters, Sara was forced to give her former in-laws, the Eldridges, custody of Grace. In desperation, Sara began writing newspaper articles. She sought help from her brother, Nathaniel Parker (N. P.) Willis, himself a well-known writer and editor of the New York *Home Journal*. Despite the fact that he had helped other unknown female writers establish themselves, N. P. refused to publish his sister's work, calling it vulgar and indecent because of its candid tone. Stung by her family's rejection, Sara went to several other newspapers and finally secured her first publication; her essay "The Model Husband" appeared on June 28, 1851, in the *Olive Branch*. Her reputation soared, and soon papers clamored for as many articles as she could produce. After publishers began to seek out her popular articles and publish them regularly, Sara adopted the

pen name *Fanny Fern*. The alliterative pseudonym satirized the verbose flowery language favored by female writers at the time, and Fern used it both personally and professionally from then on.

Fern's articles appeared regularly in the Boston papers *Olive Branch* and *True Flag* and were reprinted without permission by other newspapers as well. Once she had achieved a measure of fame, the publisher Oliver Dyer lured her away to New York to write for the *Musical World and Times*, edited by her brother, Richard Willis, at a salary twice the combined amount paid by the other two publications. The regular articles in *Musical World* established Fern as the first professional female columnist in the United States. Graciously, Dyer excused her from the exclusivity of their contract, and her work began to appear once again in the *Olive Branch* and *True Flag*, where circulation had dropped as a result of her departure. *Fanny Fern* soon became a household name and a collection of her articles, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, was published in 1853. The best seller was well received in both the United States and Britain. Later that same year, Fern published her children's collection, *Little Ferns for Fanny's Friends*; her second series of *Fern Leaves* followed in 1854. Fern moved to New York with her daughter Ellen in 1853, and the financial stability provided by her writing allowed her to regain custody of her daughter Grace shortly thereafter.

Fern soon put her newspaper career aside to concentrate on *Ruth Hall* (1854), a novel based largely on the events of her life. William Moulton, editor of the *True Flag*, responded to the novel's thinly veiled characterization of him with a series of articles designed to expose Fern's real identity. Moulton's attack backfired, however, when revelation of the characters' true identities piqued public interest and the book's status as a roman à clef contributed to its success. Despite notable sales figures, response to *Ruth Hall* was not entirely positive. Critics charged Fern with "unfeminine" conduct in her biting satire of society's indifference to the predicament of women forced to earn a living. Some saw her attacks on her father, in-laws, and brother as vicious and spiteful. Social convention dictated

that a woman keep her domestic problems out of the public sphere, even in cases of grievous wrongdoing. Overall, however, *Ruth Hall* was a success, and Fern published the serial novella *Fanny Ford* in 1855. Her second novel, *Rose Clark* (1856), sold well but never achieved the success of her first. Fern dedicated the rest of her career to nonfiction essays and articles and wrote a regular column for the *Ledger* for 16 years.

Fern's personal life also took a dramatic turn around the time her career began to flourish. In 1856 she married James Parton, a young writer and editor 11 years her junior. In keeping with her belief in the importance of women's financial independence, the now-wealthy Fern insisted that Parton sign a prenuptial agreement that gave her exclusive right to her own work and any subsequent revenue. At the time, Parton was an editor at N. P. Willis's *Home Journal* and reprinted Fern's articles until Willis put a stop to his efforts. Parton then quit.

Fern died of breast cancer on October 10, 1872, and is buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Despite her dramatic personal life and its influence on her career, Fern is best understood as a tireless social critic who championed women's rights and opposed inequality and hypocrisy. Her work appealed to a wide spectrum of American society, regardless of gender or social standing. Her straightforward prose defied convention and helped change stylistic restrictions for women writers. Other interesting facts about Fern include her origination of the phrase "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach" (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 3), her public praise of WALT WHITMAN, and her brother N. P.'s fictionalization as "Mr. Bruce" in HARRIET JACOBS's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Despite scholarly neglect for most of the 20th century, Fern has reemerged as a notable force in the arenas of journalism, literary style, and social activism.

***Ruth Hall* (1854)**

In *Ruth Hall*, a fictionalized account of Fern's first marriage and her struggles after the death of her

husband, a young widow finds that society provides no opportunities for women to support themselves. Menial labor cannot pay enough to feed her children; politics and the family's fear of shame prevent her from obtaining a job as a teacher; her miserly father and cruel in-laws refuse to help her financially. Initially abused by the newspaper editors where she applies for employment, including her own brother (based on N. P. Willis), Ruth through determination and hard work eventually establishes herself as a successful newspaper columnist and gains her hard-won financial independence.

When *Ruth Hall* first appeared in 1854, Fern, whose true identity was soon maliciously revealed, was attacked as "unfeminine." Her unflinchingly stark portrayal of her family members led critics to accuse her of writing the novel purely for revenge. That a woman would show disloyalty to her family, even in spite of their pitiless treatment, scandalized readers. By pointing out the brutal inequities that allowed women to fall into poverty, Fern tore away the veil of delicacy that surrounded most 19th-century women's writing. Her style was straightforward, and her criticisms were overt and specific. In addition, her presentation of religious hypocrisy generated charges of sacrilege. Fern's gender made *Ruth Hall* unforgivable for its outspokenness and satirical edge. One critic went so far as to say, "If Fanny Fern were a man . . . *Ruth Hall* would be a natural and excusable book. But we confess that we cannot understand how a delicate, suffering woman can hunt down even her persecutors so remorselessly. We cannot think so highly of [such] an author's womanly gentleness" (Fern, *Ruth Hall* ix). While male authors were praised for self-reliant heroes who fought on the side of justice and fair play, Fern was simultaneously condemned for her heroine's indelicacy and lack of submissiveness. Initial reception of her work denounced her for behaving in a manner unsuitable for a woman. Ironically, however, for most of the 20th century critics dismissed *Ruth Hall* on the contradictory grounds of being "too flowery" and tearfully maudlin. Contemporary critics now acknowledge the tension between these two points of view as one of the defining strategies of the text.

Ruth Hall begins where many traditional novels end, with a marriage. However, rather than offering marriage as the solution to all women's problems, Fern illustrates how even a loving marriage cannot provide complete security. The night before her wedding finds Ruth wondering whether marriage will truly make her content, opening the door for possible critique. Despite a loving husband, Ruth's jealous and disapproving new in-laws make her married life difficult. Their indifference and hypocrisy contribute to the death of her first child, and they leave her destitute when her husband, Harry, dies. Notably, at the point most narratives end and the characters live "happily ever after," Ruth's troubles are just beginning.

Fern's novel criticizes the inequities of marriage as a social institution by showcasing a wide array of marriages, almost none of which offers a rewarding condition for women. Ruth's happy marriage is marred by her in-laws' interference and cut short by her husband's unexpected death and business debts. Her own mother is dead, and her father shows little affection or concern for her welfare. Her in-laws lead a dour, colorless life and bicker constantly. Ruth's friend, Mary Leon, who has married for financial stability, is treated as nothing more than a decorative object by her husband. When he tires of Mary, her husband commits her to an insane asylum, where she dies alone. The working-class Mrs. Skiddy is deserted when her husband runs off to California. Her comic reply to his request to return home is "N-e-v-e-r." In each of these cases, Fern undermines the sanctity of marriage and reveals the ways in which, both legally and socially, marriage denies women autonomy. In a final twist, the end of the novel subverts conventional 19th-century expectations when a scene with a fire and handsome fireman ends not with the death of the unconventional heroine or romance, but with Ruth's daring escape and platonic friendship with her rescuer. These harsh depictions of marriage illustrate the importance of women's individual and economic liberty, a prominent theme in *Ruth Hall* and many of Fern's works.

Among the institutions Fern holds accountable for second-class treatment of woman is the pub-

lishing and print industry. Her thinly disguised characterizations of well-known editors, especially Hyacinth Ellet, whom she based on her brother, N. P. Willis, satirize the impersonal and cutthroat publishing world. Furthermore, *Ruth Hall* shows the industry's inherent sexism as newsrooms were solely man's domain and editors routinely paid female writers less than their male counterparts.

Ruth Hall also proves significant in terms of stylistic technique. The structure of Fern's chapters, the change in tone after Ruth's husband dies, and the use of plain vernacular diction set this novel apart from other examples of supposed sentimentality. The critic Joyce Warren argues, "The tone of the novel shifts constantly and suddenly; each description of Ruth's earlier happiness is immediately undercut by a satirical scene portraying the other characters' sour comments or unfeeling behavior" (Fern, *Ruth Hall* xxvii). Scenes of domestic bliss are followed by examples of cruelty and hypocrisy, and Ruth's overblown romantic rhetoric found early in the novel transforms into concise and straightforward syntax and diction as her circumstances change. This shift reflects both Ruth's disillusionment at her ever-worsening situation and the increased use of a terse journalistic form of prose realism.

Despite the fact that *Ruth Hall* was seen by some readers as "monstrous" and "unwomanly" (Walker 51), Fern's novel sold well. Her unconventionally assertive heroine and straightforward, conversational writing style appealed to a wide audience and gave her a platform from which to discuss gender inequality. *Ruth Hall's* unflinching look at the social and economic predicament of women and children in the middle of the 19th century paved the way for an increasingly open dialogue concerning women's self-sufficiency, work, and fundamental civic and individual rights. As a result of increasing scholarly interest, the novel was republished by Rutgers University Press in 1986.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look up the literary term *sentimentalism*. Which portions of *Ruth Hall* seem sentimental? How, specifically, does the novel conform to or deviate from the conventions of sentimentality?

2. What is Ruth's attitude toward religion? Point to specific passages where you see her beliefs expressed. How many different religious attitudes does Fern present and in what characters? Which model does she appear to endorse and why?
3. Consider the structure of the chapters in *Ruth Hall*. Look at several consecutive chapters and choose two you believe engage in a dialogue with each other. How are the issues in one chapter juxtaposed with those in the other? How do you read one chapter differently in light of the other? What is the effect of placing these two scenes together?
4. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, who infamously called most female writers of the 19th-century a "damned mob of scribbling women," admired Fern's work for its outspokenness. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* involves a woman, Hester Prynne, who, as does Ruth Hall, transgresses the boundaries of social convention. Do a comparative study of these two characters.

***Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853)**

After her enormous success as a newspaper columnist, Derby and Miller Publishers approached Fern about collecting her work in a book. The published text, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, contains more than 100 articles, some previously published and some new, on topics such as marriage, motherhood, and religion. In the preface Fern explains that she "never had the slightest intention of writing a book" and that she wishes the "leaves" she presents in the volume were "worthier of your regard." Though such humble and self-effacing explanations were typical of 19th-century writers, women relied on them to a greater extent than male authors in an attempt to show their femininity alongside the public, and therefore more masculine, act of publishing a book. Most of Fern's early columns center on family life, the everyday interests of women, and the sorts of misfortunes Fern encountered in her personal life, mainly widowhood and the death of a child.

Although its subject matter is largely domestic, *Fern Leaves* does approach some social and economic issues as well. In "A Practical Blue-Stocking" Fern sets out to correct the stereotype of a literary woman, or "blue-stocking," as a slovenly person who neglects her appearance, housekeeping, and family in order to write. Fern turns the male narrator's expectations upside down when he arrives at the home of a friend to find a beautiful "blue-stocking" wife and an immaculate house. Seeing he is surprised, the husband then describes how his wife's writing saved the family when they encountered difficult financial times. Similarly, "A Chapter on Literary Women" finds a bachelor who laments that "these literary women live on public admiration—glory in seeing themselves in print . . . [they] are a sort of nondescript monsters; nothing feminine about them" (176–177). By the end of the tale the bachelor has unknowingly fallen for a well-known female writer and renounces his earlier opinion, saying, "A woman may be literary, and yet feminine and lovable" (179). Fern argues here that women who write benefit rather than harm family stability.

Along with women's writing as a profession, Fern tackles class and economic issues associated with widowhood. In "Thanksgiving Story," one of her more sentimental pieces, two young impoverished girls reminisce about the Thanksgiving Day that took place before their father's death when they feasted with the extended family that has now deserted them. Their mother, sitting in the next room, hears them, and "the simple recital found but too sad an echo in that widowed heart" (60). Many entries, such as "The Widow's Trials," "Summer Days," and "The Wail of a Broken Heart," comment on the devastating effects of widowhood on women and children. Still other entries attack the same issue with a satirical tone. "The Model Widower" begins to think of wife number two immediately after the death of number one and "marries a playmate for his oldest daughter" (323). Clearly this "model" is not to be emulated but instead represents the gender inequity typically found after the death of a spouse when a husband could remarry a younger woman with ease but a wife might be left without financial support.

Though Fern takes on some difficult subjects in these entries, the editors of this first collection included a disproportionate amount of Fern's more sentimental columns rather than her satirical and overtly controversial works. Although *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* has not been reprinted since its original publication in 1853, the full text is available online and several individual entries have been collected in literary anthologies.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In her preface to *Fern Leaves* the author notes, "If the reader will imagine me peeping over his shoulder, quite happy should he pay me the impromptu compliment of a smile or a tear, it is possible we may come to a good understanding by the time the book shall have been perused." What sort of understanding do you think she means? What kind of reaction does she want from the reader and why? What do you make of the fact that the reader is referred to as "he" instead of "she"?
2. Look at several entries about marriage. What are the messages Fern tries to convey in these pieces, and how does her tone vary from piece to piece? Which do you think has the most effective tone and why?

***Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series* (1854)**

The popular first series of *Fern Leaves* was quickly followed by a second series in the following year. As does the first, it contains both previously published and newly composed entries. Although Fern treats many of the same issues presented in the first series, the second moves from domestic matters to more expansive social and economic concerns. The tone is less cautious and subtle and more satirical and cynical. As her career progressed, Fern became increasingly outspoken and sardonic in her critique of social injustice.

Perhaps Fern's most famous work is "Apollo Hyacinth," a sharp indictment of a dandyish writer whose selfishness and hypocrisy lead him

to associate only with those who can further his social position. Because Apollo Hyacinth considers himself a gentleman of fine breeding, he "never says an uncivil thing" (382). But, Fern skewers his character, noting his "sins of omission" as he avoids the troubles of others and feigns ignorance after the fact, thus not sully his reputation by neglecting his family and friends. William Moulton's exposure of Sara Parton as Fanny Fern revealed the true identity of Apollo Hyacinth to be Fern's brother N. P. Willis. Fern's portrait of the indifferent and self-absorbed character lurking under her brother's elegant exterior satirizes those who appear cultured and refined but in reality lack "moral excellence."

The second series also contains more direct criticisms of an unfeeling social hierarchy that allows citizens to fall into hopeless and desperate poverty. In "Dollars and Dimes" Fern notes, "An empty pocket is the worst of crimes" and mockingly reflects that without money one will not be well received by "good people" (212). She also indicts capitalism for causing a moral decline in those who attempt to climb to the top of the financial ladder. "Our Street" sympathetically describes the honest working-class men and women, starving homeless people, and child laborers of New York who walk among its more gentrified residents.

Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series has been republished twice, first in Ayer Publishing's American Fiction Reprint Series (1971) and then in the Michigan Historical Reprint Series (2005). In addition, the full texts of both series are available online from several sources.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the ethics involved in exposing the faults and flaws of a friend or family member as Fern does in "Apollo Hyacinth." When is it appropriate to condemn that person publicly for undesirable behavior? When is it not?
2. Several articles in the series illustrate the despair and misery of poverty. Does Fern identify the causes of such financial hardship? If so, what are they? Does she offer any solutions?

“Hints to Young Wives” (1852)

“Hints to Young Wives” begins with Fern’s saying she would like to take all conduct books written for married women, which generally encourage them to be submissive and excel at housekeeping, and throw them on a bonfire along with the authors. The article describes a fictionalized “poor little innocent fool” (2,102) whose fawning, servile behavior toward her husband does nothing but earn his contempt since he knows he has her unwavering devotion. Fern suggests that the husband who does not turn tyrant with such treatment is rare. To illustrate this point Fern relates an incident when she is mending “Mr. Fern’s” coat and finds a love letter in his pocket, proof that obsequious behavior will cause a man to lose interest. While most 19th-century advice book authors emphasize the importance of homemaking and the supportive role of the wife toward her husband, Fern counsels quite the opposite. Not only does she warn that subservient behavior will harm the wife, leaving her with chattering teeth and a dislocated wrist, but she places responsibility for men’s dismissal of their wives partially on the wives’ ill-informed behavior. The marital power dynamic clearly demands that a woman maintain autonomy so her husband will not “turn on his heel and march off whistling ‘Yankee Doodle’” (2,102). An inequitable relationship, it seems, draws out the worst in all parties.

Further, Fern’s tone assumes an intimacy with the reader as she confesses her own failings in marriage, such as her willingness to drop everything to mend her husband’s coat, despite a “crucifying headache.” The anecdote establishes a conversational familiarity with the reader as well as Fern’s authority and credibility with regard to the subject. Similarly, vernacular phrases such as “them’s my sentiments” and “fiddlesticks” make the author’s persona seem approachable, more like a regular woman with common problems than a celebrated author.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What portions of “Hints to Young Wives” might have been perceived as scandalous at the time of its publication? What does Fern mean when she advises the woman whose husband treats her as a housekeeper to “fill that place and no other” (2,102)?
2. Given that *Fanny Fern* is a pseudonym, what do you make of the fact that she relates an incident about “Mr. Fern” that puts him in an unflattering light?
3. Fern writes that when she found her husband’s letter, “I dropped the coat, I dropped the workbasket, I dropped the buttons, I dropped the baby” (2,102) and then looked at herself in the mirror and warned herself not to be a fool again. How might you read this passage symbolically?

“Independence” (1859)

“Independence” begins on the Fourth of July with Fern’s protesting, “I don’t feel patriotic” and declaring that although the United States promotes individual freedom, “as a woman, I shouldn’t know it” (2,107). She goes on to posit that “some orator” must have told her of her freedom, implying that while liberty is an admirable idealistic goal of American democracy, the possession of such independence for women is an illusion. She then asks a series of rhetorical questions such as “Can I go out of an evening without a hat at my side?” and “Can I be a Senator?” the obvious answer to all of which is no. She ends by griping, “Free! Humph!” (2,107).

Fern’s analysis of women’s roles here concentrates primarily on appearances in the public, rather than the domestic, sphere. Questions regarding what she cannot do are based on society’s expectations of her performance on the street, at a lecture, on a bus, and in politics or other public spaces. Her argument equates freedom and patriotism with participation in a public arena where she may openly acknowledge her opinions and rely on herself, as opposed to male guardianship. “Independence” ends by implicating the reader in Fern’s complaints, stating, “Can I *even* be President? Bah—you know I can’t” (2,107). By assuming the reader’s agreement with her statement, Fern reveals what she intimates her reader already knows: the truth of her grounds for feeling less than patriotic on Independence Day.

women today? How do we see these issues in modern society? Which 19th-century problems are no longer challenges today? Which continue to perpetuate inequitable gender roles?

2. Fern was not the only 19th-century woman writer concerned with social issues. Look at another female nonfiction writer from that period (for example, MARGARET FULLER or LYDIA MARIA CHILD) and compare her work with one or two of Fern's articles in terms of style and content.
3. Humor is an important part of satire. Where does humor come into play in Fern's writing? To what effect is humor used? Where is it most often employed (in relation to what subjects)?
4. Research the "cult of true womanhood" or "cult of domesticity" as it pertains to gender roles in the 19th century. How does Fern's work adhere to or defy the "cult's" expectations that women be pious (religious), domestic, sexually pure, and submissive?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Barker, Deborah. *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature: Portraits of the Woman Artist*. Lewisburg, Va.: Bucknell University Press, 2000.
- Fern, Fanny. *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. Auburn, N.Y.: Derby & Miller, 1853.
- . *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series*. Auburn, N.Y.: Derby & Miller, 1854.
- . "Hints to Young Wives." In *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed., vol. B., edited by Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- . "Independence." In *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed., vol. B., edited by Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- . *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*. Edited by Joyce Warren. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986.
- . "The Working-Girls of New York." In *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed., vol. B., edited by Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Harris, Susan K. "Inscribing and Defining: The Many Voices of Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*." *Style* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 612–627.
- Tonkovich, Nicole. *Domesticity with a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.
- Walker, Nancy. *Fanny Fern*. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Warren, Joyce. *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- . "Fracturing Gender: Woman's Economic Independence." In *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*, edited by Karen L. Kilcup, 146–164. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998.

Bethany Perkins



MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN

(1852–1930)

She felt like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession.

("A New England Nun")

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman was one of the most popular and successful women authors of late 19th-century United States. Although she wrote poems, plays, children's fiction, novels, and essays as well, Freeman is best known as a writer of regional or local color stories that feature dialect, detailed descriptions of authentic regional details, and a realistic depiction of relationships in small rural communities. A type of fiction that grew in popularity after the Civil War, local color fiction reflected the public's growing interest in all regions of the United States, along with an increasing awareness of the ways in which industrialism, immigration, the expansion of railroads, westward migration, and the rise of urban centers such as New York and Chicago were changing the customs of small, isolated communities. As other local color writers did, Freeman sought to capture the flavor of the small villages of rural New England. Instead of glorifying the settings and people of New England, however, Freeman tried to present them realistically by showing their intolerance and rigid ways of thinking as well as their kindness toward each other. In the 40 years between her earliest and last collections of stories, *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1887) and *The Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins* (1927), Freeman became for many readers a truthful recorder of the hard lives of New England's isolated rural communities.

Mary Ella Wilkins was born on October 31, 1852, to Eleanor Lothrop and Warren Wilkins in

Randolph, Massachusetts, a small mill town only 14 miles from Boston. (Mary later changed her middle name to *Eleanor*, to honor her mother.) Both parents were descended from families who had lived in Massachusetts for many generations, but business reversals when Mary was 15 prompted Warren Wilkins, a carpenter, to move the family to Brattleboro, Vermont, where she attended high school. In 1870 she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, but as had EMILY DICKINSON, who had attended the school in 1847, she stayed only one year. At age 21 she met and fell in love with a navy ensign, Hanson Tyler, and although her affections were not reciprocated, this experience of unrequited love colored her depiction of similar feelings in her later fiction, according to the critic Perry Westbrook. During this period, Mary had also begun to write poetry, some of which appeared in the children's magazines *Wide Awake* and *St. Nicholas*, and by 1886 she had published three books of literature for children. (She published under the name Mary E. Wilkins until her marriage in 1902.) Her career as a major writer of local color fiction began with the publication of "Two Old Lovers" in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1884, but, as Freeman later recalled, the story was nearly rejected when Louise Booth, the editor, mistook her handwriting for that of a child. Since by this time her mother, younger sister, and father had died, Mary returned to Randolph and moved in with her childhood friend Mary Wales and her family, an arrangement

that for the next 20 years allowed Mary time and space to write.

"Two Old Lovers" was quickly followed by other stories published in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, and other major outlets. Reprinted in *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, "Two Old Lovers" tells of an elderly couple who spent years "keeping company" because the man was too bashful to propose, one of many Freeman stories that depicted long courtships and delayed marriages. Among others included in the same collection are several that feature what would become her trademark characters and themes: the rigidity of the New England conscience, influenced by its Puritan heritage; the limited choices available to the rural poor; the moral conflicts raised and hypocrisies exposed by the attempts of characters to find a place for themselves in a harsh environment; and the endurance, courage, and resourcefulness of characters confronted with those choices. Freeman became especially renowned for her portrayals of what were called at the time "old maids" or "spinsters," single women who supported themselves, often by sewing and working in the houses of others, yet were not accorded the respect due to married women. A later collection, often considered Freeman's finest, is *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891); in addition to the title story, it includes such tales as "A Church Mouse," in which the impoverished elderly woman Hetty Fifield barricades herself inside a church and defies the community of churchgoers, who claim that they can find no place to give her food or shelter. A similar act of defiance is the subject of "A Village Singer": The title character, Candace Whitcomb, is dismissed from the choir because she is too old; stung by the loss of status and community that this represents, she sings so loudly in her house beside the church that services are disrupted. "The Poetess," another story in the collection, likewise shows a woman artist discarded by her community. Betsey Dole, a spinster, writes sentimental poems that console grieving parents for the deaths of their children, yet when a new minister informs her that her poetry is "jest as poor as it could be" (115), she submits to his evaluation of it and burns her poems.

By the late 1890s and early 1900s Freeman's personal life and her fiction had taken different directions. Her career was thriving: Her local color fiction had been favorably reviewed by the critic WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS and others, and given the critical praise she had received, she ventured into writing different kinds of fiction as well as the stories that had made her famous. In *Silence and Other Stories* (1898) Freeman took her subjects from history, featuring tales of the New England past. Her next work, *The Heart's Highway* (1900), again drew on history, this time a story of old Virginia. She had begun moving in this direction with *Giles Corey, Yeoman* (1893), a closet drama (a play meant to be read rather than performed) that she based on the actual Giles Corey, a Salem resident who was pressed to death when he refused to speak after being accused as a witch during the 1692 witch trials. Almost as stubborn are the characters in Freeman's first novel, *Pembroke* (1894). Based on a real incident in her mother's family (Westbrook 70), the novel, according to Freeman, is "a study of the human will . . . in different phases of disease and abnormal development" (Westbrook 72). As in "Two Old Lovers," in *Pembroke* the courtship of Barnabas Thayer and Charlotte Barnard fails to result in marriage for many years. During the course of an evening's visit Barnabas Thayer quarrels with Charlotte's father, Cephas, and refuses to set foot in the house again despite his love for her, initiating a state of separation that continues until it is nearly too late. *Jerome, a Poor Man* (1897) likewise depicted the consequences of sticking to one's irrational vow, in this case, Jerome's promise to give away \$25,000 if he ever should receive it, as he does despite his own poverty. Other novels addressed more contemporary concerns; for example, *The Portion of Labor* (1901) features social issues such as women's education and a labor strike in a mill town, and *Madelon* (1896) places its mixed-race heroine in a plot filled with passion and violence.

After 1900 a change in Freeman's personal circumstances contributed to changes in her writing. On January 1, 1902, after an on-again, off-again five years' engagement, Mary Wilkins married Dr. Charles Manning Freeman and moved to his home

in Metuchen, New Jersey. Although Freeman joked that she was happy to be married after depicting so many old maids, the marriage was by all accounts unhappy, in part because of Dr. Freeman's alcoholism and later addiction to drugs, which led to his commitment to a mental institution and the couple's separation in 1922. Equally serious is the pressure that Mary felt, from Dr. Freeman especially, to make more and more money with her writing. As Leah Blatt Glasser comments, "When Charles saw Mary baking a cake in the kitchen, he was quick to object: 'Making a cake when the same time would produce a story worth five hundred!'" (174). She had always been unusually productive: Westbrook quotes one source as saying that she kept two typewriters, each with a different manuscript in progress, and worked on one when she hit a difficult passage in the other; in this way, she could "turn out seven thousand words a day" (110). Yet, despite some fine work published after 1902, critics have agreed that the overall quality of Freeman's work suffered under such pressure. Among the best works written after her marriage is *The Shoulders of Atlas* (1907), which also relieved some of the financial pressure she felt. The novel was written in response to a widely publicized Anglo-American literary contest sponsored in 1907 by the *New York Herald* in which Freeman wrote a realistic New England novel and the British author Max Pemberton wrote an English romance; readers voted in droves for Freeman's novel, and she won \$5,000.

During this period, Freeman also ventured into mystical and supernatural fiction. As she later wrote to the critic Fred Lewis Pattee, she had earlier wanted "more symbolism, more mysticism" in her fiction but "left that out" because "it struck [her] that people did not want it" (Kendrick 382). Freeman's mysticism was sometimes spiritual, as in *By the Light of the Soul* (1906), and sometimes symbolic, as in *Six Trees* (1903) or *Understudies* (1901), in which human beings are linked symbolically to plants and animals. *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural* (1903) explores this mysticism in the form of some of Freeman's most memorable ghost stories, including "Luella Miller" and "The Lost Ghost," in which the super-

natural elements are used to explore issues of community and family relationships. Among the best of Freeman's later stories is "Old Woman Magoun" (1905), a disturbing tale about a grandmother's love for her barely adolescent granddaughter, Lily. When the two walk to town and are confronted by rowdy men, including Lily's dissolute father, Barry, Mrs. Magoun fears for Lily's safety, a fear seen as justified when Barry threatens to give her to one of his friends to pay a gambling debt. On a later walk home Mrs. Magoun remains silent as Lily innocently eats the deadly berries of the nightshade plant, preferring death for her granddaughter to the degradation that would befall her at her father's hands. Another unusual story is Freeman's contribution to the composite novel (a novel written by several authors) *The Whole Family*, a story about a courtship in which each author was to write a chapter based on one of the novel's characters. Given her special affinity for writing about "old maids," Freeman was assigned the character of the maiden aunt to the newly engaged girl, but she upset the editor's expectations and changed the direction of the novel when she made the aunt—who was, she reasoned, still attractive in her early thirties—a flirt and a rival for her niece's fiancé's affections.

The last few decades of Freeman's life contained both personal difficulties and professional recognition. Her final novels include *The Yates Pride* (1912), in which the heroine, as do so many in Freeman's early fiction, tries to conceal her poverty out of a sense of pride, and *The Alabaster Box* (1917), which recounts the cruelty of a small town toward an embezzling banker. Freeman returned to her old subjects in her short stories, too, writing about children in *The Copy-Cat and Other Stories* (1914) and about interconnected characters in a small village in *Edgewater People* (1918). Yet, her personal life grew difficult when Dr. Freeman voluntarily entered the New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane in 1920, escaped, and in 1921 was involuntarily committed; released in 1922 and separated from Freeman, he lived with his male secretary until his death on March 7, 1923. He had left all his money to his family and his secretary, leaving Freeman only a token one dollar, a

circumstance that forced her to contest the will, as she did successfully. Her professional life was happier: On April 23, 1926, she was honored by being the American Academy of Letters' first recipient of the Howells Medal for fiction, an award given to her by her old friend and fellow local color writer Hamlin Garland. After several months of poor health, she died of a heart attack on March 13, 1930, and was buried in Metuchen.

With the advent of modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman began to be considered an old-fashioned writer by the 1920s, and her work was little read in later decades. Notable work on her fiction from the 1930s through the 1960s includes Perry Westbrook's *Acres of Flint: Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Contemporaries* (1951; second edition 1981) and Edward Foster's biography *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (1956). In the 1970s and 1980s the revival of Freeman's works began in earnest with *The Revolt of Mother and Other Stories* (1974) and the feminist scholar Marjorie Pryse's edition *The Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (1983), both collections of stories that emphasized Freeman's independent female characters. From the 1980s through the present Freeman's work has been the subject of numerous critical studies, especially those that pair her with the New England writer with whom she was often paired during her lifetime, SARAH ORNE JEWETT.

"A New England Nun" (1891)

"A New England Nun," the tale of Louisa Ellis and her choice to live alone rather than marry her longtime suitor, is one of Freeman's finest stories. First published in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), it features several characteristics of Freeman's best fiction: an ethically complex situation in which the character must choose one of two imperfect solutions; an independent unmarried woman who weighs the benefits of marriage against the potential loss of her independence; detailed descriptions of the story's setting in the circumscribed space of a house, garden, and vil-

lage; and an intrusion by a representative of the larger world beyond this peaceful space who threatens its existence by bringing with him the social expectations of the outside world.

The story opens with a vision of peace and order: In the late afternoon sunlight, amid an idealized country landscape reminiscent of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Louisa Ellis slowly and deliberately puts on her hat, ties on her apron, picks currants for her tea, and strips the currants from their stems, "collecting the stems carefully in her apron . . . [and] look[ing] sharply at the grass beside the step to see if any had fallen there" (Reichardt 39). With these few brief strokes, Freeman establishes the life that Louisa has chosen to lead. The late afternoon setting symbolizes Louisa's age: As a woman in her early thirties, she is an "old maid" by the village's reckoning. Moreover, established rituals govern all her movements, and the care she takes to shield herself from nature by donning hat and apron—as the reader learns later, she is wearing two other aprons underneath, making this the third covering that protects her against the world—is matched by her conscientiousness in cleaning the natural setting as she would her house by picking up the currant stems. Louisa's sense of being "a guest to her own self" (39) is also established in the first few paragraphs as she carefully arranges the materials for her supper of light biscuits and currants, served in her best china cup and saucer and placed on a white linen cloth. What Freeman establishes prior to the main action of the story is that Louisa is no ordinary dissatisfied old maid, content to give the best part of her life to others and to keep the crumbs for herself; rather, by describing the way in which Louisa treats herself as her own guest, the story shows her contentment with the life she has made for herself. Louisa, like HENRY DAVID THOREAU at Walden Pond, is a community of one.

Given such perfect order, it is inevitable that the source of the story's major conflict will soon appear, and indeed it does in the person of Joe Dagget, Louisa's fiancé, who had gone to Australia for 15 years to make his fortune and has now returned to marry her. Freeman establishes Joe's unsuit-

ability for Louisa through a series of contrasts: He “seemed to fill up the whole room” (40) and upsets the order of two books on her table. When Louisa replaces them in her precise way, placing the gift book on top and the album underneath, Joe asks, “Now what difference did it make which book was on top?” (41). The detailed descriptions of Louisa’s actions have initially convinced the reader to see her actions as reasonable, even admirable, but Joe’s question is a fair one, and it invites the reader to take a new perspective. Viewed logically, from the position of the outside world, there is no reason why such a precise positioning of the books is necessary, yet in Louisa’s world, where her preferences do matter, replacing the books is a natural action. But, Louisa’s housekeeping rises to the level of artistry, for she has “the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home” (45) and distills flowers and herbs into essences purely for pleasure. To give up her rituals is to give up her art. The story’s conflict thus lies in Louisa’s need to choose between these two worlds: her own, where daily rituals help to obscure the passage of time, and the world of change beyond her doorstep, where larger and time-bound rituals such as birth, marriage, and death take precedence over individual preferences.

In addition to making Joe Dagget a representative of this world of change, Freeman uses animal and architectural imagery to symbolize Louisa’s state of mind. Her usually placid and happy canary awakens and flutters madly in its cage when Joe enters the room, a symbol of the ways in which her caged emotions awaken in alarm at his presence. Louisa also has a dog, Caesar, a mild-mannered creature who despite his imposing name has been kept chained in a little hut for 14 years after once biting a neighbor. Louisa feeds him only corn cakes lest meat inflame his “dangerous temper” (46), but Joe declares that he will set Caesar free. Freeman makes explicit the connection between Louisa’s concerns about Caesar and her fear of passion and sexuality: When Louisa “looked at the old dog . . . she thought of her approaching marriage and trembled” (46). She fears that Joe might set free not only Caesar, but, as Freeman suggests, her own

repressed emotions. In addition, the story abounds with references that contrast inside and outside. Louisa prefers to look at life through a glass window that separates her from others, and both the canary and Caesar are encased in structures that keep them in check. Feeling like a bear in a china shop, Joe can only be an intruder when he enters Louisa’s house and, symbolically, the self that her house represents. In addition, Joe’s muddy shoes and rough ways will disturb the housekeeping that represents her artistic vision. Yet, she sees no way out of her dilemma, for having promised to marry Joe, she cannot think of a good reason to refuse to do so.

Significantly, when Louisa does venture into the world beyond her doorstep, she finds a solution to her problem. Walking one night under a full moon, she sits near a wall where the disorder of nature runs rampant in the form of fruitful vegetation such as wild cherry trees and old grapevines, a contrast to her carefully distilled and bottled natural essences. She then hears Joe Dagget and Lily Dyer, a “tall and full-figured” girl from the village, profess love for each other—a natural courtship, in contrast to her and Joe’s artificial one motivated by a sense of duty. After Joe declares to Lily that he must marry Louisa despite his feelings, Louisa returns home and breaks the engagement the next day. Freeman presents this decision in a manner that allows multiple interpretations:

Louisa, all alone by herself that night, wept a little, she hardly knew why; but the next morning, on waking, she felt like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession. . . . That afternoon she sat with her needle-work at the window, and felt fairly steeped in peace. . . . If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself. She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness. Outside

was the fervid summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees; there were halloos, metallic clatterings, sweet calls, and long hummings. Louisa sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun. (49)

This passage emphasizes a significant theme in the story. Louisa is once again safely inside her house, shut away from the noisy world of “men and birds and bees,” the “birds and bees” suggesting once again sexuality and Louisa’s relief at not having to confront it, an idea reiterated through the image of Louisa as a nun.

The ending of the story has spurred some disagreement, primarily due to its other religious reference to the “mess of pottage.” This story appears in Genesis (25:29–34), in which Esau, the older twin of Jacob, returns home hungry from hunting and asks for pottage, a kind of red lentil stew. Jacob replies that he will give Esau the stew in exchange for his birthright, the father’s blessing traditionally given to the eldest son. Esau “sold his birthright unto Jacob,” an action often used to signify the selling of something valuable for a trivial or spur-of-the-moment impulse. Louisa’s “birthright” is to be married, yet she values the unchanging, if earth-bound, luxury of keeping her own house instead of marrying and having children, savoring the pottage of everyday life rather than the continuity of generations that is her birthright. Although some have interpreted the “mess of pottage” to mean that Louisa has given up a more valuable life for a narrow life of sexual repression, most critics, including feminist critics, see her choice as a positive if unconventional one for the time. In this reading Louisa, by remaining a “guest to her own self,” makes a conscious choice to live the life she would like to lead as an independent woman and never missing the life of marriage and children that 19th-century norms agreed was essential for a woman’s happiness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Louisa is not the only woman pictured in the story: Joe’s mother and Lily Dyer are also significant characters. Discuss the ways in which they affect the plot, especially the ways in which Lily is portrayed as a contrast to Louisa.
2. How does the relationship between Joe and Louisa differ from the relationship between Joe and Lily?
3. Do you think that this story has a happy ending? Did Louisa make the right choice, or will she regret settling for such a narrow way of life? What evidence in the story would support your position?
4. In what ways does the Louisa Ellis character in “A New England Nun” resemble the New England women Emily Dickinson describes in her poem “What Soft—Cherubic Creatures—”? How are both Freeman and Dickinson attempting to point out dangers women face when they subscribe blindly to social expectations?

“The Revolt of ‘Mother’” (1890)

“The Revolt of ‘Mother’” is another of Freeman’s best-known and most frequently anthologized stories. It was first published in 1890 in *Harper’s Bazaar*, later appeared in *A New England Nun and Other Stories*, and was the story that reintroduced Freeman to a new audience in the Feminist Press edition *The Revolt of Mother and Other Stories* in 1974, which helped to foster the revival of critical interest in Freeman. “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” fits the pattern identified by Mary Reichardt in her introduction to *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*:

Freeman’s protagonists are frequently those most trapped by social or religious customs, by circumstance, or in constricting relationships—women, the elderly, the impoverished, the outcast. Of the sixty-nine stories written between 1882 and 1891, the majority involve women protagonists who must resort to some unexpected or even extreme behavior in order to preserve self-respect. (ix–x)

Sarah Penn, the protagonist, fits several of the criteria that Reichardt defines: She is a woman in

her late fifties or early sixties; her life is somewhat impoverished, though more through her husband's choices than through her own actions; she lives in an environment in which religious doctrines determine a woman's place; and she takes an unexpected action to resolve her problem. As if to emphasize the ways in which Sarah Penn's voice has been silenced by her culture, the story begins with Sarah's questioning of her husband Adoniram's actions:

"Father!"
 "What is it?"
 "What are them men diggin' over there in the field for?"

Adoniram refuses to answer at first, finally telling her in a growl to "go into the house an' ten' to your own affairs" (Reichardt 121). The house is her domain, he implies, and the barn is his, a division that echoes the 19th-century idea of separate spheres, which meant that women belonged in the private sphere of the home and men in the public sphere of the marketplace.

But, Sarah will not be silenced: She refuses to retreat to her own sphere until he explains to her the business of his: "I ain't goin' into the house till you tell me what them men are doin' over there in the field" (121). Quite literally, she stands her ground, "as immovable to him as one of the rocks in his pasture-land" (122), until Adoniram concedes that the men are digging a cellar for a new barn where he had promised to build her a house, 40 years earlier. In this emphasis on voice and territory Freeman undercuts the idea that the space and language of the domestic and public sphere are entirely separate. Sarah knows, as she must, how to read Adoniram's silences and growls if she is to function in her own sphere, and his building of the new barn on a plot of land reserved for her house is an encroachment of the marketplace into her private sphere of the home—the obliteration of it, in fact. To add insult to injury, Sarah finds that her son, Sammy, has known about the barn all along but, like his father, is reluctant to discuss it with her. The lines of communication and partnership thus fall within gender boundaries, with men sharing their plans only with other males

and refusing to discuss them with women. Worse still are the denial of the marriage partnership and subversion of the natural lines of authority within the family, for in confiding in Sammy, Adoniram has undercut his wife's authority with her own son, placing himself in partnership with Sammy instead of with the woman who is supposed to be his wife and helpmate.

Yet, Sarah does not rebel immediately, as a modern woman might, for she understands and largely accepts that her position is to be subordinate to her husband. This is shown in Sarah's conversation with her daughter, Nanny, who voices Sarah's objection of a few minutes before:

"Mother, don't you think it's too bad father's going to build that new barn, much as we need a decent house to live in?"

Her mother scrubbed a dish fiercely. "You ain't found out yet we're women-folks, Nanny Penn," said she. . . . "One of these days you'll find it out, an' then you'll know that we know only what men-folks think we do, so far as any use of it goes, an' how we'd ought to reckon men-folks in with Providence, an' not complain of what they do any more than we do of the weather." (123–124)

Sarah's actions in scrubbing the dish "fiercely" betray her anger and frustration, but she recognizes that women's words have no effects on men's actions. In her role as an individual and as Nanny's mother, Sarah may wish that circumstances were different, but in her official role as "Mother"—a role emphasized by the quotation marks Freeman placed around it in the title—she is part of the socialization process and as such has to teach Nanny the rules of engagement where men are concerned. Sarah continues to perform this role of "Mother" for the rest of the morning, loyally defending Adoniram and their cramped house against Nanny's complaints about the shabby parlor and silently making mince pies because "however deep a resentment she might be forced to hold against her husband, she would never fail in sedulous attention to his wants" (125).

Her momentary capitulation means that she has conceded the battle but not the war. In her longest speech in the book, Sarah uses both voice and space to make a case for her new house, making different kinds of appeals as she points to the different rooms. Showing him the parlor and its dirty wallpaper, she appeals to family pride, noting that all of Nanny's friends have better parlors for their beaux than Nanny has for hers. Pointing out the tiny bedroom the two have shared for 40 years, she appeals to sentiment and the lives of their children as she reminds Adoniram of the children she has borne there, including the two who have died. Opening the door to the "small, ill-lighted pantry," Sarah appeals to Adoniram's business sense; since this cramped space is all she can use for a buttery, or a room in which to skim the milk and make the butter, how, she asks, does he expect her to take care of the milk of even more cows if she can barely complete her tasks in the room she has now? Finally, she appeals to his love for her, reminding him of the promise of his youth to build her a house, and to his love for Nanny, who is too frail to keep house for herself and must live with them after she marries. In describing Sarah's use of language, the narrator comments, "she had pleaded her little cause like a Webster" (127), a reference to the great orator Daniel Webster. Yet, to all this Adoniram has but one answer: "I ain't got nothing' to say" (128). To engage Sarah in speech would mean to acknowledge the justice of her arguments—as Sarah says, "You can't say nothin' without ownin' it ain't right" (127)—so Adoniram falls back on his only defense: refusing to engage women in conversation at all.

The conflict is resolved by Nanny's chance remark that "we might have the wedding in the new barn" (128), an idea that sparks Sarah's imagination. When Adoniram receives a letter from Mrs. Penn's brother, Hiram, inviting him to look at some horses to buy, he leaves the farm for a few days, an act that Sarah interprets as providential permission to put her plan into action, for "unsolicited opportunities are the guide-posts of the Lord to the new roads of life" (130). To the astonishment of Sammy and Nanny, she moves their

furniture into the new barn and claims it as her own, a feat "equal in its way to Wolfe's storming of the Heights of Abraham" (131), a reference to the Battle of Quebec in 1759, in which English troops under General Wolfe defeated the French general Montcalm by scaling the steep cliff that served as part of the French defenses. Another battle is before her as Sarah must confront another figure of male authority in the person of Mr. Hersey, the minister, who presumably carries the weight of God's power as well as the community's opinions on his side. Sarah defeats him with an appeal to history, referring to the nation's origins in revolution over issues of individual rights and property. She tells him, "I think it's right jest as much as I think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the old country 'cause they didn't have what belonged to 'em'" (133), standing on the barn threshold as if it were Plymouth Rock, another symbol of national heritage. Once more language has been used in a struggle over space, and once again Sarah wins, as Mr. Hersey retreats in confusion.

Sarah's third and final battle in her revolt is also fought using space and language when Adoniram returns from his horse-buying expedition. Her actions in moving their household to the barn speak loudly as he first stares in amazement and then reverses the terms of their discourse by asking Sarah a question rather than the other way around: "What on airth does this mean, mother?" (134). This time it is Sarah who does not argue, although she does explain that she's "goin' to live here" and that he must "put in some windows and partitions" (134). Before such a reversal of roles Adoniram is helpless: Continuing the imagery of battle used elsewhere in the story, the narrative voice reports that he is "like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used" (135). As Martha J. Cutter writes, Sarah "has reclaimed language not only for herself but also so that her husband and family can now speak in a more meaningful and open way" (291). Years after this story was published, Freeman commented that it was not truthful, that a New England woman like "Mother" would have lacked the nerve and imagination to move to the barn. In

presenting this vision of a strong woman, however, Freeman linked independent womanhood and the interests of the nation in ways that look ahead to greater freedom for women in later centuries.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the speech and actions of the secondary characters in this story. Do they change as Sarah Penn does?
2. Is it plausible that a man as rigid and authoritarian as Adoniram would have a change of heart at the end of the story? What evidence in the story might support this change of character?
3. Discuss the way that RALPH WALDO EMERSON would evaluate the conduct of Sarah Penn in "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Use Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" as the basis for Emerson's assessment.
4. Is Freeman's criticism that Sarah would never have behaved that way a valid one? Is Sarah's action logically motivated and supported within the story?
5. What does the position of Sarah Penn reveal about the social codes of 19th-century women's roles? Look up some information about women's rights at this time. Would she have been within her rights to build a house of her own on the designated spot, for example?
6. Many farm families might agree that the livestock is most important, since it is responsible for the family's financial security. Can you make an argument for Adoniram's point of view? Has Sarah been rash in making this move?
7. Do you think that Sarah wrote to ask her brother Hiram to draw Adoniram away from home so that she could execute this plan? What evidence in the story does or does not support this hypothesis?
8. Why do Sarah and Adoniram call each other "mother" and "father" rather than by their given names? What does this say about their commitment to their social roles?
9. What kinds of "ownership" does this story explore? What kinds of "partnerships" does it portray? Do men and women in this story have different ideas of ownership and partnership?

"Luella Miller" (1902)

"Luella Miller" was first published in *Everybody's Magazine* in December 1902 and later reprinted in *The Wind in the Rosebush and Other Stories* (1903). It is unusual within Freeman's body of work in that it uses a frame story (a third-person narrator who introduces a first-person narrator) and combines the traditional rural New England village setting of local color fiction with supernatural elements of vampirism and ghosts more suited to an EDGAR ALLAN POE tale than to the realistic stories for which Freeman was known. Yet, as "A New England Nun" and "The Revolt of 'Mother'" do, "Luella Miller" calls into question the domestic roles that women were required to play in the 19th century, and the supernatural elements in the story allow Freeman to suggest that these could be deadly for men and women alike.

Luella Miller's story is told to the reader as a tale already legendary in the village: Because she has been dead for a long time, we never see Luella except through the eyes of the elderly Lydia Anderson, who lived across the street from Luella and whose first-person narrative dominates the story. According to Lydia, Luella is a "slight, pliant sort of creature" (Reichardt 249) with beautiful fair hair and a helpless air that attracts both men and women to fly to her aid. Luella is hired as a teacher, but one of the older girls in the class, Lottie Henderson, does all the work for her before wasting away and dying. She next marries Erastus Miller, who does all of a man's work and a woman's work, too, keeping house and working himself to death in her service. After his death, his sister Lily lives with Luella, but although she is vigorous and rosy-cheeked at the start, she, too, falls ill. As Lily grows thinner, Luella grows plump and rosy by eating the food that the neighbors give her for Lily. The story repeats itself with Lily's aunt Abby Mixter, who cares for Luella as if she were a baby but goes to her grave protesting that Luella, not she, needs all the care and attention.

By this time it is plain that Luella is a spiritual vampire, sucking the life out of all who care for her so that she can live in ease and harmony. Furthermore, she is not an innocent victim of a force over

3. Define what you see as the ideal of home that Freeman imagines as she presents different female characters who struggle to make their home an environment that provides them peace and comfort. Compare and contrast that sense of home with the home that HARRIET BEECHER STOWE describes in the “Quaker Settlement” chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Campbell, Donna M. *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885–1915*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997.
- Carpenter, Lynette, and Wendy K. Kolmar. *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.
- Clark, Michele, ed. *The Revolt of Mother and Other Stories by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. New York: Feminist Press, 1974.
- Cutter, Martha J. “Frontiers of Language: Engendering Discourse in ‘The Revolt of Mother.’” *American Literature* 63, no. 2 (1991): 279–291.
- Donovan, Josephine. *New England Local Color Literature: A Women’s Tradition*. New York: Ungar, 1983.
- Foster, Edward. *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. New York: Hendricks House, 1956.
- Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. *Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Edited and introduction by Marjorie Pryse. New York: Norton, 1983.
- . *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural*. Edited by Alfred Bendixen. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1986.
- Glasser, Leah Blatt. *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Work of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.
- Kendrick, Brent L., ed. *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1985.
- Marchalonis, Shirley. *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Critical Essays on American Literature Series. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991.
- Pattee, Fred Lewis, et al. *American Short Stories*. New York: Duffield, 1925.
- Reichardt, Mary R. *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- . *Mary Wilkins Freeman: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- . *A Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap6/freeman.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Westbrook, Perry D. *Acres of Flint: Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Contemporaries*. Lanham, Md.: Rowan & Littlefield, 1981.
- Westbrook, Perry D. *Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.

Donna Campbell



MARGARET FULLER

(SARAH MARGARET FULLER)

(1810–1850)

I have urged on woman independence of man, not that I do not think the sexes mutually needed by one another, but because in woman this fact has led to an excessive devotion, which has cooled love, degraded marriage, and prevented either sex from being what it should be to itself or the other.

(Woman in the Nineteenth Century)

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE sailed with her and joined her on long, lakeside walks. RALPH WALDO EMERSON, according to Hawthorne, proclaimed that she was “the greatest woman, I believe, of ancient or modern times, and the one figure in the world worth considering” (Miller 231). She had a dalliance with the great Ludwig van Beethoven, whom she addressed in correspondence as “My only friend” and to whom she went on to write, “Oh blessed master! Like a humble wife to the sage or poet, it is my triumph that I can understand, can receive thee wholly, like a mistress . . . thou art all I want” (Miller 232). The influential transcendentalist and educator Bronson Alcott further sang her praises by stating, “She had the intellect of a man inspired by the heart of a woman, combining harmonious marriage of the masculine and feminine in her genius. We have no woman approaching so near our conception of the ideal woman as herself” (Miller 231–232). Perhaps not surprising, considering the high regard in which she was held by some of the greatest minds of her age, Margaret Fuller showed complete agreement with their consensus: “I know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own” (*Memoirs* 1:65).

Even though effusive praise of her was written by almost every significant thinker of her day, Fuller was viewed by scholars as deserving little more than a literary footnote for her *Woman in the Nineteenth*

Century (1843) until the modern feminist movement of the 1970s elevated her to the status she enjoyed during the early to mid-19th century. As more and more scholarly research is done on her social, literary, and intellectual contributions, as well as her personal and literary influence, she has emerged as a central figure of early 19th-century American culture and a major figure in the development of the women’s rights movement.

Given Sarah Margaret Fuller’s unusual childhood, it is easy to see in her earliest years the embryonic promise of genius. Her early education took place under the stern tutelage of her father, Timothy Fuller, a Harvard graduate who was both a lawyer and a politician. Fuller was taught Latin and by the age of eight was reading Ovid in its original language. She then learned Greek and soon moved on to Italian, French, and German. Before she was old enough to enter eighth grade, she had devoured William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Miguel de Cervantes. Soon her father recognized he could not instruct her alone and arranged to have her tutored by scholars from Harvard. Though women were not allowed to enroll in the male-only Harvard College, Fuller became the first female ever admitted to the school library, where she read avidly while continuing her home studies, becoming a masterful writer and an expert in Italian, German, and, of course, American literature. Indeed, so gifted and accomplished was

she that Emerson, the most esteemed philosopher and intellectual of the period, called her one of his “luminaries”: “A woman,” he said, “who seems to have learned all languages” and whose mind was “wise, magnificent . . . gifted” (*Memoirs* 1:215). The erudition, however, had a price. Later in life, Fuller was to suffer health problems, including nearly disabling headaches. She blamed her father for this and felt he had pushed her too hard and had in many ways cost her her childhood. In *Memoirs* Fuller wrote that children “should not through books antedate their actual experiences, but should take them gradually, as sympathy and interpretation are needed” (2:44).

With the death of her father in 1835 Fuller was thrust into the position of being the primary breadwinner for her family, which included her mother, a sister, and five brothers. Though she would later bemoan her youth in the unfinished “Autobiographical Sketch,” stating that she realized she had become a “prodigy by day, and at night a victim of spectral illusions, nightmare, and somnambulism” (*Portable* 161), her sense of duty led her to a teaching position at Temple School in Boston. Founded by Bronson Alcott, the father of LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, Temple School stressed individual progress, searching for a higher moral purpose, and practiced what for the time was revolutionary: racial integration. It was during this period that Fuller began to develop relationships with many of the leading intellectuals in New England. The Alcotts were social activists and saw in Fuller a kindred spirit they happily introduced to such notables as Hawthorne, Emerson, William Henry Channing, and George Ripley. The transcendentalist movement (ca. 1835–60) was just beginning to gain prominence. A philosophical and literary system permeated by romantic idealism and inspired by both the German idealist philosophers and the romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, transcendentalism proved a seductive siren to the facile mind of the young Fuller. The combination of her rich humanities background, her newly acquired skills in education, and the emerging confidence she gained from becoming more and

more independent allowed her quickly to become an influential force in the movement. In the end the movement would be remembered for the major literary accomplishments achieved by writers such as HENRY DAVID THOREAU, Hawthorne, Emerson, HERMAN MELVILLE, and WALT WHITMAN and for the influence it exerted in the political sphere (abolition, women’s rights). And, Fuller was in the thick of it all.

One of the most significant relationships Fuller developed during these heady times was with Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, a pioneer in female education. At a time when male exclusivity was the order of day and women were not allowed in universities, legislatures, or even on tours as paid public speakers, Fuller and Peabody were asked to join the Transcendentalist Club. This shocking invitation solidified in the public’s mind the radical nature of the movement, while it also facilitated an ever-widening circle of friendships that profoundly influenced Fuller’s thought and future conduct. Though she never joined any of the utopian communities that sprang from the movement, she did visit her fellow club member Ripley’s Brook Farm, and it was here that she met Hawthorne. Over the next decade Fuller and Hawthorne would spend much time together, often engaging in conversations regarding politics, culture, and literature. Indeed, when Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* appeared, “readers quickly concluded that the exotic Zenobia was the fictional counterpart of Margaret Fuller” (Miller 239).

The freshness of all these new ideas was a bit too much for some. An open approach to learning and the use of a Socratic method that encouraged the questioning of traditional institutions drew Temple School so much public criticism that enrollment dropped. Fuller realized that as the least senior member of the faculty she might be laid off and so tendered her resignation.

Paradoxically, this loss of a job for Fuller would lead to what many scholars argue was her most productive and significant period. Taking a position at the Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island, she immersed herself in the busy job of teaching rhetoric, Latin, French, poetry, and history

to 60 boys and girls. She was especially excited about awakening the minds of the girls to the possibility of going beyond the restrictions society had heretofore placed upon them. Fuller refused to let the students sit passively and take notes on her lectures, nor did she encourage the common practice of rote memorization. She explained, "A lesson is as far as possible from being learned by *heart* when it is said to be, it is only learned by *body*. I wish you to get your lessons by *mind*" (Kornfeld 23). Her fundamental classroom rules were "let nothing pass from you in reading or conversation that you do not understand, without trying to find out" and "let not your age or shame of being thought ignorant prevent you from asking questions about things or words you do not understand" (Kornfeld 23). Clearly, Fuller was beginning to discover her great passion. She wanted to teach people, especially women, to think for themselves. This process of being able to ascertain what was important and made sense to the individual would constitute the earliest stages of what she would later describe as "self-culture." Always a person who enjoyed writing and considered it important to record one's thoughts, Fuller faced a great conundrum: Should she continue a vocation that allowed her to touch the lives of a few individuals profoundly on a personal level, or should she pursue a course that would take her ideas to a broader audience?

Teaching was a wonderfully fulfilling and rewarding profession, but as many teachers before and since have discovered, it takes all of one's time and energy to do it well. Contemplating her love of teaching and her desire to write, she mused: "I cannot serve two masters." Of her teaching she finally concluded that to continue would mean to keep on "fulfilling all my duties . . . except to myself" (*Letters* 1:327). And so, in December 1838 Fuller left the Greene Street School to return to Boston to see whether she could enter the public arena as a writer. It was a decision that was perhaps as important as any in American history in regard to the awakening of the women's movement.

When Fuller again took up residence in Boston, she began two major undertakings. She established a Conversation Club for women in November 1839,

and together with Emerson she founded the transcendentalist journal the *Dial*, agreeing to serve as the publication's first editor. Both endeavors were to occupy her until she left New England in 1844 and would ultimately shape her historical persona.

As so often happens when necessity and desire meet intelligence and creativity, great art was born. Though Fuller may never be celebrated as a writer on par with her male contemporaries Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, no one can doubt the profound influence of her conversation series on the nascent women's movement. The fact that she enjoyed a public venue for discussing her developing ideas about feminism through her mystical meditations on beauty and spiritual power during her conversations, as well as a political and literary forum to state her views in the *Dial*, arguably made her one of the most powerful intellectual voices in mid-19th-century United States. Fully 20 years later, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony named Fuller in the dedication of their famous *History of Woman Suffrage*, stating that she had "possessed more influence upon the thought of American woman than any previous to her time." Indeed, Stanton, one of more than 200 women who attended the conversations over the four years they were held, concluded that ultimately they became "a vindication of woman's right to think" (Kornfeld 26).

Never was this made more clear than when Fuller drew upon much of what she had been discussing with these women to write an article published in the *Dial*, in July 1843, entitled "The Great Law-suit: Man versus Men; Woman versus Women." This would later be expanded upon and published as the book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a work that would become part of the canon of transcendental literature as well as a cornerstone for the future women's movement and would ever after be viewed as Fuller's magnum opus.

Exhausted from essentially working for three years at two jobs as a lecturer-conversationalist and editor, Fuller took a well-deserved vacation in summer 1843. Her dear friends James and Sarah Clarke invited her to accompany them on a trip west to the Great Lakes and the Wisconsin Territory. From

this experience she wrote *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. America was at the time enthralled by “travel books,” and her work enjoyed modest success. What quickly became apparent, however, was that unlike the vast majority of the writers who published in this genre, Fuller could not have cared less about describing fauna and terrain as suitable subjects in and of themselves. Instead, she used them as a means of challenging her readers to explore their own inner “territory” (*Summer* 13).

Woman in the Nineteenth Century and *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* caught the attention of the powerful Horace Greeley, who offered Fuller the job of literary critic for his *New-York Daily Tribune*. In December 1844 she accepted the position and moved to New York City. In many ways this move would mark the end of her tenure as a key figure in American transcendentalism. Just seven years after leaving Greene Street School, Fuller had successfully transformed herself from a provincial “schoolmarm” into a widely recognized contributor to U.S. literature. Interestingly, just as it appeared that she had found her niche as a writer of long-format nonfiction prose, she switched her primary focus. From this point until her untimely death five years hence it would be as a journalist that Fuller would make her mark.

During the short time from late 1844, when Fuller moved to New York City and began her journalism career, until the 1846 publication of her influential article “American Literature, Its Position in the Present Time and Its Prospects for the Future,” it was becoming clear that even though Fuller still appreciated the realm of literature and its purity in terms of the written word, she also fully understood the emerging power of the press. Whereas her years of leading the Conversation Club in Boston never reached more than a few hundred New England women (albeit many of great influence), her front-page columns in the *Tribune* reached close to 30,000 readers every day. As a woman who had been forced to support herself during most of her adulthood, Fuller had a very real pragmatic side to her life, visible even when considering questions of art. She had long maintained that life should be a balance between

thought and action, and now she had an ideal vehicle to espouse her doctrine and simultaneously address the myriad social causes dear to her heart. Fuller pioneered new techniques in investigative journalism by visiting and analyzing the city’s prisons and mental asylums as well as writing about rapidly emerging urban problems such as prostitution. She wrote more than 250 articles during this highly productive period. Her growing interest in exposing contemporary social problems and suggesting practical reforms separated her from many of the transcendentalists such as Emerson, who tended to focus most of their energy on abstract theories. Fuller was not even daunted when Emerson questioned her seeming abandonment of the transcendentalist movement to pursue journalism, writing that “the Newspaper promises to become daily of more importance, and if the increase of the size be managed with equal discretion, to draw within itself the substance of all other literature of the day” (*Letters* 2:87). It was with this idea ringing in her head that she decided to accept the offer by Greeley to become America’s first foreign correspondent by traveling to Europe and sending back her impressions, or “dispatches,” as she saw fit.

Fuller’s life would be a roller coaster from this point on. She sailed to England in August 1846 as one of America’s first foreign correspondents and while there met the Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini. She also met other writers, such as the English writer Thomas Carlyle and the French novelist George Sand, but it was her meeting with Mazzini that sparked her interest in the Italian revolution and led her to take up residence in Rome during summer 1847. Fuller immersed herself in the revolutionary efforts of the Italian people and in her dispatches to the *Tribune* called for Americans to support the republican uprising. It was also during this period that she met the marchese Giovanni Ossoli, with whom she had a son, Angelo, in September 1848. Fuller and Ossoli probably married in 1849, the same year that Rome fell to French troops, after which they fled to Florence. From there Fuller, her new husband, and their baby son set sail for America in May 1850 (Kornfeld 66). Two months later, a day before they were to arrive

in New York City, their merchantman, the *Elizabeth*, encountered a fierce storm off Fire Island. The young family of three perished. The body of one of the most influential female voices in the formative early life of American literature, philosophy, and women's rights was never recovered.

A great outpouring of grief followed the news of Margaret Fuller's death. Tributes were written by many of the luminaries of the transcendental movement as well as the women's rights movement. Her works were compiled and published by Emerson himself, and she enjoyed a brief moment of posthumous recognition. The turbulent times of abolitionism and pre-Civil War friction quickly pushed discussion of her works to the side, however, and it would not be until the feminist movement of the 1970s rediscovered this clarion voice from the 19th century that her works began to receive the serious attention they enjoy today.

“Letter to Sophia Ripley” (1839)

In a letter written to her friend Sophia Ripley, the wife of the social reformer and Brook Farm founder George Ripley, we can see the incredible range of Fuller's thinking, as well as her command of personal correspondence. Though the letter is essentially a discussion of the Conversation Club Fuller would conduct in Boston, it is in many ways a proclamation of what she considers most important about being human. She tells Ripley she believes the idea of the discussion forum will be “noble” if it forces the participants to ask, “What were we born to do?” and “How shall we do it?” before “their best days are gone by” (*Letters* 2:86–89).

Throughout the letter, but especially at the beginning, Fuller enumerates the reasons that she feels her proposed Conversation Club will make a positive addition to the lives of women. Statements like the following point to Fuller's belief that women in her day led isolated, dreary lives: “I have heard many [women], of mature age, wish for some such stimulus and cheer, and those younger, for a place where they could state their

doubts and difficulties, with a hope of gaining aid from the experience or aspirations of others” (*Letters* 2:86–89). Sentiments like these suggest that even at this earliest stage of Fuller's life as a public figure she was motivated by a desire to expand women's awareness of their true potential. This same desire would emerge with far greater force five years later in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

Knowing that the responsibility to make the enterprise work rested squarely on her shoulders, Fuller realistically assessed the task before her: “I look upon it with no blind enthusiasm, nor unlimited faith, but with confidence” (*Letters* 2:86–89). Finally, after some discussion about mundane issues like who should be invited and what topics covered, Fuller touches on an area central to her view of life: women's active participation in the world around them. Here we see her sentiments expand from a meditation on pedagogy to a far more significant view of what it takes to grow as a human. She writes, “No one will be forced, but those who do not talk will not derive the same advantages with those who openly state their impressions and consent to learn by blundering as is the destiny of man here below” (2:86–89). Though this missive is a musing to Ripley on what Fuller would wish to see during her Conversation Club series, her words might have been the siren cry of a lifetime she would dedicate to getting all people, women especially, to engage intellectually in the world around them and actively speak their minds.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Voicing deeply felt opinions is often easier when using figurative language or when addressing an audience that is familiar and wholly supportive. How do you see Fuller's voice emerging in her personal correspondence with her good friend Sophia Ripley?
2. In what ways does Fuller's initial explanation of the need for the kind of communication she hopes to provide through her Conversation Club define the experience of women in Boston at the time she was writing? Locate language in

the letter that you think defines Fuller's view of the lives most women led.

3. Identify the parallels that link the perceptions of New England women that Fuller presents in her letter to Sophia Ripley with the view EMILY DICKINSON promotes in "What Soft—Cherubic Creatures—." Do you think that Dickinson, like Fuller, is aiming to improve the lot of the women about whom she writes?

***Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (1844)**

Fuller may justly be thought of as a surprisingly prolific writer if one considers that she began to view herself as an author relatively late in her sadly shortened life of 40 years. Though she had written many articles for the *Dial* that had gained her fame, it was the publication of *Summer on the Lakes* that introduced her work to a wider audience and ultimately opened the door for the reworking of a previous *Dial* article into the book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. *Summer on the Lakes* was Fuller's first original book, and in many ways it was a novice effort. It neither adheres to an established travelogue format, nor is it fully realized. As she acknowledges near the end, "What I got from the journey was the poetic impression of the country at large; it is all I have aimed to communicate" (*Summer* 47). Nonetheless, it certainly gave notice that Fuller saw the world differently than the vast majority of published writers of the day and gave her a forum to discuss topics that she would explore in print for the remainder of her life.

One of those topics was the role of women in the formation of any newly emerging society. What she observed about the West was "the unfitness of the women for their new role" (*Summer* 16). Though she appreciated the hard work the women put forth, she thought their "city education had imparted neither the strength nor skill now demanded." Still, she hoped that over time the European traditions adhered to by their mothers would give way to a new, liberating perspective for younger women so that "a girl really skilled to make home beautiful and comfortable, with bodily strength to enjoy

plenty of exercise, the woods, the streams, a few studies, music and the sincere and familiar intercourse . . . would afford happiness enough" (*Summer* 28).

Another of the topics she discusses in *Summer on the Lakes* that would resurface in her later writings are the different effects nature produces in individuals. Niagara Falls, one of the great natural wonders that provoked awe and wonder in the hearts of many 19th-century Americans, provides the first encounter with nature that she discusses in the book. Oddly, she writes that she is not especially moved by the grandeur of the famous natural wonder because of her previous knowledge of it through etchings and myriad written accounts. Still, she recounts that as she sits on a bench close enough to feel the mist of the thundering waterfall, a man "walked close to the fall, and, after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking how he could best appropriate it to his own use, he spat into it" (*Summer* 17). This incident would prove pivotal in the tone and direction of her narrative. After seeing the man's action as contemptuous of nature and as an effort to seek dominion over it, her work became far more a meditation than a travelogue. Indeed, by her own admission, she was a poor judge of distance and topography and thus was not "particularly anxious to give the geography of the scene" so much as to communicate "the poetic impression of the country at large" (*Summer* 29).

In the end, however, it was neither the descriptions of natural wonders nor observations of rugged individualism embodied by settlers on the American frontier that made Fuller's work noteworthy. Her achievement emerges through troubled musings about the plight of the women who seemed to have become enslaved by codes of domesticity so rigid that they could never gain inspiration from the majesty of their surroundings. Fuller saw white female settlers as so completely preoccupied with the unrelieved drudgery of rural existence that the poor become "slatterns" and the better off "struggle under every disadvantage to keep up the necessary routine of small arrangements" (*Summer* 31). She became one of the first writers to chronicle not just the wearisome conditions of white women in the West but of Native American women as well.

She refused to accept the degradation of the Indians as a consequence of their “lack of civilization,” the widely held opinion. By placing a quasi-autobiographical fictional character she calls Mariana in the middle of her book, she provides a means to analyze the gender constructions that in her view entrapped all women. Whether it was the institution of marriage, the male exclusivity of higher education, or the secondary roles in terms of decision making assigned to females in every society she examined, it raised her ire, and she focused upon these perceived inequities. In so doing, she asks her readership the revolutionary question “Has the Indian, has the white woman, as noble a feeling of life and its uses, as religious a self-respect, as worthy a field of thought and action, as man?” (*Summer* 46). For Fuller this almost Socratic method of rhetorical questioning was central to a much-needed American debate. Shortly following the release of *Summer on the Lakes* came the widespread publication of her second, and most influential, book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, and just such a national examination of values was joined.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In what ways did Fuller’s “travel book” *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* differ from other such narratives?
2. Clearly Fuller was dismayed by what she encountered in the West regarding the role of women and the Native American. What conditions did she find? Might she have anticipated better? Do you feel there are “territories” in our current world that would be especially eye-opening to similar first-person investigation? Explain.

***Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)**

As ponderous as was the title of her 1843 *Dial* essay, “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women,” it proved to be the genesis of the very short book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. By almost every account this work poses singular challenges for readers. Characterized more by a sense of urgency than by a carefully sequenced argument

or narrative of events, it reads more like an impassioned call to action than a calm discourse urging the extension of equal rights to both sexes. An example of this appears in the closing pages, where Fuller appeals directly to the women of America. “Women of my country!” she exhorts. “Tell these men that you will not accept the glittering baubles, spacious dwellings, and plentiful service, they mean to offer you by these means. Tell them that the heart of woman demands nobleness and honor in man, and that, if they have not purity, have not mercy, they are no longer fathers, lovers, husbands, sons of yours” (*Woman* 98). Despite the work’s sometimes incoherent structure, pedantic diction, and at times off-putting erudition, what cannot be denied is that regardless of stylistic weaknesses, it was an enormously influential contribution to the budding women’s movement in the United States. Stylistic missteps may in part be attributed to Fuller’s daring to challenge patriarchal norms in the absence of literary precedent. As do other pathbreaking writers, Fuller had to feel her way a step at a time. In a sense what she had to say was finally more important than the way she said it, and women readers responded positively to her efforts. The first printing sold out within a week, and the basic tenets espoused in the work would become foundation blocks for the documents that emerged from the 1848 Seneca Falls convention, widely seen as the birth of the American women’s rights movement.

As historically significant as Fuller’s tract has become, for a contemporary reader it can require patience. Without a firm grasp of biblical allusion, classical mythology, American transcendentalism, William Shakespeare, and myriad literary and historical references, understanding her prose is difficult. A good strategy is to stay focused on main themes and concentrate on Fuller’s clearest illustrations. Bear in mind, for instance, that she includes many references to women from the past in order to provide evidence for her contemporary readers that women can assume and have actually assumed important public roles. Some of these women, such as the Greek Panthea and Madame Necker de Saussure of Geneva, will strike modern

readers as obscure because history has traditionally focused on the actions of men, casting a shadow over female contributions. Drawing attention to these women necessarily involves shedding light on the dark corners of history.

One of Fuller's most useful and clear conventions is a technique she experimented with in *Summer on the Lakes*: the introduction of a female protagonist through whom we view many of the dialectical musings of the author. One such character is Miranda, a female intellectual who clearly parallels Fuller. This is especially evident when Miranda explains that she has been given an excellent education because her father saw her not "as a plaything" but "as a living mind" (*Woman* 33). This homage to the supportive father is perhaps Fuller's way of atoning for her more critical early assessments of the incredibly rigid and demanding study schedule her own father imposed on her when she was a child.

Her tone of reconciliation of the sexes is also far different from the more aggressive repudiation of male presumption and indifference so evident in *Summer on the Lakes*. In *Women in the Nineteenth Century* Fuller makes the case that both men and women must appreciate that they are part of one whole, humanity, and that transcendence can occur only when their collective potential is realized. "The growth of man is two-fold, masculine and feminine" (*Woman* 99), writes Fuller near the end of her book. She continues, stating that there "cannot be a doubt that, if these two developments were in perfect harmony, they would correspond to and fulfill one another" (*Woman* 100). After a discussion of the often unharmonious struggle to achieve a balance of male and female power, she concludes: "Whenever the poet or artist gave free course to his genius, he saw the truth, and expressed it in worthy forms, for these men especially share and need the feminine principle. The divine birds need to be brooded into life and song by mothers" (*Woman* 101).

Once the challenges posed by the text are met, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* can actually be read as the optimistic, focused counterpart to *Summer on the Lakes*. Whereas Fuller communicated considerable skepticism regarding the supposed

promise of westward expansion and the unfulfilled Jeffersonian dream of social harmony and individual freedom in *Summer on the Lakes*, she is almost effulgent in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, where she concentrates on the potential for both men and women to attain spiritual progress. Indeed, she speaks of "a clearer version and better action" when "man and woman may regard one another as brother and sister, the pillar of one porch, the priest of one worship" (*Woman* 101). Interestingly, even though she had become despondent after witnessing the horrible conditions and lack of opportunities for frontier women, her new hopes for American progress centered on the liberation of women and men from the very gender constraints she had seen as so prevalent in the West. The basis of her argument in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is that men and women are both part of a "great radical duality" that gives them the capacity to experience the whole spectrum of human thought, feeling, and action. In language reminiscent of Eastern religious thought, she postulates that there is a unifying force for male and female and that "they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" (*Woman* 68–69).

At other times in the text, Fuller uses a conversational give and take to expose the sexist assumptions embedded in a patriarchal culture where men have been encouraged to speak for women. In one notable example that appears in the early pages, Fuller engages her readers by staging a radical dialogue between a representative husband and a defiant female voice. The narrative voice acts almost as a lawyer conducting a subtle cross-examination in which characters are pumped for information with the aim of revealing widely held assumptions about the sexes that Fuller seeks to overturn. Here the presumptuous husband presents observations about the condition of his wife (and presumably all other wives), stating, "She is happy enough" (*Woman* 15). When pushed to state whether he has actually asked her if she feels completely self-actualized, he replies, "No, but I know she is. . . . I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions." The arch interrogator then answers,

“Consent—you? It is not consent from you that is in question, it is assent from your wife.” “Am I not the head of my house?” asks the taken-aback husband. “You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own,” concludes the voice of the dauntless female (*Woman* 16). And with this statement Fuller leaves what she once referred to as “her footprint” on the annals of U.S. literature by initiating the conversation about the rights of women as citizens, wives, and intellectual and religious free agents that has now continued for more than 150 years.

It is not solely the rights of women that are the focus of the work, however, but also those of the African American and the American Indian. As an abolitionist tract, the book appears fairly tame when compared with the more fiery works that would soon follow. Still, Fuller minces no words in stating unequivocal support in exactly the same manner she had used previously when she repudiated the fictitious husband's audacious stance. She writes, “If the Negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, appared in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable. There is but one law for souls . . . God” (*Woman* 20).

In a passage that appears immediately prior to the one just quoted, Fuller extends the equality of souls to the equality of bodies and minds, going so far as to argue that perceived differences between the sexes and among the races arise from environmental circumstances rather than inherent abilities. In one of her most daring passages Fuller illuminates the extent to which prejudice regarding female physical endurance has blinded Americans to the actual behavior of women and their suitability for public service outside the home. She begins by presenting the conventional male view of women assuming roles traditionally assigned to men: “The beauty of the home would be destroyed, the delicacy of the sex violated, the dignity of the halls of legislation degraded by an attempt to introduce them there” (*Woman* 18). Fuller responds with a bitingly ironic female counterargument:

But if, in reply, we admit as truth that woman seems destined by nature rather for the inner

circle, we must add that the arrangements of civilized life have not been, as yet, such as to secure it to her. Her circle, if the duller, is not the quieter. If kept from “excitement,” she is not from drudgery. Not only the Indian squaw carries the burdens of the camp, but the favorites of Louis the Fourteenth accompany him on his journeys, and the washerwoman stands at her tub and carries home her work at all seasons, and in all states of health. Those who think the physical circumstances of woman would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for the negroes to endure field work, even during pregnancy, or the sempstresses [*sic*] to go through their killing labors (*Woman* 19).

By revealing the actual physical labor completed by women of all races, Fuller exposes the extent to which American culture perpetuates an inaccurate view of female ability by looking only at the diminished physical capacity of middle-class women who have been artificially confined within the dull inner circle of the home. As to the danger that women would somehow surrender the distinctive beauty of the female form by playing a role in public discourse, Fuller replies as follows: “We should think those who had seen the great actresses, and heard the Quaker preachers of modern time, would not doubt, that woman can express publicly the fullness of thought and creation, without losing any of the particular beauty of her sex” (*Woman* 24). In this manner Fuller urges readers to trust to their own senses as providing the strongest argument supporting the equality of the sexes.

After regaling her readers with multiple powerful women, such as Joan of Arc and Queen Elizabeth I, who proved at least as capable as men at directing the ship of state, Fuller concludes with a note of conciliation, brilliantly implying that her requests are in truth modest and need not be seen as threatening the fabric of American culture. She does this by clearly stating that her aim is to expand the options for female self-expression, not impose a new artificial order. This expansion of potential occupations

will not prevent women from deciding to continue as they have. “I have no doubt,” Fuller acknowledges, “that a large proportion of women would give themselves to the same employments as now” (*Woman* 103). Neither is she opposed to women and men living meaningful lives together: “I have urged on woman independence of man, not that I do not think the sexes mutually needed by one another, but because in woman this fact has led to an excessive devotion, which has cooled love, degraded marriage, and prevented either sex from being what it should be to itself or to the other.” Her aim is to grant women the exercise of strengths they already possess and that will add to the overall growth and stability of American culture: “I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation, to rouse their latent powers” (*Woman* 102).

Despite her prevailing sense of urgency, she assumes a muted, patient stance at the end. Admitting that she has now reached middle age—“the sunny noon of life”—Fuller accepts that “objects no longer glitter in the dews of morning” and that her youthful sense of a glorious destiny has significantly diminished. “Yet,” she writes in one of the truly great declarations of enduring commitment, “enough is left, even by experience, to point directly to the glories of that destiny; faint, but not mistaken streaks of the future day” (*Woman* 104). Thus, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, one of the most unconventional, unprecedented, and daring books ever written, ends on a note of humility

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the way Fuller’s sense of the challenges of her day overlapped with and differed from those HARRIET BEECHER STOWE addresses in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.
2. During parts of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* the prosecutorial narrator calls forth historical personages such as Isabella of Spain, Elizabeth I of England, and the French author George Sand (Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin) in order to establish the prowess and intellectual equality of women. Do you consider this as central to her argument that “those who think the physical circumstances of woman (domestic drudgery) would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for the negroes to endure field work, even during pregnancy, or the [seamstresses] to go through their killing labors”?
3. Fuller’s invocation of the Muse, her use of a character modeled on herself such as the female intellectual Miranda, and her writing sections in the voice of Minerva added great variety to the narrative flow of the work. What are the positive aspects of such experimentation in one’s writing? What might the downsides be?
4. It has been said that Fuller claimed for women the same principles that Emerson claimed for men. What might those principles be? Examine Emerson’s *Nature* and *Essays, First Series* to compare the moral issues he raises with those Fuller discusses in *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

“American Literature, Its Position in the Present Time, and Its Prospects for the Future” (1846)

In many ways Fuller’s article “American Literature, Its Position in the Present Time, and Its Prospects for the Future,” from her 1846 collection of pieces written for the *Tribune—Papers on Literature and Art*—is as timely a piece of writing as she ever penned. Though she has been labeled a snob by some because of her classical training and obvious appreciation of European culture, she was very much an American and wanted her country to create a literature unique to its experience. Yet, she observes, “We cannot have expression till there is something to be expressed” (*Margaret Fuller, Critic* 241). She was certainly not ignorant of the writings by Americans, but her contention was that they still parroted too much the sort of literature that best suited Great Britain “with her insular position . . . her limited monarchy” (223). What is especially significant is that Fuller addressed the question of race and recognized the power of diversity a century or more before it received much serious consideration

as a factor in developing an American literature. In her article she stresses that the paradigm of British literature cannot be applied to the New World of the Americas because it “does not suit a mixed race, continually enriched with new blood from other stock . . . with ample field and verge enough to range in and leave every impulse free, and abundant opportunity to develop a genius, wide and full as our rivers . . . impassioned as our vast prairie” (*Margaret Fuller, Critic* 226).

Clearly, development of a sense of place and a sense of self were the first steps Fuller considered necessary for the nation to begin the process of creating a fully developed American literature. She argues that only when these essential requirements are met can the recognition of what is true and special to our circumstances begin to be realized. For, she writes, “truth is the nursing mother of genius” and “no man can be absolutely true to himself . . . without becoming original” (*Margaret Fuller, Critic* 227). And it is this originality that Fuller believes will ultimately ensure the future “prospects” she references in the article’s title.

None of this will occur in her mind, however, “till the fusion of races among us is more complete” (*Margaret Fuller, Critic* 230). Sounding equally high-minded and far-sighted on other aspects of national character, Fuller warns that true U.S. literature “will not rise till this nation shall prize moral and intellectual, no less highly the political freedom” (230). When that eventuality comes to pass, she states, then we will be on our way to obtaining a national literary voice.

Her final thought in the article goes beyond the question of what constitutes a national literature to the very essence of honest expression itself, and it is here, perhaps more than in anything she ever wrote, that Margaret Fuller shows her own genius and greatness:

Writers have nothing to do but to love truth fervently, seek justice according to their ability, and then express what is in the mind. Publishers are afraid, authors are afraid; and if a worthy resistance is not made . . . there is a danger that all the light will soon be put under bushels, lest some

wind should waft from it a spark that may kindle dangerous fire. (*Margaret Fuller, Critic* 242)

For Discussion or Writing

1. After reading this essay do you agree with Emerson’s criticism that Fuller abandoned the transcendental movement by moving to New York City and becoming a journalist?
2. Is a journalist ethically obligated to present all aspects of a topic under investigation? Do you think Fuller’s passionate hope for reform prevents her from presenting a balanced assessment of the state of literature in the United States? Or do you believe that all writing is inherently biased? Support your contentions by citing examples from any of Fuller’s newspaper articles.

Things and Thoughts in Europe (1850)

The year 1846 was a time of technological advancements, when it became possible to have a report shipped across the Atlantic from Europe to the East Coast of the United States in 10 days. With newspapers now being voraciously consumed on a daily basis, the hunger for news from abroad made for a very competitive market. Fuller became not simply the United States’s first female international correspondent but in some ways one of its first media stars as her literate, passionate offerings were widely read and discussed. Already a feminist and social activist, Fuller’s established interest in cultural upheavals fueled her segue into analysis and discussion of the rich and rapidly changing worlds of European society, literature, and politics. She was invited into the houses of the famous (William Wordsworth, George Sand, Ludwig van Beethoven) while also continuing her practice of exploring the most destitute and troublesome areas in the countries she visited.

Examining the language of Fuller’s European dispatches, one is drawn to the incredible passion she feels for the causes she is covering, while also seeing that she is perhaps more comfortable with her voice and style than at almost any previous point in her career. Ultimately, Fuller sent home 37 dispatches,

published as *Things and Thoughts in Europe*, between August 1846 and January 1850. By way of a warning to her readers, she let them know that her bent was not to give a history lesson of past European glories nor provide a travelogue through countries she explored such as England, Scotland, France, and Italy, but instead to listen closely to and report on “the convulsions and sobs of injured Humanity!” (Kornfeld 209). This perspective is not only clear in the *New-York Daily Tribune* dispatches; it is also evident in many of the letters she wrote to friends and relatives during this period, most of which were published posthumously.

It was what lay beyond the cultured realms of art and high society that finally captivated the now fully confident and engaged reformer and writer. By 1848 she had become swept up in the dramatic revolutionary movements that were rocking the European continent. She was deeply moved by Giuseppe Mazzini, the exiled Italian revolutionary who was working to unite his country under a republican government. Abandoning her other assignments, she moved to Italy to report firsthand on the instability in Rome. Feeling personally drawn to Mazzini’s vision of a new Roman republic, Fuller penned some of her most descriptive and engaging prose. In a dispatch dated March 29, 1848, and printed in the *New-York Daily Tribune* on May 4, 1848, Fuller seemed to draw on her transcendental background while explaining to her readers the spirit of the movement:

Nature seems in sympathy with the great events that are transpiring: with the emotions which are swelling the hearts of men. The morning sun is greeted by the trumpets of the Roman Legions marching out once more, but now not to oppress but to defend. The stars look down on their jubilees over the good news which nightly reaches from their brothers of Lombardy. This week has been one of nobler, sweeter feeling of a better hope and faith than Rome in her greatest days ever knew. How much has happened since I wrote! (Kornfeld 210)

Further in the same dispatch she describes how she witnessed the response by Romans of every walk of

life to the news that uprisings around the country were leading the way to a new kind of republicanism that called for the enlistment of recruits ready to fight against the various conservative regimes that would resist these new stirrings. She writes:

With indescribable rapture these news releases were received in Rome. Men were seen dancing, women weeping with joy along the street. The youth rushed to enroll themselves in regiments to go to the frontier. In the Coliseum their names were received. Father Gavazzi, a truly patriotic monk, gave them the cross to carry on a new, a better, crusade. (Kornfeld 212)

This “crusade” she thought would lead to the transformation of a new nation, “rich and glorious by nature as ever, capable, like all nations, all men, of being degraded by slavery, capable as are few nations, few men, of kindling into pure flame at the touch of a ray from the Sun of Truth” (Kornfeld 213).

It is not hard to detect the enthusiasm Fuller was feeling. What is not as apparent is that the “headaches” about which she complains earlier in the dispatch were probably caused by morning sickness, as she was in the first trimester of a pregnancy she might not have even acknowledged herself.

In some ways she became a latter-day practitioner of first-person engaged reporting that would be seen as revolutionary 100 years later when such journalistic investigators as Truman Capote and Hunter S. Thompson immersed themselves personally in their stories. So completely, in fact, did Fuller become “part of the story” that she fell in love with an Italian Catholic nobleman, the marchese (marquess) Ossoli, who was one of the key leaders of the revolution, and they became the then unmarried parents of a baby boy. Even while pregnant, Fuller continued to send her work back to the *Tribune*. When finally unable to hide her pregnancy from public scrutiny (easily done at first because of the prevalent fashion of hoop dresses), she retreated to the mountain village of Rieti for the birth of the baby on September 5, 1848.

Two months after giving birth, Fuller left her child with a nursemaid and returned to Rome,

where she sent a jubilant dispatch to the *Tribune* dated May 27, 1849: "The struggle is now fairly commenced between the principle of democracy and the old powers, no longer legitimate. That struggle may last 50 years and . . . be watered with the blood and tears of more than one generation, but the result is sure. All Europe . . . is to be under republican government in the next century" ("*These Sad . . .*" 117). This unbridled excitement about the new order was soon tempered when she passed a battlefield hospital and "for the first time" saw what "wounded men suffer." She acknowledges that she witnessed "the terrible agonies of those dying or who needed amputation, felt their mental pains and longing for the loved ones who were away" ("*These Sad . . .*" 118). Apparently, Fuller must have undergone a sort of epiphany at this point, for her submissions sharply dropped off, and her personal involvement in the struggle escalated.

A letter written by the then American chargé d'affaires of Rome, Lewis Cass, Jr., provides insight into Fuller's experience during the hectic days of 1849 when she was most immersed in the republican cause. Writing to Fuller's younger sister, Mrs. W. Ellery Channing, Cass provides a clear picture of Fuller's final days in Rome before the fall of the new republic forced her to flee with the husband she had quietly married and the ill-fated voyage to America they undertook. Cass writes his letter at Channing's request for information about Fuller's last days in Italy after having been informed of the young family's death: "In compliance with your request, I have the honor to state succinctly the circumstances so connected with my acquaintance with the late Madame Ossoli, your deceased sister, during her residence in Rome" (*Memoirs* 2:17). Cass informs her that he encountered Fuller several times "during the entire siege" and that "Miss Fuller took an active part" in the "noble" work of ministering to the sick and wounded "in the Hospital of the Trinity of the Pilgrims, which was placed under her direction" (*Memoirs* 2:18).

After the July 1849 defeat of the revolution forced Fuller to abandon her journalistic post and depart Rome, she sent one final correspondence to the *Tribune* from Florence. Entitled simply "Italy,"

this last dispatch from Europe has the reflective tone of one who has seen much but still brims with the power and strength of conviction that marked Fuller's life. She waxes philosophic about "the rose-colored Aurora Borealis" and a slight powdering of snow "scarce enough to cover a Canary bird's wing" (Deiss 122). As the entry goes on, however, she gains momentum and her old fiery voice returns as she scolds the victors for their smug response to the repression of republicanism: "Do you laugh, Roman Cardinal, as you shut the prison-door on a woman weeping for her son martyred in the cause of his country? Do you laugh, Austrian officer, as you drill the Hungarian and Lombard youth to tremble at your baton?" (Deiss 123). Finally, perhaps in some strange way sensing that she was penning the last words ever to be published in her lifetime, she returned to the overarching themes of her lifetime concerning the need for love and peace:

Joy to those born in this day: In America is open to them the easy chance of a noble, peaceful growth, in Europe of a combat grand in its motives, and in its extent beyond what the world ever before so much as dreamed. Joy to them; and joy to those their heralds, who, if their path was desert, their work unfinished, and their heads in the power of a prostituted civilization, to throw as toys at the feet of flushed, triumphant wickedness, yet holy-hearted in masking love, great and entire in their devotion, fall or fade, happy in the thought that these come after them greater than themselves, who may at last string the harp of the world to full concord, in the glory of God in the highest, for peace and love from man to man is become the bond of life. (Deiss 129)

Shortly after filing her last article, Fuller departed Europe to return to the United States with her husband, Ossoli, and their two-year-old son, Angelo. Within sight of New York Harbor the ship carrying them home was swept up in a hurricane and shipwrecked off the coast of New York. Fuller, Ossoli, and Angelo all drowned.

The public, who had so closely followed her European exploits, turned out in great numbers to

pay their respects. Emerson and others compiled and edited many of Fuller's works, which were published in 1852 as *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, thus safeguarding the legacy of a woman Emerson called "one of the noblest" writers in American literature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. At what point, if ever, does a journalist have a moral obligation to remove himself or herself from a story being covered? Are there examples from Fuller's European dispatches that speak to your contention?
2. Sometimes following your convictions can put you in harm's way. Do you agree with the decisions Fuller made to pursue the causes she believed in? Might you have done some things differently? Cite examples to support your point of view.
3. Examine the journalistic writings of Walt Whitman (many are available online) and compare his style and emphasis on issues to those of Fuller during her career with the *New-York Tribune*. What similarities exist in their use of voice?

"Autobiographical Sketch" (1852)

In *The Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, which her friend Ralph Waldo Emerson helped edit, is found a short but highly informative piece entitled "Autobiographical Sketch." In it Fuller addresses the forces that shaped her early childhood years and gives insights into a love affair she began to develop with Rome that would last until her death.

No one had a greater influence in making Margaret Fuller who she would become than her father, Timothy, a Harvard-trained lawyer. Though Fuller refers to her mother as "angelic" and sings her praises, she makes it clear that her mother had little input in her daughter's education.

An event that really cemented the intensity of study that would define Margaret's childhood was the death of her baby sister. "My first experience was one of death," writes Fuller of this sad occasion. "I was left alone" (*Memoirs* 2:66). Immediately, Margaret became the center of attention in the family, and her father set up a rigorous course of homeschooling.

"I was put at once under discipline of considerable severity" and "had a more than ordinary high standard presented to me." Even when her father worked long hours, he demanded that Margaret recite to him every evening no matter how late he arrived home. Fuller remarks that this high expectation was a great source of personal anxiety. She writes that the "consequence was a premature development of the brain, that made me a 'youthful prodigy' by day, and by night a victim of spectral illusions, nightmare and somnambulism." Ironically she predicted she would go "to a premature grave," though it was the taxing nature of her study rather than a storm at sea that she thought would be the cause. She proclaims, "I had no natural childhood!" (*Memoirs* 1:73).

What she did have was an experience so demanding and lacking in childhood entertainments that she says she "was driven for refuge . . . to the world of books" (*Memoirs* 1:56). Many of these were assigned texts that she was compelled to digest and report on to her father, who "had no belief in minds that listen, wait, and receive" (*Memoirs* 1:55). Thus, she honed her speaking skills and her ability to discourse on a wide variety of topics with precision and clarity. Painful as the acquisition may have been, these skills would later serve her well during the period she conducted her Conversation Club in Boston.

Finally, she dedicates a large section of the "Autobiographical Sketch" to her infatuation with all things Roman. She loved Ovid for his ability to make "Gods and Nymphs" come alive. Latin became second nature. She devoured Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. What really inflamed her, however, were the tales of the great men of Rome and their passion for action. She states, "In vain for me are men more, if they are less, than Romans" (*Memoirs* 1:76). Perhaps not surprisingly, Margaret would, many years after this period, fall in love with Giovanni Ossoli, a wild-eyed Italian revolutionary leader, during the siege of Rome.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Every person's childhood informs his or her adult life in profound ways. In terms of "Autobiographical Sketch," how does Fuller suggest her early years influenced the woman she became?

- Kolodny, Annette. "Inventing a Feminist Discourse: Rhetoric and Resistance in Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*." *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 355–382.
- Kopacz, Paula. "The School Journal of Hannah (Anna) Gale." In *Studies in the American Renaissance 1996*, edited by Joel Myerson, 67–113. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Kornfeld, Eve. *Margaret Fuller: A Brief Biography with Documents*. New York: Bedford Books, 1997.
- Miller, Edwin Haviland. *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/fuller.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Robinson, David M. "Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos: *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*." *PMLA* 97 (1982): 83–98.
- Sattelmeyer, Robert. *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Watson, David. *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.

Bill Costello



CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

(1860–1935)

In my judgment it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk, without a purpose.

(The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman—a leading intellectual of the women’s movement at the turn of the 20th century—foresaw the needs of our modern age. Her vision for a more “human world” defines her entire life and literary career as a social reformer. Even as a child, she realized that through her imagination “I could make a world to suit me.” As a writer, editor, publisher, and lecturer, she wrote and spoke for a “purpose,” as she was often known to say, challenging many facets of women’s subjugation. Gilman championed “important truths, needed yet unpopular” (*Living* 304), promoting women’s emancipation in an era when women’s place was firmly in the domestic sphere, and marriage and motherhood were sacrosanct. Gilman advocated equal education, women’s suffrage, women’s autonomy, payment for housework, meaningful work outside the home, dress reform, marriage on the basis of love over economic necessity, and community child care—the most radical part of her agenda. Many visionary ideas that Gilman predicted for women have become realities in this millennium.

Today, Gilman is best known for her landmark short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), a striking portrayal of a woman succumbing to madness due to the confines of rigid Victorian American society. This story, rediscovered in the 1970s at the start of second-wave feminism, helped secure Gilman’s place in the contemporary literary canon.

Regrettably, however, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” has come to define Gilman—a simplification that overshadows the complexity and impressiveness of her life and oeuvre, which includes novels, poetry, short stories, essays, an autobiography, journalism, and theoretical works.

Gilman first earned her reputation as a poet, writing civic satire that garnered praise from luminaries including Upton Sinclair, George Bernard Shaw, Woodrow Wilson, and WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS. At the turn of the 20th century she was best known for *Women and Economics* (1898), a treatise about women’s suppression that gained her international acclaim. Gilman was also a tireless lecturer and editor, who single-handedly wrote and produced the *Forerunner* (1909–16), a journal with a marked socialist slant devoted to women’s rights.

Born on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut, Gilman, née Charlotte Anna Perkins, regrets in her autobiography that she was born on the eve of America’s Independence Day; she believed the “glorious Fourth” (*Living* 8) would have better characterized her revolutionary spirit. Both of her parents, Mary Fitch Westcott and Frederick Beecher Perkins, were members of prominent families, but Gilman was fiercely proud of her Beecher relatives; the educator Catharine Beecher and HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, were her great-aunts, and the noted evan-

gelist Lyman Beecher was her great-grandfather. Charlotte's parents married in 1857 and had four children (two died in infancy; Charlotte was the third child); they divorced in 1873.

Deprivation and perseverance characterize Gilman's childhood. She never experienced a secure home life: Her father deserted the family when she was young, stigmatizing Charlotte and her older brother, Thomas; in fact, she recounts in her autobiography that "my childhood had no father" (*Living* 5). She often sparred with her emotionally undemonstrative mother and lamented her "uncuddled childhood" (*Living* 78). Gilman also experienced chronic poverty; depending upon the kindness of relatives, Mary Perkins, continually plagued by debt, moved her family 19 times in 18 years.

Although Gilman received little formal education, she claims in her autobiography to have inherited a sense of duty from her mother and an appetite for knowledge from her father (*Living* 44), who became a librarian. She was a bright and precocious learner. By age five she had taught herself to read; by age eight, she began to write imaginative tales. An avid reader, she enjoyed the fiction and essays of her favorite authors: Charles Dickens, George Eliot, EDGAR ALLAN POE, and HENRY DAVID THOREAU. In 1880 she completed a two-year art course at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, enabling her to earn a modest income as a commercial artist and private teacher. However, she yearned for a more independent life, to contribute to humanity as a "world servant," not a "house servant," to use Gilman's own words. During this period she had a close friendship with Martha Luther, the first of a number of significant female friendships in her life that ended upon Martha's marriage in 1881.

In Providence at age 21 she met the artist Charles Walter Stetson; a marriage proposal soon followed. Although she initially declined to devote her life to her "world's work," after a turbulent two-year courtship, she reluctantly agreed to marry Stetson. They wed on May 2, 1884. Before marriage the conventional Walter pledged that he would not

object to her writing, a promise he failed to keep; she soon found that marriage and motherhood hampered her ability to do meaningful work. She claims in her autobiography and diaries that she objected to the conventions of Victorian marriage, not to Walter per se, whom she describes as loving, devoted, and tender. She later turned her misgivings about the private home into poetry collected in *In This Our World* (1893): "In Duty Bound" critiques the restrictive domestic sphere, and "The Mother's Charge" and "To the Young Wife" both lambaste the private home as the source of women's subjugation and marriage as a crippling institution.

After the birth of her only child, her daughter Katharine Beecher Stetson, and only 10 months into her marriage, Gilman experienced severe depression. Chilling is her diary entry of August 30, 1885: "Every morning the same hopeless waking. Every day the same weary drag. To die mere cowardice. Retreat impossible, escape impossible" (*Diaries* 1:332). She weaned her baby, traveled west to visit her father and brother, and then stayed in Pasadena, California, with her old friend Grace Ellery Channing (who became Walter's second wife in 1894). Cured upon her return, she soon grew despondent again, realizing, "Now I saw the stark fact—that I was well while away and sick while at home" (*Living* 95).

In spring 1887 Charlotte Stetson, then age 26, agreed to undergo a one-month rest cure at the Philadelphia sanitarium of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a noted neurologist. Mitchell described her condition as neurasthenia (also called nervous prostration), a breakdown of the nervous system, not uncommon among women in the Victorian era. Sigmund Freud, also trained as a neurologist, approved of Mitchell's rest cure, which aimed to heal the mind by treating the body; the five components of the cure were excessive feeding, bed rest, seclusion, massage, and electricity. Well known is Mitchell's parting advice: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time." . . . "Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (*Living* 96). Following Mitchell's

prescription, Gilman found her condition worsened; she teetered on the brink of a total nervous breakdown. She could not simply abandon her sense of social purpose to live with her traditional husband; they separated in 1888 and divorced in 1894.

Upon separation she moved with Katharine to Pasadena, where she immediately experienced improved health. Walter followed her to Pasadena two months later and remained there for a year, but they never reconciled. In California Gilman launched her writing career to support her and Katharine, publishing articles and stories, including "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892). In 1893 she lost her mother to cancer; published her first collection of verses, entitled *In This Our World*; and edited a short-lived magazine sponsored by the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association (PCWPA) called the *Impress*.

In 1894 Gilman sent her daughter east, relinquishing custody of Katharine to Stetson just before his second marriage, to Grace Channing, whom Gilman considered her "co-mother." This living arrangement, which seems strikingly modern, led to harsh criticism. Some of her contemporaries dubbed her an "unnatural mother" and cancelled her speaking engagements when they realized she had given up her daughter. The *Impress* lost its backing from the PCWPA, as Gilman was considered a liability because of her divorce and unconventional mothering. However, relinquishing her maternal responsibilities enabled Gilman to dedicate her whole life to serving the community at large. Thus, 1894 also marks the date when Gilman achieved her life's ambition to give full and earnest attention to her professional career. She wrote and lectured prolifically across the United States and eventually in Europe. Whether writing verse, fiction, or nonfiction, she made a case for social change to improve the lives of women and benefit society.

Although she had not intended to remarry, she changed her mind after renewing an acquaintance with her first cousin, Houghton (Ho) Gilman, a New York patent attorney. In 1900 she married Houghton, who supported her career by attending her lectures, assisting with her research, and

reading her work. In fact, the next two decades were highly productive ones for Gilman, who found a way to balance an active career with a lasting marriage. She wrote several influential books: *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), and *The Man-Made World: Or, Our Androcentric Culture* (1911). Gilman also founded the *Forerunner* (1909–16), declaring in her autobiography: "If the editors and publishers will not bring out my work, I will! And I did" (*Living* 304). Her monthly feminist publication, which she wrote and published single-handedly, featured poems, short stories, articles, and serialized books and novels, including *What Diantha Did* (1910), *The Crux* (1911), and her utopian novel, *Herland* (1915). She had subscribers from Europe, India, and Australia, as well as from across the United States.

In 1916 Gilman ended the *Forerunner*. Her readership was waning. Times were changing. The women's movement dwindled after suffrage. Post-World War I audiences were put off by Gilman's dual allegiances to socialism and feminism. In 1922 she completed her final social treatise, *His Religion and Hers* (1923), which received mixed reviews. Gilman lamented her fallen popularity and feared that society had made poor progress in attaining the widespread reforms she had envisioned for women. Still eager to retain her audience and "make a world to suit" her, she completed several projects late in her career to ensure that her legacy would continue but was unable to find a publisher for them. These included, *A Study in Ethics*; another anthology of poetry, entitled *Here Also*; and her lone feminist detective novel, *Unpunished* (ca. 1929), which remained unpublished at the time of her death. In this final significant work of feminist fiction Gilman turned to a genre popular between the two world wars to create a "whodunit" with a satirical twist: In *Unpunished* she makes a strong case against domestic abuse decades before this term even entered the U.S. vocabulary.

In 1932 Gilman was diagnosed with breast cancer. She devoted her final years to her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935), published posthumously with an intro-

duction by the author Zona Gale. Houghton died unexpectedly of a cerebral brain hemorrhage on May 4, 1934. After Houghton's death Gilman moved to her former home in Pasadena, to be near her daughter, Katharine, and her grandchildren. Her close friend Grace Channing Stetson, now widowed, joined her in California. As her disease progressed, Gilman planned her suicide, arranged for her cremation, and left instructions for Katharine to scatter her ashes in the Sierra Madre. On August 17, 1935, she took her life by inhaling chloroform. Her dying, like her living, was marked with conviction, spirit, and dignity.

***Herland* (1915)**

After "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Gilman is best known for *Herland*, a utopian novel published serially in *Forerunner*. Through *Herland* Gilman made "a world to suit me" and achieved her vision of "human progress" by creating a utopian world of "highly civilized women" (*Herland* 25). In *Moving the Mountain* (*Forerunner* 1911), an earlier "baby utopia" (as she called it), men and women participate equally in a socialized economy; in *Herland* there are absolutely no men at all. Motherhood is socialized and desexualized: No longer dependent on two genders for fertilization, women have evolved to reproduce through parthenogenesis (virgin birth), giving birth to girls only; a genuine community of women raises the children of Herland, who have no last names since their identity is collective, not linked to the private home (which Gilman considered a source of oppression). While aspects of the novel, such as parthenogenesis, seem fantastic today, *Herland* remains a keen social commentary: In it Gilman exposes sexism and attempts to redefine traditional gender roles by showcasing women's capabilities and natural superiority to men.

Akin to Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward* (1888), a book that Gilman admired, Gilman in *Herland* transports a character of a conventional world into the uncharted territory of an all-female paradise. At the opening three American explor-

ers—the rich playboy Terry Nicholson, the sociologist Vandyck Jennings, and the poet-botanist Jeff Margrave—land their plane and stumble upon a utopian world populated by strong, athletic, calm, short-haired, comfortably clothed women (in typical Gilman fashion, their clothes have pockets, too). The novel is set on the eve of World War I. The location of Herland is never revealed: Gilman describes it as an island with a dense forest and refers to the women as Amazons, leading some to suggest the country is in South America, but she compares the climate and soil to those in California. Gilman presents the utopia through male eyes: Van narrates the story; as a man of reason, he serves as intermediary between the male chauvinist Terry and the sentimental Jeff, who idealizes women. Impressed by this civilization, the three men declare: "There must be men. . . . Let's find 'em" (11). Instead, the Herlanders capture the male intruders and attempt to civilize them. While Jeff totally embraces the humane values of Herland, and Van expands his consciousness to recognize Herland's merits, the sexist Terry Nicholson sneers at the idea of woman-centered culture.

The Herlanders possess qualities that, in 1915, were typically associated only with men: power, courage, inventiveness, assertiveness, and physical agility. In giving Herlanders these favored attributes, Gilman wittily queries whether human traits are inherently masculine versus feminine or, rather, culturally determined. Their culture is scientifically advanced. The country's capital looks like a model for contemporary urban planning. There are no wars, no kings, no aristocracy, no criminals, no overpopulation, and no poverty. The country is clean and beautiful. Sickness is virtually unknown to them. The women are highly educated, tall, healthy, beautiful, strong, vigorous, and contented. Their standards are peace, comfort, health, beauty, and progress (68), and they are vegetarians—pacifism extending into their eating practices. Much of *Herland* reads as a sociological treatise rather than science fiction. To complete the men's education about this near-perfect civilization, Gilman describes kinship structures (all Herlanders form part of one cooperative), reproductive and

child-rearing practices (only certain eugenically fit women, called “Over Mothers,” bear children, and women gifted in child care raise the children in a kibbutzlike collective), religion (the Herlanders favor a benign, matrilineal religious practice, a maternal pantheism), and education (considered an art and entrusted only to the most skillful).

Herland is also a utopian romance novel. Reversing traditional gender dynamics and courtship rituals, Gilman wittily makes Van, Terry, and Jeff sex objects: They compete for the attention of the beautiful, wise Herlanders, who have no understanding of the term *lover*, never experience jealousy or bisexual desire, and do not blush or flirt. Conceding that dual parentage might be a higher reproductive process than parthenogenesis, the Herlanders agree to attempt “the Great Change” (89), and each of the men is selected by a partner willing to “re-establish a bi-sexual state for our people” (88). Three marriages ensue—Jeff with Celis, Van with Ellador, and Terry with Alima—but the outcomes vary. Jeff, who wholeheartedly adopts the views of his new society, treats Celis with a devotion that puzzles her, but they engage in sexual relations for procreation purposes only and remain in Herland, helping to usher in “the Great Change.” Van, a true sociologist, observes the society carefully and undergoes a slow, believable conversion. Van and Ellador experience a friendship in marriage based on mutual respect, rather than passion. However, Terry’s marriage to Alima proves disastrous. Sticking to “his pet conviction that a woman loves to be mastered” (132), Terry is convicted of marital rape and expelled from utopia. At the end of the novel Van and Ellador, eager to see the rest of the world, accompany Terry into exile, a strategic move that initiates Gilman’s sequel, *With Her in Ourland* (*Forerunner* 1916). This sequel, though far less regarded, creates an innovation in the utopian formula by putting a native of utopia into the social confusion of our world on the brink of war.

Herland gained the attention of second-wave feminists after its reprinting in 1979, with an introduction by Ann J. Lane. Gilman’s creation of a humane, peace-loving world that exposes the

absurdities and inhumanity of early 20th-century America still resonates today.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does Gilman leave the location of Herland a mystery? What aspects of Herland culture are most appealing to readers today? What aspects are least appealing? Does Gilman seem insensitive to any group of Americans or present ideas considered politically incorrect today? Look up the term *eugenics* in a reference book.
2. Why do the Herlanders concede that dual parentage is a higher reproductive process than parthenogenesis? Are you prepared for this change, or does it read as a device to move the plot along?
3. If you were to illustrate the novel, what aspects of the utopia would you choose to illustrate? How would you depict the women of Herland? Identify qualities that you would have in your own utopia, and describe them or illustrate them. What would you call your utopia? Does Gilman’s title suit her work?

“The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892)

Although Gilman created a prodigious output of poetry, fiction, lectures, novels, and theoretical works, her literary reputation stands on her best-known and best-written story, “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Ironically, in her autobiography she dismisses this remarkable example of psychological realism as “no more ‘literature’ than my other stuff, being definitely written ‘with a purpose’” (*Living* 121). Superior artistically to her other, often hurriedly written fiction, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” deftly employs two devices: first-person narration and writing as therapy. The reader follows a diary or journal chronicled by a woman undergoing a three-month “rest cure” for nervous depression, seemingly brought on by the birth of her child, in today’s clinical term a *postpartum depression*. As Elaine Hedges notes in her “Afterword” to the 1973 Feminist Press reprinting of the story, “The story is one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a 19th-century woman which directly confronts

the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship” (Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wall-Paper*, 89–90).

As the 12 diary entries progress, we witness the graphic consequences of women’s subordination in patriarchal marriage, driving the female protagonist from neurosis to madness. The narrator, who refers and defers to John in the initial entries, remains nameless in this story, although John condescendingly refers to her as a “little girl” (Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s* 138) and “a blessed little goose” (133). Required to rest in a former nursery, the narrator, who very much wants to write, must hide her journal from her physician/husband, John, who “hates to have me write a word” (133), and her sister-in-law, Jennie, who “is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!” (135). In the third entry Gilman names and indicts the eminent neurologist Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who treated her in his Philadelphia sanitarium: “John says if I do not pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don’t want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!” (135). Here Gilman blurs the lines between fiction and reality: The friend she mentions is a veiled reference to herself and her dissatisfaction with Mitchell’s treatment of her nervous depression.

At first repelled by the flamboyant wallpaper in the nursery, the narrator grows fond of it and discovers it to be a “palimpsest” with a dominant and muted pattern: The dominant front design takes the form of bars, and a second muted pattern resembles a formless figure at first, then a woman trapped behind the dominant design. Eventually, the narrator tears the wallpaper to free the trapped woman, merging her identity with a figure that is seemingly a product of her own hallucination, arguably a reflection of herself: “I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had pulled off yards of that paper” (143). The pronouns *I* and *we* are significant in this passage, as are her subsequent actions of locking John out of the room and crawling on the floor. The fate of the nameless narrator crawling endlessly in circles over her fainting doctor/husband defies a

simple explanation. Well over 100 years after its first publication, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” continues to captivate and puzzle audiences today.

It might surprise readers to learn that Gilman had difficulty publishing the story with which she is most readily associated. Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wall-Paper” in Pasadena, California, during a heat wave in summer 1890, shortly after she and her first husband, Walter Stetson, permanently separated. Although conflicting versions exist about its publication history and early critical reception, modern critics generally concur that it took about 18 months to place the story. Gilman solicited help from the author and former editor of the prestigious journal the *Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells: He had written to her in praise of her poems of civic satire, such as “Similar Cases” (1890). After receiving Howells’s “unforgettable letter” of June 9, 1890, she “felt like a real ‘author’ at last” (*Living* 113). Howells, in turn, sent Gilman’s story to the current editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Horace Elisha Scudder; memorable is the second, final sentence of his curt rejection letter: “I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!” (Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s* 27).

How did the story find its way into print? In her autobiography Gilman claims that she sent her story to a literary agent, Henry Austin, who placed it in *New England Magazine* but pocketed the publication fee (he denied this). Conversely, Howells, who reprinted the story in *The Great Modern American Stories* (1920), states in the introduction to his collection that he “corrupted” Edwin Mead, then editor of *New England Magazine*, into publishing the story; Mead may well have complied because he was grateful to Howells, who (as husband of Mead’s cousin) helped him enter the publishing field. If Howells’s story is accurate, did Gilman know of his role, or did she prefer to forget it? Gilman is not always accurate in her autobiography: For example, she lists the story’s publication date incorrectly as May 1891.

The story actually appeared in the January 1892 issue of *New England Magazine* with three black-and-white illustrations by a staff illustrator, Jo. H.

Hatfield. This relatively conservative Boston-based publication featured stories, poems, travel, history, and biography. In 1899 Small, Maynard and Company issued a small chapbook edition of the story without its original illustrations; however, the paper board covers boast a flamboyant sulfur orange-yellow design, making vivid the pattern of the ubiquitous wallpaper. The manuscript, or fair copy, version is also now in print.

While one must not read any story as a mere reflection of an author's life, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has invited biographical readings for two reasons: In the story Gilman names and indicts Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the eminent physician who treated her for neurasthenia (or nervous prostration) after the birth of her daughter. In 1887 Gilman traveled to Mitchell's sanitarium to take his famous rest cure. Second, Gilman based the story on difficulties she experienced during her first marriage, to Stetson, resulting in what we might now call a postpartum depression. Biographers and scholars frequently note the palpable biographical elements underpinning Gilman's story of a forceful husband forbidding his intelligent wife to write and requiring her to rest in a nursery/prison, a symbol of patriarchal marriage. Just as the window in the narrator's room has bars, symbolic of the restrictions on women in 19th-century society, the conventionally minded Stetson limited the vision of his socially minded wife, who longed to contribute to a more "human world." Before they married Stetson had assured Gilman he would not object to her writing and presented her with pens and blank writing tablets to affirm the promise, a promise he did not keep.

In *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Gilman records that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" "is a description of a case of nervous breakdown beginning something as mine did, and treated as Dr. S. Weir Mitchell treated me with what I considered the inevitable result, progressive insanity" (118–119). Despite its merits, the Mitchell rest cure had a decidedly punitive edge. Following Mitchell's prescription to live a domestic life, limit her intellectual activity to two hours a day, "and never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (*Living*

ing 96), Gilman reports crawling under beds and hiding in closets to escape from a "profound distress" (*Living* 96). Although Gilman states in her oft-quoted 1913 *Forerunner* article "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper?'" that she never objected to her wallpaper or had hallucinations as the narrator in the story did, she declares that she "sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad" (Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's* 46). In her autobiography she also states her reason for writing the story: "But the real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his ways" (*Living* 121). She attests she avoided madness by rejecting her doctor's "sage" advice.

After its 1892 publication "The Yellow Wall-Paper" "attracted a cult of readers" as the biographer Gary Scharnhorst notes in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (18). Numerous reviews appeared after the 1899 edition and the tale's subsequent reprinting. Two aspects of the story—its horror and the wallpaper itself (including its possible arsenical qualities common in period wall decorations)—caught the attention of contemporary reviewers, some of whom called for the story's censure. In fact, 19th-century critics who read the story as a gothic thriller or horror tale often likened it to the work of EDGAR ALLAN POE; this connection continues, leading the tale to be anthologized in collections of gothic horror and suspense. Although many feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s note that the sexual politics of female subjugation were not appreciated by Gilman's contemporary reviewers, some did remark upon the narrator's restricted lifestyle in a patriarchal society as a significant factor driving the narrator to madness, although these critics did not employ the terms of modern feminist criticism (for period reviews, see Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's* 81–87).

Since the 1973 Feminist Press publication, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has received near-unprecedented international attention and achieved iconic status in feminist circles. Reprinted in European countries including Great Britain, France, Sweden, Germany, and Spain, it is one of the most widely anthologized texts in the English-speaking world. Part of the con-

temporary canon, it finds its place on syllabuses in literature, history, women's studies, and American studies courses. It is the focus of major publications in respected scholarly journals and the subject of numerous sourcebooks, collections, and doctoral dissertations. Critics in a wide range of disciplines have read the story from numerous theoretical perspectives: feminist, psychological (Lacanian, Derridean, Adlerian, Freudian), sociological, linguistic, historical, reader response, queer theory, and a combination of theoretical perspectives. Scholars have frequently analyzed the themes of madness and regression versus liberation and empowerment, the diary format, first-person narration, symbolism, discourse of diagnosis, the narrator's psychic evolution, and the ambiguous ending.

We must read criticism of any work in relation to its own historical moment. Groundbreaking legislative triumphs for women's rights, such as the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision, and victories in equal opportunity in education and employment may well have influenced 1970s feminist critics to read the story optimistically, sympathetically. Likewise, concerns with political correctness and global feminism—with its attention to issues of color, ethnicity, and social class—have led critics since the 1980s and 1990s to notice repugnancies and prejudiced elements in Gilman's oeuvre, bleeding into the color and odor of the ubiquitous wallpaper, as well as to challenge the story's canonical status. Since the 1990s "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has found a niche in gay and lesbian studies, textual studies, and approaches to teaching. In the early 21st century, interest in the story continues to grow and shows no signs of waning.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of the narrator's namelessness? What do the nailed-down bed and the figure of the woman trapped behind the dominant pattern of the wallpaper symbolize? Why does John insist the narrator rest in a room that was a former nursery? What kind of character is John: Is he a controlling patriarch or villain, or, rather, a well-intentioned and sympathetic doctor/husband simply following the medical wisdom of his time? To support your responses look up "the doctrine of separate spheres" and the "cult of true womanhood" in a reference text. Compare Gilman's view of women's subordination to the views of her American contemporaries, including KATE CHOPIN and Edith Wharton.
2. How does the narrator's reaction to the wallpaper change over time? Does the color of the wallpaper evoke bodily excrement, feminine sexuality, decadence, and/or the "yellow peril" (at the turn of the 20th century, the color yellow was used to describe undesirable groups, including Italians, Jews, eastern Europeans, and Asians)? Is the narrator, who is denied any other form of paper, reading the wallpaper to figure out its pattern, as she vows she alone can do? In discovering a woman trapped behind the bars of the wallpaper, has the narrator installed herself in the realm of the imaginary? Does the narrator's changing perception of the wallpaper suggest that her neurosis gives way to full-blown psychosis, or does it, alternately, suggest that she is gaining an awareness of the restrictions of her patriarchal world? Is her tearing down the bars of the wallpaper an act of madness or of liberation?
3. Interpretations of the narrator's fate swing widely from liberation to defeat. Has the narrator succumbed to madness, gained a form of higher sanity, or achieved a dubious victory in gaining a more forceful sense of self despite, or perhaps because of, her madness? At the end of the story is the narrator simply trapped in a room that signals patriarchal repression; alternately, in locking John out of the room, has she attained what Virginia Woolf claims all women need: a room of her own? Is the narrator's creeping at the end of the tale animalistic (is she a groveling beast on all fours)? Is her crawling an act of infantile regression or rebirth, as babies crawl before they learn to walk? The narrator triumphantly declares in the 12th entry: "'I've got out at last' . . . 'in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (Golden, *Charlotte Perkins*

- Gilman's* 144). But who is Jane? In the 19th century Jennie was a nickname for Jane; is Jane a reference to her sister-in-law, called Jennie throughout the story? Or, is Jane the narrator's hitherto unmentioned name? If so, is the narrator rejecting her traditional Jane self, gaining freedom from her roles of wife and mother?
4. The story unfolds as a diary: How can the narrator finish the tale if she is descending into madness? Do we read the journal entries as an interior monologue, or, rather, do we assume she has recovered sufficiently to conclude the tale herself? How would Jennie or John tell the story? What of John's fate? Is he dead or alive? If John is merely fainting at the sight of the narrator creeping on all fours, what will happen when John revives? Will he lock the narrator away, likening her fate to that of other 19th-century characters filled with madness or rage—of whom Bertha Mason of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a prime example?
 5. In the third illustration the narrator resembles raving Bertha of *Jane Eyre*. In contrast, in the first image she looks like a respectable Victorian woman presumably writing in her journal the story we are reading. After examining the original black-and-white illustrations by the *New England Magazine* illustrator Joseph Henry Hatfield (Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's* 128, 137, 145), consider how the narrator's visual characterization influences a reading of the ambiguous ending. Do the three illustrations cumulatively suggest the narrator is insane, defeated? Gilman does not indicate a change in the narrator's appearance, but Hatfield transforms the narrator from a respectable-looking Victorian woman, hair tied into a neat bun, into a madwoman, wild hair flowing down her back as she creeps over John. What is the significance of these changes, and how might the illustrations have affected the original line of response to the story as a Poesque tale? Can you identify other features of the story that situate it both in the traditions of gothic horror and of American realism?
 6. Alternately to the previous question, do 21st-century readers see an emerging power and freedom in the image of the narrator pressing the swooning John into the floor, her hair unleashed from a restrictive bun? If you were the illustrator of the story, would you choose these same three scenes to illustrate? How would you draw the narrator and the enigmatic wallpaper itself?
 7. The story's style is taut, the paragraphs brief, many composed of only one sentence. How do these features and the breaks between diary entries augment the narrator's fragmentation or sense of psychic degeneration? The narrator also appears to be an inventive language user. The timid narrator initially defers to John and refers to herself as "one" (a pronoun the linguist Otto Jespersen calls a disguised *I*); as the story progresses, she increasingly uses and prominently places the nominative case pronoun in the defiant sentences she authors (for example, "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane.'"). Look up objective case and nominative case pronouns in a grammar book to consider the significance of these changes. Moreover, how do we read the various spellings of the word *wallpaper* (*wall paper*, *wall-paper*, *wallpaper*, and *paper*)? Do these variations reflect Gilman's notoriously inconsistent spelling, or do they signify the profoundly changing wallpaper itself?
 8. How do we reconcile the increased authority in the narrator's language with her progressively more crazed actions? Construct two opposing interpretations of the story. To argue that the narrator succumbs to madness, trace how the muted figure of the woman trapped behind the bars of the wallpaper gains more definition (for example, the once "formless sort of figure" becomes a "woman" to her) over time; does the enhanced clarity of the narrator's delusion translate into actions of madness during the final four diary entries when she attempts to free the woman seemingly born of her own hallucination? In contrast, to argue for the narrator's liberation or dubious victory, analyze how her

language grows stronger precisely at the point when the narrator dramatically creeps on the floor, tears the paper from the walls, and seemingly condemns herself to madness.

***Women and Economics* (1898)**

At the turn of the 20th century Gilman established her international reputation as a social critic and authority on women's subjugation when she published *Women and Economics*. In this book she critiques the socioeconomic system that restricted turn-of-the-20th-century women to the private home, making them wholly dependent on men. Women remained in a state of arrested development both intellectually and emotionally, a situation that proved damaging to men, women, and society as a whole. In her treatise she sketched out broad themes related to women and work, kitchenless homes, social motherhood, and "baby gardens" (child care centers) staffed by professionals. These very ideas provided material for future books (such as, *Concerning Children*, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*) and copious articles that she wrote well into the 20th century.

Gilman lived at a time when women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere as homemakers, mothers, and sexual partners; men were the sole providers. In fact, American women did not have the right to vote until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (although some individual states granted suffrage sooner). Throughout the 19th century a woman's ability to hold any property depended on the state in which she lived. Disturbed by these facts, Gilman explored in *Women and Economics* the origin of women's economic dependence upon men and, akin to Thorstein Veblen, advanced the view that female oppression dates to prehistoric times, when men used their physical superiority to subjugate women, exploiting them for their domestic labor. The socialism of Edward Bellamy and the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin influenced her vision for social change in this classic feminist text. Gilman aimed to liberate women from economic

dependence; freed from domestic bondage, women could contribute to the work of the world and the worth of society.

Gilman coined the term *sexuo-economic condition* to illustrate how in the case of human females, sexuality had an economic function: A woman's success was measured by her ability to attract a mate, and she was bound to her mate for her very survival. To Gilman this situation was contrary to nature, and she believed that the human female—in contrast to females of a range of animal species—had, as a result, grown completely dependent on the human male: "We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation" (*Women and Economics* 5). As a result, women are viewed as chattel, not valuable members of society. In her preface she proposed to remedy "the worst evils under which we suffer, evils long supposed to be inherent and ineradicable in our natures, are but the result of certain arbitrary conditions of our own adoption, . . . by removing those conditions, we may remove the evils resultant" (xiii). Restructuring society along feminist and socialist principles became Gilman's answer to improving the lives of both men and "the thinking women of today" (xiii).

Literary reviewers and women intellectuals of her day praised *Women and Economics*, which became a popular college text in the 1920s. A June 8, 1899, review in the *Nation* compared it to John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women," and in July of that same year Charles Lummis dubbed it "an enduring meteor in the sky, a flaming sword which wise enemies will shrink from" in *Land of Sunshine* (qtd. in Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 55). By 1911 it had gone through seven English editions, and it was also translated into seven languages: French, German, Dutch, Italian, Japanese, Hungarian, and Russian. It stopped selling when, after World War I, Gilman lost much of her influence. In 1966 at the onset of second-wave feminism, Carl Degler reprinted *Women and Economics*, redirecting attention to a work that women's rights advocates still praise for its many insights about the status of women.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How would you define Gilman's term *sexuoeconomic condition*? Gilman coined this term in 1898; is it still relevant today now that women are wage earners? Which of Gilman's ideas to improve society—kitchenless homes, child care centers, dress reform, women and work, or others—are most appealing?
2. What reforms that Gilman proposed at the turn of the 20th century would still benefit men and women today? Does Gilman direct her reforms to all of America or to a distinct community within American culture? If so, how would you define that community?

***The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an Autobiography* (1925)**

Gilman wrote her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, after World War I, when her reputation was waning. By 1925 during the twilight of a remarkable career, she had written all but the final chapter. The autobiography narrates her oft-noted impoverished and trying childhood; her sustained desire to contribute to humanity; her marriage to Walter Stetson and subsequent breakdown after the birth of her only child, Katharine, whom she sent to live with Stetson just before his remarriage; her productive years as a lecturer, writer, and editor; her second marriage, to her first cousin, Houghton Gilman; and as she lost her audience, her final frustrated efforts in writing and lecturing as she aimed to continue her life's work during a climate of increasing conservatism. She wrote the final chapter just weeks before her death in 1934 having placed the book with a publisher, Appleton-Century.

Some chapter titles reveal hardships of her life—for example, “The End of Childhood,” “Girlhood—If Any,” and “The Breakdown.” Nonetheless, the passage of time seems to have softened some of her memories, such as of her marriage. She creates a loving picture of Stetson but also details her depression in being married to that conventional man, whom her biographer Ann J.

Lane suggests served as the prototype for John in “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Two chapters—“The Breakdown” and “Pasadena”—offer insight into Gilman's creation of her best-known story. Gilman, in “The Breakdown,” vividly re-creates her nervous depression after the birth of Katharine, which resulted in a debilitating melancholy. She describes her trip west, a prescription for recovery that she repeatedly prescribes for her fictional characters, including Jacqueline “Jack” Warner of *Unpunished* (ca. 1929). Of significance also is her recounting of her stay in the Philadelphia sanitarium of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, whom she names and indicts in “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” In “Pasadena” Gilman presents the publication history of the story, including its early reviews; some of this history appears in her well-known 1913 *Forerunner* article “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper?’”

Although autobiography is now a growing genre among women writers, Gilman granted herself authority as an autobiographer at a time when few women authors chose to do so. Gilman recounts her “living,” not her “life.” Her biographer Gary Scharnhorst suggests we read Gilman's line in *His Religion and Hers* (1923) as explanation of the title of her autobiography: “We should not say ‘life’ as a noun but ‘living’ as an active verb” (Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 114). The present participle speaks to Gilman's aim to involve her readers actively in the “living” of a writer now recognized for her contributions to American literature and feminism. Although her autobiography is about her dynamic living, it is also a remarkable achievement that while she was dying, she completed her text, revised it, edited it for publication, chose the illustrations, and arranged for a foreword to be written by her friend the author Zona Gale. Critics now recognize *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, published posthumously (October 4, 1935), as an enduring part of her literary legacy; excerpts appear in a range of collections about her life and work.

For Discussion or Writing

How does the title of the autobiography set an important tone for the work? What is gained

- Knight, Denise D., and Cynthia J. Davis, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Herland*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003.
- Knight, Denise D., and Jennifer Tuttle, eds. *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007.
- Lane, Ann J., ed. *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*. 2d ed. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999.
- . *To Herland and Beyond*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.
- Rudd, Jill, and Val Gough, eds. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Optimist Reformer*. Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1999.
- Scharnhorst, Gary. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Boston: Twayne, 1985.
- . *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1985.
- St. John, Shawn, ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper": A Dual-Text Critical Edition*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006.
- Catherine Golden



FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

(1825–1911)

In her the down-trodden slave found an earnest advocate; the flying fugitive remembered her kindness . . . little children learned to name her with affection, the poor called her blessed.

(“The Two Offers”)

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is what we might call a neglected writer, neglected not because her work has been ignored—it has not—but because, often, literary critics refuse to take her on her own terms. Harper was one of the most prominent African-American writers and thinkers of the 19th century and, arguably, the most prolific. She produced numerous volumes of poetry; wrote four novels, which appeared between 1868 and 1892; authored the first African-American work of short fiction; penned essays on subjects ranging from Christianity to racial justice to women’s suffrage; and regularly lectured on pressing social subjects of her time. She was a founding member and vice president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), established in 1896, and an executive member of the National Women’s Christian Temperance Union. An active antislavery worker before the Civil War, she served as director of the American Association for the Education of Colored Youth during the aftermath of Reconstruction. In the postwar years Harper traveled throughout the South as a lecturer for the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, which had been founded in Philadelphia in 1787 by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Harper’s speeches and essays often underscored her philosophy of morals, which she melded with the concept of democratic citizenship and the call to Christianity. In every sense of the term Harper was a tireless public intel-

lectual, whose poetry, fiction, essays, and speeches echoed her thought through imagery, allegory, and, occasionally, polemic.

In spite of this, Harper’s work has generally not been received in a consistently positive light, neither during her lifetime nor in the century that has passed since her death. In *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), the African-American novelist and autobiographer Williams Wells Brown cites Harper with some reserve, in spite of their long friendship: “All of Mrs. Harper’s writings are characterized by chaste language, much thought, and a soul stirring ring that are refreshing to the reader” (525). Yet, she was praised by Phebe Hanaford as one of the representative *Daughters of America; or, Women of the Century* (1883). Of the attention given her writing by early 20th-century critics, most appear to follow the lead of W. E. B. DuBois, who, when Harper died in February 1911, marked her death in the April 1911 issue of *Crisis* magazine, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). For DuBois, Harper’s legacy was readily summed up in few words. To his mind, she was “not a great writer, but she wrote much worth reading.” James Weldon Johnson, in the preface to his landmark collection *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), writes of Harper as an “obvious” poet who “merit[s] consideration when due allowances are made for [her] limitations

in education, training and general culture” (872). J. Saunders Redding, in his seminal book of criticism entitled *To Make a Poet Black* (1930), gave perhaps the most damning reading of Harper’s work. He concluded with some disappointment that Harper “was apt to gush with pathetic sentimentality over such subjects as wronged innocence, the evils of strong drink, and the blessed state of childhood” (40). Though he deemed her use of language in her collection of poetry *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) “fine,” he judged her prose “less commendable than her poetry” (43). He dismisses what many critics consider Harper’s strongest attempt at fiction, the 1892 novel *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted*. Redding calls it “a poor thing as a novel, or even as a piece of prose, too obviously forced and overwritten, too sensational to lift it from the plane of the possible to the probable” (43).

Recent recovery of Harper’s work has largely been by African-American women scholars, such as Frances Smith Foster, Maryemma Graham, Hazel Carby, and Melba Joyce Boyd, who in some instances see the harsh critical reception granted Harper by Redding and others as the short-sightedness of male critics. In the 1970s, at the height of the male-dominated black arts movement, the critic Addison Gayle, Jr., continued to assail *Iola Leroy*, calling it a “disastrous” case of literary assimilation wherein the thought of Harper’s contemporary, the radical black nationalist Martin R. Delany, was not at all taken into consideration (31). Working deftly to extract Harper’s novel from such an attack, Carby, in 1987, countered that the novel constituted an important representation of life during the Reconstruction era. Further, she argued that Harper’s work was not as deeply steeped in the tradition of 19th-century sentimentality as Redding and Gayle contended. *Iola Leroy* served as proof that Harper was intent on subverting the conventional lives of women. She believed it to be the responsibility of the African-American writer to take on these topics, and by way of treating such subjects as racism, morality, citizenship, and male-female relationships, the writer would be in a position to address holistically the concerns of the African-American community.

In this way Harper was an intellectual of her time. Born Frances Ellen Watkins, in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825, she lived during the age of what was called the “peculiar institution”—slavery. Though she and her parents were free people of color, they inhabited a state well known for its harsh practices of enslaving African Americans. Harper’s parents died when she was only three years old, but fortunately she was not left to fend for herself in the wilderness of slavery. She was taken to live with her uncle, William Watkins, and it was there that she was inculcated with the ideals of Christianity, the central principles of which remained with her throughout her life and left a mark that may be seen in all of her work, no matter the genre. Her uncle and his family were devoted members of the AME Church and were involved in local politics. William Watkins ran a school that Harper attended and where she excelled in oratory and writing.

As did most young people of her generation, Harper left school early to obtain employment. By age 13 or so, she was working as a domestic in Baltimore while continuing to read and practice her writing. Her employer was a book merchant, who gave her access to his library, and she took full advantage of his collection, reading and drafting works of poetry. Her compositions began to appear in newspapers, and, when she was 21, she was sufficiently polished to complete a book of poems, entitled *Forest Leaves* (and sometimes referred to as *Autumn Leaves*), which was published in Baltimore in 1846. No copy of this first volume is known to exist.

Harper soon grew weary of living in the slave state of Maryland. She longed to live and die in what she memorialized in one of her poems as a “free land.” With this in mind, she moved to the free state of Ohio, where she took a position as an instructor at Union Seminary, a school founded by the Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1847. Union would be dissolved in 1863, when the AME bishop Daniel Payne purchased property on which to build Wilberforce University, whose faculty and student body would absorb that of Union. Harper served as an instructor there from 1850 through 1851.

In 1852 she took a position teaching in Little York, Pennsylvania. The Fugitive Slave Act had taken effect in 1850, and in 1853 Harper's home state of Maryland passed a law stating that any person of color who entered the state by way of its northern border could be sold into slavery. Effectively, this meant that Harper could never go home again. In Pennsylvania she became involved with the Underground Railroad, and it was during this time that she published the poem "Eliza Harris," which appeared both in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and in *Frederick Douglass's Paper* in December 1853. A dramatic poem of 14 quatrains, "Eliza Harris" echoes the theme of HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Emphasizing the indelible ties between mother and child, Harper exposes the shame of slavery, a stain on her country's "glory" and a mockery of its "star spangled banner." In an era during which pro-slavery agitators insisted that black women were incapable of love for their children (and thus that it was no shame that these children were regularly sold away from them), Harper, basing her poem on an incident that had occurred in Cincinnati, Ohio, insisted otherwise. She would emphasize her determination to critique and historicize slavery's cruelty in "The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio" (1856), which dramatizes the true story of Margaret Garner. Garner, whom Harper depicts as drawn toward the state of Ohio by the brightly shining "northern star," fled there with her four children in search of freedom. Her quest was thwarted by the Fugitive Slave Act; as she faced recapture, Garner determined that her children would be better off in death than in a life of perpetual servitude. Indeed, Harper insists that Garner fulfilled her motherly duty toward her children: "I will save my precious children / From their darkly threatened doom, / I will hew their path to freedom / Through the portals of the tomb" (*A Brighter Coming Day* 85). Garner succeeded in killing one child, the infant, before she was subdued and captured. Harper closes the poem thus: "Sends this deed of fearful daring / Through my country's heart no thrill, / Do the icy hands of slavery / Every pure emotion chill? / Oh! If there is any honor, / Truth or justice

in the land, / Will ye not, as men and Christians, / On the side of freedom stand?" Garner's American tragedy and Harper's appeal to American conscience would be echoed in the modern work of Toni Morrison. Morrison fictionalized the plight of Margaret Garner, and, by extension, America's plight, in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987). She also penned the words to the libretto of the opera *Margaret Garner* (2005).

By the time Harper poetically historicized the tragedy of Margaret Garner, she had printed a second book of poetry, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854). She had also entered the realm of speaker on the antislavery lecture circuit. She spoke throughout the state of Maine, as well as in parts of Canada. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the expatriate African-American newspaper editor who had taken up residence in Ontario (in order to escape the reach of the Fugitive Slave Act), remarked upon Harper's popularity and effectiveness as a lecturer, referring to her as "the greatest female speaker" ever to visit her area (Boyd 45). While Harper was on tour, she sold copies of her books, donating a portion of the proceeds to the cause of the Underground Railroad. She continued her work on the lecture circuit until her 1860 marriage to Fenton Harper, a widower with three children. Their marriage produced a daughter, Mary, born to them in 1862.

Fenton, however, died in 1864, leaving substantial debt that Harper was called to offset through her own efforts. Once again, she took to lecturing, and she was well received. She had not been silent during her married years, though she had remained ensconced on her husband's farm outside Columbus, Ohio. She had, in fact, published a poem on motherhood and another commemorating "President Lincoln's Proclamation of Freedom," and had given a few lectures. When Harper returned fully to public life, she became a member of the newly established Equal Rights Association. There, she became associated with not only FREDERICK DOUGLASS and Sojourner Truth, but also Harriet and Robert Purvis, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Harper soon found herself at odds with her new colleagues. She could fully agree neither with Douglass's insistence

that the quest for freedom for all African Americans and suffrage for black men trumped the suffrage demands of women, nor with Anthony, Mott, and Stanton, who saw Douglass as something of a traitor to their feminist cause. They insisted that to grant freedom to blacks and suffrage to black men was to imperil white women gravely. While Harper often saw herself as a mediator between the two camps, she could not help but see Douglass's point and called for the immediate emancipation of persons of African descent as a more urgent need than woman's suffrage. In her poetry and fiction she in turn called upon African-American men to be "true" men and to protect the rights and virtue of African-American women.

With the end of the Civil War in 1865 began nominal freedom for African Americans, nominal because while they were free by law, they were certainly not free in truth. They continued to suffer degradation and discrimination and were made to endure the terrorist onslaught of the Ku Klux Klan and other racist organizations. The year 1865 marked the beginning of a brief period of Reconstruction in the South, and the founding of the Freedmen's Bureau offered Harper glimmering hope that the nation intended to shepherd the newly freed slaves through a period of transition and into full enfranchisement. Thinking that the sacrifice of her friend John Brown (who had led the ill-fated raid on Harpers Ferry in Virginia in 1859) had not been in vain, Harper quickly headed south to see to the needs of the emancipated slaves while maintaining her ties to the North. She taught and lectured, preaching a doctrine of humanism to persons of both races. It was during the Reconstruction period, in 1869, that she published her most striking work of poetry, *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. A book-length narrative poem divided into nine chapters, this work marks a sharp departure from Harper's earlier compositions. In it she neglects the form of rhyming quatrains that had characterized so much of her poetry in favor a free verse form. Moses, a Christian archetype who appears in a number of Harper's works, plays a prominent role in her formulation of a symbolic system, whereby the plight of African Americans was allegorized

through the plight of the Hebrews. Harper's poetics shine forcefully in this work. It is, perhaps, the pinnacle of her compositions.

Of her four novels only one was initially published in book form. Her first novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, appeared in 1869 as a serial publication of the *Christian Recorder*, consisting of 20 chapters published over a six-month period. It clearly reflects the Moses archetype so prevalent in Harper's poetry and developed at length in *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. Her second serialized novel, also in the *Christian Recorder*, is *Sowing and Reaping* (1876–77). Appearing near the close of Reconstruction, the novel is, in Harper's words, a "temperance story" with minimal focus on race that cautions against excessive alcohol consumption and immoral behavior. The final serialized novel is *Trial and Triumph* (1888–89), whose heroine resembles in some ways Harper herself. The heroine, Annette Harcourt, is orphaned at a young age and lives with her grandmother, Mrs. Harcourt. The grandmother's death leaves the girl bereft, and she is placed in her uncle's home to live with him and his family. Unlike the loving environment Harper enjoyed in her own uncle's home after the death of her parents, Annette finds neither acceptance nor love in her new situation. She enters womanhood under the guidance of her teacher, Mrs. Lasette, who schools her in writing, oratory, and morals and warns her, and the reader, against aggressive materialism and impiety. These three novels have been collected and edited by Frances Smith Foster and appeared in book form for the first time in 1994. *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* is Harper's best-known work. It is her only novel to appear initially in book form and was published in 1892. Situated around the time of the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, *Iola Leroy* examines questions of race and color, class and education, and the right path for an emerging African-American middle class.

Before her death in 1911 Harper would go on to publish five more collections of poetry: *The Martyr of Alabama* (1894); *Atlanta Offerings* (1895); *Poems* (1896; reprinted in 1898 and 1900); *Idylls of the Bible* (1901), which contains a reprint of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*; and *The Sparrow's Fall and*

Other Poems (no date). In many ways Harper epitomizes Ralph Ellison's ideal writer, though Ellison himself never analyzed her work. In her writings Harper treated the African American, both slave and free, as a symbol of humanity, a literary gesture Ellison considered to be "organic to 19th-century literature" (32). Harper's attentions to the ironies and tragedies attendant on 19th-century America underscore her insistence upon the moral responsibility of U.S. literature. She was not, however, content with being an "armchair" intellectual and moralist. Instead, she shaped her thought into praxis. She insisted on active engagement with American society, male as well as female, black as well as white.

"The Slave Mother" (1854)

This poem, appearing in Harper's collection *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (first published in 1854, with revised editions in 1857 and 1874), solidified Harper's reputation as a poet. It was immensely popular, and she was regularly called upon to recite it. The poem takes up themes close to Harper's heart: motherhood, the ties between mother and child, and the horrors of slavery. Harper eschews the popular meter of iambic pentameter in favor of alternating lines of verse written in iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. The first two lines of the opening stanza are written in iambic trimeter, and thus they are read quickly: "Heard you that shriek? It rose / So wildly on the air." The reader is by this means plunged into the poem's narrative suspense, and emphasis is placed on these lines as conveying the central action around which the poem revolves. As we continue to engage lines of alternating meter, we are carried along by the relatively quick tempo of the poem, our eyes falling down the page until we reach the final stanza, which concludes the narrative thus: "No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks / Disturb the listening air: / She is a mother, and her heart / Is breaking in despair." By moving us along so quickly, yet never relenting in the intensity of her message, Harper's use of meter works effectively with the meaning, for

while we are briefly uplifted by the poem's imagery in the seventh stanza ("His love has been a joyous light / That o'er her pathway smiled, / A fountain gushing ever new, / Amid life's desert wild"), we are swiftly carried along the stream of the slave mother's despair.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics such as J. Saunders Redding have argued that Harper's poems evince "errors of metrical construction which, missed when the poems are spoken, show up painfully on the printed page" (44). Considering the first two lines of the poem, which are written in a different alternating meter than the poem's remainder, write a paragraph defending Harper's use of meter in "The Slave Mother."
2. Though Harper's use of meter draws the reader's eye swiftly down the page, her metrical feet progress slowly enough to resemble natural speech patterns. Given Harper's use of this poem in her antislavery lectures, how might the speech rhythms of the poem have contributed to its power?
3. Consider the ways in which Harper's poem "The Slave Mother" may be compared to the characters Eliza Harris and Cassy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Pay particular attention to chapters 7 and 34 in the Stowe novel.

"On the Twenty-fourth Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society" (1857)

This essay is a valuable statement of Harper's politics near the middle of the 19th century. It is not widely anthologized, nor widely read, yet it occurs at a crucial moment in the history of African Americans. In 1857 the United States found itself in the throes of financial panic, thereby placing utmost importance on the institution of slavery as an economic engine. Slavery formed the backbone of the nation's burgeoning industrial revolution, and any attempt to abolish it was seen as a great threat. This was, in addition to the fear of race

mixing and racial equality, a matter that motivated slaveholders to block all attempts at emancipating the slaves. The position of slaveholders seemed to be supported by the 1857 ruling in the now-infamous *Dred Scott* case. The Compromise of 1850 had sought to assuage the sentiments of Southern slaveholding states, establishing a balance of power between North and South through the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. However, the compromise proved an insufficient temporary measure; it set the slaveholding South in a mode of great vigilance and political posturing, just as it encouraged Northern abolitionists to battle more diligently for the eradication of slavery. The *Dred Scott* decision, which occurred shortly before Harper gave this essay as a speech, added fuel to the sectional tensions and, it may rightly be said, furthered the nation along the path to civil war. Dred Scott, a slave who had been taken by his master from the slave state of Missouri to the free state of Illinois and then again to Missouri sued for his freedom in a Missouri court. He based his case upon the fact of his temporary residence in a free territory; because he had lived on free soil, he asserted that he had a right to liberty. The case slowly made its way from the Missouri court system to the United States Supreme Court. It was there that in a decision rendered with the support of seven Supreme Court justices (two of the jurists dissented), Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that African Americans were not citizens and thus had no legal recourse to the justice system. At the same time the justices nullified the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had forbidden slavery in that part of the Louisiana Purchase north of the latitude 36°30', except in Missouri. It is this infamous decision of the nation's highest court that Harper references when she quotes Taney, writing, "You are a negro [*sic*]; you have no rights which white men are bound to respect."

This essay is as remarkable for its emphasis upon the failing economy of the 1850s as for its critique of the North. Harper's economic analysis of slavery is of a piece with that put forward by the abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass. His masterpiece of oration "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852) foreshadows Harper's words. More-

over, her critique of the North seems to have been conditioned by the thought that it might be morally profitable for the North to separate itself, politically, from the South; in essence, Harper called for the "disunion" of North and South. During summer 1857 Harper, along with her friend the 19th-century African-American autobiographer, novelist, playwright, and abolitionist William Wells Brown, would present her ideas on "disunion" before a convention assembled to debate the point.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Douglass's essay "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Compare this essay, which Douglass read before the Ladies Antislavery Society of Rochester, New York, in 1852, to Harper's essay. Comment on the historical period and the audiences to whom the essays were delivered. Give some attention to rhetorical devices and effectiveness.
2. Research the *Dred Scott* decision, and write an essay that analyzes Harper's speech through the prism of this historical judicial proceeding.

"The Two Offers" (1859)

"The Two Offers" was Harper's first attempt at short fiction, and it is considered by most scholars to be the first short story written by an American of African descent. Published in 1859, it echoes themes that are to be found in other works by Harper, most notably her second novel, *Sowing and Reaping: A Temperance Story* (1876–77). The story is first and foremost a tale of morals. It concerns two cousins, Laura Lagrange, the only daughter of a rich family, and Janette Alston, a young woman born to a family of modest means. While Laura has been doted upon, Janette has made her way alone in the world since the death of her parents.

Harper introduces the characters immediately after Laura has received two offers of marriage. Laura eventually chooses one of the two men, and we meet the cousins again after the passage of 10 years. The central ideas of the story take shape as Laura lies on her deathbed, neglected by her hus-

band, and passes mercifully from this life to the next. Like *Sowing and Reaping*, “The Two Offers” is a temperance story. Laura dies of neglect by a husband who is taken to drink and loose living. Even the birth and death of their child do not draw the husband back to the fold of the home, and this is because he had not been “blessed” with a home that was “the birthplace of high resolves, and the altar upon which lofty aspirations are kindled” (*A Brighter Coming Day* 111). The narrator condemns the husband’s mother for his shortcomings, for her duty was to teach him “how to produce the grandest of all poems—the poetry of a true and noble life” (110).

While Laura soon loses her zest for living, her cousin Janette has remained unmarried, withstanding taunts regarding her status as an old maid. The biography of Harper probably enters the story through Janette. Harper was 34 years of age when she composed this story and did not marry until the year after its publication; thus, it is likely that the moral she presents to her reader echoes the moralizing process of her own life. As Janette turns from Laura’s deathbed, we note that the “higher and better” (114) goals of Janette’s life had taken shape in Harper’s own life work: “In her the down-trodden slave found an earnest advocate; the flying fugitive remembered her kindness as he stepped cautiously through our Republic, to gain his freedom in a monarchical land, having broken the chains on which the rust of centuries had gathered” (114). The author’s final caution is in these lines: “True happiness consists not so much in the fruition of our wishes as in the regulation of desires and the full development and right culture of our whole natures” (114).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider that Harper uses this story to comment upon the role of women in 19th-century society. How does Harper construe marriage, motherhood, and the private space of the home?
2. Harper positions Janette and Laura as opposites in this story. How do their differences (of wealth, marital status, employment, etc.) serve to move the plot forward?
3. The narrator speaks of mothers as “artists,” who should be capable of “writing on the soul of childhood the harmony of love and truth” (110). Consider the convergence of motherhood, poetry, and idealism in this story.
4. In what ways does Harper’s short story “The Two Offers” exemplify women’s writing of the mid-19th century? Compare and contrast Harper’s story with the final chapter of HARRIET JACOBS’s nonfiction work *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

“Bury Me in a Free Land” (1864)

This is the poem through which Harper has become known to readers today. Critics generally refer to the poem as Harper’s epitaph. In a composition of eight quatrains, each stanza of the poem develops a scene that reinforces the poem’s overall meaning, which is, in short, a call to abolition. The major devices that move the poem along are rhyme and repetition. The end rhyme scheme Harper uses is *aabb*; she employs both pure rhymes and slant rhymes. Pure rhymes make up the largest part of the rhyme scheme, existing in such pairs as *will/hill*, *grave/slave*, and *lash/gash*. Slant rhymes, in which sounds are closely related but not identical, occur in such combinations as *bay/prey* and *high/by*, and even these are quite close to pure rhymes. The rhyming combination of *grave/slave* repeats in the second stanza, and the word *slaves* closes the poem. Harper’s use of repetition is dramatic, as she places a narrator in the text to convey a vividly imagined set of scenes. The most constant repetition in the poem is a variation upon the first-person pronoun, *I*. None of the stanzas lacks this pronoun. Stanzas 2 through 4 employ anaphora, in other words, they commence similarly: “I could not rest,” “I could not sleep,” “I could not rest.” With each recurrence we are reminded of the poet’s dying wish for peace in death, yet we are also compelled to examine that which conditions her wish, the prevalence of slavery in the land of her birth. Thus, birth and death are juxtaposed; the recurrence of the *I* in the poem keeps us quite aware of the narrator’s existence and

subjectivity, and with each recurrence we are just as aware of the imminent proximity of her death. With each stanza, with each recurrence, a new aspect of her dilemma is presented to dramatically different effect.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The poem ends in a rhyme scheme similar to that which closes the first stanza. How does this technique lend significance to the poem?
2. When a poet repeats a pattern, she or he wishes to evoke a certain response. In this poem each stanza forms a complete sentence. Write a brief essay discussing how Harper uses patterns of syntax in this poem to influence the way the reader experiences the composition.

“President Lincoln’s Proclamation of Freedom” (1865)

This poem, written about 1865, is a composition of nine quatrains. In lyrical expression of hope for the future, the strongest structural characteristics of this poem are rhyme and repetition. The rhyme scheme is *abcb*. We have, of course, seen such a scheme in much poetry from Harper; however, in this poem Harper insists upon pure rhyming elements. The rhyming pairs of each quatrain are *years/tears*, *bright/light*, *Caroline/shine*, *crime/time*, *key/free*, *light/light*, *dust/just*, *away/day*, *light/sight*. The first point we are led to notice is the absence of slant rhyme. Slant rhymes can be great innovations; they often insist upon the unexpected. Pure rhymes are clear and bold; they call attention to the poet’s versification and intentions. The pure rhyming pairs are metronomes; they establish a pattern, both aural and visual. They are neither opposites nor synonyms; by themselves, they establish no true sense of meaning. Their purpose appears to lie in their ability to call attention to the meaning that inheres in each stanza. In this way they work in concert with the repetition of certain elements of the poem. The word *shall*, which appears 15 times in the poem, sharply underscores the poet’s emphasis on

a determined future for the newly freed slaves. It appears in all but one stanza and is connected to images of light and processes of enlightenment that, the poet intimates, attend emancipation. The reference to “the sun-kissed brow of labor” should be read in light of Harper’s poem “Free Labor” (discussed later). Self-determination, freedom to participate as workers in the public marketplace, and the moral attributes of labor (through which one contributes to society) are all emphasized in the poem. The use of anaphora in the poem (primarily through the repetition of the phrase “It shall” in the first three stanzas) grants this piece the quality of an anthem. Though the anaphora breaks off in the middle of the poem, the rhythm reminds one of the strident tones of Julia Ward Howe’s “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1862).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Research the condition of free laborers and artisans of African-American descent during the Reconstruction period, and write a paper that expands upon the concept of “free labor” expressed in Harper’s poetry. One book that might be helpful to such a project is *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1800* (1935), by W. E. B. DuBois.
2. Explain the way Harper personifies oppression in this poem (see stanzas 6 and 7). How does her use of personification add strength to her poem?
3. Discuss the sorts of imagery at work in this piece. How, for instance, are colors used? What effectiveness lies in the imagery of mountains? How are light and darkness juxtaposed?

“Vashti” (1870)

This poem exemplifies Harper’s ideas regarding the intersection of her Christian beliefs and her poetic leanings. She bases this poem on a scene from the first chapter of the Book of Esther in the Old Testament. Harper’s focus is not on Esther, an orphaned Jewish maiden who became queen of

Persia and thus was able to save the Jews from persecution. Instead, Harper focuses on Esther's predecessor, Vashti, who relinquished her crown in lieu of debasing herself before a throng of royalty. This poem allows Harper obliquely to expound her beliefs in both temperance and "true womanhood," for the biblical verses she expands upon tell us that Vashti's husband, Ahasuerus (Xerxes), king of Persia, was inebriated ("The king was merry with wine," Esther 1:10). Vashti's refusal marks her as a woman of honor in Harper's eyes. More important, her refusal to unveil herself led the king to issue a decree that would strengthen male dominance in his provinces, demonstrating that he and his counselors felt threatened by Vashti's defiance. Although the unknown author of this historical book of the Bible grants Vashti no voice (she does not speak there; she only—but importantly—defies Xerxes), Harper uses her 17-stanza poem to grant Vashti speech. In alternating stanzas of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, Vashti speaks and acts through an *abcb* rhyme scheme. The swiftness of the poem underscores the urgency of her situation and reinforces her right to stand upon her moral principles: She would rather give up her diadem than live in shame as queen. She refuses to be objectified as merely one of the king's possessions. Though the Bible does not depict Vashti's actual departure, Harper shows her leaving under the light of grace, a "woman who could bend to grief, / But would not bow to shame."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Harper's poem about Vashti may be called an encomium, or a laudatory poem that celebrates a historical person. Compare the first chapter of the Book of Esther to Harper's poem and explain the importance of voice in the poem.
2. Read a few works by Harper (the short story "The Two Offers," along with other works mentioned here, will suffice), and identify core elements of Harper's style. What sorts of words does she enjoy using? How does her word choice, along with her use of poetic structure, convey her values?

"An Appeal to the American People" (1871)

Like "Free Labor," "An Appeal to the American People" was probably written during the Reconstruction era in the year 1871, though it differs from "Free Labor" in form and theme. It consisted of seven sestets and uses a rhyme scheme of *aabbcc*. The poet calls for the maintenance of democratic rights achieved in the aftermath of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Obviously, the poet responds to the threat of the Ku Klux Klan when she writes of the "traitor who stands / With the crimson on his hands, / Scowling 'neath his brow of hate, / On our weak and desolate, / With the blood-rust on the knife / Aimed at the nation's life." In penning these words, Harper took a risk that, in real terms, could have jeopardized her life. Ida B. Wells, who had documented lynchings by the Klan and lynch mobs, would be driven from her newspaper office in Tennessee by threats against her life in the 1890s. The racist hatred of the Klan would be infamously memorialized and glorified in 1915 by the filmmaker D. W. Griffith, whose film *Birth of a Nation* depicted Klan members as the restorers and protectors of the nation's ideals. Harper's work would provide a counterargument to the diatribe of Griffith, and her lectures and poetry served as an example to Wells, who traveled to England to gain support for her antilynching campaign. Forcefully Harper's poem speaks to the democratic moral sensibilities of the American people. In this spirit she appeals to the reader not to allow the "traitor" to "write above our slain / 'They have fought and died in vain.'"

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do a library search for the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and write a paper discussing the role of Harper and Wells-Barnett as 19th-century black feminists in the antilynching movement.
2. Identify those elements of this poem that provide the basis for Harper's use of the word *traitor*. In what ways do the injustices that she details in the poem constitute traitorous conduct? Can you identify groups in contemporary

American society that might qualify as traitorous in the same sense?

“Aunt Chloe’s Politics” (1872)

Published in *Sketches of Southern Life*, “Aunt Chloe’s Politics” is one of a number of “Aunt Chloe” poems. In them Aunt Chloe emerges as a plainspoken moralist and appears to be a composite sketch of wise African-American women Harper encountered during her travels through the South. The Aunt Chloe who appears in this collection of poetry undoubtedly serves as a model for Aunt Linda, a character who figures importantly in Harper’s most accomplished work of fiction, *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892). It is reasonable to assume that the women Harper encountered during her visits to the South, and who served collectively as the basis for the characters of Aunt Chloe and Aunt Linda, did not match up well with some of the standard features of Harper’s usual poetic style. While she maintains her use of iambic meter and alternating lines of three and four iambic feet, she seems to have relinquished her use of anaphora, traditional imagery of light, and so forth. In its place we find the consistent play of black vernacular speech. Aunt Chloe’s language is ripe with such commonplaces as double descriptives (“mighty ugly,” found in the first stanza, and “honey-fugle,” appearing in the second stanza). It is important to note that while these were commonplaces in the everyday speech of the African-American working class, they were ingenious innovations in Western poetic forms. Chloe’s expressive use of the structure “looking (someone) in the face” foreshadows Zora Neale Hurston’s use and discussion of the phrase “to kill (someone) dead.” In Hurston’s essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), the writer, anthropologist, and sociolinguist (whose most famous work is the 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) notes that the repetitive nature of such phrases is purposeful, serving as both a flourish of language and an underscoring of the action involved. Certainly, one would expect that if we look at someone, we look at that per-

son’s face unless we indicate otherwise; similarly, if someone is killed by whatever means, that person is dead. The repetition in “kill dead” is superfluous but lends an emphatic character to the language. The phrase “to school our children,” appearing in the fourth stanza, is an exemplary verbalization of a noun; this usage is seminal to African-American vernacular expression and spread in prevalence from primarily African-American communities to general use throughout the South. With her series of poems on Aunt Chloe, Harper won praise from even her harshest critics. J. Saunders Redding, who had roundly criticized her poems as lacking in force and originality, saw Harper’s vernacular poems as groundbreaking. Harper had, Redding reluctantly admitted, anticipated PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR’s use of dialect and James Weldon Johnson’s attention to folk speech. Further, she had done so without becoming ensnared in what Redding, Johnson, and others called the trap of dialect poetry. According to these critics, dialect poetry could do little more than express humor and pathos. Harper had succeeded in moving beyond the limitations of dialect poetry as a literary convention.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” and use Hurston’s argument to explain Harper’s incorporation of vernacular expression in this poem.
2. Analyze Harper’s poem for its use of metaphor and other instances of figurative language. Consider especially the ways her use of figurative language further establishes Aunt Chloe as a practical person who shrewdly draws on familiar experiences in establishing her point of view.
3. Read the Aunt Chloe poems from *Sketches of Southern Life* and discuss development of this character. How does Aunt Chloe serve as a voice for Harper’s ideals of womanhood, morality, equality, and Christianity?
4. Explain how the references to selling one’s race and “buying up each other” function in this poem. Think especially of the historical and cultural context in which Harper was writing.

“Free Labor” (1874)

Appearing in the collection *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, “Free Labor” undoubtedly attends to the dilemma of the newly emancipated African-American worker. It is not, however, a poem that has received broad critical attention, nor is it widely anthologized. “Free Labor” constitutes a rare moment in Harper’s poetic output when the import of the composition’s title is not readily reflected in the poem itself. We are called to deduce the relationship between title and poem by way of interpretation. Harper uses seven quatrains to present a narrative poem, the movement of which is guided by a speaker, *I*. The tone is gentle, and one has the sense that although Harper here uses a rhyme scheme of *abcb* and alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, we are not led through our reading by a sense of urgency. Indeed, the title, “Free Labor,” imparts a sense not simply of ease but also of relief and autonomy. This sense is established by the first stanza: “I wear an easy garment, / O’er it no toiling slave / Wept tears of hopeless anguish, / In his passage to the grave.” The voice is that of the freed slave, employing his labor for his own sustenance and not for the leisure of a master who does not work himself. The freedman’s sentiments are channeled through the garment he wears, which is personified to some extent. The ease of the garment, its amplex, its freedom from burdens, all reflect the emotions of the speaker. The garment the speaker wears as he works, free from oppression, reinforces the speaker’s sense of liberated subjectivity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Each stanza of this poem recounts an instance of degradation from which the speaker has been freed. Discuss Harper’s use of such moments in light of the title of the poem, “Free Labor.”
2. This poem was written at the height of the Reconstruction era. Research this era and the questions regarding labor that were important at this time, and write a paper that places this poem in a political and economic context.
3. Read the poem closely for elements that repeat, such as “light” or “lightly,” and discuss the

meaning Harper intends to convey through such repetition.

“Woman’s Political Future” (1893)

One of Harper’s more widely anthologized essays, this piece was given as a speech before the World’s Congress of Representative Women as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition. Christianity, temperance, family, and human rights are all themes that Harper forcefully exerts in this essay, which may be one of her finest.

The fair, which took place in Chicago 28 years after the close of the Civil War, was intended by U.S. industrialists such as the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie to demonstrate America’s progress and prowess since the Civil War. Carnegie considered world’s fairs to be bloodless fields of international striving upon which each nation contended for artistic, scientific, and technological supremacy. The fairs were also meant to be material displays of white men’s social and political power, although white women were also designated a single building dedicated to the display of their work and advancement. Significantly, the Women’s Building was designed by a woman architect, Sophia Hayden. Further, it must be noted that, after much agitation by Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and others, African Americans were given a small exhibition space inside the Women’s Building and were allowed as visitors to the fair on one day alone: August 25, 1893. Yet, it has often been remarked that the very layout of the fairgrounds was meant to underscore the supremacy of white men in all realms of life: The Women’s Building was situated at the edge of what was called the White City and could be found near the entrance to the Midway Plaisance. The Midway was home to displays of persons of color from around the world, largely those of colonized countries. It also provided space for the amusement of visitors to the fair; while the White City displayed the height of technological knowledge and military might, the Midway granted one the leisure of observing that which was considered uncivilized. The linear arrangement of the fairgrounds—from

the White City of men, to the Women's Building (which enclosed the Negro American exhibit) on the margins of the White City, to the flamboyance of the Midway (where the people of color were themselves on display in makeshift villages and the like)—was yet another way of announcing the ideal order of things in America.

Harper begins her essay by subverting the assumption that lay at the center of the fair's organization—that is, the dominant conviction that all serious cultural advancement was white and male. Because of their ability to contribute morally and spiritually to the advancement of the nation, women, she argues, remain central to not only American but global society. "Mind is more than matter," Harper insists, and because "the highest ideal" is "always the true real," woman, the possessor of true sentiment and knowledge, Harper seems to say, surpasses man in her intellectual purity. As a consequence, woman has the opportunity to lead the world to "grander discoveries" than those made by Christopher Columbus (436).

Of course, Harper's rhetorical posturing here is on point, as the World's Fair that year was held in honor of Columbus's "discovery" of America. (Harper would certainly question the claim to "discovery," as Native Americans had erected a civilization that was already thriving upon Columbus's arrival.) She insists that America was standing "on the threshold of woman's era" (437), an era in which the cultural work of women would open a whole new world of cultural possibilities. It was up to women to build a stronger national character, not only through the rearing and educating of children (this is made clear in Harper's poetry), but also through direct participation in the social sphere. Harper saw voting as supremely important, and she also called upon woman to enter the workforce and claim "at least some of the wealth monopolized by her stronger brother" (437). As her own life evidenced, Harper saw women's future as flourishing beyond the sphere of the domestic. Indeed, she actively advocated the participation of women in political as well as economic realms and called upon them to temper the avarice and immo-

rality of some male leaders with what she referred to as the distinctive feminine virtues of temperance, Christianity, and universal human rights.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In this essay Harper sounds many of the warnings given by another African-American feminist of her time, Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper also presented a lecture at the 1893 Congress of Representative Women, entitled "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation: A Response to Fannie Barrier Williams." Read Cooper's essay, and identify the similarities to and differences from Harper's essay.
2. Research the role of African-American and European-American women at the 1893 fair, and write an essay commenting on the social and political positions espoused by these two groups.
3. Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, and other African-American activists compiled a collection of essays entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893). Wells contributed an essay entitled "Lynch Law" to this collection. Read her essay, and discuss how it elaborates on one of the last lines of Harper's text: "How can any woman send petitions to Russia against the horrors of Siberian prisons if, ages after the Inquisition has ceased to devise its tortures, she has not done all she could by influence, tongue, and pen to keep men from making bonfires of the bodies of real or supposed criminals?" (439).

"An Appeal to My Country Women" (1894)

"An Appeal to My Country Women" was written in 1894 and appears in the volume *Poems* published in 1895. Here, Harper employs a poetic mode that is less common to her work, that of alternating lines of anapest tetrameter and trimeter. In general, it is rare to find poems written in this syllabic pattern, and for this reason we understand

that Harper wishes this poem to grasp our attention and hold it rapt. The poem moves forward at a swift, marching pace, and it seems no coincidence that the “Star Spangled Banner” (1814) is written in the same meter and accent pattern. “An Appeal to My Country Women,” too, is a patriotic composition. The poem appeals specifically to the white women of America, urging them to join the newly freed slaves in empathy and sympathy. Comparing the lot of African-American men and women to that of the “sad-eyed Armenian” and the “exile of Russia,” Harper places the plight of African-American Southern laborers within a global context. Strikingly, she adopts a tone that is rare for her work, one of warning against a gathering threat. The poem practically constitutes a jeremiad (a prophetic warning of divine punishment), yet it does not list complaints alone. Consider these lines: “Weep not, oh my well-sheltered sisters, / Weep not for the Negro alone, / But weep for your sons who must gather / The crops which their fathers have sown.” Echoing the title of her second novel, *Sowing and Reaping*, Harper calls her female readers to take heed of the impending consequences of what she refers to as criminal acts in the wake of emancipation. The speaker in this poem assumes a public voice through which she speaks, as a feminist and social activist, on behalf of those who suffer from a common experience of degradation. The viewpoint the poet espouses is transparent; her tone makes it clear that the reader must make a difficult, but necessary, choice. Such is underscored by her use of conceit, or extended metaphor, in the last quatrain: “Tis the judgment of God that men reap / The tares which in madness they sow, / Sorrow follows the footsteps of crime, / And Sin is the consort of Woe.” The conceit consists in the extended imagery of men reaping that which they have sown. Harper refers to the “madness,” “crime,” and “Sin” inherent in their sowing and the “judgment” of “sorrow” and “Woe” that results. In her admonishments to the reader, Harper risks alienation. The greater hope and the greater benefit, however, lie in capturing the sympathy of the audience and in compelling them to take moral action.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Poems written in the anapestic meter are rare because it is difficult to match the subject of the poem to the composition’s meter. Reread the poem, analyzing it for meter, syllable pattern, and cohesion. Note any irregularities in meter or accent pattern, and discuss the way these irregularities illuminate important features of the poem and enhance its effectiveness.
2. Harper makes effective symbolic use of what may be called the “perceptual field” in this poem; that is, in this poem she uses visual images that may be taken for symbols—they stand for more than themselves. Analyze the poem’s use of visual symbolism, noting symbols that may be judged to be archetypal, or universal. Also note those symbols that seem to you to be personal to the poet.
3. Do some research on the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago. That year Harper presented a lecture, entitled “Woman’s Political Future,” before the World’s Congress of Representative Women, which had gathered at the exposition. Discuss how the themes of “An Appeal to My Country Women” dovetail with those of “Woman’s Political Future.”

“A Double Standard” (1895)

“A Double Standard” appears in the collection *Atlanta Offerings: Poems* (1895). In it Harper revisits a theme familiar to her work, that of the equality of the sexes. While the first stanza may give the reader the impression that the poem refers to love lost (“Do you blame me that I love him / If when standing all alone / I cried for bread a careless world / Pressed to my lips a stone”), the poem actually laments the dual standards employed in judging the morality of men and women. Harper makes the case that women are held to a higher standard of morality than are men; women, unlike men, are not allowed casual relationships between the sexes. If they engage in such relationships, they inevitably are ostracized, even as their male counterparts are welcomed in the most exclusive homes. The poem

- Douglass, Frederick. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. 1892. Reprint, London: Collier Books, 1969.
- . “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1st ed., New York: Norton, 1997.
- DuBois, W. E. B. “Editorial.” *Crisis* 1, no. 6 (April 1911): 20–22. Reprinted in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1800*. New York: The Free Press, 1992.
- Ellison, Ralph Waldo. “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity.” In *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Frances Watkins Harper. Available online. URL: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/watkins_frances_ellen.html. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Gayle, Addison, Jr. *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976.
- Hanaford, Phebe A. *Daughters of America; Or, Women of the Century*. Boston: B. B. Russell, 1883.
- Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. *Atlanta Offerings: Poems*. Philadelphia: George S. Ferguson, 1895.
- . *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. Edited by Frances Smith Foster. New York: Feminist Press, 1990.
- . *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*. Edited by Maryemma Graham. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- . *Enlightened Motherhood: An Address by Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper, before the Brooklyn Literary Society, November 15th, 1892*. Brooklyn: The Society, 1892.
- . *Forest Leaves*. N.p., 1846.
- . *Idylls of the Bible*. Philadelphia: n.p., 1901.
- . *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.
- . *Light beyond the Darkness*. Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, n.d.
- . *Minnie’s Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, and Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper*. Edited by Frances Smith Foster. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- . *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. Philadelphia: Merrihew, 1869.
- . *Poems*. Philadelphia: Merrihew, 1871.
- . *Poems*. Philadelphia: George B. Ferguson Co., 1895.
- . *Poems*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1970.
- . *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. Boston: J. B. Yerrington & Sons, 1854.
- . *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. 2d ed. Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1857.
- . *Sketches of Southern Life*. 1887. Reprint, Philadelphia: Merrihew & Son, 1888.
- . *The Sparrow’s Fall and Other Poems*. N.p., n.d.
- . “The Two Offers.” *Anglo-African Magazine* (September–October 1859): 288–291, 311–313.
- . “Woman’s Political Future.” In *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1st ed., New York: Norton, 1997.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” In *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1st ed., New York: Norton, 1997.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Rev. ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931.
- McDowell, Deborah E. *“The Changing Same”: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Redding, J. Saunders. *To Make a Poet Black*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap5/harper.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Still, William. Introduction to *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted*. 2d ed. By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Philadelphia: Garrigues Brothers, 1893.
- Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Wells, Ida B. “Lynch Law.” In *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature*. By Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett. Edited by Robert W. Rydell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.



JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS (1848–1908)

Here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road—lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity—dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird.

(Uncle Remus)

In 1882 at the home of George Washington Cable, a southern writer famous for his New Orleans dialect, a group of children gathered with hushed excitement, waiting for their promise to be fulfilled—namely, that Joel Chandler Harris, known to America as the lovable plantation storyteller Uncle Remus, was going to read the famous Tar-Baby story. How fascinating it must have been for the children in the moments before Harris's entry to conjure up visions of this dignified slave with a knack for entertaining through witty tales who was about to recount for them the stories of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox from his own lips while they pretended to be the nameless little white boy whom Uncle Remus instructed in Harris's tales. However, the children were not prepared to discover the true extent that the fictional narrator of a story may differ from its actual author. As Harris entered, he was greeted with cries of dismay and the unrestrained bluntness of children: "Why, he's white!" Their astonishment registered the fact that for the children of Harris's day the fictional slave narrator Uncle Remus was as tangible as their own parents.

The children's disappointment serves as a testament to the artistry and accomplishments of Harris, who, from his boyhood days, developed a keen ear for dialect and an ability to reproduce aptly the poetic cadences of African-American vernacular speech. His achievement extends beyond being a

pioneer in writing dialect: He also anticipated the discipline of folklore through his tales, captured a passing moment in U.S. history with his depiction of the old plantation South, and, most important, drew an authentic portrait of an enduring character who firmly holds his place in the minds of children. Despite the controversy surrounding Harris's own racist views, in 187 Uncle Remus tales, he succeeded in placing an African American at the forefront of American literature. Today, Harris stands as a force within the literary world and as quintessential a southern writer as any. In his own day his fame was second only to that of MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens).

Harris, however, would never possess the same flair and social aplomb that Twain did. In fact, on the day he visited Cable's home to read to the children, Harris declined to recite any tales. Even with children as the only audience, Harris felt nothing but awkward and embarrassed. Just a few months prior Harris had rejected an offer from Twain to partner with him on a lecture tour across the country. An unparalleled opportunity to most, the tour represented unbearable exposure to a pathologically shy man from the middle Georgia region. Harris's feelings of insecurity, shame, and vulnerability were deeply rooted in his illegitimate birth. Born in 1848 to the unwed Mary Harris in the immensely conservative area of Eatonton, Georgia, Joel Chandler Harris never knew his father, who was prob-

ably an Irish day laborer who absconded soon after Harris's birth. Harris's stars never seemed to shine very favorably on him in his youth. With his mother working as a seamstress, he grew up in utter poverty; physically, he was short, clumsy, and marked with his father's flaming Irish red hair. He spoke with a slight speech impediment, which, when provoked by public situations of embarrassment, could turn into a stammer.

The love of his mother helped stabilize the imbalances of a chaotic childhood; she taught Harris to rely on his talents, one of which was fostered by her reading to him Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Harris later recalls that his desire to write stemmed from his mother's reading this book to him as a child. Mary Harris also sent her son to the local grammar school, where Harris became the stereotypic prankster as a way to deflect attention from his red hair and freckles. Often truant at school and never an exceptional student when he did attend, Harris was celebrated for his mischievous deeds. One market day he loosed scads of pigs onto Main Street and terrified them so much that their squealing spooked the horses, creating general chaos. Oftentimes, Harris would be smitten with the neighbor's crops and organize a gang of friends to steal melons and peaches from the local fields. Whatever the pranks, Harris would consistently use them as a shield for his self-consciousness. As Harris's grammar school education approached an end in his early teens and Mary Harris was in desperate need of financial support, Harris, who frequented the post office to read discarded newspapers and magazines to feed his active mind, stumbled upon an ad that would propel him into a career of writing and mold immutable shapes into his later fiction: "Wanted: An active, intelligent white boy, 14 or 15 years of age, is wanted at this office, to learn the printing business."

Incontrovertibly, the experience at Turnwold Plantation, a relatively benevolent plantation where he began work in the "printing business" became the birthplace for the Uncle Remus tales. Between printing jobs on Turnwold, young Harris had plenty of leisure time to indulge his gifts and ambi-

tions on the 1,000-acre plantation—hunting rabbits and foxes among the wooded areas, visiting the one-room slave cabins, listening to animal stories told by the slaves, and engaging his capacious wit in a plantation library full of classics. There, he became a voracious reader of Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, RALPH WALDO EMERSON, and EDGAR ALLAN POE; there, he could freely observe life in the South, and perhaps discover that his own self-consciousness and feelings of isolation provided a common bond with the slaves. No doubt Harris projected himself into the slave fables that told of an oppressed underdog figure who triumphed at the end of the day through tricks and pranks. That his experience as a young white boy raptly listening to the stories of the older slaves left an indelible imprint on Harris is made stunningly clear when he invented the Uncle Remus tales 10 years later. At Turnwold a fatherless Harris sought father figures in the plantation's owner, Joseph Turner, who provided young Harris with years of support and instruction in writing, and in one of Turner's slaves, known on the plantation as "Uncle" George Terrell. Harris would later comment that Uncle Remus was a composite of several slaves on Turnwold Plantation. Harris soon began publishing short pieces of humor and poems in the style of Poe in the Turnwold newspaper, the *Countryman*, but his humorous pieces garnered him most attention and approbation of Joseph Turner, which fueled his desire to be a writer. In short, at Turnwold he had everything at his disposal, and the seeds were planted that would later ripen into the Uncle Remus tales.

While no single event shaped Harris as a writer more than the experience at Turnwold, Harris was forced to move into other endeavors after five years there, when the emancipation of slaves following the Civil War caused the downfall of plantation life. After the *Countryman*, Harris continued work in the newspaper business and accepted an offer at the *Macon Telegraph*, where, after only a few months, he was troubled by his coworkers' compulsion to jeer at his red hair. Perhaps to avoid ridicule, perhaps to search for more lucrative opportunities,

Harris moved to New Orleans in 1868, but the shy Georgia boy found big city life and the cultural melting pot overwhelming and perturbing at times. He moved back to middle Georgia after less than a year away. After taking menial jobs at various dwarf-sized newspapers, Harris landed a giant-sized job for the times—to be paid \$40 a week—as an associate editor for the *Savannah Morning News* in south Georgia. Harris would settle in Savannah for almost seven years, marrying Esther LaRose there on April 20, 1873, and gaining a statewide reputation for his editorial accomplishments, particularly his paragraph commentaries. Harris's work in Savannah and later in Atlanta was characterized by his penchant for racial joking. Pandering to a predominantly racist audience, Harris's newspaper paragraphs were more subtle than slurring: "The colored people of Macon celebrated the birthday of Lincoln again on Wednesday. This is the third time since last October" (Bickley, *Joel Chandler Harris* 27). To modern sensibilities Harris's attitude is more than a little discourteous toward African Americans, but placing him in the time of Reconstruction in the Old South, we find his beliefs to be prejudiced but progressive for his day. As for his Savannah life, disaster struck in 1876 when an epidemic of yellow fever spread through the city and forced Harris and his family (by then he had two children) to uproot, but Harris would never again live outside Georgia.

Harris's next move positioned him in Atlanta, a place where he found permanent employment until his retirement in 1900. Working for one of the New South's best known newspapers, Atlanta's *Constitution*, Harris happened across an article entitled "Folklore of the Southern Negroes," published in a leading magazine. This essay by William Owens included an animal fable called "Buh Rabbit and the Tar Baby." This fortuitous discovery prompted a wealth of Harris's latent memories to rise to consciousness. Never before had Harris considered his own experiences with Southern slaves worthy of publication. Owens's article taught him differently, and within a year's time Harris was publishing stories under the title "Negro Folklore" in the *Constitution*. While Uncle Remus first appears in

the *Constitution* in 1876, it was not until 1879 that Uncle Remus tales made use of the narrative frame that presents Uncle Remus as an elderly plantation slave telling stories to an inquisitive young white boy sitting on his knee. The Uncle Remus sketches instantly established Harris as a major regional writer. Shortly after he was approached by D. Appleton and Company, Harris's first collection of Uncle Remus tales, and what would turn out to be his most famous, was published in 1881 as *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, which included not only the tales but also aphoristic phrases and songs of Uncle Remus.

While Harris blossomed as a leading writer in the South, writing Uncle Remus sketches for the paper year after year, the teasing he had experienced throughout his life and his omnipresent insecurity returned in full force. Staff members of the *Constitution* would occasionally compose epic poems in Harris's name and leave them lying around the office for everyone's entertainment. One notable example parodied Harris's red hair and cited the difficulty the fire brigade had in quenching the burning flames that Harris used to illuminate his desk at night so that he could continue reading. Appropriately written in red ink, the poem further compared Harris's hair to a lighthouse beacon that guides ships through stormy nights. Quick to smother his coworkers' mockery, Harris took to wearing a hat indoors and was rarely seen without one at the *Constitution*. Harris's physical camouflaging was matched by his own humble remarks about his work. Harris consistently undercut the value of his writing, citing himself as a mere recorder of tales and believing his tales had little historical value.

Perhaps his lifelong involvement with journalism—in which yesterday's news is quickly forgotten—fostered his erroneous sense of the ephemeral importance of language in general and his Remus stories in particular, but one must wonder whether by the time of his death Harris had finally realized his own achievement and place in American literature. By the end of his career Harris had published numerous other collections of Uncle Remus tales, including *Nights with Uncle Remus*, *Uncle Remus*

and *His Friends, The Tar-Baby and Other Rhymes of Uncle Remus*, and *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation*. He had also broadened his writing repertoire and written novels—*The Romance of Rockville*, *A Little Union Scout*, and an autobiographical novel titled *On the Plantation*—not to mention a score of other significant sketches. In 1902 he received an honorary doctorate in literature from Emory College; a few years later he was the only southern writer to be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which included writers such as WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS and Twain. President Theodore Roosevelt hosted a banquet for Harris and proclaimed him a “genius” who never “wrote anything which did not make a man or woman reading it feel a little better” (Julia Harris 42). Harris died at his home in 1908 of acute nephritis and cirrhosis of the liver; he will stand as one of the most influential local color writers, whose works have now been translated into more than 40 languages.

“The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” (1881)

As a prelude to the Tar-Baby story, Harris begins with a suggestive tale called “Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy.” In it Brer Fox orchestrates a scheme whereby Brer Rabbit is invited to dinner—not to eat but to be eaten. However, the shrewd rabbit, under the pretense of finding some calamus root, escapes, yet this ending disappoints the white boy listening to Uncle Remus’s fable, who wishes the fox to consume the rabbit. When Harris refers to Uncle Remus as “the old darkie, chuckling slyly,” he hints at Uncle Remus’s agenda in telling the boy these fables as methods of instruction for living in a racially divided society (*Uncle Remus* 16). In the Tar-Baby story, as with most of the animal fables, Harris sublimates his own views as an author in order to comment allegorically on race relations in the American South. The animal fables, then, represent a social system divided between whites (the fox) and blacks (the rabbit) and explain how conflicting values and emerging classes can be conjoined in a New South. A subordinate figure

to the other creatures’ brute strength, Brer Rabbit roams unfettered and uses his wits and tricks to survive in a hostile world where he would otherwise be devoured. The oppressed rabbit no doubt echoes in the consciousness of slaves who had little means of rebelling against a monolithic plantation system except through subversion and cleverness. The lessons Brer Rabbit teaches reflect a universal truth all too well known to slaves who were governed by their masters’ whips: Being sly and shifty is better than being honest. Contrastingly, the little white boy views the fables from his own privileged perspective and identifies with the fox, an assertive, self-sustaining predator.

At the opening of the Tar-Baby story the boy reveals how much initiation he must undergo with Uncle Remus when he asks, “Didn’t the fox *never* catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?” Wishing the predator would devour the prey, the boy seeks to maintain a social order that dominates a weaker race and eradicates threats to the system. As the educator and propitiator, however, Uncle Remus uses his own wits to spin stories that mask his subversive social aims through the rhetorical device of the children’s tale. In effect, Uncle Remus encourages social change by teaching the boy to empathize with Brer Rabbit’s plight and appreciate his resourcefulness in surviving.

Through the Tar-Baby, Uncle Remus advocates realignment of the dominant social structure to include the upstart rabbit, Brer Rabbit, that is, to integrate a supposedly weaker race into mainstream white society. Uncle Remus’s critique of society suggests that, with a large free-roaming presence of recently emancipated slaves, society cannot remain rapacious as a fox does. However, any precipitous attempt to achieve harmony in a society characterized by such aggressive values and attitudes would lead to dissension and chaos. Consequently, Uncle Remus addresses the downfalls of slaves who become too prideful. When the Tar-Baby says nothing despite Brer Rabbit’s repeated promptings, Brer Rabbit becomes enraged and positions himself on top of a hierarchy: “I’m gwineter larn you howter talk ter ’specttubble fokes” (9). Brer Rabbit becomes figuratively and then literally “stuck up”

when he disregards all manners and swings at the Tar-Baby. With this scene Uncle Remus exposes racial pride, emotional eruptions, and demands for immediate respect as flawed methods for achieving slave acceptance in Southern society; these approaches would only entangle the newly freed slaves in a self-created shackle of tar. Uncle Remus implies that racial mobility won after the Civil War may be in jeopardy if racial equality is sought too soon. With Brer Rabbit's assault on the Tar-Baby, Uncle Remus shows that pushing too hard to upset social boundaries may backfire.

On the other hand, the excessively passive Tar-Baby is also a searing allegorical attack leveled at those slaves who remain unobtrusive and obsequious even after the collapse of plantation life. These slaves are immobile, silenced, oppressed, unassertive, uneducated, and victimized, so they would never denounce the injustice of roles to which they have become so inured. The Tar-Baby serves as the antithesis of Brer Rabbit's fiery arrogant attitude, suggesting that newly emancipated slaves should adopt a middle ground between the extremes represented by these two opposing figures.

To represent the old plantation life accurately Harris scrupulously verified all of the details for his fables, using stories he learned from Southern slaves when he was at Turnwold and interviewing freed slaves while working as a journalist. Much scholarship surrounds the mysterious and debatable origins of the Tar-Baby and Brer Rabbit. On the surface the tales originated in African folklore, as Harris himself suggests, deriving from the rich cultural heritage of animal fables that slaves carried across the Atlantic to the Americas, but the closeness of these fables to similar fables from other cultures complicates this simple observation. For example, the African fables hinge on Brer Rabbit as a trickster figure, a guileful and mentally agile character who, though oppressed, survives through his wits. The trickster character embedded in African folklore appears as an anthropomorphized animal and is not an invention by Harris; however, the trickster crosses all cultures and time frames. Typical tricksters for North American Indians include the coyote and the raven; for Brazil, the tortoise

serves the same function; and fables from India tell of a double-dealing jackal. Perhaps these similar tales arose independently of each other, implying that the trickster figure can be explained as an archetype, or perhaps through the course of history cross-cultural exchanges among Africans, Indians, and South Americans spread these stories, preserving them for generations in each culture's oral tradition. Whatever the case, Africans' introducing stories, like that of the Tar-Baby, to the United States would unavoidably lead to the modification and reinvention of portions of the tales to reflect current conditions better. These unaccounted-for, unknowable amendments are now immortalized in Harris's published versions of the fables.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does Harris write the Tar-Baby story in dialect? Does it show a poetic imagination, or is it a mocking exploitation of black language? Why does he feel a need to tell the story as authentically as possible? Explain.
2. Select a person who speaks with a noticeable dialect and record a short conversation with him or her. Try to transcribe the tape in a way that best captures the distinct dialect. What observation can you make on this process, and how does this enlighten your understanding of Harris's work? Explain your response.

“How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox” (1881)

As part of his rhetorical strategy, Uncle Remus finishes the Tar-Baby story without solving the climatic dilemma and suspensefully ends the story with Brer Rabbit caught in the Tar-Baby but not yet eaten by the fox. Just as Harris kept readers of the *Constitution* in anticipation for several weeks before publishing a conclusion to the story, so too does Uncle Remus control the storytelling experience of his eager white listener. He exercises his narrative power and casually pretends to have forgotten the need for an ending when questioned by the boy. Here, Harris psychologically portrays the subtle use

of African narrative to augment the boy's interest and allegiance to the rabbit. Uncle Remus knows the underlying theme that runs through his fable insists on the acceptance of freed slaves into a dominant white society. Appropriately to engender social change, Remus speaks to his ideal audience—a young white boy, who, when he grows into an adult, will need more than a passive tolerant attitude toward freed slaves. Uncle Remus's storytelling goal is to train the rapacious fox while he is at an impressionable young age so that he will learn to embrace a diversified society with compassion and charity.

If the Tar-Baby story lays bare the destructiveness of Brer Rabbit's pride, then "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox" epitomizes his creative cunning. Harris carefully manages the tale so that Brer Rabbit's triumph merits praise from the stronger race. Since the animals operate in a lawless society, Uncle Remus emphasizes allegorically that in a world where cheating, deception, and devouring are the common order of the day, men must be self-reliant. Indeed, as Uncle Remus suggests, from an African perspective the world is lawless and chaotic. Freed slaves must be their own defenders; they must rescue themselves from danger, for none will go to their aid since Southern society is pitted against them. Accordingly, Brer Rabbit enmeshes himself so much in the tar that he stands helpless as Brer Fox mocks him with laughter: Only his own actions will save him from his self-created prison. Ironically, Uncle Remus ends the Tar-Baby story with the notion of possible salvation for Brer Rabbit: "Some say Jedge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im—some say he didn't" (*Uncle Remus* 11). However, as the conclusion makes emphatically clear, there is no *deus ex machina* for Brer Rabbit, and this makes his ultimate witty escape all the more admirable. Through Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox's mutual mockery, the story also satirizes human faults of pride, overconfidence, and imperceptiveness. Brer Rabbit's final exclamation in "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox," "Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox," taunts Brer Fox and undermines any lesson that Brer Rabbit may have learned from the Tar-Baby episode (*Uncle Remus* 19). At the end, he may still be boastful, but he is free and "ez lively ez a cricket in de embers" (19).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read selected tales from Geoffrey Chaucer, specifically the "Nun's Priest's Tale." What kind of device did Harris borrow from Chaucer in his conclusion to the Tar-Baby story, and what kind of literary influence did Chaucer have on Harris's work? Discuss.
2. Compare the trickster figure of Brer Rabbit to a trickster from another country, such as India's Jackal in "The Tiger, the Brahman, and the Jackal," or the French fox named Renart in the works by Michel Rodange. Do these other tricksters also address issues of prejudice based on race and class, or is Harris unique in this aspect of his trickster figure? Discuss your response.

"Free Joe and the Rest of the World" (1884)

No other story from Harris matches the pathos that envelopes "Free Joe and the Rest of the World." Any reader would identify with its rejected, shamed, and pathetic protagonist. Originally published in *Century* in 1884, "Free Joe" tells of the isolation and tragedy of a free black man who suffers with humility. As a freed slave in the antebellum South, Free Joe is alienated from every social caste. Harris's explanation reveals the irony in Free Joe's name: "He realized the fact that though he was free, he was more helpless than any slave. Having no owner, every man was his master" (*Free Joe* 55). Free Joe's freedom becomes his curse. As his encounter with "Spite" Calderwood attests, Free Joe longs for acceptance within a white community, which evokes the envy of other former slaves even while the white community expresses its reluctance to accept free blacks. As a consequence, Free Joe becomes a drifting outcast accepted by neither ex-slaves nor whites. As Harris addresses the gray area of the lives of freed slaves during Reconstruction, he complicates Free Joe's character by making his passivity ambiguous. Is Free Joe, like the Tar-Baby, a critique of silent, unassertive slaves, or is he made into a tragic figure, helpless to resist the waves of white brutality? Many critics answer the dilemma of "Free Joe" by asserting that the message

reinforces slavery. As Free Joe dies alone, not even with his dog at his side, these critics see Harris as advocating slavery over freedom for blacks.

In contrast to this view, Free Joe's illusion of freedom suggests Harris's sensitivity to the actual experiences of freed blacks as they integrate into society after the Civil War. With "Free Joe," Harris anticipates the icy trek of freed slaves as they confront the cold reception of an impenetrable and unwelcoming white society. As Harris shows, the Emancipation Proclamation is only freedom in words and not in the hearts of many of America's people. "Spite" Calderwood, a plantation owner who exercises as much control as he can over Free Joe, typifies Harris's depiction of a white society's antipathy to freed slaves. Symbolically shackled by Calderwood ripping his permission note and reproaching Joe for being near his plantation, Free Joe cannot even cross the property line to meet his wife, Lucinda; instead, he must wait patiently while his dog, Dan, calls on her. Here, Harris emphasizes Free Joe's societal restraint with the most subtle of symbols—Free Joe's dog. In Harris's hierarchy of Southern culture, even Free Joe's dog has more mobility and assertiveness than Free Joe himself. The permission slip that would represent his freedom is nothing but empty signifiers, for the only freedom Free Joe ever experiences results ironically through his death. Instead of affirming a need for slavery, Free Joe's death is Harris's acknowledgment of the many difficulties along the road to meaningful freedom. At the end, Harris invites us to pity Free Joe's self-delusion by recognizing that this vision may be the closest some former slaves ever get to being free.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What clues can you discover in Harris's use of dialect or content that might suggest that "Free Joe" was written by a white author? Mention some and discuss why they lead to your conclusions.
2. In "Free Joe" how does the dominant society impose stereotypes on the weaker, and what do the ex-slaves have at their disposal to undermine their former masters' attempts? Cite some examples and discuss each.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON HARRIS AND HIS WORK

1. Harris reworked the original title to the opening of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* and finally settled on "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy." Why is this title important to begin his collection of Uncle Remus tales? Discuss your answer.
2. How does Harris depict lower-class whites? How does this lack of sympathy relate to Harris's own background? Explain your responses, citing evidence from the text.
3. Compare slave life in Harris's stories to slave life as depicted in stories by CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT, such as his Uncle Julius stories or "The Goophered Grapevine." Are Chesnutt's slave characters more well rounded than Harris's, or does he present slave culture as more varied than Harris does? Defend your answer, citing examples from the texts.
4. Analyze Alice Walker's 1981 essay "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine." How convincing is Walker when she claims that Harris stole important artifacts of black heritage and usurped opportunities for blacks to publish these stories themselves?
5. Compare Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* to the Uncle Remus tales. Though she claims to owe no debt to Harris, do you notice similarities in the dialect, story line, or characters?
6. What suggestions do you find in Harris's writing that suggest he knew that he was writing art that would have a fixed place in American literature and culture?
7. Watch Disney's 1948 *Song of the South*, a film that adapts the Uncle Remus tales to a cartoon version. How does Disney appropriate Harris's tales, and what does this do for Harris's reputation, both popular and literary?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bickley, R. Bruce. *Joel Chandler Harris*. Boston: Twayne, 1978.
- . *Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography and Critical Study*. Lincoln, Ky.: iUniverse.com, 2000.

- Brasch, Walter M. *Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist."* Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000.
- Brookes, Stella B. *Joel Chandler Harris, Folklorist.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1950.
- Cousins, Paul M. *Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968.
- Harris, Joel Chandler. *Free Joe, and Other Georgia Sketches.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887.
- . *On the Plantation: A Story of a Georgia Boy's Adventure during the War.* New York: D. Appleton, 1892.
- . *Uncle Remus.* New York: Schocken Books, 1965.
- Harris, Julia Collier. *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918.
- New Georgia Encyclopedia. Available online. URL: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-525>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap5/harris.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Rubin, Louis D., Jr. "Uncle Remus and the Ubiquitous Rabbit." *Southern Review* 10 (1974): 784–804.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Benjamin Rollins



BRET HARTE (1836–1902)

All sentiment was modified by a strong sense of humor.

(“Tennessee’s Partner”)

More than any other writer, Bret Harte discovered the literary possibilities of the American West, and he worked his claim with varying degrees of success over a period of 40 years. As founding editor of the *Overland Monthly* (1868–70), he was also instrumental in sponsoring the careers of an entire generation of western writers, including Charles Warren Stoddard, Joaquin Miller, Prentice Mulford, Ina Coolbrith, and AMBROSE BIERCE. His sometimes friend MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) once acknowledged in a letter to Thomas Bailey Aldrich that Harte “trimmed and trained and schooled me patiently until he changed me from an awkward utterer of coarse grotesquenesses to a writer of paragraphs and chapters that have found a certain favor.” A pioneer in western local color, Harte earned a national reputation early in his career with a series of eight stories and a few poems set in the mining camps and boomtowns of gold rush California and published in the *Overland*. Lured east by the promise of fame and fortune in February 1871, he signed the most lucrative contract in the history of American publishing to that date—\$10,000 for 12 months—to contribute exclusively to the Fields, Osgood & Co. family of magazines. A prototype of the man of letters as a man of business, Harte learned through painful experience how to trade on his name. Though he soon fell from the first rank of American writers, he enjoyed a long and lucrative career as a magazine writer and editor until his death.

Born in Albany, New York Harte was educated in small upstate academies. In 1849, at the age of 13, he worked as a clerk in New York City, where as a member of a local militia he helped to quell the Astor Place riots. In 1854, in company with an older sister, he sailed for San Francisco and settled with his mother and her second husband in Oakland, California. He opened a small school in Tuolumne County, which failed for lack of students in spring 1855, whereupon he spent a few weeks at placer mining with little success. Over the next five years he worked as a Wells Fargo agent, a druggist’s clerk, a tutor in Humboldt County, and a printer’s devil for the weekly *Northern Californian* newspaper. Early in 1860, temporarily in charge of the paper, Harte wrote an editorial critical of an American Indian massacre near Eureka. The ensuing outrage among local residents forced him to flee to San Francisco a few days later.

He seriously aspired to a literary career from the age of 23. Since 1857 he had contributed occasionally to the *Golden Era*, a weekly San Francisco literary paper, and within a week of his arrival he joined the staff of the paper as a compositor and columnist. His writings in the *Golden Era* caught the attention of Jessie Benton Frémont, who invited Harte to her Sunday salon; introduced him to such local celebrities as Thomas Starr King, minister of the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco; and found sinecures for him in the offices of the U.S.

Surveyor General, the U.S. Marshal, and the U.S. Mint. Harte married Anna Griswold, a contralto in the choir at King's Church, in August 1862, and with the help of Frémont and King he placed his first story in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "The Legend of Monte del Diablo," in October 1863. The following spring he cofounded the weekly *Californian*, and in December 1865 his first book, an anthology of California poetry entitled *Outcroppings*, was published to mixed reviews.

During the mid-1860s Harte also wrote a series of so-called condensed novels, short parodies of novels by James Fenimore Cooper, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Charlotte Brontë, to great acclaim. He collected these pieces in a volume published in New York in 1867. He also became the California correspondent to two Massachusetts papers, the *Springfield Republican* and the Boston *Christian Register*, the weekly paper of New England Unitarianism. In the 39 articles he contributed to these papers, Harte often criticized the residents, the political corruption, even the landscape of California. He wanted to resettle in the East, where his literary ambitions were more likely to be realized.

Nevertheless, he agreed to edit the *Overland Monthly* when it was established in 1868 by the San Francisco bookseller Anton Roman. For a modest salary, about \$100 per issue, Harte selected the contents, reviewed books, and contributed an occasional story or poem. Harte and Roman had very different designs for the magazine, however. Harte planned to assemble a first-class literary monthly, if possible; Roman thought the *Overland* should "serve to advertise the economic future of the West Coast." In the short run Harte prevailed. The magazine was a popular success if not from the first issue in June 1868 then from its second, which featured Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp." The story was hailed by reviewers in both the *New York Nation* and the *Springfield Republican*, and James Fields solicited similar stories for the *Atlantic*. KATE CHOPIN later wrote that the story "reached across the continent and startled the Academists on the Atlantic Coast." By July 1870 the *Overland*

was sold as many copies in the East as in the western states of California, Oregon, and Nevada. The success of "The Luck" enabled Harte to write fiction and poetry for the *Overland* without any interference from the counting room. But, he was no literary realist: He depicted the West through a filtered lens and in soft light, and his stock characters—dandy gamblers, rough miners, whores with hearts of gold, genteel schoolmarms, gruff stage drivers—rarely transcend the stereotypical.

Despite the critical and commercial success of the *Overland*, Harte quarreled with John Carmany, who had bought the magazine from Roman in 1869. Meanwhile, Harte was courted by several rival publications, among them the *Galaxy*, the *New-York Tribune*, *Putnam's*, and the *Lakeside Monthly* in Chicago. To entice him to remain in San Francisco, he was offered a professorship in modern literature at the new University of California at Berkeley, but he spurned the job. He resigned from the *Overland* after editing its first five semiannual volumes and moved east. So widely reported in the press were his movements across the continent that WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS later compared the trip to "the progress of a prince" in the "universal attention and interest" it attracted. In Boston in early March Harte agreed to contribute no fewer than 12 poems and stories during the next year to the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Every Saturday*. The publishers, Field, Osgood & Co., needed a marquee name to attract subscribers back to the *Atlantic*, in particular after the controversial publication in the magazine of HARRIET BEECHER STOWE's "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life" in September 1869.

Technically, Harte fulfilled his obligations under the terms of the contract, submitting 14 pieces during the year, even sending the publishers two extra poems two years after the contract had lapsed. But, the quality of these pieces was decidedly inferior to that of the best of his work for the *Overland*. According to a joke popular at the time, Harte reversed the path of the Sun, rising in glory in the west and setting in darkness in the east. Notoriously poor at paying his bills, he also racked up huge debts after leaving California.

As his writing career spiraled downward between 1872 and 1875, he tried to capitalize on his waning popularity by delivering his lecture "The Argonauts of '49" dozens of times in cities across New England and eastern Canada to the Deep South and as far west as Omaha. Within the space of two years Harte went from the highest-paid writer in America to an improvident freelance contributor to Sunday newspapers.

Undaunted, he contracted to write a play for the comic actor Stuart Robson in spring 1875. The following September he estimated that a performance of the completed draft of the farce *Two Men of Sandy Bar* would last more than four hours. Predictably, the play was panned when it was produced in Chicago and New York in summer and fall 1876. The *New York Times*, for example, concluded that Harte had not written a script but a "nondescript." The *New York Herald* compared the play to a dime novel struck by lightning. *Ab Sin*, the play Harte wrote in collaboration with Twain the following year, fared no better. To the end of his life he was haunted by memories of the hardscrabble winter of 1877–78, when he and his family lived literally hand to mouth.

Finally, partly through the intervention of Howells, Harte was offered a diplomatic appointment to the U.S. Commercial Agency in Crefeld, Germany. He sailed for Europe in June 1878, never to return to the United States. Though he would support his wife, Anna, until his death, he would not see her again for more than 20 years. After two years in Crefeld he was reassigned to the U.S. Consulate in Glasgow. In both offices he entrusted most of the work to his vice-consuls. In 1885, after a change of administrations in Washington, D.C., Harte was summarily dismissed from the consular service for neglect of duties. James G. Blaine, the secretary of state, remarked in 1889 that he had been "the worst consul" on record.

Fortunately, Harte had hired a literary agent, A. P. Watt of London, in 1884. In the end Harte became the writer the literary market made him. For a small percentage Watt adroitly managed his career for the next 18 years by selling his stories to the highest bidder, arranging for favorable publicity, and sometimes

advancing him money. Watt peddled Harte's tales by the column inch to the newspaper syndicates that solicited them. As a result, Harte increased his productivity, often writing 1,000 words per day. He published a book of new fiction every year from 1883 until his death, by far the majority of the 23 volumes of his collected works. He wrote on average about 100,000 words and earned about \$10,000 per year during the final decade of his life. To be sure, his fiction was more popular in England and in translation on the Continent than in the United States. As Wallace Stegner later observed, Harte was always more popular among readers the greater their distance from California. But, as his friend HENRY ADAMS also noted, Harte to his credit insisted on "the power of sex" in his late stories "as far as the magazines would let him venture."

Even late in his career he repeatedly tried his hand at playwriting in a vain attempt to escape from the magazine grind. Between 1882 and 1897 he wrote (often with a collaborator) 11 plays and two librettos. Only one of these plays was professionally produced, however. Based on his tale "The Judgment of Bolinas Plain" (1894), *Sue*, written with his friend T. Edgar Pemberton, was staged in New York and London in 1896 and 1898 with the American actress Annie Russell in the title role. But, the play earned Harte and Pemberton almost no money.

Several of Harte's final stories (for example, "The Convalescence of Jack Hamlin") betray his worries about his failing health. When Hamlin Garland visited him in London in May 1899, Harte was "affable and polite" but looked "old and burnt out, his eyes clouded, his skin red and flabby," as Garland confided to his diary. A lifelong smoker, Harte died of throat cancer at the home of his "hostess," friend, collaborator, and mistress Mademoiselle Van de Velde in Surrey in May 1902. Since his death, especially since the advent of the New Criticism, his reputation has declined precipitously. Bernard De Voto expressed a consensus view in 1932 by dismissing him as "a literary charlatan whose tales have greatly pleased the second-rate." But, at his best Harte was a delightful satirist, a critic of sham sentiment, and an elegant stylist. His disappearance from standard contemporary anthologies of American literature

speaks more to the shifting tides of academic fashion than to the merits of his best writing.

“The Luck of Roaring Camp” (1868)

Harte contributed his unsigned story “The Luck of Roaring Camp” (August 1868), often considered a modern retelling of the Gospel account of the Nativity, to the second issue of the *Overland Monthly*. In this version “the Luck” is a type of Christ and the mining camp a “city of refuge”—the phrase refers to asylums for accidental killers during the period known as the Mosaic dispensation—gradually redeemed through his influence. Cherokee Sal, the village prostitute and the only woman in the camp, dies in childbirth (“the primal curse”) with the identity of the baby’s father a mystery and is buried in a “rude sepulture.” Her son is “swathed in staring red flannel,” nourished on ass milk, and adopted by the hundred or so miners in the camp—Kentuck, Stumpy, Jack Hamlin, French Pete, and others of their ilk, many of them criminals or fugitives from justice and all of them “reckless.” They decide not to hire a nurse because they do not think any decent woman could be persuaded to settle in Roaring Camp, and “they didn’t want any more of the other kind,” their “first spasm of propriety” or “the first symptom of the camp’s regeneration” (*Luck* 20). They christen the child *Tommy (Thomas)*—a name reminiscent of the doubting apostle—and “almost imperceptibly a change came over the settlement” as the miners begin to observe “stricter habits of personal cleanliness” and landscape their claims (22). The expressman, the only outsider admitted to the camp, reports that the miners have “vines and flowers round their houses,” “wash themselves twice a day,” and “worship an Ingin baby” (25). The tale ends, however, as the camp is washed away in a spring flood of biblical proportions and little Tommy Luck is drowned.

Rather than a sentimental revision of the Nativity account, “The Luck of Roaring Camp” humorously evokes the birth of Christ to make a very different point. Harte cautions the reader in the opening paragraphs to beware of appearances: The “greatest

scamp” in the camp “had a Raphael face,” “the coolest and most courageous man was scarcely over five feet in height,” the “strongest man had but three fingers on his right hand,” and “the best shot had but one eye” (17). A “very sinful woman” who is “dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable,” Cherokee Sal is an ironic or anti-Madonna; as the narrator suggests, “perhaps the less said of her the better” (16). Tommy Luck’s father is unknown, but not because he is born to a virgin. Similarly, the miners are ironic Magi whose gifts to the child include stolen silverware, “a gold specimen,” “a gold spur,” a tobacco box, and a silver-plated revolver. The miners christen the child at a “mock altar” in a “ludicrous” ceremony that burlesques the traditional service. Tommy Luck, in other words, is not an incarnation of Christ but a false messiah. To be sure, the child thrives in the “invigorating climate of the mountain camp,” and that “golden summer” the mines “yield enormously.” In these “flush times” the “Luck was with them” (24). But, what is the net effect of this program of civic improvement? Merely that the saloon (“Tuttle’s grocery”) is remodeled, the men begin to bathe and to forswear cursing, and the “shouting and yelling which had gained the camp its infelicitous title were not permitted within hearing distance” of the Luck’s cabin (23). Preternaturally wise, with “an infantine gravity about him” and “a contemplative light in his round gray eye” (24), the child seems even to converse with birds, much like the Christ child of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. He is a natural child in a fundamentally romantic sense of the term. “Nature was his nurse and playfellow,” the narrator observes.

For him she would let slip between the leaves golden shafts of sunlight that fell just within his grasp; she would send wandering breezes to visit him with the balm of bay and resinous gums; to him the tall redwoods nodded familiarly and sleepily, the bumble-bees buzzed, and the rooks cawed a slumbrous accompaniment. (24)

A century later the New Critics disparaged such a passage as a textbook example of the “pathetic fallacy.”

Though “Nature took the foundling to her broader breast” (21); in an ironic if not artful reversal of the trope, the flood that destroys Roaring Camp in winter 1851 seems nothing less than a judgment of God. “Every mountain creek became a river and ever river a lake,” Harte writes. “Each gorge and gulch was transformed into a tumultuous watercourse that descended the hillsides, tearing down giant trees and scattering its drift and debris,” and “in the confusion of rushing water, crushing trees, and crackling timber,” nothing could be done to prevent the camp from scattering (25). Kentuck and the “cold and pulseless” body of the Luck are found in a torrent two miles below the camp. In the last sentence of the story Kentuck clings to the “frail” body of the babe, who, like a wisp of straw, “drift[s] away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea” (26). These adjectives hardly valorize his martyrdom or sacrifice; on the contrary, they suggest that the (blind) Luck’s death is a random event in a world without design or purpose. The luck of Roaring Camp is, in the end, all bad. The story is subtle biblical parody, a 19th-century version of Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*.

The story was so controversial that it was very nearly killed in proof. The proofreader for the magazine was offended not by the biblical satire, however, but by the portrayal of Cherokee Sal and the profanity of the miners (“the d——d little cuss”). She protested to the printer, who expressed reservations to Anton Roman, the publisher, who in turn apparently asked Harte to replace the story with other material. To his credit, Harte did not fold his cards. He recalled later how he had read the tale to his wife, Anna, “and took heart and comfort” from her tears over it—a predictable response, given the death of their infant son 10 months before—“and courage to go on and demand that it should be put into the magazine.” Harte made it a condition of his continued employment as editor of the *Overland* that the story appear “without emendation, omission, alteration, or apology,” and Roman soon capitulated to his demand. While the reviews of the story in the local press were cool, those in religious periodicals were aggressively hostile and urged local advertisers

to withdraw their support from the magazine. The tide turned in Harte’s favor only when news of the favorable reception of the tale in the East reached San Francisco in October 1868. Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Springfield Republican*, praised it (“a genuine California story,” one “so true to nature and so deep-reaching in its humor, that it will move the hearts of men everywhere”). Bowles reprinted the story in its entirety even before learning that its author was “our old friend Harte.” The *New York Nation* applauded the tale (“one of the best magazine articles that we have read in many months,” with “pathos and humor” that “take it out of mere magazine writing and give it a place in literature”), and Mark Twain puffed it during his brief stint as co-owner of the *Buffalo Express* (“the best prose magazine article that has seen the light for many months on either side of the ocean”). James Fields, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, offered to publish anything Harte “chose to write, upon his own terms.” Suddenly a marquee name among American authors, Harte played his hand like a poker-faced gambler. As the San Francisco *Bulletin* bragged in 1870, “The Luck” was “by general consent of Eastern critics” the “most original story of the year.” Or, as Harte explained in 1894, “Since Boston endorsed the story, San Francisco was properly proud of it.”

Harte collaborated with a friend on a theatrical version of “The Luck of Roaring Camp” in 1882. The first act, as he wrote to the impresario Augustin Daly, was “an almost literal dramatization of my original story, except that the child is a girl instead of a boy.” Though he offered the completed play to several producers, including Daly, Charles Frohman, Dion Boucicault, David Belasco, and John L. Toole, his high hopes for the script were ultimately dashed. It has never been staged.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How realistic is a story such as “The Luck of Roaring Camp”? Do the details about the mining camp seem authentic?
2. Define the *pathetic fallacy* and identify passages in “The Luck of Roaring Camp” that express it. Compare Harte’s treatment of nature with STEPHEN CRANE’S in *The Red Badge of Courage*.

“The Outcasts of Poker Flat” (1869)

The ensemble of characters in “The Outcasts of Poker Flat,” first published in the *Overland* for January 1869, are victims of blind chance and freak disaster like the Donner party who perished in the mountains near Reno during the winter of 1846–47. Set in late November 1850, only two years after the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill near Sacramento, the story opens with a tableau of “the pastoral village of Poker Flat,” an outpost of civilization jealous of its dignity. The settlement has already begun to assume “Sabbath” airs. The local economy is not based on mining, as in Roaring Camp, but on gambling, a step up the ladder of social evolution. Ironically, John Oakhurst, the chief outcast, is banned not because he gambles but because he is too successful a gambler. He accepts his sentence of banishment “with philosophic calmness,” too much the gambler “not to accept Fate,” aware of “the usual percentage in favor of the dealer” (*Luck* 28). Each of the outcasts, in fact, is expelled in “a spasm of virtuous reaction, quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it,” by the local vigilance committee and “forbidden to return at the peril of their lives” (28). All of them—Oakhurst, a virtuous prostitute named “the Duchess,” her madam “Mother Shipton,” and the thief and drunkard Uncle Billy—vainly head for the village of Sandy Bar, “distant a day’s severe travel,” which had not “experienced the regenerating influences of Poker Flat” (28). Unfortunately, they tarry en route. Though Oakhurst does not drink, his companions do, and “they were furnished with liquor.” Soon Uncle Billy is in a stupor, “the Duchess became maudlin, and Mother Shipton snored” (29). In the “steep mountain range” halfway between the two towns, the outcasts meet young Tom Simson (“the Innocent”) and the sylvan “damsel” Piney Woods, who have eloped. Oakhurst urges Simson to hurry on to Poker Flat, where he and Piney plan to wed, but the Innocent offers to share his provisions with the outcasts and camp with them overnight. By morning, the group has been trapped by a blizzard—all save the devilish Uncle Billy, who has skipped out with the mules and horses.

Though they have enough provisions for 10 days, Oakhurst, the Duchess, and Mother Shipton understand that they are doomed. The Innocent and his virgin fiancée understand neither the gravity of their plight nor the character of their associates. In a state of nature, however, the outcasts are reformed, and sinful and sinless become virtually indistinguishable. “The Duchess blushes at Piney’s remark that she must be ‘used to fine things’”; Oakhurst “doesn’t say ‘cards’ once”; all three of them join the Innocent and Piney in a “rude camp-meeting hymn” to while away the time (33). As Harte writes, “The pines rocked, the storm eddied and whiled above the miserable group, and the flames of their altar leaped heavenward” (33). When song fails to amuse them a few days later, the Innocent offers to narrate the principal events in the *Iliad* as he remembers them from Pope’s translation. “And so for the rest of that night the Homeric demigods again walked the earth. Trojan bully and wily Greek wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the cañon seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus” (35). Oakhurst is quietly amused at the adventures of “Ash-heels,” as the Innocent called “the swift-footed Achilles.”

Barred by law and prevented by the storm from returning to Poker Flat, Oakhurst and the painted women during the last days of their lives become models of moral rectitude. Even with the snowbanks towering 20 feet over their heads, “no one complained.” The Innocent and Piney “looked into each other’s eyes and were happy,” while Oakhurst “settled himself coolly to the losing game before him” (35). Mother Shipton gives her entire ration of food to Piney before starving to death. Tom Simson sets off on snowshoes for Poker Flat to get help. That night Oakhurst piles enough wood beside the cabin “to last a few days” before “handing in his checks” and committing suicide. (He would be resurrected from the snowbank, where he dies at the end of the story, however, to appear in a pair of subsequent tales from Harte’s pen.) That night Piney and the Duchess “read their fate,” and Piney, “accepting the position of the stronger, drew near and placed her arm around the Duchess’s waist” (36). The next morning the Duchess rests her head

on Piney's shoulder, "the younger and purer pillowing the head of her soiled sister upon her virgin breast" (36). When their frozen bodies are discovered by the rescue party Tom Simson has enlisted, the narrator adds, "You could hardly have told from the equal peace that dwelt upon them which was she that had sinned" (36). The outcasts are regenerated, but like Tommy Luck and the miners of Roaring Camp, they die as the result of natural disaster. Like the ostensible rehabilitation of Roaring Camp, their reformation is finally meaningless. "The Luck" has the virtue of parody and satire, however, whereas "The Outcasts" merely builds to a contrived and pathetic conclusion.

Still, Howells considered "The Outcasts" the "more representative" of Harte's "most characteristic" work and reprinted it in his 1920 edition of *Great American Short Stories*. Frank Norris parodied it mercilessly in his so-called perverted tale "The Hero of Tomato Can" (1897). It was adapted to film three times: a silent version in 1919 directed by John Ford and talkies in 1937 and 1952, the latter starring Dale Robertson and Anne Baxter. A standard entry in American literature anthologies between the 1920s and the 1980s, it has also been translated over the years into no fewer than 12 languages.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In this story, is life in the West presented as harsh and unforgiving, or is the West presented as an opportunity to discover interior resources of spiritual and moral strength?
2. Examine Harte's depiction of dying in the story. How do the deaths of the Duchess and Piney differ from the death of Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Why does the gambler Oakhurst kill himself?

"Miggles" (1869)

Harte's tale "Miggles," first published in the *Overland Monthly* for June 1869, also takes off from a biblical source. Loosely based on the life of the actress and dancer Lola Montez after her

retirement from the San Francisco stage in 1853, the tale features in the title role a figure Howells later called one of "the edifying Magdalenes of the mining camps." The narrator, in company with six other passengers, meets Miggles, a "bright-eyed, full-throated young woman" (*Luck* 44), when his stagecoach is diverted to her cabin during a storm. Even before he meets her, the narrator describes Miggles as "our rock of refuge," an allusion to Psalms 71:3 ("Be to me a rock of refuge to which I may always go"). She had kept a saloon (or brothel) and dance hall in Marysville, where, as she admits, "everybody knew me there, and everybody had the right to know me" (45)—apparently in the biblical sense. She had sold her business six years earlier, however, and moved to the California outback to nurse her friend Jim (aka James, the brother of Jesus, according to oral tradition, and another of his disciples), a syphilitic and "prematurely old and wrinkled" invalid. Jim "used to know me" and had "spent a heap of money upon me" before his illness, she explains, and though he "would never get better" and "would be a baby all his life," she refuses to abandon him (46). "I was rich then, for I was popular with everybody" and "gentlemen like yourself" (46) visited her. She has atoned for her sins by a life of selfless devotion. The narrator explicitly compares her to the biblical Mary Magdalene when the next morning the moonlight "seemed to baptize with a shining flood the lowly head of the woman whose hair, as in the sweet old story," recounted in the gospel of Luke 7:36–50, "bathed the feet of him she loved" (47).

The story of Miggles, with her sexually indeterminate name, is also unique among Harte's fiction for its satire of traditional gender roles. A tale of ironic role reversal, it portrays a type of rugged woman who is economically independent and who protects a helpless man. They live together not in marriage but in an unconventional relationship sanctioned by mutual affection. As Miggles explains, "If we were man and wife, now, we'd both know that I was *bound* to do what I do now of my own accord" (47). She also punctuates her conversation with expletives, unlike the speech of most of her sex. In fact, "Her very frankness suggested a

perfect sexual equality that was cruelly humiliating to the younger members of our party,” the narrator admits (44). The men stranded in her house unwittingly behave as stereotypical women do when they privately crowd together, “whispering, snickering, smiling, and exchanging suspicions, surmises, and a thousand speculations” (44) about Miggles and Jim. Miggles is, in the end, a far more sympathetic figure than any of the prurient men who gossip about her.

Significantly this tale was reprinted in 1870 in one of the early issues of the Boston *Woman’s Journal*, the most important suffragist paper in the country.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What biblical allusions do you detect in “Miggles”? How do these influence your understanding of the story?
2. In what ways does this story encourage readers to distinguish between gender and sexual identity?

“Tennessee’s Partner” (1869)

“Tennessee’s Partner,” first published in the *Overland* for October 1869, represents the highwater mark of Harte’s fiction. On the surface it seems a perfectly transparent story of loyalty and friendship. After the highwayman and petty criminal Tennessee elopes with his Partner’s bride, the Partner seems to take “the loss of his wife simply and seriously, as was his fashion” (*Luck* 50). When Tennessee returns to Sandy Bar alone, however—the woman “having smiled and retreated with somebody else”—the two men are immediately reconciled, much to the dismay of the miners, “who had gathered in the cañon to see the shooting” (50). After Tennessee is arrested for robbery, his Partner appears at his trial and, while ostensibly testifying on his behalf, lays out the case against him as eloquently as any prosecuting attorney: “He lays for a stranger, and he fetches that stranger. And you lays for *him*, and you fetches *him*; and the honors is easy” (53). The Partner tries, to no avail, to bribe

the judge and jury with \$1,700 in gold if they will simply release the defendant. After Tennessee is found guilty and hanged, the Partner claims his body and buries it in the garden plot of their cabin. At the most superficial level the tale seems to evade the issue raised by Tennessee’s theft of his Partner’s wife. As a result, “Tennessee’s Partner” became something of a whipping boy for the New Critics in the 1950s. According to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Fiction* (1959), the story seemed to epitomize all that was wrong with mid-19th-century American literature. It was doggedly sentimental, they argued, valorizing the Partner’s undying friendship for the rascal Tennessee: “Bret Harte is so thoroughly obsessed with the pathos of the partner’s loyalty that he has devoted no thought to the precise nature of that loyalty.” Even Mark Twain wondered why Harte has the Partner “*welcome back* a man who has committed against him that sin which neither the great nor the little ever forgive.”

Read through the lens of southwestern humor, however, the story contains a trap for the unwary set by the author. Harte deftly structures the tale around the Partner’s elaborate scheme to avenge his loss of a wife, the act of victimization central to southwestern humor. The narrator betrays no more emotion in relating the story than the poker-faced Partner reveals in plotting revenge on the man who stole his wife. The miners in Sandy Bar who expect the Partner to shoot Tennessee on sight might have vented their indignation “in sarcasm” but for a look in the Partner’s eye “that indicated a lack of humorous appreciation. In fact, he was a grave man, with a steady application to practical detail which was unpleasant in a difficulty” (50). The Partner has already begun to hatch his plot and bides his time. With Tennessee under arrest, the miners of Sandy Bar “were ready to listen patiently to any defense” of his guilt, and the Partner exploits the opportunity to serve frontier justice when he appears in court at precisely the moment Tennessee’s trial has become “irksomely thoughtful” (52). The legal contest becomes something of a card game, with Tennessee folding his hand and the Partner in the role of the dealer. When he offers a bribe to the

judge and jury, the court is suddenly galvanized, for the “unparalleled insult” erases “any wavering determination of Tennessee’s fate”—at which point Tennessee laughs, congratulates his Partner with the words “Euchred, old man,” and shakes his hand (54). The gesture is neither one of gratitude for the failed attempt to save his life nor one of friendly parting, but a sporting gesture, in effect congratulating the Partner for playing the trump card.

After Tennessee is found guilty and hanged, the Partner unceremoniously hauls the body of “the diseased” in a donkey cart usually used “in carrying dirt” to a shallow grave at an “unpicturesque” site near his cabin. He buries the body in the earth he had cultivated during “the brief days of [his] matrimonial felicity” with the woman Tennessee stole from him. In his eulogy to the assembled miners, the Partner emphasizes his own fidelity to the friendship Tennessee betrayed. “‘It ain’t the first time that I’ve packed him on my back, as you see’d me now. It ain’t the first time that I brought him to this yer cabin when he couldn’t help himself; it ain’t the first time that I and Jinny have waited for him on yon hill, and picked him up and so fetched him home, when he couldn’t speak and didn’t know me’” (56). In effect, he asks the assembled mourners who can blame him for wishing this man dead?

After the funeral (or “fun,” as the Partner calls it), the crowd disperses. Seen from a distance, the Partner sits “upon the grave” with his face swathed “in his red bandanna handkerchief” (57). But, is he weeping or laughing? As the narrator notes, “You couldn’t tell his face from his handkerchief at that distance, and the point remained undecided” (57). He is, more probably, sitting on the grave in triumph over his erstwhile partner and rival. From the day he interrs Tennessee, however, “his rude health and great strength seemed visibly to decline” (57) and he dies the following spring. As Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* by NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, one of Harte’s favorite authors, the Partner has only lived to avenge his cuckolding. If he is reconciled with Tennessee in heaven, as the end of the story implies, they, as have Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, “have found their

earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transformed into golden love” in the Great Beyond.

“Tennessee’s Partner” has proven over the years to be one of the most durable of Harte’s stories. It has been translated into no fewer than 11 languages, including Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, and Vietnamese, and it remains a chestnut in modern anthologies of American literature. A loose adaptation of the tale starring Ronald Reagan, John Payne, and Rhonda Fleming was released in 1955.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Which interpretation of “Tennessee’s Partner” seems more reasonable: the straightforward, sentimental account of the two men’s partnership in the mines or the satirical account of the Partner’s quest for revenge? What objections to the satirical reading might discredit it?
2. Identify the ways that Partner’s relationship with Tennessee parallels the relationship of Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*?

“The Idyl of Red Gulch” (1869)

Harte literally invented the stock character of the eastern schoolmarm who travels west in “The Idyl of Red Gulch,” first published in the *Overland* for December 1869. Miss Mary, as she is named, is the lineal ancestor of such vestals of the cult of civilization as Molly Stark Wood in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) and Amy Fowler in Stanley Kramer’s *High Noon* (1952). Like others of the type, Miss Mary is a pretty young arrival who has moved west “for the sake of health and independence” (*Luck* 63) and who serves as a civilizing agent on a settlement only one or two removes from barbarism. Her influence in this story is most evident in the reformation of a local dissolute miner named Sandy, a “blond Samson” with a “corn-colored silken beard” who is quite “amiable-looking” when sober. Sandy confesses “he came to California for excitement” and had “lived a wild life” but “was trying to reform” (63). He takes a

bouquet of azaleas to the school and fills a barrel outside the door with fresh spring water every morning. Predictably, Sandy and Miss Mary fall in love. But, on the afternoon of the last day of the school term, Mary is visited by the “overdressed” mother of one of her pupils—another of Harte’s whores with a heart of gold, with her “war paint,” “gorgeous parasol,” and “lilac-gloved hands”—who begs her to “take my Tommy” away from “this wicked life, this cruel place, this home of shame and sorrow” and enroll him in “some good school, where you can go and see him, and help him to—to—to forget his mother” (65). When he is older, Tommy’s mother explains, Mary might tell him “his father’s name”—Alexander Morton, “whom they call here Sandy!”—who “when I first knew him was a gentleman” (65). Repelled by the revelation of Sandy’s sin, the teacher agrees to assume custody of the boy and resolves to return east with him. She adjures the mother to tell Sandy that “he must never see—see the child again. Wherever it may be, he must not come; wherever I may take it, he must not follow!” (66). She leaves on the Slumgullion stage the following morning for Boston, never to return. Whereas both Molly Wood and Amy Fowler compromise their genteel principles and capitulate to love, Miss Mary abandons Red Gulch to its vice and corruption, much as Harte would escape California for New York and Boston at the close of his tenure as editor of the *Overland Monthly* a year later.

Adapted to television, a version of the story starring Teresa Wright, Franchot Tone, and Jayne Meadows was broadcast on the *U.S. Steel Hour* in June 1955. Vladimir Nabokov apparently saw the program and worked an allusion to it into his novel *Lolita* (1955).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is Miss Mary in “The Idyl of Red Gulch” justified in her flight from the West? Or, does she simply fail to adapt to the less rigid moral codes of the West?
2. What moral qualities does Harte associate with the West and the East? Were these views widely held?

“The Iliad of Sandy Bar” (1870)

A companion piece to “Tennessee’s Partner,” “The Iliad of Sandy Bar” dramatizes Harte’s feud at the time with his rival and sometimes friend Mark Twain. When the story first appeared in the *Overland* for November 1870, the two men had been “off” for “many months,” the result of a squabble over Harte’s failure to receive a review copy of Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). Set in a mining camp built upon the “fatal quicksands,” as is the house built by a “foolish man” Christ mentions in Matthew 7:26, the story describes the bitter and “inexplicable” quarrel of two partners who had once been “singularly devoted to each other,” Matthew Scott (Harte) and Henry York (Twain), owners of the Amity Claim, who had once earned by their “amiability and grave tact” the title of “The Peacemakers” in a “community not greatly given to the passive virtues” (*Luck* 87). Even though their common claim (that is, California local color fiction) seems “worked out” and “worthless,” they contest their rights to it in a court battle. Before a courtroom filled with “all of Sandy Bar,” Scott wins the verdict, “which York instantly appealed. It was said that he had sworn to spend his last dollar in the struggle” (90). Each of them harasses the other, and “the fact that they had ever been friends was forgotten.” York buys land below Scott’s new claim, which required Scott “to make a long detour” to reach his property, whereupon he “retaliated by building a dam that overflowed York’s claim on the river” (91). The feud escalates into rival campaigns for the state legislature, a contest Scott also wins after he embarrasses York by declaring that “for three years, gentlemen, I was that man’s partner!” (94). That fall Scott went to Sacramento, and “York went abroad,” much as Twain joined the *Quaker City* excursion to Europe and the Holy Land in 1867, “and for the first time in many years, distance and a new atmosphere isolated the old antagonists” (94). Three years later York returns to Sandy Bar, or Riverside as the camp has been renamed, and meets the drunken and derelict husk of his former friend. The story ends with a deathbed reconciliation of the two men, though Scott insists in his last words that “thar *was*

too much saleratus in that bread" (97). Read in context, the tale seems a poignant reminder of Harte's fondness for Twain, their silly estrangement, and an open invitation to him to bury the hatchet. In fact, the two would temporarily resume their friendship in the East in 1872.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does "The Iliad of Sandy Bar" function as a companion piece to "Tennessee's Partner"? Compare and contrast the pairs of mining partners in the two stories.
2. Identify the features of the story that qualify it as an example of California local color fiction.

"Plain Language from Truthful James" (1870)

Published in the September 1870 issue of the *Overland Monthly*, Harte's "Plain Language from Truthful James," or "The Heathen Chinese," became an overnight sensation. It was immediately reprinted in dozens of newspapers and magazines across the country and appeared in three illustrated chapbook editions. Ironically, however, though Harte intended the poem to satirize prejudice among the Irish, who were competing with the Chinese for jobs, it was read by many a xenophobic reader as a satire of the inscrutable Chinese. Rather than indict bigotry, the poem seemed to license it.

"For ways that are dark" and "tricks that are vain," the "heathen Chinese is peculiar," the narrator, Truthful James, opines (*Luck* 216). With his "pensive, "childlike," and "bland" smile, the laundryman Ah Sin seems an easy mark to the card shark Bill Nye. But Ah Sin turns the tables on the Irishmen by concealing "twenty-four jacks" in his sleeves and marking them with wax. Nye declares, "We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor" before "he went for that Heathen Chinese" (216). Though the poem omits any mention of overt violence, the illustrations that often accompanied it pictured such violence explicitly. On the surface the text

constructs a racial Other in stereotypical terms; only when read against the grain does it resist or subvert the stereotype. Readers tended to identify not with the "heathen" Ah Sin but with his presumed racial superior, Bill Nye, the ostensible victim of his trickery.

"Plain Language from Truthful James" was soon appropriated for a variety of purposes. It inspired a short-lived school of western dialect poets that included Mark Twain and John Hay. It was parodied dozens of times—for example, to satirize the New Woman ("Plain Language from Truthful Jane"), the presidential ambitions of Horace Greeley ("The Heathen Greelee"), and the Treaty of Washington ("Plain Language from Truthful Bull"). It was also, of course, soon adapted to the campaign against Chinese immigration. It was cited on the floor of Congress in January 1871; the virulently anti-Chinese senator Ernest Casserly of California wrote to Harte to thank him for joining his cause; and Allen Thurman, the Democratic candidate for vice president in 1888, quoted it in his stump speech to prove his support for the Chinese Exclusionary Act.

At the nadir of his career in the late 1870s Harte also exploited the popularity of the poem for commercial purposes. His play *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1876) featured a Chinese laundryman in a small comic role. Twain later reminisced that with the "perfectly delightful Chinaman in it" the play "would have succeeded if anyone else had written it." In 1877 Harte and Twain together wrote a script entitled *Ah Sin* centered on the character of the Chinese laundryman, and the result was one of the most disastrous collaborations in the history of American letters. The play closed after three months.

Tropes from "Plain Language from Truthful James" continued to be appropriated well into the 20th century. Harte resurrected Ah Sin to ridicule the free silver plank in the 1896 Democratic Party platform in the poem "Free Silver at Angel's." As late as 1923, Charles R. Shepherd depicted the unscrupulous and inscrutable "heathen Chinese" in his book *The Ways of Ah Sin*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What internal evidence is there that “Plain Language from Truthful James” was written with a satirical purpose?
2. Compare Harte’s representation of race in this poem with the way JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS represents race in “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story.”
3. Explain why readers in Harte’s day found it easier to sympathize with the Irish than the Chinese when they encountered this poem.

“Wan Lee, the Pagan” (1874)

While “Plain Language from Truthful James” failed as a satire of anti-Chinese prejudice, Harte’s story “Wan Lee, the Pagan” was a more explicit and utterly unequivocal indictment of racism. Published in *Scribner’s* for September 1874, the ostensible “true story” was based at least in part on acts of mob violence perpetrated against the Chinese in San Francisco that Harte remembered from his years there. In his “California Letters” to the *Springfield Republican* in 1867–68, he had deplored the “late riots and outrages on the Chinese” and the way “the youth” of San Francisco “throw stones” at the Chinese “in the streets.” (At about the same time, Mark Twain wrote a news story for the San Francisco *Morning Call* excoriating the stoning of a Chinese man by Irish schoolchildren; his editor killed the article on the grounds that it would alienate Irish subscribers to the newspaper.) The narrator of “Wan Lee,” a genteel newspaperman like the author, introduces the reader in the opening paragraphs to a “grave, decorous, handsome” Chinese patriarch fluent in French and English whose character is radically at odds with the prevailing stereotype of the unscrupulous and inscrutable Oriental. “I doubt if you could find the equal of this Pagan shopkeeper among the Christian traders of San Francisco,” the narrator adds (*Luck* 125). This grandfatherly figure entrusts the impish Wan Lee, whose life has been threatened by “the younger members” of the “Christian and highly civilized

race who attend the enlightened schools in San Francisco,” to the narrator, who lives in rural Humboldt County (128). Though Wan Lee escapes for a time the prejudices he suffers in the city, the narrator, his guardian, takes a job in San Francisco and returns there two years later. The narrator concedes that “I do not think he contemplated the change with pleasure” (135). Wan Lee befriends the white daughter of a widow with whom he lives, an episode that hints at the racial toleration of some children. “This little girl was quite content to fill him with her own Christian goodness” (136), according to the narrator. The story to this point is mere prelude to its pathetic ending. “There were two days of that eventful year which will long be remembered in San Francisco, when a mob of her citizens set upon and killed unarmed, defenseless foreigners because they were foreigners, and of another race, religion, and color, and worked for what wages they could get” (136). Some “eminent statesmen” in California went so far as to “think that the passage in the Constitution which guarantees civil and religious liberty to every citizen or foreigner was a mistake” (136). No puzzling or ambiguous assertions by Irish day laborers in this tale (unlike “Plain Language”) that “we” are “ruined by Chinese cheap labor” (216). Wan Lee, an innocent victim of mindless violence, is stoned to death by a “mob of half-grown boys and Christian schoolchildren” (137) taught by their parents to hate Asians. Not to put too fine a point on it, the term *pagan* in the title of the story, in sharp contrast to the references to “Christian,” drips with irony.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is “Plain Language from Truthful James” or “Wan Lee, the Pagan” the more forceful indictment of racial prejudice? Which strategy—satire and irony or explicit moralizing—seems more effective?
2. Why does Harte choose to narrate “Wan Lee, the Pagan” from the point of view of a young journalist?
3. “Wan Lee, the Pagan” is the only story in this selection that Harte wrote after he left California.



NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE (1804–1864)

Upon my honor, I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories.

(letter to James T. Fields, April 13, 1854)

Already in his own lifetime Hawthorne was recognized as one of the most important writers of fiction the United States had yet produced, and his status as a classic American author has only grown in the century and a half since his death. If he had written nothing other than *The Scarlet Letter*, his stature would still be high, but he also penned a number of other significant novels as well as some of the most studied of all American short stories. He helped inspire HERMAN MELVILLE and was much admired by HENRY JAMES; his dark vision of human pride and sin influenced the work of many 20th-century writers, including Flannery O'Connor. Through his example as a dedicated and professional writer of fiction, Hawthorne helped create the role of the serious author in American culture, and by his emphasis on allegory, symbolism, and the exploration of profound moral issues, he helped establish a tone and approach that would chart a path for many later writers.

In view of his later importance to American letters, it seems only appropriate that Hawthorne was born on the Fourth of July (in 1804). Yet not only the date but the place of his birth seems symbolic: He was born in Salem, Massachusetts, a town infamous as the setting for the notorious “witch trials” of the late 17th century. In these proceedings (which were often little more than kangaroo courts), innocent persons had been persecuted, prosecuted, tortured, and often executed because

of alleged demonic possession, and these injustices had been committed at the behest of some of the same Puritan Christians whom Hawthorne numbered among his ancestors. Indeed, one of Hawthorne’s great-great-grandfathers had been a prominent judge during the trials, and one of the judge’s victims had supposedly pronounced a curse on him and his descendants before she was executed. Nathaniel Hawthorne certainly never forgot the darker side of this early Puritan heritage, and much of his fiction (including *The Scarlet Letter*) can be read as an effort to come to terms with—and perhaps atone for—the proud, judgmental, and self-righteous legacy of his own ancestors. Troubling guilt, secret motives, and hidden iniquity are frequent themes in his writings, and, given his own family history, this fact seems hardly surprising.

Hawthorne’s father, however (who was also named *Nathaniel*, although he spelled his last name *Hathorne*), earned his living not in a courtroom but at sea. He was a ship’s captain, and it was on a voyage in the South Atlantic that he died in Surinam of yellow fever when his only son was a mere four years old. Elizabeth Manning Hathorne, the captain’s widow, then moved young Nathaniel and his two sisters into the home of her parents in Salem, where her profound grief for the loss of her husband only deepened, if anything, her attachment to her children. Surrounded by numerous members of the Manning clan (and particularly

watched over by his uncle Robert, his mother's brother), Nathaniel enjoyed a basically happy childhood and began, even at this early age, the habit of devoted reading that would last a lifetime. An athletic injury in 1813 kept him out of school and confined at home for many months, thus deepening his ties to his mother and sisters and giving him even more time to read on his own. By 1818 he and his mother and sisters had moved briefly to Raymond, Maine, where Nathaniel enjoyed exploring the outdoors, but by 1819 he was back in Salem again, living with the Mannings once more and preparing to begin college. In 1821 he entered Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where he made a number of important friends, including Franklin Pierce (who would later become president of the United States) and Horatio Bridge (who would later take an active interest in promoting Hawthorne's literary career).

After graduating from Bowdoin in 1825, Hawthorne again returned to the Manning household in Salem, where he lived with his mother, sisters, and other relatives for the next dozen years, staying in the upper room he had inhabited throughout his youth. It was during these early years back in Salem that he changed the spelling of the family name to *Hawthorne*, and it was also during this period that he began to devote himself to the idea of becoming a serious writer. In 1828 he personally paid for the anonymous publication of his first novel, *Fanshawe*, although he later destroyed any copies he could locate and never acknowledged or republished the book while he lived. When not writing, he traveled with an uncle on business, although he also spent a good deal of time reading, researching local history, and working on various pieces of short fiction, which began to appear in print in the early 1830s. Many of these works were published anonymously, and none of them earned the young author much money. He worked briefly in Boston as a magazine editor in 1836, but when the magazine went out of business, he was soon back in Salem again. In 1837 (with financial help from his old college friend Horatio Bridge) he was able to publish *Twice-Told Tales*, a collection of nearly 20 of his stories, and it was in 1837, too (after his unsuccessful courtship of another woman), that he first met Sophia Peabody,

who eventually became his wife. Although Hawthorne was now attracting increasing attention and respect as an author, he knew that it would be difficult to support himself (let alone a wife and family) independently on a writer's income. Thus, in 1839 he began working at the Boston Customs House—a position, however, from which he resigned in 1841. He took refuge for a few months at the experimental Brook Farm community in West Roxbury, Massachusetts (a place designed to promote social ideals and cooperative agriculture), but by the end of the year he had soured on his experiences there and would eventually satirize the undertaking in a novel called *The Blithedale Romance*.

By this time Hawthorne was becoming increasingly prominent (if not financially successful) as an author. In 1841 he published such works for children as *Grandfather's Chair*, *Famous Old People*, and *Liberty Tree*, and 1842 witnessed the publication not only of *Biographical Stories for Children* but also (more significantly) of a much-expanded edition of *Twice-Told Tales*. In 1842, as well, Hawthorne finally married Sophia Peabody (to whom he had secretly been engaged since 1839), and by all accounts the early years of their marriage were very happy. The newlyweds rented a house in Concord, Massachusetts, known as the Old Manse, and during their time there they became friendly with the local transcendentalist group, which included RALPH WALDO EMERSON and HENRY DAVID THOREAU (among others). As had also been true at Brook Farm, Hawthorne tended to be more skeptical about human nature than were his optimistic new acquaintances, but his contact with these energetic intellectuals helped stimulate his own thinking and certainly did nothing to harm the growth of his own literary status. At home, too, good things were happening: Although Sophia had suffered a miscarriage in 1843, in 1844 she successfully gave birth to a daughter (named Una), who was followed in 1846 by a son (named Julian). Also in 1846, Hawthorne was appointed surveyor in the Custom House in Salem (thus providing him a reliable income), and during the same year he published another significant collection of stories, this time titled *Mosses from an Old Manse*. It was this

book (which contains some of Hawthorne's finest work) that would, before long, prompt an enthusiastic review by Herman Melville, who eventually considered Hawthorne a kindred spirit.

By 1849, however, Hawthorne's fortunes had taken a darker turn: Because of political changes at the national level, he lost his patronage appointment at the Custom House, and, even more distressingly, he also lost his mother, with whom he had always had a particularly close relationship. Both events probably contributed to the somber atmosphere of his newest novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, which he began writing during that fall; it was published in 1850 and was quickly recognized as an unusually remarkable book. Although some early readers considered it immoral, many others praised both its style and its substance, and today it is regarded as perhaps the first great American novel. It was not long before Hawthorne produced yet another masterpiece—a novel titled *The House of the Seven Gables*, which was published in 1851 (the same year that saw the birth of his daughter Rose). This book was soon followed, in 1852, by yet another novel (*The Blithedale Romance*), a collection of stories (*The Snow-Image and Other Twice-Told Tales*), a work for children (*A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*), and a campaign biography for Franklin Pierce (Hawthorne's old college friend, who was now running for president). Pierce's election helped win Hawthorne appointment to the lucrative and prestigious position of U.S. consul in Liverpool, England, where he and his family lived from 1853 until 1857. These years saw the publication of *Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys* (1853) and the printing of a second, revised edition of *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1854). Hawthorne also compiled detailed notebooks during his time in England, but these were not published until well after his death.

When Pierce's term as president ended in 1857, so did Hawthorne's position as consul. In 1858 he and his family traveled in France and Italy, taking up residence first in Rome and then in Florence, although the almost-fatal illness of the Hawthornes' daughter Una was soon followed by the family's return to England in 1859 and then by a final relo-

cation to the United States in 1860. During that year Hawthorne's latest novel, *The Marble Faun*, appeared in print, but by this time, too, the tensions that would soon lead to the Civil War had become almost unendurable. For the next half-decade the country would be plunged into extreme turmoil, and during this period Hawthorne's literary career also began to falter as his health steadily declined. He did publish a collection of articles titled *Our Old Home* in 1863, but most of his attempts at fiction were stillborn. Friends who met him during these last years of his life were struck by the change in his appearance and manner; the once-handsome and vigorous young man had now lost much of his earlier vitality, and by 1864 both Hawthorne and his family sensed that his end was near. He died in his sleep on May 19 and was buried in Concord, Massachusetts, four days later. The same minister who had married Nathaniel and Sophia more than two decades earlier now conducted Nathaniel's funeral, which was attended by many of the most eminent figures of the New England literary community. They clearly understood what most others have also realized: that during his nearly 60 years of life, Hawthorne not only had managed to create one of the most enduring and influential legacies of any American author but had also helped take American writing to a new level of maturity and international respect.

“My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1831)

An 18-year-old youth named Robin journeys from his home in the country to a city (perhaps Boston), where he hopes to profit from his contact with Major Molineux, a wealthy and powerful relative who had once taken an interest in Robin's future. While searching for Molineux's house, however, Robin encounters a series of often hostile and sarcastic Bostonians, who laugh whenever Molineux's name is mentioned and who refuse to offer Robin any assistance. As Robin—hungry, tired, and frustrated—sits on the steps of a church, he hears a noisy procession approaching, and in the midst of the mob he sees Major Molineux—tarred,

feathered, and mocked by the unruly crowd. Although Robin himself briefly joins in the general laughter, he quickly grows disillusioned by the spectacle and by his journey to the city.

This story is typical of Hawthorne's fiction in many ways. It is set in the New England past; its heavy emphasis on allegory and symbolism makes it seem something other than a merely realistic account of mundane events; it features characters and physical settings that are obviously meant to be suggestive; yet the ultimate meanings of the work are ambiguous and mysterious. The tone of the story is generally somber and gloomy (although it is lightened occasionally by literal laughter, touches of comedy, and hints of sarcasm and irony); the meanings of the plot, like the motives of the characters, are shrouded in uncertainty; and thus the story achieves an effect of confusion and suspense. By the time readers reach the end of the story, they will often have felt as mystified as Robin does, and indeed part of the power of the work results from the way Hawthorne continually postpones and delays the crucial, final revelation. That revelation itself provokes as many ambivalent and puzzled reactions in readers as it does in Robin himself, and for the central character as well as for Hawthorne's audience, the story ends on a note of perplexity and ambiguity.

Hawthorne's tale has often been read as a "coming-of-age" story—one of the most common fictional plots. In such tales an inexperienced character (often a young man) leaves the secure, familiar place where he has grown up (usually surrounded by supportive family and friends) in order to venture off into strange territories where he encounters new and often bewildering experiences, including personalities who are sometimes threatening and situations that are often highly tempting. In the course of confronting these dangers and temptations, he often makes false assumptions and crucial mistakes and frequently feels bewildered and confused, but by the end of such tales the protagonist has usually also learned some valuable lessons about life, about other people, and about himself. He has undergone various rites of passage; he has experienced a process of initiation; and as

a result of his experiences he has usually emerged as wiser and more mature but also as less innocent and naive. Obviously Hawthorne's story conforms closely to this archetypal pattern, and Robin is in some ways a symbolic "Everyman" figure whose painful initiation into the often-disillusioning facts of life is a process with which most readers will be able to identify.

However, in addition to being read in this broadly psychological way, the story has been interpreted in more narrowly political and historical terms. Hawthorne clearly invites such a reading by emphasizing topical factors in the story's first paragraph. Readers who emphasize the historical and political dimensions of the tale often see Robin as a symbol of colonial New England or as representing a youthful, developing America—an immature but growing country that had to work out its proper relationship with its British overlords, here symbolized by Major Molineux. From his extensive reading in colonial history, Hawthorne knew that the 18th century was often a time of enormous tension between the restive colonists and the British authorities; the revolution that finally resulted in the birth of a new nation was preceded by decades of rebellious and often violent outbursts, especially after the colonists lost their earlier rights to elect their governors and instead had governors imposed upon them by the British Crown. According to this kind of political interpretation, Robin's eventual disillusionment with the relative whom he once respected (and from whom he had once hoped so much) parallels the maturation and growing cynicism of the American colonists, while the rebellion that Robin witnesses at the end of the tale obviously foreshadows the American Revolution itself.

Although this political reading of the story seems almost undeniable, Hawthorne nevertheless can hardly be accused of simple-minded patriotism; the story is anything but an exercise in jingoistic propaganda. The colonists are hardly presented in entirely attractive ways; they often seem bitter, cold, calculating, and misanthropic, and when the major finally appears near the very end of the tale, he can partly be viewed as a figure to be pitied as well as derided. Presumably the colonists feel

entirely justified in having tarred and feathered him and in parading him through the streets, but, if so, the story certainly never makes entirely clear the crimes of which he is guilty. As so often in Hawthorne's writings, the "moral" (if there is one) is darkly ambiguous. The tale seems to invite a moral response, but we can never be quite sure what kind of response is expected.

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of the entire tale involves Robin's own laughter when he finally sees his tormented kinsman. As Hawthorne describes the chortling mob, he reports that the "contagion was spreading among the multitude when, all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street; every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there" (*Tales* 17). The laughter here is described (with Hawthorne's typical sense of paradox) as almost a kind of infection or sickness, and Robin's participation in it almost seems involuntary (since he is "seized upon" by the "contagion"). How do we explain his laughter? Is it a sign that he has freed himself, in a healthy way, from the influence of his "kinsman"? Or is it a sign that he has capitulated to the influence of the mob? Is he laughing at the major, at the crowd, or perhaps at his own earlier foolishness and naivete? Is his laughter a laugh of genuine joy or of dark disillusionment? Hawthorne, characteristically, leaves the matter unclear; readers are not given a neat and tidy final "moral" but are given, instead, a good excuse to ponder and reflect.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this tale with Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown." In particular, discuss the use of journeys in both tales, the emphasis on young men's facing strange and disorienting experiences, and the moods of final disillusionment. Compare and contrast the settings of both works (the town in one tale and the forest in the other); discuss the ways women are presented in both works; and discuss the political dimensions of each text.
2. Read this tale in conjunction with Willa Cather's story titled "Paul's Case." How are the youths in both works similar or different, particularly in their values, their dealings with other people, and their final experiences? Which of the characters (if either) is more sympathetic? Which of the two characters is more fundamentally isolated and lonely?
3. How might "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" be read as an initiation story that charts Robin's growth from naïve youth to adult? Do you think that Robin changes as a result of his experiences in the city? If so, how would you describe and evaluate his changes?
4. Compare Robin's development to development of the title character of MARK TWAIN's (Samuel Langhorne Clemens's) *Huckleberry Finn*. How do the tones of the two works fundamentally differ? What kind of moral choice does each character face at the end of the work, and how does each character respond?

"The Minister's Black Veil" (1835)

The Reverend Mr. Hooper is the respected but unexciting parson of a small New England town, but he shocks his parishioners one Sunday by preaching before them while wearing a black veil that covers the upper half of his face. The veil mystifies everyone who knows Hooper, including his fiancée, Elizabeth, and the mystery deepens when Hooper refuses to remove the dark cloth, even on the day (many years later) when he dies, attended by several persons, including another minister as well as Elizabeth, who had long ago refused to marry him. Although some people believed for years that the veil symbolized Hooper's own secret sinfulness, he himself seems to consider it a symbol of the hidden sins of humanity in general, and as he dies, he seems full of bitterness because he has been shunned by people who have hidden their own sins far more effectively than the veil had obscured his face.

As do many of Hawthorne's other works, this one features mysterious behavior, the growing isolation of a central character, and a powerful preoccupation with sin and guilt. The story does not present itself as a fully "realistic" tale; rather, it employs Haw-

thorne's trademark devices of allegory, symbolism, and evocative imagery. At the same time (again as do many of Hawthorne's other works), the story raises more questions than it answers, particularly about the motives and effects of Hooper's apparently strange behavior. Is Hooper a sincerely committed Christian minister who chooses the veil as a way of making an impact on sinners who might otherwise ignore his message? Is Hooper himself (as many of his congregants suspect) hiding some secret transgression, so that the veil is a badge of a guilt he refuses to confess fully? Is his decision to wear the veil a sign of self-sacrificing humility—an emblem of his willingness to make a public spectacle of himself in order to reach hardened hearts? Or is the veil in fact a symbol of his spiritual pride, particularly of his presumption in passing judgment on the secret guilt of others? Is Hooper worthy of respect, or is he a kind of spiritual sadomasochist who, while inflicting pain on others, also endangers his own soul, isolating himself from his community and from the woman who was once willing to be his wife? Finally, what should we make of his final words—his concluding claim that *everyone* figuratively wears a veil to hide his or her sins, and that Hooper has been ostracized only because he has been willing to call attention to his own secret sinfulness? As usual, Hawthorne effectively creates an air of mystery and uncertainty, and although various readers have offered definitive answers to all the questions the story raises, Hawthorne himself seems less interested in providing answers than in provoking thought. If the story succeeded in encouraging any reader to examine his or her own conscience, Hawthorne probably would have been satisfied.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this tale with Flannery O'Connor's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge." How do Hooper and Julian similarly isolate themselves? How do they relate to the important women in their lives? How do their fundamental temperaments resemble and/or differ from one another? Which character is more sympathetic, and why?
2. Read this story alongside Herman Melville's tale titled "Bartleby the Scrivener." How do both tales create a sense of mystery and suspense? How and why does each main character isolate himself from the rest of humanity? How do Bartleby's motives and personality differ from those of Hooper? How do the tones of the two works differ? In particular, how does Melville's use of comedy contribute to the effectiveness of his story? Would humor have been appropriate in Hawthorne's text?
3. Perhaps the most obvious thematic concerns of the story are the nature and effect of human sin. Some interpret the veil as a sign of "secret sin." What, finally, seems to be the meaning of Hooper's "sermon" on sin? What does he want to say about human sinfulness? How successful is his attempt to turn himself into a walking sermon? Do you think that Hawthorne's point in the story is the same as Hooper's?

"Wakefield" (1835)

The narrator recounts the story of a man he once read about in an old periodical—a man he calls Wakefield and whom he describes as a middle-aged husband living a routine, uneventful life in London. One day, for no obviously pressing reason, Wakefield decides to leave his home and his marriage, and for the next 20 years he lives an equally quiet and uneventful life in an apartment close enough to his old home so that he can keep a close watch on his wife, who grieves at first when he does not return but who then lives a quiet life, essentially as a widow. Although she once encounters him on the street, she does not recognize him in his disguise, and it is only in response to a sudden rain storm that he one day abruptly takes shelter in the house he once left, just as abruptly, so many years before.

Like many of Hawthorne's characters, Wakefield is a person who chooses to separate himself from society, isolating himself from normal human satisfactions and affection. Often the (usually male) characters who behave in this way in Hawthorne's

fiction (such as Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Warland in “The Artist of the Beautiful,” or the title character of “Young Goodman Brown”) have some deeper purpose for behaving as they do, but Wakefield’s purpose seems merely whimsical and egotistical. He moves (as more than one commentator has remarked) from one monotonous, unexciting routine to another, and neither his reasons for leaving nor his reasons for returning are entirely clear. He is (like many of Hawthorne’s protagonists) a somewhat mysterious character, but in his case the mystery lacks the kind of dark, intriguing overtones associated (for instance) with the main character of “The Minister’s Black Veil.” The story has often been read as a sort of allegorical illustration of one of its most famous sentences: “It is perilous to make a chasm in human affections; not that they gape so long and wide—but so quickly close again!” (*Tales* 78). In other words, the story may show how easily a person may be forgotten if he breaks his ties with his past, and indeed the tale ends with sentences that almost point a neat, straightforward moral: “Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the ‘Outcast of the Universe’” (*Tales* 81–82).

The story, however, may be more complex in its ultimate implications than either of these warnings suggests, for perhaps the most surprising aspect of the tale to a modern reader is the fact that Wakefield, after a 20-year absence, can presume to walk in through the front door of his old home again and resume his old life and old lifestyle. Although critics have often seen the ending of the tale as ambiguous (Hawthorne never tells us exactly how Wakefield is received by his long-suffering wife), the opening of the story suggests a happy outcome: “He entered the door one evening, quietly, as from a day’s absence, and became a loving spouse til death” (*Tales* 76). Feminists might find this tale intriguing for what it suggests about Wakefield’s blithe confidence that he can so easily take the loyalty and

affection of his wife for granted. His thoughts and behavior both imply a male-dominated culture in which the feelings, happiness, and legal status of married women mattered far less than the whims of their often self-centered husbands.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Evaluate Wakefield as a character. Does he grow as a result of his “self-banishment”? What elements of his character are responsible for his growth or the lack thereof?
2. Study the isolation of Wakefield in relation to the isolation of Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil” and in relation to the isolation of Brown in “Young Goodman Brown.” In what ways, and to what degree, is the isolation of each character freely chosen and/or socially imposed? To what degree and in what ways do we sympathize with each of these characters? How does each character relate to the woman in his life? What does each tale imply about the social status of women?
3. Some commentators have questioned whether “Wakefield” is in fact a story; some see it, instead, as lacking the basic elements of fiction (such as plot and characterization) and forming instead a kind of sketch designed to illustrate a point. What is your position concerning this debate?

“Young Goodman Brown” (1835)

As night descends on the 17th-century village of Salem, Massachusetts, a youthful newlywed named Young Goodman Brown bids farewell to his innocent young wife, Faith, and heads out on a mysterious walk through the darkening forest, where he soon meets an older stranger, whose appearance, conduct, and attitudes resemble those of the devil. As Brown reluctantly heads farther into the forest, he thinks he sees more and more of his fellow townspeople (including respected elders whose virtue he had long trusted) assembling for a Satanic ceremony, but the greatest shock occurs when he thinks he perceives his own wife at the perverted meeting. Calling out to her and urging

her to resist the very evil by which he himself is so obviously tempted, he suddenly finds himself alone in the forest, but when he returns to town, he has become an embittered, suspicious, and judgmental man—estranged for the rest of his life from his wife and from the rest of his community and convinced that he is surrounded by sinners.

As does much of Hawthorne's fiction, "Young Goodman Brown" brims with symbolic characters, an allegorical plot, pungent irony, evocative names, and suggestive images. Here as so often elsewhere, Hawthorne is mainly interested in the moral implications of the events he describes and in the spiritual dimensions of the personalities he depicts. By exploring Brown's temptations and his encounter with evil, Hawthorne creates a tale that is typically ambiguous and unsettling—one that resists any simple interpretation, and one that leaves readers, if anything, even more mystified than Brown himself. Uncertainties, irony, and symbolism are present right from the start: Brown departs on his journey at "sunset" (a detail that already suggests the descent of literal and figurative darkness), and he is a citizen of "Salem village" (a town famously associated, because of its notorious trials of alleged witches, with an irrational obsession with the supposed evil of other people). As Brown bids farewell to his allegorically named wife, Faith (who obviously symbolizes both his marital bond and his trust in the teachings of his religion), he notices that she is wearing "pink ribbons," which clearly associate her (at least at this point in the story) with delicate feminine beauty and an almost childlike innocence. Faith's parting hope that Brown will "find all well" when he returns is powerfully ironic in light of the cynical, suspicious attitude he displays at the end of the tale, while Brown's assurance that "no harm will come to [Faith]" if she remains confident in God is also richly ironic, especially in view of his own present and future rejection of the very kind of trust he urges her to display. Brown seems simultaneously naive and arrogant at this point in the story; as he departs on his journey of initiation into darkness, he blithely assumes that he can easily return, assuring himself that "after this one night I'll cling to [Faith's] skirts and follow

her to heaven" (*Tales* 65). Of course, this confident assumption about his future proves false: Although he returns physically to his village, he never returns to his earlier faith (or Faith). By the end of the story he has become pessimistic and misanthropic, and his earlier confidence in his Faith has been replaced by an egotistical assurance of the sinfulness of others and of his own self-righteous authority to sit in judgment of them.

Ironies and ambiguities abound in this carefully crafted tale. Thus Brown worries about the dangers posed by "devilish Indian[s]," rather than fearing either his own planned encounter with the devil or the evil impulses embedded in his own sinful nature (*Tales* 66). He overconfidently assumes that his Puritan ancestors and contemporaries are incapable of sin ("We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness"), thus displaying the kind of spiritual pride that inevitably precedes a fall (*Tales* 67). Quickly forgetting that the devil is a master of illusions who can easily deceive the senses, Brown naively assumes—merely because he finds a few pink ribbons in the forest—that Faith must have succumbed to evil, and when he proclaims, "My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth, and sin is but a name," he reveals an impulsive extremism, a willingness to leap (without thinking) to hasty and drastic conclusions—a willingness that already foreshadows the inflexible self-assurance he displays at the end of the story (*Tales* 71). He already begins to partake in what is later called "the mystery of sin," in which humans become "more conscious of the secret guilt of others, both in deed and thought" than of their own (*Tales* 74). By rashly rushing to the conclusion that Faith and the townspeople are guilty of sin and hypocrisy, and by unmercifully judging them rather than examining his own failings or scrutinizing his own conscience, Brown turns his back on the trust, hope, charity, and forgiveness that are the essence of the faith he has himself betrayed. By the end of the story, he symbolizes a kind of rigid legalistic judgment, an unbending spiritual arrogance, that alienates him from the very people (including his wife) he might have learned to love

and forgive, whatever their real or supposed flaws. Instead of learning from his real or imagined experiences in the woods that all human beings (including, and perhaps especially, him) are inevitably imperfect, he sets himself up as a merciless judge, hypocritically convicting others of hypocrisy. Like the Salem judges (including an ancestor of Hawthorne himself) who felt confident in condemning alleged “witches” to death, Brown becomes obsessed with others’ sins rather than seriously confronting his own. He moves from a kind of naive faith at the beginning of the story to a kind of naive self-righteousness at the end. His ultimate outlook is both hopelessly simplistic and simplistically hopeless.

Hawthorne crafts the story with careful attention to detail, patterning the work around such symbolic contrasts as the opposition between light and darkness, town and forest, good and evil, and reality and appearance. The plot is fairly simple and straightforward, with relatively few characters, no digressions, and a rising sense of suspense that builds to an effectively puzzling climax. Just as Hawthorne plays on Brown’s suspicions and uncertainties, so he similarly perplexes his readers, particularly by raising the distinct possibility that the whole account of the convocation in the forest, which he had just so vividly described, may actually have been only an illusion: “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?” (*Tales* 75). Ultimately (Hawthorne suggests) the “reality” of the meeting is unimportant. What matters, instead, are the moral and spiritual choices Brown makes in response to the events, whether those events were real or merely imagined. The ways Brown chooses to treat others (and to regard himself) are far more significant than anything that may or may not have happened in the dark and lonely woods.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this tale with Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil.” In particular, discuss the initial motives and ultimate fates of the two main characters. Discuss, as well, their relations with the women in their lives and their attitudes toward their communities. Is one character more sympathetic than the other? How do both stories effectively use mystery?
2. How does this story resemble and/or differ from Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” in its focus on the tendency to find fault in others? How and why do both stories end in tragedy both for the male protagonists and for their wives? Which story is more tragic? Which husband is a more sympathetic character? What do both stories suggest about Hawthorne’s ideals of marriage?
3. One could read “Young Goodman Brown” as an allegory of faith. In the midst of his forest experience, young Goodman Brown declares, “With Heaven above, and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!” Does young Goodman Brown lose his faith? If so, why? What, according to Hawthorne, are the consequences of losing faith?

“The Artist of the Beautiful” (1844)

Owen Warland repairs clocks in a small New England town in the early 1800s, but his main and in fact obsessive interest is in trying to create something intricate, beautiful, and highly distinctive—an interest that isolates him from the more practical, materialistic citizens of the town, including three persons in particular: his former mentor, Peter Hovenden; Hovenden’s daughter, Annie (to whom Owen is romantically attracted); and his childhood friend, a bluff, friendly, and respected blacksmith named Robert Danforth. Hovenden ridicules Warland’s impractical obsession with creating artistic “toys” and is happy when Annie chooses instead to marry Danforth, although that event (along with Hovenden’s criticism) discourages and depresses Warland. Eventually, however, after many years of effort, Warland manages to create an astonishingly lifelike and extremely delicate mechanical butterfly and proudly shows it to Hovenden, Danforth, Annie, and the couple’s young child. Annie in particular is impressed, and although Annie is horrified when the infant accidentally crushes Warland’s creation, Warland

himself seems less troubled by the loss than one might have expected.

Here as in so much of Hawthorne's fiction, the allegorical element is strong: Warland is obviously a symbol of the artist; his acquaintances are just as obviously symbols of society in its various forms of response to artists; and the butterfly is equally obviously a symbol of the complexly beautiful creation for which the serious artist strives. Less obvious, however, is the precise meaning of the tale. To what degree does Hawthorne sympathize with Warland? To what degree does he disapprove of the artist's isolation from the community as a whole? To what degree is Warland responsible for that isolation, and to what degree is he a victim of the indifference, hostility, and/or shallowness of the people who surround him? Is Warland an egotist with an unhealthy addiction to impractical dreams? Or is he a dedicated artist whose perfectionism and desire to create a thing of beauty deserve our respect? All these questions have been answered in various ways, with some commentators arguing that Warland is an immature personality whose development as a human being remains stunted because of his self-imposed isolation (a frequent theme in Hawthorne's writings), while other critics contend that Warland is an admirable idealist whose commitment to his art is worthy of respect and whose isolation results more from the narrow prejudices of his community than from his own personal limitations. Other students of the story, however, find faults both in Warland and in his circle of acquaintances (especially the belligerent Hovenden). According to this kind of interpretation, none of the characters achieves the sort of balance between practicality and imagination that Hawthorne would have considered ideal. Warland's final reaction to the destruction of his butterfly suggests, however, that he may have attained the kind of self-reliance, self-respect, and self-contentment he has been missing for most of his life. Having finally achieved the ability to create something truly beautiful, he seems satisfied with that spiritual accomplishment and seems relatively untroubled by the loss of the material manifestation of that beauty. His indifference to the loss of the butterfly, and his final indifference to Hovenden's scorn suggests that he now

possesses a kind of inner strength and confidence he has previously lacked. As he often does, however, Hawthorne the allegorist refuses to spell out any simplistic message; his goal is to provoke thought rather than to render real thinking unnecessary.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Warland with another man who is in some ways equally obsessed: Aylmer in Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark." How are their obsessions similar? How do they differ? Are there any other characters in the two works who seem comparable to one another? Discuss the roles of the women in both stories.
2. Read Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet" and then discuss the ways in which Warland either resembles or differs from the kind of artist discussed in that work. Given Emerson's ideas about art, how and why do you think he would have responded to Warland's behavior and achievements?
3. Does "The Artist of the Beautiful" comment upon the ethical dimensions of art and the artist? Does Owen Warland bear any blame for the destruction of the butterfly in the final scene?

"Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844)

After opening with a whimsical introduction, this story describes how a young Italian, Giovanni Guasconti, takes up residence in the city of Padua, where he has arrived to study at the university; looking down from his apartment window one day, he can see a garden owned by a famous doctor named Giacomo Rappaccini, and in the garden he eventually sees the doctor's beautiful daughter, Beatrice, who helps her father cultivate many strange and intriguing plants. Despite warnings from Professor Pietro Baglioni (an old friend of Giovanni's father and a great rival of Rappaccini), Giovanni becomes increasingly involved with Beatrice, whom he often meets, secretly, inside the garden's walls. When Giovanni begins to suspect that Beatrice (thanks to her father's experiments) is literally poisonous and that he himself is also slowly

being transformed into a similarly poisonous creature under her influence, he angrily confronts her and gives her an antidote concocted by Baglioni, but the antidote quickly kills her, leaving all three men gazing at her beautiful corpse.

As Hawthorne himself implies in the humorous preface to this tale, this story is another example of his penchant for allegorical plots, symbolic settings, and emblematic characters, although (as is also typical of Hawthorne) the ultimate meaning of all the symbolism and allegory is less than wholly transparent. Each of the main characters has been interpreted in both positive and negative terms, and indeed some commentators see all of them as complicated mixtures of both good and evil. Even Beatrice, who is usually regarded as a pure-hearted, innocent victim of her father's manipulative experiments, has been criticized for failing to appreciate the dangers she poses to Giovanni and for failing to warn him about her father, and Hawthorne himself was apparently unsure whether he would ultimately depict her as an angel or as a demon. Eventually he decided that she was angelic (and in fact he eventually makes this point quite explicit, in a move that some critics have regarded as clumsy and unsubtle). For most of the tale, however, readers are as puzzled by Beatrice as Giovanni is (and as Hawthorne himself was at first)—a fact that contributes to the suspense and mystery of the work. Equally mysterious, for most of the story, are the character and motives of the seldom-seen Rappaccini and more intrusive Baglioni: Does the doctor have the best interests of his daughter at heart, or is he simply a conniving, malevolent, and almost Satanic figure? Is Baglioni genuinely motivated by a desire to assist his young friend, or is he driven mainly by rivalry and envy? Are the two older men as talented as they think they are (and as they are widely considered to be), or is each, finally, a bungler in his own way? Should we sympathize with Giovanni, or is he (as some commentators think) a shallow, unfaithful, selfish meddler—a naive manipulator who is unworthy of the love of a selfless, thoughtful, and generous-hearted woman? As usual, Hawthorne raises many questions but provides few obvious answers, and it is precisely this

ability to stimulate thought without offering neat or tidy resolutions that appeals to this author's many admirers. However else one responds to Beatrice, she is clearly one of the many women in Hawthorne's fiction who are either dominated, exploited, or (at the very least) insufficiently appreciated by the men in their lives. In this respect she resembles Faith in "Young Goodman Brown" and especially Georgianna in "The Birth-mark," a story that also features a "talented" scientist who is more than willing to conduct dangerous experiments on someone he fails to love with simple affection and acceptance. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" as in so many of his other works, Hawthorne shows the tragedy that often results when people (usually males), driven by arrogant pride, fail to treat others (usually women) with full respect and dignity. Beatrice dies because her father presumes to act as a kind of false god in an artificial Eden of his own superficial devising, and it is far from clear that Baglioni is a genuinely selfless would-be savior. Hawthorne ends the story abruptly with Beatrice's death, leaving readers to ponder the final significance of the events and characters he describes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read some definitions and discussions of *gothic* literature, and then discuss the ways in which this story displays the traits of a gothic tale. In particular, discuss such matters as setting, characterization, imagery, symbolism, mood, tone, and conclusion. How is Rappaccini himself a gothic character? How does Beatrice fit the standard gothic pattern? Choose a particular passage from the story and discuss the ways all its elements contribute to a gothic atmosphere or effect.
2. The narrator refers to Doctor Rappaccini as a "man of science," and "Rappaccini's Daughter" clearly seems a cautionary tale about science. What elements of scientific practice does Hawthorne seem to criticize in the story? Why?
3. Hawthorne clearly uses poison as a metaphor in "Rappaccini's Daughter." Analyze the language of poison and poisoning in the story. How does Hawthorne use the idea of poison in the text?

“The Birth-mark” (1846)

Aylmer is a distinguished 18th-century scientist who marries a gentle-natured and beautiful young woman named Georgiana; only after their marriage, however, does he begin to be troubled by the small pink birth-mark on her cheek—a mark that many men consider one of her most attractive features, whereas jealous women condemn it. Aylmer eventually becomes so obsessed with the idea of removing the mark (and his treatment of Georgiana eventually becomes so subtly disdainful) that she insists that he attempt to rid her of this supposed defect. Despite the fact that so many of his earlier experiments have only partially succeeded, Aylmer undertakes this new one, and although he does succeed in removing the mark, he kills Georgiana in the process—an outcome mocked by his crude but pragmatically sensible lab assistant, Aminadab.

“The Birth-mark” is one of Hawthorne’s most pervasively ironic tales, and although the outcome of the story is almost predictable, the ironies are so frequent and so pungent that the story never loses its interest. Aylmer is a scientist for whom science is a kind of religion; he thinks of himself (and is thought of by others) as possessing almost god-like powers. The first paragraph already begins to emphasize the sort of religious language that runs throughout the story; Hawthorne speaks of Aylmer’s era as a time when science “seemed to open paths into the region of miracle,” and he speaks of obsessive scientists as “devoted votaries” who believed that the successful scientist might someday be able to “lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself” (*Tales* 118). Such language already smacks of blasphemy and of overweening pride, and the story can obviously be read as an allegory about the dangers of human presumption. Aylmer presumes to sit in judgment of his beautiful wife, paying unhealthy attention to her one small physical flaw while, in the process, not only ignoring but also exemplifying his own ethical and spiritual shortcomings. By attempting to remove her alleged bodily imperfection, he displays the imperfections of his own mind and soul.

The story clearly implies that beauty (or, in this case, ugliness) is clearly in the eye of the beholder. Most men find the birthmark attractive, but Aylmer “*select[s]*” it as a symbol of his wife’s imperfection; his “sombre *imagination . . . render[s]*” it a “frightful object” (*Tales* 120; italics added). The birth-mark may indeed be a sign of imperfection, but Aylmer clearly fails to realize that all people are imperfect when judged by a standard of absolute flawlessness, and that his own tendency to judge his wife in this fashion makes him guilty of a far more serious spiritual imperfection than any minor physical blemish she may possess. By the middle of the story, practically every sentence becomes ironic. At one point, for instance, Georgiana begs Aylmer, “Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life!” (*Tales* 121). He will, of course, eventually manage to do both. Likewise, when Georgiana asks Aylmer to “save [his] poor wife from madness” (*Tales* 121), Hawthorne’s phrasing invites us to consider which of the two may truly be insane. In any case, whether or not Aylmer is actually crazy, he is certainly a monumental egotist, as the long string of personal pronouns in the following sentence suggests: “*I* feel *myself* fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be *my* triumph when *I* shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than *mine* will be” (*Tales* 121–122; italics added). Ironically, of course, Pygmalion at least managed to create a living woman, not kill one.

Although Aylmer installs Georgiana in artificially attractive chambers that resemble a kind of ersatz heaven, his own scientific laboratory resembles a sort of hell, and he does indeed display a kind of Satanic pride in his willingness to deceive his wife: He experiments on her without her full knowledge or complete prior consent, failing to inform her completely of the risks involved, and failing also to acknowledge the long string of his own previous scientific mishaps. He ironically urges her not to “mistrust” him (*Tales* 125), but it is clearly *he* who mistrusts *her*; and both the irony of the story and the religious language reach a high point when, as Geor-

giana dies, the fading birthmark is compared to “the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky” (*Tales* 130). The rainbow, of course, is usually regarded not as a “stain” but as a symbol of rich beauty, and it is also traditionally considered a symbol of God’s bond or covenant with man. Likewise, the narrator ultimately describes Georgiana’s birthmark as “the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame” (*Tales* 130). By refusing to accept the inevitable fact of imperfection—not only Georgiana’s but also his own and that of all earthly things—Aylmer not only sacrifices an innocent life but also ruins his own chance for real (if imperfect) happiness. By attempting to expunge a sign that he interprets as the symbol of another’s flaw, he manifests a far deeper, more repulsive flaw of his own.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look at this story from a modern feminist perspective, and then discuss the degree to which you think Georgiana herself is partly responsible for what happens to her. How, ideally, might she have responded differently to Aylmer’s urgings? However, how might her historical circumstances—including her early training, her legal status as an 18th-century wife, and other cultural and social pressures—have prevented her from responding differently than she does? How do you think most modern women would respond to a husband like Aylmer?
2. Compare and contrast Aylmer with Angelo in William Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*. To what degree is each character guilty of pride, presumption, and hypocrisy? How does each tend to set himself up as a little god, sitting in judgment of others? To what degree is each character conscious of his hypocrisy? What biblical passages seem relevant both to Shakespeare’s play and to Hawthorne’s story? In particular, discuss the possible relevance of Matthew 7:1–5.

The Scarlet Letter (1850)

Set in Boston in the 1640s, the novel describes how the town’s rigidly Puritan community pun-

ished an attractive young woman named Hester Prynne for committing adultery and for giving birth to an illegitimate daughter named Pearl. Hester’s much-older husband had sent her from Europe to America with plans to join her later; when he, however, did not appear after a long time, he was presumed dead, and Hester secretly became involved with a young and highly respected local minister, Arthur Dimmesdale. Although the tormented preacher cannot make himself admit his affair with Hester publicly, Hester herself is willing to keep his secret, even though she must bear the public badge of her adultery in the form of a large scarlet letter *A* sewn onto her clothing. When her old husband (passing himself off as a doctor named Roger Chillingworth) unexpectedly and secretly appears on the scene, he soon suspects Dimmesdale’s guilt. Swearing Hester to silence about his identity, Chillingworth befriends Dimmesdale and begins a long process of psychological torture—a process that eventually leads not only to Dimmesdale’s public confession and sudden death but also to a brief but meaningful connection with Hester and with Pearl, who earlier had withheld her affection until he admitted his sin.

The Scarlet Letter is universally regarded not only as Hawthorne’s masterpiece, but as one of the most important novels in the history of American literature. The book has never gone out of print since its very first publication, and its status as a significant work of art was recognized almost immediately. Even the relatively few early critics who disliked the book (because of its alleged immorality, historical inaccuracy, and use of personal satire in the introductory “Custom-House” section) nevertheless paid it the compliment of serious attention, and most of Hawthorne’s initial audience was impressed (as have been most subsequent readers) by the profound moral issues the book raised, by its shrewd ethical and psychological insights, and by its memorable characters, skillful symbolism, and suspenseful plot. With the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, American literature had at last come of age, and the book was perhaps even more warmly greeted in Britain than it had already been received in the United States.

The novel opens with a long introductory section titled “The Custom-House”—a section added at the suggestion of Hawthorne’s publisher, who thought that the novel was otherwise too short. Based in part on Hawthorne’s own experiences working in the Custom House in Salem, Massachusetts, this section has always been one of the most controversial portions of the work. Many early reviewers thought that Hawthorne had used the introduction mainly to take satirical revenge on his personal political enemies, whom he blamed for the loss of his job as a customs officer. Other readers, meanwhile, have considered the introduction an unnecessary addition to the main text, and teachers sometimes advise students to skip this segment and proceed directly to the main narrative. The more common recent tendency among critics, however, is to explore the various ways in which the introduction is relevant to the main body of the book, particularly in the ways both the introduction and the book itself focus on relations between the individual and society and especially on the impact of political power on private lives. According to the excellent summation provided by Kimberly Muirhead, recent critics

often cite thematic similarities between the two works that link them (such as isolation, alienation, guilt over sins of the past, and tensions between solitude and sociability, the past and the present, public and private interests, and artistic and social responsibilities); [in addition, such critics] show how Hawthorne’s personal and political experiences during and after the Custom-House scandal [in which he was fired from his job] parallel Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s experiences in the novel; and they frequently extend those comparisons by illustrating that Hawthorne projects his own artistic temperament, personality, or state of mind onto one or more of his primary characters. (xxvi–xxvii)

In all the ways and for all the reasons just mentioned, then, “The Custom House” is well worth including in any serious reading of *The Scarlet Letter*. Certainly the occasional humor of the

introduction adds an extra dimension to the book. Meanwhile, the narrator’s claim that he discovered historical manuscripts describing the basic events on which the plot of the novel is based was a typical device of fiction writers in the 17th through 19th centuries, when creative writers often tried to give their fictional works historical credibility. Hawthorne, with his keen interest in New England’s Puritan past and his ambivalent attitudes toward his own Puritan ancestors, had special reasons to want to set his book in early colonial times, especially since the Puritan era was a period when matters of sin, guilt, and moral responsibility (key themes in much of Hawthorne’s fiction) were central to the public culture. By setting his story in the remote past, Hawthorne (paradoxically) could not only explore his interest in history and give his narrative plausibility but also gain a measure of imaginative freedom: His text would not be tied to the mundane facts of everyday life in an all-too-familiar 19th-century America; instead, the book could take on legendary coloring and an imaginative tone by describing events set in a bygone era. The past thus provided him an anchor, but it was also a source of creative liberation.

Hawthorne’s decision to set *The Scarlet Letter* in the legendary past was also appropriate to the particular kind (or genre) of work he was writing. Although the book is often referred to as a novel, in the strict sense it is more accurately labeled a *romance*. Of these two kinds of works, novels were expected to be more realistic in setting, plot, characterization, and tone. Novels, in fact, often described the daily lives of people not much different from those of the people who read them. Romances, on the other hand, afforded their authors greater range and flexibility; a romance writer could approach his materials in a more imaginative, less literal fashion; he could include elements of fantasy and the supernatural (although not to excess). Above all, he needed to be less concerned with presenting absolutely credible facts and more adept at depicting the “truth of the human heart” (the phrase Hawthorne himself memorably used when justifying romances in his “Preface” to *The House of the Seven Gables*, 1). The writer of romances is

less concerned with reporting external data than with probing the inner workings of his characters' minds and emotions, and the writer of romances also tends to be more concerned with larger, more universal, more timeless issues than with a merely accurate description of the daily life of a particular time and place. All these characteristics are especially relevant to the kind of work Hawthorne was composing in *The Scarlet Letter*, which is not only a romance but also a romance with strong gothic elements. *Gothic* fiction often features a tone that is grim, gloomy, and foreboding. Mystery, suspense, and even aspects of the supernatural are often traits found in such writings, which frequently contain at least one major "evil" figure whose often puzzling behavior threatens the well-being and often even the sanity of more sympathetic characters. Gothic writing often explores the dark inner recesses of the human psyche and frequently involves a fascination with characters who are both intriguing and morally repellent. The people in gothic works are often socially isolated and psychologically tormented, and certainly in all these ways *The Scarlet Letter* is a classic example of gothic fiction.

Hawthorne's decision to write a "gothic romance" also gave him license to employ many of his favorite fictional techniques, including a heavy emphasis on symbolism and allegory, strong patterns of repeated images (especially images of light versus darkness), the use of evocative settings and suggestive names, and a decided stress on ambiguity and mystery. All these features and devices helped him create a work that relies prominently on suggestion, connotation, indirection, and implication to convey its often shadowy and ambiguous meanings. *The Scarlet Letter* is a memorable book as much for the questions it raises and the speculation it provokes as for any answers it offers; it is effective as much for the mysterious moods it creates as for any straightforward "meanings" it definitively provides. Each of the main characters, for instance, is given an evocative name, yet none of the names completely explains the full complexity of the characters Hawthorne creates. Hester's name associates her with the psychological strength and physical attractiveness of the biblical queen Esther, who was famous for keeping a secret; Dimmesdale's

name links him with the darkness and gloom that increasingly characterize his own perception of himself; Chillingsworth's name implies the coldness at the heart of his dealings with other people; Pearl's name suggests something both beautiful and precious but also purchased at a great price. The names are obviously, in some respects, allegorical: They encourage us to think of the characters not as completely realistic individuals but as persons who are symbolic to one degree or another. Yet the names do not begin to exhaust the full significance of the characters to whom they are attached—characters who exist partly as credibly rendered persons and partly as figures in a highly evocative and symbolic narrative. The same is obviously true of the novel's varied settings: The novel's Boston is, in various respects, a believable recreation of the actual early New England town, but in other ways it also symbolizes the constricted, ordered life of a tightly knit community, in which the society's values can be harshly imposed on any individual who dares to question or reject them. Likewise, the woods that surround the town are in some ways merely a credible forest, while in other respects they also symbolize the freedom (but also perhaps the wildness and moral dangers) that result from distance from communal supervision. Hester, significantly, lives most of her existence outside the confining borders of the town and just at the edge of the forest, and in this respect, as in so many others, she is a marginal being—someone whose existence calls attention to the very same social constrictions she partially manages to evade.

When we first glimpse Hester, of course, she is anything but unconfined or unconstricted. She has just emerged from jail, carrying the infant Pearl in her arms and wearing a bright scarlet letter *A* sewn onto the breast of her dress. She is soon taken to a public scaffold, where she is subjected to hours of public display and humiliation. The scaffold, in fact, is one of the most important and most pivotal of all the settings described in the novel; "scaffold scenes" appear at crucial points throughout the book, thereby providing a sense of continuity and structure while also helping to advance the plot, usually by placing many of the main characters together in one location while also setting

the stage for some significant change in the action. The scaffold, as a symbol of public exposure and punishment, is at the figurative heart of this Puritan community, and scenes involving the scaffold are often juxtaposed with scenes involving the forest (the symbol of privacy and mysterious secrets). Hawthorne's use of the scaffold scenes typifies the economy and skill with which the novel is structured; the design of the work is relatively simple, with no elaborate subplots, no huge cast of characters, and no wide variations in atmosphere or tone. The mood of the work is consistently somber and serious, as befits its central concern with issues such as sin, guilt, hypocrisy, and revenge. The repeated scaffold scenes, as do the repeated alternations between the settings of town and forest, help give the work an impressive symmetry and coherence, while the relatively small cast of characters and the general absence of exciting physical action help keep the focus where Hawthorne clearly wants it: not so much on what the characters physically *do* as on their thoughts, emotions, motives, and psychological complexities.

Each of the four major characters has been analyzed in multiple ways. Chillingworth, for instance, has generally been seen as an almost Satanic personification of evil and revenge. He is associated with frigid rationality and with the mind rather than the heart, and in his desire to torment Dimmesdale he has often been interpreted as the dark villain of the book. In his obsession with discovering and punishing the secret sins of others, he becomes ever more sinful himself, and as his character degenerates, his body also becomes literally more distorted and crippled. As with Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (a book to which Hawthorne alludes frequently), Chillingworth's physical degeneration matches his increasing moral corruption, and it is clearly ironic that he adopts the role of a physician. Rather than caring for others or helping to cure them, he tortures and sickens them, both psychologically and physically, and in the process he himself descends into a kind of mental and moral illness. He wins only a paradoxical victory in the end of the book, for although he succeeds in destroying and even (in a sense) killing Dimmes-

dale, he himself soon dies, unloved and alone. He is both literally and figuratively a "leech"—a word synonymous in Puritan times with "physician," but a word that also implies Chillingworth's role as a kind of blood-sucking parasite. He is the moral and metaphorical vampire in this darkly gothic novel. And yet it would be far too crude to see Chillingworth as a villain pure and simple; he is, after all, also the victim of Hester's adultery and of Dimmesdale's secret hypocrisy, and his desire for revenge is, unfortunately, an all-too-human and all-too-common response to perceived injustice. Few readers can honestly or completely distance themselves from Chillingworth's darker impulses, but in his elaborate and subtle persecution of another person's corruption, Chillingworth only makes himself seem the more fundamentally corrupt of the two. Paradoxically, in his efforts to scourge and afflict Dimmesdale, Chillingworth ultimately helps lead the minister to a kind of redemption, and so he becomes a kind of spiritual physician almost in spite of himself.

Dimmesdale, by the end of the novel, has become a more sympathetic character than he was at the beginning; his guilty conscience and his physical, mental, and emotional suffering, combined with his final public confession, help make him seem something more than merely the weak and frightened hypocrite he might have appeared to be at the start of the book. As Hester does, he feels the full force of external pressures to conform to rigid social expectations, yet he, of course, lacks her strength of character and her willingness to face the public consequences of their mutual sin. He is, in some ways, the weaker and even the more conventionally "feminine" of the two sinners, but just as Hawthorne is able to convey skillfully the complexities of Chillingworth's position, so he is able to do the same with Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is not a character for whom we can ever afford to feel mere disdain, for just as Chillingworth is full of a vengefulness most people will recognize in themselves, so Dimmesdale embodies familiar fears and common internal struggles. Like all the major characters of the book, Dimmesdale is a complex figure whose dilemma should stimulate compli-

cated reactions rather than simple, self-righteous censure.

Pearl, too, is another of Hawthorne's complicated creations, although commentators have often seen her as the most allegorical and symbolic (and thus as the least fully rounded) of the four major characters. She is obviously the living embodiment of her parents' sin, and perhaps that is partly why she seems so willful, so mischievous, and so difficult to control. At the same time, however, she is also beautiful and intelligent, and of all the major characters she is the one who seems the least secretive, the least calculating, and the most impulsive. As a child who has been raised mainly on the outskirts of the town, she is the character who seems least concerned with the opinions of the community, and she is the character who is least conflicted by the need to adopt public postures. As does Chillingworth, but in a different way and from different motives, Pearl plays a major role in Dimmesdale's eventual confession and redemption, and Pearl herself seems transformed in positive ways by her father's final transformation. At the end of the novel, it is Pearl who inherits Chillingworth's money and who manages to escape the restricted life of Puritan New England: As the work concludes, she is living a prosperous and apparently happy life as a wife and mother in Europe.

Of all the characters Hawthorne created, however, it is obviously Hester Prynne who is the most memorably complex, and it is certainly Hester who has been the subject of most of the critical commentary and debate the novel has inspired. Commentators have often been attracted by her independence, her dignity, her strength and resilience, her defiance of social prejudice, her practical ability to cope with hardship, her devotion to her sometimes-difficult daughter, and her enduring commitment to protecting the complicated man she loves. Hester has often been seen as more sinned against than sinning, and many critics (especially recent ones) have viewed her as a kind of feminist heroine—a self-assertive woman whose desire for autonomy wins the respect of both Hawthorne and his readers. Hester's initial rejection of (and by) society has been seen by some as symbolizing the rise, during Hawthorne's

day, of a new kind of woman (one who would no longer be content with the confining strictures of the past), but Hawthorne's attitude toward these new developments has been the subject of intense debate. Some commentators argue that the novel adopts a generally profeminist stance, while others contend that Hester is never as much a "feminist" as some critics claim, and that Hawthorne himself was, in any case, deeply skeptical of any kind of unbridled, romantic individualism. According to some analysts, even if Hawthorne did sympathize with Hester's rebellion, he effectively "tames" her by the end of the book, after an absence of many years taking her back to Boston, where she resumes living in her small cottage, devotes herself to public charity, and wins the widespread respect of the very community that long ago persecuted her for her rebellious ways. According to this interpretation, Hawthorne ends the work by neutralizing Hester's radical or revolutionary potential, either because he lost his nerve or because he never fully sympathized with her rebelliousness. Others, however, argue that Hester remains a subversive figure to the very end, particularly in the way she assures other troubled women (who go to her for counsel) "of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (166). According to this reading, Hester at the end of the book is a kind of feminist prophet. Other readers, however, argue that at the conclusion she is a far more conventional figure than she was at the beginning.

The fact that both Hester and the novel's conclusion are open to such diverse interpretations should not be surprising, since many issues raised by the book have been the subject of much discussion and sometimes even heated debate. Is Hawthorne's attitude toward the Puritans mostly negative, or is it more subtly ambivalent? Does the novel imply a consistent political philosophy, or does it tend to sidestep political questions? If the book does have a political agenda, is that agenda "liberal," "conservative," or some complex mixture of the two? How, if

at all, is the work relevant to the tense sociopolitical controversies of Hawthorne's own time, particularly the controversy over slavery (a debate that would soon result in civil war)? How does the novel position itself in relation to contemporary disagreements over transcendentalism, a popular philosophy of Hawthorne's time, and to what degree is the book skeptical of almost any claim to truth rather than simply skeptical about particularly rigid and dogmatic judgments? What is the central theme of the text? Is that theme sin, love, or something else? Is the text fundamentally ambiguous, or does a coherent, consistent meaning emerge? How does the novel reflect Hawthorne's own personality and character, and what (precisely) were his personal traits and attitudes? Was he a relatively well-adjusted and happy man, or was he a deeply, darkly tormented soul? Finally, can the work profitably be read in light of recent interpretive theories, such as Freudian psychology or postmodern analysis? Or should it be read primarily in the context of its own particular time? These are just a few of the many questions that have been raised about the book in the century and a half since it was first published, and no doubt the discussion and debate will continue. One key trait of any literary classic is that it continues to provoke thought and stimulate dialogue (and even fierce argument). By that standard alone, *The Scarlet Letter* is definitely a classic, and although a few critics have faulted the book as a work of art (criticizing, for instance, its allegedly excessive emphasis on symbolism and the supposed artificiality of its characters and style), most readers have roundly disagreed. *The Scarlet Letter* has long been considered perhaps the first classic American novel—and certainly one of the most important—and that status seems, if anything, more secure today than at any time in the past.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Hester Prynne is one of the great characters in American literature. How are we to feel about Hester? Does Hawthorne seem to admire her or condemn her? Why does she choose to remain in Boston instead of escaping?
2. Read *The Scarlet Letter* alongside Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, paying particular to the ways in which the lives of the central characters are shaped and restricted by the societies in which they live. What are the central value systems of those two different societies? How does each society attempt to impose control on its members? How does each central female character deal with those attempts at control? How are the chief male characters in each novel comparable and/or distinct? What is the implied attitude of the narrators toward the societies they describe?
3. In what way is Roger Chillingworth a kind of Satanic character? How, and for what reasons, is he a source of pain and torment to others? Does he change as the novel progresses?
4. Compare and contrast *The Scarlet Letter* with Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Discuss the personalities and experiences of the two heroines. How are the lives of both women shaped by their communities and by their relationships with older husbands who try to control them? What attracts each woman to a younger man? What options are open to each woman in her respective society? Discuss the ways both works present contrasts between distinct physical settings, particularly between life in towns and life outside towns.
5. Examine the nature and function of each "scaffold scene" in *The Scarlet Letter*. What elements do the scenes have in common; how are they distinct; what kinds of progression occur from one such scene to the next?

Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)

In this "Preface," Hawthorne makes a clear distinction between romances and novels; the former are less strictly tied to realism and mundane facts than the latter. Hawthorne offers his book as a romance, not a novel, and although he argues that the text does offer a moral meaning, he also stresses that its moral significance is not presented in any obvious or mechanical fashion.

Hawthorne's distinction between novels and romances is important not only to an understanding

of *The House of the Seven Gables* but also to a proper appreciation of his other fiction, as well, including his shorter tales as well as his longer works, such as *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne wanted to make it clear, in this “Preface,” that his writing should not be judged by the standards appropriate to a completely realistic, documentary kind of fiction writing, particularly not the kind of writing associated with the “novel of manners,” whose purpose was to recreate the details of daily life (especially contemporary life) in a believable and convincing fashion. Hawthorne, instead, seeks “a certain latitude” in his fiction; his goal is emphatically *not* to adhere to “a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” (1). His focus instead is on an inner, deeper truth—“the truth of the human heart,” which the writer of romances has “a right to present . . . under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation” (1). Hawthorne seeks a flexibility, especially in creating the atmosphere, symbolism, overtones, undertones, and imagery of the book; he does not want to be tied to a strict, unimaginative realism. At the same time, he is conscious of the dangers of departing too far from the mundane and credible, and so he advises the writer of romance to “make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous [*sic*] rather as a slight, delicate, evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public” (1). The imagery here is significant: Hawthorne is imagining the writer as a kind of chef who should have a right to depart from ordinary, predictable cuisine, but who should not depart too far from public tastes.

One widespread expectation among readers (and critics) of fiction in Hawthorne’s era was that a work of creative writing (whether a romance, novel, poem, or story) should convey some moral meaning. Hawthorne argues that *The House of the Seven Gables* does indeed contain a “moral”—“namely, that the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones”—and in fact he adds another moral for good measure: “the folly of tumbling down an avalanche of ill-gotten gold, or real estate, on the heads of an unfortunate posterity, thereby to

maintain and crush them” (2). Once again, however, Hawthorne makes a case for flexibility, subtlety, and nuance: A work of fiction teaches most effectively not by making blatant arguments but “through a far more subtle [subtle] process” (2). If a work of creative art is to have a powerful moral impact, that impact must be achieved by indirection, implication, suggestion, and delicate shadings, not by open or crude sermonizing. The writer of a romance is an artist, not a preacher, and so Hawthorne rejects any impulse “relentlessly to impale the story with its moral, as with an iron rod—or rather, as by sticking a pin through a butterfly—thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude” (2).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Flannery O’Connor was a great admirer of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and she, too, claimed to be writing in the tradition of “romance” as he defines it. Choose one of her works (such as the story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”) and discuss the ways in which it is a “romantic” work in Hawthorne’s sense. How does the story depart from strict realism? How does it use symbolism and subtlety to convey a message about “the truth of the human heart”? How does it convey a moral without merely preaching?
2. Discuss whether and how accurately Herman Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick* might be considered a “romance” by Hawthorne’s definition. In what ways does Melville use symbolism, imagery, atmospheric effects, and “the Marvellous” to tell a story that transcends mere realism? In what ways does Melville explore truths of the human heart in his book rather than focusing on details of common, mundane behavior?

The House of the Seven Gables (1851)

In the late 1600s in New England, greedy Colonel Pyncheon acquired land for a large, imposing house, apparently by suggesting that the unsuspecting landowner, Matthew Maule, was guilty of witchcraft; however, just before Maule was hanged

for this alleged offense, he pronounced a curse on Pyncheon—a curse that reverberated down through the decades, affecting not only the colonel (who soon died) but also his descendants. In the first part of the 19th century, one of those descendants, an elderly unmarried woman named Hepzibah Pyncheon, lives in the decaying house with her broken brother, Clifford, who has recently returned from serving a lengthy prison sentence for a murder he did not commit. To make ends meet and to preserve her financial independence from a greedy relative named Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon (the true but secret murderer), Hepzibah reluctantly opens a small shop in the house, where she is assisted by a cheerful young relative named Phoebe, whose romance with a man named Holgrave (a secret descendant of Matthew Maule) eventually helps lift the dark cloud that has hung over the occupants of the ill-fated House of the Seven Gables.

Although *The House of the Seven Gables* is commonly considered a novel, Hawthorne himself described it as a “romance” (see the previous essay on the “Preface”). A *romance*, in Hawthorne’s view, was less tightly tied to strict realism than a novel was; it could afford to be more symbolic, more allegorical, more speculative and philosophical, and more closely aligned with suggestive fantasy than with merely plausible or mundane “fact.” Hawthorne was generally less interested in depicting the external features of the familiar, everyday world than he was with delving into life’s deeper meanings—especially the moral meanings that lay beneath the surface of characters and events. This concern with ethical significance is especially obvious in *The House of the Seven Gables*, with its heavy preoccupation with matters of human sin. Not surprisingly, the book’s focus on sin—and particularly on pride, greed, and hypocrisy—naturally lends itself to a dark and gloomy tone and atmosphere, and those traits in turn help make this text a gothic work. Gothic fiction often centers around old, decaying houses or mansions, and it also often involves mysterious, gruesome deaths and other sorts of bizarre misfortune. Suspense, horror, and even elements of the supernatural often play a large role in gothic writing, which also often features

lovely young heroines and grim, powerful, and threatening older men. Family curses, hidden sins, strange omens, and persistent, puzzling mysteries all often play additional roles in gothic texts, and all these features, taken together, help to make *The House of the Seven Gables* a classic example of the gothic genre. Hawthorne, however, is less interested in producing exciting melodrama than he is in exploring the moral significance of human behavior. His book rises above simple, obvious suspense through its reflective, philosophical tone and its broad range of ethical and social themes.

A concern with sin is one of the most obvious themes of this particular text, as it often is in Hawthorne’s fiction in general. Hawthorne believed that humans possess an innate capacity for evil, and in *The House of the Seven Gables* he shows how a sin committed in the distant past can reverberate for generations. Yet sin, in this book, is not an impulse humans simply cannot control; instead, it is a freely chosen act for which each sinner bears personal responsibility. Colonel Pyncheon is a sinner in his greed and deceitfulness, and so is his distant descendant, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, yet Jaffrey Pyncheon is hardly the victim of some sort of irresistible or inevitable genetic curse. Rather, he simply chooses to violate the laws of proper moral conduct in much the same way as his ancestor did. Thus, if various Pyncheons sin in ways that prove disturbing and destructive, it is not because they have no choice, but, on the contrary, because they repeatedly yield to the same corrupt temptations. If there is a “curse” on the Pyncheon family, it is a curse that some of them freely cooperate in perpetuating. Only when a Pyncheon deliberately chooses to sin does evil result—often for others, but also often for him. Thus, both the colonel and the judge are found suddenly dead just when they seem most powerful. The universe, in Hawthorne’s fiction, is ultimately a moral place in which few sins are unpunished long. Sin can be hidden or disguised for a time, but eventually its ugly consequences are felt—and often they are felt first and foremost by the sinners themselves.

This contrast between hidden sin and public reputation is, indeed, a central theme of Hawthorne’s

book. In fact, *The House of the Seven Gables* is generally concerned, in numerous respects and on numerous levels, with the contrast between external appearances and inner reality, particularly in the way it presents the colonel and the judge. Both of these men enjoy great social status and a respectable reputation, yet each is morally corrupt, and each is guilty of conscious hypocrisy. The judge's attractive smile masks an inner evil that the virtuous Phoebe nevertheless instinctively intuits, and it is one of the many ironies of the book that this corrupt and hypocritical man is in an official position to sit in judgment of others. Yet this kind of contrast between external appearance and inner reality figures in the book in other ways, as well. Thus the elderly Hepzibah, despite a physically unattractive appearance (since her face is distorted by a permanent but involuntary scowl), is capable of appealing kindness, while Holgrave, the young man who lodges in Hepzibah's house, is finally revealed as a direct descendant of the very man—Matthew Maule—whose unjust death led to the “curse” on the Pyncheon family. Part of the whole purpose of Hawthorne's book is to encourage his readers to look beneath the surface of reality and to attempt, instead, to explore its inner depths; he tries to stimulate his audience, when reading the book, to exhibit the same kind of probing intelligence that led to the book's creation. Hawthorne is less interested in stirring up and satisfying superficial suspense than he is in provoking moral reflection.

To stress the moral dimensions of this book, however, is not to deny its social and political elements. Indeed, numerous commentators have read it as Hawthorne's meditation on the transition from an outmoded aristocratic culture (rooted in elitism, isolation, and feelings of smug superiority) to a newer kind of social arrangement—an arrangement grounded in the more democratic, more republican values he associated with the best revolutionary American ideals. According to this reading, most members of the Pyncheon family represent a kind of atrophying elitism that was becoming increasingly irrelevant in Hawthorne's day; Phoebe and Holgrave, by contrast, ultimately represent the less pretentious, humbler attitudes of a younger generation

that was both more vibrant and more vital than the dying aristocracy of the decaying past. The death of the older-style Pyncheon family values therefore symbolizes (according to this reading) the passing of an often-regrettable era in American history, and Hawthorne's sympathies are wholly with the rise of the newer, more open, more generous, and more public-spirited attitudes he associates especially with the young and optimistic Phoebe. Even Hepzibah, by the end of the novel, seems to have left some of her old ways of thinking behind and has embraced a new attitude toward her place in her society. It is not surprising (according to this view) that at the end of the text most of the surviving characters abandon their ancient, ancestral home, since the history and values associated with that dilapidated house now seem increasingly irrelevant to the lives they plan to lead in the future. By the end of the book the central characters (especially Phoebe and Holgrave) move beyond the self-centeredness that had resulted either in death or in stunted, disappointed lives for so many persons earlier in the text. Hawthorne thus reveals his sympathies with a democratic future rather than with an arid, aristocratic past.

However one chooses to interpret the meanings of the book, its success as a work of art obviously depends on the skillfulness of its style, structure, techniques, and craftsmanship. *The House of the Seven Gables* would not be worth reading as a work of literature if it did not possess strengths in all these areas, and indeed commentators have praised the work for virtues in all the respects just mentioned. The book has been commended, for instance, for the ways it combines realism, poetic phrasing, and vivid depictions of life in a particular region (a kind of writing known as local color). In addition, the work has been admired for its ability to blend history and humor, lyricism and satire, as well as brooding terror with a touching story of developing young love. The characters have been acclaimed as memorable and diverse, and the book has also been applauded for its effective use of symbolism—especially symbolism involving the house, the garden, and even the family chickens, whose decrepit condition reflects the

2. Although Hawthorne was sometimes openly or implicitly critical of Puritanism, he often expresses a different attitude toward Christianity in general. In what ways can Hawthorne be called a “Christian writer”? How do his works illustrate common Christian values and precepts? Do his works ever conflict with those precepts?
3. Choose two short stories by Hawthorne and then compare and contrast those stories with one of his novels. How are all three works similar and/or different in such matters as themes, characterization, imagery, symbolism, dialogue, and diction? Are there any traits that all three works seem to share? In other words, are there any characteristics that seem relatively “typical” of Hawthorne?
4. Compare and contrast the relative effectiveness of two works by Hawthorne—preferably two works of the same genre (such as two stories or two novels). What specific factors, in your opinion, make one work more or less successful than the other as a work of literary art? Which of the two would you eagerly read again? Which of the two would you hesitate to recommend to a friend? Explain your responses in detail.
5. Discuss the theme of good and evil in several different works by Hawthorne. What motives, traits, or behavior, in Hawthorne’s view, seem to count as “evil”? What motives, traits, or conduct does he seem to consider “good”? Are distinctions between good and evil simple and clear-cut in Hawthorne’s fiction, or does he sometimes make it difficult for us to decide who is good and who is evil? Does he ever present characters who seem to embody both qualities at the same time? Support your arguments by providing detailed evidence.
6. Although humor is perhaps not as prominent a feature in the work of Hawthorne as it is (for instance) in the works of Herman Melville or MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), humor does sometimes play a role in Hawthorne’s writings. Discuss, for instance, the role of humor in “The Birth-mark,” or in “The Artist of the Beautiful,” or in “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” or in *The House of the Seven Gables*. What functions does humor serve in any one of these works? What similarities and/or differences exist in the kind of humor each work employs? Why do you think Hawthorne tends to use humor so sparingly?
7. Read the opening paragraph of “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” in which Hawthorne mockingly describes his own style of writing, and then discuss the ways in which his description might be applied to one or more of his works. To what degree, and in what respects, is the description an accurate assessment of the traits of Hawthorne’s fiction? Give specific examples from the work you choose. To what degree, and in what respects, does Hawthorne fail to do justice to his own accomplishments as a writer?
8. Read a few essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then discuss the ways in which Hawthorne and Emerson seem similar or different. Which author seems more “optimistic” and which seems more “pessimistic”? How do these differences manifest themselves, and how do you account for them? How do Hawthorne’s main themes and concerns differ from those of Emerson? How do their styles differ? Do the characteristic thoughts of one writer appeal to you more than those of the other? If so, explain why.
9. *The Scarlet Letter* has been filmed a number of times. Compare and contrast at least two of the films with each other and with the novel itself. Which film does more justice to the book? What are the strengths or weaknesses of each film considered in and of itself? How, if at all, does each film reflect the particular period in which it was made?
10. Read a reliable biography of Hawthorne, and then discuss the ways in which his fiction seems to reflect aspects of his own life and character. How does knowledge of the writer’s life enhance or complicate the reading of his fiction? Is knowledge of an author’s life necessary to a

proper appreciation of his writing? How, if at all, did your reading about Hawthorne's life alter your understanding of his creative writing?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Bloom's BioCritiques*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 2003.
- Baym, Nina. *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976.
- Clark, C. E. Frazer. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978.
- Crews, Frederick. *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. Edited by Seymour L. Gross. New York: Norton, 1967.
- . *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*. Edited by James McIntosh. New York: Norton, 1987.
- . *The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings*. Edited by Leland S. Person. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Mellow, James R. *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.
- Miller, Edwin Haviland. *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.
- Muirhead, Kimberly Free. *Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter: A Critical Resource Guide and Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Literary Criticism, 1950–2000*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 2004.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/hawthor.htm>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Newman, Lea Bertani Vozar. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979.
- Pennell, Melissa McFarland. *Student Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap3/hawthorne.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Reynolds, Larry J., ed. *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Scharnhorst, Gary, ed. *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Greenwood, 1992.
- Wineapple, Brenda. *Hawthorne: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

Robert C. Evans



WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

(1837–1920)

But let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray man and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; . . . let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it.

(*Criticism and Fiction*)

Although the reputation of William Dean Howells has suffered over the last 100 years, at the end of the 19th century he was the most powerful and prominent figure in the American literary establishment. He wrote more than 100 books, and his writings included plays, poems, short stories, travel literature, children's literature, memoirs, and more than 30 novels. As editor of the very influential *Atlantic Monthly*, and later a columnist for *Harper's Monthly*, he was in the position to make or break writers' careers by choosing works to publish and in reviewing books. Usually generous in his critical evaluations, he used this power primarily to forward careers; the beneficiaries of his influence constitute a who's who of late 19th-century American literature and include MARK TWAIN, (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), HENRY JAMES, BRET HARTE, EMILY DICKINSON, MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN, SARAH ORNE JEWETT, Hamlin Garland, STEPHEN CRANE, CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT, Frank Norris, Edith Wharton, PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, and Abraham Cahan. The visibility of most of these writers has eclipsed Howells's own, but an upward reevaluation of his work seems to be under way, especially by critics interested in the relation of literature to politics and society, one of his central concerns.

Howells was born in 1837 in Martinsville (now Martin's Ferry), Ohio, a small village not far from what at that time was the frontier; Howells ever

after clung to a sense of himself as a "westerner." His father was a printer and editor, who repeatedly moved his family from town to town as he worked for or published various Ohio newspapers—newspapers that often advocated abolitionist, socialist, and reformist points of view. Never especially successful at these endeavors, he was barely able to support the family, which grew to include five boys and three girls. Starting at age nine, Howells worked for his father setting type in various newspaper print shops—rather than going to school. As a young man he began writing for his father's papers and for other journals, publishing poems, columns, reviews, stories, translations, and news reports. If, as Howells later wrote, his father did not characteristically think about "things that make for prosperity," he did educate Will in literature and publishing, as both vocation and business; he also imparted staunch antislavery views, a commitment to social justice, and a nascent faith in socialist principles.

After his poem "Andenken" was accepted for publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859, Howells took a chance and traveled to Boston, managing to obtain a meeting with James Russell Lowell, editor of the *Atlantic*, with whom he had corresponded about his poem. After that entry into the world of literary Boston, he met other figures of Boston's legendary literary elite—including James T. Fields, owner of the *Atlantic*, and Oliver Wendell Holmes,

the well-known Harvard University physician and writer. He then traveled to Concord, Massachusetts, where he met NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, RALPH WALDO EMERSON, and HENRY DAVID THOREAU, and from there he made his way to New York, where he met WALT WHITMAN. Although these introductions did not have immediate effects on his plans to become a writer, the connections eventually helped further his career.

Back home in Ohio, Howells met and courted Elinor Mead, who would become his wife. And, asked to write a campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln, he dashed one off in a month. On the basis of this book, and in an attempt to secure some sort of stable livelihood, he petitioned the Lincoln administration for an appointment as a foreign consul and was awarded an appointment to Venice, where he arrived in December 1861. His loneliness there—he never quite gained entry to Venetian society—probably hastened his proposal of marriage to Elinor early in 1862; she crossed the Atlantic in late 1862, and they were married in Paris on December 24. They settled happily in Venice and grew to love the city. Their first child, Winifred, was born there in December 1863. They remained in Venice until August 1865—four months after Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox; Howells had lived in Venice throughout the Civil War.

Venice transformed the Howells into cosmopolitans—and this made a return to provincial Ohio unattractive. So upon arriving back in the United States, they set up house in Boston. After a brief try as a staff member of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Howells again called on Lowell, Holmes, and Fields—hoping for help with employment, but not getting it. After some desperate searching, he broadened his job hunt to include New York, where he landed a job, in November 1865, with the *Nation*; for this literary magazine he wrote book reviews and a regular column. Impressed with this work, James Fields, in January 1866, offered Howells an assistant editorship at the *Atlantic*—which, after some misgivings, he took. The Howells moved to Cambridge and became ensconced in Boston's literary social elite, becoming friends with such people as Fields, Lowell, HENRY WADSWORTH

LONGFELLOW, Charles Eliot Norton, HENRY JAMES and William James, HENRY ADAMS, and John Fiske. There followed a period of extraordinary literary productivity, during which the Howells family grew, too. John Mead Howells was born on August 14, 1868. Their third and last child, Mildred, was born September 26, 1872.

Howells had published a book of poems in 1859, without much success. But shortly after their move to Cambridge he published *Venetian Life* (1866), a book about Venice that he had worked on during his consulship; it became an immediate success. He followed it with *Italian Journeys* (1867) and then *Suburban Sketches* (1871), the latter about life in Cambridge. He was praised by critics for his capacity to describe common life and common things with insight—an evaluation that would become a hallmark of Howells's work. *Common*, here and almost always in Howells's work, meant life from a decidedly white, middle-class point of view; servants—Irish immigrants and African Americans—and poor people were treated as others. As Howells continued to write, however, the question of connection and sympathy across class and ethnic distinctions became a central and vexing concern.

During the time of his *Atlantic* editorship—as assistant editor from 1866 to 1871, then as editor from 1871 to 1881—he divided his time between his own writing and his work for the magazine. His first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, came out in 1871. A story of the honeymoon trip of Basil and Isabel March—two characters with similarities to the Howellses who would reappear in later novels—the novel resembled his nonfiction writings through its emphasis on travel description, sketches of contemporary scenes, and details of marital life. Novels that followed also capitalized on his travel-writing successes, situating stories of courtship concerning young, middle-class American women within sketches of travel abroad: *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873) recounts a young woman's aborted romance during a trip to Canada; *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), again about a young woman's romances, uses Italy as a backdrop; *The Lady of Aroostook* (1879) uses a trip to Venice as the context for the courtship and marriage of a Mas-

sachusetts schoolteacher. Intertwined with these novels about “average” Americans, Howells’s essay-length reviews for the *Atlantic*—themselves an innovation—promoted fictions of “humble” American life, stories that focused on characters rather than on intricate or outlandish plots, that advanced through plain-spoken dialogue rather than through a narrator’s intrusions, and that provided recognizably “real” and “unaffected” people and incidents. Although Howells’s developing conception of literary “realism” was certainly capacious, even incoherent according to some subsequent critics, his persistent terms of evaluation were “truth” rather than “artifice” and “every-day life” and fidelity to the probable over melodrama. As he said in reference to the work of his close, lifelong friend Mark Twain, “Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are. . . ; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and we believe that even its masterpieces will find a response in all readers” (“The Truthfulness of Mark Twain’s Fiction,” in *Selected Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2, 1886–1897 49–50).

In 1881 Howells resigned his editorship at the *Atlantic* and devoted himself to writing—having secured, as a regular source of income, an agreement with the *Century* magazine for serial publication of his novels. Another very productive period followed, as he completed and published nine novels altogether in the 1880s, in addition to works for the stage (mainly farces but also lyrics for an operetta) and magazine writing. Among the novels was *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), often considered his best novel and certainly the one most familiar to us. But also important were *A Modern Instance* (1882), which gained some scandalous notoriety because it dealt with a relationship that ends in divorce; *Indian Summer* (1886), focused on a romance between a middle-aged man and a young woman, Americans, again, in Italy; *The Minister’s Charge* (1887), about a Boston minister who meets a young, poor rural poet and encourages him to go to the city to pursue a writing career, then suffers guilt as the young man seemingly founders; *Annie Kilburn* (1888), about a woman who returns to her

poor country town with the philanthropic aim of helping the local factory workers, whose misconceived efforts run aground; and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), which has the goings-on of a magazine at its center but builds drama through the conflict between the millionaire owner of the publication and a socialist staff member and ends with deaths during a violent strike of streetcar workers.

As these nutshell plot summaries might suggest, Howells became more and more concerned with class divisions in the United States, and his writing became more pointedly political. This was related to Howells’s reading, in the mid-1880s, of the works of Leo Tolstoy, whose literary realism Howells admired, and whose Christian socialism rekindled his own interest in social justice, the problems of class difference, and the economic exploitation of underpaid workers.

These concerns catapulted Howells into national controversy in 1887 through his writing about the so-called Haymarket Riot. During a labor-union strike in support of an eight-hour workday, when the police moved to disperse a meeting of strikers, a bomb was thrown into the police ranks. The police opened fire, at the end of which seven officers and four civilians lay dead and hundreds were wounded. Seven strikers were arrested, then prosecuted in a trial that Howells thought (and most historians agree) was an unjust railroading of the defendants that resulted in their deaths (four of them were eventually hanged). After the initial trial Howells wrote to the governor of Illinois asking clemency for the defendants, and after their appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court, he wrote letters to the *New York Tribune* protesting their unjust treatment. He was not joined by other members of the literary establishment, and in a social climate predominantly hostile to political radicalism, he endured sharp criticism for his stand. The experience left him feeling alienated from an American society he saw as propelled by unbridled capitalism and disregard for social injustice. While it would be wrong to characterize Howells as an out-and-out political radical—he called himself “a theoretical socialist and a practicing aristocrat”—his sense of class division, and the disparity between his own

comfortable prosperity and the poverty he saw everywhere, colored his view of America for the rest of his life.

A number of his writings of the 1890s engaged other troublesome social issues. In *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), a businessman embezzles money and throws his company into default, then flees to Canada to avoid prosecution, setting up a situation for Howells's criticism of a "commercial civilization" that produces such failures of morality and character. *The Coast of Bohemia* (1893) raises the question of a woman's place in a male milieu—in this case, a female art student's struggles in the New York art world—and hints at a lesbian relationship. In *An Imperative Duty* (1893), a young woman who has been raised as white learns of her African-American ancestry, providing the occasion for Howells to think through the problems of segregation and miscegenation. And in *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), Howells fantasizes a visitor from a utopian republic called Altruria, an egalitarian socialist society founded on the principle of altruism, who challenges the social beliefs and assumptions of a group of middle-class vacationers at a summer resort. As the decade closed, the Spanish-American War roused Howells's denunciation of American imperialism and his opposition to war in general; in the wake of this he wrote the often-anthologized story "Editha," about a young woman caught up in ideas promoting the glory and valor of war who sends her fiancé off to fight—and die—and whose illusions about war are countered by the more clear-eyed point of view of the soldier's mourning mother.

After his break from full-time magazine writing and editing, Howells returned to such work when he agreed to write the "Editor's Study" column for *Harper's Monthly*, which began in January 1886 and ran through March 1892. In 1889 he moved to New York and, in 1892, wrote briefly for *Cosmopolitan*, a magazine he was drawn to because of the socialist beliefs of its editor. Then in 1895 he began contributing a regular column called "Life and Letters" to *Harper's Weekly*, which he continued until 1898. Thereafter, for most of the rest of his life, Howells concentrated on his magazine writing,

especially through return engagements at *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Monthly*. In this magazine writing Howells took up a range of topics, from literature and language; to art, architecture, and music; to politics and social problems. But perhaps his most influential literary criticism was written during the first *Harper's Monthly* period—a collection of which was published as *Criticism and Fiction* in 1891. In these pieces he developed his conceptions of literary realism as a kind of literature that should represent—and should be measured against—ordinary middle-class life; the people and the problems they deal with should be recognizable, and the ethical dilemmas they confront should be pictured in a way that illuminates the difficulties of moral reasoning. It is perhaps as a promoter and theorist of literary realism that he may be best remembered.

Howells's daughter Winifred had tragically died in 1889 after long struggles with illness and with 19th-century treatments for what doctors thought was a nervous disorder but that today sounds very much like anorexia nervosa. Howells's wife, Elinor, died in 1910. Howells himself died in his sleep on May 11, 1920. By this time younger writers, presenting themselves as rebels against the literary establishment that Howells represented, denigrated his writing as placid, tame, unexciting, prudish, quaint. But one wonders whether they truly read his books, which show us a writer who grappled with the compelling issues of his time and bring that time vividly to life for us.

***The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)**

Silas Lapham fits the profile of a self-made American businessman: He arose from humble roots in rural Vermont to become a successful, wealthy paint manufacturer. He moves his family to Boston, settling initially in the unfashionable South End, and starts to build a mansion on more fashionable Beacon Street. He wants his family—his wife, Persis, and their daughters, Penelope and Irene—to make their way into established, old-money Boston society. After the Lapham women meet the patrician Corey family during a vacation in Canada, a

relationship develops between the two families, partly because the Coreys' son Tom is interested in a job with Lapham's paint company, and partly because the Laphams mistakenly think that Tom is interested in the beautiful Irene—though there really is a mutual attraction between Tom and the less attractive, older, but more intelligent and witty Penelope. Despite the Coreys' distaste for the socially inferior, uncultivated Laphams, they invite the Laphams to dinner after Tom takes a job with Lapham's paint company. Penelope refuses to attend, and Silas becomes drunk at the dinner and behaves boorishly. When Tom calls on the Laphams the next day, only Penelope is home, and he takes the occasion to declare his love; knowing of Irene's infatuation with Tom, Penelope tells him never to visit her again. Meanwhile, Silas encounters business problems, partly due to competition from a West Virginia paint company. To compound his troubles, he visits the Beacon Street house, which he cannot bear to sell, and leaves a fire burning in the fireplace; the house burns down, just when its insurance has expired. In the final financial twist, Lapham, feeling guilty over having edged his former partner out of their paint business, loans him money, accepting as collateral some property soon to suffer devaluation. Given the chance to sell this property before the devaluation at a large profit, Lapham wrestles all night over the ethics of the deal, misses the chance to sell, and is financially ruined. The family moves back to the Vermont farm. Tom Corey goes to work for the West Virginia paint company, which decides to send him to Mexico; he finally persuades Penelope to marry him, and they leave Boston, free of the social distinctions that had kept their families at odds.

The novel is set in a period—the 1870s—when the American economy was still primarily agrarian, and most Americans were accustomed to a small-town world, but when there was a steadily increasing migration to the cities. The Laphams are representative of this movement, and representative, too, of an anxiety that accompanied this movement—that the republican ideal of the honest, self-sufficient farm family, with felt obligations to known neighbors within the stable structure of

the rural town, would be lost amid the anonymous, volatile, dog-eat-dog life of the city. The period was also one of change in American business, from an era dominated by small, family-operated concerns, when a single owner-manager, working perhaps with a few partners, made all the economic decisions, to an era in which transportation, mass production, and marketing enabled the creation of centralized, large-scale manufacturing, national markets, and giant corporations. Silas's career crystallizes these changes too, as he begins with a small, farm-based paint business and turns it into a paint-manufacturing empire. As he says, when he returned from the Civil War, "I found that I had got back to another world. The day of small things was past, and I don't suppose it will ever come again in this country." Silas, however, sustains elements of the older way: He retains personal control over all aspects of his business and cannot bear to have a partner, and unlike the emerging corporations that tapped capital by issuing shares of stock and limited investors' liability for debt, Silas derives his capital from personal savings and has unlimited liability for debts. It is arguably his adherence to these older ways—and finally to a business ethics rooted in personal responsibility—that causes his financial downfall and moral "rise."

The novel also focuses on the social tension between the old-money gentry of "Brahmin" Boston and nouveau riche families, like the Laphams, who seek entry into the higher levels of the urban social hierarchy. The Coreys represent a set of traditions, education and cultivation, and codes of etiquette that they feel are being assaulted by such vulgarians as the Laphams—and that they use to maintain their social distinction and superiority. Much is made of the Laphams' bad taste—in architecture, clothes, kinds of tea, literature, and so on—and of their bad manners, depicted most painfully at their dinner with the Coreys. At the same time, if the Coreys stand for elite social values that form a bulwark against the crude aggressiveness of a man like Silas, they also have a snobbism and, in the case of Bromfield, the father and idle aristocrat, an anemic and useless aestheticism that pales beside the simple and forthright

ambition and practicality of Silas. Howells evinces an ambivalence about the contrasting values that the Coreys and the Laphams represent, while he scrutinizes their clash.

Finally, the plotline of the romance between Penelope and Tom—and the romantic disappointment of Irene—raises questions of femininity and its stereotypes at the same time that it offers a criticism of popular romantic literature and the unrealistic behavior it models. At the dinner at the Coreys' house, for instance, discussion turns to the popular novel *Tears, Idle Tears*, and one of the guests, the Reverend Mr. Sewell, denounces as “ruinous” and “noxious” such books “with old-fashioned heroes and heroines,” which put unrealistically disproportionate emphasis on the “whole business of love.” But the avid reader Penelope, who is not at the dinner, devours the book and appears to act according to its plot, in which the heroine self-sacrificingly gives up her true love to another who loved him first. If Howells sets up his love plot according to recognizably stereotypical conventions—with the beautiful, insipid, “light” Irene contrasted to the plucky, intelligent, “dark” Penelope, and with the weepy, “feminine” self-sacrifice of Penelope—the novel undoes the formula. When Silas and Persis consult Mr. Sewell about their daughters' dilemma, he articulates a pragmatic, antiromantic “economy of pain,” in which Penelope's self-sacrifice is wrong because it makes three people, rather than one, unhappy. And in the end the heartbreak that Irene suffers transforms her from a beautiful but empty feminine stereotype into a mature and complicated woman, while Penelope gives up her romanticized and self-idealized self-sacrifice. And thus Howells's novel pointedly strikes a “realistic” contrast to the romantic, sentimental, and melodramatic literature against which he persistently campaigned.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Think about various aspects of “realism” in the novel. For example: Realists stressed that stories should have actual and verifiable settings. How does Howells specifically locate his story? Are the characters in the novel realistic according to Howells's terms—that is, are they “mixtures of good and bad”? Do the lives and events in the novel seem “ordinary” and “probable”?
2. Look carefully at the discussion of *Tears, Idle Tears*. What points of view are aired about this popular fiction? Are there criticisms of the book that sound as if they were being made by Howells the realist? In what ways might *Tears, Idle Tears* pertain to the story of the lovers in *Silas Lapham*?
3. Critics have noted Howells's use of paint and architecture as metaphors in this novel. Collect the references to each. What meanings do they have?
4. It is usually said that Silas loses everything except his honor, that he finally attains a moral victory. Do you agree? If so, try to describe what is involved in his moral conflict and the nature of his moral victory. Also, try to trace the steps in his financial fall, noting its causes. How might his financial fall be related to his moral rise?
5. The theme of conflict between “old money” and newly rich people—and between the values each of these groups represents—is a key concern in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923). Compare the ways these writers treat this theme, considering especially the similarities and differences in the values associated with the established rich and the parvenus.

“Editha” (1905)

When “Editha” was published in *Harper's Monthly* in January 1905, it appeared in the wake of the Spanish-American War, the four-month war that the United States waged against Spain in 1898, most of which took place near the Spanish colonial possessions of Cuba and the Philippines, and which Howells considered an imperialist adventure, an effort at territorial expansion of which the United States should be ashamed. The context for the story, however, is the war fever that pos-

sessed so many Americans on the eve of the war, and Howells's concern is with the way glorification of war operates—and exacts its costs—at the level of individual ethics by drawing people into its illusion and rendering them complicit with its wrongful tragedy. Editha Balcom is the focus of the story, a young woman who is caught up in notions of the glory and valor of war. She mouths the justifications for the Spanish-American War—that it is a war of liberation for people who have been struggling against colonial oppression, “a sacred war,” a war for “liberty, and humanity”—at the same time that she is conscious of “parroting the current phrases of the newspapers.” (And, indeed, American newspapers, especially those of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, exuberantly promoted the war and enflamed fears of Spanish forces in the nearby Caribbean.) Editha urges—or rather, manipulates—her fiancé, George Gearson, to enlist, and thus to do the honorable manly thing and be a hero worthy of her love. Gearson, doubtful and hesitant, with an inclination to think all war “stupid,” nonetheless becomes drunk and signs up, then ships out—and is killed. Ready now to play the role of the bereaved lover, sentimentally laid low and sickened by the death of her noble hero, Editha visits George's mother, who rebukes her for sending George to war and bitterly thanks God that he was killed before he had a chance to kill the reluctant conscripts of the other side, “the sons of those miserable mothers and the husbands of those girls that you would never see the faces of.” Initially shocked, and “groveling in shame and self-pity,” Editha has a conversation with another woman, who extols the good the war has done for the country and calls the reaction of George's mother “vulgar”—drawing Editha out of her “darkness” and enabling her “to live again in the ideal.” A pointed antiwar story, “Editha” also exemplifies many of the features of Howellsian literary realism, as it contrasts illusory ideals to plainspoken realities, explores the particulars and nuances of self-deception, and places at its center the difficult dilemma of ethical choices colored and plagued by noxious cultural assumptions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does Editha do to try to make George think as she does about the war? What are the psychological subtleties of their conflict?
2. In what ways do ideals of femininity and masculinity enter into the story? In reference to war, what are the differences in feminine and masculine “ideals”?
3. Think about the ending of the story, and the declaration “The mystery that had bewildered her was solved by the word [that George's mother's attitude was “vulgar”]; and from that moment she rose from groveling in shame and self-pity, and began to live again in the ideal.” What are the various ways, here and throughout the story, in which Editha seems to deceive herself? What are the sources and causes of her self-deception? Does she ever have a moment of clear-sightedness?
4. Consider “Editha” in relation to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894), thinking particularly about the ways in which Howells and Crane treat illusions about war and its realities, but also thinking about the complicated self-deceptions the main characters embody.

Criticism and Fiction (1891)

Criticism and Fiction is a collection of the influential literary criticism Howells wrote in his column “The Editor's Study” in *Harper's Magazine* from 1886 to 1890. It represents an important period in the development of his conception of literary realism. The basic tenets are all here—the importance he placed on fiction that represented everyday life in America, the ordinary speech of the people, the simple and average truths of human nature that we all recognize: “fidelity to experience and probability of motive” and the aim of “life-likeness” rather than “book-likeness,” that is, judging fiction by comparison to life and not by comparison to other literature. This realist agenda meant, for Howells, a move away from the adventure and romance and the “fantastic and monstrous and artificial things” that he thought characterized so many novels of the earlier 19th

2. At the beginning of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Silas is being interviewed by the journalist Bartley Hubbard. Derisive and condescending, Hubbard writes the interview in a way that makes fun of Silas but, as he says, not in a way “that *he*’ll ever find out.” Hubbard also reappears in *A Modern Instance*, where journalism is more fully treated as a dishonest and cynical profession. Compare the views of journalism in these two novels, then relate these views to Howells’s conceptions of truth and realism in literature.
3. The Reverend Sewell, who in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* explains his theory of “the economy of pain,” reappears two years later in *The Minister’s Charge*, where he explains his crucial theory of “complicity,” concerning the way in which people are socially interconnected and therefore bear responsibility for each other. Think about Sewell as a moral spokesman for Howells, and think about the relation between his ideas of “the economy of pain” and “complicity.”

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Cady, Edwin H. *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885–1920 of William Dean Howells*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1958.
- . *The Road to Realism: The Early Years 1837–1885 of William Dean Howells*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1956.
- Campbell, Donna M. William Dean Howells Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/howells/hbio.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Crowley, John W. *The Black Heart’s Truth: The Early Career of W. D. Howells*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- . *The Mask of Fiction: Essays on W. D. Howells*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. “The Economy of Pain: The Case of Howells.” *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 9, no. 4 (1990): 99–119.
- Goodman, Susan, and Carl Dawson. *William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005.
- Howells, W. D. *Criticism and Fiction*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1892.
- . *Selected Literary Criticism*. Vol. 2, 1886–1897. Edited by Donald Pizer, Christoph K. Lohmann, Don L. Cook, and David J. Nordloh. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Lynn, Kenneth S. *William Dean Howells: An American Life*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
- Nettels, Elsa. *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.
- . *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells’s America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988.
- William Dean Howells Society Web site. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/howells/index.html>. Accessed May 1, 2009.

Randall Knoper



HARRIET JACOBS

(HARRIET ANN JACOBS) (1813–1897)

I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may.

(Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl)

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was the first autobiography to be published by a formerly enslaved African-American woman. The stated purpose of the narrative was practical: Jacobs wanted to "arouse the women of the North to . . . the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what *I* suffered" (1). However, *Incidents* is far more than just a political statement. In order to describe the mental, as well as physical, struggles of her early life fully, Jacobs departs from the prescribed slave narrative formula by incorporating some techniques more commonly used for writing fiction. For this reason, *Incidents* has been embraced by modern scholars interested in the development of African-American fiction, particularly fiction by and about women. Although *Incidents* shares many characteristics with other antebellum slave narratives, its creative synthesis of narrative styles and forthright discussion of female sexuality sets it apart from any other narrative of that time.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born in 1813 in the town of Edenton, North Carolina. Jacobs's mother, Delilah, belonged to Margaret Horniblow, the invalid daughter of the proprietors of Horniblow's Tavern in Edenton. Jacobs's father, Elijah Knox, was a talented carpenter who was allowed to hire himself out and earn money on his own as long as he paid a certain amount to his owner. This allowed him to live in town with his wife and children rather

than on the plantation. Harriet tells us that she and her brother, John, enjoyed the unusual privilege of living in a "comfortable home" with both of their parents (5). This family circle was broken in 1819 when Jacobs's mother died. Delilah's mistress promised that she would care for the children. She taught Jacobs to sew and, more importantly, to read and write. However, at her own death in 1825 she did not free either child. Instead, she willed Harriet to her three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom, while John went to her mother. That same year, their father was recalled to his owner's plantation. He died a year later, having never realized his dream of purchasing his own freedom and that of his children.

After the death of her parents, the most important person in Jacobs's life was her grandmother, Molly. Although she was a slave, Molly was greatly respected by many of Edenton's influential white citizens and was able to run a successful baking business in her spare time. After her mistress died, Molly used her savings, and the legal aid of some of the town's white inhabitants, to purchase herself and her son, Mark. Molly's home was to become Jacobs's refuge from the increasingly intolerable conditions she encountered in her life as a slave in the Norcom house. Her grandmother's characteristic strength and dedication to her family would be an inspiration to Jacobs for the rest of her life.

Although Jacobs had been willed to Mary Matilda Norcom, she was actually under the control

of the three-year-old's father, Dr. James Norcom. Historical documents testify to Dr. Norcom's love of power and control; his treatment of his family as well as his slaves could be hard and unforgiving (Yellin 23). His wife, Maria Norcom, was a difficult and demanding mistress. When Jacobs was 15, Dr. Norcom began sexually harassing her, demanding that she become his concubine. Jacobs refused his advances, but Norcom continued to pressure her. In 1829, faced with Norcom's increasing harassment and her mistress's violent jealousy, Jacobs made a difficult decision. In order to avoid her master's sexual persecution and to assert her own control over her life, Jacobs accepted the advances of another white man, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. Jacobs describes Sawyer, a young lawyer, as "kind," and she firmly believed that he would, given the opportunity, purchase her and any children she might have (54–55). When Norcom discovered that she was pregnant by another white man, he flew into a passion and Mrs. Norcom ordered her not to return to the house. Jacobs moved in with her grandmother and there gave birth to her son, named Joseph. She continued her liaison with Sawyer and in 1833 had another child, a daughter she named Louisa Matilda. Both Sawyer and Jacobs's grandmother made attempts to purchase her and the children, but the doctor refused to sell them.

Norcom continued to harass Jacobs throughout this period and often became violent. Finally, in 1835, Norcom gave Jacobs an ultimatum. She could either yield to his demands and become his concubine or be sent to his plantation to be "broken in." Jacobs chose to leave her children with her grandmother in town and go to the plantation. She worked there until June 1835, when she heard that Norcom planned to send her children out to the plantation. Jacobs had often had reason to rejoice that her family lived in town, where fear of public opinion and her grandmother's friendliness with influential whites had restrained Norcom's violence. In her narrative she writes that if she had grown up "on a remote plantation, or lost among the multitude of a crowded city, I should not be a living woman at this day" (35). Afraid of what

would happen to her and her children once away from the supportive town community, Jacobs made a second difficult decision. On Sunday night, June 28, Jacobs ran away. Friends, both black and white, hid her during the first weeks after her escape. Finding that there was no safe way to send Jacobs north, her family contrived a more permanent hiding place in the attic of her grandmother's house. The space was tiny: nine feet long and seven feet wide, and only three feet tall at the tallest point. The only light and fresh air she had were through a hole that was barely an inch square, and she had to remain silent in order to escape detection. Jacobs's only comfort was that she had guessed correctly: Norcom had lost interest in the children after her disappearance and had finally sold Joseph, Louisa, and Harriet's brother, John, to a speculator who was acting for Sawyer and Molly.

Jacobs spent almost seven years in that small attic, which she dubbed her "loophole of retreat," crawling around the floor for exercise, suffering extremes of heat and cold, and listening to her children grow up in the house below. Norcom became convinced that she had escaped north and traveled to New York twice in search of her. He also regretted his hasty decision to sell John and the children. John had escaped from Sawyer two years previously, during a trip to New York, but the children were still living with their great-grandmother. Norcom claimed that, since the children had belonged to his daughter rather than him, their sale was illegal and they still belonged to her. In light of this, Jacobs agreed to let Sawyer send Louisa to New York to live with his cousins in Brooklyn, although she was uneasy because he did not legally free Louisa first.

Finally, Jacobs's family found an opportunity to smuggle her out of Edenton and send her north. In June 1842, Jacobs escaped by boat to Philadelphia, and from there she made her way to New York City. There she was reunited with Louisa, who was acting as a servant for Sawyer's cousins rather than being given the schooling she was promised. Jacobs wished to take her away to a home of her own, but economic circumstances forced her to leave Louisa where she was and go to work. Jacobs

found employment as a nursemaid in the family of Nathaniel Parker Willis, a well-known writer and editor. Willis had proslavery tendencies, but his British wife, Mary Stace Willis, was firmly opposed to the institution. When Jacobs discovered that Norcom was searching for her in New York, she confided in Mrs. Willis, who encouraged Jacobs to take Louisa and flee the city. John, who had just returned from a whaling voyage, escorted them to Boston. There Jacobs sent for her son, Joseph. They settled in Boston for a year, but then Jacobs received the news that Mrs. Willis had died and Mr. Willis wanted Jacobs to take charge of the baby during a planned trip to England. Jacobs left her children with her brother in Boston and accompanied Mr. Willis and the baby, Imogen, to England, where she enjoyed comparative freedom from persecution and color prejudice. Once she returned to Boston, Jacobs received harassing notes from the Norcom family, insisting that she return to slavery.

In 1849 Jacobs sent Louisa to boarding school and went to Rochester to join her brother, now a prominent abolitionist, who wanted to open an antislavery reading room in the city. While she was in Rochester, Jacobs met Amy Post, an abolitionist who would become a very close and dear friend. The reading room did not prosper, so Jacobs returned to the Willis family to look after the baby of the second Mrs. Willis, Cornelia Grinnell Willis. In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Law, was passed, which made it legal for a slave owner to go north to the "Free States" and recapture any escaped slave. Jacobs's son and brother both left Massachusetts for California to participate in the Gold Rush and to escape recapture. From California they went on to the Australian gold rush. Disappointed at his luck, John left to become a sailor. Joseph remained there, but eventually disappeared and was presumed dead. Jacobs continued to work for the Willis family but had to flee the city in 1851, and again in 1852, with the aid of her employer, Mrs. Willis. After the second episode, Cornelia Grinnell Willis insisted on buying Jacobs's freedom so that she would be spared any more persecution. By then old Dr. Norcom was dead and Jacobs's young mistress was happy to sell her missing slave. Jacobs was

finally free, but she was never able to reunite with the members of her family in Edenton. Her grandmother died in 1853, without having seen either her grandchildren or great-grandchildren after their escape from the South.

After achieving her freedom, Jacobs continued to work for the Willis family, but she maintained her connections with the abolitionists she had met, particularly Amy Post, to whom she wrote often. It was Amy Post's suggestion that Jacobs publish her autobiography in order to help the antislavery cause. After some hesitation, Jacobs agreed. Uncertain of her own literary powers, her first thought was that she might commission HARRIET BEECHER STOWE to write the story for her. However, Stowe refused to deal directly with Jacobs (writing instead to her employer, Mrs. Willis) and seemed uninterested in the story except as it might add to her soon-to-be published *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs, irritated and hurt by Stowe's patronizing attitude, refused to have her story co-opted as part of another project and determined to write it herself. In 1853 she published her first writing, three anonymous letters published in the *New York Tribune* regarding the terrible conditions of slavery, and she started her autobiography.

Finding time to put her story on paper was difficult. In March 1854 Jacobs wrote to Post that she had begun writing but that "as [of] yet I have not written a single page by daylight"; the demands of her job meant that she had "but a little time to think or write" (Yellin 129). Writing at night and in odd moments during the day, Jacobs finally finished her manuscript in 1858. She tried unsuccessfully to sell it in England and in Boston before finding the firm Thayer and Eldridge, who agreed to print it if she could persuade LYDIA MARIA CHILD, a famed white abolitionist, to supply a preface. Jacobs met Child through her abolitionist connections, and Child agreed to act as general editor and supply the preface. Although she did alter the manuscript, she writes in her introduction to the text that it was "mainly for purposes of condensation and arrangement" (3). The publishing firm became bankrupt in 1861, but Jacobs managed to raise enough money to pay to have her book printed. That same

year her brother John, who had moved to England and married an English woman, published his own narrative, "A True Tale of Slavery," in the *Leisure Hour*, a British periodical. In 1862 a British edition of Harriet's narrative was published under the title *The Deeper Wrong*.

Jacobs spent the years of the Civil War working for relief agencies among the former slaves who were refugees in Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, Virginia. Louisa joined her in 1864, and together they opened the Jacobs School in Alexandria to teach the newly freed people. During her time in Alexandria, Jacobs sent letters and reports to her friends and contacts in the North, many of which were published in the *Freedman's Record*, the *Liberator*, and other antislavery publications. After the war ended, Harriet and Louisa went south to Savannah to aid in relief efforts, but they returned north in 1866, feeling anxious about the future of their people because of racist violence and governmental policies that blocked the freed people's access to land, education, and enfranchisement. In one letter that Jacobs wrote from Savannah to the *Freedman's Record* about the state of affairs there, she closes by noting ominously, "We shall be badly off when the military protection is withdrawn" ("From Savannah").

Back in the North, Harriet and Louisa became interested in the American Association for Equal Rights, but they soon became disgusted by the racism of white feminists, particularly their verbal attacks on black men. In 1868 Harriet and Louisa went to England to raise money for an orphanage and old-age home for the freed people, to be built in Savannah, but the conditions in the South were so bad that the money they raised could not be put to its intended use. After this disappointment, Jacobs gave up her active relief work and settled down to run a boardinghouse in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harriet's brother John returned from England in 1873, but he died shortly thereafter. Four years later Harriet and Louisa moved to Washington, D.C., where many of their activist friends had settled. Harriet again opened a boardinghouse, while Louisa tried to find work as a teacher or government worker. In 1892 Jacobs sold

her grandmother's house in Edenton, which she had inherited. She had only returned to the town twice after the war and had decided that she could not resettle there. Jacobs's health was failing, and Louisa became her mother's full-time nurse. On March 7, 1897, Harriet Jacobs died in Washington, D.C. She is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts, beside her brother John. Louisa lived until 1917 and is also buried at Mount Auburn.

***Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)**

In her autobiography Jacobs tells the story of her life, beginning with her childhood and ending with the purchase of her freedom by Cornelia Grinnell Willis. Although she is telling a true story, Jacobs chose to substitute pseudonyms for the real names of all of the characters in her narrative and leave the places in the South unnamed because, as she said, "I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course" (1). Jacobs also chose to publish the book anonymously, so that the only name appearing on the title page was that of her editor, the prominent abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. These choices, combined with the almost-incredible events of Jacobs's life, led many early scholars and historians to believe that *Incidents* was a work of fiction invented by Child and should be classed with other fictionalized slave narratives, such as Richard Hildreth's *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) and Martha Griffith Browne's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1857). According to the historian John Blassingame, *Incidents* was "too orderly" and "melodramatic" to be an authentic narrative (373). However, extensive research by scholars, most especially Jean Fagan Yellin, has uncovered and verified the identities of most of the characters and places in Jacobs's narrative, and *Incidents* has since taken its rightful place as one of the most important antebellum slave narratives in existence today.

Using the name *Linda Brent*, Jacobs opens her autobiography with the classic phrase "I was born a slave," but she follows up this declaration with the

description of her happy childhood home, where she was cared for by protective and loving parents. This opening sets up a theme that Jacobs will carry throughout her narrative, which is the systematic destruction (or attempted destruction) of families by slavery. By placing the family at the center of her narrative, Jacobs is tapping into an important cultural ideal of 19th-century America. During that period most social structures were built around the idea of the patriarchal family, with father, mother, and children each playing a specific role in the functioning family unit. Supporters of slavery even tried to cast the institution as offering slaves a stable and supportive family environment. For this reason, as Donald Gibson writes, “the analogy-to-family argument became one of the chief and most frequently employed to justify slavery,” and the supposedly paternalistic nature of the institution was one of the falsehoods that antislavery activists worked hardest to eliminate (Gibson 158). Jacobs engages with this debate from the beginning of her narrative by contrasting her loving family home with the harsh realities of the auction block, where enslaved families are broken up and individuals sold to the highest bidder. In a dramatic scene, Jacobs describes how Dr. Norcom attempts to sell her grandmother although it was widely believed in town that she had been freed in her mistress’s will. His plan fails, and from that point on, Jacobs’s grandmother becomes a dominant symbol of family values and respectability in the narrative. Molly spends the rest of her life struggling against the slave system to create security and legal freedom for her remaining family members in Edenton, such as Harriet and her children, but she is constantly thwarted by the callous and vindictive Dr. Norcom. The enforced fragmentation of Molly and Harriet’s close-knit family due to their owners’ abuse, debt, and death is meant to make the reader vividly aware of the unnatural and antifamilial nature of the institution of slavery.

Jacobs’s narrative also reflects the ongoing debate over the role of the church, another important cultural institution, in a society that supports slavery. During the antebellum period, churches

were deeply divided over the question of slavery, some members embracing it as a biblical institution and others claiming that it was completely antithetical to the teachings of Christianity. Speaking from her own experience, Jacobs focuses her discussion around the hypocrisy of slaveholders who also claim to be Christians. “There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south,” she writes. “If a man goes to the communion table, and pays money into the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of blood, he is called religious” (74). By setting up this distinction between “Christianity” and “religion,” Jacobs is able to contrast the whole-hearted piety of the African-American community and its religious traditions with the half-hearted efforts of the white community. Among them is her first mistress, who taught her to read the Bible but then failed to acknowledge her as a free soul. Looking back on that period, Jacobs wryly notes, “I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor” (8). Jacobs uses these moments in her text to encourage her readers to think more deeply about the nature of Christianity aside from the trappings that surrounded the practice of religion. Although she clearly has strong religious feelings, most of Jacobs’s spiritual experiences are centered on her private reading of the Bible rather than its presentation by white ministers of the established church.

In her story, Jacobs does not just comment on the religious hypocrisy of white people in her community but also makes the Bible a point of literal contention in her narrative, dramatizing its contradictory position in the slavery debate. In a chapter entitled “The Church and Slavery” she describes how, the day after he became a confirmed member of the Episcopal Church, Dr. Norcom attempted to combine allusions to the New Testament text “Servants obey your masters” with the idea of Old Testament concubinage to convince Jacobs that giving in to his sexual demands was a Christian act. When she answers that “the Bible didn’t say so” (presumably referring to the commandment “Thou shalt not commit adultery”), Norcom responds, “How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!”

(75). Although this exchange centers on the specific topic of adultery, it acts overall to destabilize the Bible as a uniform source of truth, particularly as the self-serving interpretations of biased slaveholders are contrasted with the spiritual empowerment African Americans gain from reading and interpreting Scripture for themselves.

Harriet Jacobs's familiarity with the Bible, which gives her the authority to "preach" to Norcom, is just one of the many examples of the power of literacy in her narrative. For many slaves the ability to read meant unprecedented access to religious and political knowledge, and it is often credited by them as the first step toward freedom. For this reason, the governments of most slave states discouraged owners from teaching slaves to read and write, and some even made doing so illegal. In *Incidents* Jacobs recognizes the central importance of literacy in her own struggle for freedom. Her ability to read not only gave her a sense of personal independence, but also allowed her to engage with and resist her master on the level of language. At one point she mentions that "he knew that I could write, though he had failed to make me read his letters; and he was now troubled lest I should exchange letters with another man" (40). Once she goes into hiding, Jacobs uses her ability to write to lead Norcom on a wild goose chase by sending him letters postmarked and written as though she were in New York City. These letters represent a new form of active resistance to slavery that extends beyond the physical confrontations more often described in slave narratives.

This strategic use of literacy in Jacobs's narrative highlights the importance of writing by African Americans, be it newspaper articles, autobiographies, or speeches, in the fight for abolition. By taking up the pen, Jacobs and others like her insisted that they not only have the opportunity to share their stories, but to write them themselves, thereby taking an active, rather than passive, role in their fight for equal rights. Jacobs's fight to determine the shape of her own life did not end with her escape from slavery but extended into her decision to publish her story. After rejecting Stowe's offer

to publish bits of it in her *Key*, Jacobs set herself to the task of improving her writing style and crafting her story. The anonymous letters she wrote to the *Tribune* can be seen as exercises in storytelling, as Jacobs experimented with the most effective way to tell the story of her own life and the lives of those around her.

This is not to say that Jacobs was able to publish the book entirely on her own. As were other writers of slave narratives, Jacobs was informed that her work could only be published if it were accompanied by an introduction by a famous white abolitionist. However, letters written by Jacobs and her white editor, Lydia Maria Child, have given us insight into the extent of Child's influence on the finished product. According to a letter of August 1860, Child's input was limited to "transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places." The language, Child wrote, was "wonderfully good" and needed almost no alteration (266). We can tell from these letters that the unique aspects of *Incidents* can be attributed to Jacobs herself. With its publication, the book signified Jacobs's literary and verbal triumph over both Dr. Norcom and the well-meaning but patronizing abolitionists like Stowe who would deny her the power to narrate and control her story and her life.

Jacobs's success in writing and publishing her own book with only minimal editorial alteration becomes even more significant in light of the central conflict of her story. Sexual abuse was not a topic that was commonly discussed in slave narratives. Some narrators, such as FREDERICK DOUGLASS, alluded to it, and melodramatic tales of miscegenation and beautiful, tragic slave women were not uncommon, but no narrative had ever explored from a factual point of view the complex pressures and choices that made up the life of the sexually abused slave woman. The closest attempt was *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon*, a narrative based on a series of interviews the editor, the Reverend Hiram Mattison, had with Louisa Picquet about her life as a young slave, who was almost raped by her master and then sold into concubinage around

the age of 14 or 15. Published in the same year as *Incidents*, the narrative of Louisa Picquet forms an interesting contrast to the story Jacobs tells. Mattison's prying and almost pornographic interest in the details of Picquet's physical and sexual abuse dominates the text and allows the reader only glimpses of Picquet's own feelings and thoughts about her situation. By writing her own story, Jacobs avoided that kind of editorial control and was able to produce a much more thoughtful and balanced view of the physical and psychological aspects of the experiences that she shared with so many other enslaved women.

Jacobs knew from the beginning that the sexual aspects of her narrative, which she had previously only dared to confide to her friend Amy Post, could potentially cause female readers to shun her book as too improper for public consumption. In order to combat that kind of reception, Jacobs carefully adopted some language and conventions from the sentimental novels of seduction and resistance that were popular female reading at the time. Nevertheless, as Frances Smith Foster points out, "Hers was not a tale of a naïve or headstrong maiden who falls victim to the wiles of an unscrupulous man, then dies" (103). Instead, Jacobs carefully portrays her unwilling initiation into "the evil ways of the world" and her spirited attempts to retain her purity in the face of Norcom's harassment (54). Rather than being the melodramatic story of a sexual victim, Jacobs's account of her affair with Sawyer is filled with images of reasoned intelligence and self-control. Feeling herself to be out of other options, Jacobs began the affair with the younger, kinder, and, she hoped, more impressionable man after making a "deliberate calculation" about its possible consequences for her and any children she might have. Her pragmatic approach to the affair is paired with a sense of limited spiritual liberation. She claims, "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (54–55). Although at the time she felt a sense of humiliation and shame at the path that she chose, Jacobs refuses to reject her decision or acknowledge it as a permanent fall. Instead, she presents

it to the reader as a successful evasive action taken by a desperate woman, redirecting the guilt to the institution of slavery, which condones the sexual exploitation of African-American women.

By doing so, Jacobs redefines purity as something that is dependent on social circumstances, not solely on a woman's character. White women, she explains, can rely on family, community, and the law to help them resist attacks on their chastity (54). As her master, Norcom is given the legal right to isolate Jacobs and remove or negate all of these potential external sources of strength. After describing all of these circumstances, Jacobs feels justified in stating, "I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (56). This statement, made during a period when African-American women were almost always portrayed as somehow falling short of a universal moral standard, stakes out a new territory for them to occupy. Jacobs backs up her claims for her own respectability and that of other women in her situation by repeatedly portraying women like her grandmother, who were "neither ladies nor broken blossoms" (Yellin 25). Rather than fall into the binary either/or depiction of women so popular at that time, Jacobs carves out a third space for herself and other African-American women who were deprived of the protection of law and custom in America.

When Jacobs describes her sexual experiences, she highlights the color line: White women are afforded protection that women of color are not. However, when she describes her experiences as a mother, she builds a bridge across the color divide. She intends her narrative to be a special plea for "the thousands . . . of Slave Mothers that are still in bondage . . . [and] their helpless Children" ("Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post" 264). It is her role as a mother that she stresses throughout most of her narrative, and as she describes incidents involving her children, she often invites the mothers who might be reading her story to imagine themselves in her shoes.

Even though she is much more conventional in her representations of motherhood than of womanhood, Jacobs does not accept the passivity that is

often linked to the character of the “good mother” or the “true woman.” Her grandmother, Molly, a single mother of five and caretaker of her grand- and great-grandchildren, is an important symbol of womanhood and motherhood in the text. However, her brand of maternal devotion is not the one finally embraced by Jacobs. When Jacobs talks of running away from Norcom, Molly states her opinion that temporary abandonment of one’s children, even if it is for their own later good, is an unforgivable breach of motherly responsibilities (Foreman 88). Nevertheless, when Jacobs decides to run away, she characterizes that decision as an extreme act of mothering, since it is meant to distract Norcom from his plans for her children and focus his attention on finding her. She tells her readers that “it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom” (89). This active, rather than passive, construction of motherhood allows Jacobs to fulfill her own goals as well as her goals for her children. It also links her with the northern women she had met, like Amy Post, who were both activists and mothers.

Although Jacobs clearly makes an effort to bridge the color line in her narrative, she does so in a way that resists the objectification or marginalization of African-American people, and especially African-American women. Their self-respect, she insists, is just as important to them as their physical freedom. As Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative* or Harriet Wilson in *Our Nig* does, Jacobs argues that racism in the North is as much a problem as slavery is in the South. The ending of her narrative reflects her unease with northern race relations by breaking the behavioral patterns her readers would have been expected to follow. She stresses her departure from the sentimental novel by stating, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.” However, she insists that for a former slave, even freedom is a qualified blessing in a state overshadowed by the Fugitive Slave Law. She is also not willing to pretend that simple physical freedom is her ultimate goal. She wants “a home of [her] own” around which to gather her scattered children (201). The domestic nature of this wish fits with the motherly character she has given herself

throughout the book. However, it signifies more than just her own personal desire. By drawing attention to her unfulfilled version of the American dream, she gestures to the broader economic and social barriers that stood between all free African Americans and their ultimate goals.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the traditional roles women were expected to fill in 19th-century America. How does Jacobs seem to accept or resist these roles? What different kinds of female behavior does Jacobs model in her narrative? According to Jacobs, what is the definition of “true womanhood”?
2. White women played an important part in the abolitionist movement. What role do they play in Jacobs’s narrative? How does she portray the relationships between white and African-American women?
3. Examine the ways male and female characters are depicted in the narrative. Construct an argument in which you make the case that Jacobs gives priority to females over males because she is appealing primarily to a female audience. Then decide whether or not you think she is justified in doing so.
4. What kinds of appeals does Jacobs use to construct her argument against slavery? Why did she choose them?
5. Look at the way Eliza Harris’s story concludes in the final pages *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and contrast it with the way Linda Brent’s story ends in *Incidents*. How do the differences in these endings serve differing authorial purposes?

“A True Tale of Slavery” (by John S. Jacobs) (1861)

This narrative was written by Harriet Jacobs’s activist brother, John S. Jacobs. In many ways, John’s narrative is a more typical example of a slave narrative than that of his sister. This difference is primarily due to gender. As do the other male slave narrators before him, such as William Wells Brown

or Frederick Douglass, John “sounds the notes of anger, militancy, and humor that the 19th century assigned to men” (“Through Her Brother’s Eyes” 48). The more feminine gender conventions of melodrama, sentiment, and confessional are as irrelevant to his narrative as they were important to his sister’s. For this reason, John’s narrative, although it covers much of the same territory as his sister’s, provides a different perspective on her life and experiences and highlights ways that differences in gender and audience can affect the way a story is told.

Whereas Harriet’s narrative was explicitly directed at sympathetic women of the American North, John’s narrative was written for a British audience that would have included adults and children of both genders. The *Leisure Hour*, the periodical that published “A True Tale of Slavery,” claimed on its masthead to be “a family journal of instruction and recreation.” The contents of the paper ranged from the adventures of a family of pioneers in Canada, to rags-to-riches stories, to essays on natural science. Elements of John’s narrative make it clear that he was thinking about the paper’s focus as he was writing. While he primarily narrates his physical journey from slavery to freedom, he also stresses his mental journey from ignorance to knowledge. Once he has reached the free states, he informs the reader that he “soon began to feel my responsibility, and the necessity of mental improvement” (220–221). Resolved to be a useful member of society and an aid to his family, he decides to educate himself while on a whaling voyage. He succeeds by making “the best possible use of [his] leisure hours on board” (221). In this way, he sets himself up as a model to his readers, not only as an escaped slave but also as a self-made man.

The overall structure and style of John’s narrative reflect the expectations of the serial-reading audience as well. His narration is pragmatic and episodic, rather than emotional, reflective, and novelistic as his sister’s is. His focus is on the physical drama of capture and escape and the material injustice of the slavery system, rather than the emotional and spiritual conflict that drives Harriet’s text. The scene when Dr. Norcom tries to sell their grandmother makes a good point of comparison. Harriet

stresses the affective side of the scene, describing her grandmother’s pride, Norcom’s shame, and the dignity of the elderly woman who purchases her. John, on the other hand, focuses on the practical side, such as the way his grandmother saved the money that was to free her and enlisted white townspeople to help her manage the business. Like John, Molly is meant to represent a model of practical self-improvement under adverse circumstances to which readers, male and female, can relate.

Gender is the other main influence on John’s narrative. As an enslaved man, he approaches his life and experiences from a different angle than Harriet does hers. An example of this can be seen in the different ways that they describe their parents in their texts. Harriet’s memories of her father are fond, and she credits him with instilling a sense of freedom within his children, despite the fact that he could not give them freedom itself. However, her true point of connection throughout most of the narrative is with the memory of her mother. John, on the other hand, has “a slight recollection” of his mother but identifies very strongly with his father. “To be a man, and not to be a man,” John writes, “—a father without authority—a husband and no protector—is the darkest of fates” (207). John credits his hatred of slavery and determination to escape almost entirely to his father’s teaching, whereas Harriet describes a variety of inspirational figures, male and female.

John’s characterization of himself and others also follows the model of other male slave narratives. As does William Wells Brown, John portrays himself as a reformed trickster, who only acted dishonestly in order to escape the unjust violence of slavery. Subterfuge, John insists, was necessary if he hoped to escape bondage, and “Unpleasant as it was thus to act, yet, under the circumstances in which I was placed, I feel that I have done no wrong in so doing” (215). However, his humorous depictions of pulling the wool over his master’s eyes reflect a less contrite emotion. He clearly revels in the kind of verbal trickery that enabled him to get the better of his master, and his tone is more often triumphant than humble.

This characterization extends to Harriet as well. In her narrative, she describes her decision to run

- the Life of a Slave Girl: *New Critical Essays*, edited by Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar, 76–99. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Foster, Frances Smith. *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Garfield, Deborah, and Rafia Zafar, eds. *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Gibson, Donald. “Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family, and the Discourse of Domesticity.” In *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, edited by Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar, 156–178. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Hilbreth, Richard. *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore*. Boston: John E. Eastburn, Printer, 1861.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Edited by Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. Original edition also available in electronic form through *Documenting the American South*, an electronic database sponsored by the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Available online. URL: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/menu.html>. Accessed January 30, 2007.
- . “From Savannah.” *The Freedmen's Record* January 1866: 3–4. *Documenting the American South*. 2003. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Available online. URL: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/support2.html>. Accessed January 30, 2007.
- . “Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post.” 21 June [1857]. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Edited by Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Jacobs, John S. “A True Tale of Slavery.” *Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* 10, nos. 476–479 (February 7, 14, 21, and 28, 1861). In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Edited by Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. Available online. URL: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jjacobs/menu.html>. Accessed January 15, 2007.
- Mattison, H. *Louisa Picquet, the Oclocoon: On Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*. New York: Published by the Author, 1861.
- McKay, Nellie, and Frances Smith Foster, eds. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Contexts and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Reuben, Paul P. Perspectives in American Literature. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap3/jacobs.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2004.
- . “Through Her Brother's Eyes: *Incidents* and “A True Tale.” In *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, edited by Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar, 76–99. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Sarah Ficke



HENRY JAMES (1843–1916)

I have an inalienable mistrust of the great ones of the earth and a thorough disbelief in any security with people who have no imagination.

(quoted in Edel, *Henry James: A Life* 179)

At first glance, the fiction of Henry James appears to be about people at the center of high society. On closer examination, many of James's characters struggle to enter high society from less fortunate backgrounds. Some do enter the privileged social center, while others remain marginalized. James's own life appears privileged from the outside, but examined closely, he, as his characters, wandered between the social center and its margins. James lived among people who possessed great wealth, held positions of power and influence, married, and had families—all hallmarks of success in mainstream Western society. James himself never married and never had a family; he always worried about money, he held no positions of authority, and his writing never achieved popular success equal to the writing of his peers.

Fortunately for his fiction, these experiences instilled in James a sense of difference and complexity, viewing high society as he did from both within and without. He appreciated in a way few male writers of his or any time did the lives of women and could write about them in a style that still wins critical acclaim even from feminists. But he could also write about men who do not participate in the social center, who do not themselves marry or have families, or who are afflicted with physical abnormalities that prevent them from living out the expected life of a male.

Henry James, Jr., was born in New York City on April 15, 1843, the son of Henry James and Mary Robertson Walsh. James was raised in a home where money was not a concern. James's father had inherited a fortune of several million dollars, and so work for him could be more of a diversion than a necessity. Henry, Sr., spent much of his life experimenting with different religious experiences, abandoning the strict Calvinism of his father and finally settling on the teaching of Emanuel Swedenborg. Rather than promoting a particular religious dogma, James's father invited open discussion and debate on a wide variety of issues. He also allowed his children to decide whether or not to attend church. Henry, Jr., would later lament that he wished for more direction from his father, but the result was that James grew up free to experiment with ideas and ways of living. He was not trapped in a particular mode of thought but could observe styles of life different from his own and appreciate them for what they were. This gift of appreciation for people and experiences other than one's own would become a significant theme in his fiction.

Henry, Jr., had an older brother, William, who would achieve greatness as a psychologist and philosopher. Henry idolized his older brother, who epitomized for him the successful American male. More than one biographer has argued that Henry was taught from an early age to be submissive,

while William favored an active role. Henry tried to match William's achievements in grade school and later at the university, but was often left feeling inadequate. In retrospect, Henry described his mimicking of William as picking up the "crumbs" of his brother's "feast" and listening to the "echoes" of his accomplishments (qtd. in Edel 18). William remained in America, close to home, choosing a life in the rugged mountains of New Hampshire. He enjoyed the comforts of a wife and several children, in addition to considerable fame and wealth during his lifetime as a philosopher and psychologist. Compounding Henry's sense of inadequacy, William offered biting criticism of Henry's written work. William clearly enjoyed his position as adviser and severe critic of his younger sibling, simultaneously placing high expectations on Henry and reminding him of his inferiority.

Meanwhile, James had been observing as his father, Henry, Sr., a man secure in his position in society, tried for years to recover from a severe emotional crisis that occurred when the younger Henry was only a year old. The source of his father's crisis was not external but internal. Henry James, Sr., called his crisis a "vastation" and described the experience as follows: "The thing had not lasted ten seconds before I felt myself a wreck; that is, reduced from a state of firm, vigorous, joyful manhood to one of helpless infancy" (qtd. in Edel 7). As in Robert Frost's poem "Desert Places," James learned firsthand as a boy that the things that terrorize one the most are rooted in the mind. A person can feel on top of the world one moment and crash into despair the next. This sense of precariousness would haunt the younger James, who later in life experienced something akin to what his father had, in the form of a nervous breakdown.

When James was less than one year old, his family moved to Europe, living in London and then Paris for nearly two years. Then again in his early teens, James accompanied his family to London and Switzerland, living in Europe for about three years. James was deeply affected by what he saw and experienced; the greenery of England, the lights of Paris, the majesty of the Alps, all provided scenery that would color nearly all of his fiction. Unfortu-

nately while in Europe the young Henry took ill, suffering from one of several illnesses that would afflict him throughout his life. Unlike his brother, William, who was robust and active, Henry led a life of relative physical incapacity, suffering at various times from typhus, gout, shingles, constipation, nervousness, and depression.

James would return with his family to Europe and then alone as an adult, determining in his late twenties to reside there permanently. Once again James assumed a position more at the margin than at the center. As an expatriate, he joined an elite group of people who had left their native land, in some cases never to return. This status worked to great advantage artistically, for James acquired a unique vantage point, allowing him to view American culture from a distance and at the same time experience in depth the much older culture of Europe. He could write with facility about either Europe or America and work literary wonders when mixing the two cultures together, as he did to great effect in much of his fiction.

While James admired America for its energy and innocence, for himself he chose Europe for its lack of innocence. Europe provided an escape from the confines of a still Puritanical America. As Leon Edel, James's great biographer, wrote, James decided that America "could not offer him the sense of freedom he had won for himself abroad" (Edel 537). At some level James shared a prevailing prejudice held by American elites, especially expatriates, that Americans lacked any measurable culture when compared with Europeans. Europe offered the American expatriate of James's day supreme freedom; one could lose one's self in the vast history of Europe, whereas America's relatively shallow history could imprison a person. In Europe the expatriate American male could roam wherever he wished in a sea of visual, physical, and emotional delights.

What really piqued James's curiosity, and what would be reflected in his writing, were people like him, American expatriates. These were the people he knew who would fill his fiction: beautiful young women who went to Europe with their families and in the process fell in love with European men.

Or handsome American men who fell in love with wealthy European women, some of whom were royalty. In many cases, the American would be wealthier than the European suitor, giving to the relationship newly won American dollars to replace the fading fortunes of old-money European families. American expatriates fell in love with Europe and European ways or were terrified by the tremendous difference, but in either case were forced to confront it. On the other side, Europe was fascinated by Americans, with their energy and vitality and above all their innocence.

At the time of the Civil War, while living in New York City, James suffered another bout with ill health, this time in the form of a physical wound. In helping to fight a fire, he injured himself. The details of the injury are notoriously vague, leaving biographers scrambling to determine its true nature. The intentional vagueness of the injury reveals much about James. He created an identity that revolved around the wound. James had, after all, wanted to fight in the Civil War, but his father had discouraged him from military service. The wound, however slight, allowed him to identify at least in his imagination with the men who did participate in the war. The wound seals his identity as a person of marginal health and illustrates the use he made of his imagination in his life as well as in his fiction.

James never married, though he fell in love with one woman, oddly enough, after her death. His cousin Minny Temple suffered from a severe lung disorder, and during James's visits to Europe, they would correspond with each other, he from Europe, she from her sickbed in the United States. He felt deeply saddened when she died at the age of 24 and wrote in a letter to his mother shortly thereafter, "It comes home to me with irresistible power, the sense of how much I knew her and how much I loved her. It is no surprise to me to find that I felt for her an affection as deep as the foundation of my being, for I always knew it." He also wrote, "Twenty years hence we shall be living with your love and longing with your eagerness and suffering with your patience" (qtd. in Edel 109–110). James's biographer Leon Edel interprets this letter

as evidence that Minny and in fact most women posed a threat to James in life but in death could be worshipped as "an idea, a thought, a bright flame of memory" (109). He was a young man and Minny a young woman when she died, and the intensity of emotion he felt for her increased after her death and would remain with him throughout his life.

He developed strong emotional ties to several women in his adult life, but as at least two biographers, Leon Edel and Fred Kaplan, have noted, these women functioned for him much as they would in his fiction, as confidantes, people in whom he could confide. These women friends affirmed his sense of himself. Some offered deep affection and admiration, others simply listened, and others entertained him. Some may have anticipated romance where none could be found. His confidantes included Grace Norton, with whom he enjoyed vivid correspondence; Isabella Gardner, who shared James's passion for the fine arts; Fanny Kemble, a source for his novel *Washington Square*; and Edith Wharton, a writer of considerable fame and fortune and the beloved companion of James's later life.

Another friend, Constance Fenimore Woolson, the grandniece of the American adventure novelist James Fenimore Cooper, offers a particularly interesting glimpse into James's relations with women. Woolson sought out the company of James for his knowledge of Europe, and moreover his brilliance as a writer, as she herself had ambitions to become a writer. This relationship epitomized James's relations with women. He basked in their admiration but could not return even a hint of romantic inclination. The friendship with Woolson continued for over a decade, until Woolson began to expect more attention than James could give. This strained their relationship; then, some years later, tragedy struck in the form of her apparent suicide. While suffering from influenza, Woolson threw herself from a second-story window in Italy. This tragedy affected James for years after as a painful reminder of expectations he could never fulfill.

In some ways, James preferred the company of men. He was deeply fond of his brilliant older brother, William, and in later life James surrounded

himself with men his own age and also some much younger. At least one of these men fell in love with James, but out of respect for social mores, James felt unable to return the young man's love physically. Looking over the span of James's life, it was in his elder years, from about age 60 on, that James felt comfortable enough with his feelings to allow himself to enjoy the company of these male friends. From that time forward, James acted more honestly, even courageously for his day. He allowed himself to find comfort in a community that society would not recognize—a community of bachelor men in England who surrounded him with love and affection. These men, young and old, provided for him a sense of domesticity. One friend, Howard Sturgis, could embroider and knit with skill: "He would sit with his thick golden hair beautifully brushed, his small feet daintily crossed, . . . working on some large golden-threaded design" (Edel 576–577). With men such as Sturgis, James discovered a form of home life that he had heretofore lacked.

He sought respectability through most of his life, though less so in later years. He held that one's perception in the community as upstanding and well mannered was one of the greatest virtues. Respectability was important in itself because it meant one respected social mores on which the fabric of society depends. This may be why he has the reputation of being a bit of a prude. What went on behind closed doors was not of concern to James, but what went on in public should be discreet, exhibiting good taste. Manners meant the world to him. He understood their value in the high society he enjoyed in life, the same society he preferred to write about in his fiction. But James also saw respectability as useful, as social capital. As James was not particularly wealthy, his good manners assisted him in circulating in a society that would otherwise have been forbidden to him. His infinite respectability also allowed him to go to the aid of people who had forsaken social mores in divorce or adultery. James could vouch for their good character because of his own good name.

As much as James sought respectability, he never yearned for power. He feared the "great ones" of

the earth. Theodora Bosanquet, his secretary, said that of all the people she knew, James was the least tyrannical. He went out of his way not to assert his authority over other people. He would, if asked, give his advice, but he would never coerce or even cajole. It was not his way. He held tyranny to be one of the greatest sins of humankind, as people exert their force over someone else simply because they can. His books are filled with characters who act without tyranny. In fact, their great struggle is to avoid becoming pawns of other people, to say in effect, "I will not let you do this to me." James was this kind of person himself, not coercing others, but also wary of people who do impose their will on others.

James never realized financial success from his literary work. He once wrote that in business matters he felt "like an old maid against the wall on her lonely bench." He always felt inadequate when he compared himself with his social peers. James knew from his youth financial dependency, first on his parents and then, embarrassingly, on his older brother, William. James's sense of financial crisis reached a fevered pitch when he decided to purchase a residence called Lamb House in a remote coastal region of England. His brother, who handled all James's financial affairs, condemned the purchase as extravagant. In one of his few assertive acts against William's will, he purchased the house anyway. His comments at the time tell much about his sense of financial precariousness when he compared himself to his literary peers: "My whole being cries out loud for something I can call my own . . . when I look round me at the splendour of so many of the 'literary' fry" (qtd. in Edel 499).

One of these "literary fry," his good friend Edith Wharton, profited enormously from her literary work. Whereas James sold some 404 copies of *The Ambassadors* in the United States and England, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* sold more than 100,000 copies, earning its author some \$20,000 in 1905 dollars and becoming a best seller. In a humorous anecdote, James purportedly said that with the proceeds of another of Wharton's books she had purchased a new Packard automo-

bile, while with the proceeds of his *The Wings of the Dove* he had “purchased a small go-cart, or handbarrow, on which my guest’s luggage is wheeled from the station to my house.” He continued, “It needs a coat of paint. With the proceeds of my next novel I shall I have it painted” (Seymour 237).

James attained critical but not popular success. Even his greatest achievements in the eyes of critics never became best sellers. James’s failure to achieve popular success triggered his depression. An emotional low point occurred for him with the critical and popular failure of his one attempt at playwriting, *Guy Domville*. On opening night James did not attend his own play but instead attended a production of Oscar Wilde’s critical and popular success *An Ideal Husband*. He witnessed the enthusiastic response of the audience to Wilde’s play, and then heard that his own play, *Guy Domville*, had been booed out of the theater. Apparently when the last light of the play went out and the line “I’m the last, my lord, of the Domvilles!” was delivered, someone in the audience jeered, “It’s a bloody good thing y’are” (qtd. in Edel 420). James subsequently descended into what he called some of “the most horrible hours of my life” (qtd. in Edel 425).

He would on one other occasion experience such emotional lows, with the publication of the New York edition of his novels. These beautifully bound editions, complete with prefaces written by the author, failed to achieve any measure of popular readership, after which Edith Wharton recalls finding James a broken man. “I could hardly believe it was the same James” as he “cried out to me his fear, his despair, his craving for the cessation of consciousness, & all his unspeakable loneliness & need of comfort, & inability to be comforted” (qtd. in Seymour 123). James had experienced a nervous breakdown.

His writing of fiction continued up until the end of his life, long after he developed a pain in his right wrist that prevented him from writing. The typewriter became widespread by the 1880s, and in early 1896 James engaged a stenographer, William MacAlpine, who soon started taking dictation

on the typewriter. James wrote to his friend Morton Fullerton about his fascination with composing fiction and correspondence with the typewriter: “I can address you only through an embroidered veil of sound. The sound is that of the admirable and expensive machine that I have just purchased for the purpose of bridging our silences” (qtd. in Edel 456). Arguably his greatest novels were written in this period of dictation. James ultimately could not create without the soothing sound of the typewriter keys. Some people criticized James for relying on dictation through a scribe and typewriter. Without a doubt, James’s fiction became even more circuitous, more labyrinthine, even more identifiably Jamesian, through dictation. As Leon Edel has noted, dictation permitted “verbal music,” greater use of colloquialism, and further elaboration of metaphor (Edel 456). These years resulted in works of astonishing sophistication: *What Maisie Knew*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Ambassadors*, *Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*.

In his last years, James anguished over the reluctance of the United States to enter World War I. His anguish translated into a desire to change his citizenship from American to British. In an unpopular move, James became a British citizen a few months prior to his death. He died in Great Britain in 1916.

***Daisy Miller* (1878)**

Daisy Miller tells the story of a young American woman abroad in Europe for the first time. A member of a family of recently acquired wealth (“new money”), she fails to conform to the standards of decorum set by the American expatriate society in which she finds herself.

James published the story *Daisy Miller* in 1878 to an appreciative audience. The story appeared first in magazines and then as a separate pamphlet that sold 20,000 copies. This after the publisher James first approached rejected it as an “outrage on American womanhood.” It turned out to be “the most prosperous child” of James’s works (Edel

216). It has become one of James's most famous works of short fiction, widely anthologized and frequently read by high school and college students. The story appeared in 1974 as a mildly successful film starring Cybill Shepherd.

Daisy Miller illustrates James's interest in the contrast between the innocence of America and the worldliness of Europe. It is important to note, however, that unlike most of his "international" works, such as *The American* and *Portrait of a Lady*, this story does not offer so much a contrast between Europeans and Americans as between "old money" American expatriates in Europe and those of "new money." James lets us know that Daisy Miller has new money, not only by what she does, but equally by the way her mother and younger brother behave. Her brother Randolph says to Winterbourne, "My father's in Schenectady. He's got a big business. My father's rich, you bet" (James, *Daisy Miller* 275). Meanwhile, Daisy's mother shows appropriate concern for Daisy's health due to her going out in the evening but fails to see as Winterbourne does the social sin Daisy has committed in being seen in the company of an Italian man of lower social rank. Mrs. Miller also betrays her new money status in her conversation. Her speech is coarse, as in "I ain't used to going round alone" and "They've got going at the piano; it seems as if they couldn't leave off" (307).

Daisy herself betrays her new money roots in a more appealing way, interpreted first by Winterbourne as "innocence." He is attracted to her energy and vitality, and it does not hurt that she is physically beautiful, graceful, and well dressed. Somehow the coarseness of her mother and outbursts of her younger brother are tempered in Daisy.

Nonetheless, Daisy fails to conform to social norms, and this raises key questions in the story. For example, does Daisy fail to conform because she will not or because she cannot? Her language and behavior throughout suggest a flaunting of convention, as when she accuses Winterbourne of being stiff and then will not let him stand in the way of her meeting Giovanelli alone. She also

openly flouts convention when she refuses to enter the carriage with Mrs. Walker. So, on the one hand, Daisy chooses to disobey social mandates.

Yet the question remains as to whether Daisy could ever escape her commonness. Even with the best behavior, Daisy would still be from new money and thus be labeled common. Winterbourne's aunt uniformly dismisses Daisy and her family: "They are hopelessly vulgar. Whether or not being hopelessly vulgar is being 'bad' is a question for the metaphysicians. They are bad enough to dislike, at any rate; and for this short life that is quite enough" (294). Well into the story, Winterbourne himself is swept away by the idea that there may be some fundamental ill breeding in Daisy's background, something that she cannot escape. He goes "back to the question whether this was in fact a nice girl. Would a nice girl—even allowing for her being a little American flirt—make a rendezvous with a presumably low-lived foreigner?" (301). And later, "he asked himself whether Daisy's defiance came from the consciousness of innocence or from her being, essentially, a young person of the reckless class" (314). Daisy may be incapable of conforming to society, and her own realization of this could then invite her frustration and open flouting of convention. Her mother and younger brother, her father's new money, her roots in Schenectady—all indelibly stamp her as socially deficient.

But the story is not only Daisy's. It examines the value and morals of a society that rejects someone on the basis of standards that deny personal freedom and honest expression. Daisy's freshness and vitality—the very traits Winterbourne initially admires—would need to die before Daisy would find acceptance by the group. Of course, the nature of any group is that it demands a degree of conformity among its members. James in his own life accepted this fully, understanding that high society and fine conversation ride on the wings of exclusivity.

Nonetheless, the story turns a critical gaze on Winterbourne and his society. Mrs. Costello suggests to Winterbourne that his living in Europe for so long has made him lose his sense about Ameri-

can women. Oddly she uses the word *innocent* to describe his situation. "You have lived too long out of the country. You will be sure to make some great mistake. You are too innocent" (282). This statement will haunt Winterbourne later on, when he considers, in an often-quoted line, "I have lived too long in foreign parts" (321). His statement resonates with a meaning far different from that intended by his aunt. His statement evokes not innocence, but the loss of innocence, of freshness, of vitality. The death of Daisy symbolizes for him another death, the death of his "American" self.

Here James weighs in not only on the social differences that distinguish one society from another, but also on the moral differences. Winterbourne succeeds in high society in a rarefied expatriate Europe where Daisy fails—mortally so. But in a moment of dramatic irony, when the moonlight falls on Daisy and Giovanelli in the Roman Coliseum, the light also illuminates Winterbourne: "It was as if a sudden illumination had been flashed upon the ambiguity of Daisy's behavior. . . . He stood there looking at her—looking at her companion, and not reflecting that though he saw them vaguely, he himself must have been more brightly visible" (317–318). Symbolically James has placed Winterbourne under the microscope. The reader is asked to assess Winterbourne, to question his seeming impregnability. From the viewpoint of his aunt and Mrs. Walker, Winterbourne is a great success. For the reader, his momentary reflection on living too long in Europe should be a point for prolonged meditation.

That Winterbourne is the one watching Daisy, much as we are watching Winterbourne, deserves some attention, for it represents a technique common in James's work. James skillfully lets us see his protagonists through someone else's eyes, such that the perspective becomes as interesting as the protagonist. In this case, Daisy is the apparent protagonist. The reader watches her precipitous decline, but that decline is all through the eyes of the only character whose thoughts the reader can access directly, Winterbourne. Never once is the reader privy to Daisy's thoughts. This limited omniscience

characterizes James's work. Unlike other works of his day, in which the reader enjoyed access to multiple characters' thoughts, roaming as freely as the mind of God, James sought a psychological realism where access could be had only through a single perspective. This is not true for all of James's work, but it is characteristic of some of his best work. The effect is startling, for the reader struggles to apprehend the "truth" of the story, only to realize that the truth must be pieced together through one's imagination and critical acumen. In this story, the narrator is reliable only insofar as one can account for his character and experience. In the telling of the story Winterbourne brings with him all the advantages and liabilities that a man of position and respectability can, no more, no less. He is not to be dismissed because of his privilege, but that needs to be acknowledged as he describes a young woman in a completely different station whose thoughts he can but imagine. In the end the story is Winterbourne's, a story he creates and one that reflects on him.

To heighten the contrast between the story's two main characters, James chose contrasting names. The name *Daisy* evokes springtime, youth, vitality, and above all innocence. *Winterbourne* evokes the end of the year and dying—age, loss of vitality, wisdom, and loss of innocence. The names perfectly describe each character. Whereas Daisy enters high society full of energy and vitality, Winterbourne looks upon life with a jaundiced gaze. Much as Winterbourne might like to help Daisy, the bridge he cannot cross to meet her is precisely that of his awareness of societal demands and ultimately his respect for them. He is like an old man, "stiff," as Daisy calls him. He cannot loosen up, because his long residence in Europe has predisposed him to respect a strict social code, one that has rewarded him with a position of considerable respect and privilege.

Gender widens the gulf between Winterbourne and Daisy. As a wealthy male of good breeding, Winterbourne comes and goes as he pleases. As much as the story describes the wide gulf that separates old money and new, good breeding and

“commonness,” so it illustrates the difference between a man in high society and a woman. No one questions Winterbourne’s passing from one romantic conquest to the next, or his being seen in mixed company or walking around at night free of social obligation. The onus is on Daisy to conform. She is considered coarse and common and even vulgar because she goes out at night and chooses the company of an Italian lawyer rather than that of a count or marquis. Daisy resists the confines of her allotted station. It is her resistance to these gender confines that sets her apart from the other female characters in the story. Whereas Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker express horror at her walking about town at all hours, she finds it comical. Her resistance is demonstrated in her refusal to enter Mrs. Walker’s carriage. Mrs. Walker is described in terms that suggest her ultimate submission to feminine decorum: a “lady, smiling sweetly” with “devoutly clasped” hands (303). When Daisy refuses to enter Mrs. Walker’s carriage, she is also refusing the feminine decorum on which Mrs. Walker insists.

Daisy expresses her ultimate refusal to adhere to gender norms when she prevents Winterbourne from interfering with her friendship with Giovanelli. She says, “I have never allowed a gentleman to dictate to me, or to interfere with anything I do” (300). This refusal goes right to the heart of the situation, for women in this society generally did submit to the whims of men very much like Winterbourne, men who could enjoy romantic encounters and nights out on the town and walk alone through the streets of Geneva and Rome with little consequence. For a woman, each of these situations spelled death to her reputation, symbolized in Daisy’s physical death after wandering through the Coliseum against the advice of society.

At the story’s conclusion, a theme is touched upon that is developed more fully in others of James’s works: that new American wealth seeks out European sophistication, while European sophistication and depleted wealth seek American money in any form available. Giovanelli remains in the shadows of this story, an undeveloped character. He speaks but a few lines. This, after all, is Winter-

bourne’s story, and Giovanelli cannot play a significant role in a story where he is hardly recognized as human, let alone an equal. Giovanelli, however, sees the whole situation with startling clarity. He exemplifies the wise European of James’s stories as he sees Daisy first of all as a possible source of wealth through marriage, but then becomes quickly disillusioned. After Daisy’s death, the “subtle Roman” says to Winterbourne, “If she had lived, I should have got nothing. She would never have married me, I am sure” (321). In this moment we see a typical situation in James’s fiction, when a European of relatively modest means seeks out an American fortune, unconcerned about the history of the finances, so long as they are intact.

Giovanelli, as the one who knows, augments James’s contrast of American innocence and European sophistication. But Giovanelli’s knowledge does not prevent him from grieving over Daisy’s death. “Giovanelli was very pale; on this occasion he had no flower in his button-hole. . . . At last he said, ‘She was the most beautiful young lady I ever saw, and the most amiable. . . . And she was the most innocent’” (321). His emotional response rings truer to the situation than Winterbourne’s. His honest emotion is one more reminder that Winterbourne has indeed lived too long in foreign parts. James’s story speaks to a specific combination of foreignness and privilege that robbed Winterbourne of the freshness and spontaneity Daisy struggled to maintain.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Find another story or novel by Henry James with an American in Europe as the main character. How does the protagonist in that story negotiate Europe similarly or differently than Daisy? Consider factors such as manners, class, wealth, speech, and gender.
2. Some critics contend that today’s readers cannot relate to James’s stories of manners and high society of the Victorian era. What about this story seems to you to be dated? How so? What about this story remains relevant even today?
3. To what extent do you find Daisy to be a sympathetic character, that is, a character who deserves

our liking and sympathy? To what extent is Winterbourne? Are there any clues that suggest who has the sympathy of the narrator (the *I* mentioned at the beginning of the story).

***The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)**

The Portrait of a Lady is James's best-known novel; as does *Daisy Miller*, it tells the story of a young American woman abroad in Europe for the first time. Unlike Daisy, the protagonist of this novel, Isabel Archer, demonstrates courage and determination in the company of people far more sophisticated than she who would use her for the considerable fortunes she has inherited from her father and her uncle. Isabel exhibits great powers of imagination, typical of James's heroes, as she discovers and begins fully to comprehend the true nature of people she once considered to be her friends.

This novel explores as fully as any of James's works the paradoxical nature of great wealth. As the possessor of considerable fortune, Isabel is liberated from the need to be married and therefore not bound by one of the prevailing social forces that served to constrict female freedom. Whereas in Victorian Europe and America most women had to choose between marriage and the convent (the convent does appear, after all, in the novel, in the subplot about Isabel's stepdaughter, Pansy), Isabel is independently wealthy and so is free to remain single if she so desires. She remarks, "I don't see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don't want to begin my life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do" (James, *Portrait of a Lady* 139). She has the confidence to go it alone, in part, because she trusts her own intelligence: "I don't need the aid of a clever man to teach me how to live" (146). She also has emotional support, on the one hand, from her close friend, Henrietta Stackpole, who has herself chosen not to marry. She also has a friend in Ralph Touchett, who does not push her into marriage, as he enjoys seeing her exercise her freedom. He says to her, "I shall have the entertainment of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton" (138). Ralph is

the agent of her freedom in persuading her uncle, Mr. Touchett, to give a sizable portion of his fortune to her. Isabel herself acknowledges the great freedom that money has given her.

But money is also the source of Isabel's greatest sorrow. She wants to share her great wealth with Gilbert Osmond in an attempt to help him realize his dreams as a fledgling artist. In a typical James scenario, the wealthy American Isabel Archer shares her fortune with the more "European" Osmond by marrying him. The marriage changes everything, as Isabel realizes that part of Osmond's dream is his wish to control her completely. Money has given to Isabel not only freedom, but marital obligations with grave consequences.

James takes the question of money and intertwines it inextricably with another important theme in the novel, the question of gender. Can a woman be as free as a man in a society such as the one portrayed by James? Isabel pushes the envelope, for James adorns her with every advantage to see how far her freedom can take her. In addition to great wealth, Isabel possesses high intelligence and a vivid imagination. "It was because she felt too wide awake, and wished to check the sense of seeing too many things at once. Her imagination was by habit ridiculously active; if the door were not opened to it, it jumped out of the window" (30). She also possesses an intact ego that bristles when people take advantage of her. Indeed, critics have praised James for creating in Isabel one of the most complex female characters in American fiction. (She remains popular even with feminist critics, for she exhibits not only great virtues but egotism to a fault.)

But is Isabel really a liberated woman? The novel has been criticized for allowing Isabel to remain in an unhappy marriage. But James makes the point that Isabel chooses to do so, at least in her own mind. First of all, she takes complete credit for marrying Osmond, against the advice of Ralph: "It was impossible to pretend that she had not acted with her eyes open; if ever a girl was a free agent, she had been . . . the sole source of her mistake had been within herself. There had been no plot, no snare; she had looked, and considered, and chosen" (374).

Now that she finds herself unhappily married, no one expects her to remain with her husband. The countess, Osmond's sister, begs her to be "wicked" for once, to act selfishly and desert her husband (504). And yet Isabel stays. One could say that Isabel is a victim of social norms insofar as she cannot see an honorable way out of her marriage. Isabel believes that "when a woman had made such a mistake, there was only one way to repair it—to accept it. One folly was enough, especially when it was to last forever; a second one would not much set it off" (374). In stubborn insistence, Isabel remains in an unhappy condition of her own volition. James pushes the freedom of a woman to its extremes, at least for Victorian times.

The theme of personal freedom pervades the novel. Ralph Touchett suffers from a terminal disease and so feels he would rather leave his inheritance to someone who is free to enjoy it. Ralph then in his own estimation is not free to live a normal life, so instead he vicariously enjoys watching the freedom of Isabel, a freedom he has helped to create by passing his fortune along to her.

Madame Merle is no freer than Ralph. She has disobeyed the social code by having an affair that produced a child, Pansy. Much like Ralph, she is unable to enjoy personal freedom, and so she focuses on finding a fortune for her daughter, Pansy. Unlike Ralph, however, Madame Merle works from a position of economic powerlessness. She is unmarried with a checkered past and without a fortune. If she succeeds on behalf of Pansy, it is only because of her wits. She must outwit Isabel. Both characters have the good fortune of a vivid imagination and a powerful mind, but Isabel, working from a position of relative freedom and power and, one might say, the goodness to match, soundly defeats Madame Merle. One cannot in the end separate Isabel's goodness from her freedom to choose, or Madame Merle's sinister qualities from her sense of entrapment.

Gilbert Osmond is like none of the other characters in terms of freedom. He does not bear the cross of gender or of physical disability but instead wills a life of idleness in the form of a failed artist. James portrays in Osmond the incarnation of the decadent American expatriate, corrupted by Europe.

Osmond contains the impulse to artistic expression, however flawed, but more so a refinement of taste that is matched only by his need to control Isabel. Osmond desires to surround himself with European history, avoiding whatever is modern, industrious, and, in his view, barbaric. After living in Europe for more than 20 years, he has developed a "great dread of vulgarity," "like a prince who has abdicated in a fit of magnanimity, and has been in a state of disgust ever since" (230). As a darker version of Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller*, Osmond has nearly erased his American identity.

The greatest tension in the novel is between Osmond's Europeanness and Isabel's Americanness. These words describe the essence of the struggle: "Her notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty, and the liberty the sense of enjoyment. But for Osmond it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude. He was fond of the old, the consecrated, and transmitted" (397). The "European" Osmond yearns for control. The American Isabel flies the flag of liberty coupled with a profound and even troubling sense of moral duty that some readers may question. Whether or not she should stay with Osmond is open for debate, but the choice is one she makes freely, out of a sense of duty and a profound sense of pride and self-respect. She says to Henrietta Stackpole, "One must accept one's deeds" (450). Isabel continues to the last in possession of a goodness that James saves for the Americans of his stories.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* deals extensively with the theme of social codes. How does Isabel Archer's adherence to social codes in *Portrait* compare with that of key characters in the Wharton novel?
2. What is the point of view used in this novel? From whose perspectives are we allowed to view the action? How does this viewpoint contribute to the effectiveness of the novel?
3. Compare the characters Henrietta Stackpole and Isabel Archer. How does each function as a representative of the liberated woman?

4. Do you think Isabel made the right choice in staying with Gilbert Osmond? Why or why not?

“The Lesson of the Master” (1892)

This tale of Henry James’s maturing phase exemplifies James’s interest in the relationship of life to art. The story could well be called “The Lessons of the Master,” for the protagonist, Paul, is to learn several lessons before the tale’s conclusion. As in the story “The Real Thing,” but here with much higher stakes, James asks his protagonist (and the reader) to choose between the world of the imagination and the “real thing.”

The life of the artist, according to St. George, the “Master” in the story, depends entirely on one’s maintaining independence from relationships that would restrict the imagination. St. George encourages Paul to maintain his independence in order to maximize his artistic potential, possibly producing a work of “perfection” (James, “The Lesson of the Master” 592).

In direct opposition to the strenuous dedication to art that he recommends for Paul is the life St. George has actually created for himself. Replete with spouse, family, wealth, and popularity, St. George’s lifestyle appears to embrace the very material comforts that he urges Paul to avoid. In front of Paul, St. George condemns this life harshly. He argues that his life has destroyed his ability to create art. He points to the study that his wife has commissioned for him: “a room without windows.” “Isn’t it a big cage, to go round and round? . . . My wife invented it and she locks me up here every morning” (583). This image suggests a life of constricted vision and thus limited creativity. By this means, St. George presents Paul with what amounts to an either/or proposition. He argues that for truly great art, one must forgo a spouse and family, offering his own career as evidence of this. Paul finds it impossible to disagree, for in his estimation, too, St. George has not realized his full potential.

Curiously St. George does not practice what he preaches. He implores Paul, “Don’t become in

your old age what I am in mine—the depressing, the deplorable illustration of the worship of false gods!” (566). Yet when his wife dies, he marries again and abandons writing entirely. He pushes the entire artistic burden off onto Paul.

To complicate matters further, it is impossible to forget the all-too-real encounter Paul has with the young woman Marian Fancourt at her home. The conversation he has with her there offers a rare glimpse at a nearly perfectly matched couple. The story leaves little ambiguity here: In sharp contrast to the posturing St. George, “their tone was genuine, their emotion real; they were not posturing for each other or for someone else” (578). James offers a glimpse of one of life’s moments approaching the perfection of art. Paul recalls the encounter as an artistic image: “He has still a vision of the room, whenever he likes—the bright, red, sociable, talkative room, with the curtains that, by a stroke of successful audacity, had the note of vivid blue” (578). At this moment, the line between art and life is blurred.

Blurring the distinction still further, Marian Fancourt asks Paul, “But what is art but a life—if it be real? I think it’s the only one—everything else is so clumsy” (556). Indeed, St. George’s life, surrendered as it has so completely to creature comforts, is at best a dull and unenviable existence. Paul’s task as the artist will be to see the truth amid the conventionality and convey that to his audience.

The story suggests Paul has made a great sacrifice for his art. What the reader is left to puzzle over is whether his sacrifice has been worthwhile.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you agree with St. George that Paul should make the sacrifice necessary to be a great artist? Why or why not?
2. To what extent do you agree with St. George that art is hampered by home and family—the comforts of a conventional existence?
3. SARAH ORNE JEWETT and Sherwood Anderson portray characters essentially isolated from society because of a particular sensibility. Can you see any similarities between these fictional characters’ lives and the lifestyle advocated by St.

George in “The Lesson of the Master”? How does the characters’ isolation figure into the story? Explain your response.

“The Real Thing” (1892)

Henry James once commented that art makes life. He then added that art creates importance, or meaning, in life. James in a sense values art over life, or at least values an existence colored by art over one that is devoid of art. In the story “The Real Thing,” James depicts a contest between life (the “real thing”) and art (a representation). The contest is stacked in favor of art, for the end product in the story is the manufacture of magazine illustrations, themselves works of art. More precisely then, James in this story asks whether the lived life is better than a contrived one designed as a model for artistic portraits. The larger theme revolves around the value and place of art when compared with life, or “the real thing.”

The husband and wife who visit the narrator, who is an artist, are in search of work as models, but they have no professional experience as such. James twists the story a bit, by creating in the Monarchs characters whose lives (the real thing) are themselves contrived. The major and Mrs. Monarch have very little money and so rely on their good looks and fine manners to pass in high society as if they were rich. They have then been models all along, living a life of make-believe.

The story’s irony deepens when the Monarchs’ penny-pinching finally reaches such a state that they must look for additional income, and the job they choose is modeling for illustrations. When they are professional models, their usual success at passing (pretending) fails them. The Monarchs do not convey that peculiar something that makes art, even though their lives of pretending would seem to predict their complete success. The artist finds Mrs. Monarch to be “too insurmountably stiff.” She was the “real thing but always the same thing” (James, “The Real Thing” 118). A model should be flexible, evoking the essence of a character or mood in a facial expression or simple turn of the head, such that the

artist can capture it in the illustration. Successful illustrations result not from the real thing but from the artful pretense. In other words, art is not reality, but pretending at reality. A far cry from the Monarchs, Miss Churm (from a much and unabashedly lower social class) could succeed as a model because in a moment she could transform herself, chameleonlike, into almost anything the artist wants her to be: “The value of such a model as Miss Churm resided precisely in the fact that she had no positive stamp” (119). What the artist fears most of all is the “type,” a model who cannot become what he needs him or her to be. Worn by the stamp of the gentleman and gentlewoman, the Monarchs cannot be anything but themselves.

In a comic twist, the Monarchs become scullery maids in the service of the artist and his professional models. They cannot work as models even when they pose as the upper-class people they strive to be in life, and so are reduced to the penury of the scullery. As the narrator observes, “If my servants were models, then my models might be servants” (134).

Like the sleight of hand practiced by a magician, art is a great pretender, giving a better rendering of life than life ever can give of itself. It would seem in this story, then, that art trumps life. Or does it? The narrator’s friend Hawley says that the narrator has been permanently harmed by the Monarchs; something in them has troubled his career as illustrator. Yet the narrator concludes, “I’m content to have paid the price—for the memory” (134).

For Discussion or Writing

1. James was writing within a literary movement now identified by literary critics as realism. That is, he and other writers such as WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and STEPHEN CRANE were interested in depicting the reality and even the harshness of human existence. How do this story’s themes play on the literary realism of that time? Discuss your answer.
2. What does it mean in this story to be the “real thing”? Explain your answer.
3. The narrator’s friend Hawley claims that the major and Mrs. Monarch did the narrator “per-

manent harm,” getting him into “false ways.” What might he mean by this? Why?

***The Turn of the Screw* (1898)**

The Turn of the Screw begins as a ghost story told to friends around a fire. The story is taken from an account written by a young woman who agrees to be a governess for a wealthy man’s young niece and nephew on condition that she not bother the guardian once she takes charge. Her experience proves to be terrifying, as she believes ghosts are trying to possess the children.

The inspiration for this tale was an incident related by the archbishop of Canterbury to Henry James in 1895. The archbishop said he had once heard of two children in a remote place who were in danger of possession by the spirits of two former servants who had been evil in life. The spirits tempted the children to go to them. James wrote later in his notebook, “Note here the ghost-story told me at Addington (evening of Thursday the 10th) by the Archbishop . . . the mere vague undetailed faint sketch of it” (qtd. Edel 427). James works this vagueness into his version of the story.

The horror in James’s story results in part from things left unsaid. For example, the relationship between Quint and Miles is described in terms that leave much to the imagination of the reader. Mrs. Gross tells the governess, “It was Quint’s own fancy. To play with him, I mean—to spoil him” (James, *Turn of the Screw* 32). There is only the implication of something extraordinary in their relationship. Apparently Quint and Miles developed “so close an alliance” from being “perpetually together” (42). And of Quint himself the governess can only imagine in the vaguest terms: “things that man could do. Quint was so clever—he was so deep. . . . There had been matter in his life, strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected, that would have accounted for a good deal more” (33). The reader is never to know the precise nature of those passages, perils, and disorders. The vague terminology heightens the terror as the reader is

invited to imagine the “badness” or “evil” that may have in fact occurred—if indeed any occurred at all. This is the genius of the story, that so much is left uncertain. The reader dwells, as the governess does, in a world of the imagination.

The vague description that invites the imagination shows itself strikingly as well in the governess’s account of Miles’s misbehavior at school. This description reaches near-maddening dimensions as the reader is left to discern what happened. The only concrete fact is that Miles was sent home prematurely from school. Beyond this we have but the governess’s description of what the school administration says. She tells Mrs. Gross (the reader is, like Mrs. Gross, at the mercy of the extraordinary imagination of the governess), “They [the school administrators] go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him” (14).

Then the governess does what will be a hallmark of this story, and what makes this story a psychological thriller. She interprets for the reader and Mrs. Gross the vagueness, or rather the lack of evidence. Lacking any concrete evidence, she not only makes a guess, she makes a statement of great certainty, that the school’s (vague) statement “can have but one meaning,” that Miles is “an injury to the others” (14). The danger in the governess’s statements is that they make great sense, and might well be conjectures the reader would make, only with greater certainty. Regardless, the seeds of suspicion have been planted, such that when the issue is revisited later in the story, the reader, like Mrs. Gross, is primed to suspect the worst. Late in the tale, Miles tells the governess about what happened at school. “I said things,” he reports to her (101). Again, note the intentional vagueness of the tale. Seeds of suspicion have been planted, but with no concrete evidence. The reader is left, with the guidance of the governess, to piece together what occurred. And the implication leaves us floundering between complete innocence or striking precocity. Miles says that he said “things” only to those he “liked” (101). What this means the reader is left to imagine. The story’s horror is due in part to leaving so much to the imagination.

The lens through which we see the events is itself problematic. The story is a written account, recorded some years after the supposed events. The governess writes, "I have not seen Bly since the day I left it, and I dare say that to my present older and more informed eyes it would show a very reduced importance" (13). In addition, this belatedly written account is read to an audience expecting a ghost story. This is a story within a story, the outer story involving several friends who are gathered "round the fire, sufficiently breathless," waiting to hear the promised tale that has been written "in old faded ink and in the most beautiful hand" by the governess of the sister of a member of this group of friends (3, 4). Already removed from the "events" of the story, the narration acquires an aspect of unreliability. Further increasing this remove, the reader is told that the present version of the story is a second transcript "made much later" by the first-person narrator present at the gathering around the fire (6). Add to all this that the governess to whom the events happened and who recorded them initially is herself an unreliable storyteller. The governess is unreliable because she is by her own admission predisposed to distort the facts of the case with her hyperactive imagination. She writes of her "dreadful liability of impressions" (30). This would not be cause for alarm for the reader except that the reader is dependent entirely on the governess to receive the events of the story. Typical of James's finest tales, the story is told through limited omniscience. In this case, the reader never sees into the mind of any resident of Bly except the governess.

The governess's hyperactive imagination becomes a major theme of the story. Her imagination suffuses the story at the moment she accepts the job, when she imagines herself meeting a difficult challenge with courage and skill. The children's uncle challenges her by asking her never to contact him about anything. "That she should never trouble him—but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything" (9). The guardian's request is odd. Odder still is the governess's response to his request. Even as she begins her drive to Bly, her imagination's mental landscape overwhelms the narrative: "I remember the whole beginning as a succession

of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong" (9). Her perception of Flora is not just of a little child but rather of "the most beautiful child I had ever seen" (10). She employs adjectives like *beatific*, *radiant*, and *angelic* to render her charge from the guardian extraordinary, for in her mind she is protecting not just children but the best of all children. When the governess intuits that Mrs. Gross will support her in her efforts to protect the children from the terrors of Bly, she feels herself "lifted aloft on a great wave of infatuation and pity" (18). The governess feels not only emotion, but an excess of emotion, inspired as she is by an imagination that interprets her task as extraordinary.

The governess's imagination finds its greatest inspiration in the fundamental charge of the uncle never to disturb him. Even after she has determined to protect the children, her focus remains on the uncle: "It was a pleasure at these moments to feel myself tranquil and justified; doubtless perhaps also to reflect that by my discretion, my quiet sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure—if he ever thought of it!—to the person to whose pressure I had yielded" (19). Her imagination drifts always toward this initial charge, the source of her regulation, but also of her greatest pleasure. Her imagination has transformed a wage-earning job into a high commission: "What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me, and that I *could*, after all, do it proved even a greater joy than I had expected" (19). Always it is her imagining of her assignment that fuels her motivation, rather than the assignment itself.

This perception of her job, that it is a high commission, transforms her from being a protector of Miles and Flora to being their interrogator. After her encounter with the ghost at the lake, the governess says to Mrs. Gross, "I don't save or shield them! It's far worse than I dreamed. They're lost!" (40). This shift in role from protector to interrogator—she wants the children to confirm her suspicions about the ghosts—helps to explain why she nearly abandons them at the church. In her frustration about Miles's contacting his uncle and thus threatening her position, she is driven to abandon her charge altogether. Of course, she does not

leave, but she tries to leave. Her foremost concern resides with her imagined perception of her commission from the guardian—essentially that she take charge of everything and remain in complete control. Once this vision is threatened, her impulse to complete her assignment vanishes.

This intensity of imagination, and the resulting unreliability of the narrative, of course help to create a masterful ghost tale. The horror arguably arises more from the governess's perceptions than from any actual ghost at Bly. James pays homage in his fiction to the powers of the imagination to be used for great good, but also to precipitate great harm. One of the great questions in this tale is where the horror really resides. Quint and Miss Jessel are horrible enough, real or imagined, but the governess herself concedes that she is a source of another and possibly even greater horror. Flora is so terrified of the governess that Mrs. Gross removes her from Bly. Miles is terrified of her, too. Just before his death, the governess thinks, "It was as if he were suddenly afraid of me—which struck me indeed as perhaps the best thing to make him" (97). Fueled as she is by her imagined calling, she pushes onward. "I was infatuated—I was blind with victory" (101). For a moment she concedes how much she is implicated in the horror at Bly. "I seemed to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure, and within a minute there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his [Miles] being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?" (101). For but a moment, she steps outside her imagined role and sees that she has been operating from obscurity rather than clarity, concealing herself as a source of potential harm.

And yet facts about the story suggest a horror beyond the imagination of the governess. Miles and Flora appear to be complicit in something, if only in their toying with her on the night she finds Miles outside on the front lawn, with Flora watching him through the window. Then there is the boat that was moved at the lake. Add to that the mysterious relationship between Quint and Miles, and between Mrs. Jessel and Quint, followed by

Quint and Jessel's mysterious demise. And the fact remains that Miles was dismissed from school for something he said to those "he liked" (101). The nature of that something is left for the reader to imagine. And last, perhaps oddest of all, is the situation in which the governess finds herself: odd indeed that the guardian should insist on the governess's never contacting him when the situation at Bly has been precarious, even dangerous, with Jessel and Quint at the helm. Thus James creates in *Turn of the Screw* a tale as horrific as it is strange, where nagging questions remain unanswered except by the reader's imagination.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What in the story supports the view that there are really ghosts at Bly? What in the story suggests that the ghosts are a product of the governess's imagination?
2. The phrase "turn of the screw" is used twice in the story. How does the second use alter its meaning for the story?
3. Did you find *The Turn of the Screw* frightening? In what way(s)? Compare this story with horror stories you have read by EDGAR ALLAN POE or Stephen King, discussing the effect each is calculated to have on its audience. Cite examples and explain each.

"The Beast in the Jungle" (1902)

"The Beast in the Jungle" is one of James's most widely read stories. It was written during what is known as James's mature phase. At this time, James was dictating his stories to a secretary. He wrote in long sentences, and his stories were at their most psychological in the sense of focusing entirely on the growing self-awareness of the protagonist (usually viewed from within the mind of the protagonist, but in the third person) and containing minimal action and maximal reflection.

"The Beast in the Jungle" is also considered one of James's most autobiographical tales. He must have plumbed the depths of his soul to write the tale, for if any life lacked evidence of romantic

passion, James's did. He had surrounded himself with women with whom he was unable to consummate a relationship. Platonic relationships are all well and good, but James watched Constance Fenimore Woolson kill herself, and their one-sided relationship may well have contributed to her demise. For too long he had repressed his romantic inclinations toward men. Not coincidentally, James found a circle of male friends and some sense of domesticity and romance at about the same time he wrote "Beast in the Jungle." As Leon Edel, James's esteemed biographer, writes, the story was cathartic for James (559).

This story is intensely psychological in that it is a story in which nothing happens. The subject of the story is Marcher's struggle for self-awareness, seen first through dramatic irony, as Mae Bartram discovers the "beast" of Marcher's life. The perceptive reader can guess at the secret Mae tries unsuccessfully to convey to her friend. As Mae says, "Your not being aware of it is the strangeness *in* the strangeness. It's the wonder *of* the wonder" (James, "The Beast in the Jungle" 356).

In "The Beast in the Jungle," a beautiful riddle supplants an active life. Marcher conceives of an idea so fascinating as to fill his otherwise lonely and dreary life with adventure. "Something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and the turns of the months and the years, like a crouching beast in the jungle" (336). But the idea is only exciting so long as it does not end. The minute Marcher discovers his beast, the adventure is over. Thus Marcher is caught up in the adventure itself, at the expense of its object. Interestingly Marcher conceives of his quest in highly masculine terms, such that no woman can accompany him. "The definite point was the inevitable spring of the creature; and the definite lesson from that was that a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger hunt" (336–337). This thought assures the solitary nature and the continuity of his hunt: Mae can watch with him but never join him. The hunt itself is the barrier between him and Mae. Since passion, unbeknownst to Marcher, is itself what the hunt is about, the hunt sustains its own existence.

The hunt also becomes the beast, for in adhering to the hunt, Marcher loses out on the passion Mae tries to show him. Yet the question can fairly be posed, Does Marcher have a choice to love Mae? He shows not the least inclination to fall in love with her. It would be safer to say that Marcher has missed a life of passion with someone. The hunt for the beast has been itself his life's passion, yet an imaginary one.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Mae and Marcher. Do you think Marcher treated Mae fairly? Is it fair for Mae to have expected more from Marcher than he gives? Contrast Mae's view of the hunt with Marcher's.
2. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE wrote frequently about characters who possess a personal vision that separates them from the real world. Explain the way each author uses such characters. Can you think of a story by Hawthorne that compares in any way to "The Beast in the Jungle"?

"The Jolly Corner" (1908)

"The Jolly Corner" is another story from the mature phase of Henry James's career. It represents the full flowering of James's interest in psychology, and it offers a splendid example of James's views on the international theme of Europe versus America.

This is a story in which psychology is both technique and theme. It is a story about two lives, one lived in all its fullness, and another imagined life, one unchosen and thus un-lived. It is this second, unchosen life that Brydon yearns to witness, personified as the ghost of his alter ego. "He found all things come back to the question of what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and 'turned out'" (James, "The Jolly Corner" 379). The life he has lived has been one of "sensations" (384). James uses the word *sensation* in his fiction to describe the life of a writer or artist or critic, one who deeply appreciates artistic beauty but who also appreciates life in all its infinite variety. In other works of fiction, James uses the term

imagination to describe this kind of character as a person who possesses a vivid imagination and is susceptible to sensations. As a general rule, James treats these characters sympathetically. Regrettably if one relies on sensation for a career, one will probably live in relative poverty and from the perspective of material success would be considered, as Brydon describes himself, to have led “a selfish frivolous scandalous life” (381). In conversation with Alice, Brydon wonders what he should have been had he followed in the footsteps of his father, adhering not to a life of sensation but to the “rank money-passion.” He and Alice believe he might then have been quite powerful and wealthy, possibly even a “billionaire” (380).

This is not the first time that James sides with the life of sensation against the life of wealth and power. The reader can guess at this from his sympathetic treatment of Brydon and from the description of the alter ego. The alter ego has been “unhappy” and “ravaged” (402). Curiously Brydon feels that he too has been ravaged and unhappy. Perhaps life does that to people regardless of one’s wealth. But Alice adds, with reference to the alter ego, “He’s grim, he’s worn—things have happened to him” (402). Typically of James’s mature work, it is left to the reader’s imagination to discern what those “things” are. At the very least, Brydon sees that the richly adorned alter ego conceals his face, and whatever life he has led has reduced two of his fingers to stumps. The stranger, “whoever he might be,” is “evil, odious, blatant” and “vulgar” (397).

James weaves into this psychological tale a vivid contrast between Europe and America. A few years prior to writing the story, James returned to America for an extended tour that included his hometown of New York City, where this story takes place. One can imagine that the house in the story is very much like the house James grew up in Washington Square. James found all too much confirmation for why he had lived out most of his adult life in Europe. Spencer Brydon had chosen to live in Europe, as James had, and in this tale, as in much of James’ work, Europe is synonymous with art, history, and beauty, as opposed to material wealth. America is synonymous with new money,

even immense fortunes. It is quite clear which side James favors.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare this story with “The Beast in the Jungle.” For example, how does the male-female interaction compare? And what about the hunt or “chase” as figured in both stories?
2. Compare this tale to another “ghost” story by James, *The Turn of the Screw*. How do the sources of horror in these two works compare?
3. Compare James’s technique of exploring the psychology of the protagonist in “The Jolly Corner” and other works with that used by another intensely psychological writer, William Faulkner, in works such as *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*. What does the use of psychology add to the work as a whole? Discuss.

The Art of the Novel

(Henry James’s prefaces) (1905–1909)

Near the end of his writing career, between 1905 and 1909, Henry James commissioned a republishing of most of his work in handsome volumes he called the New York Edition. “I should particularly like to call it the New York Edition if that may pass for a general title of sufficient dignity and distinctness” (Edel 624). James made at least minor changes to nearly all of the works but in particular focused on raising the earlier works to the quality of his more mature work. In general, the New York Editions are the ones most commonly read today, for they received the author’s final stamp of approval.

One reason James commissioned the New York Edition was to garner additional sales during his lifetime. In other words, he needed money, but he also would have liked his works to reach a wider audience. The New York Edition did not sell. His first royalty statement amounted to a paltry \$211. He panicked because of the lack of income, but his ego too was damaged. He felt physically ill and in a fit of depression gathered his private papers, including the accumulation of several decades of correspondence,

acters in a more realistic fashion: That is, he attempts to get at the mind of a character by means that appear realistic. Can you identify similar techniques of character development in works of other writers of his day such as WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), Theodore Dreiser, or Edith Wharton? What are they? Discuss the way(s) each adds to a realistic portrayal.

- Wallace Stevens is a poet known for his thematic treatment of reality versus the imagination. Look up a few Stevens poems on the Internet. Selecting one or two of them to justify your response, compare Wallace Stevens's celebration of the imagination with James's attitude toward the imagination in his works, such as "The Real Thing."

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Buitenuis, Peter, comp. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Portrait of a Lady: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- Cannon, Kelly. *Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- Dover, Adrian. The Ladder. Available online. URL: <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Dupee, F. W. *Henry James: His Life and Writings*. 2nd ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956.
- Edel, Leon. *Henry James: A Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Hathaway, Richard D. Henry James Scholar's Guide to Web Sites. Available online. URL: <http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~hathaway/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Henry James. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/james.htm>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Hocks, Richard A. *Henry James: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel*. Edited by R. P. Blackmur. New York: Scribner, 1934.
- . "The Beast in the Jungle." In *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam, 1981.
- . *Daisy Miller: A Study*. In *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam, 1981.
- . "The Jolly Corner." In *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam, 1981.
- . "The Lesson of the Master." In *Complete Stories 1884–1891*. New York: Library of America, 1991.
- . *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers: The Prefaces to the New York Edition*. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- . *The Portrait of a Lady*. New York: Signet Classic, 1979.
- . "The Real Thing." In *The Portable Henry James*. New York: Viking, 1975.
- . *The Turn of the Screw*. In *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam, 1981.
- Kaplan, Fred. *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *The Jameses: A Family Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *Henry James: The Major Phase*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963.
- McElderry, Bruce Robert. *Henry James*. New York: Twayne, 1965.
- Novick, Sheldon. *Henry James: The Mature Master*. New York: Random House, 2007.
- . *Henry James: The Young Master*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- Putt, S. Gorley. *Henry James: A Reader's Guide*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966.
- Seymour, Miranda. *A Ring of Conspirators*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- Tanner, Tony. *Henry James: The Writer and His Work*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985.
- Toibin, Colm. *The Master: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2004.
- Tompkins, Jane P. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Turn of the Screw and Other Tales: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.



SARAH ORNE JEWETT (1849–1909)

Mrs. Todd never by any chance gave warning over night of her great projects and adventures by sea and land. She first came to an understanding with the primal forces of nature, and never trusted to any preliminary promise of good weather, but examined the day for herself in its infancy.

(The Country of the Pointed Firs)

Willa Cather, who met Sarah Orne Jewett in 1908, a year before Jewett's death, would later write an introduction to Jewett's stories in which she expressed her admiration in the highest terms: "If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely" (qtd. in Silverthorne 10–11). Cather was not alone in recognizing Jewett's accomplishment. WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS praised her work; John Greenleaf Whittier was a close friend and admirer; HENRY JAMES described *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as Jewett's "beautiful little quantum of achievement" (qtd. in Silverthorne 171). Considered by many to be the most accomplished of America's "local color" writers, Jewett also earned comparison with HENRY DAVID THOREAU for her close attention to detail and her devotion to the natural world. As with Thoreau, Jewett's regional orientation was not a source of limitation, but rather a means of concentrating attention, enabling the mind to reflect on the broad implications of lives lived deliberately. Her choice to write about average people and give voice to their daily experience situates her in the company of realist writers such as KATE CHOPIN and MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN, who also took a great interest in the trials and triumphs of independent women.

Jewett continues to attract attention today not only because she was a great champion of women's freedom but also because she was an early advocate of environmental conservation, who expressed a deep appreciation for what is gained and lost through the process of historical change.

Theodora Sarah Orne Jewett was born September 3, 1849, in South Berwick, Maine, a village located on the Piscataqua River, which runs along the southern portion of the state's border with New Hampshire. Her family was financially secure, benefiting from the shipping fortune generated by her paternal grandfather, Theodore Furber Jewett, and the successful medical practice established by her maternal grandfather, Dr. William Perry. Theodore Herman Jewett, Sarah's father, also a medical doctor, met Sarah's mother, Frances Perry, when he moved to Exeter, Maine, in order to enter a medical practice with Dr. Perry. Sarah, as she became known, was the second of three daughters; her sister Mary was born in 1847 and Caroline in 1855. The family moved from Exeter shortly after Mary's birth and settled in an elegant colonial house the Jewett grandfather had purchased in the center of South Berwick. This is the house in which Sarah was born and where she would die of a stroke in 1909 at the age of 59. The natural beauty of South Berwick, the tidal estuary, and the village life lived close to the ocean would surface in Sarah's later writing. She would also incorporate a pronounced respect for past generations engendered

by a childhood spent in the presence of grandmothers and grandfathers with long-standing familial ties to the region.

Sarah was exceptionally close to her father, who frequently took her with him on his medical rounds. One reason for these excursions was Sarah's struggle with arthritis, an ailment that would plague her throughout her life and periodically prevented her from attending school during childhood. On these trips with her father, Sarah became acquainted with local flora and fauna as well as the people of rural Maine. Her father always encouraged her to be attentive to her surroundings, and she credited him with offering advice that would shape her life as a writer: "Don't try to write *about* people and things," he admonished her. "Tell them just as they are" (qtd. in Silverthorne 35).

For the whole of her life, Jewett delighted in the outdoors and took as much pleasure in nature as she did in books. She was an avid hiker, loved horseback riding, and was adept at handling boats; in the winter she skated, sledged, and enjoyed sleigh rides. Even though she suffered with arthritis, Jewett enjoyed vigorous exercise and rapidly developed into an attractive girl whose good looks were widely acknowledged. Her formal education began in 1855 at the Misses Raynes' School, where she studied until age 12, when she entered Berwick Academy, from which she graduated in 1865, the final year of the Civil War, Sarah's youthful temperament was not well suited to regimented study, though she did value her education and soon became a voracious reader. Her favorite authors from this period included Jane Austin, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell, all British authors who wrote brilliantly about the characters and settings they knew intimately. The book that spoke to her most powerfully at this time was HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S 1862 *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, a novel about island life off the Maine coast that led her to imagine that the people and places she knew best might provide material for her own writing. Jewett's formal education concluded in 1865, when she left Berwick Academy at age 16. Her first publication occurred just three years later with the

appearance of "Jenny Garrow's Lovers," a short story printed in the January 18, 1868, issue of the *Flag of Our Union*. The plot is full of melodramatic twists and turns and improbable events that the more mature writer would replace with the realist's eye for accurate description and attention to the drama of everyday life.

That Jewett possessed abundant talent was evident from an early age, but she would require time to discover her true subject and voice. After three failed attempts, she succeeded in having a short story published in 1869 in one of her favorite magazines, the *Atlantic Monthly*. Her story, "Mr. Bruce," was accepted by William Dean Howells, who at that time served as assistant to James T. Fields, a figure who was well known in the literary world and was married to Annie Fields, Jewett's future friend and confidant. The story itself is highly artificial, lacking the grace and ease of Jewett's later writing. During this period, Jewett's letters and diary entries record her lack of confidence in her abilities and express uncertainty about the course her life would take. Thanks to the affluence of her family, Sarah felt no particular pressure to marry, and though she and her sisters led active social lives that included ample contact with young men, there is no mention of romance. Perhaps in an effort to establish a greater sense of purpose, Sarah and Mary were both baptized and confirmed in St. John's Episcopal Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on November 27, 1870. In spite of her lack of confidence, Jewett continued to write and in January 1870 published her short story "The Girl with the Cannon Dresses" in the *Riverside Magazine for Young People*. This was in at least three respects a breakthrough publication: It was the first work she did not publish under a pen name; it marked her first treatment of nature as a nurturing presence; and it included the theme of country versus city. Though she continued to struggle with insecurity, Jewett began to see with increasing clarity that she wrote best and with greatest passion when describing the simple but admirable lives of the country people she had known and loved growing up in rural Maine.

As she became more immersed in her writing and entered more fully into the community of writers in and around Boston, Jewett formed close friendships with leading literary figures, many of whom would have a profound influence on her writing and her personal life. This group included James Russell Lowell, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and Horace B. Scudder, as well as Fields and Howells. Sarah visited Howells and his family at their home in Boston and at their summer cottage at Kittery Point, not far from South Berwick. Howells, who was a major figure in the realist movement, encouraged Jewett to concentrate on simple plots surrounding the lives of the people who inhabited the rural settings she knew best. After accepting several of her sketches for the *Atlantic*, Howells urged her to produce a collection of stories. Jewett took his advice and in April 1877 published her first book, *Deephaven*. Whether or not the work fits together as a true novel or more accurately functions as a closely linked series of sketches remains a matter of critical debate. Formal considerations aside, the collection won Whittier's enthusiastic approval and was generally well received by critics. This volume was followed in 1878 by *Play Days: A Book of Stories for Children*.

In the meantime Jewett developed a friendship with Whittier that would last for the remainder of his life, and she met the woman who would be her closest lifelong associate, Annie Adams Fields. Sarah and Annie met in December 1879 at a reception for Oliver Wendell Holmes. Annie was at that time the devoted wife of James T. Fields, sharing his dedication to literature and the arts and using much of her time in assisting his efforts in the publishing world. Their home at 148 Charles Street in Boston was a gathering place for literary lights and quickly became a favorite stopping point for Jewett, who was close to both James and Annie. When James unexpectedly died in 1881, Annie was devastated. Jewett, who was still in mourning since her father's death in 1878, felt immediate sympathy and began a series of long visits to 148 Charles Street. During these extended visits the two women discovered a mutual compatibility that proved a great source of comfort and happiness for each. Together

they traveled in 1882 to Europe, where they met Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and during which time their friendship deepened.

After their return from this trip they established a pattern of living together in Boston during the winter season and in Maine during much of the summer. When she was not with Annie, Sarah spent the majority of her time at her family home in South Berwick, where Annie became a frequent visitor. The precise nature of Jewett's relationship with Annie Fields has excited a great deal of scholarly conjecture, but research has yet to establish any firm conclusion as to the sexual dimension of their intimacy. Jewett took all of her friendships seriously and was known to write "as many as thirty letters in a day" (Silverthorne 105), so it is no surprise that she would refer to Annie in passionate terms that reflect deep affection. Ultimately, they entered a partnership consistent with what was referred to at the time as a "Boston marriage," according to which women shared households and entered intimate relationships but were not necessarily sexually involved. Whatever the basis of their intimate life was, both women thrived, and they were immensely popular in Boston society.

Jewett began work on *The Country Doctor*, her first book deliberately conceived as a novel, in 1882. The work is strongly autobiographical in its incorporation of Jewett's childhood experience of visiting country patients with her father. She modeled the kindly Dr. Leslie on her father, and her protagonist, Nan Prince, who becomes a country doctor, was an outgrowth of her own personality. When the book was published in 1884, it was compared to Howell's novel *Doctor Breen's Practice* and generally received positive reviews, though some critics complained that it was too devoted to detail and overly concerned with moral implications. Jewett herself was very fond of the book, perhaps because it contained so much of her and because in it she was able to develop one of her central motifs: the contrast between urban and rural values. While she was completing work on *the Country Doctor*, Jewett produced another novel, *A Marsh Island*, which appeared in 1885 through serial publication in the *Atlantic*. In the following year Jewett published

her most popular short story, "The White Heron," along with eight other stories in a collection titled *A White Heron and Other Stories*. This work drew Jewett critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic and in many ways marked her emergence as a major writer. The title story is widely appreciated today for its skillful construction, its promotion of environmental conservation, and its feminist assertion of female autonomy.

From this point on, Jewett published widely in literary journals and produced numerous additional collections. The work generally considered her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, was published serially in the *Atlantic* in 1896. As was the case with *Deephaven*, critical opinion was mixed as to whether or not the work should be considered a novel or a sequence of linked sketches. Critical assessments of the work's quality were, however, uniformly glowing. From the time of its first appearance to the present moment, scholars and critics have praised Jewett's skillful depiction of New England rural life. Her unnamed female narrator travels from the city to the village of Dunnet Landing, where she rents a room from Mrs. Almira Todd, a widow whose presence informs most of what follows. In Mrs. Todd we discover a woman whose unusual strength of character grows from an intimate knowledge of the natural world and close relations to neighbors and remaining family members. Her presence enables Jewett to explore the timeless quality of primary human traits that she presents as glimpses of the mythic past while also examining the difficult challenges people face as they confront historical change. After the publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett wrote four additional stories set in Dunnet Landing. Of these, "The Foreigner" is generally considered to be the most accomplished. In it we learn how Mrs. Todd befriends a French Catholic woman who feels excluded from village life and in return learns even more about local plants and herbs. As in many of Jewett's best works, this story pivots on the power of female friendship.

In the years following publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett's reputation continued to grow, and she enjoyed increased public

recognition. One of the most meaningful acknowledgments occurred in 1901, when Jewett became the first woman ever to be awarded an honorary doctor of letters by Bowdoin College, her father's alma mater. Despite having struggled with arthritis and rheumatism throughout her life, Jewett managed to live a vigorous, physically active life up to her 53rd birthday in 1902, when she was thrown from a carriage she was driving. She would never fully recover from the injuries she sustained to her head and spine and found it extremely difficult if not impossible to write. She remained mentally alert, however, and when Willa Cather visited her and Annie Fields at 148 Charles Street in 1908, Cather was impressed by Jewett's poise and wit. The next blow to Jewett's health came in March 1909, when she suffered a stroke that left her partially paralyzed. With the beginning of warmer weather, she traveled to the family home in South Berwick, where she experienced a brain hemorrhage and passed away at 6:30 in the evening of June 24. In 1968 Mary Ellen Chase, another Maine writer, would affirm Cather's high regard for Jewett by writing in her introduction to *The Country of the Pointed Firs* that Jewett's "sensitiveness to people and places" sets her "apart not only from all other Maine writers, but from many, if not most writers of all time and of many a place," making "her in short, the deeply desired, if unreachable, model for us all" (xxx).

***A Country Doctor* (1884)**

Through the pages of this coming-of-age novel, Jewett traces the early life of Anna (Nan) Prince, who is orphaned in infancy and overcomes social opposition to become a country doctor. Nan's childhood unfolds on the farm of her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Thacher, where she enjoys unlimited access to the fields, streams, and forests of rural New England and in the process develops a love of freedom and independence. After her grandmother, dies, Nan enters the home of Dr. Leslie, who attended her mother in her final hours and who has played a role in Nan's life from the

moment her mother took her to her grandmother's farm. Even before she moved to Dr. Leslie's comfortable home in nearby Oldfields, Nan had expressed an interest in the healing arts, which Dr. Leslie immediately recognized as an expression of natural ability. After she becomes his ward, he takes her with him on visits to the homes of patients and nurtures her native talent. In the chapters that recount Nan's late childhood and young adulthood in Oldfields, Jewett draws extensively from her own experience growing up as the daughter of a doctor in rural Maine, who, as Dr. Leslie did with Nan, took Sarah with him on patient rounds and had a profound influence on her development. Despite the resistance Nan encounters from conservative members of the Oldfields community, she decides to go to medical school and dedicate herself to the healing arts. It is during this period that she arranges a visit to her father's sister, her aunt Nancy Prince, a proud woman who has remained strangely detached from Nan's life. This visit to her aunt in the seaside village of Dunport proves the occasion of Nan's greatest trial. During the few short weeks of her stay, Nan faces aggressive social opposition to her medical aspirations at the same time that she feels a romantic attachment to George Gerry, a handsome young attorney and close friend of her aunt. After a period of serious soul searching, Nan emerges with renewed dedication to her chosen vocation and the conviction that for her marriage is not the path to true happiness.

Jewett structures the novel around several core oppositions, which include the contrast between town and country, as represented by pronounced differences between Dunport and Oldfields, and the contrast between natural self-expression and social conformity, as represented by Nan's rejection of the dominant social code that limits female ambition to marriage and the raising of a family. Jewett is very careful to present Nan's childhood as shaped by extended exposure to the natural world, so that the decisions she makes as she grows into adulthood surface as the unimpeded expression of her true self. This is what enables Nan to rebuff the charge of being unnatural by telling the domineer-

ing Dunport matron Mrs. Fraley, "Nobody persuaded me into following such a plan; I simply grew toward it" (*Sarah Orne Jewett* 327). By means of such language, Jewett draws attention to the artificiality of social expectations that are at odds with the growth process. An underlying theme that runs throughout the novel, and is repeatedly supported by scenes like this one, is the belief that American culture has advanced to the point where the differences between the sexes that were so essential to species survival in earlier times no longer apply with the same force. As a consequence, to restrict the free expression of female ambition by insisting on a continued division of labor is to risk thwarting the advance of culture. Jewett is at great pains to stress that women should be allowed to choose their futures and that for some women this will continue to include marrying and managing a home. This is why Nan tells her suitor, George Gerry, how aware she is that most women would not choose to act as she has: "I know better and better that most women are made for another sort of existence, but by and by I must do my part in my own way to make many homes happy instead of one" (355). Jewett's aim here and elsewhere is to show readers that the change she advocates through her protagonist applies only to a small segment of the population and therefore poses no threat to the institution of marriage or the continued importance of the family.

The contrast between town and country is established early when Nan's mother, Adeline, expends her last ounce of strength carrying her baby to the safety of the family farm situated outside Oldfields. Her suffering and eventual death appear to be the result of alcoholism and an advanced case of tuberculosis, both of which are linked to the corrupting influence of town life and the hostile presence of the Prince family, who are associated with the town of Dunport. Adeline's dying words to Dr. Leslie convey her regret at not having returned to her rural roots long ago and make clear her wish that Nan live with Mrs. Thacher as long as possible: "She must stay here with mother, long as she wants her. 'Tis what I wish I had kept sense enough to do"

(169). Adeline goes on to say that her sole aim is in seeing that “the baby is well placed” and given “a good chance to grow up a useful woman.” The importance of being useful that is mentioned here is central to Jewett’s argument that women be allowed to decide for themselves which direction their lives should take.

The Prince family represents the opposite of this vision of expanded female choice, and it is probably no coincidence that Jewett selected *Prince* as their family name. Doing so links them to male-centered dynastic aims, and the Prince family is concerned chiefly with control of family wealth achieved through marriage and female conformity. What little we know of Adeline’s marriage to Jack Prince is that she was perceived to be an unsuitable match and that her husband’s loyalties lay more with his family than with her. Her final words to Dr. Leslie are that Nan be kept out of Prince hands: “And most of all . . . keep her out of *their* hands, I mean her father’s folks. I hate ’em, and he cared more for ’em than he did for me.” Jewett closes the chapter in which Adeline dies with the observation. “There was no love lost between the town and the country household” (174). According to Jewett’s construction of town and country, then, the town is conceived of as a destructive influence, particularly for women, because the town is where wealth is accumulated through trade, consolidated through profitable marriages, and perpetuated through respect for social traditions. In the country, where nature has a greater influence on the course of life, women are granted more independence, and social change is easier to achieve because families have not acquired the wealth that requires the protection of fixed traditions.

Miss Prince is the principal character associated with Dunport, and it is appropriate that she sets the tone in general for the other characters we meet during Nan’s stay at her aunt’s home. During her first days at that house, Nan wonders at the “implacable hostility” that “had lasted for years in the breast of a person” she now discovers to be so “friendly and cordial in her relations with her neighbors” and so welcoming to her (298). In

response to Nan’s perplexity, the narrative tells us what the young woman is “slow to recognize in her relative”: that “Miss Prince’s acquaintances called her a very set person” and though she possessed the “traits of character which are necessary for . . . an enterprising life, . . . her gifts of persistence and self-confidence had ranked themselves for the defense of a comparatively unimportant and commonplace existence.” This dedication to stability and the continuation of life as it has been rather than as it might be is the cornerstone of the society Nan enters through Miss Prince.

This dedication to the status quo is fully embodied in the person of George Gerry, the young man Miss Prince would like Nan to marry. His instinctive devotion to traditional male and female roles emerges most forcefully at the point in the novel when Nan sets the dislocated shoulder of a farmer she and George encounter while on a picnic. “I’ll be hanged if she didn’t set it,-” declares the grateful farmer, who goes on to express his admiration, telling Nan that she is “the smartest young woman I ever see” (317). The narrative then reveals George’s inner thoughts so that we see how uneasy he is at being upstaged by a woman: “He was stout-hearted enough usually; as brave a fellow as one could wish to see; but he felt weak and womanish, and somehow wished it had been he who could play the doctor” (317). The perception that George sees his manhood as dependent upon his ability to subordinate Nan is reinforced when we are later told that to his way of thinking, “all his manliness was at stake, and his natural rights would be degraded and lost, if he could not show his power to be greater than her own” (336). As readers, we increasingly agree with Eunice Fraley’s opinion that while in Dunport Nan resembled “a caged bird at a window” that watches with envy the free flight of a lark (321). For this reason, we begin to see that marriage to George Gerry is not right for Nan, and we are relieved when she at last rejects his suit. As Nan states to Dr. Leslie upon her return to Oldfields, her commitment to medicine is greater as a result of having been tested: “I shall work better all my life for having been able to

make myself so perfectly sure that I know my way” (363).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look closely at the argument that takes place between Nan and Mrs. Fraley near the end of the chapter titled “A Serious Tea-Drinking.” Explain why Jewett pays so much attention to determining what is or is not natural behavior for a woman.
2. Near the end of the chapter titled “A Sunday Visit,” Nan is described as enjoying the sights and sounds of Dr. Leslie’s summer house instead of going to church. Compare Jewett’s description of Nan with the speaker in EMILY DICKINSON’s poem “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—.” To what extent do you think Dickinson’s poem accurately expresses what Jewett is telling us about Nan?
3. Can you explain why Jewett decided to have Nan fall in love and be tempted by marriage? Do you think her novel would have been just as effective if Nan had not experienced the romantic encounter with George Gerry?
4. Look closely at the way Jewett presents Nan’s thoughts about marriage and her future profession at the end of the chapter titled “Friend and Lover.” Explain how KATE CHOPIN’s work “The Story of an Hour” might be thought of as representing an outcome Nan might have experienced if she had yielded to the temptation to marry.

“A White Heron” (1886)

This most famous of all of Jewett’s stories focuses closely on the experience of a nine-year-old girl, Sylvia, who decides that the communion she enjoys with the natural world means more to her than monetary gain and social approval. Jewett sets the story in rural New England, where Sylvia and her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, inhabit a poor but clean dwelling situated on a small country farm far removed from city life. We learn that Sylvia spent the first eight years of her life in “a crowded

manufacturing town,” where her mother, Mrs. Tilley’s daughter, fell upon unspecified hard times and was no longer capable of caring for all of her children (*Country* 228). This background sets up the contrast between town and country that is an understated but important element of this story. The main tension in the story grows from the unexpected arrival of a handsome young ornithologist who spends two nights with Sylvia and her grandmother while searching for an elusive white heron. Sylvia is attracted to the tall stranger and is tempted to show him where the heron lives in order to please him and to earn the much-needed \$10 he has offered to anyone who can show him the heron’s nest. Sylvia struggles with opposing impulses, wanting to win the young man’s approval at the same time that she wishes to preserve the trust and sense of kinship she has felt for the wild creatures that populate the region. By means of these competing natural forces, Jewett explores the way individual character emerges out of contesting internal and external influences over which persons have limited control. This core dynamic, plus the fact that the story is based on the lives of ordinary people, contributes to the work’s standing as an example of realist literature.

We learn early on that external circumstances play a major role in Sylvia’s life. Chance enters the story through Mrs. Tilley’s “unlikely choice of Sylvia from among her daughter’s houseful of children,” but it turns out that her decision gave the young girl precisely the environment that her undeveloped inner nature craved. Immediately upon their arrival at the old farm, the cat began to purr and Sylvia whispered to Mrs. Tilley “that this was a beautiful place to live in, and she should never wish to go home” (229). Sylvia blossoms in her humble surroundings, and her grandmother notes with delight that “there never was such a child for straying out-of-doors since the world was made!” (228). Sylvia also acknowledges the vitalizing influence of country life: “As for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live on the farm.” Jewett opens the story with a glimpse of Sylvia after she has been with Mrs. Tilley for a year, and it is clear that she has found contentment in

her pastoral surroundings. She lingers in the balmy June evening, companionably strolling home with the family cow. Mrs. Tilley tells us shortly after the ornithologist has arrived that Sylvia takes after her uncle Dan: "Sylvia takes after him," she says. "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over, and the wild creatur's counts her one o' themselves" (231). Such language points to the way Sylvia's genetic inheritance has predisposed her to flourish in the setting that she has landed in as the result of an unforeseen family crisis.

The sudden appearance of the handsome young man instantly disrupts the peace Sylvia has discovered, and it is no surprise that his presence is associated with disturbing memories from Sylvia's early life in town. We see this just before her solitude is invaded by the ornithologist's whistle, when Sylvia's thoughts are troubled by the recollection of a "great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her" (229). The flushed face of this male antagonist suggests heightened emotions and the possibility of passionate male pursuit that threatens Sylvia's serenity. As a consequence, when she did hear the ornithologist's "whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive," she understandably "stepped discreetly aside into the bushes." Jewett then refers to the young man as the "enemy," setting the stage for the contest ahead in which Sylvia will have to decide between her continued independence and her wish for male approval. The gardenlike setting, Sylvia's effort to conceal herself, and Jewett's identification of the young man as the enemy define the scene as an allusion to the Garden of Eden and let us know that Sylvia has come face to face with temptation. The young man's disarming admission that he is lost and in need of "a friend" increases Sylvia's alarm because she feels her instinctive defenses relax and recognizes how hard it will be to keep her distance from him.

The danger posed by the young man becomes increasingly clear when Sylvia leads him to the farmhouse and the next day accompanies him in his search for the white heron. On his first night at the farmhouse, Mrs. Tilley quickly overcomes her initial reserve and welcomes him into her home, assuming the traditional role of hostess. After their

supper, the old woman recounts her family history, giving emphasis to the hardships she has encountered. However, despite hearing that "she had buried four children" and that her only surviving son left home after an altercation with her now-departed husband, the visitor is notably unsympathetic (231). Jewett presents him as preoccupied with his own concerns: "The guest did not notice this hint of family sorrows in his eager interest in something else" (232). This indifference is immediately connected to his obsession with completing his collection of stuffed and preserved birds. "I have been at it ever since I was a boy," he says, placing particular importance on the fact that there are but "two or three very rare ones" that have eluded him. The rarity of these birds heightens his interest in acquiring them, while also making it clear that he is part of the process of human predation that will eventually lead to extinction if unchecked. When Sylvia accompanies him into the woods the next day, she has "lost her first fear of the friendly lad" and accepts his gift of a jackknife. Even though the text states that she "would have liked him vastly better without his gun" and "could not understand why he killed the birds he seemed to like so much," Sylvia is delighted with the gift and seems irresistibly drawn to him (233). She watches him with "loving admiration" that arises from a deep, instinctive attraction informed by an undeniable sexual undercurrent: "The woman's heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love" (233). With these words, Jewett prepares us for the dramatic climax of the story when Sylvia must decide whether she will use her knowledge of the white heron to win male approval or resist her instinctual attraction, preserve her independence, and stand on the side of environmental conservation.

Part 2 of "A White Heron" is developed against the backdrop of Sylvia's mixed emotions and demonstrates that for her the communion she feels with the nonhuman world finally outweighs her wish to please the ornithologist. During the second night of the ornithologist's stay, Sylvia can hardly sleep because she is so excited by the prospect of climbing an ancient pine "at break of day" from which vantage she will "easily discover whence the white

heron flew, and mark the place" (234). She imagines the "glory" that will be hers when "she could make known the secret" later in the morning (235). At this point, Jewett interrupts the narrative to clarify what is at stake for Sylvia if she acts on her newly discovered attraction and does all within her power to please the stranger: "Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfaction of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest" (235). As we soon see, however, Sylvia's fascination with the young man is countered by her discovery of the vastness of the natural world and her intimate participation in it.

With "tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame," Sylvia begins the climb that will show her where the heron's nest is located. At first, the "sharp dry twigs" of the pine "held her and scratched her like angry talons," but as she progresses up the tree, the tree itself seems to change its attitude and welcome her presence: "Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent" (236). At last she reaches the vantage she is seeking and for the first time sees "the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it," and she feels at one with the hawks that glide beneath her, "as if she too could go flying away among the clouds" (236). As readers we also marvel at the majesty of what she beholds, concluding for ourselves, if not for her, that "truly it was a vast and awesome world" (236). We are, for a time, held in suspense as we observe Sylvia undeviatingly pursuing her conscious plan of telling the young man where the nest is.

Jewett carefully composes this critical scene so that we witness Sylvia's struggle between conscious purpose and unconscious delight and find ourselves urging her to indulge her unconscious impulse. Once the sought-after bird appears and Sylvia possesses the knowledge she was seeking, the narrative is again disrupted. This time the intrusive voice instructs Sylvia to remain in the tree and behold what is to occur even though she has gathered all the information she needs: "And wait! wait!

do not move a foot or a finger, little girl, do not send an arrow of light and consciousness from your own two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours, and cries back to his mate on the nest, and plumes his feathers for the new day!" (238). Here is the bird at sunrise, preparing for the future that is the day ahead and the next generation signified by his mate on the nest. This is what Jewett wanted us to watch Sylvia watching. At first she appears undeterred in her original purpose; her immediate response is to wonder "what the stranger would say to her, and what he would think when she told him how to find his way straight to the heron's nest" (238). Once these words are uttered, however, the point of view shifts from third-person limited to third-person objective, and we no longer have access to Sylvia's inner thoughts. This is so that we can observe her behavior and see for ourselves whether her outward conduct expresses the change of heart the narrative intrusion encouraged. This is precisely what she does, but she achieves it through inaction.

When the moment arrives to tell the ornithologist where to find the nest, Sylvia remains silent. Her grandmother "fretfully rebukes her," and she herself never loses sight of how helpful the money would be and how much she would like to make the young man happy (239). Once more, the narrative guides our thoughts, stating emphatically that the girl "must keep silence!" We are told she does this because "she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together" (239). The narrative intrudes in this manner for the simple reason that Sylvia could not herself explain why she has acted as she has; the force of nature that flows through her and channels her actions is not part of her conscious thought. She is a nine-year-old girl, unaware of the power that directs her conduct. Yet again, the narrative explains: Had she acted as she intended, she would have surrendered her independence and her dignity in exchange for the young man's gratitude. Yes, she "could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves," but she refuses to submit to this fate, acting instead on an opposing impulse emerging from

what we might imagine to be her instinct for self-preservation (239).

What becomes of Sylvia after this momentous event is left ambiguous. A story written in the romantic tradition might have shown Sylvia enjoying an enhanced measure of delight when she resumes the simple life that she nearly abandoned in order to become a more conventional female who seeks to accede to male authority. But this is a realist story, and Jewett makes no claims about new joys and a deeper intimacy with nature. She raises this as a possibility but insists on leaving it open-ended: “Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, —who can tell?” (239). Ending the story in this way enables Jewett to return to the principles of realism that she herself may have strayed from when her narrator described the ancient pine as seeking to assist Sylvia and even having grown in that instant to “have loved his new dependent” (236). The existence of such a tree would have implied that the natural world is capable of sympathizing with human experience, and this is not the realist’s aim. We are left hoping that the woodlands will offer Sylvia their “gifts and graces” even while we know that in the meantime she remains a “lonely country child” (239).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Pay close attention to the function of point of view and the use of narrative interruption in part 2 of “A White Heron.” Explain how the commentary and commands that enter the narrative contribute to the reader’s understanding of what Sylvia is experiencing. Do you think that this way of managing the closing scenes adds to or detracts from the power of the story?
2. Contrast Jewett’s presentation of Sylvia’s relationship to the white heron that pauses for a minute on a branch not far from her with the way Thoreau presents his narrator’s relationship to the loons that he describes near the end of the “Brute Neighbors” chapter in *Walden*. Explain how each author manages tone in these scenes and how tone contributes to our interpretation of the events described.
3. Explain how Stephen Crane’s presentation of nature in “The Open Boat” differs from Jewett’s presentation of nature in “A White Heron.” Select specific scenes that support your observations. Is it possible to make the argument that Crane’s view of nature as indifferent to human experience is not as different from Jewett’s as might at first appear?
4. How do you interpret Jewett’s ending to “A White Heron”? Why is it important that Sylvia’s future be left uncertain?
5. Why do you think Jewett chose to write about Sylvia at age nine rather than, say, 12 or 14? Explain how her age influences the way you interpret the story.

The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896)

The 21 chapters that make up *The Country of the Pointed Firs* possess an undeniable coherence established through the consistent voice of the unnamed narrator and Jewett’s skillful management of primary themes and central characters. Critics have tended to view this work as Jewett’s masterpiece because in it she takes to fruition her multiple gifts as a writer, not the least of which was her sensitivity to the landscape and inhabitants of New England. Whether or not the book qualifies as a novel, however, will continue to be a matter of debate largely because the work does not present a single plot that develops chapter by chapter, leading to multiple crises that culminate in climax and resolution. Instead, the book reads more as a sequence of episodes or encounters that make a pronounced impression on the narrator. For this reason, perhaps, it makes sense to approach this work as a love story, one in which the object of love is the rural seaport of Dunnet Landing. The narrator urges such a perception in the opening pages when she observes that truly knowing “a village like this and its surroundings, . . . is like becoming acquainted with a single person” (Jewett, *Country* 1). When she immediately extends the village-as-person metaphor, admitting that, as with people, “falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift”

(1–2), we begin to wonder whether what we have in store is the intimate disclosure of such a love. This is indeed what we get, but it is not the interior record of the lover's journey of discovery; rather, the narrative presents scenes that leave us in the position of explaining what it is about them that provokes the narrator's admiration.

In our initial encounter with Jewett's narrator, she is described as "a lover of Dunnet Landing returned to find the unchanged shores of the pointed firs" (2). We see her from the outside, as the "single passenger landed upon the steamboat wharf," and we join the "fine crowd of spectators" that follows her "with subdued excitement." When she admits us into the interior of her experience, as she does in chapter 2 and continues to do for the rest of the book, it is with the understanding that every detail is already dear to her heart, and that we are trusted to share her affection. In our efforts not to betray that trust, we must discover the value she perceives in the experiences she describes, seeing with our own eyes the beauty she points to but does not explain. The little we know of the narrator is that she is a writer, and this fact contributes to our efforts to account for her descriptions. We learn that she was "bound" to complete a "long piece of writing" that she cannot seem to give her complete attention because she is so captivated by the sights and sounds of village life (6). She confesses that when she listens to her landlady, Mrs. Almira Todd, she does so "with an idle pen in my hand" and attempts to escape the distraction: "I resolutely fled temptation, and walked out past the fragrant green garden and up the dusty road" (9). But her efforts are futile; she admits that for her "it was impossible not to listen," and even in the act of fleeing, her attention is drawn to the "fragrant green garden" and the "dusty road." In a last effort to complete her writing and close herself off from the world around her, she rents a schoolhouse empty for the summer, and for a time she feels "most businesslike" in her single-minded dedication. Yet even here she acknowledges that when "a sheep-bell tinkled near by," her "wandering wits" were called to it and her "sentences failed to catch

these lovely summer cadences" (14–15). At last she forgoes all efforts to write and instead yields to the world that intrudes on her imagination and that she is unable to express fully through the artificiality of writing.

All of this is to say that Jewett structures her opening chapters so that we want to know what it is that so fascinates the narrator and feel relieved when we learn that the narrator will simply give us the world around her instead of attempting to contain it in her writing. This is Jewett's way of writing the author out of her story so that we learn to view what follows as what really exists, free of the constraints of literary form. Doing so defines Jewett as a realist writer, who strives to present the world in objective terms so that we see humanity and the natural world as they actually are rather than as we would like them to be or as society tells us they should be. One aim of the story is to illuminate the trials and triumphs of ordinary New Englanders, so that even as we discover what is best about them, we do so with knowledge of the hardships they must endure. The characters who appear on Jewett's pages for this reason gain what beauty they possess in the face of many struggles. Jewett's strong women characters, such as Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, demonstrate their strength by overcoming disappointments and rising above the loneliness and isolation that are so often close at hand. They achieve peace with the natural world not because it lifts them out of suffering or suddenly yields transcendent moments, but because they respect its power, regard it closely, and savor whatever delights it offers. Jewett's male characters also struggle but frequently exhibit the crippling effects of lost love or failed ambition that take them out of the present and prevent them from being grounded in themselves and their circumstances, the way the central women characters are.

Mrs. Todd is perhaps the most powerful female presence in *Pointed Firs*, and we are given insight into her character early in the book. As chapter 2 concludes, the narrator tells us that the older woman is a widow, who in her youth "had loved one who was far above her" (7). Mrs. Todd her-

self explains that “he come of high family, an’ my lot was plain an’ hard-workin’” (8). She does not bemoan her social position or begrudge her lover the life he has led; she simply admits that “them feelin’s comes back when you think you’ve done with ‘em, as sure as spring comes with the year.” We later learn that Mrs. Todd was happy with her husband, Nathan, who died before knowing that her heart belonged to another. She does not deny that her life has included sorrows, but she does not linger over them; rather, she absorbs what life holds out to her and is perhaps for that reason described as “a very large woman” who has managed to draw sustenance even from hardship (2). It is also fitting that Mrs. Todd is an herbalist, whose broad knowledge of local plants enables her to survive by selling spruce beer and herbal remedies. All these facets of her character seem to gather around her at the conclusion of chapter 2, where Jewett invests her with the timeless mystery of the ancient past that she embodies in the present: “She stood in the centre of a braided rug, and its rings of black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light. Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from her little garden” (8). Here the imagery of circles reinforces her timelessness, as if to say that she is the most recent incarnation of a female figure whose presence circulates through all the ages, while reference to the sibyl gives her an oracular power here linked to her intimate knowledge of the natural world.

The male characters are less impressive, though each in his own way possesses admirable qualities. Captain Littlepage is the first male we meet, and his name expresses his limited though significant appeal. We quickly learn that he is a dedicated reader who developed a particular interest in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* during his many years at sea. This turns out to be a key to his character, and we begin to see that he is a person whose understanding of the world is perhaps overly filtered through the written word and seafaring lore. His initial words are a quotation from *Paradise Lost*, which triggers the narrator’s recollection of Mrs. Todd’s

observation that the good captain “had overset his mind with too much reading” (17). The narrator herself states that he looks “as if he had suffered from loneliness and misapprehension.” A few pages after this, a swallow hotly pursued by a kingbird flies into the schoolhouse where the two are conversing and bangs against the walls before escaping, “but Captain Littlepage took no notice whatever of the flurry” (19). Unlike the narrator, who cannot hold the real world at bay in order to lose herself in writing, the captain is insulated from that world by the heightened language he has absorbed from others.

As a consequence, he is quick to condemn the younger generation as small minded: “There’s no large-minded way of thinking now,” he tells us; “the worst have got to be the best and rule everything; we’re all turned upside down and going back year by year” (21). His misapprehension, as it turns out, is his belief that life can be lived on the epic scale conveyed in the works of Milton and Shakespeare, so that all else pales in significance. It is difficult not to imagine that Jewett is poking fun at the romantic imagination, as expressed though Emerson’s famous transparent eyeball passage in the opening pages of *Nature*, where he states that during moments of transcendence the concerns of daily life are reduced to mere trifles. Captain Littlepage’s transcendent moment takes the form of a story he was told by an old Scotsman he boarded with while shipwrecked and recovering from a fever in the Far North. The story is about a town in the Arctic that serves as “a kind of waiting-place between this world and the next” and promises to unlock the secret of the life to come (24). Captain Littlepage believes that he “chanced to learn of one of the greatest discoveries that man has ever made,” and this knowledge casts the rest of his life in shadows; his attention remains steadfastly riveted on the “great exploit” to take place “some o’ these days” (27). Mrs. Todd’s reflection that “he used to be a beautiful man” effectively captures the way a noble life can be misdirected by literature and romantic tales distanced from actual experience (29).

Johnny Bowden seems to embody the admirable male, keeping his feet firmly planted on the ground while submitting to the authority of Mrs. Todd and happily uniting his own practical interests to those of the powerful women who surround him. We meet Johnny when he joins the narrator and Mrs. Todd as the two women make the boat trip to Green Island, where Mrs. Todd's mother lives. Mrs. Todd is clearly in charge, commanding the narrator to "let me do things my way" and declaring that Johnny is an acceptable companion because he is her "cousin's son" and "mother'll like to have him come." Mrs. Todd also points out that Johnny will "be down to the herrin' weirs all the time we're there, anyway" and will not present a burden (32). "[We don't want to carry no men folks havin' to be considered every minute an' takin' up all of our time." The subordination of male power clearly invoked in this language is further reinforced as the dory pulls away from the wharf and a male voice advises Mrs. Todd that her boat is "lo'ded bad" and "won't never get out to Green Island" (33). Mrs. Todd responds by dismissing the male speaker's judgment with such force that he walks "indignantly away."

The events that take place on Green Island forcefully illuminate Jewett's interest in the harmonious exercise of matriarchal authority. This is a theme that she has already introduced through the narrator's friendship with Mrs. Todd and that she will return to with particular force in later chapters when she presents the Bowden family reunion. Jewett's aim in these chapters is to communicate the beneficial influence of female wisdom, and readers must decide whether her doing so results in the displacement of male power or an effort to balance the social scales that have long favored patriarchy. In the Green Island chapters, readers see how men are relegated to the background so that the joys of female sociality might be more fully explored. Mrs. Todd's brother, William, is for this reason cast as unusually shy and predisposed to hover on the margins, much as Johnny Bowden does. This enables Jewett to focus our attention on the women, especially

Mrs. Todd's 86-six-year-old mother, Mrs. Blackett, who is introduced as eternally youthful and warm hearted: "She was a delightful little person . . . with bright eyes and an affectionate air of expectation like a child on holiday. You felt as if Mrs. Blackett were an old and dear friend before you let go her cordial hand" (36). We soon learn that Mrs. Blackett is a goddess of hospitality whose ready sympathy enables her to anticipate her guest's every need. In her we are reminded of Rachel Halliday, the Quaker matron of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who also makes her home a version of heaven on earth. As the day on Green Island concludes, the narrator acknowledges her deep contentment: "It was impossible not to wish to stay on forever at Green Island, and I could not help saying so" (52).

The theme of matriarchal harmony achieves its fullest expression in the journey to the Bowden family reunion and the reunion itself, during which the narrator "came near to feeling like a true Bowden" and therefore a member of the extended family over which Mrs. Blackett presides (110). Jewett frames this momentous event as an outpouring of primal energies that binds the simple country folk to the ancient past while enabling them to express a nobility of character that lifts them above their humble circumstances. The day begins with Mrs. Todd's carefully examining "the day for herself in its infancy," coming "to an understanding with the primal forces of nature," and concluding that the signs are propitious (83). After Mrs. Blackett arrives, they begin the wagon trip up country to the family seat, encountering people along the way who greet them with such affection that the narrator compares their journey to "a golden chain of love and dependence" that links "the far island" where Mrs. Blackett lives to "these scattered farms" (90). Once they reach the old Bowden house, the celebration assumes a ritualistic pattern described as the outward expression of a timeless human impulse: "We were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest

of our line” (100). At this point, the family forms a procession to the grove, where a feast awaits them and Mrs. Blackett naturally takes her position at the front. In this environment—where nature and human conduct harmoniously unite—the inner self is free to blossom. Mrs. Todd appears “as alert and gay as a girl,” and the narrator reflects on how often “a narrow set of circumstances had caged a fine able character and held it captive” (105, 107). Structuring the scene in this way enables Jewett to incorporate the realist writer’s belief that people are shaped by nature and external social forces while also suggesting that the acceptance of matriarchal influence is essential to the realization of human potential.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Describe the ways Jewett presents Captain Littlepage as a man who lives too much in his mind and fails to acknowledge the natural world and the lives of those who surround him. Do you think that Jewett creates this character as a critique of the romantic imagination that Emerson presents in the transparent eyeball passage that appears near the beginning of *Nature*? How are Jewett’s aims as a realist writer realized through her development of Captain Littlepage?
2. Look closely at the male characters in this book and compile a list of characteristics that you see Jewett presenting as most desirable in a man. Be sure to consider Johnny Bowden and Captain Littlepage, but also take into account the Reverend Mr. Dimmick and Elijah Tilley.
3. Make a comparison of the scenes that Jewett sets on Green Island at Mrs. Blackett’s home with the chapter titled “The Quaker Settlement” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Pay particular attention to the parallels linking Mrs. Blackett to Rachel Halliday. Then construct an argument in which you make the case that Jewett was or was not influenced by Stowe’s earlier work.
4. Explain why you think Jewett chooses not to name her narrator and why she presents her as an outsider who stays for the summer months only.

“The Foreigner” (1900)

This story is the fourth Dunnet Landing tale that Jewett wrote after publishing *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. It provides insight into the role of motherhood in that work, in addition to detailing further the hardship and isolation of life in rural Maine. Through the course of events related by the same unnamed narrator who appears in *Pointed Firs*, we learn the tragic experience of Mrs. Tolland, a French Catholic woman who married into an old Dunnet Landing family but was never accepted by village society. Much of the tale is related as a story within a story that is told by the narrator’s landlady, Mrs. Todd, who recalls the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Tolland that took place 40 years earlier. Mrs. Todd thinks of the previous event because an August storm that is raging outside reminds her of the storm that was blowing on the day of Mrs. Tolland’s death. She also recalls this event because Mrs. Tolland died in the absence of her mother, and Mrs. Todd is worried that the high winds and roaring waves driven by the present gale pose a danger to her mother, who lives on Green Island. In the final moments of her life, Mrs. Tolland experiences the spirit visitation of her own mother and takes comfort in the certainty of reunion with her in the next life. Mrs. Todd, who witnessed this event and actually saw the ghost of the dying woman’s mother, also takes comfort from this event. Knowledge of the reunion ahead leads Mrs. Todd to the conclusion that there is a world beyond, and our aim in this life is to bring the two worlds together: “‘We’ve got to join both worlds together an’ live in one but for the other’” (186)—which is to say that the spirit of all-embracing motherhood should be the guiding force in our mortal lives.

Mrs. Todd’s conclusion is particularly important because it first occurred to her years before she met the narrator and helps explain why she has been so welcoming of the other woman, despite the fact that the narrator is a temporary visitor to Dunnet Landing. The spirit of motherhood that so interests Jewett is most clearly expressed by Mrs. Todd’s mother, who refused to support the

6. The issue of environmental conservation plays a central role in many of Jewett's works. Explain how you see Jewett dealing with conservation in "A White Heron" and at least one other work.
7. Explain how "The Foreigner" introduces Mrs. Todd in a manner that clarifies her role in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and adds to our understanding of her relationship to her mother.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Campbell, Donna. Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909). Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/jewett.htm>. Accessed May 13, 2009.
- Cary, Richard. *Sarah Orne Jewett*. United States Author Series, 19, New York: Twayne, 1962.
- Chase, Mary Ellen. "Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Coast of Maine, an Introduction." In *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*. New York: Norton, 1981.
- Gale, Robert L. *A Sarah Orne Jewett Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Heller, Terry. Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project. Available online. URL: <http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/sj-index.htm>. Accessed May 13, 2009.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*. Edited by Mary Ellen Chase. New York: Norton, 1981.
- . *Sarah Orne Jewett: Novels and Stories*. Edited by Michael Davitt Bell. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994.
- Kilcup, Karen L., and Thomas S. Edwards, eds. *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999.
- Silverthorne, Elizabeth. *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer's Life*. Woodstock, N.Y. Overlook Press, 1993.
- Paul Crumbley



HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

(1807–1882)

Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending.

(*Elegiac Verse*)

In “My Lost Youth,” the most celebrated American poet during the 19th century reminisced about his childhood in Portland, Maine. He recalled imaginative stimuli he experienced growing up in a coastal town: the “fort upon the hill” reminding the boy of frontier fights and the War of 1812; the “Spanish sailors with bearded lips” who awakened curiosity about other countries and languages; the city’s surrounding woodlands and neighboring ocean, which impressed on him a love of nature; and the comfort he found in “the friendships old and the early loves” of what seems to have been a mostly untroubled boyhood. The second son among eight children of Stephen and Zilpah Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry was born on February 27, 1807, and grew up in Portland’s first brick house. He began school at age three and saw his first poem, “The Battle of Lovell’s Pond,” published in the *Portland Gazette* in 1820, about the same time he passed his entrance examination for Bowdoin College. Longfellow’s adult writings drew upon influences from his childhood in Maine but also on literatures from distant countries and times. It was an old Lapland song he would invoke as the refrain to “My Lost Youth” even though the education that prepared him for college emphasized classical Greek and Latin.

Bowdoin was a small country college when Henry and his older brother entered as sophomores in 1822, yet his classmates included Frank-

lin Pierce, a future president of the United States, and NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, who would reach eminence as a writer of fiction. Literary societies provided opportunities for writing and public speaking and inspired dreams of lives devoted to beauty among collegians responding to early stirrings of romanticism. Both Longfellow and Hawthorne conceived ambitions for literary careers even though there were as yet no models of Americans attaining practical success as authors. Although Longfellow’s father, an attorney, urged him to study law, the young man whose commencement address argued in defense of “Our American Authors” experienced a stroke of good luck when the college offered him a professorship in modern languages if he would spend the next three years in Europe learning French, Spanish, Italian, and German so that he could teach them on his return. While abroad, he met Washington Irving, read in contemporary and traditional literatures, assimilated ideas of German romanticism, and gathered impressions he would later publish in *Outre-Mer* (1833), a collection of prose sketches influenced by Irving’s *Sketch Book*.

Back in Maine, Longfellow toiled to develop teaching materials for his classes in Romance languages and German; most of his publications in the early 1830s were textbooks, though he also wrote articles about European literature for the *North American Review*. Even the poems he wrote in those

years were mostly translations of European verse for use with his students. In 1831 he married Mary Potter, a Portland neighbor. When Harvard University offered Longfellow the Smith Professorship of Modern Languages, the young couple left Maine for Europe and another period of study and imaginative development for the aspiring poet. Unfortunately Mary Potter Longfellow suffered a miscarriage in the Netherlands and died in Rotterdam in November 1835. Her grieving widower sought distraction in study and travel. While in Switzerland, Longfellow met the family of Nathan Appleton, a wealthy Boston merchant, and fell in love with Appleton's daughter Frances, then only 17. Returning to America, Longfellow settled in Cambridge and devoted himself to his duties at Harvard even as he continued a long courtship. This was a fruitful period for Longfellow as a writer. His most ambitious prose work, *Hyperion, a Romance*, appeared in 1839; it drew on his European travels but offended Fanny by featuring a thinly veiled fictionalization of his pursuit of her. In poetry he concentrated on lyric poems he thought of as "psalms," which appeared in *Voices of the Night* (1839); shortly afterward, *Ballads and Other Poems* (1842) expanded his reputation with "The Wreck of the Hesperus," "The Skeleton in Armor," and "The Village Blacksmith," among other poems that would remain popular for a century or more. Many of them borrowed European verse forms and traditions and applied them to present American subject matter. In 1842 Longfellow returned to Europe, where he strengthened his acquaintance with authors including Charles Dickens. Perhaps inspired by Dickens's attacks on societal injustice, Longfellow composed *Poems on Slavery* (1842) on the return voyage. Although he generally kept personal control of his earnings from publication, Longfellow devoted proceeds from that book to the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Society.

When Longfellow finally married Frances Appleton in July 1843, her father gave the couple as his wedding gift the house on Brattle Street near Harvard where Longfellow had been renting a room. Craigie House had a distinguished history, having been George Washington's headquarters

during the siege of Boston during the Revolution; after Longfellow made it his home and gradually improved his property, the house became a kind of public landmark known to American readers of that century, who took great interest in the homes and lives of celebrated writers. Longfellow's many admirers treasured poems like "The Children's Hour" that reflected the happy family life Henry and Fanny enjoyed with their six children. In those years both that house and their summer home at nearby Nahant were centers of hospitality for European and American guests, many of them authors. Longfellow's poems appeared regularly in magazines before being collected in *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems* (1845) and *The Seaside and the Fireside* (1850). Meanwhile, he promoted the careers of aspiring poets with two collections, *The Waif* (1845) and *The Estray* (1846). The introductory poem for the latter was "Pegasus in Pound," which the young EMILY DICKINSON mentioned in an 1851 letter that expressed the hope that Longfellow's success conveyed to young writers "who please ourselves with the fancy that we are the only poets, and everyone else is *prose*" (*Letters* 56). Yet, Longfellow maintained his own interest in prose, and his only novel, *Kavanaugh, a Tale* (1849), also attracted Dickinson's admiration.

Stories could be told delightfully and memorably in poetic form as well as prose, as Longfellow had already shown with his ballads. In this same period of intense literary activity, he turned his ambitions toward book-length verse narrative in *Evangeline, a Tale of Acadie* (1847). Drawing on a legend reported to him by the Reverend Horace L. Conolly (a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had failed to interest the Salem author in developing this material), Longfellow told of a little-known historical injustice in colonial North America when British authorities drove French settlers from Acadia in Nova Scotia. He focused his story on the wanderings of Evangeline, who becomes separated from her fiancé, Gabriel, when the exiles are loaded indiscriminately onto boats bound for distant destinations after their lands are confiscated and their idyllic village of Grand-Pré burns to the ground.

Her search for Gabriel takes her to the bayous of Louisiana and the forests of Michigan, ending in plague-stricken Philadelphia, where Evangeline is finally reunited with Gabriel on his deathbed in a charity hospital. Experimenting with dactylic hexameter (the meter of Greek and Roman epics), Longfellow wove this story of “affection that hopes, and endures, and is patient” into a new kind of American epic that honored a woman’s steadfast courage rather than manly skill in warfare and exposed wrongs done a French Catholic community at a time when virulent anti-Catholicism and anti-immigrant hostility raged in his United States. The poem also celebrates American landscapes and the diversity of its communities. *Evangeline* became highly successful in Europe as well as the United States. Despite critical attacks on his choice of meter, Longfellow enjoyed tremendous popularity as this poem went through hundreds of editions over the next decades. Other lengthy narrative poems celebrating American history and landscapes followed. *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) retold legends from Chippewa culture in a distinctive trochaic meter Longfellow borrowed from the *Kalevala*, a Finnish folk epic. This turned out to be the most marketable poem of the 19th century, outselling even *Evangeline*; it was adapted, performed, and parodied regularly. *The Courtship of Miles Standish and Other Poems* (1858) completed this group of long historical narratives with its comic tale of the courtship of Longfellow’s own ancestors, John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, in Plymouth Colony’s first winter while suggesting mythic implications for America in the maiden’s choice of the man of letters over the soldier. While writing that story from the New England past, Longfellow started work on two dramatic poems dealing with Puritan persecution of Quakers and suspected witches. These were the “New England Tragedies” that he eventually grouped within a three-part dramatic project known as *Christus: A Mystery* (1872), whose three sections (devoted to Christ’s time, the Middle Ages, and colonial America) allegorized the virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

After resigning his professorship in 1854—partly because he had eye problems but largely

because he found he could support his family comfortably by his publications—Longfellow became an increasingly public figure as the wise and beloved American poet. On July 9, 1861, however, disaster struck his family when the poet’s wife died in a tragic accident: Fanny Longfellow incurred fatal burns when her dress caught fire as she attempted to preserve her daughters’ curls with sealing wax. The poet, who rushed to her rescue, suffered disfiguring facial burns that prevented him from shaving for the rest of his life and required him to wear the full gray beard that characterized his public image. More important, he was left to raise their children and to attempt to recover poetic momentum despite intense personal grief and his country’s disunion. Longfellow’s way of coping with sorrow was to absorb himself in demanding poetic projects. In these years, he wrote collections of narrative poems based on both American and European subjects that appeared in sequential parts of *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863, 1872–73). Even more ambitious was Longfellow’s translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1865–67) into English blank verse, a linguistic and artistic challenge for which he enlisted help from James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton as friendly advisers who gathered for weekly readings and critique. The six sonnets Longfellow wrote to preface this three-volume edition speak eloquently of the grief underlying both his and Dante’s art and testify to his belief in poetry’s healing power.

Although neither *The Divine Comedy* nor *Christus* proved popular with the general readers for whom Longfellow had made poetry accessible, comforting, and sometimes inspiring, he remained a beloved literary figure in his later life and continued writing and publishing new poems. Meanwhile, collected editions of his work abounded and new books appeared, right up to the aptly named *Ultima Thule* (1880), the second part of which appeared just after he died of phlebitis in 1882.

The aging Longfellow was received by Queen Victoria and was awarded honorary degrees by both Cambridge and Oxford Universities on his last visit to Europe in 1868–69; at home his portrait hung in classrooms and his poems were memorized by

generations of American schoolchildren. He was besieged by visitors and by correspondents writing for autographs. Statues of Longfellow in public parks around the country testify to widespread respect, and he became the only U.S. writer memorialized in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Yet the plummeting of Longfellow's literary reputation that started in the 20th century marks his career as the phenomenon of a particular point in American literary history when this humane and gentlemanly figure embodied an ideal of poetry as pleasing, readily understood, and kindly instructive. EDGAR ALLAN POE's absurd charges of plagiarism against the poet, whose chief offense was his popularity, softened into critical recognition that his ideas tended to be conventional and his stories and forms (however varied) derivative. Longfellow would represent the limitations of "the genteel tradition" in American writing by contrast with original voices like those of Poe, WALT WHITMAN, RALPH WALDO EMERSON, and Dickinson. Classified as one of the "fireside" or "schoolroom" poets along with his friends James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Oliver Wendell Holmes on the basis of their appeal to middle-class families gathered around the fireside to read for a night's diversion and of their frequent appearance in school curricula, Longfellow retained some influence. Perhaps his most important contribution was in marking out a place for poetry in the United States. One of those who responded to his inspiration was the most popular American poet of the next century. When Robert Frost titled his first book *A Boy's Will* for its initial publication in London, he trusted his American and English readers to recall Longfellow's haunting words, "A boy's will is the wind's will, / And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

"Hymn to the Night" (1839)

This poem appeared in Longfellow's first book, *Voices of the Night*, where it immediately followed the "Prelude" in which he recalled sweet childhood visions but recognized that he must now confront

adult cares and awareness of mortality—taking into his heart and expressing in his verse "All solemn Voices of the Night, / That can soothe thee, or affright." His poems would acknowledge the fearful and melancholy moods he shared with his readers, but they would also echo the night's soothing voice more than its dismaying ones.

"Hymn to the Night" personifies Night as a goddesslike woman. Although her skirts are "sable," there is nothing gothic in Longfellow's evocation of her darkness; those skirts are "fringed with light" reflected from "marble halls" and "celestial walls" that suggest the heavenly origin of this visitor, whom the speaker hears and feels more than sees. Sensing her presence, he experiences a "spell of might" and loving comfort. Sustained by her support, he hears "sounds of sorrow and delight" but draws "repose" from the trustful mood evoked by Night's gift for mediating griefs and even transforming them into beauty. After recounting his experience in the first four stanzas, the speaker responds in the last two with prayer directed to "holy Night," a prayer of devotion and gratitude more than of invocation. Rather than asking for release from care, he gives thanks for confidence that he can "learn to bear / What man has borne before." Having experienced peace, he prays that it continue.

As a lyric poem in the romantic mode, "Hymn to the Night" recalls a setting or situation and evokes a mood. Longfellow's goal was to summon feelings of peace such as he claimed to have experienced during this night vision. The title word *hymn* suggests a worshipful mood, and his personification of Night lifts the reader's thoughts toward heaven or perhaps some mythic Elysium better suited to the speaker's likening of himself in the last stanza to Orestes in Greek mythology.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why do you suppose Longfellow chose to personify night as a woman, and what textual details in this poem help you to imagine this figure? How does she interact with Care? How else might night be personified—perhaps by a gothic or a comic writer? How does the feminine

presence in this poem differ from that expressed by Poe in "To Helen"?

2. Make note of all the rhymes you find in this poem. Do they seem predictable, or do you find any of them surprising? How many other rhyme words can you think of for *Night*, and what would be the effect of substituting one or more of those at specific points in this poem?
3. What elements of this poem remind you that it was written a long time ago? How well does it address today's anxieties and the darkness people confront today?

"A Psalm of Life" (1839)

Although Longfellow referred to several poems in *Voices of the Night* as "psalms," this is the only one he directly titled to show its relation to biblical tradition. As the psalms of David expressed many moods, including anger, dread, and gratitude, this poem conveys its author's sometimes contradictory feelings. It differs from scriptural psalms, however, in not being a prayer addressed to God but a sort of one-sided debate. Longfellow's subtitle, "What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist," suggests an internal dialogue between his role as poet/psalmist and his personal feelings as an ambitious and still relatively young person attempting to find his place in the world.

The speaker's retort to advice the psalmist has presumably given in "mournful numbers" suggests to us the melancholy burden of wisdom that mature counselors sometimes transmit to youth: "Life is but an empty dream"; "Dust thou art to dust returnest." Attentive readers of Longfellow's poetry recognize in the psalmist's message the poet's knowledge of sorrows, disappointments, and anxieties that he tried to help readers endure. Yet the young man's rejoinder here speaks for Longfellow also in his determination to make his life matter for his own fulfillment and the good of those he might influence. The voice readers find heartening declares the young man's rejection of the psalmist's doleful perspective.

Longfellow used multiple poetic techniques to lend force to the young speaker's challenge. Imperative verbs introduce the poem ("Tell me not") and recur with increasing force, generally at start of lines ("Be a hero," "Trust no Future," "Let us, then, be up and doing"). Additional emphasis results from frequent exclamation points and from the driving trochaic rhythm Longfellow chose in reversal of familiar iambic patterns. Also emphatic is the speaker's habit of refuting advice that discourages hope. If the psalmist warns that life leads inexorably to death, the young man rejoins that the soul remains immortal. If life is a struggle, then he urges bold resistance. Rather than yield to anxiety, he counsels valiant action. However dispiriting the general condition of men and women may be, "Lives of great men all remind us" of human potential for noble achievement and of the possibility that one's individual quest for glory may inspire others. The poem ends with the famous exhortation to action, effort, achievement, and, a bit surprisingly, patience.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the simile of "Footprints on the sands of time" that Longfellow develops in stanzas 7 and 8. How much comfort does this figure of speech convey if studied carefully?
2. This poem reflects the "can-do" American spirit of the Jacksonian era, when it was written, but cultural historians tell us that the period was also characterized by frequent business failures, by medical and public health problems leading to widespread early deaths, and by high levels of anxiety among people striving either to better their condition or to stave off loss of status. The popularity of "A Psalm of Life" suggests that Longfellow responded to mixed feelings among his readers. How do the two voices in this poem articulate different responses to life's problems, and do you find either voice fully convincing?
3. How well do you think Longfellow's attitudes and advice in "A Psalm of Life" suit conditions young Americans face today?

“The Wreck of the Hesperus” (1841)

Storytelling emerged as one of Longfellow’s poetic strengths. Although long narrative poems such as *Evangeline* and *The Song of Hiawatha* became his most popular writings for readers of his time, his first experiments in telling versified tales took the form of ballads such as this one and “The Skeleton in Armor,” both of which appeared in *Ballads and Other Poems*. Romantic literary tastes reawakened interest in English and Scottish folk ballads collected by Thomas Percy and Sir Walter Scott, and Longfellow had developed a fondness for German ballads when in Europe. Such poems related stories briefly (usually beginning with an event near the plot’s climax) and dispensed with background information and descriptive detail. In “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” the narrator says nothing about the ship’s voyage before the outbreak of the storm and leaves us to guess circumstances that might have caused the skipper to risk his child’s life by taking her on this expedition. Only three characters are mentioned, though the line “Then up and spake an old Sailør” suggests a larger crew. In keeping with ballad tradition, Longfellow relied on dramatic dialogue to advance the plot: first, when the skipper ignores the Spanish sailor’s advice to seek shelter from the approaching gale and later when the daughter directs three parallel questions to her father about alarming sounds and sights. Although it is the skipper’s prideful decision that dooms the ship, Longfellow assigns him few words. We discover his overconfidence from the “scornful laugh” with which he rebuffs the sailor and the paternal protectiveness with which he reassures the child. After the reversal of the father’s death (“A Frozen corpse was he”), the daughter invokes her heavenly father for rescue—with no happier result. The reader learns her fate along with the fisherman who discovers the maiden’s body still lashed to the wrecked ship.

As do the singers of folk ballads and the authors of broadside verse, Longfellow took as his topic an event of current interest, a shipwreck that occurred on the Massachusetts coast only a few weeks before

he wrote this poem in December 1839. He claimed that the poem came to him “not . . . by lines, but by stanzas” as the work of one inspiration-filled night. Seeing opportunity to cultivate an American ballad literature, he adopted the typical ballad stanza of English and Scottish tradition with quatrains composed of alternating four-stress and three-stress lines in which only the second and fourth lines typically rhymed. Rather than use simple word choices characteristic of his time, as was typical of folk ballads, Longfellow imitated some of the archaic qualities 19th-century readers would have noticed in story-songs collected from earlier periods. The poem’s musical features made it easy to remember, and “The Wreck of the Hesperus” remained popular long after Longfellow turned to less restrictive forms of narrative poetry.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A convention of folk ballads is an impersonal narrator who represents a public voice rather than his or her own feelings. How well did Longfellow follow this convention? Are there parts of the poem that make you aware of the narrator’s point of view?
2. Why did Longfellow place his emphasis on the little girl in telling this story? Does she remind you of other children in literature? What impressions does he convey of her relationship with her father? Point to textual evidence that shows the narrator’s interest in this character. If you were to develop this story, what possibilities do you see for expanding on what this brief story tells us about her?
3. Compare this poem with an American folk ballad like “Frankie and Johnny” or an English ballad like “Sir Patrick Spens.” What shared elements do you find in the ways stories are told?

“The Arsenal at Springfield” (1844)

Longfellow credited a conversation with his bride, Frances Appleton, as his inspiration for this poem.

On their wedding trip, the couple visited the U.S. Arsenal at Springfield, Massachusetts, along with Charles Sumner, the poet's most politically active and reform-minded friend. In this storehouse of weaponry, Fanny commented to her husband that the array of metal gun barrels reminded her of a vast organ likely to produce "mournful music." That simile, along with Sumner's argument that governmental resources would be better spent on education than war preparations, guided Longfellow's thoughts as he composed this poem. Another factor in his thinking may have been apprehension that his country would reproduce the tragic history of European wars that he knew about from his continental travels and remembered while writing poems he grouped with this one in *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems*.

The organ image begins in the first stanza with the poet's attention to the "silent pipes" of the warehoused firearms in time of peace. Images of sound dominate the following quatrains as he anticipates "What loud lament and dismal Miserere / Will mingle with their awful symphonies." "Miserere" ("Have mercy") calls to mind Gregorian chants of European Catholic tradition, while "symphonies" represent that Continent's classical and romantic music. Choral music and its echoes move the imagery closer to the United States in the 1840s, though most imagery throughout this poem relates sounds to violence throughout the world—sounds the poet condemns for overpowering "Nature's sweet and kindly voices." His hope, in this distinctly pacifist poem, is for a peaceful future when sounds of discord yield to "holy melodies of love."

Stanzas 9 and 10 pick up on Sumner's critique of distorted priorities that favor military spending over investment in social development. Were half the resources spent on manufacturing and storing weapons invested to "redeem the human mind from error, / There were no need of arsenals or forts." By imagining citizens who valued contributions to the public good over fighting and nations that were honored for maintaining peace rather than making war, Longfellow envisaged a better

future for humanity and a world more consonant with Christ's saving mission.

Longfellow's use of poetry's musical resources reinforces this poem's theme and dominant image pattern. Variants in iambic pentameter rhythm lend emphasis to opening words in several lines, while the additional unstressed half-foot that typically ends the first and third lines of each stanza contributes to the poem's quieting effect as force yields to peace. Even the prolonged vowel tones and multisyllabic words Longfellow favored in phrases like "The diapason of the cannonade" reinforced the tone of measured hopefulness appropriate to a poem envisaging conversion of weapons into books and musical instruments.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Analyze patterns of imagery in this poem by identifying and discussing images of harsh or frightening sounds. How do those relate to images you find of melodic sound? From what parts of the world and what times in history did Longfellow take his examples of sounds?
2. How does Longfellow's poem compare with Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in its tone, imagery, and assumptions about religious justifications for war?
3. Does Longfellow's simile likening guns to an organ serve as effectively today as it did in the 1840s? If so, how would you adapt his imagery to fit modern weapons? If not, what other figure of speech might you suggest for armaments used in recent wars?

"The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" (1852)

As it did for many Longfellow poems, inspiration for this one arose from his travels—in this case, the surprising connection he found between memories of European cities and observations on his visit to the old Jewish burying ground at Newport, Rhode Island, during a summer 1852 vacation. Like the *Touro Synagogue* in Newport, that cemetery had been dedicated in the 18th century for use by the

coastal city's Sephardic Jewish population. Finding this little-known offshoot of European ghettos in a New England town very similar to his native Portland, Longfellow focused this poem on historical continuities and transitions and developed his thoughts through a pattern of imagistic, thematic, and tonal contrasts.

The first contrast matches a sense of the foreign against expectations of the familiar: "How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves, / Close by the street of this fair seaport town." The opening stanza contrasts the stasis of this graveyard with the activity of Newport and the tidal rhythms of the Atlantic Ocean over which these wanderers sailed in their earthly exodus, which recalled that led by Moses even as it anticipated "the long, mysterious Exodus of Death." There are contrasts also between European and Anglo-American cultures, between Judaism and Christianity, and between various levels of the past and the present. Biblical names resonate throughout the poem, reminding readers of a shared Judeo-Christian past that has been differently understood by followers of two great religions of the Book. These Hebrew immigrants, as Longfellow imagines them, encountered endless exile while fleeing Spanish persecution. Although drawn to a bustling city in the most tolerant of the New England colonies just when the American Revolution established a country dedicated to belief in human equality, they seem a people without a future. The community Longfellow depicts must be reconstructed from imagination, as he observes no ongoing life of Jewish worship. Only some kindly "hand unseen" maintains these graves and suggests that the alien dead experience some slight measure of acceptance in their American haven.

Equally important are tonal contrasts between pathos and peace, despair and respect. The reader feels Longfellow's anger against intolerance as well as his gratitude for whatever peace these strangers may have found on earth or in heaven. The "certainty of faith" in immortality he attributes to these Hebrew dead, however, seems more reflective of Christian than Jewish belief. Longfellow holds

out no hope of Jewish acculturation or advancement in this poem, which consigns these children of Abraham to the graveyard of "dead nations." He represents the migrants as haunted by the past, reading history backward in light of God's covenant with their people in biblical times just as readers of Western alphabets experience the reading of Hebrew (read from right to left) as "backward."

Despite the poem's gloomy tone and conclusion, Longfellow treats these buried exiles with characteristic dignity and compassion. Recurring themes of his poems were human brotherhood and commitment to tolerance—sometimes with regard to European religious persecutions and at other times with respect to New England Puritan oppression of Quakers or English-American Protestant displacement of French-speaking Catholics. Not uncommonly, he chose Jewish lore for his poems as in *Judas Maccabæus*, one of his dramatic tragedies, or *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, in which the Spanish Jew recounts "The Legend of Rabbi Ben Levi." Sometimes, even in one of the tales narrated by the Spanish Jew, he also developed story material from the Islamic world. Overall, Longfellow's poems up to "The Bells of San Blas"—written on his deathbed—reflect expectations that history will move away from divisiveness toward unity, away from violence toward peace, and away from any one religion as a dominant force.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Point out and discuss Longfellow's use of Old Testament biblical allusions in this poem, paying particular attention to his reference to wandering Jews as "these Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind" (l. 32). Is there anything surprising about his use of this particular reference? If so, what? What do these allusions add to the piece as a whole?
2. How does Longfellow's treatment of Jews as a people consigned to the past relate to treatments of Native Americans in his poems and in fiction from the 19th century? Works you might want to consider are James Fenimore Cooper's novels such as *The Pioneers* and/or *The Last of the*

Mohicans, William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Prairies," or Lydia Sigourney's poem "Indian Names." Cite examples to justify your response.

"Paul Revere's Ride" (1861)

This classic of American patriotic narrative verse first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), a collection of story poems loosely connected in the style of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Longfellow imagined a group of travelers entertaining each other with stories at an old inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, just outside Concord. The landlord tells this tale, after which a student, a Sicilian, a Spanish Jew, a theologian, a poet, and a Norwegian musician all take turns. Although many of their stories originated in Europe, "Paul Revere's Ride" develops an incident from American history at the start of the revolution. Longfellow took poetic liberties with events of April 18 and 19, 1775, omitting William Dawes and Samuel Prescott, who also rode to "spread the alarm" about advancing British troops. He focused intently on one man, Paul Revere, a silversmith and member of the Sons of Liberty, as his representative heroic citizen.

After the landlord's invitation to the reader in the opening stanza, the poem divides into two main narrative sections: the first characterized by watchful waiting for the signal from the belfry of the Old North Church and the second dominated by urgent motion of horse and man. Quietness is associated chiefly with Revere's friend, who watches the enemy's movement from the church window until he discerns their strategy and displays two lanterns to signal their plan for a naval approach. Imagery in this portion of the poem focuses first on the stillness of the colonial city and its graveyard and then on Revere's restless motions as he prepares to vault into the saddle and begin his famous ride "through every Middlesex village and farm." Once Revere springs into action, Longfellow allows no further luxury of description but hurries the reader from town to

town as Revere awakens farmers to rally at Concord. Urgent motion and intensity of purpose engage the poet's attention rather than the full story. "You know the rest," Longfellow's landlord tells his listeners; there is no need to tell about Revere's being captured that night or details of battles. This patriot lives in the reader's imagination as perpetually in motion.

Time figures prominently in this story on several levels. First, there is the landlord's perspective on history—the interval between the events of the revolution and memories of Longfellow's contemporaries. Then there is the psychological disparity in sense of time between the friend's savoring of the last moments of peace and Revere's eagerness to jump into action. More obviously, his progress in the night ride is marked by village clocks counting off the hours between midnight and two in Medford, Lexington, and Concord. Dark imagery dominates the night scene, with the glint of the two lanterns and the spark struck out by Revere's horse breaking the gloom as those hooves "kindled the land into flame."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although "Paul Revere's Ride" concerns the American Revolution, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* appeared during the Civil War at a particularly discouraging time for Union supporters. How might circumstances of the time have influenced readers' responses to this poem and to its concluding lines?
2. Longfellow began this poem with the command "Listen," and he gave us much to attend to in the sound patterns of this poem. Read the poem aloud several times to hear the effect of metric emphasis and variation. Can you identify a prevailing beat? How well do the sounds convey the situation? Consider alliteration and repeated words and phrases in your response.
3. Another famous poem dealing with this same historical occasion is Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn." Compare Emerson's lyric with Longfellow's narrative poem as different ways of honoring citizens defending freedom.

“Killed at the Ford” (1867)

Longfellow’s love of America showed itself in his choices of historical subjects for many of his major poems and in his detailed representations of landscapes from the West and South as well as his native Northeast. Before the Civil War his allegorical “The Building of the Ship” (1849) celebrated national union. Fanny Kemble, one of that period’s great actresses, regularly performed sections of that poem in theatrical readings, moving audiences to tears with the concluding stanza that began,

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

Later President Abraham Lincoln is reported to have wept upon hearing these lines and remarked, “It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that.” Yet Longfellow held back during the war years from taking upon himself the public role of poetic chronicler that could have been his because of his literary prominence. Never a champion of war, Longfellow had little interest in chronicling battles and was absorbed and depressed for personal reasons after his wife’s tragic death. His oldest son, Charles, volunteered for the Union Army, however, and was wounded in military service. “Killed at the Ford” is concerned with bereavement caused by war.

The speaker in this poem is not Longfellow but a soldier mourning a friend from his unit. He tells the story of the youth’s last mission, his being shot from sudden ambush, and failed attempts to save him. There is no particular heroism in this narrative—simply the quick annihilation of a life that held great promise. The opening stanza, with its elegiac tone, bewails the loss of this beautiful, brave man who was evidently born for leadership: “The heart of honor, the tongue of truth.” The second shows him cheerful in the midst of danger. Clearly the nation as well as the military unit have suffered great loss. In the last stanza, Longfellow

shifts focus from the area of fighting to the home front and a “vision” of the fatal bullet’s trajectory beyond the young soldier’s breast into the heart of his lover and leaves us grieving for her as well. A characteristic detail in a Longfellow poem is that the young man was humming a song in the midst of danger that seems to have been a ballad about another brave fighter from some earlier war. Sadly the “two red roses he had on his cap” and “another he bore at the point of his sword” foreshadow physical evidence of his own death when his friend observes, “Two white roses upon his cheeks, / And one just over his heart, blood-red!”

For Discussion or Writing

1. What might Longfellow have been implying when he drew a connection between roses in a ballad about youthful courage and this man’s fatal wounds? Was he making a contrast between fighting and poetry?
2. Compare “Killed at the Ford” with one of Walt Whitman’s or HERMAN MELVILLE’s poems about Civil War soldiers.
3. How effectively does this poem about personal and public loss, about the courage and mutual loyalty of soldiers, and about the effects of war speak for Americans of our time as we try to express our feelings about deaths of men and women in military service?

“Nature” (1878)

As did many other English and American poets, Longfellow often challenged himself to work within the formal limitations of the sonnet. He composed sonnets on his personal griefs in “Mezzo Cammin” and “The Cross of Snow”; sonnets on great poetic forebears, “Chaucer,” “Shakespeare,” “Milton,” and “Keats”; and sonnets relating to his translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* along with others on various themes such as this treatment of “Nature.” The form required him to develop his poem in 14 lines of iambic pentameter divided by both logic and rhyme into predictable units of

- Ward. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Gale, Robert L. *A Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Gartner, Matthew. "Becoming Longfellow: Work, Manhood, and Poetry." *American Literature* 72, no. 1 (March 2000): 59–86.
- Gioia, Dana. "Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism." In *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini, 64–96. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Irmscher, Christoph. *Longfellow Redux*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *The Poetical Works of Longfellow*. Introduction by George Monteiro. Riverside Edition. 1893. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.
- Maine Historical Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.hwlongfellow.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Thompson, Lawrance. *Young Longfellow (1807–1843)*. New York: Octagon Books, 1969.
- Wagenknecht, Edward. *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: His Poetry and Prose*. New York: Ungar, 1986.
- Williams, Cecil B. *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- Jane Donahue Eberwein



HERMAN MELVILLE (1819–1891)

To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.

(*Moby-Dick*)

Herman Melville's reputation as a writer has fluctuated wildly. Although his first literary efforts won him instant popularity and widespread acclaim, this early success soon proved short-lived. The more unconventional his later writings became, the more his public standing declined, so that in the final decades of his life his works were generally unread and he himself was largely forgotten. He died in relative obscurity, and it was not until the 1920s that his critical fortunes revived. Almost overnight his huge but neglected masterwork, *Moby-Dick*, was widely recognized as one of the greatest novels ever composed, while *Billy Budd*, the much shorter tale on which he was working when he died, was proclaimed as another classic. In the decades since then, Melville's stature has continually grown, so that today he is considered one of the finest writers the United States has ever produced.

Born on August 1, 1819, in New York City, Herman was the third child (the second son) of Allan Melvill (who spelled his name without a final *e*) and his wife, Maria Gansevoort. Eventually the family consisted of four sons and four daughters, and life at first was comfortable. Maria, the mother, was a pious woman from a respectable family; her father had been a hero during the Revolutionary War. Allan, meanwhile, was himself of distinguished lineage and had established a successful business, importing fine French merchandise. Even in the weeks immediately after Herman's birth,

however, Allan had begun to complain to relatives that business was stagnant, and although the family moved repeatedly during these years from one pleasant residence to another, Herman's father incurred increasing debt and had begun to borrow extensively from his relatives. Herman, meanwhile, began attending school at age five and, by age nine, had begun to distinguish himself both in public speaking and in mathematics; he was even selected as a leader and instructor of other students (Allen 21). By 1830, however, Allan Melvill was bankrupt, and so the family relocated to Albany, New York, home of Maria's family. There Allan took a job as a clerk in a fur store, while young Herman continued to do well in school. However, his life and the lives of his mother and siblings were forever disrupted by the untimely death of Allan Melvill on January 28, 1832, after a bout of pneumonia.

Fortunately Herman's older brother, Gansevoort (who added a final *e* to the family name), was now established in the fur business, and Herman, at age 13, also began working as a clerk in a bank his ancestors had helped found and operate. For the time being, the family's fortunes were stable, and Herman, during these early teenage years, worked not only in the bank but also, during the summer, on a relative's Massachusetts farm, as well as in his brother's fur store at the end of the schoolday at the Albany Classical School. At that school he showed a talent for writing, an interest in reading,

and a gift for debating, and, with his whole family, he was exposed to Calvinist doctrine through their membership in the local Reformed Dutch Church (Allen 29). Calamity struck the Melvilles again, however, in 1837, when Gansevoort's business went bankrupt and Gansevoort himself suffered a lengthy nervous breakdown. By this time the family had relocated to the small town of Lansingburgh, near Albany; meanwhile, Herman tried to supplement the family income by teaching school near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where his uncle Thomas lived. Frustrated by this brief experience as an educator, he returned to Lansingburgh to study surveying, with the intention of working as an engineer on the Erie Canal, although eventually nothing came of this plan. In the meantime, he had begun publishing short articles in the local newspaper. By this time, too, he had also begun to think of going to sea, inspired by the stories of a cousin who had recently returned from a lengthy whaling expedition. On June 3, 1839, he joined the crew of a packet ship called the *St. Lawrence*, which was soon bound for Liverpool, England, where it arrived on July 3. Although dismayed by the grimy, depressing poverty of Liverpool, Melville had now developed his first real taste for life as a sailor.

When he eventually returned to Lansingburgh in fall 1839, Melville found his mother's financial condition more desperate than ever. Her home was being threatened with foreclosure, and she had been forced to begin selling some of her furniture. After another failed venture as a teacher, Herman, accompanied by a friend, set out in mid-1840 for Illinois, where his uncle Thomas had moved. While there he traveled by steamboat on the Mississippi River (an experience later reflected in his novel *The Confidence-Man*), but he soon gave up hope of establishing himself in the Midwest, returning in late fall 1840 to New York City, where he now decided to return to sea once more. He headed for New Bedford, Massachusetts, the center of the American whaling industry, and signed on with the *Acushnet*, a new vessel, whose crew list described him as follows: "Herman Melville: birthplace, New York; age, 21; height, 5 feet 9 1/2 inches; complex-

ion, dark; hair, brown" (Allen 48). The ship set sail on January 3, 1841; it headed for the South Atlantic, in search of whales, then made the dangerous passage around the southern tip of South America, eventually reaching the vicinity of the Galápagos Islands before then sailing to the Marquesas. By this point the ship had already succeeded in capturing and processing a number of whales for their oil, and by this point, too, Melville had already heard stories of a famous and deadly white whale called *Mocha Dick* or *Moby Dick* (Allen 49). Life aboard ship was sometimes exciting but also often tedious, hot, strict, and literally unappetizing, and so, not long after the *Acushnet* reached the Marquesas on June 23, 1842, Melville and a young friend and crewmate named Richard Tobias Greene decided to desert. In early July they managed to escape five miles into the interior of the island where their ship was anchored, and for several weeks an injured Melville lived with the Typee people while Greene sought help. His experiences with these people later formed the basis for his first (and extremely successful) novel, called *Typee*, which embellished some facts but was effectively written.

Soon after leaving the Typee, Melville was back at sea, having joined on August 9, 1842, the crew of an Australian ship named the *Lucy Ann*, also in pursuit of whales. Before long, he and more than a dozen other sailors rebelled against an unpopular first mate while the ship was anchored off the coast of Tahiti; Melville and the others were subsequently arrested and confined on shore. When the *Lucy Ann* set sail again in mid-October, he and his fellow rebels were set free by their indulgent Tahitian jailor. Accompanied by a former fellow crewman, Melville wandered various Tahitian islands for several weeks (an experience that provided the basis for his later novel *Omoo*) before he eventually signed on with a Nantucket whaler, the *Charles and Henry*, on November 4, 1842. The ship arrived in Hawaii on April 27, 1843, and Melville was officially discharged from its service on May 4. While in Hawaii he worked at a number of jobs (including setting pins in a bowling alley), but on August 17 he joined the crew of a U.S. Navy ship

called the *United States*, where he witnessed severe discipline, including vicious floggings. For almost a year the ship sailed the Pacific, visiting various ports, before it eventually rounded the tip of South America and returned to the United States, arriving in Boston harbor on October 3, 1844. After being discharged, Melville quickly headed for Lansingburgh, where his family, fascinated by his tales of life at sea, encouraged him to prepare them for publication. By spring 1845 he had finished his first long narrative, based loosely on his desertion in the Marquesas. A New York publisher, while recognizing that it was extremely well written, rejected it because it seemed too improbable to be accepted as a true story; a British publisher initially had the same worries but eventually printed the work, as did a different American publisher. Thus Melville's first book (called *Typee* in its American edition, with a much longer title in Britain) appeared in February 1846.

Typee was generally well received by the general public and professional critics alike, although some people objected to its satire of Christian missionaries, and others found it hard to accept as a reliable account of true events. Such skepticism was partly quieted when Richard Greene, Melville's fellow deserter, was interviewed and testified to the book's basic veracity. In any case, Melville's career as a successful professional writer was now well launched, and his standing as a popular writer was confirmed with the publication, in spring 1847, of *Omoo*, based essentially on his wanderings in Tahiti. This book earned him even more money than *Typee* had and, although he was unsuccessful in seeking a full-time government job in Washington, D.C., that year, he nevertheless felt sufficiently secure financially to marry, on August 4, Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of the chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court and a longtime friend of Melville's own sisters. The young couple set up residence in a home in New York City also occupied by one of Melville's brothers and his wife, by four of Melville's unmarried sisters, by Melville's mother, and, occasionally, by another brother. During these early years of his marriage Melville contributed articles to a local magazine and developed friendships with writers,

editors, and publishers. Meanwhile, he read voraciously and had begun working on a new book, *Mardi*, also set in the South Seas but dramatically different in tone, style, and intent from his first two books. Allegorical, satirical, dark, and highly imaginative, the book, which appeared in spring 1849, disappointed the readers and critics who expected tales of lively adventure from its author's pen. Melville (who was now a father as well as a husband) quickly produced a new book, *Redburn*, which was designed to sell. Based on his own first sea voyage to England, it appeared in fall 1849 and was soon followed by another narrative (*White-Jacket*) calculated to appeal to the same readers who had admired *Typee* and *Omoo*. This latest book, which was based on Melville's service in the U.S. Navy, appeared early in 1850. Melville himself had little respect for either *Redburn* or *White-Jacket*; he considered writing them a job to earn cash rather than a serious literary undertaking.

It was during summer 1850 that Melville, while vacationing in Massachusetts, met the noted author NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, whose dark thoughtfulness made a powerful impression on his new young friend. Melville now began reading Hawthorne's works with enthusiasm; he admired what he saw as Hawthorne's unflinching determination to pursue truth in his writings, even if that truth proved tragic and disturbing. This encounter with Hawthorne could not have occurred at a more propitious time, for Melville had now begun work on a new novel—a book designed to deal with the subject of whaling. As the book evolved and eventually became the masterpiece now known as *Moby-Dick*, it grew to enormous proportions and developed into a work unlike anything Melville himself (or anyone else, for that matter) had ever written before. Into this massive, mighty work, Melville poured all the depths of his mind and soul; it became (in style, scope, subject, and ambition) a kind of prose epic, full of drama and adventure but also full of poetry and profound thought. Melville must have realized as he was finishing it that it would never be a “popular” book in the way that most of his earlier works had been, and he was right. After it appeared in fall 1851, it received mixed reviews: Some critics recog-

nized its power, but many others complained about its length, its style(s), and its highly unconventional design. Thus the book that is now considered Melville's masterwork became, in his own day, the beginning of the end of his popular success.

A different kind of person (or Melville himself just a few years earlier) might have tried to recover from the relative failure of *Moby-Dick* by producing an appealing potboiler or two. Instead, Melville wrote *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (published in the second half of 1852)—an odd, strange novel, with a perfectly appropriate subtitle, that involves murder, possible incest, and multiple suicides. This book was an even greater failure than *Moby-Dick*, and Melville's wife now began to worry about the mental health of her increasingly depressed and exhausted husband. By 1853 he was the father of three children, but his future as a professional author was decidedly uncertain, and efforts to obtain other employment had been unsuccessful. When a fire at his publisher's warehouse in December 1853 destroyed most of the remaining copies of his books (books that were no longer selling well, in any case), Melville had even further reason to despair. Fortunately he was able to earn some income between 1853 and 1856 by publishing more than a dozen stories or sketches in magazines. Some of these (including "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno") were republished in book form in 1856 as *The Piazza Tales*, and in the previous year Melville had also published a new novel, *Israel Potter*. However, although both "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno" are now considered among Melville's finest works, none of these publications did much to restore his popularity with his contemporaries, and readers of his own day were likewise unimpressed by *The Confidence-Man*, a cynical, satirical novel set on a Mississippi steamboat and published in spring 1857. In the next three years Melville also failed as a speaker on the lecture circuit, and in 1860 his literary fortunes had sunk so low that he could not secure a publisher for a collection of poems he had written. Another attempt to secure a government job in 1861 was unsuccessful, and in 1862 Melville was badly hurt when he was thrown from a wagon. By this time, of course,

the United States was also embroiled in the Civil War, which nearly destroyed the nation. Gloom had thus settled over Melville's personal life as well as over the life of the country as a whole.

Melville responded to the war by writing a series of poems that were eventually published, in 1866, as *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, but the major piece of good fortune in his life at this time occurred later that year, when he finally secured steady employment as a customs inspector at the port of New York. Melville held this position for the next two decades; it gave him a regular income, but his career as a prominent, published author was now essentially over. For a time in 1867 it seemed as if his wife might leave him, and in fall that year the couple's eldest son shot and killed himself (whether the death was deliberate or accidental remains unclear). Another son died early in 1886 (not long after Melville's retirement from his customs post), and the literary offspring Melville produced during these final decades were essentially stillborn: *Clarel*, a long poem, was published in 1876 thanks to the financial support of a friendly uncle, while his late poetic works *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891) were privately printed in editions of only 25 copies each. When Melville died on September 28, 1891, his passing was largely unnoticed outside his immediate family, and it was not until the "Melville revival" of the 1920s that *Billy Budd*, one of his last and one of his greatest works of prose, was discovered among his manuscripts and published to wide acclaim. Finally, more than 30 years after his death, Melville had at last begun to achieve widespread public recognition as one of the most thoughtful, most talented, and most provocative authors his nation had yet produced.

"Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850)

In this review (originally published in two parts) of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* (a collection of short stories), Melville, posing as a Virginian visiting New England, extols Hawthorne's works in ways that reflect Melville's own literary ambitions. He praises Hawthorne for his

commitment to truth telling, even (and especially) if that effort involves exploring the darker aspects of human experience. In addition, by praising Hawthorne as a specifically *American* writer who is worthy of comparison with Shakespeare and with other great authors of the past, Melville calls for national pride in the accomplishments and potential of American literature.

Melville's essay is important in the first place as one of the first great appreciations of Hawthorne's writings. Indeed, Hawthorne's wife considered it the first published essay ever to convey accurately the true scope of her husband's achievement. However, the essay is also important for two other reasons: First, it announces many of Melville's own deepest aspirations and values as a writer; and, second, it was composed during a time when Melville, having met and been influenced by Hawthorne, was revising *Moby-Dick*. Thus the essay is significant in large part as a series of reflections, by Melville himself, on what he was trying to achieve in his own greatest novel. Melville praises Hawthorne, for instance, for his "contemplative humor," a "humor so spiritually gentle" that it might almost be called "the very religion of mirth" (*Tales* 49). These comments are important, for they suggest a good deal about the humor that pervades *Moby-Dick*—a humor that helps make that book so emotionally complex. Equally revealing is Melville's praise of Hawthorne for his "depth of tenderness" and his "boundless sympathy with all forms of being"—a sympathy that amounts to an "omnipresent love" (*Tales* 50). Clearly these comments are relevant to *Moby-Dick*, especially to the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg and to the loveless, egotistic monomania of Captain Ahab. Most famous, however, is Melville's assertion that balancing and deepening Hawthorne's humor and sympathy is a darker perspective—a perspective that Melville describes as being "shrouded in a blackness, ten times black" (*Tales* 51), and a blackness that enhances, through contrast, the brighter aspects of Hawthorne's work. Hawthorne, in other words, was willing to face up to the fact of evil in the world; there is in his work (according to Melville) "a touch of Puritan gloom," for "this great

power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinist sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free" (*Tales* 51). In these words we sense Melville's own fascination with human evil and corruption—a fascination reflected in his depiction of such memorable characters as Ahab and Fedallah in *Moby-Dick* or John Claggart in *Billy Budd*. Melville admires Hawthorne for some of the same reasons that he admires Shakespeare: He appreciates them for being willing to confront the ugly and terrifying aspects of reality, for being willing to tell unpleasant truths. Such traits, he says, are "the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. . . . For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth, —even though it be covertly, and by snatches" (*Tales* 53). Obviously Melville aspired to be this kind of truth teller, especially in *Moby-Dick*, and his essay on Hawthorne is essentially his own literary manifesto, his personal declaration of his deepest purposes as an author.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Use Melville's essay as a guide for interpreting some of Hawthorne's short stories, such as "The Birth-mark" or "Young Goodman Brown." How do Melville's ideas about theme, character, tone, and purpose seem to apply to these works? At one point Melville says that although "it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me," it is nevertheless possible that such darkness "is too largely developed in him. Perhaps he does not give us a ray of his light for every shade of his dark" (*Tales* 52). Is this comment relevant at all to the two stories just mentioned?

2. How are such Shakespearean characters as Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago relevant to our understanding of Melville's fiction, especially *Moby-Dick*? How does Ahab (for instance) resemble Lear? How does Fedallah resemble Iago? Does any character in *Moby-Dick* resemble Hamlet? Do any themes from *Hamlet* and *King Lear* seem relevant to *Moby-Dick*?

***Moby-Dick* (1851)**

A young man who calls himself Ishmael, bored with and depressed by life on land, decides to join the crew of a whaling ship, where he is quickly befriended by a kindly Polynesian pagan named Queequeg. Soon, however, Ishmael also encounters the grim, maniacal, but imposing Captain Ahab—an obsessive yet eloquent man who is determined to pursue and kill a famous white whale named Moby Dick, whom Ahab considers the embodiment of evil and whom he blames for crippling him by biting off his leg in an earlier encounter. Eventually, the maddened captain succeeds in tracking down and attacking the giant whale, but his obsession results in death and destruction for himself, his ship, and his entire crew—all except Ishmael, who survives to tell the tale.

Melville begins this novel—his greatest work and one of the triumphs of world literature—by focusing not on Ahab or the whale but on Ishmael and Queequeg, two of the most appealing fictional characters ever created. Most readers reading *Moby-Dick* for the first time, and knowing only that the book has a reputation as a dark and tragic epic, will be surprised by the wit, humor, and droll comedy of the opening chapters. Melville had a sure comic touch, and it is nowhere more in evidence than in the beginning of this book. Ishmael memorably reports, for instance, that he tends to go to sea when he finds himself feeling depressed or bitter: “whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet,” or whenever he finds that “it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the

street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball” (3). In other words, rather than committing violence against others or killing himself, he sails the world's oceans, knowing that “meditation and water are wedded forever” (4).

Humor of this sort proliferates in the opening chapters, but it (as does everything else in the novel) serves multiple purposes. Thus, the comedy of the book's opening helps intensify the tragedy that will eventually ensue. The self-deprecating, self-mocking humor of Ishmael helps emphasize, by contrast, the brooding darkness of Ahab when we meet him later. The early references to coffins and funerals foreshadow the deaths that eventually overtake everyone except (ironically) Ishmael himself. Meanwhile, Ishmael's humor cannot disguise (in fact, it highlights) his thoughtfulness, his wisdom, and his breadth and depth of character. From the start he seems an intelligent, perceptive, humble man—a person who is capable of appreciating the world and of laughing at himself, and thus a man who is much better balanced than the monomaniacal Ahab. As Ishmael himself later puts it with his typically understated wisdom, “A good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more's the pity. So, if any one man, in his own proper person, afford stuff for a good joke to anybody, let him not be backward, but let him cheerfully allow himself to be spent in that way. And the man that has anything laughable about him, be sure there is more in that man than perhaps you think for” (29). Surely these last words apply to Ishmael himself. He instantly seems an attractive character; we like him and want to see what happens to him, and thus Melville immediately makes us want to read further.

One of the most memorable events for Ishmael is, of course, his early encounter with Queequeg, the tattooed Polynesian harpooner (allegedly a head-hunting cannibal) with whom Ishmael is forced to share a bed in a cheap and seedy inn. When Ishmael first enters the inn (while looking for inexpensive lodging), he immediately spots an old, grimy “oil-painting so thoroughly be-smoked,

and every way defaced, that in the unequal cross-lights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could in any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose" (12). Obviously this painting, which dimly depicts a huge whale attacking a ship in stormy seas, symbolizes Melville's own novel—a book that, as with the painting, will yield up its secrets only in response to "diligent study" and "systematic visits" and "careful inquiry." Melville, in short, is not simply writing a straightforward and exciting adventure story (although he did produce a work of real excitement); he is crafting a book deliberately designed to suggest mystery and provoke deep and prolonged thought. He tried to create in this book (as in the painting the book describes) "a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity . . . that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath to yourself to find out what that marvellous [*sic*] painting meant" (12–13). The adjectives here are significant: Melville works his wonders by creating complexities, by crafting ambiguities, by dealing in shadows and shades rather than preaching any simple black-or-white message. His novel is so rich precisely because it is so complex. As the dim yet compelling painting does, the book both provokes and rewards close attention and "diligent study."

Ishmael's next memorable encounter is not with a literal painting but with a painted man. As an exhausted but apprehensive Ishmael tries to sleep on a mattress he thinks must be "stuffed with corn-cobs or broken crockery" (20), into his darkened room enters Queequeg, the fearsome roommate he has been awaiting. Queequeg (who has been out late, trying to sell the last of his supply of shrunken heads) is a dark, giant, quiet man who is tattooed from head to foot. As Ishmael watches this "head-peddling purple rascal" in silent fascination (21), the newcomer begins worshipping a tiny black statue—"a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the color of a three days' old Congo baby" (22). In passages such as this (and they are legion), Melville reveals his wonderful gift for exact and memorable description, while this whole scene shows his talent for vivid contrasts (as

in the juxtaposition of the calm cannibal and the nervous paleskin) and his thematic interest in cross-cultural encounters. When the surprised Queequeg discovers an unexpected stranger in his bed, comic mayhem erupts, but after the innkeeper reassures him that Ishmael has paid for a spot in the bed, the unlikely couple settle in for a comfortable snooze. As Ishmael comments, with splendid panache and superb alliteration, "For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely-looking cannibal. What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (24). Ishmael's open-minded tolerance is one key to his character: He is a man with few hardened prejudices, and thus he is capable (as the inflexible Ahab is not) to learn from experience, of overcoming his pride, and of accepting others—and life itself—on their own terms. Ishmael is the butt of Melville's (and the innkeeper's) humor in this opening section of the book, but he is already revealing a capacity for wisdom, friendship, and thoughtfulness that will stand him in good stead throughout the novel.

Few moments in American literature are as laugh-out-loud funny as the first encounter of Ishmael and Queequeg, although the scene the next morning (when Ishmael awakens to discover Queequeg's huge arm draped around him) is not far behind. Melville plays the moment for all its comic overtones, but he also begins to suggest the real bond of affection that has now begun to develop between this unlikely pair. Later, as their friendship grows, Ishmael reports how Queequeg "clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be. In a countryman, this sudden flame of friendship would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted; but in this simple savage those old rules would not apply" (51). As the novel develops, we will see that Queequeg is a man of his word: He is willing to put himself at risk not only for Ishmael but also for others, and indeed it is thanks to Queequeg that Ishmael survives the

whaling voyage. Ishmael may have begun the novel feeling depressed, aggressive, and isolated, but by chapter 10 he has acquired “A Bosom Friend” (49), and Melville has begun to develop one of the novel’s major themes: the contrast between the democratic fellowship of equal human beings (despite any superficial differences of cultural background or religious belief) and the lonely, proud, tyrannical isolation and domination personified by Ahab. The affectionate bond between Ishmael and Queequeg symbolizes Melville’s best hopes for the wider human community, but the dark destructiveness of Ahab symbolizes his recognition of the dangers of egotism run rampant. By skillfully sketching the appealing bond between Ishmael and his new friend, Melville makes us realize the limitations of the kind of smugly superior “civilization” that can condemn a man like Queequeg as a “simple savage.” In addition, by making us feel (and share) the affection between Ishmael and Queequeg, Melville enhances our sense of the final tragedy of the novel, when an ugly obsession not only destroys Ahab but obliterates this beautiful friendship. Ahab’s death is tragic, but it is Queequeg’s death that opens the most painful wound.

Melville’s talent for creating memorable characters is on display again with the brief but vivid appearance of Father Mapple, an old whale hunter who now serves as preacher at the Whaleman’s Chapel, where both Ishmael and Queequeg (with many others) spend their last Sunday before heading out to sea. Mapple is a comically eccentric character: He not only climbs a rope ladder to enter a towering pulpit that looks like the prow of a ship (and then pulls the ladder up after him!), but also orders his scattered flock to congregate together by proclaiming, “Starboard gangway, there! side away to larboard—larboard gangway to starboard! Midships, midships!” (41). The incongruity of such language used by a preacher makes us laugh, but it also exemplifies one of the charms of Melville’s novel: We are entering a world with its own rules, its own customs, its own lingo—a world with all the fascination of something that is foreign to everyday existence. At the same time, this world is obviously relevant to our own experience. Melville

thus manages to put us in exotic surroundings, populated with intriguingly unfamiliar characters, and yet also deal with some of the most timeless issues of human life. Mapple’s sermon is a case in point: He addresses his congregants as “shipmates” (42), and he tells the biblical story of Jonah and the whale as if it had happened yesterday to a man of his own acquaintance (as when the ancient sailors of the scriptural text call each other “Jack,” “Joe,” and “Harry” [43]). Melville thus achieves the kind of colloquial freshness and unexpected twists that help make his book so lively, yet the sermon clearly deals with larger philosophical issues relevant to human life in general and to the later plot of the novel. This is clear, for instance, when Mapple proclaims that “if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists” (43). Obviously these words resonate with the plot of *Moby-Dick*: Ahab will prove himself a man incapable of obeying God by disobeying himself. Similarly relevant are Mapple’s later words when he declares, “Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self” (48). On the one hand, Ahab is himself an example of this sort of “inexorable self,” and to some degree he earns our admiration for his determination and courage; on the other hand, he is also one of the “proud gods and commodores of this earth” of whom good men (such as Ishmael) must be wary. Father Mapple’s sermon is just one of the many ways by which Melville now begins to complicate and darken the initially comic tone of his book, introducing grim hints of foreboding and already implying the moral and spiritual dimensions of his developing tale.

Forebodings now begin to proliferate. Ishmael and Queequeg sign on as crew members of a ship called the *Pequod*, which (Ishmael tells us) “was the name of a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes” (69). Likewise, the *Pequod* itself will eventually be extinguished. Ahab, the captain of the ship, is nowhere to be seen—a fact that already lends him an air of mystery and that makes his eventual first appearance

a matter of suspense. He is described by one of the ship's owners in suitably ambiguous terms: He is "sort of sick, and yet he don't look so. In fact, he ain't sick; but no, he isn't well either. . . . He's a queer man, Captain Ahab—so some think—but a good one. . . . He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (78–79). As the contradictions and complexities, the assertions and qualifications, pile up, Melville stokes our interest (as well as Ishmael's) in the mysterious captain, and that interest builds to an even higher pitch when Ishmael and Queequeg are later confronted by a shabby, disfigured stranger, who, calling himself Elijah (the name of a biblical prophet), enigmatically warns them about Captain Ahab's dark past and about their own ominous futures if they choose to sail on the *Pequod*. Thanks to Elijah's "ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk," Ishmael now begins to feel "all kinds of vague wonderments and half-apprehensions" (93), but for the moment he dismisses them, and he and Queequeg board the ship, prepared to sail. They later discover that Ahab (appropriately enough) has already gone aboard in the darkness of night and is now holed up in his cabin, unseen by most of the crew. The ship sets sail (ironically) on a gloomy Christmas Day—a date normally associated with joy and renewal, but darkened here by Ishmael's description of the *Pequod* as it "blindly plunge[s] like fate into the lone Atlantic" (105). From now until the very end of the book, Ishmael and his shipmates have left dry land behind. They are now the inhabitants of a small, isolated world (populated, symbolically, by sailors from across the globe) in which a still-invisible and increasingly mysterious Ahab reigns supreme. Only after the ship is well under way does Ahab appear and announce his obsessive purpose: to pursue and destroy the huge white whale that once ripped off his leg, thereby maiming his spirit as well as his body and leaving him thirsty for revenge. Ultimately his quest leads to his own death and to the deaths of most of his crew.

Ahab is clearly one of the most complicated and intriguing figures in world literature, and much of the commentary on *Moby-Dick* struggles to explain or understand him. He has been

compared to Satan (especially the Satan depicted in Milton's *Paradise Lost*) but also viewed as an embodiment of the Freudian id (uncontrolled by reason or conscience). He has been interpreted as a symbol of humans' protest against fate and limitations but also as a representative of existential suffering and despair. He has been interpreted as a symbol of American imperialism, of capitalist greed, and of the demagogues who either sought fanatically to destroy slavery or who, by compromising with slave owners, symbolically sold their souls to the devil to pursue their narrow political ambitions. On the other hand, Ahab has also been regarded more sympathetically: as a reflection of the universal fear and hatred of all that seems malign and inscrutable in the universe; as a man whose honesty, courage, and suffering make him a genuinely tragic figure; and as a kind of scapegoat who plays out a common human fantasy of slaying pain and banishing deprivation. More commonly, however, Ahab is seen in darker terms: as a totalitarian dictator—eloquent, obsessed, but driven by destructive impulses (a Hitler before his time); as a blasphemous defier of God and of a godly natural order; as the personification of a death wish that destroys others in the process of destroying itself; as an epitome of malevolent egotism; and as a person so driven by hate that he eventually loses all capacity to love. Like all the great tragic figures of Western literature (including Prometheus, Faust, Macbeth, Lear, and Manfred), Ahab seems at once appalling and appealing, repulsive and inspiring, a simultaneous focus of fear and of pity. He is one of the great dark heroes of our culture, and his obsession with the whale becomes an archetypal symbol of any fixation that leads to self-destruction. Ahab sees (or seeks) meaning in the universe, even if that meaning is black and grim. He is a dark quester, handicapped by pride, intent on slaying not a dragon but a whale.

That whale, Moby Dick, has been the subject of almost as much critical speculation as Ahab himself. Some readers have seen the whale as a symbol of the brute facts of existence, with which all humans must come to terms. Others have interpreted the whale as an embodiment of our deepest

psychological mysteries, especially the mystery of evil. To some the whale seems both divine and demonic; to others the beast symbolizes fate or predestination; while to others still the whale is an example of the morally indifferent forces of nature. Critics who take a psychological or biographical approach to the novel have interpreted the whale as a symbol of debilitating parental power—imposing limits (almost to a castrating degree) but also inspiring an obsessive response. The whale can be seen as a kind of unloving God, provoking both awe and rebellion, or it can be seen as precisely the kind of nature myth that suited the 19th century: an image of nature as raw and untamed, beautiful but intimidating, and in need (at least in Ahab's mind) of being conquered and subdued. Whales in *Moby-Dick* are at the center of a great industrial enterprise typical of the increasingly commercial era in which Melville lived, but the white whale is the special object of the kind of mythic hunt that is as old as mankind itself—a hunt that symbolizes man's search for meaning in a puzzling universe.

Although Ishmael, the narrator, has often been overshadowed in critical commentary by Ahab and the whale, he is himself an immensely appealing and intriguing figure. Some analysts have seen him as Melville's alter ego, in both his darker and his lighter aspects (such as his tendency to depression and his capacity for humor). Many see him as the most complex character in the book—a person who, because of his openness, curiosity, intelligence, thoughtfulness, appreciation of irony, and distrust of absolutes, is able to learn, develop, and finally survive to share his complicated wisdom with his readers. Ishmael, it is often said, is the most balanced character in the book; unlike Ahab, he remains unblinkered and not only retains but enjoys a capacity for friendship and love. Unlike Ahab, as well, he can tolerate ambiguities; he feels no need to impose a single, obsessive interpretation on the universe; he is a genial skeptic, and during the course of the *Pequod's* voyage he leaves his opening depression behind him and learns to appreciate the value of life and love. The story of the book is in one sense the story of Ishmael's mental and moral growth, and as he learns we

learn with him. He is our representative among the crew, and although (in one sense) his survival is preordained (for if there were no survivor, there would be no one to tell the tale), in another sense his rescue at the end can be seen either as an example of providence, or as a chance accident, or as a tribute to the qualities of character that make Ishmael so fine a representative of all that is best in human nature. Without intending or seeking to be so, Ishmael is the anti-Ahab, the man of sanity and moderation in a world controlled by a madman.

Moby-Dick is compelling, however, not simply because of its characters or themes or plot but especially because of its style. The range of Melville's language is immense: Sometimes it is colloquial and slangy, while it often attains a dignity and eloquence that reflect its author's intimate familiarity with the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, and whole shelves of other Western classics. Melville is interested in hard facts (as in his detailed descriptions of the art and science of whaling), but his vocabulary is also often mythic and inspired. He can be funny, but he can also be profound; he can craft long, detailed descriptions but can also create vivid dialogue and write literal drama. Often the novel turns into a play, complete with stage directions, soliloquies, and asides; at other times the narrative suspense and excitement are overwhelming. Melville is sometimes jocular, sometimes meditative; he can spin out long, ever-flowing, ever-growing sentences, or he can be brutally abrupt. Like all great writers, he is, first and foremost, a master of the language, and as his hero Shakespeare did, he coined scores of words, revived many others, played subtle variations on common terms, and seemed (in this book at least) never at a loss for something to say or an inventive way to say it. *Moby-Dick* impresses us, if for no other reason, as an example of the splendid resources of the English language in the hands of a master writer. No one since Shakespeare had put the language through its paces better than Melville in *Moby-Dick*; no one was more alive than he was to the sound and rhythm and potential poetry of English prose.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Melville was strongly influenced by Shakespeare. Compare and contrast *Moby-Dick* with a great Shakespearean tragedy, such as *King Lear*. How are the two works similar in themes, plot, characterization, and style? What kinds of sympathy do we feel for Lear and Ahab? Is either man a more tragic figure than the other?
2. Melville was a great admirer of Hawthorne. How does Ahab in *Moby-Dick* resemble Aylmer in "The Birth-mark," particularly in terms of motivation, character, behavior, and ultimate fate? How do the two characters differ? In what way is each destructive? Is there any way in which each is admirable?
3. *Moby-Dick* has often been called an epic in prose. Examine some common definitions of the epic genre and read about some famous examples of epic poems (such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*) and then discuss the ways in which Melville's novel exhibits epic elements. How does Ahab, for instance, resemble or differ from Homer's Odysseus or Milton's Satan?
4. Discuss how *Moby-Dick* deals with the ideals of democracy. In what respects is the novel specifically American, and in what respects is it relevant to people throughout the world?
5. How is *Moby-Dick* both similar to and different from MARK TWAIN's (Samuel Langhorne Clemens's) *Huckleberry Finn*, especially in its use of colloquial language, its use of humor, its use of the motif of a journey, and its presentation of relations among people of different cultures and races?

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853)

A good-natured elderly Wall Street lawyer describes the eccentric people he employed in his office, including a man nicknamed Turkey, a scrivener (or copyist) who worked most effectively before noon; a man nicknamed Nippers, a scrivener who worked most effectively after noon; and Ginger Nut, a young boy who ran office errands. Deciding

that he needed more assistance, the lawyer hired a quiet, withdrawn scrivener named Bartleby, who, although he performed his copying effectively, soon exasperated everyone in the office by repeatedly saying that he would "prefer not" to help with most of the normal work. Bartleby's quiet noncompliance with most of the typical expectations of life eventually led new owners of the office to have him evicted and sent as a vagrant to prison, where he refused to eat and eventually died, much to the befuddlement and pain of his former employer.

This story—perhaps Melville's best and certainly his most famous work of short fiction—is by turns funny, mystifying, and pathetic. It is full of memorable characters, and although (by design) nothing much "happens" in terms of plot, the story creates real suspense as we wonder what will eventually happen to a nonconformist as genially but firmly uncompromising as Bartleby. Much response to the story centers around efforts to determine why Bartleby behaves as he does, what his behavior may signify or symbolize, and how to assess the motives and response of the puzzled lawyer. As so often in Melville's fiction, the story raises far more questions than it answers; its value lies less in any specific points it makes than in the thought and debate it provokes. Lea Newman, in her overview of responses to the tale, provides an exceptionally fine guide to the reactions the work has elicited.

Many readers have seen in the character of Bartleby a reflection of Melville himself. According to this interpretation, Bartleby symbolizes Melville's own increasing distance, withdrawal, and alienation from the standard expectations of the society of his time. Both men are writers who prefer not to conform to the dictates of others, even if their nonconformance leads to their ostracism, financial peril, and eventual demise. Just as Bartleby is an efficient copyist at first, so (according to this line of thought) Melville was initially a popular writer who knew how to satisfy the tastes of a broad audience; and just as Bartleby increasingly retreats into a life of isolated contemplation, so did Melville exasperate his original readers by turning his back on the common literary fashions of his day. He refused any longer to be a mere "copyist" or

imitator, thereby rejecting not only the standards of his era but also the ethos of commercial publishing, in which writing was seen first and foremost as a means to make money and earn a living. Bartleby thus symbolizes (for these readers) a repudiation of basic American values, in which a person's worth is measured by his or her wealth and commitment to financial success. Just as Melville became increasingly distant from well-meaning friends and family who worried about his mental health as his career as a conventional author declined, so Bartleby provokes similar concern in the lawyer through a similar withdrawal and refusal to conform.

A broader interpretation of the story focuses less on its relation to Melville's personal predicament and more on its relation to the broader problems of American society as a whole. According to this view, Melville uses this story to satirize the emptiness, pointlessness, and soullessness of the money-making business ethic that increasingly controlled American life and culture. The fact that the story takes place on Wall Street, in the very center of the main U.S. financial district (and the center of the American stock market), is, for these readers, no accident, while the fact that Bartleby spends so much of his time staring at a blank brick wall symbolizes the stultifying, soul-destroying impact (at least on any truly thoughtful person) of a life devoted merely to commerce and profit. From this perspective, the lawyer embodies many of the worst aspects of the capitalist system, including a tendency to think of other people simply in terms of their financial value and commercial usefulness, as well as a smug, self-satisfied complacency that never questions the value of a shallow, comfortable, but ultimately empty existence. The lawyer tolerates the eccentricities of Turkey and Nippers because they are literally valuable to him: These men help enrich his coffers, and, unlike Bartleby, they never rebel or pose a serious challenge to his selfish and self-satisfied way of life. They are useful, compliant cogs in the enormous machine of capitalist enterprise, whereas Bartleby, by quietly repudiating the capitalist ethic, engages in a kind of sit-down strike that leaves the lawyer-narrator frustrated and nonplussed.

Some readers, however, see an admirable evolution in the lawyer's attitude toward and treatment of Bartleby. If at first the lawyer regards Bartleby as simply a useful employee, and if he subsequently becomes frustrated by Bartleby's noncompliance and lack of productivity, eventually (and especially by the end of the tale) he regards Bartleby as a kind of friend—someone about whom the lawyer truly cares in a genuinely selfless way. He repeatedly visits Bartleby in prison, tries to make sure he is fed there, and seems truly disconsolate when he learns that the scrivener has passed away. By the conclusion of the story the lawyer has begun to demonstrate some real compassion and charity, although his fellow feeling arises (perhaps) too late and cannot prevent Bartleby's death. In his other-worldly peace of mind and rejection of mundane standards, Bartleby has been interpreted by many critics as a kind of Christ figure, and they regard his eventual effect on the lawyer as transformational to some degree. Other readers, however, strongly question whether the lawyer has really learned anything of value by the end of the tale or whether he has fundamentally changed.

In addition to being compared to Christ, Bartleby has been linked to Buddhist withdrawal and to Hindu asceticism, and his death has been interpreted as a kind of achievement of Nirvana or nothingness (Newman 58). At the same time, his utter lack of conventional motivation has been read as a kind of self-destructive psychiatric condition, resembling schizophrenia, while his maddening treatment of the lawyer has been interpreted as a sort of passive-aggressive hostility. His plight has additionally been seen as foreshadowing the ideas of 20th-century existentialism (in which each person must choose his or her own response to a world that seems fundamentally absurd and without objective meaning). From this perspective, the story reflects Melville's own growing nihilism—the philosophy of nothingness in which existence may seem absurd and in which any purposeful action may therefore seem pointless. On the other hand, the story has been interpreted by some analysts as Melville's satire of the transcendentalism so popular during the 19th century and as mockery, in

particular, of HENRY DAVID THOREAU's ideals and conduct, especially his withdrawal from society and his belief in passive resistance.

The skill with which the story is written and constructed has often been praised. Here as in so many other works, Melville creates a narrator whose values and perceptions cannot always be trusted; the reader thus becomes actively involved in trying to determine the "true" meaning (if any) of the behavior described. Irony thus plays a major role in this tale, in many ways and on many levels. Meanwhile, the structure of the work has often been seen as consisting of three parts: a first section that describes the routine of the office before Bartleby's arrival, a second section that focuses on Bartleby's disruption of that routine, and a third section that reports the fate of Bartleby after the lawyer vacates his old premises, leaving Bartleby behind. The imagery and symbolism of walls (which imply confinement, isolation, limits, and the absence of natural outlets or alternatives to urban, commercial values) have been the subject of frequent comment, while one of the best insights into the effectiveness of the story was also one of the earliest, when Richard Henry Dana, Sr., writing soon after the tale was published, commented that the work "touches the nicer strings of our complicated nature, & finely blends the pathetic & ludicrous. . . . [Turkey and Nipper] relieve the picture, at the same time that they are skilfully and humorously set off against each other" (qtd. in Newman 66). Certainly the story is one of saddest but also one of the funniest Melville ever composed; it is Dickensian in its presentation of quirky characters; and the befuddlement Bartleby produces in his colleagues often provokes real laughter in Melville's readers. Full of clever dialogue, unexpected twists of plot, and growing suspense, the story reveals Melville near the top of his talent.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the use of repetition in the story. How does it affect the story's mood?
2. How is "Bartleby" similar, in characterization and point of view, to Melville's "Benito Cereno"? In particular, how does the lawyer in Bartleby

resemble Captain Delano in the latter work, and how is the lawyer's reaction to Bartleby similar to the reaction of Delano to Cereno?

"Benito Cereno" (1855)

Captain Amasa Delano and his U.S. ship the *Bachelor's Delight* encounter a strange Spanish vessel, the *San Dominick*, a slave ship that seems to be in distress and is populated by a mainly black crew. When Delano goes aboard to investigate and offer help, he hears a tale of sickness, death, and destructive bad weather from Benito Cereno, the obviously distraught captain of the Spanish vessel, who is always accompanied by Babo, a devoted slave who seems to attend faithfully to his captain's every need. Only when Delano is about to return to his own ship does a frantic Cereno jump into Delano's boat and reveal the truth: The *San Dominick* had experienced a slave mutiny led by the brutal Babo; most of the whites have been ruthlessly slaughtered; and Cereno has been tormented by Babo, who is himself killed as he tries to take vengeance on the terrified Spaniard.

This novella (which, like much of Melville's fiction, is based on a real historical incident) is typical of Melville's work in many ways, including such features as its focus on a central observer (Delano), whose limited perspective is part of the fascination of the tale; its ambiguous exploration of complex moral and social issues; and its concern with the way the same events can be described in different kinds of discourse (such as the third-person narrative of most of the work and the legal "testimony" of Cereno himself that consumes much of the end of the story). The novella is one of the most ironic works Melville ever composed, and it succeeds in creating an air of claustrophobic mystery and growing suspense while also generating real uncertainty about who (if anyone) deserves our sympathy in a tale that sometimes is seen as strongly opposed to slavery and sometimes is seen as reinforcing white racial prejudice. Babo, in particular, has been seen by some readers as a clever, resourceful, and even heroic figure, while others regard him as an

embodiment of dark evil—a sadist who tortures both minds and bodies. As have many of Melville's works, this one has inspired intense debate and perplexed thought.

"Benito Cereno" begins, significantly enough, by emphasizing the color gray: "Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. . . . The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters" (*Tales* 182). In a story so much concerned with the complicated relations between blacks and whites, and in a tale so morally complex and so ambiguous in its presentation of limited points of view, this opening stress on such a colorless color seems perfectly fitting, as does Melville's use of such similar descriptions as "shadows," "misgivings," "clouds," "baffling," "uncertainty," "fog," "decay," "masked," and "faded grandeur," which are all employed just within the first few pages of the work (*Tales* 183–185). Immediately he sets a tone of puzzlement, but the complexity of the atmosphere and setting contrasts with the simplicity of Delano, whose perspective on events is limited by his "singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man." Melville, typically, leaves it to each reader to decide whether, "in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception" (*Tales* 183). By the end of the tale (in fact, long before then), it will be clear to most readers that Delano's "good nature" and "benevolent heart" prevent him from perceiving very quickly the true character of the circumstances in which he finds himself.

In her superb overview of scholarship on "Benito Cereno," Lea Newman surveys the various ways in which Delano and his tale have been interpreted. Most of the controversy, she notes, has revolved around whether the story should be read primarily as "a metaphysical examination of evil" or mainly as "a sociological exploration of slavery," and then around whether the rebellious blacks should be

perceived favorably or unfavorably and therefore whether the tale should be seen as opposing or accepting the fact of slavery (130). Much of this controversy centers on the figure of Babo, who has been seen variously as a symbolic embodiment of the deepest impulses of human evil; as an almost bestial, baboonlike creature who is nevertheless capable of feline cunning; as a kind of satanic being who may, ironically, represent the darkest nature of all people; or as an implicit rebuke to any whites who naively considered blacks childlike beings—natural slaves who will passively accept their lot. Melville, according to some scholars, made the blacks in his story much less sympathetic and more vicious than they had appeared in his source, while he also made the Spanish sailors and their captain more appealing figures than they were in real life. By allegedly making such changes, he made the story (at least according to some analysts) more a philosophical meditation on evil than a political reflection on slavery (Newman 131–132).

Alternatively, many other critics have contended that Melville presents Babo in a favorable light—as an intelligent, courageous leader who does what it takes to free himself and his comrades from slavery; as a heroic liberator who is willing to die for his righteous cause; as an implied warning to Americans of the kind of leaders who would someday rise up and throw off the yokes of slavery in the United States if the country did not abolish slavery on its own; and as the first admirably assertive black militant in the history of American literature. According to these interpretations, Melville clearly shows his sympathies with the abolitionist cause. On the other hand, some critics have seen Babo as representing, for Melville, the primitive, potentially violent nature of blacks; or as reflecting Melville's tendency to use blacks merely as literary symbols rather than as fully complex human beings; or as symbolizing his worries that some whites might (like Cereno) be too lax and naive in dealing with blacks and thus be unprepared for the violence the slaves might someday attempt to unleash (Newman 132–135). Finally, some critics have seen in Melville's story a reflection of the ways in which slavery dehumanizes both the slaves and their masters. Thus the story reverses the

traditional roles of Babo and Cereno by making the first an abusive tormentor and the second a cowering, terrified victim (Newman 135–136).

Not all commentary, of course, has revolved around Babo. Delano, for instance, has been viewed as symbol of a naive and philosophically unsophisticated American culture, unprepared by background or temperament to recognize or confront real evil. Many readers consider him a fool, although a few critics admire his good nature, innocence, and open-mindedness. Cereno, the Spanish captain, has likewise been interpreted in contradictory ways: Some analysts see him as a representative of Old World corruption and effete decadence and impotence (symbolized by his empty scabbard); for some readers, Babo is Cereno's dark shadow, always at the captain's side because he symbolizes the darkest aspects of the Spaniard's own character and culture. Other readers, however, find Cereno a more sympathetic (or certainly pathetic) figure, whose crucial mistake was to treat his slaves with too much trust and insufficient supervision. Interestingly enough, the same kinds of controversy that have swirled around the central characters of the story have also been reflected in assessments of its quality as a work of art. Some readers have found it a labored, overelaborate, and ultimately tedious piece of writing, but most critics have hailed it as one of Melville's finest works, especially in the way it builds suspense and integrates all the various aspects of its artistry (Newman 137–145).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Track down the historical source on which Melville based this work and compare and contrast his piece of fiction with Delano's autobiographical report. How does the story differ from the source? Why did Melville make the changes he made, and what are some of the effects of those changes?
2. Compare and contrast Melville's tale with EDGAR ALLAN POE'S story "The Fall of the House of Usher," particularly in terms of setting, atmosphere, and outcome. How does Cereno resemble Usher? In what senses are both works "gothic"? How is suspense built and employed

in both tales? Does one work have greater moral impact than the other? Justify your answer.

3. How is Melville's story similar to Hawthorne's tale "Young Goodman Brown," especially in their emphasis on a confrontation with evil, in their atmosphere of mystery, and in their use of religious symbolism?

"The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855)

This work, which is one of several short pieces by Melville that are divided into contrasting halves, opens by first describing the leisurely, abundant banquet and pleasant conversation enjoyed by a group of prosperous middle-aged bachelors, most of whom are lawyers (or their friends) associated with the pleasant London environs of the ancient Inns of Court, the center of the English legal establishment. In the second half of the work, the same narrator who participated in the banquet describes his harsh, midwinter journey in America to a hellish paper factory staffed mainly by poor, unmarried women. Both his journey and the machines that dominate the factory are described in terms that suggest the mechanics of sexual reproduction—a fact that has led many readers to see this part of the work as a commentary on both the economic and sexual exploitation of the poor, anonymous females the story depicts.

As Lea Newman notes in her fine overview of commentary on this work, most reactions to the tale have tended to present it, variously, as a satire of the smug self-complacency of the comfortable middle-class bachelors, as an indictment of the horrors of industrial capitalism and the poverty it fosters and depends on, and/or as a grim reflection on the biological slavery to which women are confined because it is they who must bear children (297). The landscape surrounding the factory resembles, in both names and appearance, aspects of the female body, while the machinery inside the cavernous building—with its two vats full of pulpy white liquid and the hot, steamy mill that produces paper in exactly nine minutes—obviously reminds one of the

facts of sexual life, especially as they affect women. The attitude of the narrator toward the locales and events he describes has been differently interpreted; some analysts find the narrator insufficiently critical of either of the environments he depicts, while others find his views, especially toward the hellish living and working conditions of the young women, clearly satirical. Certainly Melville himself seems to satirize the inhuman, inhumane industrial existence described in the second half of the tale; it represents a common 19th-century nightmare (and an increasingly common reality during that period) of nature mechanized and distorted, of machines devoted to moneymaking destroying the finer possibilities of life. Whether or not Melville's satire is itself too mechanical and heavy-handed to be effective has been a subject of debate: Some readers have condemned the first half of the work as tedious and the second half as too obviously allegorical, but others have praised the tale for its symbolism, its final horror, and its use of effective contrasts.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work (especially its second half) with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, especially in terms of imagery, setting, characterization, tone, and theme. How is the journey taken by Melville's narrator similar to the one undertaken by the speaker of Dante's poem? How are their guides similar or different? How do the ultimate outcomes of their journeys resemble or contrast with one another?
2. How do the two pieces of Melville's work relate to one another? How (if at all) does each half of the work deepen the meaning of the other half? How does the first part seem ironic in view of the second part? How implicitly critical is the narrator of the life of the bachelors? Do the bachelors deserve any blame for the conditions of the maids?

"The Portent (1859)" (1866)

This work, the opening poem in Melville's collection of Civil War verse titled *Battle-Pieces*, describes the swaying body of John Brown, the famous

abolitionist, who was hanged in 1859 for taking part in an armed rebellion in Virginia—a rebellion designed to foment an uprising by blacks against their enslavement. The poem, which is printed in italics to set it off from the rest of the collection, suggests that Brown's conduct and execution were harbingers of the Civil War, which would begin a year later.

Embedded in the title of this poem is a pun on the etymology of the word *portent*, which derives from Latin words meaning "to stretch forth." Brown's body is stretched vertically by the hangman's rope, but the significance of his death also stretches forth in time, into the future, as a "portent" (a word implying something momentous, calamitous, or ominous) of the Civil War. The poem itself (see *Tales* 337) begins with the crucial verb "*Hangings*" (which can also be read here as a noun)—a word that is metrically emphasized because the accent falls on the first syllable (rather than, as is common in much English poetry, on the second). Melville immediately creates an air of mystery and of literal suspense; not until the sixth line do we discover explicitly that the poem is about John Brown. Until then we must guess the poem's subject, led on by the plain, simple diction, the vivid images, the musical alliteration and rhythm (as in "*Slowly swaying*" [l. 2]), and the symbolism of colors, as in the dark "*shadow*," symbolizing death (l. 3), which is juxtaposed with the pleasant "*green*," symbolizing life (l. 3), of the "*Shenandoah*" river and/or valley (l. 4), where Brown rebelled and was executed and that was later the site of victories and defeats by both sides in the Civil War. "*Shenandoah*" is an Indian word meaning "beautiful daughter of the stars"—a meaning appropriate in view of the natural beauty of the river but ironic in light of the bloody battles that would later take place there. The exclamation "*Shenandoah!*" (its multisyllabic length contrasting effectively with the poem's earlier emphasis mostly on monosyllabic words) can imply various meanings simultaneously, including sadness, irony, a warning of what is to come, and regret at the apparent inevitability of these grim events.

The "*cap*" or hood placed over Brown's head (l. 8) hides his "*anguish*" (l. 9)—a word derived from Latin roots appropriately suggesting tightness,

narrowness, and difficulty but also implying physical (and perhaps also mental) pain. Brown's personal "anguish," however, is as nothing compared to the national anguish his death forebodes. His is the face of the valley's (and country's) future—a fact suggested when Brown is called "Weird" (l. 13), from the Old English word "wyrd" (or "fate"), a term implying something unnatural, unearthly, uncanny, strange, or bizarre (as in the "weird sisters" or witches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*). The poem itself seems odd and strange, with its cryptic syntax, abrupt exclamations, and peculiar parenthetical interruptions, and it ends, fittingly enough, by emphasizing the ominous word "war" (l. 14), which is likened to a "meteor" (l. 14), traditionally an omen of an important event. Like a meteor (Melville seems to imply), war can descend unexpectedly and cause enormous destruction.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the presentation of Brown in this work with his appearance in WALT WHITMAN's poem "Year of Meteors [1859–60]." How do these depictions of Brown resemble (or differ from) one another in diction, form, rhythm, imagery, theme, and purpose?
2. Consider the ways in which John Brown's hanging might be compared and contrasted with the hanging of Billy Budd. How might Billy Budd's hanging also be considered portentous?
3. Identify features of the poem that might be interpreted as establishing John Brown as a Christlike martyr. How do you think the American public would have responded to this representation of John so soon after the conclusion of the Civil War?

"A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight" (1866)

This poem, included in Melville's collection of verse on the Civil War titled *Battle-Pieces*, describes the response of a utilitarian (a practical person concerned with what is materially useful rather than with what is lofty or beautiful) to the famous battle

on May 9, 1862, between the Confederate ironclad ship the *Merrimac* and its Union counterpart the *Monitor*. The speaker of the poem reflects on the rise of mechanized, industrialized warfare, which will replace the pomp and romance and glory once associated with older forms of battle.

Appropriately enough in a work concerned with an unromantic view of reality, the opening word of this poem is *Plain*—a word that correctly describes the basic intent, meaning, and phrasing of much of the ensuing text (l. 1). Yet the poem does not lack art: Melville's skill can be seen, for instance, in the fitting contrast between the word *ponderous* (with its heavy vowels) and the shorter, quicker, lighter word *nimble* (with its short *i* sound); or it can be seen in the way "War" (in line 3) is personified, in an archaic literary style that the rest of the poem proceeds to reject (so that by the end of the work "War" has become merely an abstract concept rather than a poetic personage); or it can be seen in the way the poem mocks, through the alliteration of "painted pomp" (l. 4), precisely the sort of ornate diction it disdains as out of date. The poem mainly rejects the typically heavy reliance on rhyme of most verse written in English before Melville's time; rhyme is "barbaric" (l. 6) in the sense of being old-fashioned, but even in rejecting rhyme the poem (paradoxically) commits it, rhyming *nimble* and *cymbal* and reminding us (through that second word) that rhyme involves two things coming together to produce a shared sound. Through clever devices such as this, Melville creates a poem less "plain" than we might have expected.

When the speaker hails a "victory without the gaud / Of glory" (ll. 7–8), the word *gaud* refers to an article of vulgar finery (from a Latin word meaning to be merry or rejoice), but perhaps there is also a pun on *God*, implying that the outcomes of modern mechanical battles do not depend on divine intervention so much as on technically superior equipment. War in a capitalistic, industrial system is now linked with "trades and artisans" (l. 12): Both its motives and its means are now increasingly revealed as rooted in economics; victory is now less the result of personal bravery than of superiority of "crank, /

Pivot, and screw, / And calculations of caloric” (ll. 17–18)—the latter phrase referring to the caloric engines invented by John Ericsson. The poem ends by prophesying—doubly and thus emphatically—that “War shall yet be” (ll. 25, 27): In other words, war will never end, but the means by which it was waged were changing fundamentally and forever in Melville’s day (as it always does), becoming ever more efficient, ever more impersonal, and ever more destructive. Warriors were now becoming “operatives” (l. 28—from the Latin word for work), and if there is a tinge of nostalgia in this poem for the days when war seemed less mechanical, more glorious and romantic, there is also a realistic recognition that those days are gone forever. “War-paint” (a phrase implying something superficial and external and thus subject to mutability, and a term not only associated in Melville’s day with the “primitive” battle paint worn by Indians but also used as slang for a ceremonial military costume) was more and more associated with a dead or dying past. The same was true of the wooden ships Melville knew so well and loved so much.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Randall Jarrell’s World War II poem “The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner.” How is the poem similar to Melville’s poem in diction, theme, and effect? In what ways do the works differ in tone, point of view, and final effect?
2. Explain why Melville chose to filter the events of the poem through a utilitarian perspective. How does this perspective influence the tone of the poem? What do you think Melville was trying to achieve in lines 20 and 21, where he describes a ringing that continues to sound around the world? Does his emphasis on a utilitarian perspective enhance or detract from the power of these lines?

***Billy Budd* (1924)**

Billy Budd is a young, strong, handsome, good-natured, and exceptionally innocent sailor who is forcibly (but willingly) taken from his service on

board a British merchant ship and compelled to serve on a British warship during the time of the Napoleonic wars. Although instantly popular with almost all the crew and officers on his new vessel, he soon arouses the envious hatred of the inexplicably malignant master-of-arms, John Claggart, who eventually accuses Billy, as both men stand before Captain Vere, of plotting a mutiny during this dangerous time of war. Stunned and speechless, Billy impulsively strikes Claggart in the forehead, killing him in one blow; Vere, now stunned himself, quickly organizes an impromptu court and convinces its reluctant officers that Billy must be executed immediately in order to preserve discipline on board the ship, even though all the officers (including Vere himself) believe that Billy never intended to kill Claggart. Billy accepts his fate, even blessing Vere as he is hanged; Vere is soon killed in battle and dies with Billy’s name on his lips; while Claggart is described in a newspaper account as an admirable man and Billy is venerated in poetry and legend by his fellow sailors.

This powerful work, although unfinished at Melville’s death, was eventually published in the 1920s and was instantly hailed as a masterpiece, second only to *Moby-Dick* itself as an example of its author’s genius. Early critics viewed the novel as Melville’s “testament of acceptance”—acceptance, that is, of the moral complexities of life, of the inevitable injustice of earthly existence, and perhaps also of a higher religious truth in which earthly injustice seems ultimately less important than spiritual redemption and other-worldly love. Vere, according to this view, is a kind of father figure who must sacrifice, on the altar of military duty, a boy he considers a sort of son—a boy he knows to be fundamentally innocent even though he has committed the capital crime of killing a superior officer. The fact that Billy goes to his death without complaint (indeed, the fact that he blesses Vere moments before he is hanged) has indicated to many readers that Vere is a sympathetic, even tragic, figure who does what he thinks is right and proper under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. According to this view, Vere suffers even more than Billy as a result of Billy’s death; reluctantly, painfully, but

with a sincere commitment to strict military discipline, Vere orders Billy's execution because there is no other choice.

That, at least, is how the story was widely read at first. Eventually, however, more and more analysts began to doubt this account and began to question both the supposed necessity of Billy's death and the supposed morality of Captain Vere. Increasingly, Vere was seen by many readers as an oppressive, manipulative, dishonest, and possibly even insane figure who was willing to sacrifice an essentially innocent man without giving him a fair or proper trial. Vere was now often condemned as the representative of an inhumane system, an abusive power structure that was indifferent to true justice and committed only to preserving its own authority. Or he was seen as a renegade authoritarian—someone who was willing to violate proper military procedure in the name of mere expediency and his own personal power. According to this interpretation, *Billy Budd* is a tissue of ironies, and, after finishing it, the careful reader will perceive Vere as in some ways an even greater villain (or psychopath) than Claggart. Vere corrupts the process of justice; he holds a sham trial that could easily have been postponed in order to allow for a more deliberative and judicially legitimate hearing; he overrides the objections of his junior officers, who realize that he is proceeding improperly. In short, Vere (according to this analysis) unconscionably denies Billy the right to a fair trial, killing the boy merely to make a quick example of his own tyrannical authority.

The interpretive debates provoked by *Billy Budd* have been some of the most intense, most persistent, and in some ways most maddening in the history of literary criticism. Strong arguments can be (and have been) made on both sides; much of the same evidence can be used to support either position; and although neither camp has shown much willingness to concede defeat, honest readers will have to admit that sometimes they must doubt their own initial interpretations. There seems no way of finally settling the issue; disagreement about the fundamental import of the book is likely to last as long as the book is read. Perhaps this deep-seated

ambiguity is the strongest possible testimony to the complexity of the work and to Melville's skill as a writer. According to this argument, Melville deliberately crafted a work designed to defeat simplistic interpretation—a work he knew could be read in contradictory ways and therefore a work that is as fascinatingly complicated as life itself. *Billy Budd*, in other words, shows Melville at the top of his form as a writer intent on puzzling readers and provoking thought rather than offering simplistic, one-sided views of the dilemmas he explores. Certainly much evidence in the book can be used to support this view. On the other hand (and from another perspective), the seemingly fundamental ambiguity of the work may be due less to Melville's conscious intent than to the nature of language itself. *Billy Budd*, in other words, may not be much different from almost any text, since all language is (by its very nature) open to competing (and often contradictory) interpretations. According to this *deconstructive* view, *Billy Budd* exemplifies the difficulty of arriving at any final, definitive interpretation of practically any piece of writing, especially a work of literature. Finally, another way of dealing with the puzzling difficulties of Melville's text is to argue that the text itself is unfinished and incomplete—that Melville never lived to impose a clear and consistent order on the work. Plenty of evidence survives to suggest that the novel was in a state of constant revision and that every time Melville tinkered with it, he made it more and more complex. From this perspective, the novel is open to such contrasting interpretations because Melville died before he could impose a final, coherent form on the book. If some parts seem to contradict other parts, that is because the novel is incomplete and (in that sense) fundamentally flawed. *Billy Budd* (or so this argument goes) might someday have become a polished masterpiece, but Melville did not live long enough to make it one. Little wonder, then, that the book fails to yield a persuasively consistent meaning.

Certainly the surviving text of *Billy Budd* is confusing. When Melville died, he left a box full of manuscript sheets full of handwriting that was sometimes illegible; moreover, the sheets were cov-

ered with revisions made at many different stages of composition. Early editors of the work often disagreed about such basic matters as how the book should begin (for example, with or without an apparent preface?), the name of the British warship, or even the very title of the book. Not until 1962 was a reasonably reliable scholarly text published, but even the publication of this version did nothing to settle fundamental disagreements about the “proper” interpretation of the work. It is tempting, then, to conclude that *Billy Budd* might make more consistent sense if Melville had simply lived long enough to complete it and perhaps even supervise its publication. Yet plenty of evidence survives in the text as it presently exists to suggest that much of the ambiguity of the book is deliberate and well crafted, and that Melville intentionally sculpted a novel designed to provoke thought, raise questions, create doubts, and stimulate reflection rather than provide easy answers. *Billy Budd* is the final product of a master of mysterious effects—an author who saw existence as incredibly complex and who carefully tried to convey that complexity in this final major work of a long and thoughtful life.

Typical of the richness of Melville’s writing in this book is Billy’s impulsive outburst as he is being transferred from the merchant ship the *Rights-of-Man* to Vere’s warship, the *Bellipotent*. The narrator notes that Billy first waves good-bye to his old shipmates and then exclaims, “And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*” (*Tales* 454). Billy intends no irony here, but Melville obviously does. Billy is indeed leaving many of his old rights behind him, but the ambiguity seems even richer when we realize that the irony of this particular moment need not support an ironic reading of the novel as a whole. In other words, while it is a fact that Billy’s rights will be severely curtailed on the warship, this fact need not imply that the novel raises any fundamental objection to military service or the larger cause the warship defends. The passage *can* be read as supporting a thoroughly ironic view of subsequent events, but it *need* not be interpreted in that fashion. In this respect, this one small incident is typical of the novel as a whole: Melville writes in such a way that the same events can be interpreted

in different ways by different readers. The narrator, commenting on Billy’s exclamation, notes that to “deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature” (*Tales* 454), but this is obviously not true of the narrator himself, who often deals in double meanings, insinuations, ambiguities, and deliberately ambivalent suggestions.

Examples abound. Thus, when an officer asks Billy to name his father, the sailor innocently responds, “God knows, sir” (*Tales* 456). In one respect this reply means simply that Billy himself has no idea who his father was; on a different level (of which Billy is probably not conscious), the reply suggests that if God exists, he does indeed know the identity of Billy’s father; on another level still, the phrase can also be taken to suggest that God himself may, in some sense, be Billy’s father—thus making the reply one of many moments in the novel when Billy seems to be associated, in character and fate, with Christ. Billy’s reply thus “works” on at least three different levels, and in that respect it is typical of much else in this book. Similarly, when Captain Vere is introduced, the narrator tells us that although Vere was, by blood, “allied to the higher nobility, his advancement [in the navy] had not been altogether owing to influences connected with that circumstance” (*Tales* 463). The equivocal phrasing here is one of Melville’s favorite devices: He gives with one hand while withholding with the other. Vere’s rise has been due partly to his own merit but partly also to family connections, but reliance on such connections would have been entirely typical of his time and thus may (or may not) fail to reflect poorly on his own character. This passage, and hundreds of others like it, can be read one way or another, and the fact that there are so many such passages in this book seems part of Melville’s very obvious and very skillful design. For every passage in the book that seems to reflect well on Vere, there is another than can be read ironically or satirically, and often the same passages can be read in fundamentally different ways.

This is especially true after the killing of Claggart and during (and after) Billy’s trial. The ship’s surgeon, for instance, begins to doubt the captain’s

sanity in the aftermath of Claggart's death, but the narrator will only ambiguously comment as follows: "Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon professionally and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford" (*Tales* 497). The narrator, in short, puts the ball into our court, not even promising that the narrative will afford sufficient light but only that it "may." At one moment Vere, in his concern with secrecy, is compared to an autocratic Russian czar ("Peter the Barbarian"; *Tales* 498); then in the next moment we are told that Vere would prefer to submit Billy's case to the judgment of his superiors; then in the very next moment we are told that he feels compelled by circumstances to act quickly in "allegiance to military duty" (*Tales* 498). In passages like this the book sometimes induces a kind of mental and moral vertigo; we can never be quite sure where the narrator stands, how we are meant to respond to Vere, or whether any clear and certain response is even intended. Vere's own officers sometimes doubt the wisdom of his conduct, but they never challenge him, either during the trial or after the isolated ship returns to the fleet. By the time of that return, of course, Vere himself has been killed, and so perhaps any questioning of his conduct by that point would have seemed ungracious or gratuitous. In any case, there are also passages in the book in which the narrator seems either to endorse Vere's decision or at least to comprehend (and sympathize with) his motives, especially given the dire military circumstances Vere faced. At one point, for instance, the narrator quotes an unnamed author (probably invented by Melville), who supposedly wrote as follows:

Forty years after a battle it is easy for a non-combatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to have to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it. Much so with respect to other emergencies involving considerations both practical and moral, and when it is imperative promptly to act. The greater the fog the more it imperils the steamer,

and speed is put on though at the hazard of running somebody down. Little ween the snug card players in the cabin of the responsibilities of the sleepless man on the bridge. (*Tales* 506)

Significantly, however, these are not the narrator's own words; they are offered, with typical Melvillean indirection, simply as the reflections of "a writer whom few know" (*Tales* 506), and we are left to draw our own conclusions about how much weight to give them or how to interpret their significance. There are (it is true) times when the narrative clearly seems tipped in Vere's favor—when the captain claims, and no one challenges him, that according to the Articles of War merely to strike a superior officer, let alone kill him, is "a capital crime" (*Tales* 504), in which case Billy's punishment by death seems inevitable. But there are other places where the narrative raises, quotes, or implies doubts about the wisdom of Vere's behavior. Indeed, Vere himself seems not entirely at peace with his decisions, but he claims to have no simple alternative. In the end, whether or not Vere is credible and sympathetic is a matter "every one must determine for himself" (*Tales* 497). What seems far less debatable is the skill with which Melville crafted a novel that, once read, produces an impact so powerful that it remains a permanent part of each reader's literary and moral memory.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *Billy Budd* with Shakespeare's *Othello*. How does Claggart resemble Iago? How does Billy resemble Desdemona? To what extent (if any) is Vere comparable to Othello? Are there any points in Melville's novel in which he seems to echo the language of Shakespeare's play?
2. What resemblances or differences exist between Melville's novel and HENRY JAMES's short work *The Turn of the Screw*? Discuss the works in terms of tone, characterization, and themes, and especially in terms of the interpretive dilemmas they present. How are both works similarly puzzling?

9. Although Melville is remembered mainly as a novelist and short story writer, he also composed numerous poems. How do some of the poems seem typically “Melvillean” in theme, style, purpose, and tone? Which poems do you consider most successful, and why? Why is Melville not better known or better regarded as a poet? What aspects of his poetry often make his poems seem less successful than his fiction?
10. Although Melville is often considered an exceptionally profound and “serious” author, humor is a major element in many of his works. Choose a specific text by Melville and discuss the ways humor contributes to its effectiveness and success. How does Melville use humor to add complexity and depth even to his darkest works?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Allen, Gay Wilson. *Melville and His World*. New York: Viking, 1971.
- Bickman, Martin, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Melville's Moby-Dick*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1985.
- Bryant, John, ed. *A Companion to Melville Studies*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.
- et al., eds. *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on Moby-Dick*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2006.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *Melville: His World and Work*. New York: Knopf, 2005.
- Giles, Gunn, ed. *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Heflin, Wilson. *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.
- Herman Melville. Available online. URL: <http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/melvillebio.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Kelley, Wyn. *A Companion to Herman Melville*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006.
- Leyda, Jay. *Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951.
- Life and Works of Herman Melville. Available online. URL: <http://www.melville.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick or The White Whale*. Everyman's Library. New York: Knopf, 1991.
- . *Tales, Poems, and Other Writings*. Ed. John Bryant. New York: Modern Library, 2001.
- Newman, Lea Bertani Vozar. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986.
- Parker, Hershel, and Harrison Hayford, eds. *Moby-Dick as Doubloon: Essays and Extracts (1851-1970)*. New York: Norton, 1970.
- Williams, Stanley T. “Melville.” In *Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism*, edited by Floyd Stovall, 207–270. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Wright, Nathalia. “Herman Melville.” In *Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism*. Rev. ed., edited by James Woodress, 173–224. New York: Norton, 1971.

Robert C. Evans



SARAH MORGAN BRYAN PIATT

(1836–1919)

My mother says I must not pass / Too near that glass; / She is afraid that I will see / A little
witch that looks like me.

("The Witch in the Glass")

Prior to 1993, when Sarah Piatt's "Giving Back the Flower" appeared in the Library of America's *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, 82 years had passed since her last publication. Today many college anthologies contain substantial numbers of her poems and there are now two selected editions of her poetry, one edited by Larry Michaels (1999), the other a scholarly edition with a lengthy biocritical introduction by Paula Bennett (2001). One Piatt poem, "The Witch in the Glass," was been adopted as a popular romance novel, *Loving Jesse* by Joyce Myrus (2004). For a long-lost writer's fortunes to change so rapidly strongly suggests that, whatever the causes for Piatt's erasure, lack of intrinsic merit was not among them. Here Piatt will be treated as what she was: a major poet whose scope and diversity of concerns helped lay the foundations for American women's poetry.

Born in 1836 on her maternal grandmother's plantation outside Lexington, Kentucky, Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt descended from her state's bluest blood. Her father, Talbot Nelson Bryan, was a descendant of Morgan Bryan, who migrated west with Daniel Boone in the late 1700s. The Boones and Bryans intermarried over a number of generations, making Boone Sarah's kinsman by marriage several times over. Piatt's mother, who was also from a well-established Kentucky family (the Spiers), died when she was eight, the first of

many deaths whose traumatic impact reverberates through Sarah's writing.

According to southern custom, upon a mother's death, her children were parceled out among relatives. Sarah and her younger sister, Ellen, went to their maternal grandmother's Lexington plantation. After the grandmother's death, Piatt lived briefly with her father and stepmother on the latter's plantation in Versailles. She was then settled permanently with her father's sister in New Castle. Through all these changes her one constant was an elderly slave woman whom Piatt had inherited from her mother and who accompanied the poet north in 1861, caring for Sarah's children—even as she once had cared for Sarah and her mother—until her death, in or around 1870. Piatt celebrates and mourns this relationship with its double legacy of love and guilt in a number of poems but most notably in "A Child's Party."

While in New Castle, Piatt completed her formal education, graduating from Henry Female Seminary in 1855 with a solid background in the classics and a more-than-passing acquaintance with the British romantics, above all Byron, whom she, as did many young women of her day, idolized. At about this time, she started publishing poems in local newspapers, drawing the attention of George Prentice, editor of the *Louisville Journal* and an enthusiastic sponsor of a number of southern women poets. Prentice introduced her to her future

husband, John James Piatt, a young Ohioan, also from a large pioneering family and a poet of sorts. After their marriage in 1861, the young couple moved to Washington, D.C., where, J. J., as John James signed himself, served as a minor functionary in the Treasury Department.

As a result of frequent absenteeism, J. J. lost his position at the Treasury in 1867, the first of what would become a lifetime string of such losses. Unable to find another government job, he returned with his family to Ohio, where they settled in North Bend, a rural suburb west of Cincinnati. J. J. worked for a local newspaper and he and Sarah built a house high on the cliffs overlooking the Ohio River. Other than 12 years abroad (1882–94), spent mostly in Cork, Ireland, where J. J. served as U.S. consul, it was in this house that Sarah raised her children: Marian, her first child and only daughter, born in 1862, followed by six sons, Victor in 1864, Arthur Donn in 1867, Frederick in 1869, then Guy, Louis, and Cecil, in 1871, 1875, and 1878, respectively. It was also here that she buried two, an unnamed infant, who died in 1873, a few days after birth (the subject of “Her Blindness in Grief”), and Victor, who was killed in a freak Fourth of July accident less than a year later. Ten years after Victor’s death, a third child, Louis, died in a drowning accident in Cork harbor, Ireland. In poems that placed Sarah at the brink of blasphemy, if not beyond, she recorded the traumatic impact of these deaths on her religious faith, a faith already overtaxed by her mother’s loss when she was eight.

But whereas, through all these tribulations, Sarah continued to grow as a poet, J. J. did not fare so well. Wanting a literary career at any cost, he tried to support his family by garnering patronage positions that kept him, and sometimes the entire family, shuttling between Washington, D.C., and North Bend, where he would return whenever the government failed him. Ephemeral as these positions were, he paid a huge price for them in self-respect. As resentful as he was dependent, J. J. ultimately alienated all those to whom he applied for help, even, in the end, his oldest friends, E. C. Stedman and WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS. Nor did

the literary career for which he sacrificed so much flourish. Whatever creative urge J. J. had, he had expended it fully by 1872. Thereafter, his books were primarily reprints of old poems, with some new poems thrown in. Far less admired than his wife, he tried to maintain an appearance of parity between them, publishing his books with hers, sending his poems out with hers, begging reviews for himself as well as for her. None of these ploys worked, and by 1902, Howells reported to a mutual friend, John Hay, that J. J. was “quite pathetically poor” (*Selected Letters* 5:20). In their final years together, he and Sarah were dependent on the generosity of others to survive.

Still there was more to Sarah’s marriage than simply J. J.’s failures. If he was not half the poet she was, he was also, by that token, unable to silence her with his own genius. On the contrary, aware that editors favored her (she, for example, had 30 poems to his nine in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the most prestigious literary magazine of the day), he did all he could to advance her career. Similarly, hard as moving with so many children must have been on Sarah, the places to which they moved gave her access to major cultural centers here and abroad: New York, Boston, Dublin, London, Edinburgh, and Paris. Because of J. J.’s assiduous promotion of her career, moreover, she came to be known by some of the most important figures in late 19th-century Anglo-American letters: not just Howells and Stedman, but James Russell Lowell, HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, and W. B. Yeats, who published an enthusiastic review of *An Enchanted Castle* (1893), Sarah’s most substantial Irish volume.

While none of these advantages erased the family debt, much less eased Sarah’s other woes, they did enrich her art. Indeed, because of the length of her career (1854–1911) and the unusually sophisticated turn of her mind, which absorbed the entirety of her culture in ways few 19th-century American writers did, Piatt was able to refract in her verse the principal social, national, and artistic concerns of more than 50 years of Euro-American culture and women’s history. In 1914 a carriage accident left J. J. severely disabled and he died in 1917 without

ever regaining his health. After his death increasing ill-health forced Sarah to leave North Bend for the last time. In 1919 she died of old age in the New Jersey home of her youngest son, Cecil, who was one of only two children (the other was Guy) known to survive her.

If lack of merit was not responsible for Piatt's erasure in the early 20th century, excessive merit may have been. In strong poets like EMILY DICKINSON and Piatt, merit lies in their capacity to put a personal stamp or "signature" on their writing that sets it apart from that of others in their day. The signature component of Dickinson's poetry is her writing style. The unmatched brilliance of her figurative language and her compressed syntax allowed her to say more in 14 words than most poets could say in 14 stanzas, a point her "mentor," Thomas Wentworth Higginson, made when comparing one of his own poems to one of hers.

Piatt's signature lies in the extraordinary subtlety of her irony and in her use of multiple voices (and sometimes multiple time frames) to fracture and destabilize her poems' point of view. And just as the signature components of Dickinson's poetry make it difficult but compelling reading, so the distinguishing characteristics of Piatt's poetry also make hers difficult—and compelling—to read.

Despite Piatt's enormous popularity in her own century, it may be that we are far better positioned to appreciate her strengths today than were readers in her own day. Twentieth-century poets like T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost have accustomed us to difficult poetic strategies such as irony and fractured points of view, which demand intellectual effort of the reader. Most 19th-century readers, on the other hand, associated lyric poetry with feeling and song, and they did not know what to make of Piatt's sometimes demanding work. As reviews of her poetry make clear, what readers admired in her was not her originality, which irritated one reviewer to the point that he complained that she asked "more intelligence than is possessed by one reader in a hundred" (*Scribner's Monthly* 635). Rather, they praised what they viewed as her unusually skillful handling of her period's dominant style, the genteel, and it was these reviewers' misreading of Piatt

as a genteel poet that led to her erasure in the next century.

According to F. Brett Cox, the genteel style is best understood as a mix of "aesthetic idealism" and "cultural conservatism" (212). The *idealist* point of view is concerned with perfection; Aesthetically idealist art focuses on representing perfect beauty. Culturally conservative art upholds traditional artistic styles and subjects as well as the social status quo. Piatt was not the only writer of her period who found the genteel too restrictive. WALT WHITMAN, HERMAN MELVILLE, and Emily Dickinson did also. Nonetheless, possibly because the renowned 19th-century litterateur W. D. Howells was so vociferous in his praise for Piatt as a genteel stylist, this is how she was read both in her period and later. Piatt, Max Herzberg wrote dismissively in 1962, produced "pleasing, conventional volumes," which were well-suited to the domestic, middle-class audiences of her day (877), but of no interest to 20th-century readers. How could even perspicacious readers such as Howells misunderstand Piatt?

Just as Piatt's poetry is complicated, so is the answer to this question. As poems like "Army of Occupation" and "The Witch in the Glass" attest, Piatt, when she chose, could seem just the kind of poet that Howells said she was: a writer "as delicate and purely poetic as ever was given to the world" (*Atlantic* 104). What Howells and others did not see, however, was that when she used the genteel, she did so with a difference. Sometimes gently as in "Witch," sometimes playfully as in "The Fancy Ball," and sometimes savagely, as in "The Funeral of a Doll," she introduced resisting voices into her poems, destabilizing genteel values and turning the style itself into a vehicle by which to explore the artistic and moral limitations of her society. That is, she ironized that very mix of "aesthetic idealism" and "cultural conservatism" that Cox describes and that defined 19th-century American bourgeois culture—the culture of solid middle-class Victorianism—in life as well as art.

That even 19th-century readers as sharp as Howells missed what Piatt was doing is not really surprising. Of all literary devices, irony is the

slipperiest, the hardest to detect. Insofar as irony deals in misreading or, better, in misrecognition, it must be slippery. That is what irony is about: the gap between what we expect and what is, what we think we hear and what is actually said, what we want and what we get. In "An After-Poem," Piatt puts it succinctly: "You will read or you will not read" (114). You will understand her irony or you will not. If you do not, then she will indeed seem the poet that Howells and Herzberg describe. If you do, however, then a very different, far more complicated and compelling, but also much darker poet emerges, one whose anger at social injustice and whose highly personal religious angst are dominant motifs.

Yet it would be a great mistake to see Piatt only in terms of her most bitter or angry poems, such as "Mock Diamonds," "The Funeral of a Doll," and "Her Blindness in Grief." As poems such as "The Palace-Burner," "The First Party," and "The Witch in the Glass" suggest, she was also and always a loving poet who filtered much of her thinking through the minds of children, whom she deeply cherished and for whom she dreamed a more hopeful world than the one into which she herself had been born. Her greatest sorrow may well have been that she could not ensure this better world for them. As we confront our own fears for the future and hold out our own hopes, Piatt speaks directly to us, rewriting our nation's history not just from a woman's but from a mother's point of view. One of our few major poets of motherhood, as well as our only poet to write primarily as a mother, Piatt had what the Irish call the gift of tears, which was the gift of love as well.

"The Fancy Ball" (1866)

New readers of Piatt would do well to begin with "The Fancy Ball." Formal techniques and themes that become more complex in later poems appear here in accessible terms. The poem builds on the genre of the dramatic monologue explored by the English poet Robert Browning, in which a poem

is spoken entirely in the voice of a specific character whose words, as in the case of Browning's famous dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess," reveal the speaker's psychological depths. Piatt revises Browning's innovation by staging many of her poems as dramatic dialogues, that is, scenes in which two or more speakers converse, and the reader partially overhears their conversation. Since Piatt often implies but does not state who the speakers are and what their relation is to one another, one of the challenges built into her poems is the need to figure out what is going on from the evidence available. In later poems Piatt pushed the dramatic dialogue to its complex limits—for example, staging a fight between lovers in "A Pique at Parting," in which we hear only the woman's words and have to infer what the man is saying in response. "The Fancy Ball" presents a simpler instance of the dramatic dialogue central to Piatt's overall career.

As we begin, the speaker, a woman, contemplates what to wear to a costume party or "fancy ball." Although we are not told explicitly who the second speaker is, the fact that he suggests costumes focusing on the woman's dreamy ethereal beauty makes it likely that he is her husband or lover. She speaks in stanza 1; in stanza 2, with the advent of quotation marks, we hear his voice. Readers must attend carefully to quotation marks in Piatt's poems, as they are often the only evidence we have that there has been a switch in speakers. The female voice reemerges midway through stanza 4. By this point her companion has encouraged her to go dressed as "Morning," to which she immediately objects, then "Night," "Spring," and "Snow." At this last, she blurts out a definitive "No."

Clearly his ideas of what she is or, better perhaps, of how she should present herself, are at odds with hers. As "Snow," she says, she would "melt" in that "warm, close room," her "own life's burning" smothered. The word *burning* indicates passion and intense feeling while "Snow" is beautiful but silent and cold. When the male speaker makes his next suggestion—"a Bird of Paradise"—she

loses all patience and tells him to hush. If to be noticed in the ball's "shining world of art" means she has to pretend to be what she is not, she prefers to go as herself. That, she observes, will really get everyone's attention!

Piatt's rejection of "fancy"—a 19th-century synonym for *imagination*—in this poem can be read two ways. By having her male speaker suggest a string of costumes that, for all their "beauty," are ill-suited to his female partner at best, and downright silly at worst, Piatt is making fun of 19th-century romantic views of women that overridealized them at the expense of reality—for example, as in the figure of the angelic domestic woman. But fancy or imagination was also identified in Piatt's period with the poetic faculty, so that she could be speaking of the way she wants to write (and to be read) as well. Both as a lifestyle and as literary style, she rejects her culture's "shining world of art" in favor of the "real": herself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Imagine a dramatic production of this conversation that is taking place instead between modern lovers or spouses. What costumes might embody stereotypes about women today? Imagine the conversation again with the female character suggesting costumes to her male partner. What costumes might represent stereotypes of men today?
2. What associations do the words *bird* and *paradise* suggest? Why does the speaker want to distinguish herself from such images?
3. Look up *romance* in a literary handbook. How is the literary definition of romance related to our modern use of the term *romance* for a kind of love? What might that connection say about the relationship between the characters in "The Fancy Ball"?
4. Compare the female speaker's attitude in "The Fancy Ball" with that of the speaker in Dickinson's "I dwell in Possibility – ." Would Dickinson approve of Piatt's speaker's decision to "go as myself"? Would Piatt agree that "Possibility" is a "fairer house than prose"?

"Army of Occupation" (1866)

"Army of Occupation" addresses another characteristic theme in Piatt's work: the Civil War's aftermath, in both the North and the South. The poem commemorates the sealing that September of a mass grave at Arlington Cemetery. Unlike most commemorative Civil War poems, however, Piatt's poem splits its focus between the heroism of the dead soldiers and the pain suffered by those (women, in particular) left to mourn their loved ones' passing.

Piatt closely connects the poem's form and content through motifs of music, sound, and beat. The dominant meter is iambic pentameter; although metrical variations occur throughout, the regular iambic beat is readily audible in stanza 2, an excellent stanza for scansion practice. As the poem opens, the summer "blew its little drifts of sound," an image likening the summer wind to a musician randomly playing a wind instrument. These gentle "drifts of sound" sharply contrast with the highly organized martial music whose "fierce . . . cry for blood" the soldiers answered with their lives. The marching of the weary soldiers is another beat. The word *feet* in stanzas 2 and 3 overtly refers to their exhausted steps, but it also alludes to poetic feet, a technical term designating metrical units such as the five feet composing each line of iambic pentameter.

The marching feet of the soldiers, captured in the marching iambic beat, make up Piatt's commemorative war music, but it is a music softened not just by the weariness of war's end but by the sound of the wind and by the Potomac's "haunted flood," which the speaker bids, "Sing tenderly." Cries for blood and songs of mourning, marching men and grieving women are braided together in the poem's music as they were in life. The speaker thus pays equal honor to the war dead and to those whose grieving, in a paradoxical twist, makes them, though living, seem dead—the "dreadful phantoms" of stanza 5. Projecting the poem into the future, she asks "if, in some red-clouded dawn, again / The country should be calling to

her men, / Shall the reveille not remember these?" The military music of the reveille (from French, to wake), to which these dead can no longer respond, serves as Piatt's ironic but heartbreaking reminder of what wars cost.

In the difficult final stanza, a mysterious figure called "one" appears with "his rusted sword in his own breast." Since the poem tells us that he stands on "his lands" at "his dim fireless hearth," we can deduce that he is the Confederate commander Robert E. Lee. It was on his former estate, appropriated by the Union during the war, that Arlington Cemetery—with a deliberate irony that Piatt plays on in her poem—was established in 1864. Piatt's closing image combines national and personal grief—the cold hearth of Lee's former home standing for the hundreds of thousands of homes throughout the nation where women grieved for sons, husbands, and brothers who would never return and whose "many hands" point to Lee in accusation. In this last image one feels the full force of Piatt's ironic play on the term *army of occupation*, which is usually used to describe an active military force conquering and controlling foreign territory but here refers to the "sleeping army" that occupied Lee's estate not in life but in death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Research the history of the lands that became Arlington Cemetery. How did Confederates feel about the cemetery and its fallen sons—prisoners of war who had been held by the Union forces—who were buried there? How did the image of the cemetery shift to that of a national shrine? Also research how these lands are important to African-American history.
2. Choose three words in the poem that are not in your everyday vocabulary. Look them up in a substantial dictionary. Why has Piatt used these particular words? What do they contribute to her broader themes?
3. The speaker describes the now-deceased soldiers as seeing "the dust," then joining "the moving mass." Look up the different meanings of *dust* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Why does Piatt choose this particular word here? How does knowing the history of how this word has been used affect one's reading of the remainder of the line? And the remainder of the stanza?
4. When Piatt tells the shores of the Potomac, "Wear flowers for such, shores whence their feet did pass," she is employing a rhetorical figure of direct address called an apostrophe. Apostrophes to nature asking it to mourn for the dead are conventional in pastoral elegies, as, for example, in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloomed." Look up information on pastoral elegies in a literary handbook or glossary and discuss how Piatt's poem does or does not fit that form.

"Mock Diamonds" (1872)

"Mock Diamonds" is among Piatt's most difficult poems. However, students tackling its complex literary puzzles will be well repaid for their effort. One reason for the poem's difficulty is its weaving together of past and present using multiple speakers and multiple time frames. The shift in time frames is analogous to what happens in a movie flashback. Students may find it useful, therefore, to ponder the role that the latter plays in contemporary filmmaking since this technique formally embodies one of the poem's principal themes—the continuance of the past in the present.

"Mock Diamonds" is set at a seaside resort, the same one where the speaker (now a wife and mother) vacationed as a young woman. She has returned in order to introduce her husband (a Northerner) to the world of the antebellum Southern aristocracy where she was born. One must follow the flow of their conversation in the first four stanzas carefully if the rest of the poem is to make sense. To a question someone else (her husband) has asked—"The handsome man there with the scar? / (Who bow'd to me?)"—she answers, "Yes, slightly." From this we can surmise that her husband wanted to know whether or not she knew this man. When she answers, "slightly," he is satisfied and moves on to

another prospect, cutting her off midsentence (line 7). He is looking for a particular person: as we will soon learn, his wife's former lover.

There is a teasing quality to Piatt's writing in the next two stanzas that makes the husband's jealousy-motivated description of the second man faintly ridiculous: He has a "low Southern swagger" and looks as if he belongs to the Ku Klux Klan (vividly described as a "doubtful chivalry" that holds "midnight-vengeance meetings"). The wife denies this but says the man was among those who surrendered "late"—after the war's official end—for which some have judged him harshly. Although the husband does not know it yet, he has found his man, and the speaker, using flashback, recalls for him what her relationship to this man was and how it abruptly ended when, at his mother's urging, he left in pursuit of an "heiress" instead.

At this point, the poem turns from a mocking consideration of the sex game, Southern-style, into something darker: a deconstruction of the Old South. Refusing to romanticize either her own past or that of the Old South, Piatt rewrites the "lost cause" as "insolent false glory" and rewrites Southern planter society as a victim of its own delusions. The Southern chevalier (the speaker's erstwhile lover) and the Southern belle whose "diamonds flash'd him blind" both turn out to be frauds by poem's end. As the speaker says self-mockingly in stanza 10, her husband has nothing to worry about: "Your bright child's fading mother / And that guerrilla from—the dead? / Are nothing to each other." The past is dead.

Or is it? Rising from the sand, the man stands before her, and "all the dim sea grew dimmer," his presence blocking out all else. As if picking up where they left off decades before, he makes a single remark. When she tells us that men "never" hear such bitter laughter from other men, she implies his style with her is the intimate style that arises only between lovers, present or past. The speaker assured her husband that, like the Old South, her own romantic past is dead, but this ending suggests otherwise. When in the last lines, the "guerrilla from—the dead?" reveals the truth—that like the

chevalier himself, the belle, too, was a fraud—the final piece of the puzzle falls into place. The past, the speaker asserts, has now truly "Pas'd to the past forever," but we are left to wonder whether or not it ever really can.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look up the word *mock* and use its definitions to help you analyze the poem. Find examples in the poem of specific words, phrases, or events that rely on either sense of the word. For example, what does "doubtful chivalry" mean? What is the effect of including these words?
2. This poem is in part about the relation between the present and the past. Identify elements of the present scene that the poem juxtaposes with what happened long ago and explain their significance.
3. Why does she call her former lover a "hero"? Was he? What evidence in the poem enables you to judge the tone here?
4. Does Piatt's staging of the Old South as a grand confidence game in which each person is out to defraud the other shed light on MARK TWAIN'S (Samuel Langhorne Clemens's) use of two confidence men, the Dauphin and the Duke, in *Huckleberry Finn*? Why might these two writers, both of whom grew up in the South but eventually moved to the North, have found the idea of a confidence game an apt metaphor for the antebellum South?
5. Piatt clearly has the Ku Klux Klan in mind in stanza 3 of "Mock Diamonds." Read about Klan activities in the South in the Reconstruction period. What language in the poem suggests that she is talking about the Klan? Is there any connection between what the Old South was and the rise of the Klan after the war?

"The Funeral of a Doll" (1872)

This poem can be interpreted in opposite yet closely related ways, one sentimental, the other ironic, both of which Piatt carefully crafts into

the poem. Read sentimentally, “Funeral” is about a little girl’s grief over the “death” of her doll, and given the enormous popularity sentimental treatments of child death enjoyed in 19th-century literature, one can easily imagine sincere Victorian readers wiping away tears as they read the poem. Viewed thus, Piatt’s treatment of the doll’s death is little more than a replaying of the death of the doll’s namesake, “Little Nell,” in Charles Dickens’s beloved—and very sentimental—*Old Curiosity Shop* (1840). According to this reading, the tears the daughter sheds are the same as those adults shed, even today, when reading Dickens’s novel. Sentimental literature prized excessive feeling both in its treatment of material and in the response it sought to elicit from readers, and the little girl’s tears mimic and fulfill these expectations.

The situation with the poem’s speaker, the girl’s mother, is more complicated. As the teller of the story, she shares in its sentimentality. At the same time, however, the way she tells the story raises other, darker interpretative possibilities that distance her from the sentimental acts her daughter performs. For instance, when the speaker says that like Dickens’s Little Nell, this little Nell is “slight and still and mild, / Blue-eyed and sweet; she always smiled,” her attribution of life to what is lifeless—a wax head, a body stuffed with straw—makes the doll sound less lovable than spooky and unreal. When she adds, “and never troubled any one / Until her pretty life was done,” one cannot help but wonder, therefore, whether she is being serious or mocking. Like Dickens’s Little Nell, this little Nell sounds too good to be true.

If the speaker adopts an ironic stance toward the doll, her attitude toward the funeral is equally edgy. Calling the doll in its paper coffin “A very fair and piteous sight,” she adds, almost as an afterthought, “Enough to make one sorry, quite.” The word *quite* here is dismissive, implying that she is not really sorry at all. Only for a moment, in the dash marking a broken-off thought in stanza 3, when the coffin is closed, does the poem suggest that something deeper is going on in the mother. “But,” she says, “no matter”—which, of course,

means the reverse: It must matter a great deal for her to use a mark as dramatic as a dash to point it out. The shutting of the doll’s coffin has, it seems, reminded the speaker of something she would rather forget, possibly another death—a real one.

If so, this helps explain why the speaker’s tone is so hard to read. On the one hand, much as she loves her daughter, she not only knows that the object of her daughter’s grief is a fake (a doll) but that the little girl herself is faking grief, insofar as her excessive display of grief is merely a miming of sentimental conventions she has learned—a “story each had learned to tell.” The mother herself, on the other hand, is old enough to know what real death is. Piatt again helps us with a graphic cue, putting the daughter’s question: “*Where is she now?*”—a question the mother notably fails to answer—in italics. If the mother were a sentimentalist, she would assure her daughter her doll is in heaven. The poem would have a happy ending. But unsure of an afterlife herself, she cannot pass on this consolation to her daughter. At the poem’s end, she can only stand by helplessly watching her child grieve.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Piatt’s treatment of “Little Nell” as a living-dead doll with Sylvia Plath’s treatment of the “living doll” theme in “The Applicant.”
2. Little Eva’s death in HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is undoubtedly the most famous death scene in 19th-century American literature. Read Stowe’s chapter 26 and compare and contrast the two scenarios. Could Piatt’s poem be read as a critique not just of Dickens but Stowe’s handling of child death?
3. Since the doll is a doll and not a human child, what is the true answer to the girl’s question in the penultimate line? How is this implied answer important to the rest of the poem? Why do you think the speaker herself does not give it?
4. In stanza 3 the speaker breaks off her thought with a dash. What do you think that dash is about? What might she have thought that she

does not say? Might this missing information fill out our picture of what the speaker is like?

5. In “The Funeral of a Doll,” Piatt’s doll exists somewhere between the categories of human and inhuman. Compare and contrast what Piatt does with a contemporary horror film of your choice involving a doll that becomes alive. Why are dolls creepy in both cases?

“The Palace-Burner” (1872)

As did Dickinson, Piatt used child speakers to explore issues that many 19th-century readers would have found alienating if addressed from an adult’s perspective. Unlike Dickinson, however, Piatt never identifies her own voice with these child speakers; nor does she make them precociously wise, as many 19th-century writers—Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, did. Rather, her child speakers live in their own “child world” and think by the rules of their own child logic. Nowhere do these strategies show to greater advantage than in “The Palace-Burner.” Because of a seemingly innocent question posed to her by her son—would she “burn a palace,” too—the boy’s mother begins an examination of self that, concluding in ironic self-condemnation, turns the popular 19th-century image of woman as angel in the house—pious, domestic, fulfilled as wife and mother—on its head.

Inspired by an 1871 *Harper’s Weekly* engraving of the execution of a *pétroleuse* (palace-burner), Piatt’s poem considers the fate of the Paris Commune, Europe’s first experiment in communism, and of the women who, with no alternative but starvation, took their protests into the streets. The setting for the poem is a quintessentially middle-class domestic interior. Here a mother and son peruse clippings from old newspapers. Over his mother’s objections, the boy returns to one clipping in particular: an illustration of the execution of a palace burner by a firing squad of uniformed French soldiers. When the boy asks his mother whether under the same circumstances she would

burn a palace also, she refuses to answer, sending him off to play instead.

In the poem’s last five stanzas, the mother ponders what her answer is. Confronted by the palace burner’s inarguable courage, this conventionally “good” woman explores who and what she is really is. In the “dusk and distance,” her soul seems “sweet,” but when she looks more closely, she discovers not goodness, but the appearance of goodness: a woman who loves “light and music” and who is “fit to kiss away a baby’s cry”—and not much else. In a society that rewards “languid and worldly” women like her with material comforts, could she, she wonders, “wear / Such utter life upon a dying face, / . . . / Such garments—soon to be a shroud—with grace?” The palace burner’s “unappealing, beautiful despair” is a reverse image of her: a woman beautiful on the outside but unappealing within. Directly benefited by the very kinds of social and economic inequities that cause the palace burner’s despair, the speaker would not lift a hand to make the world a better place. On the contrary, as we see in stanzas 3 and 4, she takes it as her duty to inculcate in her son her own non-critical obedience to authority. Is this good mother, who tells her son to “respect the laws,” whether they are right or wrong, really a bad one?

In this poem Piatt pushes the idea of the bystander’s moral complicity as far as it can go, and her target is not just her own immediate middle-class society, a society that in its complaisance made self-absorbed, materialistic women like the speaker possible. She also targets the injustice of Western society’s inequitable economic and social arrangements as a whole. Safe in their homes, as the speaker is safe, the privileged are screened from the consequences of the inequities from which they profit. What makes the poem uniquely Piatt’s is that she makes us see how wrong these inequities are by showing them to us through the eyes of the only member of this society uncompromised enough still to recognize wrong as wrong—a child.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The image of the palace burner that inspired this poem can be found in the July 8, 1871, issue of

Harper's Weekly. Read the *Harper's* article that accompanies it in its entirety. Do you think that the journalist who wrote the story would be sympathetic to Piatt's position or not? Explain and defend your conclusion.

2. Describing the palace burner in stanzas 7 through 9, the speaker uses oxymorons, for example, "unappealing beautiful despair." Find three more and explore why Piatt might have chosen to present the palace burner in contradictory terms. Is the speaker's character oxymoronic also?
3. Look up *dainty*, *languid*, and *worldly*. Are these qualities positive or negative from the standpoint of the speaker? The son? The palace burner? Explain.
4. Compare and contrast Piatt's critique of 19th-century domestic female culture to Dickinson's in "What Soft-Cherubic Creatures." Consider especially the roles females play in each work.

"Her Blindness in Grief" (1873)

In a letter to E. C. Stedman, J. J. Piatt vividly describes his newborn son's death four days earlier. Healthy and vigorous at birth, the infant declined quickly, dying in his mother's arms a few days later. It was Sarah's first such loss, and she was inconsolable. Published three months later, "Blindness" supports J. J.'s description of Sarah's grief, reaching a pitch of raw personal emotion such as American women's poetry would not see again until Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, 100 years later. As in Plath, however, this impression of intense personal emotion is itself a product of careful craft and should be understood as such.

In typical Piattian fashion, the speaker opens with a question that contains traces of what someone else (the speaker's husband? her minister? a solicitous friend?), has said, probably a warning that she was putting her soul at risk with her excessive mourning since it suggested a refusal to accept God's will. The speaker's response—"Sweeter than my soul was he"—indicates that her child matters more to her than her soul. "God is a silence . . . / . . . / A

vision—that the seraphs see," and she wants "something I can touch." The next five stanzas develop this idea. Knowing her baby is with God and nursed "tenderly at Mary's breast" cannot assuage her grief because she wants him in the most primitive way possible: "Oh! But to kiss his little feet, / And say to them, so sweet, so sweet." If she cannot have him in this way, then there is "no comfort anywhere," whether or not he is in heaven.

The speaker is not being simply irrational or blasphemous. On the contrary, given the way the baby died, there is no rational way to come to terms with his death. The conundrum the speaker confronts is that posed by all child death: If God is all powerful and all good, why must the innocent suffer? "What could have hurt my baby? Why, / Why did he come; why did he go?" Without answers to these questions, how can she view his death as anything but a gratuitously cruel act inflicted on her by an uncaring deity: "My cry is but a human cry. / Who grieves for angels? Do they die?" To her God's humanity (or, rather, his lack of it) is the issue here.

Up to this point, the speaker had been flailing helplessly against her fate and it is hard to know how her struggle will turn out. There is blasphemy, true, but there is also an urgent need to understand. A return to faith in the concluding stanzas remains possible and because of the literary and social conventions of the era, most 19th-century readers would have expected it. But the hint of sarcasm in the speaker's question—"Do [angels] die?"—suggests a different shift instead, not toward faith but toward anger. If the speaker cannot have her baby, then she cannot make peace with God, and there can be no closure for her feelings, only the silence of despair.

So it is. Unable to submit to God's will without accepting her baby's death, the speaker instead embraces the open wound that is her loss, in some of the most powerful lines Piatt ever wrote: "The grief is bitter. Let me be. / He lies beneath that lonesome tree. / I've heard the fierce rain beating there. / Night covers it with cold moonshine. / Despair can only be despair. / God has his will. I have not mine." But we could never appreciate the brilliance and power of these simple, measured

words and short declarative sentences had we not experienced the passionate struggle that preceded them. This is the craft that makes this poem great—and devastatingly human—at the same time. Only Plath equals it, in the last of the *Ariel* poems.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look at the language of “touch” in stanza 2. What does the speaker mean when she says she longs for something she “can touch”? What other moments in the poem connect to this idea? What kinds of things can be touched, and what kinds of things cannot be touched? What is the point of such a distinction?
2. In stanza 4 the speaker imagines two mothers: her and Mary. In this stanza, where does she imagine her own baby? How does she feel about that? Why?
3. In the course of the poem, Piatt introduces some very grisly images. In stanza 1 she depicts her soul’s breast’s brooding on the lid of the coffin that holds her baby, while its empty eyes “stare at the dust.” In stanza 8 she imagines her baby’s hands, “as still as snows” even while its “white fingers” clutch her heart. Why might Piatt use such images? How do they contribute to the tone of the poem overall?
4. Stanza 3 opens by quoting Christ’s words to Mary Magdalene (John 20:15). The speaker then goes on to imagine that he talks to her. Read this stanza carefully. Paraphrase each line. What is the speaker’s point about how she would feel if Christ appeared to her now? In the poems of traditional religious consolation against which Piatt writes here, how might the speaker react to the same event?
5. Read Sylvia Plath’s “Contusion” in *Ariel*. Compare and contrast Plath’s use of language in this poem to Piatt’s use of language in the final stanza of “Her Blindness in Grief.”

“The Witch in the Glass” (1880)

Piatt’s tender side shows to best advantage in this poem, whose later history identifies it among her

most popular work. Seventeen years after its original publication in 1880, “Witch” had the dubious honor of being plagiarized by Dorothea Moore in “Precocity,” published in an avant-garde periodical called the *Chap-Book*. Even more telling, the editor of a rival magazine remembered Piatt’s poem well enough to call Moore to account for her theft. More recently (2004), the poem makes a rather bewitching appearance, this time properly credited, in a romance novel, *Loving Jesse*. That an author writing today could find inspiration in the poem speaks to the kind of “freshness” that, as William Spengemann says, distinguishes Piatt’s work, allowing her poems to “remain alive in ways that those of her far more famous contemporaries simply do not” (xxiii).

One of Piatt’s shortest poems, “Witch” is divided into two stanzas, the first spoken by a young girl, the second by her wary but resigned mother. Using an utmost economy of means, Piatt captures that moment in a girl child’s life when she begins the transition to adult sexuality, her innocence still intact, but now at risk as she dreams of the life she will lead as a young woman. The imagery that Piatt employs in the first stanza—the mirror, the witch, and the “red, red mouth” of the child speaker, who seeks “the very thing [she] should not know”—could not be more spare. But insofar as these images are taken from fairy tales—most obviously “Snow White,” but also “Rapunzel,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and the rest—they do double duty. Not only do they suggest the girl’s still-lingering innocence (all she knows of love and sex is fairy tale romance), but they also remind us that sexual maturation is part of growing up.

In the second stanza the mother acknowledges the fact that her daughter is maturing and accepts her helplessness to prevent it, aware that even if all the mirrors in the land were covered, sooner or later “a bird,” a “wistful wind,” or “a rose,” sent “by some hapless boy,” “will whisper low / The very thing [her daughter] should not know.” If little girls dream their lives away reading fairy tales, just as in fairy tales, innocence will be lost no matter how hard parents work to prevent it. The conclusion is ironic, but the irony is gentle and the tone

is a perfect blend of wistfulness and acceptance that speaks directly of a mother's love.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Think about the girl's relation to images from fairy tales. Which fairy tales or other children's stories had the greatest influence on you when you were growing up? Why?
2. Look up the word *witch*. Why does the poem use this word for the girl's image, rather than something like *princess*? Or is the "witch in the glass" *not* the girl? If it is not, who is the "witch" she sees there? Discuss.
3. Is there irony in this poem? And if so, toward whom is it extended?
4. Review the poem carefully and list all the words it uses that are related to mouths. Why does Piatt establish this pattern of images? How does it connect to the poem's theme as a whole?

"The First Party" (1882)

One of Piatt's classic dramatic dialogues, "The First Party" is composed entirely of direct quotations, making it especially important to keep careful track of who is saying what and why. The poem opens with a young girl exuberantly telling her "mamma" about the party she has just attended. It is her first boy-girl party, and it feeds a new sense of independence from her mother's judgments as she explores the pressures and pleasures of her peer group and the attractive but mysterious world of boys. In a timeless dynamic, her mother had wanted her to wear a more modest dress than the one she chose, which, with its red ribbons, caught the boys' attention. She defends herself by criticizing her saintly friend Rose for dressing too plainly (all in white) and implicitly criticizing her mother for not appreciating how important attracting the boys' attention is.

In contrast, we hear the mother's quiet voice on only a few occasions—at the start of stanza 3, halfway through stanza 4, and in the last two stanzas—but her few words contain a world of meaning. In fact, the heart of the poem lies in the gap

of communication between the two, a gap in which the story of the mother's own romantic past is hidden, to be pieced out gradually by the reader but not by the daughter, who is still too innocent to understand what her mother is saying.

It is one of the impressive artistic achievements of this poem that it tells the story of two first parties at once: not just the daughter's, but the mother's as well. The most handsome boy from the daughter's party looks just like "that picture of—your brother's friend," the girl tells her mother. Piatt's poems frequently use dashes to mark either gaps in perspective or withheld information. Here we learn that the mother has not told her daughter the truth. This young man was not only her "brother's friend," but, as we learn in the final stanzas, the special handsome boy from her own first party—the "one boy" who mattered. He cannot write because he is dead; the mother keeps the bud from his grave. She does not know where he is because she does not know where heaven is or whether it is at all: "In some sweet foreign Country, it may be, / Among the palms." Who knows?

Because the daughter is still innocent, she does not catch her mother's double meanings. Taking her literally, she believes a young man (named Adam) gave the bud to her mother, when she was "in Eden." The mother, however, was speaking figuratively: "Adam" was her "first man" and "Eden" was her own first state of sexual innocence, both now long gone. When the mother says the bud is actually from his grave, the daughter no longer wants to touch it. Age, death, and loss are all unfamiliar and frightening to her. This innocent girl not only cannot imagine her mother's experiencing young love, but is blissfully unaware that like her mother's first love, her own will also be lost someday. The mother's sadness stems not only from remembering her own first heartache, but also from knowing that her daughter is retracing a pattern that will give her a similar knowledge of pain and loss.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although this poem is in part about the mother's sadness, it is also about the daughter's excited happiness. The poem thus expresses sev-

- eral intense states of feeling. Find three instances in the poem where specific words and phrases reveal the mood of the speaker. Explain how these words enable you to figure out the mood.
2. Look back at all the instances in which the girl mentions her friend Rose. Analyze each in specific terms. In Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, the speaking character reveals information about himself that he does not intend to reveal. What does each of the girl's comments about Rose reveal about her?
 3. Piatt often uses dashes to indicate gaps in perspective or withheld information. Look back at line 3. Why does Piatt include a dash here? Remember that the girl is telling her story to her mother. How might this line read differently if she were telling the story to a friend?
 4. In literary studies we often use the word *tone* to talk about the author's attitudes, which are different from the characters' attitudes. What is the girl's attitude about the social world at her school in "The First Party"? Do you think that Piatt's tone differs from the girl's?
 5. In stanza 4 of "The First Party," the girl says, "Why don't you listen, mamma?" Use this line as the basis for writing about the theme of listening in the poem. Is the mother listening or not? Is the girl listening, or not? How might her question here be a useful window into the dynamic between them recorded by the poem on the whole?

"A Child's Party" (1883)

Although published relatively late in Piatt's career (1883), "A Child's Party" is Piatt's most detailed study of her own childhood and as such is one of the few intimate self-portraits she left behind. The portrait is by no means flattering. Set on the Spier plantation just after Piatt's mother died, the poem tells how as a child she inveigled a "dusky playmate"—that is, a slave child—into joining her in a "tea party" on the plantation's front lawn. When the two girls purloin props for the party from the house—silverware, china, clothing—they

draw the wrath of the adult house slaves down upon their heads. In a letter to an admiring reader, Piatt vouches for the story's authenticity, citing it as one she told her own children about her "slave-play mates . . . when I was, as they seem to imagine, 'a little negro myself!'" (March 4, 1886).

One would expect from this letter that "A Child's Party" would be awash in the same sentimentalization of "happy" slaves and "kind" masters that characterizes most post-Reconstruction literature on the Old South, whether Northern or Southern. As in "Mock Diamonds," however, Piatt resists romanticizing the past. Instead, she manipulates point of view in order to tell her story from two perspectives at once, separating her adult self (the poem's speaker) from the child she was. This distinction between what she knew as a child and what she knows as an adult carries with it very different moral understandings of the narrative itself. Thus, for example, when the child self speaks cruel words to her playmate, the adult self says she recalls the words "with shame." Or again, when the child self dresses up her playmate in "grandmamma's most sacred shawl," the adult self says she did it to "set off [her] own transcendent bloom and grace," not to be generous, and so on. Readers must tackle the interpretive challenge of figuring out both adult and child perspectives at once.

As if the relationship between the adult speaker and her child self were not complex enough, Piatt also greatly complicates the relationship between the two children. For all her "Caucasian scorn," the speaker's child self is actually in a very weak position in relation to the slaves, even her playmate, since she knows very little about them, but they know a great deal about her. When she tries to assert her superiority over her playmate, she repeatedly stumbles as a result. The child self, for instance, thinks by dressing the slave child in grandmamma's shawl, she will establish the superiority of her own beauty, but the slave child knows that the shawl is worth far more than beauty since it is a badge of power, and she immediately starts ordering the other slave children around: "Call me Old Mistress! Do you hear?" Similarly, when the child self dismisses "brother Blair" as no

- Sarah M. B. Piatt. *Harper's Magazine*. Available online. URL: <http://www.harpers.org/subjects/SarahMBPiatt>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Herzberg, Max J. *The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962.
- Howells, William Dean. "Recent Literature." Review of *Voyage to the Fortunate Isles*. *Atlantic Monthly* 34 (July 1874): 104–105.
- . *Selected Letters*. 5 vols. Edited by George Arms et al. Boston: Twayne, 1979–1983.
- Piatt, Sarah. March 4, 1886 Letter to Mrs. Pixous or Mrs. Nixon. Miscellaneous Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation.
- . *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Edited by Paula Bernat Bennett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Spengemann, William C., with Jessica F. Roberts, eds. *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Paula Bernat Bennett and Elizabeth Renker



EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809–1849)

The demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All that which is so indispensable in Song is precisely all that with which she has nothing to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing a truth we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse.

(“The Poetic Principle”)

“**M**an is a rational animal; Man is a political animal”: These are tenets of the Aristotelian conception of humanity. But the American author Edgar Allan Poe subscribed to a different, darker vision of human nature, a concession to the irrational in humanity. Poe conceived the “imp of the perverse” as his idea of irrational “Man,” the being who succumbs to unconscious and even hateful impulses. He thereby anticipated the odysseys into the abyss of human thought by such writers as Fyodor Dostoevsky, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. When few authors, other than Shakespeare, had ventured to identify humanity as “the stuff dreams are made on,” Poe explored dreams, nightmares, fantasies, and compulsive impulses in a way to make Freud shudder. He courted the abstruse and sought to embrace an arcane medievalism, when most of his contemporaries were copying European myths and legends or trying to attach American folklore to a Puritan past. T. S. Eliot denounced Poe’s adolescent advocacy of a supernal realm of perfect beauty and intuitive understanding. On the other hand, Steven Spielberg admits that his best movies would have been inconceivable without Poe’s Icarian idealism, his eccentric search for transcendence.

Poe eludes easy categorization, since he resists being an “American” writer. His personal feelings of disinheritance appear to have permeated his tales, and he refuses to locate his narratives in an American setting. He courts the bizarre, the

fantastic, the grotesque, the dangerously morbid. He indulges in necromancy, in Eastern and gothic texts, in antiquarianism for its own sake. He wants to be Merlin or Nostradamus, an alchemist after Goethe’s Faust. Yet everywhere we find references to the two seminal works that ground American literature, the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. In his own time, Poe borrowed from Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Walter Scott, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. He liked the fictional style offered in *Blackwood’s Journal*. Popular culture lured him with its incursions into mesmerism and archaeology, especially Egyptology. He read minor poets and purveyors of the macabre. Drawing from the many writers in his canon, Poe added an immediacy of effect, a nervous energy that struck a new chord, decidedly musical, in his reading public. The French loved him in his own time and beyond, hence Poe’s great influence on symbolism and surrealist poets and painters, including Franz Kafka and Edward Burne-Jones, Rainier Maria Rilke, and Egon Schiele. Poe espoused a theory of the superior, aesthetic personality, and so we can see connections to Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The art of the detective story and his delving into criminal psychology deeply affected Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson. And few can compete with his virtuo-

sic vocabulary, singular erudition, hard work, and mastery of the English language.

Edgar Poe was born in Boston in 1809. Two years later his actor father, David Poe, Jr., abandoned Edgar; his older brother, William Henry Leonard, age four; and his sister, Rosalie, less than a year old, in the sole care of their mother, Elizabeth Arnold, who continued to act professionally on the stage. Soon orphaned in late 1811, after the December death of his mother, Edgar received protection, but never formal adoption, by John Allan and his family of Richmond, Virginia. The Allans gave Edgar a good education, including five years abroad, in England, 1815–20. In 1826 Poe entered the University of Virginia, but he left after one year, since Mr. Allan refused to underwrite a second year of study. Allan had no patience with Poe's literary aspirations, nor with Poe's character, which Allan thought dissolute. Poe considered Allan miserly and abusive. Allan died when Poe was in his early twenties, not caring to mention Poe in his will.

Resigned to faring on his own, Poe became associated with eastern cities, Boston, Richmond, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. In Boston Poe enlisted in the army under a pseudonym, *Edgar A. Perry*. At the same time, a Boston publisher brought out Poe's first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, an indication of Poe's future development. Poe attended West Point (an apocryphal story of Poe's West Point fiasco has him appearing on parade wearing only his shoes and sword!), but after his expulsion for gross neglect of duty and general disobedience in 1831 he moved to Baltimore to live with the remaining members of the Poe family, his aunt, Maria Clemm, and her daughter, Virginia. Despite what may or may not be the stuff of lore, Poe embarked in writing gothic fiction, some of which satirized German and British models. Whatever his approach may have been at the beginning, Poe soon found himself published and the winner of a prestigious prize; in 1833 the Baltimore *Saturday Visitor* awarded Poe \$50 for "MS Found in a Bottle." This national recognition ultimately enabled Poe to secure an editorial post in 1834 on a Richmond, Virginia, magazine,

the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Meanwhile, Poe's brother, William Henry, had died of alcoholism in August 1831, and once in Richmond Poe sent for Mrs. Clemm and her daughter, Virginia (aged 13), whom he eventually married in order to regularize his familial circumstances.

Poe's work on the *Southern Literary Messenger* increased its circulation 10-fold, solidifying his reputation and providing some financial security, but his ambitions began to expand beyond Richmond, even while his alcoholism had begun to intrude on his professional life. Poe fell into an unfortunate pattern, especially so far as the publishing world was concerned, for unreliability. During this period in May 1836, Poe married his cousin, Virginia Clemm. Virginia's mother, Maria Poe Clemm, entirely approved, and the three lived together as a family. In 1837 Poe either quit or was forced off the staff of the *Messenger*, and he moved to New York in a fruitless quest to find permanent employment. He published his one novel, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, an epic adventure-romance, in an attempt to expand his literary horizons and legitimize the American novel in a larger structural context, akin to Virgil's *Aeneid*. *Pym* inspired such writers as Richard Henry Dana and HERMAN MELVILLE, and possibly Joseph Conrad, to exploit the South Seas narrative as a vehicle for their own use. *Pym* also established Poe as the philosophical antithesis to RALPH WALDO EMERSON and HENRY DAVID THOREAU's naive optimism in nature's innate goodness. Nature, for both Poe and Hawthorne, would always be a mix of mother and destroyer, nurturer and fatal temptress.

The year 1839 found Poe in Philadelphia, an assistant editor at *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. There Poe composed several of his most famous tales, "Ligeia," and "The Fall of the House of Usher," but his drinking provoked his dismissal. When *Burton's*, under new management, became *Graham's Magazine*, Poe was rehired. The period 1839–44 had Poe at the top of his form, and, along with "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Masque of the Red Death," and "The Pit and the Pendulum," Poe wrote "The Gold Bug," which won a \$1,000 award

from the Philadelphia *Dollar Newspaper*. Poe also embarked on literary criticism, a role that would win him friends and rivals. In 1844 he moved to New York, settling in a country house in the Bronx. He composed several more tales and critical essays and one treatise in philosophy, *Eureka*. His major achievement was the publication of "The Raven," a poem of anguished loss and bereavement. "The Raven" generated fame, if not wealth, and it would quickly become a standard poem in America's literary canon, a prime example of poetic "music" at a period when America had no actual composer to compete with romantic artists such as Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt.

Around 1845 Poe realized his dearest wish, to become the sole editor of an influential literary magazine, the *Broadway Journal*. Unfortunately mismanagement and improper investment led to the magazine's demise. This melancholy period reached a tragic peak in January 1847, with the early death of Poe's young wife, Virginia, after she had suffered repeated bouts with tuberculosis. Her alternate lapses and recoveries may have contributed to the poet's equally fitful bouts of drinking; certainly her image as a frail, almost supernaturally delicate presence found its way into many of his tales and poems, such as "Annabel Lee" and "The Oval Portrait."

In 1846–47 Poe tried to rekindle his romantic life by courting a number of literary ladies; on one occasion Poe offered marriage to Sarah Helen Whitman but was rebuffed at the last minute. He decided to return to Richmond, thinking the South offered future success. The people of Richmond actually lionized Poe, acknowledging him as a major literary personage. Nearing the end of his intense but truncated career, Poe enjoyed something close to celebrity, in that he was wined and dined, quoted, and perpetually sought out for his opinions. A much-proffered photograph of the time (1849) reveals a handsome, secure, confident, and healthy man, a definite contrast to other images of him, which support his reputation as sickly and dissolute. His prospects looked good; he took a pledge to abstain from drink; he became engaged to a childhood sweetheart, Elmira Royster; and he

again formulated plans to initiate another literary magazine on his own.

None of these happy possibilities, unfortunately, was to be. While Poe was returning to New York from Richmond in 1849, a series of still unexplained mishaps occurred. Poe failed to reach New York and was instead found in Baltimore, lying in a coma in the street. It was election time in Baltimore, a city rather notorious for political skull-duggery, including falsifying voters' registrations, carousing, brawling, and sexual blackmail. On October 6, Poe passed away in a Baltimore hospital. Speculation has it that Poe was either the victim of foul play or the victim of his own propensity to drunkenness. His condition had apparently devolved into pneumonia, whose signs accord with contemporary descriptions of Poe's states.

It has taken the better part of 150 years to undo a reputation built up by certain critics seeking to discredit Poe's personal and literary repute in America. More than once, Poe's complete mastery of the first-person narrator caused readers to confuse Poe with the social psychopaths and murderers he portrays in his writing. Many of his tales depict a protagonist who takes a sadistic delight in tormenting perceived oppressors. The vividness of Poe's detail has encouraged some readers to identify him with the lunatics, drug addicts, and multifarious fringe or marginal social types of his tales. But the richness of allusion and the apparent cosmopolitanism of his style reveal an urbane, cultivated individual, whose range of motifs and imagistic strategies shows him well versed in the lively arts of his day. The persistent themes in Poe—such as the odyssey of descent, often into nightmare—ally him to the continental influence of Dante and epic journeys to the underworld in Homer. As does Hawthorne, Poe explores the tenuous relationship between art and life, the often-fatal attraction of aestheticism, which would influence Walter Pater and his acolyte, Oscar Wilde. As a literary critic, Poe is well aware of his debts to Aristotle, Wyatt, Shelley, and Wordsworth, whose efforts to codify art through a deliberate approach to poetics influenced Poe's own structured manner of thinking about the aims of poetic creation. In many respects, Poe is a Roman

writer in the manner of Petronius, cataloging spiritual hubris and excess in palatial settings, invoking the divine vengeance of death itself. MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) offered us *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, but Poe takes us further back in history, into the primal, archaic night of primitive, destructive energies.

“Sonnet—to Science” (1829)

Poe composed his “Sonnet—to Science” in 1829, revising it in 1843. The octet sets the major tension in the poem: the poet’s refusal to pay homage to science, the spirit of which he conceives as predatory, a “Vulture” that both penetrates and preys upon the poet’s heart. Poe deliberately sets a neoclassical tone, in almost direct imitation of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which addresses the antique art object as the “foster-child of silence and slow time” (l. 2). Here science is the “true daughter of Old Time” (l. 1), but she proves sterile, since the persona of the poem asks, “How should he love thee?” (l. 5). Science alters what it sees, and it seems to transform what Poe most venerates, the eternal world of myth and imaginative possibility. In its unsentimental analysis of nature, science would appear to have divested that very nature of its sacred mysteries. Poe’s antimeliorist position, his stance that scientific progress does not ensure a more beautiful quality of life, aligns him with several British romantics, such as Blake, Dickens, Tennyson, and even the later filmmaker, Charlie Chaplin (in *Modern Times*), all of whom deeply suspect that humanity’s moral life is not uplifted by science and technology. We can see something of the same disenchantment with science in Hawthorne’s story “The Celestial Railroad.”

The poet himself enjoys a classical conceit: He is Daedalus, the inventor of the labyrinth and the fashioner of those wings of wax that lifted him and his doomed son, Icarus, from Crete into the freedom of the air, having soared with “undaunted wing” (l. 8). Poe’s equation of science with the vulture likewise confirms upon the poet the status of Prometheus, who suffered the tearing of his liver by

this winged emissary from an angry Zeus for having delivered to humanity the sacred fire of Mount Olympus. The vulture’s wings are “dull realities” (l. 4), bequeathing to humanity a world bereft of myth. In the sestet we reap the barren consequences of science’s invasion of our fanciful life: The Moon Goddess has been “dragged . . . from her car” (l. 9), the Hamadryad (l. 10) and Naiad (l. 12) exiled from their native haunts of wood and flood, the Elf sequestered from his green (l. 13), the poet from his “summer dream” (l. 14). That the poet can no longer wander “to seek for treasure in the jeweled skies” (l. 7) robs him of his cosmic aspirations, and the skies are stripped of metaphysical value. Several female representatives of myth have fled Poe’s universe “to seek shelter in some happier star.” Science “tears” the fabric of fruitful illusion. Moreover, the separation of the poet from his “summer dream beneath the tamarind tree” leaves him with the sobering thought of a world without illusions, a world perhaps ruled by Hades and Persephone, an eternal winter of spiritual discontent.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is there an inherent contradiction in Poe’s appraisal of “science” if his terms are entirely mythical? Is Poe’s a “realistic” notion of science—perhaps it might be relevant to consider his “scientific” hypotheses in his visionary essay *Eureka!*?
2. How does Poe’s antiscientific attitude compare with Wordsworth’s stance on contemporary faith in “The World Is Too Much with Us” or with Blake’s cynical “The Garden of Love,” which also speaks of the robbing of the “green”?

“Romance” (1829)

“Romance” is a relatively youthful piece by Poe. Poe’s personification of romance as a sentient being, a kind of teacher, aligns him with the romantic movement in general (c. 1750–1850). The romantic sensibility is credited to the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau for his having conceived, in his political and social polemics,

particularly *Emile*, that the child is educated by nature. We might recall that Poe's contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne specifically defined *romance* as that "twilight" domain between hard fact and subjective fancy, almost a direct invitation to Rod Serling's television *Twilight Zone* series. Poe alludes to Rousseau when he claims to have learned "my very earliest word / While in the wild wood I did lie" (ll. 8–9), as if he were a feral child, a version of Rousseau's "Noble Savage." We will see these conceits attributed to Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* and to Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli in *The Jungle Books*.

Set in two stanzas of roughly equal length, "Romance" seems similar to EMILY DICKINSON's poems in some ways. Poe may have originated the use of the dash in American lyrics as a way of pointing up emphatic emotion or rarified images. The two stanzas contrast visionary, carefree youth and disturbed, passionless maturity. The bird imagery of stanza 1 proves salutary: Romance "loves to nod and sing / With drowsy head and folded wing, / . . . To me a painted paroquet / Hath been—a most familiar bird—" (ll. 1–6). Romance is a dreamer, and its "medium" is the colorful parakeet, who "Taught me my alphabet to say—" (l. 7). When Poe's narrator claims that his tutelage under the bird was as "a child-with a most knowing eye" (l. 10), he seizes upon two common notions of romanticism, the first that proposed by William Wordsworth in his 1802 lyric "My Heart Leaps Up," where he states that "the Child is father of the Man" (l. 7). The *paradox* is a romantic tenet: Our earliest impressions establish our fundamental nature, our personal and collective sensibility and capacity to feel. The second concerns the "penetrating eye" or "Transparent Eyeball" of both the Masonic Illuminati and the poetic doctrines of Ralph Waldo Emerson—the idea of the "clear eyes of youth." Childhood was venerated, not only by Rousseau in *Emile*, but in the poetic work of the British poets William Blake and Percy Shelley and the British novelists Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens. The violation of childhood, of one's primal innocence, consistently warrants condemnation as the original sin.

Stanza 2 of "Romance" communicates a dire transformation: "Of late, the eternal Condor years / So shake the very Heaven on high / . . . I have no time for idle cares" (ll. 11–14). Life has taken a predatory, convulsive turn, and the "tumult" as the years "thunder by" (l. 13) more than suggests Milton's pandemonium in heaven when the forces of Satan assault God's kingdom. The orphic power of youthful vision is forfeit. Time spent with "lyre and rhyme" (l. 18), the healing powers of Apollo and the muses, are become "forbidden things!" (l. 19). When the narrator guiltily confesses, "My heart would feel to be a crime / Unless it trembled with the strings" (ll. 20–21), we can say of men, with the poet William Butler Yeats, "Their hearts have not grown old" ("The Wild Swans at Coole" l. 22). The consolation in this poem occurs at the word *unless* (l. 21), which suggests that musical inspiration and passion that occasionally descend upon him in "an hour with calmer wings" (l. 16) can move the poet's soul in spite of himself. The recovery of poetic insight is still possible.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What kinds of events or concerns might grab the narrator's attention when he is "gazing on the unquiet sky" (l. 15)? Why might such events divest him of his childhood freedom?
2. Compare Poe's vision of youth in "Romance" to Dickinson's view of nature in her lyric "These are the days when Birds come back – ." How are their estimations of "original innocence" comparable?

"Israfel" (1831)

"Israfel" exhibits Poe's interest in Eastern or exotic subject matter, a typical feature of romanticism, which saw the publication, in 1859, of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. The "long ago and the far away" likewise pervades the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Poe's own *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. *Pym* is set in the distant land of Antarctica. Several lines

of the poem, as well as its musicality, point to “The Blessed Damoiselle” of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

The title is taken from a line of the Moslem holy book the Quran, which describes Israfel as an angel “whose heart-strings are a lute, and who has the sweetest voice of all God’s creatures” (Poe’s note to the poem). We see this same conceit applied to the French preface to the short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In both instances, Poe takes up the idea that one’s heart is a stringed instrument consistently associated with Orpheus of Greek myth. In eight stanzas, the poem celebrates the spirit who sings unabashedly of erotic love and inflamed passions: “the skies that angel trod, / Where deep thoughts are a duty— / Where Love’s a grown-up God— / . . . // Therefore thou art not wrong / Israfeli, who despiseth / An unimpassioned song” (ll. 24–32). We might speculate that Poe’s Israfel embodies that same erotic force that Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* projects in the famous opera.

When Israfel sings, the very heavens become mute, beguiled by “Israfeli’s fire” (l. 19) and his “burning measures” (l. 37) that touch the full range of human emotions: “Thy grief, thy joy, thy hate, thy love” (l. 38). Poe’s use of fire imagery to describe a musical figure invokes lines in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” in which we are admonished that the inspired bard possesses Promethean powers: “Beware! Beware! / His *flashing* eyes, his floating hair!” (ll. 49–50). No less evident is Israfel’s power to *intoxicate*: “None sings so wildly well / As the angel Israfel, / And the giddy stars (so legends tell), / Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell / Of his voice” (ll. 3–7). Even the moon totters in drunken ecstasy (l. 9), and Artemis, traditionally averse to men and human love, “Blushes with love” (l. 12). Poe appeals to more Eastern spirits when he invokes “the Houri glances” (l. 27), the virgins of paradise promised to the most faithful Muslims. Recall that the romantic composer Robert Schumann composed an Eastern drama of love and redemption entitled *Paradise and the Peri* (1843).

The turn in “Israfel” occurs in stanza 7, where it becomes clear that the earthly poet covets Israfel’s heavenly powers for his own use; the world of met-

aphor is not the world of reality: “this / Is a world of sweets and sours; / Our flowers are merely—flowers” (ll. 41–43). And the entire last stanza *inverts* the musical relation, so that Israfel “might not sing so wildly well / A mortal melody, / While a bolder note than this might *swell* / From my lyre within the sky” (ll. 49–52). The parallels between Poe’s persona’s desire to assume Israfel’s power and Coleridge’s narrator’s desire to appropriate the musical effect of the “damsel with a dulcimer” (“Kubla Khan” l. 37) are quite striking: “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song, / . . . I would build that dome in air” (“Kubla Khan” ll. 42–46). The Orphic, erotic power of music to compel the heavens, “the ecstasies above” (l. 36), even the Pleiades (l. 14), to obedience and subservience permeates both visions. The poetic ego, as does Faust in Goethe’s epic parable, seeks absolute authority over the passions of men.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the image of “the trembling living wire” (l. 21) contribute to the “elemental” power of Israfel’s music? What does the image tell you about the role of thought and reason in Israfel’s creative process?
2. At one point, the poet calls Israfel “Best bard, because the wisest!” (l. 34). What evidence is there to support this claim?
3. Compare Poe’s lyric to Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “On Hearing a Symphony by Beethoven” and find correlations in the poets’ reactions relative to the power of music.

“The City in the Sea” (1831)

Poe wrote “The City in the Sea” in 1831, revising it in 1845. In four large stanzas, Poe seems to take his cue from Dante and describes the realm of Death, using specific images from both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The subject of Death’s dominion arises again in Poe’s fascinating story “The Masque of the Red Death,” wherein Death penetrates the otherwise hermetically sealed castle of Prince Prospero. Poe

may have known a famous fresco, *The Triumph of Death*, by the 14th-century Italian painter Orcagna, upon which the romantic composer Franz Liszt based his series of brilliant variations called *Totentanz*, the dance of death. The last stanza, in which “Down, down that town shall settle hence” (l. 51), hints at the legend of Ys, the fabled city in Brittany that sank beneath the waves. That city was the subject of an opera by Eduard Lalo and of Claude Debussy's haunting piano prelude *Le Cathedrale Engoutie*.

Poe's morbid obsession with dark water reads to us as typical of his equation of tombs with wombs, the waters of amniotic fluid and protected life with the Freudian depths of the unconscious mind. Does Poe love Death or fear Death? The opening, “Lo! Death has reared himself a throne” (l. 1), has the tone of *pride* born of radical individualism: “There shrines and palaces and towers / . . . Resemble nothing that is ours” (ll. 6, 8). Death himself “from a proud tower in the town / . . . looks gigantically down” (ll. 28–29). Poe claims that the city of the dead lies in darkness, yes, but “light from out the lurid sea” (l. 14) still casts an eerie illumination upon the “Babylon-like walls” (l. 18). The wicked city of Babylon invites destruction by the Lord in both Isaiah 14 and 21 and Revelation 16–18. Poe seems to invoke the unholy music of such an accursed place when he tells us the unnatural light streams “Up many and many a marvelous shrine / Whose wreathed friezes intertwine / The viol, the violet, and the vine” (ll. 21–23). We are caught in the throes of what Joseph Conrad called, in *Heart of Darkness*, “the fascination of the abomination.” Stanzas 3 and 4 well invoke a scene from the Apocalypse: “There open fanes and gaping graves / Yawn level with the luminous waves” (ll. 30–31). We are transfixed by “seas . . . hideously serene” (l. 41).

The turn in the poem occurs in the last stanza, which immediately echoes the first: “But lo, a stir is in the air!” (l. 42). The towers of the ghostly city appear to sink, moving “As if their tops had feebly given / A void within the filmy Heaven” (ll. 46–47). The ensuing red glow that engulfs

the town as it sinks heralds a perverse birth: “The hours are breathing faint and low—/ And when, amid no earthly moans, / . . . Hell, rising from a thousand thrones, / Shall do it reverence” (ll. 49–53). We are witness to something uncanny and paradoxical, like William Blake's “Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” The prophet in Isaiah utters, “Hell . . . stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations” (Isaiah 14:9). Has Death achieved some similar but unholy apotheosis? Is it indeed better, to cite Milton's Satan, to reign in hell than to serve in heaven?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain Poe's use of the pronoun *ours* in line 8. In what ways might this poem be designed to tell us something important about our present age?
2. Consider the repeated line “A terrible beauty is born” from “Easter 1916” by William Butler Yeats. How can “The City in the Sea” and the Yeats poem be said to celebrate the same event? Look particularly at Poe's second stanza and lines like “Up domes—up spires—up Kingly halls—” (l. 17).

“To Helen” (1831, revised 1845)

Poe wrote that “To Helen” was inspired by the mother of one his schoolmates, Mrs. Jane Stanard, and is composed of “lines written, in my passionate boyhood, to the first, purely ideal love of my soul” (qtd. in McMichael 541). The Helen of the poem becomes Helen of Troy, daughter of Zeus and a mortal woman, Leda, to whom he appeared as a swan. When Paris stole Helen, he caused the Trojan War, which later inspired Homer's epic *The Iliad*.

Poe's vision of Helen is set entirely in classical conceits within a (Spenserian) sonnet of 15 lines. Poe's strategy is to link his speaker's ardent affection to an enlightened past, extending his love over

epochs. His spirit is likened to that of Odysseus, “The weary, way-worn wanderer” (l. 4) seeking “his own native shore” (l. 5). Those “Nicean” (l. 2) barks of yore musically connect the persona to a home of Dionysus, a wanderer in myth. The narrator has traversed “desperate seas” (l. 6) in search of a time to which he can belong. Always spiritually anachronistic, Poe moves restlessly in search of the stasis and repose Helen—“statue-like”—offers (l. 12). The attraction to Helen’s “Naiad airs” (l. 8) confirms her association with placid, steady waters, as opposed to the rough seas of the narrator’s long experience. She provides clarity to his mind, bearing “the agate lamp within thy hand!” (l. 13), now assuming the character of the mythical Psyche, the Soul and lover of Cupid. That Psyche could no longer love Eros when exposed to the light does not seem to daunt our narrator. When Poe invokes the “Holy Land” (l. 15) as the region of her influence, it would appear that Poe has fused classical and Christian time.

What makes the poem endure is the youthful sincerity of its images, many of which depend on sensory qualities, such as the “perfumed sea” (l. 3) and its direct relation to the “Naiad airs” (l. 8) that Helen emanates. Poe is ever the aesthete, the votary of beauty, which Helen embodies, who takes him to his true home, “the glory that was Greece / And the grandeur that was Rome” (ll. 9–10). The legend of *The Flying Dutchman* must have appealed to Poe, the eternally disenfranchised spirit seeking a “gentle” female figure (Senta in the German legend and Wagner’s opera) to offer him solace and spiritual roots.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Poe’s need for a woman to guide (or lure) him home to Franz Kafka’s persistent search for a female intermediary in *The Trial* or to Ralph Ellison’s nameless narrator’s relation to a woman (Sybil) in his novel *Invisible Man*. Do you see this dependence on a woman as an expression of strength or weakness?
2. To what extent does the poem present an idealized vision of male and female roles? Explain

what you see as the social and personal implications of these roles.

“The Sleeper” (1831)

Walter Pater, the British critic and aesthete, wrote that “all art aspires to the condition of music.” Poe’s poetry subscribes to this maxim, especially “The Sleeper,” which the youthful Poe composed in 1831. In four stanzas of unequal length, Poe describes another of his *lunar* visions (as in “To Science”) that will prove most ambiguous in meaning: At first, the narrator claims to spy “the lake” (l. 13) where “All beauty sleeps!—and lo! where lies / Irene, with her Destinies!” (ll. 16–17). Irene, one of the keepers of the seasons in Greek myth, is also the goddess of peace and wealth. While she sleeps in her chamber, a threatening throng of “wanton airs . . . Laughingly through the lattice drop— / The bodiless airs, a wizard rout, / Flit through thy chamber in and out” (ll. 20–23). Sleeping Beauty lies in danger of violation. The poem is rife with *invisible* powers: The mystic moon emanates “An opiate vapor, dewy, dim” (l. 3), and “bodiless airs . . . flit . . . fitfully—so fearfully— / Above the closed and fringed lid / ’Neath which thy slumb’ring soul lies hid” (ll. 22, 25–27). That the narrator recognizes the lunar scent as “opiate” suggests a drug-induced dream, akin to the vision given to Sir Thomas De Quincey (in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*), to Coleridge (prior to his writing “Kubla Khan”), and to Hector Berlioz (composer of the *Fantastic Symphony*). The narrator is somewhat in awe of the lady’s ability to sleep amid such danger: “Oh, lady dear, has thou no fear? / Why and what art thou dreaming here?” (ll. 30–31). The narrator would seem the protector of the lady’s peace and security: “The lady sleeps! . . . I pray to God that she may lie / Forever with unopened eye, / While the pale sheeted ghosts go by!” (ll. 37, 42–44). By the last stanza, the narrator addresses the lady as “My love, she sleeps! Oh, may her sleep, / As it is lasting, so be deep!” (ll. 45–46).

Many of the images are idyllic in character, and they might incline the reader—given their passing references to “the month of June” (l. 1), “the quiet mountain top” (l. 6), and “the ruin” that “moulders into rest” (l. 12)—to think of the relatively gentle, melancholy musings on mortality in Thomas Gray’s “Ode in a Country Churchyard.” Even the lake in the woods recalls Lethe (l. 13), the river of forgetfulness in Hades. Readers of romance will merge the lake with the sleeping Irene and form the composite image, “The Lady of the Lake.” But more sinister thoughts plague this poem. While the lady sleeps, “Soft may the worms about her creep!” (l. 47). Recall that wanton spirits and crawling worms “try the virginity” of Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” (ll. 27–28). The “black / And winged panels” (ll. 50–51) of the tomb suggest Nemesis with an awful power, “Triumphant, o’er the crested palls / Of her grand family funerals—” (ll. 52–53). The triumph of death also dominates Poe’s tale “The Masque of the Red Death” and provides the subject of Orcagna’s fresco *The Triumph of Death* (located in the Campo Santo in Pisa). Then, with what may be a particular *spite* in Poe, he turns his attention to the lady’s *fallen* childhood: “Some sepulcher, remote, alone, / Against whose portal she hath thrown, / In childhood, many an idle stone— / . . . Thrilling to think, poor child of sin! / It was the dead who groaned within” (ll. 54–60). Has the lady, in her childish irreverence, violated some sacred precinct? The declaration “She ne’er shall force an echo more” (l. 58) carries an implication of rape, of *wanton* violence. Has the lady been condemned to death by the dead? “Strange is thy pallor! Strange thy dress! / Strange, above all, thy length of tress, / And this solemn silentness!” (ll. 34–36). Is even the goddess of peace and harmony the fruit of man’s fallen nature? Combining possible images from the fairy tale “Rapunzel” (Grimm 1812) with his own gothic machinery, Poe creates a disturbing tapestry of sight and sound that, Sphinx-like, poses more riddles than it answers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the way that Poe’s concentration on the atmosphere generated by sleep allows the

narrator to express inner fears and desires. What might the narrator be disclosing about his own subconscious or the inner desires of others?

2. Compare the narrative style of Poe’s “The Sleeper” to Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1833). Do both poets envision the tensions surrounding their respective ladies in the same way? Walt Whitman composed an extended poem titled “The Sleepers.” In what ways are his musings as “ghoulish” as those of Poe’s narrator?

“Sonnet—Silence” (1840)

Poe composed his Sonnet “Silence” in 1840, revising it in 1845. Poe chooses a 15-line version of the sonnet form, a throwback to the work of Edmund Spenser. The poem asserts the double, dual character of humanity, a notion that extends from sources in the Persian, Manichean notion that the forces of darkness and light perpetually battle for supremacy. Poe chooses to characterize the tension as between the “incorporate” (l. 1) and the “corporate” (l. 10). The eternal struggle of light and dark, humanity’s “double life” (l. 2), had always been a persistent theme in literature, for example, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, but the romantics made it their special fixation, culminating in works like Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the world of music, for instance, the romantic composer Robert Schumann (1810–56) divided his own soul into two personalities, Florestan and Eusebius, the former his aggressive, masculine side, and the latter his feminine, poetic self. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* betrays aspects of this same theme of dualism in human nature, and Poe might well allude to that novel’s austere setting in the arctic regions when he claims that a shadow (l. 13) of the dead “haunteth the lone regions where hath trod / No foot of man” (ll. 14–15). When Poe calls this distressing figure an “elf” (l. 13), he invokes his own invention, “the imp of the perverse,” by which he indicts Man for his capacity for mischief in this world.

Poe’s language in this poem is deliberately old and arcane, with words like *bath* (ll. 11, 14), *thee*

(l. 13), *haunted* (l. 14), and *thysself* (l. 15) the most obvious. But the entire tenor of the poem is slow and melancholy, a funeral dirge that mirrors its theme of a basic enmity between competing primal forces. Poe achieves what he always sought in his compositions, a *unity of effect*, a focusing of all elements of the work on a single central theme, observation, or emotion. Poe's use of the term *shade* (l. 4) suggests Homer, Dante, and Milton, all poets who envision the land of the dead. Poe claims the corporeal dead evince no terror and asserts that the dead man's silence is final: His name is "No more" (l. 9). The connection to the "Nevermore" of Poe's "The Raven" seems quite close. The problem lies in Poe's version, or vision, of the "incorporate" (l. 1), which constitutes "that twin entity" (l. 3), the "two-fold *Silence*" (l. 5). Rather than explain his assertion, Poe offers metaphors—"solid and shade" (l. 4), "sea and shore" (l. 5), "Body and Soul" (l. 6)—as manifestations of a division that "springs" (l. 3) from another schism, that of "matter and light" (l. 4).

Poe does offer one contrast, or consolation: that one of these beings inhabits "lonely places, / Newly with grass overgrown" (ll. 6–7), an indication of graves that the silent grass has freshly covered. The departed is rendered "terrorless" (l. 9) by the application of "some solemn graces, / Some human memories and tearful lore" (ll. 7–8), all of which provide the departed with a name, a history, an epitaph, and a sense of loss among those who mourn him. These "conventions" and ceremonies of death—or death's rituals—involve sound, not silence. The sounds of mourning would appear to render the Dead harmless; his death falls within the scheme of life, and so we should "dread him not!" (l. 10). His capacity for evil appears neutralized. Then Poe casts doubt on the finality of death in the last quatrain: Some element, some "shadow" (l. 13) remains unsatisfied—dare we assume that some "silence" is responsible? We do know that the "elf" (l. 13) is "nameless" (l. 13), so perhaps its very anonymity is the source of its evil power. Here we might recall those three witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* who perform "a deed without a name" (3, 4, 50). The original sin

has no "first" name. The word *untimely* (l. 12) relates well to that play, since it is rife with words and phrases beset by the prefix *un*. Poe ends his poem with a veiled threat: Should you encounter this fearsome, nameless shadow figure, by dint of "some urgent fate" (l. 12), then "commend thyself to God!" (l. 15).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Identify points in the poem that demonstrate Poe's efforts to create a "unity of effect." Explain what his aim is and how his particular selection of terms supports that aim.
2. How might you compare Poe's vision of "sea and shore" (l. 5) as connected by silence to that of Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach," which offers an image of calm as its first impression?
3. Find other sources of dualism in romantic literature; for example, the doppelgänger idea in Goethe and its echoes in works like *The Double* by Dostoyevsky and "The Horla" by Guy de Maupassant.

"The Raven" (1844)

Poe's most famous poem, "The Raven," was composed in 1844 and revised twice, in 1845 and 1849. While many can quote this poem verbatim, few try to discuss its meaning. It appears to concern an emotionally desolate man in the "bleak December" (7), bereaved by the death of his lost love, Lenore, who is visited by a Raven, which rather significantly perches itself atop of a bust of Pallas Athena and squawks, "Nevermore" at its outraged human host until he suffers distraction. There are 18 stanzas, each divided into groups of six lines, of which the last three lines rhyme, perhaps influenced by Dante's *terza rima* (interlocking iambic tercets: *ababcb*) for *The Divine Comedy*. Poe consciously chose the name *Lenore* to capitalize on its melancholy sound and its rhyming with many other words. With his innate ear for music, Poe likewise created poetic lines of inner rhyme, alliterative resonance, and emotional repetition that would unify the somber, even nerve-wracking

effect of this bird's intrusion into a man's private anguish.

We must assume that at the poem's outset, the narrator has been pondering "over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore" (l. 2) both to gain solace for the loss of the "rare and radiant maiden" (l. 11) and perhaps to discover some arcane knowledge to restore her from the dead. The very thought that his earnest attempts at resurrection may have elicited the desired response accounts for the fact that the tapping at the door at midnight "Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors" (l. 14) and had him "dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before" (l. 26). The connection to Victor Frankenstein's project of raising the dead comes to mind, and its "hellish" implications reverberate in "The Raven" when the narrator returns to his chamber, "all my soul within me burning" (l. 31). His desire for salvation from his various passions projects upon the Raven an association with "the saintly days of yore" (l. 38) when it first steps into his chamber. The bird is an emissary of nature, that eternal object of romantic pantheism to which America's first prophet-philosopher RALPH WALDO EMERSON attached the powers of religious revelation and redemption. "The Raven" will prove to be a bitter tonic to Emerson's optimistic projections about Nature, for Poe, as did his contemporaries NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE and HERMAN MELVILLE, saw not only innate goodness in nature, but simultaneously the source of evil.

Symbolically the Raven climbs "upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door" (l. 41), presumably offering "a higher wisdom" than the patron goddess of ancient Athens, the goddess of wisdom in Greek myth. Whether "the ungainly fowl" (l. 49) is named *Nevermore* or can merely repeat the word unendingly becomes a moot point, since the narrator takes up a velvet, cushioned seat "in front of bird, and bust and door" (l. 68) to listen to its interminably repetitious message, its "saintly" association transformed into a fowl "whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core" (l. 74). The "trinity" of images—bird, bust, door—before the narrator sits converts the chamber into

a parody of Emerson's "Transparent Eyeball," the all-seeing eye of the prescient poet. The bird has become a demon sent from night's plutonian shore (l. 47), a tempter to remind the unavailing Orpheus that his Eurydice, Lenore, can never be retrieved from Hades's clutches. The narrator suffers an emotional paroxysm of lost faith: "Tempter sent . . . tell me truly, I implore— / Is there—is there balm in Gilead?" (ll. 86, 89). The reference is to Jeremiah 8:22, itself a biblical book of lamentations. When he inquires whether his beloved Lenore has ascended to heaven, the Raven only retorts, "Nevermore" (l. 98). In his despair, the narrator calls the Raven "Prophet . . . thing of evil!" (l. 91) and orders the "bird or devil" (l. 92) to quit his door, as his room has become an emotional "torture chamber." In a variation of the Promethean image, the bird has buried its beak in his heart (l. 101), and having refused to leave, the bird seems symbolically wedded to the tormented narrator, whose soul lies prostrate in the spiritual shadow cast by the demon. Perhaps responding to an image from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Poe has pushed spiritual despair and loneliness to the depths, like Coleridge's "woman wailing for her demon lover!" ("Kubla Khan" l. 16).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Poe's narrator's reaction to the raven, to nature in general, compare to that of William Cullen Bryant as expressed in "To a Water-fowl"? Does Poe understand nature as exterior to thought or as the product of thought?
2. Consider how personal reactions to the flight of birds affect the narrators of "The Windhover" (Gerard Manley Hopkins) and "The Second Coming" (William Butler Yeats). Explain why birds are assigned such roles by these poets.
3. Discuss the rhythmic progression and interlocking sound patterns as the poem inevitably reminds the narrator of his impotence in human and metaphysical affairs. Where in the poem might a reader detect a metrical dissolution that reflects the narrator's disillusionment with transcendent consolations?

“Ulalume” (1847)

“Ulalume” exhibits many of the qualities that those who seek to reduce Poe to stereotypes assign to him: the haunted, morbid, gothic atmosphere; the compulsion to emotional extremes; the sense of an oppressive guilt; a vocabulary and scheme of allusions that seem deliberately abstruse. In several respects, these very criticisms could be laid at the feet of one of Poe’s more sarcastic commentators, T.S. Eliot. The argument has been made that the sheer sounds of “Ulalume” provide its allure and obscure its meaning. We might look to Goethe’s *Faust*, known to Poe through his vast readings in continental literature, for some literary model of the spiritual quest for enlightenment and absolution; Byron’s *Manfred* similarly takes the reader on an equally exotic odyssey of the mind, all in search of expiation for some nameless crime and unrelieved guilt.

“Ulalume” is set in nine stanzas, a narrative that would seem to reveal how the nameless narrator lost his own soul, or, conversely, how he began to realize his eternal guilt. By the time the narrator and Psyche arrive at the tomb of Ulalume, we have noted images rife in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “Annabel Lee,” and classical mythology. The poem begins “in the lonesome October” (l. 5), and, two stanzas later, we read that the narrator and his Soul, Psyche, “knew not that the month was October, / And we marked not the month of the year— / (Ah, night of all nights of the year!)” (ll. 24–26). Shall we assume that the night is Halloween? We do see that for the first 31 lines, the dominant images are those of spiritual decline: “The skies they were ashen and sober; / The leaves they were crisped and sere— / The leaves they were withering and sere” (ll. 1–3). The weary sentiment almost literally seizes lines from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: “My way of life / Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf / And that which should accompany old age” (5.2.26–28). The conversation of the narrator and Psyche is likewise “palsied and sere— / Our memories were treacherous and sere—” (ll. 22–23). Even the night was “senescent,” suggest-

ing that aged human wits and memory are not to be trusted. When that impression is combined with the images of “the dark tarn of Auber / In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir” (ll. 9–10), we are prepared for the themes of crime, self-deception, and unnatural revelation that we find in Shakespeare’s Scottish tragedy.

At line 32, the light breaks upon a new day, represented as the birth of a Phoenician goddess: “At the end of our path a liquescent / And nebulous luster was born, / Out of which a miraculous crescent / Arose with a duplicate horn— / Astarte’s bediamonded crescent / Distinct with its duplicate horn” (ll. 34–39). While Astarte is a fertility deity, it is “to the Lethean peace of the skies” (l. 47), the mythic river of forgetfulness, that the narrator aspires through her guidance. Psyche is less enthralled with Astarte and her association with the constellation Leo: “Sadly this star I mistrust— / Oh, hasten!—oh, let us not linger! / Oh, fly! —let us fly! —for we must” (ll. 53–56). Once more, we look to *Macbeth* and its hapless victim, Lady Macduff, for a spiritual parallel: “Whither should I fly?” (4.2.81). When Psyche’s plumes “trailed in the dust— / Till they sorrowfully trailed in the dust” (ll. 60–61), we are well aware that Macbeth’s ambitions, too, end with “dusty death” (5.5.26). Dismissing Psyche’s fears, the narrator “tempted her out of her gloom” (l. 74), only to be “stopped by the door of a tomb” (l. 76). When Psyche tells him the sepulcher belongs to the lost Ulalume, he suddenly recalls that “last year” (l. 87) he “brought a dread burden down here” (l. 90), presumably the corpse of Ulalume, because he murdered her or was otherwise complicit in her death. “Ah, what demon has tempted me here?” (l. 92) remains an unanswered riddle, though it perhaps explains the days when his heart “was volcanic / As the scorific rivers that roll— / As the lavas that restlessly roll / Their sulphurous currents down Yaanek / In the ultimate climes of the pole—” (ll. 14–18). The Dantesque descent complete, the narrator must face his repressed guilt, that he has sacrificed his beloved perhaps in his vain pursuit of “Hope and . . . Beauty” (l. 66).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is it possible to identify the basis of the narrator's sacrifice of his cherished Ulalume? Is it likely that a sane man would have forgotten, in a year, the death (or murder) of his beloved?
2. Would the narrator of "Ulalume" find kinsmen in Hawthorne's "Artist of the Beautiful" or the husband in "The Birth-mark"? Consider the lines from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* "I myself am Heaven and Hell." How might these words relate to "Ulalume"?

"The Bells" (1848)

"The Bells" appeared in 1849, three months after Poe's death; he had composed it in 1848. Set as an ode in irregular stanza lengths, each longer than its predecessor, the four sections, or "movements," of the piece celebrate a successive stage in the development of human life. Each "bell," or stage of life, has its own metal, a device Plato had employed in his "Allegory of the Metals" in *The Republic* to differentiate the respective "values" (to the state) of human beings. What has kept readers in thrall to this poem are its kinetic powers of onomatopoeia, its alliterative speed, and the sheer tempo of its linear transmission. Poe has the poetic line expand and retreat, and we recall the dynamics of George Herbert's metaphysical poetry. Clearly Poe intended the poem as a "performance piece," a moment of musical "theater" and verbal/oral virtuosity, worthy of imitators, such as Dylan Thomas, who would follow Poe's model.

Stanza 1 celebrates the vivacity of life. The "sledges with the bells— / Silver bells!" (ll. 1–2) convey an image of troikas (horse-drawn sleds) rushing through the snow on a winter night. The order of the world is assured; the sense of childhood faith permeating the landscape becomes spiritualized in "crystalline delight" (l. 8). Time itself, "in a sort of Runic rhyme" (l. 10), peals forth as a musical experience, charming, enchanted.

Stanza 2 captures the union of man and nature in a series of superheated images, liquid fire. We

"hear the mellow wedding bells / Golden bells!" (ll. 15–16). The golden age has returned, the time of original innocence, prelapsarian Adam and Eve. "What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!" (l. 17). The bliss quickly finds consummation: "How they ring out their delight!" (19). In rather overt sexual terms, Poe lets nature take its course: "From the molten-golden notes (20) / . . . What a liquid ditty floats (22) / . . . What a gush of euphony voluminously wells! / How it swells!" (ll. 26–27). Poetic "climax" occurs on the subatomic level: "Oh, from out the sounding cells, / What a gush of euphony" (ll. 25–26). Of course, "cells" (l. 25) could suggest confinement, just as "sledges" (l. 1) could suggest the hammer blows of fate. The tenor of the stanza, however, disregards human limits and rather celebrates power and possibility: "How it dwells / In the Future! how it tells / Of the rapture" (ll. 28–29).

Stanza 3 expresses the paroxysms of approaching death, the ghastly realization of human mortality. "Hear the loud alarum bells— / Brazen bells" (ll. 34–35). That same Promethean fire that gave birth to man also consumes him. The frenzied pealing of the bells "in a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire, / In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire" (ll. 42–43) proves fruitless. The image is reminiscent of Macbeth's "Out out, brief candle!" (*Macbeth* 5.5.26). The "harmony of the world" (in Johannes Kepler's phrase) is no more. The bells "can only shriek, shriek, / Out of tune" (ll. 40–41). Poe invokes another *conjunctio*, another macabre consummation, but this time it presages evil fruit: "How they clang, and clash, and roar! / What a horror they outpour / On the bosom of the palpitating air!" (ll. 52–54). Where in the second stanza the "turtle-dove . . . gloats / On the moon!" (22–23), there as an object of ardor and affection; the moon in stanza 3 has become the symbol of irrational ambition: The bronze bells are heard to leap "higher, higher, higher / With a desperate desire, / And a resolute to endeavor, / Now—now to sit or never, / By the side of the pale-faced moon" (ll. 44–48). The jarring battalions

of sound herald a mighty disjunction between will and necessity, personal pride and humanity's fate. This third stanza is Poe's equivalent to Dylan Thomas's "rage, rage at the dying of the light."

Stanza 4 commands us to ask not for whom the bell tolls. Both the poet John Donne and the *Dies Irae* from the Requiem Mass seem close at hand, and it is no accident that the Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninov set "The Bells" to music as his *Opus 35*, since he was himself obsessed with the Day of Judgment. "Hear the tolling of the bells— / Iron bells!" (ll. 67–68). The implacable "iron" conveys a world of apathy to humanity's suffering consciousness. We are cast into Dante's Inferno, and "They are Ghouls" (l. 85) who delight in the rolling of a millstone on the human heart, who feel "a glory in so rolling / On the human heart a stone—" (ll. 81–82). Moreover, it appears to be death, or even the devil alone, who grinds humanity into dust and despair: "And their king it is who tolls, / And he rolls, rolls, rolls / Rolls / A paean from the bells!" (ll. 86–89). We note "his merry bosom swells" (l. 90) with pride and sustenance as he consumes humanity. The ghouls themselves are "neither man nor woman— / They are neither brute nor human" (ll. 83–84), an amorphous race or half-life likewise made flesh by H. G. Wells in his novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. The music of this horror is a "muffled monotone" (l. 80) of "melancholy menace" (l. 72), and its figures inflame the ghoulish king as "he dances, and he yells; / Keeping time, time, time, / In a sort of Runic rhyme" (ll. 92–94), a parody of the springtime sentiment of childlike faith conveyed at line 10. Behind all the "hieroglyphs" of nature, in spite of Emerson, HENRY DAVID THOREAU, and their transcendental ilk, stands death, the ultimate, cosmic dancer, and the final "moaning and groaning of the bells" (l. 109) marks the knell of human aspirations.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider Poe's specific use of rhythm and meter to suggest a deterioration of bliss and personal control as the various bells signify the onrush of death and destruction. Select specific passages from the poem and explain how rhythm and meter function in them.
2. Do you see a parallel in this poem's presentation of vain ambition with words of the second apparition in *Macbeth*, who demands of Macbeth that he "be bloody, bold, and *resolute*. Laugh to scorn the power of man" (*Macbeth* 4.1.90–91)? What is the tone of Poe's narrator? Is he sympathetic to or disdainful of humanity?

"Annabel Lee" (1849)

Poe wrote "Annabel Lee" in 1849, revising the last line, "In her tomb by the sounding sea" (l. 50), to read "In her tomb by the side of the sea" (l. 50), which many editors consider an unfortunate change. Still, the poem remains among Poe's most popular lyrics, a passionate paean to his favorite theme of love and death, a conceit that extends to Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Isis and Osiris, and any number of Greek myths. Without being glib, we may assert that wombs and tombs define much of Poe's oeuvre and his sensibility about nature; the terms often fuse, a distinction without a difference. The music of the poem, its internal rhyme and mesmerizing use of repetition, both enchants and haunts the reader.

In six stanzas, the poet establishes a lyric narrative, a concentrated love story set as a ballad. The narrator and Annabel Lee inhabit an unidentified "kingdom by the sea" (ll. 2, 8, 10) where "we loved with a love that was more than love" (l. 9), so that "the winged seraphs of Heaven / Coveted her and me" (ll. 11–12). At two key points, the narrator finds the "reason" (ll. 12, 23) for Annabel Lee's demise to be heaven's covetousness and heaven's "envying" (l. 22) her and me. There is something defiant, idolatrous, or possibly blasphemous in the love of the narrator and Annabel Lee, and while the narrator attributes her death to heaven twice, he admits that neither "the angels in Heaven above / Nor the *demons* down under the sea" (ll. 30–21) can ever separate him from his great love. The possibility that dark forces

could be active in her death does not dissuade him from joining her after death (though no overt demise overtakes him) “in her sepulchre there by the sea” (l. 40). If the narrator has not died—and we might well assume this from the poet’s use of active voice to tell us “I lie down by the side / Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride” (ll. 38–39)—then the implication becomes infinitely more ghastly, with thoughts of necrophilia. We never do discover what led to Annabel Lee’s being “shut up, in a sepulcher / In this kingdom by the sea” (ll. 19–20) or exactly how the narrator gained entry to this sacred space, or *temenos*. Perhaps such penetrating, magical power is a factor of the spirit of youth: “She was a child and I was a child, / In this kingdom by the sea” (ll. 7–8). Perhaps Poe has assumed that William Wordsworth’s “childlike faith” provides him a kind of immunity or transparency (Ralph Waldo Emerson) to gain access to his lover’s sequestered bower.

While the passionate beauty of the poem may render futile “reasonable” attempts to decipher the amorous riddles with which it is rife, we can see that “her highborn kinsmen came / And bore her away from me” (ll. 17–18), a suggestion that social status, and not the intervention of spirits, is responsible for their separation. The narrator and Annabel Lee take a stand against those both “older” (l. 28) and “wiser” (l. 29) than they and occupy the same tomb “all the nighttide” (l. 38). The narrator looks to “the moon” (l. 34) and “the stars” (l. 36) and sees “the bright eyes / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee” (ll. 36–37). Whether this narrative is real or merely the “lunatic,” moon-struck ravings of an amorous dreamer the reader must decide.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Does “the wind” that destroys Annabel Lee represent a natural force or some punishing Nemesis that prevents the narrator from pursuing a normal relationship? Is the narrator’s and Annabel Lee’s a “reasonable” or “reasoned” relationship? Do women in Poe’s oeuvre have to be dead in order for his personae to relate to them at all? Why?
2. Shall we take this narrative on a literal, realistic level, or is the entire poem a paean to ideal love as perceived by a person suffering arrested emotional development? Compare “Annabel Lee” with Wordsworth’s “Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known”: What imagery and sensibilities do they share? Do we have a right to assume that Poe may have been responding to Wordsworth’s lyric?
3. What other works of literature that deal with arrested emotional development can you identify? Name two or three and justify your response. Would Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” with its own version of obsessive love and desire, qualify? Why or why not?

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (1837)

Poe composed his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, as an apparently “unfinished” story in 25 chapters and a “Note,” using an experimental style in which early events find a parallel in later chapters of the narrative. A strangely eclectic tale, the story involves a seagoing narrator who travels on two major vessels, the American brig *Grampus* and another ship, the *Jane*, the latter of which makes its way into the Antarctic. In each case, atrocities and butcheries occur, and Pym claims that “it appears to me a thousand wonders I am alive to-day.” What begins as a fairly conventional sea adventure, in the manner of *Robinson Crusoe*, evolves into a gothic odyssey rife with allusions to Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the book of Revelation, and apocalyptic visions of the hollow earth, concluding with the appearance of “a shrouded white human figure” who might represent death or some metaphysical entity. Poe actually involves himself in the tale, because Pym purportedly trusted Poe with the incomplete manuscript. It seems Mr. Poe “expressed interest in my statement . . . which related to the Antarctic Ocean.”

Pym early expresses his “greatest desire to go to sea.” A stowaway aboard the brig *Grampus*, Pym

admits possessing a fecund imagination, one that predicts the future course of his experience aboard the *Jane*:

My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown.

As does Daniel Defoe's classic narrative of sea travel *Robinson Crusoe*, Poe's narrative includes aspects of providential design, of ill-fated "conceptions," "labors," and thwarted "deliverances" that suggest unnatural gestations and births, often "miscarriages" of human justice. Pym will explore "events . . . of the most unconceived and unconceivable character." At one point, in chapter 10, when Pym and his few surviving shipmates are in dire straits at sea, seeking rescue, they spy "a large hermaphrodite brig, of a Dutch build." They note "three seamen, whom by their dress we took to be Hollanders." At first, their hopes embrace the vision of rescue joyfully: "our hearts leaped up wildly . . . shouts and thanksgiving to God for the deliverance." But, typically of the pattern of the novel, the scene quickly degenerates into a gothic nightmare, as the survivors have inadvertently caught a glimpse of the famous haunted ship *The Flying Dutchman*: "a smell, a stench . . .—hellish—utterly suffocating—insufferable, inconceivable . . . triple horror of that spectacle. We palpably saw that not a soul lived in that fated vessel." The "pilot" of the dead ship turns out to be a seagull "feasting on a corpse" standing at the wheel, a grotesque vision of nature's unholy stewardship.

In chapter 11, the survivors of the mutiny aboard the *Grampus* themselves devolve, by dint of hunger and privation, to cannibal measures in order to endure. They embrace a kind of "madness . . . the sad reverse of our prospects . . . Parker . . . proposed . . . that one of us should die to preserve the existence of the others." Pym himself will succumb, in chapter 24, to an explicit death wish, a spiritual collapse engendered by his own imaginative faculties, his own unnamed guilt, compounded

by any number of appearances in the Antarctic of Coleridge's fateful albatross, his bird of irredeemable guilt:

the vast depths yet to be descended . . . I found these fancies [of our destruction] creating their own realities, and all imagined horrors crowding upon me in fact. . . . My whole soul was pervaded with a longing to fall; a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. . . . I felt a new being. . . . We now found ourselves not far from the ravine . . . those dreary regions marking the site of degraded Babylon.

One of Poe's favorite vehicles for horrific effect, the idea of premature burial, occurs twice in the novel. The first occurrence involves Pym's abandonment to a cargo hold aboard the *Grampus*, on which he has secretly stowed away. His sealing in without adequate food and water finds its parallel in chapter 21, when the indigenous population has engineered a massive cave-in on the European sailors, and Poe and his mate Peters are entombed in a collapsed earthen fissure. Poe then has Pym expound the bodily and psychic terror of death in life:

We were consequently lost for ever, being thus entombed alive. . . . I firmly believed that no incident ever occurring in the course of human events is better adapted to inspire the supremacy of mental and bodily distress than a case like our own, of living inhumation. The blackness of darkness which envelops the victim, the terrific oppression of lungs, the stifling fumes from the damp earth, unite with the ghastly considerations that we are beyond the remotest confines of hope, and that such is the allotted portion of the dead. To carry into the human heart a degree of appalling awe and horror not to be tolerated—never to be conceived.

A combination of Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's journey to *Inferno*, Poe's narrative embraces human extremes, as in his description of the race

of black wild men led by Too-Wit, determined to ingratiate themselves with the European explorers only to annihilate them. "The savages . . . appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the earth." The sufferings exacted by Pym's journey might be the tragic price for the sin of intellectual pride, that same scientific curiosity condemned, respectively by Goethe and Shelley in *Faust* and *Prometheus Unbound*, their romantic critiques of overweening scientific investigation:

I warmly pressed upon [Captain Guy] the expediency of persevering, at least for a few days longer, in the direction we were now holding. So tempting an opportunity of solving the great problem, in regard to an Antarctic continent had never yet been afforded to man. . . . While I cannot but lament the most unfortunate and bloody events which immediately arose from my advice, I must still be allowed to feel some degree of satisfaction at having been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of them most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention.

The cause of science justifies the nightmares it exacts on human souls. Pym will speak (in chapter 28) of "that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled." These same "miracles" will prove as perfidious as they are blessed: Poe has become ambivalent on the topic of nature. The natives of Antarctica will warrant another sort of superlative, as "among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe," who will reap "the full and perfect fruits of their treachery." Whether Pym's final account of March 21–22, his having traveled into the heated waters of the Antarctic Ocean, "the enkindled ocean," represents transcendence or damnation remains a matter for literary speculation. If *The Flying Dutchman* vessel is "hermaphroditic," so too is Mother Nature's sickly womb, "warm" and "milky white,"

and lorded over by a menacing, male figure who appears to beckon Pym to oblivion.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Poe's account to another piece of fantastic literature that imagines a voyage into unexplored territory, such as *At the Mountains of Madness*, the work of Poe's literary successor, H. P. Lovecraft. How does each author depict the most desolate of Earth's unexplored continents? What larger themes does each develop by means of these depictions?
2. Examine Poe's depiction of "native" behavior. Is he possibly being sarcastic and ironic in his vision, perhaps writing an allegorical work after Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*?

"Ligeia" (1838)

The tale "Ligeia," which Poe considered his finest, synthesizes a number of characteristic themes in Poe's work, not the least of which is his fascination with the theory of *metempsychosis*, a belief in the transmigration of souls after death. Derived from Eleusinian Orphism, the idea that the soul is immortal and can move through time and space to inhabit another form of material life finds its way into several dialogues of Plato. Between 1838 and 1850, Poe fashioned a number of stories that deal with or allude to the subject, such as "Metzengerstein," "Eleonora," and "The Oblong Box." Poe's immediate literary model appears to be Coleridge's vampire poem "Christabel" (1816), in which the conventional notions of virtue suffer a literal rape, and a demonic, female nature triumphs without pity. In her sadistic desire to preserve what time and death strip away, an aggressive Mother Nature usurps daylight values and regresses into the womb of night. Poe ascribes such power to Ligeia's indomitable will, which subjugates first the narrator and then his second wife, the lady Rowena.

What makes Poe a romantic writer, beyond his penchant for the gothic, is his absolute equation of love and death, a motif Denis de Rougemont has

traced, via the Tristan myth, in his study *Love in the Western World*. Moreover, in his theory of poetics, Poe expressed the belief that the most perfect subject for a poem (and, therefore, by extension, a short story) would be “the death . . . of a beautiful woman” as told through “the lips . . . of a bereaved lover.” This short story fits that description perfectly. Even though the narrator marries the lady Rowena, he can never put aside, or ignore, the power of his love for the lady Ligeia, and it is possible that it is this all-abounding, all-absorbing love that helps the lady Ligeia to return to the narrator at the end of the story.

Lady Rowena is the antithesis of the lady Ligeia. She is also beautiful, but she is blonde, simple, and unsophisticated. Whereas the lady Ligeia was superior to this world, Lady Rowena, whom the narrator grows to loathe “with a hatred belonging more to a demon than to man,” is merely earthly and temporal. In contrast to the metaphysical and spiritual qualities of the lady Ligeia, whom the narrator calls “the august, the beautiful, the entombed,” Lady Rowena embodies the material and mortal qualities of this physical world. Thus, in one simplistic interpretation of the story, the narrator exchanges a world of beautiful, transcendent, ethereal reality for a world of material reality. On another plane, however, we see the tendency for Poe’s male persona to yield authority to a “fascinating” female who cannot be approached sexually except in death. Ligeia, moreover, evinces an impressive array of “masculine” qualities that convert her “Orphic” status into that of psychic rapist. While a “prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion,” she exerts her daunting erudition upon the passive narrator: “How singularly—how thrillingly, this one point in the nature of my wife has forced itself, at this late period only, upon my attention!” The epithets *wild* and *fierce* characterize Ligeia’s character, and the narrator persistently celebrates “her infinite supremacy” and “vast . . . triumph,” to which the narrator resigns himself “with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation.” After her loss, the

alchemy of their master-slave relationship reveals its inverted status: “Wanting the radiant luster of her eyes, letters, lambent and golden, grew duller than Saturnian lead.” Perhaps the entrapped male finds temporary relief in his loss of Ligeia, since he claims that “in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection.”

Ligeia presumably takes her name from Milton, in which she appears as one of the Homeric Sirens. The narrator speaks of “her low musical language,” which by degrees takes his heart in thrall. The narrator invokes an amorous blasphemy in his love, when he calls his love—or “caprice”—a “wildly romantic offering on the shrine of the most passionate devotion.” Ligeia’s attractiveness, beyond the physical, involves her uncanny erudition, a preoccupation with studies “adapted to deaden impressions of the outward world.” Oddly Ligeia has no paternal name; she seems a parthenogenetic phenomenon, self-created and creating, like Alph, the sacred river in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” Throughout the tale, the epithet *wild* permeates every vivid memory of the narrator’s experience of Ligeia. Always the narrator’s language, his metaphors and superlative conceits, insinuates the inevitable apotheosis of Ligeia. She is more a force than a mortal woman, and she cannot be subject either to common morality or to mortality.

The tale opens in some “dim and decaying city by the Rhine” and then, after the death of Ligeia, shifts to a nameless abbey “in one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England.” Commentators have pointed out Poe’s borrowing from aspects of Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” for the description of the abbey. Its subsequent invasion by a vampiric figure easily points to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. With Ligeia’s death Poe’s narrator speaks of himself as having been “crushed into the very dust with sorrow,” imagery from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The narrator subsequently trades one form of bondage for another: He becomes a slave to opium, and he speaks of his marriage to the lady Rowena as “a moment of mental alienation” attributable to his addiction, a weakness he characterizes as “child-like perversity” and “incipient madness.”

Then Poe describes the bridal chamber, whose careful detail of color imagery, its “sole window” with its “single pane . . . tinted of a leaden hue,” conjoined with the “melancholy vaulting” of the room, with its “single chain of gold with a long link,” suggest that an evil alchemy is at work, and that Ligeia’s invasive appearance well may be the result of her having discovered the philosopher’s stone. That the “stone” may have altered its form so as to undo the new wife becomes apparent when Lady Rowena drinks some wine into which “three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored liquid” have invaded. The narrator forbears to mention the “poison” to Lady Rowena, since he may have been unduly influenced by “a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, by the opium, and by the hour.” The unholy trinity of causation trivializes Lady Rowena’s imminent demise and simultaneously imparts a “sacred” power to Ligeia’s command of dark forces. As Camille Paglia puts it, “She defies God’s law of mortality because she, not he, is the resurrection and the life” (574). The Eastern sensibility of the room, its bridal couch and “pall-like canopy,” along with the constant reference to “draperies,” convey the eerie, Byzantine admixture of betrayal and sterile constancy the narrator must enact in order to remain worthy of his true beloved, Ligeia.

By the end of “this hideous drama of revivification,” the narrator sits “rigidly upon an ottoman,” a helpless prey to a whirl of violent emotions. The shrouded form of Rowena awakes and advances toward him, and the narrator remains “paralyzed— . . . chilled . . . into stone.” His beloved Ligeia has indeed risen, but her affect is Gorgonian, for even transfixed as he is, we witness “a mad disorder” and an “inexpressible madness” as the resurrected female advances. The huge masses of long, black hair—*blacker than the raven wings of the midnight*—reveal the horrid truth of Ligeia’s ascension, her “black and wild eyes” causing her lover to *shriek* in full recognition of his dearest wish fulfilled. Medusa has entered to claim her steadfast admirer.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Poe clearly emphasizes the respective facial features of Ligeia and Lady Rowena. Some critics believe he does this in part because of his belief in the discredited “science” of phrenology. How would this explain the willing slavery of the narrator to Ligeia’s domineering spirit?
2. How might the “madness” motif in “Ligeia” be applied to D. H. Lawrence’s “The Rocking Horse Winner” and to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*? Consider the ways in which these works examine the relationship of madness to lives not governed by moral restraint.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)

If Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* can be categorized as “the tragedy of thought,” Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” can be regarded as “the disintegration of the artistic mind.” The tale is ambitious, even for Poe, as it embraces several gothic and romantic conventions—such as premature burial—along with any number of biblical and classical allusions. The very shape of the Usher castle, juxtaposed with the phrenological details of Roderick Usher’s features, suggests that we have entered into the labyrinth of the mind, in this case, the psyche of an artist cut off from the source of his creativity. On another plane, Poe’s narrative persona offers a rare glimpse into the horrific intricacies of the pagan birth process, an incestuous relationship that precedes moral civilization, as the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris are said to have copulated in the womb. The intensity of the epiphany afforded our narrator is a blinding truth, and he will force his visions, these “considerations beyond our depth,” downward, into the dark abyss of the triumphant tarn, the muddy world of the libidinous subconscious.

The tale proceeds as a social call: A nameless narrator answers the request of an old boyhood friend, Roderick Usher, to provide social solace from some nameless, debilitating malady that has rendered Usher neurasthenic to a pathological degree. Usher has become morbidly acute in all his

senses, literally too sensitive to endure life. Both the House of Usher and its environs have no specific locale other than “a singularly dreary tract of country,” a wasteland, and the melancholy atmosphere of the House of Usher, its aura of moral oppressiveness and self-containment, has another revealing trait: the “barely perceptible fissure” that proceeds down the length of the structure of the building, a suggestion of bifurcated consciousness or schizophrenia. The narrator finds the state of Usher’s health shocking; Usher reveals that part of his moral gloom is traceable to the imminent death of his cataleptic twin sister, Madeline, “his last and only relative on earth.” The narrator indicates that the Usher family suffers hereditary physiological degeneration as a result of inbreeding, of what Poe tactfully calls “collateral issue . . . undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony of the name.” Madeline dies and is buried in the family crypt, after which a fearful tempest arises. As the narrator and Usher spend the night reading the “Mad Trist” of Sir Launcelot Canning, life imitates art as the literary knight Ethelred shatters the hermit’s door, and we hear the death cry of the dragon; so, too, the resurrected Lady Madeline enters in full fury through the portals of the library. She falls upon her brother and kills him. As the narrator flees the scene, the “full, setting, and blood-red moon” expands the fissure of the House of Usher, and the edifice sinks below “the deep and dark tarn at my feet.”

We cannot interpret the tale realistically, as weird commentary on mismanaged real estate. Clearly the narrator has penetrated into some inner sanctum, which may well be some form of Egyptian pyramid. In Roderick Usher, the aging and withered “pharaoh,” Poe has created an archetypal creative neurotic, the model for further studies by Loris Huysmans and Oscar Wilde. The narrator notes Usher’s “passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science.” As the narrator proceeds to Roderick’s studio, he notes “the Gothic archway,” and then, led by a silent valet “through many dark and intricate pas-

sages,” he encounters the physician of the family, who wears “a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity.” When we add to these descriptions Roderick’s “ghastly pallor” of skin, the “miraculous lustre of the eye,” and the “silken hair . . . with its wild, gossamer texture” that “floated rather than fell about the face,” we have indeed met the living incarnation of Coleridge’s fearful visionary in “Kubla Khan”: “Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” (ll. 49–50).

The archway may well suggest Dante’s gate of hell, and the troubling physician whom we meet after passing by way of “meandering with a mazy motion” (l. 25) through Usher’s castle provides a “mingled measure” (l. 33) of anxiety as to the mental and moral health of the protagonists. The narrator later describes the “wild improvisations” of Usher’s “speaking guitar,” a parody of the legendary Orpheus, whose “floating hair” signifies his decapitation by the maenads. Long hours with Usher leave in the narrator no clear recollection of their character, since an “excited and highly dis-tempered ideality threw a sulphureous luster over all.” The two are dedicated to hellish rites, and the litany of words Poe invokes, such as “a want of moral energy,” “a constitutional and family evil,” a “darkness” that “poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom,” all point to some original sin, since, as James Joyce points out in his “fire sermon” in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “the fires of Hell give forth no light.” The culmination of this “evil music” is Usher’s original poem “The Haunted Palace,” whose theme appears to be the fall of thought. Critics of Poe’s short story consistently point out that “transcendence” in this tale is downward, and that the grim, unnatural union of Roderick and his sister, Madeline, at the end has its source in the father-daughter incendiary bonding in *Medea*, and in Coleridge’s equally chilling line describing “woman wailing for her demon lover!” (“Kubla Khan” l. 16).

Madeline Usher is, of necessity, a more elusive figure. The narrator glimpses her but once, and he remarks of his “utter astonishment not

unmingled with dread,” another pass at “Kubla Khan,” whose other female figure is of “a damsel with a dulcimer” (l. 37), an image more fitting for Roderick himself. That Roderick and Madeline remain androgynous figures is typical of Poe, who always wrestles with issues of sexual identity. Madeline provides Roderick’s female perspective, and he has both isolated her and violated her. His painting that most captivates the narrator is of an underground vault or tomb, illuminated by “a flood of intense rays” that “bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour.” Roderick depicts Madeline’s burial chamber, and its moral degeneracy is implied, so much so that the narrator compares its effect to that of the “reveries of Fuseli,” noted for his study *The Nightmare*. When he and Roderick place Madeline within the “dungeon” of the castle as her resting place, the narrator complains that “there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm,” a depiction of Fuseli’s vision exactly!

With the apparent death of Madeline, Roderick enters the last phase of his own dissolution, “a species of mad hilarity in his eyes.” A whirlwind combines with “the rank miasma of the tarn,” and we recall Hamlet’s disgust with things “rank and gross in nature” (*Hamlet* 1.2.138) after learning of the unnatural circumstances of his father’s death. As the infuriated Madeline approaches and penetrates the library, Roderick assumes his final, feminine guise by asking, “Whither shall I fly?” a direct echo of hapless Lady Macduff in Shakespeare’s Scottish tragedy (*Macbeth* 4.2.81). Like a Fury out of Erebus, Madeline appears out of “the ponderous and ebony jaws” of the house. “There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle,” which captures both her breaking of the vault and her brother’s violation of her virginity. That he supposed her dead at the time only adds to the apocalyptic horror of the vision, confirmed by the “fierce breath of the whirlwind” and the final music of destruction, “the voice of a thousand waters” (see Ezekial 43:2) that marks the Ushers’ ghastly marriage as Persephone delivers the coup de grace to her misbegotten Hades.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider Hawthorne’s “The Artist of the Beautiful” as a companion piece to “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Discuss their relative views on the power and limitations of art. In what ways do these authors suggest a tension between aesthetics and morality?
2. Trace the way that Poe communicates Usher’s interior, psychological state through descriptions of architecture and landscape. With this as background, explain how the sinking of the House of Usher into the tarn makes sense as the logical counterpart to Roderick’s dissolution.

“The Black Cat” (1843)

Poe’s “The Black Cat” represents, even for such a past master of the macabre, a rare form of descent into Dante’s *Inferno*. A tale narrated by a condemned murderer who is to die on the morrow, it tells of a double murder, as well as chronicling the destruction of a man’s soul. While alcoholism, what the narrator calls “the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance,” is the apparent cause of the narrator’s downfall, he attributes a deeper, more philosophical cause to his crimes: “the spirit of perverseness.” What the narrator calls “the unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*” drives him first to mutilate and then to hang his “favorite pet and playmate,” the black cat Pluto. Significantly after he has committed “a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it . . . beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of . . . God,” the narrator’s house burns and, as he acknowledges, his “entirely worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself to despair.” That the white figure of a hanged cat above the narrator’s headboard survived the fire invokes a supernatural suspicion that the animal’s spirit—or the repressed guilt of his own foul deed—laid the crime at his head.

When the narrator, who has sunk from alcoholism to the “vile haunts” and “a den of more

than infamy”—obviously opium—to secure a second black cat, he soon realizes its physical resemblance to Pluto, except that the white splotch upon its breast represents “the Gallows,” the eventual fate of our doomed narrator. It is in an old house to “which our poverty compelled us to inhabit” that the narrator, in a rage “more than demoniacal,” attempts to kill the cat, finds his ax-wielding hand “stayed” by his wife, and so turns the weapon upon her and buries the ax in her brain. Burying her body in the walls of the cellar, “as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims,” the narrator inadvertently seals the one-eyed cat in the tomb with his wife’s corpse. When the police arrive four days later, they find nothing and are satisfied to leave when the narrator, in what he calls “the mere frenzy of bravado” resulting from his sense of triumph over mortal justice, raps the wall of the tomb with a cane, evoking a response from the sealed cat. A “dozen stout arms” of policemen toil at the wall and disclose the decayed corpse, with the cat “upon her head,” its “solitary eye of fire” transfixing the narrator with his “hideous murder.” Poe, in his grotesque fusion of elements, has the cat ascendant, its mouth filled with the gore of the corpse, which stands erect, a bloody, apocalyptic vision of murder, with the cat’s one eye a perversion of the Illuminati pyramid, while nature, “red in tooth and claw,” to paraphrase Jack London, utters “strange screams of death” (*Macbeth*, 2.3.63).

Almost from first to last, the imagery of the tale resembles Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in virtually every morbid, spiritual detail. That play, too, opens with references to witches and cats and soon evolves into a tale of usurpation and political murder; of seduction by an ambitious, ruthless wife; and of demonic promises made only to be broken, to reveal “the equivocation of the fiend” (5.5.49). This last sentiment is echoed in the narrator’s false remorse at having torn out Pluto’s eye, which he calls “at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling” that soon gives way to “my final and irrevocable overthrow.” That his wife is the one to make “frequent

allusion” to the popular superstition about black cats, the belief that “all black cats are witches in disguise,” when combined with Poe’s painstaking details of mental degeneration and dementia in the narrator’s mind, leads us to the conclusion that he perceives *her* as a witch and the cat as her familiar. After the murder of his wife, the cat becomes the voice of her soul’s cry for justice; and its terrible, remaining eye a “solitary eye of fire” that symbolizes the “hideous creature whose craft had seduced me into murder.” Prior to his act of homicide, the narrator had succumbed to hellish thoughts: “Evil thoughts became my sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts.” How similar to Macbeth’s own pledge devoting himself to an ambition that must destroy all political obstacles: “Stars hide your fires; / Let not light see my deep and black desires” (1.4.57–58). The spot of white fur on the second Pluto—for like *Macbeth* the tale is rife with doubles—might be the suggestion of an innocence that the narrator has destroyed and that he can no longer countenance. For the original sin in this man’s tortured history was the desire “to consummate the injury I had inflicted on the unoffending brute.” Seduction and consummation—the chief ingredients of an unnatural lust for power over a loving creature—these constitute Poe’s version of the imp of the perverse, whose ultimate malefaction is to see the agent of spiritual violence consume himself. (See Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse” for a full definition.)

For Discussion or Writing

1. Has the entire “mechanism” of blaming the black cats, Pluto and his brethren, become an elaborate form of denial, of guilty transference, a refusal of the narrator to take direct responsibility for the murder of his wife? Consider the plausibility of having thrown a dead cat into a burning house and why Poe might have included such a detail.
2. Why are Poe’s characters so dominated by the eyes of their adversaries? Compare Hawthorne’s “Ethan Brand” and the narrator of this tale, as each pursues “the Unpardonable Sin.”

"The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843)

Among Poe's most famous and anthologized stories, "The Tell-Tale Heart" displays a virtuoso power and synthesis: Achieving an unparalleled unity of effect, the story conveys an immediacy of feeling quite breathtaking as we witness a psychotic individual's mental unraveling before our eyes. As a performance piece or dramatic monologue, Poe's story surpasses Robert Browning's "His Last Duchess" for sheer dynamic verbal fluency in the pursuit of mad terror.

Told by an anonymous first-person narrator, "The Tell-Tale Heart" recounts, from a confessed murderer's viewpoint, his motive in killing an old man who had done him no direct harm. The narrator blames the old man's eye: "I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold. . . . It was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye." Folklore ascribes the evil eye to a form of envy, while others claim that some people can bestow a curse on victims by the malevolent gaze of their magical, Gorgon-like eye. The story alternates between images related to sight, to visual penetration, and those related to sound, culminating in the terrible *ostinato* (stubborn or obstinate beating) of the dead, dismembered old man's heart beneath the floorboards. The minute details of the plan of the crime dominate the remainder of the story, and it is within these images that we find some revelation of character.

All the while protesting his sanity and the clarity of his mind, the narrator delineates a terrible fixation and propensity for evil in himself. "I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him." A symbolic seven nights the narrator spends perfecting his entry, his own form of penetration, into the old man's closet, utilizing "a dark lantern . . . how cunningly I thrust it in!" Each night, the narrator "looked in upon him as he slept." Resemblances to Shakespeare's Macbeth, a Poe specialty, seem apt: "Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it

makes" (1.5.57–59). Or equally apt is Lady Macbeth's suggestion of what might be exacted upon the sleeping king's person: "What cannot you and I perform upon / Th'unguarded Duncan?" (1.7.79–80). Several times, the murderous narrator in Poe describes his sympathy, his likeness to the old man. In his terror at an unidentified night sound, the old man cries out, "Who's there?" and remains alert. "He was still sitting up in the bed listening; —just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall." Then the narrator describes "the groan of mortal terror," the "low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe" that rises from the old man. "I knew the sound well. . . . I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart."

Pity mixed with perverse pleasure achieved by domination provide the ghastly alchemy of the tale. Persistently denying that "madness" drove him on, the narrator ascribes his fascination with the vulture eye and an "over-acuteness of the sense," a neurasthenia, as the causes of his malice. As he carefully details his preparations for stalking and murdering the old man, a pride of individualism suffuses his language, and he opens his dark lantern upon the eye to cast by preternatural instinct a "simple, dim ray" compared to "the thread of a spider" upon "the damned spot." The old man's unfocused terror, his palpably beating heart, becomes audible: that "low, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too." The narrator calls the heart-beat "a hellish tattoo" that grows ever louder as the death watch proceeds into "the dead hour of the night." We must assume the narrator smothers the old man, having "dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him." By the time the old man has been dismembered and buried in the floor, the narrator can bask in "the end of these labors" with what he calls "the wild audacity of my perfect triumph."

What remains is to gather in the ghoulish ironies of the tale. Of course, like Lady Macbeth, the narrator has not eradicated "the damned spot" at all,

and as she will, he will suffer its eternal resistance: “Out, damned spot, out I say! . . . Yet who would have thought the old man / to have had so much blood in him?” (5.7.37, 41–42). The transfer of the visual eye to the aural torment of the heartbeat, “a ringing in my ears,” suggests the violation of the cult of Orpheus, whose first law is “Shed no blood.” As Oedipus does in the Sphinx myth, whose failure to achieve self-knowledge and understand his own life leads to tragic death, Poe’s narrator strangles the old man, but he cannot account for the “reason” behind his apparent madness, the riddle of his murderous fixation. He remains an enigma to himself and an object of horror to us. Ultimately in a paroxysm of despair and guilt, the possessed narrator “foams” at the police, like a mad dog, reminiscent of the “Hellhound” in *Macbeth* (5.8.4) who turns to face his death. Pointing to 20th-century literature’s interest in the motive force of humiliation, it is the fear of mockery that consumes him and forces his confession: “Anything was more tolerable than derision!”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” to WALT WHITMAN’s “The Sleepers,” a poem both the late poet-scholar Milton Kessler and his prime acolyte, Camille Paglia, call “ghoulish” in its thematic implication that the penetrating eye of the poet can molest the sleeping souls of America. Are both these poems finally about the naive trust of Americans and their ignorance of the evil in the hearts of human beings?
2. Compare Poe’s focus on the old man’s eye with Coleridge’s use of the transfixing eye in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” There the “bright” and “glittering” eye of the mariner holds fast the wedding guest while the mariner recounts his tale of betrayal and apocalyptic visions.
3. See whether you can explain why the narrator breaks down as he does in the presence of the police. What exactly is the source of the “derision” that he fears? Can you connect that fear to his obsession with the old man’s eye?

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845)

In this disturbing and gruesome tale, Poe casts his two favorite protagonists, death and human will, against each other in a struggle for supremacy. Poe’s psychological vehicle takes the form of an experiment in mesmerism, a technique in hypnosis named after the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1733–1815). It was purported to be a healing technique based on the idea of animal magnetism. Part of Mesmer’s theory was that all animated bodies including those of humans were affected by a magnetic force that also mutually influenced the celestial bodies and Earth. That Mesmer’s treatments ever really helped anyone remains debatable. Poe seems to take his cue about treating M. Valdemar’s impending death as just another experiment susceptible “to the magnetic influence” from Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818), an archetype of a scientist’s overweening pride in first creating, and then unsympathetically denying, a creature fashioned from the dead by the scientist’s own hands. Here the scientist’s obsessive desire to see “death . . . arrested by the mesmeric process” leads to a sickening recognition that he has manipulated forces beyond his power to control.

Poe’s “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar” is another rare instance in which we can identify a distinctly American sense of place: M. Valdemar “has resided principally at Harlem, N.Y., since the year 1839.” Valdemar, like the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and Roderick Usher, is a distinctly neurasthenic, or nervous, type, a disposition that “rendered him a good subject for mesmeric experiment.” Like Hawthorne, in his tale “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” and Goethe, in his ballad “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” Poe always presents a moral price to be paid for vain efforts to penetrate the secrets of nature. Valdemar proves a willing subject, permitting the narrator to utilize Valdemar’s approaching death, his phthisis (wasting away), as a means to subdue “the encroachments of death” within 24 hours of Valdemar’s demise. We discover that the narrator

had kept Valdemar in a state of “arrested mortality” for seven months prior to the monstrous dissolution he goes on to describe.

Poe's tale is rife with elements of black magic, such as the symbolic reference to midnight and the fact that the narrator made his mesmeric passes by “directing my gaze entirely into the right eye of the sufferer.” Optical penetration is a recurrent motif in Poe, and its equally grim effects drive the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” to distraction. After he had been “subdued,” it would seem that M. Valdemar died: “A very deep sigh escaped the bosom of the dying man. . . . The extremities were of an icy coldness.” The narrator calls Valdemar a “sleep-waker” and continues, “the manipulation vigorously, and with the fullest exertion of the will, until I had completely stiffened the limbs of the slumberer.” By three o'clock in the morning, we find Valdemar's “limbs were as rigid and cold as marble.” Has the scientist converted Valdemar into a work of art? If the narrator is Pygmalion, Valdemar is an unlikely Galatea: His skin “generally assumed a cadaverous hue . . . the circular spots . . . put me in mind of nothing so much as the extinguishing of a candle by a puff of breath.” The abundance of *un* prefixes, together with the analogy of the candle, consign the narrator's “scientific” ambitions to the darker purposes of Shakespeare's Macbeth, who in his despair at a wasted life utters, “Out, out, brief candle!” (5.5.26). What appeared at first an admirable attempt to defy death becomes a horrid commentary (as in *Macbeth*) on proud and morbid ambition, a defiance of the natural order of the universe. The various images of marbled “solidity” and aesthetic rigor into which the scientist cast Valdemar will eventually yield to a primordial ooze, an “out-flowing of a yellowish ichor” that parodies the blood of the gods and, finally, “a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity.”

The nature of the human will fascinated romantic, especially German, philosophical speculation, as witnessed by the writings of Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Could humanity resist death purely by exertion of will? We have the question put to us again in “Ligeia,” but here Poe sees only hubris in

the undertaking to retard or to neutralize physical death by mental applications. When Valdemar's “tongue quivered,” and the terrible words “dead! dead!” absolutely burst from “the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer,” we wonder into what kind of moral universe the scientist has fallen. We recall Hamlet's words, “For Murder, though it hath no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ” (*Hamlet* 2.2.579–580).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Has the scientist learned to contain his overweening scientific curiosity and desire to prolong life, or does he reveal no hindrance to his further pursuits, in spite of the putrid effects of his experiment on M. Valdemar? Which do you think is the proper approach? Why?
2. Compare Poe's “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Consider whether one has a greater right to experiment on oneself than upon others.

“The Purloined Letter” (1845)

In a letter to James Russell Lowell (1844), Poe called his detective fiction “tales of ratiocination,” and the three that stand out—“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and “The Purloined Letter”—all involve his brilliant sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin.

The impulse to create a body of work dedicated to the positive, penetrating intellect and to the triumph of scientific deduction may well be tied to Poe's ubiquitous fascination with puzzles, ciphers, codes, hieroglyphics, and labyrinths, into which Theseus can provide the clarifying thread of reason and logical connection. That Arthur Conan Doyle took his formulas for the Sherlock Holmes stories from Poe's tales like “The Gold Bug” and “The Purloined Letter” seems all too obvious today. The narrator is an unnamed friend and confidant of Dupin, easily parallel with Doyle's ingenious Dr. Watson. When we discover, at the conclusion

of this tale, that the villain of the piece, Minister D—, did Dupin “an evil turn” in Vienna “that I should remember,” we suspect a correspondence with Doyle’s Dr. Moriarity, an evil arch mastermind with whom Holmes has a personal vendetta, much like the protagonist in “The Cask of Amontillado.”

The mechanics of “The Purloined Letter” remain relatively simple: Monsieur G—, the prefect of police, seeks Dupin’s help in locating an incriminating letter taken from the queen by Minister D—, who wields considerable power over her by the possession and possible exposure of this letter. Power, in fact, is the central theme of the story: “The paper gives its holder a certain power in a quarter where such power is immensely valuable.” But the usual police methods, of searching scrupulously through every nook and cranny of Minister’s D—’s premises as well of his person, have failed to discover the letter. The purloined letter is presumed to lie always near Minister D—, who with his “lynx eye” had “fathomed [the queen’s] secret,” stolen the letter, and thus achieved “ascendancy complete” over the queen, and, by extension, the state. Dupin notes that the culprit Minister D— is both mathematician and poet, and that he, Dupin, indulges in poetry: “I have been guilty of certain doggerel myself.” Dupin perceives that it is the quality of imagination and not cold analysis that makes Minister D— a formidable opponent and concealer of the letter, which eludes all material searches, what Prefect of Police G— calls “the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope.”

One month later, Dupin blithely places the letter into the hand of Prefect G— for the reward of 50,000 francs. Dupin reveals that the secret of his success lies in “an identification of the reasoner’s intellect with that of his opponent.” Poe has created the first profiler in detective fiction. His knowledge that the poet is more cunning, more imaginative than the mathematician allows for the flexibility of his method: Dupin has realized that Minister D— “would be driven. . . to *simplicity*” as his means of deception. The letter had been “hidden in plain sight,” having become an inverted palimp-

sest that had not the look of a royal correspondence. The prefect and his policemen “never once thought it probable, or possible, that the Minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world.” After having created an outdoor diversion while visiting Minister D—, Dupin had himself purloined the letter and left a gold snuffbox to assure a pretext for his return to Minister D—’s apartments. As does Theseus, or a moralistic Dante, Dupin claims he has “no sympathy—at least no pity—for him who descends.” Dupin leaves Minister D— a card, announcing his triumph, so that the redress is personal as well as political. Poe seems to take a page from his own criminal Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado”: “A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.” In the case of Dupin, the vengeance is classical, with Dupin’s citing the murderous retribution of Atreus, who served the seducer Thyestes his own children at a banquet.

By alternating the notions of concealment and revelation, Poe fashions a genre, detective fiction, that makes a virtuoso of the cryptographer, the man who penetrates the byzantine workings of the criminal mind. Frederick S. Frank points out several psychological and stylistic ironies of Poe’s detective stories in his exhaustive *The Poe Encyclopedia*:

The irrational crimes and punishments of the homicidal fantasies find a counterpart in the rational crimes and punishments of the detective tales in which Poe elaborates upon the skill of . . . C. Auguste Dupin, in employing the imagination of the poet and analytic intelligence of the mathematician to solve insoluble crimes. To crack his cases, Dupin’s mind entertains a perfect balance of analysis and speculative insight rendered all the more effective by his close identification with the criminal and his thought processes. Solving the crime is not a moral act . . . but an intellectual exercise, like the writing of a beautiful poem. . . . Dupin is by design self stimulated

by the exotic and peculiar and acting according to a master plan. . . . [T]he mental routine of Dupin has much in common with the inquisitive narrators of the homicidal fantasies. Completely self contained and deigning to enter the social sphere only to exhibit his crime-solving prowess to the embarrassment of the authorities, the great detective operates on a plane above the forces of law and social convention. Because the moral implications of the crime never intrude upon the ideal solution, Dupin always succeeds where moralists fail. Beautiful and perfect in conception, his solutions are works of art as Dupin has attained the sort of ideality that the killers and madmen vainly seek. (3–4)

Through a pattern of consistent imagery, Poe glamorizes Dupin, who makes a pronouncement “amid a perfect whirlwind of smoke,” like some biblical vision. Whereas the police “functionaries” are “mystified” by the problem, Dupin’s “measures were adapted to [the minister’s] capacity . . . as a coutier . . . and as a bold *intriguant*.” Dupin symbolically breaks “the large black seal, bearing the D— cipher” superimposed on a letter whose “address was diminutive and feminine.” If Minister D— appeared to others as “in the last extremity of *ennui*,” Dupin has seen beyond the veil and calls the minister “perhaps the most really energetic human being now alive” and apt prey for Dupin’s aesthetic sport. No ploy is too protean, no persona too androgynous, for Dupin to follow, identify, and capture.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Sherlock Holmes’s methods in “The Speckled Band” with Dupin’s deductive analysis in this tale. Explain how each author uses a combination of scientific deduction and imaginative induction.
2. How do modern profilers—detectives who closely empathize with the perpetrators they seek, such as the one in Thomas Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs*—morally differ from the criminals they pursue? Explain how Dupin differs from Minister G—.
3. Poe has been called the “father of American aestheticism.” Do the detective stories, especially in Frederick S. Frank’s analysis, justify this epithet? Consider especially Poe’s presentation of the relationship art maintains with questions of morality.

“The Cask of Amontillado” (1846)

According to Edward Rowe Snow, writing on Robert E. Massie, of the U.S. Regiment of Light Artillery, “The Cask of Amontillado” appears to have a source in a gravestone Poe noticed when he was a private (in 1827) at Fort Independence (Castle Island). During summer 1817, Lt. Robert F. Massie of Virginia found that a certain Captain Green had formed an enmity toward him. In a duel pursuant to a card game in which Green had accused Massie of cheating, Captain Green killed the young Lieutenant Massie. It seems that the popular young officer was avenged by his officers, who seduced Captain Green with wine and then carried him to the subterranean casemate, wherein they shackled him. Despite Green’s panicked pleas for mercy, they proceeded to seal him alive within the tomb, using bricks and mortar. In 1905 workmen repairing the old fort discovered the dungeon and its gory contents.

A classic tale of premeditated revenge, “The Cask of Amontillado” rates as one of Poe’s finest tales. Its main appeal to gothic horror is its theme of premature burial, to which the vengeful Montresor consigns the hapless Fortunato, seduced by his weakness for rare vintage wines. The persona, Montresor, only provides the word *insult* as the source of his malice. We assume Montresor seeks to rectify some slight to his personal or family honor, and the spirit of Caius Brutus in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* looms nigh: “Speak, strike, redress!” (2.1.47), quotes Brutus from a letter that challenges him to defend Rome’s honor from the upstart Caesar. So, too, Montresor states, “A wrong is unre-

dressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.” In the course of the tale, Montresor will carry out his revenge in artful fashion, fulfilling the Montresor family motto: “None Shall with Impunity Molest Me.” In a series of colorfully described tableaux, Montresor and Fortunato descend—into what seems almost a parody of Virgil and Dante—into the depths of the “palazzo” that provides the only locale for this single-minded enterprise.

The story takes place somewhere in Italy, during “the supreme madness of the carnival season,” which provides a unity of setting and psychological fixation. After Fortunato has been tempted with the “pipe” of Amontillado, the very idea of the rare wine affects him as the narcotic in an opium pipe would, and Fortunato repeats the name of the wine as a mantra, whose appearance “in the middle of the carnival” assumes the character of enchantment or magic. Poe several times refers to the presence of niter in the catacombs—an ingredient in the production of black powder—which adds force to Montresor’s early stated desire to see the “immolation” of his enemy. The niter certainly exacerbates Fortunato’s cough, for which Montresor often expresses a false sympathy. But the motley-dressed Fortunato is not to die by fire: He is to be sealed in a small tomb, and so we see played out Macbeth’s notion that “all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death” (5.5.25–26). One of the last sounds Montresor will hear from Fortunato, besides a resigned laugh, is “the jingling of the bells” from the fool’s cap Fortunato had donned for the carnival.

Curiously Montresor confesses that “my heart grew sick” at the sound of those bells, and we must wonder whether that fatal music will always wound Montresor’s conscience, as though the family crest—of a trodden snake biting into the heel of its assailant—marks an ironic commentary on who indeed has had the last laugh.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What evidence is there that Montresor senses that by killing Fortunato in so monstrous a

fashion he has annihilated his own soul? How would evidence of this kind alter or reinforce your interpretation of the story? Explain.

2. Compare the killing of Fortunato to the killing of Basil Hallward in Oscar Wilde’s *Portrait of Dorian Gray* in terms of the settings and means described. Are there curious coincidences? What do they add to the works as a whole?
3. Consider the one eerie moment of humor in Poe’s tale, Montresor’s pun on *freemasonry* as he holds up a trowel. Why should Poe mock a secret brotherhood devoted to humanity and sympathy? Is Poe making a statement about the illusion of human benevolence? If so, what is it?

“The Man of the Crowd” (1850)

Any discussion of Poe’s tale must take into account the specificity of its setting: a London coffee house at “about the closing of an evening in autumn.” Only a mere handful of Poe’s stories reveal a specific locale—more often, they exhibit a European sense of time rather than place, with the action occurring in some fantastical castle. “The Sphinx” and “Murders in the Rue Morgue” are exceptions, the former especially, because its events occur in an American location, Upstate New York.

This tale opens with an epigram by La Bruyere to the effect that misery seeks company. What follows personifies that very spirit in the form of “a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age” who completely absorbs the attention of the narrator, an observer of London’s human condition as it reveals “every species of infamy.” The narrator philosophizes in the opening paragraph that “some secrets . . . do not permit themselves to betold. . . . Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burden so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave.” The melancholy embedded in this maxim might well provide the rubric for Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which also begins in London, along the Thames. In Poe’s tale, the narrator, “peering through the smoky panes” of the coffee house “into the street,” experiences a series

of visions we might well call *chthonian*—a descent into the bowels of the earth—the belly of the whale of London's social life. His aim is to observe “with minute interest” the variety of human types who inhabit London, indulging his “calm but inquisitive interest in every thing.”

The progression of humanity that passes along the London street soon resembles not the inhabitants of a vast, prosperous civilization, a city of a thriving, happy empire, but that London captured in William Blake's visions: a fallen, decadent, devolutionary monument to a jaded and corrupt industrialization, a mockery of the Great Chain of Being. Initially, oceanic imagery embraces “two dense and continuous tides of population . . . a tumultuous sea of human heads.” We then progress to “the tribe of clerks,” again divided into “two remarkable divisions,” and then to a “swell of pickpockets, with which all great cities are infested.” The gamblers betray “a filmy dimness of eye, and pallor and compression of lip,” and they are foul creatures of the air, “birds of a kindred feather” who “seem to prey upon the public in two battalions.” If the images of plague and predation are not enough, Poe takes us even further into the abyss, employing an anti-Semitic stereotype in the process: “Jew peddlers, with hawk eyes” and then “sturdy professional street beggars . . . feeble and ghastly invalids, upon whom death had placed a sure hand . . . sidled and tottered through the mob.” The apocalypse is at hand, and we witness that life in death of which Coleridge speaks in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (part 3, l. 193). The fallen women of London town put “one in mind of “the surface of Parian marble, and the interior filled with filth—the loathsome and utterly lost leper in rags—the wrinkled, bejewelled, and paint-begrimed bel-dame . . . an adept in the dreadful coquetries of her trade.” London is a haunt for painted women, a modern Babylon or the restored Rome of Petronius, rife with dehumanizing sin and vice.

The most compelling character is the old man upon whom the narrator fixes. He possesses “a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute

idiosyncrasy of its expression. . . . Retzsch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictural incarnations of the fiend.” The impression of having confronted a singular devil figure finds confirmation in the associations the narrator makes: “ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of bloodthirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of extreme despair.” The old man unites any number of contradictions within one bosom, hinting at Milton's Satan, immortalized in his maxim that it is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. The old man's clothing reveals “both . . . a diamond and a dagger,” items that solidify the narrator's resolve “to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go,” words almost biblical in their suggestion of the Book of Ruth (1:16).

The movement of the story is one huge circle, within which are a series of epicycles, as the old man wends his way from one degenerate crowd to another, “as he forced his way to and fro, without aim, among the buyers and sellers” of the town. Increasingly incidences of the word *wild* appear while the narrator, like some hypnotized Dante in pursuit of a tarnished Virgil, proceeds deeper into hell: “the most noisome quarter of London, where every thing wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty, and of the most desperate crime.” And it is precisely amid these images of filth and social depravity that the “spirits of the old man again flickered up, as a lamp which is near its death-hour.” At the first sign that the crowd is about to disperse, that he is about to be left in solitude, the old man “with a mad energy, retraced his steps . . . to the heart of the mighty London.” Finally, weary of pursuit, the narrator gives up his role of shadow to this vision of London's demimonde (underworld), but not before having “gazed at him steadfastly in the face.” The narrator concludes by categorizing the old man as “the type and genius of deep crime . . . the man of the crowd,” a “text” best not to have read too deeply.

In the spirit of allegory, Poe has wrought a tale similar to the romantics' fascination with *The Fly*—

ing Dutchman, an apocryphal tale of a ship that wanders the seas eternally, forbidden to return home. The old man seems to embody the restless, Faustian character of contemporary London life, seeking every indulgence and temptation, afraid to have to “know thyself.” That the old man might be the original sin incarnate is perhaps not too far-fetched. The “wild history” written in the old man’s bosom may well stand for the labyrinthine intrigues that bedevil the heart of London; as Conrad does later, Poe’s narrator finds a “fascination in the abomination” of humanity’s fall.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Poe’s tale to Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias,” which also speaks of “ye mighty” in the course of celebrating, on a lonely pedestal, the accomplishments of its eponymous subject. In what ways do both authors point to the self-destructive impulses released when human appetites are freed from moral constraint?
2. Consider Poe’s major metaphor—the soul or conscience of humanity as a forbidden book or text that should not see the light of day—to Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil,” which likewise deals with “secret sin” and corruption in men’s hearts. Do these stories suggest that limits must be imposed on self-exploration and that a certain level of naive belief in the goodness of humanity is beneficial?

“The Philosophy of Composition” (1846)

Poe, probably America’s first medievalist, attached to American letters a gothic and antiquarian literary past it never had, being a new nation with a short cultural history. Poe also initiated America’s *poetics*, attaching his name to those of Aristotle, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Percy Shelley, S. T. Coleridge, and William Wordsworth in explicating the function of poetry and belles-lettres. Poe early announces his intention, to “detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion.” Poe means to deny

Coleridge’s notion of method (that “ecstatic intuition” and spontaneity are the sources of poetry), and he refuses to subscribe to Wordsworth’s theory of poetry’s arising from “intense emotions recollected in tranquility.” Rather, Poe (if he is sincere and not writing a parody of aesthetic rationale) insists on the calculated nature of his multifarious effects.

Poe will use his own poem “The Raven” to exemplify his thesis, which is to disabuse the reader of the notion that its result “is referable either to accident or intuition.” Poe’s work proceeds “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.” He addresses two elements of the creative process. First, Poe believes that all works should be short, with the exception of novels. “There is,” he writes, “a distinct limit . . . to all works of literary art—the limit of one sitting.” Poe especially emphasizes this “rule” with regard to poetry, but he also notes that the short story is superior to the novel for this reason. Second, Poe stresses good literature’s unity of effect, assuming that by carefully constructing the end of a work, the author can control his audience’s emotional response and thereby subordinate all literary elements and details—tone, setting, plot, and characterization—to the realization of this effect.

Poe argues that “the legitimate province of the poem” is to delineate beauty, and that “the contemplation of the beautiful” is the ultimate, aesthetic pleasure. The soul shall be elevated even more, Poe claims, if that beauty is attached to melancholy, particularly thoughts of death. For “The Raven,” Poe considered every aspect of the poem. He deliberately set it on a tempestuous evening, causing the raven, “a non-reasoning creature,” to seek shelter. He sets the black bird upon a pallid bust to contrast with its dark plume. The bust is of Pallas Athena in order to evoke the notion of a scholar, to match the presumed student narrator poring over his “volume[s] of forgotten lore.” The death of a beautiful woman, urges Poe, is “the most poetical topic in the world,” and the raven’s “nevermore” contributes to “the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrows.” The term

11. How does Poe's tale "The Imp of the Perverse" bear directly on the events described in "The Black Cat"? How does "The Tell-Tale Heart" relate to the kinds of impulses murderers experience in this and other Poe tales? How do you think Poe is able to capture such impulses? Discuss your answer, citing examples of Poe's style that create such moods.
12. Compare "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" to "Ligeia" and explain the way each tale explores the power of the will to control material existence. For another narrative on the power of the will, consider George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant."
13. Compare "Ligeia" to the character Eleonora in the tale "Eleonora," who ultimately forgives the narrator for having taken Ermengarde as his wife. Explain why you might consider these two stories as complementing each other.
14. Compare Poe's other narratives of entombment—"The Premature Burial" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"—to "The Cask of Amontillado." Do the motives of the protagonists in any way affect the degree to which we feel horror at the events they describe?
15. Consider "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a commentary on the dark forces in art. How do images from "Kubla Khan" or Poe's own "The Oval Portrait" confirm this hypothesis?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Academy of American Poets: Edgar Allan Poe. Available online. URL: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/130>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Benet, Laura. *Young Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1964.
- Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore. Available online. URL: <http://www.eapoe.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Frank, Frederick S., and Anthony Magistrale. *The Poe Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1997.
- Hayes, Kevin J. *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald, and Liliane Weissberg, eds. *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965.
- LeVert, Suzanne. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1992.
- McMichael, George, general ed. *Concise Anthology of American Literature*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- Miller, Perry. *The Raven and the Whale*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956.
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Peeples, Scott. *Edgar Allan Poe Revisited*. Boston: Twayne, 1998.
- Poe Museum. Available online. URL: <http://www.poemuseum.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- De Rougemont, Denis. *Love in the Western World*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1991.
- Snow, Edward Rowe. "The Roving Skeleton of Boston Bay." *Yankee* 25 (April 1961): 52–55, 109–110.
- Stashower, Daniel. *The Beautiful Cigar Girl: Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe and the Invention of Murder*. New York: Dutton, 2006.
- Symons, Julian. *The Tell-Tale Heart: The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Thomas, Dwight, and David K. Jackson. *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809–1849*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.
- Wordsworth, William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*. Edited by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1968.

Gary Lemco



HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

(1811–1896)

It may truly be said that I write with my heart's blood.

(letter to Eliza Cabot Follen, December 1852)

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on June 14, 1811, the seventh of nine children in the family of the prominent Congregationalist minister Lyman Beecher and his first wife, Roxana Foote Beecher. Harriet was especially close to her brother Henry Ward, the best-known pulpit orator of the day; her sister Catherine, who pioneered the movement for women's education; and her half sister Isabella, who became an outspoken advocate for women's suffrage. Her father was an energetic man who carried out his religious teachings with determination and strict discipline. Entering the ministry at the beginning of the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening, he made it his mission to convert to Christianity those souls he viewed as threatened by an appetite for materialism fostered by an increasingly secular society. As a husband and a father, however, he could be difficult to live with: His intensity and earnest religious calling seemed at times to blind him to the more immediate personal concerns of his family members. In fact, his frequently messy and disorganized personal habits could combine with a bossy, exacting nature to make life in the Beecher household very difficult—when he was home. To complicate matters even further, the already large family was rarely without the additional company of frequent and numerous visitors, who added to the confusion and made the work of maintaining the home even more difficult.

Harriet's mother, Roxana Foote, played the role of 19th-century wife and mother that has since become known as the "angel of the house." Roxana was the central figure managing an incredibly busy domestic sphere while Lyman traveled and lectured extensively in the public realm. Although reared in a highly educated and cultured family herself, as wife to Lyman Beecher and mother to nine children, Roxana had almost no time to read nor even to think about the issues of the day, much less relax or rest. The drudgery of endless domestic duties—she had no electricity, no hired help, no modern appliances, and little income—in addition to the household's administrative duties all fell on her shoulders. This proved an impossible burden that eventually wore her out. Roxana Foote died in 1816 of tuberculosis at the young age of 41, when Harriet was only five. On her deathbed Roxana described to her mourners, including her husband and children, "a vision of heaven and its blessedness." Her mother's deathbed scene became so deeply impressed upon Harriet's imagination that she made it the basis of one of the most famous scenes, the death of little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

After the death of her mother, Harriet was sent to the home of her widowed grandmother, the elder Roxana Foote, as well as her unmarried and very capable aunt, Harriet Foote in Nutplains, Connecticut. There young Harriet was embraced happily and given much loving attention. She was

also taught the traditional feminine domestic skills of knitting and sewing. The time Harriet spent with these two loving, strong, and independent women provided not only the vivid image of a home warmed by maternal love, but also an alternative model of womanhood. The experience would influence Harriet's development of women characters, especially her depiction of forceful, independent women whose strength and wisdom enabled them to manage the large, complicated households so common at this time. Harriet lived with her aunt and her grandmother for little more than a year, at which time her father married Harriet Porter and young Harriet returned to her father's home. Harriet found her new stepmother to be rather distant and cold, as she had little to do with the upbringing of the children from her husband's previous marriage. Once she began having children of her own, the distance between the two Harriets grew even greater.

Harriet did, however, benefit from a good education; first, in Litchfield, at Sarah Pierce's girls' academy (1819–25), and later, at the age of 13, at the female seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, that her sister Catherine founded. She entered the Sarah Pierce school at the age of eight and flourished through the exercise of her remarkable memory and a growing interest in writing. In particular, the innovative teaching of John Brace, whose composition assignments were a regular part of his program, departed from the conventional topics of "female" virtues such as "cheerfulness" and "forgiveness" and inspired Harriet to write. She proved herself to be a thoughtful and imaginative writer from a very young age and was even selected as one of the writers for the school's annual exhibition. Later, at the seminary her sister founded, she spent eight years studying French, Latin, and Italian, as well as history and moral theology. But the stated goals of Catherine Beecher's seminary—"the building of character, the cultivation of the intellect, and the proper preparation of young ladies to enter society" (Hedrik 58)—would develop Harriet's sense of purpose and self-confidence in even more meaningful ways than her knowledge of aca-

demical subjects themselves. In addition, Catherine's philosophy that women held an important place in society as the dispensers of moral sentiment became an important theme in the school, in Stowe's mission in life, and in her writings. As Catherine's sister, she was often called upon to help with the work in the school; as a consequence, Harriet began to experience a sense of her own strengths in oratory. Throughout her life, Stowe advocated education as the key to social change.

When the family moved in 1832 to Cincinnati, Ohio, where her father became president of the Lane Theological Seminary, Harriet met and eventually married the widower Calvin Ellis Stowe, a professor at the seminary, in 1836. It was also there that she and her siblings became part of the Semicolon Club, a parlor literary group that offered Stowe an opportunity to meet other writers and to discuss the books she and others were reading, but more importantly, a reason to write. Being part of the group put Harriet into contact with others who shared her literary bent so that it can be said that through this group Stowe was granted an opportunity to discuss her writings and to begin her real literary career. Her participation in the parlor group also influenced her writing style (literary realism) because it helped her develop the habit of directly addressing a specific audience, whether reading a letter or telling a story. It was during this time and in this setting, situated as it was close to Kentucky, a slaveholding state, and therefore separated from legalized slavery only by a river over which many runaway slaves escaped, that Harriet observed many dramatic scenes associated with slavery that would ignite her passion for the antislavery movement and inspire her to write on behalf of slaves. The fugitive slaves' flight to the North and to Canada was facilitated by a vast network of people, mostly black but also many whites, who provided "stations" and "depots" where slaves could rest or eat, terms arising from the system known as the Underground Railroad. The society of Quakers was particularly involved in helping runaway slaves make their way to freedom; in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Stowe has her leading characters, Eliza, George, and Harry, find

refuge at the Quaker home of Rachel and Simeon Halliday.

Like her mother, Harriet was burdened with the harsh realities of domestic responsibilities, but her marriage was fulfilling in many ways. Living in what was called a “companionate” marriage, in which the husband acts as an intellectual companion and tutor, Calvin and Harriet were quite happy despite the daily challenges posed by the tedious and grueling tasks of maintaining a household on a modest income. Together they had seven children, including twin girls, Hattie and Eliza, born in 1836; a son, Frederick William, in 1840; and Samuel Charles, who died of cholera in infancy. Ill health, several miscarriages, Calvin’s frequent absences, as well as a tendency toward depression must have made life very difficult for Harriet as she looked after her six young children. In a letter to Calvin, she writes, “I am sick of the smell of sour milk, and sour meat, and sour everything, and then the clothes will not dry, and no wet thing does, and everything smells mouldy; and altogether I feel as if I never wanted to eat again” (Hedrik 267). She writes about her marriage and the conditions in which she lived to the abolitionist Eliza Cabbot Fulten: “Despite these long years of struggling with poverty and sickness and a hot debilitating climate my children grew up around me. The nursery and the kitchen were my principal fields of labor” (Stowe, “Letter” 413).

When a friend tried to help her by finding a publisher who paid Stowe for her sketches, Stowe realized that she could supplement her husband’s income and relieve the family’s economic hardship. Having “married into poverty and without a dowry,” her husband possessing “only a large library of books and a great deal of learning” (Stowe, “Letter” 413), she was motivated by her small writing income to find more time to write. It was at this time that Stowe began to publish several sketches in magazines such as *Godsey’s Lady’s Book* and the New York *Evangelist*. Her tendency to preach and to instruct, a practice known as didacticism, is an obvious characteristic of her writing—but it became even more pronounced when she moved to Brun-

wick, Maine, where Calvin was appointed in 1850 to the faculty of Bowdoin College. In that same year, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, prohibiting any citizen from assisting a runaway slave, a law that enraged Stowe. She realized then that she and all citizens, whether they were for slavery or against it, were implicated in what she described as “this horror, this nightmare abomination!” that “lies like lead on my heart, it shadows my life with sorrow the more so that I feel, as for my own brothers, for the South, and am pained by every horror I am obliged to write, as one who is forced to disclose in court some family disgrace” (Hedrik 414). She then became committed to the antislavery movement at the urging of her sister-in-law, Isabella P. Beecher, an activist in the cause. After witnessing a slave’s being beaten to death, Stowe was so distraught and so deeply moved that she decided to take action. Her sympathy for slave women whose babies were taken from them was fueled by her own loss of a child in infancy: “It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her” (*Preface*, Ammons viii). Her profound empathy for slave mothers, who, at the mercy of their masters, were forced to part with their children to be sold at slave auctions, became a central part of the plot in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Published in serialized form in 1851 and 1852, her most famous work paints a composite picture of all of these events through her careful presentation of plot and character. Inspired by the vision of a bleeding slave being whipped that appeared to her while she was in church celebrating the Eucharist, a service that commemorates the suffering of Christ, she wrote with evangelical intensity. The book was so successful that it sold more copies than the Bible and was translated into several languages. Stowe was much in demand in Europe, where she was asked to speak on behalf of the antislavery movement; when she traveled there in 1853, she received many honors.

The subtitle of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Life among the Lowly*, clearly reflects the characteristics of the genre of literary realism to which the book belongs, with its concern for and validation of “the coarse,

common world” (Hedrik 157). Later Stowe wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853) to accompany the novel and to counteract attacks on the accuracy of her portrayal of slavery, mapping out in great detail all of the factual material associated with her narrative.

In all Stowe wrote more than two dozen books of fiction and nonfiction, including *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), *Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1862), *Oldtown Folks* (1869), and *Pink and White Tyranny* (1871). In all of her works, Stowe drew on the values and experience of women to pose a radically democratic alternative to the separation between public and private, reason and feeling, that characterized the dominant patriarchal social and political structures, which were based on separate spheres of male and female authority. She was instrumental in launching the literary periodical the *Atlantic Monthly* and offered a serial novel, *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859), in the first year of the journal. She continued to advocate women’s rights in *Hearth and Home*, a magazine that she coedited with Ik Marvell (Donald G. Mitchell, author of *Reveries of a Bachelor*). In 1863 Calvin retired at age 61 while Stowe, at 52, continued her career as a determined professional writer. With the comfortable income provided by her work, they built a home in Hartford, Connecticut, where Harriet spent her final years. Harriet Beecher Stowe died on July 1, 1896, at the age of 85, surrounded by her family.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s writing is characterized by the highly romanticized Christian sensibilities that were familiar to her 19th-century audience but have less appeal for the modern reader. Her ability to use local dialects and to describe settings and characters in clear and accurate detail makes her an effective realist. However, she is best remembered today for the historical significance of her writing. Her work expresses the concerns of the 19th-century middle class and addresses the central issues and events of her century: slavery, women’s position in society, the decline of Calvinism, the rise of industry and consumerism, and the birth of a great national literature. Despite the highly sentimental

quality and Christian didacticism of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe influenced the course of American history so much that during the Civil War Abraham Lincoln met Mrs. Stowe and is said to have stated, “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that made this big war.”

The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut, promotes the life and work of this important American writer and attracts thousands of Stowe enthusiasts each year.

***Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* (1852)**

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* in serialized segments for the anti slavery newspaper the *National Era* during the years of 1851 and 1852. It was then published as a two-volume set in 1852 by John P. Jewett and Company of Boston. Stowe wrote the novel to rally others to the antislavery movement as a result of her outrage about the institution of slavery in the Southern United States. According to Stowe herself, the story took shape in her mind while she was in church, where she had a vision of a saintly black man being mercilessly flogged, yet praying for his torturers as he died. Her success in persuading readers to join her cause was in large part due to the powerful emotions aroused by her text; readers were so overcome that they cried openly over the heart-wrenching story of Uncle Tom and Eliza. Congressman Horace Greeley, traveling by rail from Boston to Washington, D.C., apparently had “to stop overnight in a hotel in Springfield, Massachusetts, because he had been weeping so copiously in public on the train as he read” (“Preface” viii). The book was the first to feature an African-American hero and certainly the first to depict him as well as the other slave characters as human beings. Humanizing slaves in this way completely changed the attitudes of her readers, who then felt profound sympathy for the plight of slaves. Initially published in a print run of only 5,000 copies, the book subsequently kept 14 presses running day and

night and sold 300,000 copies in the United States alone. Translated into many languages, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned Harriet Beecher Stowe into one of the most celebrated authors in the world. On the strength of this success, Stowe became very popular as a public speaker, traveling in Europe as well as across the United States.

The character Uncle Tom is a loyal, devout Christian slave who lives on the Shelby plantation at the opening of the novel. When Mr. Shelby meets financial difficulties, he reluctantly agrees to sell Tom and his wife's favorite slave, Eliza's young boy, Harry, whose heartbroken mother decides to flee across the frozen Ohio River to Canada rather than allow him to be sold. In the meantime, Tom is sold at an auction to Augustine St. Clare, whose angelic little daughter, Eva, is saved by Tom when she falls over the side of a riverboat. These events initiate the two primary plotlines in Stowe's novel: one that leads south with Tom's eventual descent into the most hellish conditions of slavery, and one that leads north toward Canada and freedom with Eliza, her husband George, and their young son, Harry.

Although Tom misses his family, he is treated kindly by the easygoing St. Clare, and his friendship with Eva flourishes. The two share an extraordinarily strong Christian faith and become highly unlikely disciples (Eva, a white child; Tom, a black slave). However, the young girl has fragile health, and eventually she dies in one of the most memorable and sentimental scenes in the novel. Soon afterward, St. Clare is killed in an accident and Tom is again taken to the slave auction, where he is sold to his final master, Simon Legree, a brutal man who drinks heavily. Despite the evil nature of his master, Tom responds to Legree's cruelty with courage and religious fortitude. Even when tortured in Legree's attempt to gain information about two runaway slaves, Cassy and Emmeline, Tom refuses to reveal it. In a rage Simon Legree has him flogged to death. By the time young Master George Shelby arrives to free Uncle Tom and to return him to his loving family, Tom's death is imminent. George vows to continue the fight for abolition and to keep

Tom's memory alive by proclaiming his cabin as a symbol of his martyrdom.

The other significant line of the plot takes Eliza and her young child Harry on a desperate flight from the slave trader Haley. Two other slaves, Sam and Andy, cross the Ohio River with them and north to freedom in Canada, where they hope to unite with their husband and father, George Harris, who is also fleeing his jealous and cruel master. The image of Eliza's leaping onto large, shifting chunks of ice to cross the partially frozen river, clutching her son tightly in her arms, is one of the most celebrated and sentimental scenes in the novel. It also works as a symbol of supreme motherhood in keeping with Stowe's political agenda to overturn patriarchal power by convincing women of their own power within the female sphere. Stowe's political purpose is further advanced when Eliza arrives at the Quaker Settlement, where she is greeted by the benevolent Rachel Halliday, whose serene "face and form made 'mother' seem the most natural word in the world" and who treats the frightened and desperate Eliza as if she were her own daughter. When they sit together for breakfast, Rachel is at the head of the table, usurping the traditionally male place of the head of the household, emanating "nothing but loving words and gentle moralities, and motherly loving kindness." The scene also enacts the Holy Communion and the ritual "breaking of bread" but triumphantly places Rachel Halliday in the position of the divine. Stowe believed that matriarchal power would create the ideal atmosphere of "mutual confidence and good fellowship" that Eliza witnesses in the Quaker household, and especially in the kitchen, where "everything went on so sociably, so quietly, so harmoniously" that "it seemed so pleasant to everyone to do just what they were doing" (Tompkins, *Sentimental Power* 519).

In keeping with the highly religious society of the time, Harriet Beecher Stowe takes on a preacherly and highly didactic tone in this novel in a way that suits her purposes as stated in her preface: "Every influence of literature . . . in our times is becoming more and more in unison with the great master chord of Christianity, 'good will to man'"

(xiii). In many instances, she appeals directly to the reader's sympathies by means of a conventional device of 19th-century novels, *narratorial intrusion*, to make her point abundantly clear. An early example occurs on the Shelby plantation in Kentucky, where Stowe insists that the "goodhumored indulgence" of some masters and mistresses, "and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves" should not be misinterpreted as a reason to condone the institution of slavery (Stowe, *Cabin* 7–8). "So long as the law considers all these human beings, with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many *things* belonging to a master, —so long as the failure, or misfortune, or imprudence, or death of the kindest owner, may cause them to exchange a life of kind protection and indulgence for one of hopeless misery and toil, —so long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best administration of slavery" (8). Stowe's novel is founded on basic Christian principles, particularly on paradoxes expressed in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3): "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The atonement after death, in spirit, for the injustices in life, in body, will occur after the Judgment Day, when the victory of the spirit will be revealed. This triumphant reversal of power is at the center of her "Appeal to the Women of the United States" (*Independent* February 23, 1854), where Stowe urges women to influence their husbands, brothers, and other male counterparts to show true Christian compassion and love toward their slaves and in that way to contribute to the abolition of slavery.

Certain episodes, the scene at the Bird household, for example, are pointedly intended to demonstrate the real possibility of maternal power exercised in the domestic sphere overturning patriarchal power in the public sphere (and in this case, Senator Bird even makes the laws). Mrs. Bird, a timid soul, who nevertheless becomes intimidating when faced with the persecution of helpless creatures, exhibits her power when Eliza Harris arrives with her little boy Harry at the Bird home, in desperate flight from her pursuers. Mrs. Bird's empathy for them flows to her husband, who assists her in protecting them

in their home, in spite of the Fugitive Slave Act. The Birds go so far as to offer Eliza and Harry the clothing that was made for their own baby, who died at birth. Such sentimental scenes appear again and again in the novel—a strategy that Stowe hopes will "awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us; to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it" (Preface xiii). Thus, Mrs. Bird's apparent powerlessness in the public sphere is transformed through Stowe's concept of maternal power in the private sphere so that Mrs. Bird proves able to overturn her husband's resolve to abide by the law that he himself has helped to legislate.

The most highly charged sentimental scene occurs when the golden-haired angelic child Eva lies on her deathbed. Surrounded by her family and devoted slaves, including her dear friend Uncle Tom, Eva frequently displays Christian love, affecting everyone, even the mischievous and unruly Topsy. The "child angel" scene is a common one in Victorian literature as the purity and innocence of the child serve as a powerful example of redemption for those left behind. Stowe's rendition of this device works within the Christian framework of sacrifice for the spiritual salvation of others. Little Eva's triumphant exclamation "O, love!—joy!—peace!" at the moment of her death is taken as confirmation of the reality of heaven by all of her witnesses, as anticipated by her beloved Tom: "When that ar blessed child goes into the kingdom, they'll open the door so wide, we'll all get a look in at the glory (*Cabin* 255). Eva's golden curls, given to all she leaves behind, are symbols of her victory over death and of the promise to live as good Christians so that they will eventually be with Eva again in heaven. In fact, all those who witness Eva's death are transformed and converted: Topsy promises to love Jesus and to be a good girl, Aunt Ophelia promises to help Topsy fulfill her promise, and St. Clare rediscovers the faith of his youth before he is accidentally killed. The Christian paradox stated in the beatitudes has

been fulfilled, and, more importantly for Stowe's purposes, through the self-sacrificing power of Eva's maternal love is confirmed.

As a result of St. Clare's death, his cold-hearted wife, Marie, believes she must sell all the slaves and, once again, Tom is sent to the auction block. Just as Eva and her father enter paradise, the reader follows Tom's descent into the hell of plantation slavery. The descent into the Deep South of the lower Mississippi represented the horror of being "sold down the river" to enter into the cruelest form of slavery. If Tom is a Christ figure, then Simon Legree is the Antichrist. Tom is forced to work beyond his physical limits and is whipped mercilessly and often. His passivity, his "turn-the-other-cheek" gesture of forgiveness, infuriates Legree so that his cruel treatment of Tom only increases. The evil nature of Simon Legree serves Stowe's thematic purpose in emphasizing the implications of not respecting the power of maternal love: Legree's mother was kind and loving and raised her son according to Christian values, but her son repudiated her love and later burned the letter to him written on her deathbed, along with the curl of hair she enclosed with her words of forgiveness and prayers. When one of Legree's slaves, Sambo, returns from flogging Tom, he carries a charm that consists of a dollar given to Tom by young George Shelby and a lock of Eva's hair that Tom wears to fortify himself against pain. Legree is horrified that it might be the hair his own mother had given to him and imagines it to be curling tightly around his finger so he throws it into the fire. These events emphasize Stowe's purpose in her characterization of Legree, for because he does not have a foundation in Christian faith and because he repudiates his mother's love, his deep-seated guilt leaves him open to superstition and fear: "[Legree] tried to drink, and revel, and swear away the memory; but often, in the deep night, whose solemn stillness arraigns the bad soul in forced communication with herself, he had seen that pale mother rising by his bedside, and felt the soft twining of that hair around his fingers, till the cold sweat would roll down his face, and he would spring from his bed in horror" (Stowe, *Cabin* 322–

323). These very fears also work in assisting his slaves, Cassy and Emmeline, in their conspiracy to distract Legree by inflaming his fears and ghostly visions, thus assuring their escape. Stowe's theme of the power of the spirit over that of the body, the fundamental paradox of the Christian faith, is enacted again in their triumph.

The plots surrounding the slave women Cassy and Emmeline further illustrate Stowe's belief in the power of maternal love. Embittered by her deep hatred for an earlier master, by whom she has borne children, Henri and Elise, who were then taken from her and sold, Cassy sees Legree as yet another cruel master and she is vengeful enough to murder him. However, when Legree purchases the beautiful 15-year-old Emmeline for sexual purposes, separates her from her mother, and takes her to his plantation house, Cassy's feelings change. In keeping with Stowe's theme of the redemptive power of maternal love, Cassy cares for Emmeline as if she were her own child, while the young girl swears that she will always love Cassy as a mother, since she will probably not see her own again. Empowered by their mutual love, they eventually reach freedom with the help of Tom, who, when questioned repeatedly and then flogged mercilessly for information about their whereabouts, sacrifices his own life for them. And again, it is Tom's unwavering Christian faith and kindness that will convert Cassy. Uncle Tom's death scene is described in parallels with that of little Eva. The heightened sentimentality of both scenes is meant to pierce through Stowe's readers' blindnesses and objectivity and draw forth their sympathy to slaves with intense emotionality. By linking the divine nature of a golden-haired little girl with that of a faithful old slave, Stowe also emphasizes the humanity of slaves as a whole. Tom's courageous death so moves his oppressors Sambo and Quimbo that they plead with him to teach them about the Jesus "that's been a standin' by [him] so, all this night" (358). Their conversion dramatically underscores all of the previous conversions in the novel and drives home Stowe's theme of the power of the spirit: "But, of old, there

was One whose suffering changed an instrument of torture, degradation and shame, into a symbol of glory, honor, and immortal life; and, where His spirit is, neither degrading stripes, nor blood, nor insults, can make the Christian's last struggle less than glorious." Holding up models of moral perfection for her readers to emulate, Stowe's theme is fulfilled in the enactment of Tom's martyrdom. Her allusions to biblical passages clearly indicate her depiction of Tom as a Christ figure. When Legree threatens Tom with death if he will not reveal the whereabouts of Cassy and Emmeline, Tom offers him Christian values of forgiveness, love, and compassion and a plea that he repent in order to avoid eternal damnation. Legree pauses but in the end does not respond to Tom's kindness, thus sealing his own fate by cruelly striking Tom dead.

The end of the novel finds George and Eliza and Harry happily living in Montreal, Canada. At this point, too, many surprising revelations effect reunions, such as that of Cassy and Eliza, who turn out to be mother and daughter. A characteristic of 19th-century sentimental novels is the use of unlikely coincidence to join various plotlines; Stowe uses the technique for the larger purposes of rewarding those who have shown Christian values of faith and sacrifice and of reuniting mothers and daughters.

Through George Harris's letter that appears in the final pages of the novel, we learn that he would rather go to Africa, to Liberia, in particular, since he feels more solidarity with the African race than with the white. In a highly oratorical letter, George expresses his desire to help establish an African nation "that shall have a tangible, separate existence of its own" (374). Topsy also eventually travels to Africa, where she works as a Christian missionary. Stowe's final plea to the reader is to "feel right" and, in doing so, to embrace Christian ideals and to effect the abolition of slavery.

Uncle Tom's Cabin has achieved canonical status despite ongoing critical debate surrounding its representation of slave culture. Black Americans have found Stowe's racial stereotypes offen-

sive, particularly her portrayal of "Negroes" as emotional, fiercely devout, loyal, and childlike. James Baldwin's protest against such stereotypes was passionately expressed in his influential essay "Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son." Baldwin objected to the sterile designation of "Negro" as he wanted "to prevent [himself] from becoming merely a Negro; or, even merely Negro writer." Moreover, Stowe's characterization of Uncle Tom as a passive sufferer has become a touchstone for modern critiques of racism. But the moral force of her attack on slavery remains. By humanizing slaves through her highly sentimentalized portrayal of them, Stowe swayed her readers' hearts and profoundly changed their attitudes toward slavery.

Jane Tompkins's influential essay "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History" offers a strong and convincing defense of the 19th-century sentimental genre in which the novel was written. As Tompkins points out, critics have chosen "to disregard the power of the book because . . . [its] political message" and its "emotional [tone] made it propaganda" (511). But, Tompkins argues, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* retells the culture's central religious myth, the story of the crucifixion, in terms of the nation's greatest political conflict—slavery—and of its most cherished social beliefs—the sanctity of motherhood and the family. It is because Stowe is able to combine so many of the culture's central concerns in a narrative that is immediately accessible to the general population that she is able to move so many people so deeply" (513).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Throughout the novel, the author occasionally disrupts the narrative and speaks directly to the reader, a characteristic of many 19th-century novels. What is the effect of this style? Why does Stowe do it?
2. Eliza and George Harris and their son, Harry, are characterized as attractive, intelligent, and light-skinned blacks. What purpose does Stowe have in mind by portraying them in this way?

3. There are many families described in this novel. How does Stowe portray the women in these families? In an age when women had no vote, how does Stowe describe their place in society, and how does she make an appeal to their power?
4. What is the meaning of *conversion* in a religious sense? How does it work in Stowe's novel? How is Topsy converted?
5. What purpose does the character of little Eva serve? Why is she linked so closely to Uncle Tom?
6. What is a martyr? How does Uncle Tom reflect the martyrdom of Christ in this novel?
7. This novel has been characterized as a *sentimental novel*. How does sentimentality work as a strategy to move readers' sympathy toward slaves and thus to change attitudes toward slaves and slavery in general? In other words, how does feeling triumph over belief?
8. Throughout the novel, Stowe sprinkles many generalizations about the African race. Find examples and list some of them. Discuss the negative response to her book on the basis of her characterization of blacks, in particularly of the pacifist Uncle Tom.
9. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* clearly parallels the efforts of women and slaves to overcome the oppressive conditions of their lives. Contrast Stowe's parallels of women and slaves with MARGARET FULLER's parallels of them in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. How do the differences reflect the different aims of the authors?

"Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl" (1863)

Born a slave named Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth was a strong advocate in the women's rights and antislavery movements. She is most famous for her speech "Ain't I a Woman?" at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851.

Sojourner Truth met Harriet Beecher Stowe at Stowe's home, where several clergymen and abolitionists had convened. Surprised by the unexpected

guest, Stowe was summoned for what she thought would be a short interview. However, she was sufficiently impressed by Sojourner Truth's presence that she decided to publish what turned out to be an extended conversation and description of the impressions Sojourner made on her. Throughout the essay, Stowe presents Sojourner in idealized terms; describing her at the outset as reminding Stowe of "Cumberworth's celebrated statuette of the Negro Woman at the Fountain," Stowe goes on to characterize her as "a living, breathing impersonation of that work of art." Stowe also points to Sojourner Truth's robust physical stature, and her projection of the sort of spiritual strength that "in spiritualist phraseology . . . would be described as having strong sphere."

What quickly emerges is the way that Sojourner Truth's personal experience conforms to the broad outlines of the slave struggle that Stowe presented in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe places particular importance on Sojourner's being a "full-blooded African" who is particularly responsive to the love of Jesus Christ. The largest narrative segment of the essay is devoted to Sojourner's account of her conversion. As does Stowe's character Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Sojourner flees the horrors of slavery to find refuge in a Quaker home. Unlike Eliza, Sojourner stays in the Quaker home until after emancipation, when she faces her most severe spiritual test and finally admits Jesus into her heart. This conversion experience ultimately changes her even more significantly than her achievement of freedom, as through her conversion she successfully opens her heart to love for her fellow human beings. She announces her newfound joy by proclaiming, "Lord, Lord, I can love *even the white folks!*" Just as Uncle Tom discovers love for even the most degraded white oppressor, here Sojourner Truth shows that the horrors and injustices of slavery can be overcome by Christian love.

This theme is driven home in the closing lines of the essay, where Stowe inserts a telling anecdote involving Sojourner Truth as recalled by the abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips. The event took place during a public meeting at Faneuil Hall in

- Fields, Annie. *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1970.
- Harriet Beecher Stowe. Available online. URL: <http://americancivilwar.com/women/hbs.html>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Harriet Beecher Stowe Center. Available online. URL: http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/index_home.shtml. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Hedrik, Joan D. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Meer, Sarah. *Uncle Tom Mania*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story Is Founded Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*. 1853. Reprint, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1968.
- . *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Edited by Elizabeth Ammons. New York and London: Norton, 1994.
- Tompkins, Jane P. "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons, 501–522. New York and London: Norton, 1994.
- Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc>. Accessed May 7, 2009.
- Weinstein, Cindy. *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Cindy MacKenzie



HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817–1862)

The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

(“The Artist of Kouroo” in *Walden*)

A surveyor, farmer, musician, architect, ecologist, carpenter, mason, botanist, zoologist, and teacher, Henry David Thoreau of Concord, Massachusetts, changed the world—with his pen. He published only two of his seven books in his own lifetime, but he influenced Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi and many other activists, especially through his “Civil Disobedience” essay, and he inspired countless idealists to experiment with life as he recounted his sojourn in *Walden*.

Christened David Henry Thoreau (rhymes with *furrow*), he soon switched his two first names. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE described his neighbor memorably as “a singular character—a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him. . . . He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and somewhat rustic, although courteous manners” (Meltzer and Harding 91). Yet he charmed Hawthorne, LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, and the children he taught in his youth. When he died at only 44 of lung troubles exacerbated by his work with his father manufacturing pencils, Concord’s children piled flowers on his grave.

The third child of John and Cynthia Thoreau, he descended from French, English, and Scotch forebears. John, “a quiet mousey sort of man” (Harding 4), was an unsuccessful businessman, but he passed along to his son his love of the flute and of classical literature. Thoreau’s mother, Cynthia, in contrast to her small and quiet husband,

was a tall, opinionated, and liberal-minded woman, active in such groups as the Concord Women’s Anti-Slavery Society. The mother of four passed along to Henry her passionate advocacy of reform and her love for roaming through the woods. Thoreau’s domestic education was broadened by the somewhat awkward stages of his formal schooling. At Mrs. Wheeler’s nursery school he stood apart from his little friends; in the public grammar school children called him “The Judge” or “the fine scholar with the big nose.” At age 11 David Henry entered Concord Academy, which, he said, “fitted or made [him] unfit for college” (Meltzer and Harding 21). In 1833 Thoreau entered Harvard on money (\$179 per year) scraped together by his older siblings, parents, and aunts. There he cut a broad swath through the library’s 41,000 books, reading, for example, the 21 volumes of Chalmers’s *English Poets* and Eastern holy texts (Richardson, *Life of the Mind* 9). He was a diligent student, and surprisingly conservative: Of the 63 young men in the class of 1837, young Thoreau was one of only 19 who had no disciplinary problems, eschewing even the food fight rebellion. The Harvard years put Thoreau in touch with the intellectual leaders of his and future days and ingrained such habits as keeping a commonplace book, or journal, that grew to number more than 5,000 pages.

At Harvard, though he was still considered a little odd by his classmate John Weiss (Harding

43), he was also earning respect. RALPH WALDO EMERSON, 15 years older, recognized his young friend to be a great thinker. Thoreau was small and homely; Emerson, tall and attractive. They differed also in family background: The Thoreaus' colorful forebears had emigrated to America late in the 18th century from France and Scotland, while the long line of ministers in Emerson's family originated long before the American Revolution. Thoreau was a practical man; Emerson was not. By the time Emerson met Thoreau, he had left the church and had begun a new career in a new kind of pulpit: the Lyceum Circuit, where his speeches (later, essays) reflected the new wave of transcendentalism.

Perhaps the most successful embodiment of such Emerson works as *Nature* was Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond, but that would take place a number of years after his meeting with Emerson, who said, "I delight much in my young friend who has as clear and erect a mind as any I have known." The famous story that Thoreau skipped the graduation at which Emerson delivered "The American Scholar" may be only partly true, but Thoreau, who had already learned of transcendentalism on a teaching stint with Orestes Brownson, had ready access to that talk and others: Emerson's speeches circulated widely. The then-34-year-old orator/philosopher honed his speeches for publication (often after he had delivered them on multiple occasions), then printed them in the transcendentalist journal the *Dial*, and then in book form. Two times during his years at Harvard Thoreau withdrew Emerson's *Nature* (1836) from the college library, and later he bought a copy for himself. By June 1837 Emerson knew his young neighbor well enough to write to President Quincy of Harvard, (unsuccessfully) recommending financial aid for his young friend (Harding 47).

The friendship had developed soon after Emerson and his second wife, Lydia (he called her Lidian), settled in Concord in 1835; established an impressive household; and had four children in seven years. Having inherited money from his first wife and in his marriage to Lidian, Emerson was able to help support his less fortunate neighbors.

During Emerson's many absences from his home, Henry David visited the Emerson's so often that Lidian fixed a room for him. In the Emerson household Thoreau became the essential handyman/children's companion. When his favorite, six-year-old Waldo, died on January 27, 1842, Henry grieved. That profound sadness followed an even more terrible loss, that of his brother and teaching colleague John. John had the charm and good looks that his younger brother lacked.

Together John and Henry had successfully collaborated in what would be Henry's third teaching venture. In addition to the work with Brownson in his Harvard years, he had another teaching post in his own former school, the Concord public grammar school. Rather than beat any of the 52 children in his care there, as he had been instructed, he quit. In contrast, the school that he and John ran, much like Bronson Alcott's educational experiment, respected children and stressed "learning by doing," especially exploring the natural world. For three years, John taught English and mathematics; Henry taught Latin, Greek, French, physics, natural philosophy, and natural history. The school closed because of John's poor health, probably the result of the family scourge, tuberculosis. Henry then arranged a vacation with John on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in spring 1839. Their travels were later memorialized by Thoreau in his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a harbinger of *Walden*.

After the school closed, Thoreau worked on the *Dial*. He also worked on wooing, first Ellen Sewall, who later regretted having rejected him for his better-looking brother. He also formed a close friendship with a female in-law of Emerson's who was many years older than he, and later one with an appropriately young woman named Mary Russell. Because he never married and because he devoted a chapter in *Walden* to the values of chastity ("Higher Laws"), Thoreau has been the subject of inquiry about his sexual identity. However ascetic, even misogynistic, he may have appeared in later years, in his twenties he seems to have been susceptible to sweet, bright women—and several of them

to him. To the amusement of some of his family, the embarrassment of Henry, and the grief of the lady involved (there was rumor that she considered suicide), Thoreau received a proposal of marriage from Sophia Ford (Harding 225–228). The marital strike-outs took place during the period Thoreau endured two losses that proved much more desperate and sad than the school failure or his disappointments with women.

The death of Henry's appealing brother, John, occurred two weeks after the death of Waldo Emerson. Although he had been ill for a long time, it was a grotesque accident that killed John, a cut that led to the excruciating pain of lockjaw. John died in his brother's arms. For two days after John's death Henry was gravely ill, his symptoms appearing identical to his brother's.

Afterward, Henry needed solace, friends, an occupation, and a home. The need for friends was met partly by the newly married Hawthornes, who filled in for the still-grieving Emersons, supplying skating parties. He and Emerson also encouraged Thoreau's writing. Regarded now as one of the greatest prose stylists of the English language, Thoreau began with small essays for the new *Dial*. A reflective essayist since his Harvard days, in the *Dial* he further honed his early style with its concrete, surprising metaphors and tone of the wise, amused, passionate observer of his world. Emerson also helped Thoreau with his other need: a place to live. He did this first by arranging a position for Thoreau in Staten Island tutoring the three sons of his brother, William Emerson. On tutoring breaks Thoreau met such leading lights as HENRY JAMES, Horace Greeley, Lucretia Mott, Bronson Alcott (later a Concord neighbor), and WALT WHITMAN (Harding 149). Interesting as it all was, when Emerson invited him to return to Concord to give a lecture, he moved back for good. What he moved to was not only a new house but the material for his two major works, *Walden* and "Resistance to Civil Government."

Emerson lent Thoreau part of his lot on the wide banks of Walden Pond. There he began an "experiment." On the Fourth of July 1845, when

his countrymen were expressing their patriotism and supporting the war with Mexico, Thoreau declared his own independence from an act he could not support and from an economic system of which he did not approve by moving into the little house he had made with the white pine he had cleared. Using his own labor and a little less than \$29 for supplies, Thoreau built the most famous little house in American history. In his 10-by-13 foot space, he had, as he said, a bed, some wood, a table, and three chairs, "one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society" (271). Most of his daytime hours were spent on the front stoop of that house. There, as he tells us in the book, he would publish seven years later, he hoed (*hoer* is an anagram of *hero*); from there he sauntered (the word he links, semifacetiously, to "saint a terre"); on its grounds and from the banks of its pond (actually closer to a lake) he observed nature—as a scientist and as a philosopher. There he read widely and entertained whimsically. Most importantly, there he wrote.

His writing goal was to complete the book that would honor his brother, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In many ways the book is a preview to *Walden*, which he was also writing (though he did not necessarily know it) by entering daily observations and thoughts in his journal. On their own the more than 2 million words of the journals have provided material for a musical setting by Philip Glass and numerous books excerpting portions for general readers, providing a glimpse into Thoreau's mind and writing practices. In themselves they contained finished essays in which Thoreau's "subjects are literal, his vision metaphorical" (Howarth ix), but they also show the first draft of the finished great books. The entry for his decision to leave Walden states: "But why I changed? Why I left the woods? I do not think that I can tell. . . . To speak sincerely I went there because I had got ready to go; I left it for the same reason" (Anderson 233). In the years between 1845 and 1854 he crafted that entry into the most familiar passage from *Walden*: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps

it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one” and the stirring paragraphs that follow (439; page references to *Walden* and to “Civil Disobedience” from the Stern annotated version).

Walden's high rhetoric is blended with straightforward specific Anglo-Saxon language. Its first chapter, “Economy,” begins simply with a series of prepositional phrases that situate Thoreau in his world and introduce the reader to his central concern: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from my neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (145). Thoreau itemizes expenses, but what Thoreau really means by “Economy” is at the heart of his experiment. *Economy*, in Thoreau's sense means how much “of what I will call life”—drudgery and dollars—is required to pay for a deeper, richer life of meaning. In this experiment Thoreau was not exactly a hermit. Frequently he sauntered up the path to hear the news of the village. Much of that news worried the young man, who had rung the church bells to advertise an Emerson speech and defended his invitation of the prominent abolitionist Wendell Phillips (Harding 175–176). Thus, when the war with Mexico started on May 8, 1846, Thoreau took action. Although the causes of the Mexican War were complex, for Thoreau the most important cause was slavery: It might increase the slave states through the annexation of Texas. One month after the war was declared, Thoreau went to jail—and changed the history of the world. He was not the first to commit the crime that sent him to jail, a refusal on principle to pay taxes (Alcott, for example, had done the same), but he was the one who most memorably articulated the reasons for his civil disobedience, inspiring in words and action future generations to fight perceived injustice in a peaceful way.

Because the night Thoreau spent in jail has become a successful play (in 1970 by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee), most people know that

some time during the night an unknown person “interfered” and paid his tax bill, depriving him of what seemed to be a pleasant experience. Who did so—Thoreau's sister Sophia and his aunt Maria are suspects—is unknown, but Walter Harding suspects the jailer, Sam Staples, who was eager to clean up the books on the brink of his own retirement. The oft-told story about Thoreau's asking Emerson why he was not in jail is apparently apocryphal. Emerson was out of town. More than a year after his by-then-famous night in jail, Thoreau explained his dramatic action to a Lyceum full of curious villagers. Voting and paying taxes, he explained, were the occasions on which he (or any citizen) was face to face with his government, and he wanted his government to know that he did not support an unjust war. He woke up his Lyceum audience and most future readers with the shocking call to chaos and anarchy: “That government is best which governs not at all” (455). Having attracted the attention of his audience and readers, Thoreau reversed course and modified the radical statement. He went on to say that governments are indeed necessary machinery for the safety and help of any civilization, but there may be a time when an individual must get in the way of the machine: “If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go.” However, if the injustice “requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine” (463). Clearly Thoreau, a few years later a defender of the martyred troublemaker John Brown, believed that his little bit of tax money and the continuation of the immense and tragic institution of slavery were connected. Elizabeth Peabody invited Thoreau to publish the speech in the new journal *Aesthetic Papers*, where she published it as “Resistance to Civil Government.” When the essay was included in the posthumously published *Yankee in Canada with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (1866), it was called “Civil Disobedience.” Other than a review in a London journal praising the “meatiest portions,” the 1849 publication of the essay that was to be crucial to the world “produced scarcely a rip-

ple” (Harding 207). It became famous when Gandhi republished the essay in India in 1907 (Stern 452–453).

Having sent off the essay to Miss Peabody, Thoreau went on with his own busy life. Between his night in jail and the publication by Peabody, Thoreau had helped his father build on a lot on Texas Street and experiment with improvements in pencil making. Much time, too, was spent on science. Thoreau had been conducting such precise scientific observations that a great deal of literary and nonliterary scholarship focuses on Thoreau’s botanical, geological, agrarian, zoological, and ecological studies. For example, Thoreau’s last manuscript, “Faith in a Seed,” showed his well-informed lover’s quarrel with the scientific community, and the foreword by Robert Richardson reviews for the layman Thoreau’s reaction to the new concepts of the Harvard professor Louis Agassiz, who was attempting to classify American plants. Thoreau became “a member of Boston’s new and energetic Society of Natural History” in 1850, and in 1859 he was a member of Harvard’s Visiting Committee in Natural History (Richardson, “Learning” 8). Approaching death, Thoreau wrote that “if I were to live, I should have much to report on Natural History generally” (Richardson, “Learning” 5), but, in fact, he had been reporting on it virtually all of his life. Sometimes his investigations were in far-flung spots. One particularly challenging adventure was his trip to Maine in August 1846, a month after the night in jail. Via boat, rail, and coach, Thoreau, a cousin, and two friends, carrying enough supplies—including blankets, pots and pans—for six men for a week, had to portage their boats and then pull themselves up the side of perpendicular falls of over 20 feet by roots and branches. The next year (1849) Thoreau took another trip, the first of three to Cape Cod, about which he would write another (posthumously published) book. He also spent a rugged week in Canada with Ellery Channing in 1859. Finally, in 1861 he asked the 17-year-old Horace Mann, Jr., son of the late educator and Mary Peabody Mann (sister of Elizabeth and of Sophia, wife of Hawthorne),

to accompany him on a trip to Minnesota. Thoreau’s curiosity about the rivers, lakes, homesteaders, and, most of all, Indians led him to the Minnesota adventure.

This, his last trip, is a gauge of Thoreau’s belief in the power of nature to heal; his passion for knowledge about plants, animals, and water formations; his interest in others, particularly the disenfranchised and marginalized; and his American westering spirit. It was, in fact, his only trip west of the Mississippi. By the time the two returned home, it was clear that Thoreau was worse, not better. What they did not foresee was that the exposure to Thoreau would also kill young Mann. Although he went on to Harvard and had a brief career as a botanist, Mann would die at 21 of tuberculosis, presumably contracted from Thoreau. Thoreau himself had only a little over a year left after his return east, during which he continued to write, edit, and cheerfully visit friends. To the end he kept his sense of humor, answering a friend who remarked on his lack of gray hair by crediting his virtue and lack of troubles, “But there is Blake [a friend]; he is as gray as a rat” (Harding 461).

Work and travel had been interrupted in 1849, when the family suffered the death of his sister Helen, victim of the family curse, tuberculosis. One wonders whether he could foresee his own mortality when, at Helen’s funeral, he played the music box his brother and the family had loved. Although he spent long periods meditating and silently observing nature, he packed an astonishing amount of vigorous life into his last 13 years, after Helen’s death. As he had explained to his friend and frequent correspondent Harrison O. Blake, “I have no designs on society—or nature—or God. I am simply what I am, or I begin to be that. I *live* in the present. I only remember the past—and anticipate the future. I love to live.” In another letter, he advises, “Aim above [commonly understood] morality. Be not *simply* good—be good for something” (Stern 76).

Along with taking occasional practical surveying assignments, Thoreau continued to lecture vigorously and to write. The book he went to Walden to

write, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, was published the year of Thoreau's sister's death and of the publication of "Civil Disobedience." In *Walden* Thoreau joked about his publishing debacle of that first book. He bragged, "I have now a library of nearly 900 volumes, over 700 of which I wrote myself" (Introduction, *A Week* xv). Thoreau called "the peculiarity of my 'Week' . . . its hypaethral character, to use an epithet applied to those Egyptian temples which are open to the heavens above, under the ether" (quoted in Introduction, *A Week* xvii). *A Week's* poetic prose may be situated in the clouds, but the structure—a straightforward journey narrative broken into the seven days of a week—is simple and presages *Walden's* movement from summer to the following spring. However, the literary allusions, symbolism, digressions, and language of the book help to explain its failure in the marketplace. *A Week* cost him \$290 and earned back only \$15. *Walden* did a little better.

As did the Artist of Kooroo, Thoreau worked hard and long on his craft. Ten years separated the idyllic trip with the dying John from the printed *Week* (1839 and 1849); in similar manner, it took two years to live at *Walden* (1845–47) and seven more to complete the book and publish it (in 1854). The many cross-outs on the many drafts reveal Thoreau's struggle toward perfection. Organized chronologically through the seasons, *Walden* is also organized by topics that overlap with and respond to each other. The two books published in his lifetime were only a small part of what he crafted during his life as a professional writer. Steven Fink's study *Prophet in the Marketplace* makes the case that although Thoreau did not achieve financial success, "his involvement in his profession had a profound (and ultimately positive) effect upon both the man and his works." Fink notes that just in the years between 1837, when Thoreau began his journal, and 1849, when he published his *Week*, he also published book reviews, verse translations, travel narratives, and informal essays, mostly but not exclusively in the *Dial* (Fink 6–7).

As he lay dying after that Minnesota trip, famous writers and simple townspeople paid visits.

He rewarded them with such comments as this: "When I was a very little boy I learned that I must die, and I set that down, so of course I am not disappointed now. Death is as near to you as it is to me." The family watched his peaceful end, which occurred on May 6, 1862, when his sister reported his saying, "I feel as if something very beautiful had happened—not death" (Harding 464–466). And indeed, as every student of American literature and most political activists around the world know, it had only been one kind of death. For years the site of the cabin in the woods was decorated with stones brought by faithful readers, but the real legacy would be in the means many would choose to right a world they saw as gone wrong.

THOREAU'S SPEECHES AND ESSAYS IN POLITICAL CONTEXT

Thoreau left the woods, as he tells us, because he had "other lives to live." Those lives included travel, more work in the pencil factory, and, most significantly, speaking out about the wrenching dilemmas of his day. A few historical notes about those dilemmas are in order. Thoreau's movement from experimental hermit to fiery, vigorous, if not altogether consistent activist was not surprising. The seeds of what made Thoreau, in the words of his early biographer Henry Seidel Canby, "the woodchuck gritting his teeth until they are powdered" (382), are obvious in Thoreau's family history, which included his paternal grandfather, who served under Paul Revere. Thoreau's earliest published piece was, in fact, an obituary of Concord's last survivor of the Revolutionary War.

Most glaring of the flaws in the independent country for which they fought was the status of slaves; the Constitution outlawed slavery in the North but said nothing about its extension to territories and new states. This question, along with that of the legislation for return of fleeing slaves, gathered organized protest in Thoreau's intellectual community and in his own household. By 1837 the annual Anti-Slavery Society meeting was held in Dr. Ripley's Meeting-House in Concord. The newspaper invited "friends of the cause" to

attend and “local societies [to send] large delegations.” We do not know that Thoreau attended, but the year was one in which Thoreau graduated from Harvard, taught briefly at Center School, and became a member of the “Hedge Club,” composed of the major transcendentalists. We do know that in 1844 Thoreau rang the bell to summon people to a speech by Emerson at a ceremony celebrating the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies (Harding, *Days* 193). In 1845 Thoreau wrote for the *Liberator* in praise of Wendell Phillips’s stand on the slavery-free admission of Texas, and, of course, in 1848, Thoreau refused to obey the government by not paying taxes that would support the extension of slavery.

Meanwhile, he and his community were becoming increasingly enraged by the expansion of laws that obligated the public to aid in the return of escaped slaves. As early as 1793 legislation permitted—indeed encouraged—the federal government to punish those who helped fugitive slaves. In response, the Personal Liberty Law was passed in 1843 with the aim of reducing the government’s role, making it a crime for any state official to aid in the detention of fugitive slaves and prohibiting the use of jails (Rosenblum xx). What most angered Thoreau and others who opposed slavery was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850. This law reversed the 1843 legislation, making it a federal crime to *help* fugitive slaves. Abolitionists saw this as legally obligating citizens in free states such as Massachusetts to support the institution of slavery.

Resistance to the government that would so subvert the ideals of the country pitted abolitionists such as Emerson, who declared, “I will not obey it, by God” (Harding, *Days* 196), against slave catchers who traveled to Boston to test the laws. Among those whose situations fired up the New England transcendental community was the runaway Frederick “Shadrach” Wilkens, who in February 1851 was seized while waiting on tables at a coffee house in Boston. Liberated by other blacks from the courthouse, “Shadrach” was probably helped en route to Canada by the Thoreau family and sheltered in

the home of a Thoreau friend, Mrs. Mary Brooks. “Shadrack” was luckier than most. Every day, says Harding, “Negroes were being dragged back to the chains and cruelties of slavery. It was time to act” (*Days* 314). In April of that year Thomas Simms was marched to the wharf surrounded by 250 U.S. soldiers and sent back to Georgia. In September Henry Williams was bound back for Virginia when Thoreau himself helped to enable his escape. In fact, says Walter Harding, “rarely a week went by without some fugitive being harbored overnight in town and sped along his way before daylight. Henry Thoreau, more often than any other man in Concord, looked after them” (Harding, *Days* 316). Three years later, in 1854, a jailed fugitive slave named Anthony Burns was guarded by an entire brigade of Massachusetts militiamen. In 1855 the Massachusetts Personal Liberty Law forbade anyone to act as counsel for a slave claimant. Increasingly citizens were enraged at federal judges such as Lysander Spooner, who made it his job to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law (Rosenblum xvii–xxi). Thoreau himself called the government’s actions “maddening folly” (Kritzberg 546) and a “perfectly heathenish business” (Kritzberg 548).

The problem of the territories rankled abolitionists as much as the rendition laws. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of May 1854 left the decision of whether the Kansas territory would be slave or free to a popular vote there. Among those most angry over the attempts of pro-slavery people to tinker with the election was the 56-year-old John Brown. Thoreau met John Brown in 1857 at his mother’s boardinghouse when Brown went to Concord to raise money for his cause, and he praised Brown’s “courage to face his country herself when she was in the wrong” (Witherell 654). By this time Brown, four of his many sons, and followers had already (in 1856) hacked to death five unarmed pro-slavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas. The real crisis for those attracted by Brown’s passionate war on his government’s slaveholding protectionists but temperamentally and ideologically sickened by violence occurred in October 1859, when word came of Brown’s failed and fatal but heroic attack

at Harpers Ferry. Along with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Thomas Parker, Wendell Phillips, and others, Thoreau defended the man, whom he saw as a transcendentalist with “a spark of divinity.”

Three years before his own death, Thoreau, famous for espousing civil disobedience, became a passionate advocate for this militant (some thought it mad) disobedience. Whether or not this was a break with his earlier ideas is disputed by scholars. Thoreau, the individualist, did not join the societies that opposed such injustice, but he had already acted on his beliefs when he (as others had) accepted a jail sentence issued in response to his 1846 refusal to pay taxes in support of the Mexican War. What followed summed up “Civil Disobedience,” his most famous speech, and others that were spoken and published in the later years of his brief life.

“Civil Disobedience”

(“Resistance to Civil Government”) (1848)

In response to the curiosity of his neighbors about the now-famous night he spent in jail for refusing to pay his poll tax in 1846, Thoreau delivered the lecture that many believe so powerful that its influence rippled outward to change whole governments. The next year he polished the essay, then titled “Resistance to Civil Government,” for publication by Elizabeth Peabody in *Aesthetic Papers*. Finally, before he died, Thoreau edited the essay for inclusion in *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (1866), where it appeared as “Civil Disobedience.” For all this editing, the essay maintained the vigor of a speech intended—as is so much else of Thoreau—to wake up his neighbors.

By the January night in 1848 when he first gave the speech, the July night he spent in jail in 1846 had become romanticized in his mind and had become emblematic of the power of individual action. Famously beginning with almost a call to anarchy, Thoreau radicalizes what he cites as a “motto”—“That government is best which governs least,” changing it to “That government is best which governs not at all” (203). The reader

pictures Thoreau’s listeners sitting up straighter, ready to protest or to cheer. By the end of his first paragraph, he makes clear that the (to him illegal) Mexican War is the stimulus to action. In the second paragraph, he carefully separates the government, which he relegates to “an expedient,” from the citizens who compose it; they are the freedom fighters, the pioneers, the educators. With the third paragraph he backtracks to a reasonable, practical tone: “I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once*, a better government,” and in the fourth, he weighs the power of a majority against the even greater power of a single person’s actions based on conscience. “The mass of men serve the state . . . not as men mainly, but as machines,” Thoreau says, echoing his introduction to *Walden*, where he attacks “lives of quiet desperation.” He follows this with a brief history of the revolution and of political theory and then makes a point that will be repeated in later and angrier protest speeches: “Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity” (207).

From *Walden* to the latest of the John Brown essays, Thoreau’s mission is to wake up his own neighbors and urge them to consider taking “action from principle” (210). Admitting that many abuses of government may be borne with patience and inaction, Thoreau notes that there is a time when the individual must disobey. Here is the passage on which the whole essay depends:

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go. . . . But if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. (211)

Having set up the philosophical premise for his action, Thoreau explains to his audience/readers

how he acted on this principle. “The only mode in which a man situated as I am,” he says, meets his government is “directly, and face to face, once a year . . . in the person of its tax gatherer” (212). If the uses of his tax money will, as he said, cause one to be an agent of injustice to another, as would have been the case had the states acquired through the Mexican War become slave states, he must take action: “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison.” He urges all citizens to “cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence,” as through such an action will the dictates of conscience be translated into meaningful action. “If a thousand men were not to pay their taxes this year,” it would be a “peaceable revolution” (213). Riffing on these thoughts for two pages, Thoreau finally tells the story about which his neighbors are curious, recalling his refusal for six years to pay his taxes, the frustration of failing to arouse his neighbors, and his “novel and interesting” night in jail. Watching the stars from his cell window was not unpleasant, and drawing out his cellmate for stories of previous occupants, Thoreau says, made it “like travelling [*sic*] into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold” (218).

Thoreau’s meditations on citizens and governors, on true and false conformity, on genius and its opposite, lead to a somewhat hopeful concluding image: “I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor” (224). Released when “some one interfered” and paid the tax (the guilty party is in dispute), Thoreau emerged into a Concord noontime in July only to discover that his fellow citizens remained ignorant of the justice system—the jail—in their town square. Rather than regale them with his thoughts at that time, he set off on a huckleberry party and did not broach the subject until he was asked to make the speech that “was Gandhi’s textbook for his civil disobedience campaigns in Africa and India”; that became “a handbook of political action in the early days of the Brit-

ish Labour party in England”; that Martin Luther King, Jr., used as a guide to his movement toward greater civil rights; and that “has probably been more widely read than any other work by Thoreau” (Harding and Meyer 42).

For Discussion or Writing

1. An inspiration for political activists, “Civil Disobedience” has the potential to cause chaos as well as progress. Discuss the implications of Thoreau’s words and actions.
2. Today we know that this document has reached around the world; to whom does Thoreau seem to be speaking? What is his tone in most of the essay?
3. How do this essay and the action behind it represent the philosophical assumptions of the transcendental movement? Which Emerson speeches, for example, would you hold up as inspiration for it or parallel to it?

***A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849)**

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to the publisher Evert Duyckinck about his friend Thoreau’s account of his trip with his brother on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: It had “extraordinary merit,” he said, and it was “attractive to *lovers of nature* . . . and to poets [and to] scholars for its excellent literature, and to all thoughtful persons for its originality and profoundness” (Fink 143). Every phrase of Emerson’s words about *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* fits the great book, *Walden*, that was yet to appear. Like the more famous book, *A Week* is hard to classify. On one level it purported to be a travel adventure, but the actual activities of each “day” are a small part of the book (Professor Harding thinks about 40 percent). The rest is a complex of philosophic and scientific reflections. In its own day, even Emerson called them “big beads and ingots.” James Russell Lowell’s long review (one of some dozen) had much the same complaint, declaring that “the door of the portfolio

cage has been left open, and thoughts have flown out of themselves.” Lowell voices the thoughts of many others in his observation that when Thoreau is the “Boswell of Musketaquid and Merrimack,” the book is “delightful,” but when he veers into digressions on the classics or topics like friendship, he stops us cold: “We come upon them like snags, jolting us headforemost” (Introduction, *A Week* xiii–xiv). Even committed 20th-century Thoreauvians found these wanderings annoying: Carl Bode says that “the original narrative [of the trip with John] has been weighted down with learned allusions and quotations” (Bode 138), and perhaps the most ardent Thoreau admirer and biographer of all, Walter Harding, says that the thoughts not related to the journey are “dumped in like plums into a pudding” (247).

One wonders at these complaints because the actual events of the Thoreau brothers' excursion from Massachusetts to New Hampshire do not seem to be the point of the book, which is not to diminish the importance of the travel memoir. Between the “plums” or “digressions”—usually at the beginning and end of each chapter—that is to say, of each day—the reader can trace the trip. The two brothers set off to great fanfare from friends on August 31, 1839. A fast-forward of their trip would go this way: to Ball's Hill for blueberries, seven miles downriver to Billerica for supper and the night, a view of Lowell city's furnaces in the night as if made for entertainment. The next day they reached the Middlesex Canal, where (it was Sunday) churchgoers literally and figuratively looked down on them; 12 miles farther they camped in Tyngsborough. That was just the first two days: The next few took them well into New Hampshire, past Manchester to New Hampshire's Concord, and on to Lincoln. They took time to climb mountains, take coach rides, stay in a hotel, and do much more. They met with rain and with high winds that “shook the *foundations* of the tent” (221), and they were in close contact with cows and, they feared, with bears (269). For all the complaints about the wandering nature of the book, one could easily follow the trip on a map,

and, in fact, some Thoreauvians have taken this trip in memory of the brothers.

However, for some people, the better reason to read the book is not for the travel trivia but for the same whimsical expressions of the spirit that lead us to read *Walden*, for which *A Week* seems a rehearsal. For one thing, the organization of *A Week* anticipates the greater, later book. As *Walden* would move from spring through the year to the next ice thaw (though he actually lived there for two years), *A Week* obviously proceeds in a straightforward progression through the days of one week (though the trip took two). Thoreau may have also had another organizational principle within the straightforward Saturday-to-Friday sequence (he certainly did in *Walden*), as well, but topics interlace with each other so that there is a dollop of philosophy, natural science, and wry observations on human beings in each of the chapters/days. The traveler/narrator announces that almost everything within the trip and the book is metaphorical; he introduces the river, a more important character than his brother (who is mentioned very little): In his first sentence he likens “The Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River” to the Nile, and he plays with the names of all the rivers. The Grass River will be the Concord River “only while men lead peaceable lives” (3). From there topics range wide, but any reader of transcendentalism will recognize the provenance of the thoughts. Here is Thoreau, reworking Emerson, on the difference between the poet and everyone else: “Alas, the poet too is in one sense a sort of dormouse gone into winter quarters of deep and serene thoughts. . . . Other men lead a starved existence meanwhile, like hawks that would fain keep in the wing” (126). What to some (Thoreau's own sisters, for example) seemed a shocking disdain for conventional Christian philanthropy appears in many guises in the book as well: Thoreau makes a distinction between himself and most people who are “mummies in museums” and says that it was a “pleasure to escape from Reformers” (160–162). Those who want a brief introduction to the Bhagavad Gita or Upanishads will find it in *A Week*. Those whose tastes are for Western literature

will find much on Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and others who are curious about the Fresh Water Sun-Fish will find three pages of description and analysis; those who, like Thoreau, are concerned about the history of and future of Native Americans will find much about Prince Philip's War and other historic events. Thoreau's tribute to his brother is really a continuation of the conversation he has started with himself as he tries to be unordinary and totally alive. If his attempt to extend that conversation to his neighbors, jarring them to be equally individualistic, fails, he will have other chances. The question he repeats in many ways—in his own poetry and that of others, in fable, in humor, and in preachments—is this: “What have I to do with ploughs? I cut another furrow than you see” (67).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How often do you find Thoreau speaking about the brother whose memorial this is? What picture emerges of the siblings together? How might his pages on “Friendship” in the “Wednesday” chapter give insight into the relationship?
2. As he does in all his work, Thoreau here displays his interest in puns and symbolic languages. Find examples and discuss how thinking about the many possible meanings of a word can teach you about your own creative process.
3. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is obviously a frustrating one for most readers (even for Thoreau scholars). It is, however, filled with paragraphs of two or three pages that contain nuggets of gold; those nuggets match others in other chapters. Select one topic of the many in this volume and trace that subject—perhaps Homer or Eastern thought or the nature of a river—throughout the book.

“Walking” (1851)

If “Civil Disobedience” was the most influential of Thoreau's works in changing governments and power positions, “Walking,” as the combination of

two separate essays would be titled, contained the sentence that has become the famous cry—and slogan on billboards and fund-raising campaigns—of ecologists and preservationists: “In Wildness is the preservation of the world.” The reader may wonder at “Walking” in this discussion of Thoreau's radical political essays. As the discussion progresses, it should be clear that much as Thoreau echoes the *Walden* spirit, the definitions he gives to the words *Wildness* and *Westering* in “Walking” are indeed metaphors for the attitudes Thoreau celebrates in the other essays of this period.

To be sure, Thoreau's call for a return to and a reverence for nature, Thoreau's lifetime theme, was present in his journals from the 1840s, but by the time this essay was published, a month after his death (it was the first of his posthumous publications), it clearly anticipated the John Brown material of Thoreau's declining years. Described as “the least organized of his shorter works” (Harding and Meyer 60), the version that appeared in the *Atlantic* suffers, perhaps, from its hybrid origins. Part of it was taken from journal entries Thoreau had culled for lectures that he delivered frequently in 1851–52 under the title of “The Wild.” The separate essay, “Walking,” was delivered on many occasions as one of a series of Thoreau talks in New Jersey in 1852 and again in 1856. The two essays were joined for posthumous publication in the June 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which “Walking” was the lead article. Ticknor and Fields, the new owners of the the *Atlantic*, had responded to Thoreau's “Herculean effort to gather, edit, and publish as many as possible of his uncollected and unpublished works” (Harding, *Days* 377). Knowing he was dying of tuberculosis, Thoreau worked hard to ensure financial support for his widowed mother and unmarried sister (Myerson 5).

Perhaps because of its hybrid and loosely organized nature, the essay has been read under quite different rubrics. Richard Lebeaux, who psychoanalyzed “Walking,” for example, reads the essay as Thoreau's achievement of a new self-identity. Having renamed himself (*David Henry* to the reverse), “he gloried in his identity as the saunterer, the

bold and free crusader and observer of the ‘other Concord’ (Lebeau 128). Joel Myerson places the essay in a larger historical/ philosophical context. According to him, it is Thoreau’s “Transcendentalized version of the New World Eden and manifest destiny concepts” (Myerson 154). Demonstrably open to multiple characterizations, “Walking” begins with a paragraph that could stand as the other side of the coin to Thoreau’s meditation on community, “Civil Disobedience”: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, —to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (225). The *I* of this first sentence, much as does that of *Walden*, “occupies a midway or ‘frontier’ position between woods and village, radical simplicity and sophisticated culture,” says Myerson (134). The essay’s second sentence, too, is radical: “I wish to make an extreme statement.” Myerson notes that this *extra-vagant* tone and language are “a Transcendental analogue to the saunterer’s effort to outwalk the village mindset” (154).

Thoreau builds numerous puns into his second hyperbolic paragraph: The saunterer is the Sainte Terre; he is extravagant, extra-vagant, and “the greatest vagrant” is “he who sits still in a house all the time.” Nodding to the much more extensive journeys of the crusaders of years past (later he will toss out a cornucopia of literary and historical references), Thoreau builds toward the simpler subject of himself, the *I* of the essay, and sets off with the listener/reader (us) in tow: “If you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (226). His walks, he says, are usually four hours in length, and he will begin them at any hour lest “rust” should take over. He does not castigate his neighbors as roundly here as elsewhere, but he does say that he wonders why at that hour between four and five “too late for the morning papers and too early for the evening ones, there is not a general explosion heard up and down the street, scattering a legion of antiquated and house-bred notions and whims to the four winds for an airing” (227). As

is his wont, Thoreau indulges in digressions: why and how women walk, the distinction between the way a surveyor (he was one) and a miser (he might be accused of that too) walk, the meanings of the word *village*; and even his own poem on one of those villages.

His rather long poem, “The Old Marlborough Road,” is too irregular to be doggerel and too full of specific names and inside jokes to be an enduring poem, but it might have made, one imagines, a song for the road. The playful verse segues into a little moral essay within the longer exploration on “Walking.” Emerson meets Robert Frost, starry abstraction meets concrete simplicity, in this paragraph:

What is it that makes it so hard sometimes to determine whither we will walk? I believe that there is a subtle [*sic*] magnetism in nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. It is not indifferent to us which way we walk. There is a right way; but we are very liable from heedlessness and stupidity to take the wrong one. We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path we love to travel in the interior and ideal world; and sometimes, no doubt, we find it difficult to choose our direction, because it does not yet exist distinctly in our idea. (233–234)

He plays with the points of the compass and develops his own version of westering, his own “manifest destiny”: “I should not lay so much stress on this fact [that the better way is wilderness rather than the village] if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe” (234). He offers an ode to westward migration, citing bird patterns and the travels of Columbus, even the setting sun. “He is the Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow,” says Thoreau of the setting sun (235).

As HERMAN MELVILLE plays with “Whiteness” in *Moby-Dick*, Thoreau explores the multiple sug-

gestions of “westering” and of “wildness.” When he has nearly exhausted the possible implications of both, he merges the two richly suggestive words. He offers a catalog of travelers and pioneers and philosophers, all moving, metaphorically at least, westward—Columbus, Guyot, Michaux, Sir Francis Head, Linnaeus—who travel to save the wilderness: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that [here it comes] in Wildness is the preservation of the World” (239). He defends his preference for swamps over gardens; for “the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!” over anything civilized; and even for the desert, where “pure air and solitude compensate for want of moisture and fertility” (242).

Thoreau takes wildness and tameness beyond unmediated nature into art and daily life. And in the John Brown essays he implies that the contrast (wildness and tameness) pertains to leaders as well. In this essay he points out that “wildness is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in ‘Hamlet’ and the ‘Iliad,’ in all the Scriptures and Mythologies” (244). The “wild and free” sport through the next few pages; there are strains of wild music, wild horses, wild cattle, wild tigers and leopards, even wild names. Building toward his finish, Thoreau admits, “For my part, I feel that with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only. . . . Unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o’-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable, but no moon nor firefly has shown me the causeway to it” (251).

Finally, he, the traveler, leads his readers/companions (at the opening he had spoken to “you” who are ready for a walk) not to “hug the earth” but “to mount,” even just “to climb a tree”: “I found my account in climbing a tree once. It was a tall white pine, on the top of a hill; and though I got well pitched, I was well paid for it, for I discovered new mountains in the horizon which I had never seen before, —so much more of the earth and the heavens” (253). Thoreau now closes with a long

sunset that has as much of the “super” as the “natural” about it. The ending arrives gently and takes us back, as the walks do, to the beginning: “So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day, the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, and perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as a bank-side in autumn” (255). About the ending’s nod to the sunset, John Dolis writes, “Don’t be deceived by all this pleasantries: everything’s directed toward the west, toward sunset and the end of things. It’s autumn now, not spring. It’s evening” (198).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In terms of this essay, in which the word is almost a refrain, how would you define the *wild*? Is it part of the romantic heritage of the 19th century to make the dichotomy between it (the wild) and the town or village (civilization) even sharper, or does it have other implications?
2. Considering the distressing political events taking place in Thoreau’s Massachusetts during this period, how may this essay be seen as part of a larger debate? Is the essay really about a withdrawal to a New Eden, or is Thoreau up to something else?
3. All Thoreau’s work includes names, places, events far from contemporary Concord or the Maine woods or Cape Cod. What do some of the following names of places and people do to your reading of this essay: Shanghai, Cochin, India, Nauvoo, the Moselle, the Mississippi, along with Americus Vesputius, Bunyan, Burton, Chaucer, Columbia, Confucius, Dante, Darwin, Sir Francis Head, Homer, Milton, Mohamet, Niepce, Shakespeare, and Spencer? Was he showing off his learning, or do most of these have important roles in the metaphors involving “Walking”?

“Life without Principle” (1852)

As the title of this essay suggests, Thoreau confronts readers with a radical way to live by presenting an

account of how not to live. As William Cain points out, the title is also a pun on *principal*: As does *Walden's* chapter "Economy," this essay examines the costs and rewards of accommodating a commercial, unthinking world. Given at least six times in the 1850s (it was his most frequently delivered lecture) as "What Shall It Profit?" and later edited as "Higher Laws," the essay was given its punning title when the *Atlantic Monthly* published it posthumously in 1863. If "Walking" wanders in its logic, "Life without Principle" is "one of the most cogent essays [Thoreau] ever wrote" (Harding, *Days* 342). Anticipating the John Brown essays, it is, in the eyes of Len Gougeon, "a true jeremiad" (206); some might simply call it crotchety, but Thoreau himself called it "a strong dose of myself" (Gougeon 206). Not only does "Life" sum up Thoreau's philosophy, returning to the principles and prejudices of *Walden* and most of his essays, it also shows off most of the rhetorical strategies discussed by Richard Dillman: use of symbolic language, of synecdoche, of imagistic language blended with concrete language, of successful (not faulty) syllogisms, of a sure handling of paradox, aphorisms, and proverbs (Dillman 1–4).

The speech begins in a tone of modest levity: "There is a desire to hear what I *think* on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country, —and not that I should say pleasant things merely . . . and I am determined that they shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent" (348). They do "have" him, but Thoreau's voice is boring only in the sense that it bores in against his mercantalistic neighbors. Echoing himself, he draws a distinction between the money-driven, hard-but-futilely-working mass of men ("Most men," "my neighbors"). Here he is even more pointed than in *Walden*: "The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward" (350). Especially for a writer the exchange of labor for money seems repellent: "The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man," he says (351), making it personal with "I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage" (352). Of course, he *was* writing

and speaking for money himself—or at least for the support of his family after the death he could foresee. He worried to a friend, "After lecturing twice this winter I feel that I am in danger of cheapening myself by trying to become a successful lecturer" (Myerson 87).

What follows is a series of sermonettes attacking nearly every segment of American life: those who engage in meaningless labor and those who hire them; those who seek gold and those who buy it, those who preach and those who listen to preachers without questioning them, those who are nationalistic, those who operate the criminal system and those who allow them to do so without conscience, and—here it comes—those who hold slaves. One is tempted to ask how he can bear to get up in the morning in such a meretricious, shallow, selfish, and evil world, but his attacks are so precisely stated and so neatly balanced between wit and righteous anger that the reader keeps reading and writing down the diamond-sharp sentences.

Of the intersection of commerce and politics, he rails: "And have all the precepts in all the Bibles taught men only this? and is the last and most admirable invention of the human race only an improved muck-rake? Is this the ground on which Orientals and Occidentals meet? Did God direct us to get our living, digging where we never planted?" (354). Life and gambling are one, he says: "What difference does it make, whether you shake dirt or shake dice?" (354). If work for money is spiritually stultifying, then "a man had better starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread" (357). When he takes on the press, he sounds like his neighbor in Amherst, EMILY DICKINSON declaring that "the only news [she knows] / Is bulletins all day / From Immortality." Thoreau is not quite so pithy: "We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor." His account of the press of his day seems distressingly familiar. News, he says, is "stalest repetition" (359) and "idle rumors and incidents of the most insignificant kind" (360). Rather than engaging in such trivia, he would have his listeners/readers return to

the pleasures of “Walking”: “The sun, the clouds, the snow, the trees say so much to me. You cannot serve two masters” (359). And rather than attending with nationalistic fervor (another scourge) to revolutions afar, Thoreau urges an attention to “your own affairs in Massachusetts fields” (359). He escalates the metaphors. Those who waste time on transitory news and do not spend enough on their spiritual lives, Thoreau says, “will live [as though] . . . being drawn by dogs, esquimaux-fashion, tearing over hills and dales, and biting each other’s ears” (360). This image morphs into an even stranger, cartoonlike image:

It has appeared to my mind’s eye, that when they [the neighbors and spectators and—later in the essay—mere Jonathans] took off their hats, their ears suddenly expanded into vast hoppers for sound, between which even their narrow heads were crowded. Like the vanes of windmills, they caught the broad, but shallow stream of sound, which, after a few titillating gyrations in their coggy brains passed out the other side. (361)

Two pages from the end of this spirited and figure-filled romp, Thoreau begins to suggest what one should do among such neighbors and nitwits: “We should treat our minds, that is, ourselves, as innocent and ingenuous children, whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention. Read not the Times. Read the Eternities” (362). Shortly before the end of the essay, Thoreau reminds us of his title and topic: “The chief want, in every State that I have been into, was a high and earnest purpose in its inhabitants” (365). Unlike the sometimes relentless and unnervingly passionate language of his John Brown essays, Thoreau’s tone returns to the light, understated tone with which he began the essay: “Why should we not meet, not always as dyspeptics, to tell our bad dreams, but sometimes as *eupetics*, to congratulate each other on the ever glorious morning? I do not make an exorbitant demand surely” (366).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Return to *Walden* and compare the metaphors and specific applications of the word *economy* in it and in this essay, which puns with the banking term *principal*.
2. The ending of this essay and the ending of *Walden* are also parallel. Discuss Thoreau’s use of the word *morning*.
3. To what contemporary civic problems might the high ideals of this essay be applied?

“Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854)

“Who can be serene in a country where both rulers and ruled are without principle?” Thoreau asked in his journal as early as 1853. The anger became public when, just a month before *Walden* was published, in response to the arrest and return of the slave Anthony Burns, Thoreau applied the concepts he had explored in “Civil Disobedience,” “Walking,” and “Life without Principle” when he delivered this powerful abolitionist lecture at a protest meeting opposing the Fugitive Slave Law. According to Moncure Conway, who was present at the speech, the large audience “clamored for” Thoreau (Canby 386). The meeting was called on July 4, 1854, by William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, who used the occasion to burn the United States *Constitution* in “protest against the protection it afforded slavery” (Harding and Meyer, *New Handbook* 18). Garrison later published the speech, as did Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who had been part of a failed attempt to rescue Burns, was among those who wrote to thank Thoreau (Fink in Myerson 86). Thoreau vigorously lambastes the government for allowing, much less requiring, citizens to be, as he had said in “Civil Disobedience,” “agents of injustice” to others. As it turns out, this essay was, in fact, more widely heard and read in its own time than anything else by Thoreau. It is also one of Thoreau’s most effectively organized essays, and, as Richard Dillman points out, it is remarkable for the

rhetorical control over words and sentences born of terrific anger (Dillman 11).

More strident than previous essays, dealing a “blow straight from the shoulder” (Canby 381), “Slavery in Massachusetts” is nevertheless in the line of almost all Thoreau’s past work: It is a wake-up call to his neighbors—and to himself. Richard Lebeaux argues that as Thoreau dealt with the gathering pains surrounding slavery, he drew unconscious motivation from his own sense of psychological confinement (Lebeaux 207). Lebeaux may be right, but the state—particularly the governor—and the erstwhile supporters of abolition who did not protest the actions in support of the Fugitive Slave Act seem sufficient motivation to raise Thoreau’s ire. Sarcasm controls the anger as Thoreau begins his essay in the tone of a calm journalist at a Concord meeting reporting on a crowd, which, rather than talking about Burns and castigating the government, turned to discuss matters in Kansas and Nebraska.

Thoreau’s tone turns from reporter to passionate editorialist as he names some of those who disappointed him by “taking up a position” about the western states but not even mentioning the immediate human rights problem: “Our Buttricks, and Davices, and Hosmers are retreating thither,” he says, “and I fear they will have no Lexington Common between them and the enemy. There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts” (333). He attacks the cowardly “voice of a Governor,” which proves only to be “the crashing of crickets and the hum of insects.” Railing against the governor’s failure to act during the “moral earthquake” of the Simms affair three years earlier, he says, “He was no Governor of mine. He did not govern me” (334). Late in the essay he will speak of the governor’s “time-serving irresolution” (346). The railing tone continues toward the military force of Virginia, “trained merely to rob Mexico, and carry back fugitive slaves to their masters,” an act he likens to kidnapping (336). Then he scolds his fellow citizens: Their July Fourth celebration is a “broad joke” in light of the lack of liberty for the slave and his defenders (336). The press, too, he says, exerts a “pernicious influence”

(339). With the exception of a few liberal, abolitionist papers, no one is exonerated: The “editors of the periodical press” and “the people who read them [the periodical press] are in the condition of the dog that returns to his vomit” (340). Judges and lawyers are “men of expediency” who “persist in being the servants of the worst of men, and not the servants of humanity” (342).

Calling on the logic of “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau says that “the State has fatally interfered with my lawful business,” and that he is amazed to see that so few citizens are aware of the violations the state has perpetrated on its citizens’ rights. The hope for his fellow citizens implicit in “Civil Disobedience” and “Walking” is missing here, except for the weary tone of the last sentence. The speech/essay, in contrast to the glowing conclusions of *Walden* and “Walking,” ends on a discouraging note: “Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually. . . . They are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils. We do not complain that they *live*, but that they do not *get buried*. Let the living bury them; even they are good for manure” (347). The sentence seems a precursor to the apparent acceptance of violence in the three John Brown essays.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How effective do you think the vitriol of some of Thoreau’s rhetoric might have been—or might be today if used in a parallel situation—in inspiring others to wake up and act?
2. Unlike “Walking,” this essay does not call on many historical models other than the American Revolution. Would Thoreau’s case have been stronger if he had tried to inspire his neighbors by using more examples of action against a state inspired by high moral purposes?
3. Thoreau’s rhetoric in this essay has been praised. Find examples of the perfectly balanced sentence. On the other hand, how many of the well-known problems in logic (ad hominem argument, generalizations, faulty syllogisms, and so forth) do you find in the work? Does Thoreau ever do what often strengthens persuasive essays: anticipate the opposition to his position?

Walden (1854)

What had Thoreau to do with plows? What kind of different furrow would he plow? The answers to these and many other questions are explored in the great book of Thoreau's career, one of the great books of American literature. As did the Artist of Kouroo, a story Thoreau added to the last chapter late in the writing process, Thoreau took time to shape the best account he could: seven years and at least eight vigorously edited manuscripts to prepare for the publication on August 9, 1854, by Ticknor and Fields. Although *Walden* is now considered a masterpiece, it did not meet with immediate success. In Thoreau's own (brief) lifetime sales averaged 300 copies a year; even though he was eulogized and his work was printed widely in essay form in the 10 years after his death, sales still failed to reach more than 3,000 copies. By the 1920s, however, largely because the book was cited all over the world, primarily in Russia and France (Turgenev and Proust both admired it), the book received the approbation it so richly deserved. It was translated into at least 24 languages; in Japan, seven translations had been published by 1970 (Shanley, "Historical Introduction" 368–369).

Part of its problem and part of its power is its unusual structure. Charles Anderson has likened the structure to a circle and a web, both centered by the pond itself (Stern 11). It may also be read as poetry. Many read it as a practical how-to book, a collection of botanical and zoological observations, a collection of ruminations on great books and great thoughts. For all these somewhat contradictory identities, each justified, it has unity in that every chapter in its own way explores the question raised at the beginning, the question having to do with economy in the broadest sense: how to live so as to get the most (knowledge, inspiration, spiritual life, physical strength, truth) with the least expense of that which has little meaning (money, clothes, large house, meaningless work). Unlike *A Week*, which crammed so many mixed varieties of "plums" into only eight parcels (an introduction and seven chapters: Saturday–Friday), *Walden's* 18 topical chapters sprinkle its plums in a more patterned manner. As in *A Week* the

underlying movement is chronological; the move into the cabin takes place on July 4; the book ends with the ice cracking in spring, making it appear that the two years of Thoreau's habitation took one year. But layered on the seasonal progression are well-developed essays, each of which can stand alone but each of which is enriched by its placement in the book as a whole.

Before the intricate arrangement begins, the reader meets Thoreau in the first two chapters, which contain widely quoted statements on "the mass of men" who "lead lives of quiet desperation" and in the profound paragraph that follows that passage. Thoreau also offers transcendentalism-inspired thoughts on "all enterprises that require new clothes," followed by a riff on the silliness of new clothes; the puzzling identities of the lost hound, boy horse, and turtledove; the ridiculousness of following "the head monkey at Paris" in wearing "a traveller's cap"; the praise of the Bhagavad Gita; the six-page rant on philanthropy; and the magnificent statement of why "I went to the woods." "Where I Lived" ends with a passage that is at least as deservedly famous as "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately." Each paragraph pulls us into the next; thus, following a long paragraph that begins, "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature" (echoing the famous "I went to the woods" passage seven paragraphs back), is this one:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. . . . The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. . . . I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine. (320)

The remarkable words pull the reader into what it is that the narrator will "begin to mine": The chapter called "Reading" follows.

As in *A Week*, the chapter “Reading” includes a dizzying array of recommended reading and instructions on how to read “deliberately.” In these passages, Thoreau castigates his neighbors for not being intellectually able to understand or be interested in the books on the list. Assuming that reading would best be conducted in silence, the next chapter is called “Sounds” and begins with a nod toward the reading of the previous chapter and moves forward to the beginning of the catalog of sounds: the sparrow’s “trill,” the “tantivy of wild pigeons,” “the bleating of calves and sheep,” the barking of dogs, the ringing of bells of the village, “the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon,” the whippoorwills as they “chanted their vespers for an hour”; the screech owls, whose noise Thoreau attempted to reproduce for three full pages; the cock crowing; and, most remarkably, in the middle of all these natural sounds, the railroad hoot, “sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town” (247). Commentaries have noted that this “machine in the garden” is a paradigm of 19th-century American literature, and a special focus of work by Dickinson, Hawthorne, Melville, and others. Each, as Thoreau, both regrets and celebrates the invasion of the train into the pastoral idyll. Thoreau’s famous passage provides an excuse for transcendental preaching against the growing mercantilism, but Thoreau also speaks with a kind of awe and admiration for the transformation of the people who would not otherwise go “to Boston,” much less arrive promptly. The tone is cheerful. To his other playful titles—The “Sojourner” (a pun on the French for “day”) or “Sainte a terre” (“Saunterer”)—Thoreau says he would like another, one presumably metaphoric of the moralist, as “a track-repairer somewhere in the orbit of the earth” (247).

Again, at the end of “Sounds,” Thoreau gives an entry for the next chapter, “Solitude.” After 22 full paragraphs on the “Sounds” he *did* have, he lists those he did *not* have: “neither the churn, nor the spinning wheel, nor even the singing of the

kettle.” Another person, he says, “would have lost his senses or died of ennui before this.” He lists more absences at the end of the chapter: “no path to the front-yard gate . . . no gate—no front-yard, —and no path to the civilized world!” So it is that he begins his chapter answering the most common question put to him during his Walden years (was he lonely?): “I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (269). In reality Thoreau walked up to the village daily and looked for company, but his discussion of solitude is as much metaphysical as actual. He compares his solitude to that of stars in the Milky Way or to his house in the woods or to “leaves and vegetable mould.” He ends “Solitude” with a reference to the goddess Hebe, “the only thoroughly sound-conditioned, healthy, and robust young lady that ever walked the globe” (270). Because she carried spring, she was a welcome visitor, and the next chapter is, of course, “Visitors.”

One of Thoreau’s “Visitors” was Alek Therien, a French Canadian, unnamed in this passage but recognizable to biographers because he is so thoroughly described as a cheerful woodsman, well built and skillful and, although unschooled, wise in what mattered (274–275). There were others: “an inoffensive simple-minded pauper,” “one real runaway slave,” and “some guests” who, apparently, arrived begging and others who arrived out of curiosity (“men of almost every degree of wit called on me in the migrating season”). Biographers discuss Thoreau’s relationship with the woodsman and his rather elitist attitude toward the “mass of men,” though he ends the chapter on a positive note, welcoming “all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom’s sake” (283). From “Visitors” Thoreau moves to something done alone, working in the “Bean Fields,” where he is proud to be the hoer (an anagram of *hero*). Many see in the detailed description of the preparing of the soil, the sowing, the protecting, the picking, the eating, and the selling of the beans a metaphor for the processes of

the writer. Thoreau invites such a metaphor when he says of the beans “perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day,” and, as he says at the very end of the chapter, “These beans have results which are not harvested by me” (295).

The next chapter, “The Village,” begins by nodding back to the previous three: “After hoeing, or perhaps reading and writing, in the forenoon, I usually bathed again in the pond . . . [and] strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip” (297). This chapter, then, provides the chance for Thoreau to tell his story about meeting the tax collector and famously refusing “to pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house” (301). “The Ponds,” which follows the account of civic life and responsibility, finds the poet/naturalist joining others to fish at the pond, to take a boat; playing the flute and watching the perch; and making of the pond—as of almost everything in his world—a metaphor. Throughout the journals (from which the book arose) and most of Thoreau’s public work, the reader finds the exactness of scientific observations—as that which begins, “It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long” set against flights of poetry. So it is that this chapter’s description of the length, breadth, width, color, temperature, contents, inhabitants, and use of the ponds; the weather around them; and the contact of people with them are details set against the notion of Walden Pond as the “distiller of celestial dews” (311). “The Ponds” chapter is followed by the short chapter “Baker Farm,” which is most interesting for its lengthy commentary on the Irishman John Field. As do those on Therien, these comments cause some to delve into questions of Thoreau’s attitudes—toward fellow citizens in general and toward immigrants such as the first-generation Irish American John Field in particular. A passage such as this causes much comment: “Poor John Field!—I trust he does not read this, unless he will improve by it. . . . With his horizon all his own, yet he [is] a poor man,

born to be poor, with his inherited Irish poverty or poor life . . . and boggy ways, not to rise in this world” (337).

Having described a real person as all but stuck in a bog, Thoreau moves in the next chapter to “Higher Laws.” Influenced greatly by Eastern thought, this chapter explores exotic texts as related to diet (vegetarianism), sexual practices (chastity preferred), and other bodily functions as the “Hindoo lawgiver” prescribes. For this, one of the strangest chapters to most people—especially to students—Thoreau is indebted to his heterogeneous reading, especially to the *Laws of Menu*, which he had discovered in 1840 and had published in part in the *Dial* in 1843. By now the reader of *Walden* has caught on to the way Thoreau juxtaposes topic against topic as he moves through the book. “Higher Laws,” therefore, is followed by “Brute Neighbors.” These, of course, are animals—some dozen of them—but they are preceded by the visit of “a companion,” “Mr. Poet,” who has been identified as the transcendentalist Ellery Channing (Stern 351). One species of his “Brute Neighbors” allows Thoreau a parable: that of his famous ant fight. As most students who read Thoreau in anthologies know, the battle of red and black ants stands in for the stupidity of human wars: “I never learned which party was victorious, nor the cause of the war; but I felt for the rest of that day as if I had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the struggle, the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle before my door” (359). In this chapter, too, Thoreau offers a funny description of a laughing loon and the sociability of ducks in the pond.

Cold and warmth play against each other in the next chapter, “House Warming.” By this time it is fall merging into winter, time for Thoreau to talk about his chimney and about the palaver (talk) two or more people might have near its warmth. He also turns his pen to describing all the kinds of wood one might use, introducing this section with “Every man looks at his wood-pile with a kind of affection” (376). From the hearth Thoreau takes readers on a long walk to Lincoln in the chapter “Former Inhabitants.” In “Winter Visitors” he

describes Brister Freeman, “a handy Negro,” once a slave; Hugh Quoil, an Irishman who claimed to have fought at Waterloo; a wood chopper; and other locals present and past. Finally “Winter Animals” and “The Pond in Winter” lead to “Spring.” Here Thoreau’s sometimes prolix style features shorter, more direct, more vigorous sentences. There is much that is beautiful and lyrical in the long chapter “Spring,” but the passage most quoted is in the “Conclusion,” with which the book ends. Thoreau answers his neighbor’s question: “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives left to live” (439).

The “Conclusion” chapter is so densely packed with wise words that it seems the author has tried to put every well-considered thought into words before it is too late. Although he says he does not think that “John or Jonathan will realize all this,” meaning that the Walden experiment was not for everyone, Thoreau is persuasive. Many a John, Jonathan, and Jean or Judy would want to follow his lead; in fact, there was a direct connection between this book and the experiments in simpler living that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. And who would not be affected by the passage of which this is the nub: “I learned this at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (440). The years at Walden, crucial as they were, were “an experiment,” an experiment in economics among much else. “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams,” Thoreau says; he does not say that one will necessarily reach a goal, only that in going confidently toward the direction of that goal—to write a book that will change people’s lives, for example—that success will not necessarily be the one wanted, but it will be a success—one “unexpected in common hours,” those hours when one lives an ordinary life of quiet desperation.

Finally, in the “Conclusion” we meet the Artist of Kouroo. The story, influenced by Thoreau’s studies in Eastern literature, is reworked by Tho-

reau so that the buzz of implication is autobiographical. The artist worked through the ages to perfect a staff: “He had made a new system in making a staff; a world with full and fair proportions; in which though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer or more glorious ones had taken their places” (443). The fable is a primer for a writer, at least for the writer/philosopher/ascetic/truth-seeking Thoreau: The material is “truth. This alone wears well”; “however mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names”; “Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage . . . turn the old; return to them”; and so forth. Richard Lebeaux tells us that the story that so many take away from the book, that of the Artist of Kouroo, working his heart out with skill and patience, was not present until version number four, but the story seems a perfect introduction to the seven years Thoreau spent to complete the book (Lebeaux 215–216). That book, like the staff, was a thing of beauty and a device for support on the journey of life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the uses of the ideas in *Walden* (such as civil disobedience) in the 20th and 21st centuries. What would be lost, what gained in American civilization if many people (many “Johns and Jonathans”) followed the precepts Thoreau articulates?
2. Make a list of the puns and wordplay within the book (Thoreau particularly has fun with place-names, making up etymologies for them). What does such wordplay tell you about Thoreau’s view of language?
3. Many people have set portions of this book into lines of poetry. Select at least 14 lines from any chapter that you consider most poetic; how does isolating a section of the book like this—and the individual lines—make a difference in the impact of the passage?
4. Find passages in Emerson’s essays that you see repeated and/or lived out in *Walden*. How does Thoreau revise, develop, amplify, or simplify Emerson’s ideas?

“A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859)

Slavery, federal actions such as the Fugitive Slave Law that countered attempts to free slaves, and the inattention of his neighbors to the outrage Thoreau felt climaxed when John Brown was arrested for murder and insurrection after his raid on the federal munitions depot at Harper’s Ferry on October 16, 1859. That Thoreau had met him and was one of those who had encouraged the support, financially and otherwise, of what turned out to be a failed and bloody event added to the strains of Thoreau’s last three years. He was under such great emotional pressure, that, as he says in “A Plea,” he “put a piece of paper and a pencil under [his] pillow and when [he] could not sleep, [he] wrote in the dark” (401). In the end, in the three separate works in which Thoreau honored Brown, he spoke of him as a true transcendentalist, one with the courage to act against the government for the greatest good.

In his 1857 journal Thoreau had written a clear journalistic description of his meeting with Brown: Brown’s appearance, dietary habits, speech patterns, and adventures. Two years later, in the May before the raid, John Brown returned to Concord, speaking at Town Hall. Thoreau and his fellow transcendentalists, especially F. B. Sanborn, were impressed. The raid, including murder performed with weapons purchased during such visits, took place just five months later. Thoreau called a meeting in Concord on October 30, ringing the bell himself to summon citizens in support of Brown’s actions when others would not. Two nights later he repeated it in Boston as a substitute for FREDERICK DOUGLASS, who had temporarily fled to Canada (Harding, *Days* 418), and then again in Worcester. Although Thoreau hoped to print his essay in support of John Brown in pamphlet form to support the Brown family, the essay was actually printed in James Redpath’s *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry* in 1860. Meanwhile, Thoreau would write two shorter works on John Brown, one delivered at a service in Concord on December 2, the day Brown was hanged; the other written for a memorial service in New York, on July 4, 1859. By that time

Thoreau was too ill to travel, so R. J. Hinton read that third essay for him; later, Garrison’s *Liberator* published it (Harding and Meyer 56–59). Joseph Wood Krutch calls the John Brown writings “primarily eulogies of a man, not discussion of a principle; they are arguments *ad hominem* so far as they are arguments at all” (Krutch 236).

Whatever else it was, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” was courageous. The Republican Party condemned John Brown’s deed; the *Liberator* labeled it “wild and insane”; other papers were filled with “sensational and distorted” accounts of the raid; and most of Brown’s former supporters now thought Brown “a little unhinged” (Nelson 134). For all that, Emerson reported that Thoreau defended Brown so effectively that the people who went to Concord’s town hall “found themselves listening with a surprising sympathy” (Harding and Meyer 56). Certainly Thoreau’s speech begins in that spirit as he recounts Brown’s deep roots in American history, especially in the American Revolution. Brown, said Thoreau, was disgusted by military life and “resolved that he would never have anything to do with any war, unless it were a war for liberty” (396). Such a “war” occurred, said Thoreau, when “Kansas was made free” (397). This was a reference to a previous violent action at Pottawatomie, but Thoreau does not dwell much on that, although Brown had sent his sons to do the killing. Instead he focuses on the good citizen Brown: almost “a Puritan” (398), “a man of Spartan habits” (399), “a man of rare common sense and directness of speech,” a surveyor, who could use the training to advantage by surveying enemy territory (399).

When he reaches Brown’s “last act, and its effects,” Thoreau does not castigate Brown for his foolhardy and fatal actions at Harpers Ferry—quite the opposite—but first, as he had so often, he scolds his community for their apathy. They are “craven hearted” (402). He writes of them with sarcasm and scorn: “So they proceed to live their sane, and wise, and altogether admirable lives, reading their Plutarch. . . . They nourish themselves for brave and patriotic deeds some time or other” (402–403).

Thoreau declares that in their churches they “excommunicate . . . Christ” (403), that they are “sluggish by constitution and by habit, and they cannot conceive of a man who is actuated by higher motives than they are” (404). Now he begins the panegyric. Brown did “a brave and humane deed” (405); he is “a man of faith, and of religious principle, and not a politician or an Indian” (406). Brown is unselfish: He “did not wait till he was personally interfered with . . . before he gave his life to the cause of the oppressed” (407). As Thoreau delivers punishment to neighbors and praise to Brown, he seems to echo Emerson’s images of greatness in, for example, “The American Scholar.” This passage sounds like “Man thinking”:

He was a superior man. He did not value his bodily life in comparison with ideal things. He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. (407)

Turning to the trial, Thoreau makes the usual transcendentalist’s distinction between the sane and insane, mocking those, including those in Congress, who call Brown mad, but noting the testimony of the jailers and others that Brown “is cool, collected, and indomitable” (409). He will return to Brown, but first he turns the word *Treason* back at the government for keeping “a coffle of four millions of slaves” and failing “to protect the weak and dispense justice” (411). In contrast, he describes Brown

and his six sons, and his son in law—not to enumerate the others, —enlisted for this fight; proceeding coolly, reverently, humanely to work, for months if not years, sleeping and waking upon it, summering and wintering the thought, without expecting any reward but a good con-

science, while almost all America stood ranked on the other side. (412)

That would have been a good conclusion, but this is a plea, and Thoreau makes his case: Brown was not mad or crazy except in pursuit of a good that should be sought by all; his death would not make America safer; and the hanging would amount to a crucifixion that would only reverberate to the detriment of the judicial system and the American government. Fearing that it is too late to save the life of John Brown, Thoreau states, “I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life” (416). He invokes the suffering of Christ, the heroism of the Pilgrims, the rights inherent in the Declaration of Independence and declares that when “slavery shall be no more here, we shall then be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown” (417).

History, of course, proved Thoreau right. Nancy Rosenblum tells us that “it was through [Brown’s] agency, far more than any other’s that Kansas was made free” (Rosenblum 138). And his name and martyrdom would become an anthem to inspire the necessary action in the war that was about to begin. Reverential in parts, angry in (most) parts, logical in parts, the essay does have some major gaps. For example, as Rosenblum notes, Thoreau does not privilege John Brown’s friendships with blacks, as did W. E. B. DuBois later (xxiii), but Thoreau does not purport to give us a biography of Brown; neither does he detail the actual crimes Brown’s band committed, another gap. Indeed only four pages in a 20-page essay are about John Brown. As in so many of Thoreau’s works, most of this essay is an excoriation of his fellow villagers and countrymen. Similarly to *Walden*, in which Thoreau scorns “the mass of men” who lead “lives of quiet desperation,” in this essay Thoreau depicts most of New England as arrayed against John Brown; they “have no test by which to detect a noble man, no amalgam to combine with his pure gold” (409).

For Discussion or Writing

How accurate is Thoreau’s depiction of the historical John Brown? Compare with other contemporary historical accounts.

“Martyrdom of John Brown” (1859)

Quoting from Andrew Marvell on heroes and martyrs and Sir Walter Raleigh’s “The Soul’s Errand,” with its refrain “Give potentates the lie,” Thoreau delivered this short (four-page) speech at the memorial service for Brown on the day of his execution. He ends by quoting from his own translation of Tacitus (Harding and Meyer 58). It begins, “You, Agricola, are fortunate, not only because your life was glorious, but because your death was timely” (420), and it ends, “Whatever of Agricola we have loved, whatever we have admired, remains, and will remain, in the minds of men, and the records of history, through the eternity of ages” (421). Although it is almost entirely derivative, drawing not only from the original poets, but also from his journal, in which he had already placed these and other selections of poetry and prose, it is quietly appropriate. This work, unlike the “Plea,” showed little anger, just reverence and, almost, acceptance. Brown’s daughters told Thoreau that he reminded them of their father. Spiritually Thoreau must have felt a powerful link with a person so willing to let his life be the counterfriction to stop the machine.

For Discussion or Writing

Compare this speech to Thoreau’s “Plea” for Captain John Brown. How does the different tone suit the occasion?

“The Last Day of John Brown” (1860)

Thoreau wrote out a third John Brown essay, which was delivered by R. J. Hinton in New York on the following Fourth of July (1860) when Brown was interred there. “For the first time Thoreau publicly abandoned his Transcendentalist belief that all men are innately good,” say Harding and Meyers, “with the remark, ‘I have known many a man who pretended to be a Christian, in whom it was ridiculous, for he had no genius for it’” (Harding and Meyerson 58). The tone of this short piece wavers between the wry anger of that passage and

mourning over the loss of “the greatest and best” man he knew. Six months after the “meteor-like” life of John Brown ended, Thoreau reports on those who were—or should have been—changed by the words and life and death of Brown. By this time the manuscripts Brown wrote in prison had been circulated, and Thoreau devotes much of the essay to marveling at the “wisdom and manhood,” the “variety of themes he touched on,” the simple style, “as simple as the discharge of a bullet” of the writing (426). Again he quotes Marvell’s ode to Cromwell: “He nothing common did or mean / Upon that memorable scene,” and so forth (427), and again he castigates the citizens, editors, and mostly the Massachusetts legislators for perpetrating or failing to stop the execution, and for failing to recognize the martyr in their midst.

Shortly after Thoreau wrote the last of his Brown essays, the young WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS paid him a visit in Concord. In his autobiography Howells recounts an almost comically awkward visit, the most interesting feature of which was Thoreau’s musing on John Brown: “It was not the warm, palpable, loving, fearful old man of my conception, but a sort of John Brown type, a John Brown ideal, a John Brown principle, which we were somehow (with long pauses between the vague orphic phrases) to cherish, and to nourish upon ourselves” (Harding, *Days* 434).

For Discussion or Writing

Which of Thoreau’s three “John Brown” essays do you find most effective. Why?

The Maine Woods (1864)

At the end of his own life’s journey, Thoreau’s last words were *moose* and *Indians*. He had been working on putting together four articles on the trips he made to Maine and New Hampshire in 1846, 1853, and 1857 so that they might be published as a whole. It is easy to miss the reference in *Walden* to the first of the trips that became this book. It occurs at the end of the chapter “The Village,” just after Thoreau’s brief allusion to his arrest for

his failure to pay his poll tax. In talking about the safety of the village, he mentions that “the next fall I spent a fortnight in the woods of Maine. And yet my house was more respected than if it had been surrounded by a file of soldiers” (*Walden* 301). The longer story is that, along with a cousin, George Thatcher, and two guides, he left on August 31, just a month after the July 23 night in jail. The trip was an exhausting one, even for such experts in difficult explorations; only Thoreau went on to the summit of Mount Katahdin alone. Two years later he spoke on the Lyceum circuit about the trip to the mountain. Praised by Bronson Alcott and others, he worked it into an article for Greeley’s *Tribune*. Greeley did not publish it, but he did pass it along to another publication, *Sartain’s Union Magazine*, where it was published in five installments. When Greeley finally ran part of it, he called *The Maine Woods* “as fine a piece of unrhymed poetry as we have ever read” (Harding 230).

That was his first trip. He went on a second trip seven years later, in September 1853, with his cousin George Thatcher and a Native American guide, Joe Aitteon. They went from Bangor on a boat to Penobscot, hiked to Moosehorn Deadwater, where they made camp and from which they went on an unsuccessful moose hunt. The next day they continued on the Penobscot to the base of Katahdin, and they saw two moose looking frightened. Thatcher shot, but the moose ran away, only to be discovered, later, dead. Thatcher skinned it and gave the hide to the Indians. Thoreau was disgusted with the treatment of the moose and did not take part in a later hunt. Before they returned to Bangor, the travelers spent a night in an Indian settlement. That trip, too, he turned into a lecture; in December of that year he delivered “Journey to Moose Head Lake.” He made yet a third trip in summer 1857 with Edward Hoar and another Indian, Joe Polis. This trip to the headwaters of the Allagash River and down the East Branch of the Penobscot was as ambitious and difficult as the first two. In June 1858 a serialization of the account of the trip in Maine was published in installments. Another Maine article appeared in Lowell’s new *Atlantic Monthly* in summer 1860. Thoreau was

in the process of working the three articles into a draft of the 1864 *Maine Woods*; that draft had such heavy revisions that, when Thoreau died in 1862—saying those two words, showing how much the adventures and the manuscripts were on his mind—Thoreau’s sister Sophia and friend Ellery Channing had a challenge as they took up the job of publishing the book. Not surprisingly, the edition they produced and finally published with Ticknor and Fields 18 years after Thoreau began the work is imperfect. Difficulties the two editors encountered with Thoreau’s handwriting, their lack of knowledge of the terrain Thoreau described, and the difficulties of dual editorship caused problems that awaited Joseph J. Moldenhauer’s careful editing. His annotated text of 1972 has joined the shelf of approved (by the Modern Language Association) Thoreau texts. As with most posthumous publications of unfinished work, the text remains unreliable, but in reading the more than 30 detailed pages explaining problems and editorial decisions, the reader must assume the text to be as close as possible to the author’s intentions.

Chief interests in the collected essays of *The Maine Woods* are the viciousness of nature and the victimization and strength of Indians. Thoreau’s sympathy for American Indians, says Robert Richardson, was fostered by reading *Jesuit Relations* in 1852. Thoreau checked out from the Harvard Library several of the 32 volumes by Father Paul Le Jeune about French-Indian relations in Canada in 1633. According to Richardson, “The *Relations* are attractive, readable, indeed absorbing books. The Jesuit’s focus is almost exclusively on the Indians: their habits, customs, manners, language, clothing, behavior, beliefs, and history” (282). Between 1850 and 1852 there were other reasons to focus on those who suffered at the hands of white Europeans: When *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published in 1851–52, the Thoreau family had already personally focused on real-life Uncle Toms and Elizas; they had assisted Henry Williams, a fugitive slave from Virginia, in September 1851. Before that, Thoreau had closely followed the plight of another fugitive, Thomas Sims, who, in spite of the good efforts of abolitionists, was returned to his owners (Harding 314–316).

The Maine Woods is composed of three chapters or articles, one for each of the trips: “Ktaadn” (83 pages of dense text), “Chesuncook” (63 pages), and “The Allegash and East Branch” (142 pages). Each follows one of the three trips in straightforward chronological and, to some, wearisomely detailed, fashion. These are followed by seven appendixes: Trees, Flowers and Shrubs, List of Plants, List of Birds, Quadrupeds, Outfit for an Excursion, and “A List of Indian Words.”

As he does in *A Week* and *Walden*, Thoreau begins his account with a straightforward description of time and place. Within the first two paragraphs, Thoreau reveals his interest in the Indian language and names. There is much about conveyances—boats and coaches—but little about people until page 13, when Thoreau introduces us to “a man just adventuring upon [the road] . . . in a rude, original, what you may call Aroostook, wagon . . . with . . . a dog asleep to watch them. . . . Here, too, was a small trader. . . . I saw him standing in his shop-door.” There was a woman, too, but most of the book is a long landscape painting. When Thoreau introduces other people—Mr. McCuaslin, Thomas Fowler, John Morrison, and predominantly “Uncle George” Thatcher—it is in the context of directions discovered or the kinds of houses or boats the people owned. Thus, when the narrator/Thoreau interposes personal thoughts and reactions, the reader pays attention. For example, he injects a dream: “In the night I dreamed of trout-fishing; and, when at length I awoke it seemed a fable, that this painted fish swam there so near my couch, and rose to our hooks the last evening.” He assesses Native Americans (this is before he read the Jesuit account), finding them to have “a remarkable and unexpected resemblance between the degraded savage and the lowest classes in a great city.” Thoreau sees these characters as inhabiting “the edge of the wilderness . . . in a new world, far in the dark of a continent.” The “newness” of world is mentioned again toward the end of this first essay when the narrator becomes ruminative on behalf of his country in a paragraph beginning, “What a place to live, what a place to die and be buried in!” The newness leads back to the oldest past of the

continent: “If Columbus was the first to discover the islands, Americus Vespucius, and Cabot, and the Puritans, and we their descendents, have discovered only the shores of America.” The closing words of “Ktaadn” point to the next two trips, the next two portions of Thoreau’s *Maine Woods*: He recounts the places he has been and says, “Sixty miles above [the Penobscot shore] the country is virtually unmapped and unexplored, and there still waves the virgin forest of the New World” (83).

A crisp *when*, *where*, and *how* open “Chesuncook,” Thoreau’s account of his 1853 trip: a warm September evening in 1853 by steamer from Boston to Bangor via Maine’s islands. He does not name his companion (Edward Hoar, we learn from Harding), but he gives much attention to his guide, Joe Aitteon, illiterate but the son of a governor and knowledgeable about Maine, moose, and men. Obviously fascinated with this character (he may remind a reader of Cooper’s creation, Natty Bumppo’s fictional sidekick Chingachgook), Thoreau imitates Joe’s imitating a moose in an attempt to attract one. The meeting of three moose—a cow and two calves—is the centerpiece of this the second section of the book. Thoreau mocks his cousin the hunter (“our Nimrod”), and dwells on the sight of the “true denizens of the forest”: “They made me think of great frightened rabbits, with their long ears and inquisitive half frightened looks” (110). When the travelers find the seven-foot moose dead, Thoreau sounds like other American heroes who are sickened by unnecessary violence (Huck looking at the feud from the tree, for example, or Natty setting off to the West to avoid civilization). He distances himself from “the afternoon’s tragedy”: “On more accounts than one,” he says, “I had had enough of moose-hunting” (118). Thoreau turns his attention to a human, Ansell Smith, who inhabits the largest clearing and runs a boat business. Describing the house in great detail (only eight years earlier he had been absorbed in his own design for a house in a clearing), he admires such a winter pioneer. As they progress deeper into Maine, the little party meets lumbermen and other Indians.

Thoreau finds his stay in the logging camp disgusting. All around the camp are lines holding

moose meat and skins; however, the stay in the Indian camp proved more comfortable and interesting to Thoreau, who comments on his reading in the Franciscan missionary literature and in the stories of Puritan Eliot. Even before they reach the village, Thoreau comments on the pleasant conversation among Indians, though, of course, he cannot understand it. "These Abenakis gossiped, laughed, and jested in the language in which Eliot's Indian Bible is written. . . . These were the sounds that issued from the wigwams of this country before Columbus was born; they have not yet died away. . . . I felt that I stood, or rather lay, as near to the primitive man of America, that night, as any of its discoverers ever did" (136–137). Later he comments on the cleanliness of the village ("far cleaner than such Irish villages I have ever seen"), on evidence of Christianity, and on the skin color and social customs of the Indians (146–147).

Almost as he had at the end of *Walden*, Thoreau ends "Chesuncook" by explaining his reason for going deep beyond the shores: "These [flowers and trees] remind us, that, not only for strength, but for beauty, the poet must, from time to time, travel the logger's path and the Indian's trail, to drink at some new and more bracing foundation of the muses, far in the recesses of the wilderness" (156). Following his own invitation, he begins the third account briskly and quickly moves to an introduction to the Indian guide for this 1857 trip, Joseph Polis. Joe Polis, who lived in a white house "as good as an average one on a New England village street," was "one of the aristocracy." Thoreau's empathy with the Native American moves him to describe Polis's reaction when a white Maine man addressed him in "a foolish and impertinent style . . . as if he were a child" (162).

So sympathetic with the Indians has Thoreau become that he asks for language lessons and spends a number of pages repeating those lessons. One night he listens to Joe sing hymns with "a beautiful simplicity" (178–179). They have a conversation about being Christian; the Indian inspires Thoreau to admit that he is Christian and draws from Thoreau (who usually did not do so) the promise to go to church on Sunday. They talk about travel (Joe

expressed an interest in New York and Boston), education, medicine, the horrible mosquitoes, and the Canadian who has built a home and a life in the woods. Mostly, however, as they portage and paddle and camp, they talk: about specific trees, flowers, ferns, fish, and birds. Along the way Joe Polis becomes ill, recovers, introduces Thoreau and his companion to other Indians, and invites the white men to stay in his home, where Hoar used a razor "in very good condition" and where they beheld but did not meet Mrs. Polis in her hat and her silver brooch (and one presumes much more). How would Thoreau have finished off this collection had he lived to do so? Certainly the man who ended the first two portions of *The Maine Woods* in such an elevated and poetic manner would not have left unelaborated these two final sentences: "This was the last I saw of Joe Polis. We took the last train and reached Bangor that night" (279).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Literary critics differ in their interpretation of Thoreau's representation of Indians. Isolate specific passages about Indians and explain why you think his treatment is either positive or negative.
2. Much of Thoreau's presentation of the Maine woods centers on the hardships imposed on humans by the landscape and climate. Explain how Thoreau uses encounters with hardship as a prelude to personal triumph. Consider especially the ascent of Mount Katahdin, but do not limit yourself to that part of the book.

Cape Cod (1864)

The redoubtable Thoreau expert and admirer Walter Harding calls *Cape Cod* Thoreau's "sunniest and least profound" book (Harding and Meyer 66). As *The Maine Woods* was, it was edited by Sophia Thoreau and Ellery Channing from portions that had been published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and from lectures Thoreau had delivered on the Lyceum circuit. Although it shares some of the problems

of *The Maine Woods*, it is nevertheless a good book to have at the beach, especially if the beach is on the Cape. As Joe Polis starred in the final portion of *The Maine Woods*, this one features a character known only as the Wellfleet oysterman. Called “the book on Cape Cod,” the book had its classic status confirmed when the 20th-century poet Robert Lowell quoted much of it in his “Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” (Harding and Meyer 68–69).

The sunniness of *Cape Cod* has a counterpoint: that of the human tragedy wrought by shipwrecks along its coast, such as that of the *St. John*, with which Thoreau begins his book. Thoreau and his companion, Ellery Channing, arrived at Cohasset just as the 28 bodies from the steamer that had crashed in a storm were being loaded into hay wagons. As was Thoreau’s wont, the sight of the mangled dead, their clothing scattered on the rocks, and the townspeople watching sent him on a four-page discourse on death. Of the mostly Irish who died, he said, “Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes. Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did,” but “they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of” (14). Later he will talk of the placid ocean, place of commerce and beauty, turning into “sudden fury,” breaking, distending, lashing at ships and people (144). Other hard realities include the heavy hardware discovered inside poor large fish who mistook knives, jewels, and newspapers for food.

Such somber scenes contrast with lighter moods as Thoreau and Channing move up the Cape. For example, he repeats gossip—the town had a post-mistress—leading Thoreau to tease, “We suspected that the letters must be subjected to a very close scrutiny there” (28). Later Thoreau makes another misogynistic comment on “a Nauset woman, of a hardness and coarseness such as no man ever possesses or suggests.” Before another human takes the stage, Thoreau unloads much history, especially about the early Pilgrims and their religious leaders, and he observes strange seaside creatures, “sea jellies.” The Wellfleet oysterman is worth the wait. The funny meeting is conveyed mainly in dialogue. Channing called him “the wizard.” Thoreau

called him “the merriest old man that we had ever seen, and one of the best preserved” (104–105). No one matches the oysterman, who tells a great story about seeing George Washington, but other people wander into Thoreau’s path: a family of giants picking blackberries; a schooner owner he calls Uncle Bill, who was sleeping in the mud until flood tide; the lighthouse keeper worried about erosion.

This book is not so replete with literary references as others, but Thoreau invokes Homer as he looks at the sea. At least twice, he uses—in Greek—a line from *The Odyssey*: the wine dark sea and the sunset as the shining torch of the sun falling into the ocean (173). He quotes Ovid, and, most entertainingly, he quotes an Icelandic story about Furdstrandas (a mirrorlike mirage), a story into which he manages to weave (facetiously) the derivation of his own name—as from the god Thor. The last of the 10 chapters, “Provincetown,” is almost entirely devoted to the history of the Cape—and, for that matter, all of Massachusetts and parts of Nova Scotia, but he comes around at the end to contemporary people. “So we took leave of Cape Cod and its inhabitants,” he writes. “We liked the manners of the last. . . . They were particularly downright and good-humored. The old people appeared remarkably well preserved, as if by the saltiness of the atmosphere. . . . They are said to be more purely the descendents of the Pilgrims than the inhabitants of any part of the State” (*Cape Cod* 301).

For almost 20 pages he affectionately introduces us to more of those inhabitants and then returns to the geography of America, a metaphor for the life that was so soon to end for him: “Here is the spring of springs, the waterfall of waterfalls . . . a lighthouse or a fisherman’s hut the true hotel. A man may stand there and put all America behind him” (319). That sounds like a pretty accurate description of Thoreau’s life at Walden Pond, linking each of the books of this prolific writer.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Imagine that you are a naturalist and choose one of Thoreau’s strengths (as a botanist, geologist, ornithologist, for example) and discuss what you might learn from *The Maine Woods* and/or *Cape*

- Nelson, Truman. "Thoreau and John Brown." In *Thoreau in Our Season*, edited by John H. Hicks, 134–153. 1962. Reprint, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966.
- Richardson, Robert D. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- . "Introduction." In *Faith in a Seed*. By Henry David Thoreau. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993.
- Rosenblum, Nancy L. *Thoreau: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Schofield, Edmund S., and Robert C. Baron, eds. *Thoreau's World and Ours: A Natural Legacy*. Golden, Colo.: North American Press, 1993.
- Shanley, J. Lyndon. "Historical Introduction." In *Walden*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Stern, Philip Van Doren. *The Annotated Walden*. New York: Bramhall House, 1970.
- Stull, William L. "'Action from Principle': Thoreau's Transcendental Economics." *English Language Notes* 22, no. 2 (1984): 58–62.
- Thoreau, Henry David. Introduction by Robert Finch. *Cape Cod*. 1864. Reprint, Orleans, Mass.: Parnassus Imprints, 1984.
- . *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Lost Natural History Writings*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993.
- . *The Maine Woods*. 1864. Reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- . *Walden; or Life in the Woods Together with "Civil Disobedience."* Edited by Philip Van Doren Stern. New York: Bramhall House, 1970.
- . *Walden: The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- . *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. 1849. Reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893.
- Thoreau Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.thoreausociety.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Thoreau Reader. Available online. URL: <http://thoreau.eserver.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- White, William M. *Henry David Thoreau: All Nature Is My Bride*. Old Greenwich, Conn.: Chatham Press, 1975.
- Witherell, Elizabeth Hall, ed. *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*. New York: Penguin/Putnam, Library of America, 2001.

Eleanor Heginbotham



MARK TWAIN

(SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS)

(1835–1910)

We write frankly and fearlessly but then we “modify” before we print.

(Life on the Mississippi)

Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, but best known as Mark Twain, this American literary icon was frank and fearless in both his personal life and his professional career. As a man driven by success in all his undertakings, Clemens was as invested in his personal financial success as he was in his professional achievements as an author. His public career as a popular author of humor and satire and as a widely admired lecturer on American life financed his personal quest for the fortune required to support his immediate and extended family. Beneath the gruff exterior of the persona he presented to the world lay a very complex and man who translated his frank and fearless experiences into fiction that would shape the American literary scene.

On November 30, 1835, John and Jane Clemens welcomed their sixth and second-to-last child into the world of Florida, Missouri. Two months premature and weighing a mere five pounds, the infant had a prognosis so bleak that Jane Clemens refused to name him. When John Clemens did name his struggling infant son, he named him after his own father, Samuel, and after a relative, Langhorne, neither of whom John regarded fondly (Hoffman 2).

The coincidence, however, of Clemens’s entrance into the world with Halley’s comet offered hope. According to Albert Bigelow Paine’s “Personal Memoranda” chapter from *Mark Twain: A Biography*, Clemens claimed in 1909 that

I came in with Halley’s comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don’t go out with Halley’s comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: “Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.” Oh! I am looking forward to that.

But according to historical biographers like Andrew Hoffman, the superstitious power associated with the comet instilled hope in Jane Clemens. Her family, with whom she was very close, saw the comet as a lucky omen and encouraged the Clemens to love and nurture their frail infant (1–2).

Four years later, the family relocated to Hannibal, Missouri, a place made famous in and by the writings of Mark Twain. A small frontier town on the Mississippi River, Hannibal offered the Clemens family multiple opportunities. While in Hannibal, John Clemens did his best to support his family by working in town as a general store owner, lawyer, and justice of the peace, while also working outside Hannibal as part of a circuit court jury. His position in town and his run for appointment as the circuit court clerk made the Clemens relatively well known in and around Hannibal, despite John Clemens’s inability to break his cycle of growing debt and financial obligation.

With the death of his father in 1847 and the completion of five years of formal schooling, Clemens began his professional career. Apprenticed to a Hannibal print shop, Clemens learned to typeset and prepare the presses for the daily newspaper. His early career not only taught him the printing trade, but also launched his informal education as a student of the world and the people who inhabited it. Before beginning his career as a steamboat pilot, Clemens tried his hand at publishing his own articles while working in print shops in New York and Philadelphia. In need of a steady and larger income, Clemens returned south in 1857 to learn how to finesse the finicky Mississippi.

Conveyed to the public through his own travel narrative of his experiences, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), his career as a steamboat pilot is best captured in his own prose. The close connection between his life as a steamboat pilot and his identity as an author cannot be denied, as his pen name stems directly from the years he spent on the Mississippi: *Mark Twain* signifies the safe depth of two fathoms, the depth needed for steamboats to navigate the Mississippi safely. His career on the Mississippi ended as a result of circumstances beyond his control. With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, steamboat traffic on the Mississippi was at a near-halt. Although Clemens joined the Confederacy in their fight against the Yankees, his involvement in the war was short-lived. In the two weeks of his training and maneuvering with the Marion Rangers, Clemens saw enough of war to decide it was not for him. Instead of fighting, Clemens took Huck's advice and "lit out for territory," following his older brother, Orion, to the Nevada Territory in the hope of striking it rich in the silver mines.

Although Clemens's aspirations for quick riches were not fulfilled, Orion's position as the secretary of the Nevada Territory provided him a wealth of connections. Such connections helped Clemens find work for the Virginia City newspaper as a columnist and worked to his advantage when he moved even farther west to San Francisco in 1864. Shortly after his arrival in San Francisco, Clemens

finally achieved notable success and fame. In 1865, with the publication of "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog," Mark Twain's sharp wit spread across the nation as other newspapers picked up the tall tale in their columns.

His fame growing, Clemens, now known by his pen name, was sent to report on the wide world. First, the *Sacramento Union* sent him to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) in 1865. With his hallmark wit, Twain's articles revealed the civilized heathens and heathenish colonials in the clash between American interest and island culture. His observations on life and living were so invigorating that he expanded them into lectures and began his first of many well-received lecture tours. Two years later Clemens was sent over another sea, this time to observe a grand tour of Europe and the Middle East. Once again, his articles were very witty, and the fame of Twain as a humorist continued to grow. More importantly, the content of these articles would be reworked into the first novel, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), attributed to Mark Twain.

One of the many myths surrounding Clemens concerns the personal significance of this journey. According to Clemens, he met his future brother-in-law, Charles Langdon, while on this trip and fell in love with Langdon's sister. Standing at the rails of an ocean liner somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, Langdon showed Clemens a miniature portrait of his sister, Olivia. With that one glance, Clemens claimed to have fallen in love with his future bride. When the group returned to the States in 1868, Langdon introduced Clemens to his family and his sister. Two years later, Sam Clemens married Livy Langdon on February 2.

In an effort to meet the financial obligations of providing for a wife and future family, Clemens took a position as editor of the *Buffalo Post*. Living in Buffalo, in the three-story brick house that was the Langdons' wedding present, Livy remained close to her family and friends in Elmira, enjoying financial support from her family despite Clemens's steady income. Within the year, the Clemens's first child, Langdon, was born. Prospects for this young couple seemed bright.

Clemens's hope to earn a living from his own writing and not merely the editing of others' works prompted the family's move to Hartford, Connecticut, nearer to his publisher. The Clemenses first rented a home in the heart of Hartford's literary and artistic quarter, the bohemian Nook Farm. His literary works from this period continued to be primarily travel narratives and social commentary. *Roughing It* (1872), a collection of travel tales from Clemens's adventures in the American West, and *The Gilded Age* (1873), a collaborative effort with Charles Dudley Warner, have the hallmark sign of Twain's wit and humor, but neither can compare with the works Clemens would write in his next home, the Clemens's large house on Farmington Avenue in Hartford, which they moved into in 1874.

For the next 17 years, Clemens would write in his study in the billiard room of this house. His most famous characters, including Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Becky Thatcher, all came to life on the pages he wrote in this third-floor sanctuary. The tragedy of losing his son to diphtheria in 1872 was difficult to face, but the birth of their second child, a daughter named Susy, in the same year; Clara, two years later; and Jean in 1880 kept the Clemens household full of laughter and activity.

The successful publications of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), among other works, provided the Clemenses with great wealth. Unfortunately great wealth does not always equal financial security. A series of ill-thought and ill-advised investments drained Clemens's resources. Although his own publishing company, Charles L. Webster and Company, had success with the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (1885), the success was not long-lived. The ultimate financial fiasco of the publishing company is representative of most of Clemens's ventures in business and investment. Either the technology, like that of the typesetter Clemens financed for use in the publish-

ing house, was unnecessary or outdated, or the business was plagued with delays, broken promises, and untrustworthy employees. By 1891 Clemens was financially extended to his limit, and he and the family moved to Europe to economize.

Although Sam Clemens and his family were doing their best to meet the financial challenges posed by the publishing company and indebtedness incurred through Clemens's other business ventures, the publishing company finally claimed bankruptcy in 1894, leaving Clemens, its primary investor, bankrupt as well. The failed business ventures and complicated legalities of Clemens's connection as wronged investor drained Clemens of any will to write, or at least any will to write the positive social criticism of his early career. To recoup his losses, Clemens revived his alter ego and launched a lecture tour of Europe's most prominent cities as Mark Twain. Despite his ability to recover from his financial troubles, tragedy struck again in 1896. Susy Clemens, staying at the Hartford home on Farmington Avenue, unexpectedly fell ill and succumbed to meningitis. The Clemenses could not reach home in time either to tend to her or to attend the funeral. The tragedy hurt the family deeply, so deeply that when the Clemenses did return to the United States, they never went back to the Farmington Avenue house.

In his remaining years, Clemens would never personally recover from these losses. While he still had to face the death of his wife in 1903 and that of his youngest daughter in 1910, just months before his own death, the death of Susy and his struggles with bankruptcy left a bitter mark on Twain's sense of humor. His later works, which continue to focus on travel narratives, such as *Following the Equator* (1897), and social criticism, such as *The Mysterious Stranger* (published posthumously in 1916), are marked by a dark cynicism. Angry at his situation, Clemens used his pen to depict not the injustices he suffered, but the injustices he saw inflicted on others.

His satiric revelations of the abuses of power in American and western European dealings with colonial holdings, as well as his caustic revelations

of social injustices endured by the citizens of these so-called civilized nations, did turn some readers and publishers away. However, even in his later years he maintained a loyal following. His 70th birthday party, held at Delmonico's on December 5, 1905, was well attended by powerful men and authors who had made their fortunes alongside Clemens, as well as future authors, such as Willa Cather, who would use what they learned from Mark Twain's writings to create 20th-century modernism. During these final years, he was able to reestablish himself and build another home, aptly named Stormfield, in Redding, Connecticut. On April 21, 1910, in the presence of his faithful friend and assistant Albert Bigelow Paine, and his only surviving daughter, Clara, Samuel Langhorne Clemens passed away while Halley's comet blazed across the night sky.

“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (1865)

Twain's earliest national success as an author, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” marked the beginning of Twain's career as a humorist and satirist with its publication in 1865. Examining the humor of the tale is an easy way into the intricacies of the short story's two plots. Twain uses his letter to Mr. Ward as a frame narrative that sets up the humor of the tale. The exchange between Twain and Simon Wheeler is the joke of the story.

The letter to Mr. A. Ward explains the reason for Twain's visit to Simon Wheeler. On a journey west, Twain has been asked to visit Wheeler to find out information regarding Ward's friend Leonidas W. Smiley. The joke of the frame narrative is on Twain, who fell for Ward's request and realized, all too late, that “Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth . . . that you only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him it would remind him of his infamous *Jim* Smiley.” The letter is essential as it creates a plausible explanation for Twain's seeking and listening to the rambling stories of Simon Wheeler.

Twain sets up Wheeler's tale of Jim Smiley and his jumping frog as well. In two paragraphs he reveals quite a bit about Simon Wheeler. His monotonous narrative voice and deadpan delivery must be remembered to get the full effect of Twain's humor. Twain's recounting of Simon Wheeler's tale is rather straightforward, if outlandish.

The tall tale Simon Wheeler tells of Jim Smiley's celebrated jumping frog first establishes Jim Smiley's penchant for betting before revealing the humorous encounter with a stranger, quail shot, and a frog. Smiley's success with betting has been established through his ventures with his mare. The inclusion of the sad tale of Andrew Jackson, the bull pup, establishes the potential weakness in Jim Smiley's penchant for betting and bragging. The same weakness has landed him and his bullfrog, Dan'l Webster, in a most uncomfortable situation.

The antics that the stranger, Jim, and the frogs go through make for engaging slapstick humor. Imagining Jim, who “slopped around in the mud for a long time” to find the stranger a frog for the bet, and the stranger, who “prized his [Daniel Webster's] mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail shot filled him pretty near up to his chin and set him on the floor” to slant the contest in his favor, adds to the physical and overt humor of the tall tale. Briefly outlining the scenes forces the reader to imagine the details of these extraordinary circumstances and involves the reader in the narrative. We are not merely listening to Twain retell Simon Wheeler's tale; we are actively engaged in the development of the plot. Unlike Twain's introduction to Wheeler's tale, which is full of narrative detail, Wheeler's narrative lacks the details that paint the picture, leaving the narrative gaps to us, the readers, to fill in with our own imaginations.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The short story has two narrators: Twain and Simon Wheeler. Why does Twain include the initial frame narrative? What role does it serve in the development of Wheeler's tall tale?

2. The animals included in the short story have historically significant names. Who were the real Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster? How does such a connection add color and character to these animals?
3. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" has appeared as "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" and "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog." How does each of these titles emphasize a different focus of the narrative?

***Roughing It* (1872)**

An account of Clemens's travels in the American West, *Roughing It* blends fact and fiction to create Twain's entertaining account of life on the American frontier. Despite his claim that the work "is merely a personal narrative, and not a pretentious history or philosophical dissertation," the work has contributed to the myth of the American West and has been increasingly used as a resource in recreating life on the frontier. The "good deal of information" included in the narrative lends credence to his tall tales and fantastic descriptions of the American frontier, as well as material for his satiric wit.

The narrative can be divided into two separate works. The first half of the work outlines Twain's quest westward for instant success and riches and his ultimate failure at the hands of big business. Chapter 42 introduces the second half by asking the "momentous question": "What to do next?" The second half of the narrative then outlines new experiences as Twain comes into his own as a writer who discovers that his native abilities combined with hard work can open new doors for him, including a trip to the Sandwich Islands. It is not until the final page that Twain is able to join this doubled narrative solidly. His final moral emphasizes the distinction between the two halves of his narrative: "If you are of any account, stay at home and make your way by faithful diligence; but if you are 'no account,' go away from home, and then you will *have* to work, whether you want to or not." The first half of *Roughing It* recounts the

"no account" whose quest for quick riches and easy schemes draws him to the West. The second half of the narrative recounts the importance of "faithful diligence." Although Twain does not stay at home or quickly return to it when his schemes fail, his continued attempts to better himself and make his fortune through the hard work of writing draw the greater reward. Balancing the "no account" dream of quick riches and the work ethic of a skillful writer would continue to be a struggle for Twain/Clemens throughout his life.

Of particular note in this early travel account is Twain's ability to merge biographical facts with storytelling. Sam Clemens did journey west to make his riches in the silver mines of Nevada and did travel to the Sandwich Islands as a reporter. Many of the events recorded in *Roughing It* actually happened to him or people he met. Twain's embellishments add satire and humor to the situations chronicled in his narrative. Figuring out what is fact and what is fiction is the challenge of reading any Twain narrative.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics have claimed that Twain's narrative has helped to create the myth of the American West. What is that myth, and how does Twain's narrative contribute to it?
2. Twain includes many references to people, places, and concepts important to the American West. Choose one reference and research its historical and cultural significance.

***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)**

One of Twain's best-known and best-loved works, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* captures the idyllic world of childhood imagination and adventure. Although Tom and his band of friends live in the relatively calm world of the small, close-knit river community of St. Petersburg, Tom's schemes transport the boys beyond the town, the classroom, and the prim expectations of Aunt Polly. His rascality prompts him to take chances and push the limits of fantasy with his imaginative plots as he, Becky

Thatcher, and Huck Finn find themselves in a series of misadventures and encounters with the fearsome Injun Joe.

Although the narrative reads relatively easily, Twain had trouble writing his first novel-length fiction. Charles Norton's study of the book, *Writing Tom Sawyer*, outlines the struggles Twain endured during the writing process. Not only was his writing interrupted by projects in his more familiar and comfortable vein—*Roughing It*, a travel narrative published in 1872, and a witty social commentary, *The Gilded Age* (1873), cowritten with Charles Dudley Warner—but finding the right words to portray the rambunctious Tom Sawyer and his cohorts eluded Twain for at least half a decade (2). Perseverance paid off. With the appearance of the illustrated American edition of *Tom Sawyer* on December 8, 1876, Mark Twain reached newfound heights of fame. His tongue-in-cheek nonfiction may have drawn a growing number of readers, but his seemingly simple fictional tale of Tom Sawyer represented his most dramatic popular success and guaranteed Twain's arrival as a major figure in American letters.

Although it is impossible to tell whether or not Twain anticipated the lasting impression this impish boy would make when he first put pen to paper, the impact of this novel, and its more popular brother, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is immeasurable. Norton's catalog of the novel's power only begins to outline the reach of Tom Sawyer's charismatic grin and simple tale:

[*Tom Sawyer*] would remain in print and continue to sell throughout [Twain's] lifetime, . . . when the Bicentennial Celebrations would occur a hundred years hence, it would be ranked by many as his second best book, ranked by some critics as his "best constructed" novel, and . . . Tom Sawyer would become one of the most widely recognized characters in American literature. (37)

Essentially, then, *Tom Sawyer* marks not only a turning point in Twain's career, but a turning point in American letters.

So what is so special about a narrative written from a young boy's perspective? How does a novel that combines children's risky adventures with over-the-top exaggeration and a small dose of reality become canonical? What is it about Twain's use of a simple dialect that endears the words of the novel's cast of characters to generations of readers?

An obvious answer is the simple readability of Twain's plot. The basic premises of the tale have been retold to many readers. Girls and boys have always created adventurous tales about "monsters" like Injun Joe to scare each other around campfires in woods. Men, like the childish Tom, have always bragged about their ability, cunning, and nobility. Women, like Becky and Aunt Polly, have always focused on purity of self and the domestic needs of hearth and home in order to glorify their own efforts despite their limited social status. While such a division of interests by age and gender is "politically incorrect" in today's world, Twain's ability to target all of these audiences at once ensured his novel's popularity during his time and has continued to speak to readers across time. Although modern readers may not share the same social values as the characters of Twain's St. Petersburg, the inclusion of adult and child, female and male voices encourages readers to find parallel characters in their own life experiences.

And despite his exuberant cheekiness, or perhaps partly because of it, Tom Sawyer is the all-American boy. His ingenuity, first revealed in the now-famous fence-painting scene that opens the novel, emphasizes his shrewd intelligence, an intelligence that saves him from work and makes him money. His sense of adventure, epitomized in his spinning of stories to keep Huck pirating, embraces the American quest to conquer the unknown and win the respect and admiration of others. His self-sacrifice to save Becky Thatcher from punishment is rewarded not only by the adoration of the young girl his action saves, but also in the realization that some things really are more important than pride and pure profit. In essence, Tom becomes an American hero not because he disobeys and disregards the rules of society, but because he learns when to

challenge and when to accept social expectations. At his core, Tom is a good boy with good morals who recognizes that some rules—like those against hurting others or stealing from others—are cardinal rules that should never be broken even if accepting those rules precludes a new adventure.

His sidekick, Huck Finn, is similarly developed. Huck may have had a rougher life than Tom, but they share similar characteristics. Like Tom, Huck is ingenious in tracking the robbers who stole from the Widow Douglas, but his ingenuity does not necessarily save him work and make him money. Although it is Tom's imagination that pulls Huck into the adventures, Huck is more than willing to participate in most of Tom's schemes. Twain goes to great lengths to differentiate Huck from Tom in the last chapters in order to explain why Tom wins the heart of Becky while Huck never can. The great difference that divides these two friends is their understanding of civilized society. Tom recognizes that as the two boys mature into adulthood, they will have to give up part of their dreams to be pirates and robbers and instead become respectable citizens. For Huck, making that transition to respectability is much more difficult.

Despite the Widow Douglas's efforts and apparent care for Huck's well-being, he, unlike Tom, turns his back on all that she and St. Petersburg can offer. The list of the horrors the Widow Douglas forces Huck to endure seems rather ludicrous:

Huck Finn's wealth and the fact that he was now under the Widow Douglas' protection introduced him into society—no, dragged him into it, hurled him into it—and his sufferings were almost more than he could bear. The widow's servants kept him clean and neat, combed and brushed, and they bedded him nightly in unsympathetic sheets that had not one little spot or stain which he could press to his heart and know for a friend. He had to eat with a knife and fork; he had to use napkin, cup, and plate; he had to learn his book, he had to go to church; he had to talk so properly that speech was become insipid in his mouth; whithersoever

he turned, the bars and shackles of civilization shut him in and bound him hand and foot.

For Huck these social expectations are too much to bear. Not only has Twain set up his next great novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with such a closing chapter to *Tom Sawyer*, but he has also established the significant difference between the his two young heroes. It is up to the reader to decide whether Tom's acceptance of his future in society or Huck's continued rebellion against society is the more honorable path.

Of course, any interpretation of the final scene between Huck and Tom must consider the hierarchy of rebellion. Tom's reasoning may seem purely manipulative, as his reasoning is often meant to make others act in a desired way. However, a sense of propriety distinguishes Tom's band of robbers, with their stash of weapons, from his pirates and their search for treasure along the Mississippi River. Such a self-imposed hierarchy reflects Tom's changing understanding of fundamental differences between the socially isolated, island-hopping pirates and the socially connected, community-based brethren of the caves.

Tom's experiences have changed him. Realizing the pain he has caused his family when they think he has died, Tom feels remorse that has visible repercussions on his subsequent actions. His guilt after allowing Muff Potter to be accused for the murder of Dr. Robinson when Tom had actually witnessed Injun Joe's killing him festers until he is induced to come clean. His bravery at facing Injun Joe, not only in the courtroom but also in McDougal's Cave, shows a true strength and integrity in his character.

Subtly included in the narrative are themes and motifs that enrich the dialog—and the plot—of the novel. Superstitions abound as both Tom and Huck base their actions on fantastic rules that govern their life and spur the plot's development. If they had not been in the graveyard in search of a wart cure, they would not have witnessed the central crime of the novel. If they had not witnessed the crime, then they would not have become blood brothers sworn

to hold each other's secrets. The theme of romantic criminality similarly recurs. Tom's pirates and his band of robbers play with the romantic ideal of crime without committing any real crimes against others, while the true criminal of the novel, Injun Joe, represents the reality of crime and its actual impact on the community.

Such an overview is merely an introduction to this American classic. The real value of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is what each generation of readers can add to the novel with their reading. The adventures of Tom, Huck, and Becky are not adventures of the past; nor are they merely the adventures Twain captured in his novel. Instead, they are adventure we each travel every time we read their narrative of St. Petersburg.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the development of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn in their novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Pay particular attention to the way each novel ends.
2. Tom Sawyer has two alliances, one with Huck Finn and another with Becky Thatcher. How does each alliance draw out different strengths and weaknesses in Tom's character? How does Twain use setting to help develop his characters and track their growth during the course of the novel?
3. Despite the novel's relatively happy ending, Twain includes portrayals of society's less than positive elements. Drunkenness, stealing, lying, among other negative characteristics, are all portrayed openly. How do such elements shape the development of the narrative? Do they make Twain's novel more or less realistic?
4. Although the novel focuses on a child's perspective of the world, the adults of St. Petersburg are still a pervasive presence in the novel. Judge Thatcher, Aunt Polly, the Widow Douglas, and even Injun Joe are all integral to its development. Choose one of the adult characters and trace his or her impact on Tom, Huck, or Becky's development.
5. Twain's novels often included specially selected illustrations. For the American edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain used illustrations by True W. Williams. Compare and contrast Williams's illustrations to Twain's prose. Does Williams capture the essential elements of Tom Sawyer's adventure? What would a reader miss if he or she only saw the illustrations and did not read the prose?
6. Louis B. Salomon's introduction to the Great Illustrated Classics edition of *Tom Sawyer* claims that "the reader of this novel will find himself transported to the almost amoral world of the child, where the only questions the protagonists have to answer for themselves are *What* and *How*, the *Why* is left to the unfathomable discretion of grown-ups who have somehow lost the secret of having a good time anyhow." Is such a claim an accurate overview of the novel? Refer to specific scenes to support your position.
7. Critics have argued whether *Tom Sawyer* is a child's story, an adolescent novel of growing maturity, or a tale meant for adults. How can each group of critics be right? What evidence is provided in Twain's prose to support all three readings simultaneously? Which do you think is right? Why?
8. Twain intended to recreate the novel as a play. Choose an important scene from the novel and develop it into a theatrical scene, including stage directions and dialogue, to highlight its role in the development of the novel's central theme.

***The Prince and the Pauper* (1881)**

Published in 1881 and set in 16th-century England, *The Prince and the Pauper* was Twain's earliest attempt at an extended work of historical fiction. Although the novel maintains Twain's focus on children, as both the primary characters and readers of his fiction, his social commentary is still evident. As do King Arthur's travels with

Hank in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and the twins of *Puddn'head Wilson*, *The Prince and the Pauper* develops a central theme in Twain's work: the injustice of socially and economically constructed differences.

As the pauper, Tom Canty has expectations that are not high. In fact, Twain pointedly introduces Tom as unwanted by his family in the opening paragraph of the narrative and describes his life as quite bleak. Despite his bleak surroundings, however, Tom has found an escape: "As he lay in the dark on his scant and offensive straw, tired, hungry, and smarting from a thrashing, he unleashed his imagination and soon forgot his aches and pains in delicious picturings to himself of the charmed life of a petted prince in a regal palace." Realizing that life has more to offer than a bed of straw in a small hovel of a home, Tom's imagination foreshadows the main focus of the novel. The opportunity to become the prince in a regal palace and understand the benefits and shortcomings of such a life will truly change Tom's understanding of the world around him.

Prince Edward is born into a life of prestige. His birth is a joyous occasion not only for his family but for all of England. Despite his knowledge of Latin and courtly virtues, his first meeting with Tom reveals his ignorance of the real lives of his future subjects. Not only does he offer Tom the most useless advice for his station in life, he misunderstands its joys—swimming in canals, dancing around the maypole, wallowing in mud—so completely that he too makes a significant claim to further the plot. For all the joys and freedoms of Tom's life, Prince Edward would give up every royal comfort, claiming, "Twould be worth my father's kingdom but to enjoy it once!" The opportunity to enjoy the childhood adventures Tom describes and the darker moments both characters have momentarily forgotten will ultimately provide Prince Edward a better appreciation for the station he was born into and the deprivations of his people.

The exchange of social station, however, is completely accidental and both characters quickly realize that the life they dreamed of living is much

different from the real experience of inhabiting a radically different social position. Neither royalty nor peasantry offers experience as idyllic as either imagined. The adventures each endures in his attempts to set society right create the memorable moments of the plot's development. Essentially, Edward's quest to return to the throne reveals the social, economic, and legal injustices of England and shapes young Prince Edward into the fair and judicious king he becomes at the end of the novel. Tom's ability to consider shrewdly and pass judgment on the conduct of the court similarly reveals the shortcomings of royal life. Through literally walking in each other's shoes, both Tom and Edward experience the unfamiliar and uncomfortable. By joining their adventures in one novel, Twain is able to critique, sometimes lightheartedly, both the upper and lower classes. The point, ultimately, is that neither class is flawless. As a consequence, Twain's primary focus is on Tom and Edward's abilities to use their intelligence to realize the shortcomings of the world they live in and to use their kindhearted natures to more equably settle the grievances they witness.

The seemingly simple tale was well received by Twain's contemporaries. Blending artistic skill and a moral message, *The Prince and the Pauper* was touted as a mature read that offered multiple levels of meaning. A child could enjoy the fantastic journey of Tom and Edward at face value. An adult could clearly see the challenging social commentary based on the injustices suffered by the characters and further clarified in Twain's footnotes. Perhaps most significant to Clemens was the novel's reception by his family. They enjoyed the novel so much that they staged a play based on it. The first draft of this dramatic adaptation was a thin plot summary written by Clemens with the intent of casting his children and their friends in the main roles so that they might perform before an audience of family and close friends during the Christmas holiday. The positive reaction of the initial small audience and a second, larger audience in January led Clemens to produce a version of the novel as a play in the hope of earning more than its initial publication returns.

Unfortunately Clemens's agreement to collaborate with two different playwrights to rework the novel into a professional performance led to the only long, drawn-out lawsuit Sam Clemens faced as an author. Perhaps he had not learned the same lesson as his characters about the value of riches.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Twain goes to great lengths to recount the adventures and growth of both boys. Which scenes depict the greatest challenge for both Tom and Prince Edward? How does the response of each character show his growth and development?
2. Twain includes explanatory notes for certain legal concepts in his novel. Choose one concept that Twain explains and further research its meaning and impact on history.
3. Choose one concept for which Twain does not provide an explanatory note but that needs one in order for contemporary readers to understand the development of the narrative. Write your own explanatory note, and be sure to explain why understanding this concept is central to understanding the novel.
4. Tom Canty and Prince Edward are included in a long list of literary doppelgängers, or pairings of opposites, who most often look alike. How do Tom and Edward complement each other? What are each character's strengths and weaknesses?
5. Compare and contrast the plot development of the switched twins in *The Prince and the Pauper* and *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. What interesting differences and similarities do you find? Discuss how they add to the portrayals of the characters and their worlds.

***The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1883)**

The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson is perhaps Twain's most eclectic enterprise. While *Huckleberry Finn* marked the beginning of Twain's own publishing house—a venture that eventually left him bankrupt—*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* joined Sam Clemens's entrepreneurial spirit

with Mark Twain's dark satire. Published in 1883, the novel blends many of Twain's interests and major themes. Wilson's reliance on fingerprinting highlights the importance of science. The role reversal of Thomas a Becket Driscoll and Valet de Chambre raises questions of racism, slavery, and identity. Tom and Roxy's criminal behavior place accountability and responsibility at the fore of the novel. And underscoring all of the aforementioned themes is Twain's return to the doppelgänger, or doubled character.

Although the novel was not one of Twain's biggest sellers during his lifetime and still has not equaled in fame or readership *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Clemens used his character's maxims, which open each chapter, in other ventures. The *Century Magazine* promoted Twain's latest novel with the inclusion of "Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar for 1884." The small pocket calendar included samples of Wilson's aphorisms and a description of fingerprinting techniques according to Twain's narrative. Such aphorisms would resurface again as a chapter in *Following the Equator*. The novel may not have been the success Twain had hoped for, but the character and his aphorisms have been indelibly etched in our cultural dictionary.

Set in Dawson's Landing, Missouri (another incarnation of Hannibal), *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* has three main plots. The first follows the alienated Northerner, David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson, who redeems himself in the final courtroom drama. The second follows Roxy; her beloved son, Valet de Chambre; and her master's child, Thomas a Becket Driscoll, whom she switches with her own son when they are young so that her son will never be sold away from her. The third introduces Luigi and Angelo Capello, the dashing European twins who upend the town first through their charm, then through the drama surrounding the stolen knife, and finally through their trial for Judge Driscoll's murder. All three plots are merged nicely as Pudd'nhead Wilson redeems his reputation by using his understanding of the law and study of the forensic science of fingerprinting to absolve the Capello twins of murder and reveal the switch of Tom and Roxy's true son.

Through the switch of Tom and Chambers, Twain is able to illustrate more distinctly the disadvantages and inhumanity of slavery. Roxy, the mulatto slave who could pass for white, has a child who is identical in every way to her master's child except in his social, economic, and legal status. In the opening chapters, the narrator goes to great lengths to emphasize the unjustifiable discrepancies that exist in this society. Although "to all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, . . . the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a Negro," and her son, who was "thirty-one parts white," was also a slave.

The comparison between Tom and his half brother, Chambers, is also significantly developed. Despite their identical physical appearance, the vast difference in their clothes and treatment within the Driscoll household is clearly portrayed. Although her anguish cannot excuse her later actions, Roxy's decision to switch the children results from her realization that the difference between her son and Tom is superimposed on them by society and men like Driscoll. The only other alternative Roxy can conceive is murdering her own son and committing suicide. With such an alternative, it is clear that Roxy's decision to switch the infants is purely maternal and not intentionally malicious.

Twain, however, does not leave the novel with such a simple rendering of the condition of slavery. The novel's focus on the switch eventually becomes a question of nature versus nurture. Tom, who is really the slave, steals and murders his own uncle over debts and deeds. At the end of the novel, his actions are accounted for by his black blood and responded to by selling him down river. Chambers, the real heir to the Driscoll estate, is left a white man uncomfortable with his inherited privileges. As the narrative states: "His manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up; they only made them more glaring and the more pathetic."

The drama of the murder trial and the role of forensic science in the novel justify close attention. Both provide catalysts for the narrative's determi-

nation of when and how Chambers's and Tom's true identities will be revealed. However, as important as these other plots are, they should not overshadow the social commentary of the novel.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the tragedy in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*?
2. *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* includes many of Twain's central themes. The use of science, the inequality of racism, questions of identity, issues of criminality, complexities of doubled characters are all present throughout the novel. Choose one of these themes and trace its development in the course of the novel.
3. *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* blends two narratives: the story of Roxy's twins and the Siamese twins, or those extraordinary twins. Compare the use of the extraordinary twins as they appear in the novel to their development in "Those Extraordinary Twins."
4. Several different versions (the *Century Magazine*, Marginal Illustrations of the 1894 publication, Harper & Brother edition illustrations in 1899, and the Édition de Luxe of 1899) of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* included different illustrations. Compare and contrast the effectiveness of two different publications' illustrations.
5. Choose one of Pudd'nhead Wilson's aphorisms and test its validity. Does it connect in any way to the chapter it prefaces? Does it connect in any way to the novel's themes? Does it connect in any way to real life?

Life on the Mississippi (1883)

Life on the Mississippi truly unites the mythic persona, Mark Twain, with the experiences of the man, Sam Clemens, and both voices are present in this travel narrative that unfolds along the muddy waters of this most iconic of American rivers. Focusing on Clemens's personal experiences as a steamboat pilot for a brief period before the Civil

War, Twain's persona treats the river with surprisingly little dark satire and irony, though the people included in this fictionalized memoir are of course fair game for Twain's acerbic wit. Twain's history of the river and his reflections on its ever-changing beauty are a testament to its importance to both the persona Clemens adopted as an author and Clemens himself. In fact, *Life on the Mississippi* calls attention to the direct connection between Clemens's personal life and his pen name, derived directly from his experiences piloting a riverboat, as the term *mark twain* signified a depth of two fathoms, the minimal depth needed for steamboats to travel safely along the Mississippi River.

In 1882 Clemens returned to the river of his childhood as a local hero. The visit, however, mixed business with pleasure. As recounted in part in the final chapters of *Life on the Mississippi*, Clemens traveled along the river again to recapture its beauty and tell its tale in the work while he was writing and revising it. As do all of his travel narratives, *Life on the Mississippi* required research in order to portray the time and place accurately. But Twain's research trip down the river revealed not only the history, geology, and people of the river, but also the deeply disturbing changes that the river had undergone since Clemens last visited its muddy banks. Trains had taken over the greater burden of transporting people and goods. The river itself had changed its course with human intervention. And lights and buoys now marked the safest trail for boats to follow. Despite these advances, there is a sense of loss. The previous chapters outlined a living river with its complicated connections to mankind and nature; now that river, the river of Sam Clemens's youth, has been lost forever.

Together with his recollections of childhood stories and adventures, Clemens's experiences on the river as part of a steamboat crew make up the central body of the narrative. The early chapters, focusing on the history of the Mississippi River and its finicky relationship with humanity, set the stage for the realistic and reliable account of the life of a riverboat pilot and his crew. As the novel progresses, Twain includes many colorful and fic-

tive descriptions of the history of and life on the Mississippi. But throughout the narrative, there is a sense of respect and love for the river.

Twain's love for it seems to result from its continual mutability. The river is never the same river twice. No matter how many times Twain travels down the river and no matter how hard he struggles to read the signs, the Mississippi constantly changes. Bixby, his learned tutor on the ways of the river, cautions Twain not to fall prey to the changing appearance of the river. Instead, he must "learn the shape of the river; and you learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that's in your head, and never mind the one that's before your eyes." The challenge of believing what you know to be true when your eyes and senses reveal a different scene altogether is the greatest challenge of a riverboat pilot. And it is a challenge that Twain continues to play with throughout his longer, fictional works as they all have elements of deception and/or confused identities.

Although it is clear that Twain's focus truly is on the river and the challenges of becoming a riverboat pilot, his work is not without adventure. The narrative develops the real tensions of guiding a steamboat, its crew, cargo, and passengers down the unpredictable river. Twain's deft descriptions of the hazards of the river and his ability to portray the concentration of Bixby when navigating the challenging passes contribute to the intriguing development of the narrative. Similarly the tall tales embedded in the narrative add a human dimension to a narrative that focuses on the precocious nature of the Mississippi. If Twain had remained in the historical past or focused merely on natural descriptions of the river in all its glory, the narrative of *Life on the Mississippi* would be far less than it is: a multidimensional travel narrative, which is so much more than the simple story of a trip down the Ole Miss.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is fact and what is fiction? Twain blends the history of the river and his own personal experiences with tall tales and legends of the

river. Trace Twain's use of both fact and fiction in a chapter of your choice. How does this fluid movement between fact and fiction impact the narrative's development?

2. What is fact and what is fiction in Twain's use of his own experiences? Using a detailed biography of Clemens's life, compare and contrast the version presented in his memoir of life on the Mississippi with the version presented by literary historians.
3. How do Twain's early trips on the river, when he is part of the crew of a steamboat, and his later trips, when he is a traveler on the river, change his perspective on the river? How does Twain account for the differences as more than a change in his perspective?
4. Twain spends a great deal of time discussing the changing nature of the Mississippi and its relationship with the natural world. Trace the development of a particular natural element—lightning, moonlight, sunlight, trees, fog—and its impact on the river through the dialogue of the novel, the descriptive passages, and the action of the plot.

***Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)**

Nearly a decade after the publication of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* returned readers to Twain's St. Petersburg, Missouri, this time presenting the story from a different child's perspective. But Huck Finn's adventures are anything but childish. Focusing on the difficult topic of slavery and racism and often using less than socially acceptable language, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a challenging read. Furthermore, the book has often faced severe criticism, both from reviewers and from the general public, and schools and libraries, many of which have banned the work from their shelves. Perhaps it is the genuine good nature of both Huck and Jim that keeps readers turning its pages. Twain himself, in a retrospective personal journal entry, noted that the central conflict of the novel is revealed when

Huck's "sound heart and . . . deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat" (Notebook number 35).

Hindsight may have offered Mark Twain such a vantage point, but while writing the novel he was often stuck with writer's block. Literary biographers seem to agree that Twain began to focus on Huck Finn and his narrative before he had finished writing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Both books develop his childhood memories of Hannibal, Missouri, in the fictionalized St. Petersburg and rely on the interesting and vexing contradictions in a young boy's view of the world. During the composition of *Huckleberry Finn*, two particular issues seem to have caused the author considerable trouble. The first—when Huck and Jim miss the fork in the river that would have enabled them to follow the Ohio north to freedom—caused a several-year block in the novel's progress. How could Twain right such an oversight that defied logic and rationality? The fog may have added a new challenge to Jim and Huck's quest for freedom, but Jim's choice to continue into the Deep South, known for its treacherous slave practices, simply could not be squared with the character or the setting. The second—the final chapters on the Phelps farm—posed a similar problem and slowed the writing process as Twain again struggled to square Jim's character. Not only is Huck's decision to accept Tom's escape plan questionable, Huck, whom we have seen grow and mature during his trek down the river, significantly falls short of our expectations of a hero. While it may be argued that Twain never really resolved these narrative defects, and instead merely persevered and pressed on, the novel's completion raised more than questions of plot defects.

In fact, *Huckleberry Finn* has faced severe censure. Even before the novel was published in its entirety, publishers questioned its content. The *Century Magazine*, a popular literary publication of the 19th century, published excerpts of the novel but made alterations to delete or change references to nakedness, dead cats, and other unsavory details (Kaplan 10). Even Twain censured the illustrations E. W. Kemble provided for his novel. Several

illustrations never made it to print, and one, which was included in the first printing, had to be manually excised from every edition because of its lewd depiction of Uncle Silas (Kaplan 11). The questionable terminology and distasteful illustrations called Twain's "decency and morality" into question, even by Twain's own publishing house (qtd. in Kaplan 11). Even when *Huckleberry Finn* was published with its expurgated illustrations, it continued to raise questions of appropriateness. Such questions culminated in the Concord (Massachusetts) Public Library's decision to ban the book, claiming that it was "trash and suitable only for the slums" (qtd. in Kaplan 11). Other libraries followed suit, and *Huckleberry Finn* continues to be banned today from some library and schoolroom shelves.

Since the issues of racism and slavery raised by the novel's narrative have caused the greatest and longest-lasting concern in regard to this novel's appropriateness, any attempt at a comprehensive discussion of the work must include, if not focus on, these concerns. By the end of the novel, Twain's message appears to be clear: Slavery is a social evil romanticized by the social conscience, represented by Tom Sawyer; revolted against by the truly civilized, like Huck; and endured by the unfortunate Jim. But the hardships, especially those faced by Jim throughout his journey to freedom, and especially in the "attempted" escape from the Phelpses, are difficult for a modern reader to comprehend. It is clear that Twain has made farcical the absurd inhumanity of slavery through his darkly comic rendering of Jim's tests and trials, but it is difficult to integrate Twain's message with his method.

In fact, Twain's parody of America's struggle with the most deeply divisive social issue that characterized his historical moment draws heavily on his own life experience. As a child in a Southern town, Sam Clemens probably witnessed slave sales or at least the announcements of slave auctions. His daily life in town no doubt put him in contact with slaves and exposed him to their treatment in society and the expectations imposed on them as workers. Even within his own household and at the Quarles farm nearby, Clemens was exposed to slavery.

The Clemens family may have been struggling to put their accounts in order, but they could afford a slave to assist with the general grocery store and the household chores. The Quarleses, Jane Clemens's sister and brother-in-law and their children, lived close by on a relatively flourishing farm and owned several slaves to assist in the working of the land. Personal records of the Clemenses' and Quarleses' slaves, as is true in the case of most slaves, were not kept, so it is impossible to paint a complete picture of their treatment. Treatment, however, is a moot point when one race or group holds another bound in servitude, and society offers no legal recourse for the enslaved.

Although Clemens's portrayal of slavery in *Huckleberry Finn* is considered by many to be socially and morally responsible when compared to the deeply racist opinions held during the time of the novel by Twain's own contemporaries, Clemens was raised in a Southern, slaveholding household. He may not have owned slaves (although he did have hired servants) once he was out on his own, and his ideas may have been socially progressive, but his perception of race could not help but be influenced by his childhood experiences. In 1853 Clemens traveled to New York City to make his fortune in printing houses. While Clemens disappointedly returned to the South without the riches he thought he would amass, he did gain more knowledge of the printing process and revealed his social and cultural bias in his letters home. Several letters depict his stance: he describes slave sympathizers as "infernal abolitionists," claims he should "black [his] face, for in these Eastern States n—— are considerably better than white people," and writes of his homesickness for the South and the "good, old-fashioned negro" (qtd. in Hoffman 35). Needless to say, such comments reveal the limits of Clemens's progressive thought. Moreover, his very brief involvement in the Civil War as a soldier in a militia suggests a deep alliance with Southern sympathies and values. In essence, then, Twain wrote a novel portraying the negative impact of slavery despite his rearing and experiences with slavery as a member of the oppressing class.

Understanding the setting and history of the era Twain depicts is key to addressing the novel's plot and its representation of slavery. As Twain explained, the novel is set 40 to 50 years before its publication, or roughly 1835–45. The novel's focus on the issue of freedom and race is appropriate for its Southern setting at this particular time, during the height of slavery and the beginning of the earnest national discussion of slavery that preceded the Civil War. Whether Twain deals with this issue appropriately is an issue that can be and has been argued from more perspectives than can adequately be addressed here.

But to ignore the issue of slavery altogether in any classroom discussion of the novel would be a disservice to the novel's main theme and ultimate purpose. The Public Broadcasting System– (PBS) sponsored Web site *Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* usefully emphasizes the importance of addressing the issues of slavery and racism in the novel. Providing ample support for positive classroom discussions of this sensitive issue, the Web site lists student, teacher, administrator, and parent responses to a recent controversy over the required reading of this novel. The students' responses are especially enlightening as they reveal the lingering importance of this novel's central topic. Racism is still an issue today, and the student comments reveal the importance of studying and openly discussing Twain's novel: "We don't get enough credit for understanding things—we could have read it without all of this"; "This stuff [racism] is all over the news. We can't avoid it. . . . We already learn it outside of school, why not study it in school and get the real facts?"; and "I think the impact of this book is in the discomfort the readers feel. . . . *Huck Finn* is perfect to read if it's taught correctly." Thus, with the necessary framework, a rewarding discussion of sensitive topics can be achieved.

To focus solely on the issue of slavery would, however, be a disservice to *Huckleberry Finn*, as the novel is rich in other themes, motifs, and symbols—many of which do connect to the central focus of the novel. Through the exploration of subplots that

unfold before the raft rip begins and when Huck and Jim go ashore during their journey down the Mississippi, readers can learn just as much about the principal characters, Huck and Jim, as they do through the moments Huck and Jim spend alone on the raft. The many peripheral characters, who seem insignificant in an exploration of the central theme of the novel, do further the development of Twain's commentary on society and its flaws. Beginning with events that appear to be innocuous is a convenient way to build up to the central discussion of the injustices of slavery and racism. Twain's presentation of Huck's experience before Jim enters the novel is an excellent example: When we first meet Huck, he reluctantly endures the civilizing efforts of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson and chafes at what amounts to a form of legally enforced custody that leaves Huck less than thrilled with his lot in life. But his wisdom has grown since our last meeting with Huck at the end of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. When Pap returns and seeks custody of Huck in order to control his money, Huck has the foresight to entrust his money to Judge Thatcher. Once Pap kidnaps Huck and the vicious circle of drinking and violence begins, Huck has the hindsight to acknowledge the benefits of life with the Widow Douglas. His escape highlights his ability to plan and scheme—an ability previously attributed to Tom Sawyer only. Thus, the opening chapters alone highlight the immense growth and development Huck has achieved since we last saw him at the close of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Such an exploration of Huck's struggles with his imposed custody foreshadows the much graver issue of slavery that Jim faces.

When Jim and Huck finally meet on Jackson's Island, the true crisis of the novel becomes apparent. Despite Jim's faithful tending to Huck and Huck's growing sense of responsibility for ensuring Jim's freedom, the true challenge for Huck is that of learning the value of the individual despite what his society has taught him. Huck's decision to assist Jim in his escape from St. Petersburg and Jackson's Island when he learns that the smoke from their fire has drawn attention to their hideout indicates

Huck's early decision to question the justice of slavery. His scheme to protect Jim from the band of men seeking runaway slaves by claiming that Jim is ill with smallpox is a testament to Huck's growing abilities. He has now proven twice that he is a deft schemer and his lie brings into focus the concern with truth and lies that run throughout the novel.

As Huck searches for confirmation that his decision to help Jim is the right decision to make, he is forced to tell several fibs. Before they even set off down the river, Huck's skills at deception are questioned. His disguise as a girl is quickly discerned by Judith Loftus when her tests reveal his lack of basic feminine skills. Similarly his attempt to mask his identity at the Grangerfords' causes trouble. While Mrs. Loftus's trouble is merely an inconvenience because Huck must create another lie to save himself and Jim from exposure, the false identity he assumes with the Grangerfords nearly costs him his life in the senseless family feud that rages between them and the Shepherdsons. Perhaps the greatest disguise Huck dons in the novel is the innocent and naive boy who believes the Duke and the Dauphin's con game. By playing along with these darkly comic villains, Huck is able to overthrow their plot to con Mary Jane Wilks of her rightful inheritance. His ability in this instance to see through such an act ultimately complicates even further his inability to influence Tom's plan to free Jim during the final chapters of the novel.

But it is not Huck's ability to deceive others that is most important in the end. He has in fact been deceiving himself to a far greater degree than he has deceived anyone else. Throughout the novel Huck questions the very humanity of the one character who maintains a nobleness and gentility far beyond the capabilities of anyone else in the novel. This is, of course, Jim. Huck simply cannot understand the deeply human bond he shares with Jim. When Huck learns of Jim's deep love for his own family in chapter 23, Huck cannot help question the genuineness of Jim's emotional connection: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." The

care and concern Jim has shown for Huck since they teamed up on Jackson's Island has proven that Jim is capable of caring for others regardless of what society has told Huck to believe. Even Huck's earlier declaration that "people would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don't make no difference. I ain't a-going to tell, and I ain't a-going back there, anyways" when Jim tells him that he ran away from the Widow Douglas, turns out to be an exercise in self-deception. If he had truly believed in the values of the Southern slavery system, then he would have turned Jim in despite his promise. For Huck the value of the individual and his rights has always been more important than the value of "civilized" society. It simply takes Huck the greater part of the novel to realize and accept his moral superiority to the society that has always tried to cultivate him and to induce him to assimilate its belief system.

In fact, Twain goes to great lengths to exemplify Huck's moral superiority to his surrounding society. Chapters 21 and 22 emphasize the dangers of people's taking the law into their own hands, especially when they have no secure moral foundation. This is made clear when Colonel Sherburn shoots Boggs and when the lynch mob tries to hold Sherburn accountable. But there does not seem to be any real accountability for Sherburn's actions, as he is able to cow the mob and escape their wrath: "Your [society's] mistake is, that you didn't bring a man with you; that's one mistake, and the other is that you didn't come in the dark and fetch your masks." As has Colonel Sherburn, Huck has taken the law into his own hands. His decision to assist a runaway slave has made him a vigilante as well. However, Huck's reaction to the circus stunt in chapter 23 emphasizes the difference between Huck and the Colonel Sherburns of the world. Although Huck is later ashamed to be so taken in by the stunt, he cannot help but admit that the danger the man appeared to be experiencing "warn't funny to me, though; I was all of a tremble to see his danger." Huck has both broken the law and had such a strong reaction to the circus stunt

because he is consistently more concerned with the welfare of others than with his own use and abuse of socially condoned power.

Similarly Twain juxtaposes Huck's morality with the morality of the Duke and the Dauphin during the long con targeting Mary Ann Wilks and her sisters. Spanning chapters 24 through 30, the development of the Wilks deception is second in length only to deceptions Tom and Huck perpetrate on the Phelpses and Jim in the final chapters of the novel. Huck is so ashamed by their false display and attempt to take advantage of a grieving family that he cannot help but act. The three nieces treat Huck with such kindness that he cannot help but "feel at home and know I was amongst friends. I felt so ornery and low down and mean that I say to myself, my mind's made up; I'll hive that money for them or bust." Although he uses several lies and a masterful scheme to secure the money for the Wilks family, these deceptions, like the deceptions he has used to save Jim from slavery, are good, because they help instead of hurt.

Such a distinction between positive and negative lies is dramatically situated at the fore in the final scenes of the novel. Huck may have disappointed the reader with his surprise at Tom Sawyer's willingness to help Jim escape: "I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell considerable in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a *n*—*stealer!*" The arrival of Tom Sawyer in the final chapters is not a surprise as he has been a recurrent figure in the novel. Huck and Jim have often compared their schemes and feats to Tom's exploits. When Huck learns of Tom Sawyer's deception in the final chapters, however, we cannot help but be even more disappointed in the lack of a response or accountability for Tom's deceitful and hurtful plans. Huck's final claim that "[Jim's freedom] was about as well the way it was" is far from satisfying. By saying almost nothing at all, Huck has left it to the reader to make the final decision about a society that condones Tom's escapades. The Phelpses do reward Jim for his willingness to sacrifice his own freedom to save Tom's life, but even that rings hollow. It is enough to make one want to "light out for the territory" with Huck.

As do Twain's other social satires, Huck's narrative makes it increasingly difficult for a reader to wish to continue in civilized America. While our 21st-century readings of the novel may find greater fault in the issues of slavery and racism than Twain's contemporaries, there is some satisfaction in knowing that Twain's honest portrayal of the weaker characteristics of humanity and American history have always rankled some, if not all, readers. Perhaps that is all one can really hope for when writing such a biting novel. The fact that this novel can still make us think about and discuss the sensitive issues of slavery, racism, social equality, and the essential qualities of human experience is reason enough to read it despite the plot flaws and questionable language. And perhaps that lasting impact is exactly what makes *Huckleberry Finn* both an American classic and a perennial source of controversy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the development of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn in their novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Who has changed more in the intervening time between the two novels? Why?
2. How accurate is the opening frame narrative when Huck speaks to his readers directly, claiming: "You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter"?
3. In each of the stops that Huck makes along the river, he encounters new adventures that teach him about the civilization he ultimately rejects. How does each stop contribute to his final decision to "light out for the territory"?
4. Twain provides Huck with several role models: Pap, Jim, Tom, Miss Watson, the Widow Douglas, Judge Thatcher, the Duke and the Dauphin, the Grangers, the Wilkses, the Phelpses, and Aunt Polly. From which of the characters does he learn most about civilization and its expectations?
5. Superstitions play a large role in the development of the novel. Jim and Huck share a common interest in the folklore of their area, and both learn new myths from each other. Choose

one example of folklore in the novel. Who tells us the superstition? Why is the superstition significant for the plot development? How does the superstition contribute to the overall development of a theme of the novel?

6. Racial inequality is not the only social inequity highlighted in the novel. Several references to gender differences are also made. How are girls Huck's age portrayed? What accounts for the difference between men and women in the towns Huck and Jim visit?
7. Throughout the novel Huck assumes several different identities and encounters characters who are not who they claim to be. Why does Twain use such elaborate schemes? How does such a play with characters' identities contribute to the development of the central theme of the novel?
8. Huck and Jim experience various truths, half-truths, and outright untruths throughout the development of the novel. How does each character react to truth and lies? How do his experiences with truth and lies help him grow and develop during the course of the novel?
9. Much has been written on the idyllic island Huck and Jim share on the raft and the less than ideal world they encounter whenever they visit the riverbank communities. What makes the raft ideal? How does Twain represent Huck and Jim's conduct on the raft as different from their behavior on shore?
10. The Duke and the Dauphin's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays overtly create literary allusions between the works cited and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why are such literary allusions included by Twain? What role do they have in his darkly comic farce of society? What role do they play in furthering the discussion of the novel's theme?
11. Twain's novel is set in the Deep South during the years of 1835–45. Research the history of slavery in Missouri and Arkansas during this period. Is Jim's experience an accurate representation of the life slaves endured? What has Twain fictionalized? Is such fictionalization necessary for the advancement of the novel's theme? Does such a necessity make it appropriate?
12. Appended to his foreword to the novel, Twain adds a sentence warning his reader that "persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." Does Twain mean for his audience to take his advice seriously? What is the danger in taking his advice and not finding a motive, moral, or plot?
13. Like many of Twain's works, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was carefully illustrated. How do the illustrations compare with the social commentary of the novel? Are the illustrations of Jim as sympathetic as his character development and his relationship with Huck reveal him to be?
14. Jim is not the only slave in Twain's works. Closely read Aunt Rachel's tale in "True Story." How are Aunt Rachel and Jim alike and different? Does Twain's fictionalized Jim do justice to the history and experiences captured in Aunt Rachel's more-fact-than-fiction autobiography?
15. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been banned, removed from school and library shelves, censored, uncensored, added to or subtracted from required reading lists for all ages and in many different countries. Twain rather enjoyed the furor his novel caused. After reading the novel, write a letter to Twain and support your position on whether or not the book should be banned.

***A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889)**

Written over the course of several years as the piecing together of two separate plots, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* was a struggle for Clemens as an author. According to Andrew Hoffman's biography, *Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*, Twain's novel "blended his reading of history and of *Morte d'Arthur*, with a book set in Hawaii that

he had begun a few years before. In the original manuscript, a practical, scientific, nineteenth-century man finds himself in a primitive world of superstition, faith, and ignorance” (333). Published in 1889 with illustrations by Dan Beard, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* received positive reviews but relatively weak sales in comparison to Twain's other works and in light of his fame.

Although all of Twain's most noted works have an element of social satire and commentary, the story of Hank Morgan and his debacles was perhaps too caustic for Twain's American public. The plot of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* highlights the downfall of technological arrogance. Transported to the Dark Ages, Hank Morgan assumes authority through a systematic implementation of modern marvels. Although Morgan liberally uses fantastic displays of solar eclipses and fireworks to dislodge Merlin's hold on King Arthur's court, Morgan's political power seems to be based on production, education, and communication. Factories, schools, and simple everyday inventions are used to support his quest for supremacy. Despite his use of all these respectable and respected institutions of 19th-century American life, however, Morgan's power fails because it corrupts. In the end, Morgan's final actions in sixth-century England leave him the victor over a field of the dead, awaiting the next onslaught of a new enemy. For Twain 19th-century marvels are not as civilizing as they first appear.

Twain's social commentary did not stop with the use and abuse of science and technology. Hank and King Arthur's trials as traveling peasants highlight the injustices of a society based on class divisions. Although the duo encounter many troubles and are eventually enslaved for a fight with a group of townsmen, their travels ultimately reveal the challenges faced by the lower classes. Despite Hank's repeated assertions that monarchies are limited and inferior systems of government, King Arthur's compassion for his people, once he realizes what they endure, is inspiring. Enslaved, King Arthur realizes the injus-

tices of slavery and plans to end its practice once he is recognized and can return to his throne. His powerful character had already been established during his journeys with Hank when he had risked his own life by exposing himself to smallpox in order to carry a sick girl to her mother. Injustices may prevail, but the scenes revealing King Arthur's character imply that there is a hope for the people when their leaders can recognize society's weaknesses and address the need for positive change.

Morgan's travels are not merely about his public persona. During the years he spends in medieval England, he finds time to marry and have a child. Sandy (or Alisande), the original damsel in distress whom Morgan must help by freeing 40 “princesses” from ogres, eventually becomes Morgan's wife. Sandy is always present for Morgan's best moments. In her presence he frees the slaves from Morgan La Fay's dungeons. And with her he experiences the joy and love of being a husband and father. She and Hello Central, his daughter, are present at his organized baseball games and witness the camaraderie engendered by this American pastime. Both also momentarily realign his priorities. When Hello Central falls ill, he and Sandy travel to France, leaving the position, if not the power, Hank had acquired. Through his relationship with his wife and his daughter, Morgan becomes more than a flat character on a single-minded quest for power and glory.

But even Hello Central and Sandy could not keep Hank Morgan from his destiny. His quest for power and control over the weak-minded and backward medieval English he encountered at the beginning of his time travels draws him back to England. The return to the world he had created is bleak as the final break between Lancelot and King Arthur has left only Hank to rule the gray skies and sooty lands of an industrialized England. The Interdict, or the church's disapproval of Hank, King Arthur, and Lancelot, with its plan to destroy all of Hank's modernization and Hank as well, does not provide the welcome he had imagined.

Essentially then, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is a satiric and dark social com-

mentary. The brief glimpse offered here cannot do justice to the political, social, and economic commentary included in Twain's work.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Twain's use of a frame narrative reveals that Hank Morgan's deep sleep took him back to modern times. How does Morgan's deep sleep compare to Rip Van Winkle's deep sleep?
2. The final chapters of Hank Morgan's memoir depict a dark vision of the impact of war. Is such an ending appropriate? Does the rest of his memoir build up to the apocalyptic scenes that close his narrative?
3. How does Twain's portrayal of medieval times compare to history's portrayal of medieval times? Does his use of a fictional source, *Morte d'Arthur*, lessen the reliability of his history?
4. Considered one of the earliest time travel novels, how does *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* differ in Twain's use of this device from its use in science fiction? Compare and contrast the use of this literary device and the message of Twain's novel with the way his contemporary H. G. Wells uses it in *The Time Machine* (1895).
5. Hank Morgan's inventions show the negative impact science and technology can have on society. Choose one 19th-century advancement and trace its development and impact on the medieval society of the novel.
6. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* has been the basis for several movies. Choose one movie based on Twain's novel and compare and contrast the content of the movie to Twain's narrative.

"The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1898)

Written in 1898 while Clemens and his family were on tour in Europe to recoup losses from ill-advised investments, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" has often been read as a satire of American society; however, the plot also darkly

reveals Clemens's own state of mind. Clemens was clearly distressed by his loss of the considerable income he had earned from his previous books and lecture tours. By focusing on the corrupting potential of large sums of money, Clemens uses his literary persona not only to address a lingering concern from one of his earliest works, *The Gilded Age*, but also to work through his own moral and financial dilemma.

Divided into four sections, the narrative follows a traditional plotline. In the first part, or exposition, the stage is set and the citizens of Hadleyburg are primed for the revenge of the stranger. In the second part, Twain develops the mounting tension in Hadleyburg as its principal citizens compromise themselves, their personal reputations, and the town's reputation through antics meant to win them the "hundred and sixty pounds four ounces of gold" in the sack left by the stranger. The neighbors quickly turn on one another, each trying to outthink the other; if the rightful owner of the quotation within the sack can be found, then perhaps the right words can be guessed and a share—or a claim on all—of the money obtained. The ultimate climax takes place in the third part, where the impact the discovery has had on the citizens of Hadleyburg is revealed. Set in the town hall, the discussion of the multiple and nearly exact claims to the gold makes clear the weaknesses of the town. The final part of the story resolves the central issue of character and honesty through the psychologically painful death of Edward and Mary Richards. None of the established 19 is spared, but the remaining citizens, identified as the ribald chorus from the town hall meeting, are given the opportunity to recreate themselves within a new and unnamed small town in America.

Although the narrative ends with the townspeople moving on despite the stranger's corruption of the town's morals and standing, the short story does not offer a promising ending. The reader may have learned quite a bit about the townspeople of Hadleyburg, and perhaps he or she learned quite a bit about him- or herself, but

10. In *Green Hills of Africa*, Ernest Hemingway claims: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since." Is such a claim valid? Why?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. *Culture Shock*. PBS. December 11, 2006. Available online. URL: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/beyond/huck.html>. Accessed May 7, 2009.
- Budd, Louis J. (ed). *Mark Twain: The Contemporary Reviews*. American Critical Archives, 11. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- de Koster, Katie, ed. *Readings on Mark Twain*. Literary Companion to American Authors. San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 1996.
- Emerson, Everett. *Mark Twain: A Literary Life*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Foote, Bud. *The Connecticut Yankee in the Twentieth Century: Travel to the Past in Science Fiction*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Hoffman, Andrew. *Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*. New York: Quill, 1997.
- Hutchinson, Stuart, ed. *Mark Twain: Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*. Columbia Critical Guides Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Kaplan, Justin. *Born to Trouble: One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1985.
- . *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966.
- Leonard, James S. *Making Mark Twain Work in the Classroom*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Lupak, Alan. A Bibliography of Critical Studies of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Updated by Anne Zanzucchi. An Arthurian/Camelot Project Bibliography. Rochester University. December 11, 2006. Available online. URL: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/acpbibs/twainbib.htm>. Accessed May 7, 2009.
- Mark Twain House and Museum. Available online. URL: <http://www.marktwainhouse.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Mensch, Elaine, and Harry Mensch. *Black, White, and Huckleberry Finn: Re-Imagining the American Dream*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000.
- Messent, Peter, and Louis J. Budd. *A Companion to Mark Twain*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005.
- Mort, Terry. *Mark Twain on Travel*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2005.
- Norton, Charles A. *Writing Tom Sawyer: The Adventures of a Classic*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1983.
- Official Web Site of Mark Twain. Available online. URL: <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/twain/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Paine, Albert Bigelow. *Mark Twain: A Biography*. 5 Vols. Harper, 1912. Available online. URL: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/t/twain/mark/paine/>. Accessed December 11, 2006.
- Powers, Ron. *Mark Twain: A Life*. New York: Free Press, 2005.
- Puddin'head Wilson*: Selected Secondary Bibliography. March 11, 2006. Washington State University. Available online. URL: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbell/damlit/pwbib.htm>. Accessed December 11, 2006.
- Railton, Stephen. *Mark Twain in His Times*. 2004. University of Virginia Library. Available online. URL: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/index2.html>. Accessed December 11, 2006.
- Rasmussen, Kent. *Critical Companion to Mark Twain*. New York: Facts On File, 2007.
- Salomon, Louis B. Introduction. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Great Illustrated Classics. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1958.
- Smith, Henry Nash, ed. *Mark Twain: A Collection of Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963.
- SSL (Scholarship on Southern Literature): Bibliography (archives abstracts of essays on Clemens published in the journal). Available online.

URL: <http://www.missq.msstate.edu/ssl/view.php?wid=38>. Accessed December 15, 2006.

Twain, Mark. *Notebooks and Journals. Vol. 3, 1883–1891*. Edited by Robert Pack Browning, Michael B. Frank, and Lin Salamo. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

Wonham, Henry B. *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Ziff, Larzer. *Mark Twain*. Lives and Legacies Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Nichole Bennett-Bealer



WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundred of years between us? / Whatever it is, it avails not.

(“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”)

Walt Whitman has often been considered America’s greatest poet, and the reasons for the assessment are not hard to find. The poems of *Leaves of Grass*—the book Whitman published in 1855 and continued to develop throughout his life—broke the traditional frames of form, meter, and rhyme that had governed poetry for centuries. Whitman’s poems, written in long, loosely rhythmical, unrhymed lines of varying length, revolutionized American poetry and began the breakthroughs into free verse and experimental forms championed by modernist and postmodernist poets of the 20th and 21st centuries. In addition, Whitman’s virtual invention of free verse was combined with his expansion of the range of subjects considered acceptable for poetry. Subjects formerly considered inappropriate, too ordinary, or unpoetic—the city, the body, sexuality, homosexuality, common objects and plants, forgotten, degraded, and despised people, and urban workers and laborers—became the focus of his work. These breakthroughs similarly foreshadowed the work of poets 50 and 150 years later.

Fundamentally Whitman wanted to be, and to many remains, the first poet of America and democracy, for his work celebrates America in all its diversity, contradictions, and idealism. The democratic embrace of his poetry invites all, “the foolish as much as the wise” (“Song of Myself” l. 330), “the wicked just the same as the righteous” (l. 373), “Southerner as soon as a Northerner” (l. 335),

“Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest” (l. 348 [unless otherwise noted, all citations to *Leaves of Grass* are to the 1891–92 “death-bed edition”). Such inclusiveness has gained him many admirers. His celebrations of the body drew admirers among 19th-century progressives and members of utopian communities, just as they attracted admirers among the Beat, counterculture, and free-love movements a century later. Homosexual poets have found in him the progenitor of a lineage of gay American poets. Women writers of the 19th century were inspired by his affirmations of gender equality, and 20th- and 21st-century women poets have continued to find inspiration in his work. African Americans have been empowered by his radically democratic verse. Early in his career, when Langston Hughes sailed on a merchant marine ship and felt the need for a new literary beginning, he tossed overboard all of his books except *Leaves of Grass*. Others find his poetry profound in the breadth of its religious vision, one that was unconventional, mystical, and pantheistic. Internationally Whitman has influenced more poets and novelists around the world, including many Nobel laureates, than any other American poet.

Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, the second of nine children, in West Hills, Long Island, and he died on March 26, 1892. Walt’s father, Walter, born just after the American Revolution, had been an acquaintance of Thomas Paine’s and had been

energized by radical social ideas that would influence his son's notions about democracy. Walter, however, was apparently a stern, morose man not particularly close to his son. Walt's relationship to his mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, on the other hand, was close and affectionate, and Whitman was much influenced by her Quakerism. Whitman's assertion of the divinity within each human being is akin to the Quaker notion of the divine light that shines within each person.

When Walt was four, the family moved to Brooklyn, while his father made his living as a carpenter. Never really making a go of it, he moved the family frequently, and Walt later wrote that his childhood was "a very restless and unhappy one." Whitman's formal education ended after only six years. At age 11 he was apprenticed to a Brooklyn printer and by age 16 had moved to Manhattan and already published work in a number of newspapers. His budding career was cut short, however, when a fire destroyed much of the printing district of New York in 1835. He returned to Long Island, where his father had gone back to farming. Unwilling to become a farmhand, he began teaching school. After five years of teaching, he found himself unsuited for it and returned to New York in 1841 to work for again for the newspapers.

All the while, he was writing conventional poetry on popular, sentimental subjects and tried his hand at fiction as well. His first book was a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans: or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, which sold more than any of his writings during his lifetime, some 20,000 copies. The novel warns about the dangers of alcohol as it follows a boy from the country to the city, where he becomes seduced by drink and sex and causes the death of three women. Later in his life, perhaps embarrassed by its melodramatic sentimentality, Whitman called the book "rot," claiming he wrote it in three days while sipping cocktails.

Back in Brooklyn in 1845, he became editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, where he wrote editorials on topics of local interest and reviews of works of contemporary writers such as Goethe, Carlyle, and

RALPH WALDO EMERSON. Many thought him lazy by nature, and not without some justification; he loved spending long hours walking the streets and harbors, dressed as a dandy. In 1846 he was offered the editorship of a New Orleans paper, the *Crescent*, and he and his brother Jeff traveled by stage, steamer, and train to the "Paris of the South," where for three months he absorbed the sights and sounds of the cosmopolitan city. But when Jeff became sick and Whitman fell out of grace with the newspaper's owners, perhaps because of his opposition to slavery, the two took a return boat up the Mississippi and through the Great Lakes, giving Whitman more exposure to the country he would celebrate in poetry.

In Brooklyn during 1848 to 1849 he edited a "free soil" newspaper, the *Brooklyn Freeman*. He opposed slavery, especially in the new territories, partly because of loyalty to (white) urban workers and laborers, who might be harmed by competition from free labor. He also refused to support abolition, fearing, as Lincoln did, a disintegration of the union. Over time, his views became more progressive, but even during the late 1840s, his first lines of free verse in his notebook expressed his egalitarian sentiments: "I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters / And I will stand between the masters and the slaves, / Entering into both so that both will understand me alike."

In the early 1850s a mysterious period in his life, Whitman was reinventing himself as a poet. He operated a printing office and stationery store, continued freelance journalism, and built and speculated in houses. Then in July 1855 he published what would become one of the most famous books in the world, *Leaves of Grass*. The book was so new and so unlike anything seen before that critics have wondered whether some profound personal transformation—sexual, linguistic, psychological, spiritual—took place during the preceding years, which transformed this man about town into what he calls himself in "Song of Myself," his most famous poem: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos" (l. 599). He later said about the

period that he was “simmering, simmering, simmering. Emerson brought me to a boil.”

This first of nine editions was printed privately in 750 copies, and Whitman set much of the type himself. It was a slim volume embossed on the cover in gold lettering with leaves and vines all over it. Surprisingly neither the cover nor the title page reveals an author’s name; the only identifying marks on the opening pages is a portrait of Whitman in workman’s clothing, his shirt open and standing jauntily, his weight on one leg, gazing directly at the reader. His name is found only in the middle of the longest poem in the book.

A preface announces the arrival of the “greatest poet,” one who would be absorbed by his country “as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” But *Leaves of Grass* was not absorbed by the country and had little immediate effect on the reading public. Many of the readers it did find were shocked at its celebrations of sex and the body as well as his claim that the writing was “poetry.” The book, nevertheless, inspired one of the world’s most famous literary letters, a letter that did much to gain Whitman notice. Whitman sent copies of his book to other writers and poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Greenleaf Whittier. Shocked by it, Whittier allegedly threw the book into the fire. Emerson responded more sympathetically. The “sage of Concord” and founder of transcendentalism sent this unknown poet a letter of congratulations:

I find [*Leaves of Grass*] the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.

Seven days after the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s father died, and Whitman assumed more responsibility for the family. At the end of 1855 Emerson visited him, and, buoyed by Emerson’s praise, Whitman published a second edition in 1856. Without permission he had printed in gold letters on the spine the line, “I greet you at

the beginning of a great career,” followed by Emerson’s name. Inside Emerson’s letter appeared along with Whitman’s response addressed to his “Friend and Master.” Furious at these brash actions, Emerson nevertheless remained a longtime supporter. Favorable reviews were also included in the book, several of which Whitman wrote himself.

This second edition reveals Whitman at his most exuberant, and its most important new poem was one of Whitman’s best, “Sundown Poem” (later titled “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”). Interestingly at this time he also published a prose pamphlet, *The Eighteenth Presidency*, which excoriates American politics and its vices in tones far different from the celebrations of the poetry. In 1856 HENRY DAVID THOREAU visited, later writing that Whitman “occasionally suggests something a little more than human.”

In the late 1850s Whitman began frequenting Pfaff’s bohemian restaurant, where he met other writers, artists, and social radicals. (Some years later, he would swear off drink to lead a life more worthy of his poetic calling.) At Pfaff’s he became involved in exploring new kinds of relationships with men and met Henry Vaughn, who may have become his first lover. He was also at work on poems for a new edition and wrote in 1857 that *Leaves of Grass* would be “the New American Bible.” “Calamus,” one of the most important new clusters of the edition, explored what Whitman called “adhesiveness,” a bond between men he felt could hold the nation together. He later called these poems his most political, but most readers find them fundamentally homosexual or homosocial. In fact they were originally a poetic sequence titled “Live Oak with Moss,” which chronicled a romantic relationship with another man that ended tragically. When he included the poems in “Calamus,” he rearranged them, apparently to mask their autobiographical narrative, and changed the gender of some of the persons. Whitman all his life remained publicly evasive about the topic of his relationships with men; responding to one inquiry about it, he boldly asserted that he had fathered six illegitimate children.

The failure of the relationship chronicled in “Calamus” is probably responsible for the new emotional tones of the third edition, tones of sorrow, loss, despair, and death, perhaps most powerfully voiced in two moving poems, “A Word Out of the Sea” (later titled “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”) and “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.” Whitman found a publisher for the new edition, Thayer and Eldridge of Boston, and in March 1860 he traveled to Boston. Walking the Boston Commons with him, Emerson tried to persuade him to remove the more sexually explicit poems, but Whitman refused. Interestingly Emerson never objected to the “Calamus” poems. Displays of love and affection between men (and between women) were more common in the 19th century and did not necessarily suggest sexual relations. The 1,000 copies of the first printing sold out quickly and received favorable reviews, and Whitman found himself something of a celebrity in Boston.

In 1861 Fort Sumter was fired upon, and the Civil War began. Whitman left for Virginia in December of that year, when a newspaper notice stated that his brother George had been wounded at Fredericksburg. He found George suffering from a superficial wound, but while there he saw the true horrors of war. Outside a hospital tent he came upon a pile of corpses and amputated limbs being loaded into a cart. He soon thereafter began visiting wounded soldiers in the hospital tents, helping as a volunteer nurse, consoling friend, father figure, and letter writer for the injured soldiers. From Fredericksburg, he went to Washington, D.C., to continue this work and there contacted William Douglas O’Connor, an abolitionist who would play an important role in his life, finding him at this time a job in the army paymaster’s office. Whitman estimated that during the next year he cared for some 80,000 to 100,000 wounded soldiers, establishing close relationships with many and corresponding with some of them for years afterward. He experienced a powerful surge in creativity, and began many poems about the war, which were eventually published in a collection called *Drum Taps* that later became one of the clusters in *Leaves of Grass*.

Subsequently O’Connor arranged a clerkship for him with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where Whitman would meet leaders of western Indian tribes. Then, on April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered to Grant, and five days later, Lincoln was assassinated. In response to this national tragedy, Whitman wrote “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” an elegy for the fallen president and one of his most famous and moving poems.

At the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Interior Secretary Harlan read a copy of *Leaves of Grass* left on Whitman’s desk and dismissed Whitman from his job. O’Connor rose to his defense, finding him a new job and writing a pamphlet, *The Good Gray Poet*, a work that did much to change the perception of Whitman from that of a radical, obscene poet to that of a compassionate poet of democracy. Also during this eventful year Whitman met the person with whom he would have the most intimate and passionate relationship of his life, Peter Doyle—a streetcar driver and former Confederate soldier.

In 1868 a British edition of his poems was published, creating many admirers in England, some of whom would help him later in his life. One admirer, Anne Gilchrist, widow of William Blake’s biographer, fell in love with him and after an extended correspondence traveled to America to propose marriage. Whitman graciously rebuffed her advances, once admonishing her not to confuse the “Walt Whitman” of the poetry with the “very plain personage” he was in his ordinary life.

In 1870 Whitman published his most famous prose work, *Democratic Vistas*, and a new group of poems, titled *Passage to India*. *Democratic Vistas* is virulently critical of America at the dawn of the Gilded Age but reaffirms its ultimate promise. In 1873 Whitman faced one of his worst years. He suffered the first of a number of strokes and moved to Camden, New Jersey, to live with his brother George and George’s wife. In May his mother died. In *Harper’s* magazine his poem “A Prayer of Columbus” appeared; the poem begins, “A battered, wrecked old man”—revealing the depth of his despair at the time.

In 1876 a series of prose pieces, *Memoranda during the War*, appeared, as did a Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass* and *Two Rivulets*, a new collection of poems and prose. In 1881 a well-known Boston publisher began publication of the fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but when the district attorney opposed publication on grounds of obscenity, Whitman had the volume printed in Philadelphia. Whitman's books were selling briskly now.

Also in 1881 Whitman published *Specimen Days*, a volume of miscellaneous prose serving as a sort of loose autobiography that still left many periods of his life undocumented. In 1883 his first full-length biography was written by his disciple Richard Maurice Bucke, a physician and mystic, who considered Whitman the greatest example of fully attained spiritual illumination and "cosmic consciousness." Whitman took a major role in producing Bucke's biography, toning down Bucke's tendency toward hagiography and even writing passages himself.

In March 1882 Whitman bought a small, two-story frame house in Camden and lived there for the rest of his life. Admirers sought him out and helped him financially, and he achieved something of the national fame he had sought with the first edition of his book. The "death-bed edition" of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1891–92, and Whitman died on March 26, 1892. He was buried in Camden.

"Song of Myself" (1855)

"Song of Myself" is Whitman's longest and justifiably most famous poem. Appearing as the first poem of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, it retained its position of primacy through all the editions, being preceded in the final edition only by the "Inscriptions" poems and the program poem, "Starting from Paumanok." "Song of Myself" has been called an American epic, an ode and hymn to democracy, a compendium of 19th-century American culture, a spiritual autobiography, a conversion narrative, a sermon, an ode to the self, a psychological dream or drama, a narcissistic fantasy, a shamanic per-

formance, and as what Emerson said of *Leaves of Grass*, a "combination of the *Bhagavad Gita* [a Hindu spiritual epic] and the *New York Tribune*," suggesting Whitman's juxtaposition of the sublime and the everyday.

In its final form, it comprises 52 sections, but the poem lacks any kind of traditional narrative, chronology, or logical progression just as it lacks any formal unity or structure. Its action is psychological, spiritual, imaginative, associative. Its central theme is the "Self" and the Self's relationship to the body and the soul, to sex, to other people and things, to geographies, gods, history, America, and, perhaps most important of all, to you, the reader. Other overarching themes include unity and diversity, the one and the many, identity and interdependency, democracy and the individual.

Stylistically it is written in long, rhythmical, unrhymed lines of varying length. Its poetic and musical devices include anaphora, parallelism, repetition, assonance and consonance, and an overall sweeping, undulating rhythm that carries the poem forward like the waves of the sea. Catalogs (an epic convention) are used to list the seemingly endless images of people, flora, and fauna of America. With these catalogs arranged in lines parallel in grammatical structure, each beginning in anaphora, the poem echoes the Bible, Homer, and other ancient and religious texts, often creating an oracular, incantatory effect. The self embraces the many and merges them into the unity of his song.

Unlike most poems of epic ambitions, "Song of Myself" opens not with an invocation of the muse but with an exclamatory affirmation, "I celebrate myself." But this self is not Whitman's personal ego; it is a larger Self that includes all. At a political level, this Self affirms the equality and oneness of diverse people in democracy. At a religious level the Self is akin to Emerson's individual soul that is one with the "Oversoul," a kind of pantheistic divinity permeating all things. When writing about this poem, scholars refer to the Self as the *self* (or *Self*), the *poet*, the *speaker*, or even *Whitman*, since the speaker calls himself "Walt Whitman, a kosmos" at the beginning of section 24.

After the opening annunciation of the Self, the poet characteristically turns to the reader, promising that “what I assume, you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (ll. 2–3). Throughout the course of the poem, while circumscribing the nation and the globe, he always returns to “you,” as if to anchor the Self in primary relation to the reader before launching forth again on ecstatic journeys of self-making.

The opening also differs from typical epic openings, for it begins not in war or heroic adventure but in idleness—“I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass” (ll. 4–5)—perhaps playfully mocking America’s Puritan heritage and the Protestant work ethic. The poem prizes idleness because Whitman wants to return us to Eden, to a time before “creeds and schools,” to a simplicity of being and perception now lost. He says, “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess or origin of all poems” (l. 33), echoing Emerson’s admonition that we must find “our own original relation to the universe.”

After this Edenic start, the poem then abruptly changes focus, returning to even earlier beginnings, to the chaos before creation: “Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world. / Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex” (ll. 44–46). In the 1855 edition a line in this section read, “As God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side at night and close on the peep of the day” (l. 52). Whitman is ever merging the religious and the erotic, suggesting that the Western division of body and soul, mind and matter, has been an error.

Section 4 works as a purification or cleansing ritual for the personality that must take place before the rebirth of the poet in the famous section 5. The poet now reviews the details of his daily life—“My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues” (ll. 69)—but tells us these “are not the Me myself” (l. 74). Who the “Me myself” is becomes clarified in section 5, the most important section of the poem. There we return to where the poet loafs and invites his soul:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent
summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and
gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone,
and plunged your tongue to my barestript
heart
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached
till you held my feet.
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace
and joy and knowledge that pass all the art
and argument of the earth
And I know that the hand of God is the
promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the
brother of my own
And that all the men ever born are also my
brothers, and the women my sisters and
lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love. (ll.
87–95)

In many writings of religious mystical experience the ineffable encounter with the divine finds expression in ecstatic sexual metaphors, but here the sexual seems not merely a metaphor for the spiritual but one with it. This rebirth is a sexual awakening to the body as well as a spiritual awakening. And the tongue as the active agent inscribing its message on the heart emphasizes the linguistic, poetic nature of the transformation.

Immediately after this rebirth, a child asks, “*What is the grass?*” (l. 99); *grass* is an apt metaphor for the one-in-the-many. From the posing of this question through section 16, the poet launches forth upon a journey of exploration and identification with the people and things of America and the world, venturing forth imaginatively almost as a disembodied spirit or consciousness. He does not merely see persons and things; he “becomes” them.

From section 18 to section 24 the poem works to undo hierarchies, celebrating the equality of all persons, the wicked with the just, the conquered with the victorious, the slave with the master. Then

taking on divineline qualities, the speaker says, “I know I am deathless” (l. 406), “My foothold is tenon’d and mortis’d in granite, / I laugh at what you call dissolution” (ll. 419–420). He reassures us that he is “the poet of the Body and . . . the poet of the Soul” (l. 422), “the poet of the woman the same as the man” (l. 425).

In section 24 he returns to himself, “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, eating, drinking and breeding” (ll. 497–498), the natural man and new Adam, celebrating his body, cataloging each part, claiming each part divine. From this section until section 32 he celebrates the erotic character of human experience. In section 26 he says he will do nothing but listen. He hears the sounds of country and city and ends in an ecstatic, eroticized experience of hearing a soprano’s aria. Moving then to touch in section 28 he describes in some of the most surrealistic images of the poem an experience of autoeroticism or one of being overpowered by “prurient provokers” (l. 623), being carried to orgasm and an ambiguous denouement.

Having returned to and reexperienced his own body and senses, in sections 33 through 38 he launches forth on another journey into the particulars of the phenomenal world. In the longest section of the poem, section 33, the *I* embarks with a new power and vision, becoming more and more god-like: “My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps, / I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents, I am afoot with my vision” (ll. 713–715). What follows is the longest catalog of the poem, 80 lines. As section 15 embraced people on their farms and in cities, section 33 covers the far-flung geography of mountains, rivers, and oceans. In this and the following four sections, freed from the constraints of time and space, he visits sea battles and the Alamo, knows victory and defeat, knows the cries of the fallen, feels the lash upon the captured slave. “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” (l. 845).

Then section 38 opens, “Enough! enough! enough!” He finds himself on the verge of “a

usual mistake” (l. 962), and so he must resume the “overstaid fraction” (l. 967). The Self, it seems, has become overly dispersed through identification with the multitudes and lost track of how these must be woven back into the unity of the “song of myself,” where they find fulfillment in oneness. Renewed again, the poet “troop[s] forth replenish’d with supreme power” (l. 970). From now until the end of the poem, he speaks ecstatically and more directly to the reader. We learn that he is a healer (ll. 1021–1022). He takes the “exact dimensions” (l. 1028) of the gods of all religions and “bestow[s] those dimensions] freely on each man and woman [he sees]” (l. 1036). In section 43 he says, “My faith is the greatest of faiths, and the least of faiths” (l. 1097).

At the beginning of section 44 he announces, “It is time to explain myself—let us stand up. / What is known I strip away, / I launch forth all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.” He proclaims, “I am an acme of things accomplish’d and I an encloser of things to be” (l. 1148). “Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there” (l. 1153) (as we saw in section 3). “Immense have been the preparations for me” (l. 1157). At the same time he ends section 45 with a more conventional religious sentiment: “My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain, / The Lord will be there and wait till I come of perfect terms, / The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there” (ll. 1198–1200), the loving bedfellow of section 3.

He continues to encourage the reader onward. “If you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore / The nearest gnat is an explanation” (ll. 1252–1253). In section 50 he seems ready to give the final word. “There is that in me—/ . . . / it is without name . . . / It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol. / . . . / Do you see O my brothers and sisters? / It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness” (ll. 1309–1318).

The final sections of the poem speak intimately to the reader, and there Whitman makes his famous admission: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well

then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (ll. 1324–1326). In the final section he, like the spotted hawk swooping by, "[is] not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (ll. 1332–1333). And as he takes our leave, he says, "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." (ll. 1339–1340).

You will hardly know who I am or what I
mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.
(ll. 1341–1346)

Our Pan-like poet departs with images of the sublime forces of nature, forces he has embodied and returned to, and he reassures us that he will remain with us even after he has gone, echoing the words of some of the world's spiritual saviors.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What makes "Song of Myself" a poem? Many in the 19th century dismissed it as not being poetry. Justify your answer.
2. Discuss section 5 of "Song of Myself." Is it shocking, even today? What gives it its power? Explain your answer.
3. From your knowledge of 19th-century American history, does it seem that the vision Whitman presents of America is an accurate one? Is his depiction more ideal than actual? Why?
4. Some critics complain that Whitman's efforts to merge all persons and things into a single oneness discount the real and important differences between people, such as differences as race, class, and gender. Do you think Whitman's project runs this risk? Why?
5. Read one of Emerson's essays, "Self-Reliance," "The Oversoul," or "The Poet." How is Whitman's vision in "Song of Myself" in accordance with Emerson's?

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856)

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is one of Whitman's most powerful and successful poems, one that offers a good introduction to his themes and strategies. Many readers believe that Whitman was most successful in his midlength poems, for these have a coherence in theme, imagery, and rhythmic development that the endlessly unfolding, spontaneous, and fluid "Song of Myself" sometimes lacks. This poem first appeared in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* and was one of Thoreau's favorites, along with "Song of Myself."

Here the poet is crossing the ferry of the East River at sundown, moving between New York City and Brooklyn. He leans on the rail above the water, noticing the people on deck, the water and gulls, the ships on the water and at anchor, and the colorful sunset. Awed by the sights and feeling affectionate toward the people on the ferry, he considers the relationship of these persons and things to him and to the Self and the soul. He turns to the reader and affirms that he or she 100 years or more afterward may see these same sights just as he saw them. Out of these observations emerges a meditation on themes of time and eternity, unity and identity, standing still and moving with time, and the relationship between poet and reader. Until the very end, the tone remains uniformly serene and meditative, unlike the ecstasies and barbaric yawps of "Song of Myself." The poem is also one of Whitman's most consistently visual, painterly, and aesthetically nuanced poems.

At the start of the poem, the poet silently and affectionately says to the strangers on the ferry, "How curious you are to me!" (l. 3). And from the passengers, he turns to his readers and says, "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (ll. 20–21). Speaking directly to the reader, he creates the sense of a living voice, one that will be heard as long as someone opens his book. His words speak across time and space. They also seem uncannily to issue from beyond the grave, being voiced in the past tense: "Just as you feel when you look on the river

and sky, so I felt. / Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd” (ll. 22–23).

He tells how he “look’d at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water” (l. 33), an image that makes him and everyone haloed, holy, godlike. Having created a voice that unites poet and reader across time and space, he then inquires about the nature of that which separates them. “What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores of hundreds of years between us? / Whatever it is, it avails not” (ll. 54–56).

In section 6 he draws closer to the reader, acknowledging that he, too, experienced failures, losses, and shame. And in section 7 he says, “Closer yet I approach you, / What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you . . . / I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born. / . . . / Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now for all you cannot see me?” (ll. 86–91). With this loving, godlike, ghostly voice, he now asks about the nature of that which connects him to the reader:

What is more subtle than this which ties me to
the woman or man that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my
meaning into you?
We understand then do we not?
What I promis’d without mentioning it, have
you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what
the preaching could not accomplish is
accomplish’d, is it not? (ll. 96–100)

In his preface to the 1855 *Leaves*, Whitman asserted that the message of the new American poet must be “*indirect* and not direct” (emphasis added). Here is one of the slyest, boldest instances of his indirection. He never says what it is that ties the woman or man to him, that connects him to the reader, that he promised without mentioning, and that we have accepted. What the study teaches is knowledge. What preaching seeks to accomplish is the listener’s salvation. From section 5 of “Song of Myself” we know that “a kelson of the creation

is love” and that the poet at that moment gained a “peace and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth.” The voice here seems to be working to create a relationship with the reader out of which love and knowledge and salvation, of some indefinite kind, will ensue.

Having reached the heart of the matter (without ever actually revealing what it is), in section 9 he returns attention to the ferry in celebratory, even ecstatic tones: “Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!” (l. 101). Then the poem closes with one of Whitman’s most profound meditations. He concludes that all these sights are simply “appearances,” a “necessary film” that “envelop[es] the soul” (l. 121). They are “dumb, beautiful ministers” (l. 126).

We fathom you not—we love you—there is
perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward
the soul. (ll. 130–133)

Thus although Whitman everywhere celebrates the body and the material, physical world, in the final analysis, at least in this poem, these material things are seen to be “appearances” that “envelope,” and furnish their part, to the soul.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss how the ferry works as a symbol in the poem. Consider especially the way the poem takes place at sundown and the ferry passes from one side of the river to the other. Can you think of other symbols in poems or fiction that work in such a varied way?
2. Discuss the relationship between appearances, “the beautiful dumb ministers,” and the soul in the poem.
3. Does Whitman’s depiction of the river and the city fail to take into account the ugly and distasteful aspects of the sights before him? Why does he not include these details?
4. Why is the speaker in this poem so interested in getting closer to the reader? In what ways, if any, does this speaker’s relationship to the

reader differ from the relationship the speaker in "Song of Myself" establishes in the opening sections of that poem?

"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1859)

"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is one of Whitman's most powerful and moving poems, a poem in which he dramatizes (or imagines) the original moment of his poetic calling. With the title "A Word out of the Sea" the poem appeared in the *New York Saturday Press* on December 24, 1859, being presented by the magazine as "our Christmas or New Year's present" to its readers. With revisions and a new title, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" found its permanent placement in the 1881 edition at the beginning of the "Sea Drift" cluster.

The poem opens with the poet as a boy going down to the seashore on Long Island (Paumanok) one evening and listening to the singing of two mockingbirds from Alabama. The he-bird sings carols of love to his she-bird, but soon the she-bird is lost or killed, and the he-bird's song turns to a sorrowful elegy of loss and despair. The boy interprets these sorrowful songs, and the grown poet "translates" them into the poem. From this empathic moment the boy awakens to a realization of all the sorrowful songs sung by "thousands" around the world, and he realizes what he was made for, to give voice to these sorrowful voices. Yet one thing more remains. What is the reason for this world sorrow; how does one make sense of it? The poet turns toward the sea and realizes that the sea, imagined as an old woman rocking her cradle, has been whispering the answer all the while, hissing the one "word final, superior to all": "Death, death, death, death, death."

Formally, the poem is a tour de force, masterfully employing devices from music and opera, such as pattern repetition and echoing, along with Whitman's trademark anaphora and parallelism and a rhythm that employs all of these

to a climactic ending on the riveting word *death*. The opening verse paragraph demonstrates many of these strategies: "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking, / Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle, / Out of the Ninth-month midnight" (ll. 1–3)—a litany of anaphoric phrases that continue through twenty-two lines. The subject of the sentence, *I*, is suspended until line 20, and the verb of the sentence is withheld until the very end of this single-sentence paragraph, closing line 22 with the bardic verb *sing*. It is a masterpiece of syntactic suspense carried out in a rhythmically natural voice. Similarly the songs of the mocking-bird, called "arias" in the poem, employ powerful devices of echoing and repetition. Stanza 1 of the joyful song begins, "*Shine! shine! shine!*" The next stanza begins, "*Two together!*" Stanza 1 of the sorrowful aria begins, "*Blow! blow! blow!*" (l. 52), and following stanzas begin: "*Soothe! soothe! soothe!*" (l. 71); "*Loud! loud! loud!*" (l. 81); "*Land! land! land!*" (l. 90). These repetitions prepare the reader for the bird's climactic ending of his song: "*Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!*" (l. 127), which in turn prepares the reader for the climactic ending of the poem: "*Death, death, death, death, death*" (l. 173).

Scholars have interpreted the meaning of this poem in various ways. One reading sees the poem as an assertion that "death is the mother of beauty," as the poet Wallace Stevens wrote in his poem "Sunday Morning." The sea's answer is no answer at all, only a bell tolling the inevitable, universal fact of death, and the inconsolable lover and poet can do nothing but sing, nothing but create art in response to tragedy. Others interpret the poem psychologically. According to Sigmund Freud, an infant in the womb and in early life experiences feelings of "oceanic bliss" in its relation to the mother but inevitably undergoes the loss of this blissful union. According to what Freud called the Oedipal complex the male child must eventually break from the desire to return to the mother and identify with the father to become a functioning adult. Critics who read the poem in this way see the bird's loss as a symbol of Whit-

man's loss of his own mother union, or perhaps the loss of a lover (a mother substitute). But here the poet transcends his narcissistic desire for the mother by universalizing his experience through a creative identification with the suffering of others.

Still others emphasize the process of translation itself in the poem, emphasizing that the poet learns how to become a poet, how to translate personal experience into a language available to others. He finds his own voice only by translating the words of another singer, who is himself a mockingbird, imitating others. This endless process of translation becomes the ultimate meaning of the poem. In yet another reading, inflected by Whitman's transcendental or mystical vision, death in the poem is a spiritual, psychological event necessary for a (re)-birth of the poet-prophet that Whitman presents himself to be in poems like "Song of Myself." In this reading the word *death* then is not tragic, but transforming. Particularly important is the final line, "*The sea whisper'd me*" (l. 183) not "whispered to me" (emphases added), emphasizing that the self is reborn as the child of the sea, as the sea is a symbol for what Whitman calls the "fluid and swallowing soul."

Each of these interpretations finds evidence in the poem. Understood through the lens of any of these interpretations or others, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" remains one of the most haunting, powerful poems in the language, a poem that is both an elegiac response to death and an evocative, imaginative recounting of the birth of a poetic life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the setting of the poem. The critic Harold Bloom has written that the seashore, where water and land meet, is the primordial and essential setting for the American poet. Why is this? Can you think of other poems that have this setting?
2. Find and discuss the musical and rhythmic devices Whitman uses in this poem. Consider especially his use of repetition.
3. Read Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach." How do its message and tone compare to those of "Out of the Cradle"?
4. Compare Whitman's treatment of death here with the way he presents it in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Why does Whitman's call *death* the "word final, superior to all?"
5. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" presents death as central to the speaker's discovery of his calling to become a poet. EDGAR ALLAN POE also links death to art and the highest aims of poetry. Compare his treatment of death in "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Raven" with Whitman's.

"From Pent-Up Aching Rivers" (1860)

"From Pent-Up Aching Rivers" first appeared in the third (1860) edition of *Leaves of Grass* in the "Children of Adam" cluster, a section that celebrates heterosexual sexuality and affection. In the course of celebrating sexuality, this poem as so many of Whitman's, also seeks to court the reader as a lover. It begins with a series of parallel prepositional phrases describing the yearning for, and celebratory "singing" of, the procreative act. The poet emphasizes that human sexual desire is one with the ubiquity of sex in the natural world, and, having found affirmation in nature, he moves into a celebration of the sexual act itself, dramatized in the relations between a swimmer of perfect body and an approaching woman, their exchange leading to "the mystic delira, the madness amorous, the utter abandonment" (l. 26).

Then, in the midst of this verbal celebration of sex, the poet slyly inserts a parenthetical aside to the reader: ("Hark close and still what I now whisper to you, / I love you, O you entirely possess me, / O that you and I escape from the rest and go utterly off, free and lawless / . . .") (ll. 27–29). Whitman frequently makes such gestures to the reader. Through this brilliant conceit, he makes both a private, almost secret, gesture to "you" alone and at

the same time a wildly promiscuous gesture to all of his readers. He loves only you, but as “you” can be *any reader*, his exclusivity is universally available. Such gestures linguistically and rhetorically unite the one and the many, the individual and the national, the particular and the universal.

The poem then changes address again, becoming a first-person account of the speaker in sexual ecstasy and climax. A second parenthetical aside provides a litany of lover's promises all designed to “(O I willingly stake all for you. . . .)” (l. 33). The final section of the poem, lines 37 to 57, offers a catalog of erotic exchanges and sexual “act-poems” (l. 48) out of which the poet's celebratory poem has been born. In the final lines we find the subject and verb of this 57-line sentence: “From the hour of shining stars and dropping dews, / From the night a moment I emerging flitting out, / Celebrate you act divine and you children prepared for, / and you stalwart loins” (ll. 54–57). The poem and its conclusion have been born from the procreative act. By linking children to poems, Whitman expresses his theme of the unity of sexual and creative desires, energies, and progeny. The 55-line buildup to the final climactic completion of the sentence mirrors the sexual act itself, again reaffirming the theme of the union of sexuality and creativity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider what must have been the effect of this poem on the Victorian age of American history and culture. Which lines would have been the most daring? How do references to “children,” “fatherhood,” and “divine husband” influence the way sexuality is portrayed in the poem?
2. Whitman seems always to be trying to create an intimate relationship with the reader, almost as if he were trying to induce the reader to fall in love with him. Why do you think he is doing this?
3. Do you think sexuality and creativity are psychologically connected, as the poem suggests? Why?
4. Comment on the way Whitman's reference to “swimming” and a “bath” in line 22 makes less shocking his reference to “love-flesh” in line 23.

How does his use of swimming here function as it does in section 11 of “Song of Myself”?

“Here the Frailest Leaves of Me” (1860)

“Here the Frailest Leaves of Me” first appeared in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* as the 44th of the 45 poems of the “Calamus” cluster. (See the preceding biographical note for a discussion of the “Calamus” cluster.) Originally the opening read, “Here my last words, and the most baffling,” a line Whitman dropped in 1867.

As one of the poems of the “Calamus” cluster, the “leaves” referred to in the title are the “Calamus” poems, rather than the poems of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole. The last line of this poem, which states that these poems reveal him “more than all my other poems,” makes this clear. The three-line poem is built on two paradoxes: first, the poet's assertion that his frailest leaves are his strongest; second, his claim that as he hides his thoughts, they expose him. What is the nature of this frailty and strength and this hiding and exposure? As noted, almost all contemporary readers find the “Calamus” poems to express and explore homosexual desire and affection. The tender emotions of the poems suggest their frailness, but their lasting appeal, especially to homosexual readers a century later, attests to their strength. Similarly Whitman's thoughts and desires are hidden in that neither sex nor physical intimacy between men is ever mentioned explicitly in the “Calamus” poems. The poems veil homosexual thoughts and desires but nevertheless reveal them, as demonstrated by the fact that they have been seen by and have rung a responsive cord in homosexual readers since they were written.

Stylistically this short poem succeeds by employing imagery and metaphor common to the “Calamus” cluster—the Calamus “leaves”; the suggestion of “shaded,” secluded places; the theme of exposing and exposure. The final succinct statement of the last line—that these leaves “expose me more than all my other poems”—surprises with

its hyperbole and yet reveals an almost listless passivity, as though the poet has lost control of his poems. He confesses, “I myself do not expose [my thoughts].” This passivity is characteristic of many of the “Calamus” poems and shows how far the poet/speaker has traveled from the sunny ecstasies of the first two editions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read more of the “Calamus” poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Do you think these poems are about homosexual love? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the tone of this or other poems of the “Calamus” cluster and compare the tone to that of “Song of Myself.” Start by comparing this poem to the opening section of “Song of Myself.”

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” (1861)

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” was written during the first months of the Civil War and appeared in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* (September 24, 1861) and was reprinted in the *New York Leader* and in *Harper’s Weekly Magazine* (September 28, 1861). It appeared in *Drum Taps* in 1865 and was incorporated into the “Drum-Taps” cluster of *Leaves of Grass* in 1871.

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” is a rallying poem, written as the war began, when Whitman felt that, although it would be tragic, war was the inevitable course of action necessary to save the union from breaking apart. Later he would see the real war on the battlefields and in the hospitals and write poems that have a more chastened, imagistic, elegiac cast, poems that seek to reveal the true horrors of the war.

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” is one of the few poems Whitman wrote in more traditional verse form. It consists of three stanzas of seven lines each, each stanza beginning with the same first line and closing with a line that echoes the closing line of the previous stanza. The poem also uses the parallelism and anaphora common in Whitman’s poetry

and, although having a more traditional structure, uses free verse elements as well, employing a varied rhythmic pattern and irregular line length.

The poem is an apostrophe to an imagined parade of martial drums marching through America’s cities and countryside, rousing the people to war, admonishing them to leave their everyday tasks and join the effort, to scatter their congregations, to interrupt scholars at their schools, farmers plowing their fields, bridegrooms on their honeymoons. In the final stanza the poet commands the drums, “Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer, / Mind not the old man beseeching the young man, / Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties” (ll. 17–19). Some scholars, perhaps reading against the grain, acknowledge the dominant rallying tone of the poem but find hints of ambiguity in the last lines, which voice peaceful pleas against going to war. These readers suggest that the lines could betray Whitman’s own ambivalence about the war. Perhaps these readings try too hard to distance Whitman from the patriotic impulse of hoping for a swift victory over the Southern slave states. One can also read the poem more simply as a patriotic performance by one who had yet to experience the truth of the coming war’s terrible sword.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you find it troubling that Whitman steps forward as a champion of the war when it started, after writing “Song of Myself,” in which he seems to embrace Southerners and Northerners equally?
2. Do you agree with the critics’ opinion mentioned earlier that when Whitman refers to the cries of the weeper, and the old man or the child’s and the mother’s entreaties, that he betrays his own ambiguity about his rallying all to war?

“Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” (1865)

“Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” first appeared in *Drum Taps* in 1865 and was

later incorporated into the “Drum Taps” cluster of *Leaves of Grass*. It recounts an incident occurring on a Civil War battlefield where two soldiers advance together and one is killed. As the soldier falls, he and the speaker exchange a final loving glance, yet the speaker must continue onward into battle. He later returns to the scene and buries his fallen comrade.

Disagreement exists about whether the incident happened to Whitman when he visited a battlefield or whether he recreates a scene he had heard about or simply imagined. The nature of the relationship between the two comrades is also ambiguous. The speaker calls the fallen soldier “my son and comrade” (l. 2) and says, “I faithfully loved you and cared for you living” (l. 17), phrases that suggest a father and a son fighting together. The two men could also be an older soldier and younger comrade. In any event, the relationship mirrors the kind of bond that Whitman established with young soldiers in the hospital tents, a loving older man and a younger wounded or dying soldier. The homosocial aspects of this relationship find interpretation in the frequent references to the son as a “son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding)” (l. 7).

The poem is permeated by a haunting atmosphere and tone, not unlike those of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” other poems of vigillike contemplation of the dead. The speaker returns to the scene of the fallen boy and

long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly
around me the battlefield spreading,
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the
fragrant silent night,
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh,
long, long I gazed
Then on the earth partially reclining sat by
your side leaning my chin in my hands,
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic
hours with you dearest comrade, not a tear
not a word.
Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil of you my
son and my soldier. (ll. 9–14)

The serene, mystical scene of this vigil without tears militates against the literal father-son relationship, as the lack of any real anguish is striking. Even for a relationship between comrades or lovers, the serene tone seems out of place. But in Whitman’s poems death is never a tragic event, but a mysterious force giving solace, deliverance, bliss, or leading on to some greater life. In “Song of Myself” he asserts that “the smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if ever there was it led forward life” (ll. 126–127). And in “Starting from Paumanok” he writes, “Nothing can happen more beautiful than death” (l. 169). In Whitman’s poetry, death is a mysterious but welcome force that produces only good.

The poem shifts in line 17, and the speaker no longer speaks to his comrade, but now about him. He recounts placing the son and comrade in a “rude-dug grave” as the rising sun bathes the speaker’s head. The shift here distances poet and reader from the fallen soldier at the moment of farewell.

I rose from the chill ground and folded my
soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell. (ll. 25–26)

The abrupt ending at once pays homage to the tragedy of war and death and suggests the soldier’s imperative to march on, rejoin his troops, and continue in the ranks of war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the relationship between the two soldiers in the poem. Do you think they are father and son, simply comrades, or perhaps also lovers? On what do you base your response?
2. Why is the fallen comrade not remembered as he was in life and mourned for? What is the effect of the strange, haunting, almost serene scene of contemplation of death over the dead comrade? What do you think Whitman is seeking to achieve here?
3. Whitman once said that the real war would never get into the books. Read his prose accounts of the war in “Specimen Days.” Compare them to

his war poems. How well did Whitman do in getting the war into his books?

“A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest and the Road Unknown” (1865)

This poem was written during the Civil War, first appeared in *Drum-Taps*, and was included in the 1871 and 1881 *Leaves of Grass* in the “Drum-Taps” cluster. The writing of the poem evolved from an account of the battle of White Oaks Church reported to Whitman by a soldier in one of the hospitals he visited.

We enter the scene with the speaker, a soldier, marching at night through the woods as part of the “sullen remnant” of an army defeated in battle and having suffered “loss severe” (l. 3). The soldiers come upon a dimly lit building and discover it to be an old church now converted into a field hospital. Though the soldiers are on the move, the speaker enters the church and sees “a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made” (l. 7). Inside the dark church lit by a torch with its “wild red flame and clouds of smoke” (l. 9), the speaker sees wounded soldiers all over the floor in “postures beyond description” (l. 14), a “crowd of bloody forms” (l. 16), “some in the death spasm” (l. 17), the glint of surgeons’ instruments, the smell of ether and blood. He sees a soldier at his feet, “a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen,) / I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster’s face is white as a lily)” (ll. 11–12). Then, as he hears the orders outside, “*Fall in, my men, fall in*” (l. 21), he bends down to the young man and the youth gives him a half-smile, then closes his eyes, and the speaker speeds “forth to the darkness” (l. 23), “the unknown roads still marching” (l. 25).

In a single sentence spanning 25 lines, Whitman presents this narrative with stark realism and imagism more characteristic of modernist and 20th-century writers than those of the middle of the 19th century. Without rhetorical comment or exposition, the poem creates its effects through direct

presentation of details. It is exemplary of the style Whitman adopted in his Civil War poems. The narrative is subordinated to the scene, and the climax is merely a look between two soldiers, yet the poem conveys its emotion successfully making the reader feel a part of the experience.

As in most of Whitman’s war poems, the horrors of war and the terrors of amputation and death are relieved only in the compassion, love, and affection that one human being can have for another. The dying soldier with face as white as a lily in the midst of his agony and fear shares a moment of contact with another soldier. Whitman’s work in the war hospitals gave him the experience necessary to successfully imagine this scene, horrifying to civilians but common to soldiers on battlefields.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Whitman was deeply moved by the death, injury to, and mutilation of youthful soldiers in the war. Explain how he makes us feel a similar sympathy for these youthful soldiers.
2. Research some of the central characteristics of modernist writing of the early 20th century. How does this poem foreshadow the techniques of modernism?
3. Discuss the setting of this poem, a church converted into a makeshift hospital. Notice that it is positioned at a crossroads.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865)

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is an elegy for President Abraham Lincoln, written during the weeks following Lincoln’s assassination on April 14, 1865. Whitman completed the poem along with several others after *Drum-Taps* had been printed and collected them in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, a collection bound with separate pagination in *Leaves of Grass* in 1867. “Lilacs” was incorporated in the 1871 *Leaves* and found its final placement in 1881 as the first of four poems in the cluster, “Memories of President Lincoln.”

Whitman, like the Union as a whole, was traumatized by Lincoln's death. He had attended Lincoln's second inauguration and in *Specimen Days* described him in reverent tones. In many ways Lincoln was the political embodiment of the healer, preserver, and uniter of the nation that Whitman hoped to be as a poet. This elegy is one of Whitman's most powerful poems. Written in 16 relatively short lyrical sections, it develops three central symbols, the evening star, the lilac, and the hermit thrush. For most readers, the evening star represents Lincoln; the lilac, a perennially flowering shrub, represents rebirth and regeneration; and the hermit thrush represents the poet or visionary seer.

The first section sets the scene and presents two of the three main symbols. "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd, / And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night, / I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring" (l. 1–3). Whitman later said that when he heard about Lincoln's death, he was in a place where many lilacs were blooming, and that ever afterward the lilac and its scent reminded him of the tragic event.

The narrative continues by interweaving sections devoted to each symbol. In the "dooryard fronting an old farm-house" (l. 12), the poet stands before a lilac bush and breaks a flowering sprig. A solitary thrush—"thrush of the bleeding throat" (l. 23)—is warbling in the secret recesses of a swamp. Lincoln's coffin travels the states, stopping for crowds to pay homage. Imaginatively as the coffin passes by him, the poet tosses upon it his sprig of lilac. But then in section 7 he moves beyond the immediate occasion and says: "Not for you, for one alone, / Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring" (ll. 46–47), moving the poem from a focus on the death of Lincoln into a universal meditation on death and its significance for all. This move away from Lincoln seems appropriate when one remembers what Lincoln was to Whitman—a beacon of brotherhood, democracy, and union.

Whitman's speaker says that he will take seawinds east and west as perfume for the grave and hang pictures of sights of the country on the mauso-

leum's chamber walls. He turns to the evening star as it "dropt in the night, and was gone" (l. 65), and as the star disappears into a cloud, he "knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death" (l. 119). Returning then to the swamp, he walks with "the thought of death" holding one of his hands and the "sacred knowledge of death" (l. 121) holding his other. He hears the thrush, the "wondrous singer," singing a carol to death itself. "*Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving / . . . / When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee, / Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death / . . . / I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death*" (ll. 135–136, 148–150, 162). He perceives in a vision myriad fallen, broken bodies; battle corpses; and skeletons of young men. And he sees that they are at rest, even though the living suffer on. This vision concluded, he departs from the thrush, the lilac, and the star, yet keeps their memory and meaning "for the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and for his dear sake" (l. 204).

The poem achieves its effects partly by employing traditional conventions of the elegy: It begins with a lament and ends in consolation; nature mourns the fallen one; a funeral procession ensues, and the coffin is covered with flowers. What distinguishes Whitman's elegy is the treatment of death. Here death is not assumed to lead to an afterlife but is itself celebrated. The speaker is "laved in the flood of thy bliss O death"; the carol to death is one of joy. As in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "Song of Myself," this surprising conception of death shows it not to be a fearsome thing. In the context of the war hospitals, Whitman saw death give peace to soldiers in agony, but here death not only gives peace but is ultimately greeted with joy and called blissful. Though Whitman nowhere speaks of any kind of particular afterlife, he speaks everywhere of immortality. Death for him seems to have represented an entry into universal Oneness, the individual merging with the greater Self, ecstatically, as occurs temporarily in section 5 of "Song of Myself." The living suffer on and grieve the loss

of the fallen, and so while praising death, the last line of the poem also poignantly mourns the loss of America's greatest president.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain the significance and trace in detail the development of one or more of the three central symbols of the poem: the star, the lilac, and the thrush.
2. Since the poem speaks very little about President Lincoln, how does it achieve the poignancy one feels at the end? Compare this strategy to that used in "Vigil Strange."
3. Compare the treatment of death in this poem with that in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."
4. Discuss the musical, rhythmical, and other sound devices that contribute to the emotional effect of the poem. Consider particularly the incantatory effects achieved by repetition in sections 2, 6, and 8.

"As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado" (1865–1866)

"As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado" first appeared in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865–66) and found its final home in the "Drum-Taps" cluster in the 1881 *Leaves*. The title displays Whitman's cleverness, playing on the fact that a reader may have the book in his or her lap. Whitman frequently asserts the identity of book and author, and he would like nothing better than to have his head in your lap.

Appearing in the "Drum Taps" cluster, the camerado is probably a soldier, and though the war is over, the camerado is urged to continue onward with the poet "without the least idea what is our destination" or whether they will "be victorious" (ll. 10–11). He warns that he is "restless and make[s] others so," echoing the words of Christ: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). Whitman as prophet and teacher

also brings strife: "I know my words are weapons full of danger, full of death, / For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws, to unsettle them" (ll. 3–4). He will "unsettle laws" just as at the outset of "Song of Myself" he counseled that we must hold "creeds and schools in abeyance," for Whitman must speak as "nature without check with original energy" (ll. 10–13).

Refusing to end his journey, he confesses he has failed to achieve the mark of the "greatest poet" prophesied in the 1855 preface, that his country would absorb him as affectionately as he had absorbed it. Nevertheless, he says, "I am more resolute because all have denied me than I could ever have been had all accepted me" (l. 6). Neither heaven nor hell now shall stop him.

Some readers identify the unspecified character of this onward march to be the struggle to achieve a perfect union after the close of the war. Others find it the homosexual realization of "adhesiveness," the manly affection of "Calamus." Still others find it the calling of a prophet and spiritual teacher. Whitman's withholding of the exact character of the journey is characteristic of his poetic theory of "indirection" discussed earlier. Thus, whether urging his comrade on toward a more perfect union, an Arcadia of manly affections, or an endless spiritual journey, the final aim of the poem remains the reaffirmation of the intimate relationship between poet and reader, the book/head of the poet now happily in the reader's lap.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you think is the goal of the onward march to which Whitman calls the reader? What kind of teacher or leader is Whitman?
2. Why does Whitman say that he comes to bring not peace but strife, danger, and death? And why does he echo the words of Jesus in the Bible?

"Reconciliation" (1865–1866)

"Reconciliation" is one of Whitman's most powerful, imagistic lyrics about the Civil War. First

published in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, it was later incorporated in the “Drum-Taps” cluster of *Leaves of Grass*. The six-line poem is composed of a single periodic sentence, moving from abstraction to a dramatic scene that acts as metonymy for a reconciliation between North and South. The first three lines present a meditation on the word *reconciliation*. It is a “word over all, beautiful as the sky,” since the war is over and “the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever again, this soil’d world” (ll. 1–3). As in many others of Whitman’s poems, death is a healing, soothing, regenerative force.

After this abstract meditation, the poem telescopes to a poignant moment in which a Union soldier looks upon a dead Confederate soldier in his coffin, leans over, and lightly kisses him. “For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead, / I look where he lies white-faced in his coffin—I draw near, / Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin” (ll. 4–6). Here with remarkable understatement and reserve, the poet presents a moving scene and touching gesture without authorial comment or interpretation. The poet does not need to explain the image or gesture. After the prewar poetry of epic ambitions, proliferating catalogs, and barbaric yawps, Whitman’s war poetry moved ever toward the understated, unflinching, almost chastened presentations of images and scenes that work upon the reader not through rhetoric but through the powerful presentation of resonant visual detail. This is justly one of Whitman’s most famous shorter poems and one that foreshadows the work of more modern poets and writers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss all the ways, in theme and technique, that this poem achieves its powerful effect in so few lines.
2. Why does Whitman use the image of a dead Confederate soldier? Would there not be a better “reconciliation” if the encounter were with a living Confederate soldier? What would the effect have been on the poem?
3. Explain how the inclusion of this poem in the same cluster that includes “Beat! Beat! Drums!” near the beginning contributes to the sense that the speaker’s view of the Civil War changes with the passage of time. How might this poem act as a criticism of the position expressed in the earlier poem?

“When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (1865)

“When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” is one of Whitman’s best known and most often anthologized shorter poems. First appearing in *Drum Taps*, it was incorporated in *Leaves of Grass* in 1876 and found its placement in the cluster “By the Roadside” in the final editions. The poem consists of eight lines arranged in a loose, sonnetlike structure. The first four lines recount a lecture by an astronomer.

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in
columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to
add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he
lectured with much applause in the lecture-
room . . .

Gradually growing in length, the lines accumulate a disorienting array of facts, figures, and diagrams and note the applause the astronomer receives. But the speaker does not applaud.

How soon unaccountable I became tired and
sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by
myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time
to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

The poet goes out to experience the stars firsthand, and we witness a moment of awe before the mys-

tery of nature presented with great understatement. After the expanding lines that depicted the lecture, these final lines become shorter and end in silence. Whitman's speaker does not tell us what he is feeling; he presents the moment, and we recall such moments in our own lives.

The sentiment echoes Emerson's admonition that we must find our own "original relation to the universe." The negative view of science presented in the poem was common in the literature of 19th-century romanticism, a mistrust of scientific rationalism that through logic and cold analysis breaks the world into pieces while remaining blind to its wonder, beauty, and mystery. William Wordsworth wrote, "We murder to dissect." For Whitman and other romantics, it is not through abstract reasoning that we find meaning and satisfaction in the universe but through a direct, personal, intuitive, emotional encounter.

Paradoxically in other poems Whitman celebrates science and progress. And though he was at home with contradiction in his poetry, we can reconcile his general embrace of science with this mistrust of a worldview corrupted by scientific rationalism by recalling lines the critic Ed Folsom has quoted from "Song of Myself": "Hurrah for positive science! / Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling, / I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling." His dwelling is that place where one stands in awe before the sublimity of the stars.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As in "Reconciliation," this poem moves from the abstract to the concrete and particular. Discuss the effect on you as a reader of abstraction versus concreteness and the combination of the two in a poem like this one.
2. Discuss the effect of Whitman's understatement in the final line. Why is understatement often stronger than overstatement in literature?

"Passage to India" (1871)

The last major work of Whitman's career, "Passage to India" first appeared as the title piece to a

volume of poems published in 1871 and was first incorporated in the 1881 *Leaves*. According to a footnote in the 1876 preface, "Passage to India" was intended to herald a new project and new volume that would sing the "the unseen Soul" as *Leaves of Grass* had sung "the Body and Existence." "Passage to India, and its cluster, are but freer vent and fuller expression to what, from the first, and so throughout, more or less lurks in my writings, underneath every page, every line, everywhere." To Horace Traubel Whitman said, "There's more of me, the essential ultimate me, in that than in any of the poems. There is no philosophy . . . in that poem . . . but the burden of it is evolution . . . the unfolding of cosmic purposes" (Traubel 1:156–157).

"Passage to India" begins by celebrating three technological achievements of 1866 and 1869, which joined distant parts of the world: the completion of the Suez Canal, the laying of the transatlantic cable, and the completion of the American transcontinental railroad. Whitman perceived these technological linkages of distant peoples and places as a symbol and mark of a coming spiritual brotherhood throughout the world. He acknowledges the achievements of the past, the fables, myths, and wonders of Asia and Africa and the Mediterranean as harbingers of these greater wonders ahead. In them he finds "God's purpose from the first . . . / the earth to be spann'd, connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage" (ll. 31–33).

The poem then telescopes to a detailed description of the completion of the Suez Canal and the transcontinental railroad, as Whitman places himself in the scenes, witnessing the events. In sections 4 and 5 he asserts that the history of the world has a purpose, which has sometimes lain hidden and sometimes heroically marched forward embodied by discoverers and voyagers. In section 5 he admits that the impulse of this march has often been a feverish restlessness in the human race, a frustrated yearning and unsatisfied want in the soul. But he announces that there will be one who shall come to soothe "these feverish children." This healer

shall be the poet, “the true son of God,” who shall join race to race, human to human, and nature to humanity (ll. 104–105, 115).

Section 6 then reviews the entire history of the human race and notes again how the “seed,” the hidden purpose, has lain buried and in “God’s due occasion” shall sprout and bloom (ll. 162–163). Then in section 7 the poet turns to address his soul, and the poem shifts from the physical to the transcendental: “O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me, / Thy circumnavigation of the world begin” (ll. 169–170). The poet and his Soul launch forth, no longer merely circumnavigating the world, but now sailing out onto the ecstatic seas of God, until they find the “Comrade perfect.”

Reckoning head, O soul, when thou, the time
 achiev’d,
 The seas all cross’d, weather’d the capes, the
 voyage done,
 Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the
 aim attain’d,
 As fill’d with friendship, love complete, the
 Elder Brother found
 The Younger melts in fondness in his arms. (ll.
 219–223)

Note how this language parallels that of section 45 of “Song of Myself.” Section 9, the concluding section, is an ecstatic call of the soul to launch ever forth onto those unknown, endless seas: “Are they not all the seas of God? / O farther, farther, farther sail!” (ll. 254–255).

One of the remarkable aspects of “Passage to India” is the way the technological wonders Whitman celebrates reflect the international origins of his spiritual vision. The circling of the globe connected America to India, West to East, present to ancient past—Columbus’s dream on the material level. This connection serves as a perfect vehicle for Whitman’s cosmic vision of a universe permeated by a universal soul or self, into which the individual soul launches forth to “fillest, swellest full the vastness of Space” to become united with the transcen-

denal. This religious vision originated in, or at a minimum mirrors, the cosmology of Hinduism, the religion of India. Thus, as the technological accomplishments celebrated returned the Western world to its ancient Eastern roots, so Whitman’s spiritual vision found its roots in India, the very continent Columbus had sought to reach in his own setting out.

Surprisingly in spite of Whitman’s own comments on the poem noted earlier, comments that place the poem centrally in his work, many critics, perhaps uneasy with the poem’s religious elements, have downplayed its importance and achievement. Some have found the poem too abstract, lacking the physicality and particularity of Whitman’s early poems, even of those with a transcendental theme, such as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Others bemoan the lack of Whitman’s trademark gestures of intimacy with the reader. These are legitimate complaints. Then on a political level some have lamented the poem’s celebration of industrialized capitalism and nascent American globalization, while others have found the poem’s embrace of transcendental values to be a rejection of the materialist features of that globalization and the culture of America’s Gilded Age. But to those philosophically and spiritually receptive to its message, “Passage to India” remains an ecstatic hymn of transcendental vision unmatched in American poetry.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Unlike many of his critics, Whitman considered this one of his most important poems. Do you find the poem successful in your reading experience? Explain why or why not.
2. Most readers of previous generations of Americans had a positive image of Columbus as a great explorer and discoverer. Today many see him in a more compromised light. How do you think this changed perception of Columbus affects the reading of the poem today?
3. Compare and contrast the representations of science in this poem with those in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.”

body across his writing. Why is this theme so prominent? What does his understanding of the body allow him to say about other themes?

6. Whitman believed that the artist, and the poet particularly, had an important public role to play. What did he believe the purpose of art was? What was the proper public role of the poet?
7. Whitman often employs grass as a symbol, as in "Song of Myself." However, grass is not the only natural image Whitman uses; think of the birds that appear in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and the many descriptions of bodies of water, especially when the poet is contemplating death and immortality. Examine Whitman's use of nature imagery in his poetry.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Allen, Gay Wilson. *The New Walt Whitman Handbook*. 1975. Reprint, New York: New York University Press, 1986.
- . *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. 1955. Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Asselineau, Roger. *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*. 1954. 2 vols. Reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960–62.
- Erkkila, Betsy. *Whitman the Political Poet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Folsom, Ed, ed. *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994.
- Folsom, Ed, and Kenneth Price. The Walt Whitman Archive. Available online. URL: www.whitmanarchive.org. Accessed May 1, 2009.
- LeMaster, J. R., and Donald D. Kummings, eds. *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland, 1998.
- Loving, Jerome. *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Martin, Robert K. *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.
- Miller, Edwin Haviland, ed. *A Century of Whitman Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969.
- . *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989.
- Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Selby, Nick, ed. *The Poetry of Walt Whitman*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Sowder, Michael. *Whitman's Ecstatic Union: Conversion and Ideology in Leaves of Grass*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Traubel, Horace. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. 7 vols. (Vols. 1–3, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961; Vols. 4–7, Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959–92).
- Walt Whitman Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site. Available online. URL: <http://www.waltwhitman.org/>. Accessed May 6, 2009.
- Zweig, Paul. *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Michael Sowder



HARRIET E. WILSON (1825–1900)

She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express.

(*Our Nig*)

After years as a servant, seamstress, and indigent dependent on public assistance, Harriet E. Wilson turned to writing as “some experiment” aimed at “maintaining myself and my child” (Wilson 3). Using her own meager funds to publish *Our Nig* in 1859, Wilson hoped that revenue from the book’s sale would help improve her financial condition. As a fund-raising effort, *Our Nig* failed to earn enough money for her to care for her sickly son, who died within months of the book’s publication. But the text that began as Wilson’s dire “experiment” resulted in a new form of literary expression among black women: Harriet Wilson became the first African-American woman to publish an autobiographical novel.

The details of Wilson’s early life, which she used as the basis of *Our Nig*, are, in the estimation of one 19th-century reader, “stranger than fiction” (Wilson 73). Born March 15, 1825, in Milford, New Hampshire, Wilson was the daughter of Joshua Green, a black cooper, and his wife, Margaret, a white washerwoman who married Green after being seduced and abandoned by another suitor. Though interracial unions were socially taboo—and legally prohibited in some parts of the United States well into the 20th century—the couple wed in New Hampshire and probably had two children. Little is known about the unnamed sibling Wilson depicts in *Our Nig*. After her husband died, Wilson’s mother attempted to lessen her responsi-

bilities by leaving Harriet with a nearby family. She never returned to reclaim her daughter.

For 12 years young Harriet lived as an indentured servant in the household of Nehemiah and Rebecca Hayward, prominent Milford residents who owned a sizable homestead. As practiced throughout the North, the arrangement of indentured servitude bound orphans and poor children to work for a sponsoring family in exchange for room and board. Though servants sometimes were treated almost as members of the family they served, Wilson was subjected to continual physical and mental abuse aimed at reinforcing her subjection to her white employers. At the hands of Rebecca Hayward and her daughter, also named Rebecca, Wilson was so overworked and underfed that she suffered recurrent exhaustion and sickness. Ironically Mrs. Hayward was related to the famed Hutchinson Family Singers, a Milford quartet who toured the United States in the 1840s and 1850s to protest slavery (White xxvi). Unfortunately her cousins’ songs of freedom seemed to have had little influence on Rebecca Hayward’s treatment of her young biracial servant.

Despite harsh living conditions and her mistress’s hostility, Wilson developed enduring relationships with other members of the family, some of whom encouraged her to go to school, read the Bible, and attend the local church. As the only student of color in her class, Wilson went to public school

three months of the year—the minimum time that host families were expected to provide schooling for their bound servants (Dudden 21). After three years Rebecca Hayward resentfully withdrew Wilson from classes. Yet Wilson informally continued her educational and religious instruction with the help of Sally Hayward Blanchard, Nehemiah Hayward's widowed sister, who shared the house with the family, and George Hayward, one of the family's adult sons. As Wilson would describe in *Our Nig*, she was deeply grieved when George passed away in April 1840. His death was one in a series of disturbing events that left Wilson isolated during her youth and young adulthood.

Wilson remained with the Haywards until she was 18, the legal age at which bound servants usually dissolved their relationships with their employers. The years after her release were physically, emotionally, and financially difficult for her. She attempted to support herself by working for other families in the Milford area, but her frequent illnesses often left her bedridden, unemployed, and, finally, dependent on the aid of local residents.

After regaining her health, Wilson moved to Ware, Massachusetts, in fall 1850 to sew for a living. Her new friends in Massachusetts read the Bible and shared works of literature and history with her. Perhaps it was during this period that Wilson gained exposure to the kinds of literary works to which she later would allude in her own writing. The epigraphs that appear in *Our Nig* suggest that Wilson was well acquainted with classical fiction, Scripture, and popular 19th-century British and American poetry.

In October 1851 she wed Thomas Wilson, an African-American antislavery lecturer who claimed to be a fugitive slave. As she discovered after their marriage, however, her new husband never had been enslaved: He merely posed for “hungry abolitionists” who were eager to hear former slaves’ first-person accounts (Wilson 71). Within months of her marriage, Wilson was again in financial trouble, as her husband proved an unstable provider who often left his wife to fend for herself. A poem published in Milford's local newspaper, the *Farmer's Cabinet*,

seems to express Wilson's pitiable condition. In the poem “Fading Away,” attributed to “Hattie”—the name by which Harriet Wilson was known for much of her adult life—the speaker attests to being in such poor health and emotional deterioration that she expects to die (Foreman xxiii). Appearing on December 6, 1851, the poem probably corresponds to the period of Wilson's pregnancy. During her husband's absence, she delivered her son, George Mason Wilson, in mid-1852 while living on a farm maintained for the homeless, just outside Milford.

After her husband died in 1853, Wilson was left as a single parent in a predicament similar to her own mother's. But rather than abandon her child, as her mother had, Wilson attempted to provide for her son by working as a seamstress, relying on charity, and selling hair care products. Finally, Wilson determined to write and sell a book that would allow her to capitalize on her traumatic life experiences: *Our Nig; or, Sketches of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*.

Published in 1859, *Our Nig* appeared at the end of a decade of prolific production among black authors in the United States. African Americans had been penning poetry, essays, and autobiographies since the 18th century, but black fiction first flourished in the mid-19th century. In 1853 William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* became the first novel by an African American; Martin Delany, FREDERICK DOUGLASS, and Frank J. Webb all published novels within the next six years after Brown. In 1859, the year that Wilson's novel saw print, FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER's “The Two Offers” became one of the first black-authored short stories. It is unclear whether Wilson realized how her autobiographical novel fit among other African-American literary “firsts” during the decade. But her preface does address *Our Nig* to “my colored brethren universally,” suggesting that she may have expected a black readership, especially among abolitionist circles. Wilson's novel seems not to have gained a large circulation, however, perhaps in part because many American readers were more

engrossed with debates over slavery than they were with the concerns of freeborn blacks.

Because of the dearth of information about Wilson, scholars long believed that she died in the 1860s, shortly after her book was published. However, recent research reveals that a few years after her seven-year-old son died in Milford in 1860, Wilson relocated to Boston, where she thrived as part of the growing spiritualist movement in the Northeast. Spiritualists believed in communicating with the dead through mesmerism, séances, and spiritual mediums. Practiced by a number of intellectuals and activists, spiritualism often challenged the American social order by promoting medical reform, women's rights, egalitarian marriages, and abolition (Carroll 4). Given her previous disappointments with her health, marriage, and racist treatment, Wilson may have been attracted to the spiritualist community because of its progressive beliefs. By 1867 Wilson was advertising her services as a spiritualist medium and lecturing throughout the Northeast and Midwest. Wilson married for a second time in 1870, making a short-lived match with John Gallatin Robinson, a young white man she met through their religious and professional affiliation. Often called "Dr. Hattie E. Wilson" by her listeners and clients, Wilson lived most of the rest of her life in Boston, where she found a welcoming community that shared with her the affection and respect she had lacked in her early life.

During the last three decades of her life, Wilson's status as a famed spiritualist eclipsed her role as an author. The *Banner of Light*, a spiritualist newspaper that regularly heralded Wilson as the famed "colored medium," makes no mention of *Our Nig*. She seems not to have returned to writing after publishing her single book. She did, however, lecture on the themes and social concerns, such as labor issues and child welfare, that she had raised previously in her autobiographical novel (Foreman xii). Wilson continued to appear at religious meetings well into her seventies. She was 75 when she died on June 28, 1900; she is buried in Quincy, Massachusetts.

For over a century, both *Harriet E. Wilson* and *Our Nig* remained obscure names in American literary history. Early 20th-century critics who noticed *Our Nig* at all conjectured that its author, listed on the copyright as "Mrs. H. E. Wilson," was white. Only in the 1980s did the scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., verify Wilson's racial identity and confirm that she was one of the earliest African-American female autobiographical novelists. Wilson and her text have resurfaced to a welcoming revival, due in part to the increasing study of 19th-century American women's writing. Addressing issues of labor, class, single parenthood, Northern racism, and spiritual resilience, Wilson's work is an important contribution to 19th-century American prose.

***Our Nig* (1859)**

Set in antebellum New England, *Our Nig* follows young Alfrado from childhood to adulthood, chronicling her struggles to attain self-consciousness, faith, and economic stability. Orphaned after her father dies and her mother abandons her, Frado lives as a servant in the Belmont household, where she is abused and exploited by the tyrannical mistress of the house, "Mrs. B.," and her daughter, Mary. Beyond her physical and financial hardships, Frado's greatest challenge is to resist thinking of herself as "our nig," the racial slur by which her employers and other prejudiced whites refer to her. Frado eventually leaves the Bellmonts and has a family of her own. At the novel's end, Frado, now a widowed mother, struggles to provide for herself and her child. The novel offers a bittersweet portrait of her emotional resilience, as well as a biting critique of the poverty and racism that nearly, but never entirely, break her resolve to improve her condition.

The plot and themes of *Our Nig* draw from a number of popular 19th-century literary genres, including the seduction tale, spiritual autobiography, slave narrative, and coming-of-age tale. Before proceeding with Frado's story, the first two chapters introduce her mother, "lonely Mag Smith," as an

impoverished white woman whose unwed pregnancy and subsequent taboo relationships with black men lead her “down the ladder of infamy.” Because discussions of sexuality may have offended antebellum audiences, Wilson uses the coded language characteristic of seduction plots to describe Mag’s first sexual encounter:

She knew the voice of her charmer, so ravishing, sounded far above her. It seems like an angel’s, alluring her upward and onward. She thought she could ascend to him and become an equal. She surrendered to him a priceless gem, which he proudly garnered as a trophy, with those of other victims, and left her to her fate.

The text describes Mag’s virginity as a “gem,” omitting words such as *sex* and *pregnant*.

Wilson also incorporates another trait of seduction and sentimental literature: a direct address to the reader, as though he or she is present and viewing the story’s action. Despite Mag’s “ruin” and “disgrace,” the narrator appeals to the audience to empathize with the character’s vulnerabilities. “See [Mag] as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart,” the narrator directs. Ostracized by the white community because of her sin, Mag “was seldom seen except as upon your introduction, gentle reader.” Wilson uses the form of direct address both to elicit sympathy and to reprove readers for any lingering class and racial prejudices they may hold. When Mag later reluctantly marries Jim, a “kind-hearted African” who overlooks her sexual past and offers to provide her a better life, the narrator warns the “gentle reader” not to object to the interracial marriage:

You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag.

Unlike her first relationship, Mag’s relationship with Jim is presented not as a seduction, but as an

economic necessity for the young woman. When Jim dies, Mag accepts a new lover, Seth Shipley, and the couple lives together without being legally married. Mag and Seth later dispose of her children by first abandoning Frado at the “two-story white house, North,” where the novel’s central action takes place.

Frado’s experiences at the Belmont home challenge many of the conventional ideas of home as a safe, loving environment, free of the cruelties of the outer world. Contrary to the 19th-century ideal of white women as angels in the house who offer comfort and moral direction to their families, Mrs. B. is a sharp-tongued “she-devil” who manipulates her family and her servants; her temper and merciless demands drive more than one of her employees to quit. But Mrs. B. is especially hard on Frado because the girl is biracial, young, and alone—essentially defenseless. No one, including Mr. Belmont or the couple’s adult children, has the fortitude to stand up to Mrs. B. and ultimately end her torture. Frado is confined to the uncomfortable “L chamber” to sleep, ordered to do more work than physically possible for her size, and punished with “words that burn,” and frequent blows on her head.” At one point Mrs. B. also cuts off Frado’s hair to lower the girl’s self-esteem about her physical appearance. Meanwhile, the author marks off the years of Frado’s childhood by highlighting the deaths, marriages, and family visits that occur during her 12 years of service. As witness to the Bellmonts’ major life events, Frado is reminded repeatedly that while she is part of the household, she is excluded from the family.

Frado begins to associate her torment with her blackness and thus despise her racial identity. When she seems most vulnerable to internalizing Mrs. B.’s hatred of her, she attempts to find hope and self-worth through religion. By highlighting how faith empowers Frado to cope with her unfavorable living conditions, *Our Nig* resembles 18th- and 19th-century spiritual autobiographies—a popular genre in which narrators explained how they overcame their hesitations and obstacles to accept Christianity and spread the Gospel. One charac-

teristic of the typical spiritual autobiography is the narrator's intense awareness of sin. Narrators often recounted the physical and emotional torment they experienced before they were assured of their salvation. In *Our Nig* Frado becomes more anxious, weepy, and frail while she is contemplating repentance. The Bellmonts note that she is "particularly engaged in reading the Bible; and this strengthened her conviction that a heavenly Messenger was striving with her." James Bellmont, a grown son who becomes ill during his visit to the family homestead, befriends Frado and shares his faith with her before he dies. Frado strives to accept the religion that James, Aunt Abby, and other kind Bellmonts practice. But she is repulsed by Mrs. B., who insists that salvation and heaven are exclusively for whites. Frado's decision to continue studying the Bible and attending church meetings directly defies Mrs. B.'s wishes. The young woman's increasing spirituality, which culminates in her public declaration of faith at a local church, seems to empower her to withstand her mistress.

The climax of the novel occurs when teenaged Frado demonstrates her growing confidence by resisting Mrs. B.'s physical attacks. When her mistress attempts to hit her with a piece of wood, Frado shouts, "Stop . . . strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you." Mrs. B. stops, remembering that Frado's unpaid work as "man, boy, housekeeper, domestic, etc." saves the Bellmonts incalculable expenses. Frado realizes the value of her bodily labor, as well as her spiritual worth and humanity, and begins to act as "one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts." The scene recalls a moment in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in which Douglass refused to be beaten by the slave breaker, Mr. Covey. After his physical resistance, Douglass declared that though he might "remain a slave in form," he mentally refused to accept his subjection to whites by being "a slave in fact." As does Douglass, Frado does not assert her freedom by immediately leaving her place of work. She continues to work for the family until she turns 18, but after she threatens Mrs. B., Frado avoids being beaten and

determines to "assert her rights when they were trampled on."

Frado is a free person of color in the North, but *Our Nig* repeatedly draws on the tradition of American slave narratives, such as Douglass's. Slavery lingers as a metaphor and a literal threat to Frado. Mrs. B. is "wholly imbued with *southern* principles," and her abuse of Frado in the book's early chapters recalls the brutal whippings described in tales of slavery. Frado's servitude also may be likened to enslavement with respect to the humiliation, physical deprivation, and social restrictions imposed on her. That Frado experiences such prejudice despite being legally free questions the assumption that the antebellum North was considerably more liberal and racially tolerant than the South. As the book's subtitle announces, "slavery's shadows fall even there" in the North. When Frado later travels as an adult in search of work, she is especially aware of the threat of being enslaved. "Watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists," she risks being mistaken for a fugitive slave and captured under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which declared that runaway slaves in the North could be returned to Southern bondage. By focusing on Frado's Northern experiences while paralleling them to enslavement, *Our Nig* exposes the complicity of white abolitionists who objected to slavery but who overlooked more immediate injustices against blacks in the North.

After leaving the Bellmonts, Frado strives to make a living, but her poor health and a failed marriage compound her economic difficulties. Significantly the novel does not portray marriage as a romantic escape or a means to upward mobility. In this regard Wilson undermines the pattern of much mid-19th-century American fiction by women. Women's fiction sometimes featured poor or working-class female characters to show how young women who practiced self-control and kindness were rewarded with domestic and economic fulfillment. In Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854)—the runaway best seller that spurred NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE's epithet against the "damned mob of scribbling women" whose works

sold much better than his—the white female protagonist, Gerty, begins as an eight-year-old shoeless street urchin. Yet she piously triumphs over setbacks, often with the help of generous friends. Gerty inevitably gains a comfortable home and an adoring husband in the novel's happy ending. By contrast, Frado's marriage and motherhood leave her brokenhearted and financially burdened. Motivated by “the presence of love—that arbitrary and inexorable tyrant,” Frado marries Samuel, one of the first black men she meets; because he presents himself as a kindly former slave, they seem to share a history of suffering that unites them. Frado later learns that Samuel was never a slave; he fooled antislavery supporters, presumably to gain their charity. Samuel deserts Frado and dies, leaving her to care for their son. At the conclusion of the novel, Frado seeks emotional and financial support from friends. She resolves that “nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself.”

Our Nig is ultimately a classic coming-of-age tale. It describes the young protagonist's first encounters with harsh reality, her feelings of adolescent doubt, her growing sense of independence, her first romance, and her grown-up determination to make a way for herself. Though Frado remains hopeful, critics have noted that the cumulative tale of her disappointments ironically questions whether a strong work ethic really yields safety and satisfaction, especially for people of color and single mothers in the 19th century.

The novel's concluding paragraphs and its appendix invited the original readers to respond by offering Harriet Wilson monetary support. As a first-time author and an African-American woman writer, Wilson thought that her story had to be verified in order to gain her readers' trust. The appended letters from sponsors thus serve to establish that *Our Nig* as believable and affirm Wilson as a deserving recipient of readers' patronage. In this way, Wilson reminds readers that the story of the third-person Frado merges with the author's own life and need.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the author's characterization of Mrs. B. What details of Mrs. B's appearance, actions, or speech reveal the most about her? How do other characters' impressions of Mrs. B. influence what you think of her?
2. Discuss two episodes in Frado's life that greatly impact her feelings of self-worth. Which aspect of her personality emerges most forcefully in each episode? See whether you can explain Wilson's rationale for ordering these episodes in the manner she does.
3. Using a credible online search engine or literary anthology, find out more about Thomas Moore, Lord Byron, or some of the other poets whose excerpted works appear at the beginning of each chapter in *Our Nig*. How do the poetic epigraphs foreshadow and enhance the action in Wilson's novel?
4. Compare the ending of Wilson's *Our Nig* with the ending of HARRIET ANN JACOBS's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Why do you think both works close with free African-American women who face the world as mothers without husbands? Consider the ways in which each narrative makes use of the seduction plot and refuses to accept a sentimental solution to the challenges that confront African-American women.
5. Discuss the way Wilson's presentation of religious conversion is both similar to and different from the description of religion given by Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Do you think that Frado has attained the same level of spiritual authority that Frederick has by the end of his narrative?
6. In her novel *Ruth Hall*, FANNY FERN (Sarah Willis Parton) also structures the story around her life and presents her protagonist, Ruth, as a mother who must raise her children on her own and struggle to make a place for herself in the world. To what extent do you see the same model for female achievement at work in Wilson's novel? Do you think that Ruth is happier

APPENDIX I

Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Adams, Henry	1838–1918	Volume 2	Collins, Billy	1941–	Volume 5
Adams, John, and Abigail Adams	1735–1826 1744–1818	Volume 1	Columbus, Christopher	1451–1506	Volume 1
Albee, Edward	1928–	Volume 4	Cooper, James Fenimore	1789–1851	Volume 1
Alcott, Louisa May	1832–1888	Volume 2	Crane, Hart	1899–1932	Volume 3
Alvarez, Julia	1950–	Volume 5	Crane, Stephen	1871–1900	Volume 2
Anaya, Rudolfo	1937–	Volume 5	Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John de	1735–1813	Volume 1
Anderson, Sherwood	1876–1942	Volume 3	Cullen, Countee	1903–1946	Volume 3
Angelou, Maya	1928–	Volume 5	Cummings, E. E.	1894–1962	Volume 3
Baca, Jimmy Santiago	1952–	Volume 5	Davis, Rebecca Harding	1831–1910	Volume 2
Baldwin, James	1924–1987	Volume 4	Dickinson, Emily	1830–1886	Volume 2
Bambara, Toni Cade	1939–	Volume 5	Dos Passos, John	1896–1970	Volume 3
Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Douglass, Frederick	1818–1895	Volume 2
Bellow, Saul	1915–2005	Volume 4	Dove, Rita	1952–	Volume 5
Bierce, Ambrose	1842–1914?	Volume 2	Dreiser, Theodore	1871–1945	Volume 3
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911–1979	Volume 4	DuBois, W. E. B.	1868–1963	Volume 3
Bonnin, Gertrude			Dunbar, Paul Laurence	1872–1906	Volume 2
Simmons (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Edwards, Jonathan	1703–1758	Volume 1
Bradbury, Ray	1920–	Volume 4	Eliot, T. S.	1888–1965	Volume 3
Bradford, William	1590–1657	Volume 1	Ellison, Ralph	1914–1994	Volume 4
Bradstreet, Anne	1612–1672	Volume 1	Emerson, Ralph Waldo	1803–1882	Volume 2
Brooks, Gwendolyn	1917–2000	Volume 4	Equiano, Olaudah	1745–1797	Volume 1
Brown, Charles Brockden	1771–1810	Volume 1	Erdrich, Louise	1954–	Volume 5
Bryant, William Cullen	1794–1878	Volume 1	Faulkner, William	1897–1962	Volume 3
Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez	1490–1556	Volume 1	Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	1920–	Volume 4
Capote, Truman	1924–1984	Volume 4	Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Carver, Raymond	1938–1988	Volume 5	Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1896–1940	Volume 3
Cather, Willa	1873–1947	Volume 3	Forché, Carolyn	1950–	Volume 5
Champlain, Samuel de	1570–1635	Volume 1	Foster, Hannah Webster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Cheever, John	1912–1982	Volume 4	Franklin, Benjamin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Chesnutt, Charles	1858–1932	Volume 2	Freeman, Mary Eleanor Wilkins	1852–1930	Volume 2
Child, Lydia Maria	1802–1880	Volume 2	Freneau, Philip Morin	1752–1832	Volume 1
Chopin, Kate	1850–1904	Volume 2	Frost, Robert	1874–1963	Volume 3
Cisneros, Sandra	1954–	Volume 5	Fuller, Margaret	1810–1850	Volume 2
Cofer, Judith Ortiz	1952–	Volume 5	Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	1860–1935	Volume 2

Ginsberg, Allen	1926–1997	Volume 4	McCarthy, Cormac	1933–	Volume 5
Giovanni, Nikki	1943–	Volume 5	McKay, Claude	1890–1948	Volume 3
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	McMurtry, Larry	1936–	Volume 5
Haley, Alex	1921–1992	Volume 4	Melville, Herman	1819–1891	Volume 2
Hammon, Jupiter	1711–1806	Volume 1	Millay, Edna St. Vincent	1892–1950	Volume 3
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Miller, Arthur	1915–2005	Volume 4
Hansberry, Lorraine	1930–1965	Volume 4	Momaday, N. Scott	1934–	Volume 4
Harjo, Joy	1951–	Volume 5	Moore, Marianne	1887–1972	Volume 3
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins	1825–1911	Volume 2	Mora, Pat	1942–	Volume 5
Harris, Joel Chandler	1848–1908	Volume 2	Morrison, Toni	1931–	Volume 5
Harte, Bret	1836–1902	Volume 2	Morton, Thomas	1579–1647	Volume 1
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	1804–1864	Volume 2	Murray, Judith Sargent	1751–1820	Volume 1
Hayden, Robert	1913–1980	Volume 4	O’Brien, Tim	1946–	Volume 5
Heller, Joseph	1923–1999	Volume 4	O’Connor, Flannery	1925–1964	Volume 4
Hemingway, Ernest	1899–1961	Volume 3	O’Neill, Eugene	1888–1953	Volume 3
Howells, William Dean	1837–1920	Volume 2	Oates, Joyce Carol	1938–	Volume 5
Hughes, Langston	1871–1967	Volume 3	Occom, Samson	1723–1792	Volume 1
Hurston, Zora Neale	1891–1960	Volume 3	Oliver, Mary	1935–	Volume 5
Irving, Washington	1783–1859	Volume 1	Ortiz, Simon J.	1941–	Volume 5
Jackson, Shirley	1919–1965	Volume 4	Paine, Thomas	1737–1809	Volume 1
Jacobs, Harriet	1813–1897	Volume 2	Piatt, Sarah M. B.	1836–1919	Volume 2
James, Henry	1843–1916	Volume 2	Pinsky, Robert	1940–	Volume 5
Jarrell, Randall	1914–1965	Volume 4	Plath, Sylvia	1932–1963	Volume 4
Jefferson, Thomas	1743–1826	Volume 1	Poe, Edgar Allan	1809–1849	Volume 2
Jewett, Sarah Orne	1849–1909	Volume 2	Porter, Katherine Anne	1890–1980	Volume 3
Kerouac, Jack	1922–1969	Volume 4	Potok, Chaim	1929–2002	Volume 4
Kesey, Ken	1935–2001	Volume 4	Pound, Ezra	1885–1972	Volume 3
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4	Rand, Ayn	1905–1982	Volume 4
Kingsolver, Barbara	1955–	Volume 5	Reed, Ishmael	1938–	Volume 5
Kingston, Maxine Hong	1940–	Volume 5	Rich, Adrienne	1929–	Volume 5
Knowles, John	1926–2001	Volume 4	Robinson, Edwin Arlington	1869–1935	Volume 3
Komunyakaa, Yusef	1947–	Volume 5	Roethke, Theodore	1908–1963	Volume 4
Larsen, Nella	1891–1964	Volume 3	Roth, Philip	1933–	Volume 4
Lee, Chang-rae	1965–	Volume 5	Rowson, Susanna Haswell	1762–1824	Volume 1
Lee, Harper	1926–	Volume 4	Salinger, J. D.	1919–2010	Volume 4
Levertov, Denise	1923–1997	Volume 4	Sandburg, Carl	1878–1967	Volume 3
London, Jack	1876–1916	Volume 3	Sedgwick, Catharine Maria	1789–1867	Volume 1
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth	1807–1882	Volume 2	Sexton, Anne	1928–1974	Volume 4
Lowell, Robert	1917–1977	Volume 4	Silko, Leslie Marmon	1948–	Volume 5
Malamud, Bernard	1914–1986	Volume 4	Smith, John	1580–1631	Volume 1
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4	Snyder, Gary	1930–	Volume 5
Marshall, Paule	1929–	Volume 4	Soto, Gary	1952–	Volume 5
Mather, Cotton	1663–1728	Volume 1			

Stein, Gertrude	1874–1946	Volume 3	Vonnegut, Kurt	1922–2007	Volume 4
Steinbeck, John	1902–1968	Volume 3	Walker, Alice	1944–	Volume 5
Stevens, Wallace	1879–1955	Volume 3	Warren, Robert Penn	1905–1989	Volume 4
Stowe, Harriet Beecher	1811–1896	Volume 2	Washington, Booker T.	1856–1915	Volume 3
Sui Sin Far			Welty, Eudora	1909–2001	Volume 4
(Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Wharton, Edith	1862–1937	Volume 3
Swenson, May	1913–1989	Volume 4	Wheatley, Phillis	1753–1784	Volume 1
Tan, Amy	1952–	Volume 5	Whitman, Walt	1819–1892	Volume 2
Taylor, Edward	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Wilbur, Richard	1921–	Volume 4
Thoreau, Henry David	1817–1862	Volume 2	Wilder, Thornton	1897–1975	Volume 3
Toomer, Jean	1894–1967	Volume 3	Williams, Tennessee	1911–1983	Volume 4
Twain, Mark			Williams, William Carlos	1883–1961	Volume 3
(Samuel Langhorne			Wilson, August	1945–2005	Volume 5
Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2	Wilson, Harriet E.	1825–1900	Volume 2
Updike, John	1932–2009	Volume 4	Winthrop, John	1588–1649	Volume 1
Viramontes, Helena María	1954–	Volume 5	Wright, Richard	1908–1960	Volume 3

APPENDIX II

Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Note that authors are placed in the volume that covers the period during which they published their most important works. Some authors published their works relatively early or relatively late in their lives. This explains why, for example, certain authors placed in volume 3 were actually born before certain authors placed in volume 2.

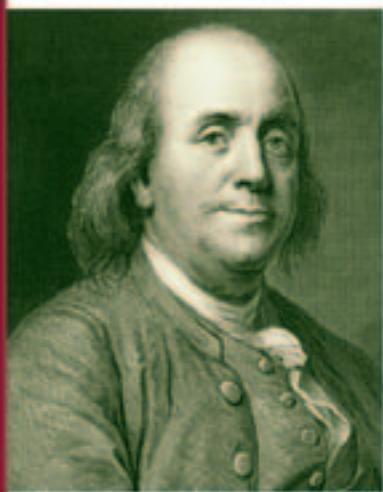
Christopher Columbus	1451–1506	Volume 1	William Cullen Bryant	1794–1878	Volume 1
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	1490–1556	Volume 1	Lydia Maria Child	1802–1880	Volume 2
Samuel de Champlain	1570–1635	Volume 1	Ralph Waldo Emerson	1803–1882	Volume 2
Thomas Morton	1579–1647	Volume 1	Nathaniel Hawthorne	1804–1864	Volume 2
John Smith	1580–1631	Volume 1	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	1807–1882	Volume 2
John Winthrop	1588–1649	Volume 1	Edgar Allan Poe	1809–1849	Volume 2
William Bradford	1590–1657	Volume 1	Margaret Fuller	1810–1850	Volume 2
Anne Bradstreet	1612–1672	Volume 1	Fanny Fern (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Edward Taylor	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Harriet Beecher Stowe	1811–1896	Volume 2
Cotton Mather	1663–1728	Volume 1	Harriet Jacobs	1813–1897	Volume 2
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	Volume 1	Henry David Thoreau	1817–1862	Volume 2
Benjamin Franklin	1706–1790	Volume 1	Frederick Douglass	1818–1895	Volume 2
Jupiter Hammon	1711–1806	Volume 1	Herman Melville	1819–1891	Volume 2
Samson Occom	1723–1792	Volume 1	Walt Whitman	1819–1892	Volume 2
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	1735–1813	Volume 1	Harriet E. Wilson	1825–1900	Volume 2
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	1825–1911	Volume 2
John Adams and Abigail Adams	1735–1826	Volume 1	Emily Dickinson	1830–1886	Volume 2
Thomas Paine	1737–1809	Volume 1	Rebecca Harding Davis	1831–1910	Volume 2
Thomas Jefferson	1743–1826	Volume 1	Louisa May Alcott	1832–1888	Volume 2
Olaudah Equiano	1745–1797	Volume 1	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Judith Sargent Murray	1751–1820	Volume 1	Bret Harte	1836–1902	Volume 2
Philip Morin Freneau	1752–1832	Volume 1	Sarah M. B. Piatt	1836–1919	Volume 2
Phillis Wheatley	1753–1784	Volume 1	William Dean Howells	1837–1920	Volume 2
Hannah Webster Foster	1758–1840	Volume 1	Henry Adams	1838–1918	Volume 2
Susanna Haswell Rowson	1762–1824	Volume 1	Ambrose Bierce	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Charles Brockden Brown	1771–1810	Volume 1	Henry James	1843–1916	Volume 2
Washington Irving	1783–1859	Volume 1	Joel Chandler Harris	1848–1908	Volume 2
James Fenimore Cooper	1789–1851	Volume 1			
Catharine Maria Sedgwick	1789–1867	Volume 1			

Sarah Orne Jewett	1849–1909	Volume 2	John Steinbeck	1902–1968	Volume 3
Kate Chopin	1850–1904	Volume 2	Countee Cullen	1903–1946	Volume 3
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	1852–1930	Volume 2	Ayn Rand	1905–1982	Volume 4
Booker T. Washington	1856–1915	Volume 3	Robert Penn Warren	1905–1989	Volume 4
Charles Chesnutt	1858–1932	Volume 2	Richard Wright	1908–1960	Volume 3
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	1860–1935	Volume 2	Theodore Roethke	1908–1963	Volume 4
Edith Wharton	1862–1937	Volume 3	Eudora Welty	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Elizabeth Bishop	1911–1979	Volume 4
W. E. B. DuBois	1868–1963	Volume 3	Tennessee Williams	1911–1983	Volume 4
Edwin Arlington Robinson	1869–1935	Volume 3	John Cheever	1912–1982	Volume 4
Stephen Crane	1871–1900	Volume 2	Robert Hayden	1913–1980	Volume 4
Theodore Dreiser	1871–1945	Volume 3	May Swenson	1913–1989	Volume 4
Langston Hughes	1871–1967	Volume 3	Randall Jarrell	1914–1965	Volume 4
Paul Laurence Dunbar	1872–1906	Volume 2	Bernard Malamud	1914–1986	Volume 4
Willa Cather	1873–1947	Volume 3	Ralph Ellison	1914–1994	Volume 4
Gertrude Stein	1874–1946	Volume 3	Saul Bellow	1915–2005	Volume 4
Robert Frost	1874–1963	Volume 3	Arthur Miller	1915–2005	Volume 4
Jack London	1876–1916	Volume 3	Robert Lowell	1917–1977	Volume 4
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Gwendolyn Brooks	1917–2000	Volume 4
Sherwood Anderson	1876–1942	Volume 3	Shirley Jackson	1919–1965	Volume 4
Carl Sandburg	1878–1967	Volume 3	J. D. Salinger	1919–2010	Volume 4
Wallace Stevens	1879–1955	Volume 3	Ray Bradbury	1920–	Volume 4
William Carlos Williams	1883–1961	Volume 3	Lawrence Ferlinghetti	1920–	Volume 4
Ezra Pound	1885–1972	Volume 3	Richard Wilbur	1921–	Volume 4
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	Alex Haley	1921–1992	Volume 4
Marianne Moore	1887–1972	Volume 3	Jack Kerouac	1922–1969	Volume 4
Eugene O'Neill	1888–1953	Volume 3	Kurt Vonnegut	1922–2007	Volume 4
T. S. Eliot	1888–1965	Volume 3	Denise Levertov	1923–1997	Volume 4
Claude McKay	1890–1948	Volume 3	Joseph Heller	1923–1999	Volume 4
Katherine Anne Porter	1890–1980	Volume 3	James Baldwin	1924–1987	Volume 4
Zora Neale Hurston	1891–1960	Volume 3	Truman Capote	1924–1984	Volume 4
Nella Larsen	1891–1964	Volume 3	Flannery O'Connor	1925–1964	Volume 4
Edna St. Vincent Millay	1892–1950	Volume 3	Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
E. E. Cummings	1894–1962	Volume 3	Harper Lee	1926–	Volume 4
Jean Toomer	1894–1967	Volume 3	Allen Ginsberg	1926–1997	Volume 4
F. Scott Fitzgerald	1896–1940	Volume 3	John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
John Dos Passos	1896–1970	Volume 3	Edward Albee	1928–	Volume 4
William Faulkner	1897–1962	Volume 3	Maya Angelou	1928–	Volume 5
Thornton Wilder	1897–1975	Volume 3	Anne Sexton	1928–1974	Volume 4
Hart Crane	1899–1932	Volume 3	Paule Marshall	1929–	Volume 4
Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961	Volume 3	Adrienne Rich	1929–	Volume 5
			Martin Luther King, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
			Chaim Potok	1929–2002	Volume 4
			Gary Snyder	1930–	Volume 5
			Lorraine Hansberry	1930–1965	Volume 4

Toni Morrison	1931–	Volume 5	Nikki Giovanni	1943–	Volume 5
Sylvia Plath	1932–1963	Volume 4	Alice Walker	1944–	Volume 5
John Updike	1932–2009	Volume 4	August Wilson	1945–2005	Volume 5
Cormac McCarthy	1933–	Volume 5	Tim O’Brien	1946–	Volume 5
Philip Roth	1933–	Volume 4	Yusef Komunyakaa	1947–	Volume 5
N. Scott Momaday	1934–	Volume 4	Leslie Marmon Silko	1948–	Volume 5
Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Julia Alvarez	1950–	Volume 5
Mary Oliver	1935–	Volume 5	Carolyn Forché	1950–	Volume 5
Ken Kesey	1935–2001	Volume 4	Joy Harjo	1951–	Volume 5
Larry McMurtry	1936–	Volume 5	Jimmy Santiago Baca	1952–	Volume 5
Rudolfo Anaya	1937–	Volume 5	Judith Ortiz Cofer	1952–	Volume 5
Joyce Carol Oates	1938–	Volume 5	Rita Dove	1952–	Volume 5
Ishmael Reed	1938–	Volume 5	Gary Soto	1952–	Volume 5
Raymond Carver	1938–1988	Volume 5	Amy Tan	1952–	Volume 5
Toni Cade Bambara	1939–	Volume 5	Sandra Cisneros	1954–	Volume 5
Maxine Hong Kingston	1940–	Volume 5	Louise Erdrich	1954–	Volume 5
Robert Pinsky	1940–	Volume 5	Helena María Viramontes	1954–	Volume 5
Billy Collins	1941–	Volume 5	Barbara Kingsolver	1955–	Volume 5
Simon J. Ortiz	1941–	Volume 5	Chang-rae Lee	1965–	Volume 5
Pat Mora	1942–	Volume 5			

STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS





**STUDENT'S
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
GREAT AMERICAN
WRITERS**

VOLUME III: 1900 TO 1945



STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

VOLUME III: 1900 TO 1945

ROBERT C. EVANS

PATRICIA M. GANTT, GENERAL EDITOR

 **Facts On File**
An imprint of Infobase Publishing

Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers, 1900 to 1945

Copyright © 2010 by Robert C. Evans

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Student's encyclopedia of great American writers / Patricia Gantt, general editor.
v. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: [1] Beginnings to 1830 / Andrea Tinnemeyer — [2] 1830 to 1900 / Paul Crumbley — [3] 1900 to 1945 / Robert C. Evans — [4] 1945 to 1970 / Blake Hobby — [5] 1970 to the present / Patricia Gantt.

ISBN 978-0-8160-6087-0 (hardcover: acid-free paper) ISBN 978-1-4381-3125-2 (e-book) 1. Authors, American—Biography—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. 2. American literature—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. I. Tinnemeyer, Andrea. II. Gantt, Patricia M., 1943–

PS129.S83 2009

810.9'0003—dc22

[B]

2009030783

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text design by Annie O'Donnell
Composition by Mary Susan Ryan-Flynn
Cover printed by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Book printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Date printed: June 2010
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

List of Writers and Works Included	vi	Marianne Moore	332
Series Preface	xi	Eugene O'Neill	343
Volume Introduction	xii	Katherine Anne Porter	360
		Ezra Pound	371
Sherwood Anderson	1	Edwin Arlington Robinson	383
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	13	Carl Sandburg	395
Willa Cather	27	Gertrude Stein	405
Hart Crane	47	John Steinbeck	421
Countee Cullen	57	Wallace Stevens	442
E. E. Cummings	68	Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	454
John Dos Passos	85	Jean Toomer	461
Theodore Dreiser	99	Booker T. Washington	474
W. E. B. DuBois	114	Edith Wharton	484
T. S. Eliot	128	Thornton Wilder	503
William Faulkner	142	William Carlos Williams	513
F. Scott Fitzgerald	166	Richard Wright	529
Robert Frost	184		
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	213	Appendix I: Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i>	549
Ernest Hemingway	224		
Langston Hughes	252	Appendix II: Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i> , by Birth Date	552
Zora Neale Hurston	271		
Nella Larsen	288		
Jack London	298		
Claude McKay	310		
Edna St. Vincent Millay	323		

LIST OF WRITERS AND WORKS INCLUDED

Sherwood Anderson (1876–1942)	1	Hart Crane (1899–1932)	47
<i>Winesburg, Ohio</i> (1919)		“Chaplinesque” (1921)	
“The Book of the Grotesque” (1919)		“At Melville’s Tomb” (1926)	
“Hands” (1919)		“Voyages, I, II, III, IV, V, VI” (1923, 1926)	
“Mother” (1919)		<i>The Bridge</i> (1930)	
“Adventure” (1919)			
“Queer” (1919)			
“Death in the Woods” (1919)			
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša) (1876–1938)	13	Countee Cullen (1903–1946)	57
“Impressions of an Indian Childhood” (1900)		“For a Lady I Know” (1925)	
“The School Days of an Indian Girl” (1900)		“Heritage” (1925)	
“An American Teacher among Indians” (1900)		“Incident” (1925)	
<i>Old Indian Legends</i> (1901)		“Yet Do I Marvel” (1925)	
<i>American Indian Stories</i> (1921)		“From the Dark Tower” (1927)	
		“Uncle Jim” (1927)	
Willa Cather (1873–1947)	27	E. E. Cummings (1894–1962)	68
<i>The Troll Garden</i> (1905)		“Buffalo Bill’s” (1920, 1923)	
“Paul’s Case” (1905)		“in Just-” (1920, 1923)	
<i>O Pioneers!</i> (1913)		<i>The Enormous Room</i> (1922)	
<i>The Song of the Lark</i> (1915)		“the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” (1923)	
<i>My Ántonia</i> (1918)		“next to of course god america i” (1926)	
<i>A Lost Lady</i> (1923)		“i sing of Olaf glad and big” (1931)	
<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i> (1927)		“somewhere i have never traveled, gladly beyond” (1931)	
<i>Shadows on the Rock</i> (1931)		“anyone lived in a pretty how town” (1940)	
“Neighbour Rosicky” (1932)		“my father moved through dooms of love” (1940)	
<i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i> (1940)		“pity this busy monster, manunkind” (1944)	

-
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>John Dos Passos (1896–1970) 85</p> <p><i>Manhattan Transfer</i> (1925)</p> <p><i>42nd Parallel</i> (1930)</p> <p><i>1919</i> (1932)</p> <p><i>The Big Money</i> (1936)</p> | <p>F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) 166</p> <p><i>This Side of Paradise</i> (1919)</p> <p>“The Ice Palace” (1920)</p> <p>“May Day” (1920)</p> <p>“Winter Dreams” (1922)</p> <p><i>The Great Gatsby</i> (1925)</p> <p>“Babylon Revisited” (1931)</p> <p><i>Tender Is the Night</i> (1934)</p> |
| <p>Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945) 99</p> <p><i>Sister Carrie</i> (1900)</p> <p>“Old Rogaum and His Theresa”
(1901, 1918)</p> <p><i>The “Genius”</i> (1915)</p> <p>“The Second Choice” (1918)</p> <p><i>An American Tragedy</i> (1925)</p> | <p>Robert Frost (1874–1963) 184</p> <p>“The Tuft of Flowers” (1906, 1913)</p> <p>“The Pasture” (1913)</p> <p>“After Apple-Picking” (1914)</p> <p>“The Death of the Hired Man” (1914)</p> <p>“Home Burial” (1914)</p> <p>“Mending Wall” (1914)</p> <p>“Birches” (1916)</p> <p>“An Old Man’s Winter Night” (1916)</p> <p>“Out, Out——” (1916)</p> <p>“The Oven Bird” (1916)</p> <p>“The Road Not Taken” (1916)</p> <p>“Design” (1922, 1936)</p> <p>“Nothing Gold Can Stay” (1923)</p> <p>“Stopping by Woods on
a Snowy Evening” (1923)</p> <p>“Once by the Pacific” (1928)</p> <p>“Provide, Provide” (1934, 1936)</p> <p>“Desert Places” (1936)</p> <p>“The Figure a Poem Makes” (1939)</p> <p>“The Gift Outright” (1942)</p> |
| <p>W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) 114</p> <p><i>The Philadelphia Negro</i> (1899)</p> <p><i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (1903)</p> <p>“The Song of the Smoke” (1907)</p> <p><i>The Quest of the Silver Fleece</i> (1911)</p> <p>“Criteria of Negro Art” (1926)</p> | <p>H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)
(1886–1961) 213</p> <p>“Oread” (1914, 1924)</p> <p>“Leda” (1919, 1921)</p> |
| <p>T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) 128</p> <p>“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
(1915)</p> <p>“Sweeney among the Nightingales” (1919)</p> <p>“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)</p> <p>“Gerontion” (1920)</p> <p><i>The Waste Land</i> (1922)</p> <p>“The Hollow Men” (1925)</p> <p>“Journey of the Magi” (1927)</p> | |
| <p>William Faulkner (1897–1962) 142</p> <p><i>The Sound and the Fury</i> (1929)</p> <p><i>As I Lay Dying</i> (1930)</p> <p>“A Rose for Emily” (1930, 1931)</p> <p><i>Light in August</i> (1932)</p> <p><i>Absalom, Absalom!</i> (1936)</p> | |

- "At Baia" (1921)
"Helen" (1924)
The Walls Do Not Fall (1944)
- Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) 224**
In Our Time (1925, 1930)
"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" (1926)
The Sun Also Rises (1926)
"Hills Like White Elephants" (1927)
A Farewell to Arms (1929)
"The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936, 1938)
"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1938)
For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)
The Old Man and the Sea (1952)
- Langston Hughes (1902–1967) 252**
"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
(1921, 1926)
"Mother to Son" (1922, 1926)
"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)
"Mulatto" (1927)
Not without Laughter (1930)
"I, Too" (1932)
"The Weary Blues" (1932)
"The Blues I'm Playing" (1934)
The Big Sea (1940)
"Theme for English B" (1949)
"Dream Boogie" (1951)
"Harlem" (1951)
- Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) 271**
"Spunk" (1925)
"Sweat" (1926)
"How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928)
"The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933)
Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934)
- Mules and Men* (1935)
Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)
- Nella Larsen (1891–1964) 288**
Quicksand (1928)
Passing (1929)
"Sanctuary" (1930)
- Jack London (1876–1916) 298**
"The Law of Life" (1901)
The Call of the Wild (1903)
The Sea-Wolf (1904)
"To Build a Fire" (1908)
- Claude McKay (1890–1948) 310**
"Harlem Shadows" (1918, 1922)
"If We Must Die" (1919, 1922)
"The Lynching" (1919, 1922)
"Exhortation: Summer, 1919"
(1920, 1922)
"America" (1921, 1922)
"Outcast" (1922)
Home to Harlem (1928)
- Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) 323**
"First Fig" (1920)
"Recuerdo" (1922)
"I, Being Born a Woman" (1923)
"What lips my lips have kissed" (1923)
"Love is not all" (1931)
- Marianne Moore (1887–1972) 332**
"The Fish" (1921, 1935)
"Poetry" (1921, 1935)
"To a Snail" (1924)
"What Are Years?" (1941, 1967)

- “The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing” (1944)
 “Nevertheless” (1944)
 “Baseball and Writing” (1961, 1966)
 “Granite and Steel” (1966)
- Eugene O’Neill (1888–1953) 343**
The Emperor Jones (1920)
The Hairy Ape (1922)
Mourning Becomes Electra (1931)
The Iceman Cometh (1939)
Moon for the Misbegotten (1943)
Long Day’s Journey into Night (1945)
- Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980) 360**
 “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1929)
 “Flowering Judas” (1930)
 “Noon Wine” (1937)
 “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” (1938)
Ship of Fools (1962)
- Ezra Pound (1885–1972) 371**
 “Portrait d’une Femme” (1912)
 “A Virginal” (1912)
 “In a Station of the Metro” (1913, 1916)
 “A Pact” (1913, 1916)
 “The Rest” (1913, 1916)
 “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” (1915)
- Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935) 383**
 “Credo” (1896)
 “The House on the Hill” (1896)
 “Luke Havergal” (1896)
 “Reuben Bright” (1896)
 “Richard Cory” (1896)
- “Miniver Cheevy” (1910)
 “Eros Turannos” (1913, 1916)
 “Mr. Flood’s Party” (1921)
- Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) 395**
 “Chicago” (1914, 1916)
 “Child of the Romans” (1916)
 “Fog” (1916)
 “Halsted Street Car” (1916)
 “Cool Tombs” (1918)
 “Grass” (1918)
 “Prairie Waters by Night” (1918)
- Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) 405**
Three Lives (1909)
Tender Buttons (1914)
The Making of Americans (1925)
The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933)
- John Steinbeck (1902–1968) 421**
 “The Chrysanthemums” (1937, 1938)
 “The Leader of the People” (1937)
Of Mice and Men (1937)
The Red Pony (1937, 1945)
The Grapes of Wrath (1939)
Cannery Row (1945)
The Pearl (1945, 1947)
Travels with Charley in Search of America (1962)
- Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) 442**
 “Sunday Morning” (1915, 1923)
 “Anecdote of the Jar” (1923)
 “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” (1923)
 “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1923)

- “Peter Quince at the Clavier”
(1923, 1931)
- “The Snow Man” (1931)
- “Of Modern Poetry” (1942)
- “Not Ideas about the Thing but
the Thing Itself” (1954)
- “The Plain Sense of Things” (1954)
- Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)**
(1865–1914) **454**
- “Mrs. Spring Fragrance” (1910, 1912)
- “The Chinese Lily” (1912)
- Jean Toomer (1894–1967)** **461**
- “Seventh Street” (1922, 1923)
- “Song of the Son” (1922, 1923)
- “Blood-Burning Moon” (1923)
- “Box Seat” (1923)
- Cane* (1923)
- “Karintha” (1923)
- Booker T. Washington**
(1856–1915) **474**
- “Atlanta Compromise Speech”
 (“Atlanta Exposition Address”) (1895)
- Up from Slavery* (1901)
- Edith Wharton (1862–1937)** **484**
- “Souls Belated” (1899)
- The House of Mirth* (1905)
- “The Eyes” (1910)
- Ethan Frome* (1911)
- Summer* (1917)
- The Age of Innocence* (1920)
- “Roman Fever” (1934, 1936)
- Thornton Wilder (1897–1975)** **503**
- The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927)
- Our Town* (1938)
- William Carlos Williams**
(1883–1961) **513**
- “The Young Housewife” (1916, 1917)
- “Tract” (1917)
- “Portrait of a Lady” (1920, 1934)
- “The Widow’s Lament in Springtime”
(1921)
- “To Elsie” (1923)
- “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923)
- “Spring and All” (1923)
- “The Dead Baby” (1927, 1935)
- “This Is Just to Say” (1934)
- Paterson* (1946–1958)
- “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”
(1962)
- Richard Wright (1908–1960)** **529**
- Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938, 1940)
- “Long Black Song” (1938, 1940)
- “The Man Who Was Almost a Man”
(1939, 1961)
- Native Son* (1940)
- “The Man Who Lived Underground”
(1942, 1944, 1961)
- Black Boy* (1945)
- American Hunger* (1977)

SERIES PREFACE

The *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* is a unique reference intended to help high school students meet standards for literature education and prepare themselves for literature study in college. It offers extensive entries on important authors, as well as providing additional interpretive helps for students and their teachers. The set has been designed and written in the context of the national standards for English language arts, created by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, the two professional organizations that have the most at stake in high school language arts education (see <http://www.ncte.org/standards>).

The volume editors and many of the contributors to this set not only are university scholars but also have experience in secondary school literature education, ranging from working as readers of Advanced Placement examinations, to developing high school literature curricula, to having taught in high school English classrooms. Although the volume editors all have extensive experience as scholars and university professors, they all have strong roots in high school education and have drawn on their experience to ensure that entries are stylistically appealing and contain the necessary content for students.

The set's five volumes are organized chronologically, as many literature textbooks and anthologies are. This system is convenient for students and also facilitates cross-disciplinary study, increasingly common in high schools. For example, a section on the Civil War in history class might be accompanied by the study of Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane in English class. To help students find what they need, each volume contains two lists of all the authors included in the set: one organized chronologically and the other alphabetically.

Within each volume, authors are presented alphabetically. Each author entry contains a biography

and then subentries on the author's major works. After each subentry on a work is a set of questions for discussion and/or writing. Another set of broader discussion questions appears near the end of each author entry, followed by a bibliography. The entire five-volume set therefore contains more than 1000 discussion questions. These questions make up perhaps the most important and useful features of the set, encouraging further creative thought and helping students get started on their own writing. Many of the questions reference not only the subject literary work or author but also related works and authors, thus helping students to make additional literary connections, as emphasized by the literature standards.

The authors and works included in the set were selected primarily from among those most popular in the high school classrooms—that is, those often featured in secondary-school literary anthologies and textbooks; those often appearing on age-appropriate reading lists; and those most often searched for in Facts On File's online literary database Bloom's Literature Online, used primarily in high schools. In addition, we have endeavored to include a range of writers from different backgrounds in all periods, as well as writers who, though not perhaps among the very most popular today, appear to have been unjustly neglected and are gaining in popularity. No selection could be perfect, and those writers favored by scholars and critics are not always as popular in the high school classroom, but the general editor and volumes editors have attempted to make the set's coverage as useful to students as possible.

Above all, we hope that this set serves not only to instruct but also to inspire students with the love of literature shared by all the editors and contributors who worked on this set.

Patricia M. Gantt

VOLUME INTRODUCTION

The period from 1900 to 1945 is perhaps the most important era in American literature, at least in terms of demonstrable impact and lasting influence. This period coincided with an unparalleled rise in American economic and military power. The United States, with a rapidly growing population drawn from all over the world, had at last become an undeniably significant player on the international stage. By the beginning of the 20th century, the United States was increasingly becoming a recognized center of innovation and progress in science, industry, technology, and medicine, and its democratic political system and constantly expanding economy held an enormous appeal to countless immigrants from around the globe. Millions of people were “voting with their feet”—choosing to leave the lands of their birth in order to take up residence in the so-called New World, which still seemed rich with the promise of economic prosperity and individual freedom.

Meanwhile, the horrific devastation wrought by World War I (1914–18), combined with the Russian Revolution of 1917, left Europe weaker, poorer, and more divided than ever. The United States, on the other hand, seemed increasingly rich and powerful. Until the early 1940s it faced no obvious military threats, and its own mostly minor military adventures had tended to be successful. The Great Depression of the 1930s struck a huge blow to American self-confidence, but that depression was a worldwide phenomenon that afflicted many other countries even more severely than it did the United States. Even during this dark time, the United States was able to avoid sliding into the kind of dictatorial tyranny that had been imposed in such countries as Russia, Italy, Germany, and Japan. When World War II concluded, much of Europe lay in ruins. By 1945, the two most obvious “superpowers” were the United States and the Soviet Union, and the stage was set for an even greater and more aston-

ishing growth of American might and prosperity. The period from 1900 to 1945 had thus seen the emergence of the United States as perhaps the most influential nation on Earth.

A similar rise in American influence occurred in the literary history of this era. In the early decades of the 19th century, a British essayist had very famously, somewhat smugly, but all-too-pertinently asked, “Who reads an American book?” At that time, the answer to the question seemed obvious—and obviously discouraging to any champion of American literature. During the course of the 19th century, however, the United States began to produce a number of writers who would gain an international readership and win the increasing respect of serious readers everywhere. Edgar Allan Poe was one of these; Nathaniel Hawthorne was another; Walt Whitman and Mark Twain were two more; and Henry James (who nevertheless published some of his most significant novels after 1900) can also be added to the list. Interestingly enough, some of the most important American writers of the 19th century were not really fully appreciated (either at home or abroad) until later—sometimes much later. Thus, the first real collection of Emily Dickinson’s poems was not published until 1890, while the great revival of interest in Herman Melville did not take place until the 1920s. Kate Chopin, meanwhile, did much of her own best writing in the 1890s (she published her great novel, *The Awakening*, in 1899), but her works were largely forgotten until the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, some of the greatest of all American writers of the 19th century were not fully appreciated—and did not begin to exercise real influence—until well after that century had ended.

By the end of the 19th century, the United States was obviously poised to make a major contribution to world literature. It increasingly had the kind of wealth and other resources necessary to nurture

and sustain an educated readership; it had a rapidly growing population for whom reading was a major national pastime (although the era of movies and radio would develop rapidly from 1900 to 1945); and, perhaps most important, it had an increasing, and increasingly self-confident, sense of itself as an important and consequential nation that deserved an important literature of its own.

American writers were not long in responding to this challenge and this opportunity. Among the authors who emerged and flourished during the period 1900–1945 are some who are difficult to classify in any obvious way, although it might be useful to think of them as “independents.” These were writers who were not necessarily connected (at least for long) with any clear-cut literary movement or any narrowly defined demographic group. They tended to chart their own idiosyncratic paths, sometimes writing in ways that now seem broadly traditional, sometimes striking out in unexpected directions, but rarely following any obviously predetermined course. Jack London (1876–1916)—with his stories and novels set in the Far North or on the broad seas—might be considered such a writer. His straightforward style and adventurous narratives have long made him one of the most popular of significant authors, both at home and abroad, and few writers are more identifiably “American” than he.

Another obviously homegrown craftsman was Carl Sandburg (1878–1967), poet of Chicago and the Midwest and one of the best-selling major poets in American history. As was Sandburg, two other authors often identified with the Midwest were the novelists and short story writers Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941) and Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), while the poets Edward Arlington Robinson (1869–1935) and Robert Frost (1874–1963) have in common not only a strong New England background but also a penchant for writing in more traditional forms and fashions than was common during much of the modern period. The same tendency to write in familiar, fairly accessible ways can also be seen in the novels and short fiction of John Steinbeck (1902–68) and in the novels and plays

of Thornton Wilder (1897–1975). None of these writers seems (either in topics, themes, or methods) an especially radical or innovative author; all are among the great writers to whom most “common readers” can most readily relate.

The same might also be said of two of the most important of all the American fiction writers of the 20th century—F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) and Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961). Few novels are as well respected and well beloved by both academic critics and popular readers as Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and although Fitzgerald never created another such obvious masterpiece, his reputation nevertheless has only grown with time. Hemingway, in the meantime, managed to fashion perhaps the most influential and most widely imitated of all American prose styles, and by the time of his suicide he had become, around the world, almost the embodiment of the iconic American writer. His death was mourned in countries everywhere, for he had come to be considered not only a significant author but also a major public figure.

William Faulkner (1897–1962)—whom many regard as the greatest American novelist of the 20th century—might also be classified as a leading independent, but with Faulkner (as also, to some extent, with Hemingway), one begins to sense that a different sort of label might be appropriate. Faulkner (more obviously than Fitzgerald) is one of the first of the great innovators or modernists—those writers who began to do unexpected things with structure, characterization, and style. Faulkner often writes as if he does not care whether he is understood; his works—like the works of many other modernists—often pose difficult challenges for their readers and depart from traditional forms and fashions in deliberately provocative ways. *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* are far less accessible and far more obviously puzzling novels than anything by Fitzgerald or Hemingway (although Hemingway’s early work titled *in our time* poses a few of the same kinds of challenges). A similar penchant for restless innovation and experimentation can be seen in the dramas of Eugene O’Neill (1888–1953) and in the early fiction of John Dos Passos (1896–1970).

Other writers are even better characterized by the term *modernist* and even more difficult. Many of these writers owe obvious (and frequently acknowledged) debts to Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), who considered herself a genius and whose confident self-evaluation was endorsed by many others. Stein often wrote in ways that seem deliberately maddening and impenetrable; ease and clarity of communication were not her primary goals. Her writings often force readers (if they have the patience) to puzzle over the implications of practically every single word or syllable; her style is innovative and experimental in the extreme. Similarly experimental—especially in his later writings—was the poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972), whose influence on the arguably greater poet T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), as well as on the host of other writers whom Pound championed and defended, was enormous. Indeed the whole period from the 1920s to the late 1940s has been labeled “The Pound Era,” and the writers (usually poets) often associated with this sort of “high modernism” include such major figures as Hart Crane (1899–1932), E. E. Cummings (1894–1962), Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), and William Carlos Williams (1883–1963). Each of these authors writes in his distinctive fashion, and none of them makes many concessions to the traditional expectations of conservative readers. Their poems are often unconventional in form, diction, subject, and tone.

American literature in the period from 1900 to 1945 was, however, increasingly untraditional not only in its structures, styles, and themes but also in the kinds of authors who participated in its creation. Women, for instance, were more and more accepted as major literary figures. Of course, females had long played a significant role in the creation of American popular fiction and poetry (one thinks of Hawthorne’s complaint, in the mid-1850s, about the “damned mob of scribbling women”), but, until the early 20th century, the works of relatively few women writers were admitted into the canon of serious American literature. That prejudice began to subside as more and more talented American women writers were able to publish their works. Edith

Wharton (1862–1937), for instance, wrote fiction that was often compared—in style, topics, and achievement—to that of her friend Henry James. Her contemporary Willa Cather (1876–1947), as did many other significant writers of this period, often set her novels and stories in the Midwest. Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980) wrote novels and stories on a wide range of topics and themes. Among the poets, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was one of the most accessible, Marianne Moore (1887–1972) was one of the most innovative, and H. D. (the pen name of Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961) was talented and unfortunately underappreciated.

Perhaps the most significant change in the period was the emergence of more and more great African-American writers. Although not primarily a creative writer, Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) not only wrote a highly important autobiography but also helped inspire the confidence and unleash the creativity of his entire community. W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963), although mainly a writer of nonfiction, also composed novels and poems. By the decade of the 1920s, African Americans had become a major and growing force in U.S. literature. Claude McKay (1890–1948) became the first best-selling black writer with his novel *Home to Harlem*; Countee Cullen (1903–46) wrote verse that was traditional in style but that explored unusual racial themes; Langston Hughes (1902–1967) expressed himself distinctively in a wide range of forms and genres; Jean Toomer (1894–1967) wrote one of the most innovative of all the modernist works in his combination of fiction and poems titled *Cane*; and Richard Wright (1908–60) produced an immensely popular and important novel in *Native Son* and a highly influential autobiography in *Black Boy* (among many other notable works). In addition, two of the most significant women writers of the period were also African American: the irrepressibly vital and talented Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) and the gifted Nella Larsen (1891–1964), both of whom fell silent far too soon.

Finally, two other writers discussed in this volume deserve special mention as pathbreak-

ers. Sui Sin Far, the pen name of Edith Maude Eaton (1865–1914), is regarded today as the first significant Asian-American creative writer, while Zitkala-Ša, the pen-name of Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (1876–1938), is widely honored as one of the first great Native American authors. Both women blazed trails that other members of their ethnic groups would later explore, and each, in her different way, symbolizes the increasingly diverse and ever-evolving nature of American literature in the period 1890–1945. By the end of World War II, American literature had become—and was still becoming—almost as full of variety as the American population itself.

In 1900 American literature still often seemed peripheral or unimportant to many readers in Europe and elsewhere. By 1945, however, the impact and influence of American writers had become undeniable. The Nobel Prize in literature was inaugurated in 1901, and in the years since the founding of the prize, seven Americans active in the period covered by this volume received the award: Sinclair Lewis in 1930, Eugene O’Neill in 1936, Pearl S. Buck in 1938, T. S. Eliot in 1948, William Faulkner in 1949, Ernest Hemingway in 1954, and John Steinbeck in 1962. In the years since then, only two Nobel Prizes in literature have been awarded to American authors who

wrote primarily in English: Saul Bellow in 1976 and Toni Morrison in 1993. (Isaac Bashevis Singer won in 1978 primarily for his works in Yiddish, while Joseph Brodsky won in 1987 mainly for his Russian poems.) Of course, winning the Nobel Prize is hardly an infallible sign of literary excellence, but the list of award winners does imply a great deal about the high regard in which many American writers from the first half of the 20th century were held throughout the world, in their own times and afterward. No one today would seriously doubt the literary importance of O’Neill or Eliot or Faulkner or Hemingway (although there is a bit more argument about Steinbeck). In the period from 1900 to 1945, American literature not only came of age but also began to set the pace. There were more distinct—and distinctive—voices in American literature during this period than at any previous era, and, for the first time, most of the rest of the world had begun to listen closely.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For help with the proofreading of this volume, I wish to thank Ruth Evans, Sarah Fredericks, and Donna Y. Smith.

Robert C. Evans



SHERWOOD ANDERSON (1876–1942)

[My mother's] keen observations of the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of life.

(*Winesburg, Ohio*)

Although Sherwood Anderson's status as a writer is not as high today as it once was, his work remains important not only in its own right but also because of his influence on other authors of even greater significance. Malcolm Cowley has called Anderson "the only story teller of his generation who left his mark on the style and vision of the generation that followed. Hemingway, Faulkner, Wolfe, Steinbeck, Caldwell, Saroyan, Henry Miller . . . each of these owes an unmistakable debt to Anderson, and their names might stand for dozens of others" (1). For years Anderson struggled to achieve his dream of being a significant author, and for a very brief time he was widely considered one of the best writers his country had yet produced. In his final decade, however, his standing fell, and in the decades since his death his reputation has never quite recovered. He is remembered mostly as the author of one crucial book: *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of interrelated stories that amount to a kind of novel. The book had an immediate impact when it appeared; it was eventually translated into numerous foreign languages, and it has never gone out of print. It remains today a widely read "classic" of American literature.

Anderson was born on September 13, 1876, in Camden, Ohio, as the third child of Irwin and Emma Anderson (Burbank 15). In 1884 the Andersons moved to the small town of Clyde, Ohio (which would later be the model for the fictional village of

Winesburg), and it was here in Clyde that Sherwood Anderson spent his most formative years. He would later regard Clyde as (at least in part) a "nostalgic symbol of pre-industrial innocence," but the town was also "an agricultural village which, long since settled, lay stagnant between an exhausted agrarian era and a nascent industrial age" (Burbank 22–23). Anderson's attitudes toward the place were therefore always somewhat ambivalent: For him it would come to represent both the comforts and the confinements of small-town existence. Similarly ambivalent were Anderson's attitudes toward his father, a man whose financial failures often left his family in dire straits but whose gift for storytelling his son would eventually both admire and emulate. For his mother, however, young Sherwood always felt both admiration and sympathy, for she "seemed to have all the desirable qualities that his father lacked; and, as he rejected Irwin's irresponsibility, he embraced the qualities of stoic endurance, self-sacrifice, and sympathetic curiosity that, to his mind, his mother possessed" (Burbank 26–27). Partly in reaction against his father's failures, Sherwood was a determined, hardworking youth whose willingness to take on all kinds of employment, "from newsboy to stable hand," earned him the nickname "Jobby" (D. Anderson ix).

In 1895, Anderson's mother died. The following year Anderson himself left Clyde and headed for Chicago, where he worked as a laborer. In 1898

he joined the military to fight in the Spanish-American War, but by the time he was posted to Cuba in 1899 the war had already ended. Later that year he was back near Clyde, working on a farm and then taking classes at Wittenburg Academy (in Springfield, Ohio), from which he graduated in June 1900. He then returned to Chicago, where (from 1900 to 1906) he not only sold advertisements but also wrote them. At both tasks he was highly successful, and by 1904 he was able to marry Cornelia Lane, a well-traveled and well-educated young woman who had had the kind of financially comfortable life Anderson himself desired. Within three years children began to arrive, and for a number of years the Andersons' marriage was happy and their existence together was conventionally respectable. In 1906 Anderson moved "to Cleveland as president of United Factories Company, a mail-order jobbing agency" (Burbank 15), and in 1907 he moved to Elyria, Ohio, becoming president of a company that prospered by selling paint by mail. From 1907 to 1912 he wrote four novels in any time he could spare from his company: *Mary Cochran*, *Talbot Whittingham*, *Windy McPherson's Son*, and *Marching Men*. By this point he had three children, a flourishing business, and a reputation in Elyria as a solid citizen who also dabbled in writing.

It was in 1912, however, that Anderson's life changed dramatically. He had been becoming increasingly frustrated with a life divided between business and creative writing, and "one afternoon late in November, 1912, while dictating a letter to his secretary, he suddenly broke off in mid-sentence, walked out of his office, and trudged along the railroad tracks toward Cleveland, where he was found a few days later wandering aimlessly and talking incoherently" (Burbank 19). After being hospitalized briefly in Cleveland and then returning to Elyria for a short stay, Anderson left his wife and children and headed back to Chicago, where he earned his living once more in advertising while devoting his main energies to his literary ambitions. He met and mingled with many other writers who were then contributing to the so-called Chicago Renaissance, in which Anderson himself now became a main force, and in 1915–16

he composed the stories that would later appear in *Winesburg, Ohio*. His marriage to Cornelia ended in 1915; a new marriage (to the less conventional Tennessee Mitchell, a sculptor) began the following year. In 1916 his novel *Windy McPherson's Son* was published, followed in 1917 by *Marching Men* and in 1918 by a collection of prose poems called *Mid-American Chants*. It was not until 1919, however, with the publication of *Winesburg, Ohio*, that Anderson's fame began. The book impressed many readers and reviewers as something new in American fiction; nevertheless, it also offended less adventurous readers, who disliked its dark tone and allegedly tawdry themes. Despite (or perhaps partly because of) these negative responses, he was admired by "advanced" intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic, and his volume began to be translated into various foreign languages.

Numerous works in varied genres followed *Winesburg, Ohio*, including *Poor White* (a novel), which appeared in 1921, along with *The Triumph of the Egg*, a collection of stories or impressions of life in the United States that included reproductions of sculptures by Anderson's wife and verse by Anderson. In addition, that same year Anderson met the young ERNEST HEMINGWAY (who admired him greatly, at least for the moment), and he also visited Europe, where he was warmly welcomed by such notable writers as GERTRUDE STEIN and James Joyce. He also won a prize of \$2,000 given by the *Dial* magazine and was now able to make a break from the advertising business for good, but in 1922 his relationship with his second wife also broke down. However, a new romantic relationship—with Elizabeth Prall—had begun. In 1923 he published a novel titled (appropriately enough) *Many Marriages*, followed by another that same year called *Horses and Men*. An autobiography (*A Story Teller's Story*) appeared in 1924, the year in which Anderson finally divorced Tennessee and married Elizabeth Prall. In 1925 both *The Modern Writer* (in which he reflected on his own craft and career) and a new novel, *Dark Laughter*, which was soon parodied by Hemingway, were published. Yet another novel, *Tar*, appeared in 1926, as did *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook*, containing more refle-

tions on writing and on being a writer. In 1927 he published *A New Testament*, a collection of poetic prose. In that same year he not only returned to Europe but also purchased a farm, house, and two newspapers in Marion, Virginia, where he hoped to live once more the small-town existence he knew so well and (to some degree) missed so much. This plan, though, did not last long, and in general Anderson felt restless and dissatisfied during this period of his life. Both 1928 and 1929 were unsettled years for him, and indeed in 1929 his marriage to Elizabeth deteriorated in the same year that America at large was entering the Great Depression. Nonetheless, during that year he published *Hello Towns!* (a collection of his writings for his newspapers), *Nearer the Grass Roots* (a pair of essays), and *Alice and The Lost Novel* (two reflective pieces of fiction).

In 1930 Anderson met Eleanor Copenhaver, and, with her, began to take a more active role in left-wing politics. His support of laborers' struggles made him briefly sympathetic to communism, though his views were never explicitly Marxist. In 1931 he published *Perhaps Women*, a miscellaneous collection of thoughts on the ways modern man was "losing his manhood to the machines," in which he suggested that "whatever hope remains for man in the factories lies in women, who are the real sources of strength in an industrial society" (D. Anderson 119–120). The next year he published *Beyond Desire* (another novel) and officially divorced his third wife, an event that allowed him to marry Eleanor Copenhaver in July 1933. That same year brought the election as president of Franklin Roosevelt (whom Anderson favored), and the publication of *Death in the Woods and Other Stories*. In 1934 *Winesburg, Ohio* was produced as a play in a script written by Anderson, who also that year published a group of brief prose writings titled *No Swank*. In 1935 *Puzzled America*, a group of essays based on his travels, was published, followed in 1936 by *Kit Brandon*, another novel. In 1937 dramatic versions of *Winesburg, Ohio*; *The Triumph of the Egg*; and *Mother* were issued, and Anderson was also elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. By 1938 he was at work on

various novels and had begun his *Memoirs*, and in 1939 he composed *Home Town*, a lengthy essay not published until 1940. Anderson died on March 8, 1941, at Colon, in the Panama Canal Zone, "of peritonitis, while en route to a good-will tour of South America" (Burbank 17). Even after his death, however, his publishing life had not quite ended, for it was not until 1942 that *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* appeared in print.

The fact that Anderson died while on a diplomatic mission suggests something of the status he still enjoyed, both in the United States and abroad, at the end of his life. Meanwhile, the fact that he could publish book after book throughout the 1920s and 1930s implies that there were still a decent market for his writings and a continuing interest in his opinions. Nevertheless, in the final decade and a half of his life, his career was experiencing a kind of slowly darkening eclipse; the more (and the more frequently) he published, the less he attained the kind of widespread respect he had once enjoyed, especially from major literary figures. Other, younger writers, such as Hemingway and WILLIAM FAULKNER (both of whom Anderson had known and both of whom he had significantly influenced), would eventually surpass him in critical renown and public acclaim, and Anderson would increasingly be remembered mostly for one book (*Winesburg, Ohio*) as well as a number of separate stories (such as "The Egg"). Even this achievement, however, deserves our respect. How many other creative writers, after all, are remembered even slightly, and how many others ever have the kind of major impact on their own contemporaries that Anderson once enjoyed? *Winesburg, Ohio* has never gone out of print and is never likely to do so. It is still the book on which Anderson's reputation is built, and in that respect, at least, his standing is—and is likely to remain—as solid as almost any writer could hope to achieve.

Winesburg, Ohio (1919)

Winesburg, Ohio is the work that made—and continues to sustain—Anderson's literary reputation.

A series or cycle of interrelated short stories and sketches, the book is unified in various ways. The most obvious of these kinds of unity is implied by its title: The stories are set in the fictional village of Winesburg (based on Clyde, Ohio, where Anderson was raised). Recurring places and characters appear in different particular tales, so that by the end of the book the reader has a fairly comprehensive sense of the geography, citizens, history, circumstances, and style of life of Anderson's fictional village.

The most important recurring character in the book is George Willard, a young reporter for the *Winesburg Eagle* newspaper, who is the protagonist (or central focus) in some tales and who is an observer or secondary character in others. Willard is absent altogether from a few stories and is mentioned only in passing in some others, but for the most part it is Willard's presence, in one way or another, that helps lend the book much of its continuity. Individual stories can be read and enjoyed in and of themselves, but when read from cover to cover the book coheres, partly because it charts the development of Willard's own character and insights. He is a more mature, more understanding character at the end of the book than at its start: Through his interaction with the other characters, he has grown in many ways. It is this growth, ironically, that makes him ready to leave his hometown in the book's brief final story, appropriately titled "Departure."

The book is also unified in other ways. Its tone, for instance, is almost uniformly dark and bleak. Little humor or joy pervades the existence of Winesburg's citizens; many of them lead lives (in Thoreau's famous phrase) of "quiet desperation," and their interactions with each other and with George are often edgy and tense. Unhappiness, loneliness, fear, awkwardness, embarrassment, dissatisfaction, and sometimes even anger are common themes; the characters often feel isolated even when they superficially communicate, and in general Winesburg seems a fundamentally sorry (and sorrowful) place. Anderson deliberately sought to present a gallery of "grotesque" characters—characters whose lives have all become, in one way or another, distorted, inflexible, or unbalanced. His book shocked many contemporary readers because of its often blunt depiction of

sexual topics and its frequent presentation of neurotic, obsessive personalities. The total picture that emerges of Winesburg, Ohio, is of a place that is often unlovely and unloving, and yet Anderson's purpose is not primarily satirical. Rather, he seeks to show small-town life in America as it really was, in all its existential loneliness, and his ultimate attitude toward his characters is not one of harsh judgment but of understanding, sympathy, and compassion.

Character is more important in *Winesburg, Ohio* than plot. In other words, Anderson is less interested in what the town's citizens do than in who they are; his focus is less on their actions per se than on the ways their behavior reveals their personalities and psychology. In particular, he is interested in their psychological depths and complexities—in the ways their minds and motives are conflicted, torn, and complex. Stories tend to build toward moments of revelation in which characters unveil themselves in some memorable fashion, either to themselves, to each other, or to the reader. The stories are usually told from the point of view of an omniscient (or "all-knowing") narrator who shares his knowledge of the characters' pasts and presents, including his insights into their innermost thoughts and feelings. The narrator will often address readers directly (thus giving some tales an air of intimate chattiness) and will also often call attention, in other ways, to the storytelling process. The language used is generally simple, plain, and direct, often featuring short, unadorned, declarative sentences but also often emphasizing recurring key words or images, such as *hands* or *adventure* or *fear*. Anderson's method often involves such "oral" storytelling techniques as "the laying in at the beginning of blocks of background before the story proper is taken up; the apparent wandering away from the story because of some associational interest provoked by the mention of a name, object, or place; the frequent authorial intrusions in the form of 'insights' and self-dramatizations; the shifts in time, and the occasional stopping of the story to lay in apparently overlooked materials necessary to the 'point' of the tale" (Thurston 305). Anderson disliked plot-driven tales featuring rigid, predictable structures; his own style and

structure are therefore looser, more fluid, and (like the characters themselves) highly idiosyncratic. He attempts to catch each main character “at an essential moment in time that reveals a series of brief, intuitive, but true glimpses of the anguish of the human heart. Each story reveals the essence of the central character’s life as Anderson knows it” (D. Anderson 38). Yet the characters, for all their seeming peculiarities, are also emblematic: They symbolize the lonely lives most people lead, and it is this fundamental theme of alienation that makes them and their sometimes apparently bizarre experiences relevant to the lives of Anderson’s readers.

Individual stories from *Winesburg, Ohio*, are discussed in the sections that follow.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Anderson’s uses of recurring characters, places, and themes with those of some other writer of short fiction, such as Kate Chopin or James Joyce. For example, compare two different stories in which George Willard appears with Chopin’s stories titled “At the ’Cadian Ball” and “The Storm.” How do Chopin and Anderson use irony in their presentation of recurring characters?
2. Trace George Willard’s evolution throughout *Winesburg, Ohio*; how does he develop in psychological or moral terms as the book progresses? In what ways is he more insightful, understanding, and sensitive by the end of the book than he was at the beginning?
3. The critic Lionel Trilling has written that in “Anderson’s world there are many emotions, or rather many instances of a few emotions, but there are very few sights, sounds, and smells, very little of the stuff of actuality” (480–481). Do you agree? Focus on a particular story in your discussion of Trilling’s claims.
4. Anderson’s style of writing has been compared to the techniques of impressionist and postimpressionist painters. Research their techniques and then discuss whether you think the comparison is valid. For instance, how is Anderson similar to these painters in his focus on everyday life and unheroic subjects?
5. How do Anderson’s style, tone, techniques, and attitudes compare or contrast with those found in the *Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters? For example, how do the works differ in the narrative points of view they employ? Is Anderson’s book as cynical as Masters’s work?
6. Compare and contrast the tone, technique, and themes of *Winesburg, Ohio*, with those of THORNTON WILDER’s *Our Town*. Which work presents a grimmer picture of small-town life? What “morals,” if any, are implied by the two works? Which work is more innovative in the techniques it uses?
7. Which stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* do you find most effective? Which do you find least effective? In both cases, explain why. Discuss such matters as characterization, style, tone, and structure.
8. Trace and analyze the use of a key term—such as *hands* or *adventure*—throughout the tales. How does Anderson use such terms for symbolic purposes? How does the recurrence of such terms lend unity to the whole work, but sometimes also contribute to the irony of the book?
9. Analyze one particular story in detail, explaining how all of its parts cohere and how they reinforce one another. For example, how does the story maintain consistency in characterization? How does it use foreshadowing and/or irony? What theme or themes help unify the work?
10. Trace one particular theme—such as loneliness or love—throughout the collection of tales. How does Anderson manage to prevent his use of the theme from becoming monotonous? How does he explore different facets of the same theme in different stories? How is his treatment of the theme affected by his presentation of different kinds of characters?

“The Book of the Grotesque” (1919)

An incapacitated old writer talks about deaths in the Civil War with an emotional old carpenter, who lost a brother in the conflict and who has arrived to raise the writer’s bed so that he can glimpse trees outside his window. After the

carpenter leaves, the writer begins to imagine “a long procession of figures before his eyes” who represent all the people he has ever known and who now appear before him as “grotesques” (S. Anderson 22). The writer labors on a book discussing this vision, the essence of which is that people become grotesques when any one of them embraces only one limited “truth” to the exclusion of others, thereby turning each “truth” into a “falsehood” (S. Anderson 24).

This brief sketch forms a kind of thematic prologue to Anderson's cycle of short stories titled *Winesburg, Ohio*. Anderson, in fact, originally planned to call this whole volume *The Book of the Grotesque* but was persuaded by his publisher to give it instead its present famous title (Small 17). The present prologue nevertheless announces the main theme of the book—a book that will focus, in one story after another, on the ways individuals have distorted their lives (or seen them distorted) by limiting themselves (or being limited by their society) to narrow, unbalanced ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and living. Anderson implies that any approach to life that may be attractive or appealing in its own right can become a straitjacket (although sometimes even a “beautiful” or “amusing” straitjacket [S. Anderson 23]) if it dominates a person's entire existence. The old writer obviously symbolizes, on at least some levels, not only Anderson himself but also the narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio*, as well as George Willard, the book's main character (Small 13, 18, 21). Meanwhile, the unpublished book the old writer composes resembles, at least in some respects, Anderson's own published collection of stories (Small 21). The prologue also introduces such main elements of the rest of *Winesburg, Ohio* as an emphasis on human suffering (in the tale of the old carpenter), the importance of sympathetic understanding (in the response of the old writer), the importance of the imagination and of the artist's penetrating insight (in the description of the old writer's vision of the procession of grotesques), and the tendency of many of the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* to move toward moments of insight or revelation (Small 21, 23).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How are the themes, imagery, or phrasing of this sketch typical of the rest of the book? In what ways are the characters of *Winesburg, Ohio* “grotesque” in the senses outlined here? What imagery of limitation can you find in later sections of the work?
2. In what ways is Captain Ahab, in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a “grotesque” according to the old writer's definition? How is Ahab's life narrow and constricted, and how does his obsession with the white whale affect the lives of his crew?
3. What do you think of the old writer's idea that all truths are originally beautiful, including such truths as “poverty,” “profligacy,” “carelessness,” and “abandon” (S. Anderson 23)? Do you agree that everything that is true is also beautiful? Explain your logic.
4. The narrator of this sketch contends that the old writer himself was “in danger of becoming a grotesque” (S. Anderson 24). In what sense does the old man run the risk? Is it a risk that Anderson himself entirely avoided? In other words, is there any sense in which Anderson himself ultimately embraced a narrow or one-sided vision of human life?
5. How has the term *grotesque* usually been used in discussions of literature, and how does the old writer's use of that term resemble or depart from the usual definitions? How does the old writer's definition of the term differ (for instance) from Flannery O'Connor's understanding of “the grotesque”?

“Hands” (1919)

Wing Biddlebaum, an aging, isolated, and anxious man whose hands are constantly moving and infinitely expressive, encourages George Willard (a young reporter for the local newspaper) not to abandon his dreams but to embrace them, and he also urges George not to conform to the conventional conduct and thinking of the rest of the community. We eventually learn that Biddlebaum's original name was Adolph Meyers; that he was once an inspired,

inspiring teacher in a small Pennsylvania town; that he had a habit when teaching of innocently touching the boys he taught while talking with them, but that one day a “half-witted boy of the school became enamored of” him and that this boy in “his bed at night imagined unspeakable things and in the morning went forth to tell his dreams as facts” (S. Anderson 32). A crowd of suspicious, belligerent parents descended on Meyers’s house, attacked him verbally and physically, and drove him from the town; for 20 years he has lived a lonely life in Winesburg, his existence blighted and his career as a teacher destroyed.

Anderson considered this story his earliest piece of really successful writing and felt an enormous sense of accomplishment upon finishing it (Small 30). Homosexuality (even if only implied) was not a common topic in the literature of the 1920s, but Anderson himself, although he had numerous sexual relationships with women, remembered being once suspected of homosexual tendencies and recalled especially how it felt to be viewed with such suspicion (Small 31–32). The story’s main concern, however, is not homosexuality *per se* (Biddlebaum certainly does not think of himself as gay); rather, the work deals with such common themes in Anderson’s fiction as loneliness, fear, social failure, and disappointed desire. Biddlebaum, like many characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, is an isolated, defeated man; his particular story may be peculiar to him, but his suffering, his need for communion and communication, and his deep attachment to hidden yearnings (which are more social than sexual) are all typical of many characters in Anderson’s book, and they are also typical (Anderson thought) of the human experience in general. As many of Anderson’s tales do, this one deals with a sudden moment of transformation in which a character, either through his own choice or through the impact of some external event, becomes a “grotesque”—a distorted, incomplete figure whose life, thinking, and feelings are thereafter confined (sometimes unwillingly) to a narrow groove. The story illustrates the “loose” plotting common to Anderson’s tales as well as his penchant for a style of narration that calls attention to the narrator’s voice. In addition, the story illustrates

Anderson’s characteristic use of evocative imagery and repeated symbols (particularly, in this case, the symbolism of hands themselves). The tale of Wing Biddlebaum is also significant because it is the first of many in the book in which characters are revealed (or reveal themselves) to young George Willard, who functions as a sort of alter ego both for Anderson himself and for all the book’s readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the use of “hands” imagery not only in this tale but throughout the rest of the volume. What continuities exist in the imagery from one story to the next, and how is the imagery also used in distinctive ways in various tales?
2. How does this story establish a pattern of particular themes and phrasing that tend to recur in later stories? For example, how is the tone of this story typical of the volume as a whole? In what ways is Biddlebaum similar to other characters in the rest of the volume, particularly in his psychology?
3. How is the emphasis on “dreams” in this story ironic? What kinds of dreams inspire Biddlebaum; on the other hand, what other kinds of dreams have destroyed his life? What does the language of “dreams” imply about the relations between imagination and reality?
4. Compare and contrast the life of Wing Biddlebaum with that of the title character of EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’s poem “Richard Cory.” How are they similar (but also different) in their social positions and in their fates?
5. Compare and contrast the idea of a sudden, life-transforming change in this story and in EDITH WHARTON’s novel *Ethan Frome*. In each work, how is the situation of the main character influenced by the kind of community in which he lives?

“Mother” (1919)

Elizabeth Willard, the mother of George Willard (the main recurring character of *Winesburg, Ohio*) is “tall and gaunt” with a face “marked with small-

pox scars" (S. Anderson 39), and her lonely life is as bleak as her appearance: She helps her ne'er-do-well husband, Tom, operate an old, rundown hotel, and she spends most of her days cleaning grimy rooms, recalling her promising youth, and hoping for a better, more stimulated and stimulating life for her son. Elizabeth's relationship with George is close but awkward, and one night, when she hears her husband telling George that George must act and think more as his father does, she concocts a plan to kill her husband to protect George from his malign influence. Fortunately, however, she learns in a conversation with George that he rejects his father's plans and values, and that he hopes to live the kind of thoughtful, unconventional life that Elizabeth herself desires but cannot enjoy.

This story clearly reflects Anderson's personal relationship with his own parents and may also have been influenced by the frustrations of his own first marriage (Small 57–58). Like the main characters of the "The Book of the Grotesque" and "Hands," Elizabeth Willard is a dreamer whose dreams, ironically, not only provide a limited means of helping her escape her agony but also help perpetuate her isolation (Small 59, 62–63). She lives the same kind of repressed, oppressive life endured by many characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*. George functions for her (as he functions for other characters in the book) as the focus of vicarious aspirations; she, as do others, tries to guide him and teach him, and she tries to live (or relive) her life through his. For her as for others, he represents a source of hope; she wants him to avoid the wrong turns that have blighted her own existence. Like many other characters in the book, she is a literally pathetic figure; Anderson invites us both to pity and to understand her, and although her plan to kill her husband may seem an extreme reaction to her circumstances, the frustration from which the plan is born is (in Anderson's view) all too typical of modern life, whether lived in large, impersonal cities or in small, constricting towns. Elizabeth Willard represents the kind of people who appear so often in Anderson's fiction: little-known, unregarded persons who feel that life has failed them (Burbank 28, 68) and who see no possibility of personal redemption or escape. Their early hopes have been disappointed,

their futures seem futile, and they cannot communicate clearly or openly their deepest feelings, even (or especially) with the people for whom they feel the most affection.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the characters and themes of this work with those of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*. In what ways are both works partially autobiographical? How can both works be interpreted in Freudian terms? In what ways (according to Freud) is the relationship between George and his parents typical of human life in general?
2. Compare and contrast the relationship between the husband and wife in this story with the relationship depicted in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Eros Turannos." How are their relationships affected by the communities in which they live and by traditional gender roles?
3. Compare and contrast the relationship between the husband and wife in this story with the relationship depicted in SUI SIN FAR's (Edith Maude Eaton's) story "Mrs. Spring Fragrance." How do the tones of the two works differ, and what does each work imply about the nature of life in general?
4. Research Anderson's life and discuss, in detail, how this story reflects his relations with his own parents. To what extent is the story autobiographical, and in what ways does Anderson depart from the details of his own life in crafting this tale? How does George Willard's father both resemble and differ from Anderson's?

"Adventure" (1919)

Alice Hindman is now a gangly old maid of 27, but when she was 16 she had fallen in love with a young man named Ned Currie, whom she hoped to marry and with whom she was even willing to run off to a big city. One day, along the banks of a remote creek outside Winesburg, they became lovers, and although Ned had the best of intentions of making his fortune in the city and then send-

ing for Alice to join him, eventually he forgot her, although she never blamed him for his neglect. For years and years she pined for him, considering herself his wife in all but name but also growing so increasingly lonely and frustrated that one night, in a fit of sexual and romantic frustration, she runs out naked into the rain; beseeches a deaf old man, who ignores her; and then crawls back, defeated and alone, to her isolated room.

This story may have been influenced, in part, by Anderson's awareness of his own sister's alienation and yearning for affection, but the isolation felt by Alice Hindman is also a major theme of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a whole. Various words, phrases, or motifs emphasized in this story—such as “narrow life,” “unable to talk,” “loneliness,” “afraid,” and “wanted to be loved” (S. Anderson 112, 113, 116, 118, 119)—also appear in many others, and indeed the title word is one that recurs throughout the larger book. It seems sadly appropriate that Alice works in a “dry goods store” (S. Anderson 115), since her own life has become desiccated and parched; it is not an accident that at the end of the tale she runs out naked into the potentially cleansing and refreshing rain. This symbolic attempt to be rebaptized and reborn fails, however, when she confronts a man even more cut off, by his age and deafness, from life and vitality than she is; he literally cannot hear or understand her, and her effort to transform her life in a dramatically unconventional fashion ends (typically enough, for an Anderson story) in embarrassment and defeat. Sexual motives and conduct play an important role in this tale, as they do in many by Anderson (Small 105), but the sexual yearnings here, as in various other works of his, are frustrated and suppressed, disappointed and disappointing. At the root of much sexual desire in Anderson's stories is an even more fundamental sense of loneliness (Burbank 73).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In what ways is Alice's frustration shaped by the fact that she is a woman? How does Ned have more options and opportunities simply because he is male? How do conventional gender roles affect the characters in other stories in *Winesburg, Ohio*?
2. Compare and contrast the relationship of Ned and Alice to the relationship depicted in EZRA POUND's poem “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter.” Which of the two works is finally more optimistic, and why? What is the role of physical distance in both works?
3. Compare and contrast Alice to the main character in Katherine Anne Porter's story “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.” How and why would a feminist critic respond to both women? In what ways are the women victims of society, and in what ways (if any) are they responsible for their own predicaments?
4. Discuss the use of symbolism in this story. For instance, what is symbolic about the physical appearance of Alice's employer? What is symbolic about Alice's final nakedness? What is symbolic about the rainfall?
5. Discuss the presentation of religion and religious imagery in this tale. How does such imagery contribute to the irony of the story? How does it contribute to the complex tone of the work?

“Queer” (1919)

Elmer Cowley, son of Ebenezer Cowley and junior partner of Cowley & Son's store in Winesburg, grows increasingly frustrated not only by his own isolation (since he thinks he is regarded as “queer,” or odd) but also by his father's incompetence as a businessman and by the apparent normality of the apparently well-adjusted and well-regarded George Willard, whom Elmer sees as representing everything he dislikes about his hometown. After threatening a salesman with violence, Elmer walks to the outskirts of the village, pours out his angry thoughts to an old acquaintance (a contented half-wit), and then returns home, determined to escape Winesburg on the next train. Summoning the curious and friendly George Willard to meet him at the station, Elmer suddenly attacks George, hops onto the departing

train, and thinks to himself, "I guess I showed him I ain't so queer" (S. Anderson 201).

Scholars have detected in Anderson's portrait of Elmer Cowley reflections not only of Anderson's brother, Earl, but also Anderson himself, who was often as chagrined by his own father as Elmer is by Ebenezer (Small 163). More generally, though, Elmer is simply another in the long list of characters Anderson created in *Winesburg, Ohio*, who are isolated, bitter, frustrated, and even a bit bizarre. The story is also typical of the book as a whole in its emphasis on a desire to escape, in the prominence it gives to George Willard, and in its movement toward a moment of sudden, unexpected, and somewhat shocking behavior. Elmer is obviously an ironic figure: The more he resists being labeled "queer," the queerer he truly seems—a fact driven home by the story's final sentence. The narrative illustrates "George's eager willingness to understand" the other characters he encounters, an eagerness that "marks his growing sensitivity to other people" (Small 165). A further irony, of course, is that Elmer attacks the one citizen of Winesburg who might have been willing and able to comprehend him. Stylistically the story is typical of most others in the book. Its diction is plain, its syntax (or sentence structure) is simple, and it relies on the repetition of key words and phrases (especially the word *queer* [Papinchak 8–9]). Midwestern dialect is also stressed, particularly in the repeated memorable phrase "I'll be washed and ironed and starched" (S. Anderson 200). In "Queer" Anderson comes perhaps as close as he ever does in *Winesburg, Ohio* to writing something comic, but the tone of the comedy is absurd rather than affirmative (Small 98–99).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the presentation of George Willard in this tale with the way he is presented in the little-discussed but highly effective story "Nobody Knows." How does he seem a more complicated, more ambiguous character in the latter tale? In what other ways (and for what other reasons) does "Nobody Knows" deserve more attention than it has received?
2. To what degree is Elmer a sympathetic or even plausible character? Can a story be effective if the main character is unsympathetic? Can a story be effective if the main character is implausible? Justify your answers to both of these questions.
3. Compare and contrast the "half-witted" character in this tale with the one in "Hands." Why does Anderson make each character "half-witted"? Would the character be less effective if he were "normal"? If so, why and how?

"Death in the Woods" (1919)

As a young man, the anonymous narrator saw a prematurely old, poor, decrepit woman walk into his small town from her remote, rundown farm to buy a few scraps of food for herself, her no-good husband, her no-good son, and the various scrawny animals who also depended on her labor for sustenance. As a girl she had worked like a slave for an old German farmer, who abused her sexually; later, as a wife to Jake Grimes (a self-centered thief disliked by the townsfolk), she had been treated once more as little better than a slave; and, later still, as the mother of a rough, tough, hard-drinking, and sexually uninhibited son, she had once again been treated without affection or respect. In the evening of the day she is glimpsed by the narrator, as she makes her weary way back to the farm, she rests under a tree and quietly dies in her sleep, surrounded by her hungry dogs, before she eventually is discovered and examined by the curious townspeople, including the narrator, who considers her more beautiful in death than she had ever seemed in life.

Anderson himself rather immodestly called this work "a magnificent tale, one of the most penetrating written in our times" (qtd. in Small 347). Whether or not this is true, the story has become one of his most admired (Small 353) and is certainly typical of his writing in numerous ways. Set in the Midwest and emphasizing rural and small-town life, it also emphasizes his characteristic themes of loneliness, fear, and the grotesque distortion of human potential. As in many of his other tales, the narration is rambling and digressive; the narrator

5. Choose one particular story by Anderson and discuss how (if at all) its various details cohere, creating a mutually reinforcing and artistically complex design. For instance, how is characterization reinforced by symbolism? How do different aspects of the plot relate to one another through irony or foreshadowing?
6. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Anderson's use of quoted speech and dialogue. Is the speech of his characters convincing? Does it sound like the speech real people would use? How does he attempt to make their speech plausible and credible?
7. Discuss the use of point(s) of view in one or more of Anderson's stories. How is one of his tales affected by the narrative perspective(s) from which it is told? How would the story be different if the point of view were different?
8. In style, tone, method, and themes, how do Anderson's writings resemble those of Jack London? On the other hand, how do the frequently exotic settings of London's stories contrast, in their implications, with the small-town setting of Anderson's stories? Why does each author choose the kinds of settings he does for the particular stories he tells?
9. Anderson wrote numerous tales besides the ones in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Track down several of his other stories and discuss the ways they resemble, or differ from, the ones in his most famous book.
10. Anderson read and admired the work of Mark Twain. In what ways do Anderson's style and attitudes resemble those of Twain, and in what other ways do they differ? How, for

instance, do the experiences of Huckleberry Finn both resemble and differ from those of George Willard?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Anderson, David D. *Sherwood Anderson: An Introduction and Interpretation*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967.
- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. Edited by Malcolm Cowley. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Burbank, Rex. *Sherwood Anderson*. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- Cowley, Malcolm. Introduction. *Winesburg, Ohio*. By Sherwood Anderson. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Ferres, John H., ed. *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Modlin, Charles E., ed. *Certain Last Things: The Selected Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1992.
- Papinchak, Robert Allen. *Sherwood Anderson: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1992.
- Small, Judy Jo. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson*. New York: Hall, 1994.
- Spear, Michael M. The Sherwood Anderson Foundation. Available online. URL: <http://www.sherwoodandersonfoundation.org>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Thurston, Jarvis A. "Technique in *Winesburg, Ohio*." In *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, edited by John H. Ferres, 304–317. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Trilling, Lionel. "Sherwood Anderson." In *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, edited by John H. Ferres, 474–485. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Robert C. Evans



GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN

(ZITKALA-ŠA) (1876–1938)

When I saw the lonely figure of my mother vanish in the distance, a sense of regret settled heavily upon me. I felt suddenly weak, as if I might fall limp to the ground. I was in the hands of strangers whom my mother did not fully trust. I no longer felt free to be myself, or to voice my own feelings.

(*American Indian Stories*)

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, who adopted the pen name *Zitkala-Ša* (pronounced “shah” and meaning Red Bird) after graduating from college, is important for a number of reasons: She was one of the first American Indians to write directly about her own life and in her own words, without the intervention or mediation of editors, transcribers, or professional (that is, white) biographers. Her autobiographical writings were published in some of the most important magazines of her day and were later issued in book form, thus giving her unusual prominence and visibility. These writings, moreover, were exceptionally blunt and outspoken in their criticism of white values, white culture, white conduct, and white hypocrisy. However, even after Bonnin turned most of her attention away from writing, she remained significant for decades as an eloquent champion of the rights of Native Americans. She was a highly visible leader in a number of American Indian organizations, achieving unusual recognition in her day not only as an Indian but especially as an Indian woman.

Although no full-scale scholarly biography of Bonnin has yet been published, many of the most important details of her life are outlined by P. Jane Hafen in her introduction to *Dreams and Thunder* and especially by Doreen Rappaport in her detailed biography for children, which provides an extremely helpful chronology. Bonnin was born on February 22, 1876, at the Yankton Sioux Agency

(or Reservation) near Greenwood, South Dakota, only months before the famous battle of Little Bighorn (also known as Custer’s last stand), in which Indians decimated a U.S. Army contingent led by General George Armstrong Custer. Although Bonnin later claimed to be the granddaughter of Sitting Bull, the famous Indian warrior who had led the battle against Custer, this claim is untrue, and indeed much of Bonnin’s depiction of her own life must be treated with a certain skepticism, since she often failed to stress important data. She often implied, for instance, that she was a full-blooded Indian when in fact she was the daughter of an Indian woman named Ellen Taté Iyóhiwin (whose Indian name meant Reaches for the Wind) and a white trader named Felker, Ellen’s third white husband, who left the relationship before Gertrude was born. At the time of Gertrude’s birth, Ellen had already given birth to eight children, of whom four were still living: Peter, Edward, and Henry St. Pierre (the children of her first husband); and David Simmons, the son of her second husband, John H. Simmons. With Felker gone, Ellen gave Gertrude the last name *Simmons*. At the same time, however, Ellen (at least by Gertrude’s later accounts) taught the girl a deep suspicion and contempt of white people. In her later memoirs (especially “Impressions of an Indian Childhood”), Gertrude paints a happy picture of her life on the reservation with her mother (her real father and stepfathers are not

mentioned), but she claimed that this happiness abruptly ended when she was lured away, at age eight, to a white school in Indiana, to be educated and “civilized.”

Gertrude's brother David had already gone off to attend Hampton Normal Institute in Virginia in 1878; in 1881 he returned to the reservation to work as a clerk and then as a teacher of agriculture. From 1882 to 1884 Gertrude herself had attended day school on the Yankton Reservation, but then in February 1884 she decided (against her mother's wishes) to go off to White's Manual Labor Institute, a Quaker-run boarding school in Wabash, Indiana. Her unpleasant experiences there are described in detail in her later memoir, “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” In February 1887 she returned to live with her mother, staying until September 1889 (the same year in which South Dakota became a state). In fall of that year Gertrude (once more against her mother's wishes) began attending the Santee School in Santee, Nebraska, where she stayed until June 1890—the year in which Sitting Bull was murdered and in which 300 Indians were slaughtered in the famous massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Gertrude stayed with her mother on the Yankton Reservation until February 1891, at which time she returned to White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, where she stayed until June 28, 1895. From there she went, in September 1895, to Quaker-affiliated Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, where she quickly distinguished herself (as she had at White's) as a star student. In February 1896, for instance, she won second prize in the Indiana State Oratorical Contest for a speech in which she offered “a stinging indictment of white society and hypocritical Christianity” (Hafen xvi). The fact that the speech won the prize (and was later reprinted in the Earlham school newspaper) implies that not all whites were as prejudiced as some, but Gertrude nevertheless had reason to remain distrustful: During the contest, students from an opposing school hung up a banner mocking Earlham for being represented by a “squaw.”

During her time at Earlham, Gertrude became an accomplished violinist, pianist, and singer in

addition to being a skillful writer. After finishing her studies there in June 1897, she began working as a teacher herself in July at the U.S. Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania—a position she held until January 1899, which is described in her essay “An Indian Teacher among Indians.” By the time that highly critical essay was published in 1900 in the prominent *Atlantic Monthly* magazine (one of the nation's leading periodicals), Bonnin had left the school, moved to Boston, adopted the pen name Zitkala-Ša, and begun attending the New England Conservatory of Music. By now she had begun publishing regularly in important journals, and in 1901 a respected Boston publisher issued her first book, *Old Indian Legends*. In June of that same year, however, she was back in South Dakota, working as a clerk at the Standing Rock Reservation. Although she was briefly engaged to an Indian doctor named Carlos Montezuma, by 1902 she had broken off that relationship, and on August 10 of that year she married Raymond T. Bonnin, who was also a Yankton Indian and who was employed by the Indian Service (the former name of the Bureau of Indian Affairs). Later that year they took up residence at the Uintah Ouray Ute Agency (or Reservation) in Duchesne, Utah, where Raymond had been transferred and where their only child, Raymond Ohiya (or Winner), was born in 1903. The Bonnins resided at this reservation until 1916, and in fact from March 1905 to November 1906 Gertrude taught at the boarding school there. The family did spend the winter of 1908 and spring of 1909 at the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota, and in 1908 they also became friends with William F. Hanson, a music teacher from Utah who shared Gertrude's cultural interests and who soon became her collaborator in a plan to produce an opera based on Indian themes. Eventually this work, titled *The Sun Dance*, premiered in Vernal, Utah, on February 20, 1913, and subsequent stagings took place in December 1913 and February 1914 in Salt Lake City as well as elsewhere that year in other places in Utah.

By this time, however, Gertrude's interests were increasingly social and political rather than strictly literary. Although she continued to compose stories

while in Utah (many of them first published long after her death in *Dreams and Thunder*), more and more of her time was taken up with her involvement in the Society of American Indians (SAI), which had been organized in 1911. She joined its advisory board in 1914 and also did fieldwork for the group, and in 1916 (in the year following the death of her mother, with whom she had continued to have a contentious relationship), she was elected secretary of the SAI and became editor of its publication, *American Indian Magazine*. In 1917 she and Raymond moved to Washington, D.C., and during this time Raymond also served in the U.S. Army, from which he was honorably discharged in 1919 (the year after the end of World War I). In 1920 women citizens of the United States were granted the right to vote (a right still denied to Indians who were not citizens), and in the same year Congress passed a law granting Indian veterans the right to apply for U.S. citizenship. Gertrude herself had editorialized in favor of the latter move, and she had also campaigned against the use of peyote among Indians. In 1919, however, tensions within the SAI led to her resignation from the organization; in 1920 she became actively involved with the General Federation of Women's Clubs, where, in 1921, she helped form an Indian Welfare Committee and authored a brochure titled *Americanize the First Indian: A Plan of Regeneration*. In these years she often spoke before groups while wearing traditional Indian costumes and advocating for Indian rights. Also in 1921 her book *American Indian Stories* was issued by a major press. Gertrude also continued her political activism, working with the Indian Rights Association and the American Indian Defense Association and collaborating on the authorship of a major report, titled *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indian: An Orgy of Graft, Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes, Legalized Robbery* (1924). All of her advocacy efforts helped to produce some significant fruit in 1924 when a law finally granted citizenship (and thus voting rights) to all noncitizen Indians born in the United States.

In 1926 she and Raymond (who had studied law and had been working as a law clerk) founded the National Council of American Indians (NCAI),

with Gertrude as president and Raymond as secretary. They claimed that theirs was the only national Indian organization actually headed by Indians, and in fact Gertrude remained president until her death. For the next decade they traveled widely and often, organizing chapters of the NCAI on numerous reservations, but they also spent much time in Washington, lobbying on behalf of various Indian-related causes and trying to influence the two major political parties to adopt pro-Indian positions. When the Democrats swept into office at the end of 1932 (partly in response to public concern about the Great Depression), many of the reforms that had been advocated by the Bonnins were put into effect. Unfortunately, despite these successes for Indians as a group, the Bonnins themselves were not faring so well. Their financial condition was precarious and became even more so when the health of their son (who was diabetic) became so poor that eventually he, his wife, and their four children had to move in with Gertrude and Raymond in spring 1937. By this time (on a happier note) interest had revived in *The Sun Dance* opera, and indeed a revised version of the work was chosen by the New York Opera Guild as its opera of the year for 1938, with a performance scheduled for that spring. Gertrude, however, never lived to see the work restaged: She died in Washington, D.C., on January 26, 1938, at age 61 after succumbing to cardiac dilatation and kidney disease. As the wife of a veteran, she was eligible for burial in Arlington National Cemetery, where her headstone reads, "Gertrude Simmons Bonnin—'Zitkala-Sa' of the Sioux Indians—1876–1938" (Lukens 154). Raymond was buried beside her in Arlington when he himself passed away on September 24, 1942.

"Impressions of an Indian Childhood" (1900)

In this memoir describing her earliest recollections, Zitkala-Ša focuses especially on her relations with her mother (who deeply distrusted whites), but she also recounts her relations with her friends, her older relatives, and the wider community. She

describes the typical pastimes of her people as well as her own activities and development, and then she also describes how and why she decided to leave her village in order to go off with white missionaries to pursue an education in the East.

“Impressions of an Indian Childhood” has the double advantage of seeming alluringly foreign and deeply familiar. On the one hand, it describes a culture and kind of life with which most people had (and have) little personal experience; reading the memoir therefore appeals to one’s sense of curiosity and answers one’s desire to learn about a distinct and different way of living. On the other hand, many of the experiences described in the essay are ones that will seem instantly recognizable to anyone who has ever been a child (that is, to everyone). The essay has an almost inevitably universal appeal because it deals with so many experiences that are so common and widespread, such as relations with parents (especially with one’s mother), relations with childhood friends, relations with one’s immediate community (including relatives), relations with natural surroundings, the process of maturation, and nostalgia for the simple joys and innocence of childhood. Native American readers are also likely to find the essay appealing as a firsthand and highly affirmative account of the history of their culture, while many white readers will respond to the essay with a strong sense of guilt about the history of the abusive treatment of Native Americans.

The language of this essay, like that of much writing by Zitkala-Ša, is clear and simple but can also seem mannered, “quaint,” predictable, and old-fashioned, as when the author describes herself by saying, “I was as free as the wind that blew my hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer” (*American* 8). At times the writing seems sentimental (“My poor child, how I cried with her because the Great Spirit had forgotten us!”; *American* 10), but at the same time the tone can also be stingingly bitter (as when the girl’s mother describes any paleface as “a sham,—a sickly sham!” and declares that the “bronzed Dakota is the only real man”; *American* 9). There are times, too, when the writing seems to depart from strict historical accuracy. At one point, for instance, Zitkala-Ša quotes her

mother as saying, “There is what the paleface has done! Since then your father too has been buried in a hill nearer the rising sun. We were once happy. But the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us to move away” (*American* 10).

What this passage fails to make clear, however, is that Gertrude Bonnin’s own father was himself a paleface and that in fact all three of her mother’s husbands were white men. The passage just quoted seems to imply, though, that Zitkala-Ša’s father was an Indian, perhaps even an Indian killed by whites, when in fact he seems to have been a white man named Felker who left his wife (or was sent away) before his daughter was even born. Interestingly enough, the quoted passage is silently omitted when Deborah Rappaport, in the only full-length biography of Zitkala-Ša currently in print, extensively reproduces the rest of this account (10). It is as if Rappaport realized that including the passage might call the general veracity of Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical reminiscences into question. Gertrude Bonnin had many good practical reasons to want to present herself as a full-blooded Indian and to present her mother as a simple victim of white maliciousness. Not the least of these reasons was a genuine desire to win sympathy for her people and thus help promote achievement of their full human rights. When we know the truth, however, her equivocation runs the risk of making her larger story seeming more generally suspect and therefore less rhetorically effective than it might otherwise have been. In a work claiming to be a reliable historical memoir, any departure from verifiable truth risks damaging the credibility of both the work and the author. A really intriguing memoir might have been written about the attitudes of Gertrude Bonnin’s mother toward Gertrude’s father (or her other white husbands), just as a truly fascinating account might have been offered of Bonnin’s own feelings about her father—feelings that must surely have been quite complicated. Instead, Zitkala-Ša chooses to present a story that is inevitably simpler, more sentimental, and finally less interesting than the truth.

Nevertheless, despite such concerns, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” retains a good

deal of genuine interest, particularly in the ways it depicts the tribal lives of Native Americans. Zitkala-Ša presents the tribe as essentially one large family in which meals are freely shared, the young address any old person as “grandfather” or “grandmother” (and are treated as grandchildren in return), and people often sit together in a “great circle” (*American* 16)—an appropriate image of the intimate communal life the essay memorializes. Zitkala-Ša’s memories of her childhood focus on literal and figurative warmth; the essay is mostly set during the spring and summer, and when cooler weather intrudes, communal fires provide comfort and a setting for sharing food and stories. At one point, for instance, Zitkala-Ša remembers being told “a long story about a woman whose magic power lay hidden behind the [tattooed] marks upon her face.” Nevertheless, although the tale was initially frightening, she “fell asleep before the story was completed” (*American* 16–17). Her sleep implies the security she feels as part of the community, even when faced with a frightening story, while the communal storytelling activity itself implies part of the impetus and model for Zitkala-Ša’s own goals as an author. She is the latest link in a long chain of tribal historians and storytellers, and her writing retains many of the features of this basically oral art. Her essays, for instance, tend to ramble a bit; they lack any sense of strict or rigid structure. Narrative threads are sometimes picked up only to be dropped, unresolved, a few paragraphs later. In this sense the essay reflects the desultory style of actual conversation.

In recounting her own life, Zitkala-Ša inevitably recounts the customs of her tribe, and while showing how she herself was informally educated by living among her people, she educates her white readers. The essay shows how she learned about nature, her people, and her people’s relations with whites, and the essay also shows the moral education of the young girl. Among the most appealing aspects of the essay are those moments when Zitkala-Ša mocks herself or shows the ability to be self-critical, as when she “snarl[s]” at her mother at one point for stopping to visit an old woman instead of hastening to a feast and then feels “shame” when

she comprehends the generous motives behind her mother’s delay (*American* 31–32). At another point Zitkala-Ša recounts how, as a very young girl intent on making coffee for a visiting old warrior when her mother was not at home, she used old coffee grounds and warm water. When her mother returned and discovered what had happened, both she and the old warrior laughed, but “neither she nor the warrior, whom the law of our custom had compelled to partake of my insipid hospitality, said anything to embarrass me. They treated my best judgment, poor as it was, with the utmost respect. It was not till long years afterward that I learned how ridiculous a thing I had done” (*American* 28–29). In moments such as this, Zitkala-Ša shows a winning ability to laugh (or at least crack a thin, snide smile) at herself—an ability that tends to be missing from some of her other autobiographical essays.

Whatever sense of limited paradise Zitkala-Ša enjoyed as a young girl is lost when some white missionaries tempt the children to leave the reservation in order to pursue education at a boarding school farther east. Symbolically, they lure the children with stories of a “great tree where grew red, red apples,” telling them about “how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat” (*American* 41–42). The symbolism is obvious (perhaps too obvious): The Christian missionaries ironically function here almost as Satanic deceivers, tempting the children in ways that will separate them forever from their once-Edenic surroundings. As the essay ends, Zitkala-Ša presents herself (as she often does in her later memoirs) feeling “as frightened and bewildered as the captured young of a wild creature” (*American* 45), even though it was she herself, despite her mother’s wishes and advice but also with the approval of a beloved aunt, who had yearned to make the journey. Her later essays emphasize the sufferings that resulted from succumbing to the missionaries’ temptations.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the way Zitkala-Ša depicts the individual’s relationship with the larger community. You might discuss such matters as relations

between parents and children, relations between family and neighbors, and the process of informal education.

2. Discuss the ways elderly Indians are depicted in this work as compared to JACK LONDON's story "The Law of Life." There are some obvious contrasts between the two works in this respect, but can you find some interesting similarities?
3. Discuss the ways the mother is presented in the work. What kinds of advice and/or training does the mother give her child?

"The School Days of an Indian Girl" (1900)

In this sequel to "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," Zitkala-Ša describes her intense unhappiness as a student at a boarding school for Indians—a school run by white Christian missionaries whom she perceives as strange, strict, and even abusive. At the school, she feels regimented, isolated, and eventually rebellious, and she longs for the relative happiness of the life she once enjoyed with her mother on the reservation. Eventually she attends a religiously affiliated college, where she excels at oratory, wins the respect of some of her white classmates, but continues to feel alone and angry, as well as alienated from her own mother.

This essay begins, significantly enough, by mentioning at least two other Indian children by name—Judéwin and Thowin. These references are important, because Zitkala-Ša never gives names to the white people she describes. Instead, they are usually presented as distant, anonymous, often ugly, and frequently menacing figures who frighten the small (or "wee") child even when they try to be affectionate. Perhaps this tactic of denying names to her oppressors was charitable: Perhaps she wanted to avoid merely personal attacks. Or perhaps she assumed that individual names and personalities were unimportant; what mattered, instead, were the motives and deeds of the whites, not their personal identities. In any case, the tactic of denying the whites any particular names makes it easier to treat them simply as anonymous,

somewhat inhuman "palefaces" (Zitkala-Ša's favorite term for her oppressors); she thus turns the tables on whites, who tended to think of Indians as undifferentiated members of an inferior group. A white person, reading this essay, experiences how it feels to be the subject of broad stereotypes and racial discrimination, and if the experience is unpleasant, perhaps that is Zitkala-Ša's intention. The essay will be uncomfortable reading for most contemporary whites, not only because they will be distressed to see the ways Native Americans were once mistreated (even by whites whose conscious intentions may have been good), but also because contemporary white readers will feel the sting of the same kinds of prejudices from which Indians so often suffered.

Only rarely are the whites in this essay presented in attractive terms, and even then the depictions are often ambiguous. At one point, for instance, one missionary tosses sweets to the new young students, and Zitkala-Ša eats quite a few. "The missionary's generous distribution of candies was impressed upon my memory," she writes, and for a brief moment it seems as if she will actually have at least one happy reminiscence of her time at the school, but then the sentence continues, and it turns out that the incident was impressed on her memory "by a disastrous result which soon followed. I had caught more than my share of candies and gums, and soon after our arrival at school I had a chance to disgrace myself, which, I am ashamed to say, I did" (*American* 49). Presumably she became ill from eating all the sweets and perhaps even vomited. Thus the ill-considered attempt to be kind literally made her sick—an apt if unintended symbol of much of what happens in this essay. A similar incident occurs a few sentences later: "A rosy-checked paleface woman caught me in her arms" and tossed the young girl "high in midair." The woman's rosy cheeks and enthusiastic playing might at first seem attractive and positively welcoming, but that is not how Zitkala-Ša remembers the experience: "I was both frightened and insulted by such trifling. . . . My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud" (*American* 50). These incidents set the tone and

the narrative pattern for much of the rest of the essay: The palefaces behave in ways that are either inadvertently or deliberately upsetting and disturbing, and Zitkala-Ša—even when writing in retrospect—finds their behavior repulsive. The fact that these missionaries were Quakers (a famously gentle, generous, freethinking, and compassionate group) is never mentioned, and the benefits of the schooling (such as the literacy displayed by the essay itself) are rarely stressed. Instead, the memoir often seems deliberately to echo the most depressing descriptions of Mr. Brocklehurst's school, Lowood, in Charlotte Brontë's famous novel *Jane Eyre*. These resemblances include an enforced policy against "natural" hairstyles, an indifference to the health of the children (an indifference that leads, both in the novel and in the memoir, to the death of a dear friend thanks to "consumption," or tuberculosis [*American* 66]), and a general regimentation that robs the children of their freedom and peace of mind. Ironically, the resemblances to *Jane Eyre* (whether intended or not) help remind us that charity boarding schools were often harsh places for anyone in the 19th century, whether the students were Indians like Zitkala-Ša or whites like Jane. Yet the resemblances also lend an undercurrent of credibility and emotional force to Zitkala-Ša's narrative: The school she describes seems in some ways so familiar that we almost feel as if we have been there.

Practically everything about the school suggests unpleasantness and an absence of vitality: The landscape is "bitter-cold," the trees are "bare," there is a "constant clash of harsh noises," and the young girls are described as "marching into the dining room" (which should, ideally, be a place of relaxed pleasure) in "stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses" (*American* 52). What these descriptions lack in subtlety they make up for in consistency; even eating is done "by formula" (*American* 54). Natural imagery, when it is used at all, is frequently used to depict the wee Indians as "little animals driven by a herder" (*American* 56). Even Satan is described in ways that make him resemble a white man: He has a beard "like some I had seen palefaces wear" (*American* 62), and when Zitkala-Ša later dreams about him,

she imagines how his "eyes were fastened upon me" (*American* 63)—much as the whites in the book are often described as rudely staring at the vulnerable young girl (see, for example, *American* 48). Ironically, then, in describing the devil ("this white man's legend"; *American* 62), Zitkala-Ša depicts him as an embodiment of the worst traits of whites themselves. She uses the education she receives about the white man's superstitions as a way of mocking the whites who teach her.

Not all of Zitkala-Ša's experiences with paleface education were entirely negative, however. At the end of her essay she describes her experiences at an unnamed college (which was in fact Earlham College, a Quaker school). Once more Zitkala-Ša describes this latest set of Quakers as "a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice" (*American* 76), but eventually she wins their respect by performing well in a school oratorical contest. Greeted with applause and even with roses by her fellow students even before she learns that she has won first prize, Zitkala-Ša issues one of her few statements of regret about her negative attitudes toward whites: "This friendly token was a rebuke to me for the hard feelings I had borne them" (*American* 78). It does not take long, however, for her to face further "strong prejudice against my people" when she is sent as Earlham's representative to a state oratorical competition. Students from another school unfurl a "white flag" mocking the fact that Earlham is represented by a "squaw," but when Zitkala-Ša is awarded one of the two top prizes, the hands that held the flag hang "limp in defeat" (*American* 79–80). Significantly, Zitkala-Ša does not mention that her speech was highly honored despite offering fierce criticism of whites and Christianity, nor that the speech was printed in the school newspaper—facts that suggest that not all whites were as prejudiced as the flag wavers. She thus sacrifices full historical accuracy, as well as the opportunity for a fuller psychological and artistic complexity, in the interests of immediate, short-term rhetorical effect. Her reasons for doing so are of course understandable. Ironically, however, the more prominent and respected Zitkala-Ša became as an advocate for her people,

the more likely it became that students of her life would become aware of discrepancies between the facts of that life and the image she offers of herself in her published works. Paradoxically, if her essays seem in some ways less credible today than when they were first published, that is partly because they contributed so effectively to the fame that made her life an object of later scholarly study. The more famous she became, the more incentive scholars had to probe the details of her life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the way schools and schooling are described in this essay. You might compare the depiction of schooling here with that of W. E. B. DuBois's book *The Souls of Black Folk*. What experiences did the two authors have in common? How did their experiences differ? What are the attitudes of each author toward education?
2. In his book *Up from Slavery*, BOOKER T. WASHINGTON describes his own experiences as a teacher of Native Americans at a school primarily intended for blacks. How does Washington's report of these experiences shed light on Zitkala-Ša's memoir, and how does Zitkala-Ša's memoir shed light on Washington's account?
3. Compare and contrast this essay with COUNTEE CULLEN's poem titled "Incident." How are the attitudes of the two central characters similar and/or different? What do both works imply about the later importance of childhood events?

"An American Teacher among Indians" (1900)

In this third of a trio of autobiographical essays published in 1900, Zitkala-Ša describes her transition from student to a teacher herself at a school for Native Americans, but her experiences there are not much happier than earlier. She feels physically weak and psychologically drained, and she perceives herself as being treated with condescension, almost as if she were a domesticated animal. When she is sent west to recruit new students, she encounters an ugly

white man, voracious white settlers, and impoverished relatives, and she concludes that education of the Indians may do more harm than good.

This essay is full of imagery of confinement and oppression. Early in the work, Zitkala-Ša describes herself traveling on a train toward her new post as a teacher at an unnamed school for Indians (which was actually located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania). She feels "tired and hot" and is surrounded by "a black veiling of car smoke" (*American Indian* 81), and the images do not improve much even after she arrives at her destination. The school, to be sure, is more attractive than the town itself ("The large trees among the houses [of the campus] gave the place a cool, refreshing shade, and the grass a deeper green"; *American* 82), but it is not long before Zitkala-Ša finds herself in her own small room, with its "ghastly walls," its curtains "yellowed with age," and its "stiff-backed chairs" (although at least the bed is "clean" and "white"; *American* 82). The essay, then, shows a careful attention to imagery, the connotations of which are used indirectly to reinforce Zitkala-Ša's overt declarative statements.

Particularly interesting is the way Zitkala-Ša describes her first encounter with her new employer (who remains unnamed, as does every other white in her three early autobiographical memoirs). At first she hears a "heavy tread" stop outside her door; then she encounters an "imposing figure." Initially, then, it seems as if she will be having the latest in her long line of negative encounters with intimidating whites. However, to her surprise (and ours), the imposing figure belongs to a "stately gray-haired man," who, "with the right hand extended for greeting, . . . smiled kindly upon me." Zitkala-Ša feels "awed by his wondrous height and strong square shoulders." It is a rare moment: Zitkala-Ša seems to have met a friendly, welcoming white person, and the narrative thus gains an unexpected complexity. Almost immediately, however, she senses his disappointment: "he looked into my face. I imagined that a visible shadow flitted across his countenance as he let my hand fall." He is soon calling her a "little Indian girl," and Zitkala-Ša reports that "I thought I heard a subtle note of disappointment in his voice." The fact that

she says she “imagine[s]” the shadow on his face and only *thinks* she hears his disappointment raises the brief possibility that she is being overly sensitive and is willing to consider the possibility that her own attitude may be partly at fault, but soon she is referring without irony to the “lines of pain” on her face, to her “ill fortune,” and to her “unhappy silence” as she feels herself being “watched by those around me.” Soon, too, her employer is telling her—in phrasing she clearly considers patronizing rather than fatherly or affectionate—that he intends to “turn [her] loose to pasture” (*American* 83–85). In other words, he plans to send her west to recruit new Native American students. It is as if she is being treated as a sheepdog, sent out to round up new victims to be fleeced of their cultural heritage. The third memoir, in other words, repeats the pattern so well established in the first two—a pattern in which Zitkala-Ša becomes a victim of whites (often thanks to her own good intentions).

After the “intense heat” and “sticky car smoke” belching from the “iron horse” (i.e., train) on which Zitkala-Ša travels west, she is met by a white man who seems, if anything, even less appealing than the train ride. Although he is very briefly described as a “trustworthy driver,” his unattractive features soon take center stage: His “unkempt flaxen hair hung *shaggy* about his ears and his *leather* neck of reddish tan. From accident or decay he had lost one of his *long front teeth*.” Zitkala-Ša notes that although she calls him “a paleface, his cheeks were of a brick red. His moist blue eyes, blurred and bloodshot, *twitched involuntarily*. . . . His *weather-stained* clothes fitted badly his *warped shoulders*. He was stooped, and his *protruding chin*, with its *tuft* of dry flax, nodded as monotonously as did the head of his faithful beast” (*American* 87; italics added). Interestingly enough, Zitkala-Ša, who just a few paragraphs earlier had seemed to object to being treated as an animal, now describes the driver in blatantly animalistic terms, especially in the final quoted sentence but also in the italicized phrases. If turnabout is fair play, then Zitkala-Ša effectively retaliates against prejudiced whites by letting such readers experience the feeling of being described as beasts. Indeed the joke—whether intended or

not—goes deeper, since this “paleface” is not pale, and in fact his skin is far redder than any “red man’s.” When Zitkala-Ša arrives with him at her mother’s cabin, her mother is momentarily stunned by the appearance of this man and his “jagged teeth” (*American* 89). Even though Zitkala-Ša had earlier mentioned that the driver had been taking passengers to the small village for “a long time” (*American* 87), her mother does not recognize him and seems to worry that her daughter has taken the ugly paleface home as a suitor. In this passage as in various others, Zitkala-Ša gives whites a taste of their own medicine, letting paleface readers experience for themselves how it feels to be the object of ethnic and cultural disdain.

A similar reversal occurs a few paragraphs later, when Zitkala-Ša describes the horde of “broad-footed white beggars” who have recently staked claims to lands near the reservation (*American* 93). Whites of the time may have liked to think of themselves as a cultivated, civilizing influence on the allegedly “primitive” Indians, but the attitude of Zitkala-Ša’s mother toward these newcomers is wholly contemptuous, and Zitkala-Ša herself writes about them with a kind of derisive pity. Once again a basic rhetorical strategy of this essay seems to be to turn the tables on any potential white racist readers, sending back to them the repugnance they have so often expressed toward Indians. Thus she describes some of her fellow teachers at the Indian school in Carlisle with bitter opprobrium: One is depicted as an “opium-eater” and as a “pumpkin-colored creature,” another is described as “stupid” and an “inebriate paleface,” and even the “few rare” whites who seem well intentioned and well qualified also seem “powerless to choose workmen like themselves.” Given these attitudes, it is little wonder that Zitkala-Ša “made no friends among the race of people I loathed” (*American* 95–97). Her essay seems designed to refute any condescending stereotypes of Indians (and especially of Indian women) as passive, long-suffering, inarticulate, faint hearted weaklings who had been beaten down and defeated by representatives of a supposedly sophisticated, powerful, well-intentioned, highly cultured, and ultimately charitable civilization.

In the present memoir and elsewhere, Zitkala-Ša shows that she can give as good as she gets, having learned well the old biblical axiom of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this essay in conjunction with ZORA NEALE HURSTON's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Discuss such matters as tone, attitude, rhetorical strategies, and views of self and others. Which essay strikes you as being a more effective piece of writing? Explain why. Which essay seems more realistic? Explain.
2. Compare and contrast the attitudes toward schools and schooling expressed in this essay with the attitudes expressed in LANGSTON HUGHES's poem "Theme for English B." What views of self and others are implied in each work? What is the final tone of each text?
3. Examine the role of the white philanthropists described in this work. How are the motives and the results of the philanthropy ambiguous? To what extent do the philanthropists deserve disdain, respect, or some combination of the two?

Old Indian Legends (1901)

This collection of 14 traditional Native American tales is typical of much folklore in its emphasis on animals who talk and behave as humans do, humans who are closely in touch with nature, and people (and even anthropomorphic animals!) who live according to the ancient ways of an ancient culture. The tales provide insights into the values and customs of American Indians, the stories are frequently amusing but sometimes have darker overtones, and almost always a moral lesson of some kind is stated or implied. A particularly important recurring character is Iktomi, a trickster who has a penchant for getting into complicated predicaments and who is often punished for his deceit.

By collecting and collating various versions of the tales presented here, Zitkala-Ša sought to preserve and pass on in writing the essentially oral culture of her people; she realized that unless their

culture was preserved and reinvigorated, Indians themselves might die out as a distinct (and distinctive) people. Zitkala-Ša claims to have heard the legends directly from "old Dakota story-tellers," and she says that she "often listened to the same story told over again by a new story-teller" (*Old* iv). The fact that she found these "renderings varying much in little incidents" (*Old* iv) gives her license to conflate various versions, just as it gives her license to introduce variations of her own.

The political dimensions of the collection are also implied in Zitkala-Ša's preface, where she justifies her decision to reproduce the tales in English by slyly noting that "America in the last few centuries has acquired a second tongue" (*Old* v)—phrasing that subtly reminds readers that Indians were the continent's first inhabitants but that they have, in the meantime, lost most of their earlier control. The quoted phrasing never mentions the horrible violence by which America "has acquired a second tongue," but the disparity between this polite terminology and the violent facts lurking behind it is deftly ironic. By retelling these legends, then, Zitkala-Ša not only seeks to preserve a sense of native culture for native peoples themselves but also seeks to show the value in (and values of) a culture that has been pushed to the brink of extinction. Paradoxically, by emphasizing the legends of Native Americans, Zitkala-Ša also seeks to show their "near kinship with the rest of humanity" and point toward "the great brotherhood of mankind" (*Old* v).

Although many of the tales give the appearance of being straightforward moral fables intended chiefly for children, in some of them definite adult political overtones are loudly audible. "The Badger and the Bear," for instance, is essentially an allegory about the mistreatment of Indians by whites: A kindly badger family assists a sickly, impoverished bear who asks for help. They feed him generously until he becomes so strong that he seizes their food and evicts them from their home. As a result, the badgers themselves become desperately poor; facing starvation, they ask for assistance from the bear, but he and his family turn them away and laugh at their plight. Only one ugly cub, treated as a pariah by the others, even attempts to help the

needy badgers, and even he must act with cautious circumspection. Ultimately, however, the badgers perform a magic rite that raises up a powerful, avenging warrior, and it is only when confronted with this threat of force that the worried bears behave with even a pretense of decency. The “real” meaning of this tale is clear enough, but the point is cleverly made through the use of animals as characters. The appearance of the avenging warrior at the end of the story is, however, troubling in various ways. It is sad to think that the only means by which Indians will achieve justice is through force, and it is perhaps sadder to think that even this drastic solution may be only a fantasy that will never actually materialize. The miraculous warrior and the happy ending he provides are the only two elements of this tale that seem less than realistic. As Zitkala-Ša undoubtedly understood, in “real life” (unlike in fiction) satisfying solutions were often hard to come by.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the Native American folklore recorded in this book with the African-American folklore recorded in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. What similarities do you see in terms of themes, images, plots, characters, imagery, and tone? How do black folklore and Indian folklore differ?
2. Folklore is often thought to be especially interesting to children. Explain why. What aspects of plot, characterization, narrative technique, and imagery might make these legends particularly appealing to children?
3. Compare and contrast these stories with a well-known collection of European folktales, such as Aesop’s *Fables*. What traits do the two collections share? How are they distinctive? Do the similarities imply anything about the possible existence of a broadly shared “human nature”?

***American Indian Stories* (1921)**

This collection consists of 10 items: the three well-known autobiographical tales first published

in 1900, an essay called “The Great Spirit” in some versions of the book (and titled “Why I Am a Pagan” in other editions), a number of obviously fictional tales, and a concluding essay titled “America’s Indian Problem.” The items vary in tone, method, technique, and skill, but throughout them all runs a fundamental concern with protecting and preserving Native American culture.

American Indian Stories is in some ways a puzzling book. The title, for instance, suggests that the work will be a collection of fictional tales, but most scholars have treated the opening three entries as examples of relatively straightforward autobiography. While the fourth seems to be an essay, the next several do seem to be stories, and the final piece is essentially a political pamphlet that quotes, at great and sometimes clumsy length, an earlier municipal research report. To make matters even more complicated, one reprint edition of the book (with a foreword by Dexter Fisher) gives the title of the fourth piece as “The Great Spirit,” while the reprint published by Rio Grande Press gives the title as “Why I Am a Pagan.” Moreover, in the various editions this essay concludes differently: In the Rio Grande Press reprint, immediately after the sentence that ends with the reference to the “sweet breathing of flowers,” the ensuing statement concludes the piece: “If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan” (*American* 107). The edition with the foreword by Fisher, on the other hand, omits this provocative assertion and instead ends with an extremely lyrical paragraph. To add to the textual complexity, the essay titled “America’s Indian Problem” is omitted altogether from the Rio Grande Press reprint (even though it is listed in the table of contents!). Finally, it is worth noting that while most other editors have treated the first three pieces in the book as autobiographical essays or memoirs, Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris, in their recent Penguin edition, treat the works as fictional stories (although they tend to do so inconsistently). *American Indian Stories*, in short, is a work that defies easy or conventional classification in terms of genre, style, method, or organization.

Of the more clearly fictional works included in the volume, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” runs the

- appeal to the broadest range of readers? (Explain why and how.) Choose four separate works—two examples of fiction and two examples of nonfiction—and discuss the audiences to which each work seems primarily addressed.
5. Compare and contrast the central figure of Zitkala-Ša's three major autobiographical essays (in *American Indian Stories*) with Helga Crane, the central character of NELLA LARSEN's novel *Quicksand*. How are the two figures similar in their moods, views, and basic psychology? How are they similar in their experiences, including their experiences with educational institutions and their relations with family members? How does each character tend to relate to other people? Toward whom is most of the antagonism of each character directed?
 6. Examine a collection of writings by other American Indian women authors from roughly the same period as Zitkala-Ša. (See, for instance, the book titled *Native American Women's Writing 1800–1924: An Anthology*, edited by Karen L. Kilcup.) How are Zitkala-Ša's works typical of the works included in such a collection, particularly in theme, style, narrative techniques, and aesthetic success? How are they atypical? With which other writers does Zitkala-Ša seem to have most in common? With which other writers does she seem to have least in common?
 7. Choose five different passages from five different works by Zitkala-Ša and discuss the effectiveness with which they are written. Discuss them, for instance, in terms of diction, imagery, tone, sentence structure, and rhythm. What are their strengths and/or weaknesses? What makes them interesting (and/or uninteresting) simply as pieces of writing? In what ways was Zitkala-Ša most talented as a writer?
 8. Does it matter that Zitkala-Ša sometimes presents herself and her life in ways that seem to be at variance with the facts? Does it matter that she sometimes seems to omit potentially significant information from her autobiographical writings? Should such matters affect the value of her works or the way we respond to them? Justify your answers in detail.
 9. What factors, aside from racial or ethnic discrimination, might help explain the tones and attitudes expressed in Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essays of 1900? For instance, how might her relations with her mother, father, and stepfathers have affected her basic outlook on life? How might that outlook have been affected by her early experiences with poverty? How might her views be seen as typical of children of any ethnic background who are separated from their parents and sent off to boarding schools?
 10. What historical events involving Native Americans were occurring at the very end of the 19th century that might help provide significant contexts for Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essays of 1900? How might those events help explain the tones, attitudes, and rhetorical strategies adopted in the essays? Did Zitkala-Ša ever adopt significantly different tones or attitudes in other essays? For instance, compare her earlier essay titled "Side by Side" with the autobiographical memoirs. How do the rhetorical techniques in that essay differ from the techniques employed in the memoirs of 1900?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Davidson, Cathy N., and Ada Norris, eds. *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*. By Zitkala-Ša. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Fisher, Dexter. "Foreword." In *American Indian Stories*. By Zitkala-Ša. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.
- Katanski, Amelia V. *Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.
- Kilcup, Karen L., ed. *Native American Women's Writing 1800–1924: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Lukens, Margaret A. "The American Indian Story of Zitkala-Sa?" [*sic*]. In *In Her Own Voice: Nineteenth-Century American Women Essayists*. Edited by Sherry Lee Linkon, 141–155. New York: Garland, 1997.
- Regents of the University of Minnesota. Available online. URL: <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/>

- vg/Bios/entries/bonnin_gertrude_simmons_zitkala-sa.html. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Ruoff, A. LaVonne Brown. "Early American Women Authors: Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, Sarah Winemucca, S. Alice Callahan, E. Pauline Johnson, and Zitkala-Ša." In *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*, edited by Karen L. Kilcup, 81–111. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Stevens, J. David. *The Word Rides Again: Rereading the Frontier in American Fiction*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002.
- Zitkala-Ša. *American Indian Stories*. 1921. Reprint, Glorieta, N. Mex.: Rio Grande, 1976.
- . *Dreams and Thunder: Stories, Poems, and The Sun Dance Opera*. Edited by P. Jane Hafen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Robert C. Evans



WILLA CATHER (1873–1947)

To feel greatly is genius, and to make others feel is art.

(The Kingdom of Art)

Willa Cather was born on a farm in Back Creek, Virginia, just 50 miles northwest of Washington, D.C., on December 7, 1873. The Cather family had been in Virginia for four generations and had been divided by the Civil War, with Willa's great-grandfather James supporting the South because he believed in state's rights and her grandfather William supporting the Union cause and sending his sons, including Cather's father, into West Virginia to avoid conscription into the Confederate Army. Her mother's side of the family was similarly divided by the war: Her grandmother Rachel Boak abhorred slavery, yet her three sons served in the army of the confederacy, and one son died in its service. By the time of Cather's birth, her community, which was on a strategic highway between North and South, was still recovering from the ravages of the war.

Despite her roots in the American South, however, Cather is probably best known for her literary portrayals of the frontier landscape of Nebraska, where she and her parents and siblings moved, joining her paternal grandparents and an uncle and aunt who had already migrated west, during the spring of Cather's ninth year. The family's migration was part of a vast national postwar movement to the West that had been opened up by the Homestead Act of 1862, an act that attracted huge numbers of American citizens as well as European immigrants—Swedes, Danes, Bohemians, Norwe-

gians, Germans, and Russians—with the promise of free land to homesteaders willing to put virgin prairies under the plow and to build and occupy their homes on those empty plains. While much of Cather's fiction expresses a deep and abiding love for the prairie landscape, her initial response had been one of horror at the difference between the plains and the Virginia hills. The prairie was, she later reflected, “as bare as a piece of sheet iron,” and “it felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality” (*In Person* 10). But, she would conclude, “The country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake” (*In Person* 32). Accepting the West, and all the perils it held for an aspiring young artist, however, was not so easy for Cather as this description might suggest. For instance, in the dissatisfied days between her graduation from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and a job offer the following spring in Pittsburgh, she felt so exiled in the West that she headed her letters from Red Cloud with “Siberia” (Woodress 104). Even into adulthood when Cather had moved away and visited the Midwest only on occasion, she continued to suffer from a “fear of dying in a cornfield” and “an unreasoning fear of being swallowed by the distances” between her and all that was going on in the world outside Red Cloud (Sergeant 49, 79).

Expressing her conflicting feelings, Cather herself concluded that Nebraska was both “the happiness and the curse of my life” (*In Person* 32).

In her first years on the prairies, young Cather had a special ability to make friends with many of the neighboring immigrant families, even when they could not speak much English. She felt that they shared her sense of alienation, and she credited those immigrants with offering the first taste she knew of the richness of European culture. Talking to them provided an intellectual excitement she had never before known. Later their stories would figure prominently in her fiction, as she became one of the first mainstream writers to include immigrants as a positive part of her literary landscape.

Less than two years after moving to the Nebraska farm, Charles Cather moved the family 12 miles south to the small town of Red Cloud, the site of a spur of the Burlington Northern Railroad and the county seat of Webster County. They settled there permanently, and Cather's father opened an office dealing in insurance, real estate, and farm loans. Red Cloud would inhabit Cather's imagination for the remainder of her life; later she used the town repeatedly as a setting for her fiction, accurately detailing key geographical details, even if the name had been changed—*Hanover* in *O Pioneers!*, *Black Hawk* in *My Ántonia*, and *Sweet Water* in *A Lost Lady*, to name a few. During her adolescence in Red Cloud, Cather developed friendships with key town figures: Julia Miner, the daughter of a famous Norwegian oboist, offered Cather her first experience of serious music. Dr. McKeeby, the family's physician, and a colleague, Dr. Damerell, regularly invited young Cather to go out on calls with them; on one occasion, Cather reportedly administered chloroform while Dr. Damerell amputated a boy's leg. Silas Garber, former state governor and founder of Red Cloud, and his wife, Lyra, often invited Cather to events at their home, which was as close to a Victorian mansion as the town could ever claim. Mr. Schindelmeisser, a German itinerant piano teacher, once told Cather's mother that she was wasting money on Willa's piano lessons because all the young girl wanted to do was hear

stories about his musical career in Europe (Cather's mother, by the way, dismissed his concerns, saying her daughter was learning a great deal from listening to music and stories). These Red Cloud figures would all later be transformed into fictional characters in Cather's novels and short stories—testament to Cather's lifelong belief that “All my stories have been written with material that was gathered—no, God save us! not gathered but absorbed—before I was fifteen years old” (*In Person* 43).

During her high school years, Cather studied Latin and Greek and voraciously read Virgil, Ovid, and the *Iliad* in their original languages, as well as reading important authors writing in English—Shakespeare, Tennyson, Emerson, Dickens, Hawthorne, Ruskin, and Carlyle, among others. Through her associations with the town's doctors, she became interested in biology, medicine, and dissection (she identified “vivisection” and “Slicing Toads” as a “favorite amusement” during summer vacations and “amputating limbs” as her idea of “perfect happiness” in an autobiographical survey she completed in 1888). When she graduated from high school in 1890, at the age of 16, she and two classmates gave graduation speeches that were published in the local newspaper. In her speech, entitled “Superstition *versus* Imagination,” Cather eloquently argued: “Scientific investigation is the hope of our age, as it must precede all progress”; however, she admitted that science was not the only valid approach to “the mysteries of the unknowable.” Imagination was the necessary complement: “Microscopic eyes,” she wrote, “have followed matter to the molecule and fallen blinded. Imagination has gone a step farther and grasped the atom” (quoted in Woodress 62).

Equipped with this passion for scientific investigation, Cather enrolled, with the intention of being a premed major, at the University of Nebraska in the state capital of Lincoln that fall as a “second prep” (meaning that she was a nonmatriculated student given one year to meet the university's rigorous entrance requirements). With a population of 35,000, Lincoln—150 miles northeast of Red Cloud—was the largest city Cather had lived

in so far, and she was amazed at the notable modern improvements she found there: telephone and electric-light companies, a six-story “skyscraper,” a public library, two thriving newspapers, and two theaters that, because of the city’s location on the east-west railway lines, attracted the important traveling companies of the day.

The opportunity for women to earn college degrees had dramatically increased over the course of the second half of the 19th century. Elizabeth Blackwell had been the first woman in the country admitted to medical school, but when she graduated at the top of her class in 1849, no hospital would allow her to practice in its facility. Other women in the country had earned law degrees but were then refused licenses to practice. By 1880, just a decade before Cather enrolled at Lincoln, the first Ph.D. was awarded to an American woman in the humanities. Despite opposition from scientists like the Harvard professor Dr. Edward Clarke, who in 1873 wrote that higher education exposed women to mental stimulus their underdeveloped brains could not tolerate and that such intellectual stimulation threatened their reproductive capacities, the numbers of women enrolling in universities steadily climbed, until, at the turn of the century, female enrollments nearly equaled male enrollments in more than a dozen states across the country, including Nebraska.

Although Cather had planned to become a doctor, by the end of her first year at the university, something had happened that would forever change her plans. She wrote a paper for her English class about the philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle, and her professor was so impressed that, without her knowledge, he submitted her essay to the *Nebraska State Journal*, the leading newspaper in the state and an important publication in the region. Seeing her essay in print in the Sunday morning edition had a mesmerizing effect, so much so that she immediately changed her major to English.

With characteristic passion, Cather threw herself into her new field. Her first short story, “Peter,” was published in a Boston magazine in May 1892

when she was just 18. Focusing on a Bohemian immigrant and former violinist who commits suicide on his family’s homestead in Nebraska, the story—based on a true one Cather had heard from her European neighbors when she first moved to the plains—would later serve as the kernel for her 1918 novel *My Ántonia*. In addition to these early publications, during her remaining years at the University of Nebraska she would act in various editorial capacities on three university publications, including a stint as editor in chief of the *Hesperian*, the university’s premier literary magazine. Numerous early Cather short stories were used to fill the pages of the *Hesperian*.

During those years, Cather found ways to be paid for her writing. In 1894 she wrote a ghost story called “The Fear That Walks by Noonday,” winning a \$10 writing prize at a time when that amount could buy a fine set of silverware or a steel beam plow from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. She also began a position as a paid theater critic for the *Nebraska State Journal*, a job that gave her a dollar a page for what she would later characterize as “my florid, exaggerated, foamy-at-the-mouth, adjective-spree period” (*In Person* 12). Nevertheless, she made enough money to pay \$15 a month for a rented room, as well as her university expenses. In her two and a half years as theater critic, she would write more than 200 1,000-word reviews; Cather’s biographer James Woodress estimates that she wrote more during these years than in all of her later work. But the pace she kept was exhausting. She spent her days at the university, carrying a full course load and continuing for most of that year as the managing editor of the *Hesperian*; her evenings were spent at performances, and the early morning hours were spent at the *Journal* offices writing reviews about everything from melodramas and minstrel shows to Madame Modjeska. It is no wonder, then, that Stephen Crane, who met Cather when he was in Nebraska to report on the drought, remembered her as the one person he had ever known who could sleep *standing up*. Her work left little time for studying, and, she would later confess, it was only by inspiration that she passed

her examinations during her senior year. Cather's energies were instead directed to her new vocation, reviewing performances by the best that the late 19th-century stage had to offer: Clara Morris, Julia Marlowe, Nellie Melba, Emma Calvé, Richard Mansfield, and—Cather's favorite—the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt.

Cather's columns were part drama criticism, part biographical notes about performers, and part meditation on the nature of art. The voice of the young drama critic is filled with vibrancy and fervor; for instance, in a column about Bernhardt, she dramatically declares: "To aspire and create and conquer, to strike fire from flint, to compel the worship of an indifferent world, to make the blind see and the deaf hear whether they will or no, to win the world's highest honor and noisiest fame, that is great" (*Kingdom* 155). Those late nights of writing were a valuable apprenticeship for Cather, an opportunity to find and exercise her voice, to work out many of her artistic principles, to analyze the process of creation, and to observe the demands of artistic life.

Cather recognized in the reviews that the performer's profession was characterized by a sacrifice of personal life: "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so than even Jehovah. He says only, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' Art, science, and letters cry, "'Thou shalt have no other gods at all.' They accept only human sacrifices" (quoted in Woodress 74). The artist, Cather wrote, must "cling" to art, "forsaking all others, and keeping unto her as long as they two shall live" (*Kingdom* 407), for "domestic and artistic life do not mix well. . . . Liberty and solitude, they are the two wings of art" (*World* 194).

Not only was she discovering firsthand what it meant to be an artist, Cather was gaining a reputation. Her work became the reason the *Des Moines Register* could declare, "The best theatrical critics of the west are said to be connected with the Lincoln, Neb. press" (*Kingdom* 14–15). Her reviews often demonstrated an acerbic wit so fatal that one theatrical manager stated that "poor companies begin to tremble long before they get here [to Lincoln]"

(*World* 226). Will Owen James, Cather's managing editor at the *Journal*, characterized her as the "meatax" critic, adding, "Miss Cather did not stand in awe of the greatest actors, but set each one in his place with all the authority of a veteran metropolitan critic" (*Kingdom* 17). She had, said another editor, "a most entertaining way of crucifying ambitious actors and actresses" (*Kingdom* 17).

But when Cather graduated from the university in 1895, the 21-year-old was at a loss for what to do next. She applied for an opening as a university English teacher, but her application was blackballed by a former professor who failed to see her promise. Back home in Red Cloud, feeling aimless and banished from the world, she gladly accepted a job offer the following spring to edit *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh. Cather packed her bags and headed east—never again to live for any extended period in the West.

The *Home Monthly*, however, was a short-lived women's magazine, trying to find its place in the new publication niche created at the turn of the century by the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Instead of writing about art and literature, Cather found herself required to produce copy on babies and mince pies, occasionally supplemented by the inclusion of one of her own short stories, usually printed under a pseudonym to disguise the fact that she was almost single-handedly writing most of the issues. When the magazine was sold more than a year later, she began reviewing for the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*, where she stayed until March 1900, when she accepted a job as a teacher of Latin, algebra, and composition at a Pittsburgh high school. Her work as a math teacher was fortunately temporary: Cather had struggled with math; as an adult, whenever she was under stress, she recalled suffering from nightmares about taking math exams. However, she enjoyed teaching composition and Latin. Beloved by her students, Cather was an effective and forthright teacher who demanded the best from her pupils and did not abide sloppy or halfhearted work.

In Pittsburgh, Cather continued writing short stories and poetry when she could steal away a few

hours from editing, reviewing, or teaching. She did manage to publish a modest and largely unnoticed collection of poems, *April Twilights* (1903), and a collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905), which garnered only a little more attention than her poetry. But her long apprenticeship would eventually pay off in spring 1906, when Sam McClure, publisher of the muckraking *McClure's Magazine*, took notice of her. *McClure's*—which published investigative exposés on big business and labor unions, as well as some of the best fiction of the time by the best writers of the time—was the premier periodical publication in the early century. McClure offered Cather a job, first as its literary editor and later, when she had proven herself, as the magazine's managing editor. As the only female editor of a preeminent magazine during the first decade of the century, Cather was in a unique position of power. Once again she threw herself into her tasks wholeheartedly, so much so that Viola Roseboro, Cather's colleague at *McClure's*, claimed that "If Willa Cather had been a scrub-woman, she would have scrubbed much harder than any other scrub-women" (quoted in Woodress 71). During her years at *McClure's*, Cather wrote very little fiction because she had to focus her efforts on editing and journalism. She also ghost wrote two extensive book manuscripts: the biography of the Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy and the autobiography of her boss, Sam McClure. Cather's job had been exhausting, and McClure, a man who reportedly "had three hundred ideas a minute" (quoted in Woodress 187), relied on Cather heavily. But as gratifying as it must have been to hold more editorial power than any other woman editor of the time, the work had exhausted Cather and taken its toll on her own literary aspirations.

One good thing that came out of her work at the magazine was the chance to become acquainted with important artists and writers. She got to know Mark Twain in his final years and acquired pieces for publication from THEODORE DREISER, JACK LONDON, and the playwright Zoë Atkins. Perhaps the most significant association of those years was with the Maine short story writer Sarah Orne Jew-

ett, author of *Country of the Pointed Firs*. Jewett became Cather's mentor, advising her that her incessant responsibilities at the magazine would hinder her development as a fiction writer; that she must find her "own quiet center of life, and write from that to the world"; that what little she was managing to do suffered from her attempt to imitate other authors; and that she ought to draw upon the authentic material of her youth in Virginia and Nebraska as subject matter (quoted in Woodress 203).

It would be almost three more years before Cather could take Jewett's advice and end her association with the magazine. During her last months with *McClure's*, she somehow managed, in spite of a serious illness and editorial duties, to write her short novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, about an engineer, Bartley Alexander, who builds a bridge across the St. Lawrence River and begins an illicit love affair with an old flame. In it, Cather imitated the style and subject matter of Henry James, the most respected American novelist of the time; his work, however, was foreign territory to her. Often called "novels of manners," James's works were distinctly urban and cosmopolitan, frequently treating wealthy characters from high society who travel the world and are well connected. As much as she admired James, Cather grew to think of her own Jamesian novel as "shallow" and "conventional" (*On Writing* 91), perhaps because she recognized that it still failed to benefit from the advice given by Jewett to "write about your own country" (quoted in Woodress 223).

The summer after leaving *McClure's* Cather was exploring the cliff dwellings at Walnut Canyon, near Flagstaff, Arizona, when she had an epiphany much like that she would later portray in *The Song of the Lark*. She had never before seen the cliff dwellings, but she had heard of them since childhood; viewing them for the first time was a profound experience that would be translated repeatedly in her later novels. There, she relates, she "recovered from the conventional editorial point of view" (*On Writing* 92) and, as did Thea in her novel, fully acknowledged how discontented and unfulfilled she felt.

That summer gave Cather the clarity to realize other things, as well: She acknowledged that working with the writing of others at *McClure's* meant she had not given full attention to her own work and that if she were to succeed as a writer at all, she would need to recognize that the West was the real material of her art.

The result of this dramatic realization was *O Pioneers!*, a novel about a family of Swedish homesteaders in Nebraska, a book in which she lets the country be the hero of the novel. Cather had found her own voice at last and had also found a way to make a unique contribution to American literature; she was writing not the Jamesian novel of manners but, as she called it, a “novel of the soil” (*On Writing* 93).

O Pioneers! would mark a personal transition in Cather's life, as well. For the first time, she was making a living as a novelist. She had finally completed the long years of apprenticeship as theater critic, teacher, editor, and journalist. Subsequent books drew increasing fame and even international recognition. Her next novel, *My Ántonia*, won wide acclaim, and in 1923, she won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. Her work in the 1920s with such important novels as *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* only solidified her position as a premier American writer, among the most significant creative artists of the 20th century.

She enjoyed financial success as well. Even when the financial straits of the Great Depression hit the dozen or more drought-plagued families she still kept in contact with in Nebraska, Cather was able to send them blankets, clothes, canned food, and substantial checks. In 1936, she decided she was no longer buying gifts for anyone but the destitute farmers she knew in Nebraska. In the 1930s, the time between her publications increased, and in 1940 she would publish her final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

Cather died in 1947 at the age of 63. She is buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in a small cemetery, where her gravestone is inscribed with a quote from *My Ántonia*: “That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

Since the 1980s, scholars have raised the issue that Cather may have been a lesbian whose sexual preference might have shaped her fiction. Although Cather may have been a lesbian, her sexuality was nothing she ever cared to express openly. Her sexual identity, ultimately, is a complex issue that has confounded those looking for easy answers. In her teens, Cather went through a period of identifying herself as “Wm. Cather, M.D.”—a pose that suggested not only her aspirations to be a doctor but her realization that men had more social power than did women. This period is also marked by her experimentation with male clothing styles; numerous pictures from the period show Cather with cropped hair and dressed in jacket and tie. To her credit, Willa's mother, Virginia Cather—herself someone who embodied a sense of genteel femininity—gave young Cather the space and latitude to experiment with gender roles, even to the extent of having the phase documented with so many photos. Even so, while her clothing may have been an expression of Cather's growing awareness of her sexual orientation, some critics have also placed her cross-dressing into a cultural context of young girls' mimicking the famous actresses of the time who occasionally assumed male roles.

Letters from Cather's early years hint that she had a romantic attachment to Louise Pound, a classmate at the university, and later in Pittsburgh, to Isabel McClung, the daughter of an affluent and socially prominent family. Cather did share a nearly 40-year friendship with Edith Lewis, who was named as the executor of Cather's estate and inherited Cather's property, a substantial financial portion of the estate, and royalties from her books. The intimacy of their relationship is in question.

During her lifetime, Cather had seen Oscar Wilde brought up on charges of homosexuality in a very nasty, public scandal; what she wrote about him in her theater and book reviews is therefore quite revealing. While she personally thought Wilde largely a second-rate writer who relied too much on cleverness, whose insincerity made him, she said, “a buffoon and a harlequin,” she decried his being dismissed and reviled, despite his liter-

ary achievements. Ultimately, she voiced anger at Wilde, not for being a gay man, but for the “crime” of courting unseemly public notoriety instead of having “reverence for his own gift” (*World* 264; see also 154 and 89–92).

Cather, who had once discussed being “married” to her art and had also proclaimed that art was “an exacting master, more so than even Jehovah,” would have been horrified to have been characterized as a “lesbian writer” rather than just purely as a “writer.” In her earliest reviews, we can also see how Cather resisted the idea that people are wholly or even significantly defined by their sexuality. In an 1899 review of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, a landmark novel in which the main character, Edna Pontellier, ultimately kills herself because she remains unfulfilled and unhappy, Cather faults Edna for being so caught up in a sexual liaison that she forgets the finer things in life, such as art. Counting her among misguided women who are solely defined by their sexuality, Cather writes, “These people really expect the passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life, whereas nature only intended that it should meet one of many demands. They insist upon making it stand for all the emotional pleasures of life and art; expecting an individual and self-limited passion to yield infinite variety, pleasure, and distraction, to contribute to their lives what the arts and the pleasurable exercise of the intellect gives to less limited and less intense idealists” (*World* 698–699). In Cather’s own fiction, characters who look to sexual passion for fulfillment often meet with sad fates (for example, Marie and Emil in *O Pioneers!* or Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*), and the best marriages are those based on mutual respect and shared goals, not on sexual passion, which does not assume major importance in Cather’s work at all.

What is important to note, finally, is how intensely private Cather always was. Prior to her death, she attempted to gather and burn private letters she had written to friends and acquaintances—in fact, only one letter to Edith Lewis, in which she calls her “darling Edith,” is in existence. Realizing that she could not ensure that all her let-

ters were destroyed, Cather added a codicil to her will that bars critics from quoting directly from any other previously unpublished letters that may have survived. Once calling literary scholars “information vampires” (*In Person* 111), Cather probably worried that her achievements as a writer would be eclipsed by speculation about her sexuality.

***The Troll Garden* (1905)**

A few of the stories published in *The Troll Garden* collection are still widely anthologized in American literature anthologies, and many readers’ first experience with Cather is found reading “A Wagner Matinee,” “Paul’s Case,” or “A Sculptor’s Funeral” from that collection. What unifies these stories—besides a sense of ultimate defeat and disappointment—is the question of whether art is possible in the West. Written during a time when Cather was struggling with her doubts about herself as a writer and with ambivalent feelings about her childhood home in Nebraska as a place of either inspiration or suffocation, the collection is thematically centered on ideas of separation between two mutually exclusive worlds—the “garden” of art (located in eastern urban centers) and the world outside art (especially as seen in the raw and rough West).

In “A Wagner Matinee,” for instance, the aging Aunt Georgiana, once a music teacher in Boston and a woman of the world, has become “semisomnambulant”—that is, half asleep—in her life as wife of a Nebraska homesteader (*Early Novels* 104), so when her nephew takes her to a matinee in Boston, she is profoundly shaken by how much Wagner’s music “broke a silence of thirty years; the inconceivable silence of the plains” (*Early Novels* 107). When her nephew tells her they must leave at the conclusion of the concert, Aunt Georgiana protests, and in a flash, the narrator understands that for her, just outside the door of the hall lie “the tall, unpainted house with weather-curved boards” and “the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door” (*Early Novels* 110). The

West of the story is portrayed as a harsh place that robs people of the ecstasies of art.

While “A Wagner Matinee” focuses on a woman homesteader’s returning to the East, “The Sculptor’s Funeral” is about a western town’s response when the sculptor Harvey Merrick’s body is taken home to his small Kansas town. The story emphasizes how the mass of people of western towns are generally incapable of being sympathetic toward an artistic soul: The townspeople prefer to relish stories of Harvey’s foolishly letting cows wander away while he watches the sunset. Merrick’s childhood home was a place of “raw, biting ugliness” (*Early Novels* 42), a “place of hatred and bitter waters” (*Early Novels* 47). While Cather emphasizes that Merrick has become widely admired for his art in the cultural centers of the world, she demonstrates that the hometown folk still see him as a ne’er-do-well. Here is Cather’s concern over provincialism and its horrific effects on the solitary artistic soul.

The Troll Garden, however, does not directly deal with artists of great genius, as Cather would in later works like *The Song of the Lark*. Instead, the point of view is consistently centered on those who are cut off from art, as is Paul in “Paul’s Case,” Cather’s most famous story.

For Discussion or Writing

The stories of *The Troll Garden* are filled with images of uncrossed thresholds, gulfs, walls, and barriers of all kinds, all suggesting how much Cather, in the early days of her career, felt lay between her and the achievement of her art. Identify some of these key threshold/barrier passages in *The Troll Garden* stories, and discuss the importance of the images.

“Paul’s Case” (1905)

“Paul’s Case” is a deft psychological portrait of a desperate and sensitive youth. Paul, a Pittsburgh schoolboy, is not an artist, but merely an usher at Carnegie Hall, the only place, Cather writes, that he “really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a for-

getting.” And while he is invigorated by the stage performances—“he breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant, poetic things”—(*Early Novels* 120) he can only hang about at the peripheries of art, “loitering” about the dressing rooms of young, indulgent actors, imagining what it would be like to enter their world and suffering keen disappointment when he realizes that “mocking spirits stood guard at the doors” (*Early Novels* 116). When his father—acting on the advice of a school disciplinary committee studying Paul’s “case”—insists that he give up his ushering job, Paul impulsively steals \$1,000 from his employer and runs away to New York to live a short but enraptured life of luxury in the finest New York hotel. When his money runs out and capture by his father is imminent, he steps in front of a speeding train.

The story opens and closes with references to the bright red carnations that Paul wears in the buttonhole of his coat—flowers that symbolize his love of beauty and his attachment to the finer things in life, but that, as Paul himself does, ultimately seem faded (and fated to die) as the story concludes. By the end of the tale, Paul feels hopeless as he realizes that his rebellion has failed and that his hastily concocted escape (financed by impulsive thievery from his Pittsburgh employers) could only ever have been temporary. Now he will not only have to confront his father but to face the law—two aspects, really, of the same dilemma. A train, the method and symbol of his earlier liberation, now becomes the instrument of his self-chosen destruction. It represents the powerful, seemingly unstoppable mechanistic forces against which Paul, throughout the story, has consistently thrown himself (or from which he has sought to flee). The train is the very symbol of the sort of industrial, mechanical mindset Paul has long rejected, and so it is entirely fitting that he should be destroyed by a train rather than dying by taking an overdose of pills or by jumping from a bridge.

In the last split seconds of his life, Paul briefly realizes that he has made yet another hasty, impulsive mistake—one from which there can this time

be no reprieve at all. Yet literally his last thoughts are vivid, imaginative, and even beautiful; they are the kinds of fantasies (of exotic, far-off oceans and deserts) that have, throughout the tale, helped sustain his desire to live. Cather's description of Paul's death is richly complex. We sense the waste involved, we realize (and so does he) the foolishness of his decision, and yet our final vision of Paul is of a person who is in some ways at peace. He seems a person who has been reabsorbed into the immense universe from which he once emerged, and to which we all must someday return. His death is in some respects gruesome and brutal, but Cather de-emphasizes any strong sense of pain or suffering. She depicts his death as in some ways a purely mechanical event, but in other ways as a moment almost of beauty and of a relaxing comfort—sensations of a sort Paul had never really enjoyed, for any length of time, while he lived.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the flights to the East in "Paul's Case" and in THEODORE DREISER's *Sister Carrie*. How do the circumstances, motives, and characters of the fleeing protagonists resemble and/or differ from one another? What does New York symbolize in each work? Discuss the final fates of Paul and of George Hurstwood.
2. Discuss your response to Paul's death in "Paul's Case." Why do you think he chose to kill himself? What other decision could he have made? What other options were open to him from the beginning of the story? Discuss the tone of Cather's presentation of his suicide. In what two ways (at least) could that tone have differed from the tone presently used? Why do you think Cather adopted the tone she chose to use?

O Pioneers! (1913)

While *O Pioneers!* was not Cather's first novel (see the earlier discussion of *Alexander's Bridge*), it was the first one in which she felt she had found her own voice and subject matter. Drawing upon

the lives of the immigrant neighbors she had befriended in Nebraska, Cather wrote a story that centers on Alexandra Bergson and her family of Swedish homesteaders, who farm on a stretch of prairie called the Divide. Unlike her dull-witted brothers who want to quit the homestead when times become difficult, Alexandra has the vision to see that the prairie is "rich and strong and glorious," and, according to Cather, "For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning" (*Early Novels* 170). Alexandra does indeed make a success of the land relatively early in the novel. Here Cather temporarily shifts the story's focus to Alexandra's youngest brother, Emil, who is desperately in love with their neighbor's wife, Marie, who is also Alexandra's best friend. Their love is fated, of course, and on the afternoon they consummate it in the tall grass of the orchard, Marie's volatile Bohemian husband shoots them while in a blinding rage. The murders devastate Alexandra, and when an old friend, Carl Linstrum, returns, she finds comfort in his friendship and agrees to marry him because "when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like—those young ones" (*Early Novels* 290).

O Pioneers! fulfills the advice given to Cather by Sarah Orne Jewett to "write about your own country" (quoted in Woodress 223). In this novel, Cather attempted what she called "a different process altogether" by writing "a book entirely for myself" (*On Writing* 92). Cather's "deepest feelings," she confessed in an interview, were "rooted" in the West: "I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, and heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the furrows of its soil and I did not find them. And so," she concluded, "I wrote *O Pioneers!*" (*In Person* 37). During the 1930s, when she looked back at the novel and what it had meant to her career, she recognized the significant break she had made from the conventional novel of manners that Henry James had made the gold standard of American literature for the time. She wrote with good humor, "I did not in the least expect

that other people would see anything in a slow-moving story, without ‘action,’ without ‘humor,’ without a ‘hero’; a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards—set in Nebraska, of all places! As everyone knows, Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background” (*On Writing* 94). Writing this novel was, Cather would write, “the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture” (quoted in Woodress 240).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In a letter to a friend, Cather wrote that she had let the country be the hero of the novel. Examine the ways in which Cather personifies the land as a hero.
2. Find and read Ovid’s story of Pyramus and Thisbe in *Metamorphosis*. Consider how Cather rewrites this fated love story in *O Pioneers!*
3. While at the center of the novel is the love story of Emil and Marie, some scholars have argued that the real love story of the novel is that of Alexandra and the land. Agree or disagree and discuss why you think as you do.

***The Song of the Lark* (1915)**

The Song of the Lark asks a question fundamental to Cather’s thinking in the first half of her career: Can the highest aspiration of art find its genesis in the West, a place so seemingly hostile to high art, and can someone with imagination and drive translate her experiences in the West into a meaningful artistic career that finds an audience outside that region?

The Song of the Lark, Cather’s *Künstlerroman* (a literary term derived from German, meaning the story of the development of an artist), centers on the life of Thea Kronborg, daughter of Scandinavian immigrants, who is raised in the small desert town of Moonstone, Colorado, patterned largely after Cather’s own childhood hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska. The novel, which is part psy-

chological autobiography, drawing upon elements of Cather’s own life, and part retelling of the life of Wagnerian diva Olive Fremstad, is about Thea’s struggle to rise from a small western town to fame as a Wagnerian opera diva in New York. Thea is one of many offspring of the Swedish minister and his wife, but unlike her siblings, Thea (whose name translates from Greek as “goddess”), has imagination and a significant talent for music, which is recognized by the people who act as her guides and mentors. Her mother respects Thea’s individuality and supports her talents in very pragmatic ways; her “queer, addle-pated” aunt (*Early Novels* 309) is astute enough to understand that Thea has gifts that will someday make Moonstone sit up and take notice; her piano teacher, Herr Wunsch (whose name means “wish”), tells her that there is only one big thing in life and that is desire—“And before it, when it is big, all is little” (*Early Novels* 360). Further, the family physician, Dr. Archie, advises her to seize opportunities to make something of herself in the larger world; her Mexican friend, Spanish Johnny, a performer himself, models for her the transcendent quality of art. Her primary support is derived from Ray Kennedy, a railroad man who dreams of marrying Thea, even though he knows that she is “bound for the big terminals of the world” (*Early Novels* 425), and who, when he dies in a railway accident, bequeaths her a modest sum of money that allows her to escape to Chicago to study music. While Thea initially goes there to study piano, it becomes apparent to her and her teacher that Thea’s real talent lies in singing. The Chicago years are marked by a struggle to accept and fulfill her fate and by a romance with a “beer prince” (*Early Novels* 523) and dilettante, Fred Ottenburg, who falls in love with her (despite the fact that he is already married). Fred watches out for Thea, and when she is at her lowest point both emotionally and physically, he provides a summer of reprieve at his Arizona ranch, where Thea discovers the ancient cliff dwellings of the Anasazi and contemplates the Indians’ pottery as artistic expression, akin to her own; she thus feels that her past is “lengthened,” that she is “bound” to “old and higher obligations” (*Early Novels* 555). The remainder of the novel

concentrates on Thea's growing reputation as a Wagnerian soprano. She ultimately achieves fame and worldwide recognition and is thought of back in Moonstone as a major source of pride. Cather emphasizes that Thea's success is based on her ability to understand and portray the sorrows and aspirations of her operatic roles, which are based on Germanic legends, by exploring the heroism in her familiar West, such as that of the ancient Indians "dealing with fate bare handed" and the old man listening as the first transcontinental telegraph message taps out, "Westward the course of Empire takes its way" (*Early Novels* 341).

One of the challenges of the novel for readers is why the portrayal of Thea becomes less and less personal as the story progresses. In her preface to the 1932 edition, Cather explains that "in an artist of the type I chose, personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer" and that "the Thea Kronborg who is behind the imperishable daughters of music becomes somewhat dry and preoccupied. . . . Her artistic life is the only one in which she is happy, or free, or even very real" (*Early Novels* 1329).

The Song of the Lark is Cather's answer to the questions she had posed in *The Troll Garden* stories about whether the soil of the western landscape could produce someone recognized as an important artist. Here, while Cather acknowledges the pettiness and lack of sophistication of people in rural midwestern towns, she is able to imagine that the artist can grow beyond that without bitterness, to find nobility and grace within the western experience—conclusions that a decade earlier Cather seemed unable to draw in her short stories. Unlike *O Pioneers!*, in which Alexandra seems eternally wedded to the soil of Nebraska, Thea goes forth from the western landscape that inspires her (the plains of Laramie, the sandhills of Moonstone, the canyons of the cliff dwellers) and seeks an attentive audience among people who seem to have stepped directly from a Henry James novel of manners.

The novel is also important because it portrays a woman whose life is not defined by a desire to marry and—even more—whose identity is not defined by the men around her. Here, as well as in *O Pioneers!*,

women determine the course of their own lives, with marriage one of the lesser goals of their existence. This view was radically unique in American literature of the time, for even EDITH WHARTON, Cather's contemporary, examined women trapped by societal expectations to marry. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea's ultimate marriage to Fred (after his wife's death) is handled almost as an afterthought; the focus remains on the possibility of her artistic achievements.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider who Thea is and what she is like in Moonstone, Chicago, and then Panther Canyon. What are the reasons for any differences you see?
2. Is the ending of the novel a happy one? Why or why not? How does Cather define happiness? Is it a concern of Cather's? You might compare and contrast this novel with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

My Ántonia (1918)

While previous works had gained Cather ever increasing recognition, it was the publication of *My Ántonia* that solidified her place among the best and brightest of early 20th-century American writers and marked the beginning of a period of notable productivity and literary success.

The novel—which remains the most widely taught Cather novel at both the high school and university levels—was inspired by Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a Bohemian woman who had worked as a "hired girl" for the Miner family, Cather's neighbors in Red Cloud. In an interview, Cather identified Annie Pavelka as "one of the people who interested me most as a child. . . . She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and her willingness to take pains." She added, "The farmer's wife who raises a large family and cooks for them and makes their clothes and keeps house and on the side runs a truck garden and a chicken farm and a canning establishment, and thoroughly

enjoys doing it all, and doing it well, contributes more to art than all the culture clubs. Often you find such a woman with all the appreciation of the beautiful bodies of her children, of the order and harmony of her kitchen, of the real creative joy of all her activities, which marks the great artist" (*In Person* 42–49). The story of Annie's father's suicide had been one of the first tales Cather had heard when she moved to the plains and had inspired her first publication, the short story "Peter." *My Ántonia* is a further reworking of that material, with the focus on the daughter. Cather would remain in touch with Annie Pavelka throughout her life, even sending her family money and supplies during the difficult years of the depression.

My Ántonia is told from the first-person perspective of a male narrator, Jim Burden, who, Cather's introduction suggests, has handed her the manuscript of his memories of Ántonia essentially as printed. Jim originally moves to the plains of Nebraska from Virginia when he is just nine years old—as Cather herself had—and on the train there he meets the Shimerda family, Bohemian homesteaders who will try to make a go of it on a poor farm they have bought from a fellow countryman. Jim becomes friends with Ántonia and is privy to how desperately hard the first winter is for the family. In January Ántonia's father kisses his children, tells them he is going out hunting, and quietly walks out to the barn and shoots himself, leaving the family to fend for themselves. To assist her mother and siblings financially, Ántonia does heavy farmwork on neighboring farms—grueling labor usually only done by men. The next year she leaves the farm and hires out as a maid/babysitter for the Harling family in town, where Jim and his grandparents have also moved.

Attracted to Ántonia's spirit and emotional strength, Jim nevertheless struggles to figure out what it is that she means to him. At one point he kisses her, but the class distinctions between them that would make a romance impossible are readily apparent to Ántonia, if not to Jim. Cather subverts the typical love plot in her novel, saying in an interview that she felt her main character "deserved

something better than the *Saturday Evening Post* sort of stuff" of formulaic romance stories (*In Person* 44). At another point, Jim saves Ántonia from a rape attempt by a nefarious moneylender whom Ántonia works for after she leaves the Harlings, but his rescue is not cast in the valiant heroics of some brave knight.

After Ántonia falls in love with an unprincipled railroad man who jilts her when she becomes pregnant, Jim recognizes the complexities of his own feelings and declares them to her: "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or sister—anything that a woman can be to a man" (*Early Novels* 910). After a brief and equally unlikely romance with another hired girl, an enlightening period of intellectual excitement at the university at Lincoln, and a marriage to a wealthy but cold New York woman, Jim returns to Black Hawk to visit Ántonia—and finds her happy in a marriage to another Bohemian, John Cuzak. The two have seemingly innumerable children and, despite struggles, have turned their prairie farm into an Edenic place of peace and harmony that sustains them spiritually. While this couple may not be so prosperous as Alexandra Bergson is in *O Pioneers!*, money hardly seems to matter to them. Ántonia and her family are rich in other ways. Jim's Ántonia (for he most definitely sees her in possessive terms, as indicated by the title of the novel) has "lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true," and she has become "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (*Early Novels* 926).

One challenge of *My Ántonia* is that it does not fit the usual pattern of plot and resolution. Loosely episodic, it begins a period in which Cather was experimenting with the novel as form. In a 1925 interview, she admitted that the novel was "just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern" (*In Person* 77).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the narrative point of view that Cather chooses in *My Ántonia*. Draw some conclusions about Jim's hopes and fears, his accomplishments, his relationship with Ántonia, his motivations, and his role as narrator. Consider, too, whether you think Jim is a narrator you can trust—why or why not?
2. *My Ántonia* is a book in which Cather pays close attention to the environment and landscape. First, examine Cather's descriptions of human encounters with the plains, especially in the introduction and the first chapter. What kinds of word choices does she make in connection with the natural world? What is the relation of human beings to the environment, and what are their feelings toward it? Then, examine the descriptions in book 5, "Cuzak's Boys," in the same way. Has the attitude changed at all? How do descriptions of human relations to the land compare to those in the introduction and chapter 1? What do you think accounts for the difference or transformation? What has happened between those periods? Enumerate the multiple things that humans have done to change the land and change their perceptions of the land.
3. *My Ántonia* is the only Cather book that in its first edition included illustrations as an integral part of the book's concept. She commissioned W. T. Benda to illustrate the book with pen-and-ink line drawings and paid close attention to the ways the drawings complemented her text. If you do not have Benda drawings in your text, find one that does have them. Consider how the drawings contribute to the portrayal of Ántonia and the people around her. What significance do the drawings have?

A Lost Lady (1923)

Loss of ideals is a theme Cather continues to explore, but this time she focuses specifically on what she viewed as the loss of western ideals in a modern world. Again inspired by real people

Cather knew, *A Lost Lady* draws upon the lives of Silas and Lyra Garber, residents of Red Cloud who had been kind to Cather and allowed the young girl a glimpse into their world. Silas Garber, one of the town's founders, had worked with the railroad during the settling of the West and had served as governor and later as founder of the bank in Red Cloud. His wife, Lyra, a beautiful and vivacious woman, was a generation younger than her husband. Together they were members of a railroad aristocracy that had arisen in the West in the late 19th century. In their ornate Victorian home, they hosted parties for important railroad men and their families who were passing through Red Cloud. Eventually Silas Garber suffered a debilitating stroke and spent his last days cared for by his young wife.

These events are reworked in Cather's novel: The Garbers become Captain and Marian Forrester, and Cather uses the point of view of Niel Herbert to examine the effect Marian has on men. For Niel and other males of his generation, Marian embodies the feminine ideal of refinement, gentility, grace, hospitality, beauty, and sensuality, and yet she is willing to "mock" the social proprieties that confine other women of the town. She exemplifies for him "the magic of contradictions" (*Later Novels* 43) and is a "bewitching" enigma that Niel idolizes—that is, until he discovers that Marian is having an affair with Frank Ellinger, an idle dandy visiting the Forrester home. Deeply disillusioned by knowledge of the affair, Neil concludes, "It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal" (*Later Novels* 48).

Niel subsequently witnesses the decline of Marian Forrester as she reveals herself to be quite human, not an ideal of womanhood at all. She is as pathetic as she is dazzling, and vulnerable as she is charming. When Captain Forrester is crippled by a stroke that follows the failure of his bank, Marian cares for him with tenderness and battles the gossips of the town who would invade her home under the pretext of nursing her husband. All the while, she laments the loss of their formerly glamorous lifestyle. After the captain's death, Marian stays in

Sweet Water for a time, throwing parties now with the young men of the town in attendance, rather than the influential men who had once attended parties in her home. Years later, Niel hears from a former friend of Marian's second marriage and death and realizes that he has not been the only one to idealize the glamorous Mrs. Forrester.

While Marian is the central figure in the novel, Cather also develops Captain Forrester as an emblem of a passing western nobility. A man who had lived out the pioneering dreams of the early West, the Captain has experienced firsthand the days when "One day was like another, and all were glorious; good hunting, plenty of antelope and buffalo, boundless sunny sky, boundless plains of waving grass." The glory of the western myth, embodied by the Captain, is a dream: "All our great West," he says, "has been developed from such dreams; the homesteaders' and the prospectors' and the contractors'. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water." His experience, however, is clearly that of a passing generation at "the end of the road-making West."

In contrast, Cather offers Ivy Peters, Niel's contemporary, as a foil. Peters, who at one point has blinded an innocent woodpecker merely because he can, becomes representative of the crass and materialistic generation willing to exploit the land for its resources, unfeeling about the West's history or the refinement of people like the Forresters, a common shyster who desires power rather than aesthetic beauty. For good or ill, the Ivy Peterses of the world have inherited the great potential of the West.

For Discussion or Writing

1. It is very easy to condemn Marian Forrester for her sexual faithlessness; however, are there ways in which Mrs. Forrester is a sympathetic character?
2. Compare and contrast the two dinner parties in the novel—the Christmas party in Book I and the one Mrs. Forrester has for the boys of Sweet Water. Consider the oral narratives told at the parties—how do they contribute to character development in the novel?
3. Cather consistently uses the notion of voyeurism in this novel (for instance, the Blum boy sees Marian and Frank, Niel hears the laughter outside Marian's bedroom window, the townswomen spend time trying to discover secrets by riffling through the Forresters' closets). Why does Cather use voyeurism as a motif in the novel? What is its thematic significance?
4. In a related matter, you might also want to consider Niel's as the chief point of view of the novel. Can we trust his conclusions about Mrs. Forrester? Why or why not? If you have read *My Ántonia*, compare and contrast him to Jim Burden.
5. Analyze the meaning of the title: What are the multiple meanings of the words *lost* and *lady*, and how does Cather use these ideas thematically?

***Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)**

As were other American novelists during the 1920s—WILLIAM FAULKNER, for example, whose *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) both inspired other writers and confounded readers—Willa Cather was interested in experimenting with the novel as form. She had used a shift in voice, style, and mood in her previous novel, *The Professor's House*. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) she took on her boldest fictional experiment yet in a work that is both modern in form and historical in subject matter.

Cather wrote to a former colleague at *McClure's Magazine* that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was "altogether a new kind of thing." In a letter to a publisher, she said that it was "scarcely a novel," and in another letter, to a literary magazine, she wrote, "I am amused that so many of the reviews of this book begin with the statement: 'This book is hard to classify'" (*On Writing* 12). Nevertheless, Cather thought *Death Comes for the Archbishop* her most significant work to date, and, as a result, for the only time in her career, she felt that she was

in the position to ask her publisher for a 1 percent royalty increase.

In a 1925 speech on the technique of the modern novel, Cather had asserted that atmosphere in a book was “invaluable,” but plot was unimportant—after all, Shakespeare never created plot but borrowed story lines from others. She also claimed that the composition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* had been influenced by seeing the frescoes of the 19th-century French artist Puvis de Chavannes, who in his portrayal of the childhood of Sta. Genevieve used “absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment . . . something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition.” In legends, she wrote, “the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance.” She was attempting at this time to exert a kind of “discipline” on herself in which she did not “use an incident for all there is in it” but instead “touch on [it] and pass on” (*On Writing* 9).

As a result, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is, as Cather herself classified it, a quiet “narrative”—loosely episodic, digressive, and without crescendo—making it difficult for readers who expect rising action and a clear sense of climax and resolution from novels they read. The title itself is a clue to what Cather was attempting, for it announces from the beginning what the ultimate outcome of the book is, the outcome that awaits us all. And while death abounds in the book (one critic has counted as many as 96 deaths mentioned in the text), these deaths are often unaccompanied by any sense of the monumental.

Cather claims she had never intended to write a novel of the Southwest, because the region was too big and varied as subject matter, but on a trip to Santa Fe, she discovered the story of Archbishop Lamy and his friend and fellow missionary the Right Reverend Joseph Machebeuf, Catholic priests who had settled in the Southwest in the mid-19th century. These men became the prototypes for the main characters, Bishop Latour and Father Valliant,

who struggle to do the work of the church within the contested space of the American Southwest, where Mexicans, Americans, American Indians, and French or Spanish missionaries all compete to claim the land and the souls of the people who live there. Although Latour attempts to introduce change in the New Mexico settlements, he ironically resists change in his own life, wishing to preserve his French ways, right down to the manner in which the onion soup is prepared. “A soup like this,” says Latour of the Christmas soup, “is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup” (*Later Novels* 299).

The literary episodes, often related through oral narratives, include stories of a tyrannical priest thrown from the top of the Ácoma mesa by the Indians he had virtually enslaved instead of ministering to them; a poor neophyte to whom the Virgin Mary appears; the performance of marriages and baptisms in remote villages; Father Valliant’s acquisition of two prized white mules; Latour’s visit on a stormy night to a sacred and secret Indian cave with an Indian guide; the downfall of a lecherous, corrupt priest, who is nevertheless beloved by his people; the vain woman who refuses to admit her age, even if that means she will lose a sizable inheritance; and the escape of a Mexican woman enslaved by an American family hostile to the Catholic Church who refuse to allow her to worship.

Many of these episodes are full of potential drama, and yet Cather works to pass over dramatic possibilities in a calm and quiet manner. One such story that clearly demonstrates the author’s goal to write a novel without accent is the story of Magdalena and her husband, Buck Scales. Latour and Valliant are riding their mules on a remote road when a storm forces them to take shelter in a rundown shack. The woman, Magdalena, secretly communicates to them that they are in grave danger from her husband. They hurriedly leave; soon afterward, she escapes and finds them. The life story she relates is horrific: In addition to the cruel beatings she has been subject to, her husband had murdered four previous travelers, as well as the three children

Magdalena has borne him. In a work of typical fictional form, such a confession would have been followed by the dramatic details of hunting down Buck Scales and bringing him to justice: Cather's method is different. Scales is indeed caught, but Cather undercuts the drama inherent in his capture, writing, instead: "The degenerate murderer, Buck Scales, was hanged after a short trial. Early in April the Bishop left Santa Fe on horseback and rode to St. Louis, on his way to attend the Provincial Council at Baltimore" (*Later Novels* 324). The plot movement from Scales's being brought to justice to the details of Latour's attending to church business occurs without so much as a paragraph break.

Much of the last part of the novel concerns the archbishop's building his church in Santa Fe. The archbishop intellectually understands and admires the local architecture and the way in which it is characteristic for the Indians to "vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. The Hopi villages that were set upon rock mesas were made to look like the rock on which they sat . . . [and the] Navajo hogans, among the sand and willows, were made of sand and willows" (*Later Novels* 419). Nevertheless, Latour envisions and builds a grand church in the classic Romanesque style of architecture. Cather does not fault Latour for this desire; nor does she seem to suggest that it is a result of great hubris; instead, her vision of Latour is as a man devoted to his work, but, ultimately and understandably, lonely and still enamored of his European culture. He emerges as deeply flawed, deeply human, and totally unforgettable.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics have said that this novel deals with the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, gluttony, sloth, lust, avarice, and wrath). Consider as many stories, scenes, and characters as possible that embody these sins. Speculate on why and how such elements are important to the novel.
2. Discuss Cather's portrayal of the meeting of European and native cultures (both Mexican and American Indian), especially in terms of religion. What issues of colonialism is she dealing with, and how do Valliant and Latour deal with religious conflicts? Is religion in this novel a relationship of antagonism or cooperation or something else? Discuss.
3. Miracles are very important in this novel, and Cather portrays a number of them. She also defines miracles at the end of book 1, "The Vicar Apostolic." Examine that quote and consider how significant it is to the novel as a whole. Consider, too, how the miracles in the novel are presented, especially in terms of Cather's goal to write without dramatic accent.

***Shadows on the Rock* (1931)**

Cather's next novel is another frontier colonization story in the tradition of *My Ántonia* or *O Pioneers!* about transforming a strange landscape into a home place, yet *Shadows on the Rock* is about a culture that is focused eastward on Europe, rather than on the American West, and focused on community rather than individual achievement, as was the theme of western American mythology. Set in the late 17th century in the French settlement of Quebec, this tranquil novel has minimal plot and is centered on one year in the life of the widower and apothecary Euclide Auclair and his 12-year-old daughter, Cécile, as they strive in their domestic lives to maintain French culture and manners in the New World. Most of the story takes place at the hearthside of the Auclair home. There a variety of characters tell tales of religious asceticism (the practice of self-denial) by the recluse Jeanne Le Ber within her austere chamber; the betrayal felt by the woodsman Pierre Charron, who is in love with Le Ber and hopes to marry her; the terrors of being the king's torturer in the Old World; the perils of building communities in the woods outside the city; and the personal sacrifice of a missionary's making a "vow of perpetual stability" to the Huron Indians he initially despises. The warmth of the hearthside and the domestic scene in which these often-horrific stories are told acts as a corrective, a remedy that reasserts the storytellers' place within a close-knit community. In the

end, all the characters make their own form of “a vow of perpetual stability” to place, thus becoming Canadians rather than displaced Frenchmen, and the epilogue reveals that Cécile and Pierre have married and have four sons who are “the Canadians of the future” (*Later Novels* 640).

While this book became a best seller in 1932, not all reviewers understood or appreciated what Cather had been attempting in it, and some complained that the novel was dramatically weak. What these reviewers did not understand, Cather protested, was that her book was like loving “a small Georgian pitcher better than the Empire State Building” (quoted in Woodress 432). Responding to a reviewer who had liked the book, Cather added, “as you seem to recognize, once having adopted a tone so definite, once having taken your seat in the close air by the apothecary’s fire, you can’t explode into military glory, any more than you can pour champagne into a salad dressing . . . and really, a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages” (*On Writing* 16).

Cather’s novel also drew the charge of falling back on “escapism.” Among intellectuals of the turbulent 1930s, the belief was that if the art of the age were to be important at all, it must have a direct political message and must wrestle head on with current social turmoil. The muralist Diego Rivera, for example, claimed, “Art is propaganda, or it is not art.” As a result of this attitude, Cather’s brand of writing, which looked at past cultures and events, began to be called into question. She was accused by Granville Hicks, an influential literary critic of the time, of having “fallen into supine romanticism because of a refusal to examine life as it is”; it was obvious, he wrote in a 1933 essay entitled “The Case against Willa Cather,” that she

could not go on, painting again and again the Nebraska she had once known. The West was changing. . . . The story of this new West could scarcely take the form of a simple, poetic idyll. Heroism and romance, if they existed, had changed their appearance. Characters could no longer be isolated from the social movements

that were shaping the destiny of the nation and the world. She would have to recognize that the life she loved was disappearing. (142, 147)

Cather saw Hicks’s accusation as “implying an evasion of duty.” “When the world is in a bad way,” she disputed, “we are told, it is the business of the composer and the poet to devote himself to propaganda and fan the flames of indignation. . . . But the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters—except escape” (*On Writing* 18–19). Asserting that literature concerning itself with current social ills was “a fleeting fashion,” she said that the critics like Hicks made “a career out of destroying the past. The only new thing they offered us was contempt for the old” (28, 25). Still thinking about the issue years later, Cather said that while writing about the theories for the betterment of humanity is a noble and useful thing, it had no place, as she saw it, in the genre of fiction (quoted in Woodress 470).

What Hicks and critics like him failed to see, of course, was that Cather was in fact confronting modern problems in more subtle ways. In the years before women achieved suffrage, *The Song of the Lark* asks key questions about the possibility of women’s having meaningful careers. The *Professor’s House* offers a sound indictment of the materialism of the 1920s, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* confronts issues of racism and contested space in the Southwest, and *Shadows on the Rock* expresses many of the concerns that would become central to the nation during the depression. In *Shadows*, Cather demonstrates that happiness can fall apart through money or fame, that the human community is more important than isolated individuals or political agendas, that there is comfort in family and cultural ritual. While the literature of the 1930s turned outward to examine the ills of society, average Americans turned inward to home and family, and Cather’s book expressed that inwardness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss Cather’s portrayal of the forest in *Shadows on the Rock*. What does it represent for the

settlers, and what is their emotional response to it? Compare and contrast this portrayal with Nathaniel Hawthorne's depiction of the forest in works like "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*.

2. The perpetuation of traditions is important in this novel. Discuss ways in which Cather expresses this idea as theme, and consider whether or not traditions are revised and adapted to the New World environment.

"Neighbour Rosicky" (1932)

"Neighbour Rosicky" is another widely anthologized short story by Cather and a companion piece to *My Ántonia*, because in it Cather draws upon the same prototypes for composition. Whereas her 1918 novel had drawn upon the life of Annie Shimerda Pavelka, this short story focuses on John Pavelka, Annie's husband, who served as the prototype for Anton.

A quiet story, "Neighbour Rosicky" investigates the daily life of the aging Bohemian immigrant and his homesteading family during the early years of the Great Depression. Through stories told by Rosicky and his wife, Mary, and memories evoked, we learn about Rosicky's impoverished early life in a London slum, his lonely existence in what he thinks of as the concrete jail of New York City, and his eventual contentment on the Nebraska farm he and Mary homestead.

The story hinges on the opening statement: "When Dr. Burleigh told Neighbour Rosicky he had a bad heart, Rosicky protested" (*Obscure Destinies* 7). The natural question at this point might be why we need to read on, if we know what is going to be the certain end of the story—Rosicky's death. However, Cather then challenges this diagnosis throughout the story, first by offering an alternative opinion in the remembered scene where the lonely young immigrant wanders the barren, concrete expanses of New York City on the afternoon of Independence Day and "found out what was the matter with him. . . . It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you in from the

earth itself, cemented you away from contact with the ground" (*Obscure Destinies* 29). Rosicky's cure, of course, is to establish a kind of spiritual kinship to the land, a deep and abiding understanding of the agrarian landscape that nurtures and sustains him, so that he can look out on what will be his own gravesite with peace and contentment, feeling that it is a good place to be buried, so close to home and family and surrounded by sky and ongoing life.

In addition, what Cather guides us to understand by the final passages of the story is that while the physiological organ may be weakened by hard work and age, the "heart" as the seat of emotional and spiritual identity remains always strong, even to the end, when Rosicky suffers the final "cramp" in his chest that will end his mortal life (*Obscure Destinies* 59). By never identifying Rosicky's suffering as a "heart attack," Cather urges her readers to reconsider what they know about his heart and to recognize finally the ways in which Rosicky's is, in fact, a good heart. He has overcome misery and hardship with grace and good humor, placed his family's emotional well-being above financial success, and offered his American daughter-in-law undying love and acceptance. Only a good heart could do so.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Students may notice a pattern in the story's episodes and oral narratives—namely, the use of companion scenes: Cather uses two Fourth of Julys and two Christmas celebrations to create a contrast of emotions. Consider what these companion scenes have in common, or what pattern emerges from them, or what these thematically similar scenes suggest about each other.
2. Find and read Thomas Jefferson's discussion on American farmers (chapter 19, entitled "Manufactures," in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* 1787). How does Cather's story exemplify the ideals Jefferson discusses when he speaks of the American farmer citizen?
3. Episodes in "Neighbour Rosicky" all reinforce personal values: The doctor's memory emphasizes family harmony and hospitality; Mary's story upholds the value of grace in time of hardship; Anton's own stories prize hard work, hon-

esty, humility, and the value of owning land. Research and record your own family's legends of holidays, winters, droughts, city life, homesteading, or hard times. Consider whether they, too, emphasize some of the same themes.

***Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)**

Written during a period when, as Cather recognized, the world was moving toward a second world war, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is Cather's most deeply pessimistic work. It in no way shares the nostalgia for a lost past that some of her prior works had contained. As she followed in the papers the actions of Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler, she recognized that there was the possibility for true evil in the world. This work is her attempt to probe the nature of evil. In it, she reveals the ways in which a facade of grace and southern hospitality can belie a deeper reality of cruelty.

The novel opens in 1856, just four years before the Civil War begins. Sapphira, the title character, is an imperious matriarch of a southern plantation in Virginia. Her husband, Henry, is a miller and a Southerner who recognizes the inhumanity of slavery, even though he feels powerless to change it. Their daughter, Rachel Black (who is closely based on Cather's maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak), is vehemently opposed to slavery, despite her upbringing. When Sapphira decides to sell their slave, Nancy, because her husband has made the mistake of treating the slave with kindness and respect, Henry objects. Since a husband's signature is necessary for the sale of a slave—only males owned property legally—Sapphira must find another way to get rid of Nancy. She invites Henry's lecherous cousin, Martin Colbert, for a long visit and tries at every turn to provide him with an opportunity to rape the slave girl. Rachel and Nancy's fellow slaves understand what Sapphira has set up, and they protect Nancy as best they can, until Rachel declares the situation intolerable. She seeks her father's help in aiding Nancy to escape, but he is too paralyzed by Southern proprieties to assist her openly. Instead, on the night

planned for Nancy's escape, he puts money into his coat pocket and hangs it near an open window, in effect forcing Rachel to "steal" money from her own father. Rachel assists Nancy's escape, getting her to people in the Underground Railroad who can see her safely on into Canada. The epilogue takes place 25 years later, when the first-person narrator, Cather herself, describes Nancy Till's welcome home.

Sapphira may be the main character of the novel, but she is certainly not its heroine. She is a woman without remorse or moral sensitivity, and her sinister actions are placed in direct contrast with her gentility and Southern manners. With most other slaves besides Nancy she is fair, even indulgent, a savvy businesswoman who, despite being a semi-invalid, has an iron will. Her handicap, identified as a crippling "dropsy" (*Later Novels* 783), symbolically represents a crippled society, a deformed social structure that tolerates slavery and all the horrors that accompany it.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is the only Cather novel in which the writer draws extensively upon material from her Southern birthplace. She once declared that in this novel her ending was her beginning—a phrase that can be interpreted in two ways. The novel's epilogue is based on Cather's own childhood memory of the former slave Nancy Till's returning to Cather's Virginia home, the catalyst for the book's subject. As Cather's last novel, this book took her full circle to her earliest childhood memories.

For Discussion or Writing

Two other women writers confronting the issues of slavery whom readers might be most familiar with are Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Harriet Jacobs, who wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). All three portray slavery especially in terms of its impact on women; Stowe writes a novel in which most scenes take place within a domestic sphere, while Jacobs portrays the cruelties that women slaves especially had to endure. If you know the work of either of these writers, discuss how Cather's point of view is similar or different. If you are not familiar with



HART CRANE (1899–1932)

I write damned little because I am interested in recording certain sensations, very rigidly chosen, with an eye for what according to my taste and sum of prejudices seems suitable to—or intense enough—for verse.

(qtd. in Parkinson 91)

Understanding Hart Crane's personal life is unusually important to understanding his poetry. Many of his poems, and especially those in his first collection, *White Buildings*, are obscure and confusing without a fundamental familiarity with the events of his life.

Born in Garrettsville, Ohio, on July 21, 1899, Harold Hart Crane was the only child of Grace Hart Crane and Clarence ("C. A.") Crane, who owned a maple syrup cannery and a successful candy company. (C. A. Crane invented Lifesavers but sold the rights before they became popular.) Harold was close to his mother and began to use his middle name, her maiden name, when he started writing poetry. As with many young men, he had a vexed relationship with his father, not really reconciling with him until 1930. Grace and C. A. had had a troubled marriage almost from the start, and even as a young child, Harold sided with his mother, who confided all of her troubles to him. When his parents' marriage fell apart in 1908, Harold went to live with his maternal grandmother in Cleveland. The family reunited together after Grace returned in 1909 from a "rest cure" in a sanitarium. Eventually C. A. returned as well, and he and Grace reconciled in 1911. However, the marriage was still unhappy and began to disintegrate by 1914. They finally officially divorced at the end of 1916. They almost remarried in 1917, but instead, they both married other people.

By 1914 Grace was often pulling Harold out of school to travel with her in order to get away from her unhappy life at home. He was incredibly well read as a child and a teenager, but he traveled so much with his mother that his school records are spotty. In 1916 the whole family took an extended tour across the United States. Travel suited him, and he lived in many different places in his life, including Paris and Mexico City. Part of his worries with his parents concerned his "fast" lifestyle. Not only was he homosexual, but he also liked to drink and party and got into a lot of trouble. He told his mother about his sexuality in his late twenties, but what had troubled both of his parents more than his sexual orientation was his inability to settle down to a stable career and nonpartying way of life. He had a quarrel with his mother in 1928 and never saw her again.

In early 1917, at the age of 16, he left high school and went to New York City to live alone. There, he settled into a bohemian way of life, interacting with many poets and artists. He also developed a taste for sailors as lovers. Eventually he would sustain long-term relationships, but his life was also filled with flings and one-night stands. In addition, he frequently got into drunken brawls, often in connection with trying to pick up men. One long-term relationship that was highly influential for Crane was with the sailor Emil Opffer, Jr. In 1924, soon after he met Opffer, Crane wrote

in a letter to Waldo Frank, "For many days now, I have gone about quite dumb with something for which 'happiness' must be too mild a term." To Crane, Opffer was associated with the Brooklyn Bridge, which was to play an important role in his later poetry. In the same letter Crane writes, "And I have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge of the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another" (qtd. in Unterecker 355). Crane moved into a building owned by Opffer's father in order to be close to the bridge. Eventually he moved into rooms at the back of the building with spectacular views of it. He was excited to find that the bridge's architect's son, who had been struck with a crippling disease, had observed its progress during construction from the very same windows. He wrote to his mother, "Just imagine looking out your window in the East River with nothing intervening between your view of the statue of Liberty, way down the harbour, and the marvelous beauty of Brooklyn Bridge close above you on your right! All of the great new skyscrapers of lower Manhattan are marshalled directly across from you, and there is a constant stream of tugs, liners, sail boats, etc. in procession before you on the river!" (qtd. in Fisher 221). The bridge was to become his major symbol.

Artistically, Hart Crane ran in a circle of prominent figures who included Allen Tate, JEAN TOOMER, E. E. CUMMINGS, Yvor Winters, Kenneth Burke, Waldo Frank, and the photographers Walker Evans and Alfred Stieglitz, among many others. He continued to read widely and was heavily influenced in his poetry by romantics such as William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson; high modernists such as William Butler Yeats and T. S. ELIOT; and French symbolists such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Jules Laforgue, not to mention the Renaissance figures William Shakespeare and John Donne. He had been published in the "little magazines" beginning in 1916 and by 1919

was starting to gain a reputation under the name *Hart Crane*. During this period he had begun to explore themes that would later appear in his "Voyages" poems. Among his many topics were loss of innocence and the differences between adolescence and maturity. His love affairs were teaching him the pains of loss due to broken promises, and in one early attempt he writes of the loss of innocence occurring at a seashore that delineates the border between adolescence and maturity. (He would later expand and develop this early poem into "Voyages I.") Even at this stage of his artistic development, the themes of love, loss, and experience and the overarching image of the sea were becoming intertwined in his work.

In 1923 his first longer poem, "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," was published to moderate acclaim. This was also the year he first saw the Brooklyn Bridge and was impressed enough by it to want to write a poem about it. *White Buildings*, a collection of several short poems and the series "Voyages," was published in 1926, and he continued to work on his masterpiece, *The Bridge*, off and on from then until he found a patron willing to help him publish it in 1930. Crane had been living a reckless 1920s lifestyle, and his new friends Harry and Caresse Crosby were the epitome of the F. SCOTT FITZGERALD decadence that he could not quite afford himself. Their Paris-based Black Sun Press would eventually publish portions of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*; in 1929 Crane met Harry, who inspired him to finish *The Bridge* with the idea that it would be published by the press. Crane spent much time with their circle of friends in Paris. In late 1929 Harry committed suicide, an act that had a profound effect on Crane. According to his friend Katherine Anne Porter, he thought that it was "imaginative; the act of a poet" (qtd. in Horton 287). Caresse published *The Bridge* in 1930 after some discussion of whether or not it would be finished. She was inclined to publish it as it stood, where Crane had stalled out on the writing, without "Cape Hatteras," but he insisted on being allowed to attempt to complete it. Later, he claimed that *The Bridge* might "turn into something like the form of Leaves of Grass,

with a number of editions, each incorporating further additions” (qtd. in Fisher 402). As it turned out, his death would preclude this possibility. The work was well received by the critics, who immediately understood its scope and its novel techniques. For example, the *New York Times Book Review* published an article titled “Hart Crane’s Cubistic Poetry in *The Bridge*.”

In 1931 Crane received a Guggenheim Fellowship and went to live in Mexico City, where he knew Katherine Anne Porter and Peggy Cowley, Malcolm Cowley’s former wife. Crane was disturbed at this time and indulged in mercurial relationships with his friends. Despite his homosexuality, he became engaged to Peggy Cowley. During this period he was having trouble with writing and attempted suicide. Shortly thereafter, he and Peggy set sail for New York. On April 27, 1932, at the age of 32, he made a successful suicide attempt, jumping from the ship the morning after yet another midnight drunken brawl. An eyewitness describes his measured actions as follows:

On that ill-fated morning, one of the ship’s officers told us that Crane had been in the sailors’ quarters the previous night, trying to make one of the men, and had been badly beaten. Just before noon, a number of us were gathered on deck, waiting to hear the results of the ship’s pool—always announced at noon. Just then we saw Crane come on deck, dressed . . . in pajamas and topcoat; he had a black eye and looked generally battered. He walked to the railing, took off his coat, folded it neatly over the railing (not dropping it on deck), placed both hands on the railing, raised himself on his toes, and then dropped back again. We all fell silent and watched him, wondering what in the world he was up to. Then, suddenly, he vaulted over the railing and jumped into the sea. For what seemed five minutes, but was more like five seconds, no one was able to move; then cries of “man overboard” went up. Just once I saw Crane, swimming strongly, but never again. (quoted by John Unterecker in “Introduction” to Crane xxxvii–xxxviii)

Crane’s poem “The Broken Tower” was published posthumously in the *New Republic* in June 1932. He also left an almost-finished folder of poems known as the “Key West” sheaf, poems about the Caribbean. (These are available in print now in *The Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Marc Simon.) Shortly after Crane’s death, his mother appointed his friend Waldo Frank to edit a collection of his works, *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, which appeared in 1933. She also decided that a biography would be in order, and in 1937 Philip Horton published *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet*. Before her collaboration with Horton, however, Grace Crane had destroyed many of Hart Crane’s letters from his lovers as well as letters from Peggy Cowley, correspondence that she deemed damaging to his reputation.

Hart Crane’s contribution to literature lies in his unique attempt to be romantic and modern at the same time. He is definitely a romantic in the strain of Whitman, though he also uses modernist themes and settings (such as urban, barren landscapes) and techniques (including fragmentation and overly obscure allusion). In addition, he combines unlikely influences such as Whitman and Dickinson or Dickinson and Eliot. Uses of the sea, the bridge as an organic symbol, and the buildings of Manhattan turned white by the sunrise point to the romantic influence of nature on his work. He remains optimistic in the face of the kind of despair common in the modern age. Judging from the progression from *White Buildings* to *The Bridge*, Crane had the talent to become one of the great poets of the century, but he died before he reached his full potential. Nonetheless, his work, especially *The Bridge*, retains its power and charm.

“Chaplinesque” (1921)

“Chaplinesque” is an example of Crane’s attempt to make a private symbol more universal. First published in 1921, it appears in *White Buildings* (1926), Crane’s early work. He had seen Charlie Chaplin’s popular movie *The Kid* in 1921 and was moved by Chaplin’s poignant “Little Tramp”

character, making connections between that persona and the French Pierrot.

Of course, Crane himself seems to identify with the “Little Tramp,” misunderstood and down on his luck but ever persevering; however, he also wants to extend that metaphor to the human situation as a whole. In addition, according to several letters, he “made that ‘infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing’ of Eliot’s into the symbol of the kitten” (qtd. in Spears 15). In the modern age of 1921, human beings must make “meek adjustments” and be content with “random consolations” (ll. 1, 2), battered about by events beyond their control.

Crane himself claimed a pun on his own name in the line “What blame to us if the heart live on” (l. 18). The previous line about evading “all else but the heart” (l. 17) is also telling of the modernist project of defining some kind of identity in the face of the anonymous, mechanical modern world. Symbols like “a grail of laughter of an empty ash can” (l. 21) clearly show T. S. Eliot’s influence, especially in juxtaposition of religious imagery with the empty, dirty reality of modern life. Crane also seems in this poem, as in many others, to be influenced by the French symbolists, particularly in his graphic imagery. In the end, though, the tramp’s innocent, surprised reaction to the smirks of the policeman is defended as a valid response to the vagaries of modern life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Watch *The Kid* and make a detailed list of images that Crane borrows from Chaplin’s “Little Tramp” character. Discuss how Crane adapts these quirks to a more universal theme. Exactly what is he saying about modern life and our response to it?
2. Crane indicates that the “fury of the street” could represent the modern world. Discuss how T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” uses similar images to condemn modern urban life. Illustrating with specific examples for support, compare the styles of these two poems.
3. What pun is suggested by *pirouettes*, and how does your answer reflect the role of Chaplin in the modern world? A famous image in William Butler Yeats’s poetry is the spiral. You might also read “Sailing to Byzantium” or “The Second Coming” and compare Yeats’s spiral images with Crane’s.
4. Browse through the poems in *White Buildings* for more Pierrot images. Compare and contrast these uses. Why is this such an attractive image for Crane?

“At Melville’s Tomb” (1926)

First published in 1926, “At Melville’s Tomb” appears in *White Buildings*, where it functions as a sort of prologue to the “Voyages” poems, which immediately follow it; the speaker looks out to sea, speculating on the remains of shipwrecks from years past and on Melville’s reaction to those remains. The sea is the major motif of the “Voyages” poems, and “At Melville’s Tomb” sets the tone for them. Melville was one of Crane’s heroes and a major influence. Here, the idea of a sea voyage that ends in death portends the voyages that will follow in the book.

The poem has been accused of being unduly difficult and obscure. Crane wrote a famous letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, where the poem was eventually first published, to defend its difficult imagery. In addition to explaining how some of the symbols operate in the poem, Crane expounds on his task as a poet: “To put it more plainly, as a poet I may very possibly be more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness (and their combinations and interplay in metaphor on this basis) than I am interested in the preservation of their logically rigid significations at the cost of limiting my subject matter and perceptions involved in the poem” (qtd. in Horton 330). In this theory, he seems to follow the French symbolists; textual evidence in the poem also points to their influence. Such evidence includes the references to “azure steepes” (l. 14), referring to the vortex of a deadly shipwreck described as a life-giving cornucopia or beautiful swirling flower bud.

Symbols in the poem illustrate the idea of chance, the indifference of cruel nature, and the hint that religion and history hold little sway over man's destiny. For example, "the dice of drowned men's bones" (l. 2) indicates the role of chance. Crane explained that the bones were ground up into "little cubes" and "thrown up on the sand," leaving no identification. Of course, the pun on *dice* and *bones* is not to be missed. Crane elaborates, "Dice as a symbol of chance and circumstance is also implied" (qtd. in Horton 333). Religious symbols, including the calyx (in the sense of chalice), altars, passing bells, and monody (in the sense of elegy or dirge); historical symbols, such as chapter and hieroglyph; and technological symbols such as the compass, quadrant, and sextant are no match for the vast power and indifference of the stars and the sea. Man's invented systems for making sense of the universe lose their meaning in the face of the spiral images connected with nature such as the coil, seashell, calyx (in the sense of flower bud), and the implied circling of the stars and vortex of the shipwreck going down. The awe-inspiring power of nature and particularly of the sea will also appear in each of the six "Voyages" poems.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In what ways does this poem convey Crane's belief in the cruelty of nature? Support your argument with specific images, analyzing each thoroughly as you go.
2. Crane's overarching image here is of a shipwreck. In fact, the poem is difficult partly because it consists largely of this image, with little explanation of what the image means. Attempt to explain how the specific details of the shipwreck image in stanzas 2, 3, and 4 contribute to the poem's greater meaning.
3. T. S. Eliot's complex poem *The Waste Land* contains recurring images of the drowned Phoenician sailor. Read *The Waste Land* and look for these images. Compare and contrast them with Crane's use of drowned victims in "At Melville's Tomb." Do you see similarities in style or content? Where? (You might also try a comparison of religious imagery in the two poems.)
4. Write an essay in which you defend the idea that "At Melville's Tomb" is a sort of prologue to the "Voyages" poems that immediately follow it in *White Buildings*. Illustrate with specific examples to support your position.

"Voyages, I, II, III, IV, V, VI" (1923, 1926)

Written between 1921 and 1925, the six "Voyages" poems appear last in *White Buildings*. They tie together the ideas of love, death, and the sea. They were written out of order and over the course of many years; critics agree that, like that of the poems of *The Bridge*, their quality is uneven.

As many of the poems in *White Buildings* do, these poems still rely on the reader's knowing something about Crane's personal experience for a full understanding, but they are less obscure than his earlier poems and approach the universality of *The Bridge* poems. For example, although several of the "Voyages" poems were inspired by Emil Opffer, Crane's lover, a sailor who returned from his periodic merchant marine voyages with fantastic tales of things like underwater cities, Crane does not refer to him directly, and even the sexual references are not explicitly homosexual. The poems are unmistakably about love, though. Other allusions to Crane's personal life occur in the poems, but not recognizing them does not detract from the larger meaning of the poems. Although the reader may not know whether "Belle Isle" in "Voyages VI" is a specific reference to a real island off the coast of Labrador; or whether the term alludes to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Whitman's "Specimen Days," Eliot's "Gerontion," Emerson's "Works and Days," or Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère"; or whether it is an inside reference to Crane's grandmother's plantation on the Isle of Pines in the Caribbean, the general meaning of the poem is not much diminished. That is, "Belle Isle" is a reference to all of those; Crane is deliberately obscure in his varied references, expecting his reader (as Eliot also did) to catch his allusions. However, the less astute or in-the-know reader can also take something away, even without recognizing Crane's public and private references. Thus, the

poem works on several levels, more successfully on a public level than on a private one and perhaps most successfully on a general level, in which “Belle Isle” simply functions as a destination in the poem representing creativity or peacefulness. The “Voyages” poems are more mature than many others in *White Buildings* precisely because they work on more levels, including a general one, and are not so confessional. The poems in *The Bridge* will develop this tendency even further.

In “Voyages I” children play on the beach. This is the beginning of the journey. The poet implores them to enjoy the shore at the same time that he warns them of the cruel sea. The tone is sad, hinting that time will steal the children’s youthful innocence. They will grow up to “flay each other” (l. 2) with more than sand. Once the reader notes that they are playing at “conquest” (l. 3), the question becomes, What journey have they begun? Crane is deliberately obscure. The reader is left asking, Why must they not cross the line? The line to what? The edge of the sea and the passage of time are somehow tied together in a bittersweet warning.

“Voyages II” also addresses the theme of passing time. The poem discusses the sea itself as it reflects the moon, whose tides hasten the seasons. Themes include sleep, death, and desire, all of which are hurried on by the moon’s influence. The journey has now moved out into the ocean, into the Caribbean, and the phrase “the vortex of our grave” (l. 24) indicates that the voyage has death or paradise as its ultimate goal. The sea of experience is vast and beautiful but also cruel.

“Voyages III” is more abstract. The sexual imagery and separation of the lovers are clear, but the famous last line is ambiguous in its exhortation “Permit me voyage, love, into your hands.” (l. 19). The address to *love* here can be to the lover, the sea, or death, yet the line is fundamentally optimistic. The poem is tinged with religious overtones throughout—note, for example, such words as *laved*, *reliquary*, and *transmembrment* (ll. 6, 8, 18).

“Voyages IV” continues the religious theme (as in the terms *chancel* and *incarnate word*—ll. 13, 17), but its topic is geographic space, particularly the speaker’s efforts to return to the lover. This is

a love letter to an absent loved one. The albatross in line 5 seems to be an allusion to Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and the word *bridge* in line 4 indicates that the bridge theme is present in much of Crane’s early work as well as in the poems from *The Bridge*. These images also figure in the description of vast space between the Tropics and the Pole. Here, the speaker of the poem is trying to bridge space and time to reach the lover.

“Voyages V” is much more vague. Here the reader feels a dramatic shift in mood. Images include the moon and the tide again, but this time the tide seems to separate the lovers. As Keats does in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Crane uses multiple negatives to set the tone, particularly in stanzas 3, 4, and 5. Images of pirates and stealing, as well as a reference to “the cables of our sleep so swiftly filed” (l. 6), point to the death of love or the death of the lover, an idea reinforced by the last phrase, “and sleep the long way home” (l. 25).

“Voyages VI” is full of sea images (such as “shell,” “leagues,” “ocean rivers” [ll. 5, 6, 3]), but the voyage is drawing to a close in an approach to the harbor. Although the love may be dead, the poet continues to strive toward the creative paradise “Belle Isle” (l. 25), which is identified with the “Word” (the poem) that is “the unbetrayable reply / Whose accent no farewell can know” (ll. 29, 31–32). In the poem, the lovers will remain united. Poetry helps the poet survive the experience of suffering and death. This poem is full of imagery of fire, light, and water. Here, the phoenix image rises not out of fire, but out of water. It is significant that “Voyages VI” reverses the nighttime theme of “Voyages V” with its bright morning imagery. Seeing and being blinded by too much light are the result. The journey has been one from childhood to maturity; no farewell can eliminate the muse of poetry, but loving involves dying. However, as the final stanza indicates, poetry itself cannot die, even though everything else does.

The “Voyages” poems, like many of Crane’s works, are heavily influenced by other authors. In homage to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, Crane implies here that the voyage

includes both innocence and experience. From the innocent children in “Voyages I” to the jaded or accepting lover who has experienced the death of love in “Voyages VI,” the characters in these poems have completed a journey. Along the way the poet has learned that art is limited but that it can be a mechanism for survival.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As indicated by the last line of “Voyages I” (“The bottom of the sea is cruel” [l. 16]), Crane is using shipwreck imagery again in these poems. Trace this motif and compare it to his use of the shipwreck idea in “At Melville’s Tomb.”
2. Try to tell what is happening in all six of these poems. Crane’s imagery is so dense that it gets in the way of the plot, but there is a plot, of sorts. You will also experience this problem in *The Bridge*. Here, make an outline of the sequence of events, as best you can.
3. What kind of journeys could Crane be alluding to in his “Voyages” poems? Emily Dickinson also discusses various trips and journeys. Read several of her trip poems and compare them with Crane’s “Voyages” descriptions. Do you see any similarity in the use of images? Where and how? Compare their styles.
4. Indicate where mood shifts occur in the “Voyages” poems. (For instance, a major shift occurs at the beginning of “Voyages V.” Why? How does Crane accomplish this effect?) What is the general tone of the series at the beginning? At the end? Find specific words and phrases to support your answers. See whether you can relate the shifts to the general meaning of the whole series.
5. In these poems, how does poetry help the poet survive the experience of suffering and death? Support your conclusion by discussing specific words and phrases.

The Bridge (1930)

The Bridge, published privately in Paris and then in America in 1930, is Hart Crane’s most ambitious

work. It is a Whitmanesque conglomeration of many smaller poems collected into eight sections and an invocation. As Whitman had, he worked on his poem for some time—it was begun in 1923; he wrote the majority of it in 1926, but he continued to add to it until its publication. Some of the sections are one substantial poem, and some contain several smaller poems. The work contains 15 poems in all. They were written out of order, and critics generally agree that those composed earliest are the most vibrant, but the poems build on one another, and to get the full effect one must read the entire cycle in sequence.

The symbol of the bridge is taken from Crane’s fascination with and admiration of the Brooklyn Bridge. In 1924 he had moved into a building with a splendid view of the bridge and was very excited about the possibilities of a full poem series on that topic. As a symbol, the bridge suggests a journey not only through space but also through time, connecting the East to the vast American push westward. So the poem explores history, including examining Native American culture, the Mississippi River, and modern technology. Figures from history and legend include Christopher Columbus, Rip Van Winkle, and Pocahontas. In addition, the journey involves an exploration of love as well as of historical understanding. The country’s westward journey and the poet’s individual spiritual quest for understanding are intertwined.

Symbols running throughout the individual poems of *The Bridge* include music, dance, and modern machinery (such as the subway, which, having been constructed in 1908, was still fairly new when the poems were written). Crane is worried about the dehumanization caused by technology. For him, in addition to bridging east and west, the Brooklyn Bridge is a bridge from the past to the future and indicates a change in American life.

It is helpful to have a complete list of the poems and their sections. Many critics discuss this cycle piecemeal, ignoring the puzzling structure. Note that some of the sections do not contain a poem with the same title as the section and that some of the sections consist solely of a single poem with the same title. As you study the poems, keep an

eye on their relative lengths, weights, and densities. Here is a complete list, with section titles in capital letters followed, after a colon, by individual poem titles. PROEM: "To Brooklyn Bridge"; I. AVE MARIA: "ave maria"; II. POWHATAN'S DAUGHTER: "The Harbor Dawn," "Van Winkle," "The River," "The Dance," "Indiana"; III. CUTTY SARK: "Cutty Sark"; IV. CAPE HATTERAS: "Cape Hatteras"; V. THREE SONGS: "Southern Cross," "National Winter Garden," "Virginia"; VI. QUAKER HILL: "Quaker Hill"; VII. THE TUNNEL: "The Tunnel"; VIII. ATLANTIS: "Atlantis."

The proem "To Brooklyn Bridge" sets the tone for the cycle. Crane is worried about encroaching technology (symbolized by "elevators," "cinemas," "subway"—ll. 8, 9, 17) at the same time that he lauds the bridge as spiritual (as is suggested by such phrases as "harp and altar," "Prayer of pariah"—ll. 29, 32) and asks the bridge to "lend a myth to God" (l. 44). Section I, "Ave Maria," presents Columbus's monologue upon his return from a voyage westward. Here we see the bridge as poetry itself, a means of spanning two worlds. Columbus links the Old World and the New, and the third world, water, "tests the word" (l. 33) by simultaneously connecting and separating the other two worlds.

In the second section, POWHATAN'S DAUGHTER, Crane uses five poems to explore the idea of Pocahontas as a symbol for America. The theme of sleeping and waking runs through several of them, including one admonishing Rip Van Winkle to hurry up and adjust to the changes that have occurred since he began to nap. "The River" continues the theme of nature versus technology with its underlying image of the train and plodding hoboes on the track who do not fully comprehend this new mechanical development. The "20th century" roars by them, and the momentum of the cycle continues in the swirling motion of the following poem, "The Dance." This poem is somewhat easier to understand than many of Crane's earlier works, primarily because the tone is more consistent throughout and the imagery is less dense and obscure. Pocahontas, standing for unspoiled nature, is fused with the West, the joyous elements

in nature. The general tone of the poem is joyous and ecstatic. "Indiana" continues the overland journey of the westward movement.

Section III, CUTTY SARK, contains another major theme of *The Bridge*: the outcast. The sailor whom the narrator meets tells of his journeys, as the pianola, the erstwhile jukebox, intersperses snippets of popular songs. The poem "Cutty Sark" itself is quite difficult to follow, exhibiting modernist stream-of-consciousness and containing multiple obscure allusions. In line 58, the narrator says, "I started walking home across the Bridge." The poet's interior journey reflects his exterior one.

Section IV, CAPE HATTERAS, represents a change in style. This poem is a tribute to Whitman and mirrors his typical use of all-encompassing lists of details. The topic is the airplane as a technological development. Again, a theme is homecoming, and a major motif is the noisiness of the modern world.

In the next section, THREE SONGS, Crane examines women in the modern world, evoking fallen women (such as Eve, Mary Magdalene, and Venus) as well as elevated women like Pocahontas and Mary. Section VI, QUAKER HILL, shows the modern corruption of simple old-time ways of living. The Quaker Meeting House has become a new hotel (symbolizing religion corrupted by commerce), and even the Mizzentop, the palatial old hotel, has been abandoned (ll. 92–93). The tone is elegiac. The modern world is overtaking tradition.

In section VII, THE TUNNEL, the narrator continues a dark journey in the subway under the river. This poem is also very difficult to follow. The tone is despairing, and the light appears only at the very end as the narrator emerges to the harbor above. There is strong birth and resurrection imagery. Finally, in section VIII, ATLANTIS, the bridge takes him back home. Here, the bridge is a fusion of the organic with the technological. The tone in this section is ecstatic.

When it was published, *The Bridge* met with critical reviews, particularly from Crane's friends Allen Tate and Yvor Winters. It is still seen as uneven in quality, though always powerful in its

7. Is Crane a modernist or a romantic? In what ways is the Brooklyn Bridge an apt symbol of both romantic and modernist elements? Crane is heavily influenced by romantics and modernists of vastly different styles and national backgrounds. Choose one or two from the following list and make a case for his or her influence: Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, SHERWOOD ANDERSON, ROBERT FROST, WALLACE STEVENS, WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Berthoff, Warner. *Hart Crane: A Re-Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Brunner, Edward. Modern American Poetry: Hart Crane. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/a_f/crane/crane.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Crane, Hart. *The Poems of Hart Crane*. Edited by Marc Simon. New York: Liveright, 1986.
- Fisher, Clive. *Hart Crane: A Life*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Giles, Paul. *Hart Crane: The Contexts of The Bridge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Horton, Philip. *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet*. New York: Viking, 1937. Reprint, New York: Compass Books, 1957.
- Leibowitz, Herbert A. *Hart Crane: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *The Poetry of Hart Crane: A Critical Study*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Parkinson, Thomas. *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Paul, Sherman. *Hart's Bridge*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.
- Schwartz, Joseph. *Hart Crane: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983.
- Spears, Monroe K. *Hart Crane*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
- Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Hart Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982.
- Unterecker, John. *Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.
- Catherine E. Howard



COUNTEE CULLEN (1903–1946)

If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET.

(qtd. in Early 23)

Countee Cullen began his illustrious career in high school and published his first book of poems, the critically acclaimed *Color* (1925), in college, followed by *Copper Sun* (1927) and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927). Cullen wrote most of these poems as an undergraduate and by the age of 26 had passed his poetic prime. But as he aged, Cullen experimented with many other genres, including novels, theater, translation, and children's literature, although none of these efforts was as well received as his poetry. At his untimely death on January 9, 1946, Cullen left more questions in his wake than answers. He seemed divided between two selves: Countee Cullen the man and Countee Cullen who represented the Harlem Renaissance to itself and the world. The question his fellow poet and sometime friend LANGSTON HUGHES asked upon Cullen's death is especially apt: "What happened to Countee Cullen?" (qtd. in Early 69).

Cullen was of a perfect age to join the Harlem Renaissance, that fraught and romantic time in New York in the 1920s. Many factors contributed to the environment of the period, not the least of which was a mass migration of African Americans from rural areas into urban environments, including the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Another influence was the mentorship of figures like W. E. B. DUBOIS, whose concept of "the Talented Tenth"—the percentage of educated, intellectual African Americans who would represent and uplift

the entire race—set a new basis for black thought. But the movement created controversy also, and thinkers both then and since have critiqued the bourgeois attitude inherent in "the talented tenth" idea and the unfortunate necessity of white patronage during the period. The Harlem Renaissance ended with the advent of the Great Depression, which was especially difficult for American minorities. Now we can see that the Harlem Renaissance was, in a sense, trapped between the too conciliatory ideas of BOOKER T. WASHINGTON's era and the more radical ideologies to be found in the later period of Civil Rights and the Black Arts Movement (see Kent).

Countee Cullen's birth on March 30, 1903, remains mysterious. Scholars are not certain who his birth parents were or where he was born. (Cullen himself variously listed his birthplace as Louisville, Baltimore, and New York City; most agree Louisville is most likely.) Sometime before 1918, Cullen went to live with the Reverend Frederick A. and Carolyn Belle Cullen, although he was still using the name *Countee Porter* (perhaps the name of his grandmother). By 1920 he went by *Countee P. Cullen*, and by the time his first book was published he was simply *Countee Cullen* (Early 6–10).

Cullen's foster father led the very successful Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem, was an active member of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and

was a compatriot of DuBois. Cullen shared a close relationship with both his foster parents but especially with his father. The two traveled together extensively and Cullen wrote three poems for his father in the course of his career. "Yet," as Gerald Early says, "there must have been some tension between the two men; the father was a strict fundamentalist while Cullen experienced intellectual doubts and often expressed a kind of ongoing quarrel with Christianity in many of his poems" (17). Cullen was also a well-known Francophile, a person enamored of French culture and the French language, which he spoke very well. As did his friend and fellow black writer Jessie Redmon Fauset, Cullen spent much time in France, taught French as a schoolteacher, and remained to his death a devotee of French culture.

Cullen always did well at school. He attended the highly regarded DeWitt High School and served as vice president of the senior class and associate editor of the school's literary magazine *Magpie*, won the Douglas Fairbanks Oratorical Contest, and received the Magpie Cup. He also won a citywide poetry contest, and "in some sense this initial success by Cullen . . . really kicked off the literary movement called the Harlem Renaissance" (Early 19). Cullen attended New York University on a scholarship, and it was there that he cemented his love for the romantic poet John Keats, arguably the strongest influence on Cullen's own work. *Color* was published during his senior year. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa, Cullen went on to receive a master of arts degree from Harvard in 1926, and shortly after that he began writing his "Dark Tower" column for *Opportunity* magazine, which also became the title of Madame A'Lelia Walker's famous literary salon. In the words of Early, "If anyone was being groomed, being intellectually and culturally conditioned and bred, first by whites, then by blacks, to be a major black crossover literary figure, it was this thin, shy, black boy. . . . [He] was the race's first honest-to-goodness child literary star" (19). By age 24, Cullen had become a celebrity.

But Cullen's star faded as he aged, although it certainly never was extinguished. None of his other work met with the critical acclaim of *Color*, and in

1924 his friendship with Hughes (arguably Cullen's greatest rival for the status of Harlem Renaissance wunderkind) came to an end. "It is a testament to the accomplished secrecy of both parties that, seventy years later, we know so little of what happened," writes Steven Watson (61). The Harlem Renaissance was still in full swing in 1924, but the break between Hughes and Cullen represents a larger break between Hughes's experimental jazz-and-blues-based poetics (those that were to signify the movement) and Cullen's affection for classical forms. Thus their separation is also the beginning of Cullen's fissure from the larger group. Early writes, "In their distinct ways, both Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes . . . produced a striking and powerful new black poetry; one through suffusing essentially English poetry with race consciousness . . . and the other through elevating black folk forms with a kind of ingenious self-consciousness" (36). However, as the Harlem Renaissance continued and became tangled up with other literary and cultural experiments as represented by the modernist movement, Hughes's poetry was embraced and Cullen's began to be passed over.

On April 9, 1928, Cullen married the daughter of W. E. B. DuBois. The union between Cullen and Yolande DuBois was seen as the ultimate conjunction, a mingling of intellect and beauty, a representation of black America's future. Nearly everyone connected to the Renaissance was in attendance, and the Talented Tenth showed up en masse. Unfortunately, the marriage was a disaster. Yolande DuBois and Cullen had very little in common, and while their marriage ended officially in 1930, it really only lasted a few months. It is impossible to know why Cullen made such a poor match, but Early speculates that "he married Yolande because she was DuBois's daughter, and this gave him a particular pedigree and status, not only socially but in polite circles of black literary culture which he wanted" (53). Regardless, the divorce signified another fissure between Cullen the man and Cullen the representation of Harlem.

There has been much speculation over Cullen's sexual orientation, although none of it is backed up with proof. David Levering Lewis implies that

Cullen was attracted to (and perhaps lovers with) both Harold Jackman and Hughes, and many have read a suggestion of homosexual love into some of Cullen's poems such as "To a Brown Boy" (Lewis 76, 81). Early, however, rejects such claims, stating, "There is, however, no evidence that Cullen and Jackman were lovers. There is no evidence that Cullen was engaged in any homosexual relations with any other figures of the Renaissance" (Early 19, n. 21). Despite assertions on both sides, there are only hints and whispers to suggest Cullen was gay, and yet they persist, even though Cullen was married twice, apparently quite happily the second time. Such continuing questions speak to another potential duality in Cullen's life. In truth, we will probably never know conclusively and it is probably best to follow Early's example and believe the actual evidence rather than the sensational speculation.

During the 1930s Cullen's writing branched out while also becoming less prolific: He produced *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929); a novel, *One Way to Heaven* (1933); and a translation of Euripides' *Medea*, "making him the first black American author to do a major Greek drama translation in prose" (Early 66). He seems to have been drawn strongly to drama, as he collaborated with Arna Bontemps on an adaptation of Bontemps's novel *God Sends Sunday* and worked on adapting his own novel for the stage as well. By the end of his life, he was also heavily and happily involved in writing stories for children, particularly a story titled "The Monkey Baboon" and a prose adaptation of his poem "The Lost Zoo" (Early 57). According to Early, "Many have speculated on Cullen's reduced output. Part of it may have been writer's block, lack of inspiration, or sheer laziness, but a part of it must have been that after 1929 . . . he no longer quite had the time to write that he had before. This was especially true after . . . he [became] a certified public school teacher, a job he was to keep until his death" (56). Noteworthy during his teaching career was Cullen's tutelage of James Baldwin, who would grow up to become another great African-American author (Early 65).

Cullen married Ida Roberson in 1940, and their marriage proved more successful than Cul-

len's first, despite ongoing speculation about Cullen's sexual orientation. His last years were fraught with mixed reviews and bad health, but he was still active in literature, working on compiling a selection of his poetry and more concerned about his father's health than his own when he died on January 9, 1946, of high blood pressure and uremic poisoning. Cullen's funeral was remarkably well attended, and his former father-in-law, DuBois, gave the perfect eulogy: "That Countee Cullen was born with the Twentieth Century as a black boy to live in Harlem was a priceless experience. . . . Yet, as I have said, Cullen's career was not finished. It did not culminate. It laid [a] fine, beautiful foundation, but the shape of the building never emerged" (qtd. in Watson 169).

Cullen remains a complex figure who is hard to decipher. Early writes, "Cullen defined his age and, in that sense, dominated it as much as a man of Cullen's temperament could dominate anything. . . . [He recognized] that the divided black psyche was the single most riveting riddle of the twentieth-century Western world and it was time for the white Western world to recognize it as such" (22–23). But perhaps Cullen was divided not only with the "twoness" that DuBois spoke of in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but also with the peculiar doubleness of those who are made too famous or too representative of something too early. The pressures put on Cullen as a very young person to represent the "New Negro" to the world were considerable and no doubt had a great effect on his personal development. Thus, Cullen the man was always divided between his individuality and the expectations of the Harlem Renaissance. What is certain, however, are Cullen's astounding contributions to American letters represented in poems that continue to define, shape, and question the African-American experience as much today as when they were first written. His words still resonate across the years.

"For a Lady I Know" (1925)

Consisting of a mere four lines, "For a Lady I Know" uses quick wit as social satire and addresses

the inherent problem of mingling Christianity with the black American experience. In this poem, however, the perspective involves the mind-set of a white upper-class woman; the work thus shows Cullen's ability to manipulate other perspectives and thereby highlight his own:

She even thinks that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores. (ll. 1–4)

The format of the poem is simple—deceptively so. As readers, we quickly get the joke that the speaker is acquainted with a woman who believes race (and class) will matter in heaven, and we are meant to see this as ridiculous. Nicholas Canaday says, “Cullen was good at making short poems of social satire . . . contain[ing] some of his most often quoted lines. . . . The pervasiveness of the black experience is again apparent” (113). But there is more involved in this poem than a simple gag. Instead, Cullen's use of obvious humor makes a larger statement about white society. (At least about the upper classes of white society. It should be noted that Cullen himself was from an educated, financially stable minority—the “talented tenth”—so it does not seem surprising that he would place his white character in the class considered mainstream, and most similar to his own.)

That the woman is of a higher economic status is hinted at by the use of the word *class*, paired with *even thinks*, suggesting she is of a leisure class and believes existence in heaven will remain similar to that on earth—she assumes that she will continue to be able to sleep late. She is almost certainly white as well, given the distance placed between her and the “poor black cherubs,” and therein lies the poem's main concern. Racism and class prejudice are so deeply rooted in this woman's mind that she cannot conceive of the afterlife, or anything else, without these constructs.

We have already seen Cullen's concern with reconciling a white Christian tradition to the enduring difficulty of the African-American experience.

While “For a Lady I Know” uses humor instead of questions, it still raises an important issue: If white culture is racist, how is a black person to embrace white culture's religion? But the poem complicates this idea, too, by making a mockery of racist assumptions about God and heaven. The speaker certainly does not believe such inequalities will exist after death, and he pokes fun at the people who are so entrenched in their own thinking. While Cullen believes God is color-blind, he feels justified in ridiculing God's followers who cannot see this. In the end, Cullen insists on his equality, if not his superiority, by implicitly contrasting his own intellectual capabilities and the inferior thought inherent in the racist mind.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look at some of Cullen's other very short, satirical poems, such as “For an Atheist,” “For an Anarchist,” “For a Pessimist,” “For Daughters of Magdalen,” or “For a Mouthy Woman.” How do they hold up next to “For a Lady I Know” as social satire? What do you think are the benefits of this brief form? How about the drawbacks? Why might a poet like Countee Cullen have chosen to write so many poems in this tight, concise format?
2. Compare and contrast this work with Langston Hughes's poem “Song for a Dark Girl.” Discuss the poems in terms of theme, point of view, setting, and tone.
3. Discuss the irony of the rhyme words *snores* and *chores*. What are the connotations of each word? How is *snores* a particularly ironic word choice in view of the *class* of the woman satirized in this poem? What are the complex connotations of the word *poor*?

“Heritage” (1925)

Generally considered Cullen's finest poem, “Heritage” portrays one of his most common conflicts: the battle between paganism—represented here by Africa—and “civilized” Christianity. According to

Early, “What Cullen finds attractive as a writer is the basic ambiguity that exists in the meaning of his being a black Christian . . . because being a black Christian has . . . a kind of uneasy meshing of the sacred and secular” (58). “Heritage” begins by asking, “What is Africa to me?” and gives several exotic descriptions such as “Strong bronzed men, or regal black / Women from whose loins I sprang / . . . / *Spicy grove, cinnamon tree*” (ll. 4–5, 9). By exploring what Africa, symbolic of heritage, means to a “*three centuries removed*” African American, Cullen examines the nature of his existence (l. 7).

In the second stanza Cullen begins to play with his readers. Starting with “So I lie,” literally meaning “lying down,” the poet also hints at a lack of truth (l. 11). Is he, in fact, lying about what Africa means to him? About the reason for the whole poem? This will be a prevalent question throughout as he repeats this phrase five times. Cullen uses this illusion to make a statement about Christianity and the black experience. “Illusions are crucial antidotes to a pain that threatens to overwhelm,” David E. Goldweber says. “Illusions are an ironic solution to life’s problems; they are, after all, unreal” (1).

This illusive quality continues as Cullen both negates his connection to Africa—“Africa? A book one thumbs / Listlessly, till slumber comes” (ll. 31–32)—but continues to dwell on it all the same, finally admitting that he cannot escape this heritage: “So I lie, who find no peace / Night or day, no slight release / From the unremittant beat / Made by cruel padded feet” (ll. 64–67, 79–80).

But then the poet denies his connection to his African heritage: “My conversion came high-priced; / I belong to Jesus Christ, / Preacher of humility; / Heathen gods are naught to me” (ll. 89–92). Nicholas Canaday, Jr., suggests that “in that voice the poet says he is superior because his belief is ‘high-priced.’ . . . One must pay; one must give something back. . . . Besides, African gods look like Africans. Cullen’s irony is devastating because he is so well aware of what the Christian God looks like” (124). Therefore, Cullen expresses his awareness of the uncomfortable position black Christians face when choosing a “white” God.

While the poet continues to express his Christianity, he also complicates his faith further by saying that he plays “a double part” and that “Ever at Thy glowing altar / Must my heart grow sick and falter, / Wishing He I served were black” (ll. 98–101). He then transforms Christianity into a faith he can embrace: “Surely this flesh would know / Yours had borne a kindred woe. / Lord, I fashion dark gods, too, / Daring even to give You / Dark despairing features . . .” (ll. 105–109). The poem concludes with (almost) a veiled threat to Christianity and the white Western tradition, expressing how close the poet lies to pagan regression: “*Not yet has my heart or head / In the least way realized / They and I are civilized*” (ll. 127–128). Ultimately, the poem explores Cullen’s connection to both paganism and Christianity, and the ways in which an African American tries to reconcile these two parts of himself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In chapter 1 of W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” DuBois discusses an inherent “twoness” in the African-American consciousness. How might Cullen have employed this idea in “Heritage”? Do you think Cullen makes a convincing case for “twoness”? Why or why not?
2. David K. Kirby suggested that “Heritage” is philosophically and emotionally comparable to T. S. ELIOT’s *The Waste Land* (1922), arguably the definitive poem of the literary period known as high modernism, a movement somewhat contemporaneous with the Harlem Renaissance. Read *The Waste Land* while keeping “Heritage” in mind. How do you think the two poems might be philosophically and emotionally comparable? Are they representative of their times? If so, how and why?
3. Enjambment is the practice of running a sentence from one line to another, rather than providing a pause at the end of a line. How does Cullen use that technique to prevent the rhythm of this poem from becoming too “singsong” or too predictable? What devices does Cullen use

to engage and involve the reader? In particular, discuss the use of questions in this poem.

“Incident” (1925)

Countee Cullen’s “Incident” stands alongside “Yet Do I Marvel” and “Heritage” in both fame and prestige. This short, three-stanza poem depicts a young black boy’s encounter with racism, maybe his first, or maybe just his first involving another child like him. Many have speculated that this incident actually may have happened to Cullen, and the poem’s formal style perhaps “suggests how poetic form sometimes offers a much needed thankful distance from the experience of racial terror, particularly when the target is so vulnerable and the incident so unexpected” (Jarraway 223). Nevertheless, “Incident” retains a profound emotional quality that manages to portray the damaging effects of racism.

The first stanza sets up the scene and the narrator. He sits on a train or trolley car, “riding in old Baltimore,” heart and head “filled with glee” (ll. 1–2). Given the specification of place, it seems fair to assume the speaker is not from Baltimore. This probability sets up an early tension of difference between this out-of-towner and the “Baltimorean” (l. 3), who keeps staring at him, a tension that is played out later as it becomes clear the Baltimorean is white and the speaker is black. However, at this point all that can be deduced are the happiness of the speaker and his difference from the one regarding him. This cheerful beginning also places both the speaker and the reader in a perfect place to be knocked down.

In the second stanza, Cullen establishes the speaker’s age: He is eight years old, and the Baltimorean is “no whit bigger” (l. 6). The speaker sees a similarity in their matching ages (as well as, probably, in the other child’s stare), and so he “smile[s]” (l. 7). However, the Baltimorean displays both his childishness (by sticking out his tongue) and his racism (by calling the speaker “Nigger” [l. 8]). Here the poem becomes more complex, because the words indicate the disturbing fact of confronting such hostile racism at such a young age (and

from such a young person), while the poem’s formality hints at how fully integrated racism is into society. Certainly this young Baltimorean did not learn bigotry in a vacuum but has already absorbed how to stigmatize others for the color of their skin, and he now passes that lesson on to the speaker.

In the end, the poem shows “an incongruity between what a childhood experience ought to be and what it is. There is now a sad awareness” of how racism taints everything (Canaday 115). The speaker says he spent many months in Baltimore, but all he remembers is the racist incident that occurred on his way into town. With this closing statement (“That’s all that I remember” [l. 12]), Cullen shows how psychologically damaging racism is—so damaging that it blocks out all other occurrences. But, again, because of his masterful use of both emotion and form, Cullen also makes a social statement. The poem is not a sob story but a cautionary tale, explaining to anyone who will listen how traumatizing bigotry can be.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read either (or both) ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S *Dust Tracks on the Road* or RICHARD WRIGHT’S *Black Boy*. How do these works concern children and their experiences with racism? In what ways do they complement Cullen’s poem? In what ways do they challenge Cullen’s poem? What are the authors’ objectives in discussing childhood experiences? Do they achieve those objectives?
2. In W. E. B. DuBois’s book *The Souls of Black Folk*, read the chapter titled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” Which incident described in that chapter seems most comparable to the incident described in Cullen’s poem? How do the incidents differ? Do you think one incident left a greater scar than the other? Explain.
3. Discuss the effectiveness of the last line of each stanza. How do the final lines of the first and second stanzas create suspense? What kind of impact does the final line of the whole poem have? How does Cullen try to make his poem as memorable—as difficult to forget—as the incident he describes? To what extent, and in what ways, does he succeed?

“Yet Do I Marvel” (1925)

“Yet Do I Marvel” stands as a classic Countee Cullen poem, mingling his concern with both race and Christianity, with just a touch of classical mythology thrown in. The poem begins with a musing declaration: “I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind, / And did He stoop to quibble could tell why / The little buried mole continues blind, / Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die” (ll. 1–4). The poet asserts initially that God is “good, well-meaning, kind” but then points out facts that seem cruel or unfair, such as the blindness of moles and the inevitability of death, and thereby complicates our sense of God’s inherent goodness.

Cullen then mentions two figures in Greek mythology—Tantalus was condemned to eternal, unslakable thirst and hunger; Sisyphus was doomed to roll a mighty stone up a hill in Hades, only to have the stone roll down once he reached the top, forcing him to start over again. Arguably, both figures deserved their punishments, but Cullen deliberately chose two myths that highlight eternal futility. These mythological figures are, in turn, linked to the God-created unseeing mole and death.

Returning to God, the poet says, “Inscrutable His ways are, and immune / To catechism by a mind too strewn / With petty cares to slightly understand / What awful brain compels his awful hand” (ll. 9–12). Here, the poet suggests that God’s ambiguous decisions are above reproach by humans. Cullen’s choice of the word *awful* is noteworthy. Probably Cullen implies older meanings of the word, such as “commanding awe” and “formidable in nature or extent” (*American Heritage Dictionary*). We should not, however, overlook the more common meaning of “extremely bad or unpleasant.” The poem thus states the speaker’s belief in God’s goodness and infallibility even as it continues to question facts that seem unfair.

The final couplet moves Cullen’s thought process full circle. Upon admitting that he cannot understand the mind of God, he says, “Yet do I marvel at

this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!” (ll. 13–14). We now see Cullen reacting to the inevitable struggle black Americans face, and ultimately questioning a God who would place them in this situation yet give them the drive to rise up and “sing.” It should be noted, however, that Fred M. Fetrow reads the poem quite differently, suggesting that the “punishments” mentioned are either justified or not punishments at all. Therefore, “Cullen acknowledges, even emphasizes, the difficulty for a black poet in answering that divine call to sing; but through the strategic presentation of precedent, he also claims that the black poet can still articulate his blackness and express his unique racial identity while singing his humanity” (2). However one interprets it, “Yet Do I Marvel” stands as one of Cullen’s most famous poems and as a perfect example of Cullen’s style and way of thought.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In Maya Angelou’s poem “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” Angelou writes as both a woman and an African American, and she too uses the metaphor of singing. Compare the two poems. What symbolism is implied by the word *sing*? Why, and in what ways, do two different African-American poets use this concept?
2. Compare and contrast this work with EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY’s poem “I, being born a woman.” Discuss the theme of fate in both works. Discuss their treatments of irony. How and why do both poets use the sonnet form?
3. Compare and contrast this work with CLAUDE MCKAY’s poem entitled “Outcast.” How are they similar and/or different in theme, tone, diction, and point of view? Which work appeals to you more? Explain why.
4. Is there any irony in the use of the word *quibble*? What are some connotations of that word, and what does that word suggest about the different perspectives of God and the poem’s speaker? Why does the speaker mention different kinds of beings, including both animals and humans as well as legendary figures and persons presently living?

“From the Dark Tower” (1927)

“We shall not always plant while others reap” declares the opening line of Cullen’s “From the Dark Tower,” setting the stage not only for a poem dealing with race and racism, but also for one that contains a simmering anger and a veiled threat. That the anger and threat should be so subtle, or hidden behind pretty words and a contained sonnet form, has led many (especially during his own time) to criticize Cullen for a lack of political or racial consciousness. However, the fact that the poem opens Cullen’s second book of poetry, *Copper Sun*, and contains a bitterness and “ominous warning” not seen from him before makes “From the Dark Tower” an important poem in the Cullen canon (Canaday 117).

“We shall not always plant while others reap / The golden increment of bursting fruit, / Not always countenance, abject and mute, / That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap; / . . . / We were not made eternally to weep” (ll. 1–4, 8). The poem’s first half bursts forth with a poetically contained anger. The speaker/poet claims that while African Americans have too often settled for the status afforded them by white culture, those days are coming to an end. “From the Dark Tower” the poet observes and bides his time, and he sees a people ready to take equality by force because they “were not made eternally to weep.”

The second part becomes slightly more complicated or, if not more complicated, more dense. After having declared his brooding threat, the speaker claims there is no aesthetic difference between darkness and lightness: “The night whose sable breast relieves the stark, / White stars is no less lovely being dark” (ll. 9–10). During the Harlem Renaissance, many thinkers insisted on the beauty of the black body, perhaps for the first time in artistic history. Langston Hughes and Cullen were joined in this respect at least, for in life and poetry both stated their belief (in essence) that black was beautiful. The speaker then suggests that some things are better black: “And there are buds that cannot bloom at all / In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall” (ll. 11–12). The speaker is here presenting the evidence that legitimizes the poem’s

first half. In short, African Americans are ready to claim equality because they *are* equal (if not, often, better).

“From the Dark Tower” concludes by saying, “So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds, / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds” (ll. 13–14). The phrase “So in the dark” clearly holds a double meaning—in a place without light where white culture cannot or has not seen “the heart that bleeds” (l. 13), as well as in the bodies and souls of “dark” (African-American) people. In this respect, the phrase “heart that bleeds” also contains a double meaning—it refers to the physical heart, of course, but also to the seat of emotion and passion. The final line, “. . . wait, and tend our agonizing seeds,” restates the threat. Tending seeds conjures visions of cultivating plants, and the speaker suggests that in African Americans hurt and anger will grow until they are ready to be harvested. No longer is the poet an innocent boy facing racism for the first time (as in “Incident”) but a grown man ready to speak for his people.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Countee Cullen has often been criticized for his devotion to “white, Western” poetic forms and for lack of a true political consciousness. We have seen, however, that Cullen often dealt with race in his poetry. Read some political poems by his fellow Harlem Renaissance poets Claude McKay (“Enslaved,” “White Houses,” “Harlem Shadows”) and Langston Hughes (“I, Too, Sing America,” “Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?” and “Let America Be America Again”). Do you think the criticism of Cullen is justified? Describe, in your own words, what makes a political poem good or important. Do you think it is the business of artists to engage with politics at all? Why or why not?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Richard Wright’s story titled “Long Black Song.” How does the ending of Wright’s story make explicit a possible outcome implied in Cullen’s poem? Is the violence at the end of Wright’s story a response merely to a single incident? In which work is the tone more ominous?

3. Discuss the irony of the term *lesser men*, especially in view of the racist assumptions of those very men. In what ways are they “lesser”? Given its economic connotations, why is *cheap* a particularly effective word? Discuss the ironic juxtaposition of the words *subtle* and *brute*. How and why would these words normally contradict each other?

“Uncle Jim” (1927)

“White folks is white,” says uncle Jim” at the opening of Cullen’s poem and thus begins a poetic musing on the essential and inherent differences between black and white, for in the poem, “the unspoken implication is that there is an impassable gulf between the white and the black experience” (Canaday 117). But while this conflict lies at the center of “Uncle Jim,” uncertainty still surrounds the poem’s subtexts, especially regarding the speaker’s white companion.

When Uncle Jim declares, “White folks is white,” the speaker responds: “‘A platitude,’ I sneer; / And then I tell him so is milk, / And the froth upon his beer” (ll. 3–4). This opening stanza gives us every reason to disregard Uncle Jim and identify with the speaker; after all, Uncle Jim uses bad grammar, drinks, and smokes (as the poem goes on), while the speaker is educated enough to dismiss Uncle Jim’s opinion with easy arguments and youthful self-righteousness. However, as the poem continues, Uncle Jim will not deign to argue with this youngster. Instead, “His heart walled up with bitterness, / He smokes his pungent pipe. / And nods at me as if to say, / ‘Young fool, you’ll soon be ripe!’” (ll. 5–8). Despite his hurt (probably stemming both from his experiences with white folks and from the speaker’s inattention), Uncle Jim knows the narrator will soon learn for himself the truth about white people.

In the second stanza the poem moves away from the scene with Uncle Jim into a description of a “friend” of the speaker “who eats his heart / Always with grief of mine, / Who drinks my joy as tipplers drain / Deep goblets filled with wine” (ll. 9–12).

In short, this friend is a kindred spirit to the speaker despite the probability that the friend is white. And therein lies the rub as the speaker ponders, “I wonder why here at his side, / Face-in-the-grass with him, / My mind should stray the Grecian urn / To muse on uncle Jim” (ll. 13–16). Even though the speaker feels the utmost affinity for his friend, he comes upon an inexplicable moment when he considers Uncle Jim’s “platitude” and cannot help wondering whether there is indeed some inherent dissimilarity between black and white.

While the major theme of the poem is relatively clear, many read a homosexual subtext, seeing the speaker’s “friend” as a lover. This interpretation adds another layer to our understanding of the poem, for it mixes romantic passion into the relationship between the black male speaker and his white male friend, a passion of which Uncle Jim (and most of Cullen’s contemporaries) would no doubt disapprove. If, however, we read the poem as a reflection on the larger theme of romantic love, Cullen may have been commenting on the complications of interracial relationships as well. For the record, most of the speculation regarding Cullen’s homosexual tendencies is just that: speculation. Nothing in either Cullen’s life or work does more than hint at this possibility. Regardless, “Uncle Jim” exhibits, once again, Cullen’s mastery of form while musing on life’s largest questions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In one sense, “Uncle Jim” could be called a poem about differences, including such differences as black/white, gay/straight, educated/uneducated. Discuss whether or not you think there are impassable barriers between certain categories of people, and be careful to justify your thoughts.
2. Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son” also deals with relations between an older black person and a younger relative. Compare and contrast the two poems in terms of diction, tone, form, point of view, and ultimate meaning.
3. How could the title *Uncle* have demeaning and racist connotations in Cullen’s time, and how might such connotations be relevant to this poem?

9. Despite the lack of evidence, many conclude that Cullen was a homosexual or a bisexual. In theoretical terms, “queer theory” acts on the assumption that gender is a culturally taught construction and is therefore malleable. Do some brief research into the uses of queer theory and then see whether you can “queer” one of Cullen’s poems. What issues arise out of this exercise? How do you imagine Cullen would feel about it? Can you do the same to a poem by Hughes? Claude McKay? Gwendolyn Bennett? Amiri Baraka?
10. Research two or more poets of the modernist period such as T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, GERTRUDE STEIN, H. D., or EZRA POUND. What similarities do you see between their work and Cullen’s? How were they all influenced by the period? Conversely, what differences do you see? What reasons account for these differences (race, gender, age, location, politics, class)? Does the Harlem Renaissance belong with the aesthetics of the modernist period? Does Cullen? Or was the renaissance its own movement? Explain and discuss your answers.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Canaday, Nicholas, Jr. “Major Themes in the Poetry of Countee Cullen.” In *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, edited by Arna Bontemps, 103–125. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972.
- Cullen, Countee. *My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*. Edited by Gerald Early. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
- Early, Gerald. “Introduction.” In *My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*. Edited by Gerald Early. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
- Fetrow, Fred M. “Cullen’s ‘Yet Do I Marvel.’” *Explicator* 56, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 103–105.
- Goldweber, David E. “Cullen, Keats, and the Privileged Liar.” *Papers on Language and Literature* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 29–49.
- Jarraway, David. “No Heaven in Harlem: Countee Cullen and His Diasporic Doubles.” In *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse*, edited by Australia Tarver and Paula C. Burns, 214–237. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006.
- Kent, George E. “Patterns of the Harlem Renaissance.” In *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, edited by Arna Bontemps, 27–50. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972.
- Kirby, David K. “Countee Cullen’s ‘Heritage’: A Black ‘Wasteland.’” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 36, no. 4 (November 1971): 14–20. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm. Accessed June 6, 2006.
- Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Knopf, 1981.
- Smethurst, James, and Cary Nelson. “Modern American Poetry: Countee Cullen.” Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/a_f/cullen/cullen.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Watson, Steven. *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African American Culture, 1920–1930*. New York: Pantheon, 1995.

Sarah Stoeckle



E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

The tragedy of life always hasn't been and isn't that some people are poor and others rich, some hungry and others not hungry, some weak and others strong. The tragedy is and always will be that most people are unable to express themselves.

(*Eimi*)

One of the most unconventional poets of American literature, E. E. Cummings is perhaps best known for his revolt against capitalization. His eccentricity in matters of poetic form and grammar unquestionably influenced the development of modern verse, yet, despite a steady if not extensive number of devotees, his poetry has inspired surprisingly little scholarly analysis and, among academics in particular, a reputation for superficiality (Friedman 1). Perhaps this ambivalence stems in part from its radically experimental nature, especially its striking disarrangement of words, its transformations of verbs into nouns, and its often puzzling manipulations of punctuation. Cummings, however, never seemed very concerned by mixed reviews; in fact, he constantly sought to disrupt both literary and social complacency. In seeking nonconformity, he may have risked glamorizing the scandalous, the immoral, and the delinquent, but his work nevertheless reveals an almost childlike wonder and love of beauty, a love that he was able to express in a style that is lavishly kinetic and musical.

Born October 14, 1894, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Edward Estlin Cummings revealed an interest in poetry remarkably early in life, and fortunately, his parents were able to provide an encouraging environment. His father, Edward Cummings, a professor at Harvard and a Unitarian minister, frequently took his young son on walks across campus, while his mother, Rebecca

née Clarke Cummings, well educated and a poet herself, read aloud to her young son daily. Perhaps because of the great interest both parents took in Cummings's language skills, he could read by age four, and by age six he was already composing short poems. To supplement their intellectual life, the Cummingses spent holidays in the country, mostly at Joy Farm, an old farm in Silver Lake, New Hampshire. For Cummings, Joy Farm eventually became a much-beloved retreat and an important scene of poetic inspiration.

Cummings's formal education began at age seven when he was enrolled at a nearby private primary school. Two years later, he was transferred to the private Agassiz School, where he continued to excel in all subjects but math. The precocious young Cummings soon began making a name for himself as a "writer" and "artist." At age 12 he was enrolled at Peabody, another Cambridge school, where he maintained his predilection for the arts. Although still conspicuously poor in math, he distinguished himself enough to be chosen to recite a poem at graduation. Later, at the Cambridge Latin School, his avid enthusiasm for education suffered its first slump, primarily because of the school's emphasis on conjugating Latin and Greek verbs. Nevertheless, Cummings was soon reading well in Latin, and he also began submitting prose pieces not just to his school magazine but also to independent journals as well. Not until his 15th birthday

in 1909, when his uncle gave him Thomas Hood, Jr.'s, *The Rhymester or The Rules of Rime*, did he begin to display the first signs of his later notorious interest in experimental poetry.

In 1911 Cummings entered Harvard to study classics. Although not a uniformly outstanding student, he continued to read and write extensively—habits that impressed such fellow student writers as JOHN DOS PASSOS, S. Foster Damon, Gilbert Seldes, and Robert Hillyer. Through these new acquaintances he developed his taste for all things avant-garde, and soon his poetry began to reflect the stylistic eccentricities common among many modern writers. In 1913 he joined the editorial team of the *Harvard Monthly*—a position that he held until he graduated. His lifelong friendships with other members of the *Monthly's* staff were his most valuable acquisitions at Harvard; these dedicated young artists not only created the Harvard Poetry Society but also collaborated on a book entitled *Eight Harvard Poets*, to which Cummings contributed. In 1916 he graduated with a Harvard M.A.; however, he briefly continued living at Cambridge, taking advantage of the free room and board and indulging in intense bouts of painting and writing.

In 1916 Cummings joined a publishing company, where most of his duties were clerical. Although he apparently enjoyed his job and “independence” (Sawyer 101), he quickly resigned, evidently unsatisfied by his lack of creative expression. Soon, however, he voluntarily joined the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, not only to seek adventure but also to avoid being drafted during World War I. On his way to Paris, he became friends with another young volunteer, William Slater Brown. Upon arriving in Paris, and having managed to detach themselves from the rest of their unit, they were detained in Paris for several months—a much-celebrated diversion that inspired Cummings's lasting passion for Parisian life. Once the two were finally deployed, they quickly gained a reputation for “insipid insubordination” (Sawyer 115). It was their letters home, however, some of which expressed sympathy for German soldiers and many of which complained of the futility of

the war, that ultimately generated worse charges. The French military, after several months of intercepting their mail, arrested them for espionage. After an initial interrogation at Noyon, Cummings was interred for three months at La Ferté-Macé, “a detention center for ‘undesirables’ and ‘spies’” (Sawyer 119)—an experience he later immortalized in his first prose piece, *The Enormous Room*.

Once released, he briefly recuperated in Cambridge before returning to New York and his artistic career. While there, he began an affair with Elaine Thayer, the wife of a Harvard friend, Scofield Thayer. Although Thayer eventually discovered the affair, it caused no breach in the men's close friendship. Early in 1918 a reluctant Cummings was drafted and sent off to Massachusetts, where he met the unidentified young pacifist who inspired the poem “i sing of Olaf glad and big.” Fortunately for Cummings, his enlistment did not last more than eight months. By January 1918 he was back in New York, where he immediately rented a studio with William Brown and reimmersed himself in the modernist revolution. In 1919 the Society of Independent Artists in New York displayed two of his paintings, but Cummings and Elaine, still deeply involved, were also confronted with Elaine's sobering pregnancy. Cummings, completely obsessed with his art, had no desire to be a parent; both he and Thayer tried to convince Elaine to have an abortion, but she refused and eventually gave birth to Cummings's only child, Nancy (Mopsy). Although Cummings deliberately avoided any paternal obligations, he remained close friends with both Thayer and Elaine, who raised Nancy as their own child.

During the following year, Cummings began to see many of his poems published, mainly in the *Dial*, a magazine now owned by Thayer. In summer 1920, Cummings moved back to Cambridge at his father's insistence to finish documenting his experiences at La Ferté-Macé. As soon as the manuscript was completed, however, he turned the proofing and publishing over to his father and left for Europe with his old friend, Dos Passos. In 1922, while Cummings was in Paris, *The Enormous*

Room was published, to be followed four years later by his first collection of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*. Unfortunately, any pleasure he might have felt was entirely eclipsed by the dismay of discovering the editors' modifications: Not only did he find numerous passages cut from *The Enormous Room*, but he also found various misspelled words and an extensive standardizing of punctuation.

Another significant event that occurred during this time was the divorce of Elaine and Thayer in summer 1921. By 1924 Cummings was back in New York, basking in the rave reviews of *Tulips and Chimneys* and contemplating Elaine's proposal of marriage. The two were married by Cummings's father, and on April 25 of the same year, Cummings legally adopted Nancy. Although Cummings and Elaine treated each other more as old friends than as newlyweds, Cummings described himself as happy. He immediately began working on two new volumes of poetry, *☺*, and *XLI Poems*, little realizing how his relentless cycle of work and socializing would take its toll on his marriage. Two months after their wedding, Elaine informed Cummings that she was in love with another man and asked for a divorce. Cummings reacted desperately but could not persuade her to stay. In September 1924, he moved in with his old college friend Watson, at 4 Patchin Place, his "home" for the rest of his life. Although he spent most of the following year in futile legal struggles for Nancy's custody, he managed to stay fairly productive.

The next two years brought both happiness and sorrow. In 1925 he won the prestigious *Dial* award and also began a passionate affair with a flapper, Anne Barton. In 1926 his newest collection of poems, *Is 5*, received many favorable reviews. However, near the end of 1926, his parents were involved in a car accident that instantly killed his father, and his friend Thayer suffered a serious mental breakdown. In the wake of these calamities, Cummings again moved to Paris, this time with Anne. There he worked on his first play, *Edward Seul*, later renamed *Him*, which in 1928 incited enthusiastic applause from audiences and equally enthusiastic censure from reviewers. The following year, Cummings married Anne, but their marriage, despite periods of intense bliss, lasted

just a little over three years. By October 1932 the two were divorced and Anne had remarried, leaving Cummings once again alone with his work. Living with Anne, however, had proved inspiring (to say the least). In the two years of their marriage, Cummings published an assortment of short stories without a title, [*No Title*]; a compilation of artwork, *CIOPW (Charcoal, Ink, Oil, Pencil, and Watercolor)*; and a remarkably structured volume of poetry, *ViVa (W)*. Also composed during this marriage was a lengthy journal that eventually developed into his second autobiographical prose piece, *Eimi*. Although the 1933 publication of *Eimi* received overwhelmingly harsh reviews, Cummings was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship that same year. It required that he spend at least one year abroad; this Cummings did with aplomb, taking with him the beautiful Marion Morehouse, actress and runway model, with whom he was to enjoy his most stable and lasting relationship.

While his personal life was improving, however, his career began floundering; unable to find a producer for his ballet, *Tom*, or a publisher for his manuscript titled *70 Poems*, Cummings began to worry over his finances. Finally, with help from his mother and the printer Samuel Jacobs, he privately published *No Thanks*, a new book of poems; meanwhile, his *Collected Works* (1938) attracted surprisingly positive reviews, as did another book (*50 Poems*). In 1944 he produced *I × I*, which won him the Shelley Memorial Award. Also in 1944 he released his play *Santa Claus* and exhibited new paintings at the American-British Art Center. Whatever joy he may have felt at this new fame, however, was curbed by the hospitalization of Marion, whom doctors diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, and the death of his mother only three years later. Perhaps because of these tragedies and his own often debilitating back pains, he began retiring from society. He and Marion divided their time between Patchin Place and Joy Farm, he painting and writing, she immersed in photography. It was during this time that Cummings reacquainted himself with his daughter, Nancy, disclosing at last the true story of her parentage. Although she was incredulous at first, they soon bonded.

Meanwhile, Cummings found himself increasingly distracted by financial concerns. In 1948 he accepted a commission to translate part of a modern opera, but the next year he was forced to ask a friend and a relative for monetary help. He also applied for another Guggenheim Fellowship but was rejected. Yet all was not discouraging. In 1949 the American-British Art Center exhibited his work again, and in 1950 he not only won both the Harriet Monroe Prize and the \$5,000 Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets, but he also published another book of poetry, *Xaipe* (which was, however, badly received). Nevertheless, Cummings was invited the following year to assume Harvard's annual Charles Eliot Norton Professorship, an invitation that baffled the poet, who had often mocked Cambridge traditionalism. Even so, he accepted the position and in 1952 began his famous "nonlectures," which drew crowds of enthusiastic fans. Soon many colleges began vying for a Cummings "reading." In fact, he quickly went from being a literary oddity to being a household celebrity. In 1954 his *Poems 1923-1954* was nominated for the National Book Award; in 1953 his *i:six nonlectures* saw publication; in 1953 his satire "THANKSGIVING" was performed; and in 1965 his last completed volume of poetry, *95 Poems*, appeared. No longer financially desperate, he spent his last years claiming one distinction after another, including two more poetry prizes in 1958 and a \$15,000 Ford Foundation grant in 1959. Meanwhile, his work continued to be reissued, set to music, and widely translated. By the time he died of a brain hemorrhage in 1962, he had gained international fame.

"Buffalo Bill's" (1920, 1923)

This poem is at once a tribute to and a mild disparagement of the famous American icon Buffalo Bill (William F. Cody), whose circus show "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," complete with cowboys, Indians, and sharp shooting, extended its commercialized, theatrical version of the western frontier to urban areas across the United States and Europe. Written two years after Cody's death, the poem provides a

brief reminiscence of Buffalo Bill and his familiar silver stallion.

Although it may appear rather simple at first, this unconventional modern elegy conveys a multitude of conflicting messages. For example, the first two lines proclaim Buffalo Bill as "defunct" (l. 2). Rather than use a more dignified, respectful term, such as *departed*, *deceased*, or even *dead*, Cummings uses a word that carries a distinctly negative connotation; *defunct* implies the demise of someone or something that is out-of-date, outmoded, or obsolete. By immediately proclaiming the entertainer "defunct," Cummings not only undermines the robust, resilient pioneering American spirit that Buffalo Bill had symbolized but also plants in the reader's mind a hint of skepticism, which taints the poem's subsequent expressions of admiration and foreshadows its concluding reference to mortality.

Yet even as Cummings subtly mocks the artificial heroism and commercialized showmanship of Buffalo Bill, he also manages to evoke a thrilling sense of nostalgia for American optimism and bravado. In fact, the opening lines may be read as an exclamation not of disdain but of regret. Perhaps the speaker genuinely admires and mourns the fallen hero. Such a reading would emphasize how the speaker swears in order to express the vehemence of his admiration ("Jesus / he was a handsome man" [ll. 7-8]) and the way he rams his words together ("onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat" [l. 6]) to mimic the rapid, effortless shots of Buffalo Bill's astonishing marksmanship. Furthermore, the last three lines of the poem could imply that Buffalo Bill took death itself by storm, just as he thundered brashly through life: "and what I want to know is / how do you like your blueeyed boy / Mister Death" (ll. 9-11).

Nonetheless, a note of sarcasm lingers; the possessive pronoun in the poet's question ("how do you like your blueeyed boy") not only signifies Death's inexorable dominance but also draws attention to the body's inevitable demise. In addition, by ending with the word *death*, the poet reinforces the hollowness of fame and the fake heroism of the "handsome man" (l. 8) on his "watersmooth-silver stallion" (ll. 4-5). Perhaps the poet's cynicism stems

from the suspicion that his own dashing good looks and poetic prowess may in turn survive only as a “defunct” legend. Even in his seeming repudiation of fame, then, the speaker may paradoxically reveal his own desire to be remembered. Another irony lies in the fact that the poem itself, presumably written to further the poet's career, serves only to immortalize the very spectacle that the poet labels “defunct.”

In structure, the poem typifies Cummings's vigorous defiance of conventional grammar. His blunt words, unhampered by punctuation, leap and halt and careen again across the page, creating a path very much like that of a cowboy's plunging stallion. Yet underneath its tone of audacity and bravado, the poem manages to retain a subtle sense of loss and of disillusionment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON's “Richard Cory.” In particular, discuss the ways the two works deal with such issues as public reputation and sudden death. How do the deaths of Cory and Buffalo Bill differ? How is irony used in both works?
2. Read Cummings's poem in conjunction with the lyric titled “Death,” by William Carlos Williams. Discuss the tone, imagery, structure, and relative clarity of the two works. Which one do you find more effective or appealing? Explain why.
3. Discuss the relationship between the first and second lines of the poem. Discuss the relationship between the first line and the last. How and why is it ironic that Death is personified? Given Bill's final fate, why is it especially ironic that he is described as a boy?

“in Just-” (1920, 1923)

In this short, simple poem, Cummings captures the bright, carefree atmosphere of a spring day immediately after it has rained. The speaker describes not only children playing at hopscotch, marbles, and jump rope but also a crippled balloon man whistling as he hawks his wares.

Erratically spaced and punctuated, Cummings's poem is as playful visually as it is in content. The words appear strewn randomly across the page, much like scattered marbles or hopscotch pebbles. However, a closer look reveals that there is a deliberate design to what may at first seem arbitrary. The irregularities in spacing, for example, help evoke the impulsive, whimsical wonders of childhood. The shortness of the lines and the sizable spaces between words force readers to experience each word or word group in a new way, with an almost childlike wonder. Such spacing also allows the reader to sense the spontaneity of childish activity and the breathlessness that accompanies physical exertion. At times the added spacing causes fluctuations of voice or elongated pronunciation. The phrase “far and wee” (ll. 5, 13, 22–24), for example, appears in a variety of different configurations—all of which leave the lively little expression “wee” either dangling at the end of a line or standing alone, thus enticing the reader's voice to mimic the gleeful shriek of a child in motion. Extra spacing between words also mirrors the wide spaces of the outdoors and so leaves room for the imagination to seize upon the endless potential of a spring day. In fact, the very profusion of meanings one can apply to such odd spacing emphasizes again the exciting possibilities of spring and childhood.

However, the poem exhibits many other significant oddities. For instance, the lack of spacing in the names “eddieandbill” and “bettvandisbel” suggests the inseparability of these children as well as the enthusiastic loyalty of childhood friendships. The lack of punctuation creates a sense of irrepressible, unruly energy, while the variously recurring lines (“when the world is mud-luscious” . . . “when the world is puddle-wonderful” [ll. 2–3, 10]; “the little / lame balloonman / whistles far and wee” . . . “the queer / old balloonman whistles / far and wee” . . . “the / goat-footed / balloonman whistles / far and wee” [ll. 3–5, 11–13, 19–24]) provide a sense of the repetitive chants and motions of children's games. Cummings's unique expressions also add to the fun—words like “mud- / luscious” and “puddle-wonderful” suggest uninhibited creativity and naive sensual pleasure. Although relatively sim-

ple, the speaker's choice of vocabulary yet manages to convey the bustling charm of a park or a circus; the imagination is engaged not just by the sound of whistling and the sensation of sloshing mud but also by the sight of a "goat-footed" (l. 20) man, floating balloons, and children dancing and playing. In a larger sense, this fun-filled scenario holds a message: The world is full of simple pleasures like mud puddles and springtime; all that is necessary to enjoy them is a childlike wonder.

Thus, although the poem may at first seem "just" a run-on sentence arranged eclectically on the page, a slower, more thoughtful reading exposes many intriguing layers of meaning. Indeed, this evocative simplicity is typical of much of Cummings's work, as are the inventive word formations and the celebration of nature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this lyric with William Carlos Williams's poem titled "Spring and All." How do the poems differ and/or resemble each other in the presentations of spring? Discuss such matters as tone, structure, techniques, and length.
2. Read Cummings's poem alongside a brief portion of *Tender Buttons*, by GERTRUDE STEIN. How are the works similar and/or distinct in their techniques, their relationships to traditional literature, and their intended and actual effects?
3. How does Cummings use hyphens in this poem to contribute to the effectiveness of its rhythms? Why does he fail to use any punctuation? Discuss the irony of "puddle-wonderful." How does that phrase imply the ability to appreciate what is often disparaged? How is the springtime setting relevant to the ages of the various persons mentioned?

The Enormous Room (1922)

The Enormous Room, Cummings's first autobiographical prose piece, recounts his unwarranted arrest and imprisonment by the French military

during World War I. Cummings and his friend B., disillusioned volunteers in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service (an American unit sent out to aid French soldiers), began writing letters full of antiwar sentiments, letters that eventually attracted the suspicions of the French police, who immediately arrested the two young Americans, questioned them separately, and finally imprisoned them together in a detention center called La Ferté-Macé. Before his eventual release and return to New York over four months later, Cummings endured many hardships, but he also met many intriguing characters whom he would remember affectionately for the rest of his life, and he additionally acquired a deep appreciation of human nature in its most primitive state.

Loosely structured after Paul Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Enormous Room* uses a traditionally Christian allegorical framework to convey a peculiarly modern message. For example, the Section Sanitaire has been compared to Bunyan's Slough of Despond, C's cell in Noyon to the House of the Interpreter, La Ferté-Macé to Doubting Castle, Paris to Vanity Fair, the Directeur of the Dépôt to Apollyon, C's depression after Brown's departure to Christian's capture by Giant Despair, and C's confrontation with the wooden crucifix to Christian's encounter with the cross. Other (more obvious) references to Bunyan's work lie in Cummings's creative use of names: He calls his four favorite inmates the "Delectable Mountains" and labels many of his other characters with equally memorable epithets, such as "the Wanderer," "the Clever Man," "the Zulu," "the Bear," "the Schoolmaster"—all of which bear a striking resemblance to some of Bunyan's figurative names, such as "Mr. Feeblemind," *Mr. Great-Heart*, "the Ill-Favored Ones," "the Shining Ones," and "Mr. Fearing." Furthermore, Cummings's captivity could be viewed as a type of pilgrimage, his spiritual and artistic awakening a pilgrim's progress, and his destination of freedom (New York) the Celestial City. However, Cummings does more than simply echo specific locations and names in Bunyan's tale; he also imitates some of the most well-known paradoxes of Christianity. For example, physical

captivity becomes the means to mental freedom, the condemned prove to be innocent, the simple become sources of wisdom just as in Christianity, earthly trials yield spiritual rewards, Innocence dies for the sin of the world, and from “the mouths of babes and sucklings” issue forth “strength” (Psalm 8:2) and “perfected praise” (Matthew 21:16).

Many critics see *The Enormous Room* as typical of much of Cummings's later work both in its revival of romanticism and in its choice of themes. As did the romantics, Cummings emphasizes sensory detail over clear exposition, leaving readers to make their own assumptions about the significance of his images; in fact, many of his descriptions reveal startling combinations of the visual, auditory, and tactile, as in such phrases as a “clammy, stupid distance” (58), a “slender” movement (227), “musical fingers” (67–68), a “sonal darkness” (93), a “putrescent placidity” (147), “solid . . . wisps of profanity heavily flicker[ed]” (93), a “roar bulge[s]” (94), “bells ding in the oldness of eyes” (119), “green murmurs in coldness” (174), and “candles wiggle a strenuous softness” (175). Another characteristic *The Enormous Room* shares with romantic literature lies in its unreal, dreamlike scenery: At one of the train stations “everything seemed ridiculously suppressed, beautifully abnormal, deliciously insane” (39); an approaching train makes the “ghastly miniature roar of an insane toy” (41); the town of Macé appears as a “city of Pretend, created by the hypnotism of moonlight” (55); a guard's “shout was not merely amazing; it was uncanny, and not a little thrilling” (90); the laughter of Cummings's fellow prisoners emerges as “unearthly smouldering” (157) from the “drooling greenish walls of La Ferté-Macé” (157); and the behavior of the prisoners themselves resembles “the ludicrous and hideous and beautiful antics of the insane” (308). Cummings also shares with the romantics an affinity for the individual, the unique, and the eccentric. His favorite inmates are the most peculiar and often the most disturbed. These include the uncommunicative Surplice, for example, with his “unobstreperous affinity for excrement” (257) or the simpleminded, massively built black man Jean Le Nègre, with his childish vanity

and mercurial nature. Yet Cummings's voice carries little of the romantics' sentimentality; although he does at times rise to eulogistic exaltations of the men he dubs “the Delectable Mountains,” many of his observations remain in the witty, slightly ironic voice of a young Harvard graduate. However, other features of *The Enormous Room* that critics consider typical of Cummings's work include crude references to sex and excrement; startling combinations of cultured and colloquial language; scathing satires of government, leadership, and cultural norms; as well as an appreciation and celebration of the humble, the outcast, and the poor.

When published several years after Cummings's return to the United States, *The Enormous Room* provoked scathing reviews. Many of Cummings's critics complained that he made light of sacred religious symbols, such as the cross, and that he diminished the violent atrocities of the war; others dismissed his linguistic manipulations as annoying rather than innovative and rejected his use of vulgarity as gratuitous rather than daringly truthful. Nevertheless, Cummings himself was unmoved by the censorious reception of his first published volume; he had intentionally sought to challenge the traditional definition of the novel and of prose in general—a goal that he achieved not just by distorting syntax but also by veiling the chronological structure of his story line beneath successions of startling imagery. In addition to challenging the conventionality of previous literary structures, however, *The Enormous Room* challenges the conventionality of academic thought by implying that higher education and cultural preconceptions inhibit one's appreciation of the world and its myriad types of beauty. Cummings portrays civilization as corrupt, governments as unjust, and religion as hollow. Yet despite this underlying message of defiance, Cummings's allegory is both humorous and perceptive. When the enormous room of his physical imprisonment was confined to the enormous room of his mind, it became accessible to all.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *The Enormous Room* to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B.*

- Toklas*. How is World War I presented in each work? How is each work innovative and unconventional in style and structure? In what ways is each an essentially “modernist” work?
2. Read *The Enormous Room* alongside ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S *A Farewell to Arms*. How are they comparable or distinct in the ways they respond to war? How do the protagonists of the two works resemble and/or differ from one another? In what ways are the styles of the two texts distinctive, and how are the styles appropriate to the subjects and themes of the two works?
 3. What traits of phrasing, imagery, and technique does *The Enormous Room* share with Cummings’s poetry? Could the story told in *The Enormous Room* have been told as effectively in a fundamentally different style? How does the style of the work contribute to its impact? Discuss in detail several specific examples of the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of the work’s phrasing.
 4. Examine the opening paragraphs of chapter 2 of *The Enormous Room*. Discuss the effectiveness of Cummings’s use of verbs. How and why does he give them special emphasis? Discuss the effectiveness of his use of repetition. Discuss the effectiveness of his use of very brief sentences.

“the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” (1923)

In 14 abrupt lines, this poem mockingly exposes the artificiality of the “Cambridge ladies” and the smug conventionality of the academic world in which they live. Although written to resemble the traditional, highly structured form of the sonnet, the poem is anything but predictable. In fact, its number of lines seems the only distinctive feature linking it to the sonnet; the other two signature features of the sonnet, its rhyme scheme and the ending couplet found in Shakespearean sonnets, are conspicuously missing.

Cummings’s reference to the women as “Cambridge ladies” introduces the first suggestion of irony: Cambridge, Massachusetts, the home of

Harvard University, and presumably a place of original thought or at least intellectual honesty, is here being used to represent stuffy “comfortable minds” (l. 2). Thus, Cummings not only mocks Cambridge but also points out the pretentiousness of those who place more value on prestigious titles than on genuine merit. The fact that these women call themselves “ladies” is in itself ironic since they meet to “coily bandy” (l. 9) gossip in a very unladylike manner. Furthermore, by referring to them collectively as “the Cambridge ladies,” Cummings implies that individual names would be unnecessary; these women have so melded themselves into their surrounding culture that one description fits them all. Another irony lies in the fact that these Christian women, candidates for the “church’s protestant blessings,” appear to have no real concern for their charity work; they are not even sure whom they are knitting for—“is it Poles? / perhaps” (ll. 8–9). They claim to love Longfellow’s poetry but are indifferent to the beauties of nature around them, such as the “moon” (l. 14), in its “sky lavender” (l. 13). Worst of all, they are blinded to reality by their overwhelming desire to see what they imagine they are supposed to see; “invariably interested in so many things” (l. 6), they are naturally drawn to none. Trends have dictated their pursuits, not personal curiosity. Thus, Cummings uses the word *furnished* (l. 1) to illustrate the state of their “souls” (l. 1). Just as a furnished room offers the comfort of prefabricated items predictably arranged, so these women’s minds offer nothing but comfortable, unoriginal, and conventionally organized ideas. Such “furnished souls” are “unbeautiful” (l. 2) to Cummings; they possess no individuality, no character; in fact, they are even too bland for the word *ugly*.

Cummings’s defiant rejection of the rules of punctuation and syntax provides a stark contrast to the ultraconservative, imitative women he is describing. It is as though by omitting capital letters and commas and periods and by rearranging normal grammatical structures, he is attempting to force his readers out of their preconceived ideas of language, thus allowing them to think in a truly original way. His poem ends abruptly with an

extremely fanciful image of the “moon rattl[ing] like a fragment of angry candy”—an image noticeably at odds with the “unscented shapeless” (l. 4) Cambridge ladies (or their daughters). Candy also conjures up visions of children with sweet, sticky hands and mouths—children who, unlike conditioned adults, tend to embrace what they love instinctively and without preconceived motive. The poem's incongruous ending not only reinforces the artificiality of the Cambridge ladies but ultimately leaves the reader with a reckless sense of abandon and freedom of expression.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with EZRA POUND's “Portrait d'une Femme.” Which work is more clearly satirical? How do the social situations implied in both poems resemble one another? Discuss the lengths and structures of the two works.
2. Read Cummings's poem alongside the poem by WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS titled “Portrait of a Lady.” How do the works differ in tone, technique, and clarity? If you had to recommend one of these poems to a friend, which one would you recommend, and why?
3. Why are these women described as *ladies* rather than as *women*? What are some differences in the connotations of those two words? What is implied by the adjective *comfortable* in describing the ladies' minds? How does Cummings's own poetry seek to create discomfort? In what senses is Christ “dead” for these women? How does the interest of these ladies “in so many things” imply their superficiality?

“next to of course god america i” (1926)

Since most of this poem is in quotation marks and since the quoted section consists mainly of muddled patriotic songs and catchphrases, it seems likely that the speaker is meant to be a politician or a military leader. However, in typical Cummings fashion, the poet satirizes the speaker's opinions; thus, while these snatches of song taken individu-

ally could demonstrate a genuine endorsement of patriotism, instead, amassed and jumbled as they are, they convey the insincerity of empty political slogans. One might assume, therefore, that Cummings is mocking not just the extremism of the patriot but the ignorance and credulity of the patriot's audience as well.

In form, the poem resembles a sonnet; it has 14 lines and an easily distinguishable rhyme scheme. However, while a traditional English sonnet usually bears a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*, this sonnet separates the lines of the anticipated couplet to form a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efge g* in much the same way that Cummings separates and rearranges his syntax (such as “drink rapidly a glass of water” [l. 14])—inversions that mimic the poem's satiric reversal of conventional ideas. Furthermore, Cummings's lack of punctuation also adds to the sarcasm of his message; the speaker appears to be talking “off the cuff,” jumbling together fleeting snippets of whatever stimulating wartime rhetoric he can remember, thus undermining his message and implicitly insulting his audience. Many of his phrases seem deliberately ambiguous, as when he proclaims, “i / love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth” (ll. 1–2). The phrase “and so forth,” suspended as it is at the end of the line, causes the reader's voice to drop slightly and diminish, thus emphasizing its vagueness. Is the speaker simply alluding to the rest of the song, or is he perhaps attempting to be politically correct, since “the Pilgrims” and their descendants have never constituted more than a fraction of the American population? Regardless of the speaker's intentions, however, the phrase serves subtly to dismiss both the song and the ensuing rhetoric as well. Throughout the poem, in fact, Cummings satirizes the speaker's imitative rhetoric; in the very first line, for example, the speaker shrewdly arranges his loyalties in the most widely accepted order, “god, america, i” (l. 1), presumably to impress the largest number of people by his morality, traditionalism, and altruism. He also tries to remain sensitive to multiculturalism, pointing out that young American men “acclaim” (l. 7) their country “in every language even deaf-anddumb” (l. 6); ironically, however, his attempt

backfires when he coarsely refers to sign language as “deafanddumb.” He appears to be passionate by uttering a hearty string of exclamations—“by gorry / by jingo by gee by gosh by gum” (ll. 7–8)—yet his passion is carefully expressed in euphemisms, typical of the habitual politeness politicians seek to cultivate.

The speaker’s inconsistency presents another troubling feature of political rhetoric. For instance, the initial appeal for a calm acceptance of fate—“centuries come and go / and are no more what of it” (ll. 4–5)—is immediately followed by the phrase “we should worry” (l. 5). While in one breath soldiers are described as courageous—“the heroic happy dead / who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter” (ll. 10–11)—in the next breath the same soldiers are described as fools: “they did not stop to think they died instead” (l. 12). The speaker’s last words, “then shall the voice of liberty be mute?” (l. 13), present the final contradiction: Although meant as a rousing call to arms, the question only draws attention to the fact that the dead soldiers are now mute forever and implies that the newly enlisted soldiers, full of patriotic zeal, are likely to suffer the same fate. The only “voice of liberty” left is the politician’s, but his words also lead to death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Carl Sandburg’s poem titled “Grass” also deals with death in war. Discuss the two works in terms of tone, imagery, point of view, structure, and ultimate impact.
2. Read Cummings’s poem, and then read the poem titled “Shine, Perishing Republic,” by Robinson Jeffers. What underlying ideas or themes do the two poems share? How do they differ in tone, techniques, and point of view?
3. Discuss the contrasting tones that appear in this poem—as, for instance, in the contrast between most of line 8 and all of line 9. How do these contrasting tones prevent us from taking the speaker entirely seriously? Discuss the significance of the final action described. What does the rapid drinking of the water imply about the speaker’s attitude?

“i sing of Olaf glad and big” (1931)

Loosely inspired by a fellow soldier Cummings met at Camp Devens, Massachusetts, who was drafted into the air force and then punished for refusing to pick up a gun, the poem both criticizes the mindless violence of the military and honors the brave pacifism of men like Olaf (not his real name). In seven stanzas of varying length, the poet describes how officers and soldiers brutally tortured, beat, and sodomized the young pacifist, whose only response was to “ceaselessly repeat / ‘there is some shit I will not eat’” (ll. 32–33).

Cummings’s unorthodox use of syntax and punctuation provides an interesting parallel to his underlying message of nonconformity while also emphasizing many of the poem’s intriguing allusions. The limited amount of capitalization, for example, serves to build a visual connection between Christ and Olaf since throughout the course of the poem the only capitalized words refer to Christ, God, Olaf, and the personal pronoun *I* referring to Olaf. This visual connection reinforces a more abstract connection: Olaf as a symbol of Christ (or the Christian God). In fact, by singling out these two names, the poet may be suggesting that the images of Christ and Olaf are equal in significance. Indeed, the two possess some remarkable similarities: Both advocate love over violence, individual conscience over communal thinking, and pacifist suffering over forceful retaliation.

Cummings’s nonconformity also reveals itself in his choice of vocabulary, as when he blends formal sentence patterns with obscenities and colloquialisms. He casts the officers’ brutalities in formal, almost polite, phrasing: “the officers “stroke / with brushes recently employed / anent this muddy toiletbowl, / while kindred intellects evoke / allegiance per blunt instruments” (ll. 10–14). Olaf’s dialogue, however, he fills with obscenities, such as “fucking” (l. 19) and “shit” (l. 33). By choosing polite language to portray horrific acts of violence and harsh obscenities to express calm, thoughtful resolve (l. 2.), Cummings forces the reader to notice the poem’s subtler ironies: The West Point-educated officers, the “nation’s blueeyed pride” (l. 23), reveal a despicable absence of morals, while

Olaf, the rebel, the “conscientious object-or” (l. 3), reveals true idealism and the “warmest heart” (l. 2). Cummings’s odd use of punctuation also forces the reader to notice the poet’s word choices. For example, by simply adding a hyphen (“object-or” [l. 3]), he draws the reader’s attention to the word *object*, perhaps to imply that the officers see Olaf only as a convenient target, not as a serious threat. Ironically, such an observation only makes their violent treatment of him all the more despicable. Cummings’s lack of spacing also draws attention to his verbal irony. The name “firstclassprivates” (l. 27), for example, unspaced as it is, accentuates the disparity between these mindless thugs and the label *first class* that is attributed to them.

The poem’s striking rhyme scheme emphasizes yet another of Cummings’s unconventional techniques—his manipulation of word order. Lines such as “officers / their passive prey did kick and curse” (ll. 22–24), “noncoms . . . do through icy waters roll” (ll. 8, 9), and “Christ . . . / i pray to see” (ll. 38–39) seem particularly contrived to accentuate the poem’s end rhymes. This doggerel style, usually encountered in children’s books, seems startlingly out of place in a poem detailing a scene of brutal torture. Yet this disjunction between style and content proves effective, for it reiterates once more the startling discrepancy between the soldiers’ flippant attitudes and the redundant torture they inflict on Olaf.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Cummings’s work in conjunction with the poem titled “The Lynching” by Claude McKay. How do both poems use religious imagery for ironic purposes? What do both poems suggest about the mentality of groups and about the dark side of human nature? In which poem is victimization more strongly stressed?
2. Read LANGSTON HUGHES’s lyric titled “Democracy.” How is it comparable to and/or distinct from Cummings’s text as a protest poem? Discuss the works in terms of length, tone, imagery, and point of view.
3. How does the opening line allude to the openings of various famous epic poems? How is the allusion to epic poems ironic? In what other senses is the subject matter of this poem “epic” in its significance? How does the poem encourage us to admire Olaf’s vulgarity? What does his use of such language imply about his character? Discuss the significance of the very final line of the poem, especially its final word. In what ways do that line and that word implicate others in a narrative that had heretofore seemed externally focused?

“somewhere i have never traveled, gladly beyond” (1931)

Through a clever manipulation of the traditional images of love poetry, such as an emphasis on springtime and roses, the poet expresses the profound mysteriousness and irrepressibility of his love. Although neatly divided into four-line stanzas and evenly aligned on the left margin, the poem nevertheless typifies many of Cummings’s typographical idiosyncrasies in its lack of capitalization, its irregular punctuation, and its unconventional manipulation of sentence structure.

The very first line suggests that the poet is about to describe something “beyond” anything he has ever experienced before and thus “beyond” the familiar words and expressions of his language. In this sense, both his experience of love as well as his experience expressing that love lead him to places altogether foreign. It seems fitting, then, that the poet’s next words praise his lover’s speechless eloquence: “your eyes have their silence” (l. 2). The poet’s sense of the ineffable soon mingles with an even more overwhelming sense of the incomprehensible, as when he sees in his lover’s “most frail gesture” (l. 3) “things . . . which [he] cannot touch because they are too near” (ll. 3–4). This idea of the unknowable, impenetrable nature of love recurs sporadically throughout the poem; in stanza 2, for example, the speaker compares his beloved’s influence on his emotions to spring’s mysterious influence on flowering plants; in stanza 4 he realizes that “nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals / the power of [his lover’s] intense

fragility” (ll. 13–14); and in stanza 5, he confesses, “i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens” (ll. 17–18).

The poet’s use of synesthesia (in which stimulation of one sense produces a response appropriate to another sense, as in “hearing” a color) gives an emotional intensity to his confessions while redefining the immeasurability of his love. For example, something as abstract as his lover’s “fragility” becomes not just a tangible and visible thing but a thing so vast as to encompass entire realms: Its “texture / compels me with the colour of its countries, / rendering death and forever with each breathing” (ll. 14–16). A few lines down, the speaker describes the “voice” (l. 19) of his lover’s “eyes” (l. 19) as “deeper than all roses” (l. 19), again translating one sensory image into another in order to convey the singularity and immeasurable depth of what he is experiencing. Such examples of synesthesia also imply that the poet sees more in his beloved than anyone else could; he imagines an eternity of pleasure in the colors and textures of a body that before now has only been praised for its fragility and hears an audible beauty in eyes that have before now only held visual appeal.

The poet also uses metaphors, juxtaposition, and personification to describe his love. In the second stanza, for example, he describes himself as a flower that the “slightest look” (l. 5) of his beloved opens “petal by petal . . . as Spring opens / . . . her first rose” (ll. 7–8). Such imagery implies that his love not only is ungovernable, just as the return of spring is ungovernable, but that it is also instinctive and desirable, just as the blossoming of a flower garden is a natural and anticipated event. The poet’s use of juxtaposition also recalls the recurring seasons of the natural world. For example, his linking of the words “power” and “fragility” (l. 15), “death” and “forever” (l. 16), “closes” and “opens” (ll. 16–17) suggests the earth’s endless, inexorable cycles of birth, growth, decay, and death. Even the poet’s use of personification involves nature. For instance, the central stanza describes how the speaker’s life would “shut very beautifully, suddenly” (l. 10) at the prospect of rejection “as when the heart of [a] flower imagines / the snow carefully everywhere

descending” (ll. 11–12), and in the final line of the poem he exclaims that “nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands” (l. 20). By thus associating his love with the beauty of nature, the poet is able to portray both the elusiveness as well as the timelessness of his love.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the way the relationship between a man and a woman is depicted in this poem and in Genevieve Taggard’s poem titled “Everyday Alchemy.” How do the poems differ in tone, imagery, point of view, and basic assumptions?
2. Read Cummings’s poem alongside a poem by EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY whose first line is “I, being born a woman.” Which of the two poems is the more “romantic”? What role do intense emotions play in the two works? How do the structure, syntax, diction, and length of the poems contribute to their divergent meanings and effects?
3. Discuss this poem’s use of paradox. Where, why, and how does Cummings use that technique? How does the poem’s use of repeated words and sounds help contribute to its lyricism? How does such repetition make the poem more like a song? Which words are repeated most often in the poem? How and why is the repetition of those words significant?

“anyone lived in a pretty how town” (1940)

The poem tells the story of a man named *anyone* who lives and dies alone in a nameless town. The other residents of the town go about their business, marrying and dreaming, and only the children of the town “guess” (l. 9) that a woman named “noone” secretly loves *anyone*. When “anyone” and “noone” eventually die, the “busy” townspeople “bur[y] them side by side” (l. 27), and life continues on as though nothing had happened.

Although this poem displays Cummings’s typical inventiveness in sentence structure and syntax,

it is uncharacteristic of Cummings in the conventionality of its layout. For example, not only are the lines evenly divided four to a stanza, but they are also uniformly aligned on the left margin. This balladlike format, combined with the rhythmic pattern of stresses in each line, presents a striking resemblance to the lively beats often found in nursery rhymes. Furthermore, Cummings's playful variants on common English word arrangements, such as "little by little and was by was / all by all and deep by deep" (ll. 28–29) add a fun, childish quality to the piece. Nevertheless, despite the cheerfulness of its beat and the simplicity of its vocabulary, the poem also conveys dark emotions such as futility and loneliness. In fact, the various contrasts that appear throughout the poem reflect Cummings's deep interest in the cyclical nature of the earth and the human experience. Contrasting seasons ("spring summer autumn winter" [l. 3] and "summer autumn winter spring" [34]) are complemented by contrasting weather conditions ("sun moon stars rain" [ll. 8, 36]). Contrasting phrases, which balance many of the lines ("he sang his didn't he danced his did" [l. 4], "Women and men [both little and small]" [l. 5], "and down they forgot as up they grew" [l.10], and "she laughed his joy she cried his grief" [l. 14]), are complemented by larger oppositions within the story line (life and death, love and indifference, lightheartedness and sadness). In fact, Cummings's choice of names alone creates diametrically opposed ambiguities: The phrase "noone loved him more by more" (l. 12) could be taken figuratively (an insignificant female labeled *noone* loved an ordinary, average man named *anyone*), or it could be taken literally (the town was loveless and no one loved anyone). The same double meaning could be read into the phrase "noone stooped to kiss his face" (l. 26). Even the title, "anyone lived in a pretty how town," suggests a multiplicity of meaning; some may translate the phrase to mean "how anyone lived in a pretty town" or "anyone lived in how pretty a town"—both of which introduce a sense of sarcasm since the town's prettiness apparently failed to give anyone happiness or satisfaction. Others may prefer to preserve

the word order and read *pretty* as an adverb (as in "a pretty good dog") and *how* as an adjective; thus, a "how town" could be a town whose inhabitants are obsessed with the hows of living rather than simply enjoying life.

Ultimately, the poem's many contrasts serve as a reminder of life's small tragedies. How is it that a human being, a someone, can feel like a "noone"? How can "anyone" remain satisfied, or even survive at all, without companionship and understanding? Yet such lonely existences are not uncommon. By giving new roles to the most ordinary, everyday terms, Cummings allows his readers a fresh glimpse into the age-old joys and sorrows of being human.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the themes of loneliness and isolation as they appear in this poem and in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Discuss the relations between men and women in both poems and the ways both poems present the relations between the individual and the community.
2. Discuss the use of seasonal imagery in this poem and in WALLACE STEVENS's "Sunday Morning." How does such imagery contribute to the tones of the poems? How do the tones of the poems differ? Which poem is more celebratory and affirmative? Why and how?
3. Discuss the use of balanced words and balanced phrases in this poem. How does the repeated use of balance contribute to the tones of the poem and to its rhythms? Choose some lines or phrases that may seem particularly puzzling (for example, lines 4 and 7) and explain their presence in the poem. How do such lines contribute (if at all) to the effects or effectiveness of the work?

"my father moved through dooms of love" (1940)

Written in commemoration of Cummings's father, a Unitarian minister and Harvard professor, the

poem is generally treated as an elegy. However, while traditional elegies typically convey a mournful or pensive tone, Cummings's elegy conveys a sense of energy and hope. In 17 four-line stanzas, it describes the various stages of Cummings's father's love; hints at the beauty, strength, and inspiration that such love imparts; and ends with a hopeful affirmation that love, at least the kind of love that Cummings's father shared, has the power to heal the world.

Unlike many of Cummings's other works, which rely primarily on typographical irregularities for structure, this poem achieves structure through the repetition of words, punctuation, and capital letters. For example, the phrase "my father moved" (ll. 1, 18, 34, 49) appears four times, neatly dividing the poem into four sections. The first, second, and third sections are all four stanzas long and conclude with a period. The fourth section, however, is five stanzas long and ends without a period. By leaving the beginning and end of the poem open ended (without capitalization or punctuation), the poet gives his readers a sense of perpetuity that implies both completion and endless incompleteness—a paradox fittingly reflective not just of death but of the cycles of nature as well. In fact, a seasonal pattern emerges from among the poem's long sentences, moving from spring ("his april touch" [l. 10]) to summer ("keen as midsummer's keen beyond" [l. 25]) to autumn ("septembering arms" [l. 37], "octobering flame" [ll. 41–42]) to winter ("he'd . . . build a world with snow" [l. 48]) and back again to spring ("spring / danced when she heard my father sing" [ll. 51–52]). This theme of circularity serves to emphasize the poem's underlying optimism by implying that death is merely the beginning of a new stage of life and that an act of love, as a single seed, carries the possibility of endless replication.

Cummings's deft balance of opposites provides another form of paradox. For example, many of his sentences are parallel not just in their structure ("his flesh was flesh his blood was blood" [l. 29], "his anger was as right as rain / his pity was as green as grain" [ll. 35–36]) but also in their oppositions

("dooms of love" [l. 1], "haves of give" [l. 2], "griefs of joy" [l. 18], "singing each morning out of each night" [l. 3], "no hungry man but wished him food" [l. 39], "to foe and friend" [l. 38], "to foolish and to wise" [l. 39]). Thus, the sense of equanimity provided by the parallelism is continually complicated and yet clarified by the paired opposites, just as the seeming perfection of Cummings's father becomes complicated and yet clarified by his obvious humanness. Furthermore, the ambiguity of Cummings's phrasing suggests that the beauty of his father's life is beyond words. For example, by beginning each new section of his poem with such ambiguous phrases as "my father moved through dooms of love" (l. 1), "my father moved through griefs of joy" (l. 18), "my father moved through dooms of feel" (l. 34), and "my father moved through theys of we" (l. 49), Cummings compels his readers to consider repeatedly the passion and complexity of his father's unselfish life. Such ambiguity also universalizes the poem, allowing a multiplicity of interpretations. One interpretation is that the love Cummings's father bore for his fellow man was strong enough to survive or "move through" the pain or "dooms" of this evil world and the "maggoty minus and dumb death / all we inherit" (ll. 63–64). Ultimately, the "doom" or fate of his love was to change the world for the better: "because my father lived his soul / love is the whole and more than all" (ll. 67–68).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the relationship between parent and child as it is presented in this poem and in Langston Hughes's poem "Mother to Son." How do the poems differ in tone, point of view, structure, and imagery? What lessons does each parent provide for his or her child?
2. Compare and contrast Cummings's poem with two poems by John Crowe Ransom—"Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" and "Here Lies a Lady." Discuss the poems in terms of structure, diction, tone, and point of view. What seems to be the main "purpose" of each poem?
3. Discuss some examples of places where Cummings achieves suggestiveness through phras-

ing that might at first seem confusing or unclear. For example, what are some suggestive connotations of “sames of am” and of “haves of give”? How would you paraphrase such terms? Discuss some of the ways in which Cummings’s phrasing suggests the complexities of his father’s character.

“pity this busy monster, manunkind” (1944)

The poem laments the unwarranted arrogance of humanity and its needless destruction of the earth through the “progress” of technology. It also predicts the overthrow of naturally born organic organisms by laboratory-born synthetic items and calls for the reader to pity the needless destruction of the “diseased” earth.

Although often categorized as one of Cummings’s “sonnets,” the poem possesses neither a rhyme scheme nor the expected length of 14 lines. In fact, only in its concise, controlled expression does it conform to the traits of a traditional sonnet. In all other respects, it typifies Cummings’s penchant for nonconformity. New sentences are often begun without capitalization, two words are often jammed together to form one, and semicolons and commas are often sandwiched between words with no dividing spaces. Although these eccentricities of mechanics seem at first arbitrary, other features of the poem, such as the 10-syllabic measure of its lines, suggest that Cummings deliberated over the placement of each letter and mark of punctuation. Ironically, Cummings’s typographical peculiarities serve as a reminder that he composed his poems on a typewriter, an invention created by the very technology he condemns in his poem.

The first sentence provides a terse summary of the entire poem. The speaker calls humanity a “monster,manunkind” (l. 1)—names that bring to mind both the chemical mutations and perversions of medical science as well as the “unkind,” indifferent processes of technology. By describing humanity as infected or diseased by “progress”

(l. 2), the speaker cleverly reinforces the image of a malformed or misshapen being. However, the symptoms of this illness are spiritual, not physical; they include an inflated sense of supremacy (“your victim . . . / plays with the bigness of his littleness” [ll. 3–4]), an utter indifference to the beauties of nature (“pity poor flesh / and trees, poor stars and stones” [ll.10–11]), and an exaggerated veneration of man-made objects (“electrons deify one razorblade / into a mountainrange” [ll. 5–6]). The image of a camera lens suggests not only the distortions in man’s vision, but also man’s inability to recognize the beauty of an unwarped reality: “lenses extend / unwish through curving wherewhen until unwish / returns on its unself” (ll. 6–8). Just as a camera lens inverts images, which are later reinverted by the developing process, so human beings continually invert or reverse the natural order of things, placing their greed for money and material objects above a love for nature and each other. However, whereas the frames in photography begin with the accurate layout, moving from normal to inverted to normal again, the spiritual framework of humanity began with an “unwish,” an abnormality, and thus will “return . . . on its unself” (l. 8). In this way, the metaphor itself becomes warped.

The concluding lines of the poem are set apart by a shift from third to first person, thus spotlighting the perpetrators of earth’s deformation. Ironically, the speaker chooses doctors, the supposed healers of humanity, to represent the monster manunkind, “this / fine specimen of hypermagical / ultraomnipotence” (ll. 9–11). Although the diagnosis seems grim (“We doctors know / a hopeless case if-” [ll. 11–12]), the lingering *if* suggests that there may yet be hope. Unfortunately, the doctors quickly change topic, preferring to start over on “a good universe next door” rather than to try to fix the one they have broken. The final irony, of course, is that there is no other universe to serve as our refuge when we have wasted the resources of this one. The poet becomes the lonely, unheeded prophet, vainly begging his people to amend their ways.

9. Humor is frequently an element in Cummings's works. Read a number of his poems and/or *The Enormous Room* and discuss the ways in which humor is used in his works. How does humor contribute to the tones, implications, and complexity of his writing? Discuss at least five specific instances.
10. Cummings wrote several plays in addition to his many poems. Track down at least one of his plays and compare and contrast it to some of his better-known work in the genre of poetry. Discuss his dramatic writing in terms of diction, imagery, structure, and technical devices. Discuss Cummings's prose with attention to the same matters. Are there any traits that Cummings seems to use consistently regardless of the particular kind of writing he is doing?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Cohen, Milton A. *POET and PAINTER*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987.
- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems: 1904–1962*. Edited by George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1991.
- . *Eimi*. New York: Covici, Friede, 1933.
- . *The Enormous Room*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922.
- Flora, Joseph M. *E. E. Cummings Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1994.
- Friedman, Norman. "Introduction." In *E. E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972.
- Kostelanetz, Richard, and John Rocco, eds. *Another E. E. Cummings*. New York: Liveright, 1998.
- Rotella, Guy, ed. *Critical Essays on E. E. Cummings*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984.
- Sawyer-Lauçanno, Christopher. *E. E. Cummings: A Biography*. Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, 2004.
- Webster, Michael. The E. E. Cummings Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/society.html>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Wegner, Robert E. *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965.

Deborah Cosier Solomon



JOHN DOS PASSOS (1896–1970)

The mind of a generation is its speech. A writer makes aspects of that speech enduring by putting them into print. He whittles at the words and phrases of today and makes of them forms to set the mind of tomorrow's generation. That's history. A writer who writes straight is the architect of history.

(qtd. in Martin xxiii)

A writer in the lost generation tradition, John Dos Passos is known primarily for his novel trilogy, *U.S.A.*, which he composed from 1930 to 1936 and published as one unit in 1938, and for his experimental style, such as his use in his fiction of stream of consciousness and newspaper headlines. In addition to being a major American novelist, Dos Passos was a playwright, a political essayist who wrote first in support of socialism but later against this movement as his ideology moved to the political Right, and a talented and prolific painter.

Born clandestinely in a Chicago hotel room on January 14, 1896, John Roderigo Madison, later renamed John Dos Passos, was raised by his Virginian mother, the elegant widow Lucy Addison Sprigg Madison. Sprigg Madison had been engaged in a romantic relationship with the renowned—and married—corporate attorney of Portuguese heritage John Randolph Dos Passos. Embarrassed to acknowledge his illegitimate newborn son as his own because of the social stigma of the era and unable to divorce his first wife because of her devout religious convictions, the elder Dos Passos often sent his young son and his mistress traveling overseas for the benefit of the young man's education, sending him to places such as France, Greece, London, and the Middle East. In 1910, upon the death of his first wife, Mary Dyckman Hays Dos Passos, the wealthy attorney finally married Lucy, and two years later he made young John (who was

actually his real son) his stepson and gave him the cognomen *Dos Passos*. The boy, therefore, became known as John Dos Passos. Young John Dos Passos went to various elite schools, such as the Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut, before attending Harvard University from 1912 to 1916. At Choate, young John was encouraged by his father to read and write; for instance, Virginia Spencer Carr notes that after the father caught a raccoon on his farm, he sent it to his young son as a pet. When the pet raccoon escaped for two days, young John Dos Passos recaptured it and took it back to his room at Choate; in a letter, the father told his son to rename the raccoon *Ulysses* and write a story about him (33). It is quite possible, however, that the capitalistic ideals of his father markedly affected the author's liberal politics and movement toward communism and away from the capitalistic system to which his father adhered. Dos Passos might have gone in a radically different direction because he was bitter that his father, an incessant champion of large corporate power and of capitalism, refused to acknowledge his son for 16 years and spent very little time with him and Lucy during those years.

After graduating from Harvard, Dos Passos went overseas so that he could aid the Allies (the Triple Entente) during World War I. He worked as an ambulance driver in Italy and France in the Norton-Harjes unit in 1917–18. This war experience as an ambulance driver, with the inherent horrors

and bloodshed he witnessed, proved to be pivotal for the young man because it led to his disillusionment with war and his movement toward the left-wing political ideology that greatly influenced his writing for years. His friends E. E. CUMMINGS and ERNEST HEMINGWAY also worked for ambulance crews during the war. Like Cummings and Hemingway, Dos Passos was motivated by the horrors of war to write accounts of his war experiences, such as *Three Soldiers* (1921), and to describe the devastation he had witnessed. His war fiction probably had a profound influence upon Dalton Trumbo when he wrote his own noteworthy antiwar novel, *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939).

In 1927 Dos Passos wrote *Facing the Chair: Sacco and Vanzetti*, in which he defended the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti from the charges of having committed two murders and a robbery seven years earlier in Massachusetts. He wrote this work the same year that the two men were executed. Upton Sinclair also wrote a book about the men (*Boston*), and other writers and artists who protested their treatment included EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY (who wrote “Justice Denied in Massachusetts”), Ben Shahn, Maxwell Anderson, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and Dorothy Parker. Dos Passos visited both alleged murderers in prison and firmly believed in their innocence; he was arrested outside the Massachusetts State House for protesting their death sentences. He was convinced that the two men had not received a fair trial and were thus wrongfully convicted because of circumstantial—and tainted—evidence. The judge, Webster Thayer, and perhaps several of the jurors were clearly prejudiced against Italian immigrants, particularly anarchists. Dos Passos’s concern with Sacco and Vanzetti manifested his interest in anarchism, his support of the poor and of immigrants, and his concern that the poor were unable to receive fair treatment in the legal system. His championing of the two poor Italian immigrants demonstrates his socialistic view that capitalism created two Americas—one for the rich and one for the poor. Dos Passos’s strong interest and personal involvement in the case tell us a great deal about him and his poli-

tics in the 1920s, which clearly permeate his fiction (such as *The Big Money*) and his political essays.

In 1924 Dos Passos met Ernest Hemingway in Paris. The two also met in Key West and other places; they shared similar political views, although their personalities were quite different. In 1925 Dos Passos published one of his finest novels, *Manhattan Transfer*, an examination of life in New York City. Dos Passos went to Russia in 1928 so that he could study communist ideals and also learn more about Russian theater so that he could employ what he learned about drama for the benefit of the New Playwrights Theatre, which was run by communists. Other important left-wing writers, such as THEODORE DREISER, had already traveled to Russia to learn more about communism. These left-wing American writers in Moscow were led by the *New York Times* writer Walter Duranty. According to Virginia Spencer Carr, Dos Passos felt ambivalent about communism: “His trouble in Russia was trying to decide whether he was for or against the Soviet Communist system, and even more important, what his own destiny was in relationship to it. . . . The Russian intelligentsia . . . saw him as the American Gorki, the most potentially influential revolutionary writer of the West, and were eager for him to commit his pen to Communist doctrine” (243). Although Dos Passos was very impressed with the Russian people, he remained ambivalent about Russian communism and eventually turned away from it politically.

In 1929 Dos Passos married his first wife, Katharine (Katy) Smith. On September 12, 1947, the couple was involved in a serious car accident while driving from Provincetown, Massachusetts, to Connecticut. Dos Passos had been temporarily blinded with the sun in his eyes and consequently had rammed his car (while his wife lay asleep beside him) into the back of a parked truck. Dos Passos suffered a severe eye injury in the accident and permanently lost his vision in his right eye. Even worse, Katy perished. Two years later, in 1949, he remarried, to Elizabeth Holdridge. One year later, his daughter, Lucy Hamlin Dos Passos, was born.

Dos Passos wrote a trilogy about the United States, *U.S.A.*, which contains the following three

novels: *42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). The novels are not necessarily separate entities, for strong connections exist between them and the plot and characters continue from one book to the next.

Dos Passos was greatly disturbed by the success of the Fascist movement in Spain in the 1930s. It is unsettling, however, that events in Nazi Germany during that time that adversely affected Jews did not claim as much of his attention. Because of his concern about Fascism in Spain, Dos Passos, along with his good friend Ernest Hemingway, cheered on the republicans (the anti-Franco forces) during the Spanish civil war. In fact, Dos Passos decided to make a documentary film about the republicans and their struggles against Franco; with Hemingway, Archibald MacLeish, and Lillian Hellman, he created the Contemporary Historians society. They hoped to show Americans how much the common Spanish people were suffering during the civil war and to drum up support from the U.S. government for the anti-Franco side. Hemingway, however, clashed with Dos Passos about the documentary because Hemingway was more concerned with showing the actual fighting between the two sides than with depicting the suffering of the Spanish people. Furthermore, Dos Passos wanted to show the atrocities committed by both factions, while Hemingway wanted Dos Passos to ignore the evils of the socialistic republicans. This split, which helped dissolve the friendship between the two men, manifested a significant difference between them: Dos Passos did not glorify war and fighting as Hemingway did.

Hemingway believed that Dos Passos's supposed wealth rendered him unsympathetic to the proletarian cause. Hemingway, however, was misguided, in that Dos Passos, despite having a wealthy father, was not rich at all; in fact, he struggled financially, particularly while he was helping to raise two children, Christopher and Jean Kaeselau, after their mother's sudden death (Carr 399). Other factors contributing to the breach between the two men were Hemingway's jealousy over Dos Passos's great success as an author and Hemingway's scornful and vigorous personality, which differed markedly

from Dos Passos's gentle comportment. In addition, Dos Passos's changing politics—particularly his disillusionment with left-wing ideology—also led to his break from Hemingway. Dos Passos later expressed concern about violations of freedom of speech in the Soviet Union by Communists. The stifling of freedom of speech in Communist organizations and countries is another reason why Dos Passos became disillusioned with—and why he moved away from—left-wing politics. Communist ideologues castigated him for his work *Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), which manifests his movement to the political Right and his leaving behind of communist ideals.

Dos Passos won several significant writing awards. He earned a Gold Medal for fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1957; he won the Alumni Seal Prize from Choate (previous winners had included John F. Kennedy, the Reverend Avery Dulles, Adlai Stevenson, and Edward Albee); and he was awarded the Feltrinelli Prize for Fiction in 1967. To celebrate the talent and the influence of Dos Passos, the Department of English and Modern Languages at Longwood College, in Farmville, Virginia, has awarded since 1980 the prestigious annual John Dos Passos Prize for Literature for excellence in creative writing. The selection committee looks particularly for works that include American themes and that incorporate an experimental style—two traits certainly present in the works of Dos Passos. Longwood College also publishes the *Dos Passos Review* in tribute to this significant 20th-century proletarian author.

Dos Passos is considered one of the greatest American novelists of the 20th century, an experimental novelist whose works offer a proverbial slice of life. His most popular and enduring writings are his works from the 1930s; although some critics might argue that the pronounced shift in his politics from a left-wing ideology to conservatism accounts for his declining popularity, one must also consider the possibility that his talent diminished after he penned his greatest texts. Dos Passos is nonetheless a major figure in 20th-century literature, but unfortunately, his influence on later writers has often been overlooked.

Dos Passos died of a heart attack in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 28, 1970, at the age of 74 and was buried in Westmoreland, Virginia.

***Manhattan Transfer* (1925)**

Manhattan Transfer is a novel about New York City and its effects on the lives of its inhabitants. The actress Ellen Thatcher attempts to rise socio-economically through her physical beauty and her marriages, yet she ends up unhappy because she fails to recognize that happiness does not derive from wealth. Whereas Bud Korpenning and other characters fail to thrive in this panoramic portrayal of New York City, Jimmy Herf realizes that the big city can crush its inhabitants, and thus he leaves for greener pastures.

The novel's heroine, Ellen Thatcher, aspires to be an actress and to be financially secure. A beautiful woman, Thatcher is pursued by many men. She first marries the bisexual actor John Oglethorpe, then Jimmy Herf, and finally George Baldwin, yet in her relationships with these men and the theater executive Harry Goldweiser she seems to desire money and prosperity rather than love. The only man she truly loves, the wealthy alcoholic Stan Emery, commits suicide. Dos Passos suggests that Thatcher's failed marriages and her quest for the trappings of wealth reflect at least indirectly the flaws of a capitalistic society.

Although this novel contains some intriguing characters, such as Ellen Thatcher, Jimmy Herf, George Baldwin, Bud Korpenning, and Stan Emery, the characters and plot seem less important than the location—New York City. It can be argued, however, that the characters represent New York City at the time; the characters and the city are intertwined. Dos Passos makes this clear at the onset of the novel when 25-year-old Bud Korpenning asks for directions to the action in the city, saying that he needs them because he “want[s] to get to the center of things” (4). To the author, New York City is “the center of things,” such as the theater and Wall Street. Yet, as Korpenning discovers,

the big city can swallow up and destroy people; he eventually commits suicide.

Dos Passos's novel contains local color and regionalism, including vignettes that depict New York City as a melting pot. Dos Passos demonstrates, for the most part, an effective ear for dialogue. He captures New York City lingo and accents well, as when a short-order cook, who makes breakfast for Bud when he first arrives in the city, comments, “I’m goin to slip you a bit of advice, feller, and it won’t cost you nutten. You go an git a shave and a haircut and brush the hayseeds out o yer suit a bit before you start lookin. . . . I’m tellin yez, that’s all” (5). (However, the dialogue spoken by a German immigrant, who has just become a father and who goes for drinks with Ed Thatcher, seems noticeably artificial and unnatural.) Dos Passos is concerned with portraying people of different ethnicities and various social classes, from Herf's wealthy family to the unemployed and emotionally scarred Bud. One can consider *Manhattan Transfer* (the title derives from the name of a station that sends railcars to New York City) a tribute to a vibrant and enthralling city that overshadows the characters who live there. However, the city can be dangerous and can destroy those who are poor and weak. By depicting various interactions and situations involving the characters, Dos Passos presents a panoramic view of New York City from the onset of the 20th century until the mid-1920s. The vignettes are short and hold readers' attention, yet they make the novel appear episodic rather than fluid. Although the episodic nature of the vignettes might seem problematic, these scenes might have been written in that style to make a point about the characters' truncated relationships. *Manhattan Transfer* quickly switches back and forth among characters, demonstrating how erratically the characters interact with each other and thus reflecting the unstable values and social mores of the city. The novel is ambitious and experimental yet also realistic in its portrayal of the characters and New York City, even tackling issues that were controversial at the time, such as homosexuality and abortion.

The idealistic Jimmy Herf, who shuns a lucrative career in banking so that he can be a journalist, resembles Dos Passos himself to some extent. It is inevitable that this idealistic man's relationship with the mercenary Ellen Thatcher cannot last; Ellen, the successful, beautiful, and ambitious actress in a big city, is unmistakably modeled after Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Meeber in *Sister Carrie* (1900); Dos Passos was, it should be noted, a good friend of Dreiser. Thatcher's father, Ed, works very hard yet cannot make a good living, and Bud has trouble finding work; this problem with making sufficient money, along with the focus on labor unions, demonstrates the author's suggestion that capitalism in America destroys lives. The backdrop in New York of the stock market and the destruction of the stock broker Joe Harland add to the mystique of New York—a city that seems to destroy many people even though some thrive there.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the portrayals of Ellen Thatcher and Carrie Meeber (in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*). What connections do you discern between the two women and the manners in which they are portrayed? What does Thatcher's failure to find true love suggest about her character, New York City, and the dangers of capitalism?
2. Discuss the portrayal of capitalism and business in *Manhattan Transfer*. Does the author suggest that there is hope for the working class under capitalism? How does money affect people's lives and the decisions they make in the novel?
3. Discuss who of Ellen's three husbands—Oglethorpe, Herf, or Baldwin—is the best suited to and deserving of her. What do these men have to offer her, and how compatible is she with them? Do the best qualities of the three men together make up a suitable husband? Which of the three does Ellen like best as a husband, and is there any hope for her marriage to Baldwin?
4. Compare and contrast the ways New York City is presented in Dos Passos's novel with the ways it is depicted in EDITH WHARTON'S *The Age of Innocence*. In particular, focus on issues of social class and status and the roles of women. In what ways is the New York of the 1870s (as presented by Wharton) similar to and/or different from the New York of the 1920s (presented by Dos Passos)?
5. Read Dos Passos's book alongside NELLA LARSEN's novel *Passing*, which is also set in New York during the 1920s and which also deals with issues of ethnicity and social status. Discuss the works in terms of their use of dialogue and diction and in terms of the aspirations of the central female characters.

42nd Parallel (1930)

In *42nd Parallel*, John Dos Passos creates narratives of individuals who represent the wealthy and the working class. Mac is from a poor family and seems committed to socialistic causes, yet love distracts him, prompting him to abandon his well-meaning ideas. J. Ward Moorehouse marries a second wealthy woman after divorcing another one, thus acquiring the capital he needs to open his own public relations firm and become a prominent and influential man.

The title of the novel signifies that the 42nd parallel, which lies 42 degrees north of the equator, extends throughout much of the northern part of the United States, including Upstate New York, the Great Lakes region, and the city of Dos Passos's birth—Chicago. The 42nd parallel tends to be stormy, a fact that symbolizes the lives of many of the novel's characters. Furthermore, Chicago is where the protagonist, Fenian (Mac) McCreary, is raised; begins his printing career; and cultivates the radical Left political ideology that shapes his future. The title is also significant because the novel seeks to be representative of America—or at least of a cross section of the nation—from the beginning of the 20th century until World War I.

42nd Parallel follows the lives of four main characters: Mac, Janey Williams, J. Ward Moorehouse, and Eleanor Stoddard. Mac, a printer who

accepts his uncle Tim's socialist beliefs, is a blue-collar worker who struggles in vain to get ahead and achieve the American dream, a sense of contentment that always seems so elusive and unattainable for the working class in *42nd Parallel* and the subsequent two novels in this trilogy. As Tim remarks, poverty is "the fault of the system that don't give a man the fruit of his labor. . . . The only man that gets anything out of capitalism is a crook, an' he gets to be a millionaire in short order" (21, author's ellipsis). Mac, a character modeled in some ways on the author himself, holds a leftist political ideology and works for the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), an international labor union that was quite powerful around the time of World War I. Mac's lack of financial success illuminates Dos Passos's argument that capitalism is an evil that hinders the working class from attaining prosperity and happiness. In San Francisco, Mac marries Maisie, who does not share his leftist ideology; she covets wealth and its trappings (the narrator even remarks that she dresses like a Gibson Girl and wears gloves as a fashion statement), and she actively attempts to dissuade Mac from following his leftist ideals. The inevitable friction caused by the conflict between his radicalism and her materialism leads to the termination of their marriage. Dos Passos suggests that love and sex can hinder one's devotion to the leftist cause.

However, readers soon realize that perhaps the problem is that Mac is not as committed to his cause as he thinks he is—a possibility that also mirrors Dos Passos's own doubts about his personal dedication to his left-wing ideals. Later, in Mexico, Mac is distracted again by a romantic relationship with a woman, a development indicating that women (and children from sexual encounters) distract socialist men from their jobs and their purpose. Donald Pizer says that in the novel, "[f]or the working-class radical, sex is a trap, since it can lead to the confinement of belief and action within the prison of middle-class marriage, as it does for Mac—first reluctantly with Maisie and then willingly with Concha" (121). Lisa Nanney claims that in *42nd Parallel* and the other two parts of the trilogy, Dos Passos portrays women as being just

as victimized by men as by capitalistic forces, yet she adds that "the predictability of the forces in the lives of the women—conventionality, the drive for respectability, shallow materialism—has led some analysts of the trilogy to criticize it as sexist or even misogynist" (181). One must wonder, however, whether women are actually the cause of Mac's failure to get ahead, especially since he is careless with money. (For instance, he sometimes spends it recklessly, once even wasting \$15 on alcohol while he cannot afford to pay the bills to support Maisie and their two young children.)

Janey Williams, another major character, is an intelligent and talented but plain-looking stenographer. She is ambitious but is ashamed of her brother, Joe, who not only deserted his navy position but also lacks an education and a good job. She is not interested in love after the death of Alec, a boy in her hometown of Georgetown who dies young. She works for a media king named J. Ward Moorehouse, who is perhaps modeled after either the public relations giant Ivy Ledbetter Lee (who handled publicity for John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Standard Oil) or the Red Cross leader H. P. Davidson. Moorehouse marries Annabelle Marie Strang, the daughter of a prominent doctor; even though he learns just before the wedding that she is sexually promiscuous, he marries her because he considers the marriage advantageous to his career. He leaves her shortly after the marriage, however, because she is still sexually promiscuous and unfaithful. Moorehouse then marries the very wealthy Gertrude Stamp and uses her parents' money to build his public relations empire. The marriage almost falls apart when Gertrude becomes jealous of her husband's relationship with an attractive and stylish interior decorator, Eleanor Stoddard. She even seems a bit jealous of Ward's platonic relationship with his dutiful stenographer, Janey Williams. When the war begins, Gertrude becomes worried about her husband's safety and begins to believe that her accusations about Moorehouse's infidelity were mistaken. However, the reader will discover in the next novel, *1919*, that her suspicions are correct.

Moorehouse becomes greatly successful in public relations, particularly in publicly defining the

relationship between capitalism and labor; this success is a concern to Dos Passos, who suggests that the media distort the truth to favor capitalism and big business. He mistrusts those who employ the media to support capitalism and, from his perspective, to hold down the working class. Donald Pizer says that the public relations icon “epitomizes the manipulation and corruption of language and therefore of belief in American life” (125). The power Moorehouse attains is troubling because many other characters are poor while he has obtained great wealth. It is possible, in fact, that Moorehouse is based not only on Lee or Davidson, but also on John Randolph Dos Passos, the author’s father, who used language and sophistry to present idealistic portrayals of large capitalistic corporations, a practice that conflicts markedly with his son’s leftist ideals. Dos Passos’s father often struggled hard to defend large corporations in their efforts against smaller interests. But Dos Passos himself employs the media, such as his Newsreels, in his novel and distorts the truth in his subjective biography segments.

The novel closes by introducing Charley Anderson (the protagonist of *Big Money*), who falls in love with Emiscah Svenson, is almost tricked into marrying her (although he realizes that he cannot be the father of her baby because he is a virgin), and then leaves for France to become a mechanic during World War I.

The innovative aspects of the novel—which include the use of “Newsreel” narratives, biographies of key historical figures, and subjective “Camera Eye” segments—manifest Dos Passos’s love of experimentation and his fascination with American history. However, although the historical information in some ways makes the novel more realistic, it can also detract from the realism by interrupting the narrative flow and calling attention to the text *as a text*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Dos Passos’s depiction of the working classes in this novel with the ways they are depicted in EUGENE O’NEILL’s play *The Hairy Ape*. How do the techniques used in the novel and the play contribute to the effectiveness (and/or ineffectiveness) of their treatments of social issues?
2. Read Dos Passos’s book alongside W. E. B. DuBois’s novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. How are the two works similar and/or distinct in their presentations of economic issues? In what ways is DuBois’s book a more traditional novel than Dos Passos’s text?
3. Does Dos Passos indicate that women are responsible for the failure of male radicals to lead a socialist revolution, or does the author suggest that the male radicals are incompetent and not fully devoted to their cause and thus use females as scapegoats for their inability to effect change that helps America’s working class? What role do women play in the leftist cause?
4. Read this book alongside Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, and then compare the ways male characters perceive female characters as obstacles in both books. How do the goals of the main characters in the two novels differ, and what kinds of obstacles do they think women pose to the achievement of their goals?
5. Critics have written about J. Ward Moorehouse as an opportunistic and amoral capitalist who employs propaganda to succeed. Is this an accurate assessment of the character, or does Dos Passos actually characterize Moorehouse in a much more positive light than these critics have claimed? How does the depiction of capitalism in this novel resemble and/or differ from the ways it is presented in JOHN STEINBECK’s *The Grapes of Wrath*?

1919 (1932)

Dos Passos focuses on Joe Williams, Richard Ellsworth Savage, and Eleanor Stoddard in *1919*, a novel that dwells on the impact of World War I on American citizens. Joe Williams wishes to achieve the American dream but cannot because he lacks the commitment to saving money and settling down in one place with one woman; the author suggests, however, that part of Williams’s failure

derives from a capitalistic society with rigid social classes. Savage uses his good looks to manipulate others, such as Daughter, whom he impregnates and then abandons in a successful effort to save his career.

1919, the middle novel in Dos Passos's trilogy, covers the time from the beginning of the United States' entrance into World War I until the Armistice. In *42nd Parallel*, the reader has met Joe Williams but only through the eyes of his sister, Janey. In *1919*, readers gain insight into the character of Joe from his own perspective. For instance, readers in *42nd Parallel* learn what Janey thinks of her meeting with Joe outside the Riggs Building; in *1919*, readers get Joe's perspective on the encounter and his evaluation of Janey and the changes in her life. Readers can now understand more about his life than they could from the cryptic comments he made in the previous novel, and they can now comprehend—although perhaps not justify—why Janey has become ashamed of him. Readers learn that he also senses his inadequacies when he is with his sister. Yet he keeps a cigar box full of mementos, including a photograph of Janey, manifesting the sentimental side of his character.

A seaman with a knack for finding trouble, Joe is arrested for attempting to enter England without a passport during wartime and for being a spy. After his release, he realizes that he must stay out of trouble, but almost immediately he is arrested again for fighting in a brothel. Many critics contend that Joe Williams is a victim of his social class and cannot get ahead because he is poor, especially since the poor are exploited by the rich. However, Janey Williams is obviously from the same social class as her brother, yet she thrives in the business world. And it is clear that Joe would have a better chance of rising socioeconomically if he had an education, if he got along better with people and did not fight, and if he did not spend all his money on alcohol and prostitutes. Della Matthews, from the same social class, who later marries him, correctly believes that Joe is "a nice boy and came from nice people and had been nicely raised and ought to be thinking of getting ahead in the world instead of being a bum and a loafer" (401). Joe falls in love with Della and

decides to marry her, yet soon after making this decision to settle down, he contracts gonorrhea from a prostitute and decides to complete only half of his medical treatment. Joe's poor character traits thus undercut the argument that his failure in life derives from his social class. The reader might not have much sympathy for Joe, particularly after he has sex with a prostitute in exchange for silk stockings and then steals back the stockings after she falls asleep. Although Joe seems to be a man who is down on his luck, he creates his own unfortunate situations and ultimately causes his own death when fighting a large man in a bar: When Williams attacks a large Senegalese man, another man crushes his skull with a bottle.

Another of the novel's main characters—Richard (Dick) Savage—does not come from a wealthy family either (although his grandfather was a major general), but he makes important connections with influential people, thus ensuring his success. Dick benefits from his connection to a prominent Jersey City lawyer and politician, Hiram Halsey Cooper. Cooper, impressed with Savage and perhaps interested in Dick sexually, uses his political connections to find Dick good jobs, including a commission after Savage is recalled to the States after writing antiwar letters. Savage is amoral, having a sexual relationship with Hilda Thurlow, who, along with her preacher husband, Edwin, has befriended the young man. Savage even sleeps with Hilda on Sundays while her husband is preaching in church in a nearby town. Hilda breaks off the affair when she becomes pregnant. Although the text never indicates who the father is, the reader might assume, from details of Hilda's relationship with her husband and with Savage, that the latter is the father. Savage joins the French ambulatory unit Norton-Harjes, just as Dos Passos himself did. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that Dos Passos identifies with (or likens himself strongly to) the amoral Savage.

The war permeates all aspects of this novel. The characters are preoccupied with the war, and it thoroughly affects their behavior. Joe's virginal wife, Della, suddenly changes when the war breaks out and becomes promiscuous, sleeping with men in uniform to do her part for the war effort.

Women frequently sleep with many men, and the men are drunk often, both justifying their behavior by saying, “C’est la guerre” (passim). Similarly, when Dick Savage asks Anne Elizabeth Trent for sex, she responds, “You boys [soldiers] have risked your lives. I guess I can risk that [losing her virginity]” (675).

The initial description of Daughter (Anne Elizabeth Trent) manifests Dos Passos’s attitude toward the wealthy and privileged:

The Trents lived in a house on Pleasant avenue [*sic*] that was the finest street in Dallas that was the biggest and fastest growing town in Texas that was the biggest state in the Union and had the blackest soil and the whitest people and America was the greatest country in the world and Daughter was Dad’s onlyest sweetest little girl.(576)

The sarcastic tone suggests the elitism that Dos Passos believes exists within wealthy American communities and families. The living is pleasant (the street name), and everything seems ideal because the privileged have wonderful opportunities. Yet Anne has lost her individuality—and her name—and thus is called *Daughter* by her father; she is treated as a child, as is suggested by the use of the word *onlyest*. Daughter’s father is a wealthy lawyer, as was Dos Passos’s father.

Daughter goes from one romantic relationship to the next; she dates socialist activists such as Edwin Vinal and Webb Cruthers, although she never seems to care about her boyfriends’ causes. The reader might wonder, furthermore, how dedicated these men are to their causes as well. She then falls in love with Dick Savage, who impregnates her. When Savage discovers that Daughter is pregnant, he breaks off their relationship: “But, Ann Elizabeth, do be reasonable. . . . Can’t we go on being friends?” (694, author’s ellipsis); then he suggests that she trick G. H. Barrow into marrying her by sleeping with him and making him think that he is the father. Savage thus manifests his own callous and selfish nature. Daughter considers marrying the foolish and stuttering Barrow but cannot

go through with it and instead goes for a plane ride with a drunken French aviator, Pierre; the plane crashes, killing them both. The death could be a suicide because she had wanted the drunken man to fly and do stunts, perhaps so that she could die in a crash. Eleanor Stoddard manipulates the press into declining to cover the story so that Dick will not be embarrassed, for his spurning of Daughter has indirectly caused the crash. Dos Passos here manifests his belief that the media manipulates, rather than reports, the news.

Eveline Hutchins’s friendship with Eleanor Stoddard cools, and both women have affairs with the public relations giant J. Ward Moorehouse. Hutchins has numerous love affairs and is impregnated by Paul Johnson, whom she does not love. Moorehouse’s infidelities (he is married to Gertrude, who lives in a sanitarium) and his smooth nature indicate Dos Passos’s disdain for people who use language and influence to distort the truth about war and business.

Dos Passos expresses his disdain for greed through his scathing biography of J. Pierpont Morgan, his contempt for deceptive public relations through the characterization of J. Ward Moorehouse, and his anger toward President Woodrow Wilson for involving the United States in World War I through the sarcastic biography titled “*Meester Veelson*.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the role that sex plays in the novel. The male characters tend to be very active sexually, and the women are very promiscuous. What points could Dos Passos be trying to make about the war or social class by introducing the theme of sexual promiscuity? What does Dos Passos’s book have in common, in these respects, with Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*?
2. How does the author characterize left-wing radicals such as Edwin Vinal, Webb Cruthers, Don Stevens, and Ben Compton? What point is Dos Passos making by characterizing socialists as he does? What does the author suggest by giving the capitalist J. Ward Moorehouse a significantly larger role than these radicals? How

do his depictions of radicals resemble and/or differ from the ways they are depicted in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*?

3. Although Moorehouse seems to be a major character, readers learn about him primarily through other characters such as Eleanor Stoddard and Eveline Hutchins. What is the effect of portraying Moorehouse from the perspectives of other characters in the novel rather than directly? What is the effect of portraying Moorehouse primarily through the eyes of women rather than providing him with his own narrative (he appears in others' narratives instead)? How does Dos Passos's use of this indirect method resemble and/or differ from the methods used in WILLIAM FAULKNER's "A Rose for Emily"?
4. What role do censorship and truth play in *1919*? Savage loses his position because he is a pacifist; Moorehouse succeeds by allegedly manipulating truth. What does this contrast suggest, particularly when Savage subsequently goes to work for Moorehouse?
5. What part does social class play in *1919*? The working-class sailor Joe Williams and the wealthy Daughter both perish after living unhappy lives. Does Dos Passos indicate that character plays a larger role than class, or what other reasons, such as the casualties of war, explain the sad fates of characters from markedly different classes? Compare and contrast the impact of class on the characters in this novel with its impact on the characters in Gertrude Stein's book *Three Lives*.

***The Big Money* (1936)**

In *The Big Money*, the author demonstrates how, in the aftermath of the war, big business and capitalism have become obsessions. The wealthy increase their power and riches while the working classes cannot succeed because of their poverty and because of the manipulation of the media by the affluent. The war veteran Charley Anderson dreams of becoming successful in the aviation motor business, yet he cheats his business partners; is cheated by his wife, Gladys; and dies of injuries suffered in a car accident.

The Big Money, the last novel in Dos Passos's trilogy, deals with the aftermath of World War I and extends through the 1920s. American soldiers have returned from Europe, hoping to find economic prosperity. In this volume of the trilogy, capitalism has replaced the war as the major theme, and the characters seem more thoroughly developed than in the first two volumes of *U.S.A.*

The aviator Charley Anderson returns to Minnesota to find his mother dying, his unfaithful former girlfriend Emiscah Svenson trying desperately to get him to marry her (she threatens several times to kill herself by turning on the gas unless they are reunited), and his brother, Jim, and his sister-in-law, Hedwig, working for the Ford Motor Company. Jim and Hedwig dismiss Charley's plans for the future of aviation engineering and appropriate his share of his mother's inheritance when the mother passes away. To make a point about the deception of Jim and Hedwig (huge proponents of Ford) and to show the evils of capitalism, Dos Passos includes a sardonic biography of the entrepreneur Henry Ford (entitled "Tin Lizzie"). The author mentions that Ford promised high wages, but "of course it turned out that there were strings to it; always there were strings to it. . . . Ford's was manufacturing munitions, Eagle boats. . . . He announced to the press that he'd turn over his war profits to the government, but there's no record that he ever did" (809, 811). Dos Passos then proceeds to discuss Ford's vigorous and hateful anti-Semitism. Ford also dehumanizes his workers and makes them unhappy by putting them on assembly lines and dictating their conduct (they must be married, not commit adultery, and not drink or smoke cigarettes on or even off the job, for instance). Dos Passos thus manifests, through his use of biography, the deceitfulness of Jim and Hedwig Anderson; he shows their strong allegiance to the Ford Motor Company and Henry Ford's insidious behavior. (Charley, it is interesting to note, ultimately dies of injuries suffered in an automobile accident.)

Charley moves to New York and attends a party hosted by Eveline Hutchins (now Eveline Johnson), who has a baby but clearly is not happy being a mother or a wife. Her former beau Don Stevens

and Dick Savage are also at the party, leading to a frosty atmosphere in the room. Stevens talks of nothing but class struggles and socialism, and he even asks Charley, whom he has never met before, “Tell us what aviators think about. Are they for the exploiting class or the workingclass [*sic*]?” (822). The question is silly and sophomoric, illustrating the simplistic thinking of socialists such as Don Stevens. Stevens’s silly behavior manifests, perhaps, the change in Dos Passos’s sociopolitical views and his recognition of the lack of complex and mature thought exhibited by certain left-wing radicals.

Charley courts the socialite Doris Humphries but cannot obtain her “love” because he is poor. Biding his time while he waits for enough money to win Doris’s heart, Charley has an affair with the promiscuous Eveline Hutchins Johnson, even though her husband, Paul Johnson, has befriended him in New York. As do many Dos Passos characters, such as Dick Savage and Joe Williams in *1919*, Charley justifies his sexual indiscretions: “He felt bad about Paul, but after all Paul wasn’t a particular friend of his and if it wasn’t him [Charley] he reckoned it would be somebody else” (835). Anderson, therefore, justifies sleeping with his friend’s wife because Paul, although very kind to him, is not his closest friend and because he is in a way preventing Eveline from sleeping with another man by committing adultery with him instead. Dos Passos demonstrates how easily people justify their irresponsible behavior and how they lack introspection. The relationship between Charley and Eveline cools when she informs him that she wants to divorce her husband and marry him. Bored by her life and tied to a dull marriage and to a baby, Eveline commits suicide.

Charley finally meets a fine woman named Anne Bledsoe, who is compatible with him, yet he chooses to marry Gladys Wheatley instead because she has a wealthier family. Their marriage fails, and Gladys tricks him out of his money. Here Dos Passos makes a statement about the dangers and seductive quality of money. He illustrates how social relationships such as marriages are inextricably tied to wealth, thus diminishing the ability of the working class to succeed or intermingle with members of the upper class.

Another important character in this novel is the idealistic and emotional social worker Mary French, who works at the Hull House in Chicago and is inspired by her admirable father, a physician who devotes his life to caring for the poor; he dies while caring for indigent patients during the influenza epidemic. As Daughter does in *1919*, French encounters a politician—G. H. Barrow—who claims to support the working class. He seduces her as he has attempted to seduce Daughter. The difference is that Barrow, an awkward man who devotes much of his time to chasing young women, is successful with French; he impregnates her in Pittsburgh and offers to marry her, but she refuses after he declines to support Gus Moscowski, who is doing the publicity for striking steelworkers. Dos Passos suggests that Barrow’s attempted seductions of women succeed or fail depending on the women’s political views. Daughter does not care about the working class, so she despises Barrow, whereas French is a strong advocate of the working class, so she admires the man, sleeps with him, and considers marrying him—until he fails to support the Pittsburgh steelworkers and thus the cause that he claims to champion. When Mary castigates Barrow for selling out the strikers in favor of the steel barons, the superficial and ignorant Barrow mistakenly assumes that her anger is caused by menstruation (“the curse coming on” [890])—not by his refusal to help Moscowski and his fellow strikers.

French obtains a job as a reporter for the Pittsburgh *Times-Sentinel* and is fired after she refuses her boss’s order to portray the strikers as Bolshevik-led, greedy agitators who receive good pay but avariciously covet more. Dos Passos employs this incident to convey his belief that the media, whether in the person of Ted Healy (the newspaper’s editor) or J. Ward Moorehouse, manipulate the news so that the public cannot learn the truth about the ill treatment of the working class. The incident involving Healy might serve as Dos Passos’s veiled attack on the publisher William Randolph Hearst and on dishonest journalists who are more interested in selling newspapers and making profits than in the truth. The author also suggests that the media favor the wealthy and thus negatively portray the working

- heroines? What generalizations can you make regarding his characterization of women such as Eveline Hutchins, Emiscah Svenson, Maisie, Daughter, Margo Dowling, Gertrude Stamp, Della Matthews, Janey Williams, and Eleanor Stoddard? How do the men characterize the women, and how do the women describe, feel about, and treat each other?
3. Although it is generally acknowledged that Dos Passos was a fervent supporter of the working class when he wrote the trilogy, why does he characterize so many working-class characters as unreliable men with penchants for alcohol and prostitutes? Do such portrayals undercut his argument, or does the behavior of such characters indicate what happens to the psyche of men who are downtrodden after being subjugated by the wealthy?
 4. Linda W. Martin says that “*1919* is usually regarded as the most despairing of the three novels” (102) that make up the trilogy. When you compare the three novels in *U.S.A.*, does the middle work seem the most despairing and pessimistic? In what ways is it pessimistic? What causes the pessimism in this novel? In what ways are the other two more optimistic? Do you agree with Martin’s statement?
 5. Throughout the trilogy and in *Manhattan Transfer*, characters share the same situations and biographical backgrounds as Dos Passos, such as serving as an ambulance driver in Paris for the Norton-Harjes, going to Harvard, and having a father who is a prominent lawyer. Although it is plausible that Dos Passos is inevitably drawing on personal experience and experiences he knew well, are there other possible reasons why he endows his characters—even the shady ones—with facts from his own personal history? How do such facts help shape the narrative?
 6. Discuss the different narrative voices that Dos Passos uses. Sometimes the narrator is an objective, third-person omniscient narrator while at other times the narrator seems to borrow the slang and even pejorative vocabulary of his characters. How do you account for the narrative shifts, and how do they affect the narrative?
 7. Discuss the significance of the Camera Eye, Newsreels, and Biographies that Dos Passos intersperses within his narratives. Which have the greatest impact and why? Do they enhance the novel, or do they detract from the plot by calling attention to the artificial nature of the books?
 8. In the novels, the virtuous characters (such as Mac and Mary French) are disappointed again and again; although idealistic, they do not succeed. Meanwhile, unsavory characters (such as J. Ward Moorehouse, Dick Savage, and Eleanor Stoddard) thrive. What points could Dos Passos be making, then, about capitalism, socialism, and ethics?
 9. Discuss the theme of abortion in Dos Passos’s novels. What do the abortions indicate about the societal and economic pressures on women and about sexual double standards? Why do these women abort their babies or induce miscarriages? How does the author link abortion to socialism and capitalism?
 10. Several characters kill themselves for various reasons and take their lives indirectly, such as Daughter in *1919*, who demands that a drunken pilot take her up in a plane and perform stunts so that she can die. Is Dos Passos making any points about the pressures of a capitalist society, a nation divided between the rich and the poor, or the ennui of the wealthy? Do those who commit suicide fit certain patterns that you can identify and analyze?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Carr, Virginia Spencer. *Dos Passos: A Life*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2004.
- Clark, Michael. *Dos Passos’ Early Fiction, 1912–1938*. Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1987.
- Dos Passos, John. *Manhattan Transfer*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925.
- . *U.S.A.: 42nd Parallel, 1919, The Big Money*. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- Harding, Desmond. *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

- John Dos Passos: Life Stories, Books, and Links. Available online. URL: <http://www.todayinliterature.com/biography/john.dos.passos.asp>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Ludington, Townsend, ed. *Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*. Boston: Gambit, 1973.
- . *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*. 1980. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1998.
- Maine, Barry, ed. *Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.
- Martin, Linda W. *Dos Passos: Artist as American*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979.
- McGlamery, Tom. *Protest and the Body in Melville, Dos Passos, and Hurston*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Nanney, Lisa. *John Dos Passos*. New York: Twayne, 1998.
- Pizer, Donald. *Dos Passos' U.S.A.: A Critical Study*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988.

Eric Sterling



THEODORE DREISER (1871–1945)

To express what we see honestly and without subterfuge: this is morality as well as art.

(qtd. in Sloane 76)

Theodore Dreiser is widely considered one of the most important American writers in the naturalistic or realistic traditions (which emphasize detailed depictions of common daily life and which stress the influence of material reality on human behavior). He was born on August 27, 1871, in Terre Haute, Indiana. By this time his parents (John Paul Dreiser and Sarah Schänäb Dreiser) already had eight surviving children, and the family was not only large but poor. Their poverty resulted mainly from the physical and psychological difficulties of Dreiser's father, whose business and body had both been damaged in an 1869 fire that destroyed an uninsured mill he had owned and operated. John Paul Dreiser, a German immigrant who still often used his native language when speaking to his wife and children, was a strict Catholic, who sought to impose his will on his children, who grew to resent and resist his efforts at control. Dreiser's mother, on the other hand, was a warmer, more obviously affectionate parent, and the "emotional dynamic of the Dreiser home during Theodore's formative years comprised an ardent desire by the Dreiser children to remain within the family to profit from the nurturing love of their mother, matched by an equally compelling need to escape the authoritarian and restrictive moralism of their father" (Pizer 9). Both the negative and the positive influences of Theodore's childhood would greatly influence his later concerns as a writer.

In 1882 the family was saved from severe poverty by Dreiser's elder brother, Paul, who had changed his last name to *Dresser* and won financial success as a comedic singer. Between 1883 and 1887 the family lived in a variety of midwestern towns and cities, where they were usually poor and often isolated, living a kind of nomadic, underprivileged, outsider's existence that significantly shaped Dreiser's attitudes as well as his later literature. During these years Dreiser (who was never very physically impressive) became interested not only in books and in natural beauty but also in sex, and his response consisted of "an immense preoccupation mixed with painful anxiety over whether he was attractive enough to girls and whether he could adequately perform the sexual act. . . . Dreiser's belief in his possible sexual inadequacy, accompanied by a sense of guilt attached to sex, bred doubts and fears that [later] required a constant stream of new conquests to prove both his sexual prowess and the legitimacy of sexual freedom" (Pizer 11). When he eventually began writing novels, his books were considered shocking for their time because of the openness with which they depicted sexual motives and behavior.

For the time being, however, Dreiser had not yet found a real focus for his life. From 1887 to 1889 he was living in Chicago with other members of his family and was working various menial jobs when he encountered a former high school teacher

who thought highly of his potential and offered to pay his way to college. In 1889, therefore, he began attending Indiana University, but he felt intellectually unprepared (having finished only one year of high school) and socially ill at ease among the more privileged students he met, and so he soon dropped out. His later fictional focus on “the outsider seeking the rich plenty on the other side of the wall or window but uncertain of his ability to grasp it probably derives from his own first encounter with middle-class life” in college (Pizer 13). Even more disappointing than his failure at the university must have been the death of his beloved mother, who passed away on November 14, 1890. By this time he was back in Chicago, working in real estate and as a bill collector, but his life took a decisive turn in 1892 when he sought and won a job as a newspaper writer. Over the next few years he would move from one paper to another and from one city to the next (including Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and, finally, New York), writing hard news, soft features, and sometimes fiction masquerading as fact. He was a talented, prolific journalist and soon also won employment as an editor (1895–97) of his own magazine and as a contributor to various others. It was in 1899, however, that he first turned his attention seriously to writing fiction, beginning with a series of stories but soon trying his hand at a lengthy novel.

This book, titled *Sister Carrie* and finished early in 1900, marks a major turning point not only in Dreiser's life but in the history of American fiction. Influenced by the experiences of one of Dreiser's sisters, the novel was affected as well as by Dreiser's own years as a big-city reporter, by his reading of such realistic European novelists as Balzac, and by his familiarity with the theories of such writers as Charles Darwin and especially Herbert Spencer, who emphasized the idea of life as a continuous struggle for survival in a universe in which both random chance and mechanistic fate left few options for genuine freedom or ultimate human happiness. The world depicted in Dreiser's first novel, as in much of his subsequent writing, is bleak and unforgiving; success depends less on moral conduct (since no transcendent moral values

can exist in a materialistic cosmos) than on ambition, competition, accident, and the inexorable laws of brute matter. Dreiser describes the (largely urban) environments of his characters in relentless detail, since he believed that environment was at least as important as “character” in determining a person's fate, especially since human character was so much a product of one's social and physical circumstances. This book, clearly, was something new, and its main plot—in which a sexually adventurous woman succeeds financially while ultimately feeling unfulfilled in any deeper sense—was shocking enough even to some readers at the publishing firm that the company did little to promote the book when it was first printed. Dreiser had produced a novel that displeased many people who first read it (as he must have known it would), but it was a book that was not, at first, read by many.

Although he started working on a new novel (*Jennie Gerhardt*) in 1901, he now became increasingly despondent. His physical and mental health declined so much, in fact, that by 1903 he was nearly at the end of his financial rope when his brother Paul once again came to the rescue by arranging for him to be treated at a sanatorium, where Dreiser responded so quickly that by the end of the year he felt sufficiently recuperated to resume writing and editing. For the next five years he steadily climbed back to prominence in the field of publishing, and indeed in 1907 he arranged to have *Sister Carrie* reprinted. This new printing received good reviews, and Dreiser himself began to flourish financially. In 1911 *Jennie Gerhardt* finally appeared, and in 1912 *The Financier* (the first of three novels based on the life of Charles Yerkes) was published, as was yet another printing of *Sister Carrie*. The year 1914 saw the publication of *The Titan* (the second of the books based on the life of Yerkes), and in 1915 Dreiser published *The “Genius”*—a “barely disguised autobiography” that was “banned as obscene and blasphemous the following year by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice” (Sloane xii–xiii). From 1917 to 1923 his financial success declined, so that he was forced to live once more under financial stress; nevertheless, his books continued to appear, including

Free and Other Stories (short fiction; 1918); *Twelve Men* (biographical pieces; 1919); *The Hand of the Potter* (a tragedy about a pedophile; 1919); *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub* (philosophical essays; 1920); *A Book about Myself* (autobiography; 1921); and *The Color of a Great City* (portraits of urban existence; 1923).

It was in 1925, however, that Dreiser enjoyed his greatest financial and critical success as an author of fiction with the publication of a massive two-volume novel titled *An American Tragedy*. This book established Dreiser as a major American writer. Movie rights were sold; a stage version was produced in New York; and Dreiser became so wealthy that he was able to visit Europe for an extended period with Helen Richardson, the woman with whom he had begun living in 1919 (after separating in 1914 from Sara “Jug” Osborne White, whom he had married in 1898). Increasingly involved in left-wing politics, he visited the Soviet Union in 1927 at the invitation of the communist government, but despite his traveling he continued to publish prolifically. In 1926, for instance, he issued a collection of his poems titled *Moods: Cadenced and Declaimed* (which was reprinted and expanded in 1928); 1927 saw the publication of *Chains: Lesser Novels and Stories*; in that same year he also issued *Dreiser Looks at Russia*; in 1929 he published a two-volume “collection” titled *A Gallery of Women*. In 1930 he missed winning the Nobel Prize in literature by one vote, but Sinclair Lewis, who was chosen instead, said in his acceptance speech that Dreiser, “more than any other writer,” had “opened the way to honesty and passion in modern fiction” (qtd. in Sloane xiii). In 1931, certainly, Dreiser was famous enough to publish another volume of autobiography (*A History of Myself: Dawn*), describing his youth and adolescence, and in the same year he issued *Tragic America*, an indictment of the failures of American capitalism.

Throughout the 1930s, as the United States suffered during the Great Depression, Dreiser became increasingly active in left-wing political causes, even becoming more and more closely associated with the American Communist Party and an apologist for the Soviet Union. His interest in science

was also even stronger now than it had always been, as was his interest in philosophy, and he devoted much of his time as a writer to work on philosophical treatises he failed to publish in his lifetime. By the late 1930s and early 1940s he was also at work on a new novel (*The Bulwark*), but his only published book in 10 years was *America Is Worth Saving* (1941), which toed the Communist Party line concerning World War II—a line that would soon change abruptly when one dictator (the German Nazi, Hitler) attacked his fellow dictator (the Soviet Communist, Stalin), with whom Hitler had made an alliance of convenience two years before. Dreiser, however (despite the show trials and persecutions in the Soviet Union in the 1930s), remained a committed communist sympathizer to the end, and indeed in 1945 he actually joined the American Communist Party. This was the year after he had received the Award of Merit Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as the year after he finally married his long-time companion, Helen Richardson. By the end of 1945, however, he was dead of a heart attack suffered on December 28. Books, however, continued to appear: In 1946 his novel *The Bulwark* was published, and in 1947 the final volume in the fictional Yerkes trilogy (*The Stoic*) was issued. In the decades since Dreiser’s death, numerous other unpublished works have been printed, and the University of Pennsylvania Press has begun publishing a series of carefully edited versions of his major and minor texts.

***Sister Carrie* (1900)**

When Caroline Meeber, at age 18, leaves her home in Columbia City, Wisconsin, in search of a better, more prosperous life in Chicago, she meets a dashing salesman named Charles Drouet, who immediately takes an interest in her and who later offers to help her when, after she works a series of menial, low-paying jobs, she suddenly finds herself unemployed as a result of sickness. After Carrie becomes Drouet’s mistress, she meets his prosperous friend George Hurstwood; he, although married

and a father, eventually becomes so obsessed with Carrie that he reluctantly steals money from his employer's safe and persuades Carrie to run away with him to start a new life in New York, where at first the couple prosper and where Carrie becomes increasingly involved not only in high society but also in the theater thanks to her innate talent as an actress. However, as Carrie's career on stage thrives, George, through abrupt financial reversals, descends into poverty and destitution; when Carrie, now a major figure on the stage, essentially ignores George when he goes to her to beg for help, he eventually decides to kill himself. Although Carrie has now achieved much greater material success than either Drouet or Hurstwood, at the end of the novel she is not especially happy or fulfilled.

Sister Carrie was not only Dreiser's first important and extended work of fiction, but it is also one of his most typical pieces of writing and (along with *An American Tragedy*) is still the text on which his reputation mainly depends today. The book exemplifies many of his most characteristic themes and stylistic traits, and the patterns of plot and phrasing it establishes were repeated often in his later writings. Carrie's movement from a small town in Wisconsin to the huge and growing metropolis of Chicago, for instance, typifies the kind of migration to urban areas that was an increasingly common fact of life in the era in which Dreiser lived and wrote, and indeed Dreiser is important in part because of the highly detailed descriptions he provides of city life during this significant period of American history. His works are often set in large cities, and in *Sister Carrie* he depicts the two largest of his era (Chicago and New York) and draws on his own intimate familiarity with both places. Carrie's experiences, in fact, often reflect his own, especially in her movement from small-town obscurity to big-city prominence, but the experiences of George Hurstwood (especially his descent from material prosperity to grinding poverty) are also experiences with which Dreiser himself, with his impoverished background, could sympathize (Matthiessen 173). In fact, after the publication of *Sister Carrie* Dreiser personally suffered many of the same kinds of losses Hurstwood experienced in

the novel, so that the book becomes a kind of odd prophecy of his own personal fate.

In addition to this novel's emphasis on urban life, many other aspects of *Sister Carrie* make the book typical of Dreiser's writings. Its focus on the struggle for material success, for instance, is a theme that recurs again and again in Dreiser's works; the American economy at the time he wrote was characterized by enormous social mobility, and, as the contrasting fates of Hurstwood and Carrie show, one person could move down the social ladder just as quickly and abruptly as another person could move up the ladder. Both Carrie and Hurstwood live, for a time, in poverty, and this emphasis on the grim underside of American life is another characteristic feature of Dreiser's works. Dreiser knew from personal experience what it was like to do menial, degrading labor for subsistence-level wages, and part of the purpose of his fiction is to describe the dark realities of American capitalism, a system (he believed) in which people are often treated as commodities and in which blind economic ambition, gnawing fear of unemployment and hunger, and the competitive struggle for survival play more important roles than any loftier spiritual motives. All these nearly Darwinian social pressures can be seen operating in *Sister Carrie*, which depicts a kind of existence involving the survival of the fittest and which also displays a kind of life in which mere chance is quite important (Elias 150).

It is merely by chance, for instance, that Carrie meets Charles Drouet, and it is merely by chance again that she discovers the talent for acting that will lead her to such eventual social prominence. Similarly, it is merely by chance that Hurstwood ultimately steals the money from his employer's safe: He had been tempted to steal it (after finding the safe unlocked), but as he attempts to put the money away (having wrestled with his conscience and decided that theft would be wrong), he accidentally locks the safe and then feels that he now has no choice but to steal after all. (A similar kind of "accidental crime" is at the heart of Dreiser's other major novel, *An American Tragedy*.) Dreiser considered the universe a puzzling, inscrutable thing guided by no larger discernible purpose or

plan; any laws that controlled it were physical or mechanical rather than spiritual or moral. Who, at the beginning of this book, could have predicted Carrie's eventual fantastic success? Who could have foreseen the eventual degradation of Hurstwood? Life in Dreiser's fiction is unpredictable because life at large (Dreiser believed) is unpredictable as well. Much depends on luck (whether good or bad) and on the social circumstances in which one happens to find oneself. If Carrie had not had the good fortune to be good-looking, she might never have attracted Drouet; if she had not happened to meet Drouet on a downtown Chicago street (after not having seen him for weeks after their first chance encounter on a train), the ensuing chain of events might never have occurred. If Hurstwood had not happened to lose his fortune in one of the periodic business collapses to which American capitalism is prone, he might have ended the novel as a successful man rather than as a poverty-stricken suicide. Success or failure depends greatly on accident, and in America success and failure are largely judged in monetary and material terms. If Carrie succeeds, in part, through means society claims to disdain (by becoming the mistress of one man and then by absconding with that man's friend, who has become a thief after abandoning his wife and children), who, Dreiser asks, is really in a position to judge or condemn her? A passage near the end of the novel sums up the narrator's attitudes:

Oh, the tangle of human life! How dimly as yet we see. Here was Carrie, in the beginning poor, unsophisticated, emotional; responding with desire to everything most lovely in life, yet finding herself turned as by a wall. Laws to say: "Be allured, if you will, by everything lovely, but draw not nigh unless by righteousness." Convention to say: "You shall not better your situation save by honest labour." If honest labour be unremunerative and difficult to endure; if it be the long, long road which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart; if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the

first stone? Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason. (368)

This paragraph is typical of the book (and of Dreiser's larger thinking) in many ways. It shows, for instance, his standard reliance on an omniscient narrator, who is frequently willing to reflect philosophically on the events he describes (Sloane 70). It shows, as well, Dreiser's common emphasis on the complexities of human existence and on the inadequacy of conventional moral, legal, or religious codes, which merely prescribe, proscribe, and condemn (Elias 157). It shows, moreover, Dreiser's own unwillingness to censure people in difficult circumstances who face hard or narrow choices or no choices at all, and it also shows his tendency to react with a kind of sympathy and pity for them that they rarely found in society at large (Elias 141–142). In addition, the passage implies Dreiser's willingness to criticize social conventions and institutions and his awareness of the desire for beauty as a major motive of human conduct. The passage further exemplifies his typical emphasis on illicit sex ("the despised path"), especially as a possible means to personal success, particularly in a society in which possessing money is at least as important as practicing private morality (Elias 144, 147, 169). Stylistically, too, the passage is revealing. The third quoted sentence, for example, displays the plain, straightforward phrasing of which Dreiser was often capable and that often shows him at his best. It must be admitted, however, that this passage also displays some of the "pompous language" that David E. E. Sloane says often "marks some of the philosophical discourses in *Sister Carrie*" (62)—language that Sloane sees as "representative of a midwesterner [*sic*] forcing higher diction" (64). In Dreiser's defense, though, it can be noted that the passage skillfully employs biblical allusions, echoing both the Old Testament ("in the beginning") and the New ("cast the first stone"), and that such allusions are highly appropriate in a passage that challenges some aspects of conventional religious thinking and proposes instead a more complex

moral response. The second allusion, in particular, by reminding us of Jesus' words concerning a woman accused of prostitution (John 8:7), also exemplifies Dreiser's tendency, when evoking religion, to stress the spirit rather than the letter of the law (West 137). In all these ways, then, this one brief paragraph from *Sister Carrie* illustrates many significant aspects of the novel as a whole.

In some ways, however, the quoted passage is not particularly representative. It lacks, for instance, the emphasis on material facts and abundant physical detail that is so characteristic of Dreiser's usual style; nor does it describe the hustle and bustle of city life he was so often accustomed to presenting (Elias 147–48). The passage does, though, reveal his fondness for repetition (Elias 151), whether the repetition involved events, images, symbols, or, in this case, phrasing (as in the repeated “if” clauses or the reiterated phrase “Not evil”). Missing from the passage, though, is his frequent emphasis on physical settings, and also missing is his habitual stress on dialogue and colloquial midwestern speech. Nevertheless, in one respect the quoted passage is quite highly significant, for it helps explain the uproar and scandal associated with the novel from the moment it was first published. The passage reveals, after all, that “Carrie not only escaped punishment” for her irregular conduct (as would not have happened in earlier books about such a woman) and that “Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful: and this was the crux of his defiance of late nineteenth-century conventionality” (Matthiessen 170). Far more than Dreiser's skill in writing (or his alleged lack thereof), it was the events of the novel, and the narrator's attitudes toward those events, that made *Sister Carrie* an unusual and even pathbreaking work in American literature when it first appeared at the dawn of the 20th century.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this novel, in its plot, main characters, setting, and style, with Henry James's novels *The Portrait of a Lady* or *Daisy Miller*. How, in particular, do James's novels and Dreiser's deal with matters of social class?
2. Compare and contrast this novel, in its plot, main characters, setting, and style, with ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How, in particular, does racial identity affect the fate of each main character?
3. Choose one brief section of this book (a paragraph or two) and discuss all the ways in which that section is typical of Dreiser's general approach to writing. In particular, discuss the ways in which the passage is either effective, ineffective, or some combination of both.
4. Study the positions of women in Dreiser's era and discuss the ways this novel reflects the lives of women at that time, particularly the options open to them. How would Carrie's life have been different if she had lived, say, in the 1960s?
5. Read a biography of Dreiser and discuss the ways this novel reflects the details of his own life. In what ways, and for what reasons, could Dreiser have sympathized and even identified with Carrie?

“Old Rogaum and His Theresa” (1901, 1918)

Rogaum (first name not given) is a butcher who lives in New York's Bleeker Street with his wife and his children, including his 18-year-old daughter, Theresa, who has begun to disobey her father's curfews in order to spend more time out on the streets in the company of her friends, especially “Connie” Almering, a handsome, flirtatious “tough” who encourages her to defy her father and who is distrusted by Officers Maguire and Delahanty, the local cops on the beat. One night, having long threatened to do so, Rogaum finally locks Theresa out of the house to teach her a lesson, but he soon learns a lesson of his own when she disappears with Connie and when Rogaum, in his frantic efforts to find her, stumbles across the writhing body of a young prostitute who has just attempted suicide. Eventually the police track down Theresa and return her to her desperate parents, but not before giving Connie a piece of their minds and Rogaum a warning about the dangers of locking young daughters out of doors at night in a big city.

This story displays many traits a reader would expect of Dreiser. It is set in a large city; the physi-

cal details of that setting are thoroughly described; and the story is populated by characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds (German, Irish, French, etc.), thereby reflecting the status of the United States as a multicultural melting pot. Ethnic dialects are heavily (perhaps too heavily) stressed, as is the kind of street lingo (especially used by Connie) that was increasingly characteristic of the colloquial speech of Dreiser's day. Although such speech can now seem dated and almost unintentionally funny, Dreiser would have justified its use because he was interested in presenting facts and details of the actual life of his time. In his references to streetcars and police phones, for instance, we sense the growing modernization and urbanization of American life in Dreiser's era; in his depiction of the nearly dead prostitute and the politically protected brothel we have evidence of what the story itself calls "the commercialized vice of the city" (219). Dreiser was always interested in the operations of power of all sorts and at all levels, and in this case we sense his view that the commercialism and materialism at the heart of American society could corrupt everything, including sex.

While Dreiser is typically interested, however, in presenting a credible picture of life as it was lived in a specific time and place, he is also usually interested in dealing with more basic drives and conduct. Those include (in this story) "the attractions of sex, the tensions of family loyalty, the lure of the city, and the yearning for beauty" (Elias 169). Theresa is torn between her dwindling impulse to obey her father and her ever-growing instinct to enjoy the sexual excitement of Connie's company; meanwhile, Connie and the elderly Rogaum embody the age-old battle between fathers and suitors, between the old and the young, between one male and another. On one level the characters represent life as it was lived in metropolitan New York in the early decades of the 20th century; on another level they simply act out desires and fears that are deeply rooted in the physical and psychological nature of human beings from time immemorial. The violence, the sex, and the contest of wills Dreiser depicts in this story are themes (he believed) that would never become irrelevant. Young people would always

rebel against the authority of elders they considered oppressive, because they had always done so (certainly Dreiser himself had rebelled); and parents (especially fathers) would always try to assert their control over the lives of their children because it was their nature to do so (as Dreiser's own father had demonstrated). The story thus deals with age-old themes as well as with aspects of life that must have seemed, in Dreiser's day, up to the minute, such as the way the young folk in this story are becoming generically "American" despite their diverse ethnic backgrounds. Arguably the story is flawed by excessive dialect, implausible diction (Theresa was "wont to betake her way upward" [202]), unnecessary verbiage ("I vill lock you oudt," he declared, in strongly accented English" [203]), and intrusive, heavy-handed philosophizing ("Now, strangely, a new element, not heretofore apparent in her nature but nevertheless wholly there, was called into life, springing in action as Diana, full formed" [210]). These alleged flaws, however, are as common in Dreiser's fiction as his various strengths, and, in that respect, this story is as typical an example of his work as one could hope to find.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Defend or attack the artistic success of this work. Pay special attention to style, dialect, and dialogue. Can you point to particularly successful and/or unsuccessful passages?
2. Compare and contrast the depiction of family life (especially the conflict between generations) in this story and in *SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S "Mother."* In particular, what are the functions of the fathers in both tales?
3. In her attitude toward her father, how does Theresa resemble (but also differ from) the boy in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"? How do the fathers in the two works differ from and/or resemble each other?

The "Genius" (1915)

As Eugene Witla, the son of a salesman, grows up in Alexandria, Illinois, at the end of the 19th century,

his increasing attraction to beauty leads him to a career in Chicago as a newspaper illustrator, while his increasing interest in sex leads him to involvement with one woman after another. Although he eventually marries an attractive young woman named Angela Blue, for whom he had felt a strong initial infatuation, his liaisons with other women continue as his career (now centered in New York) waxes, wanes, then waxes again. Eventually he becomes obsessed with Suzanne Dale, the beautiful and much younger daughter of a woman who is closely associated with his powerful employer; however, when Suzanne's mother becomes aware of Eugene's designs on her daughter, she uses her friendship with his employer to put Eugene's job at risk, but Witla refuses his employer's ultimatum, loses his job, breaks with his wife, soon becomes a widower, and ultimately returns to his original devotion to art.

This novel, which is obviously and highly autobiographical, caused a furor when it was first published in 1915. By the following summer the book's publisher was threatened with legal action by a New York morals group, and although the threat initially succeeded in having the book withdrawn from sale, Dreiser won the vocal support of many influential intellectuals. Some of these figures (such as H. L. Mencken) doubted the artistic value of the work, but they nevertheless championed it because of their support of free speech. Once again, then, Dreiser had made a name for himself as much for the content of a novel as for any artistic skill it possessed; he had caused another scandal, this time by writing a book that dealt so relentlessly with sex.

Aside from its blatantly erotic emphasis, however, the book is also typical of Dreiser in numerous other ways. The profession of Eugene's father, for instance, implies the industrial, commercial concerns usually found in Dreiser's fictions; his books reflect the transformation, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, from a rural America dependent on farming to an urban America dependent on trade and industry. The Midwest setting is also typical, as is Eugene's movement first to Chicago and then to New York (a pattern also found in *Sister Car-*

rie, as well as in Dreiser's own life). In describing the energy of Chicago, Dreiser paints his usual picture of a dynamic metropolis, but it is not long before Eugene also learns (in standard Dreiserian fashion) the importance of money in such a setting and the risks of being poor. This emphasis on the practical aspects of the struggle for survival is also typical of Dreiser, while Eugene's quick movement through a series of menial jobs not only reflects aspects of Dreiser's own early existence but also illustrates his usual depiction of the less glamorous aspects of everyday work in a competitive, capitalist America. Eugene's innate talent as an artist and his attraction toward beauty remind us of the theatrically gifted title character of *Sister Carrie*, while his philosophical conversations with Angela about their contrasting goals in life remind us how important ideas often are in Dreiser's fiction. When Eugene moves to New York, we see once more how, in Dreiser's writings, a huge city can seem both beautiful and intimidating, and we also see again how skillful Dreiser is in depicting the actual facts of American life in the era in which he lived, especially in his focus on New York's immigrants and its industrial economy. Eugene, meanwhile, is typical of Dreiser's main characters in his willingness to challenge traditional standards of conduct, especially where sexuality is concerned. Furthermore, Eugene also resembles Dreiser himself in his explicit interest in the Darwinian ideas of Herbert Spencer, his skepticism about the ultimate meaning of human existence, and his doubts about the institution of marriage.

Eugene's experiences as a painter in New York reflect Dreiser's own experiences as a writer in the same city: Just as Dreiser's writings caused controversy but earned him a decent living, the same is true of Eugene's paintings, and just as Dreiser's writings were often criticized for their grim portrayals of life in large cities, so the same thing happens with Eugene's art. Moreover, just as Dreiser himself suffered from psychological depression and financial failure after achieving a measure of success, so does Eugene after he returns from a trip to Europe. Here as elsewhere, then, Dreiser makes it clear that

economic movement in America is very definitely a two-way street: A person can be financially successful one moment and in financial peril the next. Life in modern capitalist societies is uncertain and full of potential pitfalls; relations with other people tend to be unstable; humans are essentially isolated and alone; and their prospects for real and enduring happiness are governed far more by chance than by choice. Eugene, as do most people, acts according to certain inner compulsions he seems powerless to comprehend or control, and in acting on his drives he is willing (unlike many people) to transgress the dictates of conventional social morality. Personal freedom is a goal prized by many of Dreiser's main characters, but these characters are embedded in a complex web of social and economic relations that make it difficult for them to enjoy the kind of liberty they seek and prize. Eugene (as does Dreiser himself) seems to consider marriage in particular a kind of snare—an artificial attempt to impose limits on the sexual impulses that are among the most compelling forces of human (especially male) nature. In his final pursuit of Suzanne, Eugene learns once more (as do so many of Dreiser's other characters) that economic success and social acceptance can vanish in a flash, leaving a person, quite suddenly, both financially and emotionally needy. At the end of the novel, when Eugene sees Suzanne years after their whirlwind affair, they pass without speaking—a final example of Dreiser's typical emphasis on man's essential loneliness and alienation in a universe that is fundamentally indifferent to human happiness. No simplistic or conventional philosophy (and certainly not the Christian Science espoused by Eugene's sister as the novel closes) can make sense of the complexity and the sadness of much of human life. Only an artist like Eugene or like Dreiser, who sticks close to the facts of actual experience, can even hope to have any chance of depicting life with any kind of accuracy and honesty. This, at least, is how Dreiser would justify his own ambitions as a writer and his own achievement in this particular novel. It is also how Randolph Bourne, one of Dreiser's contemporaries, justified the book when he memorably wrote in an early review that

Mr. Dreiser compels and convinces almost entirely in spite of his method. He has no distinction of style. His conversation is negligible, and at times he falls even below the level of cheapness. He is portentously wordy. He has no humor. And yet one reads him. In the 736 pages, one skips only the business and social details—which are too minute to be even good photography. One reads him because he never forgets that he is talking about life as it is lived, and because he takes it seriously. . . . He is always saved by a plodding sincerity. His people are rarely desirable or interesting. Yet they live and you cannot escape them. (245)

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the depiction of personal ambition and of American society in this novel and in F. SCOTT FITZGERALD's *The Great Gatsby*. Which novel is more effective in characterization and style, and why?
2. To what degree and in what ways is Eugene a sympathetic character? Choose a specific section of the novel and discuss how and why Eugene is depicted unfavorably or favorably there.
3. Study the life of Dreiser and discuss the ways this novel reflects that life, particularly in its treatment of women. Compare and contrast the depiction of women in this book with their depictions in other works by Dreiser.
4. Compare and contrast the depiction of marriage in this novel and in ERNEST HEMINGWAY's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." Does either work suggest a plausible alternative to marriage? What kinds of changes were occurring in the institution of marriage at the time Dreiser's novel was written?
5. Study the philosophy of Herbert Spencer (whose thinking greatly influenced Dreiser) and discuss its relevance to the themes of this novel. Choose three main ideas of Spencer and, focusing on a particular section of the novel, explain how and why they relate to Dreiser's concerns in this book.

“The Second Choice” (1918)

Shirley (last name not given) is a young woman who at first is basically content not only with her routine lower-middle-class life but also with the dull but devoted man (Barton Williams) who hopes to marry her. But then she meets Arthur Bristow, an attractive, exciting, debonair, chatty, and well-traveled businessman who introduces some excitement and romance into her otherwise humdrum existence. Shirley, smitten with Arthur, distances herself from Barton, but when Arthur moves away and indicates that he has no plans for a long-term relationship, Shirley reluctantly resigns herself to her fate: She prepares for a drab life as the likely wife of the ever-loyal but unexciting Barton.

This story opens abruptly and effectively with a letter from Arthur to Shirley in which he immediately adopts a patronizing, controlling tone as he gives her the brush-off and denies her request that he return the letters she had written to him. By the end of the second sentence he is already mentioning his “travels” (135), thus emphasizing, by contrast, Shirley’s sense of confinement, and by the middle of the second paragraph he is referring to the “great big skyscraper” visible outside his window in distant Pittsburgh, thus emphasizing (as usual) Dreiser’s characteristic themes of American urbanization, industrial growth, and commercial expansion. In this story as elsewhere in his writings, Dreiser skillfully catches the tone and rhythms of the colloquial speech of his day (particularly when the self-consciously witty Arthur is speaking), just as he also adopts, as sometimes elsewhere, an objective, distanced tone of his own in the narration. However, no philosophical disquisitions interrupt the flow of this story, as they sometimes do in Dreiser’s other works; nor does Dreiser interject his own voice conspicuously into the telling of the tale. Instead, we see everything from Shirley’s rather desperate and increasingly frustrated point of view, and Dreiser does a skillful job of conveying indirectly Shirley’s ways of thinking, feeling, and speaking.

As in many of Dreiser’s other writings, key words are repeated here to striking effect (in this case, the recurring word *dull* adds to our sense of the literal monotony of Shirley’s existence), and although the

story ends by depicting Shirley surrounded by family and assuming her eventual marriage to Barton, it nonetheless ironically conveys her profound sense of loneliness, disappointment, failure, and defeated desire—themes all quite common in Dreiser’s writings. Despite (or rather, because of) the fact that she is left with the somewhat fawning Barton, Shirley feels like a failure (another standard motif in Dreiser’s works), and the title of the story subtly reminds us that in Dreiser’s universe very few characters have any real kind of choice, since so much depends on fate, chance, and circumstance. Characters in Dreiser often strive to “succeed” in some worldly or material sense, and they sometimes do prosper in these terms for a brief period. Usually, however, they end feeling failed and frustrated, and Shirley is no exception. Like many of Dreiser’s other characters, she is driven at least in part by a real yearning for beauty (however shallow that yearning sometimes seems), and although she seems in part the focus of some understated mockery, in other respects she seems both sympathetic and even a bit pathetic. In this story as in other works Dreiser (in the words of Claude M. Simpson, Jr.) provides “a documentation of the life of instinct and emotion” (qtd. in Elias 150); Shirley’s life is dominated by her feelings more than her intellect, and, in describing her, Dreiser displays his characteristic precision in describing reality, the mind, and the emotions. All in all, the story seems carefully plotted, skillfully written, and memorable in final effect.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with Dreiser’s “Old Rogaum and His Theresa,” paying particular attention to characterization, dialogue, and style. Which story do you find more effective, and why? In particular, pay attention to the ways the characters speak.
2. Compare and contrast this story with EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’s poem “Euros Turannos,” which also deals with an erotically frustrated woman. How are the works similar and different in style, point of view, and tone? Which of the two women is more sympathetic, and why?

3. At the end of Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*, the title character has apparently achieved success, but at the end of this story the main character apparently has failed. On a deeper level, however, how are their experiences similar?
4. Compare and contrast Shirley to the title character of T. S. ELIOT's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." How are the characters similar in their desires and final fates, but how do they also differ thanks (in part) to their different genders and social circumstances?
5. Compare and contrast the yearnings and disappointments of Shirley with those of the main character of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In particular, discuss the final fates of the two characters.

***An American Tragedy* (1925)**

Clyde Griffiths, whose parents are missionaries in Kansas City, works there when he is an adolescent in a large hotel, where he is exposed to the high life of money and power and where he also meets a group of friends with whom, while driving home after a party one night, he is involved first in a hit-and-run accident and then in a serious wreck as the group try to elude police. Clyde, having escaped both injury and arrest, stows away on a train and eventually winds up in Chicago, where he happens to meet a rich uncle, who offers him a job in New York State—a job that puts Clyde in contact with Roberta Alden, a fellow worker, with whom he begins a sexual relationship, although Clyde is far more interested in the rich and beautiful Sondra Finchley, who seems to promise him entry into a world of wealth and influence. However, when Roberta announces that she is pregnant and expects Clyde to marry her, he concocts a plan to get rid of her through an apparently accidental drowning—a plan he eventually rejects, only to have it come to pass, ironically, through a real accident that leads eventually to his own execution for intentional murder.

An American Tragedy is often considered Dreiser's best novel; certainly it was his most success-

ful, and clearly it employs many of his most typical themes and stylistic techniques. The emphasis on Clyde's early poverty, for instance, is a standard feature of Dreiser's fiction, as are the initial midwestern setting and Clyde's eventual migration to New York (although here the final setting is not New York City but upstate locales). Clyde, as do many of Dreiser's central characters, starts out near the bottom of the social ladder but, through a combination of hard work and good luck, begins his ascent to prominence and "success." Indeed, the struggle for success is one of the most common of Dreiser's themes, and the same is true of Dreiser's typical focus on a young person's initiation into big-city life—an initiation that almost always involves temptations of one sort or another. It is hardly a coincidence that Clyde's departure from Kansas City involves both an automobile and a train, since both forms of transportation were symbols of the new industrial economy that was rapidly reshaping American society during (and even before) Dreiser's lifetime. Nor is it a coincidence that Clyde's first stop after he leaves his hometown is Chicago, the great midwestern metropolis that often serves, in Dreiser's fiction, as the emblem of American urbanization and as the Mecca to which countless people from all over the region (and indeed all over the world) were being drawn in hopes of better lives through better incomes and greater freedom. Often these hopes were disappointed, but Clyde, through the kind of lucky accident that is often a feature of Dreiser's fiction (and that Dreiser considered a common feature of life itself), happens to meet a rich relative who gives the youth access to a world of even greater opportunity and even greater temptation.

Clyde's journey to New York symbolizes the kind of literal and figurative mobility that was increasingly common in Dreiser's world and that is also a standard feature of Dreiser's novels. Clyde moves not only horizontally (from the Midwest to the even more powerful East) but also vertically (from menial jobs to a supervisory position and then to the possibility of real wealth and power). Both kinds of movement are common in Dreiser's books, but those books also inevitably reveal that

what goes up may also come down. Before Clyde falls, however, we see him both as seducer and as seduced, and indeed seduction is another of the most common motifs in Dreiser's fiction (Elias 147). Clyde, motivated mainly by sexual appetite (one more predictable feature of Dreiser's writings because, according to Dreiser, it was a driving force in human life), sets his sights on Roberta Alden, but his willingness to engage in sex without commitment reflects not only Dreiser's own lifestyle but also the kind of erotic liberty that was increasingly common in American society and that many readers found most disturbing in Dreiser's writings. Clyde, however, not only seduces Roberta but is himself seduced by the prospect of possessing beauty, wealth, and influence through a possible relationship with Sondra Finchley. Here as in much of Dreiser's work, a character (as does much of society at large) defines success in terms of worldly prosperity rather than in terms of "moral growth, self-discovery, and awareness" (Elias 153).

Clyde's determination to avoid a forced marriage to Roberta reflects the usual tendency, in Dreiser's novels, for many characters to regard marriage as confining and bothersome. Meanwhile, Clyde's willingness, first, to seek an abortion-inducing drug, and then, second, to force Roberta to seek an abortion-providing doctor (who refuses to help them) is revealing in itself. Such behavior by Clyde exemplifies Dreiser's grim and unflinching realism in depicting life as it was actually lived in his time, when scientific and medical advances made such "solutions" more feasible than they might have seemed a century or two before. In typical Dreiserian fashion, it is only by chance or accident that Clyde stumbles across a desperate escape from his dilemma: He happens to read a newspaper article about two people who died in an accident while boating, and so he himself begins to concoct an "accidental" drowning for Roberta. To him, her pregnancy (and indeed her existence) now seems mainly a physical inconvenience to be solved in a purely mechanical fashion; in his Darwinian struggle for survival and success, she has become an impediment that needs to be removed. He therefore drives her to a distant resort, takes her

out onto the lake in a small boat, and contemplates killing her. In the end he cannot bring himself to do it, but when she, sensing that he is disturbed by something, tries to touch him, he impulsively recoils and his camera accidentally hits her. Rising to help her and to say he is sorry, he unintentionally tips the boat; both lose their balance; both fall into the water; Roberta is struck on the head by the boat; and, as she calls for help, confused thoughts race through Clyde's tortured mind:

"But this—this—is not this that which you have been thinking and wishing for this while—you in your great need? And behold! For despite your fear, your cowardice, this—this—has been done for you. An accident—an accident—an unintentional blow on your part is now saving you the labor of what you sought, and yet did not have the courage to do! But will you now, and when you need not, since it is an accident, by going to her rescue, once more plunge yourself in the horror of that defeat and failure which has so tortured you and from which this now releases you? You might save her. But again you might not! For see how she strikes about. She is stunned. She herself is unable to save herself and by her erratic terror, if you draw near her now, may bring about your own death also. But you desire to live! And her living will make your life not worth while from now on. Rest but a moment—a fraction of a minute! Wait—wait—ignore the pity of that appeal. And then—then—But there! Behold. It is over. She is sinking now. You will never, never see her alive any more—ever. And there is your own hat upon the water—as you wished. And upon the boat, clinging to that rowlock a veil belonging to her. Leave it. Will it not show that this was an accident?" (531–532)

It would be hard to imagine a scene more typical of Dreiser or more characteristic of his view of the way the universe operates. In the end, Clyde's ambiguous intentions count for little; chance reigns supreme; and, just as in *Sister Carrie* George Hurstwood thinks about stealing, decides not to,

but then does so after he accidentally locks money outside a safe, so in this book Clyde plans to kill, decides not to, and then witnesses his plan succeed almost in spite of himself. In a reasonable universe—in a universe that made moral and logical sense—events like these could not happen, but that is not the kind of universe Dreiser thought existed. Just as Clyde began his path to success through an accidental encounter with a rich uncle, so he begins his path to execution through the accidental tipping of a boat. In Dreiser's world, nothing is stable for long, and luck can be both good and bad.

The paragraph just quoted is also worth discussing for its stylistic features. The prose is more dramatic and compelling than much of Dreiser's writing, which can often be dry, clinically factual, and crammed with excessive detail. Here, though, the detail is effectively mental and emotional: Dreiser is not describing the appearance of a room or the exterior of a building but the second-by-second evolution of a person thinking and feeling under intense strain and pressure. The passage thus illustrates what has been called Dreiser's "exactitude in the use of . . . psychological details" (Elias 157), and it also illustrates his frequent emphasis on repetition (particularly in the simple but emphatic word *this*) as well as his admiration for a style that could be brusque, raw, powerful, and unadorned. Sometimes the phrasing here, as often in Dreiser, seems mannered or hackneyed ("And behold!"), but for the most part it is vivid, gripping, and full of irony, as in Clyde's legitimate fear that if he tries to save Roberta, they both may die. Indeed, from this point on, the novel spirals ever-downward into ever-darkening irony. Irony upon irony: That is life as Dreiser often saw it. Roberta's body is discovered; papers in her room connect her to Clyde; her imploring letters to Clyde—about the baby and marriage—are found; and Clyde is arrested and charged with deliberate murder. The wealthy, influential friends, whom Clyde had sought to impress, quickly distance themselves from him, and he is convicted of a death he wanted but did not want, a death he caused but did not cause.

Critical and scholarly response to *An American Tragedy* has been extensive and varied. A number of scholars have focused, for instance, on "the extent

of Dreiser's dependence on court records" of the trial and conviction of Chester Gillette, whose killing of Grace Brown in 1906 provided the model for the basic plot of Dreiser's novel (Elias 152–153, 174–175). Dreiser drew extensively on newspaper accounts of the trial; sometimes the parallels between the phrasing of those accounts and the phrasing in his book are almost exact. Nevertheless, the consensus of opinion is that Dreiser heightened and transformed the basic facts of the Gillette trial. H. L. Mencken, for instance, in his introduction to a 1948 edition of the novel, argued that the concluding sections of the book, including the trial scenes, "have in them all the plausibility that made *Sister Carrie* a memorable event in American letters. To be sure, they stick close to the record—but surely not over-close. It is Dreiser who is telling the story, not some commonplace reporter. [The novel] offers a picture of profound tragedy seen through a suitable melancholy temperament. . . . It is not only a minutely detailed picture of one unhappy young man's life; it is a commentary upon human life in general" (11). Indeed, scholars have also studied the ways Dreiser worked many details from his own youth into the book, and, according to Mencken, the novel reflects Dreiser's own outlook on life at the time—an outlook that saw existence as "predominantly hopeless and meaningless" (12).

In addition to discussing the roots of the book in "real life" (whether the life of Gillette, Dreiser, or American society in general), scholars have discussed its themes, structure, and techniques as well as its artistic merit. They have studied, for instance, its use of wordplay and parallels (including parallel characters and scenes) and especially have debated whether or not its prose is successful (Elias 154). Critics have also discussed the relation of Dreiser's novel to past works (such as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, or T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) and to the modern novels that followed it, and they have commented on the two filmed versions the book inspired (Elias 155; West 140–141, 147–148, 151–152). Commentators have also discussed the way Clyde's attitudes and responses were shaped by the society in which he was raised as well as the way his behavior reflects

7. Both *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* have been made into films. Compare and contrast one of the books with its film adaptation(s), particularly in terms of storytelling technique and methods of characterization.
8. Explore the meaning of the term *naturalism* in literature and discuss the ways in which Dreiser is and is not a “naturalist.” Point to a specific passage in one of his works and describe in detail how it is influenced by naturalism.
9. Compare and contrast the theme, style, and main characters of *Sister Carrie* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. In particular, discuss the conclusions of these two works and the ultimate fates of the two main characters. What do the novels imply about the lives of women during their authors’ eras?
10. Track down H. L. Mencken’s various writings on Dreiser and discuss the reasons why Mencken both championed Dreiser and sometimes criticized his writings. Which author was himself the better stylist? Compare and contrast passages from their works to substantiate your claims.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bourne, Randolph. “Desire as Hero.” *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, edited by Donald Pizer, 243–246. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *An American Tragedy*. Introduction by H. L. Mencken. Cleveland, Ohio: World, 1948.
- . *Free and Other Stories*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918.
- . *Sister Carrie*. Edited by Donald Pizer. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Elias, Robert H. “Theodore Dreiser.” *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 123–179. New York: Norton, 1973.
- The International Theodore Dreiser Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.uncwil.edu/dreiser>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Matthiessen, F. O. “A Picture of Conditions.” In *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, edited by Donald Pizer, 169–185. Boston: Hall, 1981.
- Pizer, Donald E. *Theodore Dreiser*. Literary Masters Series. Detroit: Gale, 2000.
- Sloane, David E. E. *Sister Carrie: Theodore Dreiser’s Sociological Tragedy*. New York: Twayne, 1992.
- West, James L. W., III. “Theodore Dreiser.” In *Sixteen Modern American Authors*. Vol. 2, *A Survey of Research and Criticism since 1972*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 120–153. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990.

Robert C. Evans



W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963)

The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.

(“Of the Dawn of Freedom”)

William Edward Burghardt DuBois, one of the most important African-American writers and political figures, was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to Alfred DuBois and Mary Silvina Burghardt. The couple had married in 1867 despite opposition from Mary’s family, and, when Alfred shortly relocated to Connecticut, Mary declined his invitation to follow him there. Alfred stayed apart from his wife and child and in fact may have passed away in 1870; in any case, young William was raised mainly by his mother (who was employed to do housework) and never really knew his father. Nevertheless, he thrived in elementary school and enjoyed much standard boyhood fun, although his life changed for the worse when a stroke in 1879 left his mother partially handicapped. Although DuBois and his mother never had much money, as an adolescent he earned extra income by doing various odd jobs, all the while working hard in high school, reading widely, and taking part in many physical activities and sports. By 1883 he had begun writing not only for his high school newspaper but also for newspapers in Great Barrington and New York, and he had begun to identify more strongly with the broader African-American community. In 1884 he was the only black member of his small high school graduating class, and, although he hoped someday to attend Harvard, he temporarily had to defer that dream because of concerns about his mother’s

circumstances, worries about his own finances, and uncertainties about his likelihood of academic success. However, when his mother died in 1885, local churches and their ministers collected funds that helped DuBois enter the recently founded Fisk University, a black college in Nashville, Tennessee. Although a bout with fever nearly killed him during his first months there, he eventually recovered and soon became strongly involved in many aspects of college life, taking courses in languages, literature, philosophy, and science. He twice served as a schoolteacher in rural Tennessee during his summers at Fisk while also cultivating his interests both in classical European music and in the native music of his fellow black Americans.

After receiving his bachelor’s degree from Fisk in 1888, he was finally able to attend Harvard, which he entered as a junior with assistance from a grant and a later scholarship. Although his relations with his fellow (mostly white) students were somewhat distant, he studied with some major scholars, including the philosophers William James and George Santayana, all the while earning spending money by doing various jobs, by speaking to local religious groups, and by writing for a black newspaper. In 1890 he won a prize for public speaking and received his Harvard B.A. with a degree in philosophy. A speech on Jefferson Davis won national notice; a small bequest from his grandfather’s estate helped his finances,

but perhaps the major event of this period was his acceptance into the graduate program in political science at Harvard, which twice awarded him fellowships. Although initially frustrated by disappointments in his efforts to find support for further study, in 1891 he nevertheless was awarded a master's degree from Harvard, and then, in 1892, he received enough funding to permit him to study in Germany and travel throughout Europe. Returning to the United States without having received his doctorate, he applied for a number of jobs at black American colleges and was eventually hired to teach classical and modern languages at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio. Although DuBois grew increasingly unhappy there, it was at Wilberforce that he met Nina Gomer, whom he married in 1896, shortly after receiving his doctorate from Harvard in 1895—the first African American to attain that distinction. His doctoral dissertation, a study of the suppression of the African slave trade, was published in book form in 1896, the same year DuBois was hired by the University of Pennsylvania to undertake a major sociological study of the African-American population of Philadelphia.

By 1897 DuBois had become affiliated with Atlanta University, a black college with which he would be connected, off and on, for much of the rest of his life. He was becoming increasingly prominent as an African-American scholar and intellectual, focusing especially on sociological research and publications and studying numerous aspects of black American life. In 1899 his study *The Philadelphia Negro* was published by the University of Pennsylvania; however, this satisfying achievement was counterbalanced by the early death of his first son, who had been born in 1897. While living in the South, DuBois became increasingly repulsed by his experiences with segregation and discrimination, which he always resisted; partly as a result of his encounters with such prejudice, his journalism, then and later, became more and more politically outspoken. By 1900 he was active in legislative and legal efforts to oppose discrimination, and in the same year he received recognition in Europe (where he was traveling) for his scholarly work and politi-

cal advocacy. Later that year, he also welcomed the birth of his daughter, Yolande. By 1902 he was more and more disenchanted with the leadership of BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, the most prominent African-American spokesman in the country, who emphasized economic progress (rather than full civil and political rights) and who stressed the need for vocational training for blacks. DuBois, in contrast, advocated broader political advancement and emphasized the need to train the most gifted black students in the same ways the best white students were trained, exposing them to the broadest possible education. His expression of these and other views in his significant book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) gained him broad national attention and established him both as one of the most eloquent spokesmen of his people and as a challenger to Washington's leadership.

Despite attempts in 1904 to collaborate with Washington, DuBois increasingly set an independent course, even accusing his rival in 1905 of attempting to suppress opposition in the black press. In that same year DuBois was himself voted leader of a newly formed organization to advocate full rights for blacks, and in 1906, responding to white-on-black violence in Atlanta, he even took up arms to defend his own home. His devotion to scholarship, journalism, and politics continued during 1907 and 1908 and culminated in the publication in 1909 of *John Brown*, a biography of the notorious antebellum abolitionist. In 1910 he assumed a prominent position in the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization run mostly by white liberals that nevertheless soon became one of the most important civil rights groups in the country. DuBois moved to New York to establish, edit, and contribute to the organization's monthly journal, the *Crisis*, although he quickly entered into conflict with other leaders of the organization because of his political assertiveness and general independence. By 1911 he had published his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, while also building the circulation of the NAACP's magazine and continuing his conflict with Washington. Increasingly seen as

a prominent national spokesman for his race, he was now also rising to greater influence within the NAACP itself, although his talent for stirring up controversy (even or especially within the black community) remained unabated. In 1915 his historical study *The Negro* was published, and in the same year the feud between DuBois and Washington ended with the latter's death.

By this point the main patterns of DuBois's life had become established. He was a successful editor, a prominent political advocate, a controversial figure both within and outside the African-American community, a prolific journalist, and a hands-on civic organizer. He took strong positions on disputed issues (so much so that he was actually threatened with prosecution in 1918 for attacking racism in the armed forces), although he also sometimes was criticized for being too accommodating to white interests. Shortly after the end of World War I he traveled once more to Europe, where he took a leading position in 1919 in the first Pan-African Congress while also continuing his advocacy on behalf of African-American soldiers—advocacy for which he was attacked in Congress. *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (a collection of essays published in 1920) provoked further attention and attacks, while in 1921 DuBois gained further prominence at a new meeting in Europe designed to oppose colonialism in Africa. Back home, in 1922, he opposed lynching, continued the challenge (which had begun a few years earlier) to the leadership of the black separatist Marcus Garvey, and, in 1923, made his first trip to Africa. In 1924 he published *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*, and he also participated in opposition to the current president of Fisk University, his alma mater. By 1925 and 1926 he had become involved, in various ways, in the Harlem Renaissance (a significant cultural movement among blacks), and in the latter year he also visited the Soviet Union, at that time the center of international communism. On his return to the United States he praised the Soviet government, which then was less than a decade old.

During the ensuing years and decades, DuBois remained constantly busy as a writer, editor, and

political activist, and even an occasional political candidate. His novel *Dark Princess: A Romance* appeared in 1929, and his historical monograph *Black Reconstruction* was published in 1935. In 1939 *Black Folk, Then and Now* was issued, and in the following year his autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, was printed. In 1944 he became the first African-American member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1945 he published not only the first volume of a long-planned *Encyclopedia of the Negro* but also a political work called *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace*. In 1947 he edited a book-length collection of essays (titled *An Appeal to the World*) on behalf of American blacks. Meanwhile, in 1948 his often rocky, on-again-off-again relationship with the NAACP finally ended when a memo by DuBois criticizing the organization's director was published in the national press. By this point, however, DuBois had also moved much further left than many other members of the NAACP could readily accept. His involvement with organizations sympathetic to communism and the Soviet Union had also become increasingly prominent and led to much subsequent conflict with the U.S. government. After DuBois's first wife died in 1950, he married Shirley Graham in 1951 at a time when he was facing indictment for his involvement in alleged communist-front organizations, although a judge later found him innocent of these charges. His book about this experience, *In Battle for Peace*, was published in 1952, and his involvement with communist-oriented groups and ideas continued and even deepened. Not all of his writings, however, were narrowly political: In 1957 he published *The Ordeal of Mansart*, the first of three historical novels, which was followed in 1959 by *Mansart Builds a School* and in 1961 by *Worlds of Color*. By this point DuBois was in his 90s, and, although respected by many, was also a figure of great controversy. He now identified so strongly with communism, for instance, that he actually joined the American Communist Party in 1961 after years of traveling (despite the wishes of the U.S. government) in communist countries as well as in Europe and Africa. In Africa, indeed, he was considered a kind of father figure in many countries that had

recently won their independence from colonialism. Thus it was no great surprise when, in 1963, he chose to become a citizen of Ghana, where he died on August 27, in his 95th year.

***The Philadelphia Negro* (1899)**

The Philadelphia Negro is a massive sociological and historical study outlining the conditions of African-American life in Pennsylvania's largest city at the end of the 19th century. The study was commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania, which had been approached by a group of prominent (mostly white) citizens who were concerned about the widespread conditions of poverty, crime, alcoholism, and illness among the city's blacks. By interviewing thousands of black citizens, studying nearly every relevant social institution, and compiling an extraordinary number of statistics, DuBois hoped to provide solid data that could be used to improve not only the lives of the city's blacks but also the social health of the municipality in general.

In an introduction to the book, Samuel McCune Lindsay, writing on behalf of the university, described how DuBois

devoted all of his time to systematic field-work among the Negroes, especially in the Seventh Ward, attending their meetings, their churches, their business, social and political gatherings, visiting their schools and institutions, and, most important of all, conducting a house-to-house visitation in their families, through which he came in personal contact with over ten thousand Negro inhabitants of the city. (vii)

Writing 40 years after the publication of his landmark study, DuBois himself recounted his thinking at the time the work was undertaken: "The Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation" (*Writings* 596). Although he later expressed

skepticism about the motives of the study's backers as well as frustration with his own lowly status at the university (*Writings* 596), he threw himself into his work with passionate commitment, collecting nearly all the data himself and producing, in the end, a report almost 400 pages in length—a work that is full of graphs, charts, maps, and tables but one that is also characterized by its clear style, relentless logic, and frequent eloquence and passion. DuBois does not hesitate to criticize blacks for self-destructive behavior, but he makes it obvious that most of their problems have resulted from their history of oppression and the current climate of pervasive discrimination constantly confronting them. His tone is always rational and measured; he constantly strives to see the complexities in every situation he studies and to reject simplistic explanations. He is careful to study the background that helped create any contemporary problem, and his focus is always on practical, realistic solutions to any problem he describes. In every case the solutions he proposes involve changes in the behavior and attitudes of both blacks *and* whites, and he lays a special obligation on better-educated blacks to assist the struggling masses.

As the study reaches its final pages, DuBois becomes more and more outspoken about the ways racial prejudice has not only crippled the lives and spirits of black Philadelphians but also has harmed the city as a whole. At one point, for instance, he argues that

the class of Negroes which the prejudices of the city have distinctly encouraged is that of the criminal, the lazy and the shiftless; for them the city teems with institutions and charities; for them there is succour and sympathy; for them Philadelphians are thinking and planning; but for the educated and industrious young colored man who wants work and not platitudes, wages and not alms, just rewards and not sermons—for such colored men Philadelphia apparently has no use. (352)

Later, in his final chapter, DuBois offers "a few plain propositions [that] may be laid down as axiomatic":

1. The Negro is here to stay.
2. It is to the advantage of all, both black and white, that every Negro should make the best of himself.
3. It is the duty of the Negro to raise himself by every effort to the standards of modern civilization and not to lower those standards in any degree.
4. It is the duty of the white people to guard their civilization against debauchment by themselves and others; but in order to do this it is not necessary to hinder and retard the efforts of an earnest people to rise, simply because they lack faith in the ability of that people.
5. With these duties in mind and with a spirit of self-help, mutual aid and co-operation, the two races should strive side by side to realize the ideals of the republic and make this truly a land of equal opportunity for all men. (388–389)

Later in the same chapter DuBois condemns racial discrimination as “morally wrong, politically dangerous, industrially wasteful, and socially silly,” and he insists that it “is the duty of whites to stop it, and to do so primarily for their own sakes” (394). Racial prejudice, he concludes, “is a disgrace to the city—a disgrace to its Christianity, to its spirit of justice, [and] to its common sense,” and he concludes by asking:

what can be the end of such a policy but increased crime and increased excuse for crime? Increased poverty and more reason to be poor? Increased political serfdom of the mass of black voters to the bosses and rascals who divide the spoils? Surely here [in the ending of prejudice] lies the first duty of a civilized city. (396)

As the quoted passages show, *The Philadelphia Negro* is not a turgid exercise in boring sociological jargon; it is, instead, a constantly interesting, consistently illuminating, and frequently eloquent example of nonfiction prose at its best. Social scientists consider it a landmark study, and surely it is one of the earliest and most detailed examinations of the actual lives of

black Americans ever undertaken. Whatever the motives of the group that commissioned it, they received from DuBois a classic that remains as intriguing today as it was when it first appeared in print.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *The Philadelphia Negro* with chapter 5 (on the city of Atlanta) of *The Souls of Black Folk*. How (at least according to DuBois) are the two cities comparable in their remote histories, present challenges, and potentials for future development? What role does education play in DuBois's hopes for both places?
2. Compare and contrast DuBois's depiction of the conditions of blacks in Philadelphia at the turn of the 20th century with RICHARD WRIGHT's depiction of the condition of blacks in Chicago in the 1930s in his novel *Native Son*. How do the books present such issues as poverty, crime, racism, and rebellion?
3. Compare and contrast *The Philadelphia Negro* with JACK LONDON's 1903 study of poverty in England's capital city, *The People of the Abyss*. Discuss the ways both authors prepared to write their books, the conditions they described, the tones they adopted, and the solutions they proposed.

***The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)**

The Souls of Black Folk, which consists of 14 chapters sandwiched between a brief “Forethought” and an even briefer “Afterthought,” is widely considered DuBois's most important work; certainly it has been one of his most influential. First issued in 1903, it consists of nine revisions of previously published pieces, along with five wholly new sections. Diverse in topics, methods, approaches, and styles, the work is held together by DuBois's insistence in its very first paragraph that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (*Writings* 359). By exploring so many different issues in such various ways, DuBois offers

not only a complex picture of African-American life at the turn of the 20th century but also a comprehensive sense of his own interests, passions, personality, and stylistic skills.

One distinctive feature of the book—and a key source of unity—is the appearance of brief musical quotations at the beginning of each chapter. These bars of music are taken from the “sorrow songs” (or spirituals) that DuBois considered not only one of the great achievements of African-American creativity but also one of the great glories of American culture in general. Often these pieces of music are juxtaposed with quotations from famous European or American poets, thus implying DuBois’s larger belief in the fruitful interaction of people of goodwill from diverse racial and national backgrounds; he himself was a man of wide cultural training and interests, and that fact is everywhere implied and demonstrated in this book. He was at heart a humanist who wanted his own people to be full participants in the greater development of humanity; he could not comprehend why the potential contributions of such a large, vital, and valuable segment of mankind would be suppressed or ignored.

The opening chapter, titled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” begins on a frankly personal note. DuBois describes how it feels to be treated as a living representative of a social “problem”—the problem of blacks in contemporary America (*Writings* 363). He recalls the day when, as a boy, he first became aware that he differed from his white playmates. The boys and girls used to exchange “gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package,” and the exchanges were “merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (*Writings* 364). This passage typifies DuBois’s style in various ways, not only in its often elevated diction (“peremptorily,” “mayhap”) and in its equally frequent plainness and urgency (“heart and life and longing”) but also in its emphasis on the metaphor of the veil—an

image DuBois emphasizes repeatedly to describe the pervasive separation of blacks from whites. Indeed, the recurring image of the veil helps lend the volume much of its thematic unity.

Another key term introduced in the opening chapter is *double consciousness*—the tendency of American blacks to see themselves as perceived by whites. DuBois describes it as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (*Writings* 364–365). In an especially significant paragraph, DuBois writes that

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (*Writings* 365)

In the rest of the volume, DuBois eloquently describes the various obstacles to this kind of merging, and in the process he examines the shortcomings of both whites and blacks while also suggesting the potential each race possesses to attain, individually and through cooperation, the best humanistic ideals.

In his second chapter (“Of the Dawn of Freedom”), DuBois operates mainly as a historian, seeking to study the period “from 1861 to 1872 so far as it relates to the American Negro” (*Writings* 372). He details the many practical difficulties facing the

newly freed slaves and the haphazard bureaucracy set up to administer their affairs. One paragraph, in particular, outlines his key arguments:

Such was the dawn of Freedom; such was the work of the Freedmen's Bureau, which, summed up in brief, may be epitomized thus: For some fifteen million dollars, beside the sums spent before 1865, and the dole of benevolent societies, this Bureau set going a system of free labor, established a beginning of peasant proprietorship, secured the recognition of black freedmen before courts of law, and founded the free common school in the South. On the other hand, it failed to begin the establishment of good-will between ex-masters and freedmen, to guard its work wholly from paternalistic methods which discouraged self-reliance, and to carry out to any considerable extent its implied promises to furnish the freedmen with land. Its successes were the result of hard work, supplemented by the aid of philanthropists and the eager striving of black men. Its failures were the result of bad local agents, the inherent difficulties of the work, and national neglect. (*Writings* 387)

Here as elsewhere, DuBois strives for—and achieves—a balanced assessment that implies his own reason, honesty, and fairness. All these traits contribute to the persuasiveness of his analysis.

Perhaps the most notable of all the book's chapters is the third, titled "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others." Washington was the most famous black leader of his day. As the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, he was widely hailed as a champion of racial progress; his emphasis on practical economic training for blacks won the admiration and cooperation of many influential whites throughout the nation, while his tendency to de-emphasize the immediate attainment of full political rights for African Americans made him acceptable to many whites in the South. DuBois summarizes Washington's stance as a "programme of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights" (*Writings* 392)—a program DuBois

could not embrace. He felt that Washington's ideas had led not only to an erosion of voting rights for blacks but also to the "legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro" as well as to the "steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro" (*Writings* 399). DuBois, by contrast, spoke for many other blacks in insisting on (1) "The right to vote," (2) "Civic equality," and (3) "The education of youth according to ability" (*Writings* 400). He argues that Washington's "doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators, when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs" (*Writings* 403). In so directly challenging Washington's ideas and leadership, DuBois strongly established his own status as an emerging black spokesman.

Chapter 4 ("Of the Meaning of Progress") recounts DuBois's own experiences, during his time at Fisk, as a volunteer schoolteacher in impoverished rural areas. He describes, for instance, the apparently enthusiastic welcome he received from a white commissioner of education, who invited him to stay for dinner: "'Oh,' thought I, 'this is lucky'; but even then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first—and then I, alone" (*Writings* 407). With a novelist's touch, he vividly describes the different personalities he met among his isolated black students. He is careful not to romanticize the people he encountered or the conditions they endured, yet it is clear that he was deeply affected by his contact with these people, who shared his racial background but whose living conditions differed so greatly from the ones he had known in his youth. At one point he notes, "I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity" (*Writings* 410). When DuBois returns to the "tiny com-

munity” 10 years later, his tone becomes movingly elegiac as he describes the bleak changes that have occurred in the interim.

Chapter 5 is partly a meditation on the growing city of Atlanta but partly also a lamentation on what Atlanta, like America at large, was coming to represent, with its growing emphasis on materialism and “a lust for gold” (*Writings* 419). In contrast, DuBois celebrates the ideal of a true university, which should be designed to pursue “one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (*Writings* 420). He extols the liberal arts, but he simultaneously asserts that a liberal education is not for everyone. DuBois believed in equal opportunity but not in equal abilities, equal orientations, or in necessarily equal outcomes. In some ways he was an elitist, as when he notes that the founders of many of the nation’s first black colleges forgot

the rule of inequality:—that of the million black youth, some were fitted to know and some to dig; that some had the talent and capacity of university men, and some the talent and capacity of blacksmiths; and that true training meant neither that all should be college men nor all artisans, but that the one should be made a missionary of culture to an untaught people, and the other a free workman among serfs. And to seek to make the blacksmith a scholar is almost as silly as the more modern one of making the scholar a blacksmith; almost, but not quite. (*Writings* 421)

The object of the satire here is obviously Booker T. Washington, who (according to DuBois) had failed to address actual complexities, offering instead a simplistic solution to a complicated problem.

Chapter 6 continues the focus on education. Titled “Of the Training of Black Men,” it argues that human problems (such as racism) “can be met in but one way—by the breadth and broadening of human reason, by catholicity of taste and culture” (*Writings* 425). DuBois traces the history of education in the South since the Civil War, and he reiterates themes already sounded, such as his skepticism

about mere vocational training for all blacks and his doubts about the overemphasis on materialism in contemporary American culture (*Writings* 428). His elitism is also once more evident when he argues that “Progress in human affairs is more often a pull than a push, surging forward of the exceptional man, and the lifting of his duller brethren slowly and painfully to his vantage-ground” (*Writings* 429). He argues eloquently that both the South and the nation will benefit from a better-educated black population (*Writings* 436), and he insists that the “function of the Negro college . . . is clear: it must maintain the standards of popular education, it must seek the social regeneration of the Negro, and it must help in the solution of problems of race contact and co-operation” (*Writings* 437).

In chapter 7, “Of the Black Belt,” DuBois describes the life of African Americans living in a part of the South known for its rich black soil, where slaves were transplanted in great numbers to pick cotton. Part-travelogue, part-history, part-sociological study, the chapter describes the land and its people and the transformations that have occurred both since the Civil War. In chapter 8, “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece,” he maintains his emphasis on the Black Belt, focusing especially on its chief crop and the unfortunate social conditions the cotton economy has bred. Chapter 9, “Of the Sons of Master and Man,” argues that it is “the strife of all honourable men of the twentieth century to see that in the future competition of races the survival of the fittest shall mean the triumph of the good, the beautiful, and the true; that we may be able to preserve for future civilization all that is really fine and noble and strong, and not continue to put a premium on greed and impudence and cruelty” (*Writings* 476). He particularly advocates the right of blacks to vote (*Writings* 481) and laments the continuing social separation of the races. In chapter 10 (“Of the Faith of the Fathers”) he discusses the nature of black religious life and especially the social importance of black preachers, and he laments the growth of two opposed groups of blacks (“the first tending toward radicalism, the other toward hypocritical compromise” [*Writings* 503]), with neither group representing any

true hope for the future of the race. Once more DuBois both represents and advocates a more complex position in opposition to allegedly simplistic alternatives.

Chapter 11 (“Of the Passing of the First-Born”) is the book’s most personal section, recounting the birth and early death of DuBois’s infant son. The father’s sadness at this loss is mitigated by his realization that the boy, by dying so young, has at least escaped the suffering he would have experienced growing up in a racist society—a society dominated by “the Veil” (*Writings* 510). However, whereas chapter 11 pays tribute to a young boy, chapter 12 (“Of Alexander Crummell”) celebrates an old man (also dead at the time the book was published), whose example as an intellectual and man had inspired DuBois, especially because of Crummell’s refusal to submit to the temptations of hate, despair, and doubt (*Writings* 512). DuBois extols Crummell’s dignity in the face of attempted humiliations and laments the fact that he was not better known or more highly valued. Chapter 13 (“Of the Coming of John”) is essentially a short story about two boys, playmates in a small southern town, who grow up and leave home to attend northern colleges. Both, ironically, become estranged, not only from each other but also from their own people, and when by chance they meet again, the results are tragic. Finally, in chapter 14 (“The Sorrow Songs”), DuBois turns from his own fiction to the musical poetry of his race, arguing that “by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (*Writings* 536–537).

By the end of the book, then, the reader has confronted a wide swath of African-American history, personalities, experience, and culture, but the reader has also encountered one of that culture’s finest minds. The book’s unity results not only from its recurring themes (such as education) or images (such as “the Veil”) but also from DuBois’s sense and sensibility: His portrait of his people is inevitably also a portrait of himself. The book implicitly refutes the racist notion that blacks could not compete intellec-

tually with whites, just as it also implicitly rejects the idea that solutions to the race problem would be easy or simple. DuBois’s tone is alternately analytical and impassioned, indignant and calm, touching and sarcastic. He criticizes both blacks and whites, but he also is willing to reason or debate with anyone open to hard facts and fresh ideas. His faith in reason and his commitment to humanism are indeed among his most consistent traits, and for all the ugliness his book describes, he remains hopeful for the entire human race if it honestly is willing to confront “the problem of the color-line.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the ordering of chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Can you see any logic in the way the chapters are arranged? How do the chapters “play off” each other, one chapter complicating or reinforcing the section preceding or following it? How, for instance, are chapters 11 and 12 related? What connections can be drawn between chapters 1 and 14?
2. Compare and contrast chapter 3 of this book with the speech by Booker T. Washington called the “Atlanta Compromise Speech” (or the “Atlanta Exposition Address”). On what precise points do the two men differ? Are there any points of agreement? Which aspects of each argument do you find most persuasive or least persuasive, and why?
3. Examine the quotations that head each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and then discuss the particular relevance of those quotations to the chapters they preface. How, for instance, is the quotation from Byron that precedes chapter 3 relevant to DuBois’s response to Booker T. Washington? How is the quotation from Whitier relevant to the argument of chapter 5?
4. Compare and contrast DuBois’s chapter 11 and Ben Jonson’s poem “On My First Son.” Discuss the hopes the fathers had for their sons, the ways the mothers are presented in both works, and the ways both fathers come to terms with the deaths of their sons.
5. Choose one chapter from *The Souls of Black Folk* and discuss the various ways in which DuBois

tries to make his arguments appealing and persuasive. How does he use appeals to emotion? How does he use appeals to reason? How does he use plain language? How does he employ elevated diction?

“The Song of the Smoke” (1907)

In this four-stanza lyric poem, the voice of the black “Smoke King” proclaims its attributes and actions in strongly rhythmic, heavily repetitious, and highly alliterative phrasing. First published in the magazine *Horizon* in February 1907, the work is one of DuBois’s few poems. Although it is frequently reprinted, it has not been analyzed very often in much detail, perhaps because its language and meaning sometimes seem somewhat opaque.

The tone of the poem is emphatic and assertive: the word *I* (or *I’m*) is its most frequently used term, and often it wins extra emphasis by being placed at the beginning of each line. Clearly the work is an assertion of pride in being black; it stresses the power of the black smoke as well as its sheer active dynamism: Verbs are heavily emphasized, especially in the present progressive tense (which implies an action that is happening at the same time the statement is written, as in “I am swinging,” “I am wringing” [ll. 3–4]). Even the adjectives often imply action, as in the use of such words as *throbbing* (l. 5), *trading* (l. 7), and *toiling* (l. 17). The overall effect is to give the poem a sense of enormous energy; it is easy to imagine how this “song” could indeed be set to music with a pounding, impulsive beat. Just as smoke is in constant movement, so is this poem.

Paradoxically, DuBois’s lyric is both highly structured and extremely flexible. All stanzas begin and end in the same way, and the same basic patterns of grammar, sentence structure, and rhyme are constantly repeated. The poem’s shape on the page is highly regular yet constantly alternating, particularly in its use of patterned indentations. All stanzas have the same number of lines; usually the first syllable of each line is strongly accented; and the rhyme scheme is highly regular: *abccdddeeab*.

In addition, another trait contributing to a sense of predictable order is the poem’s characteristic use of alliteration (as in the references to “wringing worlds awry” [l. 4] and to “the thought of the throbbing mills” [l. 5]). In all these ways, then, the work seems tightly organized. On the other hand, standing within and against all these ordered regularities is the poem’s phrasing, which is often unpredictable and even (sometimes) seemingly impenetrable. A reader never knows for sure what new claim the poem will make about the “Smoke King” (or even quite what is meant by that phrase itself), and thus the poem is both highly regular (in sound, shape, grammar, rhyme, and sentence structure) and yet also frequently mystifying. Like smoke itself, then, the poem seems both patterned and unstable.

Lines 3–5, for instance, are clear enough in grammar and sense, but the meaning of line 6 is less obvious: What, precisely, does DuBois mean by “soul-toil kills”? Without the hyphen, the phrase would make perfect sense; with the hyphen, it seems unclear. The meaning (and relevance) of lines 14–15 is also not immediately obvious, and in general the poem proceeds in a fashion that inspires questions rather than providing answers. DuBois seems to be dealing with the two concerns that chiefly interested him as a black socialist: race and industrial capitalism. An emphasis on the grimy aspects of capitalism seems implied, for instance, in such phrases as “throbbing mills” (l. 5), “trading rills” (l. 7), “iron times” (l. 16), “the toil of toiling climes” (l. 17), “grimy hands” (l. 41), “toiling lands” (l. 42), and perhaps even “the blood of bloodless crimes” (l. 18), especially if that phrase can be interpreted as referring to the exploitation of laborers. Meanwhile, the emphasis on race seems especially prominent in stanzas 3 and 4, especially in lines 28–29 and 39–40. Finally, references or allusions to God seem to occur in every single stanza (especially in lines 9, 20, 30, and 42), perhaps implying a higher standard by which racism and capitalist exploitation can be judged and possibly even punished.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read DuBois’s discussion of “The Sorrow Songs” (chapter 14 of *The Souls of Black Folk*),

and then discuss how “The Song of the Smoke” is comparable to those songs in its themes, techniques, and impact.

2. Discuss some of the specific phrases of this poem and try to relate them to the work's larger meaning. What, for instance, do you think DuBois means when he says that smoke is “wringing worlds awry” (l. 4)? What do you think he means when he writes that smoke is “hearsing hearts unborn” (l. 37)?

***The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911)**

Blessed (Bles) Alwyn is a boy on his way to attend a school for blacks in Alabama when he encounters a spirited young girl named Zora who lives near a swamp; eventually, during the years both youths attend the school, they fall in love, but when Bles learns that Zora is not sexually “pure” (having been abused by local whites), he leaves Alabama and heads north, determined to make his way in Washington, D.C. While there he becomes politically influential but decides to return to the rural school after his strong ethics conflict with the political corruption of the capital; meanwhile, Zora has undergone a similar transformation: After serving as a maid to a powerful white woman (also in Washington), she had decided even before Bles to return to Alabama and devote herself to supporting and enlarging the school. As their bond strengthens through their mutual devotion to this greater cause (including their attempts to defend the school against white attacks), the couple subtly renew their affection and, in the book's final scene, Bles declares his love and Zora proposes marriage.

DuBois prefaces his novel with a note claiming that whatever the book may lack in artistry or beauty, it is at least honest: “In no fact or picture have I consciously set down aught the counterpart of which I have not seen or known” (11). This emphasis on truthfulness already implies that DuBois saw his work not merely as a piece of fiction but as an accurate description of political, social, and cultural conditions that he hoped to influence and change. Many themes already enunciated in

The Souls of Black Folk are repeated in the novel, including DuBois's strong concern with the nature of black education, his implicit criticism of Booker T. Washington, his focus on life in the cotton-producing “black belt,” his stress on the ideal cooperation of well-motivated people of both races, and his concern with matters of class. Indeed, class is almost as important an issue in this novel as race: By this point in his life DuBois was a socialist, and his novel shows not only how the desire for excessive profit allegedly corrupts people of both races but also how a genuine commitment to selfless service motivates admirable individuals on either side of the “color-line.” The novel depicts the complexities of black life in both the North and the South, but it also suggests how the South was inevitably changing in ways that would forever alter the lives not only of its black citizens but especially of its whites. The whites who were particularly being affected were the old aristocracy of planters and plantation owners, who were losing their grip on power in the face of challenges not simply from blacks but from the white poor and from white commercial interests, both in the South and in the North.

One of the most interesting characters in the book is Caroline Wynn, who does not appear until the novel is half over. Whereas some of the other figures in the work are clearly caricatures whose motives are simplistic and whose behavior is fairly predictable, Wynn is a talented, articulate, influential black woman whose personality is somewhat complex: She is selfish, but she knows and partly regrets that she is; she is cynical, but her cynicism is partly born of real pain and thus makes her partially sympathetic: “Miss Caroline Wynn of Washington had little faith in the world and its people. Nor was this wholly her fault. The world had dealt cruelly with the young dreams and youthful ambitions of the girl; partly with its usual heartlessness, partly with that cynical and deadening reserve fund which it has to-day for its darker peoples” (253). Caroline Wynn admires the idealism of Bles Alwyn, but she also seeks to exploit it; Bles, meanwhile, finds himself attracted by Caroline's intelligence, beauty, and ambition, and eventually he asks her to marry him. She agrees, but when she later

discovers that Bles's commitment to his principles will ruin his political career, she rejects him. Yet her response is complex:

he to her was always two men: one man above men, whom she could respect but would not marry, and one man like all men, whom she would marry but could not respect. His devotion to an ideal which she thought so utterly unpractical, aroused keen curiosity and admiration. She was sure he would fail in the end, and she wanted him to fail; and somehow, somewhere back beyond herself, her better self longed to find herself defeated; to see this mind stand firm on principle, under circumstances where she believed men never stood. (321)

Caroline Wynn, however, is only one of a number of central female characters in DuBois's novel, and in fact the women in the book are almost always more intriguing and complex than the men. Zora, of course, is the novel's key personality, and it is fascinating that DuBois finally makes Zora, rather than Bles, the book's truly visionary figure and the chief leader of her people. Her dominant position is implied even in the novel's very last sentences, when Bles kneels before her and when it is she, rather than he, who explicitly proposes marriage (433–434). Yet by this point she also seems to have begun to symbolize, for DuBois, not only the hope of her own people but that of the working class in general: "She did not anticipate any immediate understanding with the laboring whites, but she knew that eventually it would be inevitable. Meantime the Negro must strengthen himself and bring to the alliance as much independent economic strength as possible" (398). By the end of the novel, Zora has become the embodiment of the best hopes and ideals not only of her race but of her sex, her class, and humanity at large. DuBois has created not simply a compelling black heroine but also a feminist and socialist icon.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Zora in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* with Melanctha, the black character who is the central figure in the central tale of GERTRUDE STEIN's *Three Lives*. Discuss the women in terms of their fundamental motives, the kinds of language they use, and the degrees to which they change or develop. How might DuBois have reacted to Melanctha (and why), and how might Stein have responded to Zora (and why)?
2. Discuss the symbolism of distinct places in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. What does the swamp symbolize? What does the school symbolize? What do the plantation and the city of Washington symbolize? How does DuBois compare and contrast these different symbolic locations?
3. How does the socialism implied in this novel compare and contrast with the kind of socialism embraced by Jack London? What were London's views on racial differences and racial cooperation, and how do they resemble and/or depart from those of DuBois?

"Criteria of Negro Art" (1926)

In this essay, first published in *Crisis* magazine in October 1926, DuBois advocates a strong African-American interest in art, which might otherwise seem a luxury compared with the apparently more pressing issues of attaining civil and economic rights. DuBois argues, however, that art cannot (and should not) be divorced from political concerns and that all art, ultimately, is a form of propaganda.

DuBois begins by asserting that art is "part of the great fight we are carrying on" and that it "represents a forward and an upward look—a pushing onward" (*Writings* 993). He contends that black Americans, precisely because they *are* discriminated against, can see both the flaws and the true potential of their country more clearly than whites can, and that blacks have therefore developed "not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit" (*Writings* 994). After describing various instances of beauty and arguing that the "world is full of it," he laments that nevertheless "today the mass of human beings

5. Compare and contrast DuBois's fictional tale "Of the Coming of John" (in *The Souls of Black Folk*) with his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. How are the two works similar in plot, theme, and characters, and how do they differ? Which is more effective as a work of fiction, and why?
6. Compare and contrast the depiction of women in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. What consistencies run throughout both books in their presentations of women, and how and why do you think those presentations differ in the two works?
7. Compare and contrast DuBois's autobiography (*Dusk of Dawn*) with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein. How do the two works compare and contrast in topics, tone, and techniques?
8. *The Philadelphia Negro* included, as an appendix, a separate report by Isabel Eaton discussing black domestic servants. How does Eaton's work compare and contrast with the work of DuBois in its methods, tone, assumptions, and conclusions?
9. Compare and contrast DuBois's first published work (*The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade . . .*) with some of the works that followed it, especially *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. For instance, how is *The Suppression* similar to *The Philadelphia Negro* in its methods and conclusions, and, in particular, how do the final summary sections of both works resemble each other? How does *The Suppression* (especially in chapter 10) anticipate the themes and arguments of *The Souls of Black Folk* (especially in chapters 6 and 7)?
10. Compare and contrast DuBois's autobiography (*Dusk of Dawn*) with Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Discuss the ways the books treat such issues as the protagonists' regional backgrounds, class status, family circumstances, and educational opportunities.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *W. E. B. DuBois*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2001.
- Byerman, Keith E. *Seizing the Word: History, Art, and Self in the Work of W. E. B. DuBois*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. 1899. Reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967.
- . *The Quest of the Silver Fleece: A Novel*. 1911. Reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- . "The Song of the Smoke." In *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert Hass et al. 2 vols, Vol. 1: 25–26. New York: Library of America, 2000.
- . *Writings*. Edited by Nathan Huggins. New York: Library of America, 1986.
- Dudley, David L. "W. E. B. DuBois." In *African American Authors 1745–1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson, 121–131. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000.
- Hubbard, Dolan, ed. *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.
- Huggins, Nathan. "Chronology." In *Writings*. By W. E. B. DuBois. New York: Library of America, 1986.
- Moore, Jacqueline M. *Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003.
- Rampersad, Arnold. *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. DuBois*. New York: Schocken, 1990.
- Williams, Robert W. WEBDuBois.org. Available online. URL: <http://www.webdubois.org>. Accessed April 7, 2009.

Robert C. Evans



T. S. ELIOT (1888–1965)

When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the “disillusionment of a generation,” which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention.

(T. S. Eliot, “Thoughts after Lambeth”)

As an American who became a British citizen, T. S. Eliot has been claimed by both countries as part of their literary canon. Although best known for his poetry, Eliot was also a successful playwright and an extremely prolific writer of prose, in the forms of critical essays, reviews, and lectures. Eliot was a key figure in the literary movement of modernism. He became known as perhaps the most prominent man of letters of his day and was presented with many honors, including 14 honorary degrees, the British Order of Merit, the Presidential Order of Freedom, and the Nobel Prize. In 1956 he lectured to 14,000 people in a baseball stadium at the University of Minnesota, in the largest assembly ever gathered to attend a literary lecture.

Although the commonly held image of Eliot is that he was isolated and even a bit snobbish, with a formal and stiff exterior, he was described by those who knew him well as calm, generous, kind, and always deeply contemplative. Eliot wanted, paradoxically, to be “a poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth” (Gordon 3), and much of his writing can best be understood as a sort of spiritual autobiography; Eliot used his poetry and prose to grapple with the intellectual and personal issues facing him throughout his life.

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888, in St. Louis, Missouri. The Eliot fam-

ily at the time of his birth was socially prominent. Although his grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, died the year before Eliot’s birth, his legacy remained very important in the family; Eliot’s mother stressed his ideals of self-denial and public service. Eliot’s father, Henry, was a successful manufacturer, and his mother, Charlotte, was a poet, mainly writing optimistic and didactic religious verse. Growing up with much older siblings, and with a congenital hernia that led his mother to forbid sports, Eliot had few playmates and spent a lot of his time reading (Poe became a favorite). During his childhood, the family spent summers at Cape Ann, Massachusetts, and Eliot loved the seashore. His schoolboy writings reflect the glory and heroism of the fisherman, and he once said he thought of himself as a New England poet.

Despite growing up in a Unitarian family, Eliot was not convinced by this faith, as he believed that true salvation should result from individual human effort rather than divine will. The question of true religious belief was one that would continue to trouble Eliot, and this religious questioning is reflected in many of his early poems.

Eliot attended Smith Academy, a prep school in St. Louis, where in January 1899 he brought out eight issues of his own magazine. He later claimed he knew he wanted to become a poet after reading Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* at about age 14. He spent a year at

Milton Academy just outside Boston before enrolling at Harvard in fall 1906.

While at Harvard, Eliot became disillusioned with the decaying upper-class Boston society in which he was expected to play a part; despite connections with family members in the inner circles of this society, he felt detached from it, although he did take up aspects of its character, including “its rigid manners, its loss of vigour, its estrangement from so many areas of life, [and] its painful self-consciousness” (Gordon 27). He preferred time spent wandering the slums of Roxbury and North Cambridge to that at cocktail parties and social events. He was known as a bit of a recluse during his time at Harvard, but he did attend some social functions and joined the staff of the *Harvard Advocate*, a literary magazine to which he contributed some early poems.

One of the key intellectual influences of Eliot’s early years was the 19th-century French poet Jules Laforgue, whom he first encountered in December 1908 in a book by Arthur Symons called *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. He was struck by the idea of a growing interest in consciousness described by Symons, and he seems to have taken from Laforgue in particular the technique of free verse (which Laforgue developed in 1885) and the “willfully defeatist figure” (Gordon 40) that was at the center of his poems after reading Laforgue. This defeatist figure appears in Eliot’s first successful poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which he began writing while at Harvard and was first published in 1915.

Eliot’s decision to go to Paris after graduation from Harvard in 1910 was not really supported by his family, and many of the poems he wrote during this year are rejections of family and Boston life. He spent nine months at the Sorbonne and was disillusioned as quickly as he had been in Boston. He found the city drab and boring and the people apathetic and again spent time “slumming.” One important influence during his time in Paris was the philosopher Henri Bergson, whose ideas about duration—the subjective and continuous lived experience of time—would figure in Eliot’s later work.

Since Paris had not provided him with the poetic inspiration he was seeking, Eliot decided to return to Harvard for graduate study in philosophy.

There, Eliot spent some time studying Indian philosophy, although he eventually focused on the work of F. H. Bradley. In his dissertation on Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* (1893), Eliot examined ideas about subjective experience and perception and the impossibility of grasping absolute truth. Although he did finish his dissertation in 1916, Eliot was never awarded his Ph.D. because he did not return to Harvard to defend his dissertation.

Another key influence on Eliot during this time (and throughout the rest of his poetic career) was the poetry of Dante. He found Dante’s narration of his journey through the inferno extremely relevant to his own struggles with religious faith in modern life. Eliot wrote a group of religious poems in 1914, dealing with topics such as martyrdom and sainthood, which were never published, but he did not feel satisfied with his poetry during this period.

In 1912 Eliot met Emily Hale, and, although they never married, his relationship with Emily became probably the most important of his life. Many of the details of the relationship of Eliot and Emily are unknown and will remain so until the release of her letters in 2019. In later writings Eliot claimed that before he left for Europe in 1914 he told Emily he was in love with her, and he suggested that he had been rejected. Little is known about any contact they may have had between his departure and the time when their relationship was revived in the 1930s.

Eliot decided in 1914 to spend more time abroad and was awarded a fellowship at Oxford. He planned to spend the summer in Germany, but when war broke out, he moved to London in August and then on to Oxford, where he stayed until June 1915. Oxford during this time was very quiet, with many British young men fighting in the war, but Eliot did meet two very important influences during this year: EZRA POUND and Vivienne Haigh-Wood.

Eliot initially impressed Pound by showing him “Prufrock,” and Pound became a key supporter of

Eliot's fledgling poetic career. He encouraged Eliot to remain in London, arguing that poetry from America was not taken seriously in London. Pound turned Eliot firmly toward poetry at a time when he was leaning toward a career as a philosophy professor, and he remained an important "sponsor." Pound also introduced Eliot into literary circles in London.

Eliot met Vivienne (called Vivien) Haigh-Wood, a governess working in Cambridge, in early 1915. They shared an interest in writing, and he was attracted to her adventurousness and quick wit. After the end of the term at Oxford in June, Eliot faced the important decision of whether to return to Harvard and the life of a professor or to stay in London and continue to write poetry. Pound's advice was apparently extremely influential, and, for Eliot, marrying Vivien seemed to be necessarily related to a decision to stay in London. They were married suddenly, on June 26, 1915, without the knowledge of either set of parents. The marriage, although it lasted for many years, was by all accounts a failure, and a trial for both of them. Vivien was chronically ill and often mentally unstable, and these problems exacerbated Eliot's own nervous condition.

Eliot was also relatively isolated socially during this period in London. He attempted to enlist in the U.S. Navy but was rejected because of his health problems and as a result was one of the few young men of his generation to be "left out" of World War I. He and Vivien were somewhat adrift in London society. Through Bertrand Russell, who had been a mentor to him at Harvard, Eliot became acquainted with Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, and other members of the Bloomsbury group, but he did not really fit in with them. They were put off by his proper manners and ostentatious displays of learning. He did eventually, though, develop a friendship with Virginia Woolf and her husband, Leonard, whose Hogarth Press published a book of seven of his poems in 1919. This, combined with the 1917 publication of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, established Eliot as a poet in the eyes of London literary society.

During the initial period after his marriage, Eliot worked as a schoolteacher, but he was not

really suited to this position and did not enjoy it. During the fall and winter of 1916 and 1917 he also gave lectures on English and French literature in London. Eliot began working at Lloyd's Bank in 1917 and did enjoy the regular work of a banker. He was also extremely busy writing reviews for various journals. In 1922 he became the editor of a new literary review (the *Criterion*) financed by Lady Rothermere, the wife of a newspaper owner. All of these responsibilities, which he took very seriously, left him very little free time to write poetry. The continuous stresses of life in London, particularly his marriage to Vivien, led to a nervous breakdown. He spent several months in 1921 in a sanatorium in Lausanne, Switzerland, where his health did in fact improve, and where he was also able to find time to devote to his writing. On his way back he passed through Paris and left *The Waste Land* with Pound, who was to have a substantial effect on the poem's revision. *The Waste Land* was published in October and November 1922 in the *Criterion*.

By 1923 Eliot was ready to leave the bank, but Vivien's continually worsening health meant that he needed financial stability. He had to turn down the editorship of the literary journal the *Nation* because the owners were unable to give him enough of a financial guarantee. The years between 1923 and 1925 were extremely trying, and the Eliots struggled financially. By 1925 Eliot knew he needed a major change. His first thought was to leave his wife, as it was clear by then that their marriage was a complete failure. Vivien's condition grew worse, no doubt at least in part as a result of side effects of the drugs she was prescribed. In September 1925 Eliot convinced Geoffrey Faber to give him a job at his new publishing house, Faber & Gwyer, and his *Poems 1909–1925* was published in November. He threw himself into the work of the publisher, reading and commenting on works from prospective writers. As a director of Faber & Gwyer (later Faber & Faber), Eliot was in constant contact with the literary scene. Under Eliot, Faber launched the careers of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, and Ted Hughes, as well as publishing works by already established figures such as Ezra Pound and James Joyce.

This career change certainly affected Eliot greatly, but the major change to his life in this period was his religious conversion. He met William Force Stead, a poet and Anglican minister, who became his confidant, in 1923. Eliot was baptized into the Church of England in June 1927 and, in November, became a British citizen. After his conversion, Eliot regularly attended Mass, and he became a warden of St. Stephen's Church in 1934, serving in this capacity for 25 years.

In the late 1920s Eliot began once again to correspond with Emily Hale and probably spent time with her when she visited London during the summers. She became for him an ideal of womanly purity, as well as a nostalgic reminder of New England. Eliot's nostalgia increased after his mother's death in 1929 and eventually led to his acceptance of the Norton Professorship at Harvard in 1932. In the winter of 1932–33, Eliot took the train across the country to visit Emily Hale, who was then teaching at Scripps College in Claremont, California. This meeting, and his happiness at being surrounded by family while in Cambridge, left him feeling torn between England and the United States and helped him make up his mind finally to request a deed of separation from Vivien. When he returned to England that summer, he kept his address secret in order to evade Vivien, who refused to accept their separation and in fact never signed the papers. Eliot thought of this period as a sort of “new life,” the most important aspect of which was that Emily Hale came to England on a year's leave beginning in late summer 1934. They spent a great deal of time together, including a trip to Burnt Norton (an old house and accompanying garden, unoccupied at the time of their visit). Eliot's poem of the same name (1935) is often read as a re-creation of a transcendent experience.

Eliot's guilt over his “abandonment” of Vivien, however, left him unable to make a commitment to Emily, who returned to New England and accepted a post at Smith College in 1936. She did continue to visit England each year until 1939, when the outbreak of World War II forced her to stay in America. The deep-seated tension and turmoil Eliot felt about his relationship with Vivien were dramatized

in his play *The Family Reunion*, in which many of his close friends were able to recognize the main character as the playwright. Vivien never stopped feeling abandoned by Eliot, and she began to suspect a conspiracy that allegedly hid him from her. When she was found wandering the streets in 1938, her brother signed the papers to have her placed in a mental institution. While Eliot did not take an active part in her confinement, he made no objection and even arranged to have Vivien's income cover the cost. He never visited her, and she died in the institution on January 23, 1947.

Vivien's death in 1947, which should have left him free to marry Emily Hale (as she and everyone else had been assuming would happen for the previous 15 years), instead caused Eliot what he called a “catastrophe” when he realized that, although he loved Emily, he did not want to marry her. A version of this conflict is dramatized in his play *The Cocktail Party*. He felt that he had “lost his passion” (Gordon 412) and seemed to his friends to age quite a bit in this short time. He and Emily carried on the pattern of their relationship (mostly through letters, with occasional visits) for another 10 years, and he continued to send her copies of all his works. She clearly took comfort in the familiar routine, and she therefore suffered an emotional breakdown when he married again in January 1957. His marriage was not the only betrayal; at this point Eliot broke off all correspondence with Emily as well. It seems that he destroyed her letters to him; hers have been placed in the Princeton University library with instructions that they are not to be opened until 50 years after the death of the survivor (in 2019).

Eliot's *Four Quartets*, written in 1940–42 (except *Burnt Norton*, written in 1935), explore the intersection of time and timelessness. The quartets can be seen as autobiographical, conveying unity and circularity, and it seems likely that Eliot intended these poems as his final ones. After his publication of the *Quartets*, Eliot became perhaps England's predominant poet and was extremely well known, even among the general public. He was in great demand and made many appearances, especially after winning the Nobel Prize in 1948. However, despite his

public profile and popularity, Eliot was quite isolated. He spent much of his time either working or alone in the dark rooms of the flat he shared with his friend John Hayward, and even his closest friends were not privy to his inner thoughts.

Eliot's marriage to his secretary, Valerie Fletcher, in January 1957 took everyone who knew him by surprise. Valerie was 30 (Eliot was 68), and she had admired and felt a connection with the poet since first hearing his poetry as a girl. After his marriage, Eliot withdrew from the few friends he had at the time, but by all accounts he was extremely happy, and the Eliots lived in a very loving and devoted marriage until his death of emphysema in January 1965. Since his death, Valerie has devoted the rest of her life to preserving Eliot's papers, editing his works, and compiling his letters. According to Eliot's wishes, after his death he was cremated and his ashes were buried at East Coker, in Somerset, England, from which Andrew Eliot had traveled to Boston in 1670. His burial thus effectively returned him to the place of his ancestors.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915)

Although “Prufrock” adopts the narrative voice of a middle-aged man, Eliot in fact completed this poem in 1911 when he was not quite 23. It was first published in 1915 and established the young Eliot as an important poet. The poem describes the speaker's alienation and disillusionment in a lonely urban setting.

The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* suggests that what is said in the poem is not meant for the ears of anyone in the world, and it may also imply that Prufrock considers himself to be in a kind of modern hell. The poem's tone is confessional, personal, and reflective, as Prufrock takes stock of his life and attempts to answer some “overwhelming question” (ll. 10, 93). The title creates irony through the unlikely combination of the romantic suggestion of “love song” and the dull, unheroic sounding name (it is perhaps interesting that *T. Stearns Eliot* was an early form of the poet's signature).

The “you and I” of the first line seems to indicate that Prufrock has two selves—the outward, public figure who attends social gatherings, and the inner philosopher contemplating the important questions of life. His inability to fuse the two into a coherent whole reflects his overwhelming timidity (“do I dare?” [l. 38]).

As an illustration of this timidity, imagery of paralysis runs throughout the poem, beginning with the initial simile and continuing with suggestions of the repetition of existence (“For I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons . . .” [ll. 49–50]), and the comparison of Prufrock to an insect pinned to a wall (ll. 57–58). Prufrock also reveals his insecurity, one contribution to which is certainly his isolation from society. The refrain “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (ll. 13–14, 35–36) sets him apart from this type of social conversation; he is concerned with what “They” will say about him (ll. 41, 44) and does not want to “Disturb the universe” (l. 46). He is particularly uncertain in the company of women (stanza 10).

Prufrock's indecision is also key, and there is a repeated motif of delay or hesitation (even if he is “not Prince Hamlet” [l. 111]—another expression of his feelings of inferiority). Prufrock questions even the purpose of a search for meaning, and there is plenty of miscommunication (“That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all” (ll. 97–98); “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” [l. 104]). Prufrock also seems to feel that his life has passed its prime (“I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker” [l. 84]) and is perhaps even afraid of death (l. 86).

The poem is commonly read as a modernist text, because of its portrayal of Prufrock's alienation, suggestions of meaninglessness (or at least of the difficulty of finding meaning), somewhat fragmented structure, and description of a disillusionment with modern society. It is also notable for its successful employment of free verse and significant allusions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the references to Prufrock's perceived inferiority or insecurity throughout the poem.

To what extent do you think this aspect of Prufrock might reflect Eliot himself?

- Note the imagery that is used to describe the city, in particular in the first four stanzas. What atmosphere is created in the poem, and how does this contribute to the portrayal of Prufrock's state of mind?
- Choose one significant allusion or set of allusions in the poem (for example, the allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) and examine the function of these references. How do they add to the meaning of Eliot's work?
- Compare the mood and atmosphere of "Prufrock" to those of Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night." In what ways do both poems suggest the alienation and isolation of their speakers?

"Sweeney among the Nightingales" (1919)

In this early poem, the title character, who is described through the use of primitive and animalistic language, encounters two treacherous women one night in a bar or restaurant. "Sweeney" is somewhat unusual among Eliot's works in that it does not employ free verse; instead, the four-line stanzas follow a (mostly) regular pattern of iambic tetrameter, rhyming *abcb*, and the simplicity of this pattern contrasts with the foreboding atmosphere.

The epigraph ("Alas, I am struck with a mortal blow within") is the voice of Agamemnon, crying out from the palace as he is murdered by Clytemnestra, his wife. Throughout the poem Sweeney is compared with Agamemnon. The comparison culminates in the final stanza, but the intent is not clear; perhaps Eliot is merely using Agamemnon as an example of someone betrayed by women. Eliot may also be mocking Sweeney by comparing him with the heroic Greek king.

There is a nightmarish atmosphere throughout, and a sense of foreboding is created, beginning in the second quatrain's references to the "stormy moon" (l. 5) and to "Death" and "the Raven" (l. 7). The constellations are "veiled" (l. 10), and even the reference to Orion (the hunter) could be read as a threat to Sweeney.

The women in the poem are presented as dangerous, even preying on Sweeney. The "person in the Spanish cape" (l. 11), who is not revealed as female until the "She" in line 15, is destructive, overturning a coffee cup and then seeming unconcerned with her subsequent yawn. Rachel "Tears at the grapes with murderous paws" (l. 24), and the two women are "thought to be in league" (l. 26) and operating a "gambit" (l. 28). Sweeney (the "man with heavy eyes" [l. 27]) seems to escape their clutches but then returns to "grin" at the window, and he is unlikely to be protected by the host of the institution, who is busy conversing "at the door apart" (l. 34), or by the nearby "Convent of the Sacred Heart" (l. 36).

The animal imagery in the poem is striking, serving to dehumanize Sweeney. In the first stanza alone, he is compared to an ape, a zebra, and a giraffe, and the descriptions suggesting apes (such as "Letting his arms hang down" [l. 2]) in particular suggest that Sweeney is primitive. The man in brown is called a "vertebrate" (l. 21), and Rachel has "paws" (l. 24). The nightingales singing at the end of the poem, as they had sung at Agamemnon's death, suggest ultimately that there is no difference between the ancient tragedy and the modern plot.

For Discussion or Writing

- Many critics feel that Sweeney will be assassinated sometime shortly after the narrative of the poem ends. What is your opinion about Sweeney's fate? Use specific evidence from the poem to support your argument.
- Compare the depiction of women in this poem to the way women are portrayed in part 2 ("A Game of Chess") of *The Waste Land*. In what ways do both poems present women as dangerous?
- Eliot's original title for "Prufrock" was "Prufrock among the Women," suggesting a possible parallel between these two poems. How are Prufrock and Sweeney in similar situations with respect to their interactions with women? How does the difference in narrative perspective between the two poems influence your perception of these interactions?

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)

Eliot first published this essay in the *Egoist*, and it is one of his most well-known articulations of his own literary theories. It is also often considered an expression of some of the key ideas of literary modernism. The two key aspects of the argument Eliot makes here are, first of all, the necessity of being aware of the past (“tradition”) when writing poetry, and, second, the separation between a poem and the poet who writes it. It is important to reach an understanding of the arguments Eliot makes in this essay in order to grasp fully the reasons behind the allusive nature of Eliot’s own work, and in order to consider the relationship (if any) between Eliot’s poetry and his own life.

In considering the role of tradition in poetry, Eliot rejects the common practice of praising a poet by emphasizing “those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (Abrams 2,171). He claims that “not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (2,171). This assertion is somewhat paradoxical, as Eliot argues that elements of a poem that refer to or invoke the work of previous poets can in fact be the most individual creations of a poet.

However, what Eliot calls tradition is not simply a blind following of the previous generations. He considers it to be much broader, involving “the historical sense” (2,171). Eliot describes this historical sense as a consciousness of all the great writers of the past and of the fact that these great writers continue to exist and to inform the present; it is “a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [the poet’s] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (2,171).

This contention leads to his claim that “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (2,171). Eliot feels that any artist can only be considered and evaluated with relation to the entire tradition. Any new work of art, he argues, modifies and alters the entirety of the tradition

at the moment of its creation, so that “the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (2,171). This claim leads him to the concept of poetry as a living whole.

Related to this idea, Eliot moves on in part 2 of the essay to discuss his idea of the impersonality of poetry. He says that “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (2,173). This is because an artist must be constantly absorbing the past and therefore surrendering himself to what is more valuable. Therefore, Eliot argues that successful art involves a process of depersonalization. He analogizes the mind of the poet to a shred of platinum, which acts as a catalyst in a chemical reaction. Through this analogy, he suggests that the mind is necessary for the “reaction” (or the writing of the poem) to take place, but that it is itself unchanged by the process. The other elements of this reaction, according to Eliot, are emotions and feelings, and one or both of these may be present in different quantities. “The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (2,174). In this way, the mind of the poet, according to Eliot, transforms the emotions and feelings experienced by the poet himself into those expressed by the poem, and these are not the same feelings and emotions: “Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality” (2,174). Thus Eliot argues that there is a separation between poem and poet: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (2,175).

Some have seen a contradiction between Eliot’s theory of impersonality expressed here and some of his later writings, in which he argues that personality is necessary for high art. However, this seeming contradiction can be explained by considering the idea of a split or double self of the poet—the outward self, which he displays in society, is that from which he escapes in poetry, but the inner, intellec-

tual, personal self is that which is really expressed in his art.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the paradox inherent in Eliot's claim that "not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." How can you explain this seeming contradiction? Which parts of Eliot's own work might be considered "the best," according to this definition?
2. Why do you think Eliot places such importance on a consciousness of the past in his discussions of poetry? Does this seem to be particularly relevant to poetry as a genre, or do you think (and would Eliot think) that this consciousness of the past would be equally important to novels, stories, and plays as well?
3. Compare Eliot's discussion of tradition in this essay with that in the first chapter of F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1960). Consider in particular to what extent Eliot would agree with Leavis's explanation of the relationship between great writers and tradition.

"Gerontion" (1920)

"Gerontion" is a dramatic monologue, fragmented in both style and content, in which Eliot's speaker contemplates the emptiness of his last years, considering a decline in Christian faith and the state of Europe in 1919. Some critics have argued that the poem was originally intended as a sort of preface to *The Waste Land*, and it certainly makes use of similar imagery. The extended metaphor of the mind as a house is used to illustrate the speaker's decay, disillusionment, and lack of belonging, and the end of the poem shows nature (in the form of the trade winds) driving Gerontion toward "a sleepy corner" (l. 73), perhaps his final resting place.

The poem's portrayal of a barren landscape is linked to its suggestions of the isolation of the modern condition. The poem opens with images of sterility (including "a dry month" [l. 1], "wait-

ing for rain" [l. 2], and "the salt marsh" [l. 5]), and this idea continues with the descriptions of decay in cities such as Antwerp, Brussels, and London. The anonymous high-class foreigners who appear in lines 23–29 (and again in line 67) seem to be engaged in meaningless activities and linked with human faults (i.e., *Silvero* suggests money, and *von Kulp* may be taken from the Latin for fault). Isolation is implied not only by the allusion to the Battle of Thermopylae ("the hot gates" [l. 3]) but also by the succeeding lines' discussion of fighting, in that here Eliot may be expressing his disappointment at being "left out" of the war, which he saw as a defining event for his generation. The paradoxical condition of modern life is illustrated through contradictions such as "Unnatural vices / Are fathered by our heroism" (ll. 44–45).

Along with isolation are difficulties with knowledge and with communication. The phrase "The word within a word, unable to speak a word" (l. 18) suggests that knowledge cannot be passed on. History is personified as a deceptive woman (ll. 34–41), implying a possible reason for the current condition of the world: We have not been able to learn anything from the past. The speaker of the poem would like to communicate: "I would meet you upon this honestly" (l. 54) but has lost "passion" (l. 57) and all five senses (l. 59) and does not know how to make "closer contact" (l. 60). He thus remains alienated from society.

The second stanza begins to suggest Christianity's decline; line 17 refers to a passage from Matthew ("Master, we would see a sign from thee"), and the following line is taken from a Lancelot Andrewes sermon on this Matthew passage. However, "We would see a sign!" seems more desperate in tone than the biblical source, and the "word within the word" (a reference to the Christ child) is "swaddled with darkness" (l. 19) and "unable to speak a word" (l. 18). Instead, Christ is "the tiger" (l. 20) and thus seems threatening (as is the reference to Judas). Likewise, the reference to the Eucharist in line 22 is disturbingly inverted later in the poem, when the tiger "devours" us (l. 48), with the sentence structure of this line reflecting this inversion.

Although the house in the poem is literally a boarding house in which Gerontion lives, it is also used metaphorically, but it is only with the final two lines that we understand the connection between the house and the mind of the speaker. After this, lines such as “My house is a decayed house” (l. 7) and “I / Stiffen in a rented house” (ll. 49–50) take on added significance as illustrating that the speaker is uncomfortable with his own thoughts and feels his mind fading.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What are the similarities between Gerontion and Prufrock? Do they seem to have similar concerns about the modern condition?
2. Critics have argued that Eliot's early poems often show a distrust of Christianity. Do you think this is the case in “Gerontion”? Compare the view of Christianity presented in this poem with that presented in one of Eliot's later poems, such as “Journey of the Magi” or “Ash Wednesday.”
3. Examine closely the extended description of history in lines 36–43 of the poem. What are Gerontion's complaints about history? How are these complaints related to the poem's portrayal of the modern world as decayed and corrupt?

The Waste Land (1922)

The Waste Land was published in the same year as two other seminal modernist texts—*Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses*. It is perhaps Eliot's best-known work, and certainly his most difficult. It is crucial to have an edition of the poem that is effectively footnoted in order to follow the myriad allusions. Much of the poem's difficulty stems from its lack of a coherent narrative; it instead presents a series of scenes and images from which a reader must attempt to extract meaning. Its overwhelming message (and its legacy) is of the barrenness and decay of the modern Western world, and the fragmentation of the poem reflects the confusion and uncertainty Eliot (and other modernist writers) believed characterized modern existence.

Eliot, in a general note to the poem, acknowledged that much of the work's symbolism was suggested by a book by Jessie L. Weston, in which she linked ancient fertility myths to Christianity, focusing on the archetypal story of the Fisher King. The Fisher King, whose death or illness produces drought and desolation in the land and who can only be revived by a knight who finds some form of the Grail, was, according to Weston, parallel to the Christian God. In the poem, “Eliot, following Weston, thus uses a great variety of mythological and religious material, both Occidental and Oriental, to paint a symbolic picture of the modern Waste Land and the need for regeneration” (Abrams 2,146).

The dedication to Ezra Pound, “the better craftsman,” is in thanks for the enormous amount of assistance Pound provided in editing the poem for Eliot. The epigraph refers to the Cumaean Sibyl in Greek mythology, who was granted immortality but forgot to ask for eternal youth. This is why she says, in this passage, “I want to die,” and her desire for escape is fitting as an introduction to the poem and its portrayal of the entrapments of a modern wasteland. There are suggestions throughout the poem of being trapped, some of which explicitly evoke the Sibyl's dilemma: “I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing” (ll. 39–40). Tiresias is also in this type of in-between state: “I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts . . .” (ll. 218–219). Perhaps this entrapment in a difficult liminal state is one result of the modern wasteland.

The poem's bleak imagery begins immediately. The opening suggests that “April is the cruellest month” because it provides false hope; although there are “lilacs,” the land is still “dead” (ll. 1–2). This desolation is also suggested by “this stony rubbish” (l. 20) and the suggestion in the following lines that man knows “only / A heap of broken images” (ll. 21–22) and that the landscape is marked by “the dead tree” (l. 23) and “the dry stone” (l. 24). The references to dryness continue throughout, culminating just before the thunder speaks in stanza 5 in its “empty cisterns” and “exhausted wells” (l. 385). Here even the sacred

river Ganges—bathing in which (Hindu legend held) would give renewal to a person—is dried up (l. 396).

Imagery specifically relating to London occurs in the last stanza of part 1, where Eliot compares the businessmen flowing over London Bridge during the morning commute to Dante's flow of the damned into hell, and again in the descriptions of the Thames in part 3. In the last half of the "Unreal City" stanza, the use of first person, the reference to "one I knew" (l. 69), and the use of Baudelaire's phrase "mon semblable—mon frère" [my likeness—my brother] (l. 76) all suggest that the speaker is in fact one of these businessmen, and Eliot himself would have known this daily ritual well from his time working at Lloyd's Bank. In part 3 Eliot takes his refrain ("Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" [l. 176]) from Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion*, a marriage song, adding irony to his descriptions of the river as filled with garbage and infested with rats.

The City returns in part 3 with an idyllic description of St. Magnus Martyr, a church near London Bridge: "the walls / Of Magnus Martyr hold / Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold" (ll. 263–265); however, this seems to be but a brief glimpse of a lost world, and the following stanzas (which Eliot called the "Song of the Thames-daughters") return to the dingy imagery of the river.

The sterility of the wasteland world extends to the fruitlessness or lack of fulfillment in sexual encounters. This is evident in the relationship between Lil and Albert in the last stanza of part 2 (in which Lil seems to have lost her youthful good looks as a result of a drugstore abortion) and in the mention of the doomed relationship between Queen Elizabeth and the earl of Leicester in the second Thames-daughter's song in part 3. The final Thames-daughter also describes an unfulfilling sexual encounter in a canoe on the river. Tiresias observes this type of encounter between the typist and the "young man carbuncular" (l. 231); the typist's reaction after the exit of her "departed lover" (l. 250)—"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over" (l. 252)—illustrates a modern indifference

to sexual coupling and hints at the meaningless of life in general. Even conversations are fruitless, as in the dialogue in part 2, a representative line of which is "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?" (l. 126).

Despite its lack of narrative, the poem does feature several distinct characters. Madame Sosostri, the fortune-teller, is introduced in part 1 of the poem, reading the tarot cards for an unidentified listener. Her reference to "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" (l. 47) anticipates the "Death by Water" section of the poem. "The Hanged Man" (l. 55) symbolizes the self-sacrifice of the fertility god, who is killed so that his resurrection can generate fertility; therefore, her inability to locate this card is another indication of the barrenness of the modern world.

Tiresias makes his appearance in part 3, and Eliot, in a note, called him "the most important personage in the poem," claiming that "what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem." Using Tiresias as an observer is somewhat ironic, since he is blind, but in his literary appearances (as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*) Tiresias is often portrayed as able to see (metaphorically, through his gift of prophecy) more clearly than others, despite his literal blindness. Here he "Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest" (l. 229). Tiresias is a particularly fitting observer for this modern wasteland, as he had previously observed the tragic events leading to the years of plague and desolation in the city of Thebes. Indeed, parallels like this between the historical (or mythical) and the modern are created throughout the poem, suggesting that the emptiness described here has in fact been evident throughout history.

Phlebas the Phoenician is mourned in the brief part 4 of the poem, and his "death by water" is often seen by critics as a death without resurrection. The final line of this section provides a warning of mortality for all readers. In part 5 of the poem, as earlier, there is no water (although it is imagined: "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop" [l. 358]); there is merely "dry sterile thunder without rain" (l. 342). Ironically, the only time there is sufficient water in this wasteland, it produces death.

The final two stanzas of part 5 of the poem contain the most significant allusions to Eastern philosophy, which was a particular interest of Eliot's, although it is also referenced in the title of part 3. The Fire Sermon was preached by the Buddha against the fires of passions that, he argued, prevent people's regeneration. The title of part 5 refers to a Hindu fable in which different groups interpret the divine voice (expressed as thunder) saying *DA* in different ways: *Datta*, "to give alms"; *Dayadhvam*, "to have compassion"; *Damyata*, "to practice self-control." In the poem, these interpretations of the thunder's "DA" seem to provoke its listeners to question whether they have in fact performed any of these honorable actions: "*Datta*: what have we given?" (l. 401). Then, after a final stanza that may be spoken by a Fisher King figure wondering whether he can "set [his] lands in order" (l. 426), the poem ends with the repetition of "Shantih shantih shantih" (l. 434), a traditional benediction, but one that is unfamiliar to any Western audience, perhaps suggesting that any final blessing is ultimately beyond our understanding.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The first line of the poem alludes to the opening of the General Prologue of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "Whan that Aprille with his shoures swoote." In addition, George Orwell alludes to both Chaucer and Eliot in the opening of his novel *1984*: "It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." Examine all three openings and discuss the differences in tone. How does a knowledge of the earlier works inform your reading of the later ones?
2. Research the role of Tiresias in Greek mythology, particularly as he appears in Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy. To what extent do you see Tiresias as a fitting "narrator" for this poem, based on the basis of his previous history?
3. Compare the vision of the modern world Eliot develops here with the portrayal of modern civilization in W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming." In what ways do both poets suggest an ominous future, and does either of them provide any hope?
4. How far do you believe the poem itself fits the description "fragments shored against my ruins" (l. 431)? Can you understand the entire poem as a series of fragments assembled by the speaker in order to try to come to terms with his situation? Choose another modernist poem (for example, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," by Wallace Stevens) and discuss whether the same definition could apply.

"The Hollow Men" (1925)

"The Hollow Men" was written during a period in which Eliot was on leave from the bank, having suffered a nervous breakdown, struggling with his failing marriage, and contemplating his impending religious conversion, and, as was often the case, the poem seems to reflect aspects of his personal life with its bleak tone and suggestions of the emptiness and fragmentation of modern existence.

The first epigraph, the announcement of Kurtz's death by one of the natives in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, evokes the failed quest of a great man. The second refers to an English custom followed on Guy Fawkes Day and suggests the custom of burning the bearer of guilt (in this case, in the form of a straw effigy). This image directly anticipates the description of "stuffed men" "filled with straw" in part 1 of the poem.

Part 1 vividly evokes the emptiness Eliot feels pervades modern existence (expressing a typically modernist sentiment). Not only are the men described as "hollow" and "stuffed," but their minds are empty ("headpiece filled with straw" [l. 4]), and even their conversation is "meaningless" (l. 7). The use of the first-person plural illustrates that the poem's speaker considers himself one of these "hollow men."

"Shape without form" (l. 11) is a recurring image that also emphasizes emptiness and meaninglessness and links to the discussion in part 5 of the poem of the gap between the potential and the actual: "Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow" (ll. 72–76). The poem seems strongly

concerned with the failure to realize some goal or potential (as illustrated by Kurtz and by the incomplete prayer in lines 93 and 95). The “hollow men” in the poem are those who have failed to make a decision about their own actions and therefore remain in an “in-between” state.

Part 3 of the poem describes the modern landscape as a “dead land” (l. 39) and wonders whether this barren landscape anticipates “death’s other kingdom” (l. 46). Part 4 continues this imagery of lifelessness, referring specifically to hell, with the damned “gathered on this beach of the tumid river” (l. 60), an allusion to the river Acheron described in Dante’s *Inferno*. It suggests blindness and darkness with phrases such as “there are no eyes here” (l. 53), “we grope together” (l. 58), and “twilight kingdom” (l. 65), and this state seems likely to continue unless Christ (alluded to as “the perpetual star / Multifoliate rose” [ll. 63–64], another image from Dante) grants salvation.

The verse opening the fragmentary part 5 of the poem replaces the mulberry bush, a traditional fertility symbol, with “the prickly pear” (l. 68), a plant found in the desert, continuing the sterile imagery found earlier in the poem. The final lines of the poem (another parody of the children’s song about the mulberry bush) suggest that the world as a whole will peter out quietly, without fanfare.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the connections between this poem and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Do you think the poem presents an accurate portrayal of Kurtz, who is described in the novel as being “hollow at the core” (Abrams 1,802)?
2. Examine the poem’s portrayal of religion. Does the poem suggest the possibility of salvation? Consider whether you think this might relate to Eliot’s personal religious contemplations.
3. Trace the different ways in which the poem suggests a failure to achieve potential. Compare the suggestions of failure in this poem with those in Eliot’s “Prufrock.”
4. What is the effect of repetition in the poem? In particular, what do you think are the functions of the repeated images of eyes in parts 2 and 4 and of the repeated words and phrases in part 5 of the poem?

“Journey of the Magi” (1927)

Eliot wrote “Journey of the Magi” shortly after his conversion to the Church of England. A dramatic monologue, the poem adopts the voice of one of the three wise men who traveled to see the birth of Jesus, recalling the experience in old age. The speaker remembers the hardships of the journey and the way the experience changed the lives of the wise men afterward.

In the New Testament, the three wise men are from the East, and the poem evokes a contrast between the land of origin of the magi and the landscape through which they are traveling. They have traded “summer palaces on slopes” and “silken girls bringing sherbet” (ll. 9, 10) for “hostile” cities and “dirty” villages, in the “very dead of winter” (ll. 14, 15, 5). The use of anaphora in lines 10–15 (the repetition of *And* at the beginning of successive lines) emphasizes the accumulation of hardships during the journey, and indeed this was enough for the wise men to have doubts about their purpose, as they heard voices “saying / That this was all folly” (ll. 19–20).

The arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem is described in the second stanza of the poem with more vibrant imagery, including references to “a temperate valley” (l. 21), “smelling of vegetation” (l. 22), and “a running stream” (l. 23)—details symbolic of the new life given by the birth of Christ. However, this stanza also includes allusions to details from the later story of Christ: The “three trees” (l. 24) suggest the three crosses, and the description of men “dicing for pieces of silver” (l. 27) refers to soldiers dicing for Christ’s garments and to Judas’s betrayal for 30 pieces of silver. These allusions create some ambiguity, as the birth of Christ eventually leads to his suffering but also to salvation for mankind.

The speaker’s meditations about birth and death in the last stanza maintain this ambiguity. The birth the wise men have witnessed seems to have

- maps/poets/a_f/eliot/eliot.htm. Accessed April 6, 2009.
- Gallup, Donald. *T. S. Eliot: A Bibliography*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969.
- Gardner, Helen. *The Art of T. S. Eliot*. London: Cresset Press, 1958.
- Gordon, Lyndall. *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*. London: Vintage, 1998. (Revised edition of two earlier volumes: *Eliot's Early Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, and *Eliot's New Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988.)
- Kenner, Hugh. *T. S. Eliot: The Invisible Poet*. London: Methuen, 1965.
- Moody, A. David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Scofield, Martin. *T. S. Eliot: The Poems*. British and Irish Authors. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Tomlin, E. W. F. *T. S. Eliot: A Friendship*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Van Aelst, Heather. A Hypertext Version of T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men." Available online. URL: <http://aduni.org/~heather/occs/honors/Poem.htm>. Accessed April 6, 2009.

Rebecca Strong



WILLIAM FAULKNER (1897–1962)

. . . it still seems to me impossible to evaluate a man's work. None of mine ever quite suited me[;] each time I wrote the last word I would think, if I could just do it over, I would do it better, maybe even right. But I was too busy; there was always another one.

(qtd. in Cox 73)

William Faulkner is widely considered one of the very best American novelists (perhaps even *the* best) of the 20th century. His works often focus on the same large cast of recurring characters inhabiting the same small area of northern Mississippi—the area in or near the fictional town of Jefferson in a fictional place called Yoknapatawpha County. Jefferson was closely based on Oxford, Mississippi, where Faulkner spent much of his life and did much of his best writing. Nevertheless, despite his preoccupation with the people and events in one tiny portion of the American South, Faulkner won worldwide recognition (including a Nobel Prize) both for his themes and for his stylistic and technical innovations. He was a “regional” writer who appealed to an international audience, and his influence and fame (already strong during the latter years of his career) have grown even stronger in the decades since his death.

Most of the facts of the novelist's life are laid out clearly in the superbly detailed “Chronology” prepared by Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk. William Cuthbert Falkner (he added the *u* to his name later in life) was born on September 25, 1897, in New Albany, Mississippi, the first child of Maud Butler Falkner and Murry Cuthbert Falkner. On his father's side he was descended from a fairly prominent line of local notables, including a great-grandfather who had been a planter, a railroad pioneer, a Confederate colonel, a politician, and even the

author of a best-selling novel who was shot to death by a former friend and business partner. Faulkner's paternal grandfather was, in turn, a leading local businessman and political figure, while the novelist's father was first employed by the family railroad and then (after it was sold) moved his family to Oxford, Mississippi, and started a series of small businesses. Young William (along with his younger brothers, Murry, John, and Dean) grew up in a household that included not only his parents but also his maternal grandmother and an elderly black caretaker whom Faulkner loved and admired. Although William was never much interested in conventional schooling, he was an intelligent boy who read widely and began writing poems at an early age. His writing led to a lifelong friendship with an older local boy named Phil Stone, who encouraged Faulkner's literary interests and helped introduce him to the work of significant modern writers. Meanwhile, the adolescent Faulkner had also taken an interest in a local girl named Estelle Oldham; by 1918 she was ready to elope with him even though she was engaged to someone else, but both sets of parents disapproved of her relationship with Faulkner, and so her marriage proceeded as planned. Faulkner, in the meantime, tried to enlist as a pilot in the army after the United States entered World War I, but he was rejected because of his small size and low weight. After spending some time with Phil Stone, who was studying at

Yale (where Faulkner met a number of up-and-coming writers), the future novelist was accepted for pilot training in Canada by Britain's Royal Air Force. The war, however, ended before he could ever get into the air. Nevertheless, this fact did not prevent him from later claiming that he had been injured in a plane crash during his training.

Back in the Deep South after returning from Canada, Faulkner continued to write poetry and had his first significant magazine publication in 1919. After registering that year at the University of Mississippi (located in Oxford), he became involved in the campus literary and theatrical scene, even writing an experimental play, but by 1921 he had left the university for a short stay in New York City, where he worked briefly in a bookstore. By the end of the year, however, he was back in Oxford and had taken a job as the university's postmaster—a job to which he never showed much devotion but that did give him plenty of time to read and write. By 1924 he had self-published a collection of poetry (*The Marble Faun*), but in the same year he lost his position as leader of a Boy Scout troop thanks to his drinking, and he also lost his job as university postmaster because of his lack of serious attention to the job. Faulkner, however, was not brokenhearted at this loss, memorably remarking that “I reckon I’ll be at the beck and call of folks with money all my life, but thank God I won’t ever again have to be at the beck and call of every son of a bitch who’s got two cents to buy a stamp” (qtd. in Blotner and Polk, “Chronology” 997). By 1925 he was living in New Orleans, where he made the acquaintance of SHERWOOD ANDERSON (the influential novelist who had helped promote the careers of so many young American writers) and where he began contributing frequently to local periodicals. By this time he had written a novel, which Anderson recommended to his own New York publishers. Before the book was accepted, however, Faulkner set off on a freighter bound for Europe, where he spent much of his time in Paris, visiting art galleries, doing his own writing, and taking occasional side trips, including a brief journey to England. By the end of 1925 he was back in the United States

and was awaiting publication of his novel, *Soldiers’ Pay*, which appeared in February 1926 to generally good reviews. Nevertheless, despite Anderson’s role in promoting this book, by this time his relationship with Faulkner had become strained (thanks, in part, to Faulkner’s role in contributing to a book that mocked Anderson’s writings).

In 1927 Faulkner’s second novel (*Mosquitoes*) was published and he was working on two other books, including a work he planned to title *Flags in the Dust*. The latter book, however, met with repeated rejection from publishers to whom Faulkner submitted it in 1928—a fact he found discouraging, but a fact that also prompted him to begin to work on a new book written mainly for his own satisfaction. Although *Flags in the Dust* (now titled *Sartoris*) was eventually published by a major New York press early in 1929, it was Faulkner’s newest manuscript, titled *The Sound and the Fury*, that would help change the course not only of his career but of modern American fiction. Highly innovative in structure, style, and technique, that book remains one of the most influential of all modern novels, and it was always the work of which Faulkner was the most proud. The book was quickly accepted for publication, but the same was not true of his newest novel, *Sanctuary*, which publishers initially considered too scandalous to print. Undeterred, however, Faulkner quickly completed another novel, *As I Lay Dying*, which was as pathbreaking in its own way as *The Sound and the Fury*. That latter book had been published in early October 1929 (not long before the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression) and was receiving good reviews even if few copies were being sold. Nevertheless, Faulkner (who was now working at the university power plant in Oxford) had a major reason besides literary achievement to be pleased: In the midsummer of 1929 he had finally been able to marry his old sweetheart, Estelle Oldham, whose first marriage had ended in divorce. By the beginning of the 1930s, then, he had thus become not only a rising novelist but also a husband and the stepfather of Estelle’s two children.

Given his new responsibilities, Faulkner became increasingly concerned in the 1930s with earning

a decent living. He began to write short fiction for national magazines, sometimes earning more for a single story than he had for any of his novels. With this income he was able to buy a large but dilapidated house in Oxford, which he began repairing. Meanwhile, there was also good news on other fronts: Both British and French publishers had begun to show interest in his work; *As I Lay Dying* was printed in October 1930, and even *Sanctuary*—once considered too shocking to publish—was accepted and was issued (after extensive last-minute revisions) in March 1931, receiving good reviews and generating healthy sales. Furthermore, a collection of short stories, also published in 1931, also sold well; new publishers were courting him; he was making a wide range of new friends among the New York literary establishment; and his income was growing. Not all the news was positive, however: Early in 1931 the Faulkners had lost a newborn daughter, and by the end of the year Faulkner (always a heavy drinker) was so afflicted by his addiction to alcohol that he had to be retrieved by Estelle from New York (where he had been visiting) after friends became concerned. Nevertheless, Faulkner remained productive: Early in 1932 he finished *Light in August* (another masterpiece), and by spring of that year he found himself in California, where he began his long association with the Hollywood film industry as a scriptwriter and script consultant. The death of his father at the end of that summer meant that Faulkner now became the chief financial supporter of his widowed mother, but the money he was earning from his involvement with the movies (including sale of the screen rights to *Sanctuary*) was good for that era and even helped him continue with the renovations on his house in Oxford. Indeed, Faulkner soon had enough disposable income that he finally realized his longtime dream of becoming a pilot in 1933, even buying his own plane, and he was also able to purchase additional property in Mississippi. The best news of 1933, however, was the birth of his daughter, Jill, on June 24.

In 1934 a new collection of short stories appeared; further profitable work in Hollywood ensued; and another novel (*Pylon*) was completed.

During this time Faulkner was also hard at work on an even more important novel—*Absalom, Absalom!*—but his personal life was complicated, in November 1935, by the accidental death of his brother Dean and by the beginning of his own longtime affair with Meta Doherty Carpenter, a woman from Mississippi who was also employed in Hollywood. Faulkner usually resented his own need to work there, since his film duties interrupted his devotion to his own fiction writing, and so his relations with the Hollywood studios were often fitful and stormy. His drinking did not help, and Estelle herself had also acquired a strong taste for alcohol. Nonetheless, *Absalom, Absalom!* was published to impressive reviews (but less impressive sales) in October 1936, and by the end of the year Faulkner was finally able to pay off the mortgage on his Oxford house. In 1937 he spent time working in Hollywood, doing his own writing back in Mississippi, and visiting (and drinking) in New York. Indeed, he drank so heavily while there that he passed out in his hotel room and was severely burned when he lay, unconscious, with his back against a scalding steam pipe. Recuperation was lengthy and painful, but Faulkner remained productive: His latest novel, *The Unvanquished*, was issued early in 1938, and screen rights for the book were quickly sold. Faulkner purchased a large farm near Oxford (on which he planned to raise mules), all the while continuing his work on various writing projects, including a new novel titled *The Wild Palms*, which was published to significant commercial success at the start of 1939. By this time he had been elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and by the end of that year his short story titled “Barn Burning” had been awarded a major literary prize. More stories were written in 1940, and in addition a new novel (*The Hamlet*) was published that year, followed in early 1942 by a collection of fiction (Faulkner called it a novel) titled *Go Down, Moses*.

By this time, of course, the United States had entered World War II. Faulkner found himself back in Hollywood (always a source of income, if also of frustration), where he worked intermittently throughout the war. By the time the con-

flict ended in 1945, a well-known critic named Malcolm Cowley was hard at work on an anthology—to be titled *The Portable Faulkner*—that he and Faulkner hoped would call important attention to the significance of Faulkner's body of work. When the book was published in 1946, it did just that, and in fact Cowley's collection is often credited with reviving Faulkner's reputation by reminding American readers of a novelist who enjoyed far more acclaim in Europe than in his native land. In any case, by 1948 Faulkner had published a new book, *Intruder in the Dust*, which became his best-selling novel to that point; screen rights for this work were quickly purchased, and by the end of the year its author had been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1949 the film version of *Intruder in the Dust* premiered in his hometown; one of his short stories won a major prize; and a collection of short fiction was issued late that fall. By summer 1950 *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* was published, but by far the major event of that year was the announcement that Faulkner had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Both the award itself and the inspiring speech Faulkner made in accepting it won him widespread new attention and respect. Finally he had achieved, in his own country, the kind of serious recognition he had long enjoyed abroad. From now until his death little more than a decade later, awards, academic positions, speaking invitations, government assignments, and other kinds of distinctions would flow in upon him. The man who had never finished high school had become one of his country's most distinguished writers. He also increasingly became a widely published commentator on social affairs, especially on matters related to the racial problems of the South. Faulkner favored voluntary integration of the public schools and was generally liberal in his attitudes toward racial issues—a stance that often annoyed less progressive whites, especially in his native state. In other ways, however, his social views were often traditional and conservative.

Throughout the 1950s Faulkner continued to be productive, despite frequent back pain, various injuries, and persistent problems with alcohol.

In 1951 he published a partially dramatic work, *Requiem for a Nun*, on which he had worked with Joan Williams, a young admirer with whom he had become romantically involved. In 1954 he published a new novel, called *A Fable*, on which he had been laboring for many years; it won the National Book Award for fiction in 1955. That same year he published *Big Woods*, a group of stories about hunting. Meanwhile, his romantic entanglement with another young woman—Jean Stein—complicated his personal life and helped provoke his wife to offer a divorce (an offer he refused) in 1957. During that same year, his newest novel (*The Town*) received a mixed reception from the critics, but by this point Faulkner was receiving increasing respect from academics (becoming writer in residence, for instance, at the University of Virginia) and was also being asked more and more to represent the United States on goodwill trips abroad. While living in Charlottesville, Virginia, he began to spend greater and greater time participating in the hunts on horseback organized by wealthy local residents, even though he occasionally suffered serious injuries in accidents and falls. In the meantime, his latest novel, *The Mansion*, appeared in late 1959, followed in 1962 by his last novel, *The Reivers*. During these last years of his life, Faulkner spent much of his time hunting, traveling, dealing with back pain and other ailments, and (unfortunately) drinking excessively. In his final months both the pain and the drinking continued, so that when he died of a heart attack on July 6, 1962, his death put an end to a considerable amount of suffering. It also, unfortunately, ended a literary career that still held much promise, even if its most fruitful period was now decades in the past. By the end of his life Faulkner had risen from total obscurity to worldwide prominence. He had produced not only more than a score of important books but also a whole new kind of American writing. As ERNEST HEMINGWAY did (but in a much different manner), he had created a distinctive style and had explored a distinctive set of themes and subjects and had thereby helped, in the process, to win for American literature broad international recognition and respect.

***The Sound and the Fury* (1929)**

This experimental novel, which is highly innovative in structure and technique, deals with the breakdown of the southern Compson family, which is headed by a cynical father and a self-pitying mother and consists of a loving, lovable daughter named Caddy, a mentally retarded son named Benjy, his intellectual brother named Quentin (who eventually commits suicide), and their self-centered, sarcastic brother named Jason. All three brothers are preoccupied, in one way or another, with Caddy, whose adolescent sexual involvements lead to a pregnancy that results not only in estrangement from her family but also in a daughter also named Quentin, whose relationship with her uncle Jason is eventually full of tension and conflict. Ultimately the teenaged, female Quentin escapes what is left of the family, leaving behind a frustrated, embittered Jason, who strongly contrasts with Dilsey, the family's old black cook—the one character throughout the book who consistently shows herself to be wise, kind, stable, and loving.

Although *The Sound and the Fury* was Faulkner's fourth novel, it is widely considered his first truly significant work, and indeed many readers regard it as his best piece of writing. It is, initially, a very difficult book to understand, especially in the first two of its four sections. Section 1, which is titled "April Seventh, 1928," is told from the perspective of Benjy, the mentally handicapped brother, whose thoughts are highly random and disjointed: His thinking constantly shifts, without warning or explanation, between the present and the past. Indeed, the title of Faulkner's novel derives from a famous speech near the beginning of act 5, scene 5 of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* in which Macbeth declares that all of human life is merely "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." This quotation seems especially relevant to the first section of the novel for at least three reasons: (1) Benjy is considered a literal idiot by most of the other characters; (2) he is in fact often angry and frustrated, but his ability to express himself to others is limited mostly to inarticulate howls; (3) it may seem easy to conclude that the events Benjy perceives are merely chaotic and meaningless.

This impression of confusion and disorder seems, if anything, to intensify in the second section of the novel, titled "June Second, 1910"—a section in which events are described from the perspective of Benjy's older brother, Quentin. Although Quentin is not an "idiot" (in fact, he is a highly intelligent student at Harvard), his obsession with his sister Caddy is, if anything, even more intense than Benjy's and results in extreme psychological confusion and, eventually, suicide. Ironically, Benjy's section seems relatively simple and straightforward when compared with Quentin's, which is full of odd allusions, fragmented syntax, and complicated disruptions in the narrative. The first half of Faulkner's book will therefore not only puzzle most readers but frustrate many.

In contrast, section 3—titled "April Sixth, 1928"—is not only much easier to follow but also often laugh-out-loud funny, offering a refreshing change in tone and technique from the first two parts. The perspective here belongs to Jason Compson, who is in some ways a much simpler character than either of his two brothers. Appropriately, therefore, his section is presented in a much simpler, more straightforward fashion than theirs, and for many readers this portion of the book will be a welcome relief after the tangled (and, in some respects, not especially interesting) knots Faulkner ties in the first two sections. Jason is bitter, sarcastic, brutal, and biting, and all these traits give his section a strong, clear narrative thrust as well as an enormous degree of perverse energy and vitality. Reminiscent, in many ways, of Shakespeare's Iago and King Richard III, Jason is an essentially evil, self-centered character who is nonetheless highly entertaining; in his snide cynicism he anticipates (and probably influenced) some of the equally misanthropic characters later depicted by Flannery O'Connor. It is hard to imagine a mind quite as dark and derisive as Jason's, but Faulkner brings him to vivid life, and the plot picks up a kind of acerbic briskness and buoyancy whenever he dominates the scene. In section 3, therefore, Faulkner reveals that he was not simply a daring experimenter but also a conventionally talented writer. The same is true, to a lesser degree, in section 4, which is titled "April

Eighth, 1928” and differs from the three earlier sections because it is reported by an omniscient narrator. Jason is still a central figure here (as is Quentin, his adolescent niece and constant antagonist), but in many ways the central figure is now Dilsey, the old black housekeeper who has devoted her life to caring for the Compsons and who is the clear standard by which we can measure that family’s flaws and failures. Dilsey is, in particular, the polar opposite of Jason; she possesses all the kindness, selflessness, compassion, and strength he lacks, and she is (even more obviously than Caddy) the true heroine of Faulkner’s novel. Ironically enough, the cynical, caustic Jason is finally himself an object of both Faulkner’s and the reader’s derision, whereas Dilsey is the one character in the book who seems to earn the unqualified respect of both the author and his audience. Paradoxically, then, the true aristocrat of this novel—at least in moral terms—is not any of the relatively privileged Compsons, with their large house and long lineage, but an old black cook who is far less simple than she seems. Thus Faulkner’s novel, in spite of its innovative structure and unconventional techniques, is (in its underlying ethical values) a highly traditional book: It implicitly endorses many of the most orthodox ideals of old-fashioned Judeo-Christian morality.

The “plot” of the book, such as it is, is rather straightforward and even banal: When the Compson siblings are youngsters, they are playing near a creek when Caddy muddies her underpants. Later she climbs a tree while her brothers, watching from below, glimpse the dirty drawers. The soiled underwear eventually becomes, at least in the fevered mind of her brother Quentin, a symbol of Caddy’s later loss of sexual “innocence”—a loss he cannot tolerate because it symbolizes the loss of his own intensely close attachment to her. For Quentin and for Benjy, Caddy has provided the kind of love and caring they have never received from their self-involved mother or their remote and cynical father. Caddy, too, of course, suffers from this parental indifference or neglect—and so, in his own strange way, does Jason. Each child responds differently from the others to this fundamental sense of isolation: Benjy and Quentin become

obsessed with Caddy; Jason becomes obsessed with himself; and the teenaged Caddy ultimately seeks attention from a series of boys, one of whom finally makes her pregnant. In response, a marriage is hastily arranged to a youth from Indiana, but not before Quentin tries to preserve his relationship with Caddy by falsely telling his father that he and his sister have committed incest—a claim the father dismisses. Realizing that his links with Caddy (as well as his romantic illusions about her) are now fundamentally lost, Quentin kills himself by plunging into a river in Massachusetts. Meanwhile, Benjy (who is 33 when the novel opens but who has the mind of a three-year-old) spends his time roaming the grounds near the family home, moaning whenever anything upsets him or reminds him of Caddy. Benjy is usually accompanied by one of the blacks who work for the Compsons, but the only person who truly seems to care about him (after Caddy leaves) is the ever-reliable and fundamentally compassionate Dilsey. Jason, certainly, feels no real love for his disadvantaged brother: When Benjy menacingly approaches some neighborhood girls, the family has him castrated, and Jason would like nothing better than to have him also committed to an insane asylum. In the meantime, Jason himself hoards the money that Caddy sends each month to help provide for Quentin, the illegitimate daughter she has had to leave behind. Jason tries to control every aspect of the rebellious girl’s behavior, including her involvement with boys, but at the end of the novel she defeats him by breaking into his locked room, stealing the money he has hidden away, and running off with a worker from a traveling carnival. As does her mother, then, she finally escapes (at least geographically) from the bizarre influence of the Compsons, among whom Benjy seems in some ways the least unstable (or most innocent) of the bunch.

Faulkner claimed that he was inspired to write the novel by his own love of Caddy, whom he seems to have regarded as a symbol of kindness and love. If he had told the story in a “normal,” conventional fashion—with a clear chronological progression and with a consistently omniscient third-person point of view—the book would be simpler to read,

easier to understand, but not (for many readers, at least) nearly as interesting. Instead, Faulkner elected to use two techniques that were just beginning to come into widespread use among avant-garde (or cutting-edge) novelists: stream of consciousness and interior monologue. As the very term implies, in *stream of consciousness* fiction the mind of the character spills out onto the page haphazardly and without obvious or conventional structure. Practitioners of the stream-of-consciousness technique tended to believe that the mind itself was extremely complex, consisting not merely of conscious thoughts and rational ideas but also of largely unconscious yearnings, fears, moods, sensations, memories, and associations. The purpose of using the stream of consciousness method was therefore to evoke, on the page, the complications, inconsistencies, dead ends, and puzzling gaps typical of actual human thought. Just as the mind works in random, unpredictable, and disordered ways, so Faulkner's novel—at least in its first two sections—tries to convey some sense of that chaotic complexity. The same effects are achieved by his reliance on another *avant garde* technique—interior monologue. As the term implies, this technique emphasizes the individual character's responses to the world rather than emphasizing the external world itself. We see, hear, and feel everything from the highly subjective point of view of single characters: An explicit authorial voice is absent. We are “inside the head” of the character, perceiving what he or she perceives, feeling what he or she feels.

Faulkner, then, is less interested in telling a straightforward story than he is in suggesting the complexities of individual psychological experience. Any encounter with “reality” is, necessarily, an encounter from some particular, limited, biased, and conditioned point of view, and Faulkner is more interested in exploring these various viewpoints than he is in pretending to offer a simple, objective, “authoritative” narrative. His method implies that there is no single, simple “truth”—or that if there is, we have no easy access to it. For this reason he often returns to the same “events” again and again, allowing us to perceive them from many different angles and perspectives. In *The Sound*

and the Fury this method is especially relevant to some of his main themes, since the book is largely about the absence of shared outlooks, the breakdown of collective responses, and the growing isolation of alienated individuals. Benjy is cut off from the rest of the world by his mental retardation; his brother Quentin is cut off by his hypersensitivity and excessive intellectuality. Jason, meanwhile, deliberately cuts himself off from others through his monumental egotism—a trait he has inherited from his equally solipsistic mother, although her egocentrism is expressed in more passive-aggressive ways. Mr. Compson, the father, is mostly a scoffing bystander and then is mostly absent (thanks to his early death) from the later sections of the book, while Quentin, the rebellious teenage girl, is cut off from the rest of the family because of the circumstances of her illegitimate birth, because of the physical absence of her mother, and because of her refusal to kowtow to her manipulative uncle Jason. Only the black members of the household—centered on Dilsey—seem members of a real community with a clearly shared outlook, a solid chain of authority, and a relatively “normal” family life, and it is significant that the narrative is never presented solely from the perspective of any of the black characters (not even Dilsey's). Precisely *because* Dilsey (and, to a lesser extent, Caddy) is capable of genuine selflessness, the book never allows us to see events merely from her single, isolated point of view. Her perspective, after all, is never truly single or isolated, and so it should not surprise us that a section devoted exclusively to Dilsey's outlook is missing from the novel.

Many of the secondary themes of the novel are related to this larger theme of isolation or alienation. The racism taken for granted by so many of the characters (and expressed with such explicit and contemptuous language by Jason) is, for example, merely one of the many means by which characters are cut off from one another in this novel. Jason assumes his own superiority not only to most of the other people in the book (including his own mother) but especially to all of the black people—an assumption, paradoxically, that makes him even more essentially isolated. Likewise, his aggres-

sive economic competitiveness, like his monetary greed and his disdain for his niece's lower-class suitor, only reinforces his fundamental alienation. It hardly seems an accident that he never marries or is never shown even courting a woman: He is much too self-involved ever to feel the need for love, a wife, or children. More than one analyst has suggested, in fact, that his obsession with his niece (and particularly with her love life) implies more than a touch of incestuous feelings, and, if this diagnosis is accurate, such an interpretation would only reinforce the view that the thoughts and feelings of most of the characters in this book are self-enclosed and claustrophobic. Certainly the feelings of Jason's brother Quentin toward their sister, Caddie, fit this description, and although Quentin and Caddie are not guilty of the literal act of incest, Quentin is certainly guilty of a kind of "love" for his sister that is fundamentally rooted in his own *self-love*. His geographical isolation (during much of the book) from the rest of the family when he is in Massachusetts is therefore entirely appropriate, for Quentin is essentially a "distant" character even when he shares the same space with other people. Like his mother (who spends most of her time confined to her bed in her own room), and like his brother Jason (who carefully keeps his own room locked and shut off from the rest of the family), Quentin is detached, solitary, aloof, and disconnected. Most of the people in this book are in fact cut off from anything or anyone outside themselves, whether it be family, community, the church, or God. Only Dilsey and her children enjoy any kind of vital contact with these larger sources of meaning and happiness. Only Dilsey, in the end, escapes the tragic, existential isolation that is Faulkner's main theme in this book.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Jason, in this novel, with the character named Julian in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge." How are they similar in their personalities, their ways of treating other people, their ways of expressing themselves, and their ultimate fates? How and why are they funny at the expense of others, but how and why is the joke finally on them? In particular, discuss each man's relationship with his mother.
2. How does this novel resemble and/or differ from THORNTON WILDER's play *Our Town*? In what ways are the characters in both works fundamentally isolated? What does each work imply about the importance of the family, both positively and negatively, in individuals' lives? What do both works suggest about the relations of past, present, and future? How are both works technically innovative in similar ways?
3. Read Faulkner's novel in conjunction with the novel by W. E. B. DuBois entitled *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. How do the works compare and/or contrast in their depictions of race relations, in their techniques of characterization and narration, in their description of life in the South, and in their resolutions and final tones?
4. Discuss in detail the first three paragraphs of the novel. How are they typical, in phrasing and method, of the novel as a whole? How does Faulkner use them to create interest, to imply a specific geographic and temporal setting, and to suggest already the nature of relationships among the characters? How does the very opening of the novel foreshadow the novel's conclusion?

As I Lay Dying (1930)

After the death of Addie Bundren, a poor white wife and mother in rural Mississippi, her husband (Anse) and children (sons Cash, Darl, Jewel, and Vardaman and daughter Dewey Dell) laboriously transport her body 40 miles to Jefferson to fulfill her desire to be buried with her kinfolk. Her final days, her previous life, and the process of hauling the corpse are all described and commented on in a succession of 59 short chapters narrated by 15 different characters, including all the members of the family and a variety of people they meet along the way as the body, putrefying in a homemade wooden coffin, begins to stink and attract buzzards. Eventually the family arrive in Jefferson, where Addie is

buried, where Dewey Dell is seduced while seeking to abort her pregnancy, where Darl is committed to an insane asylum, and where Anse, having purchased a long-sought set of false teeth, immediately takes up with a new woman.

Like *The Sound and the Fury* (the novel that immediately preceded it), *As I Lay Dying* is a technically innovative and challenging book. Both works reject the traditional use of an all-knowing third-person narrator, employing instead a modernist “stream of consciousness” technique in which the story is told from a multitude of often-conflicting points of view. However, whereas Faulkner, in *The Sound and the Fury*, had presented the perspectives of a relatively small number of characters in only a few lengthy sections, in *As I Lay Dying* the sections are much shorter and much more numerous, reflecting the viewpoints of a much wider cross section of personalities. The later novel thus seems, at least in structure and design, more fragmented than the earlier book, although the “plot” is actually easier to follow, partly because the chronology is simpler and fewer distracting flashbacks are employed. In addition, the speaker of each chapter is clearly mentioned at the beginning of each section, making the later novel seem less confusing than its predecessor. The styles of the various chapters of *As I Lay Dying* vary in accordance with the personality and mind of the character speaking in each section, and Faulkner leaves it to his readers—as he so often does—to piece together a coherent narrative. He is (as usual) less interested in telling a simple, straightforward story than in suggesting the multitude of ways in which any event can be perceived, interpreted, and presented.

Admirers of this novel have praised it for a number of stylistic and technical traits. They have applauded it, for instance, for the ways it blends comedy (including humor that is often macabre and ironic) with more serious and even tragic elements, and they have also commended the novel for its combination of cutting-edge narrative techniques with convincing vernacular diction and dialogue. Faulkner, in other words, writes in the most up-to-date modernist fashion, but his characters think and speak (for the most part) in language that any person

from the backwoods of the Deep South would have instantly recognized. The book is thus modern in method but traditional in the personalities, social relations, and values it presents. Many readers find the characters vivid and intriguing, and analysts have also often praised the sheer variety of types of characters presented, with their multitude of different outlooks, motivations, and responses. The lengthy, arduous journey has been compared to the kind of plot often found in such classical epics as Homer's *Odyssey*, while the book has also been admired for the sheer suspense it creates: Will the Bundrens succeed in their journey? Will the rapidly decaying body survive the trip? Will the family hold together after the burial? Will Dewey Dell have an abortion? How will the characters respond to—and be treated in—the city of Jefferson? By implying such questions, Faulkner holds the attention and interest of numerous readers, who find the Bundrens sometimes laughable, sometimes pathetic, and sometimes even noble in their dedication and commitment to finishing the task they have undertaken. Simply as a piece of writing, *As I Lay Dying* has been extolled for the ways it creates and communicates emotion, for the ways it sustains interest by withholding or postponing meaning, for its effective use of imagery, and for the ways it forces readers to take an active role in trying to make sense of what is happening and why. Faulkner has been praised for creating a variety of convincing voices and viewpoints and for using contrasts among these differing perspectives to create a novel that is kaleidoscopic in its ultimate effects. Not all readers, of course, have been uniformly impressed by this book. Some critics, for instance, have found both the characters and the plot tedious, arguing that the Bundrens are merely simplistic caricatures and thus fail to arouse much authentic sympathy, compassion, or even interest. For the most part, however, commentators find the book's plot, people, and methods fascinating and engaging. Whether the Bundrens are regarded as buffoons, heroes, or some mixture of the two, they do interest many readers.

At least as interesting, to many critics, as the characters themselves are the themes the book explores. Many commentators, for instance, have discussed the ways this novel reveals the impact the dead can

have on the living or the influence the past can exert on the present. The surviving Bundrens struggle mightily to make sure that Addie's final wish is fulfilled—even if (as some analysts have argued) her wish was motivated less by a yearning to rest beside her kinfolk than by a desire to impose her vengeful will on a spouse and children with whom she was never really happy. Indeed, for many analysts a main theme of the book is the fundamental loneliness of most human beings—their essential isolation from one another even (or perhaps especially) when they are members of the same families. Each Bundren participates in the common enterprise of getting Addie moved and buried, but each Bundren has his or her private (and often selfish) reasons for doing so. Thus the book shows (at least according to some readers) how even acts of apparent solidarity can involve an immense sense of solitude, and the styles and structure of the novel emphasize the self-enclosed isolation of characters who interact with one another without ever really sharing a true common purpose or a larger point of view. On the other hand, for some readers the novel conveys a more optimistic message: It shows the ability and willingness of human beings to struggle, overcome obstacles, endure, and even prevail in the face of enormous difficulties. It would have been easy enough for the Bundrens to ignore Addie's wishes and conveniently bury her closer to home, but instead they honor their obligations, showing a kind of respect for the dead that implies that life is not without meaning, purpose, or dignity, even when the people involved are poor, uneducated, simple, and somewhat crude. Conversely, for other readers the journey the Bundrens undertake illustrates the absurdity of life—its lack of any ultimate purpose and the impermanence of human attachments and identities. At the end of the book, after all, Darl has been committed to an insane asylum and Anse has suddenly acquired not only new teeth but a new partner. Addie herself, meanwhile, seems quickly forgotten. It is tempting, then, to read the novel as a description of a long, mock-epic journey that leads to nothing of any great consequence or significance.

Comments on the various characters of the novel have focused mostly on Addie, Anse, and

Darl. Addie, for instance, has sometimes been viewed as a victim of a male-oriented power structure who, through the way she lives and through her final wishes, tries to repudiate that power and take vengeance on it. She has been seen as a sexually frustrated woman who defies her husband by having an affair, but she has also been interpreted as a woman who, in her desire to be buried in Jefferson, is motivated by sincere devotion to her own original kinfolk. Although some commentators have found Addie too stereotyped or caricatured to be a convincing character, others have regarded her as a genuinely tragic figure who inspires true devotion in her children and who exercises far more influence over them, even after her death, than their father does. Indeed, Addie has often been compared to Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*: Both women exert a powerful sway over many of the male characters even though both Caddy and Addie are technically absent from their novels for long stretches of time. Addie is as much a focus of the male characters' obsessions as Caddy was, and certainly she seems a more substantial and serious figure than her husband, Anse. Anse, in fact, has rarely been the subject of positive comments from the novel's analysts. Sometimes he is seen as a self-interested clown and sometimes as a real villain, although occasionally commentators have argued that other critics have been too hard on Anse. He has been depicted as lazy, stupid, hypocritical, greedy, and selfish and also as a master manipulator, but at least one commentator has attributed any "defects" in his character to his real physical afflictions (symbolized by his aversion to working up a sweat). In general, however, while for some commentators Anse merits derisive ridicule, others regard him as genuinely despicable. Finally, one more character has been the subject of extensive critical discussion: Darl, the second-oldest son of Addie and Anse and the figure who narrates more chapters (19) than any other character in the book. It is Darl who tries at one point to incinerate his mother's decaying corpse by burning a barn in which her coffin is temporarily housed, and it is Darl who is declared insane and imprisoned by the end of the novel. For many commentators, Darl is a

tragic figure whose incarceration confirms his perception that life is cruel—a cruelty underscored by his unrequited love for his mother, whose personal favorite among her children is Jewel, the product of her extramarital affair with a local preacher. Jewel, in fact, is the object of much of Darl's jealousy. He appears in every one of the many chapters narrated by Darl, including the first chapter, in which *Jewel* is indeed the very first word. Nevertheless, despite this obsession with a particular brother, Darl has also been seen as the most comprehensive character—the one who has the most insights into the others and the most responses to them, and indeed the character whose point of view most closely resembles the narrative perspective of the author himself. In fact, Darl's language (which, among other traits, abounds in metaphors but is relatively lacking in similes) has sometimes been criticized as sounding *too* authorial, too sophisticated in diction and tone, and thus the realism of Faulkner's depiction of Darl has sometimes been faulted. As has Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, Darl has sometimes been seen as greatly resembling Faulkner himself in his concerns, thoughts, and language, but Quentin, at least, was a highly educated person from whom complex thoughts and sophisticated phrasing might have been expected. Other commentators, however, have defended Faulkner's presentation of Darl by arguing that achieving an effect of mere realism was never Faulkner's main aim in this book—a book that many readers consider one of his best, most complex, and most intriguing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. JOHN STEINBECK's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* also deals with a lengthy, arduous journey by a group of poor white southerners in the same general period in which Faulkner's novel is set. Compare and contrast the two books in terms of style, characterization, narrative technique, and themes. For instance, how does Addie Bundren resemble and/or differ from Ma Joad? How is each book innovative in the ways it tells its story? What "message(s)" or meanings does each book seem to imply? Does one book appeal to you more than the other? If so, explain why.
2. How does the family life depicted in Faulkner's novel resemble and/or differ from the family life depicted in RICHARD WRIGHT's novel *Native Son*? Discuss the roles of the mothers in both books and the relations of the siblings. Discuss the impact of the different settings—rural and urban—presented in each book; how are the characters shaped by their environments? Discuss the impact of race and social class in each novel.
3. How does the culture of the poor southern whites described in this novel compare and/or contrast with the culture of the poor southern blacks described in ZORA NEALE HURSTON's book *Mules and Men*? Which are greater: the similarities or the differences? Which book offers a more convincing depiction of the cultures it describes? How are the techniques, purposes, and styles of the works affected by the differing genres to which they belong?
4. Choose one of the main characters and trace his or her development throughout the novel. How is the character presented in ways that make him or her seem both complex and consistent? Is there a particular episode in which this character is involved that seems especially revealing or important? Does the character change in any significant ways as the novel develops?

"A Rose for Emily" (1930, 1931)

A narrator who speaks with intimate knowledge of the town of Jefferson, Mississippi, tells about the life of Miss Emily Grierson, an elderly, isolated, strong-willed spinster who has recently died after living alone for many decades in a large, decaying, dust-filled house in which her only regular contact was with an old black servant named Tobe. When Emily was a young woman, her domineering father discouraged suitors; after his death, she took up with a visiting Yankee construction worker named Homer Barron, but their relationship caused a scandal in the town; eventually he vanished, and after his disappearance Miss Emily retreated into seclusion. After Emily is buried, a delegation from the town opens a room in her house that has not

been seen for 40 years; in it, they discover the skeletal remains of Homer Barron, dressed in his nightshirt, on a bed, with a strand of Miss Emily's graying hair on the pillow beside him.

"A Rose for Emily" is one of Faulkner's most widely read and widely admired stories. It exemplifies his typical interest in the small fictional southern town of Jefferson (modeled closely on his own town of Oxford, Mississippi) and reveals his frequent concern with eccentric characters, cultural decay, the way the past impinges on the present, and bizarre, often perverse relationships, especially within families. Faulkner often likes to deal with the strange skeletons in people's closets, and in this case the metaphor almost becomes a literal fact. The story is an example of the "gothic" in literature: It emphasizes dark settings, a gloomy tone, an eccentric character, an air of mystery, and a touch of horror. Miss Emily's life has obviously been warped by the influence of her domineering father, and it seems significant that no other close relations are ever mentioned: the words *mother*, *brother*, and *sister* do not exist in this story, and the only relatives of Emily who are referred to (besides her father) are cousins who live in distant Alabama. Emily has been isolated by her father, and, after his death and the disappearance of Homer Barron, she deliberately isolates herself. Ironically, her weakness in relation to her father ultimately results in strength and indomitable willpower in her relations with the rest of the town. By rejecting connections with the rest of the community, she paradoxically fulfills her father's desire to keep her cut off from any real influence but his own, and it seems fitting that at her funeral a crayon portrait of her father (presumably drawn by Emily herself) looms above her coffin. Although Mr. Grierson's relationship with his daughter may not have been physically perverse, it certainly seems symbolically incestuous, at least in the way he dominates and isolates Emily. In one way or another, her final decades are overshadowed by her obsessive relations with dead men.

Although commentators on this story often view Emily as a bizarre figure, she also has been seen as a character more sinned against than sinning—as an example of a woman whose whole life has been dis-

torted not simply by a particular overbearing father but by the whole patriarchal culture of the traditional South. Critics often see her as being simultaneously intimidating, pitiable, admirable, and pathetic; she is often interpreted as a woman whose isolation and conduct lend her a kind of tragic dignity. Some critics contrast her with her servant, Tobe, who seems more noble, more normal, more healthy, and more humble than his oddly murderous mistress; and commentators also tend to contrast her with the anonymous narrator, whose tone and attitudes seem sane, insightful, and sympathetic. Homer Barron, meanwhile, is as mysterious in life as he is in death: We never learn the details of his motivations or the exact nature of his relationship with Emily. Even (or perhaps especially) at the end of the tale, when we glimpse the startling remains of Homer's unexpected corpse, Faulkner keeps us guessing, and "A Rose for Emily" is rightly regarded as one of the most tantalizing mystery stories in American literature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with one or more works by Flannery O'Connor that also deal with domineering parental figures, such as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," or "The Artificial Nigger." In what ways are the tones and underlying messages of those stories similar to and/or different from the tone(s) and message(s) of Faulkner's story? How and why are O'Connor's stories "comic" in ways that Faulkner's story is not? What role (if any) does religion play in O'Connor's stories and in Faulkner's?
2. Discuss the role of isolation in this story and in the three major autobiographical essays of GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (Zitkala-Ša)—"Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The Schooldays of an Indian Girl," and "An Indian Teacher among Indians." How is the isolation, in both cases, somewhat self-imposed? How is it affected by the gender, class, and ethnic backgrounds of the protagonists? How does each character respond to (and cope with) her isolation?

3. How does Faulkner build and maintain suspense in this story? How does he keep his readers off-guard, and how does he keep us guessing? What questions remain unanswered by the end of the tale? What are some possible (and plausible) answers to those questions? What evidence in the text supports those possible answers? What evidence conflicts with those answers?
4. Discuss the ways in which this story reflects changes that were taking place in southern culture during the decades described in this tale. Do some historical research and then discuss the ways the story reflects its era. How are the different generations described in this story typical of their times?

***Light in August* (1932)**

After a long journey (much of it on foot), pregnant Lena Grove arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, in search of Lucas Burch, the father of her child, who is living there under the name *Joe Brown*; instead of finding Burch, however, Lena encounters a friendly man named Byron Bunch, who immediately takes a kindly (but also romantic) interest in her and who seeks advice and help from his one real friend, Gail Hightower, a former minister who now lives in isolation, having long been ostracized by the town because of an obsessive personality that led to the scandalous death of his unfaithful wife. Burch (alias Brown) is the junior partner in the illegal sale of alcohol by Joe Christmas, a bitter, violent man whose entire life has been warped by the suspicion (never confirmed) that his father was black; Christmas and Burch live in a cabin on the property of Joanna Burden, an aging, isolated spinster with whom Christmas has a complicated relationship full of passionate sex and psychological tension. When Burden one day threatens Christmas with a gun, he kills her with a knife, sets fire to her house, flees, is pursued, and takes refuge in the house of Gail Hightower, where he is eventually found, shot, and castrated by a fanatical racist named Percy Grimm; meanwhile, as the book concludes, Lena, having by now given birth to her baby, con-

tinues her search for Lucas Burch, accompanied by the ever-faithful Byron Bunch.

Despite its often melodramatic plot and its sometimes implausible characters, *Light in August* is widely considered one of Faulkner's best novels, particularly because of the ways it explores the racial tensions that shaped the southern past and continue to affect the southern present. Joe Christmas is the obvious symbol of this central theme: His entire life, from his earliest childhood until the moment of his death, is warped and twisted by the mere possibility (which is never actually confirmed) that his father may have been black. Although Joe looks white enough to pass easily as a Caucasian, he is haunted by the private suspicion (and the public rumor) that he may possess black blood—a possibility that subjects him not only to internal torment but especially to social prejudice and persecution. Thus, through the depiction of Christmas (but also through the depictions of such other characters as Gail Hightower and Joanna Burden), Faulkner deals with one of his favorite themes: the inevitable impact of history on the present moment. Christmas's life is distorted by the whole tradition of American racial prejudice, especially in the South; Hightower's life is distorted by his preoccupation with the allegedly glorious deeds of his long-dead Confederate grandfather; while Joanna Burden's life is deformed by the teachings of her own northern ancestors, who long ago instructed her that blacks are an inescapable burden for whom whites are responsible. Her family's attitudes have alienated her from the town in which she lives, and those attitudes also ultimately lead to her own violent death when she tries to force her views on Christmas, the "black" man with whom she has been having a clandestine affair. In his presentation of all these characters (as well as others, such as Percy Grimm, a violent racist, and Simon McEachern, a religious fanatic), Faulkner shows how attitudes inherited from the past almost inexorably affect the present, often in highly destructive ways. Human beings, in Faulkner's novels, are hardly ever entirely free or totally independent agents; instead, they are almost always trapped in sticky webs spun in the often-distant past. It is this emphasis on the

profound effects of history that so often makes the tone of Faulkner's works so gloomy and so tragic.

The impact of the past on the present is, however, only one of a number of important themes emphasized in *Light in August*. For instance, another key problem explored in this book is the struggle to achieve a whole and satisfying sense of identity. This dilemma is, in fact, the key challenge facing Joe Christmas, who is the most conflicted and therefore in some ways the most complex and fascinating character in the novel. From the beginning, Joe has never known exactly who he is: His father was killed (by Joe's own racist maternal grandfather) before the boy was born; his mother died in childbirth; his earliest days were spent in an orphanage; his later years were spent with foster parents; and even his name—*Joe Christmas*—was invented off the cuff to reflect the day on which he arrived at the orphanage. Joe's background, personality, and motivations always remain somewhat mysterious, both to him and to Faulkner's readers, but Joe is only one of a number of characters in this novel who seem to lack stable and consistent identities. Joanna Burden is another example: At first an isolated spinster, she soon evolves into Joe's sex-starved lover, then becomes suddenly frigid, then reverts to a kind of religious and social fanaticism that leads, eventually, to her bizarre attempt to kill Joe and herself—an attempt that ultimately results in her own violent murder. Joanna (like Joe, whose name resembles her own) is an enigmatic personality who can sometimes appear so strange that she can occasionally seem unreal or unconvincing—a mere figment of Faulkner's overheated imagination rather than a recognizable human being. Still, the fact that both Joe and Joanna are often so difficult to know or comprehend also contributes to another important theme of *Light in August*—the theme of isolation. Many of the characters in this book are cut off from society either literally, figuratively, or both: Joe lives in a rundown shack where his only companion is Brown/Burch, with whom Joe frequently fights; Joanna lives alone in a distant house, where her only significant contacts (with Joe) are often violent; Hightower is an exile who, ostracized by the community, shuts himself off in

a lonely dwelling; and Byron Bunch, kindhearted as he is, is mostly a loner until Lena unexpectedly enters his life. Like many other characters in various other Faulkner novels (such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*), the important characters in *Light in August* are often cut off from satisfying, meaningful relationships. Human isolation is one of the most frequent and significant themes in many of Faulkner's best books.

Other themes commonly emphasized elsewhere in Faulkner's fiction also appear in *Light in August*. The tragic legacy of southern racism, for instance, is one of the most important aspects of this novel. Joe is the obvious victim of this legacy: The mere possibility that he may be of mixed-race parentage corrupts his relations with his family, his friends, his lovers, and his society, and it also undermines any chance of his ever achieving a confident sense of coherent selfhood. His life, ironically, might be easier if he were entirely black; he would then at least belong to one defined and established community. Instead, he is the perfect embodiment of the traditional character type known as the *tragic mulatto*. In his case, however, the ironies of this status are even greater than usual since it is not even certain that he is indeed of mixed blood. He suffers (psychologically as well as socially) because of a status that may, in his case, not even be "real." People's opinions of him change instantly for the worse as soon as they suspect that he may be partly black, and corrupt characters (such as the dietitian in the orphanage or the greedy Lucas Burch) are easily able to use his allegedly mixed parentage against him. By depicting such behavior, Faulkner also implies that "race" is as much a social construction—as much a matter of interpretation—as it is a biological "fact": It matters less who Christmas actually is than who he is perceived to be. However, the fact that he is the victim of such vicious prejudice seems all the more ironic because of the presence of another important theme: corrupt Christianity. Christmas lives, after all, in a society nominally devoted to a god of love, mercy, and compassion, yet some of the least attractive features of that society result from religious fanaticism. Christmas's grandfather and foster father both pervert the true spirit of Christianity in

highly unattractive ways; each man is vicious partly because he believes such conduct reflects God's will. Faulkner shows how Christianity, far from being an inevitable antidote to racism, often served to reinforce it.

Faulkner makes his treatment of Christian themes in this novel all the more tantalizing by hinting at various parallels between Joe Christmas and Jesus Christ. Obviously they share the same initials, and Joe's name also associates him explicitly with the birthday of the Christian messiah. Other resemblances also exist. Thus, the true identity of each man's father is a matter of concern and speculation; each man attracts a seemingly loyal follower who ultimately betrays him in pursuit of money; each man is captured on a Friday; and each man is 33 when he dies. Yet the differences between the two figures far outweigh any similarities: Joe is selfish, violent, sullen, and often vicious; he lacks any sense of a higher calling or any conviction of a deeper identity; and his death lacks any transcendent or transformative meaning. Joe is, then, in some ways the reverse image of Jesus, and any parallels between them merely help call attention to their far more important distinctions. Yet the character with whom Joe most strikingly contrasts is Lena. Although these two figures never actually meet and are hardly even aware of each other (certainly Joe never learns of Lena's existence), obviously their stories are the two central strands from which the novel is woven, and just as obviously Faulkner juxtaposes these two narratives to highlight their differences. While Joe is complex, Lena is simple; while Joe is tormented, Lena is uncannily self-assured; whereas Joe is grim, violent, deadly, and ultimately dead, Lena is serenely optimistic, full of goodwill, literally full of life, and finally a nursing mother. Lena is essentially a comic figure in both senses of that term: Sometimes her actions and words (such as the very last words of the novel) provoke real smiles, but always her presence provokes a sense of the most positive and most hopeful aspects of human existence. She is kindhearted, gentle tempered, somewhat naive, and completely guileless, and she almost always draws out the best in the many people she encounters during her journey. Her positive impact on Byron Bunch is extreme

in degree but is not unique in nature: Her mere presence inspires him to acts of generosity, compassion, and self-sacrifice, and she has a similar impact on various other characters (including Gail Hightower) with whom she has contact. If anything, it is Lena—not the intriguingly named Joe Christmas—who comes closest to exemplifying (and evoking in others) the virtues often associated with Christian faith, and it is largely thanks to the presence of Lena that *Light in August* is not entirely dark and grim. Indeed, despite the fact that it features a near-beheading and an actual castration, this book is in some ways one of the sunniest of Faulkner's major novels. Lena Grove—whose last name itself implies an abundance of green life—is in some ways the embodiment of Faulkner's underlying optimism about the fundamental, eternal rhythms of nature and life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Joe Christmas in *Light in August* with Jim Casy in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In what ways does each figure resemble and/or differ from Jesus Christ? How and why does each author seem to employ allusions to the story of Christ? How do such allusions contribute to the tone, resonance, and meaning of each work?
2. Read Faulkner's novel alongside NELLA LARSEN's novel titled *Passing*. Discuss the roles of race, and of race mixing, in each work. How do geographical settings affect the "mixed-race" characters in each novel? How are their lives affected by their different genders and social classes? How does each character deal with the challenges posed by his or her ethnic background?
3. How are the themes of isolation and of social pressures explored in Faulkner's novel and in EUGENE O'NEILL's play *The Hairy Ape*? How are the positions, attitudes, and responses of Joe Christmas and Yank comparable and distinct? What roles do women play in the lives and fates of both of these characters? How are the deaths of the two characters comparable and/or different?

4. Choose a particular chapter in the book and discuss its significance in the entire narrative. What characters, themes, settings, and patterns of imagery does that chapter emphasize, and how are all those factors connected to the larger narrative? How does the chosen chapter relate to the chapters that precede and follow it? How would the book seem different if a reader skipped the chosen chapter? What would the reader lose by doing so?

***Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)**

After a mysterious outsider named Thomas Sutpen arrives one day in the early 19th century in the north Mississippi town of Jefferson, he proceeds to buy a huge tract of land, on which he and his slaves eventually build an imposing house; Sutpen then marries Ellen Coldfield, who bears him a daughter named Judith and a son named Henry. When Henry attends college, he befriends a charming but mysterious figure named Charles Bon, to whom his sister eventually becomes unofficially engaged, even though Thomas Sutpen privately expresses his strong disapproval to Henry. Only when Sutpen eventually tells Henry that Charles is not only Henry's brother (from an early alliance Thomas had in Haiti) but also partly black does Henry kill Charles to prevent the marriage—an act that ultimately leads to the destruction of all of Sutpen's ambitions for power, prestige, status, and an heir to help establish a lasting dynasty.

As so often in Faulkner's fiction, the most interesting aspect of this novel is less the plot itself than the styles, structures, and techniques the author employs to tell the story. In this work he uses four different main narrators to relate the "facts" of the plot, but these narrators are so distinct in their personalities, so diverse in their biases and motives, and so varied in their actual familiarity with the events and people they describe that readers, by the end of the book, can easily come away confused—confused not only about what, exactly, "really" happened but especially about the significance (if any) of the events the narrators relate. The first narrator

is Miss Rosa Coldfield, an elderly spinster whose sister Ellen was Sutpen's wife. At the time she tells her tale, Miss Rosa still strongly detests the long-dead Sutpen and regards him as almost demonic, and her fevered account of his acts and character, which she relates decades after his demise, is obviously colored by her contempt and disdain. Miss Rosa tells her story to young Quentin Compson, the Harvard undergraduate who is also a central character in Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, and Quentin himself also becomes a chief narrator of the Sutpen saga. In addition, Quentin collects information and perspectives on Sutpen from his own father, Jason Compson III, who in turn heard reports from *his* father, General Jason Lycurgus Compson II, who actually knew Sutpen and was indeed one of Sutpen's few real friends. Finally, yet another perspective is added by Quentin's Harvard roommate, a Canadian named Shrevlin ("Shreve") McCannon, who at first seems to mock the tale Quentin tells him but who soon becomes so caught up in it that he eventually narrates events he could not possibly know about directly. To make matters even more complex, the novel opens (deceptively) with the voice of a seemingly all-knowing third-person narrator, who quickly introduces Rosa and Quentin and then just as quickly disappears for long stretches at a time, appearing again only intermittently, so that the story is told mainly from the limited perspectives of Rosa, Quentin, Quentin's father, and Shreve, not to mention in letters written by a number of different characters. Other factors contribute even further to the narrative complexity (or confusion). Thus, sometimes Faulkner uses quotation marks to indicate clearly who is speaking; sometimes he does not. Sometimes he employs italics for one purpose; sometimes he employs them for another. Moreover, the standards of strict chronology are often ignored; it is not until late in the book, for instance, that we learn why Sutpen felt the need to build a grand house and found a dynasty, and likewise it is not until long after we hear of Bon's murder that we discover the probable reason for his death. Thus, in this novel as so often elsewhere, Faulkner deliberately makes matters difficult for his readers; he wants us to work and strain

to untangle whatever meanings or significance his story may possess.

Part of his point, of course, is to make us not only think about but also actually feel and experience the difficulty of making sense of any events and personalities, especially those from the past. All narration, all history, necessarily involves large elements of subjective interpretation, and we can never be entirely sure that our own interpretations—or those of anyone else—are ever entirely accurate or reliable. Paradoxically, the more some of Faulkner's narrators (such as Miss Rosa or Shreve) insist on the truth of their accounts, the more skeptical we, as readers, must be, and by the end of the novel we cannot be entirely sure who (if anyone) has anything like an accurate understanding of what has happened or why. Faulkner thus re-creates in his readers some of the same kind of uncertainty and insecurity felt by many of his characters. Just as the characters must rely on their memories of the events they have either experienced or heard about, so must we, and just as the characters often draw conclusions based on incomplete or conflicting evidence, so do we. As numerous commentators have remarked, *Absalom, Absalom!* resembles a highly elaborate detective novel in which readers are forced to try to piece together not only the basic elements of the story but also the natures of the characters and the meanings of their actions. Yet Faulkner's book, unlike most detective fiction, lacks any neat resolution or ultimate sense of tidy meaning. The basic story is told over and over again by each new narrator, but each new narrator adds his or her own perspective while also supplying information (or making claims) not heard before. Thus the novel becomes more and more complex as it develops, until finally we cannot be quite sure whom or what (if anything) to believe. In one sense the work *does* build to a climax—We finally do discover why (apparently) Henry kills his stepbrother—but in another sense our understanding of events becomes less certain as each new voice is heard and as each new sentence unravels. If *Absalom, Absalom!* is indeed a mystery novel, it is one that is in some ways even more mysterious at its end than at its beginning.

The process of reading the book has also been compared to that of working a crossword puzzle, but this analogy is flawed, since the process of working a puzzle results in clear, correct, and definite answers. In contrast, a reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* feels less certain, less sure of its meanings at the end of the book than at the beginning.

It is easy, then, to view *Absalom, Absalom!* as a book that “deconstructed” itself long before the term *deconstruction* was ever invented. In other words, the book seems to illustrate perfectly the recent idea that textual “meanings” are inevitably deferred and postponed and that interpretive certainty can therefore only be an illusion. Nevertheless, commentators have discovered in Faulkner's novel many themes or motifs that, they believe, help give the book coherence and significance. Certainly the common Faulknerian themes of incest, racial tension, race mixing, conflict between siblings, conflict between parents and children, and connections between sex and death are all present in this book, and likewise the novel also illustrates once again Faulkner's continuing concern with moral corruption, with the decay of southern society, and with the ways such corruption has contributed to such decay. As with many works by Faulkner, this novel also shows how strongly the past impinges on the present, and it likewise demonstrates how one's view of the past is always inevitably affected by one's present (and inevitably limited) perspective. The book not only explores but also makes a reader participate in the uncertainty of human knowledge, especially knowledge of the deepest motives of other people. And, as in much of Faulkner's fiction, this novel shows how often and how closely issues of race and issues of family are intertwined. Many commentators have remarked how ironic it seems that Henry is apparently willing to allow his sister to commit incest by marrying her half brother but cannot tolerate the thought that she might marry a man whose ancestry is partly black. Analysts have noted that just as the Civil War was fought because southerners would not admit blacks to full membership in society, so Henry kills Bon because he cannot tolerate having a black in the family. Of course, a few skeptical commentators

have wondered why Thomas Sutpen did not simply tell his children of Bon's black ancestry from the beginning and thus prevent all the complications and tragic consequences that ensued from keeping the matter secret for so long. In this respect, as in a number of others (such commentators have argued), the novel is unrealistic. Mere realism, though, was rarely Faulkner's main concern; he is more often interested in suggestive symbolism than in simple plausibility.

It goes without saying that most of the commentary about this novel's characters has centered on Thomas Sutpen himself. He is indeed a highly intriguing figure and has been the subject of extensive critical discussion. For some analysts he is the embodiment of every flaw of the Old South—the personification of all the corruption, abuse, selfishness, and exploitative impulses that finally resulted in the destruction of the prewar southern system. For other critics, in contrast, Sutpen is an interloper who is the antithesis of all the best aspects and potential of southern culture. He is calculating, rationalistic, opportunistic, and driven by a desire for money and status; for these critics, in other words, Sutpen is a kind of closet Yankee who symbolizes the rise of forces that would eventually undermine any hope for a civilized southland. Likewise, while some critics (resembling Miss Rosa) see Sutpen as almost totally evil, others view him as a dynamic, almost mythic personality—larger than life, full of energy, heroic in his ambitions, and tragic in his flaws. For some commentators Sutpen resembles a figure from ancient Greek tragedy—a figure doomed by the very qualities of character that make him stand out. For other analysts Sutpen is the epitome of self-centered American individualism—a man driven by greed to succeed at any and all costs, a man determined to stamp his own overbearing identity on the land, on other people, and on history itself. He is a person so full of pride, arrogance, and self-regard that he treats other people merely as disposable instruments in the pursuit of his own grand design. Ironically, his ambition was born when he felt lack of respect as a youth, but he then proceeds to spend a lifetime treating others with massive disrespect, often provoking

their hatred and their desire for vengeance. Bon, for instance, desires little more than recognition and acknowledgment; it is partly Sutpen's refusal simply to confess his paternity to Bon that makes Bon want to destroy his own father.

However one reacts to Sutpen or interprets the novel as a whole, and however one responds to the structural or technical innovations the book exhibits, there seems little denying the stylistic energy and inventiveness of Faulkner's language here. From the first page until the last, the book is a linguistic tour de force: The phrasing is memorable and often mesmerizing in ways that seem less consistently true of some of Faulkner's earlier important novels. The sentences frequently roll on and on, clause added to clause, word piled upon word, often without concern for conventional punctuation but frequently fresh and vivid and often even startling in their combinations and ranges of resonance. Take, for instance, the first half of a long sentence that describes a sudden appearance by Sutpen: "Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 8). Among the various strengths of this sentence, one notes especially the surprising paradox of "quiet thunderclap"; the invented, inventive verb ("abrupt upon"); the vivid, jumbled imagery ("man-horse-demon"); the concocted but convincing adjective ("schoolprize"); the newly coined noun ("sulphur-reek"); and the clutter of unpunctuated, jammed-together substantives ("hair clothes and beard"). Any of these features, taken by itself, would make us sit up and pay attention; run together, as they are, in a single sentence, they attract particular notice. The important point, though, is that there are literally thousands of such sentences—thousands of such startling moments—in this novel, and the even more important point is that for the most part such sentences do not seem mere stunts or tricks. For the most part they contribute to the power and effectiveness of the book and to the credibility of the characterization. In this novel more, perhaps, than in any other, Faulkner shows himself to be the kind of prose poet—the lover and master of sounds,

rhythms, images, symbols, and meanings—that he always aspired to be. In this book his linguistic inventiveness and sureness of step are almost Shakespearean, and one concludes the novel feeling that whatever the book may or may not mean, it adds immensely to our sense of the potential and resources of the English language.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Faulkner himself compared this book to Wallace Stevens's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." In what ways is the comparison appropriate? How are the two works similar in structure, technique, purpose, and meanings? How do they differ, especially in terms of style? In what ways do both works reflect the tendencies of modernism in literature, not only in the ways in which they are written but also in what they seem to assume about reality and truth?
2. Compare and contrast Faulkner's book with THORNTON WILDER's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. How do both works deal with the problem of trying to explain historical events and personalities? How are the works similar and/or distinct in the moral stances they imply and in the styles they employ? How does each work try to re-create, in convincing and credible ways, a particular culture and historical period?
3. How is Thomas Sutpen similar to and/or different from Wolf Larsen in JACK LONDON's novel *The Sea Wolf*? Discuss the two men in terms of their education, their personalities, their ambitions, their ways of treating other people, and their final fates. In what ways does each figure reflect his culture and his historical era? In what ways is each figure simultaneously attractive and repellent? What are each man's strengths and weaknesses?
4. Choose a small passage from the novel (a paragraph or less) and discuss the effectiveness of its phrasing. What, precisely, makes the language vivid and memorable? How does the chosen passage use such techniques as imagery, rhythms, sound effects, and sentence structure? What, precisely, makes the passage "worth reading" and worth recommending to other readers?

"Barn Burning" (1939)

Named after a legendary Civil War figure, Colonel Sartoris Snopes—or "Sarty"—is actually the 10-year-old son of Abner Snopes, a onetime horse thief and habitual barn burner who moves his poor white family from one sharecropping job to another, usually after he is expelled from the previous community in which his arrogant, vengeful character has earned him enemies. Although most members of Sarty's family (with the exception of his mother and aunt) seem untroubled by Ab's destructive habits, young Sarty feels increasingly torn between loyalty to his "pap" and an inherent sense of what is right and proper. Finally, when Ab sets out one night with the intention of burning the barn of Major de Spain (his wealthy current employer), Sarty breaks free from his mother's confining grasp, runs to the major's mansion, warns the major of what is about to happen, and then runs away, knowing that he may have put his father's life at risk and knowing, too, that in any case he has forever broken his links with his family.

"Barn Burning" is often read as a coming-of-age story in which Sarty faces a crucial moral dilemma and makes the right ethical choice despite the personal sacrifices that choice entails. Although Sarty admires his father (partly because he thinks Ab performed heroic service during the Civil War, when in fact Ab was a thief who stole horses from both sides), eventually Sarty realizes that he must place his obligations to the community and to higher standards of conscience above his loyalty to his own kin. The story can therefore be read as a tale of moral maturation in which the 10-year-old Sarty is actually more of an adult (in all the crucial senses of that word) than his own abusive, domineering, and hate-filled father. Some critics, however, feel a certain sympathy and understanding for Ab; rather than regarding him as a complete villain, they argue that he is a man of immense willpower, determination, and self-regard who protests, in his own destructive ways, against real injustices and inequalities in the social and economic systems of the traditional South. From this perspective, Major de Spain is not an entirely blameless victim; he is the beneficiary of a rigidly hierarchical social struc-

ture that oppresses not only all blacks but many poor whites as well. One problem with this reading, however, is that Ab seems full of contempt and abuse toward practically everyone, regardless of race, class, or family background, and indeed the most frequent victims of his abuse are the members of his own family. With his fierce pride, crippled foot, and love of fire, he is clearly in many ways a Satanic figure, and certainly he repeatedly disrupts any chances his family (not to mention the surrounding communities) may have for peace and stability. Ab's moral handicap is far more serious than his physical affliction, and although he is constantly on the move, he never grows or develops. He is an essentially static character whose self-assertiveness leads to self-imprisonment, whereas Sarty changes and develops, moving from passivity to activity and from actual childhood to real ethical maturity. His separation from his father and family will, ironically, make it possible for him to join (and become a productive member of) society as a whole. His disloyalty to his "pap" signals his growing allegiance to values more important than simple security, convenience, or comfort.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Ab Snopes with the father figures in such stories by Sherwood Anderson as "Mother" and "Death in the Woods." How does Ab resemble and/or differ from those fathers? What admirable traits, if any, do these fathers possess? Why does Faulkner refrain from making Ab a total villain? How would the story be less effective if Ab displayed absolutely no redeeming qualities? What redeeming qualities does he in fact possess?
2. Discuss the relations between father, mother, and children in this story and in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. How are the fathers in both works presented in ambivalent ways? How do the mothers in both works resemble and/or differ from one another? Discuss the roles of race and class in both works.
3. Compare and contrast Ab Snopes with Emily Grierson's father in "A Rose for Emily." How is each child's life shaped by the influence of his or her father? How does Sarty's response to his father differ from Emily's to hers? What are some possible reasons for the differences in their responses?
4. How are women presented in this story? How do the female characters differ from and/or resemble one another? What functions do they have in the narrative? How and why are their relations with the male characters significant or revealing?

"The Bear" (1942)

The story describes the participation of young Ike McCaslin (who is 16 during parts of the story but younger and older in other parts) in yearly hunting trips in the Mississippi woods with a number of older men, including a primitive woodsman named Boon Hogganbeck and a highly talented, half-black, half-Indian hunter named Sam Fathers, who teaches Ike the proper attitudes and skills needed to survive and succeed in the forest. Each year the men hunt a huge, wily, and ferocious black bear known as Old Ben, whom Ike glimpses on several occasions but who seems immune to the hunters' efforts and weapons; only when the bear is pursued by a huge, half-wild dog named Lion does Boon finally succeed in killing Ben with a knife, after which Sam himself dies. In the fourth section of the five-part story, an older Ike repudiates his inheritance of property—an inheritance that he considers morally tainted by his family's and his region's ethical corruption—and in section 5 Ike becomes increasingly aware of the destructive impact of humans on the vanishing wilderness.

"The Bear" exists in two main versions: a four-part story (focusing mainly on various hunts) originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and a five-part work (in which an added fourth section is almost as long as the other four sections put together) that was published as part of Faulkner's book *Go Down, Moses*. The added section is immensely complex in style and content; by providing extensive background about Ike McCaslin's family, it adds greatly not only to the length of the

entire work but also to its moral implications and historical resonance. To make matters even more complicated, Faulkner insisted that *Go Down, Moses* was a coherent text (a novel, in fact), thus implying that any interpretation of “The Bear” had to take into account the relations between that narrative and the rest of the book. Faulkner’s publishers, however, labeled *Go Down, Moses* as a collection of stories, and in fact most critics tend to treat the five-part version of “The Bear” as a generally self-sufficient work, coherent in and of itself. At the same time, however, they also acknowledge that “The Bear,” like many of Faulkner’s writings, is part of a larger, more comprehensive narrative that focuses on the same small part of northern Mississippi and that features many of the same characters, events, and themes. Interpreting “The Bear” (in short) is no easy task, and efforts to make sense of the work have resulted in much critical disagreement.

Most analysts, however, do concur that the story is a tale of maturation, education, and initiation, in which Ike McCaslin develops from a young boy into a young man. Most cultures around the world have “rites of initiation” in which girls and boys (but especially boys) are encouraged or forced to put their childish ways behind them and develop into members of the adult community. In Faulkner’s story, Ike’s participation in the hunting trips serves this crucial function; as he learns the skills of a woodsman, he also learns the values and qualities of character that should permit him to function as a successful and respected adult. His mentor in this process is the aptly named Sam Fathers, who clearly functions as a kind of paternal figure in this work. Unlike many other fathers in Faulkner’s fiction, Sam is a worthy role model for his surrogate son, and the bond that forms between Sam and Ike (despite their different racial backgrounds) exemplifies Faulkner’s ideal of the brotherhood that might ideally exist between all people of maturity and goodwill, whatever their cultural differences. By participating in the hunts under Sam’s tutelage, Ike learns valuable lessons about himself, about nature, about other people, and even perhaps about man’s proper place in the universe. From this perspective, then, Old Ben the bear symbolizes nature

itself—wild but beautiful, sometimes threatening but worthy of our respect and veneration. It is significant that neither Ike nor Sam participates in the actual killing of Ben (although each has opportunities to kill him), and it is also significant that Ben’s true nemesis is the dog named Lion—another force of nature. Boon finally kills Ben not with a gun (a mechanical instrument) but with a knife (a more primitive, “natural” weapon), and he is prompted to act partly by his desire to save Lion, the dog to whom he has become attached. In the end, though, Ben, Lion, and Sam all die as a result of this crucial hunt, and Ike is left behind—not only older but also wiser. By the end of the five-part tale, both Ike and we realize that the deaths of Ben, Lion, and Sam helped symbolize the passing of old values and old ways of life: At the conclusion of the narrative, the wilderness itself seems to be disappearing before Ike’s very eyes. The lessons he learned from Sam (and also from Ben) are perhaps becoming less and less relevant in a world that is rapidly changing under the force of modern technological “progress,” in which nature is exploited rather than respected, raped rather than loved.

Concerning the foregoing points, most commentators are agreed. There is much less agreement, however, concerning the lengthy fourth section of the narrative, which appeared when the work was published as part of *Go Down, Moses*. That section—in which Ike hunts not for a bear but for the truth about his family’s past, and in which he learns not so much about external nature as about the nature of human corruption—culminates in Ike’s decision to repudiate his right to inherit his family’s property after he learns that his grandfather not only fathered a half-black daughter but that he then later committed incest with her. Ike thus feels that his inheritance (like the South itself) has been tainted by a legacy of racial injustice and dehumanizing abuse, and so he turns his back not only on his own property but on the very idea of private property in general. For some critics, Ike’s decision is virtuous and heroic: Having learned courage and wisdom of one sort in the wilderness, he now displays courage and wisdom of another sort in his rejection of the heritage of his family

- help intensify or reinforce? What has been the attitude toward incest in most cultures throughout the world, and how and why might these attitudes have affected Faulkner's treatment of the theme?
- Trace the depiction of female characters in at least three different works by Faulkner. What continuities exist from work to work? What differences exist? How does Faulkner tend to depict females in symbolic ways? How are his depictions of them affected by such issues as race, class, and historical period?
 - Black characters frequently appear in Faulkner's fiction. Are there any patterns in the ways they tend to be presented? How do Faulkner's depictions of blacks reflect the attitudes of his era and region? How (if at all) do his depictions of blacks go beyond conventional stereotypes? How and why is race such an important theme in Faulkner's fiction? What symbolic functions do blacks sometimes serve in his writings?
 - Faulkner is famous for often writing exceptionally long, incredibly complex sentences. Sometimes these sentences go on for a page or more. Choose one of these sentences and analyze it in detail. How is it organized? What kind of structure, rhythm, diction, and sound effects does it display? How is the sentence effective in creating particular rhetorical effects? Are the length and structure of the sentence justified or is the sentence merely a gimmick? What do long, complex, tangled sentences imply about the nature of the experiences they describe?
 - Read a good, detailed biography of Faulkner; focus on one fairly limited period of his life. After doing this research, study one of the works he produced during this limited period. How (if at all) does the work seem to reflect the life Faulkner was living at the time he produced the work? How does the work seem to reflect events, concerns, personalities, and/or feelings you recognize from your study of that period of Faulkner's life? Is knowledge of an author's life necessary to a proper understanding of his works? Why or why not?
 - Choose one particular work by Faulkner and then ask yourself what particular set of ethical values (if any) seems to be implied by that work. What kind of conduct does the work seem to suggest is valuable, worthy, or right? What kind of conduct does the work seem to suggest is detestable, blameworthy, or wrong? Does the work in fact endorse—either explicitly or implicitly—any kind of moral code? Support your argument with detailed evidence from the text.
 - Choose one of Faulkner's most stylistically and technically innovative works, such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, or "The Bear." Explain how and why (if at all) the unconventional stylistic and technical features of the work contribute to the work's effectiveness. How and why would the work be less effective if it had been phrased or structured in more traditional ways? What does Faulkner gain (and/or lose) by departing so radically from traditional methods of storytelling?
 - How would you defend Faulkner against the potential charge that his fiction is too narrow and too parochial—that by focusing so much on the past and present of a tiny part of the South, he neglects to deal with broader, more universal issues and concerns? What themes or features of his writing make it relevant to nonsoutherners? Do some research to determine how and why readers from outside the South and even outside the United States have responded positively to Faulkner's fiction.
 - Choose one common theme of Faulkner's fiction—such as the history of the South, the relationship between past and present, the process of cultural decay, the conflict between distinct classes, the tensions within families, or the tensions between different races—and trace the appearance of that theme in at least one work from at least three different decades. What continuities and/or differences exist in Faulkner's treatment of the chosen theme? How does the theme contribute to the coherence and success of the selected works? How does Faulkner avoid the risk of merely repeating himself in dealing with the chosen theme?

10. Faulkner greatly admired Ernest Hemingway's short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Try to explain why Faulkner might have had such high regard for this work. How and why might the themes, setting, characterization, and "moral" of Hemingway's novel have appealed to Faulkner? How do the style and techniques of Hemingway's work differ from the typical style and techniques of Faulkner? Compare and contrast Hemingway's novella with Faulkner's work "The Bear." How are they similar in plot and theme but dissimilar in phrasing, structure, and other characteristics?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Blotner, Joseph, and Noel Polk. "Chronology." In *Novels 1930–1935: As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary, Light in August, Pylon*. By William Faulkner. New York: Library of America, 1985.
- Cox, Leland H. *William Faulkner: Biographical and Reference Guide*. Detroit: Gale, 1982.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, 1936.
- . *Collected Stories*. New York: Random House, 1950.
- . *Novels 1930–1935: As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary, Light in August, Pylon*. Edited by Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk. New York: Library of America, 1985.
- . *Novels 1942–1954: Go Down, Moses, Intruder in the Dust, Requiem for a Nun, A Fable*. Edited by Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk. New York: Library of America, 1994.
- . *The Sound and the Fury*. Edited by David Minter. New York: Norton, 1987.
- Karl, Frederick R. *William Faulkner, American Writer: A Biography*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989.
- McHaney, Thomas L. *William Faulkner: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976.
- Padgett, John B. William Faulkner on the Web. Available online. URL: <http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/faulkner.html>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Volpe, Edmond L. *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*. New York: Noonday, 1964.

Robert C. Evans



F. SCOTT FITZGERALD (1896–1940)

It eluded us then, but no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further. . . . And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

(*The Great Gatsby*)

During his lifetime, F. Scott Fitzgerald was a celebrity of sorts. Despite never graduating, he remains one of Princeton's best-known alumni. He and his wife, Zelda, embodied the ideals of the roaring twenties (and the Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald) through their carefree and extravagant lifestyle. They spent money freely, moved around the United States and Europe almost constantly, and both broke down famously and tragically. Although he did spend time among the expatriate community in Paris, Fitzgerald's works remain quintessentially American, concerning themselves with such subjects as the American dream, failed illusions, and Hollywood.

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896. Young Scott was spoiled by his mother, Mollie, who had inherited money from her father, an Irish immigrant who had become one of the most successful businessmen in St. Paul. In contrast, Scott's father, Edward, was largely unsuccessful. The family moved regularly, but they had a good standard of living because of Mollie's money.

Scott was a voracious reader and a writer from a young age. Although he was always small, he dreamed of athletic success and, throughout his life, worshipped star athletes. In addition, Scott desired popularity and respect from his peers. He was good-looking and always dressed well. Scott played with the children of the wealthy in St. Paul,

but he considered himself an outsider: "his sense of differentness in St. Paul sharpened his skills as a social observer and shaped his lifelong self-consciousness" (Brucoli 25).

In 1908, Scott started at St. Paul Academy, where he played football and baseball and was labeled a show-off. His desire for recognition and his tendency to boast sometimes annoyed his peers, but he was very socially active, always organizing activities at the center of a large group. He published his first story in the school magazine in 1909.

From the beginning Scott was a poor student; although he enjoyed writing, he found school assignments dull. In 1911 the family decided that he needed more discipline and he was sent to the Newman School, a Catholic boarding school in New Jersey. While at Newman he was unhappy and unsuccessful, but he was drawn to the idea of Princeton University and to the excitement of New York. During the summers in St. Paul he wrote, directed, and performed in plays; each year these were quite successful.

Despite his poor academic record at Newman and an unimpressive showing on the entrance exams, Scott was admitted to Princeton in fall 1913. He loved it at Princeton; he particularly approved of the focus on social success and the hero worship accorded to star athletes. He tried out for football but did not make it past the first week. He turned instead to the *Princeton Tiger*, the humor

magazine, and the Triangle Club, an organization that produced original musical comedies. He made friends, but once again he was a bit of an outsider because he was from an obscure prep school.

Throughout his Princeton career Fitzgerald did poorly in his classes, and his frequent failures put him in the position of having to take extra makeup classes. In the beginning of his junior year, he failed his makeup exam in qualitative analysis and therefore was ineligible for campus offices, including the presidency of the Triangle Club. Fitzgerald never recovered from this disappointment: "To me college would never be the same. There were to be no badges of pride, no medals, after all. It seemed on one March afternoon that I had lost every single thing I wanted." (*The Crack-Up*, qtd. in Bruccoli 60). In November Fitzgerald was in the infirmary twice and, after Christmas, he dropped out of college for the rest of the year to recuperate. He was adamant that he had not been expelled for his academic failures, although this was indeed partly the case.

He returned to Princeton in September 1916 to repeat his junior year and continued in the same pattern, finding his classes boring and throwing himself into extracurricular pursuits. He published a play, four stories, three poems, and five book reviews in a magazine called the *Lit*. After America entered World War I, Fitzgerald signed up for a military training program. Home for the summer, he took the exam for an infantry commission and then reported for training in November 1917. He spent much of his time during training camp writing a novel, because he expected to be killed in battle and wanted to leave a legacy. He finished the book, which he called "The Romantic Egoist," in February 1918 and submitted it to Charles Scribner's Sons. Scribner eventually rejected the work, although the rejection letter said that the book displayed a great deal of originality.

In March Fitzgerald reported to his infantry regiment in Kentucky. The regiment was soon transferred to Montgomery, Alabama, to prepare for overseas service. It was in Montgomery that Fitzgerald met 18-year-old Zelda Sayre, one of the most popular and sought-after belles of the

town. During summer 1918 Fitzgerald managed to become Zelda's primary suitor, although she continued to date other men.

The war ended before Fitzgerald's regiment could leave for France, and he was somewhat disappointed at "missing" the war and a chance to prove himself. By the end of the year he had decided he wanted to marry Zelda, but she hesitated to marry an unpublished writer with little money. Therefore, after his discharge from the army, Fitzgerald went to New York to try to earn enough money so that Zelda would marry him. He worked for an advertising agency and spent his nights writing stories, accumulating rejections in the process.

After a failed attempt to convince Zelda to marry him immediately, he quit his job and decided to return to St. Paul to buckle down and write a novel. He holed himself up in his parents' house and wrote steadily. The typescript of *This Side of Paradise* (much of which was transferred, and still more reworked from "The Romantic Egoist") was accepted by Scribner on September 16, 1919. The novel was published on March 26, 1920, and the first 3,000 copies were sold within three days. Fitzgerald became famous almost overnight (as he had always expected). Although the novel sold extremely well and was in fact Fitzgerald's most popular book, the sales did not make him rich. Most of Fitzgerald's income in 1920 was from stories; throughout his career, he always regarded short story writing as a way to make money between his novels. He also began the custom of borrowing money from Harold Ober, one of his publishers at Scribner.

Scott and Zelda were married on April 3, 1920, in New York and were immediately swept into a new life of celebrity. They drank, went to parties, and spent money wildly. After a month of living in hotels, Fitzgerald needed a place to work without distractions, and the couple rented a house in Westport, Connecticut. Their life did not settle down entirely, however; there were weekend parties and frequent excursions to New York.

In September 1920, Scribner published a volume of Fitzgerald's stories called *Flappers and Philosophers*. The book sold well, although reviews were

mixed. Fitzgerald continued to work on his next novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*. Zelda found out in February that she was pregnant, and, after traveling in Europe for three months, the couple settled in St. Paul, where they would stay until late 1922. Their daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald (called Scottie), was born October 26, 1921. *The Beautiful and Damned* was published in book form (after having previously appeared in installments) in March 1922, to a disappointing critical reception, although it did sell reasonably well. In 1922 Fitzgerald wrote an ultimately unsuccessful play, *The Vegetable*, and Scribner published his second collection of stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age*, in 1923.

The family moved back to New York, renting a small house in Great Neck. Fitzgerald began drinking more frequently. He continued to write stories, now needing to publish for the money. In April 1924 the Fitzgeralds moved to the French Riviera. There was a near-crisis in their marriage when Zelda became involved with a French aviator named Edouard Jozan, but they reconciled. Fitzgerald's feelings about Zelda's betrayal influenced his portrayal of lost illusions in his next novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The typescript of *Gatsby* was sent to Scribner in October 1924. The novel was published in April 1925 and received excellent reviews, despite not selling very well.

After 1925 Fitzgerald found it increasingly difficult to devote extended periods of time to writing. That spring in Paris, Fitzgerald met ERNEST HEMINGWAY, whose chronicle of their meeting in *A Moveable Feast* portrays Fitzgerald as a drunk. Fitzgerald was always awed and intimidated by Hemingway (especially because of his reputation as a war hero and an athlete). Through Hemingway Fitzgerald also met GERTRUDE STEIN and other expatriate writers. The Fitzgeralds became well known in Paris for various (often drunken) stunts and fought frequently (and publicly).

The family returned to America in December 1926. Their two and a half years abroad had generally been a failure. After staying briefly in Montgomery, Zelda and Scott spent two months in California, where Scott had been invited to write a movie treatment; they hoped to make a good

amount of money from this. Instead, the treatment was rejected and they spent much more than the amount of the advance. They settled in a rented house in Delaware and, for the most part, continued their lavish lifestyle. The Fitzgeralds decided to return to Europe in spring 1929 when the lease on their Delaware house expired. During this period Zelda published several stories, partly to pay for ballet lessons, into which she threw herself with increasing fervor. Her behavior started to become somewhat strange. At one point she accused her husband of being a homosexual, a charge for which there was no evidence and that deeply hurt him. Several of the stories Fitzgerald wrote in 1929 explore the theme of marital problems. In Paris Fitzgerald continued to drink and to get into trouble. He did also continue to work on the novel that would eventually become *Tender Is the Night*, which would be published in 1934.

Zelda continued to exhibit the strain of her intense ballet training and grew nervous and anxious. In April 1930 she entered the Malmaison clinic outside Paris, discharged herself in May against her doctor's advice, and, after trying to resume her training, experienced hallucinations that led her to attempt suicide. She was diagnosed as schizophrenic in June and entered a clinic on Lake Geneva. Fitzgerald split his time between Paris and Switzerland so that he could be close to Zelda, and they exchanged hundreds of letters during the time she was in the clinic. During this period Fitzgerald wrote stories and did not work at all on the novel. Zelda had made a partial recovery by April 1931 and was discharged from the clinic in September, when the family returned to America.

They settled for a time in Montgomery. Scott received an offer to go to Hollywood to write a screenplay; although he did not want to leave Zelda or to delay his novel, he eventually accepted when MGM raised the offering salary. He stayed for five weeks and earned \$6,000, although ultimately his screenplay was not used. Zelda's condition worsened again in early 1932, and, in February, Scott took her to a psychiatric clinic in Baltimore.

During this time Scott was working on *Tender Is the Night* and felt threatened when, after Scrib-

ner had published her mostly autobiographical novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, in fall 1932, Zelda began work on a novel dealing with madness. *Tender Is the Night* was published serially in early 1934, and then in book form in April. It was not (as commonly believed) a failure, although it was a failure in terms of Fitzgerald's expectations. It sold reasonably well for a novel during the depression.

In February 1934 Zelda was transferred to a sanitarium in New York, but she failed to improve there and in May was admitted in a catatonic condition to a hospital outside Baltimore. She attempted suicide repeatedly while in the hospital. At this point Fitzgerald seems to have accepted that she would never fully recover, and, although he would never consider divorcing her, he basically considered their marriage to be over.

Fitzgerald's fourth story collection, *Taps at Reveille*, was published in March 1935. The reviews were mainly favorable, but the book did not have huge sales. In 1935 Fitzgerald's tuberculosis had become active, and he spent the summer in North Carolina in a treatment area. He had an affair with a married woman, Beatrice Dance, that summer, but he made it clear that he would never abandon Zelda and ended the affair with a firm letter after Beatrice left North Carolina.

He continued to write stories during 1935, but "Since he was now writing to raise fast money for pressing debts, Fitzgerald was submitting what were really working drafts" (Brucoli 400). In November he returned to North Carolina and wrote a series of confessional essays: "The Crack-Up," "Pasting It Together," and "Handle with Care." Other writers (such as Hemingway) found these pieces embarrassing, and indeed they did somewhat undermine Fitzgerald's reputation, as he had admitted he was a broken man. By summer 1936 he was struggling to sell any stories and was \$9,000 in debt to Scribner. By June 1937 he had not sold a story for over a year and his situation was growing desperate. He was drinking frequently and was fairly depressed.

In 1937 he was hired by MGM to work on a movie portrait of himself, and so he went to Hollywood, hopeful that he could launch a new career and rid himself of the more than \$22,000 in debt

he had accumulated. He worked hard for MGM, but his only screen credit in 18 months was on a film named *Three Comrades*, based on a novel by Erich Maria Remarque. He did earn a good salary and did not live extravagantly, but he still had very little in savings once his paychecks stopped in 1939.

In July 1937 Fitzgerald met Sheila Graham, a 28-year-old English Hollywood columnist, at a party. They began a relationship that would last until Fitzgerald's death. Fitzgerald had ambivalent feelings about his relationship with Graham: Although he grew to depend on her, their relationship still made him feel guilty. During the time he lived in California Zelda remained in the hospital in Baltimore; he visited her occasionally and they wrote each other frequent letters.

In 1939 he became a freelancer and, without the discipline of a regular job, began drinking steadily again. In what would turn out to be the last time he saw Zelda, they went on a trip to Cuba, where he was continuously drunk. His tuberculosis was also active again at this point. In spring and summer 1939 he returned to short story writing but, after 120 stories, his "ability to write fresh, well-constructed commercial stories was irrecoverable" (Brucoli 457).

In 1939 he began planning a novel about Hollywood, which he thought of as based on the life of the MGM producer Irving Thalberg. It was published posthumously (and unfinished) in 1941 as *The Last Tycoon*.

Zelda was discharged from the hospital in April 1940 and went to live with her mother in Montgomery. Fitzgerald sent her an allowance every week, but he never considered taking her out to Hollywood.

In December 1940 Fitzgerald had a heart attack at a drugstore and was ordered to rest in bed. He died of another heart attack on December 21 and was buried in Maryland. Zelda continued to live with her mother, voluntarily returning to Highland Mental Hospital during periods of depression. She was there in March 1948 when a fire broke out, and she was one of nine patients who died. She was buried with her husband in Maryland.

***This Side of Paradise* (1919)**

Fitzgerald's first novel is also his most autobiographical. It traces the life of handsome, rich Amory Blaine, spanning from his childhood through his time at prep school, at Princeton, and in the First World War, with a brief period of aimless drifting afterward. It ends when Amory, only 23, gains some self-awareness after a period of disillusionment; however, returning to Princeton and standing in front of its gates, he demonstrates that this is not sufficient when he cries, "I know myself—and that is all!" (308).

The novel's main subject is the development of Amory's character as he progresses to maturity through a series of disappointments. Amory, like Fitzgerald himself, is influenced primarily in childhood by his mother (indicated by the title of the first chapter, "Amory, Son of Beatrice"). While Beatrice Blaine spoils her son in much the way that Mollie Fitzgerald spoiled Scott, Beatrice has wealth, beauty, style, and a glamorous lifestyle that young Scott only wished his mother possessed.

Amory begins the book with "a sort of aristocratic egotism" (21), combining a sense of his own superiority with the desire to assert this over others: "Vanity, tempered with self-suspicion if not self-knowledge, a sense of people as automatons to his will, a desire to 'pass' as many boys as possible and get to a vague top of the world . . . with this background did Amory drift into adolescence" (22). In his early days at Princeton, Amory's attitude is "I want to be admired" (54).

Throughout his young life, Amory is motivated by dreams of success and greatness, but "It was always the becoming he dreamed of, never the being" (21). Indeed, his initial relationships with girls focus on the conquest rather than the possession; once Myra St. Clair has let him kiss her once, he is no longer interested. The most passionate part of his relationship with a girl named Isabelle takes place before they kiss, and this long-delayed moment is described as "the high point of vanity, the crest of his young egotism" (100). Of course, this achievement is immediately ruined by Amory's failure to be sufficiently sympathetic about the small mark his shirt stud has left on Isabelle's neck, and he no lon-

ger views her in the same way after this incident. In the short section "Heroic in General Tone," Amory achieves a small part of the success that Fitzgerald himself never attained when he scores the only touchdown in a prep school football game, and this becomes "a high point in Amory's memory" (36).

Amory's dreams of being a "big man on campus," as did Fitzgerald's own, come crashing down when he fails a makeup exam and is left ineligible, and Amory's reactions to this disappointment are chronicled in the section titled "Aftermath." He realizes that this failure represents a regression to "the fundamental Amory, idle, imaginative, rebellious" (110). Monsignor Darcy recognizes, however, that Amory is developing: "This has given you time to think and you're casting off a lot of your old luggage about success and the superman and all" (115).

Monsignor Darcy, who was based on Father Sigourney Fay (to whom Fitzgerald dedicated the novel), is a key influence on Amory throughout the novel. Scott met Fay in 1912, and "Fay was the first important person who responded to Scott and encouraged his aspirations" (Brucoli 37). In the novel, Fitzgerald presents Darcy and Amory as having a surrogate father/son relationship, but he also depicts them as intellectual equals: "The priest seemed to guess Amory's thoughts before they were clear in his own head, so closely related were their minds in form and groove" (116). It is Monsignor Darcy who introduces Amory to the idea of the "personage," which influences the way he views himself and others.

After the war Amory is bored and restless in a way that he feels embodies the attitudes of his entire generation. He changes rapidly after his heartbreak with Rosalind: "it was already hard for him to visualize the heart-whole boy who had stepped off the transport, passionately desiring the adventure of life" (237). He engages in self-reflection, narrated by Fitzgerald as a literal question-and-answer session in the chapter "The Egotist Becomes a Personage." By the time of Monsignor Darcy's funeral, there is clear development in Amory's view of himself as he realizes what he really wants in life: "He found something that he wanted, had always wanted

and always would want—not to be admired, as he had feared; not to be loved, as he had made himself believe; but to be necessary to people, to be indispensable” (290). In the last chapter of the novel, Amory accepts his selfishness—an acceptance that is a part of his final journey to self-knowledge.

Another important aspect of the novel is the way in which Fitzgerald acts as a social historian; the novel documents trends of the era such as the “petting party” and the changes in behavior and expectations of the new, rebellious American girl. This book is often considered the first realistic American college novel and is also praised for capturing the feelings of a generation “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken . . .” (307).

An interesting stylistic feature of the novel is its blend of many different kinds of writing techniques, most notably the drama format of the chapter “The Debutante.” The dramatic sections of this chapter allow for the development of the characters (Rosalind, most importantly) through dialogue and stage directions alone; the absence of any narrative perspective also means that narrative judgment is omitted. At the actual moment when Amory and Rosalind meet, the characters are reduced to “HE” and “SHE,” a technique that serves to universalize them and this scene of flirtatious conquest.

The novel is a montage of different scenes and “poses” for Amory; it is episodic, focused not so much on plot as on development of character. This aspect of the book is illustrated by sections like “Snapshots of the Young Egoist,” which presents a series of isolated incidents from Amory’s childhood in Minneapolis in order to give the reader the opportunity to assemble an overall picture.

Fitzgerald’s use of titles for the short sections within each chapter creates an important organizing principle. Occasionally these titles self-consciously refer to function rather than content, with titles like “Historical,” “Descriptive,” or “A Damp Symbolic Interlude.” The titles also allow Fitzgerald to comment more directly on Amory’s actions than the third-person narrator can, as when he uses the title “The Superman Grows Careless” for the chapter in which Amory fails the makeup exam.

Fitzgerald’s lyricism is particularly evident in the novel in descriptions of Princeton, in which there is always a sense of nostalgia. We must remember that Fitzgerald’s time at Princeton did not end happily, and he clearly felt a strong desire to recapture the magic of his initial time there. Amory describes the seniors singing on campus at night: “The early moon had drenched the arches with pale blue, and, weaving over the night, in and out of the gossamer rifts of moon, swept a song, a song with more than a hint of sadness, infinitely transient, infinitely regretful” (47). Perhaps most poignant is the section entitled “The End of Many Things,” when Amory and Tom spend their last night at Princeton.

For Discussion or Writing

1. This novel is an example of a bildungsroman, or novel of formation, which traces the growth of its protagonist from childhood to maturity. Compare the growth experienced by Amory in this novel to that of the protagonist in another bildungsroman, such as J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. To what extent has each character reached maturity by the novel’s end?
2. Trace Amory’s relationships with young women throughout the novel. Do you see any progression in his interactions with Myra, Isabelle, Clara, Rosalind, and Eleanor? Does Amory seem to learn anything from each successive relationship and, if so, what?
3. Trace Amory’s intellectual development throughout the novel by focusing on one particular idea (e.g., wealth, the class system) and his discussions with other young Princetonians on the subject.

“The Ice Palace” (1920)

“The Ice Palace” is one of several stories in which Fitzgerald considered the differences between the North and the South, a difference personally relevant for him because of his marriage to the famed southern belle Zelda Sayre. In the story, Sally Carol Happer, a young southern debutante, decides

to marry Harry Bellamy, a northerner, because she feels that everyone in her Georgia town lacks ambition. However, during a trip north in January to visit Harry and his family, Sally becomes lost in an ice palace and, as a result, decides she belongs in the South; the story ends as it began, with Sally Carrol lazily waiting at her window on a beautiful day.

The South is presented as slow moving but familiar. In particular, the end of the story suggests the repetition of a routine that Sally Carrol knows well, and that has perhaps taken on added significance for her (and for readers) after her adventure in the North. Clark Darrow, one of Sally Carrol's suitors, seems to embody the life of many of the denizens of their southern Georgia town. "Clark had 'a income'—just enough to keep himself in ease and his car in gasolene—and he had spent the two years since he graduated from Georgia Tech in dozing round the lazy streets of his home town, discussing how he could best invest his capital for an immediate fortune" (49).

In contrast, the North is presented as more stiff and formal. Sally Carrol finds the women of the Bellamy family particularly lacking in charm and even hostile. Even Harry at one point lets slip his opinion that southerners are "degenerates" (62). Roger Patton, the only northerner in the story who seems to have any self-awareness, explains to Sally Carrol his theory that people in the North are slowly "freezing up" (59).

The ice palace, although beautiful and a novelty for Sally Carrol, represents the coldness in personality that she begins to see as typical of the North, and her getting lost also shows the isolation she feels there: "She was alone with this presence that came out of the North, the dreary loneliness that rose from ice-bound whalers in the Arctic seas." (67). Earlier in her trip, she had reflected that "sometimes at night it had seemed to her as though no one lived here—they had all gone long ago—leaving lighted houses to be covered in time by tombing heaps of sleet" (64).

Sally Carrol's true feelings about the South (and the Old South in particular) are illustrated in part 2 of the story when she takes Harry for a walk in the

cemetery. When her eyes fill with tears while observing the Confederate graves, Sally Carrol reveals her reverence for the Old South: "Oh, Harry, there was something, there was something I couldn't ever make you understand, but it was there" (54). This side of Sally Carrol also becomes clear when, during her stay in the North, she is strongly affected by hearing an orchestra playing "Dixie." Although she claims otherwise in the early part of the story, it is clear that Sally Carrol's nostalgia for the Old South means that she will be incapable of settling in the North.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Sally Carrol's idealized view of the South with the viewpoint presented in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Consider, in particular, the relationship that each female main character has with the Old South and how this affects her fate.
2. Compare the northern characters in this story with characters in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* or *Hedda Gabler*. Do you think Roger Patton's theory about the North, that its people lack "infinite possibilities for great sorrow or joy" (60), is correct? Justify your response with specific details from the text.
3. Do you think the story presents a stereotypical view of the North and/or the South? If so, what might be Fitzgerald's purpose in portraying such stereotypes? Discuss some specific examples of this kind of stereotypical presentation.

"May Day" (1920)

"May Day" takes place in New York over the course of one day, through to the early hours of the following morning, and tells three separate stories of the downfall of Gordon Sterrett, a Yale alumni dance, and a May Day riot. The three incidents become linked through characters crossing among them. The intercutting sections of the story alternately narrate these events from different points of view.

Fitzgerald said of the story that he was trying to capture some of the effect of spring 1919 in New York, when what he later called “the Age of Jazz” was born. The opening section of the story, with its allegorical description of “the great city of the conquering people” (97), poetically invokes the postwar jubilation of New York. Fitzgerald also depicts the celebratory atmosphere of the Yale dance (and its aftermath) by portraying the increasing drunkenness of Peter Himmel and Philip Dean, who, by the story’s end, have been transformed, to their own great hilarity, into Mr. In and Mr. Out.

There is a striking contrast between this atmosphere, exemplified by the extravagance of the dance and the rowdy crowd at Childs’ the following morning, described by Gus Rose as “a colorful circus of beauty and riotous pleasure” (132), and the frightening chaos of the riot in the newspaper office, when Edith “felt the push of warm bodies under rough cloth, and her ears were full of shouting and trampling and hard breathing” (130). Fitzgerald also creates contrast in the story through the juxtaposition of the wealthy socialites and the two former soldiers, Carrol Key and Gus Rose. These two live in a different world and are only able to glimpse the fashionable lifestyle when hidden in a janitor’s closet at Delmonico’s. They are easily swept along in a crowd; the beating of a small Jew and subsequent rush toward Tolliver Hall foreshadow the more serious riot later in the story, when their willingness to follow has tragic consequences for Key.

Gordon Sterrett’s relationship with Edith Bradin is sadly ironic. He remembers her fondly when he hears that she will be attending the dance, and the shifting narrative perspective allows Fitzgerald to reveal that she secretly loves him: “Edith Bradin was falling in love with her recollection of Gordon Sterrett” (113). However, from the moment Gordon cuts in on Edith at the dance, she can tell he has changed: “She loved him—she knew she loved him—then for a minute there was silence while a strange feeling of uneasiness crept over her. Something was wrong” (117). When she sees the condition Gordon is in now, Edith is repulsed by him:

“As he talked she saw he had changed utterly. . . . Revulsion seized her, followed by a faint, surprising boredom” (118). Gordon’s experience with Jewel Hudson has left him a broken man, unable to experience what might have been with Edith.

It has been argued that Gordon “is an obvious projection of Fitzgerald’s despair during the days when New York was celebrating the birth of the Jazz Age” (Brucoli 99). Gordon, like Fitzgerald himself in early 1919, is a failed artist, and his description of the reasons for his failure sound like early criticisms of Fitzgerald as a writer: “I tried, a little, but my stuff’s crude. I’ve got talent, Phil; I can draw—but I just don’t know how” (101). The decline in Gordon’s lifestyle since his graduation from college is first indicated by his clothing, which is now ragged and soiled, while “only three years before he had received a scattering vote in the senior elections at college for being the best-dressed man in his class” (99). Gordon’s desperation is evident from his manner when he first encounters Philip Dean, when he “collapsed unexpectedly upon the bed; [and] lay there inert and spiritless” (100). After Dean denies his request for money, we observe Gordon only through the narration of others, such as Gus Rose and Edith Bradin, until the abrupt final section of the story ends with his equally abrupt suicide.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “May Day” was influenced by “Fitzgerald’s temporary interest in the school of naturalistic or deterministic fiction” (97). Compare the story to a naturalistic novel such as THEODORE DREISER’S *Sister Carrie* or RICHARD WRIGHT’S *Native Son*, focusing on the way each work reveals the harsh side of life and the indifference of the universe.
2. Edith Bradin seems to be a typical Fitzgerald woman in many ways—beautiful, popular, and cruel. Compare Edith to Judy Jones, Rosalind Connage, or Daisy Buchanan. Does Edith’s experience with the riot at her brother’s office seem to change her in any way that might make her stand out from the Fitzgerald stereotype of the rich young socialite?

3. Choose one of the characters and trace the ways Fitzgerald portrays this character through the eyes of others in the different sections of the story. What new insights into the character do you gain by seeing him or her from these differing points of view?

“Winter Dreams” (1922)

This story focuses on Dexter Green, growing up in Minnesota, and his “winter dreams,” which eventually revolve around the rich, beautiful Judy Jones. He manages to become one of Judy’s many beaux, but she does not show any special interest in him until after he is already engaged to another girl, and their brief fling at that point is satisfying for no one. Eventually Dexter ends up in New York, where seven years later he hears news of Judy’s unhappy married life, and the story ends with his grief that the illusion of Judy is gone and he cannot even mourn this loss.

The story was written just before the publication of *The Great Gatsby* and has some similarities to the novel. Dexter’s ambitions to win Judy Jones mirror Gatsby’s quest for Daisy Fay. Dexter, like Gatsby, is not of the same social class as the object of his affections; it is significant that he first encounters Judy when, as a young girl, she is playing golf at the club where he works as a caddy. However, Dexter differs from Gatsby in that he eventually realizes the futility of his dream: “He loved her, and he would love her until the day he was too old for loving—but he could not have her” (233). Another difference is that this story employs a third-person omniscient narrator, allowing Fitzgerald to focus on Dexter’s feelings while still giving the impression of an outsider’s perspective.

Dexter’s “winter dreams” also differ somewhat from Gatsby’s. They initially concern success and fame among the rich patrons of the Sherry Island Golf Club: “But do not get the impression, because his winter dreams happened to be concerned at first with musings on the rich, that there was anything merely snobbish in the boy. He wanted not association with glittering things and glittering people—he wanted the glittering things themselves”

(220–221). It is only later that Dexter’s dreams become associated with Judy Jones, and, perhaps more important, with the illusions she creates.

At the end of the story, Dexter’s reaction to hearing about Judy (“The dream was gone. Something had been taken from him” [235]) reveals that what was important about Judy was his continuing illusion of her perfection, not Judy herself (who was already lost to him), and it is this loss that he tries, but fails, to lament: “Even the grief he could have borne was left behind in the country of illusion, of youth, of the richness of life, where his winter dreams had flourished” (235–236). The story is thus also about growing up, as the dreams and illusions of youth are lost as Dexter grows older.

Another illusion that is exposed in the story is that of the American dream, of which Dexter’s business success—he becomes rich from humble origins through hard work—is a clear illustration. His golf game at Sherry Island Golf Club is indicative of his social rise. However, the end of the story implies that this success has not led to happiness. Wealth and beauty are similarly unsatisfying for Judy: “‘I’m more beautiful than anybody else,’ she said brokenly, ‘why can’t I be happy?’” (232). The report from Devlin about Judy’s marriage also confirms this reality.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine closely the similarities and differences of Dexter Green and Jay Gatsby, particularly with respect to the way each goes about pursuing his dream. What does the different understanding each has of the reality of his dream suggest about the personality differences between the two men?
2. Compare the descriptions of winter in this story to those in “The Ice Palace.” How does Fitzgerald make use of specific language to give a nearly opposite impression of winter landscapes in these two stories?
3. Look closely at the description of the first meeting between Dexter and Judy (end of part 2 of the story), paying particular attention to the repetition of key phrases and the intensity of the physical description. What impression of this moment is created by Fitzgerald’s use of language?

***The Great Gatsby* (1925)**

Fitzgerald's most famous (and most widely studied) novel was written after a period of struggle in his marriage; perhaps his feelings of betrayal found their way into the novel's sentiment of lost illusions. The novel tells the story of Jay Gatsby, an idealistic young man who re-creates his whole life to recapture the love of Daisy Buchanan. The novel is narrated by Nick Carraway, Daisy's cousin, who happens to move in next door to Gatsby's grand mansion in West Egg and who therefore becomes involved in Gatsby's dreams. The novel's climax occurs in a scene in the Plaza Hotel in New York when Daisy, after seeming to fall in love with Gatsby once more, ultimately decides to remain with the security and "old money" of her husband, Tom. On the way home from New York, the car driven by Daisy strikes and kills Tom's mistress, Myrtle, whose husband, George, murders Gatsby, believing he was the driver of the car.

One of the novel's key subjects is the importance of dreams and illusions, and Gatsby himself, with his overriding quest to win Daisy back, is its most important dreamer. At the climactic moment of the book, Gatsby is personified by his dream; the man fades away as "only the dead dream fought on" (128). Gatsby's "incorruptible dream" (147) and his seemingly infinite capacity for hope are what make him "great," in Nick's view. When Nick first meets Gatsby, this hope is evident in his description of Gatsby's "rare [smile]," which showed that he "believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself" (49). Nick defines Gatsby's "greatness" as "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again" (8).

Although Nick feels that Gatsby's hope is unique, the use of the first person in the optimistic closing lines of the novel suggests that this characteristic also reflects a general human tendency to dream. Nick ends the novel by raising the possibility that "one fine morning—" "we" may be able to grasp the dream that "eluded" Gatsby (172), and the uses of dashes and ellipses in this sentence add to the sense of hope. Some critics see Gatsby as a representative of the struggle to live the American

dream, but also of the failure of this dream to provide happiness.

Gatsby's dreams are revealed as being unattainable, even from the first moments of his reunion with Daisy. Nick realizes that the extent of Gatsby's dream made it impossible for it to ever be attained: "there must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything" (92). Here it becomes clear again that it is the strength of the dream that drives Gatsby, even more than the reality of Daisy herself.

Gatsby's dreams are inextricably linked to his misconception that he can control time. During his reunion with Daisy, Gatsby is trying to recapture their past relationship, and Fitzgerald uses the clock in this scene to illustrate Gatsby's failure to impose his will on time. Although Gatsby catches the clock when it topples, Nick says that "we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor" (84). At the end of that scene, Gatsby is described as "running down like an over-wound clock" (89), a phrase once again suggesting that time does not function as he wishes it to. When talking to Nick later in the novel, Gatsby reveals his attitude toward time directly when Nick tells him he cannot repeat the past: "'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'" (106). Gatsby's illusion that no time has passed since he and Daisy were together is shattered, however, by seeing Daisy's child, the physical manifestation of her relationship with Tom.

Gatsby's dream is also illustrated by the symbol of the green light. Its first mention in the novel is simultaneous with the first appearance of Gatsby himself; when Nick returns from his first evening at the Buchanan home, he sees his neighbor, who "stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way," while Nick can see nothing but "a single green light, minute and far away" (25). Later when Jordan tells him the background between Gatsby and Daisy, Nick realizes the significance of this moment: "Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night"

(76). However, for Gatsby, the light stands not only for Daisy herself, but also for the dream of recapturing her love; that is why it loses its meaning for him after his reunion with Daisy: "it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. . . . Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one" (90). Nick, however, continues to associate the green light with Gatsby's capacity for hope: "Gatsby believed in the green light" (171).

There is a similarity between Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson as dreamers, and the repeated descriptions of Myrtle's "vitality" (28, 66, 131), the same word used to describe Gatsby's dream, illustrate the power a dream can have; it literally gives Myrtle life, which has to be violently ripped from her: It appears "as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long" (131). In contrast, George Wilson represents what happens in the absence of a dream. He is described as "a blond, spiritless man, anaemic" (27) and "one of those worn-out men" (130). He is easily manipulated by Tom, and the discovery of his wife's infidelity makes him physically ill.

The dreams of the novel often manifest themselves as the typical American dream of money and success. To achieve this dream, for the sole purpose of winning Daisy's love, Gatsby reinvents himself, becoming a literally "self-made" man: "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (95). Ironically, as a result, his unknown background leads to all the rumors that circulate about him. The rumors enter the novel the first time Nick attends one of Gatsby's parties (35), becoming most extreme with the assertion that "he killed a man once" (45). Tom Buchanan calls him "some big bootlegger" (104) and "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (123). Rumors also swirl around Gatsby's death—rumors that are "grotesque, circumstantial, eager, and untrue" (155). This constant speculation, and indeed the concern with Gatsby's background, is one way in which Fitzgerald criticizes the upper class of American society, perhaps pointing out the irony in the fact that those who achieve what should be

the American dream are then shunned by the truly wealthy.

In keeping with this irony, and with the way dreams are often revealed to be false throughout Fitzgerald's works, it becomes clear that hard work and the accumulation of money are not enough; there is an insurmountable distinction between "old money" and "new money," and this difference is a large part of the reason that the relationship between Daisy and Gatsby is doomed to failure.

The split between old and new money is also made clear in some of the novel's many geographical contrasts, such as the difference between West Egg and East Egg, which exhibit a "dissimilarity in every particular" (10). East Egg is the domain of those with old money, while the newly rich occupy West Egg. There is a striking contrast between Gatsby's mansion, described as a "factual imitation" and "spanking new" (as is Gatsby's money) under a "beard of ivy" (10), and the Buchanans' colonial house, described as "glowing now with reflected gold" (12) and with a "frosted wedding-cake" (13) ceiling. When Daisy finally attends one of Gatsby's parties, the difference is clear to her: Daisy "was appalled by West Egg" (103). Even Nick finally describes Gatsby's mansion (albeit after his demise) as a "huge incoherent failure of a house" (171).

The East-West dichotomy also manifests itself on a larger scale. Nearly all of the novel's characters originate in the "Middle West." However, after college (in the East) and the war, Nick notes that "the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so I decided to go East and learn the bond business" (9). Not only does the war create in Nick a desire for a more exciting life, but it is obvious to him (and to "everybody [he] knew" who was already in the bond business) that this type of excitement can only be found in the East. However, the "riotous" East is too much for some of the characters; George Wilson claims that "my wife and I want to go West" (118) after finding out about her affair with Tom, and Nick ultimately returns to the relative innocence of the Middle West at the end of the book.

This geographical contrast is also linked to the American dream in the sense of exploring; the novel

provides a reversal of the idea of manifest destiny in that prosperity is sought eastwards in the “fresh, green breast of the new world” (171). By the end of the novel, Nick can see, through his exposure to Gatsby’s dream, what the dreams of the original settlers—“the last and greatest of all human dreams” (171)—were like, and in that moment the novel is not just about Gatsby’s dream but about the fundamental dream that defined America as a country. The idea of the characters as trailblazers, conquering a new territory, is reinforced when Nick, early in the novel, gives directions and feels like “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” (9).

Another geographical contrast in the novel is between city and country (the “country” in this case represented by Long Island). New York City is seen as a place of adventure (57), where “anything can happen” (67), containing the “wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (67). It is also described as ironically pastoral and idyllic (30), and it is where Tom Buchanan takes his mistress, where Nick gets drunk for just the second time in his life, and at the same time the setting for the climactic final confrontation.

In between the city and the country is the desolation of the “valley of ashes” (26), which symbolizes death and decay. It is a fitting place for Myrtle’s gruesome end, and perhaps a fitting place for Tom’s affair to begin. As discussed, George Wilson is also metaphorically “dead.” The valley exists under a billboard featuring “Doctor Eckleburg’s persistent stare” (27); although we might hesitate to associate the eyes of this faded advertisement with the eyes of God, as Wilson does (152), they certainly suggest a constant watchfulness (and perhaps judgment) and are the most important manifestation in the novel of the motif of sight. However, we later see the ineffectiveness of sight, as Gatsby is left outside the Buchanans’ house the night of Myrtle’s death, “watching over nothing” (139). The eyes also illustrate the omnipresence of consumerism in the increasingly commercial American society of the 1920s.

Fitzgerald also criticizes contemporary society through his portrayal of the rich. His (and Nick’s) harshest criticism is reserved for the Buchanans:

“They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (170). Tom Buchanan is described consistently throughout the novel as brutish, cruel, and powerful (both physically and behaviorally). He is “always leaning aggressively forward” (12), and Nick notes a tone of “paternal contempt” (12) in his voice. He does not hesitate to break Myrtle’s nose when she taunts him with the name of his wife (39), and he manipulates Nick as easily as he controls a weakling like Wilson: “Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square” (16). His lie about Daisy’s being Catholic (36) shocks Nick, and it provides another means for Fitzgerald to criticize the insincerity of the rich. The only real break in Tom’s powerful image occurs immediately after Myrtle’s death, when he “whimpered” and let out a “low husky sob” (135).

In striking contrast to Tom, Daisy (along with Jordan) is initially described as ephemeral (“the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor” [13]), and her consistent connection with the color white reinforces this perception. Daisy can never be separated from her money, beginning with her “white girlhood” (24) in Louisville when “the largest of the banners and the largest of the lawns belonged to Daisy Fay’s house” (72). Listening to her voice makes Nick think of her as “High in a white palace [like] the king’s daughter, the golden girl” (115), and Gatsby sees her “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (142).

Because of this constant association, Gatsby hits the nail on the head when he says that her voice, a key image throughout the novel, “is full of money” (115). Perhaps this is the indescribable quality that makes Daisy’s voice so fascinating, even to Nick: “her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened” (19). Daisy’s voice (and, by extension, her money) becomes her most important attribute, the one thing that “couldn’t be over-dreamed” (93). However, it also makes Jordan suspect possible infidelity: “and yet there’s something in that voice of

hers" (75)—another subtle way in which Fitzgerald is able to criticize the rich.

Gatsby's party guests are portrayed as equally impersonal and unconcerned: "sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all" (43). Even Gatsby himself is wasteful; the image of the fruit used for his parties suggests an almost parasitic consumption: "Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves" (41). Gatsby's extravagance is also illustrated by his shirts (89), his car (the "circus wagon" [115]), and the books in his library. The books also show the unreliability of appearances (as his guests expect them to be false) and the fragility of his created world: "if one brick was removed the whole library was likely to collapse" (47). In contrast to the Buchanans, however, Gatsby seems to be forgiven for his excesses, at least in Nick's perspective, as they are all in the service of his "great" dream.

Indeed, the narrative perspective is a key stylistic feature of the novel. Nick is certainly a biased, and perhaps even an unreliable, narrator because of his emotional involvement with the events he describes. He is a snob, believing that he is "inclined to reserve all judgments" (7), although throughout the novel we see him judge nearly all of the other characters. When retelling the story of Gatsby's background, he invents or fills in details: "I suppose he smiled at Cody—he had probably discovered that people liked him when he smiled" (96). He also imagines Gatsby's last moments: "I have an idea. . . . If that was true. . . . He must have looked up" (153). It is also difficult to know what to think when Nick tells us that he is "glad" to have told Gatsby that he was "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (145) and then, in the same breath, says that "I disapproved of him from beginning to end" (146). As a result, a reader must be constantly aware that the events of the novel are presented through a biased lens.

For Discussion or Writing

- Gatsby, like other classic works such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and JOHN STEINBECK's *Of Mice and Men*, is commonly seen as a study of the concept of the American dream. Examine how Gatsby reveals the impossibility of the dream of achieving success and happiness solely through hard work.
- Read Fitzgerald's story "The Rich Boy" and compare the attitude toward the rich expressed in this story to that expressed in *Gatsby*. How, in both texts, does Fitzgerald illustrate his view that "the lives of the rich had greater possibilities, but he recognized that they failed to use these possibilities fully" (Brucoli 232)?
- Trace the color imagery used throughout the novel. You may wish to focus on a particular color, or a certain color's associations with a single character (for example, white with Daisy). How does the use of colors allow Fitzgerald to make the novel come alive?
- Read T. S. ELIOT's *The Waste Land*, focusing particularly on the figure of Tiresias and the description of the landscape of the wasteland, and then discuss the extent to which you agree with the following claim: "A more probable source for the Eckleburg figure (who 'sank himself down into eternal blindness') and for the valley of ashes was T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which Fitzgerald greatly admired. Eckleburg can be read as a Long Island version of the blind seer Tiresias, and the ash heaps are actually and symbolically a waste land" (Brucoli 209). In what ways can Dr. T. J. Eckleburg be compared with Tiresias?

"Babylon Revisited" (1931)

In this story, the American expatriate and recovering alcoholic Charlie Wales, now a successful businessman, returns to Paris, where his young daughter has been living with the family of his sister-in-law, Marion Peters, since his wife, Helen's, death some time ago. Now that he is sober, Charlie desperately wants to reclaim his daughter and some semblance of a normal family life. However, after initially agreeing to grant him custody, Marion recants after some of his old friends, drunk, arrive

unannounced and unexpected at the Peters' house, and the story ends with Charlie realizing that he will have to continue to live alone, at least for the time being.

Change and a nostalgia for the past are evident throughout the story, beginning with the initial dialogue, when Charlie learns that many of his former acquaintances are no longer in Paris. It is clear to him that the days when American expatriates in Paris "were a sort of royalty, almost infallible, with a sort of magic around us" (619) have passed. These societal changes parallel the changes in Charlie's personal life since losing his family and giving up drinking. Even when he happily plans his future life with Honoria, he cannot help growing sad, "remembering all the plans he and Helen had made" (628). However, although he often thinks about the past, Charlie has no desire to go back, as is evident through his rejection of Lorraine and Duncan. For him they symbolize all of the negative aspects of his earlier life.

The story is full of Charlie's regret for the wasted days of alcoholism, and especially for the loss of Helen. Even when he remembers her fondly and imagines her supporting his desire to care for Honoria, the poignant description suggests that she is slipping ever further away: "She said a lot of other things—very friendly things—but she was in a swing in a white dress, and swinging faster and faster all the time, so that at the end he could not hear clearly all that she said" (628). Charlie is also anxious about his relationship with Honoria, in particular that she will grow up without him and he will "miss" influencing her life: "Charlie was more and more absorbed by the desire of putting a little of himself into her before she crystallized utterly" (623). The story is autobiographical in these respects, as Fitzgerald also experienced anxiety about his bouts of alcoholism and his daughter, Scottie (from whom he was often separated). It is surely no accident that Charlie is 35—Fitzgerald's age when he wrote this story.

Not everything in Charlie's life has changed, notably Marion's distrust of him. The story suggests that she will eventually succumb, but at the moment she is torn, preserving her loyalty to her

sister. However, our sympathy remains firmly with Charlie through the story's moving final sentence: "He was absolutely sure Helen wouldn't have wanted him to be so alone" (633).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Does Charlie deserve what he gets at the end of the story? The fact that his chance to have Honoria back is ruined by old friends from his drinking days could suggest that he is continuing to pay for the sins of his past; do you agree with this interpretation? Support your argument with details from the story.
2. The exact circumstances of Helen's death are left unclear in the story. What do you think happened to Helen? How closely was it connected to the incident when she was locked out in the snow by Charlie, and does your answer to this question affect whether you sympathize more with Charlie or Marion?
3. Research the city of Babylon and discuss why Fitzgerald might have chosen it as a representation of Paris in the title of the story. How does this title relate to the story's theme of the unrecoverable past?

Tender Is the Night (1934)

Fitzgerald's fourth novel traces the collapse of the marriage of Dick and Nicole Diver, a wealthy expatriate American couple living on the French Riviera. In a later, revised version of the text (which Fitzgerald claimed to prefer), the novel begins when the two first meet in 1917, when Dick is a psychiatrist and Nicole a mental patient, suffering the negative effects of a childhood sexual relationship with her father. The narrative then jumps forward in time to after their marriage and, for a time, adopts the point of view of Rosemary Hoyt, a young American film star who falls in love with Dick while vacationing on the Riviera. Dick's—and, to some extent, Nicole's—dissatisfaction with their life together grows, the marriage falls apart, and, at the end of the book, Dick has returned to America, his exact whereabouts unknown.

Tender Is the Night is often considered a classic example of the “breakdown” novel, which became a common genre in American fiction of the 20th century, often focusing on a fall from grace. In particular, Fitzgerald was interested in portraying the way the “breakdown” intervenes in and ruins the glamorous and perfect facade of wealthy American life. Hints of this theme are evident throughout the novel with incidents like the duel, the shots in the train station, the corpse in Rosemary’s bed, the Divers’ car accident, and Dick’s imprisonment in Rome.

This revelation of the falseness of glamour is one way in which *Tender Is the Night* illustrates Fitzgerald’s characteristic focus on false illusions and failed dreams, including the failure of the particularly American dream of success. This failure is most evident for Dick, who begins the novel full of potential. He arrives in Zurich as a young, successful doctor, with illusions explicitly linked to the American experience: “the illusions of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people—they were the illusions of a nation, the lies of generations of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely that there were no wolves outside the cabin door” (6). Even early in the novel, Dick is beginning to understand the problems inherent in the ambitions of his youth: “he used to think that he wanted to be good, he wanted to be kind, he wanted to be brave and wise, but it was all pretty difficult” (26). After his father’s death, he regrets some of what he has not achieved: He is described as “wishing he had always been as good as he had intended to be” (257).

Dick’s success as a psychiatrist is called into question by the fact that, for much of the novel, he does not practice, and perhaps also by his failure to “cure” Nicole. For a short period he does jointly run a clinic in Switzerland (significantly, however, this is only possible with the Warren family money), but this endeavor goes downhill after he begins drinking. His aspirations to publish also never play out in the way he had hoped, and his long-delayed breakthrough work becomes a symbol of his unachieved potential. This kind of failure continues even after his split from Nicole; she

hears that he “always had a big stack of papers on his desk that were known to be an important treatise on some medical subject, almost in process of completion” (391).

The title of book I—in the revised text “Case Study”—emphasizes Nicole’s status as a patient at the beginning of her relationship with Dick, and her instability (and initial reverence for Dick) is revealed through her letters. Their relationship is manipulated by Nicole’s doctors, who advise Dick not to see her again after it becomes clear that she is in love with him. Dick initially complies, but afterward he realizes his emotional involvement and succumbs to her advances when they meet again in the mountains. He seems to accept their mutual complicity: “when he left her outside the sad door on the Zürichsee and she turned and looked at him he knew her problem was one they had together for good now” (55), and the word *problem* here also suggests that Dick is aware of flaws from the moment of the relationship’s beginning.

There are also illusions inherent in the relationship between Dick and Rosemary: “They were full of brave illusions about each other, tremendous illusions, so that the communion of self with self seemed to be on a plane where no other human relations mattered” (159). Dick’s illusions about Rosemary’s innocence are shattered when Collis Clay tells a story about her on the train with Hillis, and this image continues to haunt Dick, as is indicated through the repetition of his imagined accompanying dialogue: “Do you mind if I pull down the curtain?” (176).

Many critics consider this novel to be very autobiographical, and indeed it was written after Fitzgerald’s wife, Zelda, began to break down mentally. By this point in his life Fitzgerald had realized as well that the glamorous life of celebrity he had always assumed he would lead when he became a famous author was not all it appeared. Whether or not the Divers are intended as direct representations of the Fitzgeralds, the novel’s portrayal of the careless, often carefree lives of wealthy expatriates reflects Fitzgerald’s keen observations on and criticism of the upper class in American society. Fitzgerald criticizes the wealthy “life of leisure” by employ-

ing Rosemary's (comparably) innocent perspective: "Rosemary envied them their fun, imagining a life of leisure unlike her own. She knew little of leisure, but she had the respect for it of those who have never had it. She thought of it as resting, without realizing that the Divers were as far from relaxing as she was herself" (187). Dick realizes early on the superficiality of social poses, "starting awake at night" to ask himself with chagrin, "am I like the rest. . . ?" (25). However, even this awareness does not stop him from behaving "like the rest" after his marriage to Nicole. The party Dick hosts in Paris, featuring the car of the shah of Persia, symbolizes the extravagance of their lifestyles, and even Rosemary, from the glamorous film world, is impressed: "Rosemary appreciated how different it was from any party in Hollywood, no matter how splendid in scale" (161). The "grand stage" of Europe provides an elaborate playground for the expatriate community.

However, Fitzgerald never allows this splendor to continue long without exposing its illusory nature. In describing a large gathering of Americans at the train station, the narrator emphasizes the inaccuracy of our initial perceptions: "When there were enough Americans on the platform the first impression of their immaculacy and their money began to fade into a vague racial dusk that hindered and blinded both them and their observers" (169). Immediately after this description, the alluring atmosphere is disrupted by the sudden shooting: "The shots had entered into all their lives: echoes of violence followed them out on to the pavement" (172). Similarly, Rosemary's initial illusion of the idyllic existence of the Divers ("Rosemary was thinking that the Villa Diana was the centre of the world" [99]) is dispelled immediately at this first party by the "scene" Violet McKisco observes in the bathroom and the subsequent duel.

Another subject of the novel, and a key factor in Dick's "breakdown," is the necessity for separation between life and work, a separation Dick has trouble maintaining. As Nicole's problems recur and he deals with her as a patient, it becomes difficult for Dick "to distinguish between his self-protective professional detachment and some new coldness in

his heart" (210), and this seems to be a factor in the cooling of their marriage. Dick expresses a growing unhappiness with the way his caring for Nicole is affecting his life: "The dualism in his views of her—that of the husband, that of the psychiatrist—was increasingly paralyzing his faculties" (238). When Dick takes a leave of absence in book 4, it is from both the clinic and Nicole, suggesting that these two facets of his life can no longer be separated.

"Escape" is a fitting title for this book, which represents the turning point for Dick. The leave of absence is a sort of midlife crisis in which Dick breaks away from the confines of the marriage, realizing that he has changed: "But Dick had come away for his soul's sake, and he began thinking about that. He had lost himself—he could not tell the hour when, or the day or the week, the month or the year" (253). It is appropriate that it is during this trip that his father dies, and that his affair with Rosemary is finally consummated—"what had begun with a childish infatuation on a beach was accomplished at last" (269). Book 4 also features one of the more distressing intrusions into the glamorous lives of the characters: Dick's drunken arrest in Rome, which ultimately involves Baby Warren and Collis Clay as well.

By his return in book 5, Dick understands the permanence of the change: "I'm not much like myself any more" (326). This change is also symbolized by his failure to lift the man on the surfboard (355), and even Rosemary has heard rumors that "he's not received anywhere any more" (358). After one of the final arguments between Dick and Nicole, the close of the chapter is particularly significant: "The case was finished. Doctor Diver was at liberty" (375). The medical terms used here suggest that the failure of the marriage is in fact due to his failure to separate life and work.

Nicole's corresponding realization occurs in book 5, when she reencounters Tommy Barban after already feeling disillusioned with her relationship with Dick. After Dick's return, she tells him that "you used to want to create things—now you seem to want to smash them up" (334). Giving the camphor rub to Tommy symbolizes that she now values him above her own family (symbolism that is

not lost on Dick), and indeed shortly after this incident she yields herself to him as well. The breakdown of the marriage is now complete.

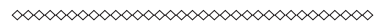
The style of the novel, in particular its focus on description and use of idealized, poetic language, is a reflection of Fitzgerald's attempt to portray the beauty and glamour of life. Moments such as the description of Dick's arrival on the train platform in Paris show the glamour conveyed by Fitzgerald's lyricism: "Dick Diver came and brought with him a fine glowing surface on which the three women sprang like monkeys with cries of relief, perching on his shoulders, on the beautiful crown of his hat or the gold head of his cane" (168). The novel is not driven by action; rather, the structure is episodic, and the isolated incidents of action exemplify the ugliness that occasionally interrupts the facade of beauty. This type of interruption is also apparent during scenes involving drinking, when the narration becomes disjointed or confused to simulate the impressions of drunkenness.

The novel's shifting narrative perspective is another interesting stylistic feature. The brief section of first-person narration from Nicole's perspective at the beginning of the revised book 2 covers the early years of the Divers' marriage quickly, in a stream of consciousness style. Its rapid jumps and sometimes childish language illustrate Nicole's still unstable state of mind, and Fitzgerald is also able to convey both her moments of despair, such as after Topsy's birth when "everything got dark again" (62), and of rapturous happiness. Aside from this section, the point of view is always third person, but it shifts frequently so that the omniscient narrator adopts the focus of each of the major characters (and even minor ones like Abe North and Baby Warren) for a time. The majority of the novel is narrated in this fashion from Dick's point of view, establishing him as the protagonist (and making his effective disappearance at the end of the novel more poignant), but the shifts allow Fitzgerald to give readers varying perspectives on the characters and to create sympathy for Dick, Nicole, and Rosemary in turn. The most significant shift is the large section told from Rosemary's perspective. The description of the Divers and their friends from the innocence

of Rosemary's point of view allows Fitzgerald to develop these characters as they appear to an outsider, and to glorify the Divers before this illusion of perfection is shattered. Although the reader is aware of the dark background behind the Divers' marriage from book 1, Rosemary remains unaware until much later.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the effect of the multiple points of view Fitzgerald uses to narrate the novel. In particular, what is the effect of the introduction of Rosemary's perspective on the Divers in book 2?
2. Compare Nicole and Rosemary, in terms of their personalities and respective relationships with Dick. You may also wish to consider each woman's relationship with her parent. Do you find it significant, particularly in comparison with Nicole, that the film that has made Rosemary famous is titled *Daddy's Girl*?
3. Compare this novel to other "breakdown" novels, such as Saul Bellow's *Herzog* or J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. How are the breakdowns of the central characters similar and different?
4. The novel's epigraph is taken from John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." Read the poem and examine the connections you see between it and the subject of the novel. Why do you think Fitzgerald chose this epigraph, and do you find it appropriate?



FURTHER QUESTIONS ON FITZGERALD AND HIS WORK

1. Trace the uses of geographical contrasts throughout Fitzgerald's works. You may wish to consider in particular his use of characters originating in the "Middle West" (Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, Nicole Warren, Amory Blaine, Dexter Green)—Fitzgerald's own birthplace—and the seemingly inevitable transfer of these characters to other locations.
2. Discuss the significance of the city of New York across Fitzgerald's fiction. You may especially

- wish to consider how the city compares to other locations in works like *Gatsby*, *This Side of Paradise*, “Winter Dreams,” and “May Day.”
3. Compare Nicole Diver to Daisy Buchanan. How are their personalities similar? Is there any similarity between the affairs they have (with Tommy Barban and Gatsby, respectively)? Research Zelda Fitzgerald and discuss to what extent each woman could be seen as a portrayal of Zelda. You may also wish to consider whether any of Fitzgerald’s other female characters incorporate certain characteristics of Zelda.
 4. Consider the appearances of automobiles throughout Fitzgerald’s fiction. How does Fitzgerald make use of the automobile as a symbol, and what is suggested by the frequent occurrences of automobile accidents in his works?
 5. Explore the significance of the First World War throughout Fitzgerald’s works. Although the war never plays a primary role, perhaps because Fitzgerald’s regiment did not actually go to Europe before the war ended, its symbolic significance and effects are clearly felt in a number of works, from the presence of the soldiers in “May Day” to the deaths of several of Amory’s Princeton friends in *This Side of Paradise*. Compare Fitzgerald’s treatment of the war to that of other American writers of the 1920s, such as Ernest Hemingway or JOHN DOS PASSOS.
 6. Consider the ways in which Fitzgerald’s works concern themselves with the idea of a loss of innocence. You may wish to compare the degree to which characters such as Nick Carraway, Rosemary Hoyt, Amory Blaine, Sally Carrol Happer, or Edith Bradin experience a loss of innocence and what leads to their respective losses.
 7. Read Fitzgerald’s “The Crack-Up” and consider to what extent the breakdowns of various characters in Fitzgerald’s fiction (Dick Diver, Gordon Sterrett, Charlie Wales) can be seen as reflecting the author’s own experiences.
 8. Read one of Horatio Alger’s novels, such as *Luck and Pluck* or *Tattered Tom*, and consider how Alger’s 19th-century presentation of the American dream compares with the portrayal of this dream throughout Fitzgerald’s works.
 9. Fitzgerald greatly admired the poetry of John Keats and tried in his own writing to “become a prose Keats, imitating the poet’s rhythms and enriching his own style with lush Keatsian imagery” (Brucoli 73). Read some of Keats’s poetry, such as the known Fitzgerald favorites “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and “The Eve of St. Agnes,” and consider the extent to which the more poetic passages of Fitzgerald’s novels and stories successfully achieve this goal.
 10. Read “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” an early story in which Fitzgerald considers the importance of social success and popularity (especially among young women), and compare his treatment of this theme in that story with its treatment in *This Side of Paradise* and in later stories like “May Day” and “Babylon Revisited.”

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Brucoli, Matthew J. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
- Bryer, Jackson R., and Cathy W. Barks, eds. *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002.
- The F. Scott Fitzgerald Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.fscottfitzgeraldsociety.org>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. London: Penguin Books, 1950.
- . *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Edited by Matthew J. Brucoli. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1989.
- . *Tender Is the Night*. London: Penguin Books, 1955.
- . *This Side of Paradise*. Edited by Ruth Prigozy. New York: Washington Square Press, 1995.
- Hemingway, Ernest. “Scott Fitzgerald,” “Hawks Do Not Share,” and “A Matter of Measurements.” In *A Moveable Feast*. New York: Scribner, 1964.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Mizener, Arthur. *The Far Side of Paradise*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951.
- Prigozy, Ruth. *Illustrated Lives: F. Scott Fitzgerald*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Rebecca Strong



ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

[A poem] begins in delight and ends in wisdom . . . it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.

(“The Figure a Poem Makes”)

During his lifetime, Robert Frost became not only one of the most respected but certainly also one of the most popular of serious American poets. He received more Pulitzer Prizes (four) than any other writer of verse has ever won, and he was also the beneficiary of numerous awards, scores of honorary degrees, many academic appointments, a variety of presidential recognitions, and healthy sales of his books. During a time when poetry had seemed to become increasingly remote and distant from the audience of “common readers,” Frost was one of the few poets to win both the respect of critics and the affection of a large and admiring public. Although his success occurred late (he was nearly 40 when his first book was published), once it arrived it never left, and the fact that Frost lived into his eighties meant that by the end of his life he had become a national icon—one of the most famous and best-loved writers of his time. In the years since his death his reputation has only grown, even though darker sides of both his personality and his verse have received increasing emphasis.

Most of the details of the poet’s life and career are outlined in the exceptionally helpful “Chronology” prepared by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson. Although Frost would eventually become most famous for poems often set in New England, he was actually born on the other side of the continent—in San Francisco, California. His father, William Prescott Frost, Jr., had been born

in New England and had graduated from Harvard, while the poet’s mother (Isabelle Moodie) had been born in Scotland but had been raised by an uncle in Columbus, Ohio. After the couple met while serving together as teachers in Pennsylvania, they married in March 1873 and soon moved to San Francisco, where William worked as a journalist and where Robert, their first child, was born on March 26, 1874. Although William had some success as a writer and editor, his taste for alcohol and gambling led to tensions in the marriage; the couple’s daughter, Jennie, was born in 1876 when Isabelle was temporarily back in Massachusetts, but eventually she returned to San Francisco, accompanied by a number of female relatives and friends. Not long after their arrival, William Frost was diagnosed with tuberculosis, but his condition did not prevent him from participating, during the next few years, in local politics. As a parent, however, William Frost was often harsh, and partly as a result young Robert became nervous and sickly and often had to drop out of school because of stomach pains. Nevertheless, as he grew older he also developed a streetwise tougher side, even while, under the influence of his highly religious and literate mother, he was cultivating an interest in reading literature and in hearing poetry read aloud.

When William Frost finally died of tuberculosis in 1885, his wife and children were left almost destitute. His widow had little choice but to take her son

and daughter back to Massachusetts to live for a time in the town of Lawrence with her husband's parents. By 1886, however, the small family had taken up residence in New Hampshire, where Isabelle Frost taught children in grades 5 through 8, including her own son, who had now developed a lively interest in reading. In the coming years Robert would increasingly distinguish himself as a student, especially after he transferred to Lawrence High School. His own first poems were published in that school's *Bulletin* in 1890, and indeed by 1891 he had been elected its editor. By this time, too, he had met and fallen in love with Elinor Miriam White, another accomplished student at the school, and by 1892 they had in fact become privately engaged. Although Frost had been accepted by Harvard, his grandparents—who were paying for his education—determined that he would instead attend the less-expensive Dartmouth College, but Frost's time there lasted merely a semester. Regimented education bored him, but he continued to study on his own even as he worked a number of low-paying jobs as a mill worker and teacher. In 1894 he was able to publish some poems in a New York newspaper, but he was unable, at first, to persuade Elinor finally to marry him. Depressed, he traveled (perhaps with suicidal intent) to the aptly named Dismal Swamp in North Carolina, but before long he was back in Lawrence, working as a journalist, teacher, and tutor. Eventually, on December 19, 1895, he and Elinor were married, and on September 25, 1896, their first child—a son named Elliott—was born. Meanwhile, Frost continued to teach, write poems, and pursue an amateur interest in botany, and he also made plans to resume his formal education by entering Harvard.

Frost's studies at Harvard began in 1897 and continued, despite ill health, until March 1899, when he withdrew despite having had some real success. His daughter Lesley was born on April 28, and Frost—partly to earn a living and partly to rebuild his health through manual labor—decided to begin raising chickens. Nevertheless, after the death of young Elliott in July 1900, Elinor became depressed and Frost's own physical and mental health continued to deteriorate, but he continued to write poems

even after his grandfather bought him a 30-acre farm in Derry, New Hampshire. Most of the work there was actually done by a friend, and when Frost's grandfather died in 1901, the poet was left with a yearly income of \$500—an arrangement that left him time for his writing despite his commitment to the farm. By 1903, in fact, he had managed to unite the two pursuits by publishing prose pieces in various poultry magazines, although poetry remained his primary literary love. He often wrote at the end of the day, after his duties on the farm were done. Meanwhile, as children continued to arrive (son Carol in 1902, daughter Irma in 1903, and daughter Marjorie in 1905), Frost felt an increasing need to supplement his income, and so in 1906 he began teaching again, this time at the local Pinkerton Academy. He was an active, effective, and innovative teacher, and his success at Pinkerton eventually led, in 1911, to a position as a college instructor. By this time, however, he had begun to feel an increasing yearning to write full-time in a new environment, and so in the late summer of 1912 he and his wife and children abandoned their life in New England and set sail for England itself. London at this time was the center of a lively literary scene, and it was not long before Frost was making the acquaintance of many notable writers, including EZRA POUND, the dynamic American expatriate. Conceited but at the same time generous, Pound was always ready to help promote other writers of talent, and when Frost's first book—*A Boy's Will*—was published by a small London firm in April 1913, Pound was one of a number of reviewers who hailed it as an important work. In the meantime, the reception of Frost's next book—*North of Boston*, published in May 1914—was even more enthusiastic. Indeed, many critics still consider this work Frost's best. Not long after World War I began in August 1914, Frost had moved his family back to the United States (they arrived in February 1915), and by the time of their return it had become clear to practically everyone who cared about poetry that a major new voice had arrived on the scene.

North of Boston and *A Boy's Will* were soon published in American editions, and both books quickly met with many highly positive reviews

and with gratifying sales. Frost had now begun to attract the kind of attention and respect in his own country that he had never enjoyed before; in 1916, for instance, he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and in that same year he was invited to teach at Amherst College (with which he would now enjoy an on-again, off-again relationship for many years). Invitations to speak and to read his poems began to arrive on a regular basis, and in November of that year his newest book—*Mountain Interval*—was published by the same major New York firm that had reprinted his first two volumes. In 1917 one of Frost's poems won a major prize; in 1918 he himself received an honorary degree; in 1919 he was elected president of the New England Poetry Club. Thus, as the 1920s dawned, Frost's career was definitely on the rise, although he continued to favor a rural life when he might easily have moved to a large city. In 1920 he began to plan to raise apples on a farm in Vermont, although in 1921 he also began a long-standing relationship with the University of Michigan, and in 1922 he undertook an extensive lecture tour in the South and Midwest. In 1923 his *Selected Poems* were published, followed later by a book titled *New Hampshire*, and during that same year he was invited back to Amherst. Success thus followed success: In 1924 *New Hampshire* won a Pulitzer Prize; in 1925 friends celebrated his birthday with a major dinner; and during this same period Frost was being wooed both by Amherst and by Michigan. In 1926 Amherst made him an offer he could not refuse, and in 1928 he signed a highly lucrative contract with his New York publisher. During these years, however, all was not entirely well: Frost's own health and the health of some of his children were often poor; tensions with his wife were increasing; his adult children were beginning to encounter problems of their own; and Elinor was more and more depressed. His relations with his fellow poets (whom he often viewed as competitors) were frequently strained, and Frost, despite his prominence, was often worried that his status would not endure, despite the publication of a new book (*West-Running Brook*) late in 1928 and the simultaneous reissue of an expanded ver-

sion of his *Selected Poems*. Nevertheless, despite his worries, his *Collected Poems* (which soon won him another Pulitzer) was published in 1930, the same year he was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Meanwhile, another major award (from the National Institute of Arts and Letters) followed in 1931.

Despite the painful illness and death of his beloved daughter Marjorie in 1934 and the declining physical health and growing depression of his wife, Frost in the early 1930s (when he was now approaching his sixties) was still an active figure on the American literary scene. He continued to travel both frequently and widely to read his poems (an activity that helped build his national audience), and in 1936 he not only gave a series of prestigious and popular lectures at Harvard but also published a new book (*A Further Range*), which sold well and soon won him yet another Pulitzer Prize. That book, however, attracted some of the first seriously negative criticism Frost had ever received as a writer; some commentators considered him old-fashioned and out of touch with the economic and social conditions of modern life. Since late 1929 the country had been suffering through the most severe economic depression in its history, and Frost, with his focus on rural landscapes and country people, seemed (at least to some readers) naively nostalgic or even worse. Indeed, his fairly right-wing political opinions put him at odds with many intellectuals (and also with much of the voting public) at that time, while his respect for custom and convention in the writing of poetry (including a preference for clear meter, regular rhyme schemes, plain language, and traditional themes) made him seem conservative not only in his politics but also in his writing. Frost never, though, really lost his popularity with the broad reading public, and any objections to his work from professional literary critics actually helped stimulate fruitful defenses and debate. He thus remained an important fixture on the American literary landscape.

The death of Elinor on March 20, 1938, was a major blow, for despite the frequent tensions in their relationship, she had been a major part of his life since his late teens. Now, without her,

he became severely depressed and, almost on the rebound, proposed marriage to a young woman named Kathleen Morrison (who at the time was married to a friend of Frost's and who was also the mother of several children). She refused his proposal, but they did begin a secret long-term affair while she officially served as his secretary for many years. Frost was proud of his continued sexual vigor, and he often boasted about the affair to male friends (Meyers 245–246). In the meantime, literary accomplishments continued and literary recognitions piled up, including a gold medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1939 and an appointment at Harvard that same year. Frost had even, by this time, chosen Lawrance Thompson as his official biographer (with the proviso that any book not appear until after his death). It was, however, the death by suicide of his own son, Carol, that was most on Frost's mind in 1940—an incident that was just the latest in a long line of sad events that often made his family life so different from his professional career. In the 1940s that career continued to prosper: another appointment from Harvard in 1941, a new book of poems (*The Witness Tree*) in 1942, yet another Pulitzer Prize in 1943, an appointment from Dartmouth that same year, another book (*A Masque of Reason*) in 1945, an updated edition of his *Collected Poems* in 1946, the publication of two new books (*Steeple Bush* and *A Masque of Mercy*) in 1947, a new appointment at Amherst in 1948, and publication of the *Complete Poems of Robert Frost 1949* (to positive reviews and good sales) at the end of the decade. Likewise, the 1950s saw many further distinctions and achievements. In 1950 itself, the U.S. Senate honored Frost with a resolution of praise; in 1953 he won a major fellowship from the Academy of American Poets; 1954 included an invitation to the White House and a major dinner in his honor, not to mention the publication of a new collection of poems (*Aforesaid*); in 1955 the state of Vermont named a mountain after him; while in 1957 he was awarded honorary degrees by both Oxford and Cambridge universities in England. While visiting in Britain to receive these awards, Frost was widely praised, and the following year—1958—included

another invitation to the White House and several new official distinctions, followed by a major celebration of his 85th birthday in 1959. Congress awarded him a gold medal in 1960, but perhaps the highlight of Frost's national recognition was his selection, by the newly elected president John F. Kennedy, to read his poetry at the inaugural ceremony in January 1961. A major trip to Russia (where he met the Soviet leader) followed in 1962, but by this time Frost's health was in serious decline, and by the end of the year he was in the hospital, where doctors diagnosed cancer. Even in his waning days, however, he was awarded one last major honor (the Bollingen Prize for Poetry), and on January 29, 1963, he died. His public career as a poet had begun late but had lasted long and had been extraordinarily successful, and, unlike many writers who are prominent in their own days but whose reputations subsequently decline, Frost has continued, even after his death, to live a vigorous and well-respected life in the many vital poems he composed—poems that remain both widely read and widely admired.

“The Tuft of Flowers” (1906, 1913)

The speaker is working alone in a field, turning over the grass that has been mowed earlier in the day by another worker, whose companionship the speaker misses (even though he realizes that the essential human condition is one of fundamental loneliness). Just when the speaker has reached this conclusion, however, he notices that a butterfly is circling around a tuft of flowers that the mower, out of an innate appreciation for their beauty, decided to spare. Responding to this gesture, the speaker suddenly feels a sense of brotherhood with the mower and with other human beings, who are linked not only by their common labor but also by their shared appreciation of natural loveliness.

This poem is not only one of Frost's earliest but is also one of his most typical. As do many of his works, it uses plain, simple language and clear, straightforward sentence structures. The diction is ordinary and uncomplicated; the tone is

understated and undramatic; and the pace (like the pace of the worker the poem describes) is deliberate and unhurried. As is common in Frost's works, the setting is rural, and the behavior the work depicts is normal and prosaic; the poem uses a highly traditional structure (rhymed couplets) and employs one of the most common of all English poetic meters (iambic pentameter, in which 10 syllables occur in each line, with the even syllables usually accented and the odd syllables usually unaccented). The iambic rhythm is perfectly regular and steady for the first nine lines; only in the first syllable of line 10 does Frost violate this predictable arrangement. Likewise, until we reach line 8, all the previous couplets had ended with periods; thus, when Frost departs from this pattern in line 8, the statement he makes there and in the next two lines has extra emphasis. As it happens, it is precisely in those lines that the speaker stresses a theme—human loneliness—that is central not only to this particular work but to many of Frost's other poems. The key word ("alone"; l. 8) is accentuated through rhyme, through placement at the end of a line, and through the unusual punctuation that both precedes and follows it. Thus, despite the surface plainness of his writing, Frost also demonstrates his subtle skill and craftsmanship. The details of his poems are always more carefully chosen than is first apparent, and the regular patterns he establishes help emphasize any departures from them.

In line 12, for instance, the phrase "a bewildered" not only disrupts the normal iambic pattern of the line but also mimics, through that disruption, the very bewilderment the phrase describes. Likewise, the same kind of meaningful disruption occurs with the use of the word *tremulous* in line 18. Examples such as these reveal that Frost had a sensitive ear for the *sounds* of poetry—a trait also revealed (for instance) in his use of quadruple alliteration in line 22 ("At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook"). This line, of course, deserves special emphasis because it offers the first reference to the crucial fact of the surviving flowers, and Frost highlights this key moment not only through his stress on similar consonant sounds (all those *ts* and *fs* and *ls* and *bs*) but also through his imme-

diately subsequent use of a memorable metaphor (the "leaping tongue of bloom," which compares the colorful flowers to a flame; l. 23). Although the poem is not without its flaws (such as the cliché of "as far as eye could see"; l. 17), on the whole it is impressively successful, particularly in the way the final lines not only echo but reverse the conclusion earlier stated in lines 9–10. In this respect, as in so many others, the work reveals the kind of careful craftsmanship that makes Frost such a reliably accomplished writer.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the depictions of man's relationship with nature in this poem and in Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire." In addition, discuss the ways both works present the relations of human beings in a natural setting. How does the speaker of Frost's poem differ, in his attitudes toward other people, from the central character of London's story?
2. How does this poem resemble and/or differ from Ezra Pound's poem "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" in its treatment of such themes as loneliness and the desire for companionship? How, in both works, do we see a change in the speaker's attitudes and feelings over time? How do the conclusions of the poems differ?
3. Discuss the use of irony in this poem. For example, how and why is it ironic that the cutting of the grass reveals the brook? How and why is it ironic that the flowers are identified as weeds? How is the speech at the very end ironic?

"The Pasture" (1913)

The speaker announces his intention to perform various farm-related tasks, but then, after each announcement, he invites an unidentified addressee to join him on his rounds.

In this very brief but highly intriguing text, Frost displays many of the traits that make him such a memorable poet. In some respects the poem seems, at first glance, unremarkable. It uses, for the most part, the iambic rhythm so common in

English poetry—rhythm that Frost himself considered close to the rhythms of typical English speech. In iambic rhythm, each even syllable is accented, while each odd syllable is not, and “The Pasture” employs this rhythm without variation in the first three lines of each stanza—a pattern that helps the poem seem both simple and traditional in its music. The work also employs (again in the first three lines of each stanza) the highly common pentameter (or five-foot) line length so frequently used in so many poems written in English: Each of those lines is exactly 10 syllables long (no more, no less). Once again, then, Frost writes in a way that makes his poem appear, at first, highly conventional and unremarkable. In its subject matter, too, the poem seems almost mundane: The speaker will clear some leaves from a spring, and then he will go to fetch a calf. In short, at first there seems nothing at all unusual about this poem.

But then, of course, Frost catches us completely by surprise, for in the fourth line of each stanza, he not only drops (without warning) from 10 syllables to eight, but he also departs completely from the rhyme scheme the poem had seemed to be establishing: The first three lines lead us to expect that the fourth line will rhyme with the first (*abba*), but instead the fourth line rhymes with nothing that precedes it (*abbc*); likewise, a similar surprise awaits us at the end of stanza 2, where the rhyme scheme is as follows: *decc*. This kind of structure is highly unusual (to say the least), and it helps reinforce the speaker’s sudden shift, at the end of each stanza, from his own intentions and activities to the desired presence of the unnamed person he addresses. Frost, in other words, uses simple diction, simple rhythms, and a structure that at first seems completely predictable to produce a poem that is nonetheless startling in its inventiveness and effect. Each fourth line gets maximal emphasis, not only because of its brevity and departure from the expected pattern of rhyme but also because of Frost’s wonderful combination of assonance (emphasis on shared vowel sounds) and alliteration (emphasis on shared consonants) in the repeated and heavily accented words “gone long” and “You . . . too” (ll. 4, 8). Although the speaker at first seems totally focused, in each stanza, on his

rural tasks, each last line makes it obvious how much he values and yearns for the companionship of the unnamed person he addresses. By leaving the identity of this addressee unclear, Frost adds to the mystery, charm, and intrigue of the poem. We cannot be sure *whose* company the speaker wants, but on one level the *you* must surely be the reader himself (or herself). The poem (which was often printed as a prefatory lyric at the head of collections of Frost’s verse) functions, in one way, as an invitation by the poet to the reader to enter the poet’s rural world. The imagery of the pasture, the spring, and the tottering calf suggests an idyllic world of calm, peace, plenty, and life, and the fourth line of each stanza extends and intensifies that sense of harmony when the speaker, in his understated way, offers a hand of friendship both to the anonymous addressee and to the reader as well.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with the poem by William Carlos Williams titled “This Is Just to Say.” How are they similar in the kinds of actions they depict, the kind of language they use, and the ways they include an unnamed addressee as part of the “plot” of the poem?
2. How does the effectiveness of this poem depend, in part, on its brevity? How and why might the poem be less effective if it consisted of 10 similar stanzas rather than just two? How might such lengthy repetition change our perception of the speaker? In terms of the poem as it presently exists, what kind of person do you imagine the speaker to be? Explain your response by pointing to specific evidence in the text.

“After Apple-Picking” (1914)

Having spent an entire day picking apples, the speaker is exhausted from his work; he describes the labor involved in picking apples and anticipates the troubled sleep that will soon descend upon him.

As many of Frost’s poems do, this one blends tradition and innovation and fuses the conventional with the unusual. It describes a common

activity in a familiar rural setting, yet it is also strangely suggestive—as if the poet implies more than he openly states. Likewise, the poem is provocative in form and techniques as well as in subject matter and theme: It uses rhyme and meter, but it does so in highly unpredictable, unorthodox ways. At first glance, it seems merely to use realistic details to depict mundane activities, but on closer inspection it also seems highly suggestive. Thus, in the same way that dreams often blend credible data with imaginative coloring, so does this poem.

The poem opens with a seemingly simple fact: “My long two-pointed ladder’s sticking through a tree” (l. 1). The line describing the long ladder is itself unusually long (12 syllables), and although the line can be forced into a regular iambic pattern (in which even syllables are accented and odd syllables are not), the rhythm *sounds* less regularly patterned. That fact, combined with the apostrophe-plus-*s* of *ladder’s*, helps create an immediate impression of a relaxed, unassuming speaker describing a literal, everyday scene. But then, of course, Frost surprises us in the second line, which adds that the ladder is pointing “Toward heaven still.” Here the use of the word *heaven* (rather than, say, *the sky*) gives the line metaphorical resonance; the speaker no longer seems simply to be describing facts but to be using figurative language. The extreme brevity of the second line (which can be read as having only three syllables) also catches our attention, especially since the first line had been so lengthy. In the space of just two lines, then, Frost has already set the tone for the rest of this unusual poem: He has combined the mundane and the metaphorical, the literal and the imaginative, and he has also shown a willingness to play freely with form. All these traits will appear repeatedly as the poem proceeds: Rhyme will be used, but the rhyme scheme will be completely unpredictable; line lengths will vary radically and without warning (reaching a radical minimum of just two syllables in line 32); and sometimes the speaker will seem to be describing simple data while at other times he will seem to be implying something more—although the exact nature of *what* he may be implying will never be precisely clear. This, in short, is a puzzling and intriguing poem.

Frost’s freedom with form in this poem means that when he *does* revert to regularity (especially in rhythm), his phrasing has maximum impact. Line 6, for instance, is especially memorable because it is the first clear example of regular iambic pentameter to have appeared up to that point: “But I am done with apple-picking now.” The steady beat lends a sense of strong assurance to the line—an assurance that contrasts with the irregularity of much of the rest of the work. And in fact throughout the poem Frost continually surprises us, alternating between present and past, the real and the remembered, the literal and the figurative. At one point, for instance, he mentions looking through a “pane of glass” (l. 10), but it soon becomes clear that this “pane” was not real glass but merely a sheet of ice. At another point (lines 18–36), it is not clear at first whether the speaker is already dreaming or whether he is describing remembered events. Even when the speaker mentions the “load on load” of apples coming in (l. 26), the phrasing can be read both literally and figuratively, and throughout the poem Frost blurs distinctions between what is strictly “real” and what is metaphorical. Is the poem simply about the process of picking apples, or is it about any kind of human labor? Is it about labor merely, or is it about the larger process of living? Is the sleep mentioned merely sleep, or is it also death? Should we be reminded, when reading this poem describing the labor involved in picking apples, of the curse of labor that resulted after an apple was picked in the Garden of Eden? Frost never makes the answers to any of these questions (or numerous others) blatantly clear, and ultimately that sense of mystery is part of both the charm and the power of this poem.

For Discussion or Writing

1. CARL SANDBURG’S poem “Child of the Romans” also describes a worker’s pause after long labor. Discuss the similarities and differences between that work and Frost’s poem, paying particular attention to such matters as setting, characterization, point of view, and tone. How does the purpose of Frost’s poem seem to differ from the purpose of Sandburg’s? Which poem would you describe as more reflective, and which poem

- would you describe as more propagandistic or political? Explain your response by pointing to details from both works.
2. Discuss the kind of weariness described in this poem in relation to the kind discussed in LANGSTON HUGHES's poem "The Weary Blues." Discuss the use of sleep imagery in both poems; discuss the points of view used in both works; and discuss the social and political implications (if any) in both texts. How does Frost use the form of his poem to create a kind of "dreamy" impact? What kind of impact is created by the use of form in Hughes's poem?
 3. Discuss the relative absence of punctuation at the ends of lines 1–5 and its heavy presence in lines 6–8. Why did Frost want those latter lines to be so heavily punctuated? Why does he shift away from such heavy punctuation in lines 9–12? How do such alterations contribute to the effectiveness of the poem and prevent any sense of predictable monotony?

"The Death of the Hired Man" (1914)

When a farmer named Warren returns to his house after going to the market, his wife, Mary, informs him that Silas, an old and somewhat undependable laborer who has worked on their farm in the past, has returned and wants to work there again. Warren is reluctant to rehire him, but Mary is more forgiving and stresses the old man's physical weakness and emotional vulnerability. After the couple reminisce about Silas's character and past behavior (including his frustrated attempts to mentor a young bookish fellow worker named Harold), Warren's attitude begins to soften, but when he goes to talk to Silas, he discovers that the old man has died.

In many ways this lengthy poem of 175 lines resembles an accomplished short story or even a brief play. Written mostly in iambic pentameter blank verse (with lines ranging in length from eight to 13 syllables, although usually containing 10 or 11), the poem moves with the ease and clarity of lucid prose and contains many elements

of effective drama, particularly since much of the work consists of straightforward dialogue. All four main characters are deftly sketched, and the comments by Warren and Mary about Silas and Harold tell us as much (if not more) about the married couple and their relationship as about the workers they describe. Mary at first seems the more gentle-natured and forgiving of the two, whereas Warren seems more judgmental and sharper edged. By the end of the poem, however, Warren's thinking and feelings have evolved—a fact that makes the death of Silas all the more sadly ironic. Just when Warren seems prepared to greet the old man with compassion and understanding, both he and we discover that Silas is dead. Of course, the title of the poem foreshadows his death from the very beginning, but suspense nevertheless remains, since we do not discover until the last lines the exact circumstances of his demise or the precise nature of its impact on Warren and Mary. Indeed, it is not even clear until the very end whether the "death" referred to in the title will be literal or simply metaphorical, and in some ways it is metaphorical *before* it becomes a literal fact. Thus the poem maintains an air of uncertainty despite its title, especially since the work's main interest derives less from the fate of the hired man than from the subtle nuances of the interaction between the married couple. The poem is at least as much about them and their relationship as it is about Silas.

In numerous ways this poem is highly typical of Frost's writing. It emphasizes, for instance, the often hard and lonely lives of New England farm folk (and, by implication, says much about the essential loneliness of the human condition). As do the couple who speak in this work, Frost himself combines realism with sympathy in his response to Silas; he refuses to mock the people he writes about, but he also refuses to present them sentimentally. Thus Silas's death is presented quickly and without explicit comment, either from Warren or from Frost; a lesser poet would have been tempted to engage in maudlin moralizing. Warren never has a chance to welcome Silas home or even extend a bit of sympathy and understanding, but Frost, in his typically laconic fashion, feels no impulse to spell

out any lessons about missed opportunities—or any lessons at all. Instead he offers a convincingly level-headed and unromantic work that offers a believable “slice of life” (and of death) in credible and effective phrasing.

It is, of course, the detailed phrasing of any poem that makes it worth reading, and this work by Frost offers many adroit details. Line 11, for instance—in which Warren exclaims, “When was I ever anything but kind to him?”—shows effectively how Frost can gain extra emphasis by playing the rhythms of speech off against his underlying iambic pattern, and the same line also shows how he sometimes lengthens or shortens lines to give them added impact. Likewise, in line 18 he uses metrical variation to emphasize the key word *Off*; and he uses the same technique in line 23 to stress the crucial word *fixed*. Throughout the poem, in fact, Frost shows a similar attention to precise detail, as in Warren’s effectively brief “I’m done” (which is contrasted with an exceptionally long preceding sentence [ll. 25–30]); or in Mary’s glancing aside (“You needn’t smile”; l. 37), which implies Warren’s thoughts without openly stating them; or in Mary’s two-word reply (“But little”; l. 46) when asked what Silas had said, so that her own brevity matches his. Throughout the poem Frost skillfully foreshadows its conclusion (see, for example, the references to “nodding off” in line 44, or the reference to “sleep” in line 60, or the image of the falling moon in 106), and he also subtly suggests the key final theme of missed chances in lines 80, 89, and 105. In addition, the poem is full of sly ironies: Thus Silas, considered a failure by so many others, presumes to offer advice to the ambitious and successful Harold (l. 100), while it is, ironically, his own family (rather than his employers) who can least tolerate his worldly failings (l. 147). Likewise, Warren ironically proclaims that Silas’s working days are done (l. 160) just moments before he discovers that *all* of the old man’s days have ended. Irony, however, is just one of many features that contribute to the complex tone of this work, for Frost combines such irony with such other techniques as prosaic statements, lyrical phrasing (see, for instance, lines 106–113), and epigrammatic

reflection (as in the famous competing definitions of *home* in lines 122–125). However, in addition to offering tonal complications, the poem features complex characterization. Mary, for instance, can be both tender and assertive, while Warren can seem both cynical and kind. Even Silas himself is multifaceted (especially in his attitudes toward Harold—attitudes that seem to combine jealousy, injured pride, and almost paternal concern). Frost, in short, has created a poem that is rich on numerous levels; it is a work that well rewards rereading.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Richard Cory.” Discuss the similarities and differences between the lonely title figures of the two works; how do they respond differently to the challenges they face? How are they similar and/or different in their relations with other people and in their social positions? How do their deaths differ?
2. In what ways does Silas resemble and/or differ from the main character of *SHERWOOD ANDERSON*’s story titled “Hands”? In what ways are both characters somewhat inscrutable? Discuss their relations with people younger than they. What does each man seek from such relations? How is each man disappointed by such relations?
3. Discuss in detail Frost’s use of various literary devices in the opening 10-line section of this poem. How do these devices contribute to the effectiveness of the passage and thus make us want to read further? For example, why does Frost use alliteration so heavily in the opening sentence? How does he create suspense? Why are the spoken comments so brief? Discuss the significance of the actions and gestures depicted. How do various details in this passage subtly suggest the class of the people described?

“Home Burial” (1914)

This poem explores the marital tensions that result from the death of a couple’s baby and its burial

(by the husband) on their rural property, in a small family burial plot within sight of their house: The wife, burdened by grief, accuses the husband of callousness, especially because of an offhand remark he made in the immediate aftermath of burying the child; meanwhile, the husband is baffled, frustrated, and even angered by her accusations and coldness, which he considers unfair. At the end of the poem, as the wife prepares to walk out of their house in anger, the husband threatens to retrieve her by force.

Like many of Frost's other successful long poems, this one is written in blank (or unrhymed) verse and uses a basically iambic rhythm (in which even-numbered syllables are accented) and basically pentameter lines (consisting of 10 syllables each). As "The Death of a Hired Man" does, this poem features a lengthy conversation of a married couple, but the differences between the two works are as significant as their similarities. That poem dealt with the death of an old man; this one deals with the death of a baby. That poem presented a reasonable if sometimes strained conversation between a genuinely loving couple; this one presents an often-heated debate between a husband and wife whose personalities and basic assumptions seem fundamentally at odds. In "Death" the wife had seemed full of sympathy, charity, rationality, and forgiveness; in the present poem the wife seems cold, judgmental, and unreasonably harsh. In "Death" the husband had seemed the harder edged of the two, but in "Home Burial" the husband, although sometimes inept in choosing his words, nonetheless seems desperate to accommodate his wife and achieve reconciliation. Finally, whereas the husband had softened in his attitude by the end of "Death," in "Home Burial" the husband's harshest words are the last ones he speaks. These are just a few of the many differences between two poems that nonetheless also resemble one another in numerous ways. It is almost as if Frost wrote a pair of companion pieces in order to illustrate the breadth of his poetic range. Whatever the case, the two poems are mutually illuminating.

The poem opens with a perfectly regular iambic pentameter line ("He saw her from the bottom of

the stairs") that also shows Frost's skill in the use of enjambment—the technique of running a sentence past the end of an unpunctuated line. In the present case, the opening sentence concludes with the significant phrase "Before she saw him," but that important fact is delayed until the beginning of line 2. The delayed phrase is also metrically irregular, giving it even further emphasis. Frost's craftsmanship in the use of such sound effects is likely to be unnoticed by the casual reader, but it is precisely this kind of craft that makes him such a noteworthy poet. He had an excellent ear and a superb sense of rhythm, and it was his ability to create apparently plain and simple speech while subtly employing all the sophisticated devices of meter and other sound effects (such as enjambment) that helps make his poetry so accomplished in such understated ways. Frost is not a "flashy" poet who calls overt attention to the artfulness of his art; it is, indeed, the seeming artlessness of his verse that so often makes it so impressive. Thus the physical positions of the couple in these opening lines (she is above; he is below) seem both perfectly mundane and appropriately symbolic: At the start of the work, the wife is both literally and figuratively in the superior position and looks down on her husband in both senses of the term. Meanwhile, his movement up the stairs is both entirely natural and effectively symbolic, and by the end of the poem he has assumed a position that is both literally and figuratively domineering. Also worth noting, moreover, is the way Frost uses the first 30 lines of the poem to put us, as readers, into the same position of confusion and uncertainty as the husband: Just as *he* is not sure what his wife is talking about, neither are *we*. Frost could easily have made clear from the very beginning that the wife was preoccupied with her dead child; instead, by withholding that information for the first quarter of the poem, he makes his readers share in (and feel) the husband's uncomprehending bafflement. As in any good poem, then, part of the power of this work derives not merely from *what* is said but from the way the poet shapes the unfolding structure of the work; the work's meaning, in other words, is not simply a matter of content but of form.

Other examples of Frost's technical skill are easy to cite. For instance, when the wife urges the husband not to mention the dead child, her apparently simple phrasing—"Don't, don't, don't, don't," she cried" (l. 31)—not only receives exceptional metrical emphasis but can also be interpreted as simultaneously pleading, threatening, angry, pained, and/or desperate (to mention just a few possibilities). Thus, what seems on the surface a perfect example of plain, mundane, and unadorned speech seems, on reflection, one of the most highly artful moments of the poem (especially since this example of repetition also resembles the famous "Never, never, never, never" in act 5, scene 3 of Shakespeare's *King Lear* [Meyers 49]—a moment that also deals with the profoundly felt loss of a loved one). Later, when the husband urges his wife, "Don't—don't go. Don't carry it [i.e., her grief] to someone else this time" (ll. 59–60), his words subtly echo her own earlier outburst, but now the emotional overtones are quieter and more pathetic. Through such subtle links and contrasts, Frost crafts a poem as interesting for its poetic skill as for the tense interaction it describes. A less skillful poet could have depicted the very same events and themes and produced a much less effective work. It is Frost's talent as an artist that brings the poem to vivid and memorable life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the ways marital tension is depicted in this poem and in Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Eros Turannos." How do the wives in the two poems differ? How are the husbands in the two poems unlike? How do the sources of tension in the two poems contrast? What similarities exist between the characters and circumstances the two poems depict? Discuss the forms and points of view used in these poems.
2. Compare and contrast the marriage presented in Frost's poem with the one described in SUISIN FAR's story "Mrs. Spring Fragrance." How are the tones of the two works different? How do the relations between husband and wife in the two works reflect the different cultural backgrounds of the two sets of couples? Discuss the endings of the two works; how do the differences in these endings reflect the differences in the genres of the two works?
3. Discuss the various ways in which dashes are used in this poem. What are their specific purposes and effects in various particular instances? For example, how does the dash in line 7 differ in purpose and effect from the dash in line 116? Why are dashes used so frequently in this poem? How are they relevant to some of the main themes of the work?

"Mending Wall" (1914)

The speaker begins the poem by noting that walls—especially those marking divisions of property—are difficult to maintain and seem destined to fall: They inevitably collapse, are undermined by natural processes, or are vandalized by humans. Even so, when the speaker tries to convince his neighbor that the wall dividing their rural properties is not worth repairing and maintaining, his neighbor insists, "Good fences make good neighbors," and so each spring the two of them repair the wall that not only separates them but also marks their continuing connection.

As many of Frost's poems do, this one has a rural setting and focuses on relations between country neighbors and indeed on the concept of neighborliness itself. The two men in the poem are simultaneously connected but separated, linked but also distinct, and in that sense they symbolize the common human condition, for in Frost's works human beings are often outwardly aligned yet also fundamentally alone. The speaker's desire to cease repairing the wall can thus be seen, in one sense, as reflecting a deeper desire for a more fundamental kind of friendship and communion, but part of the paradox of the poem is that it is the yearly ritual of repairing the wall that helps bind these two men in conversation and community. Fixing the wall gives them a common project; it gives them something to do together and something to talk about, and it does not seem an accident that the only people mentioned in the poem are two men. Two women

would probably find it easier to talk to one another; two families (especially two sets of children) would probably feel less separated by the wall than the male speaker seems to feel. The fact that no wives or children are mentioned enhances the sense of loneliness and isolation that is one of the underlying themes not only of this poem but of many of Frost's works. The wall, paradoxically, is the means by which these two men are both divided and united. While some analysts argue that Frost sides with the speaker's skepticism about maintaining the wall, and while other commentators contend that Frost endorses the neighbor's commitment to repairing the wall, most critics suggest that the poem (like the wall itself) is ambivalent—that Frost lets each man have his say, sees merit in the arguments of each, and finally (as so often in his poems) leaves the issue unresolved.

Whatever the final "meaning" of this poem, its particular techniques are often memorable and effective. It opens, for instance, with a blunt, plain statement of theme that the rest of the poem will then proceed to complicate and perhaps even undermine (just as the seemingly solid wall itself is undermined by natural and human forces). The opening statement, like much of the rest of the poem, is typical of Frost's writing in its simple, common diction; critics have noted how few of Frost's words (here and elsewhere) are derived from Latin roots and how many can be traced to Anglo-Saxon origins—a trait that helps give Frost's phrasing its air of blunt directness. To say this, however, is not to imply that the poem lacks subtlety or craft, for indeed part of the impressiveness of Frost's achievement is his ability to combine apparent plainness with understated art. In the poem's first few lines, for example, he parallels and juxtaposes two emphatic verbs—*sends* in line 2 and the similarly positioned *spills* in line 3—to stress destructive actions from below and from above, the one associated with cold and the other with heat. Meanwhile, the hyphenated phrase "frozen-groundswell" (l. 2) mimics the very swelling it describes, while the words *gaps* and *pass* in line 4 combine both assonance (repetition of vowels) and alliteration (repetition of consonants). In all these ways and in many others, therefore, Frost shows a keen atten-

tion not only to the "plot" and "theme" of the work but to its rhythms, structure, and sounds; he never forgets that the importance of a poem lies less in its meaning than in its craft.

Further craft is demonstrated later in the poem, for example, in its heavy use of parallel phrasing (as in lines 10, 14–15, 16, and 17). Such parallelism, by its very nature, reinforces the poem's key idea of things that are similar yet separate, connected but distinct. Yet Frost employs numerous other devices to prevent his plain diction and blank verse from seeming merely mundane or prosaic. He sometimes uses near-rhymes, for example, to keep the poem sounding "poetic" (as in the way the word *out* at the end of line 33 echoes the word *cows* at the end of line 31, or in the way the word *trees* at the end of line 42 echoes the word *me* at the end of the preceding line). Or he uses metaphors, as in the nicely succinct statement "He is all pine and I am apple orchard" (l. 24). And he uses a sly and humorous play on words, suggesting that to build a wall is to risk giving "offense" (i.e., a fence; l. 34). In all these ways and in many others, Frost gives the poem the kind of richness we associate with poetry more than with any other genre, but he does so in ways that keep this work (like much of the rest of his writing) simultaneously unobtrusive yet still intriguing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the symbolism of the wall in this poem with the symbolism of the "western gate" in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Luke Havergal." How do both poems deal with the theme of separation? What are the differences between the separated characters in the two works? How do the tones and conclusions of the two poems differ? How and why is humor used in Frost's poem but not in Robinson's?
2. How and why is wall imagery used differently in this poem than in H. D.'s work titled *The Walls Do Not Fall* (especially sections 1 and 43)? What do walls symbolize for H. D.'s speaker? What do they symbolize for the speaker of Frost's poem? One poem is set in a peaceful rural environment; the other poem is set in a war-torn urban area. How do these contrasting contexts of the

walls help determine the significance of the wall imagery in each work?

3. How and why might a Marxist critic respond to this poem? What does the poem suggest about “private property”? What is the probable class of the two men featured in this poem? Does their focus on maintaining boundaries seem ironic in any way from a Marxist perspective?

“Birches” (1916)

The speaker notes that white birch trees, especially when they are bent, present a striking contrast to nearby darker trees, and although he would like to think that playing boys have bent the trees by climbing in them and grabbing their branches to descend back to the ground, he knows that the branches have actually been bent by ice storms that have weighed them down and forever altered their shapes. After describing the storms and their effects, he returns to his fantasy of boys climbing the trees and bending their branches by holding them to return to solid ground. Musing on life's troubles, and recalling that he himself once swung from birch trees, he wishes that he could now climb toward heaven but then descend gently back to earth on bending branches.

As so often in his long poems, Frost here uses blank (or unrhymed) verse consisting mostly of 10 syllables per line, although sometimes he uses 11 syllables and occasionally 12. The first four lines of the work use perfectly regular iambic pentameter meter, in which the even syllables are accented and the odd syllables are not. Afterward, however, the meter of the poem becomes much less predictable and much more erratic; in a poem that deals so insistently with motion, movement, and literal swinging, this kind of frequent departure from metrical regularity is often effective, allowing Frost to emphasize key syllables, words, or phrases, as in the heavily accented phrase “As ice storms do” (l. 5), or the word *Loaded* (l. 5), where the first syllable receives unusual stress, or the heavily emphasized phrase “hung limp” (l. 2), where the rhythm mimics the sense. Frost, in other words, shows his usual skill in orchestrating the sounds of a poem

to reflect and reinforce its meaning, and the fact that the meter in this work is *so* unpredictable helps contribute to the heavily conversational style of the lyric—a quality also enhanced by the absence of rhyme, the frequent use of enjambed (or run-on) lines, the repeated use of unaccented final syllables, the repeated references to “I,” the stress on personal memories and personal aspirations, and the implicit inclusion of readers themselves in the experiences the poem describes (as in the *your* of line 45). The structure of the poem seems loose rather than rigidly patterned, as the speaker himself explicitly concedes in lines 21–22: The work begins by offering one possible (and fanciful) explanation of the bent birches (ll. 1–3), then suddenly shifts to a more realistic explanation (ll. 4–20), then shifts back to fantasy that also seems to combine elements of personal memory (ll. 21–40), then makes the emphasis on personal memory explicit (ll. 41–49), and then concludes by focusing on wishes and hopes for the future (ll. 50–59). The speaker expresses highly personal recollections and aspirations, but obviously he also speaks for any person who has ever enjoyed the carefree play of childhood, or experienced the disappointments and worries of adulthood, or longed for a way of recapturing simple joys in the midst of life's complexities. In the poem's last line, Frost moves closer than he usually does to stating an explicit theme, lesson, or “moral,” but for the most part the speaker resists any didactic impulse. Ironically, though, by speaking so convincingly of and for himself, he also speaks for numerous readers, as the enduring popularity of this poem attests.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss this poem in relation to THORNTON WILDER's play *Our Town*. In particular, discuss the relations between past and present and between youth and age in both works. How do both texts try to avoid sentimentality? How is childhood presented from a double perspective in both texts? What do both texts suggest about the process of loss through maturation?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Jack London's story “The Law of Life.” How is nature presented in both works? How is man's place in

nature described? In which work is the emphasis on man's place in society more strongly emphasized? How do the tones and conclusions of the two works differ?

3. Why and how does the speaker use the word *you* so often in the first 20 lines of the poem? How does his use of that word contribute to the poem's tone and effectiveness? How does his use of that word help to involve the reader? In what other ways does the tone of the poem seem casual and conversational, and what other devices does Frost use to help create that tone?

"An Old Man's Winter Night" (1916)

In the darkness of the night, an old man is alone in a storage room in his empty house; he has entered the room with a lantern, but now he cannot remember why he went there. The sounds of his clomping feet disturb the quiet night, but eventually he falls asleep, and the poem ends by emphasizing the theme of human isolation.

As in many of his best poems, Frost here uses blank verse and a basically iambic pentameter meter that allows him to create subtle and effective variations once the iambic pattern has been established. The opening line, for instance, is strictly regular in its iambic beat: Each even-numbered syllable is accented, while each odd-numbered syllable is not. Then, in the second line, both of the first two syllables are unaccented, so that the next two ("thin frost") receive extra emphasis. Frost's skill at using meter, however, is only one of the traits that make him an effective poet. In the present work, for instance, the title uses three key words (*Old*, *Winter*, and *Night*) to create immediately a melancholy mood—a mood the poem then develops and sustains. That mood is instantly reinforced by the word *darkly* (l. 1), an adverb that is both a literal description of the lack of light and metaphorically appropriate to the sad and somewhat ominous tone of the poem. Although Frost uses personification when describing nature (not only in line 1 but later on as well), that technique is ironic in this work, for the whole point of the poem is to emphasize

man's separation and isolation from nature, no matter how often nature is described in human terms. As the poem proceeds, Frost continues to pile on words that enhance the overall sense of coldness and alienation, including "frost" (l. 2), "separate" (l. 2), "empty" (l. 3), and "loss" (l. 8). *Loss*, of course, is an especially important word in this poem; the old man is "at a loss" not only in the sense that he cannot remember why he entered the storage room but also in the sense that his whole life is now in a process of decline. In his isolation, however, he is also paradoxically a symbol of the common human condition—a fact that Frost makes clear by the end of the poem when he uses the technique of subtracting a word to emphasize the incapacity not only of this "One aged man" but of any "one man" in general (l. 26). By the end of the work, the sleep of the old man not only is literal but also symbolizes the larger sleep of death that will overtake all people during the literal and metaphorical "winter night" of old age and death.

As in all of Frost's best poems, this one is full of specific moments of beauty and poetic skill, as in the memorable image of frost droplets as "separate stars" (l. 2), or in the rhythmic repetition of "What kept" in lines 4 and 6, or in the near-rhyme of "gaze" and "age" in lines 4 and 7, or in the use of onomatopoeia in the double use of "clomping" in lines 10–11, or in the staccato use of alliteration in the description of the old man's footsteps "beating on a box" (l. 14). Describing the house as a "box" emphasizes its empty lifelessness, while using the past tense of *know* in 16 underscores the old man's sense of loss. Frost likewise shows his skill in arranging syntax (or sentence structure) when he begins line 15 by saying, "A light he was" but then ends the sentence by adding "to no one but himself": The poet gives with the first four words but then takes away with the final five. He uses a similar technique a bit later when he first mentions (in neutral terms) a simple "moon" (l. 18) but then appends a deflating adjective: "the broken moon" (l. 19). Likewise, Frost shows his talent for delaying key facts by appending a simple two-word phrase ("And slept") at the end of an unusually long sentence (ll. 18–23) and by putting that phrase at the very beginning a line, where it not only has extra

emphasis but also catches us by surprise. In all these ways and many others, Frost shows that he can take a tried-and-true theme (human loneliness) and make something fresh and original of it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with T. S. ELIOT's poem titled "Gerontion." Discuss the works in terms of such matters as setting, point of view, characterization, imagery, symbolism, form, and style. How would you describe the differences of the poems in terms of purpose and impact?
2. Discuss this work in relation to ERNEST HEMINGWAY's short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. What differences exist between the two old men? How are the settings and actions described in the two works fundamentally distinct? How are the social situations of the two old men different? Which old man is more pathetic, and why? What is the ultimate effect of each work?
3. Analyze the poem's use of various sound effects, such as assonance and near-rhymes. Where does Frost employ such methods, and how do they contribute to the continuity, flow, and effectiveness of the poem? Analyze their impact, for instance, on lines 1–7.

"Out, Out——" (1916)

A boy living in idyllic rural New England has been cutting wood with a power saw for his family's stove; just when he is about to stop work in order to eat supper, he loses control of the saw and realizes that his hand has been cut off. Later, after he has been anesthetized by a doctor, his strength ebbs away and he dies. The people who witness his death soon return to their own routines.

Like many of Frost's narrative poems, this one is written in blank (or unrhymed) verse with a basically iambic meter. The title alludes to lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ("Out, out, brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow" [5.5.23–24]) and thus foreshadows the work's emphasis on the fleeting nature of human existence. In this case, that existence is especially fleeting, since the victim of

accidental death is only a boy—yet a boy trying to be a man by helping with the family chores. Frost begins the poem with words whose cacophonous music imitates the sounds of the tool they describe ("The buzz saw snarled and rattled"; l. 1), and he soon repeats the key words—"snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled" (l. 7)—not only to emphasize them but also to mimic the repetitive sound of the saw. The verb *snarled* makes the saw sound almost like a living beast, while the word *rattled* implies a more mechanical effect but may also suggest the sound of a dangerous snake. Yet this is a poem that is full of ironies, and so while Frost immediately makes clear the danger of the saw, he also complicates the effect by giving it pleasant associations as well. Thus the saw produces "Sweet-scented" pieces of cut wood (l. 3) that will be used to stoke the family stove, and in the background of the cutting the boy can glimpse "Five mountain ranges one behind the other / Under the sunset far into Vermont" (ll. 5–6). The setting and mood are almost pastoral, but on second reading we note the irony inherent in the reference to the "sunset" and the similar irony of the ensuing comment that the day "was all but done" (l. 9). This is a poem, after all, in which a boy will die, and so such references to passing time are not insignificant. Similar irony results from the fact that the fatal accident occurs when the boy is called to a nourishing, life-sustaining "Supper" (l. 14), and the fact that the call is given by the boy's own sister simply gives the irony one more agonizing twist. A poem that might easily have become maudlin or sentimental (on the one hand) or merely gruesome and grotesque (on the other) instead strikes a difficult balance: Frost allows us to sympathize with the victim without himself descending into manipulative pathos. Indeed the ending of the work—in which the bystanders, having witnessed the boy's death, are simply said to have "turned to their affairs" (l. 34)—has been interpreted by some readers as a sarcastic indictment of indifference and by others as a stoic recognition that life must go on. Whichever reading we choose, neither reading makes either Frost or the poem seem sentimental.

As always with Frost, there are wonderful examples of technical skill. Thus the line describing the

seemingly mundane end of another mundane day is composed in perfectly regular iambic rhythm (l. 9); later, however, the key verb “Leaped” (l. 16) is metrically emphasized; and a crucial phrase is repeated (after an interruption) with an ominous addition: “the boy saw all—/ . . . / He saw all spoiled” (ll. 22, 25). Frost can be eloquent by using a sentence consisting merely of a single word (“So”; l. 27); he can use rhythm and sentence structure to masterful effect (l. 32); and he can use near-rhyme, in an unrhymed poem, to create a powerful sense of finality (“there” and “affairs” in lines 33–34). In short, what makes this poem great is not the event described (which could easily have been mishandled by a lesser poet) but Frost’s skill and craft. But these traits, as always, are subtle and unobtrusive.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem about death with Wallace Stevens’s lyric titled “The Emperor of Ice Cream.” How do the poems differ in style, tone, and attitude? What differences in plot and characterization help to account for these other differences? What elements make Frost’s poem more “tragic” than the poem by Stevens?
2. Read this poem in conjunction with “The Dead Baby” by WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS. Which of the two works is more sad or pathetic? Why? How do the poems differ in structure, diction, tone, and method? How does the opening stanza of the Williams poem resemble the closing lines of the Frost poem? Which of the two works is more obviously sarcastic?
3. Discuss the implied depiction of gender roles in this poem. What assumptions seem to underlie the poem’s presentation of the activities and responsibilities of males and females? How do you interpret the tone of the final lines? Justify your response.

“The Oven Bird” (1916)

The speaker describes the song made by a kind of warbler known as an ovenbird because the nest it builds—made of mud and vegetation—resembles

a small oven. The bird is heard most often (the speaker claims) in midsummer, and he associates its singing with the passing of spring and the transition to fall.

Because this poem consists of 14 lines, most commentators would label it a sonnet, although its rhyme scheme (*aabcbddccdeeffgg*) is highly unusual, fitting none of the standard patterns found in traditional sonnets. In this respect, the poem is typical of Frost, who liked to use traditional forms while also giving them his own distinctive twist. The poem opens with a strictly regular iambic pentameter line (“There is a singer everyone has heard”; l. 1), in which the even syllables are accented and the odd ones are not, but this regular beat only helps emphasize the irregular rhythm of the succeeding line, especially the key word *Loud*, which (given its meaning) gets appropriately unusual stress not only because it is accented but also because of its initial position. Here as so often, then, Frost shows his alertness to the musical quality of his poems—a trait especially relevant in a poem about birdsong.

The speaker associates the song of the ovenbird with mutability—particularly with the transition from spring to fall: “He says that leaves are old and that for flowers / Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten” (ll. 4–5). The song of the bird is linked, then, with loss, decline, and diminishment—with falling flowers, with literal darkness, and with the onset of autumn (ll. 6–9). By line 10, with its reference to “highway dust,” the song of the bird has become associated not only with the kind of modernization that destroys nature but also with the death that is the inevitable fate of all living things; the use of the word *dust*, in particular, reminds us of the biblical idea that we come from dust and return to it when we die (Genesis 3:19). As is often the case in Frost’s lyrics, the tone of this work is dry, objective, and matter-of-fact: He does not lament the fact of death; he merely calls it to our attention. The poet himself, then, is a kind of ovenbird: Part of the purpose of his singing is not simply to celebrate nature and life but to note their inevitable fragility. Paradoxically, by calling attention to their passing he makes us value and appreciate them all the more; it is thanks in part to the singing of the ovenbird that

we realize more intensely the beauty of both spring and summer and even the rapidly passing beauty of autumn itself. In describing the ovenbird, the speaker calls attention to his own function as a plain-spoken herald of fundamental facts—as a poet who “knows in singing not to sing” (l. 12) and who, through the skill of his art, manages to make something beautiful and memorable even of “a diminished thing” (l. 14).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with MARIANNE MOORE's poem “What Are Years?” How does each work deal with the issues of mutability and mortality? What is the tone and/or “message” of each work? Which work more obviously has a message? How is bird imagery used in both works? How do the works differ in point of view?
2. Discuss the way the passage of time is treated in this poem and in EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY's lyric titled “First Fig.” Why is Millay's poem so much briefer than Frost's? How is the brevity of the poem appropriate to its theme? Which of the poems is more meditative? Which is more hortatory? What details of the poems account for these differences in stance and tone? How would you describe the personality of the speaker of each work?
3. Where and how does Frost use repetition to emphasize variation in this poem? How does the poem resemble (but also not resemble) a standard Shakespearean sonnet in its final two lines? How do those lines relate to the rest of the work?

“The Road Not Taken” (1916)

During a walk through a forested area in autumn, the speaker came upon diverging roads—one seeming slightly less traveled than the other, although the difference was not very great. After wishing that he could walk down both roads at once, he finally chose the road that seemed slightly less worn, telling himself that someday he would

explore the other road (although he doubted that he ever would). The speaker then imagines that a long time in the future, he will be telling people of this choice of roads and will be suggesting that the choice he made was highly significant.

This extremely well-known, highly popular, and seemingly straightforward poem is much less simple than a casual reading might suggest. The poem, in fact, has been interpreted in highly different and often contradictory ways. Some readers, for instance, take the speaker completely at face value, while others believe that the speaker is being mocked by Frost. Some readers believe that the poem endorses unconventional individualism, while others contend that the work offers no such message. Some analysts argue that the poem must be read in light of extra-textual, biographical evidence that suggests that Frost used the work to poke gentle fun at an indecisive friend (his fellow poet Edward Thomas), while other commentators believe that the poem can and should be read on its own terms, without appealing to any special knowledge from outside the text itself. Meanwhile, still other commentators assert that Frost himself initially explained the poem as satire of Thomas but later changed his mind, although this claim itself has been disputed. Thus a poem that initially seems uncomplicated—with its simple diction, its solid rhyme scheme, and its generally iambic meter spread across eight to 10 syllables per line—appears, on closer examination, more complex than a superficial reading might suggest.

The poem begins with a definitive statement of fact: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” (l. 1), and indeed few if any complications appear in the rest of the opening stanza. There is a nicely abrupt shift in the first four words of stanza 2, and in fact it is in this second stanza that the poem's real complications begin. At first the speaker seems to make a clear distinction between the two roads (one seemed less well traveled than the other [l. 8]), but then he immediately subverts that distinction, suggesting that the two roads were very much alike (ll. 9–12). It is easy to see, from these lines, how Frost might be mocking the indecisive speaker—a speaker who finds it difficult not simply to choose between the two roads but even to describe them with any real

sense of certainty or consistency. The speaker's indecisiveness continues in lines 13–15, so that—ironically—a poem supposedly dealing with irrevocable choice is actually a poem about the difficulty of making up one's mind. Even the famous final lines of the poem seem ironic. Thus the speaker imagines himself asserting, sometime in the distant future, that of the two roads before him, "I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference" (ll. 19–20). Line 19, however, plainly contradicts lines 9–10, and so even as the poem concludes, the speaker seems uncertain and confused, even when making an apparently definitive statement. Of course, if the poem is read as mocking the speaker, this final confusion only adds to the subtle satire.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the decisions (or decision-making processes) described in this poem and in Theodore Dreiser's short story "The Second Choice." Compare and contrast the central characters in the two works. What role does irony play in each text? How are the conclusions of the two works similar and/or different?
2. Discuss this poem in relation to SHERWOOD ANDERSON's "The Book of the Grotesque" in *Winesburg, Ohio*. How do the works resemble and/or differ from one another in their treatment of the tendency to make choices and in their presentation of the results of those choices? Does one work present the idea of choice more positively than the other?
3. How do you read the poem—ironically or not ironically—as a piece of satire or as a straightforward meditation? Is there some third possibility? Justify your response. Archetypal (or "myth") critics argue that great literature often deals with standard human desires, fears, and circumstances. How and why might an archetypal critic find this poem intriguing?

"Design" (1922, 1936)

The speaker notices a well-fed white spider holding a white moth on a white flower that is normally

colored blue. He wonders how all these examples of whiteness happened to be together in such a perfect conjunction, and then he suggests that the conjunction may have been the result of an appalling design or intent.

This work exemplifies Frost's interest in the sonnet form as well as his ability to use that form in unusual ways. The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, consisting of an octave (the first eight lines) followed by a sestet (the final six lines). In structuring the octave, Frost followed the standard Petrarchan rhyme scheme of *abbaabba*, but then, instead of creating a new set of rhymes in the sestet (as would have been expected), he continued to play with one of the rhyme sounds already so strongly established: *acaacc*. Finding appropriate rhyme words is more difficult in English than in Italian (Petrarch's native language), and that is one reason that Petrarchan sonnets present special challenges for English-speaking poets. In this poem, however, Frost not only accepts the challenge but ups the ante: It is as if he deliberately sets out to make his task as tough as possible. In one sense, of course, he is playing on the poem's title, calling attention to the elaborate "design" that is at the heart of his own text. The fact that the rhyme design of this poem is so rigid, inflexible, and even potentially monotonous may indeed be relevant to the "meaning" of the work—a meaning that itself implies the possibility of a universe that is rigidly designed down to the very smallest details.

The poem begins with the speaker's discovery of a spider, which he describes almost as if it were an attractive baby rather than an unappealing insect: The spider is "dimpled," "fat," and "white," but the effect of such description is paradoxical, for the same adjectives that might be pleasing in one context seem grotesque here: *Dimpled* implies a close-up, almost microscopic, view of the insect; *fat* implies that this predator has had success in killing; and *white* makes the spider sound unnatural and perhaps even sickly. Likewise, the fact that the spider appears on a white flower that is normally blue again suggests an unnatural, sickly pallor, and by the time we reach line 4, the speaker's concern with "death and blight" has become explicit. The spider,

flower, and moth seem like “the ingredients of a witches’ broth” (l. 6)—phrasing that again implies unnatural and even malign influences. At this point, however, the phrasing sounds almost fanciful or unrealistic; witches, after all, do not “really” exist, and so the tone of the poem at this juncture can sound almost whimsical or witty, especially when the wings of the dead moth are compared to “a paper kite” (l. 8).

By the time we reach the sestet, however, the tone of the poem considerably darkens. The speaker reminds us that the name of this sickly looking flower is, ironically, the “heal-all” (l. 10), and he wonders what force or forces were responsible for this deadly meeting of flower, spider, and moth. In line 13 (a number conventionally associated, appropriately enough, with misfortune) he suggests that a malevolent “design” (perhaps even a malicious deity?) engineered this “design of darkness” in order to “appall.” The conjunction of the words *darkness* and *appall* is part of the poem’s wit, for *darkness* suggests blackness, whereas *appall* implies making pale by provoking disgust, dismay, or shock. Typically, however, Frost shows both his cleverness and his sophistication by pulling back, in line 14, from any obvious or unequivocal moralizing: This final line raises the possibility that design in small matters may be merely illusory. In other words, the conjunction of spider, flower, and moth may simply have been an odd accident and may lack any larger meaning at all. In the final line, then, the poem leaves open the chance that there is no real meaning—not even a malign one—in the ironic union the poem describes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss this poem in relation to “Credo” by Edwin Arlington Robinson. How does Robinson’s poem make explicit concerns that are only implied in Frost’s work? How do the two poems differ in their views of the possibility of divine design? How do the endings of the two works differ? In what ways is Robinson’s poem somewhat self-contradictory?
2. How do the views of God implied in Frost’s poem compare or contrast with the views enun-

ciated by Wolf Larsen in JACK LONDON’s novel *The Sea Wolf*? How do both works reflect the rise of Darwinism as an intellectual influence in the late 19th century? How is the last line of Frost’s poem in some ways even bleaker, in its implications, than the line that precedes it?

3. How do the final six lines of the poem attempt to engage the reader directly? How and why is such engagement an effective strategy? In other words, how does it add to the impact of the poem? How does the speaker attempt to anticipate potential objections from his readers? How does the speaker implicitly characterize himself as he describes the objects of his attention? What kind of person does this speaker seem to be?

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” (1923)

The speaker points to various data (particularly from nature) to argue that while beauty can only be temporary, change and decline are inevitable.

The title of this splendid little lyric immediately announces its main theme: Nothing precious can endure. The brevity of the work—with its clipped trimeter (or six-syllable) lines, its quick couplets, and its short overall length—exemplifies its argument: The poem is finished almost before it begins, thus illustrating its own claims about the briefness of beauty. Yet this poem, however short, is exceptionally well designed; every detail contributes to its coherence and success, and thus part of the paradox of the text is that Frost, while arguing that beauty is fleeting, has himself created an enduringly beautiful work of art. In some respects, then, the very existence of this superbly crafted poem refutes (or at least qualifies) the poem’s own claims.

Frost begins with a line in which each key word receives maximum metrical emphasis: The first syllable of *Nature* is accented, as are the words *first* and *green*; only in the very last two syllables of the opening line does the poem settle into an expected iambic pattern (in which even-numbered syllables are accented and odd-numbered syllables are not). The iambic rhythm of the first line’s last two syllables, however, puts powerful stress on the key

word *gold*, so that the first line is a model of epigrammatic compression: Frost manages to state the main argument of the whole poem in just six syllables. The opening line, however, also has a kind of paradoxical force: How, after all, can “green” be “gold”? The meaning of this claim seems to be that the very first springtime buds of growing plants are especially precious, valuable, and beautiful, but the juxtaposition—indeed, the metaphorical identification—of green (associated with organic life) and gold (associated with something that is precious but inanimate) contributes to the paradoxical power of the opening claim. Yet even as the poem begins with a strong and vigorous assertion, this opening assertion also contains (in the word *first*) the seeds of its own undoing: The word *first*, after all, implies the very change that is the real subject of the poem, and this emphasis on change becomes blatantly obvious by line 2, which states of nature’s gold that it is “Her hardest hue to hold.” Frost here combines heavy musical alliteration on the consonant *h* with use of practically every vowel available (*e*, *a*, *u*, and *o*), so that pronouncing the line involves a vocal workout that reinforces the idea of the difficulty of holding on to beauty. By personifying nature (calling it “Her”), Frost also begins a process that the rest of the poem will expand, as he shows the relevance of natural change to human existence.

Line 3 is another paradoxical metaphor: The speaker claims that nature’s “early leaf’s a flower.” How can a leaf be a flower? Indeed, we usually think of leaf and flower as opposites. By using such paradoxical phrasing, Frost makes us think; the poem is not simply an expression of emotion but a provocation to thought. A leaf, for instance, “is” a flower in the sense that it unfolds as a flower does, and in the sense that a flower results from a leaf, and also in the sense that a leaf is merely a temporary thing of beauty, as is also true of a flower. In any case, Frost reinforces the poem’s overall emphasis on change by using the adjective *early* (which echoes the previous adjective *first* from line 1) and also by writing “leaf’s” rather than “leaf is.” Partly, of course, he is required to use the apostrophe and *s* by the demands of his metrical pattern,

but the contraction inevitably also helps create and convey a sense of speed. That emphasis on speed is then explicitly reinforced in line 4, which states that although a leaf may be a flower, it is “only so an hour.” In most plants, of course, leaves endure much longer than a mere hour, but Frost exaggerates (using *hour* to imply brief time) to emphasize the undeniable point that change and decay cannot be stopped. Frost uses the older meaning of the verb *subside* (implying to sink down, to settle to the bottom) when he states that “leaf subsides to leaf” (l. 5), and once again the swiftness of the poem’s movement contributes to (and reinforces) its meaning: Only two lines earlier, the leaves were being born; now, a few syllables later, we see them falling and piling on top of one another.

Up until this point the poem has seemed to describe merely natural processes, but in line 6 Frost vastly expands the emotional range and significance of the work by stating that just as leaves fall, “So Eden sank to grief.” In a few simple words, Frost suddenly makes clear the human implications of his poem. He associates natural change with the unnatural sin that supposedly unleashed all the forces of decay his poem describes; he implies that change is not something that simply affects external nature but is also an inevitable aspect of human life that causes deep human pain. The verb *sank* echoes the preceding verb *subsides*, and both verbs foreshadow the ensuing phrase “goes down” in line 7. That line once again masterfully combines assonance and alliteration; ironically, then, this very sad poem is also splendidly musical—a trait also seen in the final line (“Nothing gold can stay”), which not only repeats (and confirms) the title but also echoes (in its *ns*, *gs*, *sts*, and long *as*) the line with which the poem began. The repetition of the key word *gold* also helps move the poem full circle, giving the work a strong sense of symmetry, and indeed the essential message of the entire text might be summed up by juxtaposing line 1 and line 8: “Nature’s first green is gold,” but “Nothing gold can stay.” The word *Nothing* has special metrical emphasis because it violates (for the first time in six lines) the standard iambic pattern, and the entire final line receives extra emphasis because it is

the only line in the entire poem that constitutes a single sentence. By using all these elements of careful craftsmanship, Frost creates a poem that comes close to subverting its own central argument, since the poem itself seems an instance of something “gold” that will indeed “stay” or endure.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with Wallace Stevens's “Sunday Morning,” particularly its final stanza. What do both poems imply about nature? What do both poems imply about man's place in nature? Which poem is more celebratory? Which one is more elegiac? Discuss the role of religious imagery in each poem.
2. Read this lyric alongside CARL SANDBURG's poem “Prairie Waters by Night.” How are these two works similar and/or different in form, techniques, themes, and ultimate effects? What feeling(s) are you left with after reading Sandburg's poem, and how do those feelings resemble and/or differ from the results of reading Frost's poem? Justify your response by pointing to specific details in both texts.
3. Discuss the heavy use of periods in this poem. Why, in a lyric so short, are there five periods? How does this kind of punctuation affect the rhythm of the poem, and how is it relevant to the poem's theme and meanings? Discuss the use of verbs in lines 5–7. What similarities are there (and what differences) in the use of verbs in those lines, and how do those lines differ, in their use of verbs, from the poem's other lines?

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923)

The speaker, while traveling in a horse-drawn conveyance on a road beside a forested area, pauses to contemplate the vision of the woods “fill[ing] up with snow,” but as he stops, he also thinks about the owner of the woods (who lives in the village) and about the presumably puzzled reaction of his own horse. Finally, responding to the apparent impatience of the horse as well as to his own sense

of obligation, the speaker decides to continue his journey and leave the woods behind.

This poem is probably Frost's most famous and best beloved work, and it is one of the poems on which he certainly hoped and thought his reputation would rest. It has many of the hallmarks of a “typical” Frost lyric: the plain, simple, often monosyllabic language; the rural setting; the seemingly straightforward and uncomplicated “plot”; the thoughtful but understated speaker; and the theme of man's relationship with nature and man's position in the universe. The poem invites serious reflection but is not preachy or didactic; part of its impact derives from Frost's willingness to let readers draw their own conclusions about the ultimate “meaning” of the work. Is the speaker afflicted with a “death wish”? Does he in fact contemplate suicide? Is he tempted—at least temporarily—to abandon his responsibilities? Does he wish (at least for a time) that such responsibilities did not exist? Are his journey and his contemplated sleep merely literal, or are they metaphorical (implying, perhaps, the larger journey of life and the final sleep of death)? Frost's poem intriguingly raises many such questions without ever providing clear or simple answers, and it is partly the poem's ability to seem simultaneously simple and complex that makes it so hauntingly memorable.

If one effect of the poem is to lull us into a contemplative mood so that we share in the speaker's own thoughtfulness, that effect is partly the result of the strikingly regular (but strangely subtle) iambic rhythm. In every single line of the work, the even syllables are accented and the odd syllables are not, yet the poem never sounds tediously predictable or metronomic. Likewise, every line of the work consists of exactly eight syllables—no more and no fewer—and yet (once more) the poem seems anything but stale or monotonous. Frost has chosen the perfect meter and rhythm for a low-key, quiet, and contemplative work such as this, and his heavy use of monosyllabic words (only 18 of the poem's 108 words consist of two or more syllables, and only one of those words is trisyllabic) is completely appropriate to a speaker whose character seems as direct and forthright as his language. At the same time, despite its highly

unadorned and unelaborate phrasing and despite its extraordinarily regular meter, the poem also has an exceptionally unusual rhyme scheme: *aaba, bbcb, ccac, dddd*. Numerous commentators (including Frost himself) have discussed the inventiveness of this pattern of rhyme and have called special attention to the way the pattern is both broken and completed in the final line, where the unexpected repetition (not only of a rhyme word but of an entire line) gives the conclusion exceptional emphasis. Thus the form of the poem (which is simultaneously simple and complex) mirrors many other aspects of the work, for the speaker himself seems, on one level, an uncomplicated rural character while also seeming both highly self-conscious and unusually contemplative. Similarly, the landscape, too, seems both predictably mundane and highly symbolic. These woods, for instance, seem both a credible forest and yet also a symbol of something mysterious and intriguing, while the snow and cold seem both literal and metaphorical. Likewise, the journey seems both real and emblematic: The speaker moves through a believable rural landscape, but he also progresses along the larger road of life itself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Frost was a great admirer of Edwin Arlington Robinson, and he especially admired Robinson's poem titled "Mr. Flood's Party." What resemblances and/or differences can you see between that poem and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"? Discuss the poems in terms of such matters as setting, theme, symbolism, and the characterization of the protagonist. Discuss the issues of isolation and the motif of making a journey as they are used in both works.
2. Compare and contrast Frost's poem with LANGSTON HUGHES's lyric titled "Mother to Son." Discuss the way both works deal with the theme of obligations and responsibilities. Discuss how they both use the idea of physical movement in symbolic ways. Is one work more clearly affirmative or positive than the other, or is each complicated in its own way? Discuss the forms the poets choose for their works and the tones and attitudes of the speakers.
3. Why is the speaker concerned with being seen by the owner of the woods? What other evidence is there for the speaker's self-consciousness? Discuss the attitude of the speaker toward his horse. What are some effects of describing the horse as "little"? What do the speaker's observations suggest about his own personality?

"Once by the Pacific" (1928)

After describing large waves of the Pacific Ocean advancing with destructive force toward a shore, the speaker interprets them as symbols of an even larger kind of cosmic destructiveness.

Although this poem consists of 14 lines, it is not a sonnet in the usual sense. It is written in seven iambic pentameter couplets, thus lacking the standard divisions into either the octave (eight lines) and sestet (six lines) characteristic of Petrarchan sonnets or the three quatrains (four lines) and final couplet associated with Shakespearean sonnets. The frequent use of punctuation at the ends of lines (and in particular the fact that all the periods occur in that position) gives the poem a kind of tightly confined, highly controlled quality that in some ways seems to conflict with its chaotic subject matter, which concerns dangerously destructive natural forces. Yet the poem does exhibit many stylistic and technical felicities, including the combination of paradox, alliteration, and onomatopoeia (in which sound imitates sense) in the phrase "shattered water" (paradoxical because how can a liquid be "shattered"?) or the combination of sound, sight, and even tactile sensation in the phrase "misty din" (l. 1). Assonance and double accents are used to emphasize the "Great waves" mentioned at the beginning of line 2, while the phrase "looked over" in that line introduces the technique of personification that is one of the major features of this poem. The idea that nature might be capable of "thought" (l. 3) makes nature seem possibly malign and thus even more potentially dangerous than usual, and Frost enhances this sense of potential danger by vaguely saying that the waves thought of doing "something" to

the shore (l. 3). The word *something* is just the right term to create a sense of mystery and foreboding, especially when the next line implies that whatever the water intends to do, the action will be unprecedented and unique. Also effective is the memorable (indeed, almost unforgettable) imagery of “hairy” clouds (l. 5)—an adjective that at first makes them seem almost animalistic until the effect is softened in line 6. Even when Frost seems to falter—as he appears to do in his use of meter in line 8—he only proves that it is unsafe to second-guess a major poet: Why does he write “in being backed” when he could have written “to be backed” and thereby preserved metrical regularity? Because the phrasing *he* chooses emphasizes the key verb *backed*, and in addition it creates an effective repetition in line 9. Here, as usual, Frost knows what he is doing.

By the time we arrive at line 10, the vague “thought” of line 3 has evolved into an apparently “dark intent” and the imagery (especially of colors) is growing noticeably more menacing and the overtones are beginning to imply a cataclysm or an apocalypse. Then “dark intent” metastasizes into “rage” (l. 12), and finally Frost not only possibly alludes (in a potential example of black irony) to the broken water associated with birth (l. 13) but definitely alludes, in line 14, both to God’s “Let there be light” in Genesis and to the words Othello pronounces just before killing Desdemona in Shakespeare’s great tragedy. The allusion to Genesis is ironic; the allusion to Shakespeare seems highly appropriate to the murderous destructiveness that is the main theme of this poem. Meanwhile, the imagery of “water broken” moves the poem full circle by reminding us of the “shattered water” mentioned in line 1. Yet that reminder only accentuates how much the mood of the poem has changed—how dark it has become and how much its resonance has broadened. Frost is no longer merely describing waves breaking on the beach; he is suggesting the end of the world by depicting the fury of an ironically named Pacific (or peaceful) ocean.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem titled “Credo.” How do they differ in purpose, tone, and final effect? How does the final line of Robinson’s poem contrast with (but also resemble) the imagery Frost uses? Although both poems are 14 lines long, how and why does Robinson use one of the traditional sonnet forms effectively? Which of the poems is more personal in its phrasing? Which one is more concrete and vivid in its imagery?
2. Read this text alongside the poem titled “Oread” by the poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle). How do the poets use sea imagery to radically different effect? What are the mood and tone of H. D.’s poem, and how do they compare to the same aspects of Frost’s? What attitudes toward nature are implied by the two works? In particular, how do the endings of the two works differ?
3. How is it appropriate, in writing about ocean waves, that Frost chose to use seven couplets rather than a more traditional sonnet stanza in this 14-line poem? Since many 14-line sonnets have often dealt with the subject of love, how is it ironic that Frost chose that number of lines for this poem?

“Provide, Provide” (1934, 1936)

The speaker points to an ugly old woman who was once beautiful, young, and tantalizing, and he uses her as an example of the way mutability and old age inevitably overtake anyone who does not die young. He advises readers that in order to avoid this fate they must either die young or make provisions to become rich, powerful, or respected so that they will not be insulted or lose their dignity in old age. Even if they have to buy friends, they should provide for the future ravages that will overtake them when they are elderly.

In some respects this poem is humorous, whimsical, and ironic; in other ways it is deadly serious. The speaker jokes about old age, but by the end of the work it is clear that old age is not entirely a laughing matter. At first the work seems entirely fanciful: It mentions a “witch” (a description quickly echoed, through assonance and alliteration, by the phrase “withered hag”; l. 1) who finds herself in the undig-

nified position of having “To wash the steps with pail and rag” (l. 2)—a statement that makes clear that the woman is a “witch” not in the fairy-tale sense of being a woman with vast mystical powers but rather in the opposite sense: old, unattractive, and socially impotent. To add to the irony, the speaker then reveals that this ugly, elderly crone “Was once” (figuratively, if not literally) “the beauty Abishag”—a stunning young woman in the Old Testament who was so exceptionally attractive that she was chosen to lie in bed beside the aging King David to keep his old body warm. After David nevertheless died, one of his sons was so smitten with Abishag that he sought permission to marry her, but King Solomon, another of David’s son’s, suspected that the request involved treason and so had the petitioner put to death. Abishag, then, is a triply ironic beauty: Not only was her beauty incapable of preventing David’s death, and not only did her beauty lead to the death of her suitor, but, in Frost’s poem, she herself has grown old, ugly, and pathetic.

Yet the poem soon suggests that the speaker’s concern is not with the real, historical Abishag but with Abishag as a symbol of feminine beauty anytime and anywhere—including even (or especially) in “Hollywood” (l. 4). In the jump from the first stanza to the second, the poem also jumps from the mythical or legendary past to the real if glitzy present. Then, to place the work even closer to home, the speaker directly addresses the poem’s reader in line 6, thereby making it clear that the perils of aging are directly relevant to the audience of the work. Suddenly we are no long smiling at the witch. The speaker then proceeds to offer advice that can be seen as either preposterous or gruesome, telling readers either to “Die early” (an event over which individuals have no control except by suicide; l. 7), or, if they are “predestined to die late,” to make up their minds to “die in state” (i.e., with real social power or public dignity or acclaim; ll. 8–9). He then gives unrealistic advice that ends with further irony: Few people can hope to become fabulously wealthy through the stock market, and fewer still can hope to “occupy a throne,” and even if those who hold royal power cannot publicly be *called* crones, their status as crones is not at all affected by such public nice-

ties (ll. 10–12). In the next stanza the speaker offers more practical advice: One can win respect either through knowledge, ethics, or authenticity, but even in this stanza the prospect of achieving respect by these means is merely something that “might” happen to the reader (ll. 13–15). As the poem winds to its conclusion, the speaker opines that old age is inevitably “hard” (l. 18), especially if one is alone and friendless, and the work concludes with advice that can seem either cynical or bluntly realistic: It is better to buy friends than to have “none at all” (ll. 19–21). In some ways the poem (with its quick lines, brief stanzas, and triple rhymes) seems singsong and merely flippant, but in other ways it is grimly, bleakly honest. The ability to combine such tones with such craft is part of the measure of Frost’s poetic talent.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Jack London’s short story “The Law of Life” also deals with the subject of growing old. How do the tones and attitudes of the two works differ? Which treatment of the theme is grimmer? Which work expresses greater sympathy? Discuss the presence and/or absence of humor in each work.
2. The process of aging is an implicit and explicit topic in JOHN STEINBECK’S book *Travels with Charley*. How do Steinbeck’s thoughts and depictions of aging in that work compare and contrast with the ideas and descriptions presented in Frost’s poem? How could both works have easily been sentimental, and how (and with what success) do both writers guard against the risks of sentimentality? How would you describe the personality of Frost’s speaker?
3. How and why are lines 9–12 especially ironic? How are the solutions suggested there not as simple as the tone of the lines would suggest? How and why is the word *dignified* ironic in the context of this poem?

“Desert Places” (1936)

The speaker describes snow and night falling on a deserted field surrounded by woods—observations

that lead him to meditate on loneliness and nothingness. He ends by noting that although outer space is usually considered terrifying because it is so empty, a more frightening kind of emptiness exists on Earth, where human habitation ironically makes any loneliness seem even more painful.

In its imagery, setting, and “plot,” this poem invites comparison with Frost’s exceedingly famous work “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Both works involve isolated speakers provoked to thoughtfulness by a snowy rural scene, but the present poem seems both darker and bleaker than its predecessor. The speaker here is more isolated (he mentions no other people and is accompanied by no domesticated animal); his perspective is literally more cosmic and his thoughts are more explicitly frightened and frightening; and at the end of the poem there is no expression of a stoic determination to move on; instead the speaker seems frozen, immobile, in a landscape that offers no hint of consolation. Indeed, by the end of the work the speaker seems less concerned with this particular landscape *per se* than with an inner, deeper emptiness.

There is already some irony in the title of the poem, for although the word *desert* usually suggests an arid, sandy, sun-baked setting, Frost’s poem is set in fields and woods, with “Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast” (l. 1). “Snow,” “night,” and the first syllables of both uses of the word *falling* receive strong metrical emphasis here, and although most of the words of this line are objectively descriptive, the interjected *oh* already implies the speaker’s emotional response. Although in some ways the landscape reveals some beauty (“the ground almost covered smooth in snow”; l. 3), the reference to “a few weeds and stubble” complicates the picture, suggesting ugliness and decay (l. 4). By the time the poem reaches lines 7 and 8, however, the focus has shifted from the bleak external setting to the speaker’s own internal moods: His only connection to the environment is to feel as lonely inside as the surrounding setting appears. To emphasize his point, Frost repeats versions of the word *lonely* four times in three lines (ll. 8–10), but by the end of this series Frost has moved from a milder kind of loneliness to one that is more intense;

the repetition (in other words) helps emphasize the change from one mood to something even darker, just as the “blacker whiteness” of line 10 is more depressing than the snow mentioned in line 1. By the time we reach line 12, the mood of the poem has become literally nihilistic, implying a kind of existential nothingness. The speaker seems less concerned with the specific wintry place in front of him than with the march of time and the process of inevitable decay. Indeed, by the very end of the poem the focus of this speaker’s thoughts has shifted from the external environment to his own character, nature, and spirit. It is a shift from something out there to something “in me” (l. 15). The most truly significant “desert places” (Frost suggests) are the ones we carry around inside.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this work alongside Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Snow Man.” Discuss the use of imagery in both poems, and discuss their comments on the idea of nothingness. How do their tones and points of view differ? Discuss Frost’s use of the word *I* and Stevens’ use of the word *one*. Does one poem appeal to you more? If so, explain in detail why.
2. Compare and contrast this work with the poem titled “Spring and All” by WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS. How are the works similar and/or different in imagery, tone, and meaning? How do they differ in form and in point of view? Who is speaking in Williams’s poem? Why does Frost’s poem emphasize an individual speaker?
3. Discuss the effectiveness of the repetition in line 1. In what respects is the speaker’s movement in line 2 both literal and metaphorical? Weeds and stubble are normally considered unimportant or even worthless, but what makes them seem of some value here? Why is the verb *smothered* especially effective?

“The Figure a Poem Makes” (1939)

In this rambling and sometimes disjointed essay, Frost argues for the importance of variety, sounds,

themes, and “wildness” in poetry, contending that theme is particularly important in achieving the other goals. He emphasizes both the pleasure and the profit a poem can provide and suggests that a poem briefly staves off chaos. He also suggests that if a poem is to create specific emotions in its readers, those emotions must first have been aroused in the poet himself, and he ends by suggesting that a good poem never loses its freshness.

Anyone who has read Frost’s poetry carefully will not be surprised when he argues that the sound of a poem is “the gold in the ore” (*Collected* 776); Frost, after all, is one of the master technicians of sound in modern verse. Nor should anyone be surprised when Frost contends that “the object of writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other” (*Collected* 776). Frost practiced this maxim through his own close attention to variations in meter, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and numerous other devices. What *is* a bit surprising, perhaps, is the emphasis Frost places on theme (or what he calls “context—meaning—subject matter” [*Collected* 776]) in achieving variety of sound. He never fully explains why or how variety of sound is promoted by “subject matter” other than to say that the “possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless” (*Collected* 776). Also somewhat surprising (although more immediately comprehensible) is his claim that the theme of a poem can help tame its “wildness”: “Theme alone can steady us down” (*Collected* 776). Presumably this means that a poem’s theme helps impose order and discipline on writing that might otherwise be chaotic and uncontrolled. Frost, in fact, seems to emphasize the crucial importance of the meaning of a poem when he argues that a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom” and when he also contends—in one of the most famous phrases from this essay—that a poem is “a momentary stay against confusion” (*Collected* 777). In this phrase, the word *momentary* is crucial: Frost does not contend that a good poem provides perfect and immutable wisdom; rather, he suggests that a good poem gives compelling but temporary order to an existence that might otherwise seem purely meaningless and random.

Much of the essay is devoted to describing how poems are written—the evolution of a poem in the poet’s own mind and emotions. Using fragments, Frost declares, “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader” (*Collected* 777). He suggests that the writing of a poem is largely an unconscious act; certainly it is one (he suggests) that cannot be planned or controlled with total deliberation. The act of writing a poem is an act of unexpected discovery for the writer, as the act of reading one is for the reader. If a poem seems fresh to the writer as he is composing it, it will remain fresh to its readers, no matter how often it is read: “Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went” (*Collected* 778).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this essay with T. S. ELIOT’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” How do the works differ from and/or resemble one another in argument, method, clarity, and tone? How does Frost’s essay itself exhibit the kind of spontaneity and “surprise” the essay extols?
2. Read Frost’s essay in conjunction with Wallace Stevens’s poem titled “Of Modern Poetry.” What assumptions do the two works share? How do they differ? How—if at all—does Stevens’s poem illustrate any of the arguments made by Frost?
3. Discuss the ways in which Frost, in this prose essay, effectively uses devices often thought of as “poetic,” such as metaphor, simile, imagery, and rhythm. For instance, how and why is his reference to “a hot afternoon in the life of a grasshopper” effective? How might he have stated the same idea in a less memorable way?

“The Gift Outright” (1942)

In this public poem, the speaker meditates on the relations between America and Americans—between the land and the people who inhabit it. He

focuses on the nation's past, describes its evolution, and speculates about its future development.

The speaker of the poem speaks explicitly not simply for himself but for the American people in general, and it is partly this openly public stance that makes this work so different from so many of Frost's other best-known poems. The speaker begins by proclaiming (in language that involves, as does much of the language of this work, a good deal of repetition), "The land was ours before we were the land's" (l. 1). In other words, people possessed physical territory in America before they were really "Americans" in the deepest sense of that word: They lived on the land and owned it but did not yet fully identify with it or see themselves as part of it—as emotionally bound to it. In the next line and a half the speaker elaborates on this point, but the fact that he now uses personification ("She" and "her") to refer to the land already suggests a stronger bond between the inhabitants and their territory. At this point, however, the speaker still describes the relationship between the land and those who lived on it as a unilateral relationship—as a relationship between possessors and possessed, owners and owned. The original settlers lived in America but still thought of themselves as Britons; politically and psychologically, they were still "colonials"—still tied, emotionally and legally, to a distant motherland. They possessed what they were unpossessed by (l. 6): That is, they owned property in America but felt no deep bond to that property; they were "Possessed by what [they] now no more possessed" (l. 7). In other words, they were still legally citizens of Britain, even though they no longer lived there. Here and throughout, the diction of the poem is clotted, repetitious, paradoxical, and ironic; through using such techniques, Frost wants to suggest the complications involved in the range of possible relations between any land and the people who inhabit it.

Only when the inhabitants of America "surrender[ed]" themselves to the land by breaking their ties with Britain and embracing their identity as Americans did they truly find "salvation" (l. 11). Appropriately enough, the language here has religious overtones, and once again the phrasing is

paradoxical: By surrendering, the people are saved; by sacrificing, they succeed. Of course, the paradox is even greater, since it was only through literal military victories over England that this kind of metaphorical "surrender" was possible; it was only by achieving independence from Britain that Americans were able to codify the new bond they now felt with the lands they had long inhabited. As the poem continues, however, the language remains punning, paradoxical, and complex: The "deed" (meaning act, but also legal title or proof of ownership) by which we gave ourselves the country was "many deeds of war" (l. 13)—phrasing that reminds us of the fact (without making it very explicit) that the process of creating America often involved the dispossession of the Indians, the original Americans. Frost's "ours," "we," and "ourselves," however, seem mainly to imply the white, European settlers; except for the passing reference to "deeds of war," he seems little interested in the fate of the native peoples. In a poem full of deliberate ironies and paradoxes, there is, then, perhaps an unintended irony in the idea that the white settlers "gave" themselves to the land (l. 12) by moving westward—in the process taking territory that was not theirs.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the version of American history presented in this poem with the version stated or implied in various works by GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (*Zitkala-Ša*). How do you think she might have responded to Frost's poem, and why? Use specific passages from her works to support your arguments.
2. Compare and contrast Frost's work with the poem by CLAUDE MCKAY titled "America." How are paradoxical ideas and language used in both works? What do the works imply about America's future? In what ways does each work present a complex view of the relations between the land and the people who inhabit it?
3. Multiculturalist critics stress the significance of different ethnic, racial, sexual, and other minorities in the creation of and response to literature. How might a multiculturalist critic respond to this poem, especially to its references to "ours,"

10. In relation to various modern poets you have read, what do you think are Frost's distinctive strengths and most serious weaknesses? How would you rank Frost in relation to such other important modern poets as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Williams? Which of these poets do you think will be most esteemed 100 years from now? Explain and justify your answer.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Cook, Reginald L. "Robert Frost." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 323–365. New York: Norton, 1973.
- . "Robert Frost." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors. Vol. 2, A Survey of Research and Criticism since 1972*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 360–403. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990.
- The Friends of Robert Frost. Available online. URL: <http://www.frostfriends.org>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Frost, Robert. *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. Edited by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- Gerber, Philip L., ed. *Critical Essays on Robert Frost*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982.
- . *Robert Frost*. Rev. ed. Boston: Twayne, 1982.
- Greiner, Donald J. *Robert Frost: The Poet and His Critics*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1974.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Robert Frost: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.
- Nelson, Cary, and Edward Brunner. *Modern American Poetry: Robert Frost*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/a_f/frost/frost.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Poirier, Richard, and Mark Richardson. "Chronology." In *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. By Robert Frost. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- Potter, James L. *Robert Frost Handbook*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.
- Tuten, Nancy Lewis, and John Zubizarretta, eds. *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2001.

Robert C. Evans



H. D.

(HILDA DOOLITTLE) (1886–1961)

I know, I feel / the meaning that words hide; / they are anagrams, cryptograms, / little
boxes, conditioned / to hatch butterflies

(The Walls Do Not Fall)

Hilda Doolittle was rechristened *H. D.* in 1912 by her good friend (and onetime fiancé) EZRA POUND when he sent off a batch of her startling new poems to be published as the first examples of “imagist” verse. The new name stuck, and for the rest of her long life Doolittle was known as H. D., not only to her readers but even to most of her friends. The initials gave her an allure of mystery, making her seem not so much a real person as a remote oracle, speaking in the cryptic but beautiful verse one might expect from an ancient Greek prophetess. The name also forever linked her with the imagist moment and style in modern poetry—sometimes to her frustration and annoyance. During the course of a lengthy career, she produced much more than the carefully crafted brief poems that first made her famous; she wrote novels, memoirs (including a notable account of her psychiatric sessions with Sigmund Freud), and other kinds of prose. It is as a highly innovative poet, however, that she is best (and justly) remembered.

Most of the facts of Doolittle’s life are available in the detailed (if unfortunately undocumented) biography by Barbara Guest; other facts (along with a different perspective, detailed notes, and a helpful chronology) are available in the complementary book by Janice S. Robinson. The future poet was born on September 10, 1886, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Professor Charles Doolittle and his second wife, Helen Woole. The professor and his first wife (Martha Farrand) had already produced

two sons (Eric and Alfred) before Martha died in childbirth; Charles’s marriage to Helen (Hilda’s mother) occurred in 1882, and four children arrived in the decade from 1884 to 1894: Gilbert, Hilda, Harold, and Charles Melvin. Hilda, then, grew up surrounded by brothers, but although she seems to have been her father’s favorite child, she remembered him mainly as a somewhat distant figure. A highly regarded scientist who taught astronomy and mathematics at Lehigh University from 1875 to 1895, he became a distinguished professor of astronomy at the University of Pennsylvania and first director of its Flower observatory in 1896. Thus, at age nine Hilda moved to a large house in Upper Darby, a Philadelphia suburb, where she attended various schools before entering Bryn Mawr College (in 1905, according to Guest [19]; in 1904, according to Robinson [xvii]). She withdrew from Bryn Mawr in 1906 because of poor health and never completed a college degree (the only one of the Doolittle siblings to fail to do so).

By the time she withdrew from Bryn Mawr, however, Doolittle had already met and become involved with Ezra Pound—an involvement that was always, for anyone who knew him well, an education in itself. Hilda was 15 when they met at a Halloween party in 1901; Pound was just a year older, but already he was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, and already he was absolutely obsessed with literature and determined to become a great poet. Even at this

early age, he was enormously well read and was reading ever more widely all the time, educating himself and educating, through his excited conversation, all his friends in the process. Pound loved to talk, and he especially loved to talk about his own ideas; he was (even at this young age) exceptionally self-confident. Many of his fellow students found him insufferable, but some, such as WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (also at Penn) and Hilda Doolittle were intrigued. Hilda, in fact, was more than intrigued by Pound; in 1905 they became engaged (much to the displeasure of Hilda's father), and although the engagement was soon broken (Pound had also given a ring to another young woman at around the same time), the connection between them was not. Between 1905 and 1907 Pound composed poems for her and put them together into a volume he called "Hilda's Book," and although in the next few years his life was peripatetic (he taught briefly in Indiana, lost that job, went off to Venice, went to London, and then in 1910 briefly returned to New York, having visited many other places besides), he never lost his interest in Hilda; nor did she lose interest in him (despite her close relationship with another woman, Frances Gregg [Guest 22–24]). When Pound (now recognized in London as an emerging writer) returned to New York, Hilda arranged to meet him, and soon their "engagement was unofficially—or as she later wrote, 'equivocally'—renewed. There was an understanding; they were to be married. After a four-month tour of Europe in 1911 with Frances Gregg, and her mother, [Hilda] settled in London. She had at least made her decision to leave home and be with Ezra Pound" (Robinson 24).

Although her planned marriage to Pound never took place (he eventually married someone else and later took a mistress in addition to his wife), Hilda remained his good friend and occasional literary collaborator, and she spent most of the rest of her life in London or elsewhere in Europe, returning only rarely and briefly to the United States. In 1911 she married Richard Aldington, an Englishman whom she met through Pound (as she met most of her English friends), and in fact the three traveled together in the first half of 1912. It was in that latter year—when she, Pound, and Aldington were talking in

the tea room of the British Museum—that she happened to show Pound some poems she had recently written. Pound was impressed; he told her, "this is poetry" (quoted in Robinson 28), and although he could not restrain a characteristic impulse to edit a bit, at the end of the process he scrawled *H. D. Imagiste* at the bottom of the page and promptly sent the poems off to *Poetry* magazine in Chicago, of which he was then the foreign correspondent. When the poems were published in January 1913, "imagism" had in effect been born. The new "movement" (which as yet consisted only of H. D., Pound, Aldington, and a few others) rested on a few simple principles, including the following:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. (qtd. in Robinson 27)

In 1914 Pound edited a collection of poems (including some by H. D.) titled *Des Imagistes*; Aldington, meanwhile, in that same year became assistant editor of a journal called the *Egoist*, thus providing yet another platform for their new ideas and poems. "Imagism" immediately excited great interest, including the interest of the wealthy American poet Amy Lowell, who soon pronounced herself an imagist and who toured London to meet H. D. and arrange for the publication of a series of further imagist anthologies. Pound, annoyed by this transition to "Amygism," quickly lost interest (instead he took up his next new thing, "Vorticism"). Never, however, did he break his connection with H. D.; nor did she ever lose touch with him; they remained friends for the rest of their lives. Even after Pound married Dorothy Shakespeare in 1914, he and H. D. continued to be literary comrades, although increasingly her career and status became independent of his.

The most important event of 1914, of course, was neither Pound's marriage nor H. D.'s growing

fame in literary circles as a pioneering imagist but was rather the outbreak of World War I in August. The war affected everyone, and its impact was eventually felt by H. D. in numerous negative ways. Its first immediate impact was felt in 1916, when Aldington joined the army and was thus forced to spend increasing time away from his wife. Their marriage had initially been happy (despite the loss of a child in a miscarriage in 1915), and their literary fortunes had prospered in the first years of the war: H. D.'s work was being included in anthologies, and in 1916 she published her first independent book (*Sea Garden*—a collection of poems) as well as translations from Euripides' ancient play *Iphigeneia in Aulis*. In 1917 her relations with the important (and already married) English writer D. H. Lawrence, whom she had met several years earlier, became literally closer: He and his wife took up residence in H. D.'s apartment, and indeed Robinson argues that he and H. D. had a life-altering affair. Whether or not they did, it does seem clear that in 1917 Aldington became involved with a woman named Dorothy ("Arabella") Yorke, and that by 1918 H. D. had herself been involved with several other men, including John Cournos and Cecil Gray. When she became pregnant that year, Aldington realized that the child was not his. Robinson suggests that the father was Lawrence; Guest suggests that it was Gray; Aldington, in any case, was sure he had not been involved. Despite her husband's own affair(s), H. D. was thus in a difficult position, especially legally—particularly if she tried to attribute paternity to Aldington. He and H. D. separated in 1919, not long after the birth of the child (named Perdita), but they did not officially divorce until nearly 20 years later. Within a few months of the end of the war, then, H. D. had become an essentially single mother: She was separated from her husband and cut off from the father of her child (whose precise identity she never revealed). To make matters worse, her favorite brother had been killed in the final year of the war, and her father died in 1919. Furthermore, H. D. herself had been deathly ill during the final stages of her pregnancy. Little wonder, then, that she found this period so depressing and reflected on it in many of her later writings.

All was not entirely grim, however. In 1918 she had been approached by a young Englishwoman named Winifred Ellerman, who had read H. D.'s first book and had fallen in love with the poems and (by extension) with the poet. Ellerman, as it happened, was the heiress of one of the greatest fortunes in Britain; she could thus afford to be extremely generous not only to H. D. but also to numerous other artists and causes. Calling herself *Bryher* to assert her independence of her family, she now took an almost obsessive interest in H. D. She helped nurse H. D. back to health, helped begin to raise Perdita, and in general became H. D.'s constant companion (and sometime-lover) for the rest of the poet's life. Although the relationship was often strained, and although H. D. felt that Bryher's influence was frequently controlling, the two women remained extremely close from this point forward (often traveling together around Europe, to the Mideast, and to the United States), even though Bryher married in 1921 and again in 1927. H. D., meanwhile, continued to write: *Hymen* (a collection of poems) appeared in 1921; *Helidora and Other Poems* was published in 1924; and in 1925 an important New York press issued the *Collected Poems of H. D. Palimpsest* (a novel) was published in 1926, followed by *Hippolytus Temporizes* (a play) in 1927, *Hedylus* (a novel) in 1928, *Red Roses for Bronze* (a collection of poems) in 1929, *Kora and Ka* (a novel) in 1934, and *The Usual Star* (a novel), also in 1934. Interestingly enough, in 1930 both H. D. and Bryher had also appeared as actresses in a film (*Borderline*) they had helped produce. Throughout the 1920s, then, and into the 1930s, H. D. had been prolifically creative.

She had also, however, been psychologically troubled, and so in 1933 and again in 1934 she met for extended analysis in Vienna with Sigmund Freud—sessions she later described in her *Tribute to Freud* (published in 1956). Although the famous psychiatrist and his patient did not always see eye to eye, the sessions apparently helped her not only make sense of her troubled past but also prepare for an eventually productive future. She published *The Hedgehog* (children's fiction) in 1936 and a translation of Euripides' *Ion* in 1937. She was also at work

on a novel and autobiography (not published until much later), but in general the late 1930s was a fallow period. She and Aldington finally divorced in 1938, and for several years little was heard from H. D. as a published author. The outbreak of World War II in 1939, however, would soon inspire a new wave of creativity. She lived in London during the worst of the bombings and deprivations, and in response to the destruction (but also the heroism) she witnessed all around her, she began writing an important series of poems. Before the war had even ended (in 1945), she began publishing again. *What Do I Love?* (a collection of poems) appeared in 1944, followed by the significant poetic trilogy *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946). She also issued a collection of poems and prose titled *By Avon River* in 1949. Clearly the fallow period had ended; H. D. had found her voice once more, and although her health was in decline during the 1950s, she managed to write her epic poem *Helen in Egypt* between 1951 and 1956 and witnessed the publication of her *Selected Poems* in 1957. In 1960 her autobiographical novel *Bid Me to Live* appeared, and in that same year she received the highly prestigious Award of Merit Medal for Poetry from the American Academy of Arts of Letters—the first woman to receive it. She continued to work on other projects, but the last major publication to occur in her lifetime was the appearance of *Helen in Egypt* in 1961, which was printed shortly before she died on September 27.

In the years since her death, many previously unpublished works by H. D. have appeared in print, including several novels and memoirs, collections of letters, and various poems. Her *Collected Poems, 1912–1944* was issued in 1983, and much material (including diaries, correspondence, and notebooks) remains in scattered archives. Although interest in H. D. had waned somewhat during the 1950s and 1960s, in the past several decades she has been the subject of intense attention. Despite the fact that the full range and quality of her work remain to be explored and assessed, she certainly produced some of the most memorable and accomplished poetry of her time.

“Oread” (1914, 1924)

The title of this work, which refers to the mythical wood nymphs of ancient Greece, implies that such a creature is the speaker of the poem. Using language associated with the forests she knows so well, she summons the sea to rise up and fall down onto the surrounding rocks, covering the land—and presumably the nymphs as well—with its wetness.

This brief lyric, which is one of the most famous H. D. ever composed, is typical of her writing (and especially of her early imagist style) in numerous ways. The phrasing is clear and simple; no unusual words (except perhaps the title) are used; most of the words (except three) consist of single syllables. In short, nothing about the language itself makes this poem difficult to understand, although the imagery is often striking, especially the metaphorical comparison (in line 2) of ocean waves to “pointed pines.” It would be natural, of course, for an oread, so closely associated with the land and vegetation, to imagine the sea as a kind of forest, and so the metaphors of lines 2, 3, and 6 perfectly fit the character of the presumed speaker. They do not, however, seem arbitrary or merely idiosyncratic: Once we hear them, the comparisons make sense. Large waves—in their height and sharpness—*can* resemble “pointed pines”; vast green forests, seen from above, *can* resemble “pools of fir” (l. 7). The effectiveness of the poem depends, then, on imagery that seems both initially surprising and ultimately apt. As does any great writer, H. D. here achieves the so-called shock of recognition, in which we are made to think in ways we have not thought before and then instantly conclude that these thoughts are convincing.

The poem begins with an emphatic verb, and emphatic verbs occupy the opening positions of five of the work's six lines. This brief lyric thus brims with energy, and the language seems alive in numerous ways. The sea is addressed—or, rather, it is summoned and invoked—as if it were a living thing, and the energy implied by the verbs is matched by the urgent tone of the speaker's commanding and/or imploring voice. The first four verbs—*Whirl*, *whirl*, *splash*, and *hurl*—all imply

rapid, powerful movement, while the final verb (*cover*) suggests a calm, comprehensive stasis. The speaker at first seems as excited as the movements she attempts to summon; in the final line, however, she seems to surrender to a desire for rest. The poem (with its “pointed pines”) has an almost sexual rhythm of mounting to climax and then subsiding into relaxation: The first few lines imply surging waves, but the last line stresses the “pools” of undisturbed water. In a few brief lines, H. D. uses many vivid sound effects to bring the poem to life. These include anaphora (repeated opening words, as in the “Whirl” / “whirl” of lines 1–2), internal rhyme (as in the echo of “whirl” and “hurl” in lines 2 and 4), end rhyme (as in the repeated “pines” in lines 2–3), alliteration (the repetition of consonant sounds, as in the “pointed pines” of line 2), and even onomatopoeia (where the sound of the word imitates the thing described, as in the “splash” of line 3). The oread’s excitement matches the energy of the sea and inspires excitement in H. D.’s readers, and the poem ends (in expert imagist fashion) with one last striking picture that sticks in the mind. The poet offers no comment, no interpretation, no assessment; the images and words speak for themselves and leave a quick, crisp impression.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this “imagist” lyric with Ezra Pound’s poem “In a Station of the Metro.” How are the works similar in diction, imagery, purpose, and structure? How do they differ in tone, rhythm, final effects, and points of view?
2. Carl Sandburg’s poem “Grass” uses many of the same techniques as H. D.’s “Oread,” including direct address, repeated words, and a heavy emphasis on verbs. Nevertheless, how do the poems differ in subject, stance, mood, and overall effect?

“Leda” (1919, 1921)

The title of this brief poem alludes to the name of the woman who, in Greek mythology, was raped by Zeus (the king of the gods), who had transformed

himself into a swan to accomplish that very purpose. The present poem, however, depicts the swan in lovely, alluring language and describes Leda as a “gold day-lily,” while the sexual encounter of swan and symbolic flower seems anything but violent. Instead it seems rapturous, blissful, and beautiful.

The poem opens with calm, peaceful imagery that immediately sets the tone for the rest of the work; the speaker describes a place “Where the slow river / meets the tide” (ll. 1–2). The drawn-out “long *o*” sound of *slow* mimics the relaxed movement of the river, while the depiction of the freshwater river meeting (and blending with) the gently rising saltwater sea foreshadows the later encounter of other opposites (swan and flower, god and mortal). The language of the poem is typical of H. D.’s best work: It is simple, clear, colorful, and sensuous, but it is also full of restraint, understatement, and subtlety. This poem could easily have been melodramatic or sentimental; the fact that instead it is simultaneously so gentle, so vivid, and so deeply but delicately erotic is a tribute to H. D.’s art. Her famous commitment to *imagism*—to quick, sharp pictures; brief but flowing lines; and crisp but suggestive diction—is everywhere evident in this poem, while she also achieves many rich musical effects, especially by using such techniques as assonance, repeated words and phrases, and even an occasional rhyme. Thus “beak” in line 4 is echoed through assonance by “feet” in line 7, while “feet” itself is then rhymed by “heat” in line 9. Likewise, “breast” in line 13 is rhymed by “crest” in line 15, while “lifting” in 16 is echoed by “drifts” in line 19. None of these effects, however, is clumsy or obtrusive. H. D. had a sure ear and is a master of sound effects.

The structure of the poem is also subtle: Line lengths are unpredictable (ranging anywhere from just two syllables to eight), and the four stanzas are likewise of uneven shapes, consisting (respectively) of seven, eight, seven, and then finally 11 lines. Yet the structure never seems erratic, arbitrary, or contrived; the line breaks often coincide with units of sense: New lines often begin with prepositions (such as *of*, *to*, *among*, *beneath*, and *through* [ll. 6, 9, 10, 17, 20, 27, 32, 31, 33]), conjunctions

(such as *and* and *where* [ll. 1, 4, 5, 14, 19, 28], and verbs [ll. 2, 8, 12, 18, 29]). The poem unfolds with a natural rhythm, reflecting the cadences of a real speaking voice. Often the line rhythms are conventionally iambic (with each unaccented syllable followed by an accented one, as in lines 4–5, 7, 10, 14–15, 19–25, 27, 30), but these “regularly stressed” lines thereby help emphasize any departures from regularity. Often, for instance, H. D. ends lines by jamming two heavily accented syllables together, followed by an unaccented one, as in such phrases as “slow river” (l. 1), “deep purple” (l. 8), or “slow lifting” (l. 16); sometimes she places heavily accented, single-syllable verbs as the first words of her lines (as in lines 2 and 18); and occasionally almost every word in a line seems equally stressed (as in line 3, “a red swan lifts red wings,” with its wonderfully balanced syntax). The poem is brimming with vivid adjective-noun combinations (such as *slow river*, *red swan*, *red wings*, *darker beak*, *purple down*, and *coral feet*—all from just the first stanza [ll. 1–7]). The contrasts and combinations of colors are striking and memorable, making the poem a kaleidoscope of reds, purples, golds, and yellows. H. D. subtly implies that the poem is set at sunset (l. 11) on a lazy summer day, and the entire pace of the poem—including the final understated (and partly symbolic) sexual encounter—is unhurried. Although the idea of a swan copulating with a woman (or even a lily!) seems bizarre by modern standards, nothing in this poem seems unnatural. The eroticism is always understated. The images of waters, birds, flowers, and sedge-covered landscape (l. 28), along with the imagery of gently juxtaposed light and darkness and the sensation of comforting warmth during summer dusk, all combine to create a sense of almost idyllic peace and beauty. If the encounter between Zeus and Leda has often been depicted as a rape, here it seems a mutually satisfying consummation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss some of the sound effects used in this poem. Where and how (for instance) does H. D. use alliteration (repetition of consonants) for emphasis? Why is the phrase “old deep” (l. 26) so heavily accented? How is the rhythm of the very final line effective? How are assonance and alliteration combined in line 30? How is the use of one long word and two short words in that line effective?
2. Compare and contrast this work with WALLACE STEVENS’s poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” How are the poems similar yet different in subject matter? How do they resemble yet differ from one another in form and technique? How do the poems differ in purpose, tone, and final effect?

“At Baia” (1921)

The title of this poem alludes to an ancient Roman resort town; perhaps, then, the poem’s speaker (who seems to be a woman) is a long-dead resident of that town who is addressing a beloved person (whether male or female is unclear) of the same city and era. Their relationship seems to have been loving but not sexual, and the woman wonders why, in her dreams, the other person has never at least presented her with orchids or expressed love explicitly in a note.

As many of H. D.’s poems do, this one combines clear language and vivid images with an air of vague mystery. We cannot be precisely sure who is speaking or to whom, what the nature of their relationship is, what exactly is the message or purpose of the address, or how we are meant to respond to the communication. The poem alludes twice to dreams (ll. 2, 17), and the work itself has the kind of sharp-but-hazy, precise-but-indefinite quality of a dream or reverie. The odd, paradoxical nature of the phrasing is epitomized by the speaker’s yearning for something that is both “lovely” and “perilous” (l. 3), and the dreamlike atmosphere of the poem is also exemplified by the rambling, repetitive sentence structure of the second stanza. That stanza—with its reference to the “fragile” hands of the anonymous, mysterious beloved (l. 14)—raises the strong possibility that the speaker is addressing another woman. If so, this might account for the repeated use of the word *perilous* in the speaker’s

descriptions of the imagined orchids (ll. 3, 20). Openly lesbian relationships, however they were viewed in classical Rome, were still regarded with widespread distrust and disapproval in H. D.'s day; if the relationship imagined in this poem is indeed tinged with lesbian desire, that might help explain the sexual restraint or inhibitions to which the speaker alludes. The imagined lover, after all, has so far left the speaker's "throat unknissed" (l. 8); their hands have never touched (ll. 9–10); and at the very end of the poem we are reminded explicitly that so far there has been "no kiss, / no touch" (ll. 28–29). The poem is energized, then, by erotic yearnings that have been suppressed, denied, sublimated, or postponed; appropriately, the work is full of richly sensuous details, including the "blue veins" of the speaker's "throat" (ll. 7–8), the fragile "hands" of the beloved drifting "so carefully" over "the orchid heads" and "gently" touching "the fragile flower stuff" (ll. 11–16), and the repeated image of "orchids, piled in a great sheath"—a word that itself contains hints of peril because of its usual associations with swords (ll. 4, 21). The mysterious tone of the poem is enhanced by the fact that we never hear from the beloved in the beloved's own direct words; everything is presented from the speaker's point of view, even the imagined (but never-sent) notes with which the poem concludes. The poem, then, has a dreamlike focus on a single consciousness (the speaker's); all thoughts, feelings, and facts are filtered through her perspective; and if in the end we know little about the actual relationship, we do know much about the speaker's own yearnings and frustrations.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Ezra Pound's poem "A Virginal." In particular, discuss such matters as setting, imagery, tone, and theme. How are the works different in their treatment of physical contact? How are they similar in their use of personal address? How are they distinct in the forms they employ?
2. Do some historical research to determine how, in fact, lesbianism was viewed in ancient Rome. How was it regarded in H. D.'s day? How might

the facts of H. D.'s own life be relevant to the present work? Is there any reason to think that the beloved in this poem is not a woman? Why should we assume that the speaker of the poem is female?

"Helen" (1924)

Helen was the wife of the ancient Spartan king Menelaus; her adulterous affair with Paris, a prince of Troy who took her back to his city, unleashed the bloody Trojan War described in Homer's great epic *The Iliad*. For 10 long years the Greeks battled Trojans outside the walls of Troy, seeking to reclaim Helen and thus avenge her husband. This poem describes the hatred the Greeks feel for Helen, the cause of so much bloodshed.

The poem begins with a startling juxtaposition of hatred and beauty. The brief opening line, which describes the bitter contempt the Greeks feel for Helen, consists of three heavily accented monosyllables. Every word is emphatic, and H. D. effectively stresses the verb ("hates") by putting it last in the line. The next line, however, is longer and its rhythm is more relaxed; it emphasizes not the passionate emotion of the Greeks but the "still" (i.e., quiet, calm) beauty of Helen. The opening lines, then, pit raw emotion against impassive beauty, and H. D. stresses the ironic juxtaposition through the near-rhyme of "hates" and "face." The rest of stanza 1 is devoted to elaborating on Helen's physical loveliness and her cool, unexcited passivity; while the Greeks burn with hatred, she merely "stands" (l. 4), literally and figuratively unmoved, protected either by the Trojans (during the war) or by her status as Menelaus's wife and reclaimed prize (after the conflict ends).

The second stanza seems at first simply to repeat the ideas contained in the first, but (as is usual with H. D.'s work) the repetition involves variation. Now all Greece not only "hates" Helen but "reviles" her (l. 2). Hatred can be an unexpressed feeling, but to *revile* means to abuse in language, to curse or condemn openly in words. Yet the second stanza is also varied in other ways as well. Helen's face, for

example, is now described not merely as “white” but as “wan” (ll. 7, 9), a word implying sickly weakness or pallor. Although Helen “smiles” (l. 7—in an ironic rhyme with *reviles*), perhaps she is not entirely impervious to the hatred of the Greeks: Perhaps her “wan” color contradicts her “smiles,” and perhaps it suggests fear, a guilty conscience, or maybe both. In any case, the Greeks hate her even more when they see her face lose its color, either because they think her reaction shows insufficient regret for the suffering she has caused, or because they associate the whiteness with the beauty that led to so much bloodshed. Paradoxically, the very loveliness and/or vulnerability of Helen makes the Greeks feel all the more contempt for her, especially when they remember “past enchantments / and past ills” caused by her beauty (ll. 10–11). Or perhaps it is Helen herself who does such “remembering” (l. 10): The syntax of the poem permits either interpretation and thus exemplifies the complexity that often lies beneath the apparent simplicity of H. D.’s phrasing.

Finally, in the concluding stanza, it is the Greeks rather than Helen who seem rigid and static: They are emotionally “unmoved” either by her delicate beauty, by her status as the daughter of Zeus, or by her varied associations with the emotion of “love” (l. 13). They might indeed be moved to “love . . . the maid” (a word ironically associated with unmarried virginity and innocence; l. 16), but only—in one last paradox—“if she were laid, / white ash amid funereal cypresses” (ll. 17–18). Only (in other words) if Helen were dead and cremated (as so many Greek and Trojan soldiers died and were burned on funeral pyres) could the Greeks love her at all. This is love with a literal vengeance, and in the closing lines of the poem H. D. achieves a powerful sense of ultimate irony as well as a stunningly vivid final image. Only if the beautiful white skin of Helen’s body became the “white ash” of her charred flesh could the Greeks be happy.

As so often in her poems, H. D. here shows consummate restraint. She does not comment or interpret; she merely describes. We see both the beauty of Helen and the hatred of the Greeks; H. D. does not take sides, and she resists any impulse toward

melodrama or sentimentality. She communicates through images and implication, not through moralizing statement. Helen is not condemned, but neither are the Greeks. Their hatred is understandable even as her beauty remains undeniable.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Helen is mentioned or depicted in many of H. D.’s writings, particularly in her late long poem *Helen in Egypt*. Compare and contrast her depiction in the present poem with her depiction elsewhere; what similarities or differences do you see? Do some research into H. D.’s life; why did she find Helen such an intriguing figure?
2. Do some reading about H. D.’s writing, being careful to compile a list of her typical themes and her characteristic techniques and traits of style. Having assembled such a list, discuss how the present poem is a representative work by H. D. How is it typical in its setting, its phrasing, its form, and its subject matter?

The Walls Do Not Fall (1944)

Inspired by the destruction visited upon London by German bombs during World War II (and evoked also by the destructiveness of that war, and all wars, in general), this poem marvels at the endurance of the human spirit, even as it also wonders about the meaning and purpose of human life. The speaker explicitly and implicitly compares current events to historical happenings in past civilizations (especially events in ancient Egypt). The speaker indicts modern corruption, celebrates ancient and enduring wisdom (which transcends particular cultures and religions), and ends by anticipating the possibility that humanity may someday “*reach haven, / heaven*” (ll. 877–878).

In this splendidly rich work, H. D. combines a variety of tones and stances in an attempt to do justice to the complex experiences she has witnessed and the complicated feelings these evoke. Sometimes the poem is vividly descriptive in depicting the ruins of wrought by war (as when the speaker,

wandering through the devastation left by bomb blasts, describes “another sliced wall / where poor utensils show / like rare objects in a museum” [ll. 28–30]). Sometimes the tone is horrific, as when the speaker describes flesh “melted away, / the heart burnt out, dead ember, / tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered” (ll. 46–48). Sometimes the tone is satirical, as when she attempts to explain the appeal of the evil that resulted in the war (“I’ll promised adventure, / Good was smug and fat” [ll. 54–55]). Sometimes the speaker offers practical advice for survival in a hard and dangerous world (“be firm in your own small, static, limited // orbit and the shark-jaws / of outer circumstance // will spit you forth” [ll. 125–128]). The tone alternates between humility and prophetic self-confidence, between confusion and uncertainty, on the one hand, and visionary boldness, on the other. The speaker is sometimes ecstatic, sometimes weary and withdrawn; sometimes the message is inspired and inspiring, while at other times it is caustic and sardonic. She speaks as the latest in a long line of prophets, summoning readers to value old wisdom that is never out of date, but she also condemns narrowness of all sorts, including the narrowness not only of dogmatic religious bigots (who reject any traditions but their own) but also of the modern utilitarians who dismiss the value of poets and prophets, with their spiritual visions and complex language. “[I]f you do not even understand what words say,” the speaker asks at one point, “how can you expect to pass judgement / on what words conceal?” (ll. 209–211).

The Walls Do Not Fall, in other words, is epic in its range of tones and subjects, and it is therefore not surprising that H. D. later extended the piece by adding two additional sections (*Tribute to the Angels* [1945] and *The Flowering of the Rod* [1946]) to form a larger work eventually published as *Trilogy* (1973). Yet all three collections, with their brief, crisp lines, their frequently meditative moments; their constant shuttling between description and direct address; and their absence of continuous narrative, seem more lyric than epic, and indeed part of the effectiveness of all three works is that they so often achieve the heightened movement

of inspired songs. It is in their detailed phrasing, not in their general messages or meanings, that the poems attain their true value; a less talented poet could have expressed the same ideas in language that lacked all life. It is finally in the specific words, sounds, and rhythms of these poems that H. D. shows her genius and makes her views compelling. Without her talent for phrasing, the poems would seem merely puffed-up New Age pomposities. It is, ultimately, in the individual words that the poems succeed or fail.

Take, for instance, a passage from early in *The Walls Do Not Fall*. “Pompeii” (the speaker declares) “has nothing to teach us” (l. 31). Immediately, in a single line, the speaker thereby juxtaposes the past and the present (a common technique employed everywhere in this work): A great disaster of the ancient world highlights the disaster of the present, just as throughout the poem the past is used to situate current happenings into a larger, broader perspective. Moreover, by using the word *us*, the speaker makes common cause with her readers; the disasters she describes are disasters she and her readers have experienced—and endured—together (if only in our readerly imaginations). The speaker thus becomes our representative, our voice. She speaks not only *to* us but *for* us, and by adopting this role, she increases the likelihood that we will listen sympathetically when, later, her tone becomes more challenging, more critical, more strangely prophetic. For the time being, though, we are enchanted simply by the power of her language, as when she next declares, “we know crack of volcanic fissure, / slow flow of terrible lava, // pressure on heart, lungs, the brain / about to burst its brittle case” (ll. 32–35). The subtle, internal rhyming of *know*, *slow*, and *flow*; the onomatopoeic effect of “crack” and “burst” (in which the sound of the word imitates the thing described); the clotted, heavy assonance of “slow flow” (in which the long *o* sounds are strongly emphasized both by their initial positions in the line and by the use of a spondee, or double accent); the combined alliteration of *bs*, *ts*, and *ss* in the phrase “about to burst its brittle”—all these techniques, and many others used elsewhere in the work, exemplify the skill

- of writing she subsequently did? How was her thinking similar to Freud's? How was it different? How are the similarities and differences reflected in her poems?
5. How are women generally depicted in the writings of H. D.? Are there any consistent patterns? Are women presented differently in the poems than in the prose? How may H. D.'s own life have influenced the ways she presents women?
 6. Read one or more of H. D.'s novels and then compare her work in that genre to her work as a poet. Why is she remembered mainly as a poet rather than as a novelist? Is she equally effective in using both forms? What similarities or differences exist between the styles, themes, and techniques of her novels and her poems?
 7. Compare and contrast some of H. D.'s poems with some poems by Emily Dickinson. How do their works compare in style, structure, tone, and technique? In what ways can H. D. be seen as an "heir" of Dickinson? Is there any evidence that she even knew of and/or responded to Dickinson's works?
 8. Track down one of H. D.'s translations of a classical work, and then find at least one other translation of that same work (preferably use a fairly "literal" translation, such as the ones in the Loeb Classical Library). Compare and contrast H. D.'s rendering with the more literal translation. What similarities or differences do you see? What choices did H. D. make in her renderings? Are her choices effective?
 9. Read some of H. D.'s poems and then read some of the "poems" contained in GERTRUDE STEIN'S *Tender Buttons*. How do both writers use such techniques as striking images, repeated phrases, simple diction, and a variety of sound effects? Do you find one writer more appealing than the other? If so, why? Is there any evidence that they knew (or knew of) each other and/or were influenced by one another?
 10. Read WALLACE STEVENS's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Does it remind you of H. D.'s work in any way(s)? If so, how? (Be specific: Discuss such matters as structure, style, and techniques.) How and why might Stevens's poem be considered an imagist work? Is there any evidence concerning how the two poets felt about each other's writings?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *H. D.: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1989.
- Burnett, Gary. *H. D. between Image and Epic: The Mysteries of Her Poetics*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989.
- Dodd, Elizabeth. *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H. D., Louis Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *H. D.: The Career of That Struggle*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.'s Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Guest, Barbara. *Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and Her World*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984.
- H. D. *Collected Poems, 1912-1944*. Edited by Louis L. Martz. New York: New Directions, 1983.
- . *Helen in Egypt*. New York: Grove, 1961.
- . *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H. D.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.
- Hernandez, H. H. D. Home Page. Available online. URL: <http://www.imagists.org/hd/index.html>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Quinn, Vincent. *Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)*. New York: Twayne, 1967.
- Robinson, Janice S. *H. D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.
- Robert C. Evans



ERNEST HEMINGWAY (1899–1961)

For a true writer each book should be a new beginning where he tries again for something that is beyond attainment. He should always try for something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed. Then sometimes, with great luck, he will succeed.

(Nobel Prize speech)

Ernest Hemingway's importance in the history of American (and, indeed, world) literature is difficult to challenge. Even readers who do not especially admire his subjects or style must concede his enormous influence. His ideals of clarity, concision, understatement, and simplicity are widely considered hallmarks of effective writing, while the themes he repeatedly explored—such as the ways people demonstrate “grace under pressure”; or the ways they discharge their responsibilities, face their fears, or master some skill; or the ways they cope with pervasive loneliness, uncommon love, widespread despair, frequent danger, and inevitable death—are never likely to lose their interest. Finally, Hemingway will remain significant simply as a highly representative figure of his era. He voiced the ideals, aspirations, frustrations, and disappointments of millions of his contemporaries; among serious writers, he became one of the most popular and iconic figures of his time. He became associated not only with distinctive themes and a distinctive style but also with a distinctive approach to living.

Hemingway's own life began on July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, a comfortable suburb of Chicago, where his father, Clarence, was a respected doctor and a lover of the great outdoors and where his mother, Grace, was a somewhat domineering wife. Grace was a crucial influence on her son's life—an influence he later often despised—and

there was little doubt in anyone's mind that she was the stronger willed of the two parents. Because she liked the idea of having twins, for instance, she often dressed young Ernest in the same girl-ish clothes as his older sister, and she held the sister back from school a year so that she and Ernest could begin first grade together. Ernest, however, enjoyed many of the normal pleasures of American boyhood, thanks especially to the influence of his father, who encouraged his son's interest in hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, boating, and athletics. Many of the boy's happiest days were spent on long vacations at the family's cottage on Walloon Lake in Michigan, where he could indulge his interest in nature to his heart's content. Nevertheless, back in Oak Park, he did well in school, receiving a fine literary education while pursuing his growing interest in authorship of all sorts, including writing for the school newspaper and composing stories for the literary magazine. By the time he graduated from high school in 1917, his interest in (and talent for) writing was strong enough to win him a job as a cub reporter for the highly distinguished Kansas City *Star*. He tackled the job with typical energy and enthusiasm, readily embracing the *Star's* emphasis on short sentences, vigorous phrasing, clear diction, and plain syntax. He later claimed that these rules were the best he had ever encountered as a writer. He worked at the *Star* from October 1917 until the following April.

By this time, of course, the United States had entered World War I, and many young men were joining the military. When Hemingway was rejected because of his poor eyesight, he joined a Red Cross ambulance unit assigned to service in Italy. Bored with such duty (which was too far from the front), he volunteered for canteen service to be closer to the action. He discovered just how close he was when, on July 8, 1918, a large incoming shell peppered shrapnel into his legs, which were also hit by machine-gun fire. Hemingway nevertheless behaved heroically, assisting another injured man, but the physical and psychological aftereffects of the experience persisted for years. While recovering in Milan, the 19-year-old Ernest met and fell in love with a beautiful 26-year-old nurse named Agnes von Kurowsky, with whom he became infatuated. When he returned to the United States in January 1919, he assumed that Agnes would soon follow and that they would marry, but within a couple of months she wrote to say that she had fallen in love with someone else—a development that first depressed Hemingway and then made him angry. Eventually, though, he returned to his first love (writing), composing stories and hoping to have them published. A chance encounter with the wealthy mother of a handicapped son who was a year younger than Hemingway led to a job in Toronto, Canada, where Ernest would be the boy's companion and where he soon found additional employment as a reporter for the *Toronto Star*. When this job ended, however, he was soon living back at the family's cottage on Walloon Lake, where he spent much time fishing and enjoying himself—much to the frustration of his mother, who considered him disrespectful and unambitious. Not long after his 21st birthday, therefore, she handed him a note telling him to leave the cottage and not to return until he had learned to behave with greater maturity.

Ironically, this expulsion became a positive turning point. He moved to Chicago and lived with friends while looking for work, and although he soon found a job (with a commercial magazine), the most important development was his involve-

ment in the thriving Chicago literary scene, where he made the acquaintance of such rising talents as CARL SANDBURG and SHERWOOD ANDERSON. Anderson, in particular, was a beneficial contact; genuinely impressed with Hemingway's talent and potential, he did much to promote the younger man's career. He not only encouraged editors to print Hemingway's work but also advised Hemingway himself to go to Paris, where Anderson had a number of influential friends. Besides, Paris was, at that time, the center of an international literary renaissance. Meanwhile, in Chicago Hemingway had also met and fallen in love with Hadley Richardson, who was several years his senior and was from a comfortable family in St. Louis. They married on September 3, 1921, and her sizable trust fund meant that their financial condition was far from desperate. Nevertheless, he took a part-time job with the *Toronto Star*, intending to write stories about Europe, and in December they set off for Paris. Armed with generous letters of introduction from Anderson, Hemingway soon got to know many of the most notable American literary figures living in the French capital, including GERTRUDE STEIN, EZRA POUND, and Sylvia Beach (the owner of a splendid little bookstore visited by many of the most important modern writers, including James Joyce, whom Hemingway also met). With his keen intelligence, lively personality, and total devotion to writing, Hemingway quickly made a positive impression (at least at first), becoming particularly close to Stein, whose stylistic experiments he admired and emulated. Meanwhile, Pound—not only a talented poet but also an extremely energetic impresario—soon became another one of Hemingway's champions, and while Hemingway covered big stories for the *Toronto Star*, he also tried to find time for his own creative writing. Unfortunately, many of his early manuscripts were stolen when Hadley briefly left them unattended in a suitcase on a train.

This theft helps to account for the slim pickings in Hemingway's first published book—the revealingly titled *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, printed in 1923 by a newly founded avant-garde

press. This thin book was soon followed in 1924 by another short collection, titled (with fashionably lowercase letters) *in our time*. Hemingway was not (at this time) trying to make money with his creative writing; he was trying to win critical attention and respect, and that was something he had certainly begun to do. Admirers of serious literature quickly recognized that his was a new and distinctive voice—a voice that emphasized crisp, curt sentences; plenty of vernacular dialogue; and a hard-boiled, no-nonsense approach to any subject it discussed. Hemingway was giving birth to one of the most influential styles in the history of literature. Meanwhile, on October 10, 1923, Hadley gave birth to their first child—a son named John. Although Hemingway had had some qualms about becoming a father, neither marriage nor parenthood slowed him down much. By 1924 he had been named associate editor of the *transatlantic review*, and by 1925 he had made the acquaintance (and won the friendship) of such rising literary figures as F. SCOTT FITZGERALD and Archibald MacLeish. He had also met an Englishwoman named Duff Twysden (who sexually excited Hemingway and many others), and he had met as well an American named Pauline Pfeiffer, who became a friend of his wife and would soon become her replacement. In the meantime, however, 1925 also saw the U.S. publication, by Boni and Liveright, a major press, of *In Our Time* (capital letters this time), which reprinted most of the earlier *in our time*, plus much else besides. It was Hemingway's first major book and won him much admiring attention.

Another reason 1925 was important was that it was the year when Hemingway, while visiting Spain (where he was quickly developing a passionate interest in bullfighting), gathered much material for the book that would become his first significant novel—*The Sun Also Rises*. He had finished the manuscript by the fall, by which time the prestigious Scribner publishing house had expressed a strong interest. Hemingway, however, was under contract to Boni and Liveright, which also published Sherwood Anderson, who was their prime author. Therefore, Hemingway, to free himself from the contract (and to take a mocking jab at

Anderson, whom he now viewed as a competitor), quickly dashed off *The Torrents of Spring*, a novel parodying Anderson's style. Boni and Liveright, of course, refused to publish it, and so in 1926 it was brought out by Scribner, which also, that October, issued *The Sun Also Rises*. To salve his conscience, Hemingway assigned the royalties to Hadley, whom he nonetheless divorced in January 1927, marrying Pauline Pfeiffer in May. Along with his new wife he gained new-found fame, for *The Sun Also Rises* was instantly recognized as a pathbreaking book. In a few years, then, Hemingway had gone from obscurity to widespread recognition. The publication of his collection of stories titled *Men without Women* in 1927 only confirmed his growing prominence.

In 1928 Hemingway began work on a new novel—*A Farewell to Arms*—that would soon make him even more popular with critics and the public alike. By this time he had moved to Key West, Florida, where he wrote in the mornings, fished in the afternoons, and otherwise spent his time in bars. On June 28, Pauline gave birth to Hemingway's second son (Patrick), but this good news was offset by the end of the year, when Hemingway learned that his father, ailing physically and financially, had shot and killed himself on December 6. The younger Hemingway regarded the suicide as cowardly (although later he would be better able to understand it). In any case, by 1929, having finished his novel, he was back in Europe. The book was published and sold well, even after the stock market crashed in October, inaugurating the economic catastrophe soon known as the Great Depression. Hemingway, however, was living relatively well; he was back in Key West, continuing to pursue his interest in deep-sea fishing and now also planning to go on safari in Africa. He also, however, spent time on a ranch in Wyoming (while writing a book about bullfighting, published in 1932 as *Death in the Afternoon*), and in 1931 Pauline gave birth to his third son, Gregory. A book of short stories titled *Winner Take Nothing* appeared in 1933, the same year Hemingway and Pauline also returned to Europe and then finally made good on their long-delayed plans to go on an African safari. This trip provided Hemingway with raw material for

some fine stories, but it also, as usual, drew out his fierce competitive streak, both toward Pauline and toward their guide.

Back in the United States in 1934, Hemingway, having ordered a custom-designed yacht and christened it the *Pilar*, now devoted himself even more enthusiastically to deep-sea fishing. He also, however, was at work on a new book, published in 1935 as *Green Hills of Africa*, which was followed in 1936 by such famous stories with African settings as “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” and “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” Yet 1936 was important for other reasons as well: Civil war had broken out in Spain, a country Hemingway loved, and Hemingway had met a talented journalist named Martha Gelhorn, who was attractive, self-confident, and at least as interested in the Spanish war as he was. By 1937 Gelhorn and Hemingway were in Spain together, covering the war and having a passionate affair. In the same year he published a novel titled *To Have and Have Not*, which was followed in 1938 by a collection of short fiction (which included a play) titled *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories*. By 1939 he was living in Cuba with Martha, was awaiting a divorce from Pauline, and was hard at work on a massive new novel set during the Spanish civil war: *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. When the book appeared in 1940, it was an instant and massive best seller and was also a huge critical success. After he divorced Pauline, his marriage to Martha occurred on November 21, but all was far from bright. By this time the Second World War—a conflict he had foreseen and warned against—had been under way for more than a year, and it was obvious to nearly everyone that the United States would soon be dragged into the fight.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the conflict became truly global. For a time, Hemingway’s contributions to the war effort consisted mainly of cruising the Caribbean on board the *Pilar*, ostensibly searching for German submarines, which he planned to attack with bazookas and bombs. Martha, however, suspected that his main interest was still fishing; the “sub-hunting” missions allowed him to escape wartime

rationing of gasoline. As strains began to appear in their marriage, she convinced Hemingway to go with her to Europe in 1944 as a war correspondent. Because of his prominence, he arrived before she did—giving him enough time to meet and become enamored with Mary Walsh (a reporter for *Time* who would soon become the fourth and final Mrs. Hemingway), as well as enough time to become involved in a drunken car crash. Martha was not amused, and their marriage essentially ended at this time. For the duration of the war, the two saw themselves as rival writers, although Hemingway (in violation of the Geneva Conventions regarding war correspondents) also took an active role in combat. With the war winding down and an allied victory assured, he returned to Cuba early in 1945 to prepare for his divorce from Martha and his marriage to Mary (who, however, first had to divorce her own husband). After his marriage to Martha officially ended in December 1945, his wedding to Mary occurred the following March.

By this time Hemingway was at work on a new and extremely lengthy novel, which would eventually be published—long after his death—as *The Garden of Eden*. He was also back to his old habits of hunting, fishing, drinking, and eating. Although he was only in his late forties, his health was becoming so bad (and his weight so great) that he put himself on a diet and managed to drop both some pounds and his blood pressure. He and Mary traveled to Europe in 1948, and it was there that he became smitten with a much younger woman (who was nearly 19) named Adriana Ivancich. Although their relationship never became physical, he saw her as a kind of muse, and his infatuation helped inspire his next published novel, *Across the River and into the Trees*, which appeared in 1950. Unfortunately, most critics considered the book a disaster, but Hemingway did not give up. He began work on a new novel (not published until 1970) titled *Islands in the Stream*, but it was in 1951, after a visit to Cuba by Adriana and her mother, that he produced his final masterwork, *The Old Man and the Sea*. When the book was initially published as a special issue of *Life* magazine in 1952, over 5 million copies sold in just two days. The book was also selected

for publication by the Book of the Month Club, and Scribner brought out its own edition. Popular with both critics and the general public, the novel soon won Hemingway the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and helped him win the 1954 Nobel Prize in literature.

Before then, however, Hemingway had returned to some of his old stomping grounds. In 1953 he was back in Spain, watching more bullfights, and later that year he was once again on safari in Africa. In 1954 a plane in which he and Mary were riding while in Africa crashed, and then, the next day, the rescue plane crashed as well. Hemingway was significantly injured in both wrecks and was even reported dead, but these were just the latest in a long line of accidents that had occurred over the years—accidents that often involved major injuries to his head. Nevertheless, despite growing problems with his physical and psychological health, he continued to travel and write. In 1956 he was back in Spain, watching the bullfights, and later that year he was back in Paris, where the chance discovery of two trunks full of his old clothes and some of his writings from the 1920s helped inspire him to begin working on a set of memoirs that would eventually be published (in 1964) as *A Moveable Feast*. Hemingway, however, was increasingly moody and depressed, and his spirits were not improved by the growing political instability in Cuba, where a revolution would soon topple the corrupt government. Before that happened, however, Hemingway's own house was actually searched in an early morning raid by soldiers looking for a fugitive insurgent. Although Hemingway himself was not injured, his dog was shot, and by the end of the year the writer and his wife had rented a house in Ketchum, Idaho, where they settled permanently in 1959. As usual, serious tensions had long since developed in this latest marriage, and they became worse as Hemingway's mental health deteriorated. Depressed, unable to sleep, and even suffering from paranoia (he was convinced that the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] was plotting against him), Hemingway by 1960 was being treated for mental illness at the Mayo Clinic—even undergoing electroshock therapy, which helped relieve his depression but

also robbed him, for a time, of his memory. Less and less able to write, he became more and more depressed; one day in April 1961, Mary found him pointing a gun at his head. Hospitalized both in Ketchum and again at the Mayo Clinic (where he once again received electroshock therapy), he managed to convince his doctors (but not Mary) that he had recovered sufficiently to return home. He was back in Ketchum on June 30, but he survived just two days: On July 2, he awoke in the morning, went to the basement, retrieved a double-barreled shotgun, leaned his head against it, and fired.

***In Our Time* (1925, 1930)**

This innovative collection of short fiction consists of alternating stories and vignettes; the latter, ironically called chapters, are very brief (often just a single paragraph long), are printed in italic type, and deal with such matters as war, bullfighting, and crime. They provide an intriguing counterpoint to the stories themselves, many (but not all) of which deal with the physical, emotional, and psychological maturation of a character named Nick Adams, who develops from a boy living with his parents in the Midwest; to a young man dealing with his friends, girlfriends, and random strangers; to a solitary fisherman, remembering his past while communing with nature. The remaining stories, in which Nick is not the main character, often deal with characters who resemble Nick in some way, or they deal with themes first enunciated in the stories that focus on Nick.

As a group of interrelated stories unified by the appearance of the same (or similar) characters, by a set of connected themes, and by a prevailing mood or tone, Hemingway's collection resembles James Joyce's *Dubliners* as well as *Winesburg, Ohio*, a similar work by the American writer Sherwood Anderson. Anderson's writings were highly influential at the time Hemingway composed his collection, and Hemingway himself admired Anderson before he later mocked and parodied Anderson's style in his novel *The Torrents of Spring* (1926). Early reviewers of *In Our Time* praised the work for its lean, hard-

boiled style—especially its simple, often monosyllabic diction, its emphasis on concrete visual details, its sparing use of adjectives, its effective use of dialogue, its avoidance of overt interpretation and analysis of characters' emotions and motives, and its presentation of convincing characters speaking a credible American vernacular. Some reviewers did find the characters dull, thin, and mostly humorless, but in general reaction to the volume was very positive; most reviewers believed that a major new presence had arrived on the American literary scene. Hemingway was welcomed as a significant spokesman of the younger generation—a generation that had been permanently scarred by World War I and a generation that had to cope with all the challenges of a chaotic modern world.

Later commentators have mostly taken the stylistic value of the collection for granted and instead have tended to focus on two main matters: (1) how (or even whether) the stories and chapters are coherently interconnected, and (2) thematic interpretations of the various tales. Some commentators have argued that the stories and chapters are *not* coherently linked and that the randomness is deliberate; according to this view, Hemingway wanted to replicate, in the structure of his book, the chaos and disorder he saw all around him. The movements from one story to the next, as well as the alternations between stories and “chapters,” are thus meant to be disorienting and disturbing; no underlying unity was intended, and none should be sought. Most analysts, however, have indeed sought to explain how the stories are linked and how the stories and the “chapters” interrelate. Such analysts have argued (for instance) that the “chapters” cover a discrete chronological period (1914–23, inclusive); that war tends to be the focus of the first seven chapters, that bullfighting tends to be the focus of chapters 7 through 14, and that chapters 8 and 15 focus on crime; and that nearly all the chapters deal with issues of manhood—of what it means to function as a man in a world that has lost its moral and psychological bearings. According to this view, the early chapters, dealing with war, show the destruction of traditional values, while the later chapters, dealing with bullfighting, illustrate a search for a

new value system—a system rooted in individual courage, technical skill, and aesthetic grace. Hemingway never pretends that this new system of values will be widely or easily achieved (and indeed the final brief chapter of the book can be read as one last sardonic, ironic thrust), but many critics seem to agree that the book implies that it is only through private effort and individual integrity that one can hope to achieve a proper relationship with nature, with others, and with oneself.

Just as the brief “chapters” have been interpreted as suggesting a general movement from meaningless violence, extreme disorder, and tragic absurdity to a fragile but valuable sense of dignity and meaning, so the stories themselves have been seen as following a similar pattern. According to this view, most of the stories chart Nick Adams's slow, painful movement from innocent boyhood to disillusioned adulthood—with all of its physical pain, psychological suffering, and literal and figurative death—until he finally achieves, in the story titled “Big Two-Hearted River: Part II,” a kind of inner serenity and satisfaction while fishing alone and communing with nature. Meanwhile, the stories in which Nick is *not* the main character serve (according to this view) to reinforce many of the themes, attitudes, and tones first enunciated in the Adams stories. Such themes include, for instance, relations between fathers and sons, between men and women, between male friends, and between humans and nature. Additional themes include the disappointments of marriage and the demoralizing effects of war. The collection opens by focusing on Nick as a boy in rural Michigan; then it shows him as a student and soldier in Europe; and then it concludes (except for the final “L'Envoi”) by moving him back to rural Michigan, but now Nick is an adult who has achieved a kind of peace with himself and his world. The stories are thus organized (as Clinton S. Burhans, Jr., persuasively argued) by a movement from “youth to maturity, from innocence to experience, from peace to war to peace again, and from America to Europe and back to America” (see Reynolds 91). In the process of charting this journey, Hemingway offers us a vision of numerous individuals faced with a multitude of

challenges, but he also thereby offers a vision of a restless, tormented world—a world in which real happiness is rare and therefore precious.

Part of the power of the book derives from its diversity of topics, styles, and techniques. In “On the Quai at Smyrna,” for instance, Hemingway skillfully imitates the tone and vocabulary of a smug British officer, while in the extremely brief “Chapter I,” he adopts the colloquial manner of a common American soldier. In “Indian Camp” a third-person narrator suddenly yanks us back from firsthand accounts of warfare to describe, instead, an innocent boy’s exposure to bloody cesarean childbirth and equally bloody suicide, while in the cryptic “Chapter II” we are back in the midst of a firsthand account of foreign warfare, only to be returned, in “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” to the wilds of Michigan to witness an entirely different view of the physician (Nick’s father) who was first described in “Indian Camp.” The entire book alternates—in subjects, methods, characters, and locations—in just this way, producing a bewildering sense of disorientation and confusion but producing, as well, a fascinating kind of suspense and curiosity. We can never quite be sure what will happen next, and so the impulse to continue reading is strong. The collection achieves a high degree of variety but also an underlying unity of tone—a tone that is mostly bleak and somber but one that is also punctuated by brief moments of kindness, friendship, peace, joy, and even love.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the character of Nick Adams in *In Our Time* with the character of George Willard in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*. How are they similar and/or different in their experiences, attitudes, changes, and final developments? Discuss their relations with their parents, friends, and communities. In what ways is each character a reflection of his era and his region?
2. Read Hemingway’s collection alongside Gertrude Stein’s work titled *Three Lives*. How did each author try to be and succeed in being an innovative writer of fiction, especially in terms

of style, characterization, plot, and structure? Which book is more unconventional? Which, in your opinion, is more interesting to read? Explain your response in detail.

3. JOHN STEINBECK’s collection *The Red Pony* deals, as does *In Our Time*, with a recurring character—a young boy who is initiated into the facts of life and death. How is Steinbeck’s character similar to, and different from, Nick Adams? Discuss the chronological range covered by both sets of stories. Discuss the protagonists’ relations with other characters, especially their parents but also other role models. What kinds of lessons does each youth learn as he matures?
4. Do some research into literary modernism, and then discuss the ways in which *In Our Time* is a modernist work, particularly in terms of style and structure. Pay special attention to the role of the “chapters.” How does Hemingway’s collection compare, as a modernist piece of writing, with WILLIAM FAULKNER’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* and/or *As I Lay Dying*? Which of these writers is the more relentlessly modernist of the two? Explain your response in detail.
5. Choose a particular theme—such as war or bullfighting or maturation—and trace it over the course of several sections of the narrative. How does the theme change or develop (or fail to do so)? How does each section provide a distinctive perspective on the chosen theme? Is there any consistency in Hemingway’s treatment of the selected topic?

“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1926)

As an old deaf man sits late one night in a deserted Spanish café and consumes drink after drink, two waiters—one younger, one older—discuss his circumstances: Although he is economically comfortable, he recently attempted suicide, and he likes to stay as late as possible in the café, whose cleanliness and light provide him with some sense of security and comfort. Unlike the older waiter, the younger waiter cannot understand the old man’s lonely feelings, and because the younger man is impatient

with the delay and wants to go home to bed with his wife, he finally urges the deaf man to leave the café. Later, alone at a bar, the older waiter reflects on the pervading sense of nothingness and alienation that helps explain the deaf man's dislike of the dark and his desire for order and companionship.

Despite the brevity of this work, it manages to imply a great deal, not only about the characters depicted but also about the fundamental tragedy of human life—a tragedy rooted in the sense of feeling utterly alone in a world that lacks any deeper meaning or purpose. The story opens by emphasizing the “late” hour as the “old man” who is “deaf” sits in the “shadow” cast by dim electric lights (*Complete* 288). All these details are clearly symbolic: The man, who has recently been rescued from a suicide attempt, is nevertheless (as is everyone) inexorably moving toward death. His advanced age simply means that death will occur sooner for him than for everyone else. Meanwhile, his deafness simply makes him even more isolated than all people already are. He is, then, merely an extreme symbol of the common human condition; all of us are alone in the shadows, awaiting death, cut off from any real communion with others, and trying in the meantime to find some comfort in pleasurable sensations and surroundings that, by their very nature, can only be temporary. When the younger waiter asks the older waiter what has caused the old deaf man enough “despair” to make him attempt suicide, the older waiter responds by saying, “Nothing” (*Complete* 288)—a reply that is far more significant than it seems at first. It is indeed a sense of nothingness or nihilism (a sense that nothing really matters in life; that human existence has no ultimate meaning or purpose; that there are no objective, transcendent values that give fulfillment to our lives; and that we are finally alone in a universe without a god or any other source of grand significance) that helps explain why this old deaf man, or indeed any human being, might consider killing himself. Despair of this sort was increasingly common during the era in which Hemingway wrote—an era in which thoughtful people were increasingly less confident concerning all the old, traditional values (such as religion, patriotism,

or faith in progress) that had once seemed to give meaning to human existence. The older waiter, near the end of the story, uses the Spanish word *nada* to express this pervasive sense of nothingness, and the older waiter is clearly presented as more insightful and perceptive than his younger colleague, whose responses to the old deaf man are more shallow, superficial, selfish, and cruel. However, despite the gloomy philosophy that underlies the story, the work is not entirely pessimistic. The old man himself displays a quiet dignity in his loneliness; he never becomes drunk, self-pitying, or angry, and the older waiter, through his actions and attitudes, demonstrates compassion, understanding, and empathy. In a work that might easily have become sentimental or preachy, Hemingway quietly implies that human life need not be entirely solitary or lacking in generosity. The older waiter represents a kind of moral ideal, for in spite of his awareness of the underlying darkness of life, he continues to try to find some light and to share that light with others.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with T. S. Eliot's poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” How are the works comparable in tone, atmosphere, setting, and philosophical implication? How does Prufrock compare and/or contrast with the older waiter? What does Eliot's attitude seem to be toward Prufrock, and what does Hemingway's attitude seem to be toward the old waiter?
2. Read this story alongside WALLACE STEVENS's poem “Sunday Morning.” What does each work seem to imply about the status of religion, and of belief in God, in modern life? What does each work suggest about possible alternative sources of meaning, value, and purpose? Which work is more affirmative in its view of existence? Discuss the role of humor in each work.
3. Choose a relatively small section of the story and analyze, as closely as possible, how each detail of that section contributes to the tone, atmosphere, coherence, and effectiveness of the story as a whole. For example, why, in the opening

paragraph of the story, does the narrator stress that it is “very late”? Why does the old man sit in “shadow”? Why is the light “electric”? Why is the old man just “a little drunk” rather than completely inebriated? Discuss the implications of each of Hemingway’s descriptive choices.

***The Sun Also Rises* (1926)**

Jake Barnes, a young American journalist who is now impotent as a result of a wound suffered in World War I, describes his relations with a number of acquaintances while they live in France and travel in Spain in the early 1920s. Central figures of the group include Lady Brett Ashley, a highly sexed and free-spirited Englishwoman to whom most of the men in the novel are attracted; Michael Campbell, a Scotsman whom Brett plans to marry after her impending divorce is final; Bill Gorton, a successful American writer who is a friend of Jake; and Robert Cohn, a Jewish-American writer and former boxer whom most of the other characters despise, especially because of his desperate fixation on Brett. Brett herself becomes infatuated with a young Spanish bullfighter named Pedro Romero, but by the end of the novel she decides that it would be wrong to continue the affair she briefly began with him.

General assessments of *The Sun Also Rises* will inevitably depend on more particular responses to the novel’s plot, characters, themes, and style. While some readers, for instance, have found the plot tedious and trivial, far more have praised the work for convincingly depicting the lives of American and British expatriates in continental Europe and for memorably presenting the aftereffects of World War I on the so-called lost generation—a generation who were often crippled (physically, psychologically, or both) by the pointless destruction unleashed during that ironically named “Great War.” Certainly the novel communicates a vivid sense of what it was like to be young, relatively wealthy, and generally rootless in the years immediately following that massive conflict. Simply as a historical document, then, the novel retains a good

deal of interest, for Hemingway manages to convey what life was like for a small but highly influential subset of the population of an important historical era. Meanwhile, although many of the characters themselves have struck various readers as shallow, superficial, and self-absorbed, other readers have found Hemingway’s people intriguing, engaging, and sometimes even sympathetic. Jake, for instance, strikes some readers as a sensitive, thoughtful, and vulnerable man whose physical injury denies him the love that might make him whole again, while Lady Brett—despite her hard-drinking, tough-talking, sexually promiscuous ways—often strikes the same readers as a mostly sympathetic victim: Having lost her fiancé in the war and having been denied the chance for a completely fulfilling love with Jake, she has already made two bad marriages and seems about to make another. Pedro Romero, in the meantime, seems an admirable and appealing character by almost any standard; he inspires lust in Brett and respect in Jake, in most readers, and probably in Hemingway himself. However, even readers who consider most of the characters unappealing may find themselves admiring the novel for depicting such unsavory types so vividly.

The obvious themes of the book give it, to many, an appeal that is equally obvious. The novel raises a number of perennially important issues, including the following: What is love? What is friendship? What kind of life is most worth living? What qualities make a person worthy of respect? What is the ultimate significance of human life? What are the best ways to cope with loss? What values can replace old certainties that no longer seem reliable? Can mere material or physical pleasure make for a satisfying existence? Whether or not Hemingway does full justice to these themes was once (and may to some extent remain) a matter of debate, but perhaps the ultimate touchstone for the success of this book (or of any literary work) is the success of its style. If the book were not skillfully written, it might not seem worth reading, no matter how inherently interesting its ideas. It is as a stylist, in fact, that Hemingway is perhaps most important, and *The Sun Also Rises* reveals many of the stylistic traits for which he has most often been praised.

The language of the book is generally simple, clear, straightforward, and unadorned. Sentences tend to be short; adjectives, adverbs, metaphors, and similes tend to be few; and the tone is flat and largely objective, relying greatly on understatement and subtle irony. Moreover, a huge proportion of the book is given over to dialogue, and much of the novel's success depends on Hemingway's talent for convincingly catching the diction, rhythms, and sound of actual speech. Even readers who may find the book unappealing for other reasons nevertheless often concede Hemingway's skill in creating credible dialogue. If that dialogue often seems trivial, drab, monotonous, and rambling, that is partly because Hemingway is imitating the actual sounds of mundane conversation.

Occasionally the dialogue seems dated, phony, and almost quaint. At one point, for instance, Brett enters a bar and addresses Jake and some others in her typically breezy, slangy style:

“Hello, you chaps.”

“Hello, Brett,” I said. “Why aren't you tight?”

“Never going to get tight any more. I say, give a chap a brandy and soda.”

(*Sun* 22)

The fact that Brett uses the word *chap* in referring both to the men and to herself is partly a reflection of her British nationality and partly a reflection of her gender-bending personality: She acts, talks, and wears her short hair in ways that would have made her seem somewhat masculine in the 1920s, and her tendency to speak of herself as a “chap” implies that she partly thinks of herself (and certainly *presents* herself) as “one of the boys.” During her own era she would have seemed a startlingly “liberated” woman and would thus have symbolized the profound changes that were beginning to take place during that period in relations between the sexes. Nevertheless, in the passage just quoted (and often elsewhere) her speech now sounds old-fashioned and even affected, and perhaps even in Hemingway's day it was deliberately intended to suggest Brett's self-conscious pretensions. She is

less self-confident and less happy than she pretends to be, and her need to adopt such poses implies the essential hollowness at the core of her psyche.

Although Brett considers herself a sophisticated woman of the world, her discussions with Jake are often gushingly sentimental and self-pitying (as in “Oh darling, I've been so miserable”; *Sun* 24). Moreover, her explicit self-assessments are often both melodramatic and self-deceptive. At one point, for instance, when telling Jake about her sudden infatuation with the athletic young bullfighter Pedro Romero, she announces, with her usual maudlin effusiveness, “I'm a goner. I'm mad about the Romero boy. I'm in love with him, I think” (*Sun* 183). Real love, of course, is hardly the issue: She has merely glimpsed the sexy matador in his snug green tights, and her libido has been aroused. Her words to Jake illustrate the shallow theatricality that defines her personality, and later, even Brett herself realizes that her feelings are almost predatory. Of course, her change of heart does not occur until *after* she has already gone to bed with the much-younger Romero, but her belated attack of conscience at least allows her to indulge in her trademark vulgarity, which is supposed to signal her tough-as-nails sophistication: “I'm thirty-four, you know. I'm not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children” (*Sun* 243). Later still, congratulating herself on her decision to put the young man behind her, she announces, “You know I feel rather damned good, Jake. . . . You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch” (*Sun* 245). Individual readers will have to decide for themselves whether or not Brett actually attains this lofty goal, but many readers, apparently, found Brett not only an appealing character but a worthy role model. For various reasons, however, it is hard to take her nearly as seriously as she takes herself.

A plausible case can in fact be made that Hemingway's novel satirizes not only Brett but also most of the rest of the book's personalities, including even Jake (but excluding Romero and his fellow Spaniard, Montoya, who respects the artistry, skill, character, and values that Romero so strikingly embodies). According to this reading, much of the book is ironic, and we are never meant to

admire most of the people in it as much as they admire themselves. Hemingway (from this perspective) describes the aimless existence of a group of shallow hedonists not in order to endorse their frantic, frenetic lifestyle but precisely to expose its hollowness and limitations. Certainly there are passages in the book that can suggest such a reading. Almost at the very end of the novel, for instance, just after Brett has proclaimed her noble intention “not to be a bitch,” she immediately adds, “It’s sort of what we have instead of God.” To this, Jake at once responds: “Some people have God. . . . Quite a lot.” But then Brett just as quickly retorts, “He never worked very well with me” (*Sun* 245). Jake seems almost wistful for the consolations provided by traditional religious belief—consolations others possess but ones that Jake himself seems unprepared to embrace with any real enthusiasm. (His own Catholic faith is mentioned in passing but seems merely nominal.) His comment does remind us that alternatives do exist to the egotism symbolized by Brett, but Brett’s snappy comeback, as well as Jake’s immediate abandonment of the subject (“Should we have another Martini?” *Sun* 245), suggest that Hemingway is not seriously proposing religion as an answer to any of the problems the novel presents.

If anything, the answer (if there is one) lies in the cool professionalism, innate humility, and stoic bravery of Pedro Romero, who constantly faces death with the kind of courageous, unassuming nonchalance that Hemingway would increasingly admire as the decades wore on. Romero is the sort of secular hero featured in many later works by Hemingway—figures such as Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* (to mention just two obvious examples). Next to Romero, most of the other characters in *The Sun Also Rises* seem petty and pitiful (not to mention self-pitying), and if the book is indeed a satire, then Romero is the standard by which the other characters are measured and found wanting. Romero, however, does not enter the book until it is nearly two-thirds complete, and he quickly disappears from the main action. He is, moreover, a mostly silent character, little given

to all the superfluous talk typical of most people in this novel. That reticence, of course, is one of his virtues, but it also means that as a foil to the others he is mostly inarticulate: He does not speak on behalf of an alternative set of values but merely (and quietly) embodies them. However, if Romero has a more troubling flaw as a moral standard, that flaw lies in the fact that he responds at all to the ironically titled “Lady” Brett (who has memorably been called a “tart with a title”). It is hard to imagine what he finds appealing about this rapidly aging, rather prurient party hound; if Romero had simply turned away and laughed her off, it might have been more obvious that Hemingway himself was mocking her. After all, when Hemingway so desired, he could be quite blatantly satirical and ironic (as he had already proven in the story “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” in *In Our Time*). However, the satire and irony in *The Sun Also Rises*—if satire is there at all—are much more subtle, muted, and implied. Perhaps Hemingway does indeed intend to undercut the pretensions of Brett and her crew, and perhaps he even intends to satirize Jake for serving as Brett’s pimp and procurer (since it is Jake, after all, who facilitates her liaison with Romero). If these are Hemingway’s intentions, however, he mostly leaves it to his readers to connect the dots.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *The Sun Also Rises* with NELLA LARSEN’s novel titled *Quicksand*. How are the social settings of the novels similar? How are the works similar in tone? How do both novels present the experiences of Americans living abroad? How do the books compare and contrast in the ways they deal with issues of race? In which novel is the central character more appealing and sympathetic? Explain your response in detail.
2. Read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein and then discuss its relations with *The Sun Also Rises*. How do both books describe the world of expatriates living in Europe in the 1920s? How is Hemingway presented in Stein’s book; are her comments about him relevant at all to his novel? How does Hemingway’s style

- in *Sun* seem to have been influenced by Stein's ideas about style? How are the tones, moods, and atmospheres of both books similar?
3. Compare and contrast the values, social relationships, and kinds of characters depicted in *The Sun Also Rises* with the same aspects of THORNTON WILDER's *Our Town*. How does Hemingway try to prevent his novel from being excessively cynical? How does Wilder try to prevent his play from being excessively sentimental? Does one work achieve a better balance than the other? How are the styles of the two works similar? How does Hemingway's novel resemble a play, and how does Wilder's play resemble a novel?
 4. Choose a relatively minor character (such as Count Mippipopolous, Bill Gorton, Mike Campbell, or Montoya) and trace that character's appearances in the book. How does that character help illuminate the themes of the novel? How does he or she help cast light on one or more of the major characters? How would the book be significantly different if the chosen character were absent?

“Hills Like White Elephants” (1927)

As an unnamed American man and a young woman he calls “Jig” sit at a train station in a valley near the Ebro River in Spain, they drink alcohol and have a tense discussion. Although the word *abortion* is never explicitly mentioned, it soon becomes clear that the man is trying to persuade the reluctant Jig to end her pregnancy. After their discussion reaches an intense pitch in which Jig threatens to scream at the man, the tension eventually subsides, and at the very end of the story, with their train approaching, Jig claims to feel “fine.”

This story—one of Hemingway's briefest and most famous—illustrates many of the most typical traits of his writing. The phrasing is simple and clear; much of the tale is given over to terse, colloquial dialogue; the unobtrusive narrator offers few explanations and no interpretations but instead merely relays facts and reports conversation; and

the work ends without a clear or simple resolution. The story presents itself as a straightforward, objective, slice-of-life description; it offers no moralizing comments, depending instead on readers to draw their own conclusions about the psychology, motives, and emotions of the two main characters. The work relies on implication and suggestion rather than on explicit authorial explanation. Nevertheless, Hemingway provides plenty of subtle, understated imagery and symbolism to guide interpretation of this seemingly simple story. Perhaps no other work of his better illustrates his “theory of omission” or “iceberg principle”: Just as only the tip of a massive iceberg is visible above water, so a truly effective piece of writing depends for its power on what it suggests and implies rather than on what it overtly states. By the time we have finished reading “Hills Like White Elephants,” we have a far deeper insight into the relationship of Jig and the American than either of them has openly expressed. The story is extremely well designed, but the subtleties of its craftsmanship become fully visible only in retrospect.

The skill with which the story is crafted begins at once. The narrator opens by mentioning that on the side of the valley where the characters are sitting “there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun.” One part of the landscape, then, is lifeless and barren; as the narrator later reports, on this side of the valley “the country was brown and dry” (*Complete* 211). In contrast, we learn later that on the opposite side of the valley there “were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro,” and that the river is visible through the trees (*Complete* 213). Clearly, then, Hemingway has placed these characters in the midst of a highly symbolic landscape—a landscape in which one side is associated with blank sterility and the other is associated with teeming fertility and life. Obviously this setting is appropriate to a story about abortion, and it soon becomes evident that Jig is attracted by the distant, fertile side of the valley and associates abortion with the bleak desert that presently surrounds her. She finds herself at both a literal and a symbolic transition point in her life; she must choose, both literally and figuratively,

which direction she will take. A train will soon be arriving from Barcelona and will then proceed to Madrid; should Jig board it and presumably have the abortion? Or should she refuse to board the train and thereby risk ending her relationship with the American? By the very end of the story, the narrator leaves it tantalizingly unclear just what Jig has decided, or even whether she has decided anything, but during the course of the story he manages to convey the enormous pressures she feels.

Among those pressures, the heat is symbolically important. As the couple try to find comfort in the train station's "warm shadow" (a nicely paradoxical phrase), the narrator reports that "it was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes" (*Complete* 211). Not only is the climate uncomfortable, then, but Jig and the American also feel the added pressure of the ticking clock to reach a quick decision about this life-altering matter. Little wonder, therefore, that they soon begin drinking heavily—behavior that not only typifies the life of random sensual pleasure they have been leading up till now (a life of which Jig has grown increasingly tired), but will also help explain Jig's later angry outburst. In the meantime, however, Jig seems the more passive of the two; the discussion opens with her asking a question, and throughout most of the dialogue she seems more hesitant, more uncertain, and more desperate to please. Her tone often sounds like that of a pleading little girl, and indeed her comment comparing the hills to white elephants is intended to be "bright" and pleasing (*Complete* 212). Yet even this seemingly offhand remark is revealing: A white elephant was conventionally considered a possession unwanted by its owner but one that is difficult to dispose of, or as something rare and valuable but also difficult to maintain.

For the American, the baby is an unwanted burden; for Jig it seems to offer the promise of a new, more settled, more satisfying kind of existence. Ironically, the more that the American insists that the "operation" will be "simple" and "natural," the more complex and unnatural the prospect seems to Jig; physically the procedure may be simple (although the American's claim that the operation

merely involves "let[ing] the air in" seems either hopelessly naive or brutally cynical), but emotionally and psychologically it seems exceptionally complex, especially for a relatively inexperienced young woman who was living during a time when abortions were anything but accepted or routine. Although the American claims that the pregnancy is "the only thing that bothers us" and is "the only thing that's made us unhappy," Jig seems to think and feel differently. She seems increasingly dissatisfied with their life of shallow sensation seeking—a life in which their main activity has been to "look at things and try new drinks" (*Complete* 212). She has grown weary of the life of random travel symbolized by their suitcases with "labels on them from all the hotels where [in a splendid choice of verb] they had *spent nights*" (*Complete* 214; italics added). Jig clearly wants a more permanent existence with a stronger sense of commitment from her partner, but when she tells him that they could have "everything," the couple cannot even agree on a definition of that word. For her it implies a rooted life; for him it suggests continued travel (*Complete* 213). Although he insists that he does not want her to do anything she does not desire, she easily realizes that this claim is just another manipulative tactic. The discussion, then, reveals not simply their disagreement about abortion but their fundamentally different personalities, values, and goals: The American considers himself a rational, logical being (as when he emphasizes his interest in proof or when he admires the other passengers for waiting "reasonably" for the train), whereas Jig realizes that her nature is more romantic, emotional, and intuitive (as when she says, "I just know things"). If Jig finally seems frustrated, depressed, and angry, it is partly because she now understands how little she and her partner have in common and how improbable it is that an abortion will solve any of the deeper problems in their relationship. Thus her very last comment—"I feel fine. . . . There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (*Complete* 214)—seems painfully ironic. Whether she has the abortion or elects to keep the baby, it seems highly unlikely that Jig will ever feel "fine" in the ways she once hoped for or imagined. Her simple final

word—which is also the final word of the story as a whole—seems (as does so much else in this story) exceptionally double-edged.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the relationship depicted in this story with the relationship presented in Ezra Pound's poem "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter." How do the personalities, values, and desires of the two women resemble and/or differ from one another? How are the two works similar in their use of implication, symbolism, and imagery? What kind of future do you foresee for the two women?
2. Read this story alongside Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." How are Jig and Granny obviously different, but what do they also have in common? In what ways, and for what reasons, is each woman frustrated? How do they differ from and/or resemble one another in their personalities?
3. Discuss this tale in relation to John Steinbeck's story "The Chrysanthemums." How are landscape and setting used symbolically in both stories? How do the men in the stories compare and/or contrast? How and why do both stories end without a clear resolution?
4. Discuss the appearances of the old woman in this story. How does her presence add to the impact of the narrative? What does she symbolize or represent? Discuss her interactions with the two main characters; how are those interactions significant? In particular, discuss the way Jig interacts with the old woman. What do those interactions reveal about Jig?

A Farewell to Arms (1929)

Frederic Henry, a young American lieutenant who is volunteering as an ambulance driver for the Italian army during World War I, enjoys his relations with his lively Italian comrades, including a friendly young doctor named Rinaldi, a thoughtful young priest, and a variety of other colorful characters. His life becomes more complicated, however, when

he meets and quickly falls in love with Catherine Barkley, a British nurse's aide whose former fiancé suffered a brutal, fatal injury earlier in the war and whose good friend, a nurse named Ferguson (nicknamed "Fergie") disapproves of Catherine's new relationship with Frederic. Frederic is injured when the Austrians shell his camp; while recuperating at the hospital he becomes even more involved with Catherine; she becomes pregnant; the Italian army retreats; Frederic deserts; he and Catherine escape to Switzerland, but Catherine dies while being delivered of a stillborn baby.

Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, had dealt with the aftereffects of World War I on a group of feckless Americans and Britons living in continental Europe, while this next novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, describes the impact of the war itself on Americans, Britons, and Italians in the final years of the conflict. This emphasis on the so-called Great War—also ironically termed, by optimists at that time, the "war to end all wars"—is entirely appropriate, since the First World War was one of the most important events in human history. It had an undeniably major impact not only on Hemingway himself (who, as had Frederic Henry, had volunteered as an ambulance driver, was wounded, and fell in love with a nurse) but also on his entire generation. This was the group whom the writer Gertrude Stein (Hemingway's onetime friend) dubbed "the lost generation," and her adjective has always seemed apt for a number of reasons. In the first place, millions upon millions of young soldiers were literally lost as a result of the war—killed in bloody, vicious battles in which thousands of men often died on a single day merely to acquire or hold a few yards of territory. The war had begun almost by accident, but because most of the European powers were also global empires, it eventually involved the entire planet. It was fought with all the latest technological innovations (such as tanks, airplanes, poison gas, and highly destructive machine guns), and it eventually unleashed profound political and social changes, including the Russian Revolution, the collapse of the German monarchy, the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the rise of the United States to world-power status. Most important for Hemingway

and his generation, however, it helped destroy confidence (especially among artists and intellectuals) in such old-fashioned values as patriotism, nationalism, religion, and idealism. Traditions of all sorts came under withering suspicion; the young people who returned from the war (many of them mentally and physically crippled) often felt not only disgusted and disillusioned by their experiences but also betrayed by the older generation, who had let this seemingly pointless conflict occur. The mood of these young men and women was often cynical and bleak, and so they were “lost” in the additional senses of feeling rootless, aimless, skeptical, and embittered. As both its title and its plot suggest, *A Farewell to Arms* reflects the desire of many of Hemingway's generation to put war—and especially “the” War—behind them. Yet most of them also intuited (correctly, as it turned out) that the end of the First World War might soon lead (ironically enough) to a second and even more destructive conflict. Indeed, it was partly the pacifism at any price bred by the First World War that helped make the Second inevitable.

War, then, is one of the major themes of *A Farewell to Arms*; love is another. Some readers (including the novelist F. SCOTT FITZGERALD as well as Maxwell Perkins, Hemingway's editor) thought that the two themes were not sufficiently integrated, but most readers have had few complaints. Hemingway juxtaposes chapters about the war with chapters about the developing affection between Frederic and Catherine, showing how love provides a source of meaning, happiness, fulfillment, and inner peace in a world that otherwise seems chaotic, maddening, brutal, and senseless. Despite the urgings of the Italian priest, Frederic can find no source of consolation or stability from such traditional sources as religion, and so, as the novel develops and his own character matures, his relationship with Catherine (which he treats at first as a kind of game) becomes the source of much of his genuine joy and satisfaction. The fact that she ultimately dies—and that she dies while trying to give birth to his child—therefore makes the ending of the novel all the more bitter, painful, and ironic; Hemingway suggests (here as so often elsewhere) that life is not “fair,” that joy can only ever be

temporary, that the best people often die soonest, and that human love is precious precisely because human life is so precarious. By the end of the novel, Frederic has been wounded physically, but the far more serious wound is to his psyche and soul. The tone of the novel is elegiac, and the elegy Frederic offers is not only a tribute to Catherine's vitality and beauty but a far deeper tribute to the courage and selflessness she personifies. Ironically, Hemingway's “war novel” is most famous for its vivid depiction of a notorious Italian retreat from war, and the truest example of courage in the book is not provided by the men at arms but by the leading female, who faces her death with the kind of stoic resolve that Hemingway always admired.

Of the novel's leading characters, in fact, Catherine has always attracted not only a good deal of admiration but also a fair amount of controversy. Analysts have praised her vivacity, spirit, and capacity for love, but some have also found her—especially in the book's early sections—needy, immature, overwrought, and selfless to the point of being self-neglectful. Feminists have often seen her as an eager doormat, all too willing to sacrifice her own interests and finally even her life itself on the altar of serving Frederic's pleasure, and some analysts have even argued that if her death seems almost foreordained, that impression is due less to fate or circumstances than to Hemingway's general desire to keep his male heroes free of entangling involvements with women (especially women who might compromise male autonomy by becoming mothers). Other analysts, however, have argued that Catherine is far less subservient than is sometimes assumed; they note, for instance, that when Frederic first tries to kiss her, she slaps him (*Farewell* 26), and they also note that even after the relationship has lasted for a long time, Catherine at one point openly objects when she feels that Frederic has made her feel like a “whore” (*Farewell* 152). Most significantly, defenders of Catherine argue that as the novel develops, so does she—that she is a far stronger, braver, and more self-reliant person at the end of the book than at the beginning, and that the way she faces death is particularly heroic. There seems

no denying, however, that Catherine (as do many of Hemingway's women) seems almost sentimentally immature; she often resembles a little girl, even to the point of sounding mawkish. As she is straining with her labor pains, for instance, she turns and addresses Frederic: "Don't mind me, darling. Please don't cry. Don't mind me. I'm just all gone to pieces. You poor sweet. I love you so and I'll be good again. I'll be good this time" (*Farewell* 322). Sounding sometimes like a dotting mother and sometimes like a tearful infant, Catherine is frequently too saccharine for her own good (or the good of the novel). But at least she seems capable of true love, and the mere fact that she is a nurse (combined with her various other generous traits) demonstrates that she is capable of devotion to causes larger than her own momentary pleasures. In both respects she is a definite improvement over Lady Brett Ashley, the female lead in Hemingway's previous novel, who managed to combine a brash, hard-edged exterior; melodramatic self-pity; and shallow, hedonistic egotism in a way that makes Catherine by far the more attractive of the two.

Critical comment on Frederic Henry is often as mixed as responses to Catherine. As Catherine does, Frederic shows his concern for others (as well as a considerable degree of bravery) simply by having volunteered for military service—even if his service is mostly confined to driving an ambulance. He is well liked and well respected by his subordinates and comrades (especially Rinaldi), and despite being seriously injured, he willingly returns to the front. It is only later, when the entire Italian army is in wholesale retreat and he is falsely suspected of spying for the enemy and faces possible execution, that he decides to desert and makes his own "separate peace" (*Farewell* 243). Frederic, however, is admirable for other reasons as well: He is a more sensitive and thoughtful soldier than many of his mates, resisting (for instance) their tendency to bait the priest, and he eventually develops an affection and respect for Catherine that transcend a simple appreciation of her physical beauty. Nevertheless, Frederic has often been criticized for an alleged selfishness that supposedly keeps him aloof and apart, and his

relationship with Catherine (especially in its early stages) has often been seen as exploitative. Some critics consider Frederic immature and self-pitying and argue that he lacks a firm core of stable identity; others, however, see him as a typical representative of his time—a figure who is alienated, unsure, rootless, lonely, and finally alone. Many readers believe, however, that he is a more mature man by the end of the novel than he was at the beginning and that he owes his maturation largely to the beneficent influence of Catherine. Certainly Frederic is a more ethically attractive figure than just about any non-Spanish male in *The Sun Also Rises* (with the possible exception of Jake), and by the conclusion of the book Frederic seems truly capable of a kind of genuine love that seems foreign to the thinking of almost any of the characters in the earlier novel.

Finally, no discussion of the characters of *A Farewell to Arms* should fail to mention Rinaldi. One of the most lively, funny, and memorable people Hemingway ever created, he almost always adds wit, good humor, vitality, and a spirit of affectionate friendship to the novel. He shows that his creator was capable of fashioning highly vivid characters (as Hemingway would later prove again when he concocted the equally memorable Pilar in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), and Rinaldi also demonstrates that not all the admirable men in Hemingway's fiction are dour, buttoned-up tough guys. Rinaldi is a highly competent surgeon, but he is also full of life and laughter; he knows his stuff, but he also knows how to have a good time (even, unfortunately, to the point of contracting syphilis). Frederic's conversations with Rinaldi are far more consistently credible than his conversations with Catherine: The joking, the swearing, the boasting, the insults, even the affection seem easier to believe (and often easier to take) than all the terms such as *darling*, *fine*, *good boy*, *lovely*, or *dear*, *brave sweet* that so often make the exchanges by Frederic and Catherine seem so unbelievably sentimental. Hemingway often had trouble depicting relations between the sexes convincingly, but in describing same-sex friendships he was far more reliable, and nowhere better than in depicting the bond between Frederic and Rinaldi.

In characterization, plot, theme, and style, *A Farewell to Arms* struck a number of its initial readers as a definite advance over *The Sun Also Rises*. Later critics have sometimes disagreed, but it seems hard to deny that in its range of characters, events, tones, settings, imagery, and symbols, *Farewell* is the more capacious book. Simply in terms of phrasing, it has much to recommend it, for although Hemingway here (as elsewhere) shows his debt to the repetitive plainness he borrowed from Gertrude Stein (as in a brief passage full of such deadpan descriptions as “very nice,” “very fine,” “very handsomely,” and “very glad”; *Farewell* 5), elsewhere the diction is far more memorable and inventive. Thus at one point Frederic explains something “winefully” (*Farewell* 13); at another point a car is described as “looking disgraced” (*Farewell* 16); later still a character is advised to “chew some coffee” (*Farewell* 40); and, when Catherine asks Frederic early in their relationship whether he loves her, we get his classic response: “‘Yes,’ I lied” (*Farewell* 30). Consistently the language is intriguing and inventive (or at least far more consistently than in *The Sun Also Rises*), and the characters also seem more complex, both morally and psychologically. (When Catherine slaps Frederic, for instance, he is not entirely disappointed: “I felt I had a certain advantage” [*Farewell* 26].) At any rate, there are not only *more* characters in this book but more *kinds* of characters; a far broader sweep of humanity is represented here than was present in *The Sun Also Rises*, and the challenges these people face are also more serious and consequential, often involving matters of literal life and death. All in all (except in some maudlin scenes of romance), this novel seems more mature than its predecessor: The characters are more interesting, the plot is more substantial, and the style is more complex. *A Farewell to Arms* also represents, in many ways, a farewell to the shallowness that sometimes made *The Sun Also Rises* cloying and annoying.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *A Farewell to Arms* with E. E. CUMMINGS's novel *The Enormous Room*. How do both works present World War I, especially life away from the front? How are their presentations of secondary characters similar and/or distinct? What attitudes toward the war do the two works seem to have in common and/or how do they differ in this respect? How do both works present social relations among soldiers?
2. Read *A Farewell to Arms* alongside Ezra Pound's poem “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter.” Discuss the ways developing affection is presented in both works. How does the relationship between the Chinese merchant and his wife differ from and/or resemble the relationship between Frederic and Catherine? Is one relationship more sentimental than the other?
3. How is the relationship between Frederic and Catherine similar to and/or different from the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake in ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? How are the couples similar and/or distinct in the reasons they are attracted to each other, in their relations with one another, and in their relations with the outside world? Discuss the similarities and/or differences between the conclusions of both relationships.
4. Trace the role played by Rinaldi in this novel. How does he contribute to the effectiveness of the book? What themes or values tend to be associated with him? Why and how is his relationship with Frederic illuminating? How does his relationship with Frederic differ from Frederic's relationship with Catherine? What finally happens to him in this book, and how is his final fate significant?

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936, 1938)

Harry is a talented American writer who has gone on safari to Africa with a wealthy woman named Helen; although he had hoped someday to produce writing worthy of the memories he carries within him, an accidental scratch has now led to a severe case of gangrene that threatens his very life. As his condition deteriorates and as he and Helen wait for a plane that may possibly carry him to safety,

Harry ponders all the topics he had hoped to write about, and he regrets that he has allowed a life of easy living to prevent him from achieving his full literary potential. When the plane finally arrives, it takes him on a flight past the beautiful snow-capped summit of Mount Kilimanjaro—or at least it seems to do so in his fantasy, for in the middle of the night Helen awakens and finds Harry dead in his cot.

In this well-known story, Hemingway deals with issues that were obviously relevant to his own life. Like Harry, Hemingway himself was a noted writer who feared that he might never achieve all that he was capable of accomplishing. Also like Harry, Hemingway himself had spent much time hunting in Africa, had fallen severely ill there, and had waited anxiously for evacuation by a plane (although Hemingway, unlike Harry, actually *was* rescued). Finally, Hemingway, like Harry, worried that his goal of producing serious literature might be compromised by the seductions of a wealthy, comfortable lifestyle, including the enervating effect of a domesticating marriage. The story, then, can be read partly as a cautionary self-portrait—as a warning *by* Hemingway *to* Hemingway about the risks of failing to hold himself to high literary and personal standards. Yet the work would hardly be worth reading if it were merely an autobiographical memo; its real merit derives from its lively dialogue, its generally convincing characterization, its effective evocations of setting, mood, symbolism, theme, and tone, and especially its alternation between straightforward narrative (rendered in a normal roman typeface) and italicized stream-of-consciousness flashbacks, in which Harry remembers and ponders all the topics he had hoped someday to turn into powerful prose. Part of the irony of the story, of course, is that whereas Harry is denied the chance to achieve these ambitions, Hemingway himself uses the flashbacks as crucial components of a story that is both well written and skillfully designed. Harry's fears of failure thus become grist for the mill of Hemingway's own creative achievement, so that the story is a kind of literary tour de force: It is a highly successful meditation on the risks of not succeeding.

Harry, at the beginning of the story, is not an especially attractive character. He picks petty quarrels with Helen, becomes sarcastic when she offers help, and seems determined to blame her for his own lack of accomplishment. Such frustrated irritability and irresponsibility are, however, exactly what one might credibly expect of such a personality in such circumstances, and by the end of the story he seems to have mellowed and matured, at least to some degree. Spiritually and psychologically, then, he seems less sick by the conclusion of the tale than he was at the beginning; although he continues to decay physically, he recovers some lost moral ground when he shows a growing ability to appreciate Helen, treat her with some kindness, and cease blaming her for his own shortcomings and mistaken choices. He never completely changes or shows her any genuinely deep affection, but such a transformation not only would have been inconsistent with his hard-nosed personality but would also have been mawkishly sentimental. The story already flirts dangerously enough with sentimentality as it is, especially in some of the dialogue between Harry and Helen in the second half of the tale, and a syrupy reconciliation between the couple would only have ruined the work. Instead, Hemingway chooses a surprise ending resembling the conclusion of Ambrose Bierce's famous short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge": Just when we think that the protagonist may have miraculously cheated death, we are brought up short, presented with a corpse. Although the endings of both stories have sometimes been criticized as contrived (one critic called Hemingway's conclusion "a slick magazine exit" [see Smith 358]), in both cases the authors subtly prepare us for the "surprise," thus adding an extra level of craftsmanship to their works. In Hemingway's story this kind of craft is all the more important, because it helps to demonstrate once more the distinction between Hemingway the skilled author and Harry the frustrated writer.

Much commentary about "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" has centered on the italicized epigraph with which the story opens, which describes Mount Kilimanjaro itself and reports that the mountain's

western summit is known as “*the House of God*.” Even more intriguingly, the epigraph notes that close to that summit “*there is a dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude*” (*Complete* 39). Clearly Hemingway is inviting his readers to connect the epigraph and the story, but the nature of that connection has been a matter of dispute. Some critics, for instance, have seen the leopard as a symbol of Harry’s materialistic desire to live a “high life” of luxurious comfort and privilege—a desire that ultimately leaves him stranded, desiccated, and dead. Other commentators, in contrast, have more plausibly seen the leopard as a symbol of lofty aspiration—of the desire to transcend mundane limits. Interpreted in this way, the leopard can be viewed as symbolizing Harry’s own artistic ambitions, although there is disagreement about whether or not the symbolism is ironic. Is Harry (in other words) comparable to the leopard in having finally attained some type of transcendence? Or does Harry contrast with the leopard because he never achieves the kind of hard-won prominence and immortality the leopard finally attains? Each position has its advocates, and the debate has led some analysts to argue that Hemingway should be faulted for leaving the final significance of his symbols unclear. Most readers, however, seem satisfied with the story as written—a story that resembles “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” not only in its African setting but also in its focus on a character who lives most intensely right before he dies.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Harry in Hemingway’s story with the title character of EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’s poem “Richard Cory.” In what ways does each man seem to have many material advantages and thus many reasons to feel satisfied with his life? Why does each man seem, however, not to be satisfied? In which work is the reason for dissatisfaction made more clear? How does each man cope with his dissatisfaction? Which character is more sympathetic?
2. Read this story alongside Gertrude Stein’s book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. How do the two works depict the roles, responsibilities, and aspirations of the artist? How does each writer use his or her work to comment on himself or herself? How does each writer depict his or her relationship with his or her closest companion?
3. Compare and contrast this story with Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” Discuss the works in terms of setting, characterization, theme, and technique. How are the relationships between the two married couples similar and/or different? In what ways do social class and economic status play important roles in both works? Which story has the happier ending? Which of the two works strikes you as the more interesting? Explain your response.
4. The previous discussion mentions the story’s “generally convincing characterization . . . [and] its effective evocations of setting, mood, symbolism, theme, and tone.” Try to find one passage in the story that especially illustrates all of these aspects of the work’s effectiveness, and then discuss that passage in detail.

“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1938)

Francis Macomber and his wife, Margot, are wealthy Americans in a troubled marriage who are on safari in Africa, where their guide is a British professional hunter named Robert Wilson. When the inexperienced Macomber flees after being confronted by a lion he has wounded, the sarcastic Margot treats her husband with contempt; she even makes little effort to disguise the fact that she has slept with Wilson. The next day, after Macomber demonstrates surprising courage while hunting, he seems to be a new and much more self-confident man, but as he is about to be attacked by a wild buffalo he has been pursuing, he dies when Margot fires on the animal (even though Wilson later insinuates that she was really aiming at Macomber himself).

This is one of Hemingway’s most famous and most controversial stories. Most of the controversy surrounds the final scene, in which a shot from

Margot's rifle strikes Macomber in the back of the head just as he is being charged by the wild buffalo. Did Margot, as Wilson suggests, intentionally kill her husband because she feared his new-found courage and self-confidence and was worried that he might divorce her? Or did she genuinely seek to save her husband's life by taking aim at the buffalo, killing Macomber merely by a horrific accident? Opinion concerning these questions has long been divided, although commentators now most often argue that Margot did indeed intend to save her husband. The narrator, after all, explicitly states that "Mrs. Macomber, in the car, had shot at the buffalo" (*Complete* 28), and analysts increasingly have been inclined to accept this statement at face value. Wilson (these interpreters argue) is an unreliable commentator whose assessment of Margot's actions is biased not only by his own cynicism but also by his awareness that if Margot reported him to the authorities for chasing buffalo from a moving car, he could lose his license and thus his career. From this perspective, then, his closing attacks on Margot are meant to intimidate her into silence about his own professional misconduct, and in fact some critics have even suggested that Wilson intentionally engineers Macomber's death—that he deliberately creates the conditions that make it likely that Macomber will be shot by his wife.

Hemingway, however, leaves the ending of the story effectively ambiguous. Margot never denies Wilson's charges; instead, she merely repeats the phrase "Stop it" again and again, as if she cannot bear to hear his words and cannot think of a more effective answer. Nor does the narrator himself intervene to make a stronger case for Margot; instead, Wilson literally has the last word, and as the story closes, Margot seems desperately defenseless. Perhaps she feels guilty, not for having intentionally killed Macomber but for having betrayed him by sleeping with Wilson, or perhaps she is momentarily too overcome with shock at his death to muster an effective refutation of Wilson's charges. Perhaps she senses that on some subconscious level she did in fact seek or desire her husband's death, so that even if she did not deliberately aim her gun at him, she did hope to be rid of him.

In other words, her conscience may be deeply troubled even though she may be technically innocent of any crime. Hemingway, in short, has crafted a masterfully complex conclusion to an exceptionally complicated tale. Instead of providing clear answers and a pat ending, he leaves us with nagging questions about the moral and psychological complexity of all three major characters.

Macomber himself, for instance, certainly seems increasingly complex (and thus increasingly interesting) as the story proceeds. Although he is relatively young, is physically fit, is an accomplished athlete, and is a highly skilled fisherman, as the story opens he has "just shown himself, very publicly, to be a coward" (*Complete* 6). It might be easy, then, to sympathize with the disdain that Margot (and, to a lesser extent, Wilson) adopts toward Macomber, but, as the story proceeds, Wilson feels growing sympathy and respect for the novice hunter, not only because Macomber seems genuinely remorseful for fleeing from the lion but also because Wilson sees him as a victim of his bitchy, unforgiving, and self-centered wife. Ironically, the more Margot throws herself at Wilson, the less respect he seems to feel for her. In addition, the more she condemns Macomber, the easier it is for all readers to feel sympathy for him. This is especially the case when we learn that even the Africans have a proverb "that says a brave man is always frightened three times by a lion; when he first sees his track, when he first hears him roar and when he first confronts him" (*Complete* 11). Macomber's fear of the lion, then, hardly seems inexplicable (especially since this is his first lion hunt). Meanwhile, his willingness to go out the next day in pursuit of buffalo also helps to rehabilitate him not only in Wilson's eyes but also in the eyes of most readers. His courage in facing and killing three wild buffalo (including shooting the biggest one entirely on his own) further enhances Wilson's (and the reader's) respect for him. Most important, however, that act helps renew Macomber's respect for himself. His abrupt and surprising death, then, occurs at the most ironic of all possible moments: Macomber dies just when he is feeling most alive—just when he is most looking forward to the future. If at the beginning

of the story he seemed a weak cuckold, by the end of the tale he has evolved into a far more intriguing character. How might he have dealt with Margot and her infidelity in light of his new-found self-regard? Hemingway leaves the answer to that question tantalizingly unclear. Macomber's death is one of the most ironic in American literature, since he dies when he feels most vital.

Margot herself is also a fascinating character, who becomes even more complicated as the tale proceeds. Sometimes she seems weak; sometimes she seems hard-hearted and passive-aggressive. Sometimes she seems to feel sorry for her husband; sometimes she treats him with contempt. At times she seems sexually promiscuous in an almost smugly taunting way, while at other times she wins sympathy as an aging beauty trapped in a fundamentally unsatisfying marriage in which she lacks any real autonomy. A different, lesser kind of writer might have made Margot an object of sustained sarcasm and might have depicted Macomber himself with a total lack of compassion; Hemingway, instead, implies the complexity of each character and the inevitable complications of their relationship. He manages to take their complexities and, rather than letting them seem a bundle of inconsistent contradictions, he makes rounded, credible characters from them. By the end of the tale, neither the husband nor the wife seems a shallow caricature, and the same is also true of Wilson. Although often he has been seen as a kind of spokesman for Hemingway himself (particularly in his stoic attitudes toward death; in his cool, businesslike approach to hunting; in his respect for Macomber's eventual courage; and in his disdain for Margot's bitchiness), Wilson has also increasingly been seen as a morally unreliable judge of others' characters and even (by some) as a scheming hypocrite. He is willing to bed a married woman while viewing her as a kind of slut, and he prides himself on his professionalism while being willing to break professional rules. Yet he also shows himself capable of giving Macomber his due and of discerning the intricacies of the Macomber marriage. In short, all three major characters are convincingly complicated personalities, and they are enmeshed in a plot that is

itself so complex that one's immediate impulse, upon finishing the story, is to read it again.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Hemingway's story with Nella Larsen's novel titled *Passing*. In particular, discuss the ways both works describe complex marriages; the ways they present sudden, unexpected deaths; and the ways they conclude with compelling moral and psychological ambiguities. What is the evidence for and against the "guilt" of the two surviving women? What are their own attitudes toward the deaths they witness?
2. Discuss the depiction of gender roles in this story and in JACK LONDON's novel *The Sea-Wolf*. In what ways is Humphrey Van Weyden, in that novel, similar to and/or different from Francis Macomber? How do both characters evolve in similar ways? In what ways is Margot in Hemingway's story similar to and/or different from Maude Brewster in *The Sea-Wolf*? How does Wilson in Hemingway's tale resemble and/or differ from Wolf Larsen in London's novel?
3. Discuss the issue of criminal and moral guilt in this story and in THEODORE DREISER's novel *An American Tragedy*. How does the situation of Francis and Margot Macomber parallel the situation of Clyde Griffith and Roberta Alden? What differences exist between their circumstances? Discuss the intentions of Clyde and Margot, and discuss the role of accident in both works.
4. How and why is the African setting effective in this story? Why do you think Hemingway chose to place his characters in such a "primitive" environment, and why did he make one of the major antagonists in the story an animal rather than another human? In what ways does this story deal with "primal" emotions and ancient, almost primeval human passions and concerns?

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)

Robert Jordan, a young American professor who has returned to Spain during its civil war to sup-

port the side of the Republicans against the fascists, has been assigned to work with local partisans to blow up a bridge that will be crucial in a coming offensive. While living in the remote mountains with a group of republican peasants (headed by the unreliable Pablo and his feisty, courageous wife, Pilar), Jordan falls in love with a beautiful young woman named Maria, who has recently been gang-raped by the fascists. After much preparation, many delays, and numerous dangers, Jordan succeeds in destroying the bridge, but he dies in the fighting that immediately follows.

Just as Hemingway set *A Farewell to Arms* in the midst of World War I, so he set *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the midst of the civil war in Spain, which immediately preceded World War II and which, as many people foresaw, was really the opening salvo of that later conflict. The Spanish civil war was not only the first major armed struggle between fascist and anti-fascist forces, but it also gave the major Fascist powers (such as Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy) the opportunity to aid their allies while also testing new methods of warfare, including heavy reliance on airpower and the wholesale bombing of civilian targets. For numerous people in Hemingway's generation, defeating the fascists in Spain was considered crucial to preventing the spread of fascism elsewhere, but, even before Hemingway's novel was published, the Spanish Republicans had been crushed and the Second World War (which had been widely feared but just as widely expected) had already begun. Within a year the United States itself would enter the fight, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Hemingway's novel, then, was both an elegy for Spain and a call to future arms: It celebrated a Spanish cause that had already been defeated, but it was also meant to inspire courage and resolve on behalf of the even larger struggle now under way.

Responses to Hemingway's newest novel varied right from the start. Most critics immediately praised the new book; they saw it as a return to its author's earlier strength after he had produced a number of books in the 1930s widely regarded as disappointments. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was greeted by many reviewers as proof that Heming-

way could still write major narratives, and indeed some reviewers considered this work his best novel so far. Most reviewers praised it for its length, its complexity, its vivid characters, its greater variety of style, its moral seriousness, its political relevance, and its skillful blending of exciting physical action and suspense with a touching story of genuine love. The book was an immediate best seller, and film rights for a major Hollywood movie were quickly purchased. Hemingway had thus produced a novel that pleased not only most professional commentators but also the public at large. Nevertheless, critics did (of course) disagree on some points, and the disagreement continues to this day. Some analysts, for instance, found the novel too openly political and propagandistic; they believed that Hemingway wrote too much as a partisan of a particular cause, and they therefore argued that the characters were often too abstract, too thin, and too wooden. Other critics, in contrast, argued that the book was not political *enough*; they thought that Hemingway had failed to clarify the social ideas and ideals that motivated the fighting he described. Instead (these critics contended) he tended to focus too much on individual personalities, leaving obscure the larger causes at stake. Still other reviewers, however, praised Hemingway for his objectivity—especially for his ability to suggest that atrocities had been committed by both sides and his willingness to show that even the republican cause, with which he obviously sympathized, was not without its flaws, especially because of the assistance it received from Soviet Stalinists. For many of the book's initial reviewers, then, the book was politically controversial: Some considered it too stridently political, some felt that its politics were fuzzy and indistinct, while others felt that Hemingway had struck a delicate balance, producing a work of enormous political relevance while not sacrificing his ability to depict credible characters.

Characterization, in fact, was another point of controversy among the earliest reviewers of the book. Many readers (indeed, probably most) thought that Hemingway had managed to present a beautiful and moving account of the rapidly developing love (and frequent lovemaking) between

Robert Jordan and Maria, the Spanish peasant. Their romantic involvement, which becomes physical almost immediately and which develops forcefully over the course of a mere three days, struck many readers as charming, convincing, lyrical, honest, and profound. Other reviewers, however, considered the affair too abrupt, too conventional, too sentimental, and too much a reflection of an almost adolescent male fantasy in which a beautiful woman immediately offers her sexual favors. Jordan does not even need to court Maria; instead, she quickly presents herself to him, climbing at once into his sleeping bag for a night of passionate lovemaking. One Spanish reviewer, Arturo Barea, found Maria's behavior literally incredible; he argued that no self-respecting Spanish woman of Maria's era, class, and circumstances would behave in this way and expect to keep her reputation. He also argued that Jordan's constant tendency to call Maria his "rabbit," as a term of tender affection, would have been laughable to most Spaniards, since that term in Spain is a vulgar reference to a woman's genitals. Hemingway's slip, in this respect and many others, reflected (according to Barea, who knew Hemingway personally) his relatively shallow knowledge of Spanish society, customs, and phrasing. Barea asserted, for instance, that the language attributed to the Spanish characters is often stilted and pompous, and that Hemingway, in attempting to convey the true flavor of Spanish speech, had offered only incredible distortions (see Meyer 350–361). On the other hand, most English-speaking reviewers found the diction of Hemingway's Spaniards (particularly their obscenities) vivid and convincing, and the book does in fact remain one of his most popular in Spanish-speaking countries. If Hemingway's rendering of Spanish dialect is indeed inaccurate, most readers seem untroubled by that fact, and if the term *rabbit* seems objectionable to any English-speaking readers, it is probably because the word sometimes, ironically, gives the love scenes a tone that is occasionally too sugary. The problem, then, is not vulgarity but sentimentality.

Arturo Barea, the Spanish commentator who objected to Hemingway's depiction of Maria, also criticized the ways he describes Pablo and Pilar.

Spanish peasants from the mountains would never (Barea alleged) accept leadership from a couple as foreign to their parochial culture as Pablo and Pilar—especially not from Pilar herself, who is a Gypsy. For most readers, however, Pilar is one of the most memorable and appealing characters in this book; like Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, she is vigorous, earthy, opinionated, and full of spirit, and more than one early reviewer compared her to Shakespeare's Falstaff both in her size and in her gregarious self-assurance. Occasionally a reviewer objected that Pilar was overdone and overexposed, but for most readers she remains one of the best aspects of the book, contributing a vitality it might otherwise lack. As were a number of the other "secondary" characters (especially El Sordo and Anselmo), Pilar was praised for giving the novel a range and depth often missing from some of Hemingway's earlier fiction, and although some reviewers complained about the novel's allegedly excessive length, most praised it for its substantial exploration of a multitude of interesting characters facing a host of daunting moral, physical, and psychological challenges. Robert Jordan struck many reviewers as a more thoughtful, intelligent, and reflective hero than many earlier Hemingway protagonists, and the novel in which he is the central character was greeted as mature and full of meaning—a story in which much more is at stake than who beds whom, who drinks what, who slugs whom, how many fish are caught, how many bulls are killed, the skill one shows in the techniques of fishing, or the courage one shows in fighting bulls.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Hemingway's depiction of Spain with THORNTON WILDER's depiction of Peru in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. What techniques does each writer use to try to make his presentation of a foreign culture seem authentic? How do the works differ and/or resemble one another in their styles of language and in the kinds of characters they present? Discuss the symbolic functions of the bridges in both works.
2. How are the attitudes toward war in this novel similar to and/or different from the attitudes

toward war in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*? What factors made World War I seem, in the minds of many of Hemingway's contemporaries, a different kind of conflict from the struggle against fascism? How are the hero and heroine in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* similar to and/or different from the hero and heroine in *A Farewell to Arms*? How do the plots of the two books—especially their conclusions—compare and contrast?

3. Ambrose Bierce's story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" also deals with a man's effort to destroy a bridge during wartime. How is Bierce's protagonist similar to and/or different from Robert Jordan? What differences are there between the causes the two men represent? What is the nature of each man's relationship with the woman he loves? Why is it significant that Jordan acts as a member of a group whereas Bierce's protagonist acts as an individual? What is the implied attitude of each author toward his protagonist?
4. Discuss the characterization of Pilar. What does she contribute to the book? How (if at all) does she detract from its success? How does the presentation of this character reflect the strengths (and perhaps also the flaws) of Hemingway's general method in this novel? Compare and contrast Pilar with Maria. Why does Robert Jordan admire them both? What do they have in common despite their obvious differences?

***The Old Man and the Sea* (1952)**

Santiago is an old Cuban fisherman who has gone almost three months without making a significant catch—a fact that causes many of his fellow villagers to consider him pitiful, laughable, or unlucky, and a fact that also causes the parents of Manolin, a boy who assists and adores the old man, to put their son to work on another boat. One day, however, Santiago's bait is taken by a huge marlin; although the old man's struggle with the fish endures for two days, he finally succeeds in outlasting the creature and claiming his prize. Unfortunately, however, as

the old man heads back to port on the third day with his enormous catch, the marlin is attacked and almost entirely devoured by sharks. Nevertheless, at the end of the tale Santiago feels enormously tired but not entirely defeated.

When it was published in 1952, this short novel (or novella) helped restore Hemingway's faltering reputation. In the immediately preceding years, many critics had begun to feel (perhaps along with Hemingway himself) that his best days as an author were behind him, but *The Old Man and the Sea* was greeted with enormous critical and popular acclaim. WILLIAM FAULKNER considered it Hemingway's best book, and it was certainly not a coincidence that Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature just two years after this novel was published. In the years since its first printing, the reputation of the novel has declined somewhat, but the work remains one of its author's most widely read, widely taught, and best-loved books, partly because it deals with issues of such timeless concern and partly because it focuses on a central character who seems to be a kind of modern Everyman. Practically all readers can identify with Santiago's extended misfortune, his growing isolation, and his sense of being overtaken and undermined by age, while most readers would clearly also like to respond to such challenges with the kind of courage, dignity, and determination that Santiago displays. Unlike the hedonism, disillusionment, and nihilism so tiresomely emphasized (if accurately reported) in such earlier works as *The Sun Also Rises*, the values articulated and implied by *The Old Man and the Sea* are life affirming and even inspiring, and the issues the later book deals with seem of broad existential relevance. In *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway deals with characters who are shallow and rather spoiled; in *The Old Man and the Sea* he presents a protagonist who might symbolize anyone confronting the kinds of difficult challenges common to most human lives.

Certainly Santiago, on one level, symbolizes the aging Hemingway himself, and the old fisherman's struggle to tame and subdue the powerful marlin is almost an allegory of Hemingway's own struggle to produce a major, enduring piece of writing.

From this perspective, then, the voracious, scavenging sharks represent the hordes of literary critics who are always willing to descend on a dedicated author's work and tear it to pieces. If this were the story's only significance, however, the book would not only be of limited relevance but also run the risk of being highly sentimental and self-pitying. Admittedly, even when it is viewed as the story of an old man worshipped by a boy and bested by nature, the tale does sometimes veer in the direction of maudlin melodrama (especially when the old fisherman is compared, a bit too heavy-handedly, to the suffering, crucified Christ), and some major critics have in fact found the story far too mawkish. Generally, however, Hemingway guards against this danger through a number of mostly successful means. For one thing, Santiago rarely really thinks of *himself* as a victim; he never asks for pity, and he usually deflects it when it is offered. He stoically accepts his fate (whatever that fate may ultimately prove to be), and in his struggle with the marlin (and even more in his angry, violent combat with the sharks), he shows a tough pugnacity that allows him to preserve his own respect while winning the respect of the reader. At the same time, he evinces a kind of humility that prevents him from seeming excessively "macho": He is keenly aware of his own flaws, mistakes, and foibles. He is, in short, a fairly complex character beneath a veneer of primitive simplicity, and the fact that the book's only real love interest is the taciturn love between the old man and the boy means that the novel lacks the often syrupy romance that sometimes makes some other Hemingway novels too sugary. There are no "rabbits" or "darlings" or even "bitches" in this book to mar its understated tone; instead, Hemingway keeps his focus squarely on one person's struggle to live, succeed, and endure. It is hard to imagine a reader who could not empathize with such desires on one level or another.

The style of this book, like the style of Hemingway's writings in general, is simple, clear, and straightforward, but, if anything, the phrasing here seems even more clean and classic than before. Gone is the sophisticated, cynical wit often employed by the pretentious characters of *The Sun Also Rises*;

gone, too, is all the babyish love talk of *A Farewell to Arms*. Also gone are the vivid but sometimes quaint attempts of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to capture Spanish speech in English diction (all those *thees* and *thous*, not to mention the unfortunate *rabbits*). Instead, as the very title of *The Old Man and the Sea* suggests, the emphasis in this book is on universal, elemental facts presented in plain, almost pristine language. Hemingway never lets us forget that the speakers are Cuban (he occasionally uses foreign terms and foreign sentence structure), but the language rarely sounds abnormally remote from everyday English speech. Nor does it seem afflicted or affected by the repetitive, Gertrude Steinian style that sometimes mars some of Hemingway's early works (with all those phrases such as "very nice" and "very good" and "very fine" that quickly become so tediously predictable). In this book, Hemingway lets his words do whatever they need to do in any particular instance; he seems less interested than before in making the style conform to preconceived patterns. Stylistically, a reader can never be quite sure what may be coming next, and so, simply in terms of phrasing, the book is rarely monotonous.

In terms of plot, as well, the book sustains interest. The basic story—an old man struggles with a giant fish far out at sea—is inherently suspenseful: Will the fisherman succeed? Will the fish escape? Might the fisherman die? Indeed, our focus is so much on Santiago's initial battle with the marlin that it does not occur to us that he might win that battle but lose the war—that the giant fish, once caught, might itself be assailed by sharks. The abrupt arrival of these predators is a surprise (even though, of course, it should not be), and then the suspense begins all over again: Will the sharks entirely consume the marlin? Will Santiago himself fall victim to the sharks? How will Santiago finally react if the sharks do succeed in stealing the marlin that means so much to him? Thus, although the plot of the book is simple, one's interest rarely lags, and although most people cannot (of course) relate in any personal way to the struggles of a deep-sea fisherman, most humans *can* easily identify in general terms with the kinds of hopes, disappointments, and challenges Santiago faces and with the spirit he tries to sustain.

4. Read *In Our Time* as a book that foreshadows later aspects of Hemingway's career in its style, themes, techniques, and characterization. How does this early work anticipate one or more of his later writings in one or more of these ways? How is Nick Adams a precursor of later Hemingway figures? How are relations between male friends, or relations between males and females, or relations between the young and their elders depicted in *In Our Time* in ways that shed light on Hemingway's later works? How is the final tone of *In Our Time* similar to and/or different from the final tone of *The Old Man and the Sea*?
5. Hemingway's stories and novels have often been turned into films. Choose one of the filmed versions of one of his works, and compare and contrast the film with the original text. How does the film depart from the text? Are the departures effective? Why may such departures have seemed necessary to the screenwriter or director? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the film when it is compared with the original text?
6. Choose one of Hemingway's lesser-known and less well-regarded novels (such as *Across the River and Into the Trees*, *Islands in the Stream*, or *The Garden of Eden*) and discuss the effectiveness of the work. Why is the book less respected than other works by Hemingway? In what ways is it successful or unsuccessful? How does it resemble and/or differ from his other writings?
7. Choose one of Hemingway's novels, and then select several of his short stories written at roughly the same time. What similarities and/or differences do you see between the longer work and the shorter ones? What do they have in common in terms of themes, plot, characterization, style, structure, or techniques?
8. Choose one relatively brief passage from a work by Hemingway—approximately a page in length—and analyze that passage in as much detail as possible. For example, discuss the denotations and connotations of particular words, the length and structure of particular sentences, the implications of particular images, or the effectiveness of the characterization and dialogue. How does the chosen passage contribute to the work as a whole? How is it typical of the entire work? How does it look back at, or forward to, other portions of the larger text?
9. Discuss the ways women are presented in at least three different works by Hemingway. What similarities and/or differences do you see in the way female characters are depicted? What traits do various women characters seem to symbolize or represent? Does Hemingway present women effectively and convincingly? What generalizations, if any, can you make about the ways he depicts women?
10. Read a biography of Hemingway, and then discuss the ways in which his own experiences, ideas, and personality are reflected in one of his works. Is knowledge of Hemingway's life important to a proper understanding and interpretation of the work you selected? If so, why? If not, why not?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigía Edition*. New York: Scribner, 1987.
- . *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner, 1929.
- . *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York: Scribner, 1940.
- . *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner, 1958.
- . *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Scribner, 1952.
- . *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Scribner, 1954.
- The Hemingway Resource Center. Available online. URL: <http://www.lostgeneration.com>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- The Hemingway Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.hemingwaysociety.org/#welcome.asp>. Accessed April 7, 2009.

- Hoffman, Frederick J. "Ernest Hemingway." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 367–416. New York: Norton, 1973.
- Meyer, Jeffrey. *Hemingway: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- Reynolds, Michael S., ed. *Critical Essays on Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983.
- Sandison, David. *Ernest Hemingway: An Illustrated Biography*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1999.
- Smith, Paul. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989.
- Stark, Bruce. "Ernest Hemingway." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors. Vol. 2, A Survey of Research and Criticism since 1972*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 404–479. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990.
- Tyler, Lisa. *Student Companion to Ernest Hemingway*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2001.
- Wagner, Linda W. *Ernest Hemingway: Six Decades of Criticism*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1987.

Robert C. Evans



LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967)

[M]y best poems were all written when I felt the worst. When I was happy, I didn't write anything.

(The Big Sea)

Langston Hughes burst upon the American literary scene in the 1920s with prodigious force. He was quickly embraced as one of the most talented black writers of his day, and his early poetry, in particular, was accorded immense and widespread respect. Although he never (in the eyes of some critics) lived up to the enormous potential of his youth, he is still considered one of the most important and most influential of all African-American authors.

James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, the son of James Nathaniel Hughes and Carrie Mercer Langston, who had married in 1899. Almost immediately the boy was called Langston, and almost immediately, too, his father absented himself from the life of his wife and son, moving to Mexico because of a job and deciding to stay there to escape the pressures of racial discrimination in the United States. Relations between young Langston and his own mother were often strained, and for much of his youth he lived with Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston, his grandmother, while Carrie sought employment in various locations. Although Langston, his mother, and his grandmother traveled to Mexico to meet Langston's father in 1907, no reunion of the family resulted from the visit, and Langston grew up in various cities in the United States, including Lawrence, Topeka, and Kansas City, Kansas, as well as Cleveland, Ohio, and Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Most of the first decade or so of his life, however, was spent in Lawrence with his grandmother, but then, in 1915, after her death, he moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his now-divorced mother and her new husband, Homer Clark, whose son (Gwyn "Kit" Clark) became Langston's new stepbrother. Already at this early age Langston was showing definite literary talent and was chosen class poet by his fellow eighth graders.

After moving to Cleveland in 1916 and beginning high school there, Hughes continued to develop his interest in literature; he read the writings of a variety of American poets and published his own verse in the school magazine. By 1918 his mother had separated from her husband and moved to Chicago, where Hughes visited her that summer, but he made a more important (and more distressing) trip in 1919 when he visited his father in Mexico, where conflicts, especially concerning Langston's ambitions to become a professional writer, soon emerged. Hughes's father, who had an important post with a power company, believed that his son should set his sights on a more practical and profitable goal than being a poet; tensions between the father and son became so severe that Langston actually became physically ill and had to be hospitalized. Nevertheless, on returning to Cleveland, Hughes received an allowance from his father and continued to succeed at school. When he graduated in 1920, he had already begun to write some of his most notable poems (such as "When

Sue Wears Red”), and while making a second visit to his father in 1921 he composed one of the lyrics for which he is still best known (“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”), which was soon published in the *Crisis*, one of the most prominent African-American journals. Hughes’s father, however, wanted his son to become an engineer, not a poet, and so the boy’s second visit to Mexico was not much happier than the first.

Despite these tensions between father and son, the elder Hughes did agree to pay for his son’s education for one year at Columbia University in New York City. The move to New York could not have been more auspicious for Langston, since the mid-1920s became the years of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, that great outpouring of literary, musical, and artistic talent by blacks who had been flocking to New York for some time. Although financial pressures played a part in Hughes’s decision to withdraw from Columbia in 1922, in 1923 he was living, working, and writing in Harlem, all the while making contacts with other significant writers and earning a growing reputation for his own works. His time in Harlem was interrupted, however, by several expeditions abroad as a sailor on merchant ships, including trips to West Africa in 1923 and to Europe (including Paris) in 1924. These journeys and sojourns—which were full of adventure and new and exciting experiences of all sorts—helped contribute to the tone and substance of Hughes’s increasingly unconventional verse, which was also influenced by the jazz and blues music so popular during this time. After returning to the United States, he briefly took up residence in Washington, D.C., where he worked in various low-paying jobs, including as a busboy. Nevertheless, he was still in contact with various writers and intellectuals, and when he heard that the famous poet Vachel Lindsay would be reading his work in Washington, Hughes went to the hotel where Lindsay was staying, presented three of his own poems to the great man in the hotel dining room, and later had the pleasure of learning that Lindsay had read and praised the poems in public, thus winning them and their author the attention of the

press. (Ironically, Hughes himself could not attend the reading because of his race.)

In 1925, too, Hughes won a literary prize offered by the magazine *Opportunity*, and his work was also published in a number of significant venues. His contacts with other black authors and intellectuals were also broadening, and, with the support of a wealthy white patroness (Amy Spingarn), he was able to enroll at all-black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1926. The most important event of his life during that year, however, was the publication of his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*, which was issued by the distinguished publisher Alfred A. Knopf. The poems of that collection shocked many readers (including many black readers), not only because of their substance (especially their focus on what some considered the less savory aspects of black urban life) but also because of their style (which was often colloquial, jazzy, and vulgar in a variety of senses of that word). Hughes vigorously defended his work from the attacks it provoked, but the poems also received widespread praise—so much, in fact, that in 1927 he published another book of verse (*Fine Clothes to the Jew*), which created even more controversy. By now Hughes was recognized as one of the most important African-American writers of his day, and by this time he had also won the patronage of yet another patroness—a rich, eccentric white woman (Charlotte Osgood Mason) who took a strong interest in black culture and in supporting (and sometimes trying to control) the careers of young black artists. Hughes welcomed Mason’s support but eventually chafed at the strings to which it was attached.

By 1929 Hughes had graduated from Lincoln University and had finished a novel titled *Not without Laughter*, but these two strokes of personal good fortune were offset by the onset of the Great Depression, the enormous economic downturn that overtook the country in the fall of that year and created gloom and despair throughout the 1930s. Meanwhile, Hughes’s personal fortunes took a downturn of their own when he quarreled with Mason in 1930 and when he also, that year,

entered into conflict with a fellow black writer, ZORA NEALE HURSTON, with whom he had been cowriting a play. Nevertheless, on the plus side, 1930 saw the publication of *Not without Laughter* as well as Hughes's selection as a recipient of an award from the Harmon Foundation, an organization established to encourage the work of black authors. In 1931 he was also awarded a travel grant from the Rosenwald Foundation; this allowed him to tour the southern states, where he gave poetry readings and (unfortunately) came face to face with blatant examples of racial discrimination and injustice. By this time his politics (like those of many American intellectuals during the Great Depression) had become distinctly left-wing, and even somewhat Marxist; in 1932 he even traveled to the Soviet Union to participate in a planned motion picture, and by the end of that same year he published an extremely controversial poem titled "Goodbye Christ" in a black Marxist journal. The poem sparked outrage among many readers for many years, and Hughes would never quite escape the controversy it inspired. Also appearing in 1932 was a book of children's verse titled *The Dream Keeper* as well as *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play*.

For Hughes, life in the 1930s was characterized by travel. Returning from Russia, he passed through Soviet Asia and also visited Japan, Korea, China, Hawaii, and California, settling for a time (with the support of another patron) in 1933 in the beautiful town of Carmel-by-the-Sea. He had to flee that community in 1934, however, because of threats arising from his reputation as a communist, but 1934 was also the year of another literary triumph—the publication of a well-reviewed collection of stories titled *The Ways of White Folks*. Meanwhile, further travel took Hughes to Mexico (to settle the estate of his now-dead father), back to California in 1935 (where further protests dogged him), then to Ohio to visit his mother, and then to New York to witness the production of a play of his titled *Mulatto*. He was also at work on other plays during this time, including *Little Ham*, *When the Jack Hollers* (written in collaboration with Arna Bontemps), and *Angelo Herndon Jones* (which in

1936 won a contest sponsored by *New Theatre* magazine). Hughes's commitment to drama was also affirmed by the staging, in 1937, of his plays *Drums of Haiti* and *Joy to My Soul* and by his decision to establish, that year, the Harlem Suitcase Theater, which put on his newest play (*Don't You Want to Be Free?*) in 1938. He wrote further dramatic works (including *The Organizer*, *Young Man of Harlem*, and *Front Porch*) that year, in addition to publishing a collection of left-wing poetry titled *A New Song*. By 1939 he was at work on two different film scripts in California (*God Sends Sunday* and *Way Down South*), and 1940 saw the publication of his important autobiographical novel, *The Big Sea*. After a bout of serious ill health in 1941, he was soon back at work. He continued to show a strong interest in theater, founding the Skyloft Players in Chicago in 1941, working on a musical called *The Sun Do Move*, and even writing radio scripts in 1942 to support the American cause in World War II. *Shakespeare in Harlem*, a new book of poems, appeared that year, but a significant new development for Hughes began in 1943, when, in a series of newspaper columns he had begun publishing earlier for the *Chicago Defender*, he introduced the character of Jesse B. Semple, whose wry commentaries on the lives of blacks in the United States would eventually make him one of Hughes's most popular creations.

Merely to list the works of Hughes's final two decades shows how productive he remained throughout his life. His collections of poetry included *Jim Crow's Last Stand* (1943), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), *One-Way Ticket* (1949), *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1959), *Ask Your Mama* (1961), and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967). His works based on the Jesse B. Semple character included *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1949), *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957), *The Best of Simple* (1961), and *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965). Other prose works included *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (1952), *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), *Tambourines to Glory* (1958), and *Something in Common and Other Stories* (1963). Hughes produced eight books for children in his final two decades, edited

(or coedited) eight anthologies, authored (with Milton Meltzer) *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956), and worked on numerous plays. He was, in short, a comprehensive man of letters, and although he tends to be best remembered for the work he did in the 1920s and 1930s, during the course of his career he produced enough work to keep critics busy for decades. By the time he died (after undergoing surgery, on May 22, 1967) he had become one of the most visible and successful African-American authors of the 20th century. He had left a rich legacy in words and deeds and had earned his stature as one of the most respected black writers of his time.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921, 1926)

The speaker of the poem acts as the spokesman for the whole black race and its ancient and recent history; he mentions the associations between blacks and a variety of famous rivers, including the Euphrates in the Middle East, the Congo in tropical Africa, the Nile in the Egypt of the pharaohs, and the Mississippi at the time of Lincoln. The speaker associates the history of his people and their souls (and his own soul) with the timeless flow of such rivers.

This poem (one of Hughes’s earliest and most famous) announced an unusual new voice on the poetic scene—a voice that would speak with enormous self-respect about the black experience and its distinguished historical roots. The speaker is identified in the title as a spokesman for his race, and the title equates black people with one of the most ancient, archetypal, and mythic features of the planet’s geography. The poem implies that the history of black people is as ancient, varied, and vital as rivers themselves. Rivers existed long before humans arrived on the planet, and blacks (the poem makes clear) have played important roles in human culture since the beginnings of recorded time. The poem fluctuates between the abstract and the specific: Its first three lines deal with rivers in general; its next four comment on four rivers in particular, from the most distant to the nearest, both in time

and in space; its final three lines move back to the general again, repeating earlier phrasing and ending with an exact repetition of line 3, which now functions as a kind of refrain.

The Euphrates is a river associated with the beginnings of human civilization; the speaker (giving voice to archetypal black experiences) claims to have bathed in those ancient waters (l. 4). The phrasing here implies humans’ complete immersion in nature. Next the speaker claims to have built a “hut” near the Congo (l. 5)—phrasing that implies another stage of human development. Then the speaker claims to have “raised . . . pyramids” above the Nile (l. 6)—yet another advance in the progress of civilization, although the poem leaves tantalizingly unclear whether the black builders of the pyramids were their designers or were slave labor exploited to construct them. Finally, in the next line (which is, appropriately, the longest and most meandering in the poem) the speaker refers to the Mississippi—a reference that cannot help but remind us of the enslavement of blacks (l. 7). Yet the inevitable implied allusion to slavery is balanced by an explicit reference to “Abe Lincoln,” who was instrumental in ending slavery, and the line is further balanced, in effectively complex ambiguity, when the speaker claims to have seen the “muddy bosom” of the Mississippi “turn all golden in the sunset” (l. 7). Darkness is balanced against light; muddy waters are seen as beautiful. The river is personified, as if it were an old mother or a young lover, and Hughes, in his loving appreciation of the beauty of nature and the history of America, shows here (in substance, style, and form) his clear debt to Walt Whitman. The depth of the speaker’s soul is implied not only by the breadth of his historical memory but also by the absence of mere bitterness in his reference to the Mississippi; the simplicity, clarity, and directness of his language (which flows smoothly, as the rivers themselves do); and the profoundness of his appreciation of nature and natural beauty.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with two poems by Carl Sandburg—“Prairie Waters by Night” and “Grass.” How do all three poems use imag-

ery of nature? Which poem by Sandburg most resembles Hughes's poem in tone, technique, and style? How does the tone of "Grass" differ from the tone of Hughes's poem, and why? Which of the two works is more ironic and cynical? Which is more lyric and celebratory?

2. How does Hughes's poem resemble and/or differ from W. E. B. DuBois's "Song of the Smoke"? Discuss the poems in terms of rhythm, imagery, tone, and the implied characterization of the speaker. Is one poem more obviously "political" than the other? If so, explain why.
3. Discuss the use of repetition to stress variation in this poem, especially in lines 1–2 and 4–9. Discuss, in particular, the variation of verbs in the latter set of lines. How does such variation imply the complexity and capacities of the black race?

"Mother to Son" (1922, 1926)

In this poem a loving, wise, and presumably wizened old mother speaks to her young son, telling him of the repeated challenges she has faced and the persisting endurance she has displayed. She encourages him to emulate her own example—to continue struggling forward and not to give up in the face of disappointments.

Although the southern dialect used in this poem suggests that its speaker is black, the title of the work (and the sentiments the poem expresses) might refer to any mother and any son. The bond between parent and child is one of the most deeply rooted of all human attachments, and mothers in particular are archetypally associated with selfless love and compassionate wisdom. Using fewer than 100 words and only 20 lines, Hughes successfully creates a credible voice and implies a profound depth of experience; as in many of his poems, the language is simple, clear, direct, and colloquial. The first line immediately establishes an intimate tone and personal point of view; it is as if we are eavesdropping on a particularly private exchange. The second line effectively juxtaposes the conventionally ungrammatical language of the mother ("ain't been no") with a symbol of the grand, easy

life from which she feels so distant. In the next four lines (as elsewhere in this poem) Hughes not only uses anaphora (repetition of initial words) and paratactic construction (repetition of the same kinds of clauses) to create a convincing effect of actual speech, but he also enlivens the lines with precise and vivid images that serve as effective metaphors for the pains and obstacles the mother has faced. Especially effective is the sudden shift from line 6 (which is exceptionally long) to line 7, which consists of the single word *Bare*. That word thus receives enormous emphasis—emphasis that seems all the more appropriate when we realize that this single word sums up the essence of the mother's materially impoverished existence. The fact that *Bare* also rhymes with *stair* from line 2 exemplifies the subtlety of Hughes's music; the poem moves in the rhythms of natural speech, but the structure of the work is far from artless. The irregular line lengths, the general lack of rhyme, and the generally straightforward sentence construction all help make the poem seem appropriately artless and realistic, but the repeated words and repeated patterns of phrasing (such as "And reachin' . . . / And turnin' . . . / And sometimes goin'" [ll. 10–12]) also give it splendid rhetorical force. The repetition of verbs (just quoted) not only contributes to the dynamic vigor of the poem but also reflects the very persistence the mother extols: She repeats patterns of phrasing just as she persisted in patterns of determined behavior, and the catalog of "And / And / And" in lines 10–12 (which describe her continuous movement upward) nicely answers and balances the earlier pattern of "And / And / And" in lines 4–6 (which described the obstacles she faced). In her diction and grammar the mother may seem simple and unsophisticated, but in her feelings and attitudes she embodies the wisdom of the race, in both senses of that word.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the character of the speaker of this poem with the central character in NELLA LARSEN's novel *Quicksand*. How do their backgrounds, attitudes, tones, styles of speech, and final outlooks differ? How are the

conclusions of the two works different in effect? How have issues of race and gender affected the lives of both women, and how have they responded in different ways?

2. Read this poem alongside some of the autobiographical writings of GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (Zitkala-Ša), such as “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” and “An Indian Teacher among Indians.” How do the poem and the prose works differ in spirit, tone, and implied purpose? Do you find one of the speakers more appealing or admirable than the other? If so, explain why. What role does anger play in the Hughes poem and in Bonnin’s prose?
3. How is this work similar to (and/or different from) Hughes’s poem “The Negro Mother”? Discuss the two works in terms of characterization, structure, form, tone of voice, point of view, and diction. In your opinion, is one poem more effective than the other? If so, explain why, being careful to discuss precise details. Is one poem more sentimental than the other?
4. Discuss the ways this poem is divided into distinct lines. Why does Hughes break up the lines as he does? How and why would the poem be less effective if it contained the same number of words but fewer lines? How do the structure and length of the poem mimic its message and its central metaphor?

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926)

In this essay, first published on June 23, 1926, Hughes begins by describing the remark of another young and talented black writer who told Hughes that he wanted “to be a poet—not a Negro poet” (DeSantis 31), a remark Hughes interpreted as implying that the man essentially wanted to be white. In the rest of the essay, Hughes laments the ways black people often are encouraged to devalue the beauties, achievements, and potential of their own race, and he celebrates the black common folk, who simply live their lives, without worrying

about whether whites will approve. Hughes looks forward to the day when black artists of all sorts will proudly embrace their racial identity and use the abundant raw material at their disposal to create art that is true to the full richness of the black experience.

Written in the direct, clear, and accessible style that characterizes much of Hughes’s prose, this essay is obviously a kind of personal artistic manifesto. It helps justify and explain the kind of creative writing that Hughes himself had already begun to practice. The essay is, in a sense, a response to the critics (especially the black critics) who objected to the kind of poetry Hughes himself preferred to write—poetry that featured the actual slang, dialect, rhythms, subjects, and attitudes common in the colloquial speech used by African Americans of the “lower classes.” The essay explains why Hughes values such speech and the perspectives and experiences it represents, and yet the essay also shows how skillful and articulate Hughes can be in employing the kind of language, logic, and attitudes associated with people who are highly educated and highly literate. Hughes admires “the low-down folk, the so-called common element” (DeSantis 32), but he can more than hold his own when arguing with people who consider themselves superior to such folk. Yet his tone (as is characteristic of Hughes) does not seem hectoring, belligerent, or unduly argumentative; the essay exemplifies the very kind of self-confidence, self-possession, and self-respect it advocates. Near the very conclusion of the piece he writes, for instance, that “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too” (DeSantis 36). Those last three words are typical Hughes: On one level they amount to a joke; on another level they are thoroughly serious. In one sense the words are an implicit but taunting reply to all the critics who alleged that Hughes wrote unduly about the “ugly” side of black life. In another sense the words simply acknowledge the plain fact that *all* life has an ugly side, and that to be fully true and complex, great art must deal with

the ugly as well as the more obviously beautiful. Hughes here implies that his deepest commitment is not so much to a particular race as to truth itself, and he also implies that the best art about black people will be art that treats them simply as people, with all the inevitable complications that word connotes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with T. S. ELIOT's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." How are both authors concerned with the relationship between the individual writer and other writers of the past and present? How, why, and to what extent does each essay deal with sociological matters or economic concerns? How do you think Eliot would react to Hughes's essay, and vice versa? Support your arguments with specific evidence from each text.
2. How does Hughes's essay resemble and/or differ from the comments on African-American art in W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*? What values, aspirations, or attitudes does Hughes seem to share with DuBois? How (if at all) do they seem to differ? Discuss the style, tone, and argumentative methods of both works.
3. Discuss the rhetorical effectiveness of the opening sentence of this essay. How does that sentence immediately command attention and create interest? How and why does it make the reader want to read further? Rewrite the sentence in a way that would make it much less forceful—perhaps by dividing it into a number of separate sentences. By the same token, discuss the rhetorical effectiveness of the final four sentences of the essay. In particular, discuss their tone and attitude. How do both factors contribute to the final impact of the essay as a whole?

"Mulatto" (1927)

This startling poem opens with an impassioned exclamation by the mixed-race son of a white southern man; the son asserts his connection to the father, but the father, in angry and ugly tones and

phrasing, rejects any link. The racist father sees black women in the rural South merely as opportunities for sexual exploitation; in illiterate and vulgar language, he repudiates any deeper bond with blacks in general and with his own son in particular.

Part of the effectiveness of this poem derives from the stark contrast between the beauty of the rural Georgia setting—with its "turpentine woods" (l. 3), its "Great big yellow stars" (l. 10), and its "scent of pine wood [that] stings the soft night air" (l. 18)—and the ugliness of the racist father's vulgar language. The poem is simultaneously lyrical and dramatic, lovely and bitter, and its complicated imagery of color also contributes to its force. Appropriately enough, the text is full of images of light that are juxtaposed with images of darkness, with the color yellow (often associated with the stars) mediating between white and black and thus symbolizing the mixture of the races. As many of Hughes's poems do, this one uses repetitions to great effect; rhyme, on the other hand, is used only infrequently, so that when rhymes do occur, they have the impact of the unexpected. Here as so often elsewhere Hughes demonstrates a gifted musical ear; very long lines often alternate with very short ones; the meter follows no prescribed, monotonous pattern; the poem moves along according to its own rhythms and logic, seeming spontaneous and unpredictable but also (thanks to the repetitions and refrains) seeming ordered, artful, and anything but shapeless. As usual in Hughes, the language is simple, colloquial, bold, and direct, with touches of dialect and more than a touch of crudeness and profanity. Hughes wisely refrains from explicitly commenting on, responding to, or sermonizing about the vicious outbursts of the racist father; he lets the man have his say, feeling no need to spell out any obvious lessons derived from the ugliness of the father's words and feelings. The son's tone can be read both as angry and as pleading, while the father's words can be read both as highly personal and private and as representative of broader racial prejudice. On the one hand, the poem depicts the confrontation between one son and one father; on the other hand, it symbolizes the whole history of

American racism, especially the widespread mixing of the races. At the beginning of the poem, the voice of the son seems defiant and bitter, but at the end of the work our last glimpse of him is of “A little yellow / Bastard boy” (ll. 44–45). In this transition, as in so many other respects, the poem manages to combine anger and pathos, satire and sadness, repulsive ugliness and affecting beauty. The ugliness prevents it from seeming sentimental; the beauty prevents it from seeming entirely cynical, depressing, or grim.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is this poem comparable to, and/or different from, Nella Larsen’s novel titled *Passing*, particularly in its depiction of the lives of mixed-race people and their relations to the dominant racial culture. Discuss such issues as the impact of economic class, the importance of regional settings, the genders of the central characters, and the significance of the conclusions and concluding tones. Is one work more pessimistic than the other? Is one work more private or personal in focus than the other? If so, are these differences significant in what they imply about the place of mixed-race persons in American culture?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with WILLIAM FAULKNER’s short story “Barn Burning,” paying particular attention to the ways the two works present relations between fathers and sons. How are the fathers similar in their attitudes, tones, language, and behavior (especially in their treatment of blacks, women, and their own children)? How are the attitudes of the sons complicated and ambivalent? Compare the imagery used at the very end of Faulkner’s story with the imagery of Hughes’s poem. How do the works differ in their points of view?
3. Discuss the connotations and significance of line 3; what meanings does it imply? How does Hughes structure the poem so as to create maximum curiosity? In particular, what is the function of the early passages describing the landscape? Discuss the ironic juxtaposition of line 35 and line 36. How is the poem as a whole built around such juxtapositions?

Not without Laughter (1930)

This novel describes the maturation and family life of a young boy named James “Sandy” Rodgers, who lives in a small town in Kansas with his hard-working and deeply religious elderly grandmother (“Aunt Hager”) and his mother, Annjee, while his carefree father, Jimboy, travels the country in search of work. Aunt Hager has two other daughters: the rebellious Harriet, who runs off and joins a carnival, flirts with prostitution, but ultimately becomes a successful singer; and the distant and ambitious Tempy, who is proud of her hard-won economic and social status and who disdains the lower-class values and behavior of the rest of her family. After Aunt Hager dies, Sandy (now a teenager) is taken in by his aunt Tempy and her husband, who try to groom him according to their upper-middle-class values; eventually, though, he goes to live with his mother in Chicago, where an encounter with his now-prosperous aunt Harriet helps ensure him the chance at a fuller education that he so desires.

This book, which was the first of only two novels by Hughes, was widely praised when it first appeared. Contemporary critics (whose comments are reproduced by Dace) admired the work for presenting a cross section of black society—from the old to the young, from the poor to the relatively well off, and from the traditional, pious, and accommodating (such as Aunt Hager) to the rebellious and often bitter (such as Hager’s daughter Harriet). By structuring the novel around the literal, mental, moral, and emotional growth of Sandy, and by using Sandy mostly as a detached and fair-minded observer of the older characters, Hughes was able to create a convincing sense of what it was like to grow up as a sensitive black in the opening decades of the 20th century. In addition, he was able to convey a sense of the conflicts and tensions involved in the transition from one generation (a generation whose members, such as Aunt Hager, had often known slavery from their own experience) to a new generation—one that

was often eager to break with the past, either by the pursuit of pleasure (as Harriet does) or by strict self-discipline and the determined acquisition of status and wealth (the path chosen by Tempy).

Reviewers who commented on the novel when it first appeared often praised the book for offering a different view of African-American life than the views frequently presented in novels set either in sophisticated (or squalid) Harlem or in the gothic (or moonlight-and-magnolias) territory of the Deep South. Hughes was frequently commended for depicting "ordinary," credible blacks who reflected the typical lives of average African Americans; the characters in his book (it was often said) were neither all saints nor all sinners but usually a bit of both. A number of early commentators praised Hughes for his simplicity, directness, avoidance of melodrama, and ideological restraint; the novel was extolled for dealing with difficult issues without degenerating into mere propaganda, and the tone was often seen as neither sentimental nor simply sarcastic. Reviewers praised Hughes for creating characters who were not political props but convincing human beings. The dialogue, dialect, and glimpses of popular culture and popular entertainment (especially the snatches of songs Hughes often quoted) were applauded for adding credibility to the book, and Hughes was commended for presenting most of his characters with objectivity, understanding, and even compassion. As its title suggests, this is not a fundamentally angry book, although it does contain scenes that arouse the anger of both characters and readers—especially the scenes that depict the often subtle yet crude manifestations of racist discrimination, which seem particularly repulsive when (as often here) the victims are children.

Not all the early reviewers, of course, praised the novel completely; some even had serious reservations. Some found the book's pace too slow (especially in its early pages), and some found its ending too rushed. A number of readers complained that the work lacked a compelling plot, depending too much on characterization and too little on intriguing or revealing incidents. Some claimed Sandy was an underdeveloped character, while others found the same fault with most of the other people in the

book, whom they considered stereotypes rather than fully rounded people. Although almost all readers found Aunt Hager a memorable, vivid, and attractive personality, at least one reviewer dismissed her as too much an old mammy type and wished that more attention had been paid to Annjee, whom he considered potentially more complex than the other characters because she was closer to seeming real. Even readers who praised Hughes's lively and endearing depiction of Aunt Hager (and they were numerous) sometimes regretted that the book (in their view) lost much of its force and interest after Hager's death, while others thought that Hager, even when alive, sometimes hurt the book by philosophizing too much. Although objections to the novel were much less common than praise, objections did exist, and even Hughes himself (in his later autobiography *The Big Sea*), felt that he had been less than fully successful in rendering the characters he had imagined (228–230).

One of the oddest complaints about the novel (at least to a modern reader) was that of a black reviewer, Lillian Lewis Feurtado, who worried that white readers might think "that segregation is justifiable" after having to suffer through "chapter after chapter of contact with immoral, vulgar, low-down, 3rd rate Colored people." She considered the book to be full of "vulgar suggestions and some plain talk that makes for nasty thought," and she thought that Hughes's focus on such characters and such language was "too bad, for we do have some girls of lovely characters and fine instincts who think of something besides sex and jazz." However, because Hughes was such a talented writer, Feurtado worried that white readers would find his depiction of the ugly aspects of black life convincing and typical and would never know that among African Americans there actually existed "some young men with high aspirations" to match the girls with lovely characters (see Dace 151). Interestingly enough, Feurtado sounds, for all the world, like the novel's own Aunt Tempy and thus is living proof that people like Tempy did actually exist. This is not a trivial point, for one of the persistent notes of controversy in early comments on the work concerned Hughes's presentation of Tempy: Critics disagreed about whether

she was a credible character and whether she had been presented fairly. A number of the novel's first reviewers found Tempy a caricature rather than a believable human being (Dace 142, 147, 160), and at times it is hard to disagree with this allegation. One early reader, however, thought that Hughes had drawn Tempy with "sympathy and understanding" and that, in any case, "it is upon her kind that the progress of the race depends" (Dace 150). Feurtado's review shows, if nothing else, that people like Aunt Tempy were not merely figments of Hughes's imagination. Tempy, in any case, is a more complex character than she has often been given credit for being, and the same seems true of most of the other characters, who merit more analysis than they have yet received.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Hughes's work with Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How do the various husbands in that novel function in similar ways to the various sisters in Hughes's book? How do the geographical settings of the works affect the tone of each book? In which book does setting play a more prominent role? What is the relative importance of plot and characterization in each novel? How are the experiences of the main characters affected by their different genders?
2. Read Hughes's account of his own youth in his autobiography *The Big Sea* and then discuss the similarities and differences between his own life and the life of "Sandy" Rodgers. How do the two boys differ from and/or resemble one another in such matters as family backgrounds, interactions with relatives, experiences with racial prejudice, fundamental aspirations, and essential temperaments?
3. Trace the character of Aunt Tempy throughout the book and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of her characterization. How did Hughes succeed in presenting her? How (if at all) did he fail? How might he have made her a more believable character? Do you agree or disagree about the faults some critics have found in the ways she is presented?

"I, Too" (1932)

In this poem the speaker begins by announcing that he also sings (that is, writes about or even celebrates) the United States, even though he is treated as a second-class citizen, who is separated from whites, especially on important occasions. In spite of this discrimination, he nurtures himself and prepares for the future, when, because of his newly developed strength, no one will dare to treat him with less than respect. In that future time, whites will finally recognize the merits of blacks, and in their consciences they will regret their past treatment of blacks.

In its opening and closing lines and in its general subject matter (especially its identification of an individual voice with the American nation as a whole), the poem recalls the work and attitudes of Walt Whitman, a poet Hughes greatly admired. By echoing Whitman in tone and technique, the poem cannot help but remind us of the distance between Whitman's democratic ideals and the actual degrading existence of blacks in the United States at the time Hughes wrote. The allusion to Whitman, then, is not merely a matter of similar phrasing; instead, it also helps highlight the contrast between Whitman's optimistic celebrations of personal freedom and national idealism and the sad realities most black Americans faced. Yet the tone of Hughes's poem is not as bitter as one might have expected. The lyric opens, after all, by proclaiming that the speaker "sing[s]" America" (l. 1), and although there is a hint of a threat in line 11 ("Nobody'll dare" mistreat the speaker after he has grown strong), in general his mood is one of vigorous, vital self-confidence; self-respect; and even generosity in his assumptions about whites. The speaker's vitality, for instance, is symbolized by the ways lines 5–7 answer, and undercut, lines 2–4; his self-confidence is symbolized by the ways lines 8–14 balance and respond to lines 2–7. His generosity, meanwhile, is implied in lines 15–17, in which he gives whites credit for having both a sense of beauty and a sense of ethical responsibility; the shame whites will someday feel will actually be, ironically, a testament to their own moral attractiveness. The transformation the poem predicts

(and implicitly calls for) is implied by the subtle change of phrasing in the final line, which functions as a kind of refrain: Whereas the poem began by asserting that the speaker “sing[s] America,” it ends by announcing (and prophesying) that the speaker will *be* America: He will not simply stand apart from the country and celebrate its best ideals; he will instead be part of its very fabric, embodying those ideals and exemplifying them in the everyday facts of his life.

In its plain diction, simple rhythms, generally short lines, and generally declarative sentences, the poem exemplifies many of the most typical traits of Hughes's poetry, just as in its fundamental optimism it reflects the best qualities of the national spirit. In poems like this, Hughes speaks for himself, for his race, and for the worthiest instincts of his country as a whole.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the similarities and differences between this work and Hughes's poem “Mother to Son.” In what senses might the present poem almost be considered an address from son to mother? Discuss the poems in terms of the speakers presented, the tones adopted, the attitudes implied, the diction used, and the other techniques employed.
2. Read Hughes's lyric alongside CLAUDE MCKAY's poem titled “Outcast.” Discuss the works in terms of the forms used, the diction chosen, and the focus emphasized. Which poem focuses on the past? Which one focuses on the future? How and why is this difference significant? Which poem seems more bitter? Which one seems more resigned? Which one seems more determined? Which one, ironically, seems more traditional or conventional in structure?
3. Discuss the connotations of the idea of eating in the kitchen. What two kinds of people might typically “eat in the kitchen / When company comes”? What is the symbolic relevance of both kinds of persons to this poem? What are the connotations associated with one of those kinds of people, and what are the connotations associated with the other kind? How might the poem suggest an eventual transition from one of those kinds of persons to the other kind?

“The Weary Blues” (1932)

The speaker describes hearing a man perform, playing a piano and singing a melancholy “blues” song on a dark New York night. The man's song emphasizes his loneliness but also his resilience, yet the end of the song stresses his fundamental dissatisfaction, and even a measure of despair. After concluding his song, the singer's body sleeps while the song “echoes through his head” (l. 34).

This poem, like many by Hughes, is both a tribute to and an imitation of the blues tradition in black American music. The speaker (who may or may not be black himself, since his racial identity is never made explicitly clear) obviously appreciates the beauty of the blues, and just as obviously he employs many “musical” features in his own poem. He begins, for instance, with emphatic alliteration (or repeated consonants) in the words “Droning a drowsy” (l. 1). In fact, alliteration is a prominent feature throughout the work, especially in a phrase such as “pale dull pallor” (l. 5) or in a line such as “He made that poor piano moan with melody” (l. 10), with its repeated *ms* and *ps*. Assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) appears less often than alliteration, but it does show up, as in such phrases as “sad raggy” (l. 13) and especially in line 23 (“Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor”)—a line that not only combines the assonance of the repeated *u* and *o* sounds with the alliteration of *th* and *f*, but also achieves (in the first three syllables) the effect of onomatopoeia, in which words mimic the very sounds they describe. Throughout the poem, Hughes uses repetitions of lines, phrases, sounds, and ideas to give his lyric a highly musical quality, and he achieves the same effect by alternating line lengths, by employing rhyme, and by inserting exclamatory interjections. He often emphasizes verbs by placing them at the beginnings of lines and accenting their key syllables (as in “Droning,” “Rocking,” “Swaying,” and “Coming” [ll. 1, 2, 12, and 15]); he sometimes runs strings of

heavily accented syllables together (as in “pale dull pallor” and “old gas light” [l. 5]); at other times he makes us wait for the accented syllable by putting two unaccented ones before it (as in “To the tune o’ those Weary . . .” [l. 8]). In short, in any number of complicated and subtle ways, Hughes makes his own poem literally lyrical—literally like a song. The poem does not simply describe, celebrate, or quote from the blues; it becomes itself an example of the art form it extols.

Another technique the poem effectively employs is the juxtaposition of opposites. Thus the drawn-out sound of *drowsy* is set immediately beside the bouncy rhythm *syncopated* (l. 1); or the piano-player’s “ebony hands” are set against the piano’s “ivory key[s]” (l. 9); or the word *moan* (implying pain) is linked with *melody* (implying beauty); or the self-pity of lines 19–20 is offset by the resolve of lines 21–22. Of course, the most significant form of juxtaposition involves the pairing of the poem’s speaker (who seems educated and conventionally literate) and the blues singer (who relies on dialect and other examples of nonstandard English). Without making an explicit argument, the poem implies the universal relevance of “low” or “popular” culture (such as the blues) to all people, no matter what their race, their class, or their level of education. The poem shows the speaker’s bond with the singer, and the poem implicitly endorses a larger bond among speaker, singer, and readers as well.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Hughes’s lyric resemble and/or differ from WALLACE STEVENS’s poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier”? Discuss such matters as tone, diction, imagery, point of view, and purpose. How does each poet use music as both a subject and a technique? Which poem seems more clearly an example of high culture? Which seems more clearly an example of popular culture? Discuss the specific aspects of the poem that support your answers to the previous two questions.
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Claude McKay’s sonnet “The Harlem Dancer.” Discuss such matters as the central characters (both are black performers), the attitudes of the observer(s), the forms and styles of the poems themselves, the appropriateness of the forms and styles to the subjects of the works, and the appropriateness of the diction used.
3. Discuss the various ways in which the musician might accurately be described as “a musical fool.” In particular, what are some possible connotations of the noun in that phrase? How does the use of dialect add authenticity to the poem, but how do the words in dialect nevertheless express universal human emotions?

“The Blues I’m Playing” (1934)

When Mrs. Dora Ellsworth, a very wealthy New York widow and patroness with no children of her own, hears about—and then hears for herself—the talented piano playing of Oceola Jones, a poor young black woman from Harlem, she instantly decides to sponsor the young woman: She pays for further lessons, provides her with a nice apartment, eventually sends her to Europe for further study, and in general tries to manage both her artistic career and her personal life. She dislikes Oceola’s interest in jazz music and other forms of popular culture, and she particularly dislikes Oceola’s romantic involvement with Pete Williams, a young black medical student. When Oceola, despite Mrs. Ellsworth’s warnings, decides to marry Pete, Mrs. Ellsworth makes it clear that she will have little more to do with the young woman, but their break is preceded by one last performance, in which Oceola defiantly launches into a loud and spirited rendering of a sensuous blues number.

This story, with its obviously autobiographical roots in Hughes’s recent troubled experiences with his own patron (Charlotte Osgood Mason), runs the risk of seeming merely two-dimensional and even a bit vindictive. Mrs. Ellsworth (in other words) can be interpreted too easily as a merely manipulative villain, while Oceola can be perceived as a simple saint who suffers for her art in ways her domineering patroness cannot imagine. Hughes does, however, manage to complicate a potentially black-and-white (or black versus white) story in a

number of interesting ways. For one thing, he suggests that while Mrs. Ellsworth's attitude toward Oceola is partly "motherly," there may also be elements of an erotic attraction. This is especially the case when he describes how the two women would sometimes sleep in the same bed, with Mrs. Ellsworth "aware all the time of the electric strength of that brown-black body beside her, and of [Oceola's] deep drowsy voice. . . . such a hard young body!" (Miller 78). Phrasing such as this implies that the roots of Mrs. Ellsworth's behavior may be more complex than she realizes, while descriptions elsewhere of her life as a young woman, and of her relations with her late husband, suggest that she may have repressed (or been forced to repress) potentially romantic and even rebellious aspects of her own nature (Miller 80, 84). There are hints, in other words, that Mrs. Ellsworth may not be a totally uncomplicated ogre who is subtle only in her unconscious racism; she may be a more complex human being than she or anyone else in the story understands. However, another way in which Hughes avoids simple (and simplistic) polarities in the story involves his descriptions of classical music. Clearly the story makes a case for the value and vitality of jazz and the blues, but Oceola's talent and tastes are clearly eclectic: "She played the Rachmaninoff *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*. She played from the Liszt *Études*. She played the *St. Louis Blues*. She played Ravel's *Pavanne pour une Enfante Défunte*" (Miller 73). Obviously her repertoire is determined in part by the demands of her audiences, but just as obviously she is a gifted and committed performer of the classics (otherwise she would never have attracted Mrs. Ellsworth's attention), and her personal love of "art" music is implied when Hughes tells us that she could not understand how "white folks . . . [could] imagine that Beethoven had nothing to do with life, or that Schubert's love songs were only sublimations." Her own interpretations of the classics are "warm and individual" (Miller 80). Thus, just as Hughes partially resists the temptation to make Mrs. Ellsworth simply a kind of evil stepmother, so he also partially resists the temptation to make classical music merely the art of oppressive whites and jazz merely

the art of oppressed blacks. Indeed, in one of the most complex moments in the whole story—the last sentence—Hughes even raises the possibility that Mrs. Ellsworth may be more open to the appeal of the blues than either she or Oceola had suspected (Miller 84). But that is another story altogether.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the discussions of music in W. E. B. DuBois's book *The Souls of Black Folk*. How do his comments on music seem relevant to Hughes's story? How is DuBois's view of music complex? Are the views about music in Hughes's story similarly complicated?
2. Read Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea*, particularly its closing discussion of his relations with his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason. What similarities or differences do you see between Hughes's own experiences with Mason and Oceola's experiences with Mrs. Ellsworth? In which work is the patron presented in more complex, sympathetic, and credible ways?
3. Read the opening two paragraphs of the story and discuss their contrasting tones. How does the second paragraph undercut and complicate the first? What are the various methods Hughes uses to accomplish this ironic effect? How does the beginning of the story (especially the second paragraph) already foreshadow the story's conclusion?

The Big Sea (1940)

This book, the first of Hughes's two autobiographies (the second is *I Wonder as I Wander* [1956]), traces his life from childhood to the 1930s and the traumatic break with his wealthy white literary patroness, Charlotte Osgood Mason. The work is divided into three sections. The first describes Hughes' life until the age of 21 and focuses especially on his tense relationship with his disapproving father. The second section describes his life as a sailor, his voyages and visits to Africa, his time in Europe (particularly in Paris), his return to the United States, and the real beginnings of his seri-

ous literary career. Section 3 describes his experiences in New York during the black Renaissance in Harlem, his experiences as a student at Lincoln University, his various travels in the South and in Cuba, and his initially gratifying but ultimately troubled relationship with Mrs. Mason.

This volume of autobiography is appealing in numerous ways. It not only provides crucial insights into his own personality, values, conflicts, and development, but can also be read as an intriguing work of social and literary history, especially in its treatment of the Harlem Renaissance, in which Hughes was an active participant while serving also as a perceptive eyewitness. As the thoughtful, surprisingly objective observations of a highly intelligent African American—observations set down in response to some of the most important decades of black American history—the book provides an “inside narrative” of how it actually felt to grow up under the heavy burden of racial discrimination. In addition, simply as a highly colorful travelogue the book is also of great interest: Hughes provides a black man’s view of black Africa, and he also happened to be in Paris during one of the most significant periods in the cultural history of that ancient city. Finally, the book is of interest for its depiction of the often-complicated relations between parents and children (especially between sons and fathers) and for its personal telling of the oft-told stories of an artist’s growth and an individual’s achievement of independence and maturity. On all these different levels, then, and for all these different reasons, the book is innately interesting, but it is also worth reading for the clarity of its writing, the sharpness of its observations, and the even-handed generosity of its assessments of other people. Even when Hughes proclaims that he hated his father (McLaren 62), he hardly seems full of hate, and even when he had good reason to feel contemptuous of other people, he rarely seems to have looked on the world with bitterness or contempt. The final impression left by this book is of a man who enjoyed his life, was capable of enjoying others, did not take himself too seriously, and almost always exhibited great sanity, attractive modesty, and calm self-respect.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is this autobiography similar to and/or different from *Black Boy*, by RICHARD WRIGHT? Does one book seem more credible than the other? If so, why and how? How are the tones of the books affected by the geographical and economic circumstances the authors faced in childhood and later?
2. Read Hughes’s book alongside two other notable examples of autobiography by African Americans: BOOKER T. WASHINGTON’s *Up from Slavery* and the autobiographical sections of W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Does Hughes seem to have more in common (in background, values, and goals) with one of these men rather than the other? Does he have any qualities shared by both of his predecessors? How is his book different precisely because it is the work of a younger man—a man of a newer generation?
3. Why is it symbolically significant that Hughes begins his own book by describing how he discarded books written by others? Why is it symbolically significant that the one book he particularly mentions was written by a white man (H. L. Mencken)? Why is it symbolically significant that Hughes’s book opens when he is 21? What does that age traditionally symbolize? Why is it symbolically significant that Hughes begins his book by describing an ocean voyage that takes him away from America? Discuss other instances of possible symbolism in this autobiographical work.

“Theme for English B” (1949)

The speaker tells of being given an assignment in an English class—an assignment to write something expressing himself, since self-expression will necessarily be true. In the course of reflecting on this apparently simple (but actually fairly complicated) assignment, the speaker reveals details of his life: He is a young black who has emigrated from the South to attend college in New York; he lives in a room at the Harlem YMCA; his desires

are ordinary; his tastes are broad; but his life and experiences are inevitably affected by his race. Despite their important differences (especially the difference of race), he and his instructor are both Americans, and each has the potential to learn from the other.

In this deliberately prosaic poem (in which the poetry, appropriately enough, comes close to sounding like unadorned, nonfiction prose), the speaker first responds to the assignment by reporting the external details of his life, including his age, his place of birth, the college he attends, the crucial fact that he is the only black in his class, and the neighborhood and building in which he resides. When the “theme” (or essay) itself begins with line 16, the tone becomes more personal and complex; now the speaker not only directly addresses the teacher, but he also begins to focus less on the external facts of his existence and more on his thoughts, feelings, desires, and uncertainties. As befits this new focus, this section of the poem becomes more irregular and unpredictable in every way. Whereas lines 7–15 were of roughly equal length (at least in appearance on the page), the shape of the poem from line 16 to the end is far less predictable. The rhythms and the sentence structures are also more varied, but perhaps the most striking difference between the introductory section of the work and the “theme” itself is that in the theme portion the speaker directly addresses his instructor and (by implication) the reader of the poem as well. The *you* continually mentioned is both the teacher in the poem and the reader outside it, and although the speaker has been asked to write about himself, to express his own authentic truth, he realizes that a self rarely if ever exists in isolation—that crucial to any individuality is the individual's relations with others. This is especially the case if (as in this example) the individual is treated as less than fully equal by those who enjoy superior power. The speaker was assigned to write autobiographically, and he realizes that to do so most effectively, he must try to create a dialogue. The assignment called for self-examination by the speaker, but the poem encourages self-examination by the reader. The speaker is realistic enough to acknowledge the differences that separate him from

his instructor (“you’re older—and white— / and somewhat more free” [ll. 39–40]), but despite his youth he is also mature enough to understand that he and the instructor (and the reader) are indissolubly linked by the common fate of being Americans together. The instructor is only “somewhat more free” (l. 40)—a wonderfully resonant line. On the one hand, the line seems subtly ironic and even sardonic in one respect (since the white instructor is significantly more free than the black student in the America of Hughes's time simply because the instructor *is* white). On the other hand, the line simply acknowledges a plain fact: No human being is completely independent or autonomous. All humans exist in relations to others, whether they want to or not. Hughes's debt to Walt Whitman is evident in this idea, and it is particularly evident when the student tells his instructor, “You are white— / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you” (ll. 31–32). In simple, plain, straightforward language, the speaker produces a “theme” that is as much about his instructor (and his reader) as it is about himself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is Hughes's poem similar to Booker T. Washington's famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech? In particular, what do both works suggest about the inevitability of relations between whites and blacks in the United States? What techniques do both works employ in addressing white audiences? What do both works suggest about the underlying similarities between whites and blacks, despite their obvious differences? What do both works suggest about the ability—and the necessity—of both races to learn and profit from one another?
2. Discuss Hughes's poem alongside “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” by GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (Zitkala-Ša). Compare and contrast the works in terms of tone, attitude, purpose, and literary techniques. Do you find one speaker more appealing than the other? If so, why? Which of the two speakers seems to have faced a more difficult life? Which speaker seems more bitter?

3. How and why is it symbolically significant that the college is up on a hill and that Harlem is down below? What does the speaker's residence at the "Y" suggest about his social circumstances? Discuss the significance of line 21. How and why would this line resonate with most readers? Discuss the speaker's musical tastes, especially his liking for Bach. What does his liking of Bach suggest about him? Line 26 is not grammatically correct, but how is it therefore credible in a poem of this sort?

"Dream Boogie" (1951)

The poem uses the bounce and diction of boogie-woogie music—"a rhythmically complex and experimental kind of jazz characterized by dissonance, improvisation, and unusual lyrics" (Emanuel 145)—to imply the complex feelings of American blacks, including both their capacity for joy and celebration and their frustration with the postponement of full freedom.

This brief and highly energetic poem begins on a literally bright and emphatically joyous note: "Good morning, daddy!" (l. 1). The word *daddy* here almost certainly does not refer to the speaker's literal father but is, instead, quite probably already an example of the jazz talk that permeates the poem. A "daddy" in this sense is simply another person. Yet this word, like the other two of the opening line, is clearly upbeat and affirmative, implying a close bond between speaker and addressee, including the poem's own readers. The tone remains light until the end of line 4, where the sudden appearance of the phrase "dream deferred" implies a particularly pervasive concern of Hughes's writing here and elsewhere—a concern with the risks of postponing the achievement of treasured ideals and the dangers of putting off the fulfillment of solemn promises. In a mere four lines, then, Hughes has managed to enrich and complicate a work that might otherwise have been merely upbeat; now, and for the rest of the poem, there is a darker undercurrent. In retrospect, even the earlier word *rumble* (l. 3) takes on a slightly ominous connotation: On the one hand, the word

can merely seem an example of onomatopoeia (in which the sound of a term echoes its sense). That is, the word *rumble* echoes the very kind of low, heavy, rolling sound it describes. On the other hand, *rumble* by this point had also become a slang term for a street fight between urban teenage gangs, and the most common such fights occurring in the United States at the time Hughes wrote were fights between gangs of blacks and whites. A poem that seemed to begin as a joyous celebration has now turned into a kind of subtle warning; the speaker does not even need to repeat the phrase "dream deferred" (a phrase that is clearly implied, but not openly stated, in line 13) in order to suggest the danger inherent in continued, continual postponement of full civil rights for a huge segment of the national population. The last seven lines of the poem are emphatically affirmative, but they also seem ominously superficial. The tensions the poem has suggested remain unresolved; the joyous conclusion is belied by the disturbingly vague reference to "something underneath" (l. 12).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is this poem similar in its methods, brevity, and concluding tone to ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S short story "Hills Like White Elephants"? In both cases, what is the importance of what is left unsaid? How do both works use indirection and implication rather than overt statement? How do both works end on notes that seem falsely cheerful? How do both works manage to suggest more complex human relations than they ever make explicit?
2. Compare and contrast this work with Hughes's poem titled "Harlem" (whose first line is "What happens to a dream deferred?"). Pay particular attention to the tones, diction, structures, and conclusions of the two works. How and why are questions used effectively in both works?
3. How is the poem all the more effective because it is explicitly addressed to the "daddy" mentioned in line 1? How does such drama contribute to the energy of the poem, and how does it also involve the reader? By what means does Hughes create curiosity and suspense? Where and how does the poem seem especially ambiguous?

“Harlem” (1951)

The poem begins by asking what happens when an ideal remains unachieved or a promise remains unfulfilled. After using a number of metaphors and similes to suggest some possible results of such a situation, the poem ends by suddenly raising the possibility of a violent and destructive outcome.

The title of this poem refers to a section of New York City that was (and still is) most heavily populated by African Americans. In the 1920s it had briefly been the center of a remarkable creative outpouring by blacks (including Hughes himself) in literature, music, and many other arts, but by the time Hughes wrote this poem, the neighborhood was more often thought of as a slum characterized by poverty, unemployment, and widespread discontent. These latter connotations of the word *Harlem* are the ones that seem most relevant to the present lyric—a lyric that gains impact from its brevity, directness, and repeated use of vivid, probing questions. Hughes does not preach; instead, by directly interrogating the reader, and by raising a number of alternatives, he actively engages us, encouraging often-disturbing thought rather than providing simple, easy answers.

The “dream” mentioned in line 1 is almost certainly the dream of full civil, political, and economic equality for blacks—a dream that many Americans (both black and white) had assumed would result from the triumph of the Union in the Civil War. Instead, by the time Hughes wrote this poem, nearly a century after that conflict, blacks were still suffering from severe discrimination, much of it sanctioned by government authority. Blacks, however, were increasingly unwilling to tolerate second-class citizenship. Riots had broken out in various cities in the late 1940s, but they were as nothing compared to the storms of racial violence that would eventually overtake the country in the mid- to late 1960s. In light of these later developments, Hughes’s poem seems eerily prescient, and its final line seems prophetic.

Lines 2–3 raise the possibility that a dream deferred may “dry up / like a raisin in the sun” (ll. 2–3). This simile (a comparison using *like* or *as*) is memorably effective, for whereas grapes are full

of life-sustaining juice, raisins are black, withered, shriveled, and on the verge of desiccation. The ensuing imagery, however, is even more disturbing: The speaker wonders whether a dream deferred might “fester like a sore— / And then run” (ll. 4–5). At least the transition from a grape to a raisin is still somewhat hopeful: A raisin is still edible and pleasing. In lines 4–5, however, the process implied in lines 2–3 is reversed: Instead of a transition in the direction of dryness, the imagined sore becomes wet and swollen with pus, and then (as if to make the imagery even more disgusting) the pus runs. The lines suggest an infection or uncleanness that has begun to spread. Having affronted our sense of sight, Hughes next repulses our sense of smell by asking whether a dream deferred will “stink like rotten meat” (l. 6)—an image that implies not only sickening corruption but also wasted potential. Hughes now invokes two more senses—the senses of touch and taste—when the speaker asks whether a deferred dream may “crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet” (ll. 7–8). As with the comparison to meat, the imagery here implies something valuable squandered through lack of proper or timely use. Finally, after one more simile that seems deliberately less vivid than the ones before it (as if the speaker has begun to run out of possible comparisons [ll. 9–10]), the poem suddenly switches to a short, sharp, and frightening metaphor: “*Or does it explode?*” (l. 11). The abrupt shift to italic type catches us by surprise, much as an explosion itself might, while the rhythm of the line mimics the meaning the line describes: The final syllable bursts forth with exceptionally heavy emphasis. All the processes described earlier in the poem are gradual; they unfold slowly in time. By using the italicized word *explode*, however, Hughes implies that time for remedies or improvement may soon—or may already have—run out.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Hughes’s text with Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die.” Discuss the works in terms of technique, diction, imagery, tone, and use of implication. Who are the main implied readers of both works? In other words, whom is McKay mainly addressing, and

8. Choose one brief work from each of the decades of Hughes's public career—the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In each case, choose a work that somehow typifies the decade in which it was written. For instance, from the 1920s choose a work that seems representative of the Harlem Renaissance. From the 1930s, choose a work that seems relevant to the Great Depression. From the 1940s, choose a work that seems to reflect American involvement in World War II. From the 1950s, choose a work that seems connected in some ways to the cold war. From the 1960s, choose a work that seems to reflect the Civil Rights movement. What continuities exist among these diverse works? What fundamental differences (if any) do they reveal? How do they reflect the evolution of Hughes's career?
9. Choose two different poems by Hughes of roughly comparable length and on roughly similar themes; choose one poem that you think is successful and another that you consider a relative failure. Then, in as much detail as possible, explain your reactions to each work. Explain why you think one work is effective and the other ineffective. Pay attention to such matters as structure, diction, rhythm, imagery, and tone.
10. Compare and contrast the depiction of black urban life in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* and the various works written by Hughes that feature the character Jesse B. Simple. Are there any comic dimensions to Wright's works? Are there any darker dimensions to Hughes's stories? In what respects do these authors' depictions of the lives of blacks in northern cities conflict with and/or reinforce one another? How do the works reflect the particular times during which they were written?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Langston Hughes: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1989.

Dace, Tish, ed. *Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

De Santis, Christopher, ed. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Vol. 9, Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

Emanuel, James A. *Langston Hughes*. Boston: Twayne, 1967.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.

Hubbard, Dolan, ed. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Vol. 4, The Novels: (Not without Laughter and Tambourines to Glory.)* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Knopf, 2000.

Jemie, Onwuchekwa. *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973.

Leach, Laurie F. *Langston Hughes: A Biography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004.

McLaren, Joseph, ed. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Vol. 13, Autobiography: The Big Sea*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

Miller, R. Baxter. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Vol. 15, The Short Stories*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

Nelson, Cary. Modern American Poetry: Langston Hughes. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/hughes.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.

Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes. Vol. 1, 1902–1941, I, Too, Sing America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

———. *The Life of Langston Hughes. Vol. 2, 1941–1967, I Dream a World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Robert C. Evans



ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1891–1960)

Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen / that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation / more or less. No, I do not weep at the world— / I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

(“How It Feels to Be Colored Me”)

Although during her lifetime Zora Neale Hurston won a certain amount of recognition as a writer, in the decade following her poverty-stricken old age and death she was largely forgotten. After dying in a welfare home in rural Florida, she was buried in an unmarked grave, and her surviving manuscripts were nearly burned as trash. Only in the 1970s was the rich legacy of Hurston’s work really rediscovered, and in the years since then, her reputation has soared. She is now considered one of the preeminent authors of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, the brief but highly important efflorescence of creativity among African-American artists in the New York of the 1920s (and 1930s), and certainly she is the most important black woman writer in the first half of the 20th century. As a novelist, essayist, folklorist, short story writer, and theatrical director and producer, she left behind a wonderfully vibrant body of work, full of wit and wisdom. She had discerning ears and eyes, a vivid sense of style both in her prose and in her clothing, and an immensely appealing sense of humor (often laced with stinging sarcasm). She is an author who richly deserves all the renewed attention she is now receiving.

Hurston’s own autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, is a superbly well-written book, and it is necessarily the primary source of much information about her early life. It is, unfortunately, also unreliable in some of its claims. Thus, for strictly accurate accounts of Hurston’s life, readers should

turn to the various scholarly biographies that have appeared since the mid-1970s. Most of the solid facts are laid out nicely in the highly detailed “Chronology” prepared by Cheryl A. Wall, which reports that Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama. (Hurston herself claimed to have been born in Florida, and she sometimes misreported the year of her birth.) She was the fifth child (and second daughter) of John Hurston and his significantly younger wife, whose maiden name had been Lucy Ann Potts. Lucy had alienated her family (especially her mother) by marrying Hurston, whom they considered lower-class, but John was a hardworking and ambitious man. In 1894 he moved his family (which eventually consisted of eight children) to the small village of Eatonville, Florida, which was the first all-black town to be officially incorporated in the United States. Zora and her siblings grew up in an eight-room house on five acres of land in the town, where their father, in addition to doing manual labor, was a local minister and where he also eventually served three terms as mayor. Zora was a lively child (sometimes too lively for her exasperated father, who favored his quieter daughter); she attended a local school and also learned at her mother’s knee, but she particularly enjoyed listening to the adults talk, joke, and tell stories on the front porch of a local store.

Zora’s early childhood was playful and happy, but her life changed significantly when her mother

died on September 18, 1904. Zora was soon sent off to school in Jacksonville, where she performed well (especially in spelling), even though she had to do manual labor to help offset her tuition expenses, which her father had begun to neglect to pay. Her father had quickly remarried, and his new wife had little interest in raising his children; although Zora was sent home from school (after her father had failed to pay for her return), she did not stay there long. Instead, she and some of her siblings were sent to live with relatives (some of the older siblings had already left home on their own), and Zora blamed her stepmother for this breakup of the family. After returning to Eatonville in 1912, she actually fought with the stepmother physically, and for the next several years she had to support herself by doing domestic work, even after she moved in with an older brother in Memphis. In 1915, however, her life took another of its radical turns. She was hired to be the personal maid of a singer with a traveling musical production, and her involvement with this troupe of entertainers not only took her around the country but also gave her a kind of second family. When she became ill in Baltimore in 1916, she had to leave the show, but in 1917 she began attending an evening high school (claiming to be 10 years younger than she really was) while supporting herself as a waitress. Her father died that same year in an automobile accident. She gained encouragement from various teachers and school administrators who recognized and admired her intelligence. In September 1917 she entered Morgan Academy (the high school branch of the college now known as Morgan State University), graduating in 1918 after impressing many people (as she always did) with whom she had contact. One of these people suggested that she should think of attending Howard University, a prestigious all-black college in nearby Washington, D.C., and so in the summer Hurston moved to Washington, entering Howard's preparatory program in the fall while working as a manicurist in a black-owned barber shop that served a strictly white clientele. Once again she impressed people; her white customers often tipped her generously to help support her schooling.

In 1919 Hurston began taking regular college classes at Howard, receiving her associate degree in

1920. Although she took classes at Howard until 1924 and was a member of a sorority there, she never received a B.A. She did, however (as usual) impress her teachers, including Alain Locke, a philosophy professor who was later a crucial figure in fostering the growth of African-American literature. Hurston herself, in fact, now began to publish fiction and poetry and to associate with other writers, including a number of the most prominent and/or talented black authors of the day. By 1924, in fact, she had published a story in a significant black magazine headquartered in New York, and it was largely thanks to the encouragement of its editor that she moved to New York in 1925, just as the Harlem Renaissance was coming into full bloom. Hurston, with her lively personality and literary gifts, was quickly at the center of developments. She began winning literary prizes, and she also won the friendship and patronage of important figures, including a number of prominent whites with a strong interest in black culture. Thanks mainly to their support she won a scholarship to Barnard College (the women's division of Columbia University), where she was the only black student at the time. At Barnard she soon attracted the attention of the famous anthropologist Franz Boas, who encouraged her to become an anthropologist herself. Meanwhile, she was also heavily involved in the Harlem literary scene, having gained the friendship of many significant figures, including such up-and-coming younger writers as LANGSTON HUGHES.

In 1927, in fact, Hurston accidentally reencountered Hughes in Mobile, Alabama, while she was on a funded anthropological research trip to the Deep South to collect folklore data. The two drove back to New York together in Hurston's car (nicknamed "Sassie Susie"), stopping off at numerous southern locations and cementing the friendship they had already developed in New York. Earlier in the year, however, Hurston had already married Herbert Sheen, whom she had met much earlier as a fellow student at Howard, but they spent most of their time in different places (partly because he was studying medicine in Chicago), and eventually they divorced. Perhaps the most significant person to enter Hurston's life in 1927, however, was an elderly

(and wealthy) white New Yorker named Charlotte Mason (Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason), who was earning a reputation as a generous if somewhat demanding and eccentric patron of black artists and writers. Hughes was already one of her clients, and Hurston now also joined the fold. Mason had a forceful and intriguing personality; she insisted that her support be anonymous, but she also insisted that “her” artists literally sit at her feet and address her as “God-mother.” Both Hughes and Hurston seem to have felt genuine affection for Mason (besides being thankful for her financial support), but eventually both also chafed at their dependency. In the meantime, however, Hurston prospered even further thanks in part to Mason’s encouragement. She was able to collect southern black folklore with funding from Mason and other sources; she published widely and often provocatively; she earned a B.A. from Barnard in 1928, the same year she also studied hoodoo in New Orleans; she began working on a lengthy manuscript based on her folklore findings; and in 1929 she not only began planning to write a play with Hughes but also traveled to the Bahamas for further anthropological research. Meanwhile, her relationship with Mason was growing increasingly complex, while her relationship with Hughes was becoming more and more tense because of disagreements about the play (tentatively titled *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*).

By 1931 an open (and permanent) break with Hughes had occurred. Each artist felt betrayed by the other, and *Mule Bone* was not produced until long after both writers had died. In 1931 Hurston’s support from Mason also suffered a decline, and by that year, too, it had become obvious to everyone that the United States (and indeed the world) was in the grips of the Great Depression, the severe economic downturn that had begun with the stock market crash of October 1929. Just when Hurston was most full of creative energy, then, Americans had the least amount of disposable income ever. If she never made much real money from her writings during the next few years, the depression was largely to blame. The depression also hampered her repeated efforts during the 1930s to stage black-inspired and black-acted theatrical and musical pro-

ductions; Hurston often had to scrape together the funds to pay actors. Nevertheless, despite her own poverty, she was preoccupied with the idea of theatrical production (in several senses of that term) during this period, and her obsession led her all over the country during this decade, seeking jobs connected with drama and seeking venues for a musical production called *From Sun to Sun*. Ultimately, though, it was her prose (both fiction and nonfiction) rather than her drama that would win her the most recognition and reward.

In 1933 Hurston published a wonderful story titled “The Gilded Six-Bits” in a national magazine. This story was seen by a number of significant New York publishers, who wrote and asked her to consider submitting a novel. She wrote back to the most prominent publisher, promising to send him something soon, and by spring 1934 her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, was in print. The publisher also offered her a contract for her folklore book (which appeared as *Mules and Men* in 1935), and indeed later in 1934 a wealthy Chicago foundation offered to pay her tuition if she decided to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia University. Back in New York, she began her academic work but was more interested in creative writing than in pure scholarly research and publication. The foundation therefore withdrew much of its promised funding, but Hurston, always resourceful, found other sources of support, including a job with the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem and a Guggenheim Fellowship to study the black culture of Jamaica. By this time she had fallen deeply in love with a somewhat mysterious and much younger man (having officially divorced from Sheen in 1931), and it was partly in response to this love affair that she composed her most important novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, toward the end of 1936. The book was published by fall 1937, receiving mostly positive reviews despite some objections from a few black critics, including her old friend and mentor Alain Locke as well as the rising young author RICHARD WRIGHT. Hurston, meanwhile, continued to support herself through jobs on government-funded writing and editing projects, through brief academic positions, and through the spotty earnings of her various

books, including *Tell My Horse* (1938), which was published in England in 1939 as *Voodoo Gods: An Inquiry into Native Myths and Magic in Jamaica and Haiti*. Her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* also appeared in 1939, the same year in which Hurston married Albert Price, a much younger man, whom she divorced the following year.

Perhaps the most significant event for Hurston in the early 1940s was the publication of her splendid autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, in 1942. During these years she also did further anthropological research, briefly worked in Hollywood, lectured at various black colleges, published essays and articles, taught creative writing, bought and (lived happily on) two different houseboats, received recognition for her award-winning and profitable autobiography, was awarded various honorary degrees, and published a number of highly controversial statements about race and racism in America. Some fellow blacks found her comments too conservative and accommodating, and indeed by this time Hurston had staked out a position for herself to the right of most other black intellectuals. By 1948 her latest novel, *Seraph on the Swanee*, had been published, but in that year, too, she also suffered perhaps the most devastating event of her life: She was accused (almost certainly falsely, it seems) of child molestation. Unfortunately, the accusations received wide attention in the national black press, and for a time Hurston, depressed and uncertain about how she could possibly prove her innocence, even contemplated suicide. In 1949 the charges were dropped, but significant damage—to Hurston's reputation and to her psyche—had been done. She never really recovered from these events, and although she did continue to write (and sometimes publish an occasional article) throughout the 1950s, she never recaptured her earlier fame. Her weight was increasing; her health was declining; her funds were increasingly meager; and more and more she began to rely on charity. She ended her days living in a small, concrete-block house, using orange crates as a desk and shelves. Her personality was still often lively, but by the end of the 1950s, she was largely a neglected and forgotten figure. When she died on January 28, 1960, in Fort Pierce,

Florida, few people noticed or cared. Not until the 1970s was her unmarked grave tracked down (by the rising young African-American writer Alice Walker) and properly honored. In the decades since then, however, Hurston has been fully restored to life thanks to her richly vibrant writings.

“Spunk” (1925)

When the townspeople inform Joe Kanty that Joe's wife, Lena, once again has been seen walking in the streets with her lover, a big and fearless man called Spunk, the reluctant Joe finally decides that he must take action: He approaches Spunk with a drawn razor, but Spunk shoots and kills him and is later acquitted, since the killing is judged an act of self-defense. Although Lena soon moves in with Spunk, Spunk begins to be troubled by various ominous signs: He thinks that a howling black bobcat he has spotted near his house is actually Joe, back from hell to haunt him, and he thinks Joe's spirit has pushed him in the direction of a buzz saw at the sawmill where he works. When Spunk later does in fact fall into the whizzing saw, he blames Joe's spirit again and, before dying, vows to take vengeance when he meets Joe in hell.

This story, one of Hurston's earliest published works, is typical of her writing in many ways. It is set in the small-town rural South; it heavily features African-American characters (in fact, in this work no whites appear at all); it effectively employs the dialect of rural southern blacks; and it explores the complexities of romance, violence, and superstition. In addition, the story makes clear the importance of the local community in the lives of Hurston's characters (another common feature of much of her fiction), and the tale deals with such archetypal figures and themes as the powerful and sexually aggressive male, the unfaithful wife, and the intimidated cuckold; the force of lust, jealousy, and community pressure; and the power of a guilty conscience and poetic justice. In fact, the next-to-last sentence (with its reference to “the funeral baked meats”) has been read as an allusion to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, which deals with

many of the same issues and presents many of the same developments of plot. Hurston's story, then, deals with people and actions that have been staples in much great literature of the past, but she gives these standard characters and personalities her own distinctive stamp, thereby creating something fresh and new.

The name of the title character—*Spunk*—also implies his personality: As a noun, the word suggests mettle, spirit, courage, or pluck, but as a slang term it could also refer to seminal fluid. As a verb, *spunk* could mean to stand up or assert oneself, or to blaze up in fire or passion. All these meanings seem appropriate to the central figure of Hurston's tale, who initially radiates masculine energy and self-confidence. The fact that he literally rides a log at the sawmill is obviously symbolic, suggesting his phallic potency; the fact that he later loses his self-confidence and becomes, if anything, even more fearful and nervous than the man he has killed is one of the story's great ironies. The story may imply that moral qualms (or perhaps mere superstitions) are finally more potent than physical strength; by the end of the story, Spunk has lost his spunk as well as his life. Meanwhile, the rather amoral community—which had egged on Joe to challenge his rival—are gossiping just as much in the final paragraph as they had been at the beginning of the tale. For them, the conflict between Spunk and Joe has merely been a source of much-needed excitement and even entertainment.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this tale is the way Hurston complicates our initial impressions of Joe and Spunk. At first, Joe seems merely cowardly: He challenges Spunk only when he feels pressured by the gossips. Later, however (after Joe has been killed), a character named Walter points out that in some respects Joe had more real courage than Spunk: "Lookit whut he [i.e., Joe] done; took a razor an' went out to fight a man he knowed toted a gun an' wuz a crack shot, too; 'nother thing Joe wuz skeered of Spunk, skeered plumb stiff! But he went jes' the same" (*Novels* 953). By the end of the tale, it is Spunk who actually seems the more easily frightened of the two men—at least until, in his dying breaths, he vows revenge: "Ah'll git the

son-of-a-wood louse soon's Ah get there [i.e., to the after-life] an' make hell too hot for him" (*Novels* 954). By the concluding sentences of the tale, however, Hurston's focus is not on any imagined afterlife but on the everyday existence of small-town communities, in which people eat, drink, and gossip.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the small-town existence Hurston depicts with the small-town life depicted by THORNTON WILDER in his play *Our Town*. Consider such matters as race, class, and gender and such techniques as diction, dialect, and tone. How do both works deal with the afterlife? How does each work feature "choral" characters who comment and explain?
2. Discuss this story in relation to EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON's poem "Eros Trannos." How is the title of that poem relevant to both works? How is marriage presented in both texts? What is the role of the community in each work?
3. Trace and discuss the pattern of ironies and foreshadowings Hurston has built into this story. For example, discuss the comment that Spunk "ain't skeered of nuthin' on God's green footstool" or the reference to his skill at the sawmill (*Novels* 949). How do such ironies contribute to the resonance and complexity of the story?

"Sweat" (1926)

Delia Jones is a hardworking, deeply religious woman who takes in laundry to earn income, while her husband, Sykes, is a crude, abusive philanderer who enjoys tormenting Delia while flagrantly cheating on her with a large rival named Bertha. Knowing Delia's intense fear of reptiles, Sykes one day takes home a rattlesnake in a wire-covered box and leaves it on their porch; Delia is terrified, but Sykes merely laughs. The marriage continues to deteriorate, and one night, when Delia finds the snake in her laundry basket, she flees to the nearby barn; when a drunken Sykes himself stumbles home in the darkness, he is bitten by the snake,

and as the tale ends, Sykes glimpses Delia as Delia watches him die.

Here, as in many other works, Hurston deals with relations between black men and women, especially husbands and wives. As in many of her tales, the rural community plays an important part; the other men in the small town cannot understand why Sykes neglects Delia to consort with the hefty Bertha, whom one of them memorably describes as looking like “a hunk uh liver wid hair on it” (*Novels* 960). As this comment suggests, part of the pleasure of reading this story—as of reading much of Hurston’s fiction—results from her use of vivid imagery, memorable dialogue, and convincing dialect. Meanwhile, Delia Jones (like many of Hurston’s women) is a strong, appealing, resourceful, and stoic character; she stands up to Sykes when she needs to, but in general she prefers not to fight. Despite his abusive treatment of her, she retains her self-respect and thus earns the respect of the community at large. Hurston deals here, as she often does, with elemental emotions, such as sexual desire, sexual jealousy, and the tensions between husbands and wives. Thus the story, although set in a remote and somewhat unfamiliar locale, and although populated with characters whose speech and actions are tinged with a certain degree of “local color,” never seems merely quaint or exotic.

If the story seems faulty in any way, it is perhaps flawed in its depiction of Sykes, who is close to a simple, unidimensional villain. From the moment he enters the tale, he seems sadistic, abusive, and mean; it is difficult to understand why he is as full of hatred (especially for the long-suffering and compliant Delia) as he is. Occasionally Hurston implies that he resents the fact that his wife must wash the clothes of white people; perhaps, then, his mistreatment of her is a way of striking back at whites. In general, however, he displays the kind of “motiveless malignity” that Coleridge once attributed to Shakespeare’s Iago, but unfortunately Sykes does not seem anywhere near as complex a character as Iago is. He is, for the most part, merely an uncomplicated “evildoer,” and it is hard to feel any sympathy for him as the story ends. This is especially true since it seems quite likely that it was Sykes who deliberately placed

the snake (a fairly obvious symbol of evil) in Delia’s laundry basket, intending to kill her. Although some critics have suggested that Delia, ironically, takes on some of her husband’s evil personality by the end of the story (since she fails to help him and watches him die), it would be hard to expect her, with her well-known fear of snakes, to enter the rattler-ridden cabin. Besides, the narrator notes that “Delia could not move—her legs were flabby,” and the narrator also reports that despite her inaction, Delia nevertheless does feel a “surge of pity” for Sykes (*Novels* 966). Delia, in other words, does not seem much more complicated than Sykes himself: He is a fairly simple villain, and she is a fairly simple (and almost completely sympathetic) victim. The story therefore runs the risk of seeming merely melodramatic but is rescued by Hurston’s talent for re-creating convincing, lively speech and by her skill at sustaining suspense. From the moment the snake enters the story, we cannot help but wonder—and worry—about how the tale will conclude. That it concludes with Sykes’s death is a nice (but perhaps too neat) bit of poetic justice.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss this work in relation to the story “Barn Burning,” by WILLIAM FAULKNER. How does Sykes resemble Abner Snopes in personality and behavior (despite their differences in race)? What motivates each man? In what ways is each a complex character? What similarities or differences do you see between Delia and Sarty?
2. Discuss the moral complexity of the characters. Is Sykes nothing but a simple villain? Is Delia nothing but an abused wife? Is Bertha nothing but an unappealing (and unattractive) hussy? In what ways does Hurston give the story ethical and artistic complexity?

“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928)

In this brief autobiographical essay, Hurston announces her pride in her race and her pride in her own personality; using reminiscence, personal narrative, and a healthy dose of humor, she describes

how she first realized that she was different from most Americans in her skin complexion, but she insists that she does not feel “tragically colored.” She feels (she says) unhampered by her race in her determination to succeed in life; indeed, her color (and the relatively recent freedom of her people) gives her a challenge that makes life particularly exciting; instead of bemoaning the past, she looks forward to the future, and she says that she would rather be black (with everything to gain) than white (with the constant fear of loss). She does concede that blacks do differ from whites (in their impassioned response to jazz, for instance), but in the final analysis, she thinks of herself as first and foremost Zora, and she cannot comprehend why anyone would deny himself or herself the joy of getting to know her.

This essay exhibits many of the traits that make Hurston such an attractive prose stylist—traits that also, by all accounts, made her a delightful personality and an instant friend to practically all who met her. From the very first sentence of the essay, for instance, she displays the directness, the candor, and the disarming ability to laugh at herself (and at others) that make her writing seem so honest, unpretentious, and trustworthy. She shows a fine flair for paradoxical phrasing (as when she says, “I remember the very day that I became colored”; *Folklore* 826), and her childhood memories of life in her small (and all-black) Florida town are the sort that immediately make her an appealing figure, partly because of her ability to mock herself without sacrificing her self-respect. She describes, for instance, how whites passing through her town would often give her small gifts of money when she performed amusing antics for them—generosity “which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop” (*Folklore* 827). By teasing her earlier self, Hurston makes her present persona all the more attractive and thus makes her current essay all the more winning. It is difficult to imagine being able to justify discrimination against a person who is so obviously articulate, intelligent, wise, and full of life.

Hurston in this essay displays many of the traits any person would wish for in a child, a friend, or

himself. She is resourceful, stoic, optimistic, and determined; at one point, for instance, she proclaims, “No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (*Folklore* 827). That single sentence epitomizes many of the best traits of her writing, here and elsewhere: It is crisp; it is clear; it is unforgettably vivid in its imagery; it is self-confident without being at all arrogant; it is, in short, an expression of the vitality of the mind and spirit that produced it. Hurston is frank in her ambitions (“The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting”; *Folklore* 828), but her ambitions are never unattractive, because they are the normal and healthy human ambitions of wanting to make the best of one’s life and talents and leave behind a record in which one can feel a sense of accomplishment. One rarely senses, either in this essay or in most of her other writings, that Hurston is asking for more than she would willingly grant to others; she is merely asking (or, rather, taking for granted) the right to prove herself. Ultimately she sees herself as an individual, and as an *individualist*: When she is feeling most confident, the “cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time,” and she simply cannot imagine how anyone “*can* deny themselves the pleasure of my company!” (*Folklore* 829). The frankness of this nonegotistical egotism cannot help but make one smile, laugh, and ultimately like Zora.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this essay with BOOKER T. WASHINGTON’s autobiography *Up from Slavery* and with RICHARD WRIGHT’s autobiography *Black Boy*. With which of these other works does Hurston’s essay have most in common? Discuss the tones, attitudes, and credibility of the three works. How do the three writers use humor?
2. Read this essay in conjunction with one of Hurston’s fictional works, such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. How are the attitudes expressed in this nonfiction essay reflected in Hurston’s more obviously “creative” writing? Do the main protagonists of her novels seem to share any of the attitudes expressed in the essay? Given the social circumstances of

American blacks in Hurston's day, is the essay at all naive or simplistic?

3. Discuss specific instances of Hurston's use of humor in this essay. How, in particular cases, do the touches of humor contribute to the persuasiveness and rhetorical effectiveness of the piece? What does Hurston's humor imply about her attitudes toward herself, others, and life in general? How and why are such attitudes appealing?

"The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933)

Missie May and her husband, Joe, a young black couple living in the rural South, enjoy a happy, playful, sexually fulfilling marriage; they take pleasure in each other's company, and in fact one evening they visit an ice cream parlor newly opened by Otis D. Slemmons, a prosperous black who has recently arrived from the North—a man whom Joe admires for his wealth, his success with women, and even his prominent pot belly. Missie May, however, cannot understand why Joe thinks so highly of Otis, whom she finds much less physically appealing than Joe himself; nevertheless, when Joe returns home early from work one day, he finds Missie May and Slemmons in bed together. Although Joe's first impulse is to laugh, the infidelity opens up a silent chasm between the couple: Missie May feels deeply guilty and Joe largely keeps his distance as well as his own counsel, but eventually the breach is mostly healed when Missie May gives birth to a child who is clearly Joe's.

In this exceptionally fine and complex story, Hurston manages to create an utterly persuasive picture of domestic joy. The opening scenes of Joe and Missie May, which are full of genuine tenderness as well as palpable sexual energy, are among the best ever presented of a happy marriage—a fact that makes the later destruction of that happiness all the more powerful and tragic. Hurston makes Missie May's initial disdain for Slemmons so convincing that readers are just as shocked as Joe is to find his loving wife and Slemmons in bed together. Even more surprising, however, is Joe's response:

"He was assaulted in his weakness. Like Samson awakening after his haircut. So he just opened his mouth and laughed" (*Novels* 991). Just when we might expect Joe to launch into a vicious, vindictive assault on his wife (he does, after all, beat Slemmons), he merely puts "Slemmons' watch charm in his pants pocket and [takes] a good laugh and [goes] to bed" (*Novels* 992). Joe, however, is not an implausibly noble saint who merely turns the other cheek; instead, he commits small acts of psychological vengeance, even treating his wife at one point as if she is a whore who has earned her wages of sin. For the most part, though, Joe and Missie May handle the crisis in their marriage with admirable maturity: She shows commendable sorrow, while he shows commendable restraint. Readers miss their evening romps as much as Missie May does, but eventually they do begin having sex again, although even then Joe cannot resist punishing her by leaving Slemmons's gilded coins underneath her pillow the next morning (*Novels* 994). In this story (unlike in some others by Hurston, such as "Sweat") nothing ever seems simple. Instead, the story is full of rich and complex characterizations—a fact that makes the comment of a white merchant near the end of the tale seem especially ironic: "Wisht I could be like these darkies. Laughin' all the time. Nothin' worries 'em" (*Novels* 996). The shallowness of this comment is highlighted by the depth of the preceding story—a depth that also lends added ironic dimension to the first words of the text: "It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement" (*Novels* 985). These words imply a completely stereotypical setting for a totally predictable tale. In contrast, Hurston gives us something much richer, more knotted, more vivid and vital—a story every bit as complicated as life itself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with ERNEST HEMINGWAY's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." In particular, discuss such matters as marital relations, sexual jealousy, male psychology, and moral complexity.
2. How do you explain Missie May's affair and Joe's reaction to it? How are both the affair and

his response to it surprising? How, in particular, do you explain Joe's relatively passive reaction? Why does he seem generally willing to forgive his wife? How might a less talented writer have depicted Joe's response?

***Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934)**

This novel traces the rise and fall of John Buddy Pearson, a strong and resourceful black youth who is born into poverty in turn-of-the-century Alabama, where he is loved by his mother, Amy; abused by his stepfather, Ned; and respected and admired by a lively community of blacks and even by a local white plantation owner, Alf Pearson, the man from whom he takes his last name and the man who may indeed be his biological father. Much of the novel describes the growing love and gradual courtship of John and a beautiful young girl, named Lucy Potts, whom John finally succeeds in marrying; unfortunately, however, despite his real affection both for Lucy and for their ever-increasing number of children, and despite his new-found prominence as a popular preacher in a thriving Florida church, John engages in one extramarital affair after another—a pattern of behavior that breaks the spirit of the long-suffering Lucy. When Lucy dies, John cannot stop his pattern of womanizing, and this behavior leads to a bad second marriage, a messy divorce, loss of his church, and a plunge into poverty, until he is rescued by his marriage to the prosperous and affectionate Sally Lovelace—a marriage, however, that still does not prevent him from lapsing into his old ways just before his untimely end.

This remarkably well-written first novel was composed in just a few months in response to the invitation of a publisher who had been impressed by Hurston's story "The Gilded Six-Bits." As is that story and much of Hurston's other fiction, the novel is set in the rural and small-town South and paints a convincing picture of numerous aspects of African-American life, including the joys and tensions of communal existence, the pleasures and frustrations of relations between the sexes (especially in marriage), and the complex interplay

between blacks and whites. Whites, however, tend to be mostly a marginal presence in this book (as in much of Hurston's work); her chief interest is in the lives, loves, hopes, worries, happiness, and disappointments of the people she knew so well, and indeed this particular novel is loosely based on the life of her own father. In fact, a character named *Isis*, closely resembling the young Hurston herself, also appears in the book. One need not know this autobiographical background, however, to appreciate the riches of this novel—riches that include exceptionally vivid use of dialogue, imagery, folklore, and African-American dialect. Hurston makes it possible for readers to feel, taste, smell, see, and above all *hear* what it was like to live as a poor southern black in the early decades of the 20th century, and some of the impressions she creates in this work are indelible.

The novel begins, for instance, with a memorable description of the "grumbling" thunder of an approaching storm—a sound that leads Amy, John Buddy's mother, to remark of God that "Ole Massa gwinter scrub floors tuhday" (*Novels* 3). The remark is typical of dialogue in this novel in many ways. It alludes, for instance, to the long history of slavery that continued to shape African-American thinking well after the official end of that practice. It also reveals the tendency in black folk culture to describe nearly everything (even the weather) in anthropomorphic terms. Thus, God is not simply an abstract force or even a mystical personality; he is a powerful and unpredictable "Ole Massa." At the same time, however, the imagery is typically homespun, mundane, and unpretentious: Thunder means that God is scrubbing floors, not that he is engaging in any grand, awesome, or incomprehensible conduct. God, then, is distant and powerful, but in his actions, feelings, and thoughts, he is also kin to the people he has created, and indeed in the folk world Hurston describes, practically everything seems vital, alive, familiar, and approachable. God scrubs floors just as everyone else does, and when he speaks, he speaks in the same kind of dialect as Amy herself.

That dialect is one of the most appealing aspects of the novel. By lovingly reporting and recording it, Hurston performs a role that T. S. ELIOT considered

one of the most important any poet could discharge: She keeps the language fresh and alive, revivifying and renewing it (and doing so, in this case, by returning it to its roots). Examples of Hurston's skill in re-creating the actual speech of the people she describes are too numerous to mention; memorable phrasing occurs in practically every paragraph of the novel, especially in its first two-thirds. At one point, for instance, when Amy reproaches her husband (John Buddy's stepfather) for constantly criticizing the boy's mixed racial heritage, she accuses him of "always washin' his face wid his color" (*Novels* 4), and later the stepfather himself uses memorable phrasing when he tells Amy to "git dat punkin-colored bastard outa dis house" (*Novels* 10). As both of these examples will attest, Hurston pulls no punches in honestly reporting even the least attractive aspects of life among her characters (including a good deal of intraracial prejudice, as well as a good deal of violence, especially against women), but the important point is that her language is almost always equal to whatever task she sets for herself. She rarely hits a false note, and she can convincingly re-create the speech both of upper-class whites and of lower-class blacks, just as she can use standard English every bit as effectively as dialect. It is the dialect, however, that makes this novel live. We hear it, for instance, in various examples of folk poetry (such as "See yuh later, and tell yuh straighter"; *Novels* 16); we hear it in folk sayings (such as "Ah'll betcher Alabama wid uh fence 'round it"; *Novels* 24); we hear it in the vivid imagery of common (and comic) phrasing (as when Lucy tells John, "Hug me till mah dress fit tight"; *Novels* 47); and we hear it in the colorful syntax, or sentence structure (as when John's brother asks him, "Where at de bread is?"; *Novels* 56). Again and again, Hurston makes these characters live through the words they use; speech and characterization are at least as important to this novel as plot, and readers turn its pages in eager anticipation of the next bit of vivid phrasing Hurston will employ.

Further examples of Hurston's lively language include her use of invented words (such as *shickalacked*, to describe the sound of a moving train; *Novels* 16); her skill at characterization (as when she says, "The teacher was a stodgy middle-aged man

who prided himself on his frowns"; *Novels* 25); her effective use of fragments (as when she describes a school ceremony as follows: "Opening prayer. Song. Speech by white superintendent. Speeches rattled off like beans poured into a tin can"; *Novels* 35); her striking skill with metaphors (as when she notes that "the things left unsaid laid a steamy blanket over talk"; *Novels* 41); and her splendid sense of comedy (as when Lucy, wanting John to stay as long as possible at her parents' house for supper, "cut peas in two and split grains of rice" while they are eating; *Novels* 60). Hurston enters the minds of men as well as women; she conveys the thoughts and emotions of the young as well as the old; she reports the latest cultural developments (such as the mass migrations of blacks to the North touched off by World War I), but she also deals with ancient, enduring facts of life (such as sexual maturation, tensions between parents and children, and the complexities of marriage). The book is full of wisdom and comedy, pleasure and pain, happiness and regret. John achieves his goal of marrying a good, beautiful, and supportive young woman, and then he unaccountably destroys the life he has made for himself. In one sense his behavior seems inexplicable; in another sense it seems all too familiar. Hurston's novel is one more variation on the ancient theme of "paradise lost": John works to achieve and then ruins his achievement. Yet Hurston offers no simple morality tale; like Lucy, she is tolerant of John's misjudgments because she appreciates his many strengths.

Lucy is one of Hurston's most memorable creations, and the book loses much of its appeal when she dies two-thirds of the way into the novel. John himself is most interesting when he is courting and living with Lucy, and, after she passes, the novel weakens: The language becomes less lively, the plot seems rushed, and the characterization seems less rich than before. Hattie (John's new wife) is unappealing but is treated too obviously as a mere villain, while the saintly Sally not only seems too good to be true but (more important) is introduced and depicted so quickly that we never get to know her well enough to be greatly interested. John's behavior, meanwhile, is much harder to understand in the last third of the novel than

it was earlier, nor does Hurston make much effort to explain it. The church members who scheme against him are almost cartoonish, and the rival preacher they bring in to challenge John seems too inept to be a credible contestant. It is as if Hurston herself lost much of her own earlier interest in the book when Lucy (the character modeled closely on her own mother) departed from it, but to say this is not to imply that the novel fails. It simply becomes less good in its final third than earlier, but the first two thirds of the book is impressively strong and refreshing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Hurston's book with W. E. B. DuBois's novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Discuss the works in terms of characterization, diction, use of dialogue, and plot. Which novel seems to have a more explicit political purpose? Which is more effective as a work of art?
2. Read Hurston's novel alongside CLAUDE MCKAY's book *Home to Harlem*. Discuss the works in terms of their settings, their use of dialect, their depictions of race relations, and their conclusions. How are the main male characters alike and/or different?
3. Discuss the moral codes this novel seems to imply or take for granted. What kinds of attitudes and behavior (if any) does the novel seem to endorse? What kinds of attitudes and behavior (if any) does it seem to censure? Which characters seem most—and least—admirable, and why? How does Hurston complicate her presentation of her characters, so that they do not seem merely superficial or stereotypical?

Mules and Men (1935)

In this innovative anthropological report on African-American folklore, Hurston herself becomes a character and narrator as she returns to her hometown in Florida (and journeys to New Orleans) to collect and record the stories, sayings, jokes, songs, and customs of southern blacks, including “hoo-doo” practices in Louisiana.

Now considered a classic of American anthropology, *Mules and Men* was (and remains) a path-breaking book, not only because of its content but especially because of its methods and style. Previous students of African-American folklore had often been white outsiders who never succeeded in truly penetrating the depths of the culture they had been sent to study. They faced polite reticence from blacks, who distrusted their questions and their motives. As Hurston herself remarks in describing the response of her fellow blacks to the typical folklore researcher, “We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity with a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries” (*Folklore* 10). As this passage illustrates, *Mules and Men* is another of Hurston's typically well-written books: The language is clear, precise, and vivid. She gives to her scientific task all the gifts of a talented prose stylist, and indeed the book is valuable not only for the numerous tales and sayings it reports but also for the vivid narrative (and often dramatic) style in which the reports are offered. *Mules and Men* reads as a good piece of fiction rather than a dry anthropological report; both the narrator and the characters come alive as distinct personalities, so that Hurston does not simply describe a culture from the outside but instead re-creates it from within. She does not merely record tales; instead she shows how the tales arise from, and function within, the culture that gives them birth. She writes as a trusted “insider” and even as a participant in many of the events she describes, and just as she quickly wins the trust of her black southern subjects, so she soon establishes the same bond of trust with her readers. It is easy to understand why her subjects “opened up” to her, since the personality she presents in this book is so obviously appealing and inviting.

The success of the book derives, however, not only from its manner but from its matter. The stories, events, and practices that Hurston describes are almost invariably interesting (and entertaining) in and of themselves. Often the stories are funny;

often they are charming; frequently they are wise. Many of the tales are extended jokes, as in the story about the slave owner who told a judge that he owned a black who smelled worse than a goat. The judge, curious to see whether this was true, first asked the man to bring in the goat, which smelled so bad that the judge fainted. After the judge was revived, the black was brought in, who smelled so bad that the goat fainted (*Folklore* 82). Hurston reports such stories (using language that would be considered highly racist today, at least if used by a white person) without apology or defensiveness; she obviously delights in all the facets of her people's complex culture. Her book suggests the ways African Americans used humor to cope with a history and lives that were often full of pain. The book reveals a rich, vibrant culture (full of friendship, comedy, imagination, and inventiveness) existing outside the awareness of most white Americans; it makes that culture accessible to everyone and thus helps promote a richer national heritage for all.

Although *Mules and Men* obviously reflects the experiences of a particular subset of the human population, it also deals with many of the most common and widespread of human concerns, such as relations between the sexes, relations between the young and the old, relations between different cultures, relations between man and nature, tensions within communities, and relations between humans and the supernatural or divine. Indeed, one reason the book is so interesting is that it presents the responses of one specific culture to these broad concerns. The book allows readers to compare and contrast the responses of African-American culture to these timeless preoccupations with the responses of other cultural traditions. Doing so not only provides a better appreciation of the distinctiveness of the black American heritage but also offers a fuller sense of cross-cultural similarities. The fact that readers of all sorts can find the book's jokes amusing, its fables charming, and its insights wise suggests that Hurston has done something more than describe the legends and lore of one particular culture; apparently, by doing so, she has also tapped into some deeper truths of human nature. On the one hand, her book is an introduc-

tion to a wide variety of forms of African-American discourse (including prayers, sermons, fables, jokes, poetry, and the forms of everyday conversation); on the other hand, the work also speaks to something broader and more universal. Reading the book is like getting to know more deeply a branch of one's family that had never before seemed so familiar.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read *Mules and Men* alongside W. E. B. DuBois's pathbreaking sociological treatise *The Philadelphia Negro*. How are the two works similar and/or different in their purposes, procedures, methods, and styles? What are the advantages and possible disadvantages of the distinctive approaches used in each book? What kind of picture emerges of African-American culture in each book? What similarities and/or differences are there between the urban culture described by DuBois and the mainly rural culture depicted by Hurston?
2. Compare and contrast the southern black culture described by Hurston with the kind of culture depicted in Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*. How do the two works complement one another? How are they similar and/or different in style, substance, purpose, tone, and attitude? How do the differences between the two works reflect and/or help explain the tensions that existed between Wright and Hurston?
3. Read this work as if it were (as it partly is) an autobiographical portrait. How does Hurston present her own personality and character? What consistencies emerge in her comments about herself? What attitudes does she display? What kind of coherent picture emerges of Hurston the individual?

***Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)**

Janie Crawford is an adolescent African-American girl being raised by her grandmother, Nanny, in impoverished conditions in the rural South; when Nanny (who has suffered in the distant past from

sexual abuse herself) realizes that Janie is reaching sexual maturity, she quickly marries the girl off to a much older man named Logan Kendricks—a relatively prosperous black farmer but a man in whom Janie herself has no real interest. Thus, when a younger, more attractive, more articulate, and more ambitious black man named Joe Starks comes along, he has little trouble persuading Janie to run off, marry him, and help him build a prosperous business in a newly founded all-black town, where he quickly becomes the mayor and leading citizen, but where he also (eventually) begins to treat Janie more as a workhorse than as a beloved wife. After Starks dies, the now-wealthy Janie meets a lively, attractive, much younger black man nicknamed Tea Cake, with whom she falls into passionate love and with whom she lives a happy life farming in the Everglades—until a natural disaster leads to a tragic conclusion to their previously joyous relationship.

This novel is generally considered not only Hurston's best but also one of the finest novels by any African-American writer. Its emphasis on the growth of an increasingly independent and self-assertive female spirit—especially a spirit faced with various kinds of male oppression—has made the book a favorite of feminists, while its focus on both the discrimination suffered by blacks and their resilience in the face of racist conditions has made it a popular work among people of color. Some black males, however, have objected to the novel's depictions of the abusive husbands (even the normally charming Tea Cake sometimes beats Janie), while some African-American political activists have suggested that the novel underemphasizes the destructive impact of white racism and lacks the kind of liberating political force it could have had. Hurston, however, could plausibly reply that *Their Eyes* does possess a more obviously political dimension than her first novel (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*), and she could also claim that although violence by black males against black women is a feature of both novels, the main character of *Their Eyes* is less a passive victim than had been true in the earlier book. Janie, in fact, seems to embody many of the best traits of the young Lucy, who had been only a secondary (but highly appealing) character in *Jonah's Gourd*

Vine, but Janie also epitomizes many strengths and virtues that Lucy lacked. By the end of the novel Janie has become the kind of character seldom featured in previous fiction in the United States (or anywhere else, for that matter): a woman of color who is not merely (or even mainly) a tragic victim but who has lived a rich, full, and complex life and has also learned and grown in the process.

Hurston's second novel features many of the same traits that make much of her fiction attractive. She is adept at characterization; she employs dialogue effectively; she uses humor to offset and intensify sadness; she is psychologically insightful; she shows an unsurpassed skill in rendering the black dialect of the rural South; she takes readers inside the internal workings of small black communities; she draws on the resources of folklore and folk culture while also offering a credible depiction of modern life; and she depicts settings (especially natural settings) in ways that are both convincingly realistic and highly evocative. *Their Eyes* is richer in self-conscious symbolism than *Jonah's Gourd Vine*; it begins, for instance, with a highly lyrical passage comparing human existence to a vision of ships at sea; it uses imagery of a flowering pear tree to suggest Janie's sexual awakening; and its later depiction of a destructive hurricane makes the storm seem almost apocalyptically powerful. Above all, however, the novel is alive with the kind of vivid phrasing that is "poetic" in all the best senses of that term: It is fresh, crisp, suggestive, and precise. Repeatedly Hurston uses language that leaves a memorable impression. When Janie first appears, for instance, her nosy neighbors are so transfixed that "nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit" (*Novels* 176). Anyone might have written the first two phrases, but only Hurston (or someone with a comparable imagination) could have conceived the third. Later, when Joe Starks enters the novel, he is deftly characterized as a man "who walked like he knew where he was going" (*Novels* 196), and thus Hurston, in fewer than 10 simple words, efficiently conveys the essence of his personality. A little later he is described (with effective alliteration and wordplay) as someone who "spoke

for change and chance" (*Novels* 197), and later still another character threatens to kill someone "cemetery dead" (*Novels* 235). It would be easy to compile a long list of examples of Hurston's language that sticks in the mind and rolls off the tongue. Her writing is essentially an oral art, based on long years of listening closely to the way words are actually spoken by street-corner poets and front-porch raconteurs.

The structure of the book is straightforward: It opens in the present, when Janie mysteriously returns to town after a long absence, thus provoking not only curiosity in her gossipy neighbors but also suspense in Hurston's readers: Both the neighbors and the readers want to know what Janie has been up to and why she has returned. The story then deals, in turn, with three significant deaths (those of Nanny, Joe, and Tea Cake) and with three distinctive kinds of husbands (an old man, a less-old man, and then a man much younger than Janie). Each husband is a symbolic figure: Killicks is a relatively prosperous farmer who represents the traditional rural economy; Starks eventually becomes an even wealthier symbol of the rising merchant class; while Tea Cake is a relatively poor but almost entirely carefree symbol of vibrant, youthful masculinity; he is associated with nature, with music, with sexuality, with life—a fact that makes his sudden, violent death, and its even more tragic circumstances, all the more powerfully ironic. He is the only husband Janie actually chooses for herself, and although he sometimes beats her (when he submits to traditional notions of masculine power and authority), for the most part their relationship is one of healthy mutual respect and affection. As in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston here shows a splendid ability to depict the true joys (both physical and emotional) of genuine love in a good marriage. Yet the book is rarely, if ever, saccharine or sentimental. In its tone as in almost every other respect, it is a remarkably well-balanced book: It is complex but comprehensible. Even in dealing with men and with whites it seems to have no special ax to grind; its focus is more on explaining Janie's growth and development than on indicting other characters. Hurston obviously sympathizes with Janie, but not

to the point of lacking objectivity; few (if any) of the characters are presented either as simple villains or as simple saints.

Janie's grandmother, for instance, might easily have been depicted as a merely villainous character; after all, she thwarts Janie's youthful romantic dreams, forces her to marry a man she does not love, and even slaps her face when Janie resists (*Novels* 186). Yet it is obvious that the grandmother also loves the girl and wants to protect her from harm, and it is equally obvious that her protectiveness is rooted in painful recollections of her own hard life. Thus she tells Janie, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" (*Novels* 186). Later she memorably explains herself by telling Janie, "Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate" (*Novels* 190). In depicting the grandmother, as in presenting most of the other characters, Hurston reveals a good deal of charity and generally avoids sarcastic caricature. She puts her people in their places—not in the sense of standing over them in judgment, but in the sense of situating them in complex settings and circumstances that help us understand their tangled motives and complicated behavior. It is easy, for instance, to sympathize both with Janie and with her first husband when Janie explains to her grandmother why she finds the man physically repulsive: "Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck." And when her grandmother replies, sensibly enough, that the husband cannot be held responsible for his appearance because he "never made his own head," we can nevertheless laugh at Janie's sharp reply: "Ah don't keer who made it, Ah don't like the job" (*Novels* 193). In exchanges such as this one, Hurston reveals the illogic often found in human responses while presenting them sympathetically, and she also catches the real rhythms of the ways people actually think and speak.

If the book does have a villain, it may be Joe (or "Jody") Starks, Janie's second husband. The irony, of course, is that he is the man Janie her-

self selects as a way of escaping from her loveless first marriage, and although their own union quickly deteriorates as Starks becomes more and more taken with his own power, authority, and prosperity, they stay married for many years. As he eventually lies on his deathbed, Janie rebukes him with all her pent-up frustration over years of abusive treatment, but even at this moment, she is able to see him with some balance and perspective: “Listen, Jody, you ain’t de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You’s whut’s left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn’t satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me” (*Novels* 244). The pathos of this scene derives from the fact that Janie’s anger is fueled by her sense of lost love: She is bitter at Starks because she so clearly remembers the man he once was and because she so strongly regrets the ways he has squandered the opportunities for real happiness they might have shared. Her treatment of him as he is dying is cruel from one perspective but perfectly understandable from another, and when he finally does die, Hurston writes that Janie “was full of pity for the first time in years. Jody had been hard on her and others, but life had mishandled him too. Poor Joel!” (*Novels* 245). The complexity of Janie’s emotions here is a sign of her psychological maturity, as it is of Hurston’s insightful and balanced characterization.

Finally, just as Hurston resists demonizing either Janie’s grandmother or her first two husbands, so she also resists turning Tea Cake into an entirely implausible saint. Yes, he is charming, handsome, sexually potent, and even musically talented, but he can also be dishonest (as when he steals Janie’s money soon after they run off together, although he quickly wins it back by gambling), and he also beats her at one point—if only to prove his authority to others (*Novels* 294). Oddly enough, Janie’s response to this beating is not reported, but we know from elsewhere in the book that she can fight back when she feels the impulse, as when she and Tea Cake battle each other over his apparent attraction to another woman:

They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible; kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion. (*Novels* 287)

It is a typically complex passage, as complicated in its sentence structure as in the actions it describes; it is full of violence and affection, resistance and attraction, power and love. It mixes activity and passivity, anger and lust: In some ways the action seems a rape and in some ways it seems a mutually satisfying expression of shared desire. It is a passage, in other words, that exemplifies the kind of complications that make Hurston’s novel as a whole so compelling and provocative.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Janie resemble and/or differ from Melanctha in the second section of GERTRUDE STEIN’s work *Three Lives*? Discuss these characters in terms of their motives, their behavior, their romantic involvements, their styles of speech, and their ultimate fates.
2. THEODORE DREISER’s novel *Sister Carrie* also deals with a young woman’s maturation and romantic involvements. How do the two novels compare and contrast in setting, style, characterization, and plot? How do such issues as race and class affect the works? What motives drive the two main characters? How do the endings of the novels reflect the values of the heroines?
3. How does Hurston’s novel compare and contrast with Richard Wright’s *Native Son*? Consider such matters as the protagonists, the plots, the settings, the outcomes, and the implied purposes of the two books. How are men and women presented in the two novels? How important is race in each work?
4. Read Hurston’s book alongside Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand*. How are the heroines comparable and/or different, especially in their backgrounds, their basic attitudes, their involvements

9. Discuss the ethical or moral dimensions of one or more of Hurston's works. What kinds of ethical ideal(s) seem to be implied by the work? What does Hurston seem to suggest about the ways people should treat one another, and why? How does Hurston present characters in morally complex ways (that is, as combinations of good and bad rather than as all good or all bad)? How does moral complexity contribute to the artistic effectiveness of a novel or story? How does a simplistic approach to moral issues detract from the artistic impact of a work?
10. Examine one of Hurston's lesser-known works (such as one of her less-known short stories) and discuss the work in detail. Does it deserve to be more widely recognized? If so, why? If not, why not? What are its strengths and weaknesses? How is it typical or atypical of Hurston's writing?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- , ed. *Zora Neale Hurston*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003.
- , ed. *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 1999.
- Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Campbell, Josie P. *Student Companion to Zora Neale Hurston*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2001.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. Edited by Cheryl A. Wall. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- . *Novels and Stories*. Edited by Cheryl A. Wall. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- Newson, Adele S. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.
- Wall, Cheryl A. "Chronology." In *Novels and Stories*. By Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- Zora Neale Hurston. Available online. URL: <http://www.zoranealehurston.com>. Accessed April 7, 2009.

Robert C. Evans



NELLA LARSEN (1891–1964)

[S]urely it is more interesting to belong to one's own time, to share its peculiar vision, catch that flying glimpse of the panorama which no subsequent generation can ever recover.

(letter to Carl Van Vechten, qtd. in Wall 93)

Nella Larsen has always been, and remains, one of the most mysterious figures in the famous Harlem Renaissance, the brief but effervescent outpouring of creative writing by African Americans in the 1920s that centered around the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Larsen is remembered, on the strength of two surviving books, as one of the best novelists of the movement, but her personal life has always been somewhat obscure, and in her final decades she virtually vanished from the literary scene. Fortunately, the publication of George Hutchinson's massive biography of Larsen in 2006 has answered many lingering questions and cleared up much previous confusion, and any student of Larsen's life is necessarily indebted to Hutchinson's research and should begin by studying his huge and impressively detailed volume.

According to her birth certificate, Larsen was born as Nellie Walker in Chicago on April 13, 1891, the daughter of a white Danish immigrant named Mary Hansen and of Peter Walker, an immigrant from the Danish West Indies whose own parentage was racially mixed: Walker's father was probably a West Indian white man who had impregnated a black mistress. Although Walker (a cook) had a reasonably good job for a "colored" man in the racially prejudiced United States of the 1890s, at the time of Nellie's birth he and Mary (whom he apparently married in 1890) lived in an especially unappealing area of Chicago. Unfortunately, Peter Walker either

died (as Larsen herself believed) or disappeared from Nellie's young life for some other reason; Nellie's mother soon became involved with (and probably married to) a white Danish immigrant named Peter Larsen, and in July 1892 Nellie's white half sister, Anna, was born. Claims that "Peter Larsen" was *really* "Peter Walker" passing as a white man have been effectively refuted by Hutchinson (24); in this case, as in many others, Nella Larsen's own accounts of her life seem more trustworthy than those of some later biographers.

Nella's childhood and adolescence cannot have been easy, not only because she experienced racial discrimination but also because her parents were never prosperous. There is some reason to think that her white stepfather found her something of an embarrassment (at one point he apparently failed to report her existence to a census taker), but, on the other hand, there is good reason to believe that she was much loved by her mother. For one thing, her mother took both Nella and Anna with her on a return visit to Denmark when both girls were quite young, and when they returned to Chicago in 1898, Nella was enrolled in school and in fact eventually received a better education than Anna. Hutchinson argues that Nella's mother realized that her racially mixed child would face greater challenges than her white daughter and so made an extra effort to ensure that Nella would be as well prepared as possible for her future. The available evidence suggests

that young Nella was a particularly bright child; she was able to skip various grade levels, and when she entered a largely white high school in 1905, she was one of a very small minority of Chicagoans of any race able to avail themselves of a high school education. Her half sister never had this opportunity; nor did she go to college (as Nella did). Through her own gifts and efforts and through the extra income provided by her mother's work as a dressmaker, Nella thus became a well-educated and highly articulate young woman, but in the America of her era all her talents were less important than the simple fact of her race. Chicago was becoming increasingly racially segregated during Larsen's youth, and she must have realized that life for her parents and sister would have been easier (or at least less awkward) if she were not a member of the family. Hutchinson convincingly argues that this early recognition of her difference shaped Larsen's psychology for the rest of her life.

Larsen's awareness of racial discrimination would have increased vastly when she enrolled at Fisk University, a traditionally black college in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1907. Suddenly she was living in the South, where legal and de facto segregation was a pervasive fact of life; she and her mother, for instance, could not have sat beside each other on public transportation (Hutchinson 53). Nashville had a much higher proportion of African-American citizens than did Chicago, and Fisk itself (at least in its student body) was entirely black. Larsen's time there did not last long, however, for in June 1908 she was one of nearly a dozen students who were expelled from the university, apparently for objecting to its rigid dress codes and other restrictions on student conduct. The self-assertiveness that would increasingly become a feature of Larsen's character had now begun to manifest itself, but if her expulsion from Fisk was a disappointment to her mother, it provided an opportunity of sorts for Nella, for during the next four years (except for a brief return trip to the United States) she was able to live with relatives in Denmark, where racial prejudice was much less common than in America and where she seems to have been cordially received. Although

some biographers have questioned Larsen's claims about this sojourn in Denmark, Hutchinson argues persuasively that (once again) Larsen's own accounts can be trusted. This extended stay abroad, especially since it occurred during the crucial years of her late teens and early twenties, helped radically to shape her sense of herself as a cosmopolitan outsider—familiar with many different nations, cultures, classes, and ethnicities, but not entirely “at home” in any. Larsen and her family may even have assumed for a time that she would live permanently in Denmark, and perhaps it was this assumption that helped account for the fact that she was not reported as being a member of her family's Chicago household in the 1910 census.

In any case, Larsen was back in the United States in 1912 and had soon enrolled in a nursing school in New York, where she received rigorous training and where (as before and later) she excelled in her work. In January 1915 she graduated as one of the top nurses in the program and quickly found employment as head nurse at the Tuskegee Institute, perhaps the most famous black college in the world at that time. At Tuskegee, however, she was expected to work long and punishing hours (especially as a result of an epidemic of grippe that hit the school during the winter season), and she was also expected to conform to a rigid code of conduct—a code Larsen soon found oppressive and exploitive, and one with which she quickly became disenchanted. Resigning from her position in fall 1916, she eventually returned to New York, began teaching at her old nursing school, and earned certification in the rapidly developing and increasingly important field of civil service nursing. In the early summer 1918 she began working for the Bureau of Preventable Diseases, earning impressive pay raises and taking a leading role in helping to combat the infamous epidemic of Spanish flu that spread throughout the globe that year—one of the most deadly epidemics in world history. Larsen had a real talent for nursing and a passionate commitment to it, and these facts would stand her in good stead when her later literary career suddenly collapsed. For the time being, she remained a nurse

until 1921, by which time her salary had increased substantially.

On May 3, 1919, however, she had married Elmer Imes, a black man who not only was a member of a noted and well-connected family, but also had the distinction of being only the second African American in U.S. history to earn a Ph.D. in physics (Hutchinson 124). Elmer and Nella soon became active in the social and cultural life of Harlem, and Nella in particular became involved with a local library and began to consider becoming a writer. Resigning her position as a nurse, she became a librarian and then enrolled in library school—one of the first blacks in the country to do so. Once again she quickly distinguished herself, especially in her performance on the job, and pay raises and promotions rapidly followed. By the mid-1920s, however, she was as much interested in writing books herself as in tending to books written by others, and her growing connections with other black intellectuals and writers, as well as the increasing interest taken in her by such white literati as Carl Van Vechten (author of the famous novel *Nigger Heaven*) helped encourage her ambitions. Interest in black literature, music, dance, and art was at a high point during this period; whites visited Harlem to take part in its active social life, which centered around nightclubs and jazz. Larsen's first published work of fiction, a story titled "The Wrong Man," appeared in print in January 1926, followed in April by another, titled "Freedom." In was in early 1928, however, that her first novel, *Quicksand*, appeared. Partly autobiographical in theme and plot, this novel won Larsen wide acclaim, and by the end of the year she had already finished a second novel, titled *Passing*, which some readers considered even better than her first. Despite her growing professional success, however, her marriage had begun to fail—a fact reflected in the plot of *Passing*.

Although charges (probably accurate) that Larsen had deliberately plagiarized a story called "Sanctuary" damaged her reputation in 1930, she had nevertheless begun working on a new novel, and in the spring of that year she learned that she had been selected to receive a highly prestigious

Guggenheim Fellowship, which would allow her to travel to Europe to work on her new book. The fellowship occurred at a welcome time, since Larsen could now confront Elmer with her knowledge of his affair with a white woman who worked at Fisk University, where he had recently become a high-paid professor. Although their marriage did not end immediately (since the wrong kind of scandal would have cost not only Elmer his job but Nella any chance of adequate alimony), her time in Spain and France, which began in fall 1930, gave her an opportunity to work on her book, gather her thoughts, and perhaps (or so Hutchinson suggests [372]) conduct an affair of her own with a young white man. Her third novel, however, pleased neither Larsen nor her publishers, and the book never did appear in print. Adding to her disappointment was the fact that she was expected, upon her return to the United States, to move from New York to Nashville to take up residence as the faculty wife of her adulterous husband. Although she did indeed move to Fisk, she was quite unhappy there—a feeling exacerbated by the fact that many blacks on campus sympathized with Elmer. During her time in Nashville she apparently suffered (or took) a fall—an incident that some have interpreted as either a real or phony suicide attempt. In any case, by the end of August 1933 she was granted a divorce (with ample alimony) on grounds of Elmer's alleged cruelty. The alimony payments, which continued until Elmer's death in 1941, gave her a measure of financial security during the depths of the Great Depression.

By the mid-1930s Larsen had begun to withdraw from many of her previously closest friends, and by the late 1930s she had broken with most of her former acquaintances. Few of them had any idea where she now lived or how to contact her. The breakdown of her marriage (which had been publicized in the press) had demoralized her, while the failure of her third novel must also have been depressing. Hutchinson suggests that she may have become dependent on drugs and/or alcohol in the final decades of her life (450, 469–471), and perhaps by pulling away from her former friends she sought to hide this or other problems. The alimony

payments from Elmer allowed her a certain degree of economic freedom, but in the years immediately following Elmer's death on September 11, 1941, Larsen became a bit more accessible, although she maintained her distance from most of her old associates. Early in 1944 she began working as a nurse at Gouverneur Hospital in New York, and, as in the past, she quickly won promotions and raises. By 1947 she had become chief nurse and night supervisor, and throughout the 1950s she worked diligently, earning the respect of numerous colleagues. Even when she was assaulted and robbed in early 1960 while on her way to her job, she nevertheless proceeded to work, but she seems to have lived a largely isolated life, keeping to herself and breaking with friends when (for whatever reasons) they disappointed her. In September 1963 she was forced to retire because she had worked beyond the legal age limit, and in late March 1964 she was found dead in her apartment, apparently of a heart attack. The woman who had once found fame as a leading light of the Harlem Renaissance died, alone and lonely, obscure and largely forgotten.

Quicksand (1928)

Helga Crane, the young, talented, well-dressed, and well-educated daughter of a white mother and black father, finds herself unhappily employed at Naxos, an all-black college in the South, but she soon quits her job, returns to her hometown of Chicago, makes her way (with the support of a wealthy black patroness) to New York City, and there becomes involved with a group of comfortable, sophisticated blacks living in Harlem, the center of African-American cultural and social life in the United States during the 1920s. Eventually, though, after she grows disenchanted with her circle of black friends, she moves to Denmark (her mother's home country) for several years, but she soon becomes frustrated with the patronizing, calculating attitude of the Danes (who find her merely exotic), and so she yearns to go back to the United States. After her return and after some romantic disappointments, she impulsively mar-

ries an unkempt, exploitative black preacher, who moves her to Alabama, where she lives in poverty, remains constantly pregnant, gives birth to several children, nearly dies in childbirth, and ends the novel depressed, disillusioned, and pregnant with a fifth child.

Larsen's first novel, which is obviously autobiographical to a great degree, opens with a poetic epigraph by LANGSTON HUGHES (another significant writer of the Harlem Renaissance) that already implies several of the book's main themes. The epigraph's first line ("My old man died in a fine big house") foreshadows the novel's sometimes satiric depictions of upper-class life among both blacks and whites; meanwhile, the second line ("My ma died in a shack") anticipates the grim ending of the book, which describes the continually pregnant protagonist suffering in rural poverty. Meanwhile, the epigraph's final two lines ("I wonder where I'm gonna die / Being neither white nor black?") announces the novel's central concern with racial division, racial tension, and personal alienation. Helga Crane is "neither white nor black" not only because she is racially mixed by birth but also because she feels fully at home in none of the cultures she tries to inhabit. She is rootless, bitter, and constantly on the move; her dissatisfaction with one place and one circumstance after another generates much of the forward movement of the plot and most of the shifts from one symbolic location to another. As she moves from Alabama to Chicago to New York to Denmark and then ultimately back to Alabama, she tries out not only a series of possible homes but also a series of potential identities, finding fulfillment or happiness in none of them. The book is partly a meditation on the old theme of the "tragic mulatto," but more broadly it is a depiction of a woman whose life is defined in large part by rigid definitions of race, class, and gender. More broadly still, it is a novel that deals with the fundamental modern problem of existential alienation—of the inability to feel at peace, at rest, or at home anytime or anywhere.

The first sentence of the book is highly revealing: "Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in a soft

gloom” (35). Helga’s name is immediately suggestive: Her Christian name already implies her part-Scandinavian roots, while her last name is plain and nondescript. Even her name, in other words, suggests her mixed cultural background, while the fact that she is “alone” symbolizes her essential condition: She is alone at the beginning of the book, will be essentially alone (even when surrounded by others) throughout much of the rest of it, and will be even more fundamentally alone and lonely when the novel ends. It is not an accident, then, that the book opens in literal darkness and “gloom”: That word sets the tone for much of the rest of the novel. Helga, in these opening pages, is surrounded by abundant material comforts, but she never feels comfortable in her own skin; nor does she ever really feel at home with other people. It is not long, for instance, before she is remembering the day’s “distasteful encounters and stupid perversities” (36–37), a phrase that epitomizes many of her assessments of most of the people and events she encounters throughout the book. Helga is intensely unhappy with Naxos (an ironic anagram of *Saxon*), the white-funded and white-controlled institution of higher education for blacks (modeled on BOOKER T. WASHINGTON’s famous Tuskegee Institute)—a place she considers to be “smug and fat with self-satisfaction” and a place that “tolerated no innovations, no individualisms” (39). But Helga, unfortunately, is no more satisfied with her biological family than she is with her coworkers: Remembering her relatives in Chicago, she reflects that they “feared and hated her. She pitied and despised them” (41). From now until the end of the book, no matter where she is or who surrounds her, Helga will never know joy, for (as the narrator notes), “She could neither conform, nor be happy in her nonconformity” (42).

Quicksand, then, is a book with a deeply unhappy and (it must be said) a fairly unpleasant and even unappealing central character. Helga rejects Naxos (with typical melodrama) as “a place of shame, lies, hypocrisy, cruelty, servility, and snobbishness” (48), and she compares it to “some loathsome, venomous disease” (53), but she rarely stops to consider that the roots of her dissatisfac-

tion may lie in her own bitterness as much as in her surroundings, and (more to the point) Larsen rarely invites us to regard Helga with this sort of critical irony. Perhaps Helga was too close to Larsen’s own personality for Larsen to achieve any kind of significant distance from her, but in some ways the novel suffers from its almost suffocating focus on a character who seems, in many respects, so self-centered, uncharitable, and essentially immature. Everything is seen from Helga’s perspective; everything is filtered through Helga’s consciousness; there is relatively little of the dialogue and drama and conflict of viewpoints that help make Larsen’s second novel (*Passing*) an arguably better book. Helga and many of her friends (especially when she arrives in New York) can appear pretentious, affected, self-centered, and unsympathetic in both senses of that word, and sometimes Larsen’s own writing lapses into awkward affectation. At one point, for instance, she reports, “Having finally turned her attention to Helga Crane, Fortune now seemed determined to smile, to make amends for her shameful neglect. One had, Helga decided, only to touch the right button, to press the right spring, in order to attract the jade’s notice” (69). Occasionally Larsen seems to mock the materialism and hedonism of the people she describes, but she rarely achieves the kind of ironic, satiric, or humorous distance from those values that would make the book seem either warmer, more complex, or more substantial. In the final analysis Helga Crane is (sad to say) a character about whom it is difficult to care very deeply; her suffering seems largely the result of her own self-centeredness. As Charles Larson puts it, “The problem is Helga herself: her restlessness, her feelings of superiority, her deeply rooted sense of insecurity about her blackness, all the seemingly contradictory aspects of her personality. Self-hatred can manifest itself in many ways, and certainly one of the most common is to disdain everyone else” (*Invisible Darkness* 73). It is not clear, however, that Nella Larsen shares Charles Larson’s penetrating diagnosis of Helga Crane; too often the novel seems to invite us to pity Helga, and to share her perspective and attitudes, rather than to achieve much critical distance from them. Helga takes her-

self quite seriously, and Larsen unfortunately often seems to follow Helga's lead.

To say this, however, is not to deny the importance of Larsen's achievement in this book. She has been praised, for instance, for her "depiction of a memorable protagonist, her adept narration, and her skillful development of the novel's central metaphor" (Wall 116), and although most critics consider Helga's sudden marriage unconvincing and the novel's ending abrupt and flawed, most have also agreed with the original judgment of W. E. B. DuBois, who considered the book one of the best novels by a black person written up to that point (see Davis, *Nella Larsen* 280). The book might benefit from greater distance from (and about) its protagonist, but there is no gainsaying the talent Larsen reveals—a talent (it seems possible to argue) that would soon be on even greater display in her next novel, *Passing*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the somewhat autobiographical protagonist of this work with the autobiographical protagonist of Booker T. Washington's book *Up from Slavery*. Pay particular attention to such matters as tone, attitude, character, and implied values. How do you think each writer would have responded to the other's book, and why? Discuss the significance of race, class, and gender in each work.
2. Both this novel and the short story "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" (by SUI SIN FAR [Edith Maude Eaton]) deal with minority women who must find a place for themselves in an ethnically distinct majority culture. How do the works resemble and/or differ from one another in such matters as style, genre, technique, and final effect? What role does social and economic class play in each work? Discuss the depiction of marriage in each text.
3. Read W. E. B. DuBois's work *The Souls of Black Folk* and then discuss the reasons DuBois may have admired Larsen's novel. How does her book reflect some of the ideas discussed by DuBois? Why would the style, manner, and subject matter of her writing have been likely to appeal to DuBois? What personal traits or experiences did the two authors have in common?
4. Compare and contrast Helga's experiences in different geographical and cultural settings (for instance, the North versus the South and America versus Europe). What similarities and/or differences do you see? Is there any place where Helga seems particularly happy or at home? Where might she have had the greatest chance to lead a satisfying life?

Passing (1929)

Irene Redfield, a comfortably upper-middle-class and light-skinned black woman living in New York in a somewhat strained marriage with her husband, Brian, and their two young sons, chances to renew contact with Clare Kendry, a very light-skinned, very beautiful friend from her youth who has in the meantime married a wealthy white racist named Jack Bellew and who is "passing" as a white herself. Clare, however, is eager to spend time among the blacks of Harlem without her husband's knowledge, and, as the vivacious Clare insinuates herself into the social circle of Irene and Brian, Irene becomes increasingly worried that Brian is becoming attracted to the adventurous interloper and that this attraction may threaten the Redfield marriage and, with it, Irene's economic security. When Bellew unexpectedly stumbles across reason to believe that his wife is indeed black, he traces her to a party (also attended by the Redfields) in a six-story building; when he angrily confronts Clare, Irene rushes to her side, but Clare falls (or jumps, or is pushed) from a large open window nearby, and Irene, distraught and worried, is left suddenly anxious and alone.

The complexity of Larsen's splendid second novel is already implied by its title, which obviously refers to the phenomenon of racial "passing" but also carries numerous other possible meanings and implications. Irene herself, for instance, is "passing" in certain respects: She is living an outwardly comfortable life, but she realizes that her economic security depends greatly on the continued existence of a marriage that

is increasingly unhappy. She also passes as a friend of Clare, even though she feels growing hostility toward her old acquaintance. Worried that her marriage and her lifestyle may be at risk of passing away, Irene tries to imagine means to remove the threat of Clare from her life, and, at the very end of the book, when she may indeed have shoved Clare from a window to a death that others consider simply an accident, Irene may be in the conscience-stricken predicament of spending the rest of her life passing (or posing) as an innocent person who may actually be guilty of murder. Some critics have also suggested that there is an undercurrent of sexual attraction between Clare and Irene, in which case these women may to some degree be “passing” as devoted wives who nevertheless feel more complicated emotions. Finally, other analysts have suggested that many of the middle-class black characters in the book are “passing” by imitating the lifestyles and values of wealthy whites, while various wealthy whites themselves may be “passing” as friends of blacks by visiting Harlem on the weekends for exotic adventure without ever really abandoning their fundamentally racist assumptions. Larsen, in short, has created a novel that is full of psychological and social complications. A number of the individual characters (especially Clare, but also Irene and Brian and even Clare’s racist husband) are morally and emotionally complex, and the plot itself (especially the conclusion) is full of suspense and intriguing ambiguities.

Many of the same thematic elements dealt with in Larsen’s first novel (*Quicksand*) are dealt with again in *Passing*, including the social and psychological distortions caused by overrigid definitions of race, class, and gender, especially as they affect the lives of women in general and of African-American women in particular. But although the setting of *Passing* (which basically centers on New York City, with a quick side trip to Chicago) is more confined than the multiple locations of *Quicksand* (which travels from the South to the Midwest to the Northeast to Europe and then back to the South again), Larsen’s second novel somehow seems more expansive than her first. For one thing, the basic focus is not confined to the consciousness of a single character; for another, the characters in *Pass-*

ing seem more interesting and more sympathetic than those in *Quicksand*; finally, much of the narrative in *Passing* is carried along by crisp, rapid, and usually vivid (if sometimes mannered, pretentious, or dated) dialogue. Larsen has a more nuanced, more distanced, more critical perspective on all her characters here than she seems to have achieved in *Quicksand*, and this is especially true of her perspective on Irene, who emerges as an exceptionally complicated personality. On the one hand, it is easy to feel sympathetic to Irene, who cares about her sons and is anxious to preserve their security as well as her own; it is also easy to see why she feels threatened by the vivacious and somewhat amoral and calculating Clare. On the other hand, by the end of the book, Irene has allowed her fears to lead her to become fairly calculating and amoral (if not actually immoral) herself. *Passing* (it can be argued) is a more ethically complex novel than *Quicksand*; the moral dilemmas it raises would be interesting no matter what the color(s) of the characters, and the characters themselves would seem intriguingly complex no matter what their race or class. *Quicksand* (as its title implies) dealt more obviously with passive victimization; *Passing* (as its title suggests) is more concerned with conscious choices for which the characters can be held responsible.

As with *Quicksand*, Larsen has been criticized for the ending of *Passing*; some analysts consider the conclusion too abrupt, too melodramatic, and too quickly convenient in the way it disposes of Clare and moves the novel to a rapid finish. All these criticisms have some merit, but the final pages of the book can also be defended in various ways. Consider, for instance, Jack Bellew’s verbal attack on Clare when he bursts unexpectedly into the party: “‘So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!’ His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and pain” (271). His words are ugly, but his anguish is real, and Larsen manages to capture the complexity of his emotions, which are fueled by hatred and (ironically) by love; he feels bitter in part because he feels deceived, and although he is hardly a sympathetic character, he is not merely a cheap villain, either. This becomes clear when Clare later falls from the window and Bellew emits

“a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. ‘Nig! My God! Nig!’” (271). “Nig” had been his nickname for his darker-than-usual “white” wife, and when he shouts that name now we are repulsed by the word but nonetheless touched by his sense of loss. In some ways he is indeed a “beast,” but he is also a “beast in agony.” A lesser writer would have made Bellew merely evil; Larsen, to her credit, achieves something more complex. Complexity, in fact, is the hallmark of her writing throughout the novel, even in its somewhat contrived ending. Thus, although Irene lovingly remembers Clare’s beauty, “Irene wasn’t sorry” about Clare’s fall (272). And as she rushes down to view the body, her greatest fear is not the sight of the mutilated corpse but another possibility altogether: “What if Clare was not dead?” (273). Whether or not she actually pushed Clare, Irene is glad that Clare is no longer a threat; striving to preserve her marriage, her family, and her respectability, Irene has become a kind of moral monster; she is full of selfish calculation, but she is also like a frightened child. When Irene faints in almost the last (somewhat melodramatic) sentence of the book, Larsen writes that “everything was dark” (275), but the sentence is redeemed when we realize that the darkness can be explained not simply by a loss of consciousness but also, symbolically, by a loss of conscience. Irene may (or may not—even this much is not clear) get away with murder, but if she does, her experience with “passing” is only just beginning.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Irene Redfield in *Passing* with Bigger Thomas in RICHARD WRIGHT’S novel *Native Son*. How do their social, economic, and racial circumstances differ, but how (at the end of both works) do they face comparable moral predicaments? Is one character more ethically appealing than the other? If so, why?
2. Read ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and then discuss the similarities and differences between Janie Crawford and Clare Kendry. What motivations and other traits of character do they share? How are their lives affected by their marriages and their racial

backgrounds? How does a yearning for freedom and autonomy affect both characters?

3. Both *Passing* and THEODORE DREISER’S *An American Tragedy* (1925) climax with deaths whose circumstances are ambiguous. How are the descriptions of these deaths comparable and/or distinct? Discuss the circumstances and motivations that lead to both deaths and the aftermaths that ensue. What role do larger social forces play in both deaths?
4. Focus on the theme suggested by the title of the book and trace its different appearances throughout the novel. Discuss as many different instances of as many different kinds of “passing” as you can find. How does this theme, almost by definition, contribute to the complexity of the book’s characterization? How does this theme help guarantee that the characters will not be mere stereotypes?

“Sanctuary” (1930)

In a remote area of the poor rural South, a large black man approaches the isolated cottage of aging Annie Poole (also black); when the man enters the cottage, Annie sees that he is Jim Hammer, a friend of her son Obadiah, although Annie herself dislikes him intensely. However, when Hammer reveals that he is being pursued by the local white authorities for having impulsively shot someone in a panicked escape from an attempted robbery, Annie agrees (because he is her son’s friend) to hide him; she knows that he is unlikely to receive fair treatment at the hands of the local whites. Even after the white sheriff arrives and reveals that it is Annie’s own son who was shot and killed, Annie keeps Hammer hidden; when the whites leave, however, she expels Hammer from her house and makes it clear that she kept his secret only because he was a black being pursued by whites.

This effectively written story—the only surviving work by Larsen set entirely in the South, and the only one so full of southern dialect—caused enormous controversy soon after it was published, when a reader alleged that the text seemed to be

5. Track down a copy of Carl Van Vechten's famous work *Nigger Heaven*—a work Larsen admired and defended. Why do you think Larsen was attracted to this book? What features does it have in common with her own work? What were Van Vechten's purposes in writing his book, and why might Larsen have been sympathetic to his purposes and his achievement?
6. Choose one specific passage from one work by Larsen and analyze it in as much detail as possible. Discuss it in terms of such matters, for instance, as plot, characterization, theme, diction, dialogue, imagery, and symbolism. How is the chosen passage an effective piece of writing? How does it contribute to the larger success of the work of which it is a part? How is the chosen passage typical of Larsen's writing as a whole? How does the chosen passage help justify the recent renewed interest in Larsen as an author?
7. Discuss the role of some of the white characters in one or more of Larsen's works. What are their practical as well as their symbolic functions? Are they depicted convincingly, or are they merely caricatures? Is there any observable pattern in Larsen's use of such characters, or is each such character depicted in a unique and complex way?
8. Discuss the presentation of lower-class blacks in Larsen's fiction. What practical and/or symbolic functions do they serve? What are their relations with the upper- (or upper-middle-) class blacks who are the central figures in Larsen's two surviving novels? Compare and contrast Larsen's depiction of poorer African-American characters with the depiction of such characters in the fiction of Richard Wright.
9. Do some research into the "tragic mulatto" character in American fiction. Read (for instance) Kate Chopin's story "La Belle Zoraode" and other such works, and then discuss the ways in which Larsen echoes or departs from previous depictions of mixed-race persons in American fiction. How does she reinforce and/or subvert any stereotypes associated with such persons?
10. Compare and contrast the writings and careers of Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston. How are the works and lives of these two writers similar, and how are they distinct? Discuss such matters as theme and style, the autobiographical elements in the fiction they produced, and the final fates of both women.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Ammons, Elizabeth. *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Davis, Thadious M. "Introduction." In *Passing*. By Nella Larsen. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- . *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994.
- Hutchinson, George. *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Larsen, Charles R. "Introduction." In *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen*. By Nella Larsen. New York: Anchor, 2001.
- . *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.
- Larsen, Nella. *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen*. Edited by Charles R. Larson. New York: Anchor, 2001.
- McLendon, Jacquelyn Y. *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995.
- Nelson, Emmanuel S. "Nella Larsen (1891–1964)." In *African American Authors, 1745–1945: A Biographical Sourcebook*. Edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000.
- Regents of the University of Minnesota. Available online. URL: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/larsen_nella.html. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Robert C. Evans



JACK LONDON (1876–1916)

Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club, and if you don't get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it.

(qtd. in Sinclair 32)

Jack London, who eventually became one of the most popular American writers in the world, was born in humble circumstances in San Francisco on January 12, 1876. His mother, Flora Wellman, had been involved with a traveling astrologer named William Henry Chaney, who quickly abandoned her when she told him she was pregnant. When her son was born, she named him *John Griffith Chaney*, but by September 7, Flora married John London, a widower with two daughters of his own, and Flora's son became John Griffith London. In 1876–85 the family lived in straitened circumstances in various places in or near San Francisco; in 1878 (for instance) they moved to Oakland (across San Francisco Bay) to escape an epidemic that nearly killed Jack and Eliza, an older stepsister who helped take care of him until she herself later married. By 1881 the family was living in Alameda; by 1886 they were residing in San Mateo County and then in the Livermore Valley; by 1886 they were back in Oakland, where Jack became a frequent user of the public library while also helping to support his family through a variety of menial jobs. After graduating from grammar school in 1891, he worked briefly in a cannery but then borrowed enough money to buy a small boat and become an oyster pirate in San Francisco Bay. In 1892, however, he was hired as a deputy patrolman for the California Fish Patrol. By 1893 he had signed up as a sailor on a ship that sailed, for more than half a year, to the North

Pacific, Hawaii, and Japan. Then, when London returned to San Francisco, he not only did heavy labor for little pay but also began his career as a writer by winning top prize in a contest sponsored by a local newspaper. His winning entry was based (as was much of his later work) on his own experiences at sea.

In 1894 London joined a group of other unemployed California workers who were making their way east to protest in Washington, D.C., but London left the group in Missouri to do some traveling on his own. He visited the World's Fair grounds in Chicago before winding up in Niagara, New York, where he was arrested as a vagrant and spent a month in jail. Back in Oakland, he attended high school for a year; there he wrote and published in a school publication while trying to get ready to enter the University of California at Berkeley. In 1896 he joined the Socialist Labor Party, earning a reputation as the "Boy Socialist," before being admitted to the university that fall. Forced by financial hardship to leave college in 1897, he tried at first to earn his living as a writer before turning to work in a laundry. Later that year, however, he made one of the most momentous decisions of his life: He and a brother-in-law joined the "gold rush" that had begun in Alaska. He spent a rough winter in a small cabin in the Yukon until sickness forced him to abandon his plans. After rafting down the Yukon River to the Bering Sea, he worked as a sailor to

earn his passage home to San Francisco, where he arrived by late July, only to discover that his stepfather had passed away during his absence. From this point on, London was more and more determined to earn his living as an author, and by 1899 he had begun to achieve real success with writings based on his experiences in Alaska.

In 1900 London's first book, *The Son of the Wolf* (set in Alaska), was published, and in the same year London also married a woman named Elizabeth (Bess or Bessie) Maddern, with whom he settled back in Oakland. Their daughter Joan was born early in January 1901, and London himself won his first job as a journalist. He received only a few hundred votes when he ran for mayor of Oakland as a Socialist, but he did succeed as an author once more by the end of the year with the publication of another book of tales set in Alaska, *The God of His Fathers*. In 1902 his first novel (*A Daughter of the Snows*) was published, as were two additional books (*Children of the Frost* and *Cruise of the Dazzler*); his second child, Bess, or Becky, was born; and he traveled to England to collect material for yet another publication. In 1903 *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (a book about love he cowrote with Anna Strunsky) appeared, as did not only *The People of the Abyss* but also *The Call of the Wild*, which was an instant success and remains one of his most famous works. During this same year, however, he also separated from his wife after falling in love with Charmian Kittredge, whom he had met in 1900. In 1904 he was a war correspondent in the Far East, while, back in London and New York, his publishers issued a new collection of tales (*The Faith of Men and Other Stories*) as well as one of his most notable novels, *The Sea-Wolf*. During this same year, his wife filed for divorce, citing her husband's involvement with Anna Strunsky as one reason for the breakup. The divorce was finalized in November 1905, and the next day London married Charmian Kittredge. Also in 1905 he ran again (and again without success) as a Socialist for mayor of Oakland, and also in that year he bought a large California ranch. Despite this new status as a substantial landowner and successful author, he

also in 1905 published a book of essays called *War of the Classes* and additionally lectured at Harvard and elsewhere advocating socialism. More books of fiction—*Tales of the Fish Patrol* and *The Game*—also appeared that year.

More lecturing on socialism occurred early in 1906 in such diverse places as Chicago, New York, New Haven, North Dakota, and Jamaica, although illness soon led London to end these appearances and return to California. While he was there, three new books were published: *Moon-Face and Other Stories*, *Scorn of Women*, and the particularly notable *White Fang*. Perhaps his most significant non-literary project of 1906, however, was his decision to begin building a schooner, the *Snark*, which he planned to sail around the world in a trip that would last seven years. The craft was finished in 1907, and in late April London and Charmian set off for the South Pacific, arriving in Hawaii in late May. They stayed there until October, then visited a number of other islands, including Tahiti. Meanwhile, books written by London continued to spill from the presses, including (in 1907 alone) *Before Adam*, *Love of Life and Other Stories*, and *The Road*, followed in 1908 by *The Iron Heel*. London was briefly back in California at the beginning of 1908, but the South Pacific voyage soon continued, taking him to Samoa, the Fiji Islands, the New Hebrides, the Solomon Islands, and Australia before he was stricken by sickness and, in late November, felt compelled to give up the trip. By mid-1909 he was back at his California ranch after traveling through Central America and the American South, and he now spent much of his time improving his property (and adding to it). His ambitious novel *Martin Eden* appeared that year, followed, in 1910, by *Lost Face*, *Revolution and Other Essays*, *Burning Daylight*, and *Theft: A Play in Four Acts*. Unfortunately, a daughter born that same year died within a few days, but London soon turned his attention to his plans to construct an elaborate home ("Wolf House") on his newly expanded ranch.

London's taste for new adventures continued in 1911, when he, Charmian, and an employee spent their summer driving a four-horse carriage

to Oregon and back. Meanwhile, four new books appeared that year: *When God Laughs and Other Stories*, *Adventure*, *The Cruise of the Snark*, and *South Sea Tales*. By late December London headed for New York, and by the beginning of March 1912 he and his wife were on a voyage from Baltimore that would take them on a sailing ship to Seattle by way of a trip around the Horn of South America. London was back at his ranch by August 1912, a year that saw the publication of still more books: *The House of Pride and Other Tales of Hawaii*, *A Son of the Sun*, and *Smoke Bellew*, which were followed in 1913 by *The Night-Born*, *The Abysmal Brute*, *John Barleycorn*, and *The Valley of the Moon*. Unfortunately, during July of that year, after undergoing surgery for appendicitis, London learned that his kidneys were diseased. As if to compound this misfortune, a month later the Wolf House was destroyed in a mysterious fire. Nevertheless, by midfall London had the distinction of seeing his book *The Sea-Wolf* presented on-screen as the subject of the first feature-length movie produced in the United States. By early 1914 he was back in New York but soon left for Mexico with his wife to report on the revolution there, although by midsummer illness forced him to return to the California ranch. *The Strength of the Strong* and *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* appeared that year, followed by two fantasies, *The Scarlet Plague* and *The Jacket* (otherwise known as *The Star Rover*), in 1915. During this latter year London, battling extreme rheumatism, traveled back and forth twice between California and Hawaii, hoping that the change of climate would help his health, but to little avail. He quit the Socialist Party early in March 1916, disappointed with its moderation, and, despite his stay in Hawaii, his health did not improve. He entered a California hospital for treatment of his rheumatism in September, but by November 22 he was dead of uremia. Although this death may have resulted from an intentional drug overdose (Pizer 994; Nuernberg xx-xxi), some scholars consider this possibility is unlikely (Lundquist 73).

In the year of his death, London was as prolific as ever: In 1916 *The Acorn-Planter: A California Forest Play*, *The Little Lady of the Big House*, and

The Turtles of Tasman were published. Yet even after he died, books by London continued to pour from the presses, including *The Human Drift*, *Jerry of the Islands*, and *Michael, Brother of Jerry* in 1917; *The Red One* and *Hearts of Three* in 1918; *On the Makaloa Mat* in 1919; *Dutch Courage and Other Stories* in 1922; *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.* in 1963; and, in subsequent years, collections of his war reportage, articles on sports, fantasy fiction, uncollected stories about Alaska, miscellaneous articles, and multiple volumes of letters. Even this list is hardly comprehensive, for London was one of the hardest-working and most productive writers of his or any time, and, although it is usually conceded that his works are of uneven quality, many were instantly popular and have always remained so, and some have won increasing critical respect.

“The Law of Life” (1901)

Old Koskoosh, an elderly Indian who was once the chief of his tribe but who is now blind and decrepit, sits outside in the cold weather, listening as his son (the new chief) and the other young members of the tribe break camp and prepare to move to a new location. It soon becomes clear that they plan, in accordance with custom, to leave Koskoosh (protected merely by a temporary fire) behind to meet his fate, for he is too old now to help either himself or his people. After the tribe departs, Koskoosh thinks back to his youth, when he watched an old moose, separated from its herd, eventually lose the battle for life with a pack of wolves; as he ponders the fate of the moose, he realizes that he is himself now surrounded by snarling wolves and that resistance can only be brief and futile.

Thematically, stylistically, and in nearly every other way imaginable, this story is a typical work by Jack London. Its very title already suggests his characteristic concerns with the immutable facts of existence—facts no living thing can afford to ignore. The setting is the Klondike territory, which was the breeding ground of London's earliest ambitions as a writer and the landscape where so many of his most distinctive tales take place. Against this

backdrop he depicts (in stark, unsentimental terms, and in clear, simple, straightforward language) the inevitable fact of death in a world in which individuals are of no intrinsic importance. They matter only as members of groups, and they matter only as long as they contribute to the group's survival. Here as in so many works by London, nature is not so much pitiless, cold, or cruel as blankly indifferent: Nature is not (as it was for many romantics) a beautiful home but an often grim and dangerous testing ground, an obstacle course in which creatures either survive or die. The influence of Darwinism on London's thinking is especially obvious in this tale: Koskoosh has long since fulfilled his basic natural functions (he has survived to maturity, mated, and produced offspring), and now he not only serves no obvious purpose but (what is more important) can no longer struggle successfully to survive. The main "law of life," paradoxically, is that all life must die.

The opening sentence of the story is already full of significance: "Old Koskoosh listened greedily" (365). The crucial fact about Koskoosh in this tale is his age, and so London emphasizes that detail in the story's first word. Meanwhile, the name *Koskoosh*, which immediately sounds exotic to Western, American ears, alerts us to the fact that here (as in so many other works by London) we will be focusing on a human being whose cultural background differs from our own, but one whose existence is likely to resemble ours in ways we might not at first imagine. London often sets his stories in remote or "primitive" locales, but the tales almost always deal with facts that are basic to any human life—facts we ignore at our peril, even in our supposedly civilized urban environments. The fact that Koskoosh "listened greedily" already suggests, for instance, our basic human need to depend on our senses, and on the strength of our flesh, to survive. Koskoosh is almost literally hungry for information, but neither his eyes nor his limbs can help him now. London never lets us forget that our minds are embedded in bodies and that our continued existence depends largely on simple physical strength. Old as he is, Koskoosh still possesses a keen and "glimmering intelligence" (365), but intelligence alone is not

enough to guarantee his survival. Indeed, part of his tragedy (if we can use such a potentially sentimental term) is that his mind and memory have outlived his body. In this respect, of course, his fate is quite common, and so London makes the life and death of this obscure Klondike Indian implicitly relevant to any reader. London's writings interest us because they deal with seemingly exotic and unfamiliar people and events, but also because (on another level) they deal with facts we may fear, may try to ignore, but must ultimately acknowledge.

Stylistically, too, "The Law of Life" exemplifies many of London's most typical traits. Thus, in calling the female character *Sit-cum-to-ha*, Koskoosh's "daughter's daughter" (365), London not only again uses an intriguingly exotic name but also uses a kind of foreign dialect to refer, in a strange but exceedingly precise way, to a person we would merely (and more vaguely) call the old man's "granddaughter." London's diction is rarely complicated, but it often (as in the example just mentioned) subtly implies a significantly different and remote way of looking at the world. Likewise, his syntax (or sentence structure) is rarely complicated, but it is often more artful than a quick reading might suggest. Thus, when London writes that "the long trail waited while the short day refused to linger" (365), he not only skillfully balances *long trail* and *short day* but also uses the alliterative *l* sound with understated musical effect. Similarly balanced, alliterative, and indeed almost rhyming language is used later in the emphatic description of a portable lodge's being "rammed and jammed" into place (365), while the techniques of both personification and foreshadowing are employed when London writes, "Death waited, ever-hungry and hungriest of them all" (366). Such phrasing not only looks forward to the story's final paragraph but also looks back to its opening reference to Koskoosh's own greedy listening. Yet London's diction never calls undue attention to its own artfulness; if it did, it would distract us from his focus on facts that exist beneath and behind any mere literary style.

"The Law of Life" is, then, skillfully but unobtrusively crafted. London knows, for instance, how to use brief sentences for dramatic effect (as when he

deftly notes the tribe's departure by suddenly and simply reporting, "They were gone" [366]). And he also knows how to use authentic-sounding dialect (as when Koskoosh's son tells his father, "There be wood beside you" [366]). And London knows how to use dramatic juxtaposition, as when he no sooner describes one young brave as "the craftiest of hunters" than he immediately reports that this same youth died suddenly when he "fell through an air-hole on the Yukon" (369). The implied point is swiftly and effectively made: Nature is unforgiving, and even the strongest and most cunning can instantly vanish. Finally, London knows how to use both parallelism (the old moose is taken down by wolves, just as old Koskoosh will be) and symbolism (the old man's fire "sizzled and went out" just before Koskoosh himself meets a similar fate [371]). But always, in London, the emphasis is less on the words themselves than on the facts they represent. For London, words do matter, but facts matter more.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the depiction of nature in this story with its depiction in "Sunday Morning," a poem by WALLACE STEVENS. For example, focus on the final passages of both works, and discuss the ways in which Stevens's view of nature seems more "romantic" than London's.
2. Compare and contrast this story with T. S. ELIOT's poem "Gerontion." In particular, discuss the works in terms of their treatment of old age, their use of points of view, their choices of diction, and their ultimate clarity.
3. Compare and contrast the use of nature imagery in this story and in ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In particular, relate this story to the description of the storm in the second half of Hurston's novel. What do both works imply about man's relations to the elements, to animals, and to other people in extreme situations?
4. Discuss, in detail, the effectiveness of the opening paragraph of this story. How does it arouse interest and make us want to read further? How does it foreshadow central themes of the tale as

a whole? How does it already begin the process of complexly characterizing the central figures of the tale? How does it use setting and diction effectively?

The Call of the Wild (1903)

Buck, a large dog, had been living a comfortable life on a California farm before he was stolen and sold off to pull sleds in the Klondike. Through struggle, suffering, and the will to survive and prevail (especially in conflict with a dog named Spitz), he eventually learns to function well under a variety of human masters. Eventually he is lucky to find, in John Thornton, a master who treats him with love and kindness—a master whom Buck can love in turn—but when Thornton is killed, Buck joins a wolf pack, becomes its leader, and heeds the ancient, instinctive call of the wild.

This novel, considered by many readers to be London's best, is also highly characteristic of his work in general. As do many of his other writings, it shows the kinds of transformations that occur when any individual is taken out of a familiar, comfortable environment and plunged into strange and challenging surroundings. In this case, however, the individual is not a human but a dog named Buck, who, owned by the kindly Judge Miller, "lives the life of a sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself, was even a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular situation" (6). As this sentence suggests, part of London's purpose is not simply to tell the story of a dog but to draw parallels between its life and the lives of human readers. What happens to Buck could happen to anyone; the lessons Buck learns are lessons any person ignores at his or her own peril. London often writes about animals, not because he wants to sentimentalize them or treat them as humans but because he sees humans themselves as merely animals of a different sort. Influenced by the thinking of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, London believed that people share much of their psychology and physical nature with other beasts, and so it made perfect sense for

him to explore common “human” problems by showing animals facing similar challenges. Thus, just as Buck’s egotism will eventually be humbled, so will our own. We will soon take a great interest in this dog because we will soon recognize that his circumstances could (and do) easily resemble ours.

On the night Buck is stolen, the “Judge was at a meeting of the Raisin Growers’ Association, and the boys [the Judge’s sons] were busy organizing an athletic club” (7). In this clever sentence, London already implies how California, once part of the untamed frontier, was now becoming prosperous, effete, and civilized: Raisins, after all, are luxuries, not necessities, and the fact that there are enough raisin growers to need an “Association” suggests that life in California was becoming as commercialized and organized as in the East. Meanwhile, the fact that the Judge’s sons feel the need to organize an “athletic club” again suggests the encroachment of civilized values in a previously untamed landscape: A few decades earlier, any settler in California would have had plenty of athletic exercise merely by working, but now life has become so easy and relaxed that artificial exercise must be invented and organized. Although London’s works are more often read for their plots than for the subtle details of their phrasing, such subtlety does exist, and the sentence quoted is an example. London does, to be sure, often blatantly spell out the philosophical meanings of his works, but his writings are strongest when they work by implication, challenging readers to think rather than simply digest preformulated thoughts.

Buck’s journey to the Klondike begins, significantly enough, during the same year as London’s own: 1897 (6). In describing Buck’s adventures, London thus surely is also describing aspects of his own unsentimental education, and just as Buck is forever transformed by his experiences, so was London. Both Buck and London, however, are themselves merely single instances of London’s larger concern with what would happen to any human (or any creature) suddenly shifted from a relatively comfortable routine and forced to confront elemental conditions, particularly the struggle for survival and the survival of the fittest. Inevitably, economics

is key to everything that now happens to Buck, just as economics (for London) is key to everything in any human existence. When Buck is sold into slavery, he hears how “the money chinked between” buyer and seller (7), and surely the cold brevity of the transaction implies London’s view that in capitalistic societies, people themselves can be (and are) disposed of as dogs are. London’s novel, then, reflects not merely his Darwinism but also his socialistic creed that a society rooted in profits is inevitably crude, vicious, and uncaring. In one sense, Buck travels to a remote, exotic place, but in another sense, he merely arrives in a landscape where the brutal but familiar energies of exploitative capitalism are most obvious and transparent.

In his new environment Buck first survives, then later thrives, not merely because of his physical strength but also because of his real, and realistic, intelligence. It takes only one severe beating, for instance, for Buck to learn “that he stood no chance against a man with a club” (12). The lesson does not break him (he does not react as other “beaten dogs that fawned upon the man, and wagged their tails, and licked his hand” do [12]), but neither is he foolish enough to rebel openly (for “he saw one dog, that would neither conciliate nor obey, finally killed in the struggle for mastery” [12]). Here as often elsewhere, Buck both chooses and embodies a middle course: Just as he eventually becomes both half-dog and half-wolf, so he steadily learns to steer a middle passage. He bides his time and picks his fights, realizing that intelligence is no less crucial to survival than instinct. Nowhere is this strategy more obvious than in his dealings with the hypocritical Spitz, the dog he must eventually challenge, who seems “friendly, in a treacherous sort of way, smiling into one’s face the while he meditated some underhanded trick” (13). As Buck watches Spitz attack a weaker dog and then smile as the other dogs kill it, Buck draws a valuable conclusion: “So that was the way. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you. Well, he would see to it that he never went down” (16). The simplicity of the diction and the brevity of the sentences drive home the elemental force of the lesson—a lesson that London, both Darwinist and socialist, could

easily embrace. Spitz embodies the kind of deceit, meanness, and egregious selfishness that London despised and that he always associated with exploiters intent on dominating others, not merely living their own lives. *The Call of the Wild* can be read, in part, as an education manual intended to show anyone (but especially the downtrodden) how to survive in a world populated and controlled by beings like Spitz. As Buck learns, we learn; as Buck's insight grows and develops, ours does, too. We profit vicariously from his education.

Spitz eventually meets his end when Buck, surprised but prepared, is challenged for the last time. The two dogs fight, and although Buck "fought by instinct, . . . he could fight by head as well" (35). Once more, then, what makes Buck finally superior is his versatility, his combination of strengths, his ability to adapt. Buck's story is indeed the story of the survival of the fittest, but in this case *fittest* means not merely most strong but most capable of fitting the right talents to particular circumstances. At the end of the battle, as the other dogs tear into the fatally wounded Spitz, "Buck stood and looked on, the successful champion, the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good" (16). Surely the ironic echo of the opening chapters of the Bible is intended here: The Hebraic, Christian God created, and then found his creations good, and now Buck kills and finds satisfaction in killing. A different kind of writer might have recoiled from such irony, but London merely implies that death is a part of life, that some must die if others are to live, and that beings such as Spitz, in particular, deserve little mercy and no pity. Darwin is behind such thoughts, but so is Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who taught the doctrine of the Superman, for whom pity is weakness and for whom strength is essential to life itself.

With Spitz gone, Buck soon asserts his leadership of the other dogs—a leadership acknowledged both by them and by their present human masters, a pair of tough but affable French Canadians who use the dogs to haul mail. After being turned over to another master (a "Scotch half-breed" [40])—phrasing that implies London's tendency to describe humans in animalistic terms, just as he

describes animals as if they were humans), the dogs are eventually purchased by a trio of callow, superficial, and ludicrously out-of-place adventurers consisting of two preening men (Hal and Charles) and one preening woman (Mercedes). Their presence allows London to mock (without much subtlety) both "civilized" affectations and the cruelty, selfishness, and naïveté of the so-called cultured class. Hal, Charles, and Mercedes symbolize much that London considered weak, wicked, and ultimately doomed in the pretentious, artificial society of his day—a society unable to withstand any true confrontation with genuinely harsh realities. The trio quickly descend into petty bickering, and they abuse the dogs. Finally, they all stagger "into John Thornton's camp at the mouth of the White River" (55). It does not take long for John (with his plain, blunt name and his plain, blunt manner) to become disgusted with the greenhorns, especially with their abuse of the dogs. When John eventually threatens to kill Hal if Hal strikes Buck again, Hal quickly backs down, and, in a somewhat melodramatic touch, we soon witness the trio and the other dogs plunge to their deaths through a break in the ice as John, unconcerned, comforts Buck (58).

Thanks to John Thornton, Buck's life changes dramatically: "Love, genuine passionate love, was his for the first time" (59)—not only John's love for Buck but especially Buck's love for John. Buck finally serves an "ideal master" (60), who genuinely cares for Buck's well-being and who thus earns his deep affection and respect. It is hard not to see, in John, London's own notion of an ideal human type: John has mastered both his physical environment and his own worst instincts. He is comfortable both with others and with himself. He is capable of both giving love and inspiring it; his needs are simple, his outlook is wise, and his manner is unpretentious. The life Buck leads with John reflects genuine loyalty but also increasing freedom, for Buck now begins to explore the surrounding woods and make contact with the surrounding wolves, to whom he finds himself increasingly attracted. Buck, then, is leading an idyllic existence that allows him to satisfy both aspects of his double nature. With John he enjoys the love of a human, and with the wolves

he can satisfy the increasingly urgent “call of the wild” he feels growing within him. Of course, in most works by London, any idyllic existence can never last long, and Buck’s idyll is soon shattered when he returns to camp one day only to find the other dogs, the other humans, and John himself slaughtered by Indians. Filled with fury, Buck exacts his revenge, even using his intelligence to trick the marauders into firing deadly arrows at each other (82). Thus the Indians, inadvertently, cause Buck’s final break with humans: “Man and the claims of man no longer bound him” (84). And yet Buck’s link with man is not entirely broken, for each year he returns to the site of John’s death and issues a mournful howl (85–86).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this novel with London’s *White Fang*, which describes how a wild dog becomes domesticated. In particular, discuss the works in terms of plot, characterization, and theme. Pay special attention to the characters of John Thornton and Weedon Scott; what do these characters imply about London’s social ideals?
2. Study Jack London’s own experiences in the Klondike in 1897–98 and discuss how they compare and contrast with those of Buck. What were London’s own experiences that year with nature, with other people, and with animals?
3. Compare and contrast John Thornton in this novel with Wolf Larsen in London’s novel *The Sea-Wolf*. Specifically, discuss the two men in terms of their attitude toward love, their treatment of others, and the ultimate success of their lives. Which character do you think London admires more, and why?
4. Compare and contrast the opening chapters of the novel with the closing chapters. Using specific examples, discuss the ways in which Buck’s “personality” has changed between the beginning of the book and its conclusion. How is he different at the close than he was at the start of the book? What lessons has he learned, and how have they affected his attitudes toward others and his interactions with them?

The Sea-Wolf (1904)

When Humphrey Van Weyden, a prosperous man of letters, is shipwrecked while crossing San Francisco Bay, he is picked up by a ship full of seal hunters commanded by the imperious and brutal Wolf Larsen, who decides to make “Hump” a cabin boy to replace a dead crewman. During the ship’s long voyage, the once-weak Van Weyden is forced to become physically and psychologically tough in order to survive the harsh treatment he both witnesses and receives, meanwhile engaging in spirited philosophical debates with the intelligent, articulate Larsen, whose view of life is hard, unsentimental, and uncompromising. After the poet Maud Brewster is also rescued at sea, she and Humphrey manage to escape and begin building a new life together on a deserted island, but the unexpected reappearance of Larsen, who is now sick and dying, not only introduces new threats but also gives the lovers one more chance to return to civilization.

As do many of London’s other tales (especially *The Call of the Wild*), this novel takes an untested, complacent character who has been living a comfortable, predictable life and suddenly plunges him into a strange environment full of harsh challenges and threats. The character must (and does) learn to survive, but only by sacrificing many civilized illusions. Here as in so many other works, London implies that civilization is merely a veneer covering a more basic primitive reality—a reality no creature can afford to ignore if it hopes to continue living. *The Sea-Wolf*, however, is an especially powerful and interesting treatment of London’s familiar themes, and much of its effectiveness derives from London’s creation of the fascinating character of Wolf Larsen. On the one hand, he is crude, brutal, mean, and even vicious; on the other, he is thoughtful, well read, and supremely capable of both asserting and defending his highly unconventional beliefs. He is both physically strong and mentally agile, sophisticated in his thinking yet primitive in his impulses, and his debates with “Hump” are among the most interesting passages in the book. In many ways this novel is much more complex than *The Call of the Wild*; there are a greater diversity of characters, much greater emphasis on both dialogue

and dialect, and considerably more stress on irony and sardonic humor. The ship functions as a small world—a microcosm that is not only unfamiliar to most readers (and therefore inherently interesting) but also inherently unpredictable, both because of the sea in which it sails and because of the diverse crew it contains. London shows real skill at characterization, and the fact that the story is told from Van Weyden's perspective gives the work a good deal of its interest. On the one hand, the narrator is laughable, effete, and pretentious, but, on the other hand, we cannot afford to mock him much, because few of us would be any better prepared to confront a man like Wolf Larsen than Van Weyden is. As the story proceeds, Van Weyden increasingly wins the respect of Larsen, the other crew members, and the novel's readers, especially when he bravely tries to hold his own in debate with the confident captain. Larsen is a fascinating figure: His ideas and actions are often repellent, but his views are not easily refuted, and they constantly provoke thought. To a much greater degree than in *The Call of Wild*, the reader feels mentally challenged by *The Sea-Wolf*: London is not merely philosophizing here but is challenging Humphrey (and us) to respond. We can never predict what Larsen will say or do, and his penchant for brutality makes him a dangerous but compelling figure. Like Humphrey, we can never be sure how to respond to Larsen: One minute he seems repulsive, the next minute sympathetic. Certainly he is one of the most intriguing and memorable characters in American fiction.

Unfortunately, the novel suffers greatly when Maud Brewster arrives. It seems implausible, to begin with, that of all the people Larsen might happen to rescue on the open sea, he would rescue a famous woman poet—someone, moreover, who already knows (and is known by) Humphrey Van Weyden. The dialogue between the supposedly great poet and the allegedly great critic seems insufferably stilted and pretentious, and their growing love for one another seems sentimental in the extreme. When Humphrey, late in the novel, says of Maud that “she was spirit, first and always spirit, etherealized essence of life, calm as her calm eyes, and sure of permanence in the changing order of

the universe” (696), it is hard to take either him or London seriously, especially after everything that has gone before in this book. Also implausible is the sudden reappearance of Larsen near the end of the novel, as well as the ability of the inexperienced Humphrey and Maud to refit a badly damaged ship. However, if the second half of the novel often seems contrived and unconvincing, the first half (especially the sections dominated by Larsen) is powerful, intriguing, and full of fascination. Larsen is a kind of demented Nietzschean Superman—a supreme egotist whose belief that might makes right leaves him, by the end of the book, utterly isolated and ironically vulnerable. Dark, brooding, destructive, and finally self-destroying, he is one of the great antiheroes of American literature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Many critics have attacked the final half of the novel, which describes the love affair of Humphrey and Maud. Can you justify this portion of the book, especially in terms of characterization, diction, and plot? Is it effective in any of these respects?
2. Wolf Larsen has sometimes been compared to Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Examine books 1, 2, and 4, 5, and 6 of that poem, and then discuss the similarities and contrasts between the two characters. For instance, discuss their motives, their philosophies, and their treatment of others.
3. Compare and contrast *The Sea-Wolf* and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, paying special attention to such matters as the ways both books combine adventure with philosophizing, the ways both works create complex social worlds, and the ways Ishmael both resembles (and differs from) Humphrey Van Weyden.

“To Build a Fire” (1908)

An unnamed gold miner, with only a year's experience in the frozen Klondike, decides to take a shortcut from the main path as he walks (accompanied only by a husky dog) in severe subfreezing

temperatures toward a camp and the comfort it will provide. Having ignored warnings from more experienced men about traveling alone in such cold, the miner prides himself on his skill—until, suddenly, he falls through thin ice into water and feels his feet instantly begin to freeze. Although he successfully builds a fire to warm himself and dry out his socks and shoes, the fire is abruptly extinguished when snow falls from the tree beneath which the fire was built—a mistake that dooms the man first to frantic fear and then to a slow death as the dog watches and wonders.

This story, which is perhaps London's most acclaimed piece of short fiction, is one of many tales he set in the Far North, drawing on his own familiarity with that territory when he was a gold miner there in 1897–98. As does much of his fiction, this work focuses on humans' relations with a natural environment that can seem both literally cold and figuratively cruel but that is actually indifferent and uncaring. London's skill as a writer is already evident in the story's first sentence, which begins by reporting that "Day had broken" (a statement that might at first seem to imply hope and promise) but then continues to note that the day was "cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray" (a statement that immediately undercuts any initial hint of optimism [462]). The main character is identified simply as "the man": His name and his unique personal identity are unimportant, for in the present context he is merely a representative human trying to survive in circumstances that may seem extreme in one sense but are entirely typical in another. All human beings (London implies) are, like this man, on an ultimately lonely journey in a forbidding and unforgiving environment—a journey that will inevitably end in death. This man, however, has mistakenly decided in several senses to "go it alone": He unwisely departs from the main path, and he foolishly ignores advice to travel with a human partner. Moreover, he shows no affection or concern for the dog who accompanies him and thus, in the end, can expect none in return. Like many of London's works, this one is strengthened by the presence of the animal and the animal's point of view: Animals (London often implies) see

life more clearly, less sentimentally, than humans do. They are more in touch with the elemental facts of life than are most humans, who are misled either by their emotions or by their reason. Animals rely on instincts born from generations of close contact with nature, and so animals are, in many ways, wiser than the humans, who pride themselves on rationality or fine feelings.

Here as in so much of his writing, London's prose is dry, objective, clear, and precise. A certain degree of suspense is naturally built into the tale (we wonder from the beginning what will happen to this man and this dog in such a dangerous climate and landscape), and that suspense instantly intensifies when the man steps through the ice and begins his frantic struggle to survive. Yet London avoids melodrama, sentimentality, or cheap theatrics: He merely describes what happens and what each character (both human and canine) thinks and feels. We can recognize the man's foolishness and yet still sympathize with his plight; we can be shocked by his final plan to kill the dog (in a desperate bid to stay alive) and yet still understand his primitive logic. Moreover, while London's skills as an objective, almost relentless reporter are evident throughout the story, other skills become obvious as well. Among these, for instance, are his penchant for irony (particularly in such quick, crisp statements as "The fire was a success. He was safe" [470]), and his talent for presenting perceptions from the elemental perspective of the dog (who tends to think of humans simply as "food-providers and fire-providers" [478]), or his ability to imitate action through sound (as in the alliterative statement "the spittle crackled" [463]). Here as in his other work London also effectively employs dialect (as in the description of the inexperienced man through use of the Indian term *chechaquo* [462]), and he likewise skillfully uses implication (as when, referring to the human heart simply as a "pump" [469], he robs it of all its conventionally romantic associations and emphasizes instead its vital, mechanistic function). Larger implications seem at work as well when, for instance, London describes the man's treatment of the dog as a mere "toil-slave" controlled (in some typically ironic

6. Examine the ways religion is discussed in *The Sea-Wolf* and then discuss the depiction and relevance of religion in *The Call of the Wild*, “The Law of Life,” and “To Build a Fire.” How (if at all) is religion presented in these works? What is implied about the nature of reality by the way(s) religion is or is not discussed in these works?
7. Compare and contrast the presentation of women in *The Sea-Wolf*, *The Call of the Wild*, “The Law of Life,” and “To Build a Fire.” Discuss the ways women function in these works as symbolic characters, how the works are affected by the presence or absence of female characters, and the kinds of women London seems to admire or disdain.
8. Compare and contrast the presentation of Indian characters in “The Law of Life” and *The Call of the Wild*. For example, discuss the complexity of London’s presentation of Indian culture(s) and characters in both stories, the ways Indians are used symbolically, and the relations between Indians and physical nature and animals.
9. Compare and contrast Captain Ahab in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Wolf Larsen in London’s *The Sea-Wolf*, especially in terms of their treatment of their crews, their guiding philosophies, and their ultimate fate. What is each man’s attitude toward God?
10. From his own day to the present, Jack London has always been one of the most widely read and widely admired American authors in other countries. How would you explain this enormous international appeal? In particular, discuss any aspects of *The Call of the Wild* that would make this book of great interest to non-

American readers. How does the book explore themes of universal interest?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Auerbach, Jonathan. *Male Call: Becoming Jack London*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Hedrick, Joan D. *Jack London and His Work*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- Hodson, Sara S., and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, eds. *Jack London: One Hundred Years a Writer*. San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 2002.
- Jack London Foundation. Available online. URL: <http://jacklondonfdn.org>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- London, Jack. *Novels and Stories: The Call of the Wild, White Fang, The Sea-Wolf, Short Stories*. Edited by Donald Pizer. New York: Library of America, 1982.
- Lundquist, James. *Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction*. New York: Continuum, 1990.
- Nuernberg, Susan M., ed. *The Critical Response to Jack London*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995.
- Pizer, Donald. “Chronology.” In *Novels and Stories: The Call of the Wild, White Fang, The Sea-Wolf, Short Stories*. By Jack London. New York: Library of America, 1982.
- Reesman, Jeanne Campbell. *Jack London: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1999.
- Sinclair, Andrew. *Jack: A Biography of Jack London*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Tavernier-Courbin, Jacqueline, ed. *Critical Essays on Jack London*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983.
- The World of Jack London. Available online. URL: <http://www.jacklondon.net>. Accessed April 7, 2009.

Robert C. Evans



CLAUDE MCKAY (1890–1948)

I believe that whenever literature and art are good and great they leap over narrow group barriers and periods to make a universal appeal.

(qtd. in Hathaway 46)

Although Claude McKay was born and raised in Jamaica and although he spent many years of his adult life living and traveling in Russia, Western Europe, and North Africa, he also spent a good deal of time residing in (and writing about) the United States. He is generally considered one of the most significant black authors in America in the first half of the 20th century. In his poetry, fiction, memoirs, and nonfiction prose he established a reputation as a creative and often controversial figure who was never shy about expressing himself, even when doing so meant alienating friends or allies and creating new enemies. He moved from an early sympathy with communism to a strong anticommunist stance, and he also moved from a career that seemed to hold enormous promise to a life of relative poverty and neglect.

Most of the details of McKay's life are available in the superb study by Tyrone Tillery and especially in the excellent and lengthy biography by Wayne F. Cooper. Born on September 15, 1890, in the small village of Sunny Ville, Jamaica, McKay was the youngest of eight children produced by Thomas Francis McKay and his wife, Ann Elizabeth. Although the parents were peasants, and although they were black in a society in which people of mixed race ranked above blacks but below whites, Thomas and Ann were respected and influential members of the local community and church. Economically they were better off than most of their

neighbors; they were also better educated and more ambitious and were particularly devoted to Baptist Christianity. Thomas was a serious and somewhat distant figure, whereas his wife was more relaxed and loving; Claude's ties with his mother were, in consequence, especially strong. When he was eight, however, his parents sent him off to live with his oldest brother, Uriah Theophilous ("U'Theo"), a full-time schoolteacher and occasional journalist who lived with his wife near the resort town of Montego Bay. U'Theo's library was well stocked and U'Theo's own thinking was open-minded, and it was while living with his brother that young Claude fell in love with learning and began to distance himself from the simple faith of his parents. During these years he had no contact with them, and by the time he (along with U'Theo and his wife) returned to Sunny Ville when Claude was 14, Claude already felt somewhat distant (or at least distinct) from the rest of his family. Although he could be friendly, a kind of reserve characterized his relations with most people throughout his life, and his sense of independence often put him in conflict with friends and foes alike.

Although Claude began training in 1901 to become a schoolteacher, in 1906 he won a stipend to begin three years of study at a trade school in Kingston. Early in 1907, however, an earthquake struck the city, and so Claude soon moved to a smaller town to prepare for certification as a maker

and repairer of wheels. Nevertheless, after two years of training in that profession, he returned home, briefly tried his hand at farming, and then, after the death of his beloved mother, moved once more to Kingston. After working briefly in a factory there, he joined the local police force, where he seems to have bonded closely with some of his fellow officers. Tillery even suggests that McKay fell in love with one of them (7–8), and certainly later in life he had sexual relations with both men and women, with perhaps a stronger inclination toward homosexuality. In any case, by this time he had begun writing poems, and after he quit the police force he was fortunate to make the acquaintance of a middle-aged Englishman named Walter Jekyll, a resident of the island, whose interest in Jamaican verse had led him to publish a well-regarded book on the subject. Jekyll took an immediate (and perhaps romantic) interest in the young poet and encouraged his work, particularly his poetry written in the Jamaican dialect. Thanks in large part to Jekyll's support, McKay in 1912 published *Songs of Jamaica*—a book that not only sold well but won him a literary prize. This book was soon followed by *Constab Ballads* (1912), which reflected his experiences on the police force (or constabulary). By the time he was in his very early twenties, then, McKay had already begun a noteworthy literary career.

However, 1912 was an important year in McKay's life for other reasons as well. By the summer of that year he had left Jamaica for the United States, intent on earning a degree in agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the famous all-black school founded and directed by BOOKER T. WASHINGTON. Nevertheless, although McKay admired Washington, he soon tired of the rigid lifestyle at the school itself, and so he quickly left and instead began studying agriculture at Kansas State College. He remained there for almost two years, but by 1914 he had decided that farming was not his future. Fortunately, early that year a generous gift of several thousand dollars (probably from Jekyll) allowed McKay not only to leave Kansas for New York City but also to marry there a Jamaican woman, Eulalie Imelda Lewars, with

whom he had been corresponding for some time. Their marriage occurred on July 30, 1914, when Claude was 23, but within six months a pregnant Eulalie had returned to Jamaica. There she gave birth to a daughter (Rhue Hope McKay), whom McKay never met. McKay never married again, although he was involved with various men and women throughout his life.

With his gift of money gone by 1915, McKay needed to find some way—any way—of supporting himself, but this was not an easy task in a country in which employment opportunities for black males (even educated ones) were hardly abundant. He took a succession of menial jobs—“porter, fireman [to coal-burning boilers], waiter, bar-boy, houseman” (qtd. in Cooper 77)—but during all the years from 1915 to 1919 his main hope was to become a writer. He began submitting poems (usually conventional sonnets) to various publications and eventually saw a few of them published. In 1917, for instance, two poems—including one called “The Harlem Dancer”—were printed in a small but influential magazine, and from 1917 to 1919 McKay himself was based in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City (although he spent most of his time working as a waiter on the railroad). Harlem, in fact, would soon become the center of a renaissance in black creativity that affected all the arts, but especially literature. By this time McKay had attracted the attention and support of Frank Harris, an influential white editor, and by this time as well McKay had also begun to make an increasingly outspoken commitment to left-wing political causes. In 1919 he had met and won the patronage of Max Eastman, the wealthy but radical editor of a magazine called the *Liberator*, which now began to publish McKay's vocally political poems. These included a sonnet called “If We Must Die,” which soon won McKay widespread fame as a fierce opponent of racial discrimination. From this point forward, McKay became known as a significant black writer with a strong commitment to economic and political radicalism, both at home and abroad.

Later in 1919, in fact, McKay was able to travel to London through the support of some socialist

friends, and while there he became more and more interested in Marxism and began working for an English socialist periodical. In 1920 he published in London a collection of his poems titled *Spring in New Hampshire*, but by 1921 he had returned to New York, where he now became an editor of the *Liberator*. His book of poems *Harlem Shadows* appeared in 1922; in that same year he resigned from his post at the *Liberator* (after a disagreement with a more strident Marxist) and undertook a momentous journey to the newly formed Soviet Union, which was now the center of international communism. Although representatives of the American Communist Party at first opposed any official recognition of McKay, the Soviet government soon accredited him as a representative to the international communist congress, and McKay not only spoke to the group on behalf of American blacks but also received highly friendly receptions from the Soviet people. Back in western Europe in 1923, he was treated for a severe bout of syphilis and began a 10-year voluntary exile from the United States, living mostly in France but also in Spain and Morocco. Ironically, during the very decade when black writers, intellectuals, and artists in Harlem were beginning to attract widespread attention, both from other blacks and from whites, McKay was abroad, living in rather poverty-stricken circumstances. He did write a novel ("Color Scheme") in 1925, but he destroyed it. In 1928, however, his novel *Home to Harlem* was published with great success, even though some of the more conservative members of the black community found it shocking and distasteful. In 1929 a second novel—*Banjo*—appeared, followed in 1932 by a collection of stories (*Gingertown*), which was in turn followed in 1933 by *Banana Bottom*, the novel that many critics consider McKay's best. Unfortunately, none of the books after *Home to Harlem* earned McKay much money, partly because by the early 1930s America and the world were in the depths of the Great Depression. Financial conditions were desperate for everyone, and especially for McKay.

In 1934 he finally returned to the United States, hoping to find work but instead finding himself compelled to take up temporary residence in a

welfare camp for the unemployed, many of whom turned out to be alcoholics. Given such circumstances, one might have expected him to become even more closely associated with communism than he had been in the early 1920s, but instead, just the opposite happened. As the 1930s wore on, McKay became increasingly anticommunist, partly because he had grown disenchanted with Stalin's brutal Soviet dictatorship and partly because McKay had by now been involved in numerous skirmishes with homegrown communists, who, he felt, were often hypocritical, racist, and/or unscrupulous in their treatment of anyone who was not a true believer. In his 1937 autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, he tended to downplay the extent of his own earlier infatuation with communism; by now he had become more an advocate of black self-reliance and self-help than of international socialism. When Soviet Russia signed a peace pact with Nazi Germany in 1939 (allowing the two nations to carve up Poland when World War II broke out), McKay's distrust of communism seemed vindicated, but by this time he was no longer a very influential voice on the African-American scene. His prickly personality had alienated many former friends, and his days as a major creative artist now seemed behind him. In 1940 he did publish a book, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, and he also continued to write essays and poems. In the early 1940s, however, his health began to fail, and he turned increasingly for friendship and support to friends who were deeply involved in the Catholic Church. After McKay suffered a stroke while working in a shipyard in 1943, his reliance on his Catholic friends became even stronger, and in spring 1944 he moved to Chicago to work for Bishop Bernard Sheil as an adviser on both communism and blacks and as a lecturer on social topics. By the fall of that year McKay had himself become a Catholic, a decision he explained in various writings published in 1945 and 1946. Partly his decision was motivated by his anticommunism; partly he was grateful for the church's recent support; partly he believed that Catholicism was the one organization best equipped to resist tyranny and promote racial justice; and partly, no doubt, he hoped for literary patronage from a well-

endowed source of funding. In any case, when McKay finally died of heart failure in Chicago on May 22, 1948, his funeral was Roman Catholic, but for a final commemorative service his body was sent (appropriately enough) home to Harlem.

“Harlem Shadows” (1918, 1922)

Harlem was (and is) a section of New York City inhabited mainly by African Americans. In this poem the speaker describes and laments the degradation of young black women who feel compelled to earn their income as prostitutes.

The poem opens by describing “the halting footsteps of a lass” (l. 1). Appropriately enough, not only this line but most of the poem (which describes literal streetwalkers) is written in the regular rhythm of iambic meter, in which even syllables are stressed and odd syllables are unstressed. The regular rhythm of the poem almost mimics the movement of walking and thus suits the poem’s subject matter, but the work is also skillful in other ways as well. The word *lass*, for instance, seems almost deliberately archaic and even romantic; *lass* (which refers to a girl or young woman) is a word used mainly in northern England and in Scotland and thus seems somewhat ironic in the present context. The word also suggests innocence and youth and thus again seems ironic, since the young women McKay describes are earning money in ways that quickly rob them of both traits. Not until the fourth line does the emphasis on prostitution become obvious and explicit; for the first three lines, then, the poem postpones this crucial information, so that when the information arrives we feel a sense of loss—a sense of vanished innocence. The sudden realization that the “lass[es]” mentioned in line 1 are actually prostitutes enhances the poignant and ironic reference to them (in line 5) as “little dark girls in slippered feet”—phrasing that makes them seem almost delicately childlike. That irony, in turn, is underscored by the immediately ensuing reference to their “prowling through the night” (l. 6), phrasing that makes them sound almost like animals looking for prey. In the short space of six lines, then, the women have been

described as lasses, then as prostitutes, then as “little . . . girls” (l. 6), and then almost as beasts. The constant shifts in the ways they are described imply the speaker’s complex responses to the lifestyle he describes—responses that mix affection and dismay, pity and repulsion.

The rhythm and other sound effects of the poem become more complex in the second stanza. McKay had already used alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds) in stanza 1, especially in the phrase “bend and barter” (l. 4). In stanza 2, however, he combines both alliteration and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) in the phrase “know no rest” (l. 8), and he also effectively emphasizes the words “long night” (l. 7), not only by accenting both words but by preceding them with two unaccented syllables. He then echoes “long night” in the subtly varied phrase “lone night” two lines later, just as he uses the phrase “street to street” as a kind of refrain in the final line of each stanza. The poem, in other words, reveals a sophisticated sense of music, and this kind of artistry is enhanced by its subtle use of imagery as well. In the second stanza, for instance, the speaker makes it clear that the setting is in winter, and although the falling snow makes the landscape beautiful, it also makes the “slippered feet” of the girls (mentioned earlier; l. 5) seem woefully unprotected. As the poem proceeds, in fact, both the tone and the imagery become progressively darker and more depressing; thus the first stanza refers to “little . . . girls . . . in slippered feet” (l. 5), while the second stanza refers to “half-clad girls of tired feet” (l. 11), and then the third excludes any reference to “girls” at all, focusing instead simply on their “weary, weary feet” (l. 17). Likewise, the feet at first are described as “prowling” (which at least suggests animal vigor and vitality; l. 6), then as “trudging” (which implies an almost lifeless weariness, but at least a sense of direction; l. 12), and then finally as “wandering” (which suggests an absence of any aim or meaningful purpose; l. 18). Through the use of such subtle shifts, and especially through the constant and constantly changing references to feet, McKay reveals real poetic skill, and if the poem sometimes seems too effusively romantic and too much focused on

the speaker rather than on the girls (as in the “Ah’s” of lines 13 and 17 and the phrase “heart of me” in that latter line), these minor flaws do not outweigh the work’s general accomplishment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with McKay’s sonnet titled “The Harlem Dancer.” What are the similarities and differences in the depictions of women in both works? Why are women (rather than men) used as symbolic figures in both poems? How is Harlem portrayed in these two poems?
2. Discuss the depiction of prostitution in this poem and the way(s) it is depicted in W. E. B. DuBois’s sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro*. How do the two works illuminate one another? Why is prostitution a potent symbol for the more general conditions blacks have had to suffer in America?
3. Why do you think McKay chooses to focus on the feet of these women rather than on other parts of their bodies? How do the references to feet contribute to the unity and coherence of the work? Discuss the use of color imagery in this poem. How do the various colors add a sense of variety to the poem?

“If We Must Die” (1919, 1922)

In this poem (which won McKay instant fame when it was published), the speaker exhorts his fellow sufferers of oppression, urging them not to surrender to their persecutors but to offer courageous resistance.

Here as in other poems, McKay ironically uses a highly traditional form (the Shakespearean sonnet, with a rhyme scheme of *abab / cdcd / efef / gg*) to give expression to highly defiant content: The attitude of the speaker is almost revolutionary, whereas the form of the poem is strictly traditional. McKay thus shows that he can appropriate the legacy of Western culture and use its standard forms for his own purposes; he demonstrates that he is deeply familiar with the conventions of Western art, even

as he employs those conventions to resist the worst aspects of Western culture. No one, therefore, can accuse either McKay himself or the speaker of this poem of being uneducated or illiterate, and indeed part of the power of the poem derives from the fact that the speaker expresses ideals of freedom, courage, and self-respect that are often considered central to Western culture. The poem’s form and even its content thus imply the ways in which whites, by persecuting blacks, have betrayed the deepest values of their own cultural heritage.

The effectiveness of this poem depends as much on the skill with which it is written as on the ideas it expresses. McKay effectively varies the meter of the poem (for instance) to emphasize the verbs *Hunted* and *penned* in line 2, just as he also uses double alliteration, near-rhyme, and metrical variation to stress the connection between *Making* and *mock* in line 4. In addition, McKay uses repetition in the opening halves of lines 1 and 4—repetition that therefore stresses the distinct contents of the second halves of each line. Likewise, he effectively employs enjambment (in which the sense of the phrase runs beyond the unpunctuated end of the line), making use of this technique not only in lines 1–2 but especially adeptly in lines 6–7, so that the phrase “In vain” has special stress. (The speaker suggests that blood may indeed be shed—but at least it will not be shed “In vain.”) Especially potent is the strong double-accented emphasis on the key word *deathblow* in line 11, while metrical stress is also used with special effectiveness in the final line, in which *Pressed* has unusual emphasis, and in which the double stress on syllables 4 and 5 gives the line a memorably tight and tangled rhythm.

In addition to employing sound and meter skillfully, McKay uses individual word choices to great effect. Thus the speaker urges his fellows not to behave like *hogs* (animals often thought of as fat, stupid, and dirty; l. 1), while he compares their persecutors to “mad and hungry dogs” (l. 3), thus making them seem irrational, inhuman, and out of control. Dogs, however, are at least familiar creatures and are sometimes well behaved; later the enemies are described as “monsters” (l. 7), phrasing that makes them seem unnatural, abnormal,

deformed, hideous, wicked, and cruel. Then, later still, they are called a “cowardly pack” (l. 13), phrasing that is almost contemptuous in implying that they are innately weak and unheroic, their temporary strength depending on sheer numbers alone. They operate as a stupid, unthinking unit rather than as a collection of autonomous beings, unlike the “men”—the true human beings—the speaker tries to rally. The irony, of course, is that it is the “dogs” and “monsters” who, by trying to treat others as beasts, behave as mere beasts themselves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Booker T. Washington’s famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech. How do the works differ in tone, spirit, and purpose? To which audiences are the works addressed? How is each persuasive in its own way?
2. McKay’s poem was first published in 1919. Do some historical research in order to try to recover the original historical contexts of the work. What was happening in American race relations in 1919? How is McKay’s poem partly a response to those circumstances? Why did the poem have the kind of immediate impact it did? Can the poem speak to other situations besides racial conflict? Is there any evidence that it has proven its appeal in such broader circumstances?

“The Lynching” (1919, 1922)

The title suggests that the poem will describe one of the illegal public hangings that were often used by mobs to persecute and punish alleged wrongdoers—hangings that were especially employed by whites against blacks (particularly in the South) in the decades after the Civil War. Very quickly, however, the language suggests that McKay is comparing such a lynching with the crucifixion of Christ. By the end of the poem the focus returns more obviously to a contemporary lynching, but the analogies between the two events are now clear.

The poem is cast in the form of a sonnet with the following rhyme scheme: *abba / cddc / effe / gg*.

The title suggests that the work will describe the kind of lynchings that were becoming increasingly notorious as examples of the racist abuse suffered by American blacks, especially in southern states. The opening line, however, especially because of the capitalized word *Spirit*, implies that the poem may be describing the immediate aftermath of Christ’s crucifixion. This possible reference to Christ seems confirmed by the next two lines, but then line 4 introduces momentary confusion, since it mentions an “unforgiven” sin, whereas the whole point of the crucifixion was to redeem mankind from its sinfulness. In line 5, though, McKay seems to allude to the star of Bethlehem, and lines 6, 7, and most of line 8 also seem appropriate as descriptions of the crucified Christ. The last word of line 8 is briefly ambiguous: Does *char* mean a small cart, wagon, or chariot (as in the famous spiritual “Swing low, sweet chariot,” to which the line may allude)? Or does *char* refer to something burned or charred? Both meanings of the word were acceptable in McKay’s era, and perhaps both meanings are simultaneously acceptable in this poem. The first meaning would seem to refer most clearly to Christ, while the second meaning would seem most appropriate to the lynched body of a black man, since lynched bodies were indeed often burned. In the single word *char*, then, McKay may combine and epitomize the double meanings already suggested by the title and by the first eight lines.

The double reference seems to continue in lines 9 and 10 and the first half of line 11: The hanging body, the gathering crowds, and the interested women could all be appropriate in describing either Christ’s crucifixion or a lynching, and certainly the irony of the phrase “Day dawned” (which would normally carry hopeful connotations; l. 9) would apply to either event. By the second half of line 12, however, the poem’s focus seems to have shifted clearly to a modern-day lynching, and by the end of the work that modern focus seems particularly clear. In any case, it seems dreadfully ironic that women and children (often symbolically associated with innocence and compassion) are the ones described as either unmoved by, joyous about, the dead body. Such phrasing makes the poem seem all the darker

in its final tone, since these lines imply little hope for the future. The mothers and their children either are indifferent to the ugly sight (“never a one / Showed sorrow”; ll. 11–12) or are actually filled with “fiendish glee” (l. 14). The work ends, then, on a thoroughly ironic word that epitomizes all the paradoxes suggested by the poem as a whole.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this work alongside RICHARD WRIGHT's story “Big Boy Leaves Home.” How are lynchings presented in each work? Is one work more memorable or effective than the other? Explain your response in detail, paying special attention to such matters as genre, point of view, imagery, and the lengths of the two works.
2. Compare and contrast this poem with ERNEST HEMINGWAY's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, paying particular attention to the ways both works use religious imagery, allusions, and symbolism. What are the advantages of employing religious references in works that otherwise seem to deal with secular issues? How does use of such references contribute to the range, resonance, or depth of a work?
3. Why might lines 2–3 seem particularly disturbing or unsettling? What might those lines imply about the nature of God? Discuss the relationship between those lines and line 7. What is the “awful sin” mentioned in line 4? How is the reference to “women” in this poem especially ironic in view of traditional depictions of Christ's crucifixion?

“Exhortation: Summer, 1919” (1920, 1922)

The poem is set explicitly during the year just after the end of World War I, when many African-American servicemen were returning from the conflict, hoping for new opportunities, and when many of the blacks who had emigrated to the North from the South to work in wartime industries were hoping for a new and better phase in their lives. Instead (unfortunately), various destructive and violent riots broke out in response to racial discrimination

in a number of northern cities; many blacks died, and McKay's poem—which prophesies the dawning of a new day for blacks (a new day linked with the rise of Africa)—is therefore simultaneously hopeful and ironic.

This work differs from many of McKay's other poems in several important respects. In the first place, it is not a sonnet; instead, it consists of 26 relatively long lines, ranging in length from 11 to 16 syllables each. In appearance, language, and rhythms, the poem seems indebted to the work of Walt Whitman; it is as if McKay thought that he could not do justice to his prophetic message here in the shorter, more constricted, more conventional sonnet form. As its title suggests, the poem is a kind of formal public speech summoning the spirit of a group to encourage proper attitudes or action; the sonnet would not have been the most appropriate genre to use for such an extended hortatory purpose. However, another way in which this poem differs from many others by McKay is in the very explicitness of its racial rhetoric. In some of his sonnets (such as “If We Must Die” or “America”), McKay never openly mentions racial conflict (although such contexts are often implied); in the present poem, however, the references to Africa and Ethiopia, along with the context implied by the title itself, make the racial message unmistakable. The poem is primarily addressed by one black person to other blacks. Finally, another difference between “Exhortation” and many of McKay's other poems lies in its peculiar structure. Not only does McKay here abandon the sonnet form, but he also abandons regular, predictable stanza structures altogether. Thus, the first stanza consists of only four lines; the second consists of nine lines, while the third consists of 13 lines (although six of those 13 are repeated, with one slight variation, from the preceding stanza). The poem thus has a cumulative structure: The stanzas grow in length and intensity as the poem proceeds, and the heavy use of repetition gives the work an almost chanting, songlike cadence. In its rhythms, shape, and rhetoric, this is one of McKay's most distinctive poems.

Here as in many of his other works, McKay reveals a discerning ear. From the first line to

the last (for instance), it is clear that he will not be content with using straight iambic meter (in which each even syllable is stressed and each odd syllable is unstressed). Instead, in this poem the very first word is accented, and throughout the work McKay shows an unusual willingness to play with (and vary) the rhythms of his lines. The first syllable of the word *rumbles*, for instance, receives exceptionally strong stress because the two syllables preceding it are unaccented (l. 1), and indeed this technique is one McKay employs frequently elsewhere in the poem. One particularly striking use of this rhythm occurs, for instance, in line 5, in which three unaccented syllables precede the heavily accented *new dawn*, which thus receives all the more stress because of the preceding unstressed words. (The same tactic is employed in the reference to a “strong new world” in line 11, where three heavily stressed syllables are preceded by three syllables that are unstressed.) However, McKay also effectively employs other sound effects, such as assonance (echoing vowel sounds, as in “rumble” and “thunder” in line 1), internal rhyme (such as “quake” and “break” in line 2 or “birth” and “earth” in lines 8 and 21), and alliteration (repetition of consonants, as in “Sons of the seductive night” [l. 15]). It is as if McKay, in this work, sought a new kind of music that would be appropriate to the new day he called for and predicted. In this work more than in many others (with the obvious exception of “If We Must Die”), the speaker functions as a kind of public bard—as the historian, conscience, and voice of an entire people.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with McKay’s sonnet “If We Must Die.” How are the poems similar in rhetoric, intent, tone, and diction? How are they different in form, meaning, and final effect?
2. What does this poem imply about the relations between Africa and African Americans? How does the poem perhaps reflect new thinking about Africa that was beginning to arise in the first decades of the 20th century? Who, for instance, was Marcus Garvey, and how might he be relevant as part of the historical context of this poem?

“America” (1921, 1922)

The speaker describes his paradoxical relationship with the land in which he lives: On the one hand, he feels oppressed by his country (probably because he is a member of a racial minority, although this point is never openly stated); on the other hand, he feels that such oppression strengthens him by forcing him to achieve a tough resilience. In any case, he anticipates the day when the country that oppresses him will collapse as history takes its inevitable toll.

Here as in so many other works, McKay uses the sonnet form (this time with a rhyme scheme of *abab / cdcd / efef / gg*) to give emphatic brevity and point to a fairly bitter and sardonic poem: The work would be less potent if it were lengthy and less controlled. The initial line uses effective delay, becoming openly ironic only when we reach the final word, while the second line enhances the intensity of the poem as the speaker shifts from an image of being fed to an image of being attacked and even eaten. Line 3 begins with an emphatically stressed verb, while line 4 concludes the opening sentence with a surprising paradox: In spite of everything, the speaker loves the “cultured hell” (an effective oxymoron, or union of words with opposite meanings) that “tests [his] youth.” The word *youth* makes his status as victim of oppression seem all the more unfortunate, but the same word also suggests his strength, his resilience, and his willingness (even his eagerness) to face a challenge.

The next few lines, however, seem the least successful in the work (ll. 5–10). The similes (comparisons using the word *like* or *as*) seem undistinguished; the imagery seems mostly unmemorable; and the ensuing claim—that the speaker feels neither “terror” nor “malice” and offers no “word of jeer”—seems refuted by the existence of the poem itself, especially the opening two lines and the final couplet. In any case, in the final four lines

the speaker prophesies the collapse of America; he predicts that it will suffer a kind of national shipwreck, and he compares its ultimate fate to a vision of “priceless treasures sinking in the sand” (l. 14). The speaker does not say whether this fate is a kind of divine punishment or whether it is simply the sort of decline that has befallen all once-mighty nations. He takes no unequivocal joy in the decline he predicts, but neither (for obvious reasons) does he express any regret. Instead he seems indifferent to the fate of a nation that has, after all, shown him only contempt and even malevolent hatred.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read McKay's poem alongside “The School Days of an Indian Girl” by GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (Zitkala-Ša). How is America depicted in both works? How do the works compare and/or differ in tones, attitudes, and rhetorical strategies?
2. How does McKay's sonnet compare and contrast with CARL SANDBURG's poem titled “Chicago”? Discuss the works in terms of form, technique, tone, and purpose. What are the fundamental attitudes of the two works?
3. Discuss the specific metaphors and similes and other figurative language in this poem. In what cases, and for what reasons, do you find them either effective, ineffective, or some combination of both? Discuss the tone of lines 8–10; do you find that tone effective or ineffective? Explain your answer.

“Outcast” (1922)

The speaker, who feels like an alien in a foreign culture, longs for the language, heritage, peace, and freedom he associates with Africa, the land of his ancestors.

Like many of McKay's poems, this one is a sonnet consisting of three quatrains (or four-line stanzas) and a concluding couplet (two rhyming lines). The rhyme scheme is thus *abab / cdcd / efef / gg*. Ironically, then, McKay uses a highly structured poetic form—one with a long history in Western litera-

ture—to lament the bondage imposed on blacks by Western culture and to extol freedom from Western influences. The poem begins by referring to Africa as “dim regions”—a phrase in which the first two syllables are emphasized by being doubly accented, and a phrase in which the word *dim* is meaningful in several different senses. Africa is “dim” (unknown, obscure) not only because it was as yet a relatively unexplored continent, but also because it is a place about which the speaker himself has little personal knowledge. Yet it is the place “whence my fathers came” (l. 1)—a phrase in which the noun refers not only to the speaker's direct ancestors but also (more broadly) to the ancestors of his race as a whole. When the speaker describes his “spirit” as being “bondaged by the body” (l. 2), the alliterated phrase not only alludes to the ancient Christian belief that the soul is imprisoned in the flesh, but also refers to the literal bondage endured by African Americans during several centuries of slavery. Meanwhile, the ironic juxtaposition of conservative phrasing with radical content continues in line 4, in which the speaker mentions his desire to “sing forgotten jungle songs,” even as the rhythm of the line (and of the lines before and after it) is a perfectly regular example of iambic pentameter verse (in which the even syllables are accented and the odd syllables are not). The very form of the poem, in other words, exemplifies the extent to which the speaker has mastered the discipline of a kind of poetry associated with the culture he partly rejects.

As does any talented poet, however, McKay uses metrical regularity to establish predictable patterns—patterns that will then emphasize any departures from them. Thus, when the speaker describes how the “great western world holds” him in bondage, every syllable except the third is stressed, so that the meter not only accentuates the power of the West but also mimics the kind of pressure by which the speaker feels himself enthralled. A similar effect is achieved in the final line, where the phrase “white man's menace” receives unusually heavy metrical emphasis on the first three syllables. The fact that most of the poem is highly regular in its iambic rhythms makes any such moments of metrical irregularity stand out. In this way and in others, there-

fore, McKay reveals a sure ear for sound effects, just as he also shows a solid sense of the varied connotations of words. In line 8, for instance, the speaker refers to the “alien gods” to whom he must bend his knee. If he had referred to a *god* (singular) rather than to *gods* (plural), the line might have seemed a direct attack on Christianity; instead, *gods* can suggest not only the Christian God but also the various idols worshipped in the West, especially the false gods associated with materialism. Likewise, when the speaker says that he feels like “a thing apart” (l. 12), the word *thing* (which is indefinite and vague) not only implies that he feels less than fully human but also suggests that he is treated as less than a true person by the surrounding culture. In this work as in any good poem, the important thing is not the meaning itself but the skill with which that meaning is communicated.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this work alongside T. S. ELIOT’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and then discuss the theme of alienation in both works. What is the basic source of alienation in each poem? How do the speakers differ in their backgrounds and attitudes? What implied attitude does each poet take toward each speaker? How are Prufrock’s problems more individual and “personal” than the problems of McKay’s speaker?
2. Compare and contrast this work with LANGSTON HUGHES’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In particular, discuss the forms, tones, imagery, and diction of the two works. How do both works effectively use simple, clear diction?
3. Discuss the ways references to gender are used in this poem. Do you see any consistency in those references? How and why might a feminist object to those references? How might McKay respond to such possible objections?

Home to Harlem (1928)

When Jake Brown, a vigorous, friendly, and open-minded young black man goes AWOL from the

army and returns to Harlem, he chances to meet and spend the night with a beautiful and generous young prostitute, Felice, who refuses to accept payment for their encounter. Although he unfortunately loses touch with her, he thinks of her often during the rest of the novel, which describes his encounters with various other lower-class blacks as they work at various jobs while looking forward to chances to drink, party, and spend time with members of the opposite sex. While working, Jake befriends Ray, an intellectual young black who lacks Jake’s carefree attitudes; eventually Ray departs, but by the end of the book Jake has reestablished his connection with Felice, and as the novel concludes, they look forward to a happy life together in Chicago.

McKay’s novel is often considered one of the seminal works of fiction of the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of artistic creativity by African Americans living in or near the Harlem neighborhood of New York in the 1920s. The book created significant controversy when it was published: Some black opinion leaders thought that the work played into white prejudices by giving so much emphasis to so many of the seedier aspects of African-American urban life, such as violence, prostitution, drinking, and even drug abuse. W. E. B. DuBois famously wrote that the novel made him sick and left him feeling in need of a shower, but other blacks—including such up-and-coming young writers as Langston Hughes—had the opposite reaction. For them the novel was refreshing in its honesty, its realism, and its commitment to telling the truth even when the truth might prove unappetizing to the more “refined” segments of the black community. For these readers, McKay seemed a conscientious artist rather than a mere political propagandist. DuBois, however, argued that even the best black art could and should have a propagandistic dimension; it should help improve the lives, and advance the cause, of black people, rather than merely describing the ways in which many of the less conventionally successful members of the community lived.

McKay’s determination to present an unvarnished picture of some of the less appealing aspects

of existence is signaled by the novel's first sentence, which describes the protagonist's life as a worker on a ship: "All that Jake knew about the freighter on which he stoked was that it stank between sea and sky" (1). Since much of the novel deals with physical sensations of one sort or another, it seems appropriate that it should open with this strong emphasis on the sense of smell, even if the smell is repulsive. Jake, however, is an infinitely adaptable character; nothing depresses long, and it is clear that McKay admires and respects his hero's resilience. Jake is not even bothered very much by the insects that bite him as he tries to sleep: "'Nip me all you wanta, Mister Louse,' said Jake. 'Roll on, Mister Ship, and stinks all the way as you rolls. Jest take me 'long to Harlem is all I pray. I'm crazy to see again the brown-skin chippies 'long Lenox Avenue. Oh boy!'" (3). This passage is typical of the book in several ways, including in its strong emphasis on nonstandard English dialect, its use of slang from the 1920s (such as *chippies*), and its stress on irrepressible sexual energy. Jake is dynamic, vital, and lacking in any kind of hypocrisy; *chippies*, for instance, was a slang term for prostitutes, and so McKay makes it clear that Jake is not even interested in finding a real girlfriend so much as he is interested in immediate, casual sex. Neither Jake nor his creator feels any need to hide or apologize for the character's strong sexual drives. In the 1920s this kind of frank emphasis on sex—and particularly on illicit sex—would have been considered far more scandalous than it seems today.

Another feature of McKay's novel that made it startlingly unusual in its own time was its explicit emphasis on the beauty and attractiveness of black people. Whereas many blacks during this period derived their standards of beauty from the majority white culture, and whereas many lighter-skinned blacks even tried to "pass" as whites, McKay celebrates the seductiveness of dark-skinned people. At one point, for instance, Jake fantasizes about the women he will encounter when he returns to Harlem: "Brown girls rouged and painted like dark pansies. Brown flesh draped in soft colorful clothes. Brown lips full and pouted for sweet kissing. Brown

breasts throbbing with love" (8). In passages such as this, McKay shows his unabashed, unapologetic pride in the distinctiveness of his own race; Jake never yearns for white women, just as he never submits in other ways to the standards of "white" culture; instead he is (both literally and metaphorically) comfortable in his own skin.

At the same time, another aspect of the novel that created some controversy was the book's repeated descriptions of the variations in skin color among African Americans, as when McKay depicts all the many different "layers of brown," such as "low-brown, high-brown, nut-brown, lemon, maroon, olive, mauve, gold. Yellow balancing between black and white. Black reaching out beyond yellow. Almost-white on the brink of a change" (57). Black writers who wanted to emphasize the sameness and solidarity of black people in order to forge a strong sense of political and cultural unity had to contend, then, with McKay's emphasis on the *differences* among "blacks," and indeed McKay's stress on a wide variety of distinctive skin tones is related to his general interest in the individuality of his characters. As usual, he resists the impulse (or the externally imposed compulsion) to paint in broad strokes: He suggests that just as "black" people are diverse in their physical appearance, so they are diverse in their personalities, their values, their interests, and their motives. Some of the black characters in McKay's novel are admirable; some are unappealing; some are merely ridiculous. McKay feels no need to make all the blacks virtuous or noble, and even the occasional white character is sometimes presented in an appealing light. At one point, for instance, Jake asks his new friend Ray (whom he meets when they both work in a railroad dining car) how Ray "like[s] waiting on them ofays." "'It isn't so bad,'" Ray replies. "'Most of them are pretty nice. Last trip I waited on a big Southern Senator. He was perfectly gentlemanly and tipped me half a dollar'"—a sizable sum in the 1920s (138–139). Ultimately McKay seems more interested in people as individuals than as members of groups, for as Jake says at one point, "We may all be niggers aw'right, but we ain't non-etall all the same" (159).

6. Do some research and discuss McKay's response to GERTRUDE STEIN, especially his reaction to the "Melanctha" section of her book *Three Lives*. In what ways does that work by Stein remind you of McKay's works? In what ways are the works of these two writers different in purpose and effect?
7. Trace McKay's evolving political positions (focusing, for instance, on his changing responses to communism). Are his changing attitudes reflected in his creative works? If so, how? Should knowledge of a writer's political ideas shape our responses to his or her works? If so, why and how?
8. McKay is often discussed as both a poet and a novelist, but he is little discussed as a writer of short fiction. Find some of his short stories and discuss them in detail. Is any of them particularly successful as a work of art? Is any of them particularly unsuccessful? Why are they not better known? How are they comparable (in such matters as themes, style, settings, and techniques) to McKay's novels and/or poems?
9. McKay set a number of works in countries other than the United States. How do his "non-American" writings compare and/or contrast with the "American" ones? How do the settings of these various works affect such matters as characterization, dialogue, dialect, plot, and tone? How is the issue of race affected by different settings?
10. Track down some of McKay's nonfiction, especially his writings about art. How do these writings help us understand his own artistic purposes and achievements? What was McKay trying to do in his "creative" writing? To what

extent, and in what ways, did he succeed or fail in attaining his announced objectives?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Cooper, Wayne F. *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance: A Biography*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Giles, James R. *Claude McKay*. Boston: Twayne, 1976.
- Gosciak, Josh. *Claude McKay and the Romance of the Victorians*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- Hathaway, Heather. *Caribbean Waves: Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- James, Winston. *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion*. New York: Verso, 2000.
- Maxwell, William. Modern American Poetry: Claude McKay. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/m_r/mckay/mckay.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- McKay, Claude. *Complete Poems*. Edited by William J. Maxwell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- . *Home to Harlem*. 1928. Reprint, Chatham, N.J.: Chatham Bookseller, 1973.
- Ramesh, Kotti Sree. *Claude McKay: The Literary Identity from Jamaica to Harlem and Beyond*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006.
- Stephens, Michelle Anne. *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Tillery, Tyrone. *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991.

Robert C. Evans



EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY (1892–1950)

My candle burns at both ends; / It will hardly last the night; / But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends— / It gives a lovely light!

("First Fig")

Edna St. Vincent Millay—known as “Vincent” to her family and friends—was born in Rockland, a small town in coastal Maine, the eldest of three daughters. Her father left the family when she was seven, though he did remain in regular contact with them. Edna grew up in what was basically an all-female household, an environment that played a role in her lifelong independence and strong sense of self. Millay, her sisters Kathleen and Norma, and her mother, Cora, maintained a tight (as well as a literary and highly musical) family unit until her mother’s death in 1931. Edna was recognized early at her school for her writing talents, and her work (signed *E. Vincent Millay*) was frequently published in a national young people’s magazine, *St. Nicholas*. She won the magazine’s Silver Badge in 1909 and a cash prize the following year. When she turned 18, however, that association ceased.

Millay lacked the financial means to attend college, but she did get involved in local dramatic troupes. Then at age 19, during a stay with her ailing father, she began work on the poem that would change her life (Milford 58–59). She submitted “Renaissance” to a new literary anthology, the *Lyric Year*. Though destined for fame, the lengthy poem was very nearly discarded by the two men who were culling the thousands of submissions. The poem was notable for such arresting images as “The creaking of the tented sky / The ticking of eternity” (ll. 43–44) and for the opening of its final

stanza: “The earth stands out on either side / No wider than the heart is wide; / Above the world is stretched the sky, / No higher than the soul is high” (ll. 203–206).

The year 1912 was a fortunate time for the poem to appear. It was a revolutionary year not only for Millay, but also for the arts in general. Cubism in painting, the rejection of tonality in music, the rise of imagism in poetry—all of them were products of *modernism*, the general term for a large-scale artistic revolution in the opening years of the 20th century. Most readers recognized the poem’s freshness and vitality, and they condemned the editors who had awarded it a mere fourth place. (Fourth place also meant no cash prize, a sore disappointment for Millay and her struggling family.)

A certain Mrs. Caroline Dow heard Millay read the poem at the Whitehall Inn, a summer hotel in Camden, Maine. Dow was dean of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) Training School in New York and an influential Vassar alumna. She became determined that Edna would attend her alma mater. Before long, funds were being raised on Millay’s behalf, and soon she was spending a college-preparatory year at Barnard College in New York. It was a city whose vitality she was to love, and to which she would return after her college graduation.

The following year, at age 21, she became a member of Vassar’s class of 1917, choosing Vassar over

Smith College, even though Smith had offered her a full scholarship. As she told her mother, she preferred Vassar because of the wide range of international students there, while “there isn’t one ‘furriner’ in Smith.” In addition, it was apparently a tradition that “Lots of Maine girls go to Smith; very few to Vassar. I’d rather go to Vassar” (Milford 79). This sentiment was clearly another early sign of Millay’s independent spirit, as well as a lifelong interest in that wider world beyond America’s shores.

Once matriculated, Vincent continued to devote herself to poetry, but she also again became deeply involved in college dramatic productions, this time both as writer and actor. She excelled in both arenas. She performed as Marie de France in *A Pageant of Athena*, in celebration of the college’s 50th anniversary. Her Deirdre in Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was remarkable enough to bring reviewers from several New York newspapers. A poem, “The Suicide,” that she had written in 1914 won first prize in 1916 from the Association of Northern College Magazines. ROBERT FROST served on the committee that awarded the prize.

She also became an ardent suffragist, committed to the movement that was demanding the right to vote for women and that led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. She also took a woman’s right to independent choice and behavior seriously on a more personal level. For one thing, she acquired several lesbian lovers, taking full advantage of the era’s new commitment to sexual freedom, including free love. She herself later admitted she was “far from unsusceptible to a woman’s charms” (qtd. in Milford 379). She also hotly rejected many of Vassar’s rules and customs (mandatory class and chapel attendance in particular) and was nearly disqualified from Vassar’s graduation ceremony by some off-campus antics.

She had a firm supporter in Vassar’s new president, Henry Noble MacCracken, a progressive educator who winked at much of Vincent’s misbehavior. He wrote later that he had assured her, “I don’t want to have any dead Shelley on my doorstep and I don’t care what you do.” He also recorded her reply: “Well, on those terms I think I can continue

to live in this hellhole” (qtd. in Milford 138). In short, her college years encouraged Millay’s iconoclastic tendencies, in both behavior and belief. She rejected what she considered Christianity’s strict doctrines and proclaimed a woman’s right to total freedom, both intellectual and sexual.

She did receive her diploma and moved to New York’s Greenwich Village, whose bohemian lifestyle and freedom perfectly suited her. She continued to write poetry, performed with a new theater group (the Provincetown Players), and either fended off or encouraged the attentions of many suitors, male and female. Three years later, Millay left America for Europe, where she earned money as a foreign correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post*.

After her 1922 return to America, she finally settled on a husband: Eugen Boissevain, a handsome Dutch widower who had been married to another Vassar alumna (also an active suffragist). He proved to be the perfect match for Millay, deeply committed to her physical and mental health and remarkably tolerant of her occasional romantic and sexual involvements. The most intense of these was with the young, probably gay, poet George Dillon, whom she had met on a fall 1928 reading tour in Chicago. Their affair produced an unprecedented outpouring of sonnets from Millay, and the 52 sonnets were later gathered into a volume called *Fatal Interview*. It sold an astonishing 33,000 copies within 10 weeks of its April 1931 publication (332).

Millay and her husband retreated to a house they built in the Berkshire Mountains, “Steeple-top.” Along with their purchase of Ragged Island near her old home in Maine, it became her primary residence for the remainder of her life, though the couple also traveled widely.

Most of Millay’s best writing was completed by the late 1930s, including *Wine from These Grapes* (1934), *Conversation at Midnight* (1937), and *Huntsman, What Quarry?* (1940). An effort was made to publish her *Collected Poems* in the early 1940s, but critical appraisal had begun to turn against her work. A review of the proposed volume suggested that “If [her artistic merit] is not taken quite seriously . . . today, it may be that she was

taken too seriously twenty years ago.” It suggested further that “the direction of her progress has been from legend to success” (qtd. in Milford 464).

Though afflicted with a series of both nervous and physical ailments throughout her life, she remained an admired performer of her work. Making use of her remarkable dramatic gifts, including a vibrant speaking voice, she conducted exhausting national tours to read from each new volume of poetry she produced. Millay was the first poet to be given eight Sunday evenings to read her poetry, live, on a national radio hook-up. She also served until 1939 on the prize committee of the Guggenheim Foundation, helping to determine each year which new poets deserved financial encouragement.

Her health prevented her from continuing her reading tours after 1939. To combat various ailments, Millay became a prey first to alcoholism and later to drug addiction, particularly addiction to morphine, for which she unsuccessfully sought rehabilitation. She never retreated, however, from national life. As she said, “Poets are deeply aware of world conditions. In fact, they have a tendency more than other writers to become world-conscious” (qtd. in Milford 420). In her first years in New York, she had been a defender of Floyd Dell, who, besides being a theatrical entrepreneur, was one of the editors of the radical magazine the *Masses*, which had been indicted by the government under the 1917 Espionage Act. After two trials, Dell and his fellow “conspirators” were acquitted. Millay accompanied him to court every day, in a show of support. Later Millay became deeply but unsuccessfully involved in the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, two convicted anarchists from the 1920s, in whose innocence many believed. She wrote to the Massachusetts governor, Alvan Fuller, on the eve of their 1927 execution, “I cry to you with a million voices: answer our doubt. Exert the clemency which your high office affords” (qtd. in Milford 298). She later became a determined voice warning Americans of the impending threat from Hitler’s Nazi regime in Germany. She was particularly sensitive to that threat when her husband’s property in the Netherlands was seized by the invading Germans.

She is best known for her volumes of poetry, the most famous of which are *Renaissance and Other Poems* (1917), *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920), *Second April* (1921), *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* (1924), *The Buck in the Snow* (1928), *Fatal Interview* (1931), and *Wine from These Grapes* (1934). She also wrote (and performed in) several plays in the 1920s, and even composed the book for one opera, *The King’s Henchman*, with music by the eminent music critic and composer Deems Taylor (1927). It proved to be a splendid Metropolitan Opera premiere, and book sales of the play were massive. She also wrote several short stories for *Ainslee’s Magazine* under the pen name of *Nancy Boyd*. The one genre at which she failed was the novel.

Her favorite poetic form was the sonnet. She preferred it to the increasingly common use of free verse. She liked its tight structure and rhyme schemes. She once exulted: “What formal grace and method of procedure as of a ritual most precise and perfect of high ecstasy restrained” (qtd. in Milford 459). Her word *ecstasy* is a reminder that love is a sonnet’s usual topic—its intense pleasures as well as its complex emotional challenges. In 1922 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in literature. This gratified her enormously, both as an artist and as a feminist, as she was both the first woman and first poet to earn the prize. In 1940, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Millay was very much a part of her times and was either intimately or informally acquainted with the major writers of her day, including Deems Taylor (music critic, composer, and collaborator); the critic Edmund Wilson; the novelists Pearl Buck, JOHN DOS PASSOS, and Somerset Maugham; the painter Georgia O’Keeffe; the playwright Susan Glaspell; as well as her fellow poets Elinor Wylie and Rebecca West. The English poet and novelist Thomas Hardy once said of her, “There are two great things in the United States: the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay and our ‘recessional buildings’ [skyscrapers]” (qtd. in Milford 290). If ZELDA and F. SCOTT FITZGERALD were the prototype Jazz Age couple, Millay was its liberated young woman. She gave the age, as her biographer Nancy Milford asserts, “its lyric voice” (33).

“First Fig” (1920)

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends,
It gives a lovely light.

This is the most celebrated Millay poem, the one that opened her second collection, *Some Figs from Thistles* (1920). That title suggests that while life can be full of thorns and will not last forever, beautiful moments can happen. The four lines offer a concise and clear metaphor for the speaker's (and in this case also the poet's) take on life, a strong argument that one should *carpe diem*, Latin for “seize the day”: Pursue life's intensity.

The phrase “burning one's candle at both ends” has entered our language as an expression of living life to the fullest, but with the awareness that such a course may not be the most healthful. It conveys perfectly a young person's philosophy on living life. (Millay was in her twenties when the poem was written.) One weakness in the poem derives from the two interjections, *oh* and *ah*. One would expect that since they are addressed to two opposing groups—“my friends” and “my foes”—they would express differing emotions or attitudes, but actually the two interjections are interchangeable. What cannot be denied, however, is that both words convey the speaker's pure enjoyment of the self-indulgence with which s/he was seizing the day, as well as the pleasure and “illumination” she was giving herself and her world. But coupled with this delight in those double pleasures is the awareness, characteristic of Millay (not to mention many great poets from Shakespeare or the medieval French poet Villon, to Marvell and Housman), of life's brevity and time's passing. The speaker knows full well that the light he or she is generating may not even last through the night. Self-indulgence in Millay is often shadowed by the knowledge that time is flying.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Scan the poem (mark its accents, light and heavy, and its rhyme scheme). Also pay attention to its use of alliteration and its vowel sounds.
2. Examine how the sounds, meter, and rhythms contribute to the poem's effectiveness.
3. Summarize in a few sentences the speaker's philosophy for living life. Then respond in a lengthy paragraph to the poem's recommendations for living. Do you approve? What do you find appealing about those recommendations? What dangers might result from living life this way?
4. Compare the philosophy of life voiced by the speaker to that of the speaker in Andrew Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress.” Which poem is potentially the more ironic? In which does the poem's content do more to undermine the speaker's apparent views? Explain how such irony is achieved. Which poem is the more successful as a work of art? Explain why. Compare and contrast the philosophy implied in this poem with the one implied in Robert Frost's poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

“Recuerdo” (1922)

This poem consists of three six-line stanzas and recounts another apparent night of romance, this time outdoors and this time less explicitly physical than the experiences described in some of Millay's other poems. It was written early in Millay's career, possibly during her “college-prep” year at Barnard (1913).

As a sonnet does, the poem relies on a careful structure. The first two lines of each stanza are identical, and their recurrence reflects the “back and forth” experience of the ferry the couple apparently rode all night. Furthermore, the third, fourth, and fifth lines of each stanza list pleasures the couple experienced during the night. In the final stanza, the kindness and generosity the lovers display are not so perfect that they forget to be practical: They save enough cash to go home on the subway.

The poem does a fine job of suggesting a night (a long night) of romantic adventure and pleasure, and the details are just poetic enough (the ferry,

the table, the smells, the fruits) to suggest a real-life experience. The second stanza also ends with a brilliant and captivating image of the sun as it rises “dripping, a bucketful of gold” (l. 12).

There are, however, some less appealing features of the poem. Each stanza’s opening couplet consists of a feminine rhyme (“merry” / “ferry”), one that consists of two syllables, not the usual one. In English, the practice can produce a singsong effect. The poem also relies too heavily on an irregular anapestic rhythm (in which two unaccented syllables precede an accented one), which disrupts the regularity of its flow. Finally, line 15 employs some unnecessarily archaic diction (“we hailed, ‘Good morrow, mother’”), which undercuts the fresh naturalness of its diction elsewhere. The line does use an effective synecdoche, however (in which *head* stands for “woman”).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Mark the stressed and unstressed accents of the opening couplet. How does the rhythm of the lines contribute to their meaning or effectiveness? Which words or syllables receive special emphasis, and how can that emphasis be justified?
2. To what activities do you suppose the speaker is referring in lines 3 through 6 and in line 11? What can we infer about the couple’s tastes, interests, and values from these activities?
3. The word *recuerdo* in Spanish means “memory.” How do you think the couple is feeling about this one-night adventure? Do you imagine they will view it differently in 10 years? If so, why?
4. Compare the speaker’s experience of a night and dawn on a New York ferry with the experience recorded by Walt Whitman in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” How and in what ways do the poem’s respective tones, attitudes, and vocabularies either compare or differ?
5. Compare and contrast the romantic relationship depicted in this poem with the one presented in T. S. ELIOT’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” How is sexuality dealt with in each work? How do the tones of the speakers differ?

“I, Being Born a Woman” (1923)

Millay is one of the comparatively few women poets who have mastered the sonnet form. Her wit and craftsmanship in this handling of a sonnet in the Petrarchan mode are impressive. She describes a distinctly physical encounter with a man that, while it has produced no lasting emotional bond, still seemed unavoidable and felt to a degree pleasurable, at least at the time.

This sonnet resembles Shakespeare’s number 138 (“When my Love swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her, though I know she lies”) as a knowing, wise, and in fact cynical take on a dying or dead relationship, this one from the woman’s point of view. The opening five lines constitute a rather ironic or self-critical analysis of the man’s expectation that she wants him. She is “urged by your propinquity” to feel attracted to the man; any attraction results less from any inherent merit or appeal in him than from “the needs” of her “kind” (ll. 2–3). The speaker accepts, not with total enthusiasm, that women need sex from men.

One of the poem’s most brilliant insights is the very unfeminist suggestion that women are almost designed, by nature, to crave thoughtless and meaningless sexual intimacy. It is the way females are made, the speaker strongly implies. She warns the man clearly that the moment has meant nothing. She in fact looks at three steps in the process: First her pulses grow clear (l. 7), which in this context means that she is filled with desire for him; when that happens, her mind grows cloudy (she loses her calm powers of reason); and the final result (l. 8) is to be left abandoned. He has simply used her, and she has for the moment participated, allowing herself to be thus used. Line 4 contains the possibility of another interpretation. Either she is declaring that she “feel[s] a certain zest,” or the word *feel* goes back to “urged by your propinquity,” which would suggest that she does not truly feel it but is *forced* to respond that way by her body’s desires. Good poets put into their poems these double possibilities, these potentially ambivalent interpretations, forcing the reader to think about both choices and to decide for himself or herself which meaning is the more likely.

The speaker's insights about her physical responses and loss of self-discipline in line 7 are nicely repeated in lines 8–9, when she speaks of “the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain.” Their night (or perhaps merely an hour) of passion is no reason for him to expect her to talk to him next time they meet. Of course, as with any poem worth its salt, that final couplet can be taken a second way, creating an interesting ambivalence. She may be implying that, next time, once again, there will be no need for any chat—just one more encounter of passionate but meaningless sex.

Given that Millay was a woman who was a firm believer in women's rights and talents, the persona (the speaker) of this particular poem may seem surprising. “She” seems convinced that women have unique “needs and notions” that drive them into unwise choices of lovers, as if they have little control over their desires. This work is a reminder that a good poet will often create a speaker who represents a certain type of personality and may not speak for the poet herself. Millay is portraying human psychology, not judging it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you think is the most likely meaning of *propinquity* in line 3? What is the effect of Millay's use of this particular word, rather than a synonym? How does her choice of diction, and the tone it creates, contribute to our sense of the speaker's personality? How would you interpret line 7?
2. In line 13, define the noun *frenzy*. How and why is that noun effective? Discuss some alternatives to that word. How might those other choices have changed the line's connotations?
3. Compare and contrast the attitude toward sexuality of Millay's speaker with that of the central character of ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How is sexuality presented in complex ways in both works?
4. In a substantial essay, compare this speaker's analysis of an unsatisfying love relationship with that of the speaker in Shakespeare's Sonnet 138, “When My Love swears. . . .” What common attitudes to an imperfect relationship do both sonnets share?

“What lips my lips have kissed” (1923)

In this sonnet, the speaker, in a mood both coolly philosophical and melancholy, lies in bed late at night and recalls the many men whom she has loved, recognizing that she has forgotten most of them. The poem ends with a sad realization that many of the pleasures that she has known have fled and that she somewhat regrets that loss. The sonnet reflects the speaker's life of romantic self-indulgence as well as the indifference to particular loves that can result from such frequent pleasures.

The octave (a Petrarchan sonnet's first eight lines) describes the speaker's state of mind as she considers how many young and apparently needy men she has loved and realizes further how many of them she can no longer even recall. The phrase “quiet pain” (l. 6) suggests ambivalent feelings. The speaker knows that she has outgrown the attentions of men, but she cannot stop herself from feeling upset at that more “mature” insight. The sonnet's sestet (its final six lines) consists of an extended simile in which she compares herself to a tree in winter. She recalls the joys of summer, seeming to recognize that her previous days of love and pleasure, even though the individual lovers are no longer recalled, were a lovely time in her life. She also senses, however, that they are likely never to recur, though summer, being part of the natural cycle, may offer a subtle hint that one part of her hopes a season of love will eventually return. As many of Millay's poems do, this one contains an echo of Shakespeare. The “vanished . . . birds” and the “summer” that “no longer . . . sings” in her echo the reference in his Sonnet 73 to tree branches in late fall, which that speaker terms “bare ruined choirs / Where late the sweet birds sang.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Mark the poem's rhyme scheme and from that try to determine whether this is an Italian or a Shakespearean sonnet. How does the sonnet

form—especially the division between octave and sestet—contribute to the poem’s meaning? How do a sonnet’s brevity and tight construction add to the work’s impact?

2. Discuss the relationship of the poem’s final six lines to the dramatic situation described in its first eight lines. What role does that relationship play in the development of the poem’s argument?
3. Compare Millay’s simile likening the speaker to a tree in winter to Shakespeare’s image of a tree in his Sonnet 73 as “bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.” Compare the effects of the two similes in their respective poems.
4. Write a substantial paragraph that analyzes the speaker’s attitude toward her past “loves.”

“Love is not all” (1931)

This appealing sonnet has the complexity and ambivalence one looks for in a satisfying work of art. It traces the speaker’s analysis of the nature and benefits of love, as well as its wide range of inadequacies. But at its resolution, it considers two possible conclusions to the lovers’ night of love—“I might be driven to . . . / . . . trade the memory of this night for food. / It may well be. I do not think I would” (ll. 13–14).

The poem takes for its cue a clever premise. As does Shakespeare’s “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” it begins with a look at love’s inadequacy, listing all it *cannot* achieve. But most of those items are either physical (“It is not meat nor drink”) or medical (it cannot heal one’s “blood” or “lung” or “fractured bones” [ll. 1, 5–6]). Nevertheless, the speaker is quick to admit that men may die without love. The sonnet’s last six lines (its third quatrain and concluding couplet) turn the attention to the speaker herself, address her relationship with her lover, and focus on a particular night; she looks carefully at the possibility that she might be disloyal but is fairly certain she would not.

The poem also shows considerable technical facility. This is especially evident in its use of caesura (the grammatical pause in the middle of the

first and last lines) and its use of enjambment (in which the end of one line flows without punctuation into the next, as between lines 3 and 4). Both techniques work to break up the regularity of the iambic rhythm. The poem also takes the rather daring step of devoting one full line and part of another to the alternating repetition of the verbs *rise* and *sink*, and it ends, significantly, on the latter.

Another part of the poem’s originality (or at least its experimenting with the traditional sonnet form) is that it chooses not to make use of the “three quatrain plus couplet” structure of the typical Shakespearean sonnet in order to present three different aspects of love. Instead, it devotes its first six lines to negative descriptions, then moves in lines 7 and 8 to another facet—men who die for lack of love. Those two lines form a transition to the speaker’s own involvement in love, when she contemplates the possibility that she might sell “your” love for peace of mind. The poem concludes with the suspense of ambiguity: *Would* she sell the memory of their night of love? She leaves the possibility open, thus ending with an honest appraisal of love’s indefinable and emotionally wrenching power.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Mark this sonnet’s rhyme scheme and meter, comparing them to the rhyme and meter of “What lips my lips have kissed.” Discuss the ways in which these two techniques contribute to the meaning and effectiveness of both poems. Which syllables or words receive special metrical emphasis, and how?
2. In a paragraph, identify and then analyze the various forces that might drive the speaker to “sell your love.” What is the speaker’s tone? To what degree is it appealing or sympathetic? Explain your assessment. How does the attitude of the speaker in Millay’s poem compare or contrast with the attitude of the female speaker in EZRA POUND’S “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”?
3. Draw a conclusion as to the speaker’s analysis of love: Is it really something humans can do without, or will it have a lasting effect on the speaker’s life? How does the speaker ultimately

- Falck, Colin, ed. *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Gould, Jean. *The Poet and Her Book: A Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962.
- MacDougall, Allan Ross, ed. *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1952.
- Majerus, Elizabeth. "Modern American Poetry: Edna St. Vincent Millay." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/millay/millay.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Milford, Nancy. *Savage Beauty*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Nierman, Judith. *Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977.
- Patton, John J. "A Comprehensive Bibliography of Criticism of Edna St. Vincent Millay." *Serif* 5 (September 1968): 10–32.

Jamie Spencer



MARIANNE MOORE (1887–1972)

Poetry—I, too, dislike it.

(“Poetry”)

The best authority on Marianne Moore is of course the author herself. In an October 7, 1951, interview for the *New York Herald Book Review*, Moore reveals quite a bit about herself. In her own words she presents herself as an average American who enjoys “the theater, tennis, sailing, reading, and the movies—animal documentaries, travelogues, an occasional French film, and the newsreel” (14). The terse list of her personal favorites includes “country fairs, roller-coasters, merry-go-rounds, dog shows, museums, avenues of trees, old elms, vehicles, experiments in timing like our ex-Museum of Science and Invention’s two roller-bearings in a gravity chute, synchronized with a ring-bearing revolving vertically” (14). Such a list mirrors her ability as a poet to paint a picture by using only a few details. Moreover, her declaration that “I am fond of animals and take inordinate interest in mongooses, squirrels, crows, [and] elephants” emphasizes the central role animals and animal imagery play in many of her poems (14).

Most of the key facts concerning Moore’s life are laid out in Charles Molesworth’s fine biography. Born on November 15, 1887, in Kirkwood, Missouri, Marianne Craig Moore was the second child of Mary Warner Moore and John Moore. However, John Moore never took an active role in Moore’s or her older brother’s lives. In fact, it appears that Marianne Moore never had the opportunity to meet her father and that her mother made

every effort to prevent the Moore family from having contact with her children (Molesworth 1).

Together Mary Moore and her two children formed a tight family unit that became a powerful force in Moore’s poetry. Mrs. Moore may have been Moore’s most severe critic, but the close relationship between mother and daughter cannot be denied. Although Moore and her brother did experience sibling rivalry, their relationship was built on a mutual respect for each other’s accomplishments. When Moore’s grandfather died, her mother decided to support financially and raise her children on her own. She and her two children moved to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where she taught English at the Metzger Institute. Moore’s mother had been college educated, and she instilled in both of her children a great knowledge of literature and culture. While many hypotheses have been offered to explain why the Moores moved to Carlisle, it is clear that the change afforded Marianne Moore a better education. Her daily lessons at the Metzger Institute may not have prepared her adequately for college, but the tutoring of a friend, Mary Norcross, helped Moore pass Bryn Mawr College’s entrance exams in summer 1905. Once there, Moore studied literature but was advised against majoring in English because her essay writing was marked by the unconventional organization that became the hallmark of her poetry. Although she edited and published short stories and poems in the college

literary journal, *Tipyn O'Bob*, she majored in history and politics. In 1909 she graduated from Bryn Mawr and enrolled in Carlisle Commercial College to master secretarial skills.

Her first job, however, was not as a secretary or even as a writer. Instead, in 1911 she became a teacher at the United States Industrial Indian School of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. As an employee at a government-funded program intended to help Native Americans assimilate into American culture through education, Moore bore a heavy workload for small wages. Somehow, however, she did make time to write and began to publish her poetry, with several poems appearing in national magazines in 1912 and 1913. But in 1915 Moore published an astonishing 20 poems and gained some significant literary notice. Seven poems were published in the *Egoist*, a literary bimonthly edited by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), a well-known imagist poet, who befriended Moore and supported Moore's developing talents through a balance of praise and criticism. Four others were placed in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. EZRA POUND, an editor and contributor to that journal, "was one of the first to notice Moore's unique talent, and was later . . . to begin a correspondence with her" that marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship (Molesworth 111). Moore may not have been able to make a living by her art alone, but the recognition and professional associations H. D. and Pound offered were important steps on her journey as an author.

In 1918 Moore and her mother moved to New York City. The family dynamic was changing and challenged by Moore's mother's recent remarriage, but the valued relationships among Moore, her brother, and her mother were not severed. Moore's move to Greenwich Village created a new source of support through the literary circles she encountered there and through expanding connections to other modernist poets, including WALLACE STEVENS, WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, and T. S. ELIOT. In fact, New York City, along with Mount Rainier and Virginia, became one of the central themes of Moore's poetry.

In Moore's first decade in New York, she was very busy. Molesworth reports the literary parties,

trips to museums, and lectures she and her mother attended. But her life there was not entirely enjoyment; she also worked to support her mother and herself. Her first position (as a secretary at a girls' school) seems irrelevant to her developing literary identity. Her part-time position at the Hudson Park Branch of the New York Library has often been connected to her penchant for categorization and lists in her poetry. Lasting from 1925 to 1929, her full-time position as an editor for the *Dial*, a literary magazine, widened her literary connections and assured her that her literary tastes were valuable. Her poetry was also gaining wider acclaim. In 1921, her first volume of poetry, *Poems*, was collected and published by H. D., Winifred Ellerman (known as *Bryher*), and Robert McAlmon through the *Egoist* Press, but it was not noticeably reviewed. In 1923 Moore oversaw her first publication of her own work, and this chapbook of verse was widely reviewed by key modernists, including T. S. Eliot and Richard Aldington. The capstone to this decade's literary publication, however, was the *Dial* Press's publication of *Observations* in 1924. After its publication, Moore in 1925 won the annual *Dial* Award of \$2,000 for a writer's overall contribution to art. Sharing her title with Van Wyck Brooks and William Carlos Williams, she had established her place in literary modernism.

After the closing of the *Dial*, the literary magazine she not only edited but where she published the greatest number of poems in the 1920s, Moore now began supporting herself through publication of her works. Devoting her time and resources to her art, Moore began a long series of publications that reflect her connection to other poets as well as her own development as a poet, including her need to revise and republish works until she believed they clearly conveyed her intended message. In 1935 she published *Selected Poems*, which draws from two of her previous publications, *Observations* (1924) and *Poems* (1921). T. S. Eliot's introduction praised her work and career, and his suggestion that she reorganize her poems so that the works from *Observations* appeared first helped provide the order Moore would use in later replications (Molesworth

267–268). In the next year, she published *Pangolin and Verse*, a small, limited-edition volume of five poems. This volume, regarded as her masterpiece, reflects her ability and range as a modernist poet. Later publications, however, included *What Are Years?* (1941); *Nevertheless* (1944); *Collected Poetry* (1951), which received the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and Bollingen Prize; *Like a Bulwark* (1956); *O to Be a Dragon* (1959); *Eight Poems* (1962); *Occasionem Cognosce* (1963); *The Arctic Ox* (1964); *A Talisman* (1965); *Dress and Kindred Subjects* (1965); *Le mariage . . .* (1965); *Poetry and Criticism* (1965); *Silence* (1965); *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics* (1965); *Tip-top's Tiger* (1967); and the *Complete Poems* (1967), which received the Edward MacDowell Medal, the Poetry Society of America Gold Medal, and the Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres.

To think of Marianne Moore only as a poet, however, is to neglect her other literary work. For instance, in 1945, *Rock Crystal: A Christmas Tale* by Adalbert Stifter was published in translation from the original German by Elizabeth Mayer and Marianne Moore. Furthermore, in 1954 Moore published her own translation of the *Fables of La Fontaine*. Considered “her largest single project,” the “*Fables* continued her interest in the dynamic relationship between nature and culture” (Molesworth 304). She also published *Puss in Boots, The Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella: A Retelling of Three Fairy Tales Based on the French Tales of Charles Perrault*, illustrated by Eugene Karlin, in 1963. Although not a literal translation as her renderings of the works by Stifter and La Fontaine were, Moore’s versions of these three fairy tales emphasize her wide scope of reading and her ability to find value in what others could easily discard. *The Absentee: A Comedy in Four Acts* (1962), a play based on Maria Edgeworth’s novel of the same name, similarly shows Moore’s command of a wide variety of genres and indicates her willingness to attempt new challenges. Other publications—including *Predilections* (1955), a collection of essays and reviews; *Idiosyncrasy and Technique: Two Lectures* (1958); *The Accented Syllable* (1969); and her contribution to *Homage to Henry James* (1971)—

not only reveal her own theories of writing and reading but also underscore the characteristics she valued in art.

Moore also played an important role, however, as a mentor to younger poets. Her relationship with Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, was of key significance to both poets’ careers. Bishop approached Moore for advice while still a student at Vassar. The public record of their connection reveals a distinctly professional relationship. In 1936 Bishop introduced Moore to Louise Crane, the heir of the Crane Paper Company, who would support Moore financially and with legal advice and would become the executor of Moore’s estate (Molesworth 292). Moore similarly helped Bishop nearly 10 years later by recommending that she receive the Houghton Mifflin Award for her first volume of published poetry, *North and South*. Moore’s January 4, 1937, letter to her brother indicates her fondness for Bishop; she claims to “like Miss Bishop better than any of our friends—of the friends we have adopted, & are not beating off. But my whole feeling of enthusiasm is tempered by her tendency to be late” (*Selected Letters* 376). Her letters to “Dearest Elizabeth” and her use of pet names (like those Moore used with her mother and brother, such as “Master of Minnows”) reveal the closeness of their friendship (*Selected Letters* 378–379).

During her lifetime, Moore received widespread recognition for her poetic skill. Included in her long list of awards are a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal, two Poetry Society of America Gold Medal Awards, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, a MacDowell Medal, appointment as the chevalier of the Legion of Honor, election to the Order of Arts and Letters, and recognition as a Woman of Achievement by the American Association of University Women.

Nevertheless, Moore was the people’s poet as well. In her final years, she was named an “Unknockable” by *Esquire* in June 1966 and was honored as Senior Citizen of the Year at the New York Conference on Aging in 1969. The photograph of a small figure of an elderly woman in a black tricorne hat throwing out the opening pitch at

Yankee Stadium in 1966 seems comic, but baseball was one of her favorite pastimes. When Marianne Moore died on February 5, 1972, America lost more than a poet; America lost an icon.

“The Fish” (1921, 1935)

“The Fish” is one of Moore’s many poems about nature and animals. As in “To a Snail,” the poem’s meaning and development are more complex than the title implies. Although the poem describes the fish of its title, the description provides insight into Moore’s intricate rhyme and stanza schemes, which Moore uses to mimic the complex setting of the fish her poem describes.

Each stanza consists of five lines. In all of the stanzas the lines create a rhythm through a repeated metrical pattern. The first line of each stanza has only one syllable; the second has three syllables; the third has nine syllables; the fourth has six syllables; and the last line usually has eight syllables. Essentially the rhythm mimics the rise and fall of waves.

The rhymed lines also mimic the ebb and flow of the water. The first line’s syllable rhymes with the final syllable of the second line, and the third and fourth lines’ final syllables rhyme as well. The fifth line is left unpaired and confronts the silence of the line breaks between the stanzas. As do the waves of the water, the first two lines have a short rhyme, mimicking the rocking beginning of a wave. The third and fourth lines build up to the crest and roll of the wave. The last line is the surge and rush of the water to shore, followed by the silence of the receding water.

Throughout the poem, Moore describes in detail the world beneath the sea. “The fish wade / through black jade” of dark waters full of life (ll. 1–2). Hidden beneath the waves is a brutal, but beautiful, world. While the sea creatures dance with “spotlight swiftness” (l. 13) in the glorious light and color of the kaleidoscope of life beneath the sea, they are rooted to the “defiant edifice” (l. 29) of the scarred surface of the dead chasm. Complicating the contrast between life and death are the natural color and vibrancy associated with life and the man-made dynamite and

hatchet associated with the dead chasm. In the last lines, Moore emphasizes the contrast between life and death: “Repeated / evidence has proved that it can live / on what can not revive / its youth. The sea grows old in it” (ll. 37–40). Figuring out what Moore means by *it* is her challenge to her readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Moore’s intricate use of stanza, meter, and rhyme is integral to this poem. How do these poetic devices work to establish mood and meaning?
2. Moore provides a vivid, detailed description of the underwater scene. Are these details realistic or fanciful? What effect do these details have on the poem?
3. The contradictions of the poem build up to the image of life and death contained in the final stanza. How do these contradictions lead you to explain the challenging lines of the final stanza?
4. Compare and contrast this work with Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Birds and Fishes.” What does each work imply about nature and beauty? How do they differ in tone and theme?

“Poetry” (1921, 1935)

Among the first poems Moore published, “Poetry” is an odd start to a poet’s career. Included in *Poetry* (1921) is a 29-line poem that begins with the startling declaration “Poetry / I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle,” which seems to devalue the author’s work and poetry in general. If the author does not like poetry, then why should a reader like the author’s verse?

Even more startling may be the reception “Poetry” received from other poets, who understandably could have been insulted by Moore’s work. William Carlos Williams wrote to Moore with praise, claiming that she was “the only one who sees any use in using his brain” (qtd. in Molesworth xviii). In the *Egoist* of August 1916, H. D.’s essay on Marianne Moore’s poetry claimed that “Miss Moore helps us” (118) through her poetry.

If Moore's poem truly impressed two well-known modernist authors, one of whom was her earliest publisher, then she cannot be discarding all poetry.

A close reading of the longest version of her poem reveals what Moore dislikes about poetry. In the second and third stanzas, the speaker suggests that the most prominent problem is not poetry alone, but interpretation. When critics use "high-sounding" words and "become so derivative as to become unintelligible" (ll. 7–8), then a poem loses its power because the general audience can no longer understand it. With the fourth stanza, Moore introduces another complication—"half poets" (l. 19) and poets who are not "literalists of / the imagination" (ll. 21–22). Neither can effectively portray their messages in their poetry because they are caught up in form, not content. As the final stanza reveals, only those who have distilled poetry to its raw material in search of the genuine can appreciate and write poetry. All the rest is false poetry, and it is false poetry that Moore dislikes.

As she did with many of her texts, Moore returned to "Poetry" to revise and distill the essence of her work. The resulting version, which appeared in *Selected Poems* (1935), is far briefer than the original. Its three lines appear in the first stanza of Moore's original version of the poem. As the need to revise suggests, defining the difference between genuine poetry and everything else was a preoccupation throughout Moore's career.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you like poetry? Think beyond a simple yes or no and, as Moore does, describe what it is you like or dislike about poetry. Do you like or dislike this poem in particular? Explain your response in detail.
2. How does "Poetry" help Moore's readers understand her definition of her art? What, according to her definition, must a poem do to be genuine? How does her own poem accomplish that task?
3. The three-line version of the work included in *Selected Poems* (1935) is meant to represent the same principles articulated in the original version. How does the later version differ from the earlier

version? Moore has distilled the details from the original version of the poem, but does the revised work still relay the same message to her readers?

"To a Snail" (1924)

First collected in *Observations* (1924), "To a Snail" is a quintessential Marianne Moore poem. As many of her other works do, "To a Snail" focuses on nature and the animal kingdom. Also as do many of her poems, it includes a quotation without providing its author or source. However, as in all of her volumes after *Observations*, Moore provides an index of her poetry and notes to explain references made in her poems.

In these "Notes," Moore attributes the opening line of "To a Snail" to *Demetrius on Style* as translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe. Thus, a poem with a title that seems to suggest that it will be merely a fablelike animal tale quickly becomes a study of composition. Both the snail and the poem achieve "grace of style" through "compression" (l. 1). The snail, small in stature, compresses itself within its shell, displaying the dual virtues of contractility (an ability to limit itself) and modesty. The shell is much more than a pretty covering for the snail's slimy, sluglike body. For Moore the shell becomes the symbol of the snail's ability to use something beautiful. Similarly, in order for a poem to be powerful, it must limit itself and present its message directly. The style, or shell, of the poem is much more than a beautiful covering that hides the supple existence of a poem of many meanings. Style is not adornment but a trait that makes every word count in the creation of the poem and its message.

Nevertheless, Moore is not asking for simple or unadorned poetry. As the snail moves without feet, the poem should move without our needing to count its feet and meters. A poem's movement is determined not by the number of lines or rhymes, but by the feeling it conveys and the reaction it receives. The snail's "curious phenomenon of your occipital horn" (l. 12), or its eye, allows it to see "a knowledge of principles" (l. 11) as it travels along its glistening trail. Essentially then, "To a Snail"

is not merely about a snail. By pairing her description of the snail with advice on rhetoric and style, Moore has complicated our understanding of both a poem and a snail. By analyzing the characteristics they should share, Moore develops a subtle definition of poetry that emphasizes not what is said, but the way one should say it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What other animals or insects could Moore have chosen to represent “compression” through her poetry? Why do you think she chose to write about a snail instead of other possible subjects?
2. In terms of the theories of composition Moore outlines in this poem, is “To a Snail” a successful poem? Why or why not?
3. Compare and contrast this work with Robinson Jeffers’s poem titled “Vulture.” In particular, discuss form, tone, point of view, and theme. What does each poem imply about beauty?

“What Are Years?” (1941, 1967)

“What Are Years?” is Marianne Moore’s way of asking, What is history? Moore was a history and political science major with an interest in philosophy during her college career; this poem is clearly connected to the concepts she thought about as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr. Far more sophisticated in language and topic than her college publications (which focused on college dramas that reveal the identity of the artist) and written long after Moore graduated, the poem moves beyond the immediacy of the present moment and looks at the significance of the individual’s moment within the context of all of history.

The opening allusions to innocence, guilt, nakedness, and safety reveal a beginning to mankind that closely parallels the conditions described in Genesis in the Bible. Cast out of paradise for eating of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve lost their innocence, experienced guilt both for their actions and for their nakedness, and were no longer safe. Here the rewriting of the Bible ends. Rather than focus on their sins, Moore emphasizes their

courageous actions. Both had the courage to ask unanswered questions, to doubt without yielding, to call without speaking, and to listen without hearing; essentially Moore claims that both were thinking human beings. Courage is finding strength to question, and questioning strengthens the soul.

By connecting the questioning soul of mankind with the sea and a bird, Moore complicates the image of courage. (Moore’s use of masculine pronouns is a reflection of her times; her poem is meant to include both men and women.) The sea, with its constant ebb and flow and fathomless bottoms, is compared to the soul’s imprisonment in ignorance. Regardless of how many times the soul rises up with a courageous question, it can never break free of the confines of mankind because man has a limited capacity to know and understand the world. Like the water of the sea, man must recognize his limits in order to survive. By recognizing and achieving what it is capable of, the soul achieves freedom regardless of captivity.

As has the caged bird, the now free soul has a new challenge. Breaking free of the confines of its captivity by recognizing his or her limits, the individual must share the knowledge he or she has acquired. Through singing his song, the bird grows. Through spreading his message, man “steels / his form straight up” (ll. 21–22). Accepting the status quo, or satisfaction with life as it is, brings man down. Joy results not from singing and spreading knowledge or accepting limitations, but from the questioning that leads to knowledge.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Moore’s poem about history contains few if any historical references. How then does she establish her poem’s focus: the history of mankind?
2. Moore’s last lines claim, “This is mortality / this is eternity.” What is *this* and how can it be both mortal and immortal simultaneously?
3. Is there another motive or message in Moore’s poem, or is it simply about history? Explain your response.
4. Compare and contrast this poem—in theme, tone, attitude, and image—with ROBERT FROST’s “The Road Not Taken.”

“The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing” (1944)

Essential elements of the beauty of “The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing” are the complex, rhythmic rhyme scheme and syllabic structure. All stanzas are six lines long and follow the same rhyme scheme (*abaccd*), although Moore uses slant rhyme when it is needed. Such an innovative rhyme scheme may be difficult enough to master in one poem without any added structural complexity, but Moore also closely monitors the number of syllables in every line. All of the stanzas follow the same pattern: Line 1 has six syllables, line 2 has five, line 3 has four, line 4 has six again, line 5 has seven, and line 6 has nine, except in one case. (In a nice bit of wit, line 24, which mentions “inconsistency,” has 10 syllables, thus violating the consistency of the pattern.) The repetition of the number of syllables and use of rhyme create a sing-song feel to the poem, enchanting the reader with sound as well as words.

The words Moore selects similarly enchant the reader. In the first stanza, Moore captures her readers by mentioning glazed katydid wings and by including references that call for identification although none is provided by the author. Walter Gieseking, a celebrated pianist who reportedly played every performance flawlessly even though he never physically practiced the music, and Domenico Scarlatti, an 18th-century composer of more than 500 complex pianoforte sonatas, are both presumed to be well-known persons. It seems that the mind is an enchanting thing because of people like Gieseking and Scarlatti, whose astounding skill and creativity display two of the many feats the human mind can achieve.

Using a technique that mimics stream of consciousness, Moore moves from the easily identifiable and explainable allusions to the musicians to the convoluted complexities of memory and the way it works. Although the bird imagery deserves closer scrutiny since Moore's use of animals in her poetry is always complex, the development of memory as the magic of the mind is the significant theme of the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas. Memory allows us to “hear without / having to hear” (ll. 14–15) and see with “conscientious inconsistency” (l. 24) what never was. The double-edged sword can keep alive

a moment we do not want to forget or recreate—a moment from our past to reflect our own desires. Although we rely on our minds to store our life experiences, Moore, the librarian, reminds us that the mind may be the best natural means we have for storing data, but it is not objective or reliable. It is this very unreliability and flexibility that grant the mind its greatest power. The ability to change is what makes the mind an enchanting thing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Moore refers to several birds and parts of birds throughout the poem. What significance do the kiwi, dove, beak, and wing have?
2. Moore overtly uses hearing and seeing in her discussion of memory. Are the other senses—taste, touch, smell—included in her poem? Why or why not?
3. Moore alludes to three key men—two positively (Gieseking and Scarlatti) and one negatively (Herod). Who is Herod, and what was his oath?
4. Compare and contrast this work with WALLACE STEVENS's poem “The Plain Sense of Things.” What does each poem imply about the mind? Compare them in terms of tone, attitude, and imagery.

“Nevertheless” (1944)

The title poem of Moore's 1944 volume of poetry, “Nevertheless” appears to be an unassuming work that is merely an exercise of form, but its very form contributes to its challenge. By using the form to shape the visual representation of the poem, Moore teases the reader into the disadvantage of ignorance. The first word of every line (except one) is lowercased, so that the stanzas begin in the middle of sentences. Thus, it seems as if Moore's speaker invites the readers into a conversation he/she has already started with someone else. Moreover, the couplets that end every three-line stanza end midsentence as well, causing further confusion by halting the conversation as if the speakers were interrupted. Without a linear, logical exchange of ideas, it seems impossible to make any sense of

the obscure references to fruits and vegetables or achieve any immediate comprehension of the topic at hand. How does any of these images have anything to do with the word *nevertheless*?

Moore explains the connection between the title and its imagery in the last stanza of her poem. *Nevertheless* (according to Moore's understanding of the term) implies fortitude. The unstated refrain of each stanza, then, is that even these representatives of the plant kingdom that are limited in mobility and have no critical thinking skills have managed to find a way to overcome the insurmountable obstacles they confront in their daily existence.

The stalks of kok-saghyz, a central Asian plant in the dandelion family, are confronted with potentially damaging frost. Nevertheless, they have found a way to thrive where other plants would die. Although the frost may kill the fragile leaves, the roots have thrust deep into the soil for protection. The prickly pear of stanzas 5 and 6 is suspended by barbed wire. Nevertheless, a root grew in search of the anchorage provided by the ground. Although far from the soil, the root system extended two feet in order to find what the plant needed to survive. Neither the kok-saghyz stalks, which are weeds, nor the prickly pear, which is a cactus, looks inviting, but through Moore's poem they have managed to earn our admiration. Their perseverance has allowed both to thrive in the natural world despite all the odds against them.

It may have been simpler if Moore had declared that *nevertheless* suggests fortitude in the face of adversity, but the images she uses to explore such fortitude are integral to understanding her definition of the word. The weeds and cacti, not the lovely rose and sweet carnation, are nuisances because they have the tenacity not only to survive, but to thrive. From Moore's perspective, such characteristics endow these plants and others like them with heroic qualities.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do "Nevertheless" and its association with perseverance and fortitude apply to plants only? Explain your response.
2. Is Moore's portrayal of the strength of fortitude and perseverance positive or negative?
3. How is Moore's depiction of nature in this poem similar to (or different from) the depiction of nature in Wallace Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning"? In which poem is the presentation of nature more complex?

"Baseball and Writing" (1961, 1966)

Laden with allusions to baseball, "Baseball and Writing" combines Moore's favorite American pastime with her poetic craft. According to Molesworth, "In 1964, three years after 'Baseball and Writing' appeared in *The New Yorker*, she said in an interview in *Harper's* that it was the display of 'dexterity—with a logic of memory that makes strategy possible' that made baseball especially appealing to her" (393).

As her poem begins, Moore pairs baseball and writing by emphasizing the excitement they both generate. Excitement results from unpredictability as "You never can tell with either / how it will go / or what you will do" (ll. 3–5). Although both activities produce excitement in Moore, as a poet she feels excitement from shaping the poem as it is created. As a baseball fan, she is excited by watching the game unfold. Essentially, then, excitement can be achieved by the players who shape the game and by the reader of the poem who watches it unfold. More important, in order for baseball and poetry to be exciting, there must be both a doer and a receiver. Without both, there is no excitement in the game or the art.

As the poem continues, it seems as if the first stanza alone links baseball and writing, but a close inspection of the descriptions of the men referenced throughout her lines reveals many of the characteristics Moore valued in baseball and, by inference from the poem's title, in poetry. Elston Howard emphasizes the good of the team. Roger Maris and Mickey Mantel of stanza 3 stretch themselves to their physical limits. The winners of the pennant won it together because they are "all business, each, and modesty" (l. 46); each works to complete his job on the team to his best potential and knows that he could not win the series without

the team's other eight men. Although each play is controlled by two men, the pitcher and the batter, there would not be a game if all the members of each team did not give their all. As baseball players must, the words and lines of a poem must join and work together for the overall success of the poem. And "yes, [both are] work . . . but [you] enjoy it while you're doing it" (ll. 76–78).

Again Moore closes her poem with a complication. The stadium becomes "Studded with stars in belt and crown" (l. 82). It is the new Pleiades twinkling in the sky with Orion. Mythical sisters of ancient Greece captured in the night sky will no longer hold fame or fascination for people. The new stairway to fame is "the Stadium" (l. 83). The accomplishments and fame of these bright nine will continue to shine long after they have left the field.

For Discussion or Writing

1. If the baseball players are the Pleiades (a cluster of nine stars), then who is Orion?
2. Is Moore's comparison valid? Can a sport, such as baseball, really be compared to an art? What qualities could a sport and an art form share? What differences exist between a sport and an art form?
3. As an American pastime, baseball has been immortalized by many other authors and in many other genres. THORNTON WILDER'S *Our Town*, WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS'S "The Crowd at the Ball Game," and CARL SANDBURG'S "Hits and Runs" (among many other works) refer to or focus on baseball imagery. Chose one work to compare and contrast it to Moore's "Baseball and Writing." Examine what the sport symbolizes in each work and how the author conveys the social significance of the sport.

"Granite and Steel" (1966)

In 1929 Moore and her mother moved across the Brooklyn Bridge to leave Manhattan, Greenwich Village, and the literary circles of the *Dial* for the "domestic tranquility" of 260 Cumberland Street, Brooklyn (Molesworth 248). The poem captures Moore's imagistic rendering of the causeway

between her professional life as an editor and her career as a poet.

The Brooklyn Bridge project spanned nearly two decades; 1866 saw the initial legislation in support of the bridge, which opened to the public on May 24, 1883. Suspending a 14,680-ton structure 135 feet above the East River are approximately 3,600 miles of steel cable manufactured at the New Jersey factory of John Roebling, the chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge project. At the time of its completion, the Brooklyn Bridge was the largest successful suspension bridge in the United States. Moore's poem, published nearly 60 years after the first nickel was paid to travel across its span, commemorates the ingenuity and beauty of the granite and steel of this modern marvel.

Moore's word choices paint a picture of both the bridge and the men who built it. "German ingenuity" (l. 7) allowed men to find a way to overcome the once-impassable distance between cities. Described as "silvered by the sea" (l. 1) and "grayed by the mist" (l. 2), the steel cables and wire become insubstantial and natural elements invested with a magical strength. The granite towers and steel cables join to create the "Climactic ornament, a double rainbow / as if inverted by French perspicacity" (ll. 26–27).

As "John Roebling's monument" (l. 28) the bridge is a testament to this individual's accomplishments as an engineer and manufacturer, but it also is a large tombstone testifying to the cost of scientific progress. Mankind has learned how to use the "'catenary curve' from tower to pier" (l. 8) in order for "Liberty to dominate the Bay" (l. 3). However, such knowledge has a grave price. Before the bridge was even under construction, it claimed its first fatality. On July 6, 1869, John Roebling's foot was crushed at the Brooklyn Fulton Ferry Slip. After a partial amputation of his foot, Roebling suffered from an infection and lockjaw, which eventually killed him on July 22. The Brooklyn Bridge truly is a monument honoring John Roebling's life work.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Moore is often considered a poet of locales. How does knowing that she lived near the bridge for

- Bryant, Jen. *Call Me Marianne*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2006.
- A Concordance to the Poems of Marianne Moore*. Edited by Gary Lane. New York: Haskell House, 1972.
- The Critical Response to Marianne Moore*. Edited by Elizabeth Gregory. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003.
- Engel, Bernard F. *Marianne Moore*. 1964. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- Kalstone, David. *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Marianne Moore*. Edited by Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987.
- Marianne Moore: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*. Edited by Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004.
- Marianne Moore: The Art of a Modernist*. Edited by Joseph Parisi. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1990.
- Molesworth, Charles. *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life*. New York: Atheneum, 1990.
- Moore, Marianne. *Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin, 1981.
- . *Idiosyncrasy and Technique*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958.
- . *A Marianne Moore Reader*. New York: Viking, 1961.
- . *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*. Edited by Bonnie Costello. New York: Knopf, 1997.
- . "Some of the Authors of 1951 Speaking for Themselves." *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 7 October 1951, p. 14.
- Nitchie, George W. *Marianne Moore: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.
- Page, Dave. *Marianne Moore*. Mankato, Minn.: Creative Education, 1994.
- Tomlinson, Charles. *Marianne Moore: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Engelwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.
- Willis, Patricia C., and Cary Nelson. "Modern American Poetry: Marianne Moore." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/moore/moore.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.

Nichole Bennett-Bealer



EUGENE O'NEILL (1888–1953)

What I am after is to get an audience to leave the theater with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle.

(transcript from *Eugene O'Neill*, PBS documentary)

Before Eugene O'Neill, American theater consisted largely of light comedy and melodrama. More than any other playwright, O'Neill established America's place in the realm of literary drama, introducing an intensely American dramatic realism and psychological focus to theater.

A master of applying his often painful life experiences to playwriting, O'Neill transformed his experiences inside and outside the theater—as gold prospector, sailor, journalist, derelict, stage manager, and member of a dysfunctional family—into characters of shattering psychological depth and realism. He was also one of the pioneers of expressionism, which he saw as being more “spiritually true” than classical realism. The only U.S. playwright to win the Nobel Prize in literature, O'Neill also won Pulitzer Prizes for four of his plays.

O'Neill was immersed in the theater from birth. The son of a handsome, successful actor, he was born in a Broadway hotel room. He spent much of his early childhood touring with theatrical companies, together with his mother and his older brother, Jamie. Their only stable residence was a house in New London, Connecticut, where they stayed during summers. His father, James O'Neill, Sr., was a successful Shakespearean actor who left literary theater for a more lucrative lead role in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a melodrama. This choice made him famous but bitter. Eugene grew to share his father's disdain for “the old, ranting, artificial

romantic stuff” (qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 64), and this was a factor in his own quest to create plays that offered depth and insight into the human condition.

Eugene's mother, Ella, loved her husband and children but disliked the theater and its people. Her unhappiness was a factor in her morphine addiction, which began at Eugene's birth. Her addiction had profound effects on both her children. The pain of Eugene's childhood and its lingering consequences would be retold in his most autobiographical play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

Irish Catholicism was another influence on O'Neill's early life. Like his parents, O'Neill was proud of his Irish ancestry, though by 15 he had abandoned the Catholic Church. Instead, he found his ethical foundations in philosophy and experience. After attending a series of Catholic and non-sectarian boarding schools, he entered Princeton in 1906. He made little effort to study the required curriculum, though he read Nietzsche, Strindberg, and JACK LONDON voraciously. These works proved influential in his writing. When heavy drinking, low motivation, and a student prank led to his suspension after a year, he chose not to return.

He became secretary of a small mail-order jewelry house in New York but became bored with that quickly. At his family's instigation, he joined a gold-prospecting expedition in Spanish Honduras. His father hoped the trip would separate him from

his girlfriend, Kathleen Jenkins, of whom the family did not approve. He married her secretly before leaving, because she was pregnant, but they never lived together as a married couple.

O'Neill's experiences in Honduras were an inspiration for his play *The Emperor Jones*, set in Haiti. He discovered no gold but contracted malarial fever after just six months, which convinced him to return to the United States. He made no attempt to see his wife, though he did visit his son.

Next he sought adventure as a seaman. Between voyages he lived destitute on the waterfronts of New York, Liverpool, and Buenos Aires, occasionally taking short-lived jobs. These experiences offered good inspiration for the sea plays he wrote in later years, including *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914) and *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1917). He claimed that his "real start" as a playwright occurred when he "got out of an academy and among men on the sea" (Gelb and Gelb 156).

O'Neill suffered from shyness and depression, and much of his life during those years centered around drinking. In New York he roomed at Jimmy-the-Priest's boarding house and saloon, living on free soup and five-cent whiskey. His closest friends were unemployed sailors, prostitutes, and other marginal characters. Many of these would be represented in such plays as *Anna Christie* and *The Iceman Cometh*. Though he was not politically involved, he had close friends who were, including the founder of the U.S. Communist Party, John Reed.

In many ways 1912 was his saddest year: a year of derelict wanderings, divorce, a failed attempt at journalism, a diagnosis of tuberculosis, and endless nights in bleak saloons. At his lowest point, he attempted suicide by overdosing on Veronal. Fortunately he was discovered by friends who took him to a hospital in time to save his life. His father sent him to a private sanatorium, which turned out to be a much-needed place of rest and rediscovery of literature. He once claimed that without this experience he might never have become a playwright.

After his discharge from the sanatorium, he began writing plays in earnest. At his father's expense, in 1914 he attended the 47 Workshop at Harvard, where he studied literature for a year.

He learned to write scenarios before fleshing out dialogue, and he studied the use of dialect in Irish plays. Both skills would be put to good use.

In this first period of his writing, he focused on realism with touches of naturalism. He sought to represent characters and events as realistically as possible, including the sometimes colorful ways in which his characters spoke. Because of his intimate knowledge of life at sea and in waterfront dives, he was able to offer theatergoers a glimpse of this very different world. Naturalism added emphasis on the effects of heredity and environment.

His closest friends remained derelicts, and he often lived on the one-dollar allowance that his father gave him. One friend was Terry Carlin, who convinced him to go to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where a group of like-minded artists had opened a theater company that featured their own plays. His *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914) was accepted, and it was a success. According to O'Neill, it was the first of his plays that had merit. This play was light on plot but progressive in dialogue, as it introduced the use of dialect into American drama. It began his life as an established playwright. He had friends who believed in him, and he had a job in the theater, where he sometimes acted bit parts.

The Provincetown Players opened a theater in Greenwich Village, New York, and nine of O'Neill's one-act plays were produced there, starting in 1916. As depicted in the movie *Reds*, he had a short affair with Reed's wife, Louise Bryant. Some claim that she broke his heart. In 1918 O'Neill married his second wife, Agnes Boulton. She was a writer of novellas and short stories, and they lived artists' lives in New York. In 1919 they had a son, Shane. When Louise tried to tempt him back, he declined; he was content.

Delighted that Eugene seemed to have settled down, James O'Neill bought them a home in Provincetown. In 1920 both parents attended the successful performance of O'Neill's first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, on Broadway. It won his first Pulitzer Prize. During this time, Eugene O'Neill began to know and understand his parents better, though the reconciliation was short-lived: His father died of cancer later that year. O'Neill

also renewed his acquaintance with his first son, whom he had not seen since the child was a baby.

Also in 1920 *The Emperor Jones* was produced. This production was notable for having an African-American lead, an innovation in American theater. This was done at O'Neill's insistence, and it opened the way for African-American actors in theater and musicals. This also marked the beginning of O'Neill's expressionist period. Expressionists are more concerned with inner realities than outer realities; actions and dialogue portray life the way one or more characters perceive it, which may be radically different from the way life really is. In 1922 another expressionist play, *The Hairy Ape*, was released.

By 1922 O'Neill was clearly living the life of a successful playwright. He wrote more and more daring, successful plays, including *Anna Christie*, which won his second Pulitzer Prize. In 1923 he wrote *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, a daring play about an interracial couple for whom love is insufficient for happiness. In 1924 he wrote *Desire under the Elms*, another powerful play that focused on passionate people who spiraled to their own destruction. He now had a large house and estate in Connecticut. Yet he was not at peace. Among other things, he needed quiet to work, while his wife wanted liveliness.

O'Neill's mother finally recovered from her addiction, but she died in 1922. After her death, Jamie O'Neill, Eugene's brother, returned to alcoholism and died in a sanatorium. Needing an escape, Eugene and his family moved to Bermuda, where his daughter, Oona, was born. The change proved insufficient to save the marriage, however. In 1927 O'Neill resumed his friendship with Carlotta Monterey, who would become his third and last wife in 1929. His literary productivity continued. In 1928 *Strange Interlude* won his third Pulitzer.

His last marriage proved his happiest. They first lived in France, where Carlotta protected his privacy and helped him find enough peace to enjoy the company of others. A brief stint with psychoanalysis also gave him a taste for Freudian psychology, which had played a role in the creation of the intensely psycho-

logical *Strange Interlude* (1927) and in the writing of *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931).

The O'Neills returned in 1931 to the United States, where Carlotta was even more protective than she had been in France. In 1932 he wrote his only full-length comedy, *Ab, Wilderness*. In 1934 he wrote *Days without End*, the last of his plays to be produced on Broadway during his lifetime. He suffered a nervous breakdown that required a six-month rest. One factor was a degenerative disease similar to Parkinson's, which made his hands shake. This made writing very difficult, since his creative process required handwriting. He produced no more plays for 12 years. In 1936 he received the Nobel Prize in literature. In 1937 the O'Neills moved to California, where they remained. In 1939 he wrote *The Iceman Cometh*, which was produced in 1946. In this period he finally came to terms with parts of his past and he wrote his most autobiographical plays, *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941) and *Moon for the Misbegotten* (1952). This marked his third and last literary period: a return to realism.

He and Carlotta separated a few times but always reunited. His relationships with his children were more strained. He estranged himself from Oona when she became an actress, then disowned her for marrying the elderly Charlie Chaplin when she was only 18. He and Oona never reconciled, and he never spoke her name again. He also disinherited his son Shane for becoming a heroin addict. Shane committed suicide in 1950. In 1951 his eldest son, Eugene, Jr., also committed suicide. His suicide note showed that he also succumbed to the family curse of alcoholism: "Never let it be said of O'Neill that he failed to finish a bottle" (*Eugene O'Neill*, a Steeplechase Films Production).

O'Neill himself died in 1953. Ironically, he died in a hotel room, as he had been born, and his last words lamented that fact: "Born in a hotel room—and goddamn it—died in a hotel room" (*Eugene O'Neill*, a Steeplechase Films Production). Despite his wishes, Carlotta made *A Long Day's Journey into Night* available to theaters in 1956, and she requested that it be published. The publishers at Random House already had the copy that O'Neill

had sent, but they refused to publish it early, in respect for the playwright's wishes. Carlotta then took it to Yale University Press, which published it immediately. It won O'Neill's fourth Pulitzer Prize and gave his fans an essential insight into the forces that shaped his genius. In all he wrote 62 plays, of which 45 were produced. He remains one of the most widely translated and produced playwrights in the world.

***The Emperor Jones* (1920)**

The debilitating effects of industrialism on humanity are starkly portrayed in this play about an African-American porter who escapes from prison, travels to a Caribbean island, and persuades the inhabitants to crown him emperor. In his inevitable fall from power, he confronts memories from his own past as well as the historical past.

In some ways *The Emperor Jones* is one of O'Neill's more dramatic plays. The play draws on events in Haitian history, though the playwright sacrificed historical accuracy for dramatic effectiveness. The work was so successful that long lines formed at the box office for the second night's production. Subscriptions to the Provincetown Theater, where it was produced, doubled. The production moved from off Broadway, where lesser plays are produced, to Broadway itself by the end of the year, then to major world capitals, including London, Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo. This success made O'Neill an internationally known playwright—the first American playwright to earn this kind of recognition.

Originally titled "The Silver Bullet," *The Emperor Jones* was O'Neill's first experiment with expressionism, a style that emphasizes internal realism over external realism. It inspired O'Neill to go further with expressionist techniques in many of his later plays, such as *The Hairy Ape*.

The Emperor Jones was groundbreaking in other ways. It was the first Broadway play to feature an African-American actor in the leading part. Previously African Americans had not been considered capable of major theatrical roles; African-American

characters were typically acted by white actors in stage makeup. O'Neill felt strongly that his character should be played by an African American, and Charles Gilpin became the first African-American actor to star in an all-white theater. Gilpin's powerful performance helped open doors for all African-American actors.

Brutus Jones is, as his name suggests, a brute: He was in prison for killing a man over a craps game. Yet he is also a victim. His strength and cleverness had few outlets in early 20th-century American society, and his only avenues to real power involved crime. As with many bullies, Jones might have channeled his strengths into more positive results if he had had the opportunity: Where society limits an individual's potential, the results can be devastating. One inspiration for the character was Adam Scott, a black bartender whom O'Neill admired in New London. Gelb and Gelb note that Scott's strength, bravado, superstitions, and influential personality were translated into Jones (203).

The play opens in Emperor Jones's throne room. Jones claims to be unconcerned about an impending revolt. He has convinced the Haitians he can only be killed by a silver bullet, and he already has escape plans and a substantial stock of cash. By scene 2, his plan is problematic. He begins to see "Little Formless Fears," or hallucinations. In scenes 3 and 4, he confronts the ghost of the man he killed as well as his fellow convicts and prison guards from the United States. In scene 5, the hallucinations become historical memories: He sees an auction block where slaves are bought and sold, and he is one of the slaves. The Auctioneer describes Jones as a "good field hand" (26). The technique of showing what Jones imagines he sees, rather than what actually exists, demonstrates both expressionism and psychological focus.

By scene 6 Jones has fired so many bullets at hallucinations that he has only one silver bullet left, symbolically the last vestige of his power. In scene 7, a Witch Doctor tells Jones he must be sacrificed to a ghost-crocodile. He spends his last bullet on the beast. By the final scene Jones is back where he started: His fear has caused him to run in a circle, and he is killed. *The Emperor Jones* shows the debilitating effects of

racism in the United States and other countries. Even Jones uses terms such as “ign’rent bush n-----s” (13) to describe the native people. As do many in power, he believes the less powerful are innately inferior, and O’Neill memorably demonstrates the danger as well as the inaccuracy of this view.

Smithers, a white man who had previously held a position of power on the island, is openly racist. On hearing that Jones will be overthrown, he crows, “Serves ’im right! Puttin’ on airs, the stinkin’ n-----!” (6–7). Despite Jones’s evident strength and intelligence, his confidence is easily shaken: When Smithers suggests that his rise to power resulted more from luck than from ability, Jones fears that this is true, even though Smithers himself is unable to deny that Jones did most of the “brainwork” (8) that put Smithers himself in power. Whereas Smithers was content with petty crimes, Jones had a larger vision, albeit a corrupt one. Jones also had the perception to see that larger crimes are likelier to be unpunished: “For de little stealin’ dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin’ dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o’ Fame when you croaks” (9). At the end he recognizes the evil of his ways, as when he calls out, “Oh, Lawd, pertect this sinner!” (30), but it is too late.

Thematically the play shows O’Neill’s attempt to “probe the collective consciousness of the black race” (Ranald 206). Inspired by his readings of C. G. Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst, O’Neill used Jones’s hallucinations to show the complexity of the psyche, including the collective unconscious. Thus Jones can reach back to events that he did not personally witness but that are still a part of his character, such as slavery and the early rituals of witch doctors. The white and black cultures are in opposition, and Jones must choose between the new gods and the old ones. The consequences, as the play demonstrates, can be dramatic.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the importance of hallucinations in showing Brutus Jones’s character. Compare and contrast these with dreams presented in James Thurber’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” or Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.
2. List examples of racist attitudes and language shown by Jones, Smithers, and at least three minor characters. How are these important in developing themes?
3. Discuss how the staging and special effects of this work contribute to characterization and theme. Compare and contrast with another work in which nonrealistic effects are used to communicate something about reality, such as O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” or Gabriel García-Márquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.”

The Hairy Ape (1922)

The brutally hard work of stoking coal furnaces on a steamer can reduce humans to the level of animals, but Yank finds the insult of an upper-class woman more painful than backbreaking work. His search for revenge can only lead to disaster.

The dehumanizing effects of modern society are graphically shown in *The Hairy Ape*, in which physical characteristics as well as internal traits demonstrate the effects of industrialism on human beings. This play is O’Neill’s first major venture into expressionism, extending the experiment he began with *The Emperor Jones*. It also represents greater experimentation with language, going beyond the slang he had used in earlier plays to include a dialect that reflected the exact way characters talked—including words hitherto considered too crude for the theater. O’Neill was greatly influenced by the works of the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, who believed that the internal realities of life were best expressed by moving away from the external realities. Expressionist artists such as Strindberg exaggerate certain features—scenery, events, and/or characters—in order to portray a more memorable, more emotional internal reality. These techniques are clearly seen in *The Hairy Ape*, where unrealistic descriptions and events offer important insights into reality itself.

The play is drawn from O’Neill’s experiences on the SS *New York*, which he described as “no place for a man who wanted to call his soul his own”

(qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 164). According to the stage directions, the title character (Yank) and other representatives of the lower classes have degenerated into a near-animal state: "*The men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the appearance of Neanderthal Man is guessed at. All are hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes.*" At the other extreme, the upper classes have degenerated into a pale, weak version of humanity: "*incongruous, artificial figures, inert and disharmonious, as if their lifeblood had been sapped*" (644).

The play is divided into eight scenes. In scene 1, Yank is immediately established as the leader of a group of firemen on a transatlantic steamer. O'Neill uses dialect to establish the men's low educational levels and the primitive way in which many of them communicate. When Yank cries that he is "tryin' to t'ink," his comment is almost laughable: He has little capacity for thought since he is rarely called upon to think. Emphasizing the irony, O'Neill shows him sometimes assuming the position of Rodin's statue *The Thinker*. "Drink, don't think!" the voices chant in a chorus (645). Drinking is the only escape from the harshness of life that some can find. The oldest fireman, Paddy, can remember the time of clipper ships, when the laborers at sea could still enjoy the beauty of nature, but that time has passed. Their work has divorced them from nature.

Scene 2 introduces the contrasting world of the wealthy. O'Neill's inspiration for this was his experience on the SS *New York*, a luxury liner. He found the attitudes of wealthy passengers to be worse than the job itself. On the promenade deck, the wealthy people in the play pass their time in idle conversation. Mildred claims she wants to help the poor, but her pretense at social conscience is shallow. Her wardrobe is white, symbolizing her colorlessness and artificiality. She wangles permission to visit the boiler room so she can "investigate how the other half lives" (649). In scene 3, she gets her wish. The sight of hairy, half-naked men bent over roaring furnaces and the sound of Yank's angry voice so horrify her that she faints, though not before crying out, "The filthy beast!" (651).

The gap between her and the workers is too large for her to bridge.

Yank's rage at being called a beast leads to taunts by the other firemen in scene 4. When Paddy suggests that Yank has fallen in love, Yank retorts, "Hate, dat's what. I've fallen in hate, get me?" (651). Long, the most politically inclined fireman, uses the exchange as an excuse to argue that workers must rise against capitalists, but few in the room have the mental capacity to understand his arguments: The Marxist notion that the workers will rise against the bourgeoisie is seen as unlikely at best.

Scene 5 takes place three weeks later, when Yank and Long are searching New York for their revenge. They pass through crowds that ignore them entirely until the end of the scene, when Yank punches an elderly gentleman. The gentleman does not react at all to the punch but is angry that Yank made him miss his bus, for which Yank is sent to prison in scene 6. The nonreaction to a vicious punch is another example of expressionism: Showing an elderly wealthy man unaffected by a punch makes clear that physical strength has little value in industrialized society; inconvenience has greater repercussions. For all Yank's strength he is powerless to harm Mildred or any of her class.

While in prison, Yank learns about the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a socialist group that fights against industrialists. Yank attempts to join the IWW in scene 7, but he cannot communicate his passion for the cause. When asked for his name, he answers, "Lemme tink," since it has been so long since he was called anything but Yank. This response demonstrates the way in which industrialism can dehumanize. Yank can only enunciate his desire to cause violence to industrialists, causing the IWW secretary to reject him as "too stupid" at best, a "rotten agent provocator" at worst (659).

In the final scene, realizing that he belongs nowhere, Yank finds himself in the monkey house of a zoo. He hopes that there, at least, he can belong. But Yank is a man, not an animal; he does not belong. He is killed by the ape he hoped might be a brother.

A recurring O'Neill theme is that people need to belong, but that industrial society has torn too

much of the social fabric for this to happen easily. Yank fits nowhere: He is rejected by other firemen, passers-by in New York, cellmates, the IWW, and an ape. As many moderns cannot, he cannot find meaning within his social role, but neither can he break out of it. His role, like the coal dust that surrounded him on the ship, is part of his being.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the worlds of Yank and Mildred. Discuss how their physical appearance offers insights into the worlds that formed them.
2. Find as many references to animals as possible, both in stage directions and in dialogue. Compare and contrast this animal imagery with that in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where animals are given human characteristics.
3. Compare and contrast the way that expressionism is seen in *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*. How do expressionist techniques aid in developing the themes in each play? How do O'Neill's applications of expressionist techniques differ from those of Strindberg?

***Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)**

The Mannon family is tormented by inappropriate romantic attachments as well as a historical legacy of past wrongs. Ezra, Christine, Orin, Lavinia, and Adam must choose between revenge and forgiveness. They must also decide whether to follow their hearts or social conventions. O'Neill's most complex and ambitious work, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a trilogy of three plays: *The Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The Haunted*. Unlike in other dramatic trilogies, each part of the larger work is really incomplete without the other two. This fact does not make production easy, since presenting all three plays unedited takes more than six hours. O'Neill's fondness for long plays increased with time, and theatergoers became accustomed to seeing the first part of an O'Neill play, taking a dinner break, then returning for the final act or acts. In creating these works, O'Neill drew inspiration

from ancient Greek tragedy as well as contemporary Freudian psychology. His intent was to create a modern psychological drama using a plot from Greek tragedy. He chose the *Oresteia*, also a trilogy of tragedies, as the model for *Mourning Becomes Electra*. To emphasize the parallels, the Mannon house is described as "of the Greek temple type" (454).

The first play of O'Neill's trilogy, *The Homecoming*, establishes the strange and complicated family relationships of the Mannons. The parallels with the *Oresteia* are particularly clear in the first play of Aeschylus's trilogy, entitled *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus wrote about the return of Agamemnon, king of Thebes, to a wife who wishes he had died in the Trojan War; since he did not, she plots to kill him. In O'Neill's trilogy, Ezra Mannon—very similar in sound to the name *Agamemnon*—is returning from the Civil War to a wife, Christine, who hates him, though for very different reasons than Clytemnestra hated Agamemnon. Agamemnon was responsible for the death of their daughter, for which Clytemnestra cannot forgive him. Brant, Christine's lover, is the parallel to Aegisthos, Clytemnestra's lover; Christine loves him because he is "not a hypocritical Mannon" (491). Both Clytemnestra and Christine kill their husbands when their lovers are unwilling to help, and their children discover that the emotional consequences of their parents' acts have a permanent effect on their lives.

An equally dark theme in both plays is the love that the daughters feel for their fathers and the hatred they feel for their mothers. Lavinia reveals her hatred for her mother when she quietly accuses Christine of having an affair and attempts to blackmail her mother into curtailing the illicit relationship. Angry at the daughter she never really loved, Christine flaunts Ezra's affection for her, then poisons him in the marital bed.

In each trilogy, the brothers are torn. Electra's brother, Orestes, is pulled two ways: He loves his mother but must avenge his father. Ezra's son Orin—similar in sound to the name *Orestes*—is also pulled, as he loves his mother overly much but also loves his sister, who causes the mother's suicide.

Additional twists in the Mannon family history are revealed in the first play: Adam Brant is actually Ezra's cousin, a Mannon who had been dispossessed over a squabble concerning Adam's mother, and his seduction of Christine was motivated by hate and revenge. As in his other plays, O'Neill suggests that the effects of parentage, environment, time, and chance are virtually inescapable. Each personal tragedy has clear roots in at least one of these factors, and the characters seem powerless to break free. Each character has moments that inspire sympathy, as when the normally cold and harsh Ezra tries to regain his wife's love, but each quickly returns to the original role.

An understanding of Freudian and Jungian psychology is very helpful to understanding both trilogies. Freud wrote about the Oedipus conflict and Oedipus complex, which describe the strong feelings that children have for the parent of the opposite sex; both terms are derived from the Oedipus trilogy, by Sophocles. According to Freud, sons unconsciously desire their mothers and see their fathers as competitors for that love. This explains the conflict that fathers and sons often experience: They are in competition for the same woman. In normal development the male child matures and transfers his affections to females of his own age, but if the Oedipus conflict is not resolved, it becomes a complex. The adult may not be able to leave the parent of the opposite sex, or he or she may be drawn only to adults who strongly resemble the parent. Freud used the term *Oedipus conflict/complex* for both genders, but Jung introduced the term *Electra complex* for a woman's inability to resolve her attraction to her father and her competition with her mother. In many ways Electra is the better representative of both genders: The tragic Oedipus did not know that the woman with whom he fell in love was his mother, nor that the man he killed was his father, since he had been raised by strangers, while Electra understood quite clearly that she loved her father and hated her mother. O'Neill protested when critics referred to his use of Freudian psychology, since he was more strongly influenced by Jung, but both schools influenced him.

The role of fate is established in the first play and continued throughout the second and third plays

of the trilogy. In the second play, *The Hunted*, the battle of affections focuses on Orin, who is back from war. Lavinia and Christine vie for Orin's affection and sympathy, but Orin loves his mother "better than anything in the world" (533), just as Christine loved her father. Orin refuses to believe that Christine poisoned Ezra until he is confronted by evidence of her affair, but even then his anger is focused on Brant, whom he kills. His hope is to go away with Christine, but upon learning of Brant's murder, she kills herself.

This play not only bears strong similarities to Aeschylus's second play, *The Libation Bearers*; it also recalls the Oedipus trilogy. In this parallel, Orin is Oedipus, who loved his mother, Jocasta. Christine is Jocasta, and Ezra is Laius, who is killed by her. Brant, who resembles Ezra, is also a Laius figure.

In the third play, *The Haunted*, the townspeople are convinced that the Mannon house is cursed. Here O'Neill returns to the notion that heredity and environment are inescapable: The sins of the parents are now visited upon the children, physically as well as emotionally. Lavinia and Orin now resemble their parents in appearance and dress. Neither is capable of a healthy relationship. Orin is now attracted to Lavinia; he comments, "You don't know how like Mother you've become, Vinnie" (579). He makes an indecent proposition but is repelled when she admits to having had a relationship with an island man—symbolic of her desire for paradise. Her chances with this man, Peter, are ruined when she accidentally calls him Adam (Brant). Orin kills himself, the only way he can resist fate, and Lavinia becomes a recluse in the old house. *The Haunted* bears only general similarities to the last play in Aeschylus's trilogy, *The Eumenides*, which centers on a court case in which gods debate the ethical issues, a premise not easily translated into an American post-Civil War setting, though some critics suggest that the parallel still exists: Ethical issues are argued, albeit not by gods, and revenge is shown to be destructive.

Though clearly influenced by Greek tragedy and Freudian psychology, the trilogy also focuses on issues that are more clearly American. Critics note that the word *Mannon* is also similar to *mammon*,

or worldly gain, and money has cursed this family. The family's strange pathologies can be traced back at least as far as David Mannon, Ezra's uncle, who married a beautiful Canadian woman, Marie Brantome, who was not of his class. This decision completely estranged him from his family. When David fell on hard times and needed help, Ezra chose financial profit over family responsibilities, a decision that ultimately led to Marie's death. Had the Mannons accepted the American notion of class mobility—or at least valued family over materialism—the tragic events would not have been set in motion.

Modern psychology, Greek tragedy, and American history combine to create powerful drama in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The plays add interesting changes in the Greek tragedies: Electra, not Orin, is the major figure, and drives, not gods, motivate actions. Throughout the plays the townspeople function as the Greek chorus, offering perspectives on the events and people portrayed, and these perspectives are very American. The plot was particularly daring for the period, as it included notions of incest and adultery as well as the more classic honor and revenge.

For Discussion or Writing

1. To what extent can the characters control their destinies, and to what extent are they victims of their past and their environment? Compare and contrast the role of fate in this play and in *Long Day's Journey into Night*.
2. Compare and contrast *Mourning Becomes Electra* with the *Oresteia*. Consider plot, character, and themes.
3. Discuss the importance of Freudian and Jungian psychology to the themes in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Explain how understanding this psychology contributes to understanding characters' motivations and actions.

The Iceman Cometh (1939)

The characters at Harry Hope's saloon are all failures in some way, but all have dreams that sustain

them. They are waiting for Hickey, a hardware salesman who goes to Harry Hope's saloon every year and treats everyone to drinks. This year is different: Instead of offering just a temporary escape, Hickey wants to help them achieve their dreams, with very unexpected consequences.

Though it is long on dialogue and short on action, the power of the play was such that it was recognized as one of O'Neill's finest. It would be the last play produced in his lifetime. As in many other plays, O'Neill observes the Aristotelian unities of time and place: All action takes place within a single place, in a single day. It also begins with extensive stage directions, including very precise physical descriptions for each character. For O'Neill this precision had a price: He saw his characters very clearly, but as a result he tended to be disappointed in the actors who took their roles—they were rarely exactly as he saw the characters in his imagination. The play is set in 1912, one of the saddest and most significant years in the playwright's life. Harry Hope's saloon is modeled on three bars that O'Neill frequented: Jimmy-the-Priest's, the Hell Hole, and the Taproom of the Garden Hotel—bars where the playwright himself dreamed of a happier future. O'Neill believed that dreams are essential to life, often the only things that keep humans "fighting, willing—living" (Gelb and Gelb 5).

Act 1 establishes the characters and their pipe dreams. The characters live for tomorrow, when they pretend they will take action to improve themselves. All depend on a pipe dream, the belief that tomorrow they will make something of themselves, to maintain their connection with each other as well as their belief in themselves. Most of the dreams concern a tomorrow that will never occur: Cora will never leave prostitution and marry. Others have illusions about today as well as tomorrow: Rocky imagines he is a manager rather than a pimp because he does not beat his employees, and he believes he will one day be successful. Still others have illusions about yesterday as well as tomorrow: Harry Hope imagines that his dead wife was a wonderful woman, and he believes he will have the confidence to go out into the world instead of hiding in his bar.

Larry, one of the central characters, claims he lost his pipe dream. He lost his belief in “the movement,” yet he still dreams, imagining that tomorrow he will pay his bar bill and lead a more respectable life. For Larry and Parritt the movement is the radical labor movement known as the International Workers of the World, or IWW. The same political organization appears in *The Hairy Ape*. The IWW sought to unionize workers to empower the working class to rise against the wealthy industrialists, but ultimately its dream was no more successful than Larry's. All eagerly await Theodore Hickman, known as Hickey. Hickey is popular not only for his generosity but for his sense of humor. When he finally arrives, however, he has changed. Instead of dreaming with them, he intends to show them “what real peace means” (611). Through him O'Neill describes the many do-gooders whose intentions backfire.

In act 2, Hickey goads the others into trying to achieve their dreams, but they are resistant. Rocky complains that “everybody's gettin' a prize grouch on,” though he claims that the “bums” do need to relinquish their pipe dreams (619). Hickey claims they will be happier when they can lose the “grandstand foolosopher bunk” (620), but dreams are the cement that holds the characters together, both individually and collectively. They are diminished without them. When Parritt is driven to admit that he turned in his mother to the legal authorities, he does not find peace; instead, he begins the spiral to his own destruction.

Act 3 shows the deterioration of the once-cohesive group as they begin to see the unreality of their dreams. Since Parritt's revelation in act 2, his bond is diminished with Larry, the other anarchist. Parritt reveals that his reason for betraying his mother was not political commitment but desire for the money, combined with jealousy that she loved the Cause better than she loved him. His honesty costs him Larry's friendship. As each dream disappears, sadness or loss follows. Cora realizes that she and Chuck are unlikely to make a happy married couple. Wetjoen has claimed to want a real job to earn his passage back to South Africa, but he must admit his past actions preclude his return. Finally,

Hickey admits that his wife did not just die, as he suggested in act 2; he killed her.

In act 4 Hickey explains that he murdered his wife because she always forgave him for his failings and she believed in him. Ironically, that left him with a guilt that became too oppressive to handle. He loved her and hated her at the same time. This drove him to kill her: He was saving her from his own unfaithfulness. His admission does not give him peace. Parritt's repeated begging for understanding also backfires. Larry believes that suicide is Parritt's only respectable escape, and ultimately he persuades Parritt of this.

What allows the others to resume their pipe dreams is Hickey's confession that he murdered his wife to give her peace: They grasp at the notion that he must be crazy, and therefore when Hope asks “with a groping eagerness” whether Hickey has become insane, they all grasp at this—including Hickey himself. If he is insane, they all have a reason to continue their pipe dreams, and then their attempts to set aside their dreams were ill-fated attempts to follow the bad advice of a crazy person. They can return to the happiness of their pipe dreams. Symbolically, the stage setting in this act is exactly as it was in act 1, representing the return.

The title of the play is taken from a bawdy joke that Hickey likes to tell about his wife: that she cheats on him with the iceman. Symbolically the title implies much more. Ice is suggestive of death: Corpses were once preserved in ice, and in the slang of O'Neill's time, *to ice* someone meant “to kill.” Larry makes this clear when he says, “Death was the Iceman Hickey called to his home” (667). Ice is also suggestive of inaction: To freeze means to cease action, and freezing preserves things exactly as they are. In a sense the characters are frozen in both ways: They are unable to change and escape their ruts, and they are likely to stay there until death.

Critics as well as theatergoers complained about the length of the play—it lasted somewhere between four and five hours—but O'Neill was adamant that he would not cut it. Lawrence Langer complained that O'Neill had made the same point 18 times in the play, but O'Neill retorted, “I intended it to

be repeated 18 times” (qtd. in Bogard 408–409). There are many repetitions in the play, but all are important. On the surface the redundancy is realistic, since drunks tend to repeat themselves. If we dig deeper, we see that the repetitions emphasize the patterns that the characters are unable to escape—the recurring excuses, poor choices, and dreams that make up their lives.

The names are symbolic. Harry Hope houses people who live their lives on futile hopes that nonetheless sustain them. Hugo Kalmar, the former political radical, represents Karl Marx: His last name is a condensation of those two words. The former policeman, McGloin, takes his name from the Tenderloin section of New York, where the police were particularly known for corruption. The greedy barman is Pioggi, a name very close to *pigg*y. Hickman is hick-man, one who innocently offered a very false salvation.

The critic Cyrus Day has pointed out the many parallels between the play and the Bible. He notes that Hickey, the would-be savior, has 12 disciples. They drink wine in a grouping that the stage directions suggest is like the Last Supper. One is a betrayer, like Judas: Parritt. The supposed savior, Hickey, will go to his death.

One of O’Neill’s strengths as a playwright is the ability to portray beauty in the darkest aspects of life. He believed that “vices are often nobler than . . . virtues, and nearly always closer to a revelation” (Gelb and Gelb 3). In this play, characters’ vices are the vehicle for important revelations about the human condition. O’Neill shows that dreams can be as important as accomplishments. Forcing people to face harsh realities is not always a kindness: It can be a cruelty that leads to psychic or physical death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the ways in which characters in *The Iceman Cometh* depend upon pipe dreams with the way characters in other dramatic or novelistic works do so. Examples might include Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* or F. SCOTT FITZGERALD’S *The Great Gatsby*.
2. Discuss how events in the past have influenced the present and future for Mary, Jamie, and Tyrone. To what extent are these influences inevitable? To what extent do the characters have more control than they imagine?
3. Compare and contrast the ways in which the characters deceive each other and themselves. Discuss how O’Neill uses symbols to clarify these deceptions.

Moon for the Misbegotten (1943)

A farmer and his queen-sized daughter are masters at comic deception, whether they are deceiving their landlord, a wealthy neighbor, or each other. Josie discovers that deception in the name of love can be a kindness for the deceived but a profound sacrifice for the deceiver. One of O’Neill’s more autobiographical plays, *Moon for the Misbegotten* is the playwright’s expression of love for his older brother, Jamie. The character Jim Tyrone is clearly Jamie O’Neill, Eugene’s older brother, and Josie is one of the women he loved.

The play is notable for its excellent balance of comedic and tragic elements. It was not immediately appreciated, partly because its three-dimensionality was not recognized and partly because its bawdy humor was more than audiences could handle at the time, but it was later praised as a masterpiece.

The play is set in the period after *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, and it picks up where that play left off. The action takes place within a 24-hour period, from noon until the dawn of the following day. Set in an impoverished New England farmhouse, the interactions between characters are comic in the first act but increasingly tragic in the following three acts.

One problem for theatrical producers was the character of Josie, who was particularly difficult to cast in the 1940s, when young actresses were expected to reflect conventional notions of female attractiveness, which excluded larger women. According to the stage directions, Josie is “so oversize for a woman that she is almost a freak—five feet eleven in her stockings and weighs around one hundred and eighty. Her sloping shoulders are broad, her chest deep with large, firm

breasts, her waist wide but slender by contrast with her hips and thighs . . . immensely strong . . . more powerful than any but an exceptionally strong man" (857). These descriptions are central to the play, because Josie is blessed and cursed by her own anatomy: It allows her to prevent her harsh father from controlling her, but it also radically reduces her chances for romantic love.

The irony is that Josie is delicate in spirit and romantic at heart. She has the strength to return sarcastic remarks as well as physical blows, but she lacks confidence in herself as a woman. She sees herself as an "ugly lump of a woman" (870), a "great ugly cow" (923). She is both tough and vulnerable, proud and ashamed of her strength at the same time. She pretends to be a coarse woman of loose morals when in fact she is a virgin.

Jim Tyrone is also a study in contrasts. He is a gregarious loner—one who loves the comradeship of a bar but must drink heavily to feel that he belongs. As Jamie does, he drinks to escape his guilt over his behavior after his mother's death. Like Josie, Jim is a lost soul who needs love but lacks hope. Like her, he is judged on externals—in his case, his drunkenness and wealth—that have little relation to the man inside. He pretends to be a shallow cosmopolite interested only in fun, while in truth he has a profound need for closeness and understanding. He is the only one who sees through Josie's facade—he knows she is really a virgin—and the only one who perceives her genuine beauty.

The father, Hogan, is five inches shorter than Josie but still powerful. A harsh man who is readier with a blow or an unkind word than with a kindness, he is slowly revealed as a person capable of love, though only with those he respects. Josie helps him partly because he is her father and partly because he is the only person who seems to care for her.

The play is a series of deceptions that move from the comic to the tragic. In act 1, Josie deceives her father to help her last brother, Mike, escape from the farmhouse. Mike is a self-righteous prig, but she loves him because she remembers the child that he

sive to him, and Josie is the only one who can stand up to the father, physically as well as emotionally.

Josie joins her father, Hogan, in deceiving the landlord into forgetting the rent, and they recount stories of times they deceived other farmers by selling them damaged livestock. The family's banter often has a hard edge, but it also shows the closeness they share: They are people who can express their affection only through insults. In the most comic section of the act, Hogan and Josie turn the tables on a wealthy neighbor, Harder, who has arrived to complain that their pigs are bathing in his ice pond: They berate him for endangering their livestock. (Hogan is based upon one of James O'Neill's tenants, who pulled precisely that deception. Harder is based not on O'Neill, Sr., but on a wealthy man of O'Neill's acquaintance.) Harder is such an unlikable character that the deception seems just.

The deceptions in act 2 are more complex. Through many convoluted arguments, Hogan finally convinces Josie that she should trick Jim Tyrone into marrying her. He claims that doing so is necessary to prevent Tyrone from selling their farm to Harder. Because Josie loves Jim—and because she believes Jim might sell their farm—she deceives herself into thinking that her deception would be fair.

Act 3 concentrates on the ways in which various characters deceive themselves. Jim reveals his understanding of Josie's self-deceptions about her character. He knows she is not a slut but a virgin with a tender heart. He reveals that he finds her beautiful and desirable, but he believes that he does not deserve her goodness. Jim suffers from the classic virgin/whore dichotomy: He cannot understand that women can be pure at heart yet have a sexual side. As a result, he cannot reach out to Josie as a potential mate, however much he needs to do so. He shares with her the guilt that has wracked his soul—his behavior after his mother's death, when he sought out a prostitute to escape the pain, just as Jamie O'Neill had. Like Jamie, he is unable to forgive himself. Jim reaches out to Josie for maternal comfort, but that need is complicated by another need: He also desires her as a woman. Each time

his sexual feelings for her arise, he represses them with self-loathing. Josie recognizes that his guilt is causing him to drink himself to death. Because she loves him, she gives him the material comfort he seems to need rather than staking a claim on the more mature romantic love that she needs.

Act 4 establishes that the play is more tragedy than comedy. Hogan reveals that he deceived Josie to give her a chance at happiness. His love for her is made clear. Josie hopes that Jim Tyrone will be able to find peace in death, as she realizes that he cannot find it in life. The challenge of this play is understanding the tragedy and psychological complexity that overlie the humor. This challenge also faces producers of the play, since the comic deceptions cannot take precedence over the psychological deceptions; nor can the romantic elements be over-emphasized, lest the play become the type of melodrama that O'Neill detested. Hogan is a tyrant and a cheat, but he loves his daughter. Jim is a drunkard with a penchant for self-destruction and an inability to reconcile the virgin/whore dichotomy, but he is a sensitive soul who understands Josie's beauty and delicacy and who is more generous to Hogan than Hogan deserves. The bawdy-mouthed Josie is a partner in her father's deceptions, but she chooses Jim's needs over her own, and she protects her brother Mike even as he insults her.

As Bogard observes, the play is "an act of love, supplying through its romantic fiction a blessing for a damned soul" (446). Hinden suggests that O'Neill may also have been seeking absolution through this romantic portrayal for his own abandonment of his alcoholic brother. Whatever the reason, the result is powerful theater.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss how Josie's appearance has shaped her life choices. To what extent has her appearance been an advantage, and to what extent has it harmed her? Compare and contrast her challenge with that of Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.
2. Compare and contrast the inner and outer strengths of each of these characters: Josie, Phil, Mike, Harder, and James.
3. Discuss the ways in which a character's sacrifice can work against his or her own happiness. What lessons does O'Neill mean for the audience to take away? Compare and contrast Josie's choice with that of Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Long Day's Journey into Night (1945)

Four members of an Irish-American family blame fate as well as each other for what went wrong in their lives, yet they love each other even as they trade emotional barbs. The Tyrones face the same challenges with which O'Neill grew up: His mother's drug addiction and depression, his older brother's alcoholism and wild life, the father's stinginess and regrets, and his own tuberculosis and ill-fated emulation of his brother.

The dedication to *Long Day's Journey into Night* provides an essential insight into the play as well as into the circumstances that created it. Writing to Carlotta, O'Neill's third wife, on the occasion of their 12th wedding anniversary, O'Neill describes the play as one of "old sorrow, written in tears and blood," meant as "a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones" (7). Through this play he forgives himself as well as his family for the wrongs that were done.

This is O'Neill's most autobiographical play. James Tyrone, simply called "Tyrone" in the play, is his father, James O'Neill. Jamie is Eugene's older brother, Jamie, and Edmund is Eugene himself. Mary Tyrone is his mother, Ella; Ella's given name was actually *Mary*. Recognizing the pain that this play could cause his family, O'Neill stipulated that it not be published or produced until 25 years after his death, though his wife chose to release it just three years later. It won a Pulitzer Prize, O'Neill's fourth, and it is counted among his most successful works.

The entire play takes place in a summerhouse much like the one where the O'Neills spent their

summers. O'Neill observes the classical unities of time and place, as presented in Aristotle's *Poetics*: The time span of the play consists of 24 hours, and the setting is a single place. The past, however, is always present: The dialogue makes clear that past events heavily color the present.

As the title suggests, the play involves a movement from light into darkness, both figuratively and literally. It begins in the morning and ends at night. The characters frequently retreat into denial, continually referring to dark memories that affect their present and cast clouds on their future.

Act 1 opens with a gesture of affection, as Tyrone walks with an arm around his wife and they exchange loving words. Yet there are undercurrents to suggest that something is not quite right. Mary loves him but is unhappy with him. Her inability to stop her hands from fluttering is symbolic: She is unable to control herself physically or emotionally. When Tyrone compliments Mary for having gained 20 pounds, it is clear that her health is an issue. It soon becomes clear she is a morphine addict: She would like to break the addiction but cannot do so. When she means to "take advantage of the sunshine before the fog comes back" (41), she cannot. Fog is a recurring motif, and it is also figurative and literal: Just as fog obscures people's ability to see far ahead, destructive practices obscure people's ability to understand and move ahead.

The other central conflicts and motifs of the play are also introduced here. Denial of personal responsibility for existing problems, refusal to move beyond the past, and escape into alcohol and narcotics are examples of the Tyrones' destructive behavior. Jamie blames his father's miserliness for the health problems faced by his mother and brother, since Tyrone hired only the cheapest doctors. Tyrone blames Jamie for weakening Edmund's health by introducing him to a life of dissipation. Jamie, Tyrone charges, is a "healthy hulk" (33) like him, while Edmund is delicate like his mother. Mary blames everyone but herself for her addiction: Tyrone for hiring the cut-rate doctor who prescribed the morphine; Edmund for causing the birth pains that necessitated drugs; Jamie for infecting their youngest brother, Eugene, with

his own childhood measles, thereby causing the baby's death and increasing the mother's depression. While each family member argues against the accusations, each nonetheless accepts the guilt. Act 2 begins at lunchtime. Throughout the play, characters use the excuse of drinking or drugs to say things they would not say when sober. Mary alternately berates her family and finds excuses for their failings, aiding in the pattern of denial: Whiskey can be useful in generating an appetite when someone is ill, an impoverished childhood can lead to difficulty in spending money later in life, and so on. Though she knows it is "inconsiderate . . . to bring up the past" (67), she cannot help it any more than the others can. This is a recurring theme: The past indelibly marks the present. As in *The Iceman Cometh*, it is essential to have faith in something, religious or otherwise. Mary regrets the loss of the happiness she felt in her convent days, when she had faith. For Tyrone his sons' rejection of Catholicism put them on the path of destruction. He believes that if Mary had more faith in God and the church, she would have the strength to fight her addiction.

The loneliness that has plagued Mary's married life is emphasized in act 3. Mary cannot bear to be alone, and she keeps Cathleen, the maid, with her by plying the girl with whiskey. Ironically Mary is still alone, since each character discusses very separate personal concerns. Mary speaks eloquently of the rheumatism in her crippled hands, the loneliness of being an actor's wife, the loss of her girlhood faith, the alcoholism of the men in the family, and her inability to protect Eugene from death. Inability to handle more pain is her excuse for the morphine. When Edmund tries to tell her about his tuberculosis, she angrily hushes him, denying the problem.

The dialogue makes clear that the playwright has reached an understanding of his own mother's tragedy. While he does not excuse her addiction or her denial of her sons' problems, he understands them: Sometimes an individual's pain is too great for the person to reach out to others for help. When Mary retreats to her room at the end of the act, supposedly to rest, the others know that she is going to use drugs, and they know they cannot stop her. Sometimes it is simply futile to offer help.

The love that Tyrone feels for Mary is particularly evident in this act. When she recalls the time that they first fell in love, Tyrone must blink back tears. When he tells her that he will love her “always and forever” (112), it is clearly true.

Act 4 focuses on the loneliness of the male Tyrones. Near midnight Tyrone is already drunk. He laments to Edmund that he is still affected by his impoverished childhood, when he was deserted by his father. His resulting miserliness has hurt him as well as his family. Though he is a great melodrama star—a matinee idol—this was never his dream. He once had a chance to fulfill his dreams, since even the great Edwin Booth commented on his great talent for Shakespeare, but he chose the “big monemymaker” (150) instead. Here O’Neill expresses his understanding of his own father’s tragedy at being typecast in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Tyrone is embarrassed by his work and angry at himself for abandoning his dream in order to ensure a dependable income. He is hurt that his wife speaks of her convent childhood as the happiest time in her life. Though he denies it, his wife is equally tormented by wasted talent: She was recognized as a brilliant pianist. Tyrone knows he is at least partly to blame for his own loneliness. Thus, he drinks heavily, though, as with O’Neill, Sr., his constitution could handle large quantities of alcohol, and he never misses performances.

Next Edmund talks about his own loneliness, sense of meaninglessness, and need to escape from his own pain, all of which correspond to O’Neill’s own experiences. When he says, “The fog was where I wanted to be” (131), he is talking about more than his walk outside. While he was at sea, he felt a sense of peace he was unable to find at home: “I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life” (153). At home, he feels the fog—the loneliness and lack of clarity—and he is “always a stranger who never feels at home” (153). He fears what tuberculosis will entail, and he suspects that Tyrone means to pay for only the cheapest care. His suspicions are correct, though by the end of the act, Tyrone has agreed to send him to a private facility. Edmund blames his

father for Mary’s inability to break her addiction, while he recognizes that both Jamie and Tyrone blame him for it. When Jamie enters, he is equally drunk and equally inclined to talk about personal regrets. He describes his evening with Fat Violet, a prostitute who was about to be dismissed because of her weight. She is similar to Josie in *Moon for the Misbegotten*, though much less developed as a character. Feeling sorry for Violet, Jamie hired her for the evening and made her feel loved and appreciated.

Speaking more freely as a result of the alcohol, Jamie reveals that he cannot forgive their mother for her addiction. Her inability to break her habit gives him little optimism of recovering from his own alcoholism. He fears that Edmund, his closest friend, will die in the sanatorium. He confesses that he led Edmund into bad habits, such as drinking alcohol and patronizing whores. In part he acted from jealousy, since he failed to develop his own talents, and in part he acted from anger that Edmund’s birth had begun Mary’s addiction, though he knew that the latter was not Edmund’s fault.

Even more than in the first three acts, the characters bare their souls, but they also bare their teeth. They love each other, but they are well skilled in hurting each other and better skilled at hurting themselves.

At the climax, Mary enters, wearing a blue dressing gown. The gown is symbolic: The blue represents goodness while the nightgown represents the precedence of dream over reality. Mary has taken so much of the drug that she does not know where she is. She imagines she is still a convent student, dreaming of being a nun, though she carries her wedding dress. Her hopelessness and sadness are summed up in the last line, when she remembers one spot of happiness in her life: when she fell in love with Tyrone and was “so happy for a time” (176). Earlier in the act Tyrone said, “My name is Might-Have-Been” (168); clearly he spoke for them all. In creating his characters, O’Neill recognized his own failures—his own might-have-beens—as well as his family’s, and the play provides beautiful absolution for all.

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, or any other full-length literary work in which guilt plays an important role in motivating action.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alexander, Doris. *Eugene O'Neill's Last Plays: Separating Art from Autobiography*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Black, Stephen A. *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Eugene O'Neill: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
- Bogard, Travis. *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Day, Cyrus. "The Iceman and the Bridegroom." *Modern Drama* 1 (1958): 3–9.
- Dugan, Lawrence. "O'Neill and the Wobblies: The IWW as a Model for Failure in *The Iceman Cometh*." *Comparative Drama* 36, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2002): 109–124.
- eO'Neill.com: An Electronic Eugene O'Neill Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.eoneill.com>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Eugene O'Neill*. A Steeplechase Films Production for American Experience, 2006. WGBH Educational Foundation and Steeplechase Films, Inc. Transcript. Available online. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/oneill/filmmore/pt.html>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Floyd, Virginia. *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: A New Assessment*. New York: Ungar, 1985.
- Frenz, Horst. *Eugene O'Neill*. Translated by Helen Sebba. New York: Ungar, 1971.
- , ed. *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964.
- Gassner, John. *Eugene O'Neill*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
- Gelb, Arthur, and Barbara Gelb. *O'Neill*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.
- Hinden, Michael. "O'Neill and Jamie: A Survivor's Tale." *Comparative Drama* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 435–445.
- Houchin, John H., ed. *The Critical Response to Eugene O'Neill*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1993.
- Johnson, Janice. "A Long Dark Journey into Light." *Humanities* 27, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 38–41. Available online. URL: <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2006-03/darkjourney.html>. Accessed July 7, 2009.
- Krasner, David. "Whose Role Is It Anyway? Charles Gilpin and the Harlem Renaissance." *African American Review* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 483–496.
- Manheim, Michael, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- O'Neill, Eugene. *The Emperor Jones. Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- . *The Hairy Ape. A Treasury of the Theater: From Henrik Ibsen to Robert Lowell*. Edited by John Gassner and Berhard F. Dukore. 4th ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970.
- . *The Iceman Cometh: O'Neill: Complete Plays 1932–1943*. Edited by Travis Bogard. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988.
- . *Moon for the Misbegotten: O'Neill: Complete Plays 1932–1943*. Edited by Travis Bogard. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988.
- . *Mourning Becomes Electra: Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Ranald, Margaret Loftus. *The Eugene O'Neill Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984.
- Sheaffer, Louis. *O'Neill, Son and Artist*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1973.
- . *O'Neill, Son and Playwright*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1968.
- Siebold, Thomas, ed. *Readings on Eugene O'Neill*. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998.
- Tornqvist, Egil. *A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Super-naturalist Technique*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1969.
- . *Eugene O'Neill: A Playwright's Theater*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004.

Terry Mackey



KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

(1890–1980)

I am a passenger on that ship.

(*Ship of Fools*)

Katherine Anne Porter was notoriously secretive and mysterious about the details of her life. For instance, for much of her life she gave a false birth year. In fact, she was born on May 15, 1890, in Indian Creek, Texas, the fourth of five children. Her mother and father were Harrison and Mary Alice Jones Porter, and she claimed that Daniel Boone was her ancestor. As a child she was named *Callie Russell Porter*, only changing her name when she began to write. Her mother died in 1892, when Callie was very young; the children went to Harrison's mother, Catherine Ann Porter, in Kyle, Texas, to be reared. At age six Callie wrote and illustrated a "nobble" in crayon titled *The Hermit of Halifax Cave* and was upset when her grandmother and the neighbors laughed at it. The grandmother died in 1901, leaving the family to move to San Antonio. During this time Callie had free access to many books and read widely from such authors as Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. She and her sisters attended convent schools, although the family was Methodist. (She converted to Catholicism in 1910.)

In 1906 at age 16, Porter eloped with John Henry Koontz. In some accounts the marriage lasted only until she was 19, but they did not divorce until nine years after they married. After she left him, she supported herself with a variety of interesting jobs, including newspaper work at papers in Fort Worth and Denver, movie work in

Chicago, and ghostwriting in New York City. She had a bout of tuberculosis and spent some time in a sanatorium in 1915, and she contracted influenza in October 1918. Near death, she recovered and used her experience as the basis for the story "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," written many years later. Both of these illnesses made her keenly aware of the need to be serious about her purpose in life: Her chosen profession was art, specifically writing. She became preoccupied with the idea of death, partly because a favorite niece died shortly after Porter's own near-death experience.

In 1920 she made her first visit to Mexico. She spent the next several years there, on and off, studying art while also writing. She published "María Concepción" in *Century* magazine in 1922. During her time in Mexico she came face to face with the Obregón revolution, the first of five Mexican revolutions she witnessed. This was the culmination of violent insurrections that had begun in 1910; Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and various landowners joined the wealthy reformer Francisco Indalecio Madero to overthrow the longtime ruler Porfirio Díaz. This was an exciting time for Porter, who thought she could make a difference in the world in a significant way. She spent her time with artists and intellectuals and showed a decided interest in Mexican politics, analyzing events for Mexican and American newspapers. Her affiliation with communist ideals would continue for some time,

but eventually she recognized that artistic expression was being squelched in favor of mainline party rhetoric, and she broke off her relation to communism. It is unclear whether she was actually a member of the Communist Party; if so, it was probably only for a brief period during her stay in Mexico. In 1925 her story "Rope" was published in *American Caravan*. This work was based on a relationship with an Englishman named Ernest Stock. (There are conflicting reports as to whether she actually married him or not.) During this period she also had experiences that later resulted in episodes in "Flowering Judas" and *Ship of Fools*.

In the mid- and late 1920s she was a book reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New Republic*, and the *Nation*. She worked at length on a biography of Cotton Mather that was never completed or published, although she would continue to work on it for many years to come. Meanwhile, the story "He" appeared in *New Masses* in 1927, and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" was published in *transition* in 1929. Politically she was involved in protesting the Sacco-Vanzetti case, in which two anarchists had been sentenced to death. She later claimed that this affair was "one of the important turning points in the history of this country" (quoted in Unrue 109). In August 1927 she marched in the picket lines and was arrested several times, all to no avail—the anarchists were put to death. At this point Porter began to have serious doubts about the value of organized political movements. A major literary break occurred for her in 1930 with the publication of "Flowering Judas" in *Hound and Horn*. From that point on critics regarded her work as serious literature, and although she did not publish a great volume of literary work, each piece she produced received close attention. She eventually became a member of the literary intelligentsia, associating with such figures as Allen Tate, Delmore Schwartz, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, WILLIAM FAULKNER, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, SHERWOOD ANDERSON, Edmund Wilson, Christopher Isherwood, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNiece, Robert Lowell, Lincoln Kirstein, Gilbert Seldes,

Yvor Winters, Mark and Carl Van Doren, and Diego Rivera.

In 1930 a collection of stories, *Flowering Judas*, was published. (It was expanded in 1935.) She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1931, writing in Mexico and Europe. She had a falling out with the poet HART CRANE, also in Mexico on a Guggenheim, where he was her housemate and neighbor. They had been fairly close friends, despite her distaste for his flagrant homosexuality. Both of them had a bit of a diva streak, however, and when they finally blew up at each other, over a misunderstood time for a dinner appointment, each held a grudge. Her trip from Mexico to Europe provided her with much of the material for *Ship of Fools*, and some critics claim that the scene in which a man dies after jumping overboard was inspired by Crane's suicide by jumping from an ocean liner in 1932. In Europe she lived in Berlin, Paris, and Basel and met many political figures, including Hermann Göring. (She never met Hitler, though she later claimed she had.) Her personal life in the 1930s included marriages with Eugene Pressley in 1933 and Albert Russell Erskine in 1938. After marrying Erskine, she lived primarily in Louisiana. They separated in 1940 and divorced in 1942. In 1933 she collected and translated songs for *Katherine Anne Porter's French Song Book*. She won a Book-of-the-Month-Club award in 1937, and her collection of three novellas *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* appeared in 1939. This book includes "Old Mortality," "Noon Wine," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." A fourth short novel, "Promised Land" (later called "No Safe Harbor") was to have been included, but it was not finished; this novella became her life work, *Ship of Fools*, weighing in at 500 pages and taking more than 20 years to complete. She liked to point out that she did not work on it "full time," as she was obliged to earn a living. Rather, she wrote on it when she could get a few minutes here and there. At any rate, it was not published until 1962.

In the 1940s Porter worked briefly as a scriptwriter in Hollywood and lived in California. World War II affected her politics, and at this time she turned against communism, becoming a political

moderate. Her interests turned to teaching writing and practicing literary criticism, and she taught at Stanford in 1948–49 and at the University of Michigan in 1953–54, among several other schools. During this period she published *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944) and won several honors, including the first annual Gold Medal for Literature from the Societies of Libraries of New York (1940) and election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1943). She translated *The Itching Parrot* by Fernández de Lizárdi in 1942.

In 1952 her collection of essays *The Days Before* appeared, and she continued to receive awards and grants throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including election as vice president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1950–52), an Emerson-Thoreau Award from the Academy of Arts and Sciences (1952), a Fulbright Lectureship at the University of Liège (1954), a Ford Foundation Grant (1960–62), the National Book Award for fiction (1966), and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1966). *Ship of Fools* finally appeared in 1962 to mixed reviews. It concerns an Atlantic crossing in August 1931, in the years before World War II, and in addition to presenting the intricately intertwined relationships of some five dozen main characters, not counting the “eight hundred and seventy-six souls in steerage” (SFxii), it implies hints of impending political doom. By 1962 critics considered the material “stale,” but commercially the book was a great success, and in 1965 a Hollywood movie appeared starring a large cast, including Vivien Leigh in her last film role, Oskar Werner, Simone Signoret, Lee Marvin, Jose Ferrer, George Segal, and Elizabeth Ashley. Porter earned quite a bit of money from the film, and she became more of a household name than she had ever been. In 1965 riding this new wave of publicity, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* appeared to great acclaim. Her National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize were for this book.

In the 1960s and 1970s Porter lived largely in Washington, D.C. She published *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* in 1970. The *Never-Ending Wrong*, a memoir of the Sacco-Vanzetti case, was published in 1977. In 1976 she experienced a series of strokes

that left her bedridden; her health continued to deteriorate through the late 1970s. Mentally she became cranky and suspicious, turning on her friends. For instance, she became convinced that Malcolm Cowley was plotting to publish her letters to him without her permission. She died at age 90 on September 18, 1980, and her ashes are buried beside her mother's grave in Indian Creek, Texas.

Of course many of Porter's stories are based on episodes from her life. Nevertheless, her point always is to delineate a particular character or characters in relation to a universal theme. The “Miranda” stories depict a recurring character at different ages who is supposed to represent the young Porter, and various other stories center on her grandmother's farm or her life in Mexico. However, her primary interest is in psychological analysis, and a specific understanding of the particular events of her life is not necessary to an understanding of what she was aiming for in these stories. In general, her style is compressed, economical, and forthright. Her characters use everyday language, yet the overall effect is of brilliant subtlety and control. Descriptions can be elaborate, displaying a close attention to detail. Her sensitivity to language, particularly in dialogue, is precise yet unpretentious. Much of her work is funny, and characterization is her forte. Her major themes include the relation of past to present in the mind, cultural displacement, the death of love, the idea of a fate that dooms one to suffering and disappointment, the nature of reality, and courage in the face of fear and failure, all of which demonstrate modernist concerns. Katherine Anne Porter is considered a major figure in American letters, despite her relatively small output.

“The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1929)

“The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” first appeared in the magazine *transition* in 1929 and is collected in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. It is a masterpiece of shifting point of view, not so much among characters as among different times within a single character's consciousness. Alternating between limited omniscient narration and stream

of consciousness in Granny Weatherall's thinking, Porter employs flashbacks to make the reader piece together who Granny Weatherall is.

Once the reader distinguishes between present events and Granny Weatherall's wandering memories, the plot is fairly simple. Granny is sick, and the doctor has arrived. She thinks he is a whipper-snapper and wants to give him a piece of her mind. She does, here at the beginning and again later. At first he reacts, but later, although *we* hear her diatribes, it is clear from his and the nurse's reactions that they do not. She addresses people in the room, people who are long dead, and herself, both her present self and an earlier version. Eventually we can surmise that the children and the priest have arrived. Granny is worse off than she has realized. Much of the plot concerns flashbacks to the time when she was left at the altar by George. She seems to have married anyway—"I want him to know I had my husband just the same and my children and my house like any other woman" (Porter, *Flowering Judas* 131)—married the man who caught her when she swooned at the wedding after George failed to appear. It is telling that she wants her children to find George and explain that she has forgotten him. (She has not.) Many of her memories concern the everyday things she did to take care of the house and the children and above all the things she did to be prepared. She does not like surprises, but there is one last one for her at the end of the story—a surprise left to the reader to figure out. Granny has been jilted at the altar again, a second time, at the very end of her life.

Porter's technique is very modernist (dense, cryptic, compact), leaving a lot of work for the reader to do. For instance, near the end of the story Granny snaps at the priest, who is tickling her feet and murmuring in Latin (*FJ* 134). It is left to the reader to infer that he is performing last rites. Throughout the story the pillow rises and floats; it is up to the reader to understand that Granny's head is sinking deeper and deeper into it. Even with sensations like the doctor's whispering, Granny cannot decide whether leaves are rustling or newspapers are swishing or what. She concludes that her daughter and the doctor are whispering loudly

into her ear, even as she recognizes that what they are saying is not meant to be heard by her. Clearly we cannot trust Granny to analyze correctly what is going on, and much of the humor in the story results from her unawareness of the gravity of her situation. She says to the doctor, "Ah, I'll never be young again—but I'd be happy if they'd let me lie in peace and get rested" (*FJ* 130), never realizing that "Rest in Peace" is exactly what she'll do at the end of the story. The end, however, will not be all that peaceful for her.

Despite the novelty of the stream-of-consciousness technique, the point here for Porter always seems to be characterization. We get a real sense of who Ellen Weatherall is and how she got to be that way. (Of course, the symbol of her last name is not to be missed.) In imagining seeing her husband again, a husband who has preceded her in death by some years, she thinks:

Why, he couldn't possibly recognize her. She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That changed a woman. John would be looking for a young woman with the peaked Spanish comb in her hair and the painted fan. Digging post holes changed a woman. (*FJ* 126)

Her repetition of "changed a woman" sounds as though she is either trying to convince herself that she *has* changed or trying to reason out *why* she has changed. Her incessant worrying about the future indicates that she does not want to be caught off guard by sudden change. It is ironic that she has spent 20 years thinking ahead and preparing for her death yet only recognizes late in the story that it is actually happening to her now. "Granny closed two fingers around Jimmy's thumb. Beads wouldn't do, it must be something alive" (*FJ* 135). That religion cannot help her foreshadows the betrayal at the end of the story.

Porter's command of voice and her use of juxtaposition help make this story a resounding success. The tight pattern of recurring descriptive symbols (such as Cornelia's voice described as a tilting cart

[*FJ* 134, 136]) and repetitive phrases like “my time has come” (*FJ* 131, 133) lead the reader to the true sequence of events in the work. More than that, however, they provide clues to Granny Weatherall's psyche and give us a view of her take on death, a surprise that no one wants to admit is about to occur. Granny meets death as she has met life, with hard work, a chip on her shoulder, and a sense of entitlement—God owes her; her entire life has been spent putting the pieces together after the first jilting, and it is a shattering image, for her and for the reader, when God fails to appear.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What happens at the end of this story? Trace the light/flame imagery throughout. Why does Granny Weatherall blow out the light in the last sentence? What does her action mean?
2. Name Granny's children. Why is there no name-sake for her husband, John? What has happened to Hapsy? (How do you know?)
3. Have a look at the tenses in the story. Note instances of past perfect, usually indicating flashbacks. Can you identify the order of her flashbacks? Trace the “real” time of the present events, realizing that Granny is not a reliable narrator here. Also check to see where the idea of “tomorrow” is mentioned. What can you infer from these instances?
4. How is Granny Weatherall jilted twice? Explain the last paragraph in light of the allusion to Christ's parable of the bridegroom. (See Matthew 25:1–13.) What bridegroom is missing here?
5. Compare and contrast this work with Flannery O'Connor's story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Discuss the grandmothers in both works (especially their relations with the families and their deaths). Which work has a more positive ending? Why?

“Flowering Judas” (1930)

“Flowering Judas” was a pivotal story in Porter's career because it first made critics notice her as a

serious literary figure. It first appeared in *Hound and Horn* in 1930 and is collected in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. The story is a tightly written account of incidents in the life of a young American expatriate during the Obregón revolution in Mexico. There is speculation that Laura, like the Miranda character in many of Porter's stories, is a stand-in for the author herself, but Porter insisted that Laura was based on a friend and was an amalgamation of several acquaintances.

Laura has several potential lovers: the young captain she goes riding with, the shock-haired boy who sings to her at her window and to whom she makes the mistake of tossing a rose, and Braggioni, a bigwig in the revolution. When we first see her, she is painfully enduring Braggioni's advances—he is serenading her with a guitar, and she is disgusted by him. He is described as a “gluttonous bulk” (Porter, *Flowering Judas* 141) “heaped” on a chair (*FJ* 139) “flaunting a yellow silk handkerchief” doused with Jockey Club cologne (*FJ* 144). She fancies herself a revolutionary, and we later find that she is tolerating Braggioni because he is an influential figure in the cause. Her motivations are unclear to him, and he imagines that she must be working so hard for the revolution because she has a lover involved in it, but she denies this notion.

The story displays masterful descriptive characterization, especially in depicting Laura. Porter is descriptive but selective here: To piece together what is going on and how Laura feels, the reader must pay close attention to small clues. One big clue is the symbol of the Judas tree in her yard. Legend has it that Judas became a redbud tree after betraying Christ, and it is easy to see how Laura feels she has betrayed Eugenio, who has been languishing in prison, waiting for Braggioni to do him the favor of getting him released. Laura has given him the pills he ultimately uses to commit suicide. When he appears as a Christ figure in her dream and calls her “Murderer! . . . and Cannibal!” (*FJ* 160), her trademark “No!” has new and dramatic meaning. Throughout the story she has been reluctant to commit herself to love, even seeming to be incapable of feeling any fondness for her little students. She keeps repeating, “No. No. No” (*FJ*

151) to amorous advances. By the end of the story, however, she shows some feeling and observes, “It is monstrous to confuse love with revolution, night with day, life with death—ah, Eugenio!” (*FJ* 159). She has been dead to life and love, and now because of her dream of Eugenio, she wakes up, “afraid to sleep again” (*FJ* 160). The implication is that she might finally learn to love, accepting the sacrament of the “warm bleeding flowers”—but she still cries “No!”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain the “cruelty,” “vanity,” and “vast cureless wound of [Braggioni’s] self-esteem.” Who killed Eugenio, and why? Explain the title “Flowering Judas.” What has Laura known all along that Braggioni is going to ask of her?
2. Comment on the implication of Braggioni’s “tenderness,” “amplitude,” “eternal charity,” and “excess” of self-love. What does his name suggest?
3. How would Laura’s possible gift of a “box of colored crayons” be appropriate for the young captain’s declaration of love?
4. Explain the reason for Laura’s stoicism and her “negation of all external events.” How is her mantra of “No” appropriate or inappropriate?
5. Compare and contrast this work with Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Good Country People.” Discuss similarities or differences between the heroines, the tones of the works, the uses of religious imagery, and the final situations of the central characters.

“Noon Wine” (1937)

Published in 1937 in *Story* magazine and also brought out that year as a separate book in limited publication, “Noon Wine” is the middle novella in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Its setting is a “Small South Texas Farm,” and it covers the years 1896–1905 (Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* 93). A farmer and his family have trouble making ends meet until a stranger appears. The stranger not only whips the farm into shape but stays on as a worker for many

years. When a bounty hunter appears and demands that the farmer turn the worker over to him, the farmer defends the worker with tragic results.

The first sentence immediately introduces three central characters: “The two grubby small boys with tow-colored hair who were digging among the ragweed in the front yard sat back on their heels and said, ‘Hello,’ when the tall bony man with straw-colored hair turned in at their gate” (*PHPR* 93). As is usual with Porter, even the smallest detail gives a wealth of information. That the boys are digging is a central point—they are real pests, always into things, and their curiosity and lack of self-control eventually set a key factor in the plot into play. The taciturn stranger will also set into motion the chain of events that results in the story’s shocking ending. We already get a sense that the farm is somewhat rundown, with ragweed allowed to thrive in the front yard. The stranger will change all that.

The two boys are Arthur and Herbert, sons of the dairy farmer Mr. Thompson and his sickly wife, Ellie. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson have different ideas as to discipline for the boys, with the result that the boys are basically uncontrolled. Mrs. Thompson is particularly indulgent, but at the same time she feels guilty for being so. She makes excuses for the boys and often takes the path of least resistance when faced with a conflict between them and her husband. For instance, she says the fastest possible dinnertime blessing, rather than enforcing the rule of waiting until the prayer is over to reach for the food.

Mrs. Thompson clasped her hands, bowed her head and said aloud hastily, “Lord, for all these and Thy other blessings we thank Thee in Jesus’ name, amen,” trying to finish before Herbert’s rusty little paw reached the nearest dish. Otherwise she would be duty-bound to send him away from the table, and growing children need their meals. Mr. Thompson and Arthur always waited, but Herbert, aged six, was too young to take training yet. (*PHPR* 108)

Of course six is not “too young to take training.” At the same time that she makes an excuse for

Herbert in her mind, she feels guilt about the situation. She knows that if she does not outpace him with the prayer, there will be consequences and she will have to be the one to enforce them. That she includes Mr. Thompson in her mental description of what happens seems to indicate that she is feeling guilty or responsible to someone besides him for her family's potential bad behavior—perhaps toward the God she is so hastily thanking. Her shame eventually finds as its object the mysterious stranger who has arrived in the first sentence.

Mr. Helton, the stranger, is a cryptic, silent Swede who seems stubborn and has the one passion of his treasured harmonicas. He becomes their hired hand. In actuality he is a very hard worker and turns the farm around fiscally, suggesting improvements and doing all sorts of chores that Mr. Thompson eschews as “women's work.” Mrs. Thompson has not wanted him there at first, jumping to the conclusion that he will be lazy or cause her trouble, but she soon recognizes that he has made her life easier. She feels even guiltier when the boys pester him or get on his nerves. In one alarming incident, she observes him shaking Arthur and concludes that the boys must have done something to deserve it. Although she is unnerved by his taking disciplinary action as his responsibility, she gives him the benefit of the doubt until she hears the full story. (This is a new development. Throughout the story people jump to conclusions about character that sometimes prove to be false and sometimes prove to be true. Mr. Thompson will have a “gut instinct” about another stranger at the end of the story that will be correct.) It turns out that the boys had played with and ruined Mr. Helton's precious harmonicas. Mrs. Thompson, trying to make small talk when she first met him, had recognized this as a possibility and warned him to keep them up on a shelf, out of harm's way. She fully understands his anger and is unnerved only by the sudden violence and total silence of the scene. This is the only hint we get that Mr. Helton may have had a violent past.

The point of view in the story shifts back and forth from Mrs. Thompson to Mr. Thompson, and it is somewhat of a surprise when Mr. Thompson

becomes the dominant voice. Nine years pass, and the boys grow up to be decent young men (one gets the impression that this happens through Mr. Helton's influence and no thanks to their parents' lenience). Then one day, another stranger, Mr. Homer T. Hatch, appears, nosing around for information about the Swede. Mr. Thompson is immediately suspicious of him, and they have a long conversation before Mr. Hatch gets to the point. He is trying to collect a bounty for Mr. Helton, who he claims “jus' went loony one day in the hayfield and shoved a pitchfork right square through his brother” (*PHPR* 144). It turns out that the brother had also borrowed and lost a sacred harmonica. Mr. Thompson is immediately on his guard and wants to defend Mr. Helton, and events quickly escalate—we see some real action for the first time in the slow-paced farm life. Mr. Helton appears; Mr. Hatch charges at him; Mr. Thompson, thinking the Swede has been fatally wounded, crashes an ax down on Mr. Hatch's head, killing him. The tragedy is that Mr. Helton has not been murdered. The posse sent for him kills him as they try to take him into custody. The remainder of the story deals with Mr. and Mrs. Thompson's psychological responses to this jarring event. Although Mr. Thompson has been acquitted with a self-defense plea, he experiences terrific guilt and feels the need to make the rounds to the neighbors, telling his side of the story. It is clear that most of them either do not believe him or just do not care. Mrs. Thompson is required to tell the white lie that “she saw and heard it all” (*PHPR* 165)—when, in reality, she had walked around the corner a split second after the incident.

Mr. Thompson's shocking suicide at the end of the story is the culmination of a confusing series of events. As with much of Porter's writing, the beauty of this story lies in its descriptive detail and psychological portraiture. Recognizing the shift in point of view is essential to a full understanding of the story's meaning: Different participants perceive different versions of an event, and in the retelling, either to oneself or to others, an event and its motivations change even further. Reality is a slippery concept, and if one loses grasp of one's own ver-

sion of it, all hell is liable to break loose. The story concerns themes of guilt and innocence, knowing the difference between right and wrong, and doing something about that difference.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the subtle shifts in point of view. Whose story is this, ultimately? How do you know?
2. People often seem to miss Mr. Thompson's meanings and intentions. Find at least three of these passages and analyze them, explaining why people respond to him as they do. Explain the ending, particularly the last line. How does it relate to Mr. Thompson's personality?
3. Trace Mrs. Thompson's difficulty seeing—both literally and figuratively. How does it relate to the end of the story?
4. How does the title relate to the story? Clearly it is a reference to Mr. Helton's harmonica tune, but explain what that song means to the story itself.
5. Compare and contrast this work with Flannery O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person." How do the works compare in plot, theme, characterization, and setting?

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1938)

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider," which first appeared in *Southern Review* in 1938 and is the final novella in the collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, is based on a real incident in Porter's life. She contracted influenza in the epidemic of 1918 and almost died. Both the boy and the dreams depicted in the story were real, but even her own accounts vary as to how well she knew him and whether she was in love or not. (This is one of the Miranda stories in which the recurring character stands for Porter herself.)

The plot is uncomplicated. Miranda, who works as a newspaper reporter in Denver, has contracted the flu close to the end of World War I. She has fallen in love with Adam, a young soldier who is to be shipped out within a matter of days and whom she has only just met. He takes care of her, disappears when the hospital workers arrive to take her

to the hospital, and then, she later learns, dies of the flu himself. The story is considered to be one of Porter's best, not because of the plot, but because of the skill with which she explores Miranda's consciousness. The story begins with a hallucinatory dream about a mysterious rider trying to persuade her to go with him—an obvious symbol of death. Miranda wakes from the dream, but it is not until later that we realize the waking episodes of the story may be occurring "out of order" in Miranda's fevered reconstruction of events. The dream sequences throughout point to Miranda's encounter with death.

In addition to describing her own near-death experience, the story explores Miranda's reaction to the tragic irony of Adam's death. She loses him twice, and the first time she has trouble in her fevered state understanding what has happened. He has stepped out to fetch her some ice cream when the orderlies arrive for her. They will not wait for him, and at the hospital she keeps asking for him, only to be told that he has been by to see her and left a note, a note that explains that the doctors are not allowing him to visit her. At this first "loss," Miranda goes back into the daze of her fever while she observes the shadows of two figures behind a screen making a bed. This Platonic shadowy dream world seems to be "an entrancing and leisurely spectacle" (Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* 248), in which she sees figures bowing and curtsying to one another, but once the screen is removed, she blithely observes that there is a dead man on the bed. This episode leads into a complicated stream-of-consciousness dream involving the doctor and the battlefield.

After a brief waking episode, the continuation of her dream involves "granite walls, whirlpools, stars" (*PHPR* 252), concrete images that dissolve into a "fiery motionless particle," which in turn flattens into a rainbow that Miranda looks through. Porter said in an interview that when she almost died in 1918, she "felt a strange state of—what is it the Greeks called it?—euphoria" (quoted in Hendrick and Hendrick 59); Miranda's extended vision of some sort of afterlife is an attempt to represent this state. That her long-dead acquaintances

“cast no shadows” and have been transfigured into “pure identities” suggests that Miranda has arrived in Plato’s world of Forms. However, she is jangled back into waking life by the din of celebration of the Armistice.

A major irony occurs when Miranda, now somewhat recovered, gets around to reading her letters. She finds one reporting that Adam has died of the flu—her second loss of him. She has struggled back to life, resisting the temptation to go into the light; when she returns, the Armistice promises a happy ending for the two of them, since he will not be shipped out after all, and yet he has died. Her zombielike reaction to the news and her going about mundane tasks to resume regular life underscore the futility of love and being. In the last paragraph the dead images of life after her illness and after the war—“dazed silence,” “empty streets,” “dead cold light of tomorrow” (*PHPR* 264)—indicate her spiritual death, even as her body has recovered.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explain the title of this story. How does it relate to the first episode?
2. Trace Miranda’s dreams/hallucinations. Do you see any recurring themes? Examine closely Miranda’s long internal monologues about death near the end of the story. What conclusions can you draw from her images?
3. Make a timeline of the events of the story to sort out flashbacks and stream of consciousness from present action. When does her waking up/getting ready occur?
4. How does the juxtaposition of her waking up and the celebration of the Armistice work in the story? Explain the line: “Adam, she said, now you need not die again, but still I wish you were here; I wish you had come back, what do you think I came back for, Adam, to be deceived like this?”
5. Compare and contrast this work with Porter’s story “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.” How are the works similar and/or different in setting, theme, characterization, and narrative technique?

Ship of Fools (1962)

Porter’s only novel, *Ship of Fools*, was published in 1962. It is a massive work, defying summary. (There are so many characters to keep track of that she provides a list of them in the front.) Basically, a diverse group of people is traveling on a ship from Mexico to Germany on the eve of World War II, in August and September 1931. Porter draws the reader in, with a big crowd milling about before they embark. Through detailed description of each one’s appearance we get to know them one by one and then in combinations of two and three as their story lines become entangled. There are literally dozens of characters, at least 10 of whom can be considered major figures. In fact, the point of view shifts in such a fluid way that it is difficult to tell who is a protagonist, even at any given moment. The characters are from Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Cuba, Mexico, Sweden, and America, not counting almost 900 Spaniards in steerage who are being deported from Cuba. So, in addition to class differences between upper and lower decks, there are distinctions in nationality among the passengers—distinctions that are especially important in light of the ominous political developments in Germany in the early 1930s. The issue of anti-Semitism, for example, figures in more than one of the subplots.

Of course, in a crowd this big, there are also love issues—problems with marriages, love triangles, unrequited crushes, pimps and whores, innocent flirtations, full-blown affairs, and lechery. In addition to romantic relationships, there are simple cabinmate squabbles to keep track of. For the most part, those sharing cabins have been assigned their roommates randomly, creating interesting problems and tensions. The situation in the first-class dining room is a little more structured—such matters as who is privileged to dine at the captain’s table and who is shunned are based on class as well as on the elite’s changing perceptions of individual values. For instance, one character is “banished” from the captain’s table when it is discovered that his wife is Jewish.

A central episode of the book points to the allegorical nature of the work as a whole. An artistic woodcarver in steerage jumps after a spoiled first-

7. During a panel discussion on southern fiction held at Wesleyan College in 1960, Porter stated, "Symbolism happens of its own self and it comes out of something so deep in your own consciousness and your own experience that I don't think that most writers are at all conscious of their use of symbols. . . . I have a great deal of religious symbolism in my stories because I have a very deep sense of religion and also I have a religious training" (quoted in Givner 54). Find and explain a religious motif or theme in one of Porter's works. Do you think it was conscious? Why or why not?
8. Porter is often compared with Eudora Welty, particularly since they are both southern women writers who favor the short story as a genre. Compare and contrast one or more of Porter's and Welty's characters, themes, or techniques. How do these two authors differ?
9. Porter's stories, especially the Miranda Gay works, also have much in common with the stories of the New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield. Read Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and discuss the idea that both Porter and Mansfield use young female protagonists who stand for them. Would you know that fact without being told? Why or why not?
10. In a 1965 interview with Roy Newquist, Porter discussed the unfavorable reception of *Ship of Fools*. She states, "I don't blame them if they don't like *Ship of Fools*. But isn't it odd that they can read Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, they can read Hawkes' scene in *The Lime Twig*, about that man in the dark cellar beating a woman to death with a sandbag . . . but they hate *Ship of Fools*. Nobody's going to identify with that man in the cellar—that's all sexual daydreaming. They know it doesn't apply to them. However, *Ship of Fools* is about live people, and if they don't take care, they're going to see themselves" (Givner 112). In your opinion, has *Ship of Fools* worn well? Does it seem tame? Dated? Sensationalistic? Real? Support your assertions with specific examples from the text. Address whether her perception that *Ship*

of Fools is unpopular because it hits too close to home emotionally is still valid.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- DeMouy, Jane Krause. *Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983.
- Givner, Joan, ed. *Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987.
- Hendrick, Willene, and George Hendrick. *Katherine Anne Porter*. Edited by Kenneth E. Eble. Rev. ed. Twayne's United States Authors Series 90. Boston: Twayne [G. K. Hall], 1988.
- Katherine Anne Porter Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.lib.umd.edu/Guests/KAP>. Accessed April 8, 2009.
- Lopez, Enrique Hank. *Conversations with Katherine Anne Porter: Refugee from Indian Creek*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1981.
- Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1965.
- . *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. New York: Modern Library [Random House], 1935.
- . *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944.
- . *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels*. New York: Modern Library [Random House], 1939.
- . *Ship of Fools*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1962.
- Stout, Janis P. *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995.
- Unrue, Darlene Harbour. *Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- , ed. *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*. Critical Essays on American Literature, edited by James Nagel. New York: G. K. Hall [Simon & Schuster/Macmillan], 1997.
- Warren, Robert Penn, ed. *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Maynard Mack. Twentieth Century Views. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1979.

Catherine E. Howard



EZRA POUND (1885–1972)

Let it stand that from 1912 onward for a decade or more I was instrumental in forcing into print, and *secondarily* in commenting on, certain work now recognized as valid by all competent readers.

(*Make It New*)

Ezra Pound's importance in the history of both American and even British and Irish literature is hard to overestimate. A gifted if sometimes eccentric poet, he was also a revolutionary taste-maker: He helped found, formulate, and propagate modernism, not just in literature but in all the arts. A generous friend, discerning critic, and tireless champion of other artists (at least the ones whose work he approved), he was often the whirling center of new and radical approaches to writing and thinking. William Butler Yeats, though older and more experienced than Pound, valued the advice and example of his new young American friend, while T. S. ELIOT, WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), and a host of other eventually important authors were strongly influenced by Pound's ideas, personality, and personal advocacy. Pound's increasingly extreme economic and political views—which eventually led him to embrace Mussolini, fascism, and anti-Semitism—posed a dilemma for his many admirers, especially after he was indicted for treason after World War II and then committed to a hospital for the insane. Yet even readers who could not stomach Pound's politics often found his poetry undeniably important, both in its own right and in the influential example it set for so many other writers.

In his superbly detailed “Chronology” Richard Sieburth outlines the main facts of the poet's life. Ezra Loomis Pound was born on October 30, 1885,

in Hailey, Idaho, the son of Homer Pound and Isabel Weston Pound. Pound's father was a government official, whose own father had been a successful Wisconsin businessman and flamboyant congressman, and when the Pounds moved east in 1887, Ezra's father again eventually found work with the government—this time with the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia in 1889. Ezra grew up in the Philadelphia suburb of Wyncote, where he attended local schools, entered a nearby military academy, and eventually enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania at age 15. Already well read, highly opinionated, and unusual in both dress and appearance (with his wild reddish hair), he soon also showed the talent for winning friends (and annoying bystanders) that would be so significant to his later career. While still in Philadelphia he befriended both Hilda Doolittle (whom he would later rechristen *H. D.* when he was championing her poetry) and William Carlos Williams, both of whom would eventually have significant literary careers of their own—thanks in part to Pound's enthusiastic support. After transferring to Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, in 1903, Pound maintained his infatuation with literature of all sorts, from the most modern to the most ancient, while also cultivating his interest in foreign languages, including Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Italian, Spanish, and French. Indeed, this interest was so strong that in 1906 he received his master's degree (from the University of Pennsylvania) in Romance languages

and immediately set off for Europe for further academic research.

Pound, however, was never a conventional academic. Although he was hired in 1907 as a professor of Romance languages at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, he was dismissed the next year for allowing a destitute actress to stay in his rooms overnight—scandalizing his landladies and the college. Rejected in 1908 by one young woman (Mary Moore) when he asked for her hand, and rejected as well by Hilda Doolittle's father as an unsuitable potential son-in-law, Pound, with the support of his father, made the momentous decision that year to set his sights on Europe, and in a sense he never looked back. After spending time in Venice (where he self-published his significant early collection of poems titled *A Lume Spento*), Pound soon moved to London, quickly making friends with a wide spectrum of other writers. There he published his important collection *Personae* in 1909 and followed it immediately with more poems in *Exultations* (1909) and *The Spirit of Romance* (1910). By this time Pound had befriended (or been befriended by) such notables as Ford Madox Hueffer (the novelist and editor better known as Ford Madox Ford); T. E. Hulme (the literary theorist); Wyndham Lewis (the novelist and literary radical); D. H. Lawrence (the novelist and poet); and W. B. Yeats (the great Irish writer), to mention just a few. Pound also found, in 1910, support from a wealthy patroness who guaranteed him a substantial yearly income (at least for the time being), and for the next few years his life was a whirlwind of travel, translations, social interactions, and original literary productiveness. His collection titled *Canzoni* appeared in 1911; his translations of *The Sonnets and Ballets of Guido Cavalcanti* were published in 1912; and *Ripostes*, his collection of mostly original works, was also issued in 1912. During the latter year Pound learned, however, that his publisher was bankrupt and that his patroness had killed herself, but the year proved auspicious in various other respects, particularly through his association with the newly founded *Poetry* magazine, edited in Chicago by Harriet Monroe—a magazine for which Pound soon became foreign correspondent. This

position gave him a prominent soapbox from which to expound his own tastes and enthusiasms, and he quickly took advantage of the opportunity by announcing the existence of a new school of poets, the “imagists,” consisting mainly of H. D. (who was now living in London); her new husband, Richard Aldington; Pound himself; and a few others.

The impact of imagism (which favored brevity, directness, simplicity, and crisp images) was immediate and profound. Pound himself, however, would soon abandon the group, partly because he distrusted the influence of one of its newest members (Amy Lowell) and partly because of his interest in a new approach to writing (“vorticism”) that emphasized dynamic energy as opposed to the more static approach of the imagists. In the meantime, he was throwing himself, with his characteristic energy, into all sorts of literary and artistic projects, including helping to promote the careers of ROBERT FROST and James Joyce, championing the sculpture of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Jacob Epstein, serving as an editor of the *Egoist*, contributing to such other magazines as the *Smart Set* and the *New Age*, promoting vorticism, assisting T. S. Eliot in being published, and developing an interest in Chinese poetry and Japanese drama. In April 1914 he also found time to marry Dorothy Shakespeare, but by late summer 1914 World War I had broken out—a conflict that unleashed profound destruction. Gaudier-Brzeska, for instance, was soon killed in action, an event that inspired Pound to publish *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* in 1916. Nevertheless, despite the war, Pound's own literary productivity continued to be prodigious; his collection of poems titled *Cathay* had been published in spring 1915, followed by an expurgated edition of his collection titled *Lustra* in 1916 and by *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* that same year. In 1917 a fuller version of the Japanese plays was published, followed also by a fuller version of *Lustra*. Meanwhile, Pound continued to be a vigorous advocate and midwife for other now-famous-but-then-obscure writers, especially Eliot and Joyce. Yet the destructiveness of the war continued to have personal impact: For instance, the battlefield death of T. E. Hulme, whose literary ideas had been such an important

influence on Pound's own thinking, occurred in 1917. Pound's growing interest in offbeat economic ideas (an interest that would eventually lead him to become an apologist for fascism and would fundamentally ruin his life) can be attributed, in part, to his disgust with the political and economic causes and results of World War I.

In the decade following the end of the war (which concluded in late 1918), Pound was as vigorous as ever as an author, promoter, and innovator. *Umbra: The Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, appeared in 1920, as did *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, a work in which he signaled his growing disenchantment with London. He now began to spend more time in France (especially Paris), becoming acquainted with many eventually notable French and American writers (including GERTRUDE STEIN and E. E. CUMMINGS), helping to promote the careers of the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi and the American poet MARIANNE MOORE, and befriending the young ERNEST HEMINGWAY. His own *Poems 1918–21* appeared in the latter year, but perhaps his most significant activity at this time involved his editing, in early 1922, of Eliot's revolutionary poem *The Waste Land*, which Pound helped transform into a highly influential masterpiece. By this time Pound himself had also begun working on a series of poetic "Cantos"—a project that would last for the rest of his life. In 1925 *A Draft of XVI Cantos* was published, and by that time Pound had also begun to spend most of his time in Italy, not only with his wife, Dorothy, but also with his mistress, Olga Rudge, who bore him a daughter that year. Not to be outdone, Dorothy bore him a son in 1926, but Pound (predictably) seems to have been less interested in his flesh-and-blood children than in his literary and artistic offspring, which included an opera staged in 1926 and a poetic collection titled *Personae* published that same year. By 1927 he had begun editing his own journal, the *Exile*, in which he printed such significant writers as Yeats, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. In 1928 *A Draft of the Cantos 17–27* as well as Pound's *Selected Poems* were published, followed in 1930 by *A Draft of XXX Cantos* and by *Imaginary Letters*. His advice on *How to Read* was

published as a book in 1931, but by this time his writings had also become increasingly preoccupied with politics and economics, often exhibiting a fascist and anti-Semitic tone. His *ABC of Economics* appeared in 1933, followed in 1934 by an *ABC of Reading* and by *Make It New* (both works of literary commentary) as well as by *Eleven New Cantos XXXI–XLI*. The increasingly political preoccupations of his poetry can be seen in the latter work, and they appear as well in *Alfred Venison's Poems* and in the prose work *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, both published in 1935 during the depths of the Great Depression, the worldwide economic downturn that made the 1930s so bleak.

By this time Pound was an open supporter of fascism—a fact reflected in *The Fifth Decad of Cantos, XLII–LI*, which was published in 1937 (the same year as his *Polite Essays*). His important prose work titled *Guide to Kulchur* appeared in 1938, and during a brief return to the United States in 1939 he met with various politicians in an effort to promote peace (at least according to his own definition)—doing so at a time when most people were expecting a new world war. His fascist politics created unease among his friends and controversy with others, and when *Cantos LII–LXX* appeared in 1940, certain anti-Semitic lines were blacked out. By late 1939 the long-dreaded war had finally begun, and by spring 1940 Fascist Italy was in the thick of it, allied with Nazi Germany. Pound now made the fateful decision to begin broadcasting for Radio Rome—eventually delivering well over 100 Fascist and anti-Jewish diatribes, although he continued to think of himself as a highly patriotic American with the best interests of his country at heart. This was true even after the United States entered the war late in 1941. His broadcasts, however, were now being transcribed by the U.S. government, and in mid-1943 he was indicted for treason. Nevertheless, he continued to speak over the air, and in 1944 the now-retreating Fascist government even managed to publish six volumes of his Italian writings. By spring 1945, though, everything was lost: Mussolini was dead, the Germans had surrendered, and Pound was imprisoned by American forces in Pisa in a literal cage—an experience that led to mental collapse

in a man whose sanity had been in doubt for some time. Nevertheless, he was able to compose his *Pisan Cantos* (often considered among his greatest works). In fall 1945 he was in Washington, D.C., awaiting trial as a traitor. By the end of that year, however, he was diagnosed as suffering from paranoia and was declared mentally unfit to stand trial. Now began his long confinement in Washington's St. Elizabeths Hospital for the criminally insane.

During his long years of confinement, Pound was (as usual) a highly paradoxical figure. On the one hand, he was a political embarrassment; on the other hand, many considered him one of the greatest literary figures of the 20th century, and he was visited in St. Elizabeths by many of the most notable writers of the day as well as by many younger writers who worshipped his work. His writings continued to appear in print—including *The Pisan Cantos*, published in 1948. When this book was awarded the first annual Bollingen Prize of \$10,000 (given in the name of the Library of Congress), all hell predictably broke loose. The highly distinguished judges declared that poetic merit alone should determine the awarding of the prize, but many citizens obviously disagreed—and disagreed vociferously. The award did stand, but the Library of Congress was stripped of its authority to offer similar prizes in the future. Meanwhile, throughout the 1950s Pound continued to produce translations and original work, the most important of which were published in 1955 as the *Rock-Drill cantos*. During this period numerous important writers called for Pound's release from imprisonment, and eventually, in 1958, the treason charges were dropped on the grounds that Pound would never be mentally fit to defend himself. Returning to Italy (where he at first seemed an unrepentant Fascist), he began to lapse into depression. Nevertheless, the *Thrones cantos* (96–109) were published in 1959, and although his mental and physical health was unsteady throughout the 1960s, he was more and more recognized and honored for his early work, including both his own writings and his efforts on behalf of others. Increasingly dejected and increasingly doubtful about his value as a writer or political thinker, he nevertheless remained an intriguing and controversial figure. *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos*

CX–CXVII appeared in 1969, but when the American Academy of Arts and Letters proposed to award Pound a major prize in 1972, the plan was vetoed by its executive council. When he died on November 1 of that year, he himself was far less sure of the value of his work than were his far-flung and numerous admirers, who considered him one of the major authors of his era.

“Portrait d'une Femme” (1912)

The poem describes a presumably middle-aged and apparently unmarried woman who has lived in London for at least 20 years; during that time she has met and conversed with many intelligent people, who have sought out her company, especially when no better company was available. Her long history of interactions with interesting persons has thus made her, derivatively, interesting herself; she is like the Sargasso Sea, a calm area of the Atlantic Ocean where seaweed is abundant and where odd and unusual items that have been tossed from ships, lost from them, or swept up from wrecks can be collected, examined, and appreciated. The woman has no really independent identity, yet she is fascinating nonetheless because of her long and rich exposure to others.

In its title as well as in its phrasing and manner, the poem is reminiscent of the fiction of the novelist Henry James—a writer whom Pound greatly admired and who was famous for his subtle, understated, but probing depictions of people of leisure. Certainly the woman depicted here seems Jamesian in her interests, habits, and lifestyle; she is apparently under no great pressure to earn a living by strenuous work, and so she has been able to spend most of her days merely observing, listening to, and remembering all the interesting people with whom she has had contact. It is not an accident that it is her “mind” that the speaker values (l. 1), and by *mind* he seems mainly to mean her memory, her recollections: She is less important for any of her own thoughts, insights, or reflections than as a repository of information about others. There is some irony, then, in the poem's title, since the subject of the portrait is not so much

intriguing in her own right as a reflection of others. Ironically by being so open to the lives of others, she has not lived much of an independent life herself; she has not developed much of an autonomous existence or separate identity (there is “Nothing that’s quite [her] own” [l. 29]); like the Sargasso Sea itself, she is fascinating but somewhat stagnant. On the other hand, she has avoided the worse fate common to the lives of many women of her era; she has not been the mere appendage, through marriage, of “One dull man, dulling and uxorious, / One average mind—with one less thought each year” (ll. 9–10). In short (and in typically Jamesian fashion), her life has been ambiguous and complex; in some ways she has profited (and been a source of profit to others); in some ways she has lost. As a good portrait does, Pound’s poem presents a subtle mixture of light and dark shades, making us admire this woman even as we somewhat pity her.

With its blank verse, mainly iambic meter, clear phrasing, and occasional touches of rhyme, this fairly traditional poem is entirely in keeping with its subject; it is restrained, cultured, and sophisticated. The speaker acts as a representative of (and spokesman for) the community of London’s intelligentsia; his tone is by turns genuinely appreciative and slightly ironic or biting, as when he says, “Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else” (l. 6). The blank verse, leisurely rhythms, and long lines allow Pound to achieve a conversational cadence that is entirely in keeping with the subject and setting of the poem; it is as if we are overhearing the actual spoken words (or at least the actual thoughts) of a real member of this sophisticated milieu. In some ways, the poem is reminiscent of the blank-verse monologues of Robert Browning; in other ways (such as in the use of the extended metaphor comparing the woman at great length to the Sargasso Sea), the poem recalls the use of *conceits* (or highly detailed comparisons) common in the poetry of such metaphysical writers as John Donne. As is true so often in so many of his early poems, Pound here is deliberately adopting a persona; he is taking on an identity independent of his own; he is trying out a distinct and distinctive style, manner, and point of view, and part of the

effectiveness of the poem derives not only from his vivid portrait of the lady but also from the convincing self-portrait he offers of the speaker. The poem is even richer than a painting would have been, because every word used to characterize the woman also characterizes the speaker himself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read T. S. Eliot’s poem “Portrait of a Lady,” and then read the poem of the same title by William Carlos Williams. Discuss the similarities and differences of the three poems in terms of such matters as style, diction, setting, point of view, and theme. Which of the three poems appeals to you most? Be careful to explain why, by pointing to particular details of each work.
2. Compare and contrast this work with EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’s poem “Eros Turannos.” In particular, discuss such matters as a woman’s isolation, the speaker as spokesman for the community, the use of sea imagery, and the implied dangers of marriage. Discuss the relevance of social class in both poems, and discuss the forms (including line lengths and degree of rhyme) each poet chooses.
3. How does this poem characterize the speaker? What does it reveal about the speaker’s values, ideals, attitudes, and personality? Is it a safe assumption that the speaker is a male? What can we assume about the speaker’s social class and habits of mind?

“A Virginal” (1912)

In this sonnet the unidentified speaker addresses an unidentified interlocutor, urging that person to leave the speaker (who seems to be male) alone so that the speaker can enjoy his memories of a very recent encounter with a beautiful woman. Merely being in her presence (he feels) has brightened his life, and he does not want that brightness to diminish by contact with anything less attractive.

The title of the poem refers to an archaic musical instrument—“a small rectangular harpsichord . . . popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries”

(Froula 41). The title seems appropriate in several ways: first, because the poem itself is a small work, a kind of miniature finger exercise in which Pound (as was his habit) impersonates a speaker from an earlier era; second, because in its sonnet form and archaic diction (such as “hath” and “aye” [ll. 3, 11]) the poem harks back to a previous historical period and an ancient poetic style; and third, because the title suggests the presumably virginal woman herself, so that the poem becomes a song about a woman of virginal purity. The poem exemplifies Pound's exploration by imitation of whole swaths of literary history; here he adopts the style, tone, diction, mentality, and mannerisms (as well as one of the favorite forms) of a Renaissance poet. His sonnet rhymes *abba / cddc / efg / efg*—a variation on the standard Petrarchan form (in which the first eight lines would normally rhyme as follows: *abba / abba*). As in most Petrarchan sonnets, there is an emphatic division between the octave (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the last six); the transition is signaled in Pound's poem by the repetition of “No, no!” at the beginnings of lines 1 and 9. In addition, the imagery of seasons and plant life in the last six lines helps set off that section of the poem from the rest of the work. The imagery of the first eight lines (especially the references to “sheath[s]” and “sheath[ing]”; [ll. 2, 8]) seems less clear than the imagery of the sestet, sometimes making the meaning of the octave difficult to follow. On the whole, however, the poem shows Pound as a skillful technician, particularly in his use of meter. In many lines (such as ll. 2, 5, 7–8, and 14) he takes full and obvious advantage of iambic rhythm (in which an unaccented syllable precedes an accented one); this solid iambic base allows him to play expert variations, as in the use of spondees (two heavily accented syllables) at the start of lines 1 and 9, or in his use of trochaic substitutions (where an accented syllable precedes an accented one, as at the beginning of line 4). Pound, in other words, plays with his words much as a master performer might manipulate a virginal's keys, and indeed one of the most technically daring aspects of the sonnet is the unusual music that ends each line. Every single line concludes (appropriately enough, in view of the subject of the poem) with a feminine

rhyme—that is, with a rhyme in which the final syllable of each rhymed word is unstressed. The decision to use so many feminine rhymes in one poem was typical of Pound's poetic daring; the proliferation of such rhymes makes the poem sound somewhat mannered and old-fashioned—which was, of course, precisely the effect he was seeking.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Pound's use of the sonnet form in this work with its use in various poems by Claude McKay (such as “The Lynching,” “If We Must Die,” “Outcast,” and many others). Discuss the poems in terms of theme, tone, style, diction, and purpose. How is McKay's choice of the sonnet form both ironic and appropriate in view of the history of sonnet writing in English? How does Pound's sonnet represent only one aspect of that history (the aspect that focuses on romantic love)?
2. Discuss the treatment of love in this poem and in Pound's “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter.” In particular, pay attention to such matters as point of view, the relationship between speaker and addressee, the use of natural imagery, and the role of sexual contact or relations. Do you prefer one poem to the other? If so, explain why in specific detail.
3. What is the meaning of “spoil my sheath” (l. 2)? Why do you think Pound used that phrase rather than something more clear and simple? Why does he use the verb *hath* rather than *has*? Aside from the title of the poem, what other indications are there that the speaker is from an earlier time? How are the attitudes he expresses, as well as the language he uses, typical of an earlier era? Whom do you think he is addressing?

“In a Station of the Metro” (1913, 1916)

In this extremely brief but highly influential poem, the speaker compares the appearance of random faces in a packed subway station in Paris to the appearance of flower petals against a backdrop of the dark wet bark of a tree.

This poem is one of the most famous of all the texts associated with *imagism*—the phrase invented by Pound to describe the kind of precise, crisp, clear, and highly visual poetry he and several of his friends were trying to achieve in the years preceding and following World War I. The brevity of the poem contributes to its impact: The work records and then re-creates a vivid mental impression, and then it ends. If the poem were longer, it would be less effective, since elaboration would ruin the effect of transience—of beauty suddenly glimpsed and then just as suddenly gone. It is both ironic and appropriate that the poem is set at a subway “station,” since that word implies a place of stasis, a place where movement ceases. The irony of this setting is that the “metro” itself is a place whose whole purpose is devoted to movement. The appropriateness of the setting, however, is that the poem itself freezes a moment in time. It provides a kind of impressionistic snapshot of an instant glance that is now preserved forever. Yet the setting also seems ironic because we do not normally think of a busy, noisy, crowded urban transportation hub as a place where beauty is likely to present itself. That, of course, is part of Pound’s point: Beauty can be found anywhere if an observer is alert enough to see it.

The poem is full of implied opposites. These include not only the station (associated with stasis) and the metro (associated with movement) but also the urban, man-made setting of the metro and the rural, natural language of petals and trees. Such oppositions also include the juxtaposition of individual faces and the impersonal “crowd,” as well as the juxtaposition of the soft, light (or colorful) petals and the hard, dark wood. Simple, plain, monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon words are juxtaposed with the Latinate term *apparition*, while the first line depicts the fact the speaker wants to convey, even as the second line provides the metaphor that communicates his response to that fact. However, just as the poem is complexly and subtly structured, so its individual words are precisely chosen. The term *apparition*, for instance, not only means “appearance” but also connotes a startling or unexpected appearance, just as it likewise suggests the appearance of ghostly or supernatural beings, thus creat-

ing an impression of the people briefly glimpsed in the subway as transient phantoms. Meanwhile, the word *these* creates a sense of immediacy; it makes readers feel almost present at the act of seeing, as if we are almost cowitnesses rather than a distant audience to whom the vision is later recalled. The vowel of the word *crowd* is echoed later in the word *bough*, so that the poem achieves a kind of rhyme without really rhyming. In all these ways, then, the poem is a skillful, nuanced work of art. Its simplicity is deceptive; it is a finely carved miniature whose subtleties become ever more apparent the more closely it is examined.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” and/or “This Is Just a Say.” How are the poems similar in technique, diction, purpose, and effect? Are there any significant differences, such as in structure or point of view?
2. How is this work similar to and/or different from WALLACE STEVENS’s poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”? What similarities are there in diction, structure, and tone, and how are the works different in purpose and final effect?
3. Scan the meter of this poem: Which syllables are accented, and which are not? What patterns do you detect? How does the first line differ metrically from the second? Why does Pound contrast the meters of the two lines so strikingly? What effects does he thereby achieve?

“A Pact” (1913, 1916)

The speaker (presumably Pound himself) offers a “pact” (or “truce” in the poem’s first version) to Walt Whitman, the great innovative American poet of the 19th century. For a long time the speaker has detested Whitman as one might detest a stubborn father, but now the speaker feels mature enough to appreciate Whitman’s genuine contributions to American poetry without feeling any impulse to imitate them slavishly. He can assimilate and appropriate Whitman’s innovations while also

trying to improve upon them and advance beyond them.

This poem speaks in the direct, plain, brusque, and colloquial manner that Pound often favored both in his poetry and in his prose. Significantly enough, the first word is *I*, and this emphasis on the self is true of four of the poem's nine lines. Despite his well-known generosity, Pound was usually at the very center of his own mental universe, and so it is not surprising that the poem focuses at least as much on him as on Whitman. Pound saw Whitman as a poet who, as did Pound himself, sought something new, daring, and different in the history of his country's often conventional literature. He recognized that Whitman had been a great revolutionary and innovator, and he recognized that many of Whitman's innovations had pointed in his own direction—that is, in the direction of plain speech, freedom from ossified tradition in form and phrasing, and liberty in breadth of subject matter. By the time Pound was writing, however, Whitman had himself become a part of the acknowledged literary tradition in America. Pound, then, found himself in the paradoxical position of having to admit that Whitman had once been a revolutionary, even as he recognized that Whitman's influence could now seem suffocating. In this poem Pound makes his peace with his great predecessor: He concedes that Whitman has done important work because he “broke the new wood” (i.e., cleared the forest for habitation), but this activity, however essential, was also somewhat crude, requiring more brawn than any deep intelligence. In Pound's view, however, “Now is the time for carving” (l. 7): In other words, the time has arrived for more subtle, artful, skillful writing than Whitman himself produced. It is a measure of Pound's maturity and self-confidence that he no longer feels threatened by Whitman. He thus offers Whitman a “pact”—a word that in its etymology (or history of development) connotes not only an agreement but also a fixing, a fastening, a process of making something solid, and a process of creating peace (from the Latin word *pax*).

Fittingly, Pound addresses his great predecessor in precisely the kind of abrupt, straightforward language that Whitman himself favored and could

appreciate. He uses “unpoetical” language (such as “pig-headed” [l. 4])—undignified language of the sort that Whitman himself had helped make acceptable. With his typical self-confidence, Pound addresses Whitman man to man, as an equal. The line lengths of the poem are unpredictable, and the poem lacks rhyme—traits that Whitman himself could appreciate. Pound, as had Whitman, speaks here as a literary democrat, and he pays tribute to Whitman not only in what he says but also in his very manner of saying it. Significantly, a poem that began with the word *I* ends with the word *us*, while the word *commerce* implies a freely chosen exchange of things of value in which each party profits.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is Pound's poem relevant to the ideas expressed in T. S. Eliot's essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in which Eliot discusses the relations between modern poets and their predecessors? How, in their own creative writings, did Pound and Eliot try to assimilate the work of earlier writers, especially through such techniques as allusion and citation?
2. Compare and contrast Pound's poem with Mark Twain's famous essay “Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses.” How are the poem and the essay similar in basic intent, and how do they differ in approach, style, and tone?
3. Discuss the use of pronouns in this poem, especially the very first and the very last. What kind of progression is there in the use of such words? How, in the use of line lengths and in the overall brevity of the poem, does Pound still assert his independence from the kind of writing we typically associate with Whitman? What does this poem imply about Pound's view of poetic tradition and of the relationship of newer poets to their predecessors?

“The Rest” (1913, 1916)

The speaker of this poem (presumably Pound himself) addresses the fellow artists he has left behind in his own country (presumably America); he

speaks from his present perspective as an expatriate or exile. He expresses pity for them because of the obstacles, discouragements, and oppressions they face, even as he praises their integrity and intelligence. He ends the poem by offering himself as an example of an artist who has persisted despite discouragements and who has achieved.

In his typically excited, prophetic, and even somewhat melodramatic fashion, Pound presents himself as a survivor who has managed to escape the oppressive conditions of an America hostile to true art. However, although he criticizes most of his fellow citizens, he still thinks of himself as a patriot: He still considers the United States his own country (l. 1), and he definitely sees its best artists as its best hope for national redemption and renewal. The poem is addressed primarily to those artists and is intended to give them heart, but it also addresses indirectly the country at large, implicitly pleading with Americans to value properly their most creative and insightful minds. The double exclamation of *O* at the beginning of the first two lines implies a multitude of emotions, including pity, anger, frustration, concern, and perhaps even a touch of fear for the ultimate fate of the brave remnant of artists; they are left behind in an America that seems alternately ignorant of, indifferent to, and even hostile toward them. These “enslaved” artists (surely a histrionic adjective) are “lost in the villages”: That final word suggests not the ideally comforting community of small towns but rather a sense of isolation and provincialism—the narrow confines of a limited and fundamentally parochial culture (ll. 2, 4). These artists are not simply isolated but are “mistrusted” (this word is repeated twice: ll. 5, 16); they are “spoken-against” and even “Hated” (ll. 5, 16). Yet despite all the obstacles and hostility they face, the best American artists remain true to themselves (and thus, ironically, also true to their country’s best ideals); they refuse to wear themselves out by “persisting to successes” in the conventional sense of that term (i.e., financial or material success). Instead, they seek a deeper, more satisfying, more spiritual success by remaining devoted to their art. Moreover, just as these artists reject the tempting allure of American commercialism, so they also reject the conventional role of the successful artist

in America: They refuse merely to repeat and imitate what is already acceptable; they refuse to lapse into the mere “reiteration” that might win them popular approval (l. 11). These artists, after all, are men and women who have it within them to “know at first hand” (l. 14)—that is, to think and feel for themselves rather than conforming to approved, traditional habits of thought and expression. In the final stanza, Pound urges them not to “take heart” but (significantly) to “Take *thought*” (italics added; l. 17), and he ends by presenting himself as someone who has “weathered the storm” and “beaten out my exile” (ll. 18–19). If the reference to “weather[ing] the storm” seems, ironically, somewhat conventional and pedestrian, the final line seems more original and fresh, and clearly Pound sees himself as the best hope of the best hope—that is, as an artist who has it in him to inspire not only his fellow artists but his nation at large. The poem began by exclaiming, “O . . . / O” (ll. 1–2); it ends by emphasizing “I . . . / I” (ll. 18–19). Ultimately Pound assumes the simultaneous roles of both prophet and savior.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do early poems such as this one already possibly foreshadow Pound’s later involvement with fascism? What does a poem like this imply about his attitudes toward democracy, the “common people,” and the ideal role of artists in the life of a nation? After World War II Pound was diagnosed as suffering from paranoia; are there already hints of paranoia here?
2. How does Pound’s view of small-town America relate to the view offered by THORNTON WILDER in his play *Our Town*? How does Wilder try to protect his play against possible charges of offering a sentimental view of an American village? Is Pound’s poem sentimental in its own ways?

“The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” (1915)

The speaker is a young Chinese woman (16 or, at most, 17 years of age) who is writing to her absent husband, who is probably not much older. As

young children they innocently played together; when she was 14, they were married, and her initial attitude was one of reserve; by the time she was 15 she had fallen deeply in love with her husband; when she was 16, he left on a trip (presumably connected with business). Now she writes to suggest how much she misses him and how eagerly she looks forward to his return.

This poem, adapted by Pound from an original by the Chinese poet Li Po (701–762), who was known in Japan as *Rihaku*, exemplifies Pound's interest in the literature of an enormous range of nations, cultures, languages, and eras. Pound was both well and widely read to an enormous degree, but behind his reading was always the hope that he could use his massive learning to breathe new life into the English-language poetry of his own day, which he considered somewhat ossified and stale. His goal as a writer was always to “make it new” (the title of a 1935 collection of his essays), even if “making new” meant returning to ancient examples. Pound himself recognized that the original Chinese poem he worked with here was similar to the dramatic monologues of the English poet Robert Browning, but the delicacy, subtlety, and gentleness of the present work almost seem in a class of their own. The use of indirection and implication, of understated symbolism and restrained imagery, makes this work an altogether different kind of reading experience than such other poems by Pound as “A Pact” or “The Rest.”

The opening line of the present work, for instance, does not state a specific age for the young woman; instead, the line implies her youth by referring to the style of her haircut. The childish activities described in the opening lines seem both enchantingly exotic and deeply familiar, and indeed the entire poem (although set in the China of centuries past) deals with experiences and feelings with which all humans can deeply identify. The language of the poem is simple, clear, plain, and precise. The statements are direct, but they are also often heavy with implication. The sudden shift from childhood to marriage, for instance, in line 7 suggests that the marriage was probably arranged rather than freely chosen; the mere fact that the girl refers to her slightly older husband as “My Lord” suggests a rig-

idly hierarchical and patriarchal society. Obviously, however, this couple have by now fallen deeply in love, and indeed one of the most beautiful things about the poem is the sense that they both perform their duties and behave as expected, while feeling so much more than simply a dutiful connection.

At first the woman seems shy, perhaps even sexually reticent, but just as the transformation from girlhood to marriage was sudden, so is the transformation from marriage to love and even to sexual fulfillment (ll. 11–14). By the end of the first half of the poem, the couple have bonded completely, but once again a sudden shift takes place: In the very middle line 15 the husband's departure is described, and in the ensuing stanza Pound uses some of his most effectively evocative language. The husband has gone to (or by way of) “the river of swirling eddies” (l. 16), phrasing that surely implies the wife's own disorientation and unsettled mind and emotions; similarly, when she thinks of his long absence she remarks, “The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead” (l. 18). The monkeys, of course, are not sorrowful; it is she, in her pain, who interprets their noise as expressing sadness.

It is not only the woman, however, who feels the pain of separation: When the husband left, he “dragged [his] feet when [he] went out” (l. 19). The final stanza is full of imagery of decay, transience, and mutability: Moss grows, autumn leaves fall, and even though the butterflies are still paired (unlike the speaker and her husband), they, too, age. In the final lines, however, the speaker does not recall the happy past or mourn the lonely present but instead anticipates a joyous reunion; in the poem's final words she is ready to become active—to meet her beloved as he returns. The poem ends, however, not on a note of sentimental melodrama but with practical plans and a precise geographical fact. In this way as in so many others, Pound not only depicts delicate restraint—he enacts it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this work alongside John Donne's famous poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” How are the works comparable in “plot” and theme? How are they different in point of view,

8. Read one or more of Pound's political or cultural writings (such as *ABC of Economics, Jefferson and/or Mussolini, If This Be Treason, or Impact: Essays on Ignorance and the Decline of American Civilization*), and then discuss one or more of his poems (preferably written at around the same time) in light of one of those prose works. How are the prose work and the poem(s) relevant to one another in such matters as themes, style, purpose, and tone?
9. Choose a favorite work by Pound, and then discuss the ways in which that work has been analyzed and interpreted by five or more critics. Which analysis or interpretation do you find most helpful or convincing, and why? How does each critic muster evidence to support his or her particular reading of the poem? On what points do the critics agree and/or disagree? Is there any way to resolve their differences, or are the disagreements entirely a matter of personal opinion?
10. Choose an artist in some other medium (such as music, painting, sculpture, or the novel) who reminds you most of Pound in terms of values, goals, styles, methods, and achievements, and then compare and contrast their works. For instance, in what ways (if any) does Pound remind you of Picasso or Stravinsky or Joyce or Brancusi? What contacts, if any, existed between them? What comments, if any, did they have on each other's work? How are they comparable figures in the history of their own art forms?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Ezra Pound*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.
- Alexander, Michael. *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.
- Bell, Ian F., ed. *Ezra Pound: Tactics for Reading*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1982.
- Espey, John. "Ezra Pound." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 445–471. New York: Norton, 1973.
- . "Ezra Pound." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors. Vol. 2. A Survey of Research and Criticism since 1972*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 519–597. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990.
- Froula, Christine. *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems*. N.p.: New Directions, 1982.
- Nadel, Ira B., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Nelson, Cary. "Modern American Poetry: Ezra Pound." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/pound.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Pound, Ezra. *Poems and Translations*. Edited by Richard Sieburth. New York: Library of America, 2003.
- Sieburth, Richard. "Chronology." In *Poems and Translations*. By Ezra Pound. New York: Library of America, 2003.
- Wilson, Peter. *A Preface to Ezra Pound*. London: Longman, 1997.

Robert C. Evans



EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

(1869–1935)

If a man's work is good for anything it will find a way to those who read it; and if it isn't it won't.

(*Selected Letters* 41)

Edwin Arlington Robinson is widely considered one of the most important American poets of the early 20th century, although interest in his work has diminished greatly in recent decades. In his early years he faced frustration, disappointment, poverty, and family tragedy; by the end of his life he had achieved great recognition and acclaim. Ironically, his early sufferings may have benefited his writing by contributing to his distinctive themes and tone, while his later success may have hurt his work by allowing him to write long, somewhat diffuse poems—poems often considered far less successful than his earlier, briefer lyrics. Robinson mastered many traditional poetic forms (especially the sonnet), and he frequently employed rhyme and conventional meters; all these traits can make his work seem old-fashioned when compared to the writings of such later poets as T. S. ELIOT or EZRA POUND. At the same time, he often used plain, unadorned diction and wrote about “unpoetic” topics in ways that clearly distinguish his works from the mannered, precious artificiality of much earlier verse. In some ways, then, he is one of the first “modern” American poets, while in other ways his roots are firmly in the 19th century.

Robinson was born in Head Tide, Maine, but spent most of his early life in nearby Gardiner, a town on which he later modeled a fictional village (“Tilbury”) in which he set many poems. His father was a successful businessman, his mother was fairly

cultured, and both parents had deep roots in New England. One brother became a doctor; another was trained for business. Edwin, whose interest in poetry was strong from an early age, was able to study at Harvard for two years before his family suffered in an economic downturn in 1893. Robinson's father had died the year before; meanwhile, Dean, the brother who had become a doctor, had also become a drug addict and eventually committed suicide; then in 1896 Robinson's mother died of a highly infectious disease. That same year saw the publication of his first book of lyrics, *The Torrent and the Night Before*, which was printed at his own expense; the same was true of his next book, *Children of the Night* (1897), which contains altered versions of many earlier poems. Neither book succeeded, either critically or financially, although both contained some of his most justly admired works, including “Luke Havergal,” “Richard Cory,” and “Credo.” Robinson, now living mainly in New York City, was financially badly off and increasingly tempted by alcohol. In 1902 his collection *Captain Craig* was printed but met with little success. The title poem, in blank verse, describes an eccentric, humorous, and stoic failure. Other poems in the volume (such as “Isaac and Archibald” and “The Book of Annandale”) also depict distinctive characters, as do many of Robinson's later writings.

In 1903 and 1904 Robinson was employed as a time checker during the construction of New

York's first subway, and his mood was increasingly gloomy. His fortunes improved, however, in 1905, when President Theodore Roosevelt happened to read *The Children of the Night*, which had been shown to him by his son. Roosevelt (who sometimes shared Robinson's poems at cabinet meetings) not only published a favorable assessment of the book but also arranged for Robinson to receive a government job, which he held until Roosevelt left office in 1909. Finally relieved of financial pressure, Robinson worked on two plays (*Van Zorn*, a failed comedy, and *The Porcupine*, a more successful tragedy), but neither work made much of a mark. In 1910 he published a third volume of poems (*The Town down the River*), which contained "Miniver Cheevy" as well as other notable works. In 1911 he spent his first summer at the MacDowell artists' colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire—a place he found so appealing that he returned for 23 successive summer visits. It was not until 1916, however, that he achieved his first major success, with the publication of a new book of poems titled *The Man against the Sky*. Among notable works printed there are "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" and especially "Eros Turannos," regarded by many commentators as among Robinson's very finest poems. Critics now began to pay increasingly favorable attention to his work, and from 1917 to 1922 he even began receiving financial gifts from anonymous admirers. Also in 1917 *Merlin*, the first of a trilogy of long narrative poems updating the legends surrounding King Arthur, was published. (Similar works included *Lancelot* [1920] and the enormously successful *Tristram* [1927]). In 1919 Robinson's 50th birthday was commemorated by the publication, in the *New York Times Book Review*, of a host of favorable commentaries on his career, while 1920 saw a new book of lyrics (*The Three Taverns*, including a number of dramatic monologues and dialogues), followed in 1921 by *Avon's Harvest*. The title poem describes Avon's macabre, obsessive memories of an acquaintance from his youth—memories that eventually lead to Avon's bizarre death. The volume also contains such noteworthy poems as "Mr. Flood's Party" and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt." Most significantly

in 1921 Robinson's *Collected Poems* appeared. At nearly 600 pages, this book contains most of the nine volumes of verse he had released until that point, and it won him the very first Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Robinson had now obviously arrived quite firmly on the national literary scene; many (though hardly all) informed readers regarded him as the best American poet then writing.

And write he did. Unmarried, childless, and mostly uninterested in the literary limelight, Robinson devoted himself relentlessly to his art. In his last decade or so he turned out one book after another, often writing quickly (some would say lazily), in the process producing most of the long narrative poems that many readers consider far less effective than his earlier lyrics. In 1923, for instance, he issued *Roman Bartholow*, which is sometimes regarded as his least appealing work but is typical in its focus on the complexities of romance and a suicidal character. More successful was *The Man Who Died Twice* (1924), another narrative, this time focusing on a failed composer, for which Robinson won his second Pulitzer. *Dionysus in Doubt* (1925) is a collection of lyrics (including, notably, the title work and such other important poems as "Karma" and "Maya"), while *Tristram* (1927), the final volume in the Arthurian trilogy, was a stunning commercial and critical triumph. Endorsed by a major book club, it sold nearly 60,000 copies in its first year, and it also won Robinson (remarkably) a third Pulitzer Prize. The work marks the high point of Robinson's public career, although he continued to produce books almost yearly for the rest of his life.

In 1929, for instance, he published *Cavender's House*, which delves into the psychology of a husband who slays his wife; in 1930 he issued *The Glory of the Nightingales*, which describes the complex, murderous relations between two men. *Matthias at the Door* (1931) depicts, in transcendental terms, the relations between the title character and a symbolic rock formation, while *Nicodemus* (1932) describes various real or legendary personalities. In *Talifer* (1933) Robinson attempts a comic depiction of romance involving two couples, while *Amaranth* (1934) presents a talentless painter who neverthe-

less achieves self-understanding. Finally, in 1935, Robinson (although dying of cancer) was nevertheless hard at work putting the finishing touches on his final book, *King Jasper*, which seems to have been inspired by the Great Depression of 1929 and the rise to power of Franklin Roosevelt. The poem can be read as an economic allegory, although it (along with much of Robinson's later verse) is in fact seldom read in any way today. It seems fitting, however, that Robertson was working almost until the moment he died. As Hoyt C. Franchere has written, Robinson's "business was the writing of poetry. His poetry was concerned almost exclusively with people: not so much with what these people did but with what they thought and how and why. His own quiet way of living, his humility, his genuine warmth, his capacity for friendship, his large humor—all are exemplary" (147).

Robinson died as a famous and respected man, but interest in his work declined sharply in the second half of the 20th century. His traditionalism proved unappealing to many later, younger writers, while the long poems on which he expended so much time during the height of his fame have done little to enhance his subsequent reputation. Nevertheless, Robinson remains a highly significant writer, not only because he helped usher in a whole new tone in American poetry (a tone that was often dry, laconic, witty, ironic, understated, and plain-spoken), but also because his poetry had a distinctive focus on often everyday characters facing the trials and tribulations of everyday life. These characters often fail in worldly terms while sometimes succeeding in other respects, whether by gaining in self-understanding or simply enduring the challenges they confront. Alienation (that modern buzzword) is Robinson's special theme, and indeed James Dickey (a later admirer and himself a significant poet) has written that

no poet ever understood loneliness or separateness better than Robinson or knew the self-consuming furnace that the brain can become in isolation, the suicidal hellishness of it, doomed as it is to feed on itself in answerless frustration, fated to this condition by the accident of human

birth, which carries with it the hunger for certainty and the intolerable load of personal recollections. He understood loneliness in all its many forms and depths and was thus less interested in its conventional poetic aspects than he was in the loneliness of the man in the crowd, or alone with his thoughts of the dead, or feeling at some unforeseen time the metaphysical loneliness, the *angst*, of being "lost among the stars," or becoming aware of the solitude that resides in comfort and in the affection of friend and family—that desperation at the heart of what is called happiness. . . . The acceptance of the fact that there is no way, that there is nothing to do about the sadness of most human beings when they are alone or speaking to others as if to themselves, that there is nothing to offer them but recognition, sympathy, compassion, deepens Robinson's best poems until we sense in them something other than art. A thing inside us is likely to shift from where it was, and our world view to change, though perhaps only slightly, toward a darker, deeper perspective. (86)

Any poet who wrote as well as Robinson often did on so many central concerns of the human experience is unlikely ever to be forgotten. Out of the pain of his own life and the lives he saw around him, he managed to produce a handful of truly memorable lyrics that will surely be read and admired for as long as poetry itself survives.

"Credo" (1896)

The title, which literally means "I believe" in Latin, refers to a creed or system of beliefs. Ironically, however, the speaker here seems at first to deny the existence of any such system; implying instead an absence of any obvious source of significance, he almost welcomes death. Nevertheless, finally the speaker asserts that a "far-sent message" does indeed give existence meaning, and he ends by proclaiming "the coming glory of the Light!" (l. 14).

In its conclusion (at least) this is an unusually and overtly affirmative poem by Robinson, although he always claimed that despite his apparent surface pessimism he was an idealist or optimist at heart. The poem resembles his other writings in its basically plain, clear, simple phrasing; in its initial emphasis on loss and darkness; and in its functional use of generally uncomplicated imagery of sight and sound. The poem also displays Robinson's mastery of the sonnet form—one of the most respected, but also one of the most overused and abused, of all poetic types. Robinson, moreover, here chooses an especially difficult sonnet pattern: He uses the so-called Petrarchan form, in which the standard 14 lines are divided into an eight-line octave followed by a six-line sestet. Petrarchan octaves are especially challenging to write in English because they use only two rhyme sounds, structured *abbnabba*. The sestet, which introduces new rhyme sounds, is also usually more flexible in structure than the octave; in the present case, Robinson chooses a *cdecde* rhyme scheme. In "Credo," the octave is one long sentence, as is the sestet. However, while the sestet's first three lines at first seem simply to restate the dark, somewhat pessimistic argument of the octave, the last three lines point the work in an entirely new, emphatically affirmative, direction. Robinson thus uses form to reinforce meaning. The final line of the sonnet completely reverses the impact of the poem's opening assertion, although it must be confessed that the speaker provides little specific, solid evidence to make us share his own final (and somewhat abrupt) belief in the "coming glory of the Light" (l. 14). That claim risks seeming a bit wishful rather than anything the poem convincingly proves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Imagine that Robinson chose to end this poem on a less optimistic note. Rewrite the final three lines in a way that would be typical of Robinson's apparent pessimism in other works. How does the overall structure of this poem (and especially its conclusion) compare and contrast with that of Robinson's "Richard Cory"?
2. Are there any lines in this poem that strike you as either particularly effective or particularly ineffective? Which lines are they, and how would you justify your opinion of them?
3. Compare and contrast this poem with John Donne's sonnet "Death Be Not Proud." Which of the poems is more affirmative, and why? Which of the poems is more coherent, and why?

"The House on the Hill" (1896)

In this brief, simple, but evocative poem, an unidentified speaker (who nonetheless seems to speak for a larger group) describes an empty house whose former inhabitants have departed, leaving the residence "shut and still" (l. 2)—a desolate place through which winds now "blow bleak and shrill" (l. 5). Although no one at present can say anything good or bad about the former inhabitants, people nevertheless continue to visit the house, even though the speaker confesses that any words spent describing it are "wasted" (l. 14) and that "There is nothing more to say" (ll. 3, 6, 9, 15, 18). However, the fact that the speaker makes this assertion in five separate lines suggests that he is, in some ways, haunted by this house and that he hopes to haunt his readers, too.

This poem is representative of Robinson's work both in its phrasing and in its subject. As so often in his writing, loss is a major theme: The house is no longer a home, and its former residents have vanished. The phrasing is deliberately monotonous, especially in its rhymes, which revolve around merely two different sounds; here as in other poems, Robinson uses repetition with great impact, creating an effect of paralysis, lassitude, and apathy. The speaker seems almost as listless and lifeless as the scene he describes. The diction is plain and simple; few words have more than one syllable, and those that are longer tend to be depressing (including "nothing" [ll. 3, 6, 9, 15, 18]; "broken" [l. 4]; "sunken" [l. 11]; "wasted" [l. 14]; "decay" [l. 16]; and "away" [l. 18]). The speaker makes no effort to ascribe any grand, sweeping significance to the scene he describes, although clearly the poem symbolizes Robinson's view of everyday life as often dreary, frustrating, and

perhaps even meaningless. The speaker, however, merely states facts as he sees them; as so often in Robinson's works, understatement and reticence are major features of this poem.

The opening word (*They*) is both precise and vague, and indeed vagueness is used effectively throughout. The former residents of the house have "all gone away" (l. 1), but we are never told why or how. Have they simply moved? Have they died? The speaker never says, and indeed he paradoxically insists—again and again—that "There is nothing more to say," thereby crafting a poem out of his repeated confession that no poem is necessary and that no account of his subject can be adequate. As is common in Robinson's works, the speaker asks questions without ever attempting to provide clear answers ("Why is it that we stray / Around that sunken sill?" [ll. 10–11]); the subject of the poem is a mystery and the tone of the poem is mysterious. The sense of "ruin and decay" (l. 16) mentioned in the final stanza is typical of Robinson's verse, and the same is true of the craftsmanship with which the final stanza (now consisting of four lines rather than the expected three) ties everything together, including the poem's title, its main themes, and the refrains from all the earlier stanzas.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher." How are the works similar in tone, symbolism, and imagery? Contrast the endings of the two works; which is more dramatic, and why?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with the ancient Anglo-Saxon lyric "The Ruin," particularly in terms of symbolism, imagery, and diction. How are the poems alike in theme and final effect? Why and how do both works use buildings as symbols?
3. What (if anything) do you think the house and its departed inhabitants symbolize? In what way are the themes of the poem relevant to the lives of nearly all humans? Why does Robinson want to create a sense of mystery, and how does he achieve that effect?

"Luke Havergal" (1896)

A voice from "Out of a grave" (l. 17) speaks to the mournful title character, whose loved one has apparently died. The voice tells Havergal that if he goes to a mysterious "western gate" (l. 1), he will be able to hear the woman's voice among the sounds of falling leaves, and the voice from the grave even seems to insinuate that the only way for Havergal to reunite with his beloved is by joining her in death, perhaps through suicide. There is (the voice assures Havergal) just "one way to where she is"; although that way is "Bitter," it is "one that faith can never miss" (ll. 21–22).

This poem is one of Robinson's most admired works; President Theodore Roosevelt, in particular, thought so highly of it that it was one reason he was moved to help Robinson find a government job. Roosevelt confessed, however, that although he found the poem effective, he was not quite sure precisely what it meant, and many subsequent readers have agreed. Certainly the poem creates an air of intriguing ambiguity that seems perfectly appropriate to its literally haunting subject matter. Certainly, too, the poem is one of Robinson's most typical works, both in themes and in style. His poetry often concentrates, for instance, on particular people, and especially people in pain, and surely Havergal is one of these. These characters are often lonely and isolated and have often suffered some profound loss, and Luke qualifies on all these counts. The tone of many of Robinson's poems is dark and desolate, and suicide is a frequent topic. Robinson's language is often plain and straightforward (as is true here), and when he does use imagery, he tends to use it symbolically, as is clearly the case in "Luke Havergal." Repetition is often a major feature of Robinson's style, and nowhere is this trait more obvious than here, not only in the repeated images of gate, wall, wind, and leaves, but also in the way the first line of each stanza is repeated in each seventh line, and then in the way each eighth line echoes the last few words of the line before it. Robinson was a master of stanzaic form, and in this poem he strikingly combines rhyme and meter to reinforce meaning powerfully. Each stanza rhymes in an *aabbaaaa* pattern, thus

giving the poem an almost claustrophobic insistence—an effect amplified by the repetition used in each stanza's brief final phrase. In each of the four stanzas, the first seven lines consist of 10 syllables, while the abrupt eighth line is all the more emphatic by using only four syllables. In another unusual move, Robinson makes sure that each first syllable of each stanza is heavily accented. In all these respects this poem (like many of his works) is very carefully and lovingly crafted.

Here as in so many works by Robinson, nature provides no consolation to suffering humans, and religious consolation is notable mainly by its absence. Indeed, the only explicit reference to God seems to suggest a model for possible self-destruction (“God slays Himself in every leaf that flies” [l. 13]), and the only reference to “faith” (l. 22) also seems to associate that word with suicide (an act forbidden by conventional Christianity). The “western gate” toward which the ghostly voice of the poem repeatedly urges Havergal clearly seems linked with death; it seems a place of transition that is forbidding and perhaps also forbidden. In an earlier era the poem's seductive voice would clearly have been associated with a Satanic tempter. It is typical of Robinson, however, that he never condemns the voice; nor indeed does he pass any obvious judgment at all. He merely lets the voice speak and lets each reader judge for himself or herself what to make of the dark counsel it offers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is this poem similar, in theme and phrasing, to such other classic works by Robinson as “Richard Cory” and “Eros Turannos”? Discuss the tones of the two works and the sense they convey of mystery and ambiguity.
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Robinson's “Mr. Flood's Party.” How do they contrast in tone, point of view, and final effect? In what ways is isolation an important theme in both works?
3. Compare and contrast this poem, in theme and style, with Edgar Allan Poe's “The Raven.” How do both poems create and sustain an air of ambiguity? How are the voices of the two works similar and/or different?
4. Do some research into Robinson's attitudes toward religion and relate those attitudes to this poem. How were Robinson's views typical of those of his era? What historical factors influenced his thinking about religion?
5. What do you think Robinson meant by the phrase “hell is more than half of paradise”? Why does he not make the meaning of the phrase more simple and clear? What is the effect of making its meaning suggestive rather than obvious?

“Reuben Bright” (1896)

The first-person but unidentified speaker begins by directly addressing his audience, remarking that although Reuben Bright was a butcher, we should not therefore assume that he was any less tenderhearted than the speaker or we are. As proof of this claim, the speaker reveals that when Reuben was informed of his wife's impending death, he wept as an infant does, causing women who witnessed him to weep in response. After his wife had passed away, Reuben took care of the funeral expenses, stored and perfumed her belongings, and (somewhat surprisingly) “tore down the slaughterhouse” (l. 14).

Like “Credo,” this poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, thus revealing once more Robinson's strong commitment to conventional forms and to the traditions of rhyme and meter that many poets of his time had begun to reject. Robinson uses the octave/sestet division effectively, and he also packs one of his not infrequent surprises into the final half-line. In other ways, too, the poem is typical, particularly in its focus on an individual character facing a traumatic experience and suffering, as a result, a feeling of desolation and defeat without any real source of spiritual or philosophical consolation. All the while this character is observed and commented on by a representative of the community, but this speaker offers no overt “moral” to the story he reports, although commiseration and compassion are implied, particularly by line 8. The style, as usual, is plain, simple, and matter-of-fact; the tone is flat, laconic, and realistic. Robin-

son lets us draw our own conclusions about why Reuben Bright “tore down the slaughter-house” (l. 14); perhaps death, which had once been his stock in trade, was now something he could no longer stomach. In any case, Robinson employs a form (the sonnet) often associated with romance, prettiness, and affected language and uses it to offer a grim, unflinching slice of life and death, but one rooted in deep love nonetheless.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How (if at all) does line 2 make sense in light of the implied logic of lines 1, 3, and 4? Why is the simple, general word *things* in line 11 effective? Choose other specific details of the poem’s diction and explain how they contribute to the effectiveness of the two works.
2. Compare and contrast the use of the themes of death and marriage in this poem and in Kate Chopin’s short tale “The Story of an Hour.” What is implied about the relations of the couples in the two works? What is the difference between the reactions of the grieving spouses? How does each work use its ending to give the work maximum effectiveness?
3. Compare and contrast this poem with another famous sonnet—Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “How do I love thee?” How are the poems similar and/or different in tone, imagery, structure, and final effect? Which work is more “romantic,” and why? Do you prefer one work to the other? If so, explain why.

“Richard Cory” (1896)

This poem (perhaps the most famous Robinson ever wrote) describes a wealthy, good-looking, well-groomed, courteous, and eminently fortunate man who is an object of fascination and even envy among the people of the town in which he lives. Cory seems to possess every material advantage a person could desire, and thus it shocks both his fellow citizens and Robinson’s readers when we learn, in the final line, that one night Cory “Went home and put a bullet through his head” (l. 16).

The poem is typical of Robinson’s writings in both theme and style. As many of his works do, it deals with one person’s painful life, even if that pain is not apparent until the very end. The lyric is one of Robinson’s numerous character studies that deliberately raise more questions than they answer. It provokes thought rather than teaching a simplistic lesson. Suicide (which is often implied or suggested in Robinson’s poems) is here shockingly explicit, and yet Robinson, typically, passes no judgment and preaches no moral. Cory, despite the regard in which he is seemingly held by his fellow citizens, is nevertheless deeply alienated from them and is thus in one more respect a typical Robinson character. No religion, and indeed no secular philosophy of life, seems to offer an answer to whatever pain leads him to his death; aside from speaking in polite but superficial pleasantries, he is cut off from any genuine communion or communication with others. The poem’s diction, as so often in Robinson, is simple and plain, and here as in other works by this author the speaker represents the common citizens he describes. Imagery is kept to a minimum; the syntax (or sentence structure) is uncomplicated; the narrative is straightforward and (until the final line) unsurprising; thus, the irony of the last four words is all the more unexpected and powerful. Irony, indeed, is one of the most common traits of Robinson’s style and of his general outlook on life, and perhaps one reason this poem has been so perennially popular is that it implies that most humans carry within them painful thoughts and feelings that others might never suspect. In its meter, rhyme scheme, and stanzaic form the poem is both conventional and plain: The meter is iambic pentameter (10 syllables in each line, with even syllables accented); the rhymes alternate (*abab*) in a thoroughly predictable fashion; the four-line stanzas are brief and uncomplicated. In short, nothing in this poem prepares us for the potent surprise of the final line. Robinson’s craft, here as in all his best poems, is sure but unobtrusive.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read a biography of Robinson and discuss how this poem may reflect the experiences of his elder

brother, Dean. Does the effect (or effectiveness) of the poem depend on such knowledge? How does the poem deal with universal experiences and emotions?

2. Simon and Garfunkel set this poem to music. Listen to their song and examine the relationship between the music and the poem. Is their music appropriate to the words? Why or why not? Is their adaptation of the work effective?
3. Explore historical facts concerning suicide in Robinson's era and discuss their relevance to this poem. Were attitudes toward suicide changing during this period? If so, why and how? Why is suicide such a common theme in Robinson's writings? What does it symbolize?
4. Why do you think this has always been one of Robinson's most popular works? How much of the appeal of this work depends on its theme, and how much depends on the craft with which the poem is written?
5. In what ways is Richard Cory unusual, and in what other ways is he typical of many people? Why would a person like Cory be more common in Robinson's era than in earlier historical periods? What kinds of changes were taking place in the culture of Robinson's time that would have made a person like Cory less unusual than (say) during the Middle Ages? Compare and contrast Cory with the title figure in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

"Miniver Cheevy" (1910)

This poem describes a frustrated, scornful modern man who regrets that he was not born in more exciting, less prosaic times. He fantasizes about living in the classical past, enjoying the days of King Arthur, and indulging in the excitement of the wicked Renaissance. He feels contempt for modern materialism and for the unfortunate need to earn money, but instead of trying to act according to his ideals, he merely thinks about them, as he grows increasingly and pathetically dependent on alcohol.

Many critics have seen this poem as (in part) a satiric self-portrait of Robinson himself. As does

Cheevy, Robinson felt much contempt for the modern age, was steeped in the past, and was tempted by alcohol. Unlike Cheevy, however, Robinson was devoted to hard work, was capable of self-discipline, and was able to mock, with good humor, his own shortcomings. The poem is typical of Robinson's writings in its plain style, its simple diction, its colloquial language (as in the phrase "on the town" [l. 15]), and its somewhat surprising conclusion. Irony and even sarcasm are especially emphasized in this work, particularly in stanza 4 (about the Medicis) and in the undercutting comic reference to "the mediaeval grace / Of iron clothing" (ll. 23–24). Perhaps Robinson (who usually did not judge harshly, if at all, the characters he created) felt inclined to be fairly tough on Cheevy precisely because he saw a bit of Cheevy in himself. In any case, in the depiction of Cheevy we have another of Robinson's psychological character studies, as well as another of his alienated, isolated people who are disappointed with their lives—people whom the world counts as failures.

Robinson's ironic treatment of Cheevy begins with the character's oddly unusual name, which sounds too contrived to be taken seriously. The fact that he is a "child of scorn" (l. 1) implies his basic immaturity and suggests not only that he feels scorn but that he is probably scorned by others. He is, paradoxically, full of both anger and maudlin self-pity (ll. 2–3), and Robinson shows his usual metrical skill in the sudden switch, in line 4, to an abruptly briefer line. Line 4 creates real suspense in the ambiguous "he had reasons," but then we discover that Miniver's "reasons" amount merely to a bad case of nostalgia. Until stanza 5 it is partly possible to sympathize with Miniver's rejection of modern materialism, but when we learn that he would love to sin if given the chance, his moral authority vanishes. From that point forward, Cheevy seems increasingly the object of the speaker's disdain, particularly in the wonderful lines—full of verbs without action—in which the speaker reports that "Miniver thought, and thought, and thought, / And thought about it" (ll. 27–28). ROBERT FROST (himself an eminent American poet, who respected Robinson) justly admired these lines

(Franchere 80), in which Robinson makes the repetitious structure of his sentence cleverly mimic its meaning.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why is Miniver Cheevy a less sympathetic character than the title character of “Richard Cory” or “Mr. Flood’s Party”? Why and how does his scorn cause us partly to scorn him? Why is it harder to identify with him than with the characters described in those other poems?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” What similarities of personality, attitude, and situation do the two characters have? How is Eliot’s work, in general, similar to Robinson’s?
3. Research Robinson’s life. How did he resemble Cheevy, and how were they also different? What might have been the psychological benefits to Robinson of writing a poem about a character with whom he had various traits in common?
4. Do any details in the poem suggest that Robinson partly shares Cheevy’s “scorn” for the modern world? How are Robinson’s views of the modern age reflected in his longer poems based on medieval legends?
5. Using a good reference work (such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*), explore the meaning of the phrase “on the town” (l. 15). Why, in light of your findings, is line 15 particularly ironic?

“Eros Turannos” (1913, 1916)

This poem, one of Robinson’s most widely praised, describes the loveless relationship between a woman who, fearing the prospect of growing old alone, marries a superficially charming man whom she nonetheless distrusts and knows to be unfaithful. He, in turn, marries her not because he truly loves her but because she provides security and status; however, as she grows increasingly disenchanted with her choice, she withdraws from society and perhaps even contemplates suicide. Meanwhile, the townspeople observe this domestic tragedy from afar and gossip about it, although the poem’s

speaker (who is also their spokesman) admits that the full truth of other people’s lives can never be completely explained or understood.

The title of this poem refers (ironically enough) to the ancient Greek god of love, who is imagined here as a tyrant or overwhelming force of nature that overrules the woman’s better judgment. She is another in the long line of Robinson characters who considers herself (and is considered by others) a frustrated failure; her life is one of disappointment and defeat. Robinson here provides another of his many psychological character studies, suggesting the complex motivations of the woman and the man while also suggesting not only the way each is regarded by the community but also the inevitable limits of the community’s perceptions. Alienation and despair are major themes of this poem, as they are of so many of Robinson’s works, and it is typical, too, that the woman has no source of consolation, either in religion or in some secular philosophy. She lives a life of lonely pain—a life made all the more lonely by the presence of her unloving, unloved husband. The style of the poem bears all the hallmarks of Robinson’s writing: The poem uses conventional rhyme and meter to describe a topic that would have seemed highly unconventional in Robinson’s day. The phrasing is simple, plain, understated, and restrained; bleak imagery contributes to the gloomy mood and tone, and nature provides no comfort, but instead reinforces the woman’s sense of isolation and despair. Although the poem is a narrative, it contains very little “action”; here as elsewhere, Robinson creates a sense of stifling paralysis as he depicts a doomed life lacking any options or joy. Repetition of key phrases and images adds to our sense of a stagnating relationship that can end only in disappointment or death, and perhaps even self-destruction.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare this poem to the sonnet cycle *Modern Love* by the English poet George Meredith. How do both works depict marriage? How do both use irony? How are they similar in tone, themes, and imagery?

2. Research the position of women in Robinson's times. Why would a woman in Robinson's era feel particularly compelled to marry? How were a woman's options more constricted than a man's? Why might a woman feel particularly frustrated in an unhappy marriage?
3. Discuss some of the many ironies of this poem. For instance, what is ironic about the phrasing of the second line? How does irony contribute to the effectiveness of the poem? Why use irony rather than some more obvious method of communicating an idea?
4. Compare and contrast the depiction of marriage in this poem with the ways it is depicted in ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How does the main character in Hurston's novel respond to the frustrations of her early marriage? Would the woman in Robinson's poem have had the same options of response?
5. How do you interpret the first two lines of stanza 3? How have other readers of the poem interpreted those lines? How do those lines contribute to the overall impact of the work?

"Mr. Flood's Party" (1921)

This poem describes Eben Flood's journey back to his lonely home after a visit to Tilbury Town (the fictional setting of many of Robinson's poems), where he has refilled his jug with liquor. Pausing on the isolated road during the moonlit night, Flood courteously engages in whimsical conversation with himself as he remembers his happy past, contemplates his lonely present and lonelier future, and offers himself several drinks. He sings a nostalgic song, remembers long-gone friends, and ponders his present isolation.

Robinson's tone here (unlike the tone of many of his other best-known poems) is comic and somewhat playful. Yet Eben Flood (whose name perhaps suggests the "ebb and flow" of human life) is not merely or even mainly a subject of mocking fun; he is treated with some genuine dignity (as the term *Mister* implies), since he symbolizes many common human emotions, desires, and experiences.

These include a yearning for friendship, a love of lost friends, a fear of isolation, the process of loss that inevitably accompanies age, and the will to face life's disappointments with stoic good grace and without maudlin self-pity. Robinson uses many words implying loss, gloom, and mutability, including "Old" and "night" (l. 1); "forsaken" (l. 2), "harvest moon" (l. 9), "dim" (l. 24), "fearing" (l. 26), "trembling" (l. 28), "break" (l. 28), "uncertain" (l. 30), "time" (l. 34), "change" (l. 34), "loneliness" (l. 45), "weary" (l. 49), "last" (l. 50), "nothing" (l. 54), "strangers" (l. 55), "long ago" (l. 56), and especially "alone" (ll. 1, 17, 52), a term that is almost the keynote of the work. Here as in so many other works, Robinson emphasizes alienation and pain in a universe lacking much consolation aside from cool liquor and fond memories. Flood obviously suffers pain, but he (unlike such other Robinson characters as Richard Cory) endures his suffering without becoming self-destructive. Despite his drinking, he is an intelligent man, capable of literary allusions (as in line 11, which invokes Edward Fitzgerald's famous translation of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*) and worthy of being compared (even if a bit ironically) to the legendary (and ultimately tragically isolated) medieval hero Roland (l. 20). Flood's longing for companionship is so great that he creates an imaginary alter ego with whom he can converse and imbibe, and the humor of the tipsy but polite conversation Flood conducts with himself only underscores the pain of his loneliness. Robinson achieves a wonderful balance in this poem between the funny and the profound; by the end of the poem, Flood has earned both our compassion and our respect. The poem reminds us that life, for everyone, is a kind of journey that must ultimately end in isolation. What matters is less the outcome of the journey than the courage, good humor, and self-respect with which we proceed.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with ROBERT FROST's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." How are the two works similar in tone, imagery, theme, and final effect?

- , ed. *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969.
- Coxe, Louis. *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry*. New York: Pegasus, 1969.
- Dickey, James. "Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Many Truths." In *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Francis Murphy, 77–94. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.
- Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Virtual Tour of Robinson's Gardiner, Maine. Available online. URL: <http://www.earobinson.com>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Franchere, Hoyt C. *Edwin Arlington Robinson*. Boston: Twayne, 1968.
- Joyner, Nancy Carol. "Edwin Arlington Robinson." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets, 1880–1945, Third Series. Part 2, N–Z*. Vol. 54, edited by Peter Quartermain, 366–387. Detroit: Gale, 1987.
- Murphy, Francis, ed. *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.
- Porter, Joshua. Edwin Arlington Robinson. Available online. URL: <http://robinson.bokardo.com>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Robinson, Edwin Arlington. *Collected Poems*. New York: Macmillan, 1929.
- . *Selected Letters*. New York: Macmillan, 1940.
Robert C. Evans



CARL SANDBURG (1878–1967)

All around us the imponderable and the unfathomed—at these targets many a poet has shot his bullets of silver and scored a bull’s eye, or missed with dull pellets of paper.

(“Notes for a Preface”)

Carl August Sandburg was born in humble circumstances in tiny Galesburg, Illinois, on January 6, 1878, the son of Swedish immigrants, August and Clara Sandburg. The family lived in a small house near the main rail line. Sandburg’s father was a hardworking, deeply religious man with a no-nonsense temperament and a limited education. Employed by the railroad, he made less than 15 cents an hour, but both his politics and his personality were conservative—traits that would eventually put him in conflict with his strong-willed son. Carl’s mother was more openly affectionate and was also better educated than her husband, and it was she to whom Carl always felt more drawn. Soon after the boy began attending school, he also began calling himself by the more American-sounding name *Charles*—the first of many signs of his intense identification with the land of his birth. However, his formal education ceased for a time after the eighth grade, since his parents could not afford to pay for high school. From his earliest teenage years, then, young Sandburg worked, and his experiences with various forms of manual labor and service jobs would help give him a lifelong sympathy with the working class. Although confirmed in the Swedish Lutheran Church when he was 13, he never took much interest in formal religion, tending instead to derive his spiritual sustenance from faith in the best aspects of humanity and from nature’s beauty. His

interest in liberal politics can also be traced to these teenage years, when he first began to identify with the Democrats (in opposition to his Republican father). Nevertheless, his lifelong admiration for Abraham Lincoln (the most famous of all Republicans) also began at this time (Crowder 21–25; Niven 1–26).

By the time he was 19, Sandburg had begun a life of restless traveling that would never really cease. He hopped a train and headed west, with no definite destination or plan in mind. During these early travels he saw the country and worked an even greater variety of temporary jobs, but now he had also begun keeping notes and writing about his experiences. Back in Galesburg, he did more manual labor before joining the state militia and heading off, in 1898, to participate in the Spanish-American War. Although he saw little military action, he did send letters back home to the Galesburg newspaper recounting a soldier’s life, thus beginning his long involvement with journalism. When he returned to Galesburg he was able, as a veteran, to enroll free for a year’s study at tiny Lombard College, and he was even offered a chance to enroll at West Point, although his performance on academic examinations was not good enough to permit him to study there. Back at Lombard, he was active both academically and athletically, and he also continued to work a variety of jobs to help support himself. Perhaps the most important aspect of his time at

Lombard, however, was his contact with Professor Philip Green Wright, who taught not only English but numerous other subjects and who quickly saw in Sandburg a young man of great potential. It was Wright who first encouraged his literary ambitions and who actually published some of Sandburg's earliest poetry on a basement printing press. Sandburg always said that Wright was one of the three people who had most affected his life (the other two were his eventual wife and her brother). Wright was a relatively freethinking teacher at a relatively liberal college, and by this point Sandburg himself increasingly identified with liberal, populist, and "progressive" causes, to which he would be loyal all his life (Crowder 25–33; Niven 27–89).

Although he spent four fruitful years at Lombard, Sandburg did not graduate. Instead he left in 1902 to travel once more—this time heading east rather than west. Arrested in Pennsylvania for hitching an unpaid ride on a train, he spent more than a week in jail—an experience that allowed him to identify even more strongly than before with the less genteel aspects of American life. Back in Galesburg by 1904, he worked as a fireman and salesman and reestablished contact with Professor Wright, who that year published Sandburg's first three books of verse and other creative writing (*In Reckless Ecstasy*, *The Plaint of a Rose*, and *Incidentals*), which already show his enduring interest in common people and in the loveliness of nature. By 1906, however, he had begun to feel constrained in Galesburg, and so he set his sights (and hopes) on the metropolis with which he is now forever identified: Chicago. Soon after arriving there he became an editor of the *Lyceumite*, a journal intended for traveling public speakers, and it was not long before Sandburg himself began touring in that capacity, speaking particularly on Walt Whitman, the poet with whom he had so much in common, both in outlook and in style. By 1907 he had also begun to take an increasingly prominent role in politics, signing on as an organizer and speaker for the liberal Social Democrats. It was through his involvement with this party that he met Lillian Steichen (whom he called Paula), with whom he quickly fell in love, who would soon become his wife. Intelligent and thoughtful, she admired his charac-

ter, his views, and his poetry, and for the next 60 years she would be a source of constant support and encouragement in all his varied endeavors (Crowder 33–41; Niven 90–180).

By 1909 the Sandburgs had moved to Milwaukee, where Carl continued to be involved in politics while also working in advertising and journalism and maintaining his interest in creative writing. Besides publishing a socialist pamphlet (*You and Your Job*), in 1910 he also issued a literary essay (*Jossefy*) and additionally served as private secretary to the newly elected socialist mayor. After leaving this job he worked for a liberal newspaper (the *Leader*), then headed to Chicago in 1912 to work first on one newspaper (the *World*), then another (the *Day Book*), then (ironically) for a business journal (the *System*), then for the *National Hardware Journal and American Artisan*, and then finally back to the *Day Book* at a salary of \$25 per week. He now had an infant daughter to support, but despite his need to earn a living and his constant switching from one job to another, he still found time to write poetry, and in 1914 he submitted a batch of it to a recently established (but highly significant) journal based in Chicago called *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Its editor, Harriet Monroe, soon became one of Sandburg's most vigorous champions, despite the opposition of various critics, who found his work allegedly too shapeless, rough-hewn, and vulgar to constitute as true "verse." In poetry, however (as in politics), Sandburg was deliberately radical, yet it was not long before his work was winning recognition, payment, and awards (including the magazine's Levinson Prize for the best poems of the year). His career as a poet was now firmly launched, and for the moment (at least) he was increasingly considered one of the country's most distinctive and revolutionary creative writers. He wrote in free verse on gritty urban topics and celebrated the common people in the language of the streets, and he was thus part of a general rejection at this time of the genteel tradition in American letters (Crowder 42–48; Niven 181–273).

In 1916 *Chicago Poems*, one of Sandburg's most important books, was published. In 1917 he joined the staff of the Chicago *Daily News*, a newspa-

per with which he would be associated for many years. In 1918 his book of poems called *Cornhuskers* appeared, its very title suggesting its focus on the life of common workers on the prairie. The book helped win him a prize awarded in 1919 by the Poetry Society of America; in that same year his continued interest in journalism and public affairs resulted in the publication of a book called *The Chicago Race Riots*. In the following year he not only began reading his poems in public on college campuses (a practice that would last most of the rest of his life), but also published a third significant volume of verse (*Smoke and Steel*), for which he was again honored in 1921 with a prize from the Poetry Society of America. In 1922 he published yet more poems (*Slabs of the Sunburnt West*) as well as his first collection of children's tales (*Rootabaga Stories*, followed in 1923 by *Rootabaga Pigeons*). By now, though, his interest in Abraham Lincoln had deepened enormously, so that in 1926 he published a massive two-volume biography (*Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*) that quickly established him not only as a best-selling author but as one of the most important (if controversial) Lincoln scholars in the country. Meanwhile, his interest in American folk music resulted, in 1927, in publication of *The American Songbag*, while his continuing productivity as a poet and creative writer resulted in the publication of a collection called *Good Morning, America* in 1928—the same year he was honored both by Harvard University and by his alma mater, Lombard College. Honorary degrees were now awarded to him frequently, as his ever-prolific pen produced more books; in 1929 a study of his increasingly famous brother-in-law titled *Steichen the Photographer*; in 1930 two new children's books (*Potato Face* and *Early Moon*); in 1932 a biography called *Mary Lincoln, Wife and Widow*; and, in 1936, another volume of poems (*The People, Yes*). By this point in his life Sandburg was one of the most prominent writers in the country, even though many critics thought that as a poet he had begun to repeat himself and had failed to develop (Crowder 48–126; Niven 273–513).

As a biographer, however, Sandburg's best days still lay ahead. In 1939 he published a massive, two-

volume sequel to his earlier biography of Lincoln, calling the continuation *Lincoln: The War Years*. This work was even better received than the first installment, winning the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1940, the same year in which he also received honorary degrees from five colleges or universities, including Harvard and Yale. During World War II Sandburg (a great admirer of President Roosevelt) wrote a newspaper column, made radio broadcasts, and wrote commentary for a film, using all these media largely to support the nation's war efforts. Some of these works appeared in *Home Front Memo* (1943), but it was not until 1948 that his next major work (and first novel) appeared. This massive historical epic, *Remembrance Rock*, is the one work that even his strongest admirers consider weak and disappointing. Nevertheless, in 1950 his *Complete Poems* was published and received the Pulitzer Prize, and in the same year his *New American Songbag* also appeared. In 1952 he was awarded the gold medal for history and biography by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in the following year he received yet another gold medal—this one for verse—from the Poetry Society of America. Also in 1953 his autobiographical work *Always the Young Strangers*, which covered his earliest years, was published, and in 1954 a condensed, corrected version of the Lincoln biography appeared. Various other collections and modified versions of his works were also issued in ensuing years, including *Prairie-Town Boy* (1955), *The Sandburg Range* (1957), *Harvest Poems* (1960), *Wind Song* (1960), and *Six New Poems and a Parable* (1961). In 1959 he was invited to speak before the government and both houses of Congress to celebrate Lincoln, and in the same year he received a medal from the king of Sweden. He was also a frequent guest on national radio and television (Crowder 126–155; 514–684).

In his final decade, Sandburg continued to be active and celebrated. A play called *The World of Carl Sandburg* toured the country with some success; he was employed as a script consultant in Hollywood; he was invited to the White House by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson (receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from the latter); and,

in 1963, he saw the publication of *Honey and Salt*, his final volume of poems to appear during his own lifetime. He was particularly moved by an award he received in 1965 from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and in general by this time Sandburg was considered a revered national figure, even if respect for his poetic talent had now declined sharply. Although he had been hale and hearty for most of his long life, he was now increasingly frail, both in body and in mind. Death took him quietly on July 21, 1967: His last word was his wife's name, and then he was gone.

“Chicago” (1914, 1916)

This poem, one of Sandburg's most famous and most characteristic works, takes a hard, clear, but ultimately affirmative look at the city with which the poet was most associated—a city that had become one of the largest and most dynamic urban centers in the world during the era in which he wrote. The speaker acknowledges the dark, gritty, unappealing aspects of Chicago (its prostitution, its murders, its poverty), but he also celebrates its vitality, its strength, and its energy and dynamism.

“Chicago” is typical of many of Sandburg's works, both in themes and in style. Thematically the poem is characteristic in its focus on hard labor, big industry, urban corruption, and the suffering of the poor, but the poem is also typical of Sandburg in its celebration of virility, physical power, mental determination, and the sheer joy of living and creating (or what the speaker calls “Building, breaking, rebuilding” [l. 17]). The poem is a tribute to the common people, particularly the working class, on whom the strength and prosperity of the nation depend, and its affirmation of Chicago is indirectly an affirmation of America (and of the “American dream”) as a whole. Stylistically, the poem is also typical of Sandburg in numerous ways, including its unconventional, “unpoetic” imagery; its vigorous rhythms and meter; its uneven, unpredictable line lengths; its strong stress on emphatic verbs (often heavily accented on the first syllable); its forceful use of repetition of all kinds; and its love of lists.

In its free rhythms, unconventional shape, unusual imagery, and masculine assertiveness, the poem itself mimics the city it extols, and yet the poem (as does the city itself) exhibits a deeper order beneath its apparent randomness. It is built, for instance, around a variety of oppositions (including accusations versus defense, the accusers versus the speaker, the city's ugliness versus its undeniable power and even beauty), and the poem is given further order and coherence through the return, in its final lines, to the images and phrasing with which it opened. It seems significant, too, that the poem's final word is *Nation*, since one main purpose of the work is obviously to celebrate the essential contribution of Chicago to America as a whole. The poem implicitly extols the city as a symbol of all that is best in America but also treats it as a symbol of all that needs reform and improvement.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the depiction of urban life in this poem with that offered in T. S. ELIOT's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In particular, focus on the imagery, moods, tone, and themes of the two works.
2. Compare and contrast the style and themes of this poem with the style and themes of Walt Whitman's “Song of Myself.” In particular, discuss the works in terms of their rhythms, line lengths, imagery, and points of view and in terms of their attitudes toward common people, working life, and role of the American poet.
3. Compare and contrast the image of American life presented in this poem and in THORNTON WILDER's play *Our Town*. In particular, discuss the two works in terms of their presentations of big city life versus small town existence and in terms of their presentations of distinctions of class.
4. Discuss the effectiveness of specific aspects of the diction of this poem. For example, discuss the nouns used in the first three lines. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they distinct? Discuss the adjectives used in line 3. Why are all three of those words accented in their first syllables? Why are all the admissions of lines 6–9 crucial to the later credibility of the poet's praise?

“Child of the Romans” (1916)

The poem describes an Italian workman (probably an immigrant to America) who grabs bites of an extremely simple lunch as he works to maintain a rail line. As he eats, a train whizzes by; it is filled with people wealthy enough to afford lavish meals at well-appointed tables. The Italian’s work—dedicated but unnoticed—allows these people to enjoy their meals without disturbance.

Irony is a key element of this poem, in its phrasing, situation, and tone. The irony begins with the two key words of the title. The Italian workman is, obviously, no longer a “Child”: He is an adult who must perform back-breaking labor to earn a meager income. His life is thus far from the innocence and uncomplicated joy we normally associate with children. He is, however, indeed a “child” of the “Romans” in the sense that his heritage is Italian, but the word *Romans* is double-edged: It reminds us of the reputations the ancient Romans enjoyed as mighty builders (constructors of aqueducts and coliseums), and thus it seems an appropriate term to use in connection with this hardworking laborer. Yet the word *Romans* also reminds us that the Roman Empire once ruled the world, whereas this descendant of Roman forebears must now struggle to earn his very humble daily bread. The irony becomes even more emphatic when, in the first line, the workman is called a *dago*—a slang insult for a person of Italian heritage and thus typical of Sandburg’s tendency to use colloquial language for harsh and shocking effect. The “dago” is not simply a worker but a “shovelman” (l. 1): His identity is bound up with the tool he uses, and he is valued by his employers merely as an extension of that instrument. His simple meal—consisting of the alliterative “bread” and “bologna” (l. 2)—contrasts starkly with the lavish fare being eaten by the wealthy people who whiz by on the train, who are oblivious to him, his work, and their dependence on both. The comfort and beauty they enjoy depend ultimately on the labor of such people as this anonymous “dago,” and it is part of the poem’s point to make the wealthy (and all readers) aware of this undeniable but often overlooked fact.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Sandburg’s poetry has sometimes been criticized as too politically propagandistic. Is this poem guilty of that charge? If so, why? If not, why not? In particular, how do you respond to line 9?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with “Mill Town,” a poem by Genevieve Taggard. In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their tones, attitudes, and implied political stances.
3. Compare and contrast this poem with EZRA POUND’s Canto XLV. In particular, discuss the works in terms of their political and economic stances, their allusions to earlier eras, and their uses of repetition.

“Fog” (1916)

This poem compares the approach and departure of fog in an urban port to the approach and departure of a small, quiet cat.

In contrast to Sandburg’s often loud, boisterous, even hectoring political poems, this one is brief, cryptic, and impressionistic. In style and theme it has much in common with the work of the so-called imagists—writers (such as Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound) who believed that the poet’s responsibility was to use quick, vivid images to convey an indelible mood by implication rather than by overt statement. Sandburg’s poem fits this definition almost perfectly, although he sets himself the difficult task of trying to paint a vivid picture of a vague, indefinite subject. The brevity of the lines, like the brevity of the poem as a whole, is appropriate to this task. The simple diction, the focus on a single metaphor (comparing the fog to a cat), and the abrupt but quiet conclusion all seem fitting to the subject, and just as the cat quietly moves on at the end of the poem, so the poem quietly moves on after a mere six lines. Whereas Sandburg’s poetry often blatantly stresses the harshness of life, the tone of this poem is subdued, understated, and peaceful, and whereas his works often emphasize shocking images and gripping diction, this poem is gentle, simple, and plain. The lyric gains added

impact by its contrasts with the very different poems that surround it; it suggests that beauty and delicacy can be found even in big cities if we simply take (or are given) the time to look.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the use of fog and cat imagery in this poem and in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In particular, discuss the kinds of tone, attitude, and mood created by the use of such imagery in each poem. Why is it significant, for instance, that Eliot's fog is yellow?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with "This Is Just to Say," a brief lyric by WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS. In particular, discuss the works in terms of structure, diction, imagery, tone, and point of view.
3. Try to write a poem of your own that resembles this one by Sandburg. Use simple phrasing, simple imagery, and just a few lines to create a vivid impression. Compare and contrast your poem with Sandburg's, discussing in particular the difficulties involved in making such a poem successful.

"Halsted Street Car" (1916)

The anonymous speaker summons cartoonists (visual artists) to draw the faces of the working people the speaker glimpses on a downtown Chicago streetcar. The poem begins by emphasizing the visual appearances of these people but ends by implying their worn-out inner moods.

If the poem "Chicago" is written in an almost epic, aggressively public tone, the mood of the present work is more intimate and lyrical. The poem is typical of Sandburg in its sympathetic focus on the hard life of the urban working class, and it is typical, too, in the various stylistic devices it uses, including emphatic verbs, colloquial diction, repeated words, and contrasts between terms that are abstract and concrete. The work begins with a vigorous summons—"Come you, cartoonists" (l. 1)—that employs direct address, alliteration, and a strongly

stressed opening verb. Another emphatic verb and further alliteration appear in the second line, along with two words (*me* and *here*) that instantly create a sense of personal and physical immediacy. The speaker of the poem is himself a witness to the details he describes, and he will create verbally the very pictures he urges the cartoonists to conjure with their pencils. He wants these cartoonists to draw "faces" (l. 6)—a key word, and one he repeats constantly—but by the end of the poem he will himself have sketched not merely external visages but also internal emotions and feelings. The people on the streetcar are headed to work, and it is work—hard, physical labor—that mainly defines their lives. Their work is hardly glamorous: One of them is a "pig-sticker" (a phrase typifying Sandburg's penchant for vigorous, unconventional imagery that would have shocked the more polite poetry readers of his day), while another is an "overall factory girl" (with the word *overall* not only describing her cheap denim clothing but also, perhaps, suggesting through a pun her versatile skills). The fact that a young female worker is included is typical of Sandburg's common emphasis on gritty, realistic details: "girl[s]" are not exempt from the need to toil in Sandburg's world (l. 9).

Repetition (always a major technique in Sandburg's verse) is used with special effectiveness in the second half of this poem, in which the mood and tone become more abstract. Emphasis continues on the key word *faces*, but the appearance of the words *tired* and *empty* (for instance) in line 11 prepares us for their emphatic reappearance in the final two lines, where the speaker tells us that even after a night's sleep, these workers are still (ironically) "Tired of wishes, / Empty of dreams" (ll. 17–18). By the end of the poem the vigorous tone of the opening lines has given way to a quieter, more thoughtful, more melancholy mood, not only in the speaker's subjects but also in the speaker himself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with "Chicago," particularly in their presentations of work, youth, and women. Also, discuss why Sandburg chooses to emphasize pigs so strongly in both poems.

2. Compare and contrast this poem with Ezra Pound's lyric "In a Station of the Metro." In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their visual techniques, their moods and tones, and their presentations of urban life.
3. Compare and contrast this poem with Robinson Jeffers's "To the Stone-Cutters." In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their presentations of labor and in terms of what they imply about the relations between manual laborers and the artists who depict them.
4. In what specific senses do you think Sandburg meant the word "cartoonists" (l. 1)? Why does the speaker want the artists to focus on faces? What do faces usually symbolize or suggest? How do the people in the poem contrast with the atmospheric conditions mentioned?

"Cool Tombs" (1918)

This poem emphasizes the finality of death by mentioning a number of famous figures in American history who now lie "in the dust, in the cool tombs" (the poem's constant refrain). The work concludes by asking whether, in the end, anything is more valuable than love, especially in the face of death.

Death is a frequent theme in Sandburg's poetry, and here the theme is obvious. All people—from the most famous to the most anonymous, from the most noble (such as Lincoln) to the most tainted (such as Grant)—are finally united by the fact of the grave. Typically, Sandburg chooses American examples to illustrate his claims, and although his focus on two noted leaders of the Union in the Civil War may seem to limit the breadth of his poem, he does manage to mention an American Indian woman (Pocahontas) before broadening the focus even further in the final section to encompass "any streetful of people." This phrase is typical of Sandburg in its emphasis on urban life and the common masses, and typical, too, is the sudden shift from this concern with everyday people going about their ordinary lives to a focus on "a hero" being celebrated with "confetti" and "tin horns." Everyone and anyone,

whether hero or common human, whether Indian princess or corrupt politician, ends finally in the "cool tombs"—a phrase effective partly because of its assonance and partly because of its paradoxically combining the fact of death with the suggestion of comfort and peace. Death seems to hold no terror for this poem's speaker; nor does he seem interested in any religious consolation. He can speak shockingly but dispassionately of Lincoln's being "shoveled into the tombs" (l. 1), but he can also appreciate the beauty of Pocahontas's body. His attitude seems predominantly secular: The spirit seems to die with the flesh (although there is a slight hint that the mind of Pocahontas may somehow survive in some form). Ultimately it is love (the final section implies) that may be the closest to true happiness anyone experiences in life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the presentation of death in this poem and in WALLACE STEVENS's "Sunday Morning." In particular, discuss the relations of death and beauty, death and religion, and death and love.
2. Compare and contrast this poem with HART CRANE's lyric "At Melville's Tomb." In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their diction, form, imagery, accessibility, and effectiveness. Which poem appeals to you more, and why?
3. Compare and contrast the attitudes toward death implied by this poem and by Philip Larkin's lyric "Aubade." In particular, discuss the poems in terms of tone, point of view, imagery, and final implications.
4. Discuss the use of the refrain in this poem. How and why is it effective, and how and why does the constant repetition of the phrase reinforce one of the major themes of the work? Discuss the final variation of the refrain. What is the effect of the alteration?

"Grass" (1918)

This poem, spoken by the grass that covers and eventually obscures the common graves of common

soldiers, implies the waste caused by war by mentioning the sites of famous battles both in Europe and in the United States. Ultimately (the grass asserts) no one remembers the dead when the grass has done its job.

Beginning (as he often does) with an emphatic, heavily accented verb, Sandburg implies the sheer numbers of the dead, who are treated as so much mere flesh to be “shovel[ed]” (l. 2) and who are thus robbed of their individuality. Just as Sandburg often deals in his poems with the masses of the living, so he deals here with the masses of the dead, killed in famous battles but now forgotten as the unique persons they once were. Significantly, no individual names are mentioned (as they are in “Cool Tombs”); the dead (both those whose sides were victorious and those whose sides suffered defeat) are united in their common anonymity and oblivion. Using Sandburg’s common technique of repetition, the grass repeatedly urges that the bodies be “pile[d]” (ll. 1, 4, 5), and, in the same way, the poem itself piles the name of one famous battlefield on top of another. The bodies (in a typical bit of Sandburgian contrast) are both “pile[d] . . . high” and “Shovel[ed] under” (ll. 2, 6). Meanwhile, grass—which we normally associate with life, with gentle growth, and with peacefulness—here seems (ironically enough) almost aggressive, malevolent, energetic, and brusque. The simple language, the direct address, the quoted questions, and the emphatic monosyllables of the final line all contribute to the force and power of this ironically memorable work. In the very act of seeming to extol forgetfulness and oblivion, the poem undercuts its surface message, implying that the dead should never be forgotten and suggesting also an understated protest against the waste of war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est.” In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their speakers, their attitudes, their imagery, and their effectiveness as antiwar poems.
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Wallace Stevens’s “The Death of a Soldier.” In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their forms, diction, syntax (especially repetition and brevity), and treatments of religious consolation.
3. Compare and contrast this poem with Randall Jarrell’s poem “The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner.” In particular, discuss the works in terms of their points of view, their imagery, and their attitudes toward death.
4. Discuss the pattern implied in the battles mentioned; how are they organized, chronologically and geographically? Why is Sandburg careful to mention battles in Europe as well as one in America? Discuss the special significance, for him and his contemporaries, of the battles mentioned in line 5.

“Prairie Waters by Night” (1918)

This impressionistic poem describes the sights, sounds, and moods evoked by its titular subject, including the sounds of birds, the sights of old stones, and moods of drowsy peace.

If Sandburg’s verse is often associated with the hustle and bustle of urban life and the turmoil and even exploitation of industrial workers, this poem typifies a different aspect of his creativity: his frequent focus on the pastoral beauties of the midwestern prairie. With its long, lazy lines; its catalog of vivid images; its repeated phrases; its emphasis on comforting personification; and its stress on the gentle aspects of nature, this is one of Sandburg’s most romantic and most Whitmanesque poems. As the romantics do, Sandburg here offers a vision of natural loveliness—a landscape almost Edenic in its peace, tranquillity, and quiet beauty. As Walt Whitman does, Sandburg here tosses conventional poetic forms, meters, and rhythms aside, letting his ideas and images dictate the shape of his work. Just as the poem’s mood is relaxed, so is its form. Yet even though the poem almost seems at times to approach the level of prose, it contains enough heightened language to give it the complexity we usually associate with poetry. Among its more obviously “poetic” devices are its use of alliteration (as in the second

- Carl Sandburg Website. Available online. URL: <http://www.carlsandburg.net>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Crowder, Richard. *Carl Sandburg*. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- . "Sandburg, Carl." In *St. James Reference Guide to English Literature: 20th-Century Poetry*. Edited by James Vinson, 398–401. Chicago: St. James, 1985.
- Golden, Harry. *Carl Sandburg*. Cleveland: World, 1961.
- Niven, Penelope. *Carl Sandburg: A Biography*. New York: Scribner, 1991.
- Sandburg, Carl. *Complete Poems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1950.
- "Sandburg, Carl." In *Library of Literary Criticism: Modern American Literature*. 3rd ed. Edited by Dorothy Nyren, 416–420. New York: Ungar, 1964.
- Yanella, Philip. *The Other Carl Sandburg*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996.
- Robert C. Evans



GERTRUDE STEIN (1874–1946)

It is always a mistake to be plain-spoken.

(qtd. in Bridgman 91)

Gertrude Stein was born on February 3, 1874, to Daniel Stein and his wife, Amelia, who had four other surviving children. Although Gertrude was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, she lived there only briefly, for by that autumn her father had moved his family to Austria for business. Although Daniel Stein often returned to the United States, his wife and children stayed in Europe, living in Vienna from 1874 to 1878 and in Paris from 1878 to 1879. Eventually everyone moved to East Oakland, California, in 1880, where Daniel pursued various business interests. Gertrude's relations with her parents, however, were never particularly close; her greatest bond was with her brother Leo, her elder by two years. She was always an intelligent and bookish child (once worrying that she would eventually run out of things to read), and even as a small girl she showed some talent for writing, although she never officially graduated from high school. The deaths of her mother in 1888 and of her father in 1891 left her even more closely attached than before to Leo, and when he began attending Harvard in 1892, Gertrude followed in 1893. She entered the Harvard Annex (soon rechristened Radcliffe College), and for the next four years she was a well-regarded student of philosophy and psychology, studying with such notables as George Santayana and William James. Even when she was an undergraduate her writing, punctuation, thinking, and behavior

were unconventional; nor was she conventionally attractive (particularly because of her weight), but she made friends easily and impressed her teachers with her promise. By the time she received her B.A. in 1898, she had already entered medical school at Johns Hopkins University and seemed set on a career as a physician.

By this time Stein seems to have realized that she was a lesbian, and she was also becoming increasingly bored with medicine. Having failed four courses at Hopkins, she decided to abandon her medical studies. During the next few years (partly to escape an unsuccessful love affair), she traveled in Europe with Leo, with whom she shared a growing interest in art. While briefly back in America in 1903, she started work on the book that would eventually grow into her huge novel *The Making of Americans*, and then, after having returned to Europe to live with Leo in Paris, she composed a brief novel, *Q.E.D.*, a partly autobiographical account of a lesbian triangle. With inherited money, she and Leo began buying modern paintings, acquiring (over the next few years) work by artists who would later become extremely famous, such as Delacroix, Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, Degas, Cézanne, Matisse, and especially Picasso. Meanwhile, Stein satisfied her own creative urges by working (in 1904) on a short novel called *Fernhurst* and by producing (in 1905–06) a collection of stories called *Three Lives*, a book still considered one of her most important. She also continued working

on her mammoth novel *The Making of Americans*, but she was now becoming even more noted for her friendships (especially with Picasso, who painted a famous portrait of her) and for the parties she and Leo hosted in their Paris apartment—parties attended by many notable modern painters, writers, thinkers, and their admirers. Stein, it was widely agreed, had an extremely lively mind, a pungent wit, and excellent taste as a connoisseur of art, and the apartment's walls were soon festooned with paintings that made it one of the most noteworthy collections in the city, if not the world. By 1907 Stein had increasingly become a champion of the latest developments in Picasso's style, much to the growing annoyance of her brother, whose tastes were less radical. By 1907, as well, Stein had met the person who would soon displace Leo as the most important figure in her personal life: Alice B. Toklas.

Toklas, who had grown up in San Francisco, had there met relatives of Stein's, who had shown her paintings by Matisse and had thus stimulated her interest in visiting Paris. After Toklas arrived in France, she and Stein quickly became friends, and by 1908 they were essentially a couple. Alice volunteered to type the enormous manuscript of *The Making of Americans*, while Stein herself began to write in ever-more-unconventional ways, beginning (for instance) a series of abstract word portraits of numerous friends, including Toklas herself. Meanwhile, Stein's *Three Lives* was finally published in New York in 1909 at her own expense, and some of the few people who read it were struck by its originality, especially in its middle section. Meanwhile, Stein's relationship with Toklas was growing increasingly close as her relations with Leo became increasingly strained. By the end of 1910 Toklas had moved in with Stein, becoming (essentially) her de facto wife and all-around helpmate. In 1911 Stein finally finished *The Making of Americans*, even as she continued working on her various word portraits of friends or acquaintances; two of these, "Matisse" and "Picasso," were published in a magazine in 1912, the same year in which another portrait (of the wealthy Mabel Dodge) was published in book form at its subject's expense. Stein and Toklas traveled in Europe in 1912 and in 1913 vis-

ited England, where Stein hoped (without success) to find a publisher. During 1913 Stein also wrote her first play (*What Happened*), but the year's most significant event was her final break with Leo, who took his paintings, moved to Italy, and never met or spoke with his sister again. He could not abide her growing enthusiasm for cubist painting; nor could he tolerate her increasing independence and autonomous fame. Although Gertrude had begun as Leo's follower, she now considered herself a true and independent genius.

In 1913 Stein published one of her most notorious works, *Tender Buttons*, a three-part collection of poetic meditations on objects, food, and rooms. By conventional standards these works (like many of her other recent writings) seemed ponderously impenetrable and barely coherent; they were full of repetitions, wordplay, violations of standard grammar, and an absence of any obvious logic. Many readers considered them annoyingly nonsensical, while others (particularly Stein herself) regarded them as cutting-edge innovations in perception and expression. Clearly they were comparable to the similarly radical innovations in painting, sculpture, music, and indeed almost all the arts that were occurring at this time; "modernism," in other words, was now in full swing. And then the war began: In 1914 the conflict that soon became known as the Great War or World War I was unleashed, with massive destruction descending on Europe. Stein and Toklas were in England at the time, visiting the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (whom Stein considered, along with herself and Picasso, another genius), but by October the two women were back in Paris. In 1915 they moved to Spain for a year, but by 1916, when the tide seemed to have turned against the Germans, the women returned to Paris, where they soon began volunteering to deliver supplies for an organization designed to aid the French wounded. After the end of the war, in 1918, Stein and Toklas (who had been awarded medals for their volunteer service) eventually resumed something like their old routine, although now they were increasingly visited by young writers (such as ERNEST HEMINGWAY) who arrived to imbibe Stein's wine and

wisdom. Affable, opinionated, and the friend of practically anyone who counted in the modern arts (especially in Paris), she enjoyed a growing reputation not only as a patron and connoisseur but as a writer herself. In 1922 she published a collection of prose, poems, and dramas called *Geography and Plays*, with a foreword by SHERWOOD ANDERSON, who was one of her swelling band of admirers. More and more, she was the subject of written tributes, admiring photographs, and the attention of sculptors and painters.

In 1924 Stein's epic novel *The Making of Americans* was partly printed in several issues of the magazine *Transatlantic Review*, and then in 1925 the entire book was published in a subsidized edition. During this same year Stein's circle of contacts expanded to include F. SCOTT FITZGERALD and his wife, Zelda, as well as Edith Sitwell, the English poet. Stein had already met WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS and T. S. ELIOT the year before, and in 1926 her fame was such that she was invited to lecture at both Cambridge and Oxford universities. During that same year she published not only this lecture ("Composition as Explanation") but also an illustrated book with the typical Steinian title "A Book Concluding with As a Wife Has a Cow, A Love Story." In 1927 she produced the libretto for an opera by Virgil Thomson called *Four Saints in Three Acts*, wrote a lyrical prose work titled *Lucy Church Amiably*, and continued producing her prose portraits, all the while maintaining her ongoing interest in befriending, cultivating, and gossiping with the newest writers, painters, and other artists. In 1928 she self-published a collection called *Useful Knowledge*, continued composing a work titled *How to Write*, and witnessed the publication of her book titled *A Village [:] Are You Ready Not Yet*. Meanwhile, *Lucy Church Amiably* appeared in 1930. Ironically, her friendship with the French writer Georges Hugnet ended when in 1931 she published *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded*, which Hugnet considered an insufficiently accurate translation of one of his works. In 1932 Stein's *How to Write* appeared in print, as did a collection called *Operas and Plays*. It was toward the end of that year, however, that

she composed the work that would soon make her a best-selling writer: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. With typical cleverness, Stein here adopts the pose and persona of Toklas to write mainly about her own life, opinions, and friendships, including (of course) the important link with Toklas herself. When the book was printed in America in 1933, Stein suddenly won the fame she had long coveted. Written in an unusually accessible style and full of wit, gossip, and personal memories of the growth of modernism, the book made Stein a celebrity in her home country—a figure whom the press loved to quote, mock, bait, and debate.

By 1934 Stein was off to America for a highly publicized and highly successful lecture tour. She was widely interviewed, spoke often, was invited to the White House, and made new friends, including THORNTON WILDER. Her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* was successfully staged, a shorter version of *The Making of Americans* was issued, and a collection called *Portraits and Prayers* was published. Also in 1935 she lectured, visited Hollywood, returned to her childhood home in Oakland, and published not only *Lectures in America* but also *Narration* (consisting of further lectures). In 1936 she spoke again at Oxford and Cambridge, collaborated with the composer Lord Gerald Berners, befriended (and posed for) the photographer Cecil Beaton, and then witnessed the publication (in 1936) of *The Geographical History of America*, followed in 1937 by *Everybody's Autobiography* (an account of her travels in the United States). In 1938 she published *Picasso* (in French) and completed a play called *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, and in 1939 she published a children's book titled *The World Is Round*. By this time, however, the world was not (unfortunately) peaceful, and when the Second World War broke out in September 1939, Stein seems to have been caught by surprise. Although urged to leave France, she and Toklas stayed behind, and initially Stein (despite being Jewish) seems to have felt real sympathy for the French collaborators with the Germans. She published *Paris France* in 1940 and *Ida: A Novel* in 1941, and she began work on a novel called *Mrs. Reynolds* as well as on a memoir called *Wars I Have*

Seen. In 1944 American troops liberated the small village where Stein and Toklas were living, and Stein now won even greater publicity, not only as a famous writer but as a kind of mother hen to the American troops. *Wars I Have Seen* was published in 1945, the same year Stein lectured in Germany, Paris, and Brussels (often speaking to soldiers), and the year in which she began an opera libretto called *The Mother of Us All*. In 1946 she completed that libretto, heard of the production of her play *Yes Is for a Very Young Man* back in California, and published an account of American troops called *Brewsie and Willie*. By midsummer, however, she was diagnosed with cancer, and on July 27 she died during surgery. On October 22 she was buried in a Paris cemetery, to be joined there in 1967 by the body of Alice B. Toklas, her long-beloved mate.

***Three Lives* (1909)**

Three Lives, which was begun in 1905 and published in 1909, is one of Stein's earliest and most accessible books; it depicts the lives of three lower-class women, including two German immigrant servants ("The Good Anna" and "The Gentle Lena") whose relatively brief stories frame a much longer central section ("Melanctha") that emphasizes the romantic relationships of a young black woman. All three tales end in the early deaths of the central characters, and all three also stress the hard lives these women lead because of their bleak circumstances. The book reflects Stein's intense interest in character types and in repetitious patterns of behavior—patterns reflected in Stein's own deliberately repetitious style of writing.

"The Good Anna" begins with an apparently conventional opening describing the relations between Anna and various tradesmen as well as her relations with her employer, Miss Mathilda, whose household Anna manages. The style at first seems simple, direct, and plain, and the key to the story's tone is set in the fourth paragraph, which asserts that "Anna led an arduous and troubled life" (69). Although Stein's later stylistic trademark of repeated phrases already begins to appear

in the next two paragraphs, at first the tale emphasizes Anna's colloquial, colorful speech; her comic obsession with "canine chastity" (70); and a fairly straightforward plot involving the succession of assistants with whom she often finds fault. As the title suggests, Stein tends to be interested in character types, often using single adjectives to sum up a person's essential traits, as when she describes two subordinate servants by saying that the "pretty, cheerful Lizzie was succeeded by a melancholy Molly" (71). Stein conveys the monotonous lives of the women she depicts, including their minor spats and simmering tensions, and the tale reveals its author's ear for both dialect and dialogue. The characters' ethnic backgrounds are often stressed, so that Stein's people often seem to be representative types rather than highly distinctive individuals. The story's style is rarely vivid, powerful, or engaging; instead, Stein intentionally uses dry, unadorned phrasing to portray predictable, unexciting lives. Often the diction seems so basic and stripped down that it sounds almost awkward, as if written by a foreigner with a limited command of English: "It was pleasant that everything for one was done, but annoying often that what one wanted most just then, one could not have when one had foolishly demanded and not suggested one's desire" (77–78). The strange inversions, the repetition of *one*, the absence of any kind of concrete, enlivening detail—all these traits would become increasingly typical of Stein's style, and all are already apparent in "The Good Anna."

The second part of "The Good Anna" takes us back into the protagonist's past, briefly describing her time in Germany and her immigration to the United States. Here as before, Stein tends to focus on externals: Anna is described as being "of solid lower middle-class south german stock" (78), while her brother is depicted as "a heavy, lumbering, good natured german man, full of the infirmity that comes of excess of body" (79). Despite all of Stein's proclaimed interest in psychological characteristics, she rarely in this opening section of *Three Lives* conveys or stimulates much interest in the distinctiveness or complexity of the people she depicts—probably because she felt that few people

were truly distinctive or genuinely complex. Anna tends to regard other persons as mere types (as in her thoughts on boys versus girls [79–80]), and she herself tends to be treated as such by Stein. Here as so often elsewhere, Stein shows little interest in creating excitement, suspense, or even a strong sense of a developing “plot”; there is no powerful feeling of forward movement, only the humdrum, everyday impression that this-happened-and-then-this-happened-and-the-good-Anna-reacted-this-way-or-that way. By writing this way, Stein was deliberately reacting *against* the conventional expectation of a “well-made tale”; her method was revolutionary precisely because she was rejecting and stripping away many of the standard elements past writers had used to create and sustain readers’ interest, such as exotic settings, shocking events, “profound” themes, lyrical phrasing, or characters who seemed larger than life. Instead she presents an “ordinary” character who lives a rather unexciting life, who thinks rather predictable thoughts, who expresses herself in rather standard speech, and who is treated—by her creator and by other characters—as a “type” rather than as a fully complicated personality. Stein repudiates the often flowery diction, the often lofty moralism, and the often high-minded characterization that make bad Victorian fiction so difficult to read; instead she chooses a style and methods that are simple almost to the point of being simplistic. Nevertheless, in the process she helped create a new way of writing that other authors (such as Hemingway) would exploit with much greater popular success.

If part 1 of “The Good Anna” focuses mainly on Anna’s relations with other servants, part 2 deals chiefly with her relations with various employers. Part 3, the brief final section, emphasizes the period when she makes her living by taking in boarders. Eventually, having grown increasingly poor and increasingly unhealthy, she dies, and the narrative ends as quietly and abruptly as it began. Stein suggests no larger meaning or significance for Anna’s commonplace life; she offers no grand interpretation of its purpose or even its lack of purpose. Anna dies as she lived: without fanfare, without any close family, with just one friend in attendance—in short,

essentially alone. Yet Stein emphasizes no sense of pathos; she simply describes plain facts.

The second section of *Three Lives*—“Melanctha”—is widely considered one of Stein’s best pieces of writing. It is one of the first works by a white American author to focus so intently and exclusively on the lives of black characters, and although the story has been accused (even by some of Stein’s greatest admirers) of exploiting and perpetuating racist stereotypes, it has also been broadly praised for capturing so effectively the diction and rhythms of African-American speech. The story describes the friendship of Melanctha Herbert (whose first name means dark flower) and Rose Johnson. It also describes Melanctha’s romantic involvements with a young doctor named Jeff Campbell and then with an unsettled gambler named Jem Richards. The potentially offensive nature of Stein’s narrative is apparent from its opening paragraphs, in which Rose is described as “a real black, tall, well built, sullen, stupid, child-like, good looking negress” and as a character who “was never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes” (124). Anyone writing such sentences today would instantly be suspected of racism, but although Stein probably did share some of the racist preconceptions of her era, her phrasing here is also typical of her more general tendency to view *all* her characters (both black and white) in terms of somewhat crude external stereotypes. Fortunately the most important aspect of her depiction of Melanctha is not her almost cartoonish description of the woman’s external traits (“Melanctha Herbert was a graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive negress . . . [who] had been half made with real white blood” [125]) but rather her splendid ability to convey the rhythms of this woman’s thought and speech.

The most interesting portions of “Melanctha” involve the slowly growing affection between the title character and Dr. Jeff Campbell, whom she meets when he helps treat her sick and dying mother. As usual, Stein introduces Campbell with her standard list of simple, even simplistic adjectives and her typical neglect of common punctuation: “Dr. Jefferson Campbell was a serious, earnest, good young

joyous doctor. He liked to take care of everybody and he loved his own colored people. . . . He sang when he was happy, and he laughed, and his was the free abandoned laughter that gives the warm broad glow to negro sunshine" (143). If these sentences had been written by another author, we might suspect the writer of having some ironic fun at the expense of a simple-minded, racist narrator, but such broad-brush comments about ethics, ethnicity, and personality typify the ways Stein describes practically everyone. The story achieves real distinction, however, during the long middle section, in which the dialogues between Jeff and Melanctha are quoted at length. Here, for instance, is Melanctha addressing Jeff early in their relationship:

You are certainly a very good man, Dr. Campbell, I certainly do feel that more every day I see you. Dr. Campbell, I sure do want to be friends with a good man like you, now I know you. You certainly, Dr. Campbell, never do things like other men, that's always ugly for me. Tell me true, Dr. Campbell, how you feel about being always friends with me. I certainly do know, Dr. Campbell, you are a good man, and if you say you will be friends with me, you certainly never will go back on me, the way so many kinds of them do to every girl they ever get to like them. Tell me for true, Dr. Campbell, will you be friends with me. (156)

In passages such as this, many of the odd tics that typified Stein's phrasing (including the repetitions, the comma splices, the simplistic vocabulary, the strange grammar, and the imprecise punctuation, to name just a few) seem perfectly appropriate to the characters she depicts. Much more than is true of "The Good Anna" or "The Gentle Lena," one emerges from "Melanctha" with a strong sense of the distinctive personality of the central character, partly because in "Melanctha" Stein herself often keeps quiet and lets her heroine talk for such long stretches. The result is a fascinating character portrait—certainly one of the most genuinely effective and compulsively readable pieces of writing Stein ever produced.

Unfortunately for Melanctha, her relationship with Jeff Campbell does not last. She loses interest in a man she knows is good and decent (or, as Stein puts it in her typically fractured English: "Melanctha was all ready now to find new ways to be in trouble. And yet Melanctha Herbert never wanted not to do right. Always Melanctha Herbert wanted peace and quiet, and always she could only find new ways to get excited" [217]). New excitement enters her life in the person of Jem Richards, a normally lucky gambler who soon gives her a ring and promises marriage. However, when Jem's luck fails, he sours on making a permanent commitment, and Melanctha's attempts to pressure him boomerang. Over and over again Stein repeats that Melanctha's passion for Jem has made her "mad and foolish" (230), and indeed when he leaves her, she even contemplates suicide. Suicide, however, would be too dramatic and exciting a plot development for a story by Stein, and so Melanctha, as does Anna before her, merely dies an unseen, uneventful, anticlimactic death, and once more Stein deliberately points to no moral, draws no conclusions, and indeed seems rather unmoved by the loss. A different kind of writer would have made us feel the lonely pain of Melanctha's passing or would have drawn some larger parallel between Melanctha's life and the existence of humans in general. Stein, however, deliberately avoids pathos or the suggestion of any larger meaning. Her method is one of laconic understatement and plain restraint. In creating Melanctha Herbert, however, and in letting her speak with Jeff Campbell at such great length, Stein invented some of the most memorably eloquent characters of recent American literature.

The third and final portion of *Three Lives*, titled "The Gentle Lena," resembles the opening section by focusing on a German immigrant servant. The portrait begins just as one might expect, with Stein's typical list of sweeping adjectives: "Lena was patient, gentle, sweet and german" (240). Once more, too, the phrasing is simple to the point of sometimes seeming banal, as when Stein describes Lena's place of employment: "This place Lena had found very good. There was a pleasant, unexacting mistress and her children, and they all liked Lena

very well” (240). Stein’s style in such passages is anything but concrete, precise, or gripping; instead, it seems colorless and abstract, perhaps to suggest the relatively drab and colorless lives such characters lead. Stein describes the predictable relations Lena shares with her fellow servants, her employers, and her employers’ children. Excitement (of a sort) enters Lena’s life only when her employer decides that Lena should marry and arranges a match with the parents of Herman Kreder. A lethargic but compliant young man, he has no real interest in marrying but seems willing, at first, to follow his parents’ orders: “He did not like to see girls and he did not want to have to have one always near him,” but “Herman always did everything that his father and mother wanted and now they wanted that he should be married” (251). Small hints of suspense and uncertainty, and even a bit of pathos, enter the story briefly when Herman absconds before the wedding, but soon he is retrieved and the match occurs. Lena and Herman both perform their duties; they move in with Herman’s parents; and, despite his mother’s scolding of Lena, Herman learns to value her presence (or, as Stein puts it, “He did not care very much about her but she never was a bother to him being there around him” [263]). Another kind of writer might have milked this relationship for a good deal of pathos or even comedy, but neither sympathy nor laughter seems much on Stein’s mind. Or, again, a different kind of writer might have presented Lena’s story as an example of the oppression of women, or might even have presented Herman himself as a victim of his environment and upbringing. Stein, however, seems uninterested in any such “messages,” and the tale’s only real surprise occurs when it emerges that the asexual Herman wants to be a father. Lena, typically, does her duty, and the story’s final pages describe the arrivals of four children. During the fourth delivery the child dies, and even “Lena had grown very pale and sicker. When it was all over Lena had died, too, and nobody knew just how it had happened to her” (270). Not that anyone (including the narrator) seems to care about her death or miss her much; in the story’s final sentence, we are told that “Herman Kreder was very

well content now and he always lived very regular and peaceful, and with every day just like the next one, always alone now with his three good, gentle children” (271). Stein’s phrasing, as usual, is very plain and very simple and very repetitious and very frequent in its use of the word *very* and it is very common for it to be using very bland adjectives like *content* and *regular* and *peaceful* and these no doubt are some of the very reasons that Stein had such a very strong influence on writers who were looking for a very different way of writing than had been usual before Gertrude Stein.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine Stein’s descriptions of the lives of German immigrants. How does she use dialect to depict them and other characters in the book? How does she evoke sympathy for them?
2. Compare and contrast Stein’s depiction of Melanctha with ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S depiction of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How do the women resemble each other or differ in their dialect, their backgrounds, their aspirations, their achievements, and their relations with men?
3. Richard Wright was a great admirer’s of Stein’s “Melanctha.” Read his story “Long Black Song” and then compare and contrast the two works in terms of their use of dialogue, plot, and theme. How and why does Wright use suspense differently than Stein? How do the writers seem to differ in their motives and purposes?

Tender Buttons (1914)

As its title suggests, *Tender Buttons* is full of odd combinations—strange juxtapositions involving words, phrases, and sentences that ordinarily seem to have little relationship. Divided into three sections (titled, respectively, “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms”), the work appears to be a series of brief, disconnected prose paragraphs, although it is often regarded as a collection of short prose poems. Here as in so many of her other works, Stein challenges conventional notions of genre (in other words, the different kinds

of literature), as well as traditional ideas about sentence structure, grammar, logic, punctuation, and the importance of conveying meaning.

Perhaps the most profitable way to read *Tender Buttons* (as well as much of the rest of Stein's work) is as a series of experiments in language. In this text as in so much else that Stein composed, "meaning" in the conventional sense is relatively unimportant; she is not so much trying to convey information or ideas as she is attempting to startle, provoke, disconcert, entertain, and even frustrate. She wants readers to pay attention to individual words and to their unexpected, even apparently "nonsensical" combinations; she wants readers to linger over sounds, to listen for puns, to play (and/or watch Stein play) with words as one plays with toys: for the sheer pleasure of the activity rather than for any more "serious," "larger" purpose. Admirers of *Tender Buttons* find it a fascinating exercise in linguistic inventiveness; they extol its unpredictability, its suggestiveness, its microscopic attention to the tiny details of daily living, its rejection of the tired conventions of "normal," "rational" thought and inherited rhetoric. Dissenters, on the other hand, consider the work mostly monotonous, lumbering, dull, contrived, pretentious, emotionally barren, and finally both uninspired and uninspiring.

Tender Buttons has been usefully compared to the kind of abstraction common in many arts during Stein's era: Just as the cubist painters were challenging traditional methods and subjects of Western painting, and just as the 12-tone composers were undermining traditional techniques of Western music, so Stein and other writers were trying to break free of the standard practices of Western creative writing. Thus, the "poems" Stein creates in *Tender Buttons* do not seem poems in the traditional sense: They lack any regular patterns of rhyme or meter; they resemble short fragments of prose; and they lack any obvious coherence of theme, any standard pattern of internal development, and any clear sense of an overall "plot." It would be difficult to argue, for instance, that the fragments depend on their present arrangement to be intelligible: The current "shape" of the work could presumably be altered without doing any real

damage to its "larger meaning," precisely because Stein seems uninterested in meaning of that sort. Likewise, it would be difficult to imagine the grounds on which any particular interpretation of the work could be challenged. Numerous critics, for instance, have attempted to offer explications of individual sections, but these explications frequently have little in common; nor do their authors seem engaged in meaningful dialogue, partly because *Tender Buttons* does not encourage such exchange. How would it be possible to argue, for instance, that any particular interpretation was "correct" or "incorrect," "adequate" or "inadequate," "convincing" or "unconvincing"? For good or ill, *Tender Buttons* is not amenable to such discussion. Each reader reacts to it individually, and there seem to be no means to assert that any particular reaction is "valid" or "invalid." Faced with a text like *Tender Buttons*, such criteria seem outmoded or pointless. And perhaps such "pointlessness" (ironically) is precisely the point.

Tender Buttons reveals Stein's ability to focus on any particular thing (including the most common domestic objects) and use that thing as an occasion for meditation and writing. The work has often been compared to a collage, and it has also often been compared to a series of painted "still lives"—the kind of painting that centers on objects but in which the objects themselves are less important than the painter's treatment of them. In *Tender Buttons* as elsewhere, the main "theme" of Stein's writing seems to be writing itself; the main subject is not so much any of the things she "describes" but rather the movements of her mind (erratic, associative, dissociative) as she contemplates those objects. The text is fragmented, open-ended, unresolved, and unresolvable; it depends on a method of constant surprise, of continuously subverted expectations. (Of course, once one begins to expect that one's expectations will constantly be subverted, the sense of surprise diminishes and monotony may set in.) It is a text that will intrigue many readers and frustrate many others; it is, in short, Stein at her most Steinian.

The challenges posed by *Tender Buttons* are apparent from the very first item in the "OBJECTS" section:

A carafe, that is a blind glass

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

What do we make of this? The short answer is “pretty much whatever we want.” The “poem” seems to be a series of relatively free associations, and it certainly seems to spark such associations in the minds of many of Stein’s more admiring readers. The first two words of the title seem simple enough: They seem to promise that the “poem” will provide a description of an open-topped glass flask typically used for serving wine. The next two words (*that is*) seem to reinforce this promise: They seem to promise a clarifying explanation. The words that follow, however, are not especially clear or explanatory: In what senses is a carafe a “blind glass”? Well, certainly a carafe is (usually) made of glass, but in what senses is a carafe “blind”? Perhaps in the sense that when it is filled with dark red wine it cannot be seen through, although *blind* is usually a word applied to someone or something normally capable of *seeing* rather than to someone or something normally capable of being *seen* (or seen *through*). Already in the title, then, Stein has achieved her usual effect of being puzzling or provocative—an effect many of her readers find appealing.

When we move into the body of the “poem” itself, we discover that *kind* rhymes with *blind*—a fact commentators frequently note, although why such rhyming is important or how it contributes to the effectiveness of the “poem” is rarely made clear. The first four words of the body of the “poem” seem to continue the definition and explanation begun in the title (a carafe is indeed usually made of glass), but the word *in* is puzzling: If Stein had said that a carafe was a “kind of glass,” the statement would make more immediate sense (although even then it would not be conventionally clear, since a carafe is actually a kind of *thing* that is usually made of glass). Per-

haps Stein means to suggest that a carafe is a kind of thing that usually finds expression in the form of glass; in any case, in a mere four words she has once again disrupted our normal expectations of how an English sentence usually works. Next the carafe is called “a cousin.” Commentators usually note the alliteration of *carafe*, *kind*, and *cousin*, although once again they often fail to explain what larger purpose, if any, the alliteration serves or how it contributes to the poem’s effectiveness or how it adds (dare one say it?) to the beauty of the piece. Commentators also often note the possible pun on the word *spectacle*, which can suggest “glass” put to a different “kind” of use (that is, in eyeglasses, or “spectacles,” which work *against* blindness). This alleged pun can also suggest that the carafe is an object of fascinated sight (a “spectacle” in the sense of being a “public spectacle”). What, however, is the point of such a pun? How is it effective? Is it in any way beautiful? Does it contribute to the overall impact of this “poem”? These are questions each reader must answer for herself or himself.

No sooner does the text describe the carafe as a “spectacle” (in the second sense of the pun) than it immediately asserts that the carafe is “nothing strange.” Thus the work seems to offer a paradox: We are presented with something that is unusual but also not unusual. The word *strange* is later echoed, through assonance and a kind of internal rhyme, by the word *arrangement*. Moreover, the idea that the carafe is “nothing strange” is later complicated by the assertion that it is also “not ordinary,” and then the sound and sense of that phrase are themselves played with in the subsequent assertion that while the carafe is “not ordinary,” it is also “not unordered.” Thus, the carafe is in some ways peculiar (it is “not ordinary”), but it is also not chaotic (“not unordered”). While noting all these kinds of echoes of sounds and all these playings with sense, commentators also often note the constant repetition of *not*, if only because such repetition is one of the mainstays of Stein’s style. Finally, the opening paragraph (or stanza?) of “OBJECTS” closes with an assertion (“The difference is spreading”) whose relation to everything that precedes it is not immediately clear,

although perhaps the word *difference* relates to the prior reference to “not resembling.” Or perhaps not. Perhaps the “poem” ends with a broad metaphysical pronouncement. Or perhaps the reference to “difference” forecasts and foreshadows the method of the ensuing book. Who can say? How could one argue convincingly for any particular interpretation? By what criteria could one decide that any given interpretation was invalid or unconvincing? Is interpretation even necessary or appropriate in dealing with such a text? The only confident assertion one can offer is that the rest of *Tender Buttons* strongly resembles its opening paragraph (and so, in that sense, difference—ironically—is *not* spreading).

One phrase in the opening paragraph does seem (at least to me) memorable and striking: “hurt color.” Here the combination of words does seem to evoke a sharp, refreshing idea. One does not normally think of colors as capable of being “hurt,” but it is just this kind of odd combination of contrasting words, and of distinctive categories of experience, that Stein’s admirers value in her writing. The phrase “hurt color” is effective perhaps because it seems less abstract, less coldly clinical than much of Stein’s phrasing; here both the adjective and the noun seem more vivid than usual. This phrase does seem to refresh the English language in the ways Stein claimed she wanted to do (and in a way that her most famous phrase—“A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”—may not). Commentators have suggested that “hurt color” may refer to the (bloody) red color of wine, or to the various colors of different kinds of wines—colors that may resemble the various shades of a bruise. Whatever the case, I find that “hurt color” does stick in my mind in ways that the rest of the “poem,” frankly, does not. This, of course, is purely a subjective opinion, but it is hard to see how writing like Stein’s can do much more than appeal to almost purely subjective reactions. *Tender Buttons* does not invite us to evaluate it by shared, conventional, traditional categories or by common standards of response. Like most of her works, it is *sui generis*—it is (in other words) a thing unto itself, its own kind of thing, something finally unique.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast one brief section of *Tender Buttons* with WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS’s poem “The Red Wheelbarrow.” How are the works similar and/or different in style, method, tone, and philosophical implication? What do they suggest about the importance of “common” objects? What do they imply about the role of the observer and describer of such objects?
2. Commentators have suggested that some aspects of *Tender Buttons* (including the title itself) have erotic connotations that make sense in light of Stein’s lesbianism. Read through the entire text and look for any imagery, phrasing, rhythms, and possible puns that might support such an interpretation.
3. Compare and contrast one brief section of *Tender Buttons* with EZRA POUND’s brief poem “In a Station of the Metro.” How do the works resemble and/or differ from one another, particularly in their use of imagery, in their structure, and in their use of grammar, punctuation, and syntax (sentence structure)? Which work is more conventionally “unified,” how is such unity achieved, and what does such unity contribute to the effectiveness of the work?

The Making of Americans (1925)

The Making of Americans, which Stein considered her most important work, is less significant for its plot than for its style and technique; it is a huge, rambling book (consisting of over 900 closely printed pages), and even some of Stein’s greatest admirers have confessed to being unable to finish it or even to stay awake while attempting to read it. Ostensibly it is a saga describing the lives of three generations of the Dehning and Hersland clans, with various Herslands resembling various members of Stein’s own family, including Stein herself; the narrative, however, is less concerned with individual personalities or individual conduct than with character types and recurrent patterns of behavior.

The full title of Stein's book—*The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*—suggests that the work is some kind of historical novel, and writing such a work may indeed have been Stein's original intention. By the time she had finished her project, however, she had deliberately violated most of the traditional conventions of novel writing, producing a work in which the story, people, setting, and themes take a distant back seat to the particularities of phrasing and to the very process of writing. Few people read *The Making of Americans* for its narrative; to the extent that the book is read at all, it is usually dipped into for samples of its style and for Stein's reflections on various topics. The work has been considered a kind of day book or journal rather than a standard novel; in other words, it has been regarded as a text in which Stein, over a period of years, recorded her thoughts on various characters and issues (particularly issues of writing, including the writing of this book itself) rather than as a coherent narrative. Both for Stein and for most of her readers, *The Making of Americans* is more important for the way it is written than for what it actually says or for any story it attempts to tell.

The book seems (and probably was) largely improvised; it follows no obvious plan and displays no obvious design. Although it is divided into five large sections, it lacks the kind of coherent structure—such as chapters of roughly equal length—that usually helps readers pace their progress through most traditional novels. Characters are introduced and then dropped for hundreds of pages, only to be reintroduced much later without fanfare or explanation. Because the book deals with different generations of two families, various characters share the same first and last names, but Stein makes little effort to distinguish one person clearly from another. As the book grew in length, so did its sentences and paragraphs; it is not unusual for a single paragraph to take up most of (or even more than) an entire page. As in most of Stein's writings, conventional rules of punctuation and capitalization are tossed aside; commas are often missing where they would usually be expected, or commas are often used where periods or semicolons might

have made the sentence structure clearer. Rambling sentences sometimes consume entire paragraphs. Thus, just as an obvious structure is missing from the book as a whole, so the same kind of structure often seems missing from individual utterances. The book de-emphasizes many of the standard “literary” devices (such as imagery, metaphors, similes, dialogue, dialect, dramatic irony, foreshadowing, symbolism, wit, humor, figurative language, or descriptions of setting) that attract most readers to most novels and help sustain their interest.

The following paragraph, for instance, is relatively short and relatively conventional in its focus on character description (including inner personality traits) and on relations *between* characters; even in this paragraph, however, some of Stein's most typical stylistic traits are obvious:

Mr. David Hersland had it in his strongest living to be as big as all the world around him, it was in him, he was all it in him, it was to him all inside him, he was it and it was to him all always in him. This was the big feeling in him and then he was strong in beginning. This was the biggest time of his living, when this was strong in him his big feeling his being strong in beginning his keeping going even with impatient feeling in him, before all of it in him turned into impatient feeling. This was the big time in his living, and this was when his wife was still in him as a tender feeling, when his children were first beginning to have in them individual feeling. This was the time of such a big feeling in him and then he was strong in beginning. The world around him, all, every moment, in beginning, it was then and it was all in him, and he was strong then and full up with beginning. (136)

Here as so often elsewhere, Stein's choice of individual words seems simple and plain; she writes a kind of basic English, restricting herself to just a few fundamental words and then repeating them continuously. She rings constant variations on them, recombining them in almost every conceivable way until she seems to have exhausted practically every possible permutation of sound and

meaning. Her style has often been compared, in this respect, to the style of grammar school primers (such as the famous Sally, Dick, and Jane books), in which a few basic words are reiterated incessantly, often to the point of maddening monotony. In this sense, her style can often seem deliberately naive and even childish, although obviously one of her intentions was the more sophisticated one of trying to force readers to puzzle out the complexities that can result when a few apparently simple terms are laid out, combined, and then endlessly recombined. Thus, although Stein's vocabulary is indeed usually simple, it is also usually anything but transparent; it is impossible to breeze through a Stein sentence, reading it quickly for any obvious "meaning." Instead, Stein tries to compel readers to linger over every word, even every syllable; she wants us to pay close attention to every single word *as a word*, rather than simply as the symbol of an idea. When read aloud, her sentences often have a rhythmic, hypnotic quality; they function more as a kind of music than as plain communication.

In the paragraph just quoted as so often elsewhere, Stein violates all the standard rules usually associated with effective writing. Rather than showing, she tells; rather than using dialogue to disclose feeling, she stands apart from her characters and externally describes their emotions in the most blatantly abstract language. Rather than using vivid imagery to create pictures in her readers' minds, she uses terms so general that they risk seeming imprecise and vague. (What, exactly, is a "big feeling"?) Rather than using just a few words to convey meaning efficiently and effectively, she often uses more words than plain sense seems to require—referring, for instance, to "impatient feeling" rather than "impatience." Grammatically she prefers to emphasize participles and gerunds (such as *living, beginning, keeping, feeling, being, going*, etc.), and the effect is to slow the pace of her paragraphs, de-emphasizing any sense of rapid action and thereby forcing the reader to linger, and almost to meditate, over every single word. Moreover, just as Stein violates the common rules of effective narrative, so she violates the standard prescriptions of normal grammar and punctuation. Comma

splices and run-on sentences abound; parentheses and dashes (typically used for emphasis and clarity) are rarely employed. Semicolons rarely appear, and question marks or exclamation marks are also infrequent. Most of Stein's sentences are blandly declarative. She seems less interested in getting inside her characters' heads or hearts and letting them speak for themselves than in making external pronouncements about them. In short, Stein seems less interested in her characters (or her readers) than in Gertrude Stein: Gertrude Stein's thoughts, Gertrude Stein's style, Gertrude Stein's emotions. Many professional readers of Stein find this egotism refreshingly honest, and certainly in her obsession with her own responses to words, ideas, and behavior, Stein has given us one of the most detailed insights into the minute workings of one person's mind ever put to paper. Her proclaimed intention, in writing *The Making of Americans*, was to show how the American people had evolved, and she also said that she was interested in explaining the fundamental traits of a few basic personality types. In the end, however, the clearest picture that emerges from her book is a complex picture of Stein's own mind and personality, Stein's own thoughts and emotions, Stein's own struggles with language and meaning and narrative. The book, in the final analysis, is perhaps more a record of the making of Gertrude Stein than of anything else.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *The Making of Americans* with another experimental novel that deals with the fortunes of several generations of the same family—WILLIAM FAULKNER's *Absalom, Absalom!* In particular, discuss the works in terms of their styles, themes, structures, and characterization. Which book would you more strongly recommend to a friend, and why?
2. Since Stein admired Henry James, compare and contrast *The Making of Americans* with his novel *The Europeans*. How do the works resemble and/or differ from one another in style, theme, tone, and structure? What do the works suggest about the traits of inhabitants of the "Old World" (Europe) and the "New World" (America)? Can

you see any ways in which James may have influenced Stein in his methods or concerns?

3. Examine *The Making of Americans* in light of T. S. Eliot's famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." What is Stein's relationship with the tradition of novel writing that precedes her? How does she help alter and transform that tradition? How (if at all) does Stein's work exemplify the kind of artistry Eliot calls for in that essay? How (if at all) is Stein the kind of artist Eliot admires? How might Stein have reacted to Eliot's ideas?

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933)

This book, which was Stein's most popular work and which is one of her most accessible, is initially presented as the autobiography of Toklas, her long-time companion; its central focus, however, is Stein herself, and, in its final pages, Stein's own authorship is made clear. Stein uses a generally lucid and straightforward style to recount, in gossipy, often witty anecdotes, her decades of life in Paris and her relations with many of the most famous names of modern art (including Matisse and Picasso) as well as her connections with such noted writers as Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson. Stein's personality traits (including her humorous egotism, her unconventional opinions, and her often peculiar habits of thought and expression) provide the main source of unity in a work that tacitly assumes that any event in the life of Gertrude Stein will naturally interest others.

People who knew Alice B. Toklas have claimed that Stein, in this book, expertly conveys Toklas's own habits of speech and thought—so much so, in fact, that some scholars have even suggested that Toklas herself may in fact have written the book. The consensus of opinion, however, is that Stein is indeed the author, and certainly it would have been typical of Stein to write about another person's life in a way that makes Stein the central figure. Just as Stein was able, in *Three Lives*, to imitate convincingly the speech patterns of a variety of Afri-

can Americans and German immigrants, so in the *Autobiography* she was able to mimic the tone and temperament of Alice B. Toklas. The stylistic peculiarities of the book (such as its habit of jumping erratically from one topic or time to another, or its self-conscious references to the process of its own composition) are appropriate in a work that offers itself as an unfolding monologue expressing the mind and perspectives of one particular person. In writing the book, Stein not only conveyed aspects of her own life story in often interesting ways, but also created an interesting "fictional" character who also happened to be a "real" person. This kind of blending and subversion of traditional genres, as well as this kind of experimentation with style and point of view, are both typical of modern literature, but in writing the *Autobiography* Stein also created a work that has a generally interesting story to tell, that presents some often intriguing characters, and that is frequently appealing for its stylistic cleverness. In short, in writing the *Autobiography* she came closer than usual to meeting conventional standards of literary effectiveness. Although the book sometimes becomes tiring in its "this-happened-and-then-this-happened-and-then-Gertrude-Stein-said-this-about-that" comprehensiveness, there is no denying that the work is often fascinating and clever and that it is even sometimes both fun and funny.

One appealing aspect of the *Autobiography* is its emphasis on the personal eccentricities of both Toklas and Stein. A reader never knows quite what to expect from either of them, and thus the book attains a certain level of sustained suspense, since we can never predict what either woman may say or do. Both seem to be generally good-natured individualists who not only enjoy their own peculiarities but also seem interested in (and mostly tolerant of) the peculiarities of others. In the book's third paragraph, for instance, Stein has Toklas report of herself that "I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it" (659), and it is just this sort of emphasis on slightly off-kilter sensibilities that helps make the book attractive. Humor also adds to the book's appeal, as when "Toklas" reports (with Stein's typical disregard for conventional punctuation) that "I remember that once when my brother

and a comrade had gone horse-back riding, one of the horses returned riderless to the hotel, the mother of the other boy began to make a terrible scene. Be calm madam, said my father, perhaps it is my son who has been killed" (660). The *Autobiography* is full of similarly clever anecdotes, and one senses that both Stein and Toklas saw life as a kind of droll pageant staged mainly to amuse and entertain them. Partly for this reason, the tone of the work sometimes seems superficial; rarely does much depth of feeling or any sense of tragedy or compassion or deeply personal revelation interrupt the flow of sophisticated chitchat. We never have much sense, for instance, of anything painful about the lives of two women, who were, after all, a pair of conventionally unattractive expatriate Jewish lesbians in a culture that often disdained Jews, mocked the fat and "ugly," and discriminated against gays. In fact, the most intimately personal aspects of the relation between Stein and Toklas are never discussed; their sexual identities are lightly implied but never confirmed. To expect such things from the book, however, would be to misjudge its purpose: It is, for the most part, a witty comedy (often resembling a play by Oscar Wilde) in which Stein gets all the good lines.

Stein makes little attempt to impose a conventional shape on the book or to hide the hinges that link its various parts. She is not trying to write a "standard" autobiography but to create a kind of drama, with Toklas as the only actor in a one-woman show—but a show in which Stein is always the main subject of discussion. "Toklas" is constantly telling us what she plans to tell us before she is distracted by another digression; the book thus conveys the sense of listening to an actual person talking. The *Autobiography* also contains many of Stein's standard stylistic tics (such as her emphasis on repetition), but in this case those traits do not seem as contrived or self-indulgent as they occasionally seem in her other works, since they appear to reflect the idiosyncratic character of "Toklas." At one point, for instance, "Toklas" says, "I was confused and I looked and I looked and I was confused" (668). Here the repetition seems effective, since it not only captures and conveys an individual

personality, also re-creates and mimics the very sense of puzzlement it describes. Likewise, when "Toklas" later says that "Matisse worked every day and every day and every day and he worked terribly hard" (696), the repetition seems functional rather than arbitrary: It forces the reader to share the experience of incessant labor rather than merely reading about it. Whether or not Stein's book is factually reliable (and many of the people described in its pages instantly challenged its credibility), it certainly conveys the *impression* of plausibility, vitality, and real life; one comes away from it with a strong sense of what it might truly have been like to be alive in bohemian Paris in the early decades of the 20th century.

The *Autobiography* is full of memorable anecdotes and incisive observations, many of them involving some of the most important figures of 20th-century culture. It is hard to forget (for instance) Stein's brutally quick put-down of Ezra Pound (whose own ego was almost as large as hers): "Gertrude Stein liked him but did not find him amusing. She said he was a village explainer, excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not" (856). Likewise, she later quotes Picasso as saying dismissively of Georges Braque (the painter) and James Joyce (the novelist), "they are the incomprehensibles whom anybody can understand" (869). One of the most often-quoted of these jibes concerns the now mostly forgotten Glenway Wescott, about whom Stein simply said, "He has a certain syrup but it does not pour" (875). Hemingway, meanwhile, is depicted as a kind of imitative, cowardly sycophant whose mysterious personal life is far more interesting than any of his books (872). Yet Stein was sometimes capable of genuine admiration for others, especially if she considered them geniuses (like her) and especially if she herself had played any role in calling them to public attention. (It also helped if the others in question had publicly praised Gertrude Stein.) Thus she expresses great regard for Picasso and for the painter Juan Gris, and her opinion of Sherwood Anderson seems to have been as high as his opinion of her. At times, however, her comments seem callous by modern standards, as when she writes, "Gertrude Stein

7. Choose a short work by Ernest Hemingway (such as the story "Hills Like White Elephants") and then, on the basis of your reading of that work, try to decide why Hemingway admired Gertrude Stein and how her method(s) of writing influenced his own style. For instance, how does the story reflect Stein's interest in repetition, in subtle revelation of character, and in a lack of conventional emphasis on story or "plot"?
8. If you had to choose one work of Stein's to recommend to a good friend, which work would you choose, and which three reasons would lead you to recommend it? Is there a work of Stein's that you do not particularly like? If so, which one is it? Explain specifically why you dislike the work; what three elements of the work do you find particularly ineffective?
9. Listen to the work of a recent minimalist musical composer, such as Philip Glass. For example, listen to his works called *Einstein on the Beach* and *Akhnaten*. How does Glass's music resemble Stein's writings, particularly in its use of repetition, variation, simplicity, and unexpected shifts?
10. Compare and contrast *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* with Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. How are the two works comparable or different in their themes, structures, styles, tones, and purposes? What are the ethical implications of each work; in other words, how does each work address issues of right and wrong in human conduct? How are both concerned with issues of art but in different ways? Is one work

fundamentally more serious than the other? Is it fair to compare them?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bridgman, Richard. *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Hoffman, Michael J., ed. *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986.
- . *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965.
- . *Gertrude Stein*. Boston: Twayne, 1976.
- Knapp, Bettina L. *Gertrude Stein*. New York: Continuum, 1990.
- Nelson, Cary. "Modern American Poetry: Gertrude Stein." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/s_z/stein/stein.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Reid, B. L. *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*. Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.
- . *Writings 1903–1932: Q.E.D., Three Lives, Portraits and Other Short Works, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Edited by Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- Stendhal, Renate, ed. *Gertrude Stein in Words and Pictures: A Photobiography*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1994.

Robert C. Evans



JOHN STEINBECK (1902–1968)

I have always lived violently, drunk hugely, eaten too much or not at all, slept around the clock or missed two nights of sleeping, worked too hard and too long in glory, or slobbered for a time in utter laziness. I've lifted, pulled, chopped, climbed, made love with joy and taken my hangovers as a consequence, not as a punishment.

(*Travels with Charley*)

John Steinbeck's status as a major American author would be secure if he had written no book other than *The Grapes of Wrath*, his huge, sprawling, vivid, and moving account of a simple Oklahoma farm family displaced, along with hundreds of thousands of others, from their land during the disastrous drought that made the Great Depression of the 1930s a doubly devastating period. *The Grapes of Wrath* is an American epic, but in addition to composing that significant and popular book Steinbeck authored *Of Mice and Men* (a brief novel about loneliness that is almost a drama in prose), *The Pearl* (a lyrical but tragic parable about a modern-day loss of innocence), and a number of short stories that are considered among his country's finest. Steinbeck also, of course, wrote much else during the course of a long and prolific career, and during that career he was showered with prizes, awards, and recognitions—a trend that culminated in his being awarded, in 1962, the Nobel Prize in literature. Yet although his works were often turned into influential films and his books remain widely read, he has never been accorded quite the same level of critical respect bestowed on such contemporaries as ERNEST HEMINGWAY or WILLIAM FAULKNER. He remains a writer whose reputation was somewhat hurt by his very popularity.

Most of the details of Steinbeck's life are laid out clearly in the helpful "Chronology" compiled by Robert DeMott. Steinbeck was born on Febru-

ary 27, 1902, in the town of Salinas, California, to Olive Hamilton Steinbeck (who had been a teacher) and John Ernst Steinbeck, who managed a local flour mill. The Steinbecks already had two daughters (Esther and Beth) and would later add another (Mary). Young John, however, was their only boy, and he spent his early years enjoying the pleasures of nature and developing an early infatuation with books and literature. He was a good student, and already as an adolescent he had begun composing stories and sharing them with friends. After graduating from Salinas High School, Steinbeck began taking classes in fall 1919 at Stanford University, which he attended off and on for the next several years without ever taking a degree. Meanwhile, he also worked at various practical jobs and began to develop a deep interest in science to match and balance his literary inclinations. He did publish stories in the Stanford literary magazine, but his real interest in writing did not fully surface until after he moved in 1926 to New York, where he worked both as a laborer and as a reporter. His first collection of short stories was turned down that year by a New York publisher, but Steinbeck persisted in writing, and by 1927 (after he had returned to California) he had published one story and had begun collaborating on a play. By 1928 he had completed his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, which appeared in print in August 1929. By this time, Steinbeck (who had been working a variety of jobs)

had moved to San Francisco and was able to devote more time to writing, thanks to financial support from his father. In 1930 he married Carol Henning (whom he had met in 1928), and the two lived extremely simple lives in a number of very modest homes. Most important to Steinbeck, however, was 1930 because it was the year in which he first made the acquaintance of Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist who became a close and influential friend. Meanwhile, Steinbeck continued to write, producing an innovative short novel as well as a crime novel (neither of which was published). In 1931 he was also hard at work on a series of stories that were published in 1932 as *The Pastures of Heaven*.

The year 1933 was sad but productive for Steinbeck. In early spring his mother became severely sick, eventually suffering a major stroke. Steinbeck and his wife soon moved home to care for her, but then his father also became seriously ill. When time permitted, Steinbeck worked on stories that eventually became part of his noted collection titled *The Red Pony*, and indeed two of them were printed in a prominent magazine by the end of the year. Meanwhile, his novel *To a God Unknown* appeared in September, by which time he was also nearly finished with the first draft of a new novel—*Tortilla Flat*—that would soon help make him famous. When his mother passed away in February 1934, Steinbeck and his wife continued to live with his father for a time, but eventually caretakers were found to look after him, thus freeing John to devote more time to his writing. During that summer he composed nine stories, most of which were later collected in *The Long Valley*, but during this time he was also working on a new novel, *In Dubious Battle*, which was based on recent labor strife in California. *Tortilla Flat* was accepted for publication in 1934, and in 1935 *In Dubious Battle* was also accepted. Unfortunately the highly successful publication of *Tortilla Flat* in May was counterbalanced by the death of the novelist's father that same month. Profits from sales of the novel allowed Steinbeck and his wife to travel to Mexico, and it was not long before film rights to the book were also sold for a substantial sum. Steinbeck, in other words, had finally begun to achieve real commercial success as a writer. *In Dubious Bat-*

tle appeared in print early in 1936, thus giving him even further visibility as an increasingly significant author.

By this time he had also begun working on one of his most famous books—*Of Mice and Men*. Unfortunately, his dog chewed up much of the manuscript, but Steinbeck was able to rewrite the piece rather quickly (and showed relative mercy to the dog). The revised manuscript was finished by August 1935; by then the Steinbecks had also moved into a newly constructed home near Monterey, California. The year 1935 was even more significant for other reasons, however, because this was the year in which he began researching California's migrant farm workers—research that would eventually lead to the composition of his masterwork, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the meantime, however, a number of his less famous books were issued in limited editions this year, and in March 1937 *Of Mice and Men* was published and became immediately successful. The Steinbecks were now able to travel in northern Europe as well as in the Soviet Union, and on their return in midyear his notable collection of stories, *The Red Pony*, was published, to be followed in the fall by an enormously well-received stage version of *Of Mice and Men* on Broadway (Steinbeck himself, however, never attended a performance). Meanwhile, early in 1938 a stage adaptation of *Tortilla Flat* was much less successful, but in general the late 1930s were perhaps the most satisfying years of Steinbeck's creative career. In 1938 the dramatic adaptation of *Of Mice and Men* won the top award of the New York Drama Critics' Circle; also during 1938 Steinbeck was hard at work on the novel that would soon be published as *The Grapes of Wrath*. He finally finished the book in November, by which time his collection of short stories titled *The Long Valley* had been published and was doing well both with critics and with the buying public.

It was in 1939, however, when he achieved his greatest critical and popular success. *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared in April and was soon the country's best-selling novel. Even readers who disliked it recognized its political importance. Indeed, the book was too often discussed as a political docu-

ment rather than as a work of art—a fact that led, for a long time, to insufficient appreciation of the work as a well-crafted novel. It was actually burned or banned in various American locales and was even denounced in Congress; farmers' associations considered it a left-wing libel, while leftists naturally embraced it. In any case, it was not long before Hollywood purchased the film rights; nor was it long until the work was turned into an unusually fine movie directed by John Ford and starring Henry Fonda, which appeared by the end of the year—at around the same time as the release of a separate film based on *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck himself, in fact, was increasingly becoming involved in motion pictures: In 1939 he collaborated on a documentary called *The Fight for Life*, and it was in Hollywood in 1939 that he met and began an affair with a singer named Gwendolyn (“Gwyn”) Conger. Nevertheless, his now-strained marriage to Carol would briefly continue, and during 1940 he worked on further film projects, including the script for a movie called *The Forgotten Village*. The highlight of 1940, however, was the news that *The Grapes of Wrath* had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. (With typical generosity, Steinbeck gave the prize money to a fellow novelist to help him complete a book of his own.)

Early in 1941 Steinbeck purchased a small home back in Monterey, near Salinas. By spring he had separated from Carol, at around the same time as the publication of his newest book (*The Forgotten Village*, based on the script of the film). He was also now at work on a screenplay of *The Red Pony*, and the end of the year saw the appearance of his innovative work *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journey of Travel and Research*, cowritten with his scientist friend Ed Ricketts. By this time, of course, the United States had been plunged into World War II, and soon Steinbeck began his own contributions to the war effort. His novel *The Moon Is Down*, which takes place in occupied Norway, appeared in March 1942, followed quickly in April by a staged version on Broadway and plans for a film. Steinbeck also began work on an officially sanctioned book about the U.S. Army Air Force; this soon appeared as *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*. Although

plans for a film of that book were soon in the works, it never appeared, but by the end of the year Steinbeck had completed the script for a new movie—*A Medal for Benny*—and a Hollywood film of his earlier novel *Tortilla Flat* was issued, directed by Victor Fleming and starring Spencer Tracy.

Steinbeck's divorce from Carol became final in mid-March 1943, and within two weeks he had married Gwyn. By midsummer he was off to Europe and North Africa as a war reporter, but his involvement was not limited to reporting: He actually took part in combat (including special operations commanded by the actor Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) and suffered both physical and psychological wounds. Partly in response, he began working on *Cannery Row*, a nostalgic look back at life in prewar Monterey. Nevertheless, by the end of 1943, his war film *The Moon Is Down* was released (as was an important omnibus collection of his writings titled *The Portable Steinbeck*). In addition, early in 1944 another war movie (based on a Steinbeck novella and titled *Lifeboat*) appeared, and although Steinbeck himself disliked the film, even though it had been directed by Alfred Hitchcock, it nevertheless won him an Academy Award nomination. More important to Steinbeck, however, were the birth of his son Thom (on August 2) and his move back to Monterey by the end of the year. Appropriately enough, the novel he had set in that town (*Cannery Row*) appeared early in 1945; it was a commercial success even if many critics disliked it, and soon the novella *The Pearl* was completed, with Steinbeck quickly beginning work (mostly in Mexico) on turning this story into a film. Ironically, by the end of the year his relations with the Monterey community had become so sour that he and Gwyn quickly sold their house there and returned to New York, and Steinbeck would live mostly in the East from then on.

Although the major event in Steinbeck's life in 1946 was the birth of his son John (in mid-June), he also completed a novel titled *The Wayward Bus*, which was published early in 1947. By this time, however, his relationship with Gwyn had begun to falter, as had his own health. Nevertheless, after recovering well enough to travel, he visited France

with Gwyn in midsummer and then traveled without her in Eastern Europe for much of the rest of the year. In November *The Pearl* appeared in book form (having earlier been published in a magazine), followed early in 1948 by the film version, which was itself followed in the spring by the publication of his book titled *A Russian Journal*. Unfortunately these successes were soon counterbalanced by various kinds of misfortune, including hospitalization for minor surgery, the death of his good friend Ed Ricketts, and (by October) final divorce from Gwyn. Although Steinbeck tried to distract himself from such troubles, he nevertheless began drinking too much and became severely depressed. Professionally, however, he continued to prosper; he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters by the end of 1948, and early in 1949 the film based on his own screenplay of *The Red Pony* (with music by Aaron Copland) was released. During that same year he met Elaine Scott, the wife of the actor Zachary Scott, and by the end of the year she had filed for divorce from her husband and had moved in with Steinbeck. Meanwhile, in 1950 he continued his work in film and theater, collaborating on a movie titled *Viva Zapata!* (released in 1953), while also seeing his latest work (*Burning Bright*) first produced as an unsuccessful Broadway play and then released as a novel. By the very end of 1950 he had married Elaine, but he was also hard at work during this period on a lengthy new novel—to be titled *East of Eden*—which he hoped would be a major book.

The novel was published late in 1952, after a period in which Steinbeck and Elaine had traveled widely in Europe. Commercially the book was a success, but critically it was less so. Despite Academy Award nominations in 1953 for his work on the film *Viva Zapata!* (which had been released the year before), and despite his work on other literary projects, Steinbeck during this time was depressed. Nevertheless, he was anything but paralyzed or inactive. He was moving in high society; he was writing frequently for newspapers; he collaborated on plans to turn *Cannery Row* into a musical; he was able to travel widely; and in 1954 his latest novel, *Sweet Thursday*, was published. In 1955 the

film adaptation of *East of Eden* (overseen by the notable director Elia Kazan and starring James Dean) appeared, and toward the end of that year *Pipe Dream*, a musical created by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II and based on Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday*, was produced on Broadway (although without much success). Steinbeck was increasingly involved in politics (he actively supported each of Adlai Stevenson's three presidential campaigns, in 1952, 1956, and 1960), and in 1957 he actually published a short satirical novel based on the French political scene titled *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*. Yet much of his time during the late 1950s was consumed in foreign travel, and his health had become unpredictable. His literary production during this time was not especially noteworthy; his novel *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which was published in 1961, totally pleased neither the critics nor Steinbeck himself. He achieved a genuine popular success, however, in 1962 with the publication of *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, which recounts a long, 10,000-mile car trip he took with his dog around the country in 1960. It was also in 1962, however, that Steinbeck—to the surprise of many and the utter astonishment of not a few—was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Many thought that he was hardly the most deserving candidate, but this was not the first (or last) time that the Nobel award created this kind of controversy.

In the final five years or so of his life, Steinbeck functioned frequently as a kind of national cultural ambassador. He traveled widely in Europe and in the Soviet Union in 1963, received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 from Lyndon Johnson, traveled in England and Ireland in 1965, and was named by Johnson to the council of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1966. During this time he supported the war in Vietnam and in fact even traveled there in 1966 and 1967, filing positive reports about the conflict for a New York newspaper, but by April 1967 he had returned to the United States with an injured back that required surgery. Although the operation (which took place that fall) succeeded, Steinbeck suffered a stroke at the end of May 1968 and then two heart attacks in the next few months. By this time he had become

disillusioned with the war, but his days as an active political commentator had now ended. When he died of heart failure on December 20, 1968, he was widely considered one of the most important American writers of the 20th century. Although, as do many great authors, he had long outlived his most creative period, he had nonetheless produced thousands of pages of memorable work. Probably none of those pages, however, were more memorable or of longer-lasting significance than *The Grapes of Wrath*.

“The Chrysanthemums” (1937, 1938)

Elisa Allen, a strong, capable woman with a talent for growing plants, lives with her kind but taciturn husband, Henry, on a small ranch in California’s Salinas Valley; when Henry sells some steers from the ranch, he suggests that he and Elisa go into the nearby town to celebrate by having dinner and seeing a movie. After Henry goes off to round up the steers, Elisa sees a traveling salesman approach in a beat-up old wagon; when he seems interested in the chrysanthemums she is growing, she gives him some in a pot to take with him, and she feels pride and satisfaction in the fact that she and her plants are valued. Later, however, as she and Henry drive into town, she sees the flowers tossed onto the road, but she realizes that the salesman did at least keep the valuable pot.

The story opens with imagery that already suggests the isolated, enclosed, somewhat dreary life Elisa leads with her husband on their remote farm. Elisa herself is described in ways that make her sound almost conventionally masculine: Her clothing, activities, and manner associate her with male stereotypes, although she also seems physically and psychically remote from most of the actual men on the ranch, including the ranch hand, some visiting agricultural buyers, and even her own husband, with whom her conversations tend to be abrupt and even a bit awkward. Communication does not seem to be an especially strong point in this marriage, and the fact that the couple apparently have no children, combined with their somewhat clumsy

and reticent ways of speaking to one another, has led many critics to assume that their marriage is a source of sexual and psychological frustration, at least for Elisa. Her vigorous devotion to her plants, and especially to her flowers, has led many readers to assume that gardening provides her a sense of satisfaction, beauty, pride, and fulfillment that is otherwise lacking in her life. According to this view, the flowers function almost as substitute children; cultivating them gives her a sense of power, identity, and fulfillment she otherwise lacks. Likewise, the traveling salesman seems to appreciate not only her own technical skill but also the beauty of her flowers; in her discussion with him about the plants, she seems far more animated, stimulated, and voluble than in her earlier exchange with her own husband, and indeed her response to the salesman even seems tinged with a kind of sexual excitement, partly because he seems to symbolize a romantic life of travel, freedom, and adventure. To her he seems to represent the sort of autonomy and liberty denied her because she is a woman, and in fact many critics read the story from an explicitly feminist point of view, so that Elisa is seen as a victim of an oppressive, male-dominated culture. Her encounter with the salesman leads her to feel a renewed sense of self-worth and a renewed appreciation of her own sexual and feminine potency.

Ironically when Elisa, near the end of the story, sees the flowers discarded in the middle of the road, she realizes that the seemingly romantic traveler is far less thoughtful and caring than her stumbling, bumbling husband, whose compliments, affection, and concern, however poorly expressed, at least seem sincere. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the tale, Elisa feels impotent and defeated; in our very last glimpse of her she is “crying weakly—like an old woman” (348). In one sense the story is an object lesson in the illusions inherent in dreams that are excessively romantic and insufficiently realistic; in another sense, however, the story is a sympathetic study of the alienation, isolation, and sense of constriction any human being (of either sex) can feel from time to time. Although Elisa herself can at times seem at least as distant and remote as her husband, Steinbeck succeeds in picturing her

in ways that arouse compassion for her loneliness and empathy for her longings.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with “The Great Mountain,” the second tale in Steinbeck’s collection titled *The Red Pony*. Which characters in one story most resemble which characters in the other story? How and why? How are the themes of the two stories similar? How do they also resemble one another in setting and in style?
2. Read this story alongside KATHERINE ANNE PORTER’s tale “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.” Discuss any similarities and differences between the two main characters. Which of the two (if either) is more sympathetic? Explain your response. How are the stories similar in theme?
3. How does Steinbeck use symbolism in this story to reinforce characterization and themes? In particular, discuss the ways the landscape is described, the ways the flowers are depicted, and the ways actions are presented (especially Elisa’s actions as she works with the plants and, later, as she prepares for her evening out with Henry).

“The Leader of the People” (1937)

When the grandfather of young Jody Tiflin (his mother’s father) announces his plans to visit Jody and his parents at their modest ranch, the parents have opposite reactions: Jody’s mother looks forward to the event, but Jody’s father dreads it, because he hates to listen to the old man’s endlessly repeated stories about the days when he and other explorers traveled across the United States in wagons to settle in California. One morning, when the grandfather accidentally overhears Carl complaining to Jody’s mother about the stories, the old man becomes depressed and withdrawn, partly because he realizes that there may be some justice to Carl’s complaints. Although Carl awkwardly apologizes for his words, it is young Jody who makes a real effort to comfort and appreciate the elderly storyteller.

This story was eventually included as the final work in Steinbeck’s four-part collection titled *The Red Pony*. Just as the first and third stories of that collection focus on young Jody’s obsession with the adventure of owning and raising a horse, so the second and fourth stories focus on his fascination with the adventurous lives once lived by old men who are now approaching death. Indeed, death—whether literal or figurative—is a major theme that unites all four works: Collectively, the stories show Jody’s initiation into an adult world of mutability and loss. At one point, for instance, when Jody is telling Billy Buck (the family’s faithful ranch hand) how he plans to kill some mice, he says, “I’ll bet they’re fat. I’ll bet they don’t know what’s going to happen to them today.” To this, Billy Buck (a spokesman for intelligent common sense in all four stories) simply replies, “No, nor you either, . . . nor me, nor anyone.” Life, Steinbeck suggests, is not only unpredictable but also often hard and unforgiving, and just as the mice can easily be crushed and killed, so can humans suddenly be robbed of their literal lives, their metaphorical vitality, or their reasons for living. Billy’s words, in fact, prove prophetic, for it is only a few paragraphs later that Jody’s grandfather feels crushed by the weight of Carl’s thoughtless words.

In addition to showing Jody’s growing acquaintance with death and disappointment, the stories in *The Red Pony* collection show his own growing maturation, and nowhere is he more mature than at the conclusion of the present tale. Having witnessed, with shame, his father’s wounding of the grandfather, Jody loses his earlier keen interest in killing the similarly defenseless mice. Instead, he sits on the porch, trying to comfort the old man, if only through his presence. No one else makes a similar effort: His father has already retreated; his mother has refused to intervene; and even the wise and compassionate Billy Buck has been left speechless and has hurried off. In the final pages of the story, the young boy sits and listens sympathetically to the old man, thus demonstrating his own growth toward moral maturity. This conclusion might easily have been trite and sentimental, but Steinbeck wisely refrains from implying that any problem has

really been resolved. The old man's depression is not cured, but he does take some comfort in his grandson's simple presence and respect. Although the grandfather ends the story by feeling defeated and outmoded, Jody's kindness implies that a fundamental link from the past to the present has been forged and that the moral values embodied by the grandfather will pass to a new generation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the three earlier stories in *The Red Pony* collection and trace Jody's emotional, psychological, and moral growth from one story to the next. How does he mature in his relations with others, in his attitudes toward life, and in his capacity for independent action? How does Steinbeck demonstrate his own ethical maturity in the present story? How, for instance, does he prevent Carl Tiflin from seeming a mere villain even in the present tale?
2. Compare and contrast the presentation of elderly characters in this story and in JACK LONDON's tale "The Law of Life." How are the underlying philosophies of the two stories similar and/or distinct? What traits do the two old men in the stories have in common; how are they different? Contrast the endings of the two works.
3. Discuss the ways different generations relate to one another in this story. What role does the theme of past versus present play?
4. Make a list of at least 10 specific words or phrases from this story that you find especially striking, memorable, or effective, and then try to explain why they have that kind of impact. You might focus, for instance, on striking imagery, memorable sound effects, or effective bits of dialogue.

Of Mice and Men (1937)

The novel opens by focusing on two working-class drifters who are also close friends: George Milton is small, intense, intelligent, and skilled at practical survival, while Lennie Small is a huge, childlike, mentally retarded man whose affection for soft little animals (such as mice and puppies) often

leads, ironically, to their deaths because Lennie has no sense of his own strength when he tries to caress them. The two men dream of someday owning a small farm together, but in the meantime economic necessity compels them to take work on a ranch populated by a variety of other lonely workmen and overseen by the small, pugnacious Curley (whose belligerence leads him into conflict with practically everyone—including, to his misfortune, the gigantic Lennie) and Curley's wife, whose prowling, flirtatious, almost predatory yearnings, combined with her fundamental loneliness, lead to her accidental death during an unfortunate encounter with Lennie. As Curley and a mob pursue Lennie with the intention of vengefully killing him, George, in an ironic act of mercy, preempts them by shooting Lennie himself—thus ending not only the life of his best friend but also his own dreams of the life they had hoped to share.

Of Mice and Men was the first work by Steinbeck to win him enormous popularity. First published as a short novel with an unusually high degree of dialogue, this playlike work was soon transformed into an award-winning drama that pleased both audiences and critics alike. Later the story became the basis of a well-regarded film. Meanwhile, the novel continues to be very widely read (especially in high schools), and the play has been adapted and filmed several times since the release of the original movie in 1939. Yet although the novel is often considered one of Steinbeck's best, it has also been subject to severe criticism over the years. Its characters have been condemned as simplistic stereotypes; its plot has been attacked as too predictable; its tone has been censured for being too sentimental; its language has been called uncouth and uninspired; and its themes have been called thin and rudimentary. Even Steinbeck himself expressed some reservations about the success of the book, but it nevertheless continues to be read, admired, studied, and praised.

As many of Steinbeck's works do, this one focuses on relatively simple working-class people who must struggle to survive. It shows the loneliness that pervades the lives of many people, but it also shows the satisfactions that can result when persons let

down their guard and embrace the possibilities of friendship. Communication among the characters is often awkward, stilted, and inarticulate, but when true communication does occur, it can provide immense satisfactions. The novel reveals the genuine capacity of people to care for (and about) one another, but it also shows the obstacles that so often stand in the way of a satisfying sense of community. The novel also emphasizes the importance of dreams and aspirations in sustaining the will to continue living. As do the characters in Steinbeck's later masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*, George and Lennie seek security, peace, and happiness by pursuing the dream of owning and working a small plot of land they can call their own, and, as with the characters in that later novel, their dreams are ultimately thwarted. Nevertheless, in both works Steinbeck implies that without dreams to motivate and sustain them, human beings suffer from desperation and isolation. The book implies the rewards that can result when people bond and cooperate, but it also suggests that friendship, communication, cooperation, and community are rare, fragile things that can easily be lost or broken.

The language in *Of Mice and Men* is plainer, simpler, less vibrant, less colorful, and less lively than the language in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Whereas that later novel is full of rich dialect and vivid imagery, the language of the earlier book seems relatively drab by comparison, as perhaps befits its relatively drab setting, characters, and themes. Occasionally, however, Steinbeck breathes distinctive life into the phrasing, as when he describes how traveling tramps “jungle-up” near a woodland pond (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 797), or when bed-bugs are described as “pants rabbits” and “graybacks” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 810), or when a character reports that Curley has “yalla-jackets in his drawers” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 835). At times, too, the narrator's descriptions are nicely and precisely observed, as when he describes how George “unrolled his bundle and put things on the shelf, his razor and bar of soap, his comb and bottle of pills, his liniment and leather wristband” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 810), or when he describes how the hair of Curley's wife “hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages” (*Novels*

. . . 1932–1937 819), or when he reports how another character “held a crushed Stetson hat under his arm while he combed his long, black, damp hair straight back” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 821). In addition, the language of the narrator is often psychologically shrewd and insightful, as when he notes that the supposedly slow-minded Lennie, in an early conversation with George, “avoided the bait” and “spoke craftily” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937*, 806). Lennie, then, can be more cunning and less psychologically simple than he seems. A similar psychological complexity is implied later when the narrator refers to “those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 809), and comparable insight into the complex workings of human minds is demonstrated when the narrator later observes how a black character, insulted by a sarcastic white woman, “had retired into the terrible protective dignity of the negro” (*Novels . . . 1932–1937* 855). At moments like these, Steinbeck peels back the layers of characters who are less simple than they may otherwise appear.

For the most part, however, the characters in this novel are not especially complicated. This is particularly true, of course, of Lennie, whose simplicity is crucial to his role. He represents a kind of innocence, decency, and kindness that would not be entirely credible—and would also seem much too saccharine and sentimental—in a normally mature human being. Steinbeck thus makes Lennie a half-wit, but by doing so, he helps us see that much of what passes for “normal” human behavior also seems crude and uncaring when juxtaposed with Lennie's fundamental decency and goodness. Although numerous characters ask George whether Lennie is crazy, one of Lennie's functions in the book is to highlight through contrast the craziness of much supposedly “normal” behavior. Curley and his wife, for instance, are much closer to being mentally disturbed in the truest sense than Lennie ever is, and much the same might be said of Carlson, a somewhat sadistic ranch hand who seems all too eager to kill another ranch hand's aged dog. By contrast, Lennie is passive, peaceful, and benevolent; any hurt he inflicts (whether on animals or later on Curley's wife) is entirely unintended. Yet his

capacity for committing violence also helps make him a somewhat menacing figure and thus prevents him from seeming an entirely maudlin or mawkish character. Always lurking beneath his gentle exterior is the potential for destruction, and thus he is a natural source of suspense in the plot. At the same time, however, his killing of Curley's wife (like his earlier confrontation with Curley himself) seems almost entirely predictable. Because he lacks a full intelligence, Lennie also lacks the kind of free will and capacity for independent thought and choice that are crucial traits of a truly complicated character. In the plot of this book, Lennie is partly a wild card, partly a victim of fate, and partly a puppet (though a largely appealing puppet, to be sure) in the hands of Steinbeck himself.

George is clearly a more complicated figure. If Lennie symbolizes the body, George represents the mind. Yet George is obviously also capable of real feeling; his willingness to help look out for Lennie and help keep him out of trouble shows his capacity for kindness and even for love, and his final act of killing Lennie (to prevent Lennie from being captured and killed by a violent mob) is, paradoxically, the most compassionate deed in the book. Beneath his often gruff, sarcastic exterior, George is a romantic at heart; his dream of having a small place of his own where he can enjoy peace, security, and freedom is a romantic dream to which almost everyone can relate, while his concern for Lennie (and the many practical sacrifices he endures while acting on that concern) makes him the moral touchstone of the novel. His frequently blunt, occasionally caustic style of speech helps prevent the novel from seeming overly sentimental, as when, in exasperation with his friend's forgetfulness, he tells Lennie, "Jesus Christ, you're a crazy bastard!" (*Novels . . . 1932-1937* 799). At times George even adds a much-needed touch of comedy to this otherwise somber tome, as when Lennie notes that George had recently told another character that he and Lennie were cousins, to which George responds, "Well, that was a lie. An' I'm damn glad it was. If I was a relative of yours, I'd shoot myself" (*Novels . . . 1932-1937* 814). When we first read this exchange we laugh in sympathy with George's frustration, but in retrospect, of course, his

comment seems profoundly ironic. By the end of the novel, George does indeed act toward Lennie with the kind of love one would hope for from a member of one's family, but it is not George who is shot, but Lennie. At the same time, however, by killing Lennie George also kills a deeply valuable part of himself. By acting morally to prevent pain to Lennie, he creates pain for himself. Of all the characters in the novel, he is the most complex.

Unfortunately some figures in the book amount to little more than caricatures. Both Curley and his wife, for instance, are almost cartoonish: He is a short-tempered, thuggish boor, while his wife is a vampish tart. Neither arouses or sustains much real interest; instead, both are convenient stooges, and it is hard to take either of them very seriously. Steinbeck's efforts to provoke some sympathy for Curley's desperate housewife sometimes veer toward sentimentality, and in the final analysis her death provokes little compassion either for her or even (ironically) for Lennie, partly because the wife seems so unappealing and partly because the death seems almost a foregone conclusion from the time we first see the two characters together. However, in the same way that Curley and his wife seem too simplistically debauched, Slim (a mule driver on the ranch) can seem too simplistically virtuous, sane, and sensible. He is obviously the anti-Curley—the man whom the rest of the men admire and respect; however, just as Curley represents one extreme of the moral and psychological spectrum, so Slim represents the other extreme. Neither is as intriguing a character as George (whose seemingly unselfish devotion to Lennie is in some ways as puzzling to us as it is to the other characters). In any given situation, Slim will predictably behave well and do good, in the same way that Curley will just as predictably behave badly. Less predictable (and therefore more interesting) is Crooks, the sole black ranch hand. In his encounter with Lennie, he is by turns hostile, defensive, vulnerable, pitiable, cruel, and kind. He is, in short, a recognizable human being whose complications make the relative superficiality of some of the other characters—particularly Curley and Curley's wife—all the more apparent by contrast.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read *Of Mice and Men* alongside JACK LONDON's novel *The Sea-Wolf*. Discuss the ways both writers depict essentially all-male environments in which the most powerful male is often cruel and vindictive. Discuss the impact of the lone female in both environments. Discuss the similarities and especially the contrasts between Curley and Wolf Larsen. What do both works imply about the value of friendship and the perils of isolation and loneliness?
2. Compare and contrast Steinbeck's novel with SHERWOOD ANDERSON's short story titled "Hands." How do both works deal with abnormal characters or with characters who are cut off from the larger community? Discuss the themes of isolation and alienation in both works. In what ways is Lennie more fortunate than the main character in "Hands," and in what ways is he less fortunate?
3. How are male bonds presented in this work and in EUGENE O'NEILL's play *The Hairy Ape*? What is the role of women in both works? How do both works employ animal imagery? What are some important similarities and/or differences between Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* and Yank, the central character of O'Neill's drama? What similarities and/or distinctions exist between the kinds of language used in both works?
4. Discuss the structure of this book. How, for instance, does phrasing early in the book foreshadow later developments? How do the concluding scenes look back to the very beginning? Has either one of the central characters changed or developed at all during the course of the book? If so, how? If not, why not?

***The Red Pony* (1937, 1945)**

The Red Pony is a collection of four interrelated short stories: "The Gift," "The Great Mountains," "The Promise," and "The Leader of the People" (discussed earlier). In "The Gift," 10-year-old Jody Tiflin is presented with a young horse by his rather stern and distant father (Carl Tiflin) and the

father's wise and friendly ranch hand, Billy Buck, but Billy Buck is unfortunately unable to prevent the horse from catching cold and dying. In "The Great Mountains," young Jody is approached by an old Spanish-speaking man of Mexican or Indian heritage, who returns at the end of his life to live his remaining years on the land (now owned by the Tiflins) where he was born, but when Carl Tiflin refuses him more than temporary hospitality, the old man steals an old horse named Easter (whom Carl no longer values) and rides off into the nearby mountains on the animal's back. In "The Promise," Jody is promised by his father and Billy Buck that he can raise the new colt due to be delivered by Nellie, but when the long-awaited day arrives, Billy Buck must kill Nellie in order to ensure that the colt is born safely.

The stories included in *The Red Pony*, like many stories about children, are essentially tales of initiation—that is, tales in which a young person is initiated into the often hard facts of adult reality and into the often painful ways of the world. Each of the stories (including the last, "A Leader of the People") deals in some way with the theme of actual or approaching death: In "The Gift" the pony dies; in "The Great Mountains" the old man is facing imminent death; in "The Promise" the mother horse dies so that her colt may live; and in "The Leader of the People," Jody's own grandfather is facing the sunset of his life. As the stories are read in sequence, Jody grows not only physically but also psychologically and morally; by the time one reads the final story, Jody has reached an important new level of maturity and shows himself capable of a kind of sympathy, empathy, and compassion that are to some degree lacking in his father, who is older than Jody in years but who in some ways seems emotionally stunted. Indeed, the relations between Jody and his parents provide much of the "human interest" of the stories—an interest that also depends on the boy's relations with Billy Buck, who provides a different kind of role model than Carl Tiflin. Billy seems more closely in tune with Jody's feelings than the boy's own father does, and in fact Billy seems to combine the best aspects of conventionally male and female

behavior: He is strong, wise, decisive, and physically capable, but he is also a nurturing figure who is capable of showing tenderness and concern both to the animals he cares for and the boy he cares about. In the final story, Jody shows that he has learned well the lessons of concern and compassion that Billy Buck teaches by quiet example.

Steinbeck does an effective job of conveying the personalities of all the major characters, presenting none of them in a simplistic or unequivocal way. Carl Tiflin is the closest to seeming coldly unappealing and one-dimensional, but even he has his attractive and complicating aspects. In “The Gift,” for instance, he enjoys pretending to be stern with his son just before he gives the boy the gift of a lifetime, and when he sees how happy the boy is with the pony, he retreats in befuddled embarrassment. Carl, in other words, is not a fundamentally cold man; he is simply (like many men of his time) uncomfortable with showing the tenderness he is capable of feeling. He is a sensible, practical man, and if he sometimes seems chilly and even a bit mean (particularly in the second tale), he is also able to recognize and apologize for his shortcomings (as he does most obviously in “The Leader of the People”). Even when he is rebuked openly by Billy Buck in front of Jody (as happens at the very end of “The Gift”), he seems willing to tolerate the chastisement, and the fact that Billy feels comfortable enough with Carl to criticize his employer so blatantly speaks well (ironically) of Carl’s own character. Carl, in short, is not the simple villain he could easily have been in the hands of a lesser writer. By the same token, Billy Buck is not the kind of plaster saint that a less talented author might have created. He is in many ways an attractive alternative to Carl, but he is capable of making mistakes (as when he misjudges the effect a rain storm may have on the pony’s health), he is capable of losing his temper (as he does with Carl at the end of “The Gift”), and he is even capable of being angry with—and swearing at—a young boy when he feels frustrated at having had to kill Nellie in order to save her colt and fulfill his titular “Promise” to Jody. Billy’s anger, however, is always rooted in love—love for Jody at the end of “The Gift” and love for Nellie at the end of

“The Promise.” He is a perfect example of the kind of rock-solid but kindhearted common working man whom Steinbeck especially admired. In crafting this series of stories, Steinbeck created a small but entirely credible community of real persons who reflect the kinds of thought and feeling common to their time and place while also reflecting deeper, more universal, and more timeless habits of the human heart and mind.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the life of young Jody with the life of the young girl described in Gertrude Simmons Bonnin’s (*Zitkala-Ša*’s) “Impressions of an Indian Girlhood.” In particular, discuss the relations of both young people with their parents and with their broader communities. How (if at all) are their experiences affected by their distinct ethnic backgrounds? How (if at all) are their experiences affected by the fact that one is a boy and the other a girl?
2. Read these stories alongside LANGSTON HUGHES’s novel *Not without Laughter* and then discuss the plots, themes, characters, and settings of both tales. In what ways do the boys in both stories grow up? How are their relations with their fathers similar and/or different, and how are the fathers themselves comparable or distinct? Compare and contrast the mothers in both tales. Which characters provide the main role models for the two boys, and what traits and values do those role models have in common?
3. Choose one of the characters besides Jody and discuss the continuities in the ways that character is portrayed from one story to the next. How, for instance, does Jody’s mother remain consistent from one story to another? How does she develop? Does she seem any more complex by the end of the final tale than she had seemed by the end of the first tale?

The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

When Tom Joad returns to his family’s Oklahoma farm after having been released from prison (where

he served time for killing a man in self-defense), he discovers that his family, along with thousands of others, have been evicted from their land as a result of bank foreclosures sparked by a dusty, persistent, and destructive drought. Accompanied by Jim Casy, a preacher they have known for years who has now turned his back on conventional religion in favor of a simpler commitment to human welfare, the Joads (Ma, Pa, Granma, Grampa, Tom, Al, Ruthie, Winfield, the pregnant Rose of Sharon, and her husband, Connie) pack up as many of their belongings as they can cram into an old truck and begin a desperate journey, as do hundreds of thousand of other "Okies," toward California, where they have heard that jobs are plentiful. By the end of the novel, after making a few good friends but also after suffering many hardships and disappointments, the group begins to disintegrate: Grampa and Granma have died, Connie has deserted, Casy has been killed, and Tom has killed Casy's assailant and must flee, but Rose of Sharon, although having lost her baby, is able, at Ma's urging, to show compassion to a man even more needy than the Joads themselves.

The Grapes of Wrath is generally considered to be Steinbeck's best book as well as a classic of American literature. Although the novel has sometimes been criticized as too long, too sentimental, and too propagandistic, it has also been vigorously defended. Champions of the work have praised its large cast of memorable characters, its vivid language (especially its striking imagery, convincing dialogue, and use of lively rural dialect), and its structural innovation (particularly its alternation of chapters focusing on the Joads with "intercalary" chapters offering a broader picture of various social developments). When the book was first published, it was enormously controversial as well as highly popular; opponents of the work accused Steinbeck of offering an inaccurate and deliberately distorted view of the economic and social conditions he claimed to depict, while other readers found the novel realistic, credible, and profoundly moving. Some readers felt that interest in the novel would dwindle as the depression-era conditions it describes receded in memory; others, however,

think that Steinbeck wrote in a timeless style about issues of enduring human concern.

It is, in fact, the style of this book that helps to make it so effective. It would not matter what topics Steinbeck wrote about if his language were dull, tedious, or commonplace, but the language of *The Grapes of Wrath* is brimming with energy and vitality, especially in its use of dialogue and dialect but also in its imagery, symbolism, and descriptive passages. When Steinbeck depicts people, places, or events, he usually (in this book, at least) has the power to make us *see* them, and when he lets his characters talk, real people seem to speak. Entering the pages of this novel is like entering a previously unknown but highly intriguing region in which persons employ language that is unself-consciously poetic in its freshness and sharp precision. Thus Tom does not simply say that his feet were tired; he says, "My dogs was pooped out" (*Grapes* 218). Later, explaining one effect of his time in prison, he remarks that "when you been in stir a little while, you can smell a question comin' from hell to breakfast" (*Grapes* 223). Casy, the preacher, later describes a girl who is "so full of the Holy Spirit that it's sproutin' out of her nose and ears" (*Grapes* 232). Likewise, he subsequently asks himself, "Why is it that when a fella ought to be just about mule-ass proof against sin, an' all full up of Jesus, why is it that's the time a fella gets fingerin' his pants buttons?" (*Grapes* 233). What (exactly) does it mean to be "mule-ass proof against sin"? Presumably it means to be stubbornly or even almost stupidly immune to temptation; in any case, the language is much more evocative than if Steinbeck had written something like "completely untempted by sin." Similarly, the metaphorical phrase "all full up of Jesus" implies that Jesus is like a brimming, nearly overflowing liquid, and the metaphor is therefore much more powerful than if Steinbeck had simply said "truly committed to Jesus." Finally, the imagery of a "fella . . . fingerin' his pants buttons" is much more precise, vivid, and memorable than if Steinbeck instead had colorlessly written, "a man becomes sexually excited." In phrase after phrase, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, Steinbeck reveals a sure command of

the idiomatic English actually spoken by the real people he describes. That dialect, however, far from seeming dated or quaint, retains its power to startle, surprise, and stimulate, and one of the pleasures of reading *The Grapes of Wrath* is the pleasure of anticipation—the delight in knowing that each new page will reveal diction (especially spoken diction) that will seem colorful, vibrant, zesty, and yet always entirely credible. Quite simply, the novel is full of what Casy himself at one point calls “the poetry of folks talkin’” (*Grapes* 309).

The rural dialect of the book is, however, only one strength of the novel’s language. Similarly important is Steinbeck’s highly skillful use of dialogue, which he employs to characterize the speakers, to advance the plot, and to underscore themes in subtle ways. As with his use of dialect, examples are extremely numerous, but one instance may be taken as typical. Thus, at one point, Al works on a car while Tom talks to a one-eyed man whose whining self-pity and maudlin self-consciousness he finds annoying. As he rebukes the handicapped man, the following exchange occurs (with Tom speaking first):

“I knowed a hump-back in—in a place I was. Make his whole livin’ lettin’ folks rub his hump for luck. Jesus Christ, an’ all you got is one eye gone.”

The man said stumbly, “Well, Jesus, ya see somebody edge away from ya, an’ it gets into ya.”

“Cover it up then, goddamn it. Ya stickin’ it out like a cow’s ass. Ya like to feel sorry for yaself. There ain’t nothin’ the matter with you. Buy yaself some white pants. Ya gettin’ drunk an’ cryin’ in ya bed, I bet. Need any help, Al?”

“No,” said Al. “I got this here bearin’ loose. Jus’ tryin’ to work the piston down.”

“Don’t bang yaself,” said Tom.

The one-eyed man said softly, “Think—somebody’d like—me?”

“Why, sure,” said Tom. “Tell ’em ya dong’s growed sence you los’ your eye.” (*Grapes* 401)

In this vignette, each separate person is deftly characterized, not only through the words he

speaks but also by the manner in which he speaks them. Tom, for instance, is typically blunt, direct, and honest; here as elsewhere, he does not mince words, although his tone here is sharper than usual. When he refers to the handicapped person he once knew, he does not call him a “handicapped person”; rather, he calls him a “hump-back.” Yet Tom can also be evasive when he needs or wants to be; thus, the prison in which he spent time is simply called “a place I was.” The profane references to Christ, meanwhile, are exactly the kind of language we might expect from such characters, while the staccato rhythms of Tom’s angry instructions mimic perfectly the cadence, inflection, and intonation (not to mention the imagery) of a real exasperated outburst. Overall the language of the passage is precise, concrete, and exact, not abstract or general (“Ya gettin’ drunk an’ cryin’ in ya bed, I bet” is much more effective than “You’re feeling depressed, aren’t you?”). Yet Tom can immediately switch from anger at the one-eyed man to a practical concern with Al’s work on the car, and Al, focused on his important work, remains oblivious to the argument. Tom can seem almost mean to the handicapped man while also seeming solicitous toward Al, and yet Tom, perhaps regretting his earlier sharpness, can also end the exchange with a reassuring joke. In just a few swift sentences, then, Steinbeck uses dialogue to depict his characters memorably, move his plot forward, and underline such important themes as the virtues of determination, the dangers of self-pity, and the value of stoic endurance.

Although much of *The Grapes of Wrath* (to the novel’s great benefit) advances by means of this kind of energetic dialogue, the book is also famous for its reflective and interpretive passages, in which the omniscient narrator pulls us back from our immediate focus on the Joads to give us broader insights into the conditions of the hundreds of thousands if not millions of people who were undergoing similar experiences. At one point, for instance, when speaking of these people, the narrator remarks that

suddenly the machines pushed them out and they swarmed on the highways. The movement

changed them; the highways, the camps along the road, the fear of hunger and the hunger itself, changed them. The children without dinner changed them, the endless moving changed them. They were migrants. And the hostility changed them, welded them, united them—hostility that made the little towns group and arm as though to repel an invader, squads with pick handles, clerks and storekeepers with shotguns, guarding the world against their own people. (*Grapes* 510)

Passages such as this reveal Steinbeck's ability to use standard English just as eloquently and effectively as he uses rural dialect. Each word, each detail, is carefully chosen, and then all are assembled in a masterfully arranged paragraph. The word *machines*, for instance, implies an unfeeling, unthinking, inhuman power, while the word *swarmed* implies that the displaced people now resemble insects or animals. The constant repetition of the word *changed* mimics the grinding, relentless forces the passage describes, while the progression of details becomes ever-more specific: First abstract "movement" is mentioned, then more specific "highways," then even more precisely imagined and inhabited "camps along the road," then the "fear of hunger" among the people who inhabit those camps, then not just the fear of hunger but the actual hunger itself, and then, finally, not just hunger itself but the hunger of starving children. After the long series of repeated references to "change" comes a very brief and entirely different kind of sentence: "They were migrants." Three simple words sum up all that is important about their new condition. And then the focus switches from the swarms of migrants themselves to the people who have changed from ordinary, everyday citizens of "little towns" into armed "squads." The final quoted sentences are steeped in paradoxes, as "clerks and storekeepers" (who are usually anything but militant) arm themselves with "shotguns," intent—in a final paradox—on "guarding the world against their own people." If in his scenes featuring dialogue Steinbeck shows his ability to zoom in for close-ups, in passages such as the one just quoted

he shows his skill at offering panoramic overviews. Much of the dynamic rhythm of the book results from this constant interaction between the specific and the general, between chapters on the Joads and chapters on the conditions they represent, but even the most "general" portions of the novel are rarely abstract, dry, or imprecise.

Steinbeck, then, uses dialect, dialogue, and exposition to great effect, but he also simply shows enormous skill in coining memorable phrases and phrasing. Thus the dust that coats a truck is compared to "red flour," while children are pacified with candy they have "whined out" of their father (*Grapes* 310). A young boy is "kid-wild and calfish," while a young pregnant woman has a "knowing perfection-look." Connie, when staring at his pregnant wife, "was proud" (as we might expect) but also "fearful" (a bit of a surprise). Connie himself is a "sharp-faced, lean young man of a Texas strain, and his pale blue eyes were sometimes dangerous [impression one], and sometimes kindly [impression two], and sometimes frightened [impression three]" (*Grapes* 311). Through such subtly complicated phrasing, Steinbeck implies the complexity not only of the characters he describes but of human beings in general: Connie cannot be easily explained, because no person is easily explainable. People are complicated, but so are physical environments and social conditions, and Steinbeck's language tries to do justice to all the complexities involved. More often than not, however, his phrasing is not only complex but also sharp and precise, conveying an unforgettable impression. Thus, one character "would raven with lust for some whore," and, having paid for three prostitutes at once, "snorted and rutted on their unresponsive bodies for an hour" (*Grapes* 311–312). Again and again and again, Steinbeck summons up just the right words to create whatever picture he means to impress on our memories. His general diction is thus every bit as effective as his use of dialect or dialogue.

Steinbeck uses all these stylistic strengths (and many more) in the service of a number of significant themes or key ideas. His book has been seen, for instance, as lamenting the passing of the old belief,

associated with Thomas Jefferson, that American democracy would be best sustained by a citizenry composed mostly of small independent yeoman farmers. Steinbeck is clearly a “small-*d*” democrat (not a communist, as some of his detractors alleged) who has enormous faith in the “common people.” In this sense he is a writer clearly in the tradition of Whitman, Thoreau, and especially Emerson, and indeed Jim Casy’s notion that humanity shares one big soul is obviously indebted to Emerson’s transcendentalist idea of the Oversoul—an idea that similarly stresses the importance of the bonds that unite all people. Steinbeck’s social and political ideal, however, is not any forced collectivism (of the sort associated with Bolshevism) but rather a voluntary group cooperation, in which free individuals see the practical and spiritual advantages of joining for mutual assistance. Casy himself, meanwhile, is obviously a kind of secular Christ figure: His initials are *J. C.*; he has turned away from religion as conventionally practiced; he travels with a band of 12 people (including Sairy and Ivy Wilson, whom the Joads befriend on their journey); and he dies while trying to help others and while speaking words clearly similar to Christ’s last words on the cross: “You don’ know what you’re a-doin’” (*Grapes* 621). Because Casy’s words are repeated twice just before he dies and are then quoted twice again later by Tom (*Grapes* 627), the parallel with Jesus becomes impossible to miss. Tom subsequently becomes a kind of apostle of Casy’s cause, and Rose of Sharon’s final act—in which she offers her milk-swollen breasts to a man who is starving—becomes a kind of secular Eucharist (*Grapes* 692). The whole movement of the Joads from Oklahoma to California is an ironic reenactment of the exodus of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt to their hoped-for freedom in the promised land, and California itself is potentially a land of milk and honey—in which, however, neither the Joads nor many others find any immediate salvation. Thus in its language, its ideas, and even its title, the book draws on the rich biblical heritage that has been central to a good deal of literature and culture in the West, and yet the novel uses that heritage to promote ends that are more secular than conven-

tionally sacred. The book is a protest against the growing materialism, alienation, and selfishness of American life, but if Steinbeck is hopeful about a solution at all, he does not put his trust in God but in the basic decency of common people united by a sense of their own best interests.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *The Grapes of Wrath* with THEODORE DREISER’s *An American Tragedy*. In what ways does each book try to offer an epic or panoramic overview and diagnosis of American life? How are their diagnoses similar, particularly in their assessments of matters of class and economics? How do they differ in their plots, their settings, and their lead characters?
2. Read Steinbeck’s novel alongside GERTRUDE STEIN’s *The Making of Americans*. What role does family play in each work? How do the styles of the two books differ? Discuss the social milieu depicted in each novel. What are Stein’s central thematic concerns, and how do they differ from Steinbeck’s? In what way does each book reflect the life and lifestyle of its author?
3. Discuss *The Grapes of Wrath* in relation to WILLIAM FAULKNER’s novel *As I Lay Dying*, paying particular attention to such matters as the emphasis on journeys, the importance of families, the significance of mother figures, the use of rural dialect, and the influence of Deep South versus western settings.
4. Compare and contrast *The Grapes of Wrath* (which was published in 1939) with RICHARD WRIGHT’s novel *Native Son* (which was published in 1940). In what ways are the books similar and/or different in their emphasis on social conditions, family life, economic pressures, and class strife? How are the rich and poor presented in each work? What political solution does each book seem to propose for the problems it presents? How do matters of race add an extra level of complexity to Wright’s novel?
5. Discuss Steinbeck’s characterization of Ma Joad. What factors help to make her an effective character? What personality traits does she exemplify? What values does she symbolize? In

what ways does she epitomize Steinbeck's moral, social, and even political ideals?

6. This book is one of the most famous novels to deal with the America of the 1930s, but what factors—if any—prevent the book from seeming dated, parochial, or no longer relevant? How (if at all) does Steinbeck deal with timeless issues, perennial concerns, and standard character types? Why should a reader of the 21st century find this novel worth reading apart from its historical value?

***Cannery Row* (1945)**

Doc, who makes a very modest living as a marine biologist, is the most respected person living in a rundown area of Monterey, California, known as Cannery Row, whose other inhabitants include (among many others) a pragmatic Chinese grocer named Lee Chong, a generous-hearted woman named Dora Flood (madam of the nearby whorehouse), and a ragtag group of good-natured vagrants known as “the boys” and consisting of Mack (their leader), Hazel, Hughie, Jones, Gay, and Eddie. The “boys,” as does everyone else, love Doc, who is kind, intelligent, cultured, helpful, and friendly to any and all, and so they decide to scrounge up the means to throw him a party to show their appreciation. Their first attempt to stage the event ends in a drunken brawl, but their second succeeds to the general satisfaction of all concerned.

Steinbeck eventually claimed that he had written this novel at the behest of some of the soldiers he had encountered during his own service during World War II, who had asked him to write something comic that had nothing to do with the war that had sickened both them and him (Lisca 198). Certainly a personal desire to put the war at least partly out of his mind seems to have helped motivate him to compose this novel, which is a nostalgic (and some would say saccharine and sentimental) look back at prewar life on the Monterey coast. Many critics have complained about the allegedly flimsy and anecdotal plot of the book, while many others have censured the work for its some-

what syrupy characterization. The prostitute with a heart of gold is a staple of sentimental fiction, and Dora Flood and her “girls” certainly fit that description; it is they, for instance (in chapter 16), who assist Doc in treating an influenza outbreak by volunteering to sit with and comfort sick children, but their selfless behavior is typical of many other characters in *Cannery Row*, especially when those characters are in the presence of the noble and inspiring Doc. The “boys,” for example, may in some respects be cagey, “irresponsible” vagrants who live from hand to mouth on borrowed (or stolen) dimes, but when it comes to dealing with Doc, all their best traits of generosity and fellow feeling move to the fore. More than one character in the course of the novel openly expresses explicit love for Doc, and certainly Steinbeck goes out of his way to make him seem a highly lovable man. He symbolizes, in fact, all the traits of character Steinbeck most admired: He is smart, wise, kind, capable, sensitive, and thoughtful, but he hides all these endearing traits under an even more endearingly tough and gruff exterior. He loves to listen to classical music and appreciates great art, but he can swill beer with the best of them, satisfy multiple women, and hold his own in a fight. Many readers will feel that a character like this is too good (in several senses of that word) to be true, but Steinbeck seems to have modeled him carefully on his close friend Ed Ricketts, whom Steinbeck considered a singular pearl among men. Doc, however, is just one of the many amiable ne'er-do-wells who stroll through the pages of this book. They are people who may seem unsuccessful by the standards of a competitive, materialistic world, but who appeal to Steinbeck because of their fundamental decency, honesty, and benevolence and their indifference to worldly values. Although Steinbeck does include some suicides, corpses, meanness, hard drinking, and rough behavior to try to prevent the book from seeming unduly saccharine, the novel does (unfortunately) leave a fairly sugary aftertaste.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *Cannery Row* with Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*, particularly in the ways

- they present mainly male social groups and the impact of women on those groups. How do the male groups in the two novels differ in spirit, attitudes, and purpose? How does Wolf Larsen differ from Doc? Are they similar in any respects?
2. How does the community presented in this novel resemble and/or differ from the community presented in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*? How is Dora in the present novel similar to and/or different from Curley's wife in the earlier book? Is there any character in *Cannery Row* who resembles Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*? How do the tones, atmospheres, and conclusions of the two works contrast?
 3. Choose two characters from this book and discuss the ways in which (and degrees to which) Steinbeck manages to present each as a distinctive personality rather than as a mere stereotype. How is each character individualized—especially in attitudes, behavior, and speech—so that he or she seems a complex figure rather than a mere artificial creation?

***The Pearl* (1945, 1947)**

Kino is a young Mexican-Indian pearl diver who lives with his wife, Juana, and his infant son, Coyotito, in a small hut near the beach; although they are poor, they enjoy a basically happy life, existing in harmony with nature and with other people until one morning, when a scorpion bites Coyotito. Kino, desperate for money to pay a doctor, goes diving and finds an especially impressive pearl, but as word spreads that he owns the gem, various people try to steal it: The hut is broken into and eventually burned down, and finally Kino even kills an attacker in self-defense—a deed that causes him to flee toward the mountains with his wife and child. The trio are pursued by three trackers, but although Kino succeeds in slaying the pursuers, Coyotito is killed in the process; thus, when the bereaved mother and father return home, Kino throws the pearl back into the ocean.

This short novel (or novella), with its simple diction, simple plot, and relatively simple characters, is

often considered a kind of parable—that is, a short allegorical story that teaches a straightforward moral lesson. In this case, the lesson seems to involve the risks of materialism and the dangers of greed: The pearl at first seems to be an extremely lucky find, but it soon arouses corrupting instincts, not only in the thieves who try to steal it and in the many people who envy Kino for possessing it, but even in Kino himself. At first, he sees the pearl mainly as a means of helping his young son achieve the kind of educated and prosperous life that Kino and Juana themselves have never enjoyed, but eventually the pearl symbolizes his own yearning for prosperity, power, and autonomy. Ironically, not only is the pearl unnecessary to cure Coyotito's wound (since he had largely recovered before the pearl was found), but its discovery eventually results in his death. Thus, in attempting to preserve and protect the literal pearl, Kino paradoxically loses “pearls” of far greater value, including his infant son and his previously happy life. The novel has therefore often been seen as a kind of retelling of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: Untroubled paradise (at least of a rudimentary sort) is lost when humans cannot control their selfish desires.

The novel opens with a brief epigraph, which quickly introduces the main characters and the basic plot and explicitly suggests that the story may indeed be a kind of “parable,” particularly since the tale involves “only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere” (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 231). Yet the book itself seems more complex and subtle than this phrasing suggests; certainly Kino is a more complicated character than this epigraph might lead us to suspect, and although the phrasing of the book is generally direct and straightforward, it is also often subtle and even sometimes ironic. As the dangerous scorpion approaches tiny Coyotito, for instance, the narrator describes how Juana “repeated an ancient magic to guard against such evil, and on top of that she muttered a Hail Mary between clenched teeth” (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 235). The sentence not only nicely suggests the mixed cultural heritage of the people Steinbeck depicts (superstitious, on the one hand, and religious, on the other), but it also

leaves unclear which kind of belief gives Juana the greater hope: She first turns to magic (implying that she is more superstitious than devout), but she then immediately turns to religion (implying that she may doubt the efficacy of magic alone). Juana, in short, is a more complicated character than we might at first assume. Later, for instance, she rebels against her husband (when she tries to throw the pearl back into the ocean after realizing the trouble it is beginning to cause), but at the end of the novel, she submits to Kino, allowing *him* to throw the pearl back into the water as the book concludes, and thereby showing not only her respect for him but also her recognition of the apology implied by his own contrite behavior.

Kino himself repeatedly demonstrates the kind of complex psychology and motives that make his story more than a simple parable. For instance, as he approaches the doctor's residence to seek help, he is said to have "felt weak and afraid and angry at the same time. Rage and terror went together," and a few sentences later, as Kino prepares to knock on the door, the narrator notes that "his lips drew tight against his teeth—but with his left hand he reached to take off his hat" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 241). His balanced actions indicate his complicated emotions. At the doctor's residence Kino is greeted by an Indian servant, but the latter, instead of responding with immediate compassion to a fellow Indian in need, "refused to speak in the old language" and shuts the gate; and when the servant does inform the doctor of Kino's presence, he calls him "a little Indian," as if to distance himself from his own ethnic heritage. Later, however, after the doctor has refused to treat the baby because Kino cannot pay, the servant leads Kino out, and the narrator reports: "And he shut the gate quickly out of shame" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 241–242). The fact that he shuts the gate quickly might at first make him seem as callous as his employer, but the fact that he shuts it out of shame shows that he *is* capable of moral compassion. Within just a few paragraphs, then, Steinbeck manages to create a minor but complex character: The Indian at first seems supercilious, then seems intimidated enough by his employer to want to distance himself from his own people, but then finally seems

embarrassed enough by his employer to feel ashamed of the doctor's behavior. The Indian servant is thus a minor but typical example of the ways the story moves beyond the simple black versus white polarities of an uncomplicated parable, thereby becoming something more than a straightforward allegory of good versus evil.

No matter how complex the characterization, however, the book would not hold much interest if its language were dull. Steinbeck, fortunately, manages to breathe a good deal of life into the novel simply by the skill of his phrasing. Often, for example, the language has the same kind of rhythmic repetition and simple phrasing frequently found in the King James version of the Bible, as in the following passage describing Kino dreaming of Coyotito's reading: "And then darkness spread over the page, and with the darkness came the music of evil again, and Kino stirred in his sleep; and when he stirred, Juana's eyes opened in the darkness. And then Kino awaked, with the evil music pulsing in him, and he lay in the darkness with his ears alert" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 263). The repeated images and the pulsating "and . . . and . . . and" clauses make the language seem artfully artless, as if it were being spoken rather than written. Sometimes, too, the language can seem almost primitive in its simplicity, as when Juana's birth pangs are called "child pain" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 239) or the poor are referred to as "poverty people" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 240), yet sometimes the phrasing can also seem sophisticated in its poise and balance, as in a comment about four beggars sitting outside a church: "They knew every little scandal and some very big crimes" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 240). The imagery, too, is often sharp and precise (as when the narrator reports that the doctor's eye's "rested in puffy little hammocks of flesh" [*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 241]), and the words are also frequently rich in sound effects (such as assonance and alliteration), as when Kino, having seen the special pearl, is flooded with feelings that seem "glowing and gloating and triumphant" (*Novels . . . 1942–1952* 250). On nearly every page, then, Steinbeck manages to provide some intriguing linguistic nugget that resembles the pearl itself: The language of the

book is smooth but is also often brilliant, and it never ceases to command our fascinated attention.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with ERNEST HEMINGWAY's brief novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. How are the works similar in setting, style, characterization, and theme? What is the role of struggle and loss in both stories? What is the nature of the struggle in each work, and how are the struggles distinctive?
2. Read this story alongside ZORA NEALE HURSTON's tale "The Gilded Six-Bits." How does each work deal with the theme of "paradise lost"? What role does materialism play as a motivating factor in each work? Discuss the relations between the married couples in each work. How is each tale morally and psychologically complex?
3. Read this story in relation to THORNTON WILDER's brief novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. How does each writer cope with the challenge of presenting a "foreign" (that is, non-American) culture? What is gained by setting these works in non-American locales? How are the works similar in style and characterization? How is loss a major factor in both works?
4. Discuss the ways Steinbeck presents male and female characters in this novel. Does his presentation conform to—and/or violate—any stereotypes? If the presentations are at all stereotypical, how might that kind of presentation perhaps seem appropriate to the kind of work he has composed here? In other words, how might the subgenre of this work have affected the way he chose to present his men and women?

***Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962)**

In this meditative journey of his travels across the United States in 1960 accompanied by an old French poodle named Charley, Steinbeck describes his progress from New York to New England, then his trip across the northern rim of the country, down the West Coast, through Texas, into Louisiana, and

then back home to New York. Traveling in a specially outfitted truck with a camper on the back, Steinbeck moved around anonymously and was never recognized; he stayed mostly on back roads and visited many small towns in an effort to reacquaint himself with the sights, sounds, habits, and pulse of his country. He was distressed by many of the changes he witnessed, including rapid urbanization, growing materialism, and a loss of independent spirit.

This book was one of Steinbeck's most popular best sellers; many readers must have found the idea of a famous author traveling around the country with his dog inherently appealing, but Steinbeck produced a book with a sharper bite than many might have expected. The book is not a straightforward hymn to the natural beauty of the American landscape (although Steinbeck does sometimes wax lyrical, especially when describing California redwoods), and it is even less a simple celebration of the sturdy virtues of the American people. Often, indeed, its depiction of American lifestyles and manners is quite bleak, especially when Steinbeck arrives in the Deep South in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and witnesses numerous examples of ugly racism. Anyone turning to the book merely for a fuzzy, warm, nostalgic, and cheerful report about "life in these United States" must have been disappointed, for Steinbeck's own disappointment with his country is expressed repeatedly. If he hoped (as he did) that by renewing his intimate acquaintance with his country he would restock his supply of topics to write about and refresh his inspiration, he must have been a bit frustrated, at least on the second count. The book is not entirely inspiring, but for that very reason it can at least claim to be honest.

Dog lovers will of course find this book appealing (even if it seems incongruous that the companion of this hard-nosed, hard-drinking, and often rough-spoken traveling author is a poodle!), and Steinbeck tries his best to guard against the kind of sentimentality that might inevitably creep into a book on such a topic. Thus he spends a good deal of time emphasizing Charley's urinary habits, and he avoids the temptation to make Charley seem too cutely human. Meanwhile, the journey from one place to another and from one encounter to another gives Steinbeck

6. Discuss the ways women are presented in several of Steinbeck's works. Are there any continuities in the ways they are depicted? What qualities does Steinbeck seem to admire in women? Are those qualities different in any ways from the traits he seems to admire in men? Which of Steinbeck's women do you consider most memorable and/or admirable? Explain why.
7. View one or more of the numerous films and/or television productions that have been based on work(s) by Steinbeck. How well does a given film or program do justice to Steinbeck's text? What changes did the director of the film make in adapting the text for the screen, and in what ways were those changes either appropriate or inappropriate? Study one of Steinbeck's own film adaptations of one of his works, such as his screenplay for *The Red Pony*. What changes did he make in his own work, and why?
8. A number of Steinbeck's texts were adapted for theatrical presentation, even as musicals. Compare and contrast one of those adaptations with the original text. What kinds of changes were made in the movement from one genre to another, and what is the logic behind those changes? Is one version of the work more effective than another, or is each version effective in its own way? Explain your responses in detail.
9. Examine one of Steinbeck's lesser-known works—such as *Sweet Thursday*, *The Wayward Bus*, *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, *The Winter of Our Discontent*—and discuss that work in relation to his better-known writings. How is the lesser-known work similar to and/or different from his more famous writings in themes, style, characterization, plot, and so forth? Does the lesser-known work deserve to be more widely read and appreciated? If so, why? If not, why not?
10. Choose a relatively brief section (a page or two at most) from any one of Steinbeck's works, and then discuss that passage in detail. How is the passage typical of Steinbeck's writings in style, theme, characterization, setting, and other characteristics? How does the passage contribute to

the work of which it is a part? How does it relate to what has preceded it in the work; how does it connect to what follows? How is the passage effective simply as a piece of writing?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 1996.
- DeMott, Robert. "Chronology." In *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings 1936–1941*, by John Steinbeck, edited by Robert DeMott and Elaine A. Steinbeck, 1,031–1,049. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- Ditsky, John, ed. *Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989.
- Donahue, Agness McNeill, ed. *A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Crowell, 1968.
- French, Warren. "John Steinbeck." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 499–527. New York: Norton, 1973.
- . "John Steinbeck." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors. Vol. 2, A Survey of Research and Criticism since 1972*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 582–622. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990.
- Hayashi, Tetsumaro, ed. *A New Study Guide to Steinbeck's Major Works, with Critical Explications*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1993.
- Lisca, Peter. *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958.
- National Steinbeck Center. Available online. URL: <http://www.steinbeck.org/MainFrame.html>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Steinbeck, John. "The Chrysanthemums." In *50 Great Short Stories*. Edited by Milton Crane. New York: Random House, 1988.
- . *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings 1936–1941*. Edited by Robert DeMott and Elaine A. Steinbeck. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- . *Novels and Stories 1932–1937*. Edited by Robert DeMott and Elaine A. Steinbeck. New York: Library of America, 1994.
- . *Novels and Stories 1942–1952*. Edited by Robert DeMott. New York: Library of America, 2001.

Robert C. Evans



WALLACE STEVENS (1879–1955)

In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all.

(“Adagia”)

Although poets are often assumed to lead exciting, romantic lives, the outward existence of Wallace Stevens was largely uneventful. He spent most of his adulthood as a prominent insurance executive, composing his poems in the time he spared from overseeing a department concerned with surety bonds. Shy, retiring, but self-assured, he shunned publicity and kept his distance from most people; certainly he was not flamboyant in the ways other notable modern poets (such as EZRA POUND or Dylan Thomas) have been. Ideas for poems often occurred to him as he walked to and from work, and it was later the job of his secretary to type the poems after deciphering his nearly impenetrable handwriting. His poetic career began late, was interrupted by a lengthy period of silence, but then developed steadily and productively, so that by the end of his life, he was widely regarded as one of the best, most distinctive, and most innovative voices in modern American literature. He is now often considered one of the finest modern poets, although his works are often so complex in phrasing, tone, and theme that he never achieved the wide public fame of writers such as ROBERT FROST or even T. S. ELIOT. He is often called a poet’s poet—an author whose true greatness is best appreciated only by other workers in the craft.

Stevens was born on October 2, 1879, in Reading, Pennsylvania, where his father was a lawyer and where his mother encouraged an interest in Christi-

anity and music. Stevens received a solid education in the local schools, where he eventually excelled as a student and where his interest in writing (especially for the school newspaper) first developed. After graduating from high school in 1898 with various distinctions, he entered Harvard as a special student (on a three-year course of study). There he read widely, studied with noted scholars, rose to prominence on the staff of the college newspaper, and increasingly began to compose stories and especially poems. After leaving Harvard in 1900, he settled in New York, working as a journalist for various newspapers before deciding (at the urging of his practical-minded father) to study law. Nevertheless, while pursuing his legal studies he maintained and even increased his commitment to creative writing, vowing to write something each evening, no matter how little. By 1903 he had graduated from law school, and by 1904, while back in Reading, he had met an attractive young woman—Elsie Viola Kachel Moll—who would eventually become his wife. Meanwhile, he worked in New York as a lawyer, reading widely, writing to Elsie, and even composing a book of poems for her. His parents, however, strongly disapproved of this romance, considering Elsie socially inferior. Angered by their opposition, Stevens proposed marriage in 1908 and began avoiding his family during trips home to Reading.

Stevens’s early devotion to Elsie (whom he considered physically stunning) are reflected in his fre-

quent letters to her, in his composition of another gift book of poems, and, finally, in their marriage on September 21, 1909—an event his family boycotted. Although the couple established a home in New York, Elsie was frequently back in Reading. The deaths of Stevens's father in 1911 and then of his mother in 1912 helped him reestablish some connections with the rest of his family, although for years he remained rather distant, both geographically and emotionally. Meanwhile, he was enjoying growing success in business, having begun working in the insurance business, and in 1914 he was made a local vice president for the Equitable insurance company in New York. He was at this time also increasingly writing poems and submitting them for publication. In fact, he had by now already written some of his most memorable works, particularly "Sunday Morning" (considered by many one of the greatest poems of the 20th century). He began to interact with other poets and artists and had begun to win a reputation as a significant writer. In 1916, however, the Equitable collapsed, and so Stevens was forced to leave New York to begin working at the Hartford insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut, where he would spend the rest of his life and make his name both as a poet and a highly competent executive. During this period immediately preceding and following the end of World War I, he composed a few plays, traveled on business, won several literary prizes, and broadened his connections (mostly through correspondence) with other literary figures. In 1922 he visited both Cuba and Florida, finding the latter most appealing and using it as a backdrop for some of his most famous poems. By that same year, also, he had collected some of his works and submitted them for publication as a book; this volume, eventually titled *Harmonium*, was issued in fall 1923 by Alfred A. Knopf (a prominent publisher), after which Stevens and his wife left on an extended vacation to Cuba, Central America, California, and then back across the United States to Hartford. Their only child (Holly) was conceived during this trip and was born on August 10, 1924.

Reviews of *Harmonium* were mixed. Some critics praised it for its brilliance, wit, cleverness, innova-

tion, and exoticism, while others condemned it for some of the very same reasons, censuring Stevens for being a dandy, an aesthete, and a writer whose highly wrought style failed to conceal a lack of human substance (Sharpe 116–118). Ironically in the years following the publication of what is now considered one of the most important books of modern American poetry, Stevens largely ceased to write. He attributed this lack of productivity to the demands of his job and the constraints of his family life, but his health was also poor during this period. Whatever the reasons, during the late 1920s and early 1930s he wrote very little, although a few new works *were* included in a revised version of *Harmonium* published in 1931. By this time, of course, America was in the depths of the Great Depression, but Stevens, the successful executive, was relatively immune. Indeed, by 1933 he had purchased a large home in a fashionable neighborhood of Hartford and was employing a local woman to help look after the house and care for his daughter. Relations with his wife had been strained for some time and never really improved; the couple seemed to have less and less in common, and Stevens rarely if ever invited his few friends to visit him at home. Business associates often remembered him as aloof but industrious; many considered him ironic, reserved, yet highly competent. He could be secretly kind and openly sarcastic; he was loved and respected by people who knew him well and disliked and distrusted by others. Although he often enjoyed a good drink and a bad joke, he was hardly a "hail fellow well met," and his relations with his wife, daughter, family, friends, colleagues, and fellow artists often seem to have been stiff, distanced, reserved, and formal. Nevertheless, he did well at any task he set for himself, particularly in business, and by 1934 he had been named a vice president of the Hartford, which was now one of the most successful insurance companies in the country.

By this time Stevens had begun writing again, and in 1935 his important book *Ideas of Order* was issued by a small press and then reprinted the following year by Knopf. During 1936, too, occurred the one incident in Stevens's life that seems surprising: a drunken brawl in Florida with ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(in which Stevens had the worst of it), although the two men soon reconciled. *Ideas of Order* was well received, and Stevens was increasingly recognized as one of the country's major poets—a status acknowledged, during the coming years and decades, through an increasing shower of prizes, awards, honorary degrees, and invitations to speak on the campuses of leading colleges. The year 1937 saw the publication of his collection *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (with its significant title poem), and, by 1939, when Stevens turned 60, he enjoyed not only widespread respect but also the friendship of wealthy and influential people and broad connections in the literary community. Unfortunately he did not enjoy much happiness at home, where relations with his wife were as distant as ever. As World War II broke out in Europe, Stevens was entering a new period of literary productivity and was the focus of increasing attention from sympathetic critics. More and more he composed essays as well as poems, and in 1942 (with America now fully involved in the war) his book *Parts of a World* was published by Knopf and his poems “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” were issued by a small private press. Ironically by 1943–44 he found himself as vigorously opposed to his daughter's choice of a mate as his own parents had once resisted his own marriage to Elsie. Nevertheless, although Stevens considered Holly's fiancé socially inferior, she married him anyway, and her marriage would soon prove even less happy than that of her parents (Brazeau 277).

In 1945 Stevens's book *Esthétique du Mal* was issued by a small but respected press, and further recognition of Stevens's growing status was signified when he was named a fellow of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The next year he received a major poetry award, and in 1947 he was not only invited to speak at Harvard but received an honorary degree from Wesleyan University and saw the publication of his Harvard lectures by a private press. In 1948 he spoke at both Yale and Columbia Universities, and in 1949 he used a speaking engagement in Connecticut to read one of his most important poems, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” He was awarded the prestigious Bollingen Prize in 1950, witnessed the publication of his book *The*

Auroras of Autumn by Knopf, and was pleased when Knopf also committed itself to reprinting all of his previous books. *The Auroras of Autumn* received the National Book Award in 1951, the same year in which some of his prose was published in book form as *The Necessary Angel*. Speaking engagements and honorary degrees were now commonplace for Stevens, and he was also more and more often an official judge of others' poems for prizes and awards. In 1953 a volume of his *Selected Poems* was finally published in England, and the following year his monumental *Collected Poems* was issued by Knopf in time for his 75th birthday, which was celebrated by many of the most important writers of the time. He was offered the chance to be Harvard's professor of poetry for 1955–56 but declined, but in 1955 he did accept an honorary degree from Yale, won his second National Book Award, and was also awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Despite his growing public stature, however, his good fortune was not unblemished. His wife suffered a stroke in January 1955, and in April Stevens himself was hospitalized with intestinal troubles. Surgery revealed severe stomach cancer, and during the next few months he shuttled back and forth from his home to a convalescent facility to the hospital where he would soon die. His mood was surprisingly cheerful; his family had concealed his ultimate diagnosis from him, but he must have realized that his life was coming to an end. A priest who often visited him in the hospital later claimed that Stevens, who had always been an atheist or agnostic with a strong interest in religion (and in poetry as a possible substitute for religion), converted to Roman Catholicism shortly before his death, but that this news was withheld from his wife and daughter. In any case, when Stevens died on August 2, 1955, he was widely hailed as one of the most distinctive and important poets in the history of American literature (Brazeau 289–298).

“Sunday Morning” (1915, 1923)

A woman stays home on a Sunday morning rather than going to church, but, instead of merely enjoy-

ing herself or simply feeling guilty, she reflects on the role of religion in human life and ponders possible alternatives to it.

“Sunday Morning” is widely considered one of Stevens’s very finest poems. It opens by depicting a woman relaxing on a Sunday morning, apparently having skipped the church service that would have been considered obligatory by most people in her time. Yet even as she enjoys the physical pleasures of fruit, drink, sun, and nature, she nevertheless cannot help thinking of Christianity, which was born in “silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre” (or burial place) (ll. 14–15). In this splendid opening stanza, already full of vivid imagery and mesmerizing sound effects (especially assonance and alliteration), Stevens introduces the basic thematic tension that dominates the work: Should we enjoy the world or renounce it, indulge the flesh or nourish the spirit, live for the present or focus on the past or future? The second stanza opens appropriately with questions, which in this work are far more important than answers. The woman wonders why she should renounce pleasure to worry about death or the dead; she wonders why divinity usually seems so insubstantial and why earthly joys do not seem (to most people) as precious as a merely imagined heaven. And then, as if to save the poem from a sentimental romanticism, Stevens ends the stanza by acknowledging the complexities of earthly life—its pain as well as its pleasures, its losses as well as its gains. For a brief moment the poem seems to reach a resolution in the final line of stanza 2, but the poem’s great glory is that Stevens never rests, nor ever allows *us* to rest or stop thinking, and so the meditation begins anew with stanza 3.

This stanza briefly surveys past religious ideas, especially classical mythology and the Christianity that replaced it. Jove (king of the Greek and Roman gods) once commanded devotion, but, because he seemed too distant, too remote and imperious, human beings imagined a different kind of god (Jesus Christ) who was both human *and* divine. The stanza ends, however, by asking whether it might not be possible (and might not be better) simply to dispense with gods altogether. Instead

of inventing a fictitious heavenly paradise, might it not be best simply to acknowledge that earth itself may be “all of paradise that we shall know?” (l. 41). If we were willing to give up our dreams (or illusions) of supernatural perfection, nature itself might then seem more satisfying. Yes, our life here has its labors and pains, but it is also full of beauty, joy, and love, and, if we could accept the earth as our home (rather than merely as a brief stop on the way to a supposedly glorious heaven), our lives here and now might be more satisfying and contented. Once again, however, Stevens ends with only a temporary resolution, for in stanza 4 the meditation begins anew. The woman now admits that although she is indeed happy with earthly joys and pleasures, she knows they can never last. Once they fade, how can we then be happy? The answer seems to lie in the cycles of natural existence: Yes, spring ends, but it also returns, and the palpable reality of nature is far more substantial and reliable than the merely imaginary pleasures of myth or religion. But again, in stanza 5, the apparent answer is once more undercut by new questioning: Yes, the pleasures of nature may return each year, but she still longs for a personal happiness that will not fade, that will be permanent. In response, Stevens offers one of his most compelling statements: “Death is the mother of beauty”—a claim so important that he states it twice (ll. 63, 88). In other words, it is precisely our realization of our mortality and mutability that makes anything beautiful *seem* beautiful and precious. It is the consciousness of loss that makes us value beauty; that consciousness also makes us want to *create* beautiful things, whether they be works of art, acts of love, or children. The impulse to love and procreate is partly an effort to cheat and defeat death, to make beauty from mortality, to wrestle something precious from inevitable loss.

Stanza 6 amplifies this argument, suggesting that the merely imaginary paradises of myth or religion are static and sterile because they lack (or deny) change. Although they are usually described in ways that make them resemble beautiful places of nature, such heavens are unreal, and they lack the mutability that defines true, natural existence. Once again the poem states that “Death is the

mother of beauty,” but now it also insists that from the realization of death are born the mothers who themselves give birth to others: Human procreation is one long, continuous chain of acts designed to defeat death by creating and re-creating life. In stanza 7 the poem becomes almost visionary and ecstatic, as the speaker imagines a time when people will praise the glories of the sun and when all of nature will be united in one large choir of celebration. The sun, however, will be praised not as a god (for to praise it thus would merely repeat past mistakes), “but as a god might be” (l. 94). Thus, in this new ecstatic vision, we will appreciate nature’s beauties without foolishly deifying nature. If human beings can accept their mortality (rather than denying it or wishing it away), they will “know well the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish.” They will see their lives to be as beautiful (but also as brief and precious) as the morning dew (ll. 102–103). By accepting our common mortality we can begin to overcome our divisions, enjoying our brotherhood as children of the earth. Finally, in stanza 8, the poem and its meditations come full circle: The woman comprehends that the “tomb in Palestine” is not a site of divine resurrection; it is simply “the grave of Jesus, where he lay” (l. 109). It is, in other words, the final resting place of a man like the rest of us—a man precious not because he was God’s son but merely because he was our human brother. In its final lines the poem reminds us that in one respect we are fundamentally alone: In reality, no gods protect or terrorize us; we live like an island’s inhabitants, “unsponsored, free” (l. 112). But our island (this earth) is full of beauty; it is our home, and we share it with lovely creatures. Graceful sights and charming sounds are all around us. In the end, however, we must acknowledge that night follows day, that death follows life, and that finally we, like the birds Stevens so beautifully describes, must sink “Downward to darkness, on extended wings” (l. 120).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with another important modern poem on religion, T. S. ELIOT’s “Ash Wednesday.” In particular, discuss the two poems in terms of their images, tones, moods, and implied points of view. Which work seems more complex? Which (if either) seems more “convincing,” and why?
2. Compare and contrast the presentation of nature here and in JACK LONDON’s “The Law of Life” or in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat.” In particular, what aspects of Stevens’s view of nature make him seem more “romantic” than the other writers? How, in this poem, does he try to guard himself against excessive romanticism or sentimentalism? In other words, how does he try to ground the poem in realism?
3. Can a religious person appreciate and value a poem like this? If so, how and why? If not, why not? Is it necessary to agree with the message of a work of art in order to appreciate the work’s beauty, skill, and complexity?
4. Examine the attitude toward death in this poem. How does the work imply the value of being constantly aware of death? Is it open to an accusation of sentimentality? Why or why not?

“Anecdote of the Jar” (1923)

The anonymous speaker places a jar on a hillside in Tennessee, and this simple act transforms his (and our) perceptions.

This mysterious little poem, with its odd title and even odder “plot,” is typical of Stevens in its tendency to provoke thought without providing clear or simple answers. Its wit begins already in its title, since the word *anecdote* (which refers to a short narration concerning something real, but which can also imply an unreliable account) derives from a Greek term meaning “things unpublished.” Obviously, however, Stevens’s “anecdote” *is* published, and its inclusion in a book of poems implies that it will have some significant meaning. Who, however (besides Stevens), would think of writing a poem about a simple jar? Well, John Keats wrote a famous lyric about a Grecian urn, and surely Keats’s poem is somewhere in the background of Stevens’s work, influencing its interpretation if only through our reactions to the poems’ differences. Keats’s urn, for

instance, is elaborately decorated, whereas Stevens's jar is plain and unadorned. Keats's urn is associated with the artistic glories of a great, exotic civilization; Stevens's jar, on the other hand, exists in isolation in a rural Tennessee landscape and seems to serve no present purpose, not even the utilitarian one for which it was presumably designed. Yet both Keats's urn and Stevens's jar do seem to symbolize something created, something man-made, and thus some aspect of human skill and art as opposed to uncomplicated nature, and just as Keats's urn invites our contemplation and meditation, so does Stevens's jar. A simple, ordinary object to which we would usually pay no great attention becomes an object of fascination when it is placed in an unusual context. In this sense, the speaker's "plac[ing]" of the jar symbolizes the creative act of the artist, who, by inserting something man-made into the midst of nature, alters our perception not only of the object itself but also of the surrounding landscape and of relations between the two. The poem's simple, spare language (so different from the elaborate, punning pyrotechnics we often encounter in Stevens) is perfectly appropriate to its clipped, blunt tone; its brief, declarative syntax; and its clear, formulaic structure (just three four-line stanzas, with just two sentences in each of them). The poem is simultaneously plain and provocative, ordinary and strange, clear and yet compellingly odd.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although this poem profits from plain language and simple structure, discuss some examples of how it also employs "poetic" devices such as repetition, assonance, rhyme, structural circularity, and inverted sentence structure.
2. Taking your cue from the preceding discussion, compare and contrast this poem and Keats's "Ode." In particular, discuss the different titles of the works and their differences in length, stanza forms, points of view, tone, and meaning.
3. Compare and contrast this work with William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." In particular, discuss the poems in terms of their lengths, themes, tones, points of view, and kinds of diction.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1923)

A burly worker is summoned to a domestic gathering where male and female youths have begun to congregate and where the worker is given the task of preparing ice cream. The gathering, apparently, is a wake for an old woman who has recently died, and whose stiff, silent body lies on her bed, illuminated by lamp light, as the ice cream is prepared.

Beginning (as he often does) with a tantalizing title, Stevens immediately arouses our curiosity: Who or what is an "emperor of ice-cream"? The poem itself commences with a commanding, accented verb and a striking image: The "roller of big cigars" is presumably a strong, "muscular" laborer whose strength makes him the ideal person to "whip" (another active, accented verb), in normal, everyday "kitchen cups," the "concupiscent" (or pleasurable) "curds" of ice cream (ll. 1–3). In a mere three lines, then, we are in the midst of a typical Stevens poem: The basic situation is unclear but intriguing and makes us want to read further; the heavy use of alliteration (especially in line 3) implies a playful tone; and the juxtaposition of opposites (such as *concupiscent* and *curds*) exemplifies Stevens's typically ironic double vision. We are unsure just what is happening, but we want to learn more. Girls (although here called by the archaic term *wenches*, which implies sexuality) are present, and so are *boys* (the word implying their youth and thus also their sexuality); the girls are dressed plainly and the boys bring flowers plainly wrapped. The scene is thus one of ordinary beauty and ordinary vitality, but it is one of beauty and vitality nonetheless. Not until the second stanza do we discover that the occasion for this gathering is a wake—a celebration of a person's life after that person's death. The dead woman (like her mourners) was presumably poor or at least lower-middle-class: Just as their clothes and flowers are unelaborate, so the dresser near her deathbed is damaged, but while she lived, she was capable of creating beauty by "embroider[ing] fantails" on the "sheet" now used to "cover her face" (ll. 10–12). Her dead body may now be cold, silent, and even ugly (ll. 13–14), but it is as much a fact of life, which must be confronted unflinchingly, as is the pleasure symbolized by the ice cream. Death happens, but life goes on; indeed, it is the fact of death that gives meaning

and intensity to our passing fleshly joys. One woman has died, but the community continues and is drawn together by her passing to renew its affirmation of life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning," the speaker asserts, "Death is the mother of beauty." How, specifically, is that assertion relevant to this work? In what ways does death enhance our appreciation of beauty and even lead to the creation of beautiful things?
2. Discuss all the different kinds of pleasure implied throughout this work, and then discuss how they relate to one another and how they contribute to the poem's larger theme. What role (if any) does religion play in this poem? How is the tone of this work (and its attitude toward death) different from that in EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON's poem "Luke Havergal"?
3. Research the meaning of the term *carpe diem*, and in particular examine some poems in the *carpe diem* tradition (such as Robert Herrick's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"). Then, discuss how this work by Stevens falls into that tradition. What is the role of sexuality in such poems?

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"

(1923)

An anonymous, unidentified speaker addresses the woman of the title, informing her that poetry is "the supreme fiction" (l. 1) and imaginatively suggesting that the impulse to morality and the impulse to sensual pleasure may share common roots. Indeed (the speaker implies) perhaps the people who seem most rigorous in their sensual self-denial derive pleasure from their apparent pain, so that pleasure may be the ultimate source of much human conduct, even if it bothers some persons to consider this possibility.

This poem, from *Harmonium*, is typical of Stevens's work as a whole, especially his early work. As often in Stevens, the title is important: Each

adjective is significant, for the fact that the woman addressed is "High-Toned," "Old," and "Christian" implies that she is somewhat stuffy and pretentious; that her thinking may be traditional to the point of being outmoded and that she represents the kind of conventional, unthoughtful religion that Stevens often questioned. Although the poem is explicitly addressed to her (as the first line makes clear), she is never given a chance to reply; we hear only the speaker's side of the dialogue, but we can easily imagine the views he is critiquing. Like many of Stevens's poems, this one is explicitly concerned with poetry in particular and with the imagination in general. Stevens considered the imagination, and the arts it produced, as among the most precious of human possessions, and indeed he saw the imagination as perhaps the "supreme" feature of the human mind and life. In this poem he implicitly defends poetry against religion, implying that religion itself is largely an imaginative construct. His tone, here as so often elsewhere, is hypothetical and speculative (as in line 1), but the speaker also tries to imply the logic of his views, especially in such words or phrases as "Thus" (ll. 3, 9) and "That's clear" (l. 6). In addition, the tone is also whimsical, ironic, and even somewhat sardonic; even the repeated use of the word *madame* can be seen as simultaneously respectful and sarcastic. The heavy emphasis on assonance (as in lines 2, 10, 12, 18, and especially 21–22) and the even heavier use of alliteration (as in lines 2–5, 8–10, 12–13, 15–16, 18–19, and especially 21–22) are typical of the verbal playfulness and cleverness (some would say "self-indulgence" and "frivolity") so often found in Stevens's speakers, who love the sounds their words make both in the ear and on the tongue. The poem suggests, however, that earthly pleasure (even the pleasure of mere sounds) is a positive good that should not be despised in favor of "haunted heaven" (l. 3).

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem shares similar themes and arguments with "Sunday Morning." Why, however, is the latter poem a considerably greater work of art? In particular, compare and contrast the two poems in terms of their tones, their uses of

ambiguity, and the fairness with which they deal with opposing points of view.

2. Choose five words or phrases from this poem that seem to you especially striking or effective and discuss how and why they have their effect. Discuss them in terms of their denotation, their connotation, their qualities of sound and rhythm, and the ways they fit into the larger design of the poem as a whole.
3. How can you justify (or how might Stevens justify) the use of a line such as line 18 in a serious poem? How does this line contribute to the larger themes or meaning of the work, and how does it reflect the larger attitude of the poem's speaker?

“Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1923, 1931)

As Peter Quince (perhaps the comic stage manager in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) plays at a keyboard and thinks of a beautiful woman, he is reminded of the biblical figure of Susanna, herself a beauty, who, as she bathed, once inspired dangerous lust in some elderly voyeurs. When the old men tried to rape her, Susanna resisted. The poem ends by reflecting that although merely abstract beauty fades, beauty embodied achieves immortality, if only through memory.

This poem illustrates many common characteristics of Stevens's verse. In its opening and closing stanzas it is highly meditative, even philosophical—musing on the relations between music and emotion and then on the connections between beauty in the mind and in the flesh. The two middle stanzas, meanwhile, are highly evocative; they, in particular, are full of vivid, sensuous images, so that as readers we, too, like the elders, almost become voyeurs. Quince is a kind of artist, and the poem (as do many by Stevens) partly concerns art itself and the act of artistic creation. Many commentators have suggested that the poem has, appropriately enough, a musical structure (perhaps indebted to the sonata or sonatina forms), and certainly musical imagery provides much of its unity. But Stevens also uses his characteristic emphasis

on repetition of all kinds, just as he also typically exploits the full range of sound effects, especially through alliteration and assonance (see especially lines 13–15). Each section has its own shape, structure, and rhythm, from the tercets of section 1, to the alternating long and short lines of section 2, to the rhymed couplets of section 3, and concluding with the irregular rhymes and unpredictable stanzas of section 4. These alterations and variations make the work resemble even more a musical composition, yet the poem also gains unity through its underlying theme of beauty, its imagery of music, and its abiding concern with Susanna as a symbol of both loveliness and love.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss in detail some of the specific techniques Stevens uses in this poem. For instance, in the first section, how does he instantly create a sense of immediacy? In the same section, how does he introduce a sense of argumentative logic into a poem that otherwise emphasizes emotion? Why and how does he use colors in this section? Here and elsewhere, discuss the poetic effectiveness of his word choices as precisely as possible.
2. Compare and contrast Stevens's poem with the biblical episode of Susanna and the elders. How closely does Stevens follow the biblical account? What details, if any, does he change or omit? Is it possible to understand the poem without knowing the biblical report?
3. Compare and contrast the imagery used to describe Susanna with the images used to describe the elders. Discuss the connotations of the various images. For instance, why are the elders described as “red-eyed” (l. 12) and “white” (l. 62)? Why is Susanna associated with “water” that is “green,” “clear,” and “warm” (l. 16)? Discuss these and other word choices as precisely as you can.

“The Snow Man” (1931)

In this poem Stevens meditates on possible human responses to a winter landscape. He suggests that

to appreciate such a landscape properly and accurately, one must not impose meanings (especially tragic meanings) upon it or derive such meanings from it.

Typically enough, Stevens begins with a double-edged title: At first we might imagine a pleasant winter scene in which children have playfully constructed a stereotypically jolly, cheerful man of snow. But this, of course, is a Stevens poem, and so the mood and tone are thoughtful and philosophical rather than whimsically quaint. Of course, because it *is* a poem by Stevens, we cannot be easily or precisely sure what it means, although it seems to deal with a problem his writings often confront: the relation between man and nature, the connection between the observer and the thing observed. In other words, here as elsewhere Stevens seems to be concerned with the way the imagination relates to reality. The poem has been linked by critics to ideas associated with Schopenhauer, Heidegger, William James, and Eastern Buddhism (among others), but more important than *what* the poem may or may not mean is its craft. The work is more significant for the thoughts it provokes than for any answers it provides. What, for instance, does Stevens mean by the open reference to a “mind of winter” (l. 1)? Does he mean a mind attuned to winter? Does he mean a mind stripped bare of preconceptions, as winter itself seems bare and blank? In any case (and these are just two possible meanings), the phrase already suggests the two poles between which Stevens’s thought characteristically moves: between the perceiving mind and the real thing or real fact (in this case, winter) that the mind perceives. Although Stevens implies that winter is a season of nothingness, in lines 2–7 he splendidly evokes it with crisp, precise images that place it before our mental sights. Not until the second half of line 7, however, does the main argument enter: It takes a particular kind of mind to resist imposing a human meaning on what is, after all, a mere landscape. The landscape’s proper viewer must be one who (1) sees clearly all that can be seen, (2) introduces nothing extraneous into his vision, and (3) can also see “the nothing” before him (ll. 14–15). Yet the poem is not merely a philosophical puzzle. If it works as a

poem (as a work of art), it works because of the poet’s skill with words and rhythms—a skill that in this case involves striking imagery, effective repetition, puns, paradoxes, and an apparently simple diction that can nonetheless imply extraordinary complexity of thought and feeling.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the depiction of winter in this poem. What does the poem imply about the relationship between man and nature?
2. Compare and contrast the depictions of landscape in this poem and in Stevens’s poem “Sunday Morning.” In particular, how do the two poems seem to differ in their attitudes toward man’s relationship to nature? Which poem is more consoling or comforting, and why?
3. Compare and contrast this poem with ROBERT FROST’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” In particular, how do the poems contrast in their views of the relationship between man and nature? How does Stevens’s speaker try to resist the kinds of thoughts emphasized in Frost’s work?

“Of Modern Poetry” (1942)

This poem is striking in its almost programmatic clarity: It both sums up and enacts Stevens’s ideas of what modern poetry (and a modern poem) must be if it is to “suffice” (ll. 2, 10), or seem credible and convincing.

Stevens asserts that poems can no longer (as they once did) merely restate conventional ideas or repeat standard social, religious, or political orthodoxies, for these no longer exist. The modern poem, like the modern people it must serve and satisfy, must be an act of continual questing, of ceaseless finding, of constant discovery and rediscovery. It must be vital and must address people living here and now: It must address crucial aspects of reality (such as war), and it must speak so convincingly, and so much in the modern idiom, that those listening will think they hear their own speech. A successful modern poem can describe the simplest actions (“a man skating, a

woman dancing, a woman / Combing” [ll. 27–28]), but it must do so in language that rings true to a modern ear and a modern mind. Appropriately enough, Stevens here composes the kind of poem he commends: His language is simple and lucid; his sentence structure is uncomplicated; he writes with exactly the plainness and precision he praises. Yet the poem is not without art or craft, for it uses repetition effectively; it exploits and develops several controlling images (such as the imagery of stages and actors); it shifts between short sentences and long; and its final sentence is a fragment that both echoes and modifies the fragment with which the poem opened. In its loose structure, flexible rhythm, and unpredictable meter, the poem exemplifies the very colloquialism it calls for, so that the work is the perfect marriage of meaning and form, of substance and style.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with a more “difficult” poem by Stevens, such as “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” What factors, exactly, make the present poem easier to understand than that other work? Which of the two appeals to you more, and why? What are the potential virtues and faults of each work?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Ernest Hemingway’s short story “Hills Like White Elephants.” In particular, discuss how Hemingway’s story is a “modern” work of art in the ways suggested by Stevens’s poem. How does Hemingway’s story satisfy many of the criteria set out by Stevens?

“Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” (1954)

When the speaker hears the weak sound of a single bird outside at the very beginning of a late winter day, he realizes that the sound is the first indication of the rising sun and of the coming spring. The realization strikes him as an epiphany.

Here as in other poems (as the very title of this work suggests), Stevens is concerned with the relations between the mind and reality, between the

imagination and the world. The speaker is certain the sound he heard was not imaginary or part of a dream but something real, and (what is more) he associates it with even larger realities, such as the rising sun, the changing seasons, and nature’s response (symbolized by the coming “choir” of the birds [l. 14]) to both these transformations. Typically, at the very end of the poem the speaker is still somewhat tentative: He does not claim that his revelation is in actual fact “A new knowledge of reality”; instead he merely says it is “like” such knowledge (ll. 17–18). Stevens was too intelligent to think that the human mind can ever have pure, unmediated access to reality; he knew that our knowledge could only be approximate. Nevertheless, it is the business of this poem (and of his poetry in general) to help us share quick flashes of insight and revelation that seem to take us closer to the truly real. This particular poem accomplishes its goal of seeming credible through its plain, simple diction; its calm tone; and its lucid but unobtrusive structure. This work is an example of Stevens when he is seemingly most simple but also most profound.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss all the ways this poem deals with states or moments of transition or transformation—conditions of “in-betweenness.” How, for instance, does the first stanza repeatedly stress such states, and how and why is this condition relevant to the poem’s larger meaning?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Ezra Pound’s brief lyric “In a Station of the Metro.” In particular, discuss the two poems as examples of epiphanies, or sudden, brief revelations. How are the revelations similar (especially in their implications about beauty), and how do they also differ?

“The Plain Sense of Things” (1954)

When summer gives way to winter (or youth gives way to age), things seem to become simpler and more clear, but even to perceive or describe this change still requires the shaping power of the imagination.

5. Compare and contrast Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry" with his own "Sunday Morning." In particular, discuss how "Sunday Morning" exemplifies the kind of modern poem Stevens endorses. Pay special attention to such matters as the poem's diction, the actions it depicts, its emphasis on questing and questioning, and its imagery.
6. Discuss the depiction of nature in at least three different poems by Stevens. How is nature presented differently in each poem? Are there any similarities of presentation? What symbolic functions does nature serve in each work? How is Stevens's concern with nature relevant to his ideas about the relations between imagination and reality? How do Stevens's presentations of nature seem (or not seem) stereotypically "romantic"?
7. Compare and contrast the depictions of death in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and in "Sunday Morning." Why do both poems emphasize the presence of young men and women? Why do both poems emphasize the idea of sensual pleasure? Why do both poems emphasize the creation of beauty? How are all these topics relevant to their larger concerns with death?
8. Drawing on the discussions of Stevens offered earlier, discuss how his poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is typical of his work. In particular, discuss the poem's structure, themes, tone, attitudes, and methods, including its use of such techniques as repetition, variation, alliteration, and assonance. How is the poem typical of Stevens in its depictions of nature and in its implications about the role of the imagination?
9. Study some ideas contained in Stevens's prose work *The Necessary Angel* and then discuss their relevance to one or more of his poems. For example, you might focus on Stevens's ideas about the purposes of poetry, the relations between poetry and religion, the relations between poetry and the physical and social worlds, or the relations between reality and the imagination.
10. Using the poems discussed earlier as examples, what (if anything) do you think can be inferred about Stevens's social or political views? What evidence (if any) do the poems provide for believing that Stevens was a "conservative" or a "liberal," a "traditionalist" or a "progressive," and so on? To what degree do these poems suggest that Stevens was concerned with politics or society? On what specific evidence do you base your conclusions?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Brazeau, Peter. *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered: An Oral Biography*. San Francisco: North Point, 1985.
- Brunner, Edward, John Timberman Newcomb, and Cary Nelson. "Modern American Poetry: Wallace Stevens." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/stevens/stevens.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Kermode, Frank, and Joan Richardson. "Chronology." In *Collected Poetry and Prose*. By Wallace Stevens. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Serio, John N. *Wallace Stevens: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994.
- Sharpe, Tony. *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Sukenick, Ronald. *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure*. New York: New York University Press, 1967.
- Vendler, Helen. *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- . The Wallace Stevens Journal. Available online. URL: <http://www.wallacestevens.com>. Accessed April 7, 2009.

Robert C. Evans



SUI SIN FAR

(EDITH MAUDE EATON)

(1865–1914)

I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant “connecting link.”

(“Leaves”)

Sui Sin Far is the pen name adopted by a woman born in England and raised in Canada who lived at various times in New York, Jamaica, San Francisco, Seattle, and Boston before dying in Montreal at age 49. The daughter of an English father and Chinese mother, she had been given the name *Edith Eaton* at birth, but it is as *Sui Sin Far* that she achieved some measure of contemporary fame as well as lasting historical significance. She was the first author of serious fiction in North America to write as a Chinese person about Chinese (and Chinese-American) topics. Although her physical appearance would easily have allowed her to “pass” as white, and although most of her 13 siblings did indeed blend (and marry) into the dominant culture, *Sui Sin Far* chose to identify with, and speak up for, a minority population that was strongly discriminated against in her era.

In her journalism as well as in her fiction, *Sui Sin Far* sought to understand and depict the experiences of the Chinese (especially in America) in ways that would undermine the negative stereotypes that affected the ways they were viewed and treated throughout the English-speaking world. As an unmarried woman of mixed ancestry who struggled throughout her life to make a living, and as an author whose unconventional writing earned her little real income, she chose an independent path that provided little material comfort but that obviously answered a deeper need for personal integ-

riety, self-respect, and empathy with an oppressed people.

Sui Sin Far’s father, Edward Eaton, was born in England in 1839; by the early 1860s he was in Shanghai, China, working as a merchant despite his interest and training in art. There he met a Chinese woman named Lotus Blossom Trefusis. Born in 1846, she had apparently been taken from China and educated in England, as a child; she may have returned to China as a Christian missionary. Despite their similarities of faith and education, Edward and Lotus Blossom were divided by race, yet they chose to defy the traditions of their nations and families by marrying. This decision, however, would have even more impact on their children than on the couple themselves. The first of their children, Edward Charles, was born in China in 1864; the second child (and first daughter) was Edith, who was born in the small village of Macclesfield, England, in 1865. Over the years, 12 more children arrived at regular intervals, and Edith (as the eldest daughter) was deeply involved in raising and supervising them. She thus knew from an early age the time and effort demanded of a mother, and these experiences may have affected her later decision not to marry or have children of her own, especially once she had decided to be a writer. However, another factor perhaps influencing her decision to remain single may have been her own experience with the sometimes violent preju-

dice faced by children of mixed racial backgrounds; she knew firsthand that such children were often taunted and even attacked by other children and were then later subject to legal discrimination as adults (White-Parks 39).

Some of Edith's most vivid childhood memories centered on the experience of being treated as "different" because of her mixed racial parentage. In a memoir written years later, she recalls being scrutinized as a child by curious adults, and she also recalls later being abused, through attacks and taunting, by other children. Even when quite young, she defended herself, verbally and physically, from such assaults and sought reasons to feel pride in her Chinese heritage, but her early exposure to prejudice left a lasting impact. Moreover, such exposure became, if anything, even more intense after her parents left England for North America in 1871 or 1872. Settling briefly in Hudson City, New York, by 1872 or 1873, they had arrived in Montreal, Canada, the city where Edith would spend most of her childhood and adolescence. By this point, the growing family was increasingly poor; they lived in a city divided ethnically between English- and French-speaking whites as well as by chasms of class. The Eatons lived in a section of Montreal with one of the highest rates of infant death on the planet (White-Park 21), but Edith's father seems to have been less and less interested in making a conventional living. Instead, he spent much time painting, and Edith herself, despite physical frailty, was put to work in the streets, selling lace and hawking her father's artwork. She was educated in private schools and by her parents (although she never mastered written or spoken Chinese), and by 1883 she had found work as a compositor and stenographer for a Montreal newspaper. Stenography, in fact, would be the practical means by which she would earn her living for most of her life, but her work at the paper also allowed her entry into the world of writing, which would provide the focus of her truest and deepest ambitions.

Her earliest known story, "A Trip in a Horse Car," is a human-interest sketch published in 1888 in a new Canadian periodical, the *Dominion Illustrated*. Over the next two years the same periodi-

cal printed seven more works authored by "Edith Eaton"; in some of these (such as "The Origin of a Broken Nose" and "Albemarle's Secret") the writer mocks romanticism, sentimentality, and unrealistic behavior; in others (such as "A Fatal Tug of War" and "Robin") her subjects and tone are darker. None of these early works, however, reveals the Chinese-oriented focus that would later become her hallmark. By the early 1890s, however, she had begun to take a deeper personal interest in Montreal's tiny Chinese community, and it is even possible that two anonymous sketches published in 1890, and focusing on discrimination against Chinese in Canada, were written by her (White-Parks 78–80). Two similar pieces appeared in 1894 and 1895, but it was in 1896 (the year she also visited New York's fairly large Chinatown) that her growing commitment to Chinese people and topics became especially obvious. During that year she published a letter to the *Montreal Daily Star* titled "A Plea for the Chinaman." Although the letter was signed E. E. (White-Parks 30), in a series of stories printed that same year ("The Gamblers," "Ku Yum," "The Story of Iso," "A Love Story of the Orient," and "A Chinese Feud") she began publishing on Chinese topics under the name *Sui Sin Far*, a phrase meaning "lily" or "water lily" and associated with love for family and homeland (Diana 74). Her career as the first significant Chinese-American writer on Chinese-American subjects had now begun.

The word *career* is probably too strong, for Sui Sin Far never made a successful living as a full-time professional writer of fiction. Instead, she almost always had to rely on stenography and journalism. She practiced both professions, for instance, during a brief stint in 1897 in Jamaica, where she was exposed to yet another highly complex multicultural and multiracial society (about which she wrote 30 separate pieces of journalism). It was there that she also (unfortunately) contracted malaria. By 1898 she was back in Montreal, but her doctors soon advised her to head west to a healthier climate, and so by the end of that year she had moved to San Francisco and then, eventually, to Seattle. Even in Seattle she moved at least seven times, often living in single rooms while

eking out a modest living. (Throughout her life she sent home money to her parents and siblings.) Meanwhile, her exposure to the relatively large Chinese community in San Francisco (as well as to the much smaller one in Seattle) fed into her work as a journalist and author of short fiction. In 1898 she published "Sweet Sin" and "The Sing-Song Woman"; 1899 saw the publication of "Lin John," "The Story of Tin-A," and "A Chinese Ishmael" (an especially fine work). In 1900 she published "The Smuggling of Tie Co," "A Chinese Tom-Boy," "Ku Yum's Little Sister," and "O Yam—a Sketch." Most of these works of 1898 and 1899 appeared in the California-based periodical *Land of Sunshine*, but one appeared in the *Chicago Evening Post*, and increasingly Sui Sin Far would begin to attract a national audience through widely distributed periodicals. In 1902, for instance, her story "The Coat of Many Colors" appeared in the *Youth's Companion*; in 1904 "A Chinese Boy-Girl" was printed in the influential *Century* magazine; in 1905 the *Chautauquan* printed "Aluteh"; and by 1909 Sui Sin Far was sufficiently prominent that a national magazine, the *Independent*, printed her autobiographical memoir titled "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian."

Nevertheless, Sui Sin Far never had as much time or money to devote to her writing as she desired. In this respect she was much less fortunate than her sister Winnifred, 10 years younger and married to a white man, who had adopted a fictitious, aristocratic Japanese ancestry (since the Japanese were less discriminated against than the Chinese) as well as a Japanese pen name (*Onoto Watanna*). By 1899 Winnifred had become a successful published novelist whose numerous books would be issued by major presses; Sui Sin Far, in contrast, won far less acclaim and earned much less money; most of her publications in 1903 and 1904 were small pieces of journalism printed in Los Angeles, and she apparently published nothing at all in 1906, 1907, or 1908. (Many of her manuscripts seem to have been destroyed, unfortunately, in a 1907 train wreck [White-Parks 46–47].) A steady stream of publications resumed, however, in 1909, which saw the printing of at least 20 different works (including adult short fiction, children's stories, and occasional journalism).

A similar flood of at least nine works (including some of Sui Sin Far's most notable stories, such as "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," "A White Woman Who Married a Chinaman," "The Inferior Woman," "Her Chinese Husband," and "The Bird of Love") appeared in 1910, often in major periodicals. Only one tale ("A Love Story from the Rice Fields of China") seems to survive from 1911, although that is also the year that saw the publication of a frank autobiographical essay titled "The Persecution and Oppression of Me," which has recently been attributed to her by Dominika Ferens (98–99). It was in 1912, however, that Sui Sin Far enjoyed her greatest achievement, when the A. C. McClurg publishing company in Chicago brought out 2,500 copies of a handsomely printed selection of her short fiction and children's tales titled *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. Nevertheless, despite generally positive reviews and a feature article on the author in a newspaper in Boston (where she had moved in 1910), there is not much evidence that the book sold especially well (no second printing is recorded). At least two other stories were printed in 1912 ("Chan Hen Yen, Chinese Student" and "Who's Game"), and an article, "Chinese Workmen in America," appeared in 1913; after that, however, nothing else seems to survive from her pen, even though she claimed to be working on another book (possibly a novel).

At some point (perhaps as early as 1911) she seems to have returned to Montreal, and it was there that her death notice appeared on April 7, 1914. An obituary attributed her demise to heart trouble, and it also noted the irony that she had died just when her career had begun to flourish. A handsome monument was erected to her in a Montreal cemetery, but for the next 60 years she was largely forgotten. Only in the last decades of the 20th century, with the rise of feminism and ethnic studies, did interest begin to revive in the life and works of this remarkably unusual writer.

"Mrs. Spring Fragrance" (1910, 1912)

"Mrs. Spring Fragrance" describes the way the title character, a sprightly Chinese-American woman

from Seattle, helps ensure that her young friend, Mai Gwi Far (also known as Laura), can marry her true love (Kai Tzu) rather than Tsen Hing, whom Laura's traditional Chinese parents have selected for her. While visiting San Francisco, Mrs. Spring Fragrance meets Tsen Hing and the woman he would prefer to marry and assures him that Laura will not object to such a match. When Mr. Spring Fragrance learns that his wife has been seen with Tsen Hing, he fears she may be falling in love with the young bachelor, but when she returns to Seattle, his misunderstandings are laid to rest, and the story ends by affirming the genuine affection between the Spring Fragrances and also by clearing the way for Laura's marriage to Kai Tzu.

This tale is Sui Sin Far's most often-reprinted work. In many ways it typifies her writing, both in style and theme, but in some respects it is not one of her strongest tales. Readers who find it flawed should not assume that it represents her at her best. In numerous respects, however, the story is indeed representative. It is set, for instance, in a genteel, middle-class neighborhood; the Spring Fragrances live between a stereotypical white family and a traditional Chinese family. Sui Sin Far thus demonstrates that not all Chinese Americans live in "Chinatown" ghettos, that not all are poor, and that not all are divorced from "mainstream" America. Both husband and wife speak English well; both are well-mannered and even "cultured" (especially the wife); and both exhibit not only respect for others but a good deal of self-respect as well. In all these ways, Sui Sin Far refutes anti-Chinese stereotypes prevalent in her day; she depicts the Spring Fragrances as, in many respects, a "normal" American middle-class couple. Nevertheless, they also typify her characters in being members of two cultures that often conflict in their values, behavior, and assumptions. Moreover, the story is also characteristic of Sui Sin Far's stories in its focus on such topics as divided identities, the power of romantic love, the complications of marriage, conflicts between children and parents, friendships between women, misunderstandings between the sexes, tensions between and within cultures, and the willingness of women to make a difference by asserting themselves, although often in

subtle ways. Stylistically the story is typical of Sui Sin Far in its relatively simple and straightforward language, its use of dialect (both Chinese and American), its subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) ironies, its somewhat mannered dialogue, its occasional satire, and its structural sophistication. This story, however, is more consistently comic than many of her best works; its resolution seems somewhat simplistic; and its title character may strike many readers as too quaint, cheerful, and contrived (see White-Parks 165–169, 206). Readers who prefer darker, more realistic, and more "tragic" tales can find them in abundance in Sui Sin Far's other works, but this is not such a story.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the presentation of marriage in this story and in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." Is one work more "realistic" than the other? If so, why and how? How do the heroines of the two works differ, not only in their motivations but also in the freedom available to each of them? How do issues of economic class play important roles in both works?
2. Compare and contrast the depiction of romantic love in this story with its depiction in Sui Sin Far's tale "A Chinese Ishmael" (which is available on the Internet). Which story do you prefer, and why? Which story seems more sentimental? Discuss the style and dialogue of the two works.
3. Which aspects of this work do you find most effective, and which aspects do you find least effective? In both cases, explain why. Discuss such matters as characterization, diction, and tone.
4. Compare and contrast this story with ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which also deals with a minority population. Which work seems more plausible or credible? Which seems more psychologically complex? Discuss the use (or absence) of dialect in each work.
5. How does the genre of this piece (in other words, the kind of work it is) affect the presentation of marriage? How would the presentation be different if the work were less comic? Is it fair to judge one kind of work by the standards of another?

6. Discuss the ways in which characters in this story are differentiated by such characteristics as race, class, gender, cultural background, and age. For example, how do the Chinese-American characters differ from the “Anglo” characters, and how do the males differ from the females? What do people of the same generation have in common with one another despite differences of (for instance) ethnicity?

“The Chinese Lily” (1912)

Mermei, a young Chinese woman who has been handicapped and severely disfigured by an accidental fall, lives an isolated life in the upstairs room of a dwelling house in San Francisco's Chinatown, where she is often visited by her devoted young brother, Lin John, who is her only friend and companion. One night, when Lin John cannot visit, Mermei weeps from loneliness, and her weeping is overheard by Sin Far (whose name means Chinese Lily), a young and beautiful neighbor woman who is also lonely and who gives Mermei a Chinese lily as a sign of friendship. Eventually Lin John falls in love with his sister's new friend, but suddenly he is informed one night that his sister's apartment building is on fire; as he reaches the top of a flimsy ladder (surrounded by flames), he and the two female friends realize that there is enough time for him to save only one of the girls. Thus, a fateful choice must be made.

Sui Sin Far's fiction is often most powerful when it is most brief, and the current story is a fine example of the memorable effects she can often achieve in a limited amount of space. Her style seems best when (as here) it is plain, simple, and straightforward—when it is least flowery and sentimental. This is a story that could easily have lent itself to melodrama, both in depicting Mermei and in depicting the final fate of Sin Far, but in this tale the author mostly resists any temptations to indulge in maudlin emotions. Instead, for the most part, the story depends on subtle understatement—a trait that actually enhances the emotional impact of this stinging tragic work.

To say that Sui Sin Far's style in this story is simple, however, is not to suggest that it lacks sophistication. Often, for example, she manipulates syntax (or sentence structure) in ways that give her tale maximum impact. Thus, early in the story she emphasizes the isolation of both Mermei and Lin John in a way that might at first seem improbable: “Their mother had died the day she entered the foreign city, and the father the week following” (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance* [1995] 102). The abrupt deaths of both parents seem, at first, too coincidental to believe, but then the sentence continues: “both having contracted a fever on the steamer.” Now the deaths seem sadly credible. Likewise, Sui Sin Far again uses syntax effectively when she explains how the orphaned children were cared for by their father's brother: “although he was a poor man he did his best for them until called away by death” (102). Thus, just when the prospects of the unfortunate children might seem to be looking up, the final five words of that sentence appear. The untimely deaths of both the parents and the uncle foreshadow, significantly, the tragic ending of the present story. In this tale (in contrast to some of her better-known works), Sui Sin Far never lets us forget how dark, unpredictable, and unforgiving life can be. The moral dilemmas faced by all three characters at the end of the story and the moral maturity all three display make this tale a brief but unforgettable gem in Sui Sin Far's body of work. The story's richly ambiguous final sentence is especially effective; it literally raises more questions than it answers and thus contributes to the haunting impact of a brief, beautiful, but finally very disturbing work.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Does Lin John make the right choice at the end of this tale? Why or why not? What would you have done if faced with his dilemma? What details from earlier in the story help foreshadow the choices made by all three characters at the end? Was there a third option that none of the characters seems to have considered?
2. In setting, characterization, tone, atmosphere, and style, how does this story contrast with Sui Sin Far's most famous tale, “Mrs. Spring Fragrance”? To which genres does each of these

gender, ethnicity), is one more important than another in determining the fates of the characters? Does this relative importance change from one story to another?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Ammons, Elizabeth. "Audacious Words: Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*." In *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *American Women Fiction Writers: 1900–1960*. Vol. 3. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 156–177.
- Diana, Vanessa Holford. "Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton) (1865–1914)." In *Asian-American Short Story Writers: An A–Z Guide*, edited by Guiyou Huang and Emmanuel S. Nelson, 73–83. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2003.
- Ferens, Dominika. *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Ling, Amy. "Edith Eaton: Pioneer Chinamerican Writer and Feminist." *American Literary Realism* 16 (1983): 287–298.
- Novak, Terry D. Available online. URL: Edith Maude Eaton (Sui-Sin Far). Accessed online. URL: <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/eatonEdith.php>. Accessed July 11, 2009.
- Solberg, S. E. "Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton: First Chinese-American Fictionist." *MELUS* 8, no. 1 (1981): 27–39.
- Sui Sin Park. "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian." *Independent* 66 (January 21, 1909): 125–132.
- . *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. Chicago: McClurg, 1912.
- . *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*. Edited by Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- White Parks, Annette. *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Robert C. Evans



JEAN TOOMER (1894–1967)

“Th form that’s burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words.”

(*Cane*)

Although often considered one of the most important voices in the history of African-American literature, Jean Toomer was sometimes quite ambivalent about being labeled a black person. His personal ancestry was highly complicated, and his skin was light enough that he could even pass as white, as was also true of other members of his immediate family. Toomer thus often preferred to think of himself as the first fully aware member of a new “American” race—a people derived from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, *Cane*—the idiosyncratic amalgam of prose, poetry, and drama for which he is almost solely famous—deals at length with the lives, thoughts, and feelings of American blacks, and Toomer himself obviously identified deeply with African-American culture.

Most of the key facts of Toomer’s life are outlined in the excellent biography by Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge. He was born Nathan Pinchback Toomer (he only much later began referring to himself as *Jean*) on December 26, 1894, nearly nine months to the day after his mother, Nina Pinchback, had married the much older Nathan Toomer on March 29 of that year. Nina was the daughter of a wealthy and influential man named P. B. S. Pinchback, who had once been elected lieutenant governor (and had even briefly served as governor) of Louisiana in the era following the Civil War, when political opportunities for blacks

and persons of mixed race had suddenly (but only briefly) opened. P. B. S. Pinchback possessed skin so light that in some photos he strongly resembles the Scottish-American industrialist Andrew Carnegie, and in the Reconstruction era he was able to use his mixed racial background to political and social advantage. After his political career ended in the South, he moved his family to Washington, D.C., where they lived a life of significant privilege. Pinchback was a strong-willed and imperious man, and he greatly disapproved of Nina’s relationship with Nathan Toomer. He was not surprised, then, when Toomer, in 1895, deserted his new wife and young son. In 1896 Nina reluctantly moved back into her parents’ home and agreed to her father’s insistence that she rename her boy *Eugene*. During the early years of his life, young Toomer thus lived in a mostly white and mostly affluent neighborhood, under the influence of his successful but domineering grandfather—a man he would both respect and resent.

By 1899 Nina had officially divorced Nathan Toomer, who now essentially disappeared from his son’s life. Eugene’s main male influence, in addition to the imposing example provided by his grandfather, was that of his uncle Bismarck, a man who loved to read and socialize but who, as did all the children of P. B. S., never quite lived up to the old man’s expectations. From 1901 to 1905 young Eugene attended a school for blacks in Washington,

and although his heart was not in his schooling, he did enjoy his friendships with other local children, especially their chances to play outdoors in an area that was still largely rural. This relatively happy life was disrupted, however, when in 1906 his mother married a man named Archibald Combes, with whom she moved to Brooklyn, New York. Then, in 1907, the family relocated again, this time to nearby New Rochelle. Young Eugene apparently disliked his stepfather, and when Nina died in 1909, the boy returned to Washington to live once more with his grandparents and his beloved uncle. In 1910 he began high school in a noted all-black institution, but by the time he graduated, his grandfather's finances were no longer sufficient to support the kind of university education both of them thought he deserved. Instead, Toomer headed off in 1914 to study agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. Although he worried that he would suffer discrimination there if people discovered he had attended an all-black high school, his light skin shielded him from obvious prejudice, and in fact he was popular with his classmates (some of whom thought he was an Indian).

Nevertheless, Toomer's college years were unsettled. He soon left Wisconsin, in 1915, intending to study agriculture in Massachusetts, but by 1916 he had arrived in Chicago to study physical training. While there, he also dabbled in atheism and socialism; by 1917 he was in New York City, taking classes at various colleges and supporting himself through odd jobs. Although he never did finish a college degree, all during these years he was actively studious, reading widely (especially the writing of Walt Whitman) and even beginning, in 1918, to produce serious literary work. His story "Bona and Paul" (later included in *Cane*) dates from this year, and Toomer now began increasingly to think of himself as a professional writer and intellectual. In 1920, for instance, he produced his important poem "The First American," in which he outlined his ideas about transcending standard racial distinctions, and it was around this time, too, that he met the influential writer Waldo Frank and began calling himself *Jean Toomer*. Frank took an immediate interest in Toomer's writings and career and helped

promote both. Fortunately it was in 1921—during a brief stint as a school principal in rural Sparta, Georgia—that Toomer was suddenly inspired to begin writing most of the material he subsequently collected in *Cane*. Meanwhile, his relationship with Frank was prospering, and he was also gaining contact with ever-growing circles (both in Washington and in New York) of like-minded, ambitious, and unconventional young writers. Many of these new contacts were black, and some of them saw Toomer as part of an emerging "New Negro" movement that would lead to a cultural and artistic renaissance in the black community.

By 1922 Toomer was at the height of his own artistic productivity. His stories, sketches, and poems—many of them soon to be included in *Cane*—began appearing in avant-garde magazines around the country. By the end of that year Toomer had assembled most of these pieces into the puzzling hybrid he titled *Cane*, which was soon published (thanks in large part to Waldo Frank's encouragement and glowing introduction) in 1923. The book did not sell well, and Toomer seems to have been bothered by the emphasis—both in Frank's introduction and in the publisher's advertising—on his identity as a "Negro" writer. Nevertheless, most reviewers praised *Cane*, and Toomer seemed on the verge of a significant literary career. It was just at this moment, however, that he not only began an affair with Margaret Naumburg, the wife of his friend and patron Waldo Frank, but also became increasingly fascinated by the teachings of the Armenian mystic Georges I. Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff's philosophy—and the rigid discipline it required—seemed to offer Toomer a prospect of wholeness, of integrated identity and personal stability, that he had long felt was missing from his life. In any case, his devotion to Gurdjieff's ideas soon became so intense that in 1924 he journeyed to France to study at the master's feet. It was not long before Toomer himself became an instructor in "the Gurdjieff work," and as he became more and more preoccupied with this sort of spiritualism, his interest in creating "literature" declined. He would never cease writing, but *Cane* would be his one significant literary work.

By 1925 Toomer was back in the United States, spreading the Gurdjieffan gospel not only in Harlem but also in Taos, New Mexico, where he won the support of the wealthy patron Mabel Dodge Luhan. By 1926 his relationship with Margaret Naumburg had ended, but his fascination with Gurdjieff continued. In the summer of that year he was back at Gurdjieff's headquarters in France, then returned to the United States to teach Gurdjieff's ideas in Chicago, and then in summer 1927 was back in France again. The written works he did produce during 1927 and 1928 were often rejected, a pattern that continued, for the most part, into 1929, the year in which he completed a collection of short stories that remained unpublished during his lifetime. By 1930 serious tensions had arisen in his relations with other Gurdjieffians, and in the same year Toomer's autobiography was rejected. Further rejections of his literary work (including a book of poems) followed in 1931, but on October 30 of that year Toomer did marry a woman named Margery Latimer, who gave birth to their daughter (also named Margery) on August 16, 1932. Unfortunately the elder Margery died during childbirth, and so Toomer found himself a widower with an infant to raise. Nevertheless, he continued to write and sometimes did find publishers for his work, and in 1934 he also married Marjorie Content, daughter of a wealthy businessman. She would remain his wife for the rest of his life and would help raise his "Argie," his only child.

The patterns that had now been established in Toomer's life continued for most of the rest of it. He continued to write, but most of his works remained unpublished until long after his death. In 1935 he ended his close connection with Gurdjieff, although he never completely lost his interest in Gurdjieff's ideas. In 1936 he and Marjorie bought a house in Doylestown, Pennsylvania (near Philadelphia), where Toomer maintained his interest in spiritualism—an interest that led in 1939 to a lengthy journey through India. Even before leaving for this trip, however, Toomer and his wife had begun an involvement with a local group of Friends (or Quakers), and on their return to the United States they both became more and more tightly

connected with the Friends movement. Toomer continued to write, and he sometimes found outlets for his work, especially in publications sponsored by the Friends. He even continued his teachings of Gurdjieff's philosophy (much to Marjorie's frustration). By the mid-1940s his health had begun to falter, but during this time his involvement with the Friends also became more and more official: He was now a speaker, adviser, and pamphleteer. By the end of the 1940s, however, his ties with the Friends began to decrease and he took up a new interest in the teachings of the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung. By 1950 he had even become intrigued by the ideas that would eventually become known as scientology, and by the mid-1950s he was not only fascinated by nutrition and dieting but had also become heavily involved, once more, with the Gurdjieffians. By the end of that decade, however, his health was increasingly frail. His last years were often spent in nursing homes, and when he died on March 30, 1967, his passing was almost unnoticed in the literary world. It was not long, however, before his work was rediscovered by a new generation of black writers interested in the accomplishments of its predecessors, and Toomer ironically soon achieved far more recognition and appreciation in the years and decades following his death than he had ever enjoyed during his long and unsettled life.

"Seventh Street" (1922; 1923)

This very brief sketch—the opening piece in the second section of *Cane*—marks the book's transition from its early emphasis on rural Georgia to its new emphasis on the urban North. Seventh Street was a main thoroughfare in the mostly black section of Washington, D.C., and in a few brief brush strokes Toomer manages to suggest its chief characteristics, in the early 1920s, as a place of materialism, crime, and modernizing, mechanizing innovations.

As he does elsewhere in *Cane*, Toomer in this sketch uses a brief, repeated poem to frame an impressionistic piece of prose. "Seventh Street" has

no real plot; it is instead designed to create a mood and set a tone. The poem's first word—*Money* (41; l. 1)—suggests the emphasis on materialism and acquisitiveness that will be crucial not only to this sketch but also to much of the whole second section of *Cane*. Seventh Street is a place of “Bootleggers in silken shirts” (l. 2)—a place, that is, where profits can be made from breaking the law, and where wealth and self-display have replaced any concern with higher or more spiritual values. It is a place where machines play increasingly prominent roles in human life—a place where “Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs” go “Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks” (ll. 3–4). Seventh Street is (in language designed to be crudely blunt) “a bastard of Prohibition and the War” (41). It is, in other words, a reflection of the wholesale and widespread social changes unleashed first by World War I (one of the most catastrophic conflicts in human history) and then by the ill-fated ban on alcohol sales that soon followed (a ban that only encouraged the rise of organized crime). As Toomer attempts to convey the sensuous complexity of Seventh Street, he piles adjective upon adjective, image upon image, ignoring neatly conventional sentence structure to suggest, in kaleidoscopic prose, the sheer variety of the place: It is a “crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington” (41). Seventh Street is a place of paradoxes and contradictions, of opposites blended and contrasted, and in attempting to describe it, Toomer often lapses into phrasing that becomes (as in the heavy emphasis on alliteration in the last words just quoted) almost musical and jazz-like itself. By the middle of the passage the clarity of explanation, sentence structure, purpose, and meaning have largely broken down: “Wedges rust in soggy wood. . . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . . the sun” (41). By this point the prose has become almost hallucinatory and surreal, and indeed the tone soon becomes almost violently hectoring. Questions pile up; images accumulate; verbs are emphasized by being placed at both the beginnings and ends of fragmented sentences. Finally the

prose reaches a crescendo of accusatory bluntness: “God would not dare to suck black red blood. A Nigger God! He would duck his head in shame and call for Judgment Day. Who set you flowing?” (41). The tone has become sarcastic, satiric, almost apocalyptic. And then the whole structure suddenly repeats (and closes with) the opening poem. Such symmetry, however, only calls added attention to the disordered images and chaotic emotions crammed between the two brief snatches of verse.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with CARL SANDBURG's poem titled “Chicago.” What seems to be the purpose of each poem? How do they differ in tone, effect, and point of view? Why does Toomer's text seem relatively more chaotic than Sandburg's?
2. Read this sketch alongside CLAUDE MCKAY's poem titled “Harlem Shadows.” Discuss the depiction of big-city life in both works. Discuss the ways both texts deal with the theme of materialism. Comment on the structure, design, diction, and tone of each piece.
3. In theme, imagery, diction, and tone, how does this section of *Cane* relate to the sections that preceded it? In all the same respects, how does it foreshadow later developments in the book? In other words, how is this section pivotal in the structure of the work?

“Song of the Son” (1922, 1923)

One of numerous poems interspersed throughout the prose of *Cane* (especially in the first of the book's three sections), this lyric employs many of the images, symbols, and themes that help unify the opening portion of the book. As do other parts of *Cane*, this poem emphasizes the theme of mutability—of time passing and conditions changing, of a vital cultural heritage being lost, but not before it can partly be preserved in art. The speaker implies that he has arrived in the South just in time to hear and re-create, through his own poem, the fading music of a once-enslaved people.

The poem begins with an emphatic, heavily accented verb that is then immediately repeated (“Pour O pour” [14, l. 1])—techniques frequently used elsewhere in *Cane*. The tone of the poem is both celebratory and elegiac, for the spirit that the speaker wishes to pour forth in song is a “parting soul” (l. 1). This phrasing implies a kind of life that is all the more beautiful because it is also being lost. Light-and-dark imagery, so prominent throughout *Cane* and so appropriate to its pervasive racial themes, is soon stressed in line 2, and so is a strong emphasis on natural rural beauty, which is also highly typical of the first section of the book. The speaker of the poem creates a characteristic sense of immediacy (as when he refers, for instance, to the “air to-night” [l. 3]), and he also (as so often elsewhere in *Cane*) uses repetition and refrains to good effect, as in the closing couplet of the opening stanza. All five stanzas use rhyme, but the rhyme never seems artificial or contrived; instead, the poem echoes the works of Walt Whitman in the plainness of its diction but also in the rapturous, almost prophetic tone of its voice.

The Whitmanesque elements of the poem become especially apparent later in the work, where the speaker describes himself as the “son” of the rural southern “land and soil” (ll. 9, 6). He has arrived just in time to capture, in the music of his own verse, “thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone” (l. 14). By this point it has become clear that the poem is intended both to echo and to elevate the dying but nonetheless compelling folk music of a “song-lit race of slaves” (l. 12). That last phrase, in fact, is typical of the subtle skill of Toomer’s own poem: It uses the technique of synesthesia to combine the senses of sight and sound in the phrase “song-lit,” and it implies that this supposed “race of slaves” has nonetheless produced a rich cultural heritage worth recording, imitating, and preserving. The poem ends on a typically paradoxical note, as it describes songs—both those of the past and this song of the present—“Caroling softly souls of slavery” (l. 23). The final effect is one of tenderness combined with pain—of beauty emerging from degradation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with W. E. B. DuBois’s lyric “The Song of the Smoke.” How are the poems similar and/or different in setting, tone, structure, style, and purpose? Which poem is more obviously “propagandistic”? Discuss the points of view and the voices employed in each work.
2. Read this poem in conjunction with Langston Hughes’s lyric titled “The Weary Blues” and then discuss the ways music is used as a metaphor in both works. How does each poem use details of setting? How does each use tones of voice? What does each poem suggest about the role of music in dealing with suffering?
3. How—in diction, structure, subject matter, and point of view—does this poem resemble the kind of spiritual songs associated with black culture in the South, and how does it also differ from those songs? Discuss, for instance, the use of such words as *epoch’s*, *scant*, *profligate*, and *plaintive*. Would such words be likely to appear in a spiritual? If not, why not? What does their appearance in this song suggest about the singer? What element commonly found in the spirituals is missing from this poem?

“Blood-Burning Moon” (1923)

This relatively long story—the concluding piece in the opening third of *Cane*—deals with an interracial love triangle centered on a beautiful black working woman named Louisa, who is desired not only by Tom Burwell (a black worker also known as “Big Boy”) but also by Bob Stone, son of a prosperous white family for whom Louisa cooks. Tom is a large man with a violent past and is intensely jealous of Bob’s attentions to Louisa; Bob, meanwhile, cannot understand why he is so attracted to a woman his culture has taught him to consider inferior. After Tom easily beats and slashes Bob in a fight over Louisa, Tom is hunted down by a gang of local whites and is burned alive as Louisa sings a song of pain.

“Blood-Burning Moon” comes closer than many pieces in *Cane* to being a conventional story, with

a number of developed central characters, a relatively clear plot, and a fairly standard structure. It opens, appropriately enough, with imagery of gathering darkness, but at first the tone and atmosphere seem appealing (and thus contrast powerfully with the story's shockingly brutal conclusion). The narrator, using effective alliteration as well as Toomer's gift for coining unusual expressions, describes how dusk "soft showered the Negro shanties" in a village described, almost archetypally, simply as "factory town" (30). As do many pieces in *Cane*, this one revolves around a beautiful, desirable woman; here as elsewhere, Toomer implies the power women enjoy because of their sexual attractiveness, and he also sets sexuality within an environment that implies the continuity between the natural and the human, between animal impulses and personal desires. Thus, when Louisa sings, hounds yell and chickens cackle, as if stirred by the urgent rhythms of her song (30–31).

Even more stirred than the animals are Tom and Bob. Toomer takes us inside the minds and feelings of both characters, often presenting their thoughts through a kind of stream-of-consciousness technique that effectively conveys the erratic, uncertain fluctuations of their responses. Thus, Bob's thoughts are described as follows: "He was going to see Louisa to-night, and love her. She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew. Must know" (33). Through the use of these abrupt starts and stops, these jarring fragments and clipped phrases, Toomer conjures up the perplexed, perplexing mind of a complicated character—a man who is able to think of love one second and then call his supposed lover a "Nigger" in the very next moment. This kind of contradictory, ambivalent complexity is typical not only of the main characters in this story but also of their entire culture. Toomer repeatedly finds methods in his prose to convey the uncertainties lurking within his people, as when Tom tells Louisa, "Bob Stone likes y. Course he does. But not the ways folks is awhisperin. Does he, hon?" That last, plaintive question—which contradicts and undermines all the confident assertiveness that precedes it—nicely conveys Tom's sense of psychological vulnerability despite his obvious

physical strength. Tom knows that in the competition for Louisa, the mere facts of Bob's race, wealth, and social status give Bob advantages that Tom can never match, and although Tom easily defeats Bob when they fight one on one, Tom is soon defeated by his victory. A story that began by emphasizing an idyllic setting, a beautiful woman, and the easy rhythms of a relaxed rural life ends with fiery violence by a brutal mob.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this story in conjunction with the poem titled "The Lynching" by Claude McKay. Which of the two works is more complicated in tone, topics, and point of view? Discuss the stylistic traits and technical devices used in both works. How does each work use irony to achieve its goals?
2. ZORA NEALE HURSTON's story titled "Spunk" also deals with a love triangle involving poor blacks in a small southern town. Discuss the attitudes of the women in both stories; discuss the role of violence in both works; and discuss the role the community plays in each narrative. Discuss some of the effects of Hurston's decision to make all her characters African American.
3. Discuss the use of moon imagery in this story. Where does it tend to appear? Where does it tend to be absent? How do its appearances contribute to the structure of the story? How does the imagery contribute to the story's tone and atmosphere? How and why is the imagery of a white moon against a black sky relevant to the story's plot and themes?

"Box Seat" (1923)

This piece, a story of frustrated courtship, appears in the second section of Toomer's *Cane*; it describes how Dan Moore, a young black man living in Washington, D.C., visits a house owned by the respectable Mrs. Pribby. Also living in the house (apparently as a boarder) is Muriel, the young woman Dan is courting, but when Dan becomes too ardent in expressing his desires, Muriel emphatically rejects him.

Later that night, after both Muriel and Dan arrive separately at a vaudeville theater, Dan nearly comes to blows with another member of the audience after Dan disrupts the show.

“Box Seat” opens with sentences that typify Toomer’s penchant for using striking metaphors, vivid images, blunt language, fragmented syntax, and unexpected shifts of tone: “Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street. Upon the gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger. Shake your curled wool-blossoms, nigger” (59). Prose like this is close to poetry, especially in its assonance and alliteration (as in “shy eyes . . . shine”), and such inventive coinages as “curled wool-blossoms” (to describe hair). Toomer seems less interested, in this kind of prose, in simply depicting facts than in suggesting or evoking moods. For every sentence that simply relates dry details (such as “Dan Moore walks southward on Thirteenth Street”), there are many more that sketch vivid pictures and play clever games with the sounds and meanings of words:

Chestnut buds and blossoms are wool he walks upon. The eyes of houses faintly touch him as he passes them. Soft girl-eyes, they set him singing. Girl-eyes within him widen upward to promised faces. Floating away, they dally wistfully over the dusk body of the street. Come on, Dan Moore, come on. Dan sings. His voice is a little hoarse. It cracks. (59)

In passages like these, Toomer employs many of his favorite devices, such as repeated phrases, shifts of perspective, sudden irony, and quick, abrupt sentences. It is ironic, for instance, that just when Dan sings at the end of this appealingly lyrical passage his voice “cracks,” but this shift from lyricism to dissonance actually epitomizes the structure of the whole story. As so often in Toomer, relations between the sexes quickly prove tense and unsatisfying; no sooner do we meet Muriel than we begin to sense the discord underlying her relations with Dan. Toomer takes us inside the mind and feelings of each character so we can glimpse the discrepancy between what he or she really thinks and what he or she

openly says. The drift of the entire story is a movement toward frustration and disappointment—a movement that has been ironically prepared for, and emphasized by, the contrast established by the appealingly lyrical opening. By the end of the story, Dan is once more walking alone, too distracted and too indifferent even to fight with the man he has repeatedly annoyed in the theater. Dan thus begins and ends the work in isolation, unable to connect either with the woman he desires or with anyone else in the tale. His alienated plight symbolizes (or so Toomer seems to suggest) the essential loneliness of most persons in modern urban culture. At the start of the tale Dan had been walking alone but in hope; at the end he is merely walking alone.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss this story in connection with Ralph Ellison’s work titled “King of the Bingo Game.” How do both works use crowded theaters to emphasize human isolation? In what ways do both works seem “surreal”? How are relations between the central character and the woman he loves differently depicted in each work?
2. Compare and contrast this story with T. S. ELIOT’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In particular, discuss the themes of alienation and the relations between the sexes in both works. How do Prufrock’s attitudes toward himself and society resemble and/or differ from those of Dan Moore?
3. Closely examine the first several pages of this story and discuss the ways in which Toomer violates “normal,” conventional, traditional narrative methods. How and why would his writing in these pages have seemed highly unusual to most readers in the 1920s? Rewrite some of his passages using more conventional methods and techniques, and then discuss the advantages and/or disadvantages of the techniques he chose to use.

Cane (1923)

Universally considered the most significant of Toomer’s surviving writings, *Cane* is a difficult-to-classify

medley of character sketches, short stories, brief poems, and dramatized fiction. It contains no single plotline or consistent set of characters, and its style is sometimes lyrical, sometimes realistic, frequently dreamlike, and often highly experimental. The first section is set in the rural South; the second is set in the urban North; and the third and final section is set once again in the rural South, but all three parts of the work tend to focus on the complicated relations between men and women and between the black and white races.

Analysts of *Cane* have expended much ink trying to comprehend what kind of book it is and what kind (if any) unity it achieves. Some interpreters consider the text a miscellaneous hodge-podge—a deliberately experimental and unconventional artistic notebook to which Toomer never intended to give an obvious sense of shape or coherence. Others compare the work to similar collections of seemingly discrete pieces (such as SHERWOOD ANDERSON's *Winesburg, Ohio*), but those books are at least unified by a consistent narrative voice, common themes, a shared tone, and repeated images and symbols. Toomer's text, by contrast, is much more puzzling, and much less conventionally coherent, and its larger shape and deeper purposes are much less easy to explain. Some critics think that Toomer intended to contrast the spontaneity, vigor, and basic health of life in the rural South with the corruption, repression, and distemper of life in the mechanized, modernized North, but this distinction is far too simple, for Toomer shows with unblinking clarity the moral and social limitations and even sickness of southern culture. Perhaps the best way to think of the overall shape of *Cane*, therefore, is to consider it a kind of dream, and indeed the word *dream* crops up with astonishing frequency in its pages. Like a dream, the book is sometimes beautiful and sometimes nightmarish, sometimes lucid and sometimes confusing, sometimes smoothly flowing and sometimes full of abrupt and jerky transitions. Poems are mixed with prose and prose is mixed with drama, and just as dreams can be both revealing and cryptic, both suggestive and opaque, so the same is true of *Cane*. Dreams can be compelling and are often difficult

to analyze, and much the same can also be said of Toomer's book.

Partly the work is interesting as a contribution to the local color tradition of American writing: It reveals the distinctive customs, rhythms, sights, and sounds of life in particular regions and cities of the country, especially through the use of local dialect and slang but also through its emphasis on distinctive physical settings. Notably in its sections dealing with the South, *Cane* reveals the impact of traditions that can seem by turns either strange, quaint, charming, ugly, or even horrific, but even in its depictions of life in the big-city North, the book can seem revealing about the particular ways in which life was lived in what is now an increasingly remote era. Toomer had a generally good ear both for rural southern idioms and for trendy, "sophisticated" northern slang, and much of the genuine interest of the book derives from overhearing its characters speak. Toomer seems to have realized this, for much of the book (especially in its second and third sections) is formatted almost as if it were a play, so that the speech of the characters emerges directly and in relatively unmediated fashion. Even when the narrator sometimes does insert explanatory comments or evaluations, these often sound like the stage directions in a play. For the most part, however, the "overheard" and literally dramatic qualities of much of the book's speech contribute to its effects of vivid directness; as we listen to the characters talk, we get a sense not only of them as individuals but of the kind of larger society in which they live and move and have their being. Toomer takes his readers to unfamiliar places and confronts us with often odd and peculiar manners of life, and he does so without much obvious moralizing or sermonizing. His purpose does not seem primarily didactic; he does not seem to be trying to teach or preach in any obvious sense. He tends, instead, to let his characters, settings, facts, and depicted customs speak for themselves.

This is not to say, however, that the voice of the narrator (or narrators) is totally absent from *Cane*, nor that such voices consistently refrain from overt commentary. At one point, for instance, the narrator refers openly both to himself and to the reader

when he explicitly observes, “You and I know, who have had experience in such things, that love is not a thing like prejudice which can be bettered by changes of town” (18). This sort of direct address to the reader (as in “Your thoughts can help me, and I would like to know”) contributes to an unusual sense of immediate contact between narrator and audience that helps (as does much else) to make *Cane* seem so strangely unconventional. Ironically, the book often describes characters who seem isolated and alienated, yet the work itself frequently creates a sense of strong connection between its narrators and their audience. Not only do the narrators (who sometimes seem Toomer’s alter egos) comment openly on their own thoughts and feelings, but they also frequently speak forthrightly to the reader, as if to imply that a bond may exist between speaker and audience even if bonds are often lacking among the characters described. Thus the narrator of “Fern” states that “When a woman seeks, you will have observed, her eyes deny,” and a few sentences later he comments, “As you know, men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it is a woman” (16). The male speaker thus makes common cause with his (presumably male) readers, and this intimate connection between narrator and audience deliberately violates the kind of distanced, objective tone that had become so conventional in fictional prose before Toomer. In this way as in so many others, *Cane* is a surprising and unpredictable book. A reader can never guess what, exactly, the next sentence may hold.

Nevertheless, Toomer’s style exhibits many characteristic traits. Often his sentences are short, simple, direct, and unconfusing: “Carma, in overalls, and strong as any man, stands behind the old brown mule, driving the wagon home” (12). Frequently the narrators also stress emphatic verbs: thus, Carma’s wagon “bumps, and groans, and shakes as it crosses the railroad track” (12). Fragments, or other kinds of nonstandard syntax, appear regularly, as do unexpected phrases: “She, riding it easy. . . . Nigger woman driving a *Georgia chariot* down an old dust road” (12; italics added). Nature, especially in the first part of *Cane*, is an inescapable

presence, and Toomer’s imagery is often so vivid that it seems lyrical: “The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face” (12). Here as elsewhere, Toomer’s prose is almost poetic, just as his poems sometimes have the long, loopy rhythms of prose. And, throughout, the effect is often a kind of “you-are-there” immediacy, as if events are taking place not in a recounted past but in an eternal present.

Cane opens by focusing on backwoods Georgia, where life is lived close to the land, where the influence of history is omnipresent, and where complex relations between the races and sexes affect the facts and rhythms of daily life. Typical of this section of the book is the brief character sketch titled “Becky.” As do many of the prose pieces in the opening section of *Cane*, this one focuses on an intriguing, somewhat mysterious woman. The sketch’s first sentence—“Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons” (7)—is typical of much of the book in its emphasis on a female character, her implied sexual conduct, and the paradoxically intimate relations between whites and blacks in a culture supposedly committed to racial segregation. As Toomer well knew from his own biographical background, race mixing was far more common in the South than southern whites wished to acknowledge, and indeed race mixing is an important theme not only in “Becky” but in *Cane* as a whole. The opening sentence of “Becky,” however, is typical of the larger work not only in the topic it deals with but also in the style Toomer employs. He begins abruptly, with no introduction or explanation and no attempt to set a scene; instead, he merely states a fact, and his phrasing in this sentence is simple, declarative, and apparently uncomplicated. Yet complexities, on closer inspection, soon begin to emerge. Becky is not simply “a” white woman with two black offspring; she is “the” white woman with a pair “Negro sons.” The simple use of the word *the* implies that Becky is well known and even notorious; the single word thus foreshadows a central theme of the tale, which concerns Becky’s relations with the community as a whole. She is, paradoxically, both famous and

mysterious, both well known and rarely seen, and the fact that she is a white who also somehow has two “Negro” sons is paradoxical in one sense but perfectly explicable in another: Even though Becky herself was Caucasian, her sons would still have been considered black in the racially segregated culture Toomer describes. As he himself knew all too well, even the merest drop of black blood could cause a person to be considered black, even if one of that person’s parents was white. The opening sentence of “Becky,” then, is typical of Toomer’s style in *Cane*, which can often appear superficially simple and uncomplicated but frequently implies complexities just beneath its surface.

Also typical in many ways of Toomer’s phrasing is the passage that opens section 5 of “Kabnis,” the third portion of *Cane*:

Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South. Night throbs a womb-song to the South. Cane- and cotton-fields, pine forests, cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch. Night’s womb-song sets them singing. Night winds are the breathing of the unborn child whose calm throbbing in the belly of a Negress sets them somnolently singing. Hear their song. (105)

Here, as so often in *Cane*, repetition features strongly in Toomer’s writing. Reiterated words such as *night*, *Negress*, *South*, and *song* give the passage a hypnotic, almost chanting effect and help exemplify how Toomer’s prose, which is often concerned with songs and singing, is also frequently musical and songlike itself. Equally typical is Toomer’s emphasis on metaphor (as at the beginning and end of the opening sentence), sensual overtones, alliteration (such as “sets them somnolently singing”), coined phrases (such as “womb-song”), personification, natural imagery, catalogs and lists, and direct address to the reader (as in the brief final quoted sentence). In passages such as this, the influence of Walt Whitman’s poetry is clearly discernible in Toomer’s prose,

and indeed that influence is even more obvious in many of the literal poems contained in *Cane*. In its structures and effects, in fact, *Cane* frequently resembles Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, for neither writer is concerned to abide by traditional literary structures and forms, and both try to communicate a sense of the immense complexity of the sights, sounds, thoughts, and feelings they describe.

Indeed, even when he is being most appealingly lyrical (as in the passage just quoted), Toomer never lets us forget for long the less savory aspects of human existence, especially in a society preoccupied with race. Thus, the chantlike description of night’s “womb-song” is followed immediately by this more disturbing lyric:

White-man’s land.
Niggers, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground. (105)

Startling juxtapositions of this sort—in which the polite word *Negress* is set against the crude word *Niggers*, or in which the soil that seems fertilized and made “fecund” by the dark night is suddenly and plainly revealed to be “White-man’s land”—are often found in Toomer’s book, and indeed if *Cane* has a larger method at all, it seems to consist in this kind of jamming together of unexpected combinations. Thus the inviting phrasing “Hear their song” is soon followed by the abrupt command “Niggers, sing,” and the imagery of night winds as “the breathing of the unborn child” is followed by the frank reminder that “black children” must “Burn” (perhaps as they work in the sun, perhaps as they are being lynched) in a land preoccupied with racial distinctions. Yet the imagery of burning is itself juxtaposed with imagery of rivers, and the idea of work is itself juxtaposed with the idea of rest. This whole brief passage thus illustrates, in microcosm, the artistic, moral, social, and psychological complexity of *Cane*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Cane and W. E. B. DuBois's work *The Souls of Black Folk*. How are they similar and/or different in structure, style, point of view, and purpose? How are poor southern blacks depicted in both works? How are songs or poems used in both works? Pay special attention to the fictional sections of DuBois's work.
2. Discuss the final section of *Cane* (titled "Kabnis") by placing it in relation to "An Indian Teacher among Indians," by GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (Zitkala-Ša). How do Kabnis and his experiences resemble and/or differ from the protagonist and experiences described in Bonnin's work?
3. How are northern and southern settings, characters, and culture used both in *Cane* and in NELLA LARSEN's novel titled *Quicksand*? Which work presents a more attractive image of the South? How are their presentations of the North similar and/or different? Discuss the styles, techniques, and themes of both books. Do you consider one work more effective than the other? If so, explain and justify your opinion.
4. Discuss the style, techniques, and structure of *Cane* in relation to the same aspects of WILLIAM FAULKNER's *The Sound and the Fury*. In what ways can both books be described as modernist texts? How does each work violate older ideas about the organization and effectiveness of a relatively long piece of fiction?
5. How does *Cane* resemble the poem titled "The Bridge" by HART CRANE (whom Toomer admired)? Discuss the works in terms of phrasing, structure, purpose, and effectiveness. In what ways are both works representative of avant-garde tendencies in modern writing?
6. Many critics think *Cane* is built around contrasts between the North and the South. In what ways does this seem true, and in what other ways does Toomer suggest similarities between the two regions? How and why would this book be likely to appeal (if at all) to non-American readers? How and why does it speak (if at all) to uni-

versal human concerns? Why would someone in Finland or Japan (for instance) find this book worth reading?

"Karintha" (1923)

Originally written as part of an unpublished drama and then included as the opening piece in *Cane*, "Karintha" describes the growth, from childhood to womanhood, of a girl who was so beautiful (even when very young) that she captivated old and young men alike. Karintha's beauty and natural grace win her the attention and deference of the entire community, and as she matures she becomes the object of increasingly obvious sexual desire among competing males. Eventually she becomes pregnant and gives birth, and the sketch concludes by suggesting that men give her monetary gifts—or payments—to win her favors.

"Karintha" exemplifies many of the stylistic and thematic traits employed elsewhere in *Cane*. It begins, for instance, with a four-line poetic stanza, thus emphasizing the lyricism of the entire work. The poem immediately emphasizes a woman's beauty—a major theme stressed throughout *Cane*, especially in the first of its three sections. The poem directly addresses its audience ("O cant you see it, O cant you see it" [3])—a technique used repeatedly in *Cane* to enhance the book's impact. Meanwhile, the poem's stress on "dusk" and on the setting sun already foreshadows the theme of mutability, a central motif that is emphasized throughout the entire sketch as well as throughout the book as a whole. Sexual desire is also a major theme of *Cane*, and Toomer highlights that topic in the first prose sentence in "Karintha"—a sentence that also illustrates the unusual syntax (or sentence structure) that makes *Cane* such an unconventional work. Finally, the opening paragraph of the sketch concludes with the kind of suggestive foreshadowing that helps Toomer create suspense and sustain interest both here and elsewhere in this book.

As does much of the rest of *Cane*, "Karintha" not only sketches a central character but also

5. Would *Cane* have been a better, more powerful, more effective work if it had been written in a more conventional style and manner, or would a more traditional approach have hampered the book's effectiveness? In what ways are the style and structure of *Cane* especially suited to its ideas, meanings, and intended impact?
6. Choose several of the separate poems in *Cane* and discuss how those works contribute to the larger impact of the entire book. How do the chosen poems emphasize key themes, fit into the larger structure, or relate to the pieces that immediately precede or follow them?
7. Examine some of the little-known writings by Toomer that are reprinted in the volumes edited by Darwin Turner and by Frederik L. Rusch. How (if at all) do some of these works seem relevant to *Cane*, either in theme, style, or both? Which of these writings strikes you as being most interesting and effective? Explain your response.
8. Although the first and last sections of *Cane* are often considered convincing depictions of life in the rural South, Toomer was actually raised for the most part in the North and spent only a few months in Georgia before composing his book. How does his depiction of the life of southern blacks compare and contrast with those of other black writers of his time, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, or RICHARD WRIGHT, who had spent much more time in the South?
9. Do some reading, in some standard reference works, about modernism in literature, and then discuss the ways in which *Cane* can be described as a modernist work. What traits of style and structure and what thematic features might lead this work to be considered a modernist text? Which other modernist writings might have influenced *Cane*?
10. Soon after finishing *Cane*, Toomer became strongly influenced by the teachings of the mystical philosopher Georges I. Gurdjieff. What were Gurdjieff's basic teachings, and why might they have appealed so forcefully to the author of *Cane*? How (in other words) does *Cane* perhaps already reflect aspects of Gurdjieff's beliefs?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Fabre, Geneviève, and Michel Feith, eds. *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Griffin, John Chandler. *Biography of American Author Jean Toomer, 1894–1967*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2002.
- Hutchinson, George. "Identity in Motion: Placing *Cane*." In *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, 138–156. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Kerman, Cynthia Earl, and Richard Eldridge. *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Larson, Charles R. *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.
- O'Daniel, Therman B., ed. *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1988.
- Rusch, Frederik L., ed. *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Scruggs, Charles. "Modern American Poetry: Jean Toomer." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/s_z/toomer/toomer.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. Edited by Darwin T. Turner. New York: Norton, 1988.
- Turner, Darwin, ed. *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980.

Robert C. Evans



BOOKER T. WASHINGTON (1856–1915)

The Negro who hates a white man is usually little and narrow. The white man who hates a Negro is usually little and narrow. Both races will grow strong, useful and generous in proportion as they learn to love each other instead of hating each other.

(The Story of My Life and Work)

Booker T. Washington was the most prominent and influential African American of his time; he was widely respected by both blacks and whites for his innovations as an educator, and whites in particular admired his emphasis on economic training, self-help, and patience in the pursuit of full civil rights for blacks. Many members of his own race, however, were troubled by Washington's "accommodationist" tendencies, and he was sharply criticized even during his own era as being too conciliatory—too willing to defer the dream of complete social and political equality for African Americans. In the decades since his death, his legacy has been highly controversial, and the title of a recent book about Washington (*Uncle Tom or New Negro?*) suggests that the controversy continues. Few will deny, however, that Washington was a talented and determined man who had a major and at least partially positive impact on the lives of blacks in the United States.

Washington was born a slave in spring 1856 on the farm of James Burroughs near Hale's Ford, Virginia (presently part of West Virginia). Washington himself later described the place as "about as near to Nowhere as any locality gets to be," saying that it was "a town with one house and a post-office, and my birthplace was on a large plantation several miles distant from it" (10). He never knew the identity of his father and never seemed especially interested in knowing, although the man

was almost certainly a white person living nearby, perhaps even a member of the Burroughs family itself. Young Booker's mother, Jane, was an unmarried cook on the Burroughs farm; only later did she marry an escaped slave named Washington Ferguson, and only later still did young Booker adopt his stepfather's first name as his own surname. His middle name, *Taliaferro*, had been given to him by his mother at birth, and although a family by that name lived about 20 miles from the Burroughs farm, their connections with Booker's mother seem to have been minor or nonexistent. The boy, in short, was scarred from birth by the confusions of breeding, heritage, and parentage that were among the most common and unfortunate results of the American system of slavery.

Young Booker grew up in a tiny, ramshackle cabin with a dirt floor and with rags for bedclothes, and indeed Washington later wrote that the "first time that I got a knowledge of the fact that my mother and I were slaves, was being awakened by my mother early one morning, while I was sleeping in a bed of rags, on a clay floor of our little cabin. She was kneeling over me, fervently praying as was her custom to do, that some day she and her children might be free" (9). During his years as a slave the boy was often literally naked or poorly clothed, and although he regarded his master as "above the average in the treatment of his slaves" (since "except in a few cases they were not cruelly whipped"), an

especially vivid childhood memory involved “seeing a grown man, my uncle, tied to a tree early one morning, stripped naked and someone whipping him with a cowhide” (12). When the South lost the Civil War and the slaves were emancipated, Booker and his mother, brother, and sister made the trek to Malden, West Virginia, to join his mother’s husband, who soon found employment for Booker and his brother John in the salt furnaces and coal mines, where Booker labored until around 1871. Meanwhile, he was growing increasingly interested in learning; he managed to persuade his stepfather to permit him to attend a school after he worked from four to nine each morning in the salt furnace, and he also tried not only to teach himself but also to work with private teachers at night. His mother eventually found him a position as the house boy in the family of General Lewis Ruffner, the town’s most prominent citizen, and it was Washington’s contact with Viola Ruffner, the general’s stern, demanding, but self-disciplined wife, that he later considered one of the best influences on his own development. She encouraged his schooling and helped teach him the habits of hard work, reliability, and even personal cleanliness that he later would value so highly.

In 1872, however, Washington left Malden with the hope of attending the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, in Hampton, Virginia, a college for blacks run by a white general, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, who had commanded black troops in the Civil War. Washington was not immediately admitted to Hampton; he first had to prove his talents as a janitor before the head teacher would accept him as a student. Impressed with his sweeping and dusting, she allowed him to stay on, and for much of his time there he earned his bread and board through janitorial work. Washington immensely admired General Armstrong, later calling him “the most perfect specimen of man, physically, mentally and spiritually, that I had ever seen” (21), and he always considered Armstrong (along with Mrs. Ruffner and his mother) one of the best and greatest influences on his life. During a vacation back in Malden after two years at the institute, Washington lost his beloved mother.

He later wrote about her that “the lessons of truth, honor and thrift which she implanted in me while she lived have remained with me, and I consider them among my most precious possessions” (23). After graduating from Hampton in summer 1875, by fall Washington was back in Malden, where he became the teacher at the very school he had attended part-time in his youth, occupying that position for three years. He also taught at night and additionally taught at two different Sunday schools. He organized a local debating society and had a prominent role himself as a public speaker in a campaign to make Charleston the capital of West Virginia. In 1877 or 1878 he attended the Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C. Although for a time he studied the law with the idea of becoming a lawyer, he thought that his true calling was in education, and in 1879, after delivering a successful commencement address at the Hampton Institute, he was invited to return there as a teacher and graduate student. He gladly accepted and soon found himself not only running a rapidly growing night school but also supervising the education of about 75 American Indians. “My daily experience with them,” he later wrote, “convinced me that the main thing that any oppressed people needed was a chance of the right kind and they would cease to be savages” (27).

The main turning point of Washington’s life occurred in 1881, when some leading citizens of Tuskegee, Alabama, contacted General Armstrong to ask whether he could recommend a white man to become principal of a new school they were founding to educate the area’s blacks. Armstrong instead recommended Washington, and the recommendation was accepted. Arriving in Tuskegee in mid-June, Washington opened the school in a dilapidated church on July 4, at first instructing 30 students (who were themselves mostly local teachers) under a roof so poorly maintained that a student had to hold an umbrella over him when it rained. Washington soon sought to acquire a more modern and permanent structure for the school so that students could live there full-time and could not only master their academic subjects but also learn

good personal habits as well as useful trades. With financial assistance from Hampton, he was able to purchase a farm near Tuskegee and begin turning it into the institute that would later become so well known and highly respected. Local residents, white and black, contributed money or goods to the project and helped raise money for it, and by November 1882, with the additional help of some northern philanthropists, Porter Hall was completed. The growth of the Tuskegee Institute had begun, and Washington's personal life had also undergone a major change with his marriage, earlier that year, to Fanny Norton Smith, whom he had known since his childhood in Malden. Their daughter, Portia, was born on June 6, 1883, but unfortunately Fanny herself died less than a year later, on May 4, 1884. Despite this personal setback, Washington's school (which emphasized practical training in useful skills) was beginning to flourish: A month after his wife's death he was invited to speak before the National Education Association, and in spring 1885 Tuskegee Institute graduated its first class of students.

Students at Tuskegee were expected to work as well as study, and in fact many of the campus buildings were constructed by the students themselves from the bricks they also fashioned on campus. With further support from the state legislature, the local community, and the northern philanthropists to whom Washington frequently spoke and wrote, the institute continued to prosper, and Washington's personal life also improved in 1886, when, on August 11, he married Olivia A. Davidson, a dedicated teacher at the institute who had also been one of its most vigorous advocates and leaders. Their first son was born on May 29, 1887, and a second arrived on February 6, 1889, but tragedy again struck Washington's life when Olivia died on May 9 of that same year. Eventually he married for a third and final time, wedding Margaret James Murray (the Lady Principal of the institute since 1890) on October 12, 1892. Meanwhile, progress at the school had been rapid and substantial. Whereas enrollment had consisted of 169 students in 1884, by 1895 that number had increased to 1,013, and

by 1893 the campus had grown from two buildings to 30, nearly all of them constructed by the students themselves. Even so, many applicants had to be turned away for lack of space, despite Washington's continuous efforts to raise funds in the North and despite continuous generosity from the residents of Tuskegee themselves. In a decade and a half the institute had become one of the most important centers of black education anywhere in the world. Meanwhile, Washington himself had become perhaps the most widely respected black person in America, and his fame was also growing abroad.

Washington's status was both recognized and confirmed when he was invited to address, on September 18, 1895, the Cotton States and International Exhibition in Atlanta, Georgia. On that occasion he gave perhaps the most famous address of his career—one that would win him even wider recognition and respect among many blacks and whites across the country, but one that would also ignite an eventual firestorm of disagreement and dissent among blacks who believed he had conceded far too much to the interests of prejudiced whites. In the speech Washington argued that the interests of blacks would best be served if they initially focused mainly on economic development: By mastering trades and building reputations as productive citizens, they would eventually win the respect of whites and then, having won that respect, they could hope one day to be granted their full civil and political rights. In the meantime, the races could cooperate as the separate fingers of a united hand do. This was music to the ears of many whites (especially in the South), and at first many blacks also were enticed by Washington's vision of economic progress. It was not long, however, before a reaction set in among many other black leaders (particularly W. E. B. DuBois), and Washington found himself subjected to growing criticism from his own people despite the admiration he enjoyed among whites. The Atlanta speech, more than anything else, led many blacks throughout the 20th century to condemn Washington as an "Uncle Tom."

By the beginning of the 1900s, Washington was a powerful man who consorted with other powerful people, especially in the North. In 1899 he had traveled to England, where he had tea with Queen Victoria. In 1901 he dined with President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House (a dinner that caused great indignation in the South), and in that same year he published his best-selling autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (one of scores of books and articles, many ghost-written, published under his name throughout his long career). In 1903 Andrew Carnegie, one of the world's richest men, donated \$600,000 to Tuskegee, but this stroke of massive good fortune was offset by the publication, during that same year, of DuBois's stinging criticism of Washington in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois himself had followed the lead of William Monroe Trotter, a black leader from Boston who had assailed Washington in print the year before. Washington, meanwhile, was not above retaliating against his opponents: He set spies on them, kept academic critics in line through his relations with the presidents of other black colleges, and, through his influence with white benefactors and black businessmen, could stifle the careers and projects of anyone he disliked. He has been compared, in his final decade, to the other political "bosses" who dominated much of American life during this period, and his behavior has sometimes been called hypocritical or dishonest. There can be little doubt, however, that he was sincerely committed not only to the progress of Tuskegee Institute but also to advancing the interests of his people, even when his notion of advancement seemed excessively tame or cautious to others. Openly preaching accommodation and cooperation, he secretly financed legal challenges to some of the most egregious forms of racial discrimination, and when he died on November 14, 1915, he was widely hailed as the most important African American of his era. No one—not even his fiercest opponents—could deny the legacy he had established in Tuskegee or the larger impact he had made on American life in general.

"Atlanta Compromise Speech" ("Atlanta Exposition Address") (1895)

In 1895 Washington was invited to address the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, a major trade show designed to showcase and promote the economic progress of the South. Addressing a huge audience of southern blacks, southern whites, and whites from the North, Washington argued that the best immediate path to black advancement was through economic success, cultural self-improvement, and cooperation with fair-minded southern whites. Once blacks had shown themselves to be productive, responsible citizens, any reasonable objections to giving them full citizenship rights would wither away, but, until that day, blacks and whites could cooperate as the separate fingers of a single hand do.

Washington himself realized the historic importance of this speech; he reprinted it in full, and described its genesis and the responses to it, in both of his early autobiographies (*The Story of My Life and Work* and *Up from Slavery*). The reaction to the speech among the audience who first heard it was electrifyingly positive, and Washington's words were soon reprinted, with much acclaim, in newspapers throughout the country. The speech instantly made him the most recognized spokesman for his people across the nation. Whites (especially southerners) were particularly gratified by Washington's ideas. Eventually, however, a negative reaction began to set in among various rival black leaders, who thought that Washington had been too ready to compromise with white racism—that he had been too willing to postpone the achievement of complete civil and political rights for his people. Ironically, then, the speech that at first had won Washington such wide acclaim later became a main count in indictments accusing him of being an "Uncle Tom" (accommodationist).

Washington began the speech by emphasizing a central fact and deducing an important conclusion from it: "One third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and

reach the highest success" (73). After praising the exposition's managers for generously highlighting African-American contributions to southern life, Washington urged blacks to focus more of their attention on practical economic development than on ineffective political organizing. In a particularly striking passage, he proclaimed:

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are"—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.

Cast it down in agriculture, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. . . . Our greatest danger is, that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life that we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities. (74)

Although these words were enthusiastically received by most of the people who originally heard them, they later created great controversy, especially among other black leaders. These critics (particularly W. E. B. DuBois) felt that Washington had conceded too much to his white listeners, especially by placing so much emphasis on the value of "common labor" for blacks rather than on the more traditional forms of higher education. DuBois emphasized the importance of cultivating

the intellectual development of the mentally gifted portion of the black population—the so-called talented tenth—who would provide crucial leadership for the rest of the race. Washington (according to DuBois and other critics) was too willing to consign blacks to the lower rungs of the intellectual, social, and economic ladder; he was (they believed) too willing to sacrifice long-term political, social, and cultural gains in favor of immediate and minor economic advantages. Washington, on the other hand, believed that true and solid progress in all these other spheres could not be made without first laying a solid economic foundation.

After urging blacks to cast down their buckets where they lived, Washington offered the same advice to whites, advising them not to depend on imported foreign labor but to make use of their 8 million black neighbors and encourage their further development: "While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen" (74–75). In perhaps the most famous sentence of the speech he declared that in "all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (75). Indeed, the full progress of the South depended (Washington proclaimed) on the full progress of its black citizens:

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upwards, or they will pull against you the load downwards. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic. (75)

Washington asserted that the "wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and con-

stant struggle rather than of artificial forcing” (76). He ended by looking forward to a “blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions” and to a “determination to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of law” (76). Perhaps more than any other speech or piece of writing he ever composed, Washington’s oration to the Atlanta Exposition sealed his fate as the preeminent (but also the most controversial) black leader of his time. After delivering this speech, he became the object of growing praise by most whites and many blacks, but he also became the target of increasingly severe criticism by black leaders who disdained his emphasis on what they regarded as excessive compromise and complacent cooperation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In composing this speech, Washington faced the difficult task of trying to appeal simultaneously to northern whites, southern whites, and blacks across the country. Examine the speech in detail and discuss specific ways in which Washington tried to appeal to each group individually and to all three groups at once.
2. What different kinds of persuasion does Washington use in this speech? For instance, how does he use humility, and how does he use implied threats? How does he use objective facts, and how does he appeal to emotion? How does he use such rhetorical devices as parables, statistics, repetition, heightened rhythm, striking imagery, literary allusions, moral arguments, practical arguments, and religious language?

Up from Slavery (1901)

Up from Slavery is not only Washington’s most famous and most influential book, but also one of the most notable of all American autobiographies. It tells the story of his life from his boyhood as a slave to his eventual success as the leader of one of the nation’s most important institutions of African-American education and as the foremost national spokesman for his people. The book appealed to

early readers because it showed how much could be accomplished, in spite of enormous odds, if a person were determined, optimistic, and willing to work hard to accomplish sensible, practical goals. For all these reasons, however, many later readers have condemned the book as naive and simplistic.

Up from Slavery was actually Washington’s second attempt at a book-length autobiography. The first, titled *The Story of My Life and Work* and first printed in 1901, had been published for sale by subscription, mainly to a black readership. Although the narratives of both works are often highly similar, the earlier book is longer, less efficient, and less clearly structured than its sequel. It often includes lengthy excerpts from speeches, letters, official documents, and newspaper articles, and although these features give the earlier work some genuine historical interest, they detract from its narrative flow and literary effectiveness. *Up from Slavery*, on the other hand, is well designed, well written, and consistently interesting. Washington had help from ghost writers in composing both works: Eugene Webber, a black journalist, assisted with the first; Max Bennet Thrasher, a white journalist and public relations man, assisted with the second. In the case of *Up from Slavery*, however, Washington seems to have exercised firm control; he would dictate notes to Thrasher as they traveled by train; Washington would then prepare drafts based on those notes; then Thrasher would go over those drafts. Washington, however, had the final say as to content, structure, and style.

The book’s style is in fact one of its most striking features. In the preface, Washington says that he has “tried to tell a simple, straightforward story, with no attempt at embellishment” (211), and certainly that is the effect he achieves: His phrasing seems utterly lucid and impressively direct, creating the impression of an honest man speaking truthfully to others in a spirit of goodwill and common humanity. It is as if Washington has no ax to grind, no agenda to push, no grudges to nurse; by relating the facts of his life calmly and without rancor, he invites his predominantly white readers to respond sympathetically rather than defensively, encouraging them to focus on helping to build a productive future rather

than dwelling on the injustices of the past. Washington does not deny the sufferings his people endured, but neither does he emphasize them in any dramatic fashion. Instead, his dry, unemotional commentary on the lives of the slaves is often stingingly understated, as when he notes, "My mother, I suppose, attracted the attention of a purchaser who was afterward my owner and hers. Her addition to the slave family attracted about as much attention as the purchase of a new horse or cow" (215–216). Readers (especially whites) cannot help but wince at such statements; Washington knew he had no need to make the point emphatic. Yet even whites will sometimes find themselves agreeing with black readers who believed Washington was sometimes excessively willing to forgive and forget. This is especially true, for instance, of his concluding comments on his white father:

Of my father I know even less than my mother. I do not even know his name. I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations. Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing. But I do not find especial fault with him. He was simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time. (216)

It is hard not to feel that Washington, here and elsewhere, seems too eager to turn the other cheek and that his attitudes are therefore either impossibly saintly or perhaps even calculated and insincere.

Washington's description of the tiny, rundown, dirt-floored cabin in which he spent his first years are vivid and affecting, and his account of life among the slaves and their owners, especially during the closing days of the Civil War, is detailed and complex, showing both the eagerness of the slaves for their freedom and the real affection many felt toward the whites with whom they had lived for generations. Washington is careful to reject any notion that "some of the slaves did not want freedom," for he insists, "This is not true. I have never seen one who did not want to be free, or one who

would return to slavery," and he announces that he pities "from the bottom of my heart any nation or body of people that is so unfortunate as to get entangled in the net of slavery" (222). Yet a few sentences later he asserts that "notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe. . . . Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have entertained the idea that, notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did" (222–223). Such statements made some blacks feel that Washington had gone much too far in his efforts to conciliate southern white opinion.

Washington's account of his early years as a freed black is fascinating, especially when he recounts his own hunger for education as well as the widespread passion for learning among his people as a whole, or when he describes his years at Hampton, or when he details his early service as a schoolteacher back in Malden. Throughout these pages his emphasis is on hard work, self-discipline, the virtues of cleanliness, and selfless commitment to others. He extols the value of manual labor by showing its positive influence on his own life, and he candidly criticizes certain black teachers and preachers who turned to those professions merely to avoid hard work. He also criticizes blacks who relied too heavily on the federal government for assistance, or who placed excessive hope in merely political progress, or who emphasized a "liberal arts" education to the exclusion of practical training, or who engaged in wasteful spending on frivolous activities or possessions. His willingness to find these kinds of fault with his fellow blacks can, of course, be seen as part of a cynical ploy to ingratiate himself with whites, but this reading of his motives seems cynical in itself, since he makes many of the same points in *The Story of My Life and Work*, the autobiography written with black readers mainly in mind. His entire career, both in words and deeds, suggests his sincere commitment to the val-

ues he espouses in *Up from Slavery*, and in reacting to his life and writings it always is important to recall the exceptionally complex historical circumstances in which he found himself.

One passage that suggests the exceedingly complicated state of race relations during Washington's era involves his assignment, after his return to Hampton as a teacher, to instruct a large group of uneducated American Indians:

At first I had a good deal of doubt about my ability to succeed. I knew that the average Indian felt himself above the white man, and, of course, he felt himself far above the Negro, largely on account of the fact of the Negro having submitted to slavery—a thing which the Indian would never do. The Indians, in the Indian Territory, owned a large number of slaves during the days of slavery. Aside from this, there was a general feeling that the attempt to educate and civilize the red men at Hampton would be a failure. (266)

Thus, whites looked down on blacks and Indians, Indians looked down on whites and blacks, and many blacks were dubious of the prospect that Indians (who had once enslaved blacks) would ever be successfully educated! Nevertheless, despite all these crisscrossing prejudices, Washington (with his typical combination of optimism and determination) took on the task and succeeded, and in an immediately ensuing passage he makes clear his willingness to criticize whites just as bluntly as anyone else:

The things that they [the Indians] disliked most, I think, were to have their long hair cut, to give up wearing blankets, and to cease smoking; but no white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man's clothes, eats the white man's food, speaks the white man's language, and professes the white man's religion. (266)

This is a kind of frankness for which Washington is often given too little credit. It was in this kind of highly charged racial atmosphere—an atmo-

sphere of multiple suspicions, mutual distrust, and reinforcing bigotries—that he had to operate, and the fact that he was able to operate so productively shows a good deal about his talent, his diligence, and his innate diplomacy.

All these traits made Washington an ideal choice to found and lead the new school for African Americans in Alabama. His account of its founding and early years is, of course, central to the narrative substance and historical importance of *Up from Slavery*; as he himself realized, his own life was interesting and significant primarily because of his successes at Tuskegee. Nevertheless, he also used his book as an opportunity to comment on many other matters, such as the efforts of numerous southern communities to deny blacks the right to vote. At one point, for instance, he argues that such practices are more harmful to whites than to blacks:

The wrong to the Negro is temporary, but to the morals of the white man the injury is permanent. I have noted time and time again that when an individual perjures himself in order to break the force of the black man's ballot, he soon learns to practice dishonesty in other relations of life, not only where the Negro is concerned, but equally so where a white man is concerned. The white man who begins by cheating a Negro usually ends by cheating a white man. The white man who begins to break the law by lynching a Negro soon yields to the temptation to lynch a white man. (303)

In passages such as this, as in others that might be quoted, Washington seems anything but accommodating; here as often elsewhere, his tone is more complicated and assertive than is sometimes acknowledged. Washington believed that progress for blacks, like progress for the human race in general, would be slow and incremental, but he also believed that if people lived by the values of hard work and moral decency, their progress would also be inevitable and unstoppable. At one point, for instance, Washington asserts his belief that “the whole future of the Negro rested largely upon the question as to whether or not he should make himself, through his skill,

5. Compare and contrast *Up from Slavery* with *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. How do the two works resemble and differ from one another in their purposes, tones, attitudes, styles, and subject matters? What values did Franklin and Washington share? How did Washington's race make his life fundamentally different from Franklin's?
6. Frederick Douglass wrote three substantial works of autobiography. Choose one of them, and then compare and contrast it with *Up from Slavery*. How do the works resemble or differ from one another in the incidents they describe, the perspectives they adopt, and the implied lessons they teach?
7. Compare and contrast a section of *Up from Slavery* with an account of the same period in Louis Harlan's two-volume biography of Washington. In what specific ways does Harlan offer a more complex presentation of the same material than Washington offers? What motives are implied by Washington's presentation? What motives are implied by Harlan's?
8. Trace a theme throughout *Up from Slavery* and discuss the ways Washington's treatment of that theme shows consistency and/or development. For example, discuss his depiction of women throughout the book, or discuss his comments on religion, or discuss his comments on liberal arts education.
9. Washington is listed as the author of numerous other books besides *Up from Slavery*, yet these are rarely read. Find one of these books (such as *My Larger Education* or *The Life of Frederick Douglass*), read it, and then compare and contrast it with *Up from Slavery* in terms of its themes, style, tone, attitudes, and implied arguments.
10. In its basic plot and themes, *Up from Slavery* has often been compared to the novels of Horatio Alger, which usually describe a poor boy's rise from poverty to success. Read one of Alger's novels (which are freely available on the Internet) and compare and contrast it with *Up from Slavery*.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Andrews, William L., ed. *Up from Slavery: Authoritative Text, Contexts and Composition History, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 1996.
- The Booker T. Washington Papers. Available online. URL: <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Brundage, W. Fitzhugh, ed. *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up from Slavery 100 Years Later*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003.
- Carroll, Rebecca. *Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Up from Slavery One Hundred Years Later*. New York: Harlem Moon, 2006.
- Harlan, Louis R. *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- . *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- . "Booker T. Washington in Biographical Perspective." In *Up From Slavery: Authoritative Text, Contexts and Composition*, edited by William L. Andrews, 204–219. New York: Norton, 1996.
- Olson, Ted. "Booker T. Washington (1856–1915)." In *African American Authors, 1745–1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson, 440–447. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000.
- Thornbrough, Emma Lou, ed. *Booker T. Washington*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969.
- Verney, Kevern. *The Art of the Possible: Booker T. Washington and Black Leadership in the United States, 1881–1925*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Washington, Booker T. *The Autobiographical Writings*. Edited by Louis R. Harlan and John W. Blassingame. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Robert C. Evans



EDITH WHARTON (1862–1937)

My first few weeks in America are always miserable, because the tastes I am cursed with are all of a kind that cannot be gratified here, and I am not enough in sympathy with our “gros public” to make up for the lack on the aesthetic side. One’s friends are delightful; but we are none of us Americans, we don’t think or feel as the Americans do, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the most *déplacé* and useless class on earth!

(letter to Sara Norton, June 5, 1903)

With a background of wealth and refined culture, and aware of her family heritage, Edith Wharton exhibited inquisitive intelligence and a perceptive eye when she put the world of her time under a magnifying glass, analyzing male-female interpersonal relationships and revealing the weaknesses of the social hierarchy in New York City. In a literary career that lasted almost 50 years and produced novels, novellas, short stories, and nonfiction writing, Wharton described accurately and unflinchingly the world of the American upper class. She chronicled the transformation that occurred in that world as its original inhabitants, descendants of old, venerable European families, were replaced by the power brokers of New England industry. Wharton also directed her attention to more socially relevant topics such as labor and political conflicts and the rise to power of American women. As an author, Wharton enjoyed success and popularity among the literary elite and the general public. After her death, some critics began to distance themselves from her work, claiming that her focus on one particular setting and time was more a limitation than a virtue. Although one might quibble with Wharton’s choice of setting and subject matter, her ability as a writer and judge of human character attracts an ever-increasing number of admirers to her fiction.

One of three children, Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones on January 24, 1862, in New

York City. Her father was George Frederic Jones, who supported his family through money earned from real estate holdings in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Her mother, Lucretia Rhineland Jones, had the reputation of being a woman devoted to the world of high society, including its parties, clothing, food, and social graces. Both parents placed great value on a traditional education and upbringing for their daughter. While they encouraged her acquisition of any knowledge and talents that would help her in her future life as a wife and mother, they discouraged her curiosity about new intellectual trends and artistic movements.

As a child, Wharton traveled extensively with her parents, and this travel ignited within her the desire to discover foreign lands and instilled in her a critical attitude toward her homeland. As an author, Wharton attempted to capture the allure of—and sense of culture and history found in—foreign lands, but she also devoted significant energy to depicting what she knew best: the good and the bad of fashionable New York society. From the days of her youth to old age, Wharton directed her attention to this milieu again and again. She was critical of many aspects of this segment of society, and her right to judge was warranted by personal experience. Wharton knew well the limitations of this group. The main emphasis of a woman’s education was to prepare her for the role of a wife, who was supposed to run a household, entertain, and

support her husband in his endeavors. Wharton herself suffered under the demands of this environment, and in her writing, it is clear that her native intellectual curiosity rebelled against the pressure to conform.

In spite of her dislike for much of the upper-class environment, Wharton also enjoyed certain benefits from being born to socially prominent parents. She was taught to read at an early age and had access to her father's extensive library. She had the luxury of free time, which allowed her the opportunity to explore her own intellectual interests. Left to her own devices, Wharton also acquired the discipline required for successful self-study. Even though she was not able to experience the benefits of a formal education, she developed a taste for, and knowledge of, history, literature, foreign languages, art, and architecture.

At about the age of 12, Wharton began her first attempts at composing poems and prose. At age 13, she enjoyed an early publishing success: Some of her translations of German poems appeared in an American magazine. In general, her mother was not supportive of her writing, and mean-spirited negative comments discouraged Wharton from further attempts at prose fiction for a number of years. Her mother did, however, support her interest in poetry, it has been suggested, because she considered writing poetry a more suitable occupation for a debutante and future society wife. Wharton's mother bears a great deal of responsibility for Edith's later anxieties as an author. From letters and conversations, we know that Wharton complained of feelings of inadequacy, worrying about the quality of her work and questioning her calling to the art.

On the surface, Wharton's life might have seemed to be carefree and filled with pleasure, but it was also marked by stress and worry. Her family was not immune to the financial pressures and economic turndowns that confronted the United States after the Civil War. As a result of strained finances, George Frederic Jones moved his family to Europe in 1866. There the cost of living was lower, enabling the family to maintain its extravagant lifestyle. In

1872 the family returned to America, and in 1880 they were again forced to live in Europe. They returned in 1882 after her father died in Cannes, France. Although Wharton profited greatly from her stays in Europe, she never forgot the troubled circumstances that caused her travels, and recognition of the transient nature of security and happiness had a profound impact on her.

When Wharton's family returned the first time from an extended stay in Europe, she was subjected to rigorous preparation for life as a woman in high society. While she might initially have been spellbound by the splendor and excitement of the wealthy and cultured, she quickly noticed the drawbacks of their way of life. She observed that women, goaded on by class-conscious parents, were pitted against each other in an unnatural competition, with the prize being a man who would replace the parents and become a new captor. Afterward, a woman's life with its social obligations and expectations would resemble the existence of a valued circus animal that is expected to hop through hoops and perform other tricks on command. Surrounded by camouflaged despair and desperation, Wharton saw the impact of this unnatural struggle. Women were unable and unwilling to initiate and experience true friendship with other women, and the supposed goal of the competition, a wealthy, prominent husband, might not lead to intellectual stimulation, emotional fulfillment, and sexual satisfaction for a woman. When Wharton's family moved to Newport, Rhode Island, her outlook on life changed, and she approached her duties with renewed energy. She made her formal entrance into society in 1879 and appeared to be on the way to realizing the dream of many young women: to be admired and envied, to be wealthy, and to be advantageously married.

During the years after Wharton's debut, she was courted by a series of men, including Henry Stevens and Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton. In 1885 she married Wharton, older by 12 years, who was considered athletic, socially prominent, and financially secure. During the first few years of their married life, the Whartons traveled extensively, and

they spent much time satisfying social obligations. Although Edith appreciated the companionship of her husband, she found his lack of interest in intellectual matters disappointing and his inability to satisfy her sexually frustrating. As her initial intoxication with her new status as wife ended, she began to seek the acquaintance of men whom she could consider her intellectual equals.

Turning her attention away from the limited social circle of New York City's elite and directing her energy toward her writing, Wharton began to experience artistic success. *The Greater Inclination*, her first short story collection, was published in 1899, and *The Touchstone*, a novella, appeared in 1900. She also authored articles and books on formal gardens, architecture, and interior design. Her first novel, a historical romance titled *The Valley of Decision*, was published in 1902. During this early period of artistic activity, she earned most critical acclaim for *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, in which she examines New York society and highlights what a woman must sacrifice for the sake of money, marriage, and family.

In 1907 Wharton completed *The Fruit of the Tree*, a novel in which she left the setting of her earlier fiction to explore the changes occurring in the United States as a result of the Industrial Revolution. As Wharton widened the scope of her prose, she suffered a setback in her artistic success. Although her collection of short stories titled *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910) enjoyed critical acclaim, other works were received with less enthusiasm. In fact, it was not until 1911 and the publication of *Ethan Frome*, a novella set in rural Massachusetts, that Wharton again garnered praise from the literary world. In this work, as in her successful short stories and novels, she limits the subject matter of her fiction to a very specific environment and cast of characters. In so doing, she can linger in her depiction of characters' thoughts and emotions and contemplate the scenery without overwhelming or weakening the novel's focus.

As Wharton's creative life took shape, her private life was also in transition. Since her marriage to Teddy Wharton, she had been making regular trips to Europe, and shortly after the turn of the

century, she decided to live in Paris to escape the emphasis on wealth and possessions that she saw in the United States. At this time Wharton met Henry James and began to correspond regularly with him. She valued his critical judgment greatly, and their friendship lasted until James died in 1916. In 1907 Wharton met Morton Fullerton, a journalist and friend of Henry James, and found herself attracted to him physically. They began a sexual relationship in summer 1909, but the meetings lasted only until the fall. During her relationship with Fullerton, Wharton experienced sexual satisfaction and physical and emotional intimacy with a man for the first time, and she began to realize the importance of those aspects of life to the creation of believable, realistic fictional characters. At the same time, Wharton's marriage to Teddy began to suffer as a result of his struggle with mental illness. In due time, she discovered that he had stolen money from her and that he lived with a mistress. As his condition deteriorated and he was institutionalized, Wharton struggled with feelings of duty and obligation, but in the end, the desire to be free of her husband's instability and harmful influence won out. Wharton filed for divorce, and the marriage was terminated in 1913.

Regardless of the personal problems Wharton faced, she found the energy to remain intellectually active and socially committed. Soon after her divorce, World War I broke out. Wharton, who had long ago acquired a love for Europe and an insatiable desire to discover as much of it as possible, decided to settle permanently in France and distinguished herself through her efforts to ease the suffering of wounded soldiers and to improve the living conditions of the many refugees who went to Paris during the war. In recognition of her valuable work, France awarded her the Legion of Honor in 1916. Wharton was the first woman to receive that honor. Her endeavors and experiences were chronicled in works such as *Fighting France* (1915) and *The Book of the Homeless* (1916).

Wharton remained active in the writing of fiction as well. Shortly before the war, she completed *The Reef* (1912), a novel that depicts the romantic relationship between middle-aged, respectable

Anna Leath and the American diplomat George Darrow, recording the emotional and psychological suffering brought about by Darrow's earlier affair with Sophy Viner, a young governess in the employ of Leath. The novel was criticized for many reasons, including its rather exaggerated concern for propriety and its stylistic indebtedness to Henry James. In *The Custom of the Country* (1913), Wharton exhibits the more admirable aspects of her literary style, including her knack for satire, her ability to capture time and place, and her willingness to create a strong story line. The novel, featuring the character Undine Spragg and attacking a preoccupation with upward mobility and the consumption of goods, chronicles Undine's efforts to use marriage to gain wealth and social prestige.

During the postwar period, Wharton remained active in the literary arts. In 1920 she completed *The Age of Innocence*, a novel portraying the love of Newland Archer for two women, May Welland and Ellen Olenska, and the moral, social, and cultural dilemma he faces as he tries to choose between them. In 1921 Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel. Wharton also directed her attention to the creative process; *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) represents her most extensive discussion of a writer's craft. By the time the book appeared, she had been practicing her art for 30 years, and in her text, she relates her views concerning European and American authors, the role of tradition in writing, the choice of appropriate subject matter and form, and the traits of effective, memorable prose. Further information about Wharton's opinions concerning the education and formation of a writer can be found in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934).

Common wisdom states that Wharton's later writing does not live up to the strength, vigor, and incisiveness of her earlier prose fiction, and she is accused of writing too much too quickly. Novels written after 1922 are often numbered among her least successful books. Works such as *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and *The Gods Arrive* (1932) received at best mixed reviews. However, toward the end of her life, Wharton appeared to

recapture her former skill and energy. At the time of her death in 1937, she was at work on *The Buccaneers*, a novel in which she portrays the life and exploits of five young American women who set out to use traditional forms of courting and marriage to take the London social world by storm. The novel appeared posthumously as an unfinished work in 1938 and was completed by Marion Mainwaring and published in 1993.

Wharton's growing disillusionment with the United States and its preoccupation with consumerism and bourgeois values made her homeland increasingly unpalatable to her. In fact, in the years following World War I, she traveled to the United States only once, in 1923, to receive an honorary doctor of letters degree from Yale University; otherwise, she remained in Europe, choosing to acknowledge from afar other awards such as the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence* and the Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1924. Wharton remained active until she suffered a stroke in June 1937. She died on August 11, 1937, and was buried at Versailles. Wharton's commitment to France and her support of the French during World War I were greatly appreciated—so much so that French war veterans served as pallbearers for her coffin.

In her own way, Wharton became a controversial figure during her career as a writer. She never hesitated to criticize the milieu of her birth and education, yet she enjoyed all the advantages that money and preferred social standing could offer. She revealed herself to be a fine judge of character and motivation, yet happiness eluded her as she suffered through unsatisfactory personal relationships. She was a sharp critic of literature as an art form (including its subject matter and mode of expression), yet she was accused of sacrificing quality in her own writing to satisfy publishers' demands for quantity. She mocked America's lack of cultural sophistication, yet she chose to remain abroad and avoid a direct role in improving standards. In the end, Wharton became known for her ability to evoke a feeling of place and time in her writing, for her psychological and emotional insights, and for her dedication to writing as an art.

“Souls Belated” (1899)

This story, taken from Wharton's first collection, titled *The Greater Inclination*, focuses on the experiences of two Americans, Lydia Tillotson and Ralph Gannett, as they travel through Italy during an extended tour of Europe. Lydia has left her husband in the United States and is traveling with Ralph as they wait for her divorce to become final; looking for a new life that will free her from the yoke of social convention, offer her emotional and physical satisfaction, and provide excitement, Lydia realizes, while staying with her lover at an Italian resort, that she has grown accustomed to Ralph and that their relationship is becoming predictable. Recognizing that she is fleeing from one conventional relationship to another, she tries to explain her fears to her lover, but his responses reveal that he does not regard her any differently, or with any more appreciation, than her former husband did; in the end, Lydia, who attempts to leave Ralph in order to avoid surrendering to conventionality, is observed by him as she returns to the hotel.

Using different points of view to convey her characters' thoughts and feelings, Wharton portrays two people held prisoner by social convention. Lydia seems to be the more perceptive individual, but she is unable to use her insights to break free of the chains of prejudice, social etiquette, and self-doubt. She dreams of leading an adventurous, stimulating, independent life, but she is rendered powerless by her lack of options. Indeed, she has numerous opportunities to see how guests at the Italian resort, representatives of respectable society, ruthlessly condemn and ostracize anyone who does not conform to their view of proper behavior. Moreover, society does not take a woman seriously and offers her few options outside marriage. Ralph, a product of 19th-century American upbringing, is convinced that a woman achieves identity through the man she marries. Although he is attracted to Lydia's intellect as well as to her beauty, he is willing to accept the fact that her possibilities for self-realization are limited and does nothing to improve her situation. In the end, when he sees her walking back to the hotel, he is convinced that she has rediscovered her passion for him and that her love

has motivated her to return; he cannot imagine the possibility that Lydia might be returning because she believes she has no other choice and that she might be disappointed in her lack of strength and resolve to abandon the idea of socially appropriate behavior and risk comfort for personal independence. What Ralph interprets as physical and emotional desire might very well be Lydia's surrender to feelings of powerlessness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON's poem "Eros Turannos." In particular, discuss the ways in which both works present the social contexts of private relationships and the ways both works depict the constraints faced by women in relations with men. How were women's options limited during the era in which both authors wrote?
2. Compare and contrast the relationship described in Wharton's story with the marriage depicted in SUI SIN FAR's (Edith Maude Eaton's) tale "Mrs. Spring Fragrance." How do matters of ethnicity and class affect the relationships depicted in both works? Which of the women in the two stories seems happier with her life, and why?
3. Read Wharton's story in conjunction with "The Second Choice," by THEODORE DREISER. Discuss similarities and differences between the two works in terms of theme, characterization, setting, and socioeconomic milieu.
4. Discuss Wharton's use of phrases set off by quotation marks, as when she writes "she had made it 'do'" or when she notes that the "men would probably back Gannett to 'do the decent thing.'" What does such phrasing suggest about the relations between language and society in this story? Whose voices are being "heard" in such phrases, and what effects do such voices have on the characters in the story?

The House of Mirth (1905)

Wharton's first major commercial and critical success tells the story of Lily Bart, a member of

the elite of New York City, who faces financial difficulties and must find a socially prominent, wealthy husband in order to secure her position in the only world she has ever known; Lily's search for an acceptable husband is complicated by the fact that she has a strong streak of independence, making it impossible for her to accept a man for whom she does not feel an intellectual or emotional attraction. Although Lily suffers a steady decline in social standing as time passes and is eventually forced to seek employment and move to a boarding house, she refuses to compromise her moral principles by resorting to blackmail, lies, or manipulation in order to find a husband; one man, Lawrence Selden, attracts her attention and meets her approval, yet circumstances never allow them to express their feelings for each other or even spend much time together. As Lily becomes poorer and poorer, she is rejected more and more firmly by her friends and family, including Selden, and she eventually dies of a partly accidental, partly intentional overdose of chloral, a drug she purchased to combat bouts of sleeplessness. The morning she is found dead, Selden appears ready to profess love and offer marriage, but it is too late: Their feelings for each other have been sacrificed on the altar of social demands and prejudices among New York's elites.

Critics commonly agree that life circumstances schooled Wharton during her youth and young adulthood to write a novel like *The House of Mirth*. As is the case with Lily, Wharton learned, from an early age, to place great value on physical beauty, decorum, and traditional female roles. Also as with Lily, Wharton wrestled with the idea that a woman should be willing to enter into a marriage that was not based on mutual attraction but rather on mutual social and financial benefits. Unlike Lily, however, Wharton eventually managed to escape from the narrow world of New York society by fighting against the constraints of marriage, taking a lover, and seeking out a life of challenge and satisfaction in her writing and charitable efforts. One can say that Wharton, in novels like *The House of Mirth*, is warning herself and other women with a similar background of what awaits them if they

accept, and limit themselves to, the traditional upbringing offered to girls in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Works by Wharton preceding *The House of Mirth* include short story collections such as *The Greater Inclination* (1899); a novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902); a novella, *Sanctuary* (1903); and works of nonfiction such as *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and travelogues. In response to these efforts, Wharton is often praised for her eye for detail, her ability to describe vividly and accurately, and her insight into human character and motivation. In 1903 she began work on *The House of Mirth*, a novel that tested her ability as a writer as well as her specialized knowledge of New York high society. Critics say that Wharton, when writing this novel, put her environment under intense scrutiny, isolating and describing the manners, morals, and shortcomings of this world. Published serially by *Scribner's Magazine* in 1905, *The House of Mirth* proved to be a great success. Although commentators valued the text primarily for its nonspeculative, nonabstract style and its use of irony and sarcasm, the general reading public was more interested in the tale of romance involving Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden.

Mention should be made of another factor that played a role in Wharton's decision to write the novel and her choice of writing style: her disdain for many other female writers of her time. Wharton believed that these writers did not live up to the high standards demanded by true literature. She faulted these women for their provincialism and their unrefined way of expressing themselves. She also thought that they chose uncontroversial subject matter as a way to satisfy a prejudiced American reading public. In her eyes women writers allowed themselves to be forced to write about socially acceptable, often cheery topics. Unlike these authors, Wharton set out to avoid nostalgic generalizations, sentimental romantic vignettes, and pointless descriptions of nature and family.

Originally Wharton chose "A Moment's Ornament" as the title of her novel. With that title, the focus is clearly on Lily and the transitory, inconsequential nature of what she, in the eyes of others, can offer the world around her. Lily's world believes

that women have their value as decorative statues and that marital matches should be made according to how well the woman complements the man; little thought is given to what might benefit the woman. Wharton, however, reconsidered her decision about the title and chose, instead, *The House of Mirth*. This phrase can be found in Ecclesiastes 7:4: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Many verses in Ecclesiastes function as reprimands or warnings, and this particular verse counsels against living solely for short-term enjoyment; a life devoted to more meaningful pursuits is advisable and preferable. In the context of Wharton's novel, the phrase from Ecclesiastes can be understood in two ways. First, it presents an ultimatum to Lily: Will she follow the example of thousands of women before her in similar circumstances and seek an existence as a beautiful, charming, witty work of decoration, thereby renouncing other aspects of life, including intellect and soul; or will she expect more of herself and her environment, daring to demand that she be offered the same possibilities as men and be judged with equal harshness? Second, the phrase "house of mirth" raises a provocative question concerning New York high society: On the surface, amid the many parties, evenings at the opera, fancy dress balls, and polite manners, life might seem to be filled with amusing diversions, but does reality match appearance?

In her novel Wharton gives a resounding condemnation of the elite of New York. For the sake of decorum, rigid principles govern the lives of members of that society. Exceptions are not tolerated. Society demands, for example, that an unmarried woman never be alone with a male who is not a member of her family except in certain circumstances. Society frowns upon women who smoke or gamble. And society discourages female initiative, bonding, and self-discovery. Rather than a happy environment as appearances might indicate, New York high society is revealed to be restrictive, inflexible, and intimidating. Noteworthy is the fact that members of this group accept the demands placed on them by tradition. Indeed, it would only take a small rebellion to change certain rules and

practices, but members willingly support the status quo. Their greatest desire is to maintain the existing social order and its institutions; individuals who challenge customs or practices are marginalized quickly and ruthlessly. Members fail to see that they are being held captive in a self-created prison and that they are their own guards.

In the hands of Wharton, Lily remains a rather dubious figure. At first glance, Lily appears to be different from other women of her social class and age. She does not fully agree with the emphasis society places on social graces, and she seems ready to marry for something other than material gain. However, she is never able to leave this world completely. She views a woman's standing in society with a critical, perceptive eye, yet she is unable to turn her observations into new standards for conduct. As the novel progresses, Lily grows increasingly desperate to find a husband, and we see her doing and saying things that are incompatible with an enlightened outlook. Readers grow angry with a society that treats women as objects but also become frustrated with Lily: Although her life and thoughts could have been catalysts for change, she lacks the strength and insight to act. Only at the end of the novel does Lily experience a state of heightened self-awareness. In a condition of complete physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, she reviews her life and passes judgment on herself; she realizes that she has become a plaything of society, making its goals her goals and accepting its interpretation of events and people as her interpretation. Even as she reaches this understanding of her life and environment, she sees the threatening possibility of a new plunge into the darkness of ignorance, a return to old habits, old opinions, old expectations. She states that she has grown tired and that sleep is what she seeks most of all. She takes chloral, knowing the risks as she counts out a higher dose than normal, but at this point, her only concern is sleep, a relief from the recognition of her failings and limitations.

Since its appearance, *The House of Mirth* has remained popular, attracting new admirers with each successive generation of readers. As is the case with other works by Wharton, this novel has been

adapted for the big screen, most recently by Terence Davies in 2000. It is, however, questionable whether Wharton would have approved of Davies's final product since the film concentrates on depicting the romance between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden rather than on examining the issues that were of central concern to Wharton and her time. It seems odd that a divide still exists, a little over 100 years after the publication of the novel, between those who are willing to recognize and consider the shortcomings of society or the problematic nature of male-female relationships and those who become mesmerized by the tale of romance. Wharton's statements concerning the seductive power of wealth, beauty, and class and her analysis of the influence of tradition and heritage are as timely as ever.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the depiction of women's lives in this novel and in GERTRUDE STEIN's collection of stories titled *Three Lives*. In both works, how are the lives of women shaped and constrained by their social circumstances? What roles do social class and romance play in both works? Discuss the differences in style and characterization employed by Wharton and Stein.
2. Read Wharton's novel in conjunction with "The School Days of an Indian Girl" and "An Indian Teacher among Indians" by GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN (Zitkala-Ša). What special pressures does the protagonist of the latter works face that are not faced by Lily Bart? What roles, if any, does ethnicity play in Wharton's novel, and what role does social class play in the works by Bonnin?
3. How do the style, purpose, and characterization in Wharton's novel differ from the same aspects in (say) RICHARD WRIGHT's *Native Son*? How do you think Wright might have reacted to Wharton's book, and how do you think Wharton might have reacted to Wright's? In what ways is social class important in both works? How are women presented in both novels?
4. Discuss Wharton's novel in relation to EZRA POUND's poem "Portrait d'une Femme." In what ways do the main characters of both works resemble and/or differ from one another? How are their social circumstances similar and/or different? What is the implied attitude of the narrator of each work toward the woman he presents?
5. Read WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS's poem "The Young Housewife," and then discuss it in relation to Wharton's novel. In particular, discuss such matters as social class, social setting, the roles of women, and the satisfactions of marriage (or lack thereof).
6. Choose one particular chapter from somewhere near the middle of the novel and discuss that chapter in relation to the chapters that precede it and follow it. How do the preceding chapters lead up to (or prepare for) the chosen chapter? How do the succeeding chapters follow from the chosen chapter? In other words, how is the chosen chapter crucial to the book in terms of such matters as themes, characterization, structure, and tone?

"The Eyes" (1910)

At the end of a long, enjoyable evening of telling ghost stories in the smoke-filled, cozy library of the home of Andrew Culwin, a self-appointed judge and supposed connoisseur of literature and art, it is finally the host's turn to relate a supernatural tale, and he speaks of his experiences over the last several years, during which he has been haunted off and on by two eyes that stare accusingly and relentlessly at him—eyes that appear calculating, spiteful, and insensitive. In the end, Culwin and one guest in particular, Phil Frenham, realize that the eyes symbolize Culwin's conscience, which confronts him whenever he contemplates—or is in the process of—harming someone emotionally or intellectually; our final image of Culwin is of a broken, abandoned man.

Wharton gives her well-known ghost story, first published in *Scribner's Magazine* and included in *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, the form of a framework narrative in which the present can interact with, and pass verdict on, the past. Claiming to have experienced the events he recounts, Culwin, an older man,

reveals himself to be egotistical and manipulative; he does not consciously set out to harm others, but his emotional coolness and his fear of commitment allow him to abandon others at will, often when they are in greatest emotional need. All his life Culwin has been attracted to youth and youthful beauty, especially male youth and male good looks, and he enjoys the company of these young adults until they place too many demands on him. Once that occurs, Culwin severs contact with the individuals, often destroying them in the process, and in his mind, he prepares an elaborate rationalization and justification for his behavior. As the short story progresses, readers grow to know the real Culwin, whereas it appears that he entertains certain romanticized ideas about his attitudes and actions.

As the frame story draws to a close, Culwin—looking into a mirror and realizing that the eyes that have haunted him are his own eyes—is finally confronted with his callousness, coldness, and speculative ways, and he recoils from the impact. At the same time, Phil Frenham, Culwin's latest youthful male companion, catches a glimpse of the real Culwin, is overcome with fear and realization of the rejection that awaits him, and turns away from the older man. Critics respond variously to the homosexual themes in this story. Some commentators downplay this aspect of the text, focusing instead on Wharton's portrayal of an obsessive lack of trust toward oneself and others; many reviewers, however, see in Andrew Culwin a figure reminiscent of Morton Fullerton, a bisexual journalist, with whom Wharton had a brief passionate affair and whose often ambivalent attitude toward women frustrated her.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss this story in relation to the tale titled "Hands" by SHERWOOD ANDERSON. How do the two central characters resemble and/or differ from one another? Which of the two characters is presented more sympathetically? How do social values current during the time of composition affect the authors' presentation of both characters?
2. Study the use of eye imagery in this story and in Flannery O'Connor's tale titled "Revelation."

What personality traits do the central characters of both works have in common? In what ways does each character achieve a kind of revelation? How do the tones and styles of the two works differ?
3. Make a list of some of the story's allusions to other literary works, to artworks, to classical figures, and/or to foreign persons or places. How do these allusions function in the tale? How do they relate to the themes of this story? How do they help characterize the speakers who use them? What do they imply about the nature of the intended audience for this work?

Ethan Frome (1911)

His curiosity aroused about Starkfield, Massachusetts, and especially about three residents in a remote farmhouse, an unnamed narrator tells the story of Ethan Frome; his wife, Zeena; and her cousin, Mattie Silver; pieced together from the narrator's personal observations and various conversations with local residents, the story focuses on the uneasy relationship between Ethan and Zeena and dissects Zeena's jealousy and fear of Mattie. Readers learn that Ethan is dissatisfied with his marriage to Zeena and that he is attracted to Mattie, who sees in him hope for her otherwise grim future; feeling that he is caught in a cheerless marriage to Zeena, Ethan fantasizes about running away with Mattie and leaving his wife, Starkfield, and his obligations on the farm. Within a short period, he realizes that his dream will never become reality; he and Mattie make a suicide pact on the spur of the moment; and once their attempt to commit suicide fails, they are forced to return, spiritually broken and physically deformed, to Zeena and lead an existence filled with financial anxiety, emotional strain, and self-recrimination.

Destined to become Wharton's best-known work, *Ethan Frome* was strongly praised by her contemporaries and retains a place of honor today on university and secondary school reading lists. It is, indeed, often the only work by Wharton to which many Americans are exposed. In general, the short novel,

fewer than 200 pages, is known for its effective narrative structure, its depiction of female interpersonal relationships, its treatment of sexual tension, and its comments on the pervasive influence of nature, society, and family on matters of everyday life. Also, it is said to be a commentary on Wharton's feeling of imprisonment in her unsatisfying marriage to Teddy Wharton and her yearning for sexual and emotional fulfillment elsewhere. Wharton's novel has inspired two movie versions: a film made in 1960 by Alex Segal and one in 1993 by John Madden.

Many readers are intrigued by Wharton's choice of narrator and mode of narration. She chooses an outsider to tell the story of Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie since that individual can proceed objectively and gain access to a variety of sources. In essence, the novel is as much about the narrator as it is about the main characters. Readers learn where the author's sympathies lie while analyzing the narrator's personality and his view of the role of the past in Starkfield. In general, the narrator feels admiration for Ethan and views his efforts to support Zeena and Mattie and maintain the family farm as a noble sacrifice. It is important to note that the narrator does not present a reportlike listing of events; he uses interviews, face-to-face interaction with Ethan, and knowledge of human nature to create a work that explains as well as describes the past and present.

Equally noteworthy is Wharton's nuanced portrayal of women and their emotional and psychological composition. At first, a reader might be tempted to be critical of Zeena, calling her selfish and cold, and to favor Mattie, who seems to be warm and natural. But by the end of the novel, readers, having gained insight into what causes Zeena to act the way she does, might be willing to excuse some of her behavior. Moreover, originally sympathetic to Mattie, some readers grow critical of her once they discover her quick transition to a shrew after the accident. Indeed, Mattie is just as desperate for understanding and acceptance as Zeena, and she is equally driven in her struggle for Ethan's heart and soul. Each woman sees Ethan as her only chance at a life with some happiness, autonomy, and security.

Readers are also fascinated by Wharton's treatment of determinism in the text. Within the first few pages of the novel, the narrator illustrates how the climate and the natural world exert influence on the mood of Starkfield's inhabitants, preparing the way for consideration of how family heritage, physical environment, and social class shape individuals and affect events. As the narrator relates Ethan's history, readers discover a man who feels overwhelmed by family responsibilities and who cannot free himself from what he believes to be family expectations. Even though most members of his family died long ago, Ethan senses their presence; in his eyes, the headstones on their graves, located near his farm, are like sentinels who guard and enforce family custom. The farm on the outskirts of Starkfield has been in the family possession for years; Ethan feels that it is his duty to maintain the property to his dying breath. What is more, memories haunt Ethan and cause him to feel obligated to Zeena. He remembers, for example, that Zeena took good care of his mother, and the image of Zeena looking after his sick mother reminds him that he is in her debt. In addition, the cold, stark, repressed atmosphere surrounding Ethan's everyday life mirrors the snow-covered, frozen portrait of nature. Passages in the novel dwelling on winter storms, ice-packed ponds, and mind-numbing cold are juxtaposed with descriptions of Ethan's despair and inability to act. Furthermore, the lack of social mobility in rural Massachusetts plays a role in Ethan's acceptance of the idea that he has no chance for advancement. Reflecting the frozen state of nature, the structure of society and its economy are unchanging and unchangeable; an invisible, yet permanent wall stands between the haves and the have-nots.

Wharton's text may also be read with an emphasis on sexual themes. A reader can easily view the story as a tale of inhibited sexual satisfaction. To all intents and purposes, Ethan and Zeena lead a sterile, passionless marriage. Although Ethan is described as a robust, virile, athletic farmer who is good-looking and successful in attracting the attention of the opposite sex, Zeena is depicted as sexless, shriveled, and unapproachable. When Mattie

arrives to stay with them, Ethan begins to sense that he may have found an outlet for his pent-up sexual energy. While Zeena has always acted aloof and reproachful, Mattie gives Ethan admiring looks, laughs at his jokes, and encourages him to communicate with her. Wharton presents Mattie in a very favorable light when describing her appearance and personality. She unleashes feelings in Ethan that he was scarcely aware of, and he falls totally under her spell. Once Mattie realizes that she has no chance of experiencing a passionate relationship with Ethan, she proposes a suicide pact: She suggests that they go on a wild sled ride together and collide with a huge tree; the crash will kill them instantly and allow them to be together in eternity. Ethan, feeling equally desperate and frustrated, agrees. Some readers see in the description of the sled ride—a rushing, bumpy adventure ending in a head-on collision with a tree—a reference to sexual intercourse and climax. Ethan and Mattie's sled ride, however, does not provide the satisfaction or release they hoped to achieve. As Ethan and Mattie start down the hill, the image of Zeena seems to be waiting for Ethan at the bottom, and he is unable to crash the sled head-on into the tree, veering to the right instead. As a result, the two would-be lovers are cheated out of their ecstasy and eternal togetherness, and they are forced to lead the lives of handicapped people. Our final image of them as they spend the rest of their miserable lives together in the rundown farmhouse is of two failed lovers who never achieve physical intimacy.

Not all reviewers give the novel unequivocal praise. One criticism is that *Ethan Frome* is too bleak and that it paints a picture of a world completely without hope and without relief. Some commentators claim that the New England fall with its vivid colors or the summer and spring with their rejuvenating effects on nature are not sufficiently considered. If the frigidity of winter imprisons the residents literally and figuratively, what are the effects of spring and summer? Why does winter overshadow the other seasons? Finally, some readers quibble with the reasonableness of the suicide pact and its enactment. They cannot empathize with Ethan and Mattie's grief, their desperation, and their emotional and psychological stress, and

they regard the sled ride into the tree as a fairly ridiculous way to commit suicide.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the issue of suicide (or attempted suicide) as it appears in this novel and in EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON's poem "Richard Cory." How do the motivations that lead to suicide differ in the two works? Which characters—Wharton's or Robinson's—seem to lead more desperate lives? What are the implied attitudes of the authors toward the suicide attempts they describe?
2. Discuss the use of seasonal imagery in this novel and in JACK LONDON's short story "The Law of Life." How does the imagery contribute to tone, meaning, and atmosphere in both works? Do the works share any similarities of theme? What does each work imply about the nature of life?
3. Discuss the use of rural New England settings in Wharton's novel and in ROBERT FROST's poem "The Death of the Hired Man." In each work, how does the setting contribute to the mood, tone, and meaning of the piece? What kind of life (and what kind of socioeconomic status) is taken for granted in each work?
4. Compare and contrast Wharton's book with NELLA LARSEN's novel *Quicksand*, especially the closing chapters of that book. What are some obvious differences between the two works in terms of setting, plot, and characterization, but how do both books end bleakly and emphasize final frustration? What are the sources of frustration in each case?
5. How, if at all, does Wharton prevent Zeena from becoming a completely unsympathetic character? How does she present Zeena so that she seems complex rather than simplistic? How, by the same token, does Wharton do the same with Mattie and Ethan? How does she darken and complicate our views of them?

Summer (1917)

Employing elements of a 19th-century sentimental tale of romance and a traditional coming-of-age

saga, Wharton tells the story of four months in the life of Charity Royall, a 17-year-old girl from North Dormer, a small town in Massachusetts, who experiences sexual awakening and independence but who eventually renounces her freedom in favor of small-town social order and security. Intellectually, emotionally, and sexually frustrated at the home of her guardian, Lawyer Royall, Charity, who works at the local library and who is ripening physically in the way fruit matures as spring passes to summer, meets Lucius Harney, an attractive, stimulating man from New York; becomes infatuated with Harney; is seduced by him; and agrees to regular meetings in an abandoned house in an orchard. Harney eventually leaves town, intending never to return, and Charity, learning that she is pregnant, decides to run away to an impoverished place called the Mountain, where her mother still lives. Once there, Charity learns that her mother has died, and, recognizing that she will never feel comfortable among the primitive, unfeeling people of the area, she chooses to return to North Dormer; trudging toward an uncertain future, Charity is met by Lawyer Royall, who offers to marry her. Although disappointed that Harney regards her as a mere summer fling, Charity does not succumb to melancholy; she makes a match with Lawyer Royall, obtaining security and social standing in the community, but she retains in her heart and mind memories of her first exhilarating experience with sexual, economic, and social freedom.

Calling *Summer* her “hot Ethan,” Wharton gives a clue about what she saw as the main theme of the story. While the cold, bleak, snow-filled winter in *Ethan Frome* freezes any outburst of human emotion and puts obstacles in the way of social advancement or change, *Summer*’s sense of warmth, promise, and vigor encourages the expression of sexual desire and the testing of social constraints. The physical world reinforces Wharton’s themes of romance and education. Charity is presented early in the text as a moist bud on the verge of opening. She gains knowledge of physical love through Lucius Harney, a stranger who visits North Dormer. Introducing a sense of the exotic and forbidden, he seduces Charity, and readers become witnesses to

their passion when the two meet in a small home in a garden setting. Wharton avoids all comparisons with tawdry tales of sexual exploits; instead, her accounts of the meetings between Charity and Harney emphasize the spiritual and emotional benefits of mutually satisfying sex.

Some commentators claim that by writing this novel, Wharton is paying tribute to the life-changing sexual liaison she had with Morton Fullerton eight years earlier. Fleeing a marriage characterized by sexual coldness and emotional aloofness, Wharton discovered a realm of experiences and sensations of which she had scarcely been aware. Eager to incorporate this sensory world into her writing, Wharton took the opportunity to use *Summer* to highlight her new thematic concern. Of special interest is the way in which Wharton deals with the topic of sex. She does not present sex as a prelude to any type of idealized home life in which the woman assumes the roles of wife and mother; in fact, Charity, successfully putting all thoughts of marriage out of her mind, regards sex as an antidote to boredom and is chiefly interested in the momentary pleasure that the sexual act offers.

Just as summer must pass to fall, Charity’s relationship with Harney cannot last forever. He has fulfilled his mission of enabling her to see the world around her in a different light, to question rules of propriety, and to view her existence without pretense. As her time with Harney ends, Charity suspects that she is pregnant and must quickly find her place in the world. Although she initially experiences a period of desperation, Charity is no longer the inexperienced girl she was previously. She looks at her environment with critical, calculating eyes and discovers admirable qualities in a man she previously detested: Lawyer Royall. Royall is Charity’s guardian, and the girl Charity rails against him at the beginning of *Summer* in the way an uncooperative prisoner fights against a guard or warden. Originally Royall, his home, and her life there symbolize tradition, dependence, and denial. Charity’s work at the library, her relationship with Harney, and her flight to the Mountain represent rebellion against Royall. Toward the end of the novel, Charity observes Royall with a different attitude and

judges him according to different standards. What she saw before as stifling tradition takes on the aura of security. What she saw as monotony turns into reliability. And what she took to be inflexibility has the positive attributes of strength.

The novel ends with Charity's accepting Royall's offer of marriage and returning to his home in North Dormer. Our final glimpse of Charity is not of a young, carefree girl or of a sex-starved harlot; instead, we find a rather contemplative figure. At this point, Charity seems to be most concerned about the welfare of her child and her own freedom from hardship. Earlier she turned to Harney for physical pleasure; now she turns to Royall for future comfort. Many critics have commented on the rather ambiguous ending that Wharton provides. Is the final image of Charity one of a woman who is pondering her inability to make significant changes in her destiny? Does she feel that Royall has taken advantage of the fact that she has few other possibilities in the rural Massachusetts community? Has Charity sacrificed adventure and personal freedom for stability and social respectability? Has she accepted limitations created by a society dominated by self-serving males? Wharton does not provide a direct answer to these questions. The reader must determine whether Charity, in the future, will behave like a young, wild woman, unable to focus her energy on accomplishing any one given task, or whether she will put the knowledge gained from her adventures of the past months to use in order to find and maintain her position in the world and pass on her spirit and zest for life to her baby.

In keeping with the idea that *Summer* represents Wharton's "hot Ethan," critical response to the novel has been heated, and the text is regarded as one of Wharton's most controversial works. On the one hand, critics praise the author's ability to mold characteristics of popular fiction, especially the romance novel, to form a unique work of art without creating a mawkish story that strives to bring tears to the eyes of readers. Also, Wharton does not create a nostalgic tone for the end of her novel. Readers have the feeling that Wharton wants to emphasize Charity's capacity for the future—not dwell on a melancholic Charity, who pines

for the past. Furthermore, according to commentators, Wharton writes a believable text, one that points to the long-standing abuse and exploitation of young women by predatory men. On the other hand, some reviewers—especially those writing in Wharton's day—have viewed the subject matter and the incidents as shocking and inappropriate for cultured readers. Although most people in the 21st century no longer find the text and its events to be an affront to their sensibilities, *Summer's* subject matter and the text's language and descriptions are still used by some individuals to criticize the text; however, in this day and age the reasoning is different: Readers—especially young readers—find the text lacking in details and written too delicately and finely to satisfy their prurient tastes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Wharton's novel alongside Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, and then discuss the two works as coming-of-age stories. How do the two main characters differ from and/or resemble one another? How are the conclusions of the two books comparable and/or distinct? What role does geographical setting play in each work?
2. Compare and contrast Wharton's book with Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How does each work present a young woman's development? How are the male characters in both works similar and/or different? How do the conclusions of the two works differ? Discuss the use of imagery of nature in both works.
3. Discuss Wharton's novel in relation to the novel titled *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen. How are the two works comparable and/or distinct in terms of plot, central characters, themes, and conclusions? What roles do race, ethnicity, and gender play in the two books? Which of the two central characters is more appealing and/or sympathetic?
4. Compare and contrast the first and final chapters of this novel. Discuss their similarities and/or differences in such matters as imagery, tone, atmosphere, characterization, and setting. How, specifically, has the main character changed

between the opening and final chapters? What is the final “moral” or “message” or “meaning” of this book?

***The Age of Innocence* (1920)**

Set in New York in the 1870s, *The Age of Innocence* tells of the engagement and marriage of Newland Archer and May Welland, two members of high society’s most prestigious families; although Newland admires May and her standing amid the rich, cultured, and influential, he gradually develops an interest in Ellen Olenska, May’s cousin, who married a count in Europe but who has returned to New York amid talk of marital infidelity and an impending divorce. Newland feels drawn to both women: On the one hand, May represents respectability, status, and tradition; on the other hand, Ellen appears exotic and ushers in hints of passion, forbidden excitement, and freedom. In the end, even after much talk of love and desire for Ellen, Newland chooses a life with May, guaranteeing for himself comfort, security, and companionship; however, there is an opportunity years later, once May has died and Newland and May’s children have grown up, for Newland to be reunited with Ellen, but he rejects it, giving Wharton’s novel an ambiguous ending: Is Newland yielding to the power of society and its expectations, or do the many years together with May mean more to him than he at first thought?

Drawing on memories from her childhood and youth and supplementing them with knowledge gained from conversations with family members and friends, Wharton paints a realistic portrait of the social elite in New York during the last quarter of the 19th century. On occasion, the novel strikes the reader as somewhat nostalgic since members of the New York elite of the 1920s, the time when Wharton was writing her novel, bore little resemblance to the people described in Wharton’s novel. Elsewhere, she deals with the transformation that New York experiences as the elite of birth and heritage are replaced by the rich industrial barons and their families.

Some critics focus on Wharton’s commentary on New York society. All the characters—including

Ellen—live their lives in the shadow of what they believe society expects of them. They see their existence as one demanding obedience to rules, fulfillment of duties, and conformity to standards of proper behavior. People are expected to sacrifice their individualism in order to preserve social order and harmony. It is important to note that the code of conduct is not written down; it has been internalized by every member of the elite. Members of this class normally do not consciously consider their actions and attitudes; they act on instinct. Characters who behave differently are considered outcasts. Newland might toy with the idea of abandoning social conventions and daydream about ignoring the demands of respectability, but he never arrives at the stage of acting on his ponderings. He unconsciously restrains himself and yields to the pressure of society. In the end, he acts as superficially well bred and refined as any other member of the elite. Ellen, too, submits to the authority of society. Although she appears to rebel, she does not have the strength to confront the power of social expectations for long. Quickly and efficiently, she is marginalized and expelled—first to Washington, D.C., and then to Europe. While she might continue to exhibit her maverick tendencies abroad, she turns out to be no match for high society in New York. Wharton’s novel is, therefore, often read as an attack on that group’s suppression of individualism.

Other commentators divide their time between analyzing Newland Archer and contrasting May Welland and Ellen Olenska. Criticism of Newland is harsh. For some people, Newland is weak and unable to break away from traditions that threaten to crush him and his chance at happiness. At first glance, Newland resembles the men around him. He dresses as they do, talks as they do, has the same type of career as they do, and worries about the same types of issues as they do. Gradually, the narrator gives hints that Newland has started to question the oppressive power of tradition and society. We learn that he hesitates to accept prevailing opinion about events of the day and the alleged missteps of other members of high society, but he never risks any type of open rebellion, fearing the cost to his reputation and future prospects. However, after he has had

more and more contact with Ellen and sees how New York society rejects her, he begins to act on what he had only thought before. For example, he talks and interacts with Ellen in a public forum when decorum would dictate a type of shunning. He visits her home when others would rather cross the street to avoid contact with her. And he is less than convincing when he carries out his assignment to urge her to think of her family and friends and to put an end to her plans to divorce her husband. During the course of the novel, Newland's feelings for Ellen change from admiration to desire. Ellen symbolizes everything that is far from Newland's existence: spontaneity, emotion, independence, and defiance.

Although members of the same family, May and Ellen represent opposing types of women. May epitomizes New York society's ideal of young womanhood. Everything she says and does is in accord with that group's expectations; in fact, it is noteworthy that she spends little if any time reflecting on what is proper. May knows instinctively what is appropriate. She is aware, for example, of the proper behavior of a daughter in matters of engagement and marriage. She knows how to navigate the tricky waters of partygoing and partygiving. She also behaves automatically in the proper manner when interacting with her fiancé. Descriptions of her physical appearance and clothing praise her natural beauty and grace, but she is also made to seem like one of a mass of attractive, well-dressed, wealthy young women. Even in her place of residence, readers find that May chooses something that is luxurious but not ostentatious. After all, her acquaintances live in well-outfitted, noteworthy homes, and it would not be proper that May's house should attract any more attention than murmurs of approval. Conversely, Ellen delivers a slap to the face of society. There is no chance that she will blend in with the other young women. From childhood on, she has exhibited a streak of strong-willed defiance. She married someone not only outside the elite group of families in New York but a foreigner. She has led a high-profile existence rather than one of modesty. And she is rumored to have given in to a woman's yearning for emotional and physical satisfaction by abandoning her husband

and running away with his male secretary. Even in matters of dress and appearance, Ellen is unusual. Her clothing is striking in color and memorable in cut; she exudes vitality and unrestrained physical charm. Even the way she holds her body and her manner of speech are different from what society expects. Finally, while in New York, Ellen rents a home that is not located in the fashionable part of town, and she regularly invites outcasts from high society to her home for entertainment.

Quite often, critics dwell on the view of Newland as a man caught between these two women. He professes love for both, but he is referring to two kinds of love. His attraction to May rests on his familiarity with New York and high society. By marrying her, he can assure himself of continued acceptance by that group. His interest in Ellen is tied to his skepticism about social propriety and decorum, and his pursuit of Ellen reflects his curiosity about a world with which he is completely unfamiliar. Throughout much of the novel, a battle rages in Newland's soul. Obligation to May is countered by thoughts of adventure with Ellen; understanding and compassion for Ellen are ambushed by reminders of May's stellar reputation and Ellen's failure to gain the respect of New York's powerful elite. In the end, Newland pursues a life with May, following the established pattern of engagement, marriage, and parenthood.

Many readers assume that weakness alone drives Newland to marry May. At the end of the novel, Wharton tells of the death of May and an opportunity for Newland to rekindle his romance with Ellen. Once again, Newland does not reach out to Ellen. Many readers feel that Newland is still concerned about Ellen's bad reputation in society or that he is still wrestling with indecisiveness. Other readers believe that different emotions and concerns are at work here. Even though Newland initially speaks of his marriage with May in what might sound like disparaging or indifferent terms, readers quickly learn that the bond that grew between them was strong, even if it was a bond of shared interest and mutual respect rather than one of excitement and romance. Newland might not want to be so quick to question that bond. Also, Newland has grown more percep-

tive with age. He realizes that some of the longing for Ellen that he experiences at the moment is really a veiled longing for his youth and the past. He asks himself what he really knows about the present Ellen and seems to doubt that one can recapture the dreams and desires of youth. The final factor in his decision not to meet Ellen is an incident recounted by his son. Newland learns that May understood him better than he thought and that she realized what he gave up for her sake; she held him in high esteem for the rest of her life, and he is reluctant now to act in a way that would dishonor the memory of their life together.

By the time the novel was published, Wharton had been traveling in Europe and living in France for several years. She was already an established writer with an excellent reputation, and *The Age of Innocence* shows her in top form. In fact, Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the novel in 1921. Her novel has inspired filmmakers since its appearance; a movie version of the text was directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 1990.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Wharton's book with the novel by W. E. B. DuBois titled *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. How are the two works similar in plots, themes, protagonists, and the moral choices they present? How are they dissimilar in setting, characterization, style, and the socioeconomic and ethnic details they depict?
2. Discuss Wharton's book in relation to Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans*. How do the books differ in style? How are they similar and/or different in their presentation of issues of social class, economic status, and family relationships? How are gender relationships, the roles of men and women, presented in both works?
3. What role does social class play not only in Wharton's novel but also in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*? In what ways are both Gatsby and Ellen outsiders? To what degree and in what ways are both of these characters sympathetic or appealing? In what ways are the conclusions of both books tragic? How does each author depict the relations between individuals and the larger societies in which they live?
4. Focus on some descriptions of the ways people dress in the novel and discuss how their costuming is relevant to their characters or personalities. How much variation is there in the ways people dress in the book, and how and why are the differences revealing?

“Roman Fever” (1934, 1936)

Alida Slade and Grace Ansley have lunch together on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the Coliseum and Forum in Rome. World War I has ended, and the women take advantage of the calm to discuss the present and the past. Quickly Alida and Grace reveal themselves as fierce competitors who duel spitefully over who has had the happier life.

Alida is dissatisfied with her daughter, but she feels that she is luckier than Grace because she won Delphin Slade, the man both women desired, and was married to him for 25 years; she mocks Grace by revealing a cruel joke: Alida sent a note to Grace in Delphin's name and invited her to a rendezvous at the Coliseum; Alida imagined that Grace would never respond to such a bold offer. Grace, less combative and more reserved, has produced a socially graceful, beautiful daughter who will become a leader in high society; as she is taunted by Alida, she admits that she answered the note, met Delphin at the Coliseum, had sexual intercourse with him, and as a result became pregnant by him, the latter information given in the form of a vicious stab at Alida's pride.

First published in the magazine *Liberty* and later in the short story collection *The World Over*, “Roman Fever” is generally considered a fine example of Wharton's skill and sensitivity, and it is also admired for many other reasons. Some critics praise Wharton for her ability to detail the impact of the past on the present: That is, to show that our understanding of the present depends on the way we interpret the past. If our view of the past is challenged and found to be faulty, it means that our concept of the present might be just as incorrect. Other critics take special

6. Reread the quotation at the beginning of the biographical entry. Consult relevant sections of Wharton's autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, and identify which aspects of early 20th-century American society are viewed by the author with disapproval. How are these negative American "tastes" treated in two of her novels?
7. Wharton often examines the role of determinism in shaping the lives of her characters. Examine her portrayal of Zeena in *Ethan Frome* and Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*. How do society, family heritage, and the physical world in which these characters live impact their present and govern their future?
8. On the one hand, Wharton is praised for her realistic depiction of women in New York City's high society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and for her keen eye for motivation. On the other hand, she has been faulted for her reluctance to present women in meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships with one another. Examine *The House of Mirth* or *The Age of Innocence*, identify the main female characters, and evaluate their relationships with other women. How do the women interact with one another? Why do they behave the ways they do?
9. Common themes in works by Wharton include the quest for freedom and the repressive power of propriety and decorum in social intercourse. Both male and female characters are shown struggling against limitations and restrictions created by members of their social class, yet these characters ultimately acquiesce to the demands of their surroundings. Examine how Wharton treats these themes as she writes about the lead male characters in *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence*.
10. Many of Wharton's novels have been turned into movies, and film companies often choose to emphasize a social concern or plot device that readers might consider of secondary importance. Compare the book and movie versions of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. Identify two issues in each novel that you think Wharton wants to highlight. View the films and list two issues that the screenwriter and director underscore. How do the differences impact one's understanding of the works in question?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Ammons, Elizabeth. *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980.
- Auchincloss, Louis. *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time*. New York: Viking, 1971.
- Bell, Millicent, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- . *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship*. New York: Braziller, 1965.
- Benstock, Shari. *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*. New York: Scribner, 1994.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Edith Wharton*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- Campbell, Donna. The Edith Wharton Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.edithwhartonsociety.org/index.html>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Erlich, Gloria C. *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Garrison, Stephen. *Edith Wharton: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990.
- Goodman, Susan. *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1990.
- Holbrook, David. *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Howe, Irving, ed. *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962.
- Joslin, Katherine. *Edith Wharton*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Kellogg, Grace. *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1965.
- Killoran, Helen. *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*. Rochester, N.Y., and Suffolk, England: Camden House, 2001.
- Lauer, Kristin O., and Margaret P. Murray. *Edith Wharton: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1990.

- Lubbock, Percy. *Portrait of Edith Wharton*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947.
- The Mount Estate and Gardens. Available online. URL: <http://www.edithwharton.org>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- McDowell, Margaret B. *Edith Wharton*. Rev. ed. by Twayne Series. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991.
- Pennell, Melissa McFarland. *Student Companion to Edith Wharton*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2003.
- Singley, Carol J., ed. *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Walton, Geoffrey. *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970.
- Wershoven, Carol. *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*. London: Associated University Press, 1982.
- Wharton, Edith, ed. *The Book of the Homeless*. New York: Scribner, 1916.
- . *The Buccaneers*. Completed by Marion Mainwaring. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- . *Collected Stories, 1891–1910*. Edited by Maureen Howard. New York: Library of America, 2001.
- . *Collected Stories, 1911–1937*. Edited by Maureen Howard. New York: Library of America, 2001.
- . *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort*. New York: Scribner, 1915.
- . *The Fruit of the Tree*. New York: Scribner, 1907.
- . *The Glimpses of the Moon*. New York: Appleton, 1922.
- . *The Gods Arrive*. New York: Appleton, 1932.
- . *Hudson River Bracketed*. New York: Appleton, 1929.
- . *The Letters of Edith Wharton*. Edited by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. New York: Scribner, 1988.
- . *Novellas and Other Writings: Madame de Treymes, Ethan Frome, Summer, Old New York, The Mother's Recompense, A Backward Glance*. Edited by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York: Library of America, 1990.
- . *Novels: The House of Mirth, The Reef, The Custom of the Country, The Age of Innocence*. Edited by R. W. B. Lewis. New York: Library of America, 1985.
- . *Sanctuary*. New York: Scribner, 1903.
- . *Selected Poems*. Edited by Louis Auchincloss. New York: Library of America, 2005.
- . *The Touchstone*. New York: Scribner, 1900.
- . *Twilight Sleep*. New York: Appleton, 1927.
- . *The Uncollected Critical Writings of Edith Wharton*. Edited by Frederick Wegener. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- . *The Valley of Decision*. 2 vols. New York: Scribner, 1902.
- . *The Writing of Fiction*. New York: Scribner, 1925.
- Wharton, Edith, and Ogden Codman, Jr. *The Decoration of Houses*. New York: Scribner, 1897.
- White, Barbara A. *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1991.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

David V. Witkosky



THORNTON WILDER (1897–1975)

“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

(*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*)

Although Thornton Wilder is the only writer ever to win Pulitzer Prizes both for fiction and drama, and although his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* has been read by millions while his play *Our Town* is one of the most frequently performed dramas ever written, Wilder has not been accorded the kind of intense attention from scholars and critics that these achievements would seem to warrant. On the one hand, his very popularity has made some analysts suspect that his writing may be somewhat superficial; on the other hand, the bookish qualities of some of his works have led, over the years, to accusations that his work is too literary, too much a product of libraries, and thus too remote from everyday life. Paradoxically, then, Wilder has been accused of being both too popular and too elitist, and both charges have inhibited a fuller appreciation of his accomplishments.

Wilder, along with a twin brother who died immediately at birth, was born on April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wisconsin, to Isabella Niven Wilder and Amos Parker Wilder. Both parents were well educated and comfortably middle-class. Amos, a graduate of Yale University, was the editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal* at the time of Thornton's birth; he was a deeply religious but also an eminently practical man who believed both in being godly and in doing good. His commitment to public service led to his appointment, in 1906, as consul general in Hong Kong. Thornton, his mother, and his two sis-

ters lived there briefly at first, but Mrs. Wilder and the children returned to the United States later that year, and Thornton attended school in Berkeley, California. The family was briefly reunited in 1909 when Thornton's father became consul general in Shanghai, China. Thornton and one of his sisters, however, were soon attending a school fairly distant from Shanghai, and then in 1911 Mrs. Wilder and two of her daughters (including Janet, born in 1910) moved to Italy. Meanwhile, in 1912 Thornton himself returned to California, where he and his elder brother, Amos, attended school together in Ojai before Thornton graduated from high school in Berkeley in 1915. By this stage in his life his intense interest in reading and writing literature had already manifested itself; he had already authored some short plays, and his commitment to the imagination was already so strong that his father worried that he was raising an impractical son.

Wilder entered Oberlin College in Ohio in 1915. While there he continued to pursue his literary interests; he wrote a number of plays, authored stories and poems, and had the good fortune to have contact with a particularly inspiring teacher (Charles Wager), who helped broaden his intellectual horizons even further by encouraging him to study numerous classic writers, especially the ancients and the continental Europeans. By the time Wilder transferred to Yale University in 1917, his commitment to the literary life had grown even

stronger; he wrote a prizewinning play, was strongly involved with a collegiate literary society, and made friends with other campus writers. Problems with his eyesight prevented him from serving in the regular military after the United States entered World War I in 1917, but he did serve for half a year in the coast guard artillery and was always strongly patriotic. After graduating from Yale in 1920, he studied archaeology for a year at the American Academy in Rome—an experience that not only helped shape his strong view of the vastness of historical time, but also helped lead to the production of a partly autobiographical first novel, originally titled “Memoirs of a Roman Student” and later published (in 1926) as *The Cabala*.

When Wilder returned from Rome in 1921, his father had already found him a practical job as a teacher at a prestigious boys' boarding school in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, not far from Princeton. Wilder was a committed and successful teacher, but he also managed to find time to continue writing, publishing various short works in a number of small literary magazines. In 1925–26 he left Lawrenceville temporarily to pursue a master's degree in French at Princeton University, and he also began his long affiliation with the MacDowell Colony (a retreat for writers and other artists) in New Hampshire. When *The Cabala* appeared in spring 1926, many reviewers praised it. During the summer Wilder was in Paris, where he met a number of significant literary figures (including ERNEST HEMINGWAY), and by the end of that year he saw his play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* produced in New York. All these achievements of 1926, however, were as nothing compared to the life-transforming events of 1927. Having returned to his teaching duties at Lawrenceville, Wilder awaited the publication of his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which appeared that fall. A brief, lyrical, and philosophical book set in a remote time and place, it was not expected to earn a wide readership, but such expectations proved spectacularly wrong. The novel was widely praised by reviewers, was snapped up enthusiastically by hundreds of thousands of readers, and soon became an international sensation. By 1928 it had been awarded a Pulitzer Prize and was already

earning Wilder so much money that he was able to end his teaching career, travel widely in Europe, and, in 1929, build a large house for himself, his parents, and a sister in Hamden, Connecticut. By the end of the 1920s he was one of America's best-selling and most widely respected authors; he lectured throughout the country and, in 1930, even began teaching part-time at the University of Chicago. At the beginning of that year his new novel, *The Woman of Andros*, appeared in print. Wilder seemed to be riding high.

In October 1929, however, the country had suffered a stock market crash so severe that the resulting economic disaster, which quickly engulfed the whole world, soon became known as the Great Depression. Desperate times and desperate feelings lasted for much of the 1930s, and, at the beginning of the decade, Wilder was suddenly accused of being hopelessly out of touch with the realities of ordinary American life. In October of that year Michael Gold, a prominent Marxist critic, used the pages of the *New Republic* (an influential journal of opinion) to attack Wilder, and especially his latest novel (set in classical Rome), of catering to a taste for frivolous escapism among the leisured classes. Although many prominent writers rose to Wilder's defense, and although Wilder himself never explicitly responded to the charges at any length, the ensuing controversy damaged his reputation and may even have shaken his own confidence in the kinds of directions he had previously been pursuing. In any case, as the 1930s wore on, he turned his attention increasingly to the theater, publishing in 1931 a collection of one-act plays called *The Long Christmas Dinner*, staging a translation of a play by André Obey in 1932 (published in 1933 as *Lucrèce*), and then issuing, in 1935, his first novel set in the United States (*Heaven's My Destination*). By this point, too, Wilder had become friends with the eccentric but highly influential and idiosyncratically pro-American writer GERTRUDE STEIN, who helped encourage his new enthusiasm for American topics and experimental styles of writing.

During 1937 (while in Europe), Wilder was at work on three different plays: an adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, an adaptation of Johan Nestroy's

Einen jux will er sich machen, and a play largely of his own invention that would soon make him even more famous, even more respected, and even more wealthy. This play—titled *Our Town*—puzzled and perplexed many of its initial audiences, especially when it opened in Boston. With its mostly bare stage setting and its highly unconventional use of a character called the “Stage Manager” (who functions partly as a narrator and partly as an interpreter, in the manner of the ancient Greek chorus), the play proved problematic for many who first saw it, and initial audiences were also unsure how to react to the appearances of “dead” characters speaking in a cemetery at the end. Soon, however, the play—with its focus on small-town American life and its theme that humans do not appreciate the beauty of existence until they have lost it—became a sensation. After its highly successful run on Broadway, it began to be widely performed in regional theaters and by amateur companies (including those in many high schools) around the nation and throughout the world. It was released on film in 1940 and has been produced and revived almost continuously in the decades since it first appeared, becoming one of the most popular serious plays in the entire repertoire of American theater. The claim has often been made (and it seems accurate) that *Our Town* is always being performed somewhere in the United States on almost every single night of the year. Needless to say, the work won Wilder his second Pulitzer Prize in 1938.

Wilder would never again enjoy successes quite as striking as *The Bridge* and *Our Town*, but he remained a dedicated and productive author for another 30 years or more. In 1938 his play *The Merchant of Yonkers* had a brief run in New York, and by 1940 he was at work on a new play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which opened in 1942, by which time he had enlisted in the air force during World War II. Although two scholars accused the play of plagiarizing James Joyce’s novel *Finnegans Wake* (a book Wilder immensely admired), Wilder and most impartial observers considered his debt to the novel a case of legitimate literary influence rather than any sort of dishonorable theft. Indeed, in 1943 Wilder won his third Pulitzer Prize for the play, but most of his attention during this time was

consumed by his military duties. When the war ended in 1945, Wilder worked on an updating of Euripides’ ancient play *Alcestis*, but his next major literary production was his 1948 novel *The Ides of March*, which was set in classical Rome and which was chosen as a main selection by the influential Book of the Month Club. Meanwhile, Wilder was increasingly being acknowledged by the academic world: In 1950–51 he was invited to lecture at Harvard, which (along with Northwestern University) awarded him an honorary degree, and in 1952 he won the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1954 a revised version of *The Merchant of Yonkers* (now called *The Matchmaker*) was successfully staged, while in 1955 the *Alcestis* adaptation, titled *A Life in the Sun*, was staged in Edinburgh, Scotland.

By the early 1960s Wilder had become an elder statesman of American letters—a status signaled by celebrations of his work performed for the presidential cabinet (in 1962), by his selection as a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963, and by his reception in 1965 of the National Book Committee’s Medal for Literature, presented at the White House. Wilder, however, was not content to rest on his many laurels. In 1964 a musical adaptation of *The Matchmaker* (now called *Hello, Dolly!*) appeared on Broadway and became one of the most successful musicals ever staged, while in 1967 Wilder’s novel *The Eighth Day* not only became a best seller but received the National Book Award. Later, in 1973, *Theophilus North*, a novel loosely based on Wilder’s own experiences, was published and became another best seller. When he died on December 7, 1975, in his home in Hamden, Connecticut (in “the house *The Bridge* built”), Wilder was not only widely honored as an author but also widely respected as a man whose life had been characterized by enormous vitality, intelligence, generosity, and humility. Most people who met Wilder not only admired him but liked him, and even after his death he continued to receive recognition. When *Our Town* was restaged on Broadway in 1988—half a century after its first production—it won a Tony Award, and the play remains a staple of the American theater, just as *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* maintains its status as

a widely read and widely respected novel. If Wilder lacks the kind of critical reputation enjoyed by some other writers of the modern period, he nonetheless enjoys the affection and regard of many ordinary readers and theatergoers, who never seem to grow tired of his two greatest works.

***The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927)**

On July 20, 1714, a Catholic priest named Brother Juniper witnesses five people abruptly plunge to their deaths when an old but very fine suspension bridge high in the mountains of Peru suddenly collapses; the event leads Juniper to try to discover whether those particular five people died purely as a result of random chance or because of some deeper fate or providence. The five included the elderly marquesa de Montemayor and her youthful and devoted attendant, Pepita; a surviving twin brother named Esteban, who had been in deep mourning for the earlier death of his identical and much beloved sibling, Manuel; and fatherly Uncle Pio, who was accompanied on the bridge by the young son of a once-great actress named Camila Perichole, whose career Pio had shaped and nurtured from her youth. Juniper's rationalistic efforts to make sense of the deaths lead, ironically, to his own persecution and death by the Inquisition, while the survivors of the victims—including the marquesa's once-distant daughter, the aging actress who lost both a son and a loyal friend, and the charitable abbess who had been a kind of mother to Pepita—are left with enriched appreciations of their lost loved ones.

Wilder's novel was something of an anomaly in the serious fiction of the 1920s in America: While other authors were producing books set in the present day and describing in often exhaustive and even cynical detail the sometimes less-than-savory facts of contemporary life (including the grimmer aspects of urban living, the psychological scars left by World War I, the realities of an increasingly materialistic culture, and the growth of looser sexual behavior), Wilder set his book in a faraway time and place and produced a highly meditative

and reflective work, with religious and mystical overtones, whose central theme was the value and importance of love. The immense and immediate success of the book surprised everyone (including Wilder himself); readers were apparently ready for an alternative to documentary naturalism, with its gritty descriptions of external facts. There was (it seemed) an audience eager for a book such as Wilder's, which dealt profoundly with the mysteries of human hearts, souls, and minds and with the subtleties of human relationships—a book that tried to explore such issues as the meaning (if any) of life, the role of accident or design in the universe, and the existence (or nonexistence) of God. During an era that prided itself on its tough-minded skepticism, hedonism, and sophistication, Wilder had produced a subtle, philosophical novel celebrating morality and old-fashioned charity.

Wilder's novel has been praised, over the years, for such stylistic qualities as simplicity, grace, picturesqueness, delicacy, and restraint, as well as for its allusiveness, subtle wit, understated irony, and avoidance of sentimentality (even though it deals with issues in which sentiment plays a vital role). One passage that illustrates many of the qualities mentioned describes how the previously selfish marquesa, transformed by her sudden realization of the selfless love displayed by young Pepita, vows to live a new life:

She opened the door upon her balcony and looked at the great tiers of stars that glittered above the Andes. Throughout the hours of the night, though there had been few to hear it, the whole sky had been loud with the singing of these constellations. Then she took a candle into the next room and looked at Pepita as she slept, and pushed back the damp hair from the girl's face. "Let me live now," she whispered. "Let me begin again."

Two days later they started back to Lima, and while crossing the bridge of San Luis Rey the accident which we know befell them. (49)

Here, in miniature, are many of the typical features of Wilder's style: the plain language that sometimes

becomes almost lyrical; the simple gestures (such as the pushing back of the damp hair)—gestures that are full of implied meaning; the beauty of the universe set against its apparent senselessness; the moral focus combined with a tough-minded refusal to moralize. A different kind of writer might have used this moment as an excuse to produce a sermon; Wilder, instead, simply describes, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions, if any, from the events he recounts. The gentleness of the marquesa's gesture and the fervor of her prayer are suddenly juxtaposed with the implied ugliness of her and Pepita's abrupt and seemingly meaningless deaths, yet the tone is not designed to shock but merely to recount what happened. The narrator speaks to us directly (as in his use of the word *me*), taking us into his confidence but never pretending to know too much.

Although some analysts have criticized the novel for being unexpectedly dull, for lacking the kind of drama that the opening might have led us to expect, and for being too bookish, too episodic, and too much the product of a self-conscious and sometimes obtrusive narrator, most readers have praised the book for its understatement, its psychological shrewdness, its effective use of dialogue, and its occasional flashes of social and religious satire. Thematically the book has been seen most often as an exploration of the varieties and complexities of human affection (from the selfish to the selfless, from the erotic to the spiritual, from the shallowest desire to the most profound kind of love), and it has also been hailed for its suggestive, undogmatic approach to the philosophical and religious questions it raises. Both skeptics and believers have found the book worth reading; Wilder never claims to offer any final answers to the complex problems he explores, although the ending of the book does imply the value of earthly love as a source of whatever deeper purpose exists in life. By the conclusion of the novel, the survivors (especially the marquesa's previously cynical daughter) have achieved a deeper, truer appreciation of the victims of the accident, and in the final words of the book Wilder suggests that between the land of the living and the land of the dead, the only "bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning" (148).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S novel *The Sun Also Rises* (published in 1926), which also describes life in a distant Hispanic culture and also deals with complex human relationships. Discuss the works in terms of tone, style, characterization, narrative point of view, and philosophical implications.
2. How does Wilder's book resemble and/or differ from THEODORE DREISER'S *An American Tragedy* (published in 1925)? Discuss the books in terms of such themes as love, chance, and destiny and in terms of such technical features as setting, style, symbolism, and characterization.
3. How and why does a novel such as Wilder's seem at variance with a book such as JOHN STEINBECK'S *The Grapes of Wrath*? Consider such matters as style, structure, characterization, purpose, underlying philosophy, and even sheer length. Why does Steinbeck's novel need to be so much longer than Wilder's?
4. Choose one particular passage from the novel—a passage approximately 500 words long—and then discuss the ways that passage is typical of the total effect and effectiveness of the book in terms of such matters as style, theme, characterization, tone, and atmosphere. How does that passage fit into (and contribute to) the larger design of the book?

Our Town (1938)

Set in an archetypal New England village called Grover's Corners in the decades immediately after the beginning of the 20th century, Wilder's play immediately presents a Stage Manager (a kind of choral figure who directly addresses both the audience and the other characters); he in turn introduces us to, and continually comments on, the rest of the people on stage, including not only young Emily Webb and her family but also young George Gibbs and his parents, sister, and friends. Act 1 (titled "Daily Life") depicts the citizens as they go about their typical routines; act 2 (titled "Love and Marriage") shows how Emily and George fall in love and marry; act 3 ("Death")

jumps significantly ahead in time, after Emily has died while giving birth. After taking her place in a cemetery full of other dead citizens of the town, she convinces the Stage Manager to allow her to return to a past moment of her life (her 12th birthday), but she finally and painfully realizes that humans never fully appreciate the preciousness and beauty of their lives while they actually live them.

In various respects *Our Town* is a paradoxical work. It can be seen, in some ways, as a response to the criticism Wilder had received in the late 1920s and early 1930s for writing novels apparently remote from the lives and concerns of typical American citizens; his new play was populated with everyday folks speaking the common language of New England. Yet the play is far from merely current or documentary in its basic concerns; it is not an obvious response to the Great Depression (still in force as Wilder wrote), nor especially political in theme or propagandistic in tone, although such traits were common in the writing of the 1930s. In setting, then, the play is a departure for Wilder, but in subjects and stance it is not. In method, too, the play represents an interesting mixture of the new and the familiar. Wilder had begun to believe that drama could present life more immediately and vividly than the novel, and yet the character of the Stage Manager can be seen almost as a novelistic device—an omniscient narrator turned into a speaking theatrical presence. Various features of the play—including the Stage Manager, his unusual interactions with the other characters and with the audience, the use of a mostly bare stage with few props, and the sudden jumps in time from one era to another—made this drama a highly experimental work in Wilder's day, and yet for all its technical boldness *Our Town* deals thematically with such standard themes of Wilder's writings as the brevity and fragility of human existence, the value of love, the richness of even the most apparently simple lives, and the failure of most people to appreciate or savor that richness (or each other) as they live one moment to the next. Thematically, then, the play is highly traditional and even commendably old-fashioned; most of its key ideas had already been sounded in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In some ways the play was thus a new departure for

Wilder, but in other ways it clearly echoes his earlier writings. It exalts the past—particularly the American past—in a fashion that has led some critics to accuse it of sentimental nostalgia, but it was seen as a shockingly daring and even unsettling work when it was first performed. Nevertheless, in the decades since it was originally staged, it has become one of the most popular works of the American theater. In writing *Our Town*, therefore, Wilder had created a paradoxical work, blending the unusual with the conventional to produce a text that continues to enjoy widespread popular appeal.

Nevertheless, controversy has surrounded the play from the beginning. Critics in Wilder's time and in the decades since have found various faults with the work and have attacked both its meanings and its methods. Some have argued, for instance, that the play fails to deal with the darker aspects of small-town life, ignoring any hint of real evil and thus presenting an essentially superficial, saccharine view of middle-class existence. The reason the play has proven so popular on high school and amateur stages (these critics allege) is that it ratifies the way “average” Americans like to think of themselves and of their essentially bourgeois values; it fails to issue any fundamental challenge to “normal” ways of feeling or behaving; it glorifies mediocrity; its characters are superficial; and its tone is essentially smug and complacent. Its people lack depth; their language lacks poetry; and despite (or because of) its nostalgic emphasis on the past, it fails to engage with complex historical forces. The play has also been attacked, moreover, not only in terms of its meanings but also in terms of its style, structure, characterization, and techniques. Some critics find it insufficiently dramatic; others think the Stage Manager and lack of props are mere theatrical stunts; still others find the pace of the work hopelessly slow and its manner overly didactic. The characters (according to some critics) are merely stick figures used to illustrate a monologue by a Stage Manager who is simply a stand-in for Wilder himself; the play thus becomes a kind of lecture—and a sentimental lecture at that. Neither the characters nor their thoughts, feelings, or actions are complex; the play is simple to a fault, despite its

“stagey” theatrical gimmicks. These (at least) are some of the charges leveled by Wilder’s critics.

Obviously, however, many other readers and theatergoers have strongly disagreed with these views. Thus, admirers of the play have contended that the work, despite being set in such a specifically American setting, has a universal appeal because it deals so effectively with the basic facts and rhythms of common human life. These elemental features of life include relations between parents and children, relations within a broader community, the process of individual maturation, the rituals of courtship and marriage, and the inevitable cycles of birth, aging, and death. The play thus deals with eternal human problems and truths, not with any particularly American dilemmas. Wilder sets his work in a small New England village, but the basic processes the work depicts could (and do) take place anywhere. Admirers of the play also value it for the ways it exhibits and extols the common lives of the average folk who are the social, spiritual, and material backbone of any community or nation; from this perspective, the claim that the characters lack much individual complexity or depth testifies to their representative natures: They are not meant to be complicated, idiosyncratic personalities but function, instead, as archetypal fathers and mothers and daughters and sons. Their very commonness contributes to their effectiveness; Grover’s Corners is a microcosm of the world at large, and its citizens are typical humans. The play is less a celebration of American life than of common, ordinary life as it has been lived anywhere and always, and indeed part of the point of the play is that no life is really common or truly ordinary—that all lives consist of precious moments whose preciousness is rarely grasped as we live them. In some respects the play is part of the long literary tradition of *carpe diem*, in which readers are urged to “seize the day” by appreciating, and making the most of, every available minute of life. Wilder implicitly urges us to value each moment of our own lives while also appreciating the lives and links we share with our friends, families, and communities. In this respect, the underlying themes of the work are not unlike the themes already sounded in *The Bridge of San*

Luis Rey, which had been set in a time and place quite distant from 20th-century New England.

Defenders of Wilder’s play, however, admire not only the themes of the work but also its style, structure, tone, techniques, and use of characterization. The work has been praised for its gentleness, wisdom, simplicity, and humor; the language is mostly plain and therefore credible in the mouths of these plain and unaffected characters. Indeed, the very simplicity of much of the speech prevents it (in the view of Wilder’s advocates) from seeming overblown or sentimental. Wilder has been praised for his skill at crafting convincing dialogue, and even the play’s monologues, far from seeming didactic or preachy, have been defended as being consistent with the characters of the play’s various speakers. The episodic structure of the work has been praised for reflecting the haphazard, zigzag motions of life itself, while the use of the omniscient Stage Manager (who knows the future fates of all the characters), along with the abrupt shifts from one distinct historical moment to the next (focusing, for instance, on Emily as a young girl, then on Emily as a late adolescent, then on Emily as a dead parent who briefly returns to her life as a young girl), have been commended for contributing effectively to the work’s thematic concern with mutability, fragility, and the passage of time.

Meanwhile, the simple, mostly bare stage and the general absence of props have been defended as enhancing the universal significance of the work: *Our Town* may be set in a particular New England village, but the style of staging encourages us to imagine it as taking place almost anywhere. The absence of props helps suggest that material things are finally less important to human existence than other humans—that what we ultimately remember most about our lives are not pieces of furniture or other possessions but our interactions with friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances. In its literal movement from the dawn of act 1 to the darkness of act 3, the play symbolically traces the movement of each individual human life, and in its simultaneous focus on past, present, and future, the play mimics the way all people experience time: as a complicated blending of memory, sensation, and anticipation. For the many admirers of *Our Town*, the play succeeds

as an organic whole in which every element contributes to a larger effect and a general effectiveness. The continued success of the play on stage (according to this view) is not the result of smugness or complacency, either in the playwright or in the audience, but instead of the craft with which the work has been composed. Far from being sentimental, this play, in the view of its defenders, is a sobering, thoughtful, and thought-provoking work that leaves each reader or viewer with a fundamentally renewed appreciation of life and other people.

Ultimately the success or failure of any literary work depends on the specific details of its phrasing and structure, and in these respects *Our Town* has much to recommend it. The general simplicity of its diction as well as the complexity of its temporal perspectives are already apparent, for instance, very early in the play when the Stage Manager is describing Grover's Corners. He announces, in colloquially clipped syntax, "First automobile's going to come along in about five years—belonged to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen . . . lives in the big white house up on the hill" (5). This single sentence exemplifies many of the most common but also most effective traits of Wilder's play, including both its plain speech and its complicated blending of past, present, and future: Cartwright *will* have a car, but the car has already "belonged" to him (perhaps suggesting that the Manager already knows of Cartwright's death?), but Cartwright, at the present moment, still "lives" up on the hill. Almost as God supposedly does, the Stage Manager perceives all aspects of time at once. Meanwhile, the fact that Cartwright lives in a large house distant from the rest of the town implies distinctions of class and status, but Cartwright is still "our" richest citizen and is thus still regarded as a valued member of the broader community. The fact that he is identified by his profession ("Banker Cartwright") rather than by a first name exemplifies Wilder's tendency, in this play, to treat characters as types rather than as fully individualized persons; Cartwright is more important for the role he fulfills than for any specific personality he displays. Yet even the particular phrasing Wilder uses here is more subtle than it might seem at first: There is some irony, for instance, in the fact that a man named *Cartwright* (a

maker of carts) will own the town's first automobile (thus symbolizing the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy), while the fact that his car will "come along" is a phrase that describes both its emergence as a historical fact and its literal movement down the street. Here and in many other places, Wilder's language is more complex, and more artistically appropriate, than a quick glance might suggest. *Our Town* merits more close attention to its details than it has tended to receive; for a play that ranks so high in American literary history, it has prompted surprisingly little detailed analysis.

The play, however, is full of memorable moments and wonderful lines—lines that become even more memorable upon reflection. When the Stage Manager tells us, for example, "Nobody very remarkable ever come out of [Grover's Corners], s'far as we know" (6), his comment at first seems merely a statement of simple fact. By the end of the play, of course, we realize that from another perspective *all* lives are remarkable, and that part of the purpose of this play is indeed to help us "know" and appreciate that fact. Likewise, young Emily's proud boast to her mother that she has "a wonderful memory" (15) will eventually seem ironic when, at the end of the play, her memory of her youth becomes a central focus of the play's pathos. Wilder's play is brimming with moments like this—moments that seem (as do the lives the play depicts) fuller and richer in retrospect. But the play is also full of lines whose impact is instantly felt, as when Emily's mother, exasperated by her daughter's repeated questions about whether she is pretty, finally tells her, "You're pretty enough for all normal purposes" (32). Inevitably this reply generates a laugh, both when reading and when watching the play, and the sure comic touch the line reveals helps contribute to the overall tonal complexity of Wilder's work. The play is, by turns, touching and wry, funny and dark, pleasing and sad. It captures (in other words) some of the genuine richness of life itself, and it helps us comprehend that richness in vivid and deeply memorable ways.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Wilder's depiction of small-town American life resemble and/or differ from the

8. Choose a particular passage from one work by Wilder and discuss, in as much detail as possible, the ways in which that passage contributes to the larger impact of the work as a whole. How does the chosen passage function as part of the rest of the work in terms of such matters as theme, style, structure, tone, mood, and characterization? How is the chosen passage effective as a piece of writing?
9. Track down one or more of the adaptations of Wilder's works (such as the two filmed versions of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the Hollywood film of *Our Town*, or the various televised productions of that play) and discuss the effectiveness of the adaptation(s). How and why is one of the chosen adaptations successful as a realization of the potential inherent in Wilder's text? How and why is the adaptation successful in its own right, as an independent work of art? Compare and contrast two different adaptations of the same work, such as the two films of *The Bridge* or two filmed versions of *Our Town*.
10. Examine one of Wilder's lesser-known works and discuss the ways in which that work seems typical of the author of *The Bridge* and *Our Town*, the ways in which the work seems different from Wilder's most famous texts, and the relative success or failure of that work as a piece of writing. What specific features make the work either effective, ineffective, or some combination of the two?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Thornton Wilder*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003.
- Burbank, Rex. *Thornton Wilder*. 2nd ed. Boston: Twayne, 1978.
- Castronovo, David. *Thornton Wilder*. New York: Ungar, 1986.
- Goldstone, Richard H. *Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait*. New York: Dutton, 1975.
- Haberman, Donald. *Our Town: An American Play*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- Harrison, Gilbert A. *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983.
- Kuner, M. C. *Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark*. New York: Crowell, 1972.
- Simon, Linda. *Thornton Wilder: His World*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979.
- Stresnau, Hermann. *Thornton Wilder*. Translated by Frieda Schutze. New York: Ungar, 1971.
- The Thornton Wilder Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Walsh, Claudette. *Thornton Wilder: A Reference Guide, 1926–1990*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993.
- Wilder, Thornton. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- . *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*. New York: Perennial Library, 1985.

Robert C. Evans



WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

(1883–1961)

In the work of the poem, the joining of phrases, the trimming away of connectives, the joining of stone to stone, as a Greek column was joined, as the Incans joined their great wall—there is virtue.

(qtd. in Mariani, 1981 597)

Although his poetry and other writings were largely ignored and/or disparaged during the early decades of his career as an author, William Carlos Williams remained convinced of his own talent and insisted (in the face of numerous discouragements) on pursuing his own independent path. He wrote novels, essays, short stories, hundreds of lyric poems, and also a lengthy verse “epic”—all the while carrying on a demanding practice as a small-town physician (delivering, for instance, more than 3,000 babies during more than 40 years as a full-time doctor). In his private letters he was often foul-mouthed and raunchy, while in his public comments he was often belligerent, arrogant, prickly, and self-defensive. Nevertheless, by the end of his life he had earned the respect and affection of many of his fellow writers and had won the loyalty of many younger poets, who saw him as a man totally committed to his art and to the ideal of constant innovation.

Most of the facts of Williams’s life are laid out in the exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) biography by Paul Mariani, who takes the reader from the poet’s birth to his death in 770 highly detailed pages (not counting notes). Williams was born on September 17, 1883, in Rutherford, New Jersey, the eldest son of William George Williams and his wife, Raquel Hélène Rose Hoheb Williams. As her name might suggest, the future poet’s mother was partly of Jewish and partly of Puerto Rican

ancestry; his father’s roots were mainly British. The future poet, however, would later pride himself on being a solidly American writer, rooted in a locale, language, way of life, and ways of thinking that sometimes struck others as narrowly provincial. He was always close to his mother (she lived past age 100 and spent her last frail decades under the poet’s roof), and his childhood seems to have been “normal” and happy. The main unusual event was a yearlong trip to Europe with his mother and his brother Ed in 1898–99; Williams was able to study in Switzerland and visit Paris. After returning to the United States, he and his brother began attending a very fine high school in nearby New York City, and it was there that the future writer first became enthralled with poetry. He began to write verse, and although he had decided to study dentistry (later changing to medicine) at the University of Pennsylvania, he never lost his ambition to be a serious author. Fortunately, his years at Penn (1902–06) put him in contact with the irrepressible EZRA POUND, a younger fellow student who was, if anything, even more preoccupied with poetry that Williams was. Pound, of course, would go on to become one of the most influential figures in modern literature, and his long if often frayed friendship with Williams was one of the most important in the latter’s life. The highly opinionated and cocksure Pound was sometimes an inspiration, sometimes a source of frustration to

Williams, but the two men always remained in creative contact. Interestingly enough, Williams also at this time (through Pound) became friendly with another young person who would later make a significant literary mark—a young woman known as *Hilda Doolittle*, whom Pound, years later, rechristened *H. D.* when he was promoting her startlingly new “imagist” poems.

Although Williams was often lonely at Penn, he made solid progress in his medical studies. After graduating in 1906, he interned in New York City for the next several years, all the while producing poetry (heavily influenced by Keats) that he self-published in a volume titled *Poems* in 1909. During that same year Williams realized that he was in love with the very same woman in whom his younger brother was interested; when they finally asked her to choose between them, she chose Ed. Williams, crushed, within a few days proposed on the rebound to her sister, Florence Herman, who accepted. Williams, however, soon left the United States to study pediatrics in Germany, and while in Europe he also visited many other countries, including England, where his old friend Pound was making a name for himself as a highly innovative modern writer. Back in the United States by 1910, Williams began practicing medicine in Rutherford, his hometown, where he would live and work for the rest of his life. On December 12 he married Florence (whose nickname was *Flossie*), and although he was occasionally unfaithful to her over the coming years, their marriage endured for the rest of his life, and generally it was a happy union. The older he grew, the more he appreciated his loyal wife, and the more he also regretted his early infidelities. In the meantime, William Eric Williams, the first of two sons, was born on January 7, 1914. The year before, the boy's father had also produced his second book (*The Tempers*), and during 1915 and 1916 Williams also became closely connected with a group of writers involved with a “little magazine” published in New York City called *Others*, which was in competition with the better-established *Poetry* (published in Chicago). Williams spent much time in New York, getting to know a variety of up-and-coming cultural fig-

ures (including MARIANNE MOORE and WALLACE STEVENS). He was also in steady correspondence with Pound and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), who were both now in London, but although many of his friends or acquaintances were earning recognition and praise for their writings, Williams's work failed to produce the same immediate impact. The steady stream of publications he issued in the next few years—including *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1918), and both *Spring and All* and *The Great American Novel* (1923)—aroused little widespread interest. Certainly they aroused nothing like the interest that greeted the early publications of T. S. ELIOT, Pound's latest London protégé, for whom Williams felt instant and enduring contempt. He believed that Eliot (with his learned, allusive verse and his thorough immersion in the entire Western literary tradition) would make poetry academic rather than alive—a product of the schools, not the streets. Williams wanted to write poetry that was rooted in things, not ideas; he claimed to favor sharp perception, not meditation or reflection. His hatred of Eliot (often viciously expressed in his private letters) was one of the ruling passions of his life.

Williams was now 40 years old; he was married, was the father of two children (a second son, Paul, had arrived in 1916), and was known in his hometown mainly as a doctor, not an author. Although he published in a variety of little magazines and corresponded with a number of better-known writers, and although he considered himself (and was considered by some others) to be on the cutting edge of the avant garde, he was frustrated by his lack of obvious literary success. Sometimes he doubted his real worth, but mainly he remained stubbornly committed to pursuing the goals he had set for himself, especially the development and use of authentic “American” diction and rhythm in verse. A trip to Europe in 1924 allowed him to visit Paris, at that time the hub of world literature (Pound, of course, was already there), where he made various useful contacts, and in 1925 his well-regarded prose work *In the American Grain* was published by a major press. In 1926 he won a significant award from *Dial* magazine (although he was also sued for libel for

one of his short stories), and in 1927 his novel titled *Voyage to Paganry* was issued by the innovative New Directions Press, which would champion his work for decades. Increasingly, then, Williams was beginning to attract attention and admirers, including the young poet Louis Zukofsky and the young novelist Nathaniel West. In 1934, the year after Williams turned 50, his *Collected Poems, 1921–1931* (with a preface by Wallace Stevens) appeared, followed by *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935), a collection of poems called *Adam & Eve & The City* (1936), an opera libretto called *The First President* (1936), a novel titled *White Mule* (1937), a collection of stories called *Life along the Passaic River* (1938), and *The Complete Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, 1906–1938*. Williams was nothing if not prolific, although his letters are full of crude complaints about his patients for distracting him from his writing. At the same time, he was also known as a careful and caring doctor. In short, he was a complex man—sometimes generous and considerate, sometimes full of petty jealousies, vulgar language, and ugly prejudice.

By the late 1930s it was obvious to most people that another world war would soon begin. Although Williams often sympathized with the economic ideas of his old friend Pound (who spent the war making propaganda broadcasts for Fascist Italy), he generally considered himself either apolitical or a man of the Left. His main interest, in any case, was in his own writing, and he was especially interested in trying to develop new kinds of poetic lines and innovative rhythms. By the time the war ended in 1945, he had been devoting most of his creative energies to producing a long poem—a kind of small-town epic—titled *Paterson*. Book 1 of this work appeared in 1946 to notable acclaim; even critics who had never much admired Williams considered *Paterson* (particularly its first book) a significant achievement. Book 2 appeared in 1948; book 3 was published in 1949; and book 4 (supposedly the final section) was issued in 1951. (Later, in 1958, he belatedly added a fifth book, much to the surprise of readers, who thought the project was already finished.) Finally, then, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, he had begun to attain the kind of

public recognition and honor he had long craved. He even began to make some money from his writings, and certainly he had long since ceased to pay to see his work in print. His *Selected Poems* (with an introduction by the noted poet and critic Randall Jarrell) appeared in 1949, and his *Collected Later Poems* was published in 1950 (the year in which he won the National Book Award), followed by the *Collected Earlier Poems* in 1951. Also in 1950 *Make Light of It: Collected Stories* was published, and in 1951 he issued his *Autobiography*. Unfortunately in 1951 he also suffered his first stroke, followed by another one (this time more serious) in 1952. Although his novel *The Build-Up* was published that year, Williams's ill health made writing difficult. Ironically, then, just when he began to receive widespread acclaim, his body began to fail him. Little wonder, then, that in the early months of 1953 he was confined in a mental hospital, where he was treated for severe depression. Never, however, did Williams give up his interest in literature (especially his own); even when he could only peck out poems with a single finger on his typewriter, he refused to abandon his lifelong goal of being a noted and innovative author.

The rest of the 1950s saw new publications and further recognitions. In 1953 he and Archibald MacLeish were cowinners of the prestigious Bollingen Prize (the first of which had been won several years earlier by Pound, who was now himself confined long-term to a mental hospital, having been accused of treason for his wartime broadcasts on behalf of Mussolini). In 1954 Williams's *The Desert Music and Other Poems* as well as his *Selected Essays* were published; in 1955 he issued a collection of poems titled *Journey to Love*; and in 1957 *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* was published, along with "The Lost Poems of William Carlos Williams." Unfortunately, a third stroke hit in 1958, but even this did not prevent him from publishing *Yes, Mrs. Williams: A Personal Record of My Mother* in 1959, the same year in which his play *Many Loves* was successfully staged in New York. By now he had become a widely revered figure, especially among the newer, more iconoclastic wave of younger American poets, including such Beat

figures as Allen Ginsberg (also from Rutherford), whom Williams “adopted” as a kind of poetic son. Williams’s way of writing was seen as a more free-spirited alternative to the highly intellectual work of T. S. Eliot and his imitators, and it was also seen as a rebuke to the more highly structured, more self-consciously formal verse of such younger poets as Richard Wilbur. Some readers, of course, continued to see Williams’s writing as relatively shapeless, unmusical, and bland, but by this point any criticism just made him all the more attractive as a father figure to the young Turks of American verse. It was a period of growing intellectual rebellion, and Williams had seen himself as a rebel for half a century. Many others now agreed.

More strokes occurred in 1961, and Williams finally had to abandon serious writing. This was also the year, however, that saw the publication of *Many Loves and Other Plays: The Collected Plays of William Carlos Williams* and *The Farmers’ Daughters: Collected Stories*. Finally, *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* appeared in 1962. Thus, when Williams was found dead in his bed by his wife on the morning of March 4, 1963, he had departed as one of his country’s most respected poets. Later that year he was awarded both a Pulitzer Prize and the Gold Medal for Poetry by the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Such recognition had been long delayed and sometimes grudging, but by the end of his life he had become one of the most influential American poets of his time—even more influential, in some ways, than his old friend Pound. Williams was an easier poet to imitate than either Pound or Eliot or Wallace Stevens; his subjects were more commonplace than theirs, and his style and forms were both more lax. He remains a potent force—a writer clearly in the line of Whitman—and will probably always appeal to younger poets who see themselves as rebels and who disdain conventional discipline and form.

“The Young Housewife” (1916, 1917)

In this poem, the speaker describes his reaction to imagined and actual glimpses of a young married woman—a woman he seems to find erotically

attractive, although his overt response to her is literally distanced and even somewhat courtly.

The poem opens with a precise reference to time, although we soon wonder how the speaker can possibly know what is happening at 10 in the morning to a “young housewife” dressed in a “negligee” “behind / the wooden walls of her husband’s house” (ll. 1–3). Presumably he knows her routine because he himself has routinely driven by her house in the past at this time and seen her emerge regularly at this hour—a presumption implied by the word *again* when he tells us that “again she comes to the curb” to interact with various delivery men (l. 5). The speaker, however, does not himself seem to be one of these latter types, who have a commercial interest in visiting the woman; instead, the speaker seems to be a kind of voyeur, and he turns us (his readers) into voyeurs in turn. We watch him as he watches her, and thus we watch her as well. His attitude, however, in the end seems neither predatory nor creepy; instead, he seems simply to appreciate (and perhaps yearn for) the woman’s beauty, and in the poem’s final words he even seems to pay her gentle tribute.

The speaker is distanced from the young woman in various ways. Presumably he is older than she (since he emphasizes her youth), and he is also cut off from her partly because she is married (in conventional terms, she belongs to her husband much as the house is also his). He is further separated (at first) by the walls of the house and the doors of his car. The first stanza, in particular, provides merely an external, imagined view: The woman is inside, the speaker is outside, and both are alone, or “solitary” (l. 4). Quite literally, the speaker is merely passing through; as yet, he has no contact at all with the woman.

In the second stanza she at least becomes actually visible when she emerges from the house, and so we get more details of her actual appearance as she “stands / shy, uncorseted, tucking in / stray ends of her hair” (ll. 6–8). Although her manner of dress is sexually provocative, she consciously intends no provocation: She is “shy,” and her shyness is part of her beauty and part of her charm. The “ice-man” and “fish-man” (their very titles suggesting their identification with their jobs)

see her mainly as a source of income, whereas the speaker, more poetically, compares her “to a fallen leaf” (l. 9). The image implies his sense of her beauty, her fragility, her isolation, and her function as a symbol of mutability—of the passage of time. In a sense, then, she symbolizes (for the speaker) his own mortality; she is alluring precisely because she is younger than he and because her youth will pass, as his has. The poem freezes her in a moment of time, capturing her in all her unself-conscious freshness and vulnerability.

The car in which the speaker moves is thus not only a symbol of his separation from this particular woman but a broader symbol of mutability in general. Just as the car crushes “dried leaves” (as it moves with a “rush” and produces “crackling” sounds—both instances of onomatopoeia [ll.11–12]), so the woman herself, who had earlier been compared to a “fallen leaf,” will be crushed and left behind by the passage of time. All the more reason, then, for the speaker to honor her with a courteous “bow” and smile (l. 12), since she not only is young and beautiful herself but is also anything or anyone that is full of youth, full of beauty, but also subject to the irreversible passage of time.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the appropriateness of the car as a symbol in this poem. How would the poem be different in the speaker were walking by the house or pedaling by on a bicycle? How does the car symbolize modern civilization? What does the poem imply about alienation in modern life?
2. How might a present-day feminist react to this poem? In what senses is the woman here turned into an object of a man’s gaze? Is the poem at all disturbing, or is it instead a delicate expression of feelings all humans—of both sexes—can share?

“Tract” (1917)

In this relatively long poem, the unidentified speaker instructs his fellow townspeople on the proper way to conduct a funeral. He condemns the conventional elaborate trappings of most such

ceremonies, preferring instead a plain, rough-hewn approach in which the reality of death is not prettied-over or denied. He wants a simple ceremony in which the mourners and the wider community participate without ostentation or polite repression.

This poem is obviously indebted to the rhetorical style and manner of Walt Whitman, Williams’s great predecessor as a democratic bard. Significantly, the first word of the poem is *I*, followed closely by *you* (l. 1), and we are never allowed to forget either the personality of the speaker or the fact that he is addressing a particular audience of his fellows. He adopts a bluff, plain-spoken, exclamatory, self-confident, argumentative, and even hectoring tone. Although he often invokes God—“For Christ’s sake” (l. 9), “My God” (l. 16), “God knows what” (l. 40), “For heaven’s sake” (l. 46)—his attitude seems fundamentally irreverent; certainly he is anything but pious in the conventional sense of that term. The deity enters the work mainly as a source and subject of expletives, and indeed the rhetoric of the poem is at once unadorned and self-important: The speaker presents himself both as representative of the community and as its loud-mouthed, self-assured instructor. One might even briefly suspect that Williams could be mocking the speaker’s cocky pomposity, except that this imagined voice sounds so much like Williams’s own in some of his least humble moments. Certainly the person speaking in this work takes himself almost too seriously; it is almost as if the funeral is more about him than about the corpse.

Through its broken syntax, its unpredictable line lengths, its abundance of dashes and exclamation points, and its heavy emphasis on questions and other forms of obviously direct address, the poem conveys the sound and rhythms of a speaking (even a shouting) voice. Sometimes the lines have all the force of the very actions they call for or describe, as in the heavily accented command “Knock the glass out” (l. 16)—an image that epitomizes the iconoclastic mood of this work). In general the poem is full of the vigor of lively speech, and although the speaker himself can sometimes seem an almost laughable combination of small-town rube and self-conscious orator, Williams seems to admire

him, and he seems to want us to share that admiration. Just as Williams saw himself as a poet intent on busting up the stale conventions of traditional verse, so the speaker is a revolutionist of funerals. He speaks the kind of idiomatic “American” lingo Williams often favored, and sometimes he uses the kind of homespun vernacular Williams himself affected (especially in his letters to Ezra Pound—letters in which the two often adopted the manner of Midwest cracker-barrel philosophers). The poem gives voice to Williams’s preference for all that is plain, simple, and unaffected. Ironically, however, the poem itself can sometimes seem comically if unintentionally pretentious in its own odd ways.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with CLAUDE MCKAY’s poem “If We Must Die,” especially in terms of such matters as form, style, structure, diction, and tone. Do you find one poem more appealing than the other? If so, explain why; if not, explain how each is effective in its own way.
2. This poem is obviously a different kind of work from such other works by Williams as “The Red Wheelbarrow.” How would you characterize the differences? Do you have a preference for one kind of work rather than the other kind? If so, explain why.
3. Reread the account of the poem given here, especially its implicitly and explicitly critical comments. How might you defend the poem against such criticism? What, specifically, makes this an accomplished and effective poem?

“Portrait of a Lady” (1920, 1934)

Discerning the “plot” of this poem is difficult, partly because it is unclear who is speaking to whom or whether any “real” discussion is actually taking place. Some kind of dialogue (whether actual or imagined) seems to be occurring, with one speaker, using painterly metaphors, attempting to describe a woman and another speaker (the woman herself? the speaker himself? the speaker’s

alter ego?) responding with questions. As do many poems by Williams, this one ends abruptly and (quite literally) raises more questions than it answers.

The title of the poem suggests that the text will be the latest in a long line of literary and artistic works in which a woman is portrayed. (Henry James wrote a novel titled *Portrait of a Lady*, Ezra Pound wrote a poem titled “Portrait d’une Femme,” and there are so many paintings with this title that it would be impossible to name them all.) The title, in other words, suggests that the poem will be highly conventional, but the actual poem is anything but. It begins with an improbable, even preposterous metaphor: “Your thighs are appletrees / whose blossoms touch the sky” (ll. 1–2). Perhaps the speaker is having some fun with the woman he presumably addresses, or perhaps Williams is having some fun at the expense of the speaker. Although the imagery here seems a bit absurd, at least the sentence structure and meaning are clear, and the fact that each line contains six syllables, combined with the fact that both lines employ regular iambic meter (in which the even syllables are stressed), implies that the poem will proceed clearly, both in substance and in form. This assumption, however, is immediately undercut in the next line with the unexpected appearance of the question “Which sky?” (l. 3). Who is speaking this question? Is it the woman herself? Is it the speaker in a moment of inquisitive reflection about the two preceding lines? Williams leaves the matter unclear, and the poem soon seems to get back on track with an answer that alludes to a famous painter: “The sky / where Watteau hung a lady’s slipper” (ll. 3–5). With that matter out of the way, the poem then seems to return to its original purpose of describing the lady, this time with an awkward rhyme and oddly contradictory metaphors: “Your knees / are a southern breeze—or / a gust of snow” (ll. 6–8). Now, surely, the speaker is the subject of mockery; it is as if we are eavesdropping on the composition of a particularly inept poem and are overhearing either the speaker’s conversation with himself or with the lady he seeks to extol. In any case, as the rest of the poem proceeds in this

desultory fashion, both its form and its meaning becomes progressively less clear, especially when we reach lines 17, 19, and 22, which seem to appear almost out of nowhere. Thus a work that began as a hackneyed exercise in conventional meter and subject descends, by its end, into a kind of prosy, exclamatory chaos. It is as if we witness a kind of minor mental and artistic breakdown. Some critics have praised the wit, cleverness, and irony of the resulting poem.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this text with Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme." How do the works differ in purpose, tone, technique, and final effect? Can Williams's poem be read as in any ways a response to the kind of poem Pound composed?
2. Williams wrote a number of poems with *portrait* as the first word of the title. Track a few of them down, read them, and then discuss any similarities and/or differences between them. Are there any significant likenesses?
3. In what specific ways (if at all) is this poem witty, clever, and/or ironic? If you were commending the poem to a friend, on what grounds would you commend it? If you were condemning the poem, on what grounds would you condemn it? How would you defend either your commendation or your condemnation to someone who disagreed with you?

"The Widow's Lament in Springtime" (1921)

In this poem, a widow's grief for her lost husband is intensified by her observations of natural beauty.

As its very title suggests, this poem is full of juxtapositions of sorrow and beauty: The first three words of the title emphasize gloom, while the last two stress the joy of renewal. This same basic contrast between opposites helps structure the rest of the work. In the first line, for instance, the word *Sorrow* is juxtaposed with *yard*, with the first word implying pain and the second implying a relatively

small grassy area, thus suggesting the continuance of life. The word *yard* implies, on the one hand, a familiar place (a place connected with the comforts of home), but it also implies a relatively confined and constricted place. The widow's grief has so transformed her outlook that sorrow *becomes* her yard; she feels bounded by and contained by her pain; it has become the psychic "place" she inhabits. The new grass metaphorically "flames" (l. 3—a paradoxical verb that mixes colors even as it suggests the dynamic energy of renewed growth), but (in another bit of paradox) the widow's mood makes the flames seem merely a "cold fire" (l. 5). That last phrase epitomizes Williams's technique in this poem: He constantly jams together contradictory images, thoughts, and emotions, and as the widow meditates on the death of her husband, she inevitably contemplates her own demise.

As in most of Williams's works, the language of this poem is plain, simple, and "ordinary." The words spoken by the widow are the kinds of words a real person might use: The diction is colloquial; the rhythms are unobtrusive; the brief lines and absence of rhyme distance the work from anything that might seem conventionally "poetic." Nevertheless, the poem does contain subtle touches that give the language a slightly intense effect; these include the emphasis on specificity (as in the references to "plumtree" [l. 9] and "cherry branches" [l. 12]), the varied references to colors (such as "white" [l. 9], "yellow," and "red" [l. 14]), the use of repetition (as in lines 10–11), and the use of the first words or initial syllables of lines to emphasize key nouns or verbs (as with "Sorrow" in line 1, "flames" in line 3, "Masses" in line 11, or the strongly stressed "load" in line 12).

Throughout the work, Williams first creates an effect and then subverts it: The poem begins by emphasizing sorrow, then it shifts to emphasizing growth, and then that growth gives way to a sense of coldness and confinement. Likewise, in the next phase the beauty of the flower trees is stressed, but then that beauty is undercut by an explicit reference to "grief" (l. 15). The "joy" (l. 17) once associated with the flowers is momentarily mentioned, but that happiness is soon forgotten (l. 19). The aging

woman next mentions her “son” (who might symbolize the continuation of life, a source of consolation, and a hope for the future), and the fact that he tells her of having seen “trees of white flowers” in “meadows” at “the edge of the heavy woods” (ll.21–22, 24) again suggests a possible change in mood to something more positive. Obviously the son is trying to revive her spirits, and the lush natural language used to describe his vision does temporarily give the poem a more upbeat tone. The widow’s response can even, for a brief moment, seem almost ecstatic, as if she intends to abandon her grief by uniting with nature: “I feel that I would like / to go there / and fall into those flowers” (ll. 25–27). As befits the apparent new mood, the language becomes a bit heightened: We notice (for instance) the echo of “feel” and “fall” and the alliteration of “fall” and “flowers.” Yet the word *fall* is inherently ambiguous: On the one hand, it can suggest a surrender to natural pleasures, but, on the other hand, it can imply a kind of death, and it is this second mood that Williams chooses to emphasize in the poem’s last line, when the widow imagines that she would like to “sink into the marsh” near the flowers (l. 28). In its final words, therefore, the poem comes full circle: It returns to its opening emphasis on sorrow, and it concludes with a memorable image of nearly suicidal grief.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare this widow’s response to the death of her husband to the response of one twin to his brother’s untimely demise in THORNTON WILDER’s novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. How are their thoughts and feelings similar? How are they distinct? In which case is the grief more intense? Why?
2. How does the woman here resemble and/or differ from the main character of KATHERINE ANNE PORTER’s story “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall”? What kinds of marriages are implied in both works? How are the women alike or different in their fundamental personalities?
3. Scan this poem (in other words, count the numbers of syllables in each line, and mark the syllables that are accented and unaccented). What patterns do you detect? How does Williams emphasize key words or phrases? Where and how does Williams’s use of meter seem especially subtle or skillful?

“To Elsie” (1923)

The speaker begins with a generalization about the way common people in the United States “go crazy” (whether literally or metaphorically); he then seems to focus on the inhabitants of northern New Jersey in particular, describing careless young men and filthy young women who engage in degraded sex that results in rootless, abandoned children. One such child is the “Elsie” of the title, who works as a maid in a suburban doctor’s home; physically unattractive, she wears “cheap / jewelry” to attract “rich young men with fine eyes” (ll. 46–48). The poem ends by contrasting a sense of filth, hunger, imprisonment, and aimlessness with a brief glimpse of merely imagined beauty.

The poem opens with phrasing that seems paradoxical: “The pure products of America” (a phrase that sounds hopeful and uplifting) “go crazy” (a phrase that undercuts the promise suggested by the opening words; ll. 1–2). This pattern of ironic juxtaposition of opposites continues elsewhere in the text. Thus, lines 3–6 and the first word of line 7 seem generally attractive, but that appealing tone is then immediately subverted by the reference to “deaf-mutes, thieves / old names / and promiscuity” (ll. 7–9), and this renewed bleakness continues for several more stanzas (ll. 10–24). In those ensuing lines, the speaker expresses contempt for the character, the appearance, and the basic morality of people he seems to consider social dregs, who have no taste and little sense of responsibility or ethics—people who seem driven merely by a desire for cheap sensations. He mocks their personal habits as well as their clothes, using them (apparently) as symbols of a broader social sickness, a wider failure of the national culture. When a touch of natural beauty does once again briefly enter the poem, the phrasing sounds either ironically violent (“choke-cherry”) or foreign and abstract (“viburnum”); ll.

25–26), and it serves only to emphasize by contrast the mechanical, almost predatory sex for which it provides a backdrop. When the poem's focus shifts from these disgusting generalities to the specific girl of the title, she is described as if she is something either vomited forth or washed ashore (l. 31), and she is depicted not only as ugly in her physical appearance (ll. 44–45) but as tawdry in her taste and motives (ll. 46–48). More repulsive imagery continues for a few further lines (ll. 49–54), is very briefly interrupted by a quick imagined glance at “deer / going by fields of goldenrod” (ll. 56–57), and then is followed by more depressing phrasing until the poem simply peters out. It ends with an image of aimless mechanical movement.

As a satire of cultural corruption the poem has some force, although at times its contempt for the people it describes seems to border on the vicious and misanthropic. The speaker seems not only scornful of loose-living young men and the filthy young women who submit in “numbed terror” (l. 24) to meaningless sex, but also disdainful of “deaf-mutes” (l. 8) and even of those with “a dash of Indian blood” (l. 30). Most surprising are the repellant terms used to describe Elsie herself. The speaker shows her little pity and less consideration. Presumably Williams meant to avoid any hint of mawkish sentimentality, but when we discover that Elsie was in fact a real person, was an orphan, and was indeed the Williams family's own maid, the publication of a poem about her (with “her great / ungainly hips,” her “flopping breasts,” and her “cheap / jewelry” [ll. 44–47])—a poem with her name in the title, no less!—seems more than a little cruel. Armed with this biographical information, one is tempted to regard the poem as an unintended satire on the poet himself, who can perhaps seem at least as crude as the vulgar cretins he disdains. The speaker's sympathies, in any case, seem directed more toward the hardworking middle-class people who employ Elsie (“some doctor's family” who live in a “hard-pressed house in the suburbs” [ll. 38–40]) than toward the slovenly, overweight, tasteless woman the poem presents. Indeed, the speaker even seems more sympathetic to attractive “rich young men with fine eyes”

(l. 48) on whom Elsie has set her sights than he seems toward the gross and grasping servant. If Elsie could read (or cared to), one wonders how she might have felt about the poem in which her employer so carefully immortalized her name, appearance, and character.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with T. S. Eliot's satirical poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Discuss the works in terms of setting, tone, imagery, and form. Which work appeals to you more as a satire? Explain why in detail.
2. Read this work alongside Williams's “The Young Housewife.” How are women presented in the two works? What qualities of women seem important to each speaker? How are the views of women presented in the two works typical of attitudes commonly held in our culture?
3. Discuss the absence of periods in this poem. What effects are achieved by this absence of final punctuation? How do those effects contribute (if at all) to the success of the poem? How, in its form and structure, does the poem seem both organized and somewhat chaotic?

“The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923)

The speaker asserts that a significant connection exists between various details of an outside scene, including a rain-glazed red wheelbarrow and some white chickens.

This brief and highly cryptic poem is one of Williams's most famous works. It clearly seems to be an example of the kind of thinking about poetry that led to the creation of imagism, a style associated with the works of such writers as H. D. and the early Ezra Pound. Imagism insisted on emphasizing direct, specific, crisp, clear, brief, and unadorned glimpses of particular objects, with a minimum of commentary, interpretation, or obtrusive “artistry.” The images, if sharply enough presented, would themselves evoke a significant mood, emotion, perception, or understanding. Williams's own version of this kind of writing is often called objectivism, in

which the focus is clearly on a few particular objects and in which the poem itself becomes a kind of object, like a painting or snapshot. In a poem such as “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Williams does not even seem especially interested (as the best imagist poets are) in creating an emotional epiphany or providing a moment of meaningful insight. Instead, his focus seems to be on things in and of themselves, in and for their own sakes.

In its own day, Williams's poem would have seemed highly iconoclastic. It rejects most of the features conventionally associated with poetry until then, including regular rhythms, relatively long lines, and predictable rhymes. Yet the poem is not without a certain shape and design: Each “stanza” consists of two lines; in each case the first line contains three words and the second line contains just one; each single word of each second line consists of two syllables; finally, in stanzas 1 and 4 (the two outside stanzas) the first line consists of four syllables, while in stanzas 2 and 3 (the two inside stanzas) the first line consists of three syllables. In all these ways, then, the poem does attain a high degree of symmetry and form. Yet the lyric is also highly structured in other ways as well: The first stanza, for instance, consists entirely of abstract language, while each of the next three stanzas zeroes in on a specific, discrete image. Moreover, in the second line of stanza 1 (the abstract stanza), it is the second syllable of the two-syllable word that is accented, whereas in the second lines of the three stanzas (the “imagistic” stanzas), it is the first syllable of each two-syllable word that is stressed. Furthermore, in each the three final stanzas, the line break separates an adjective (or modifying word) in the first line from a noun (or substantive word) in the second: “wheel / barrow” (ll. 3–4), “rain / water” (ll. 5–6), “white / chickens” (ll. 7–8). By breaking these lines as he does, Williams thus emphasizes each component part of a significant phrase, and the nouns in particular are stressed by their relative isolation. For a poem as brief as this one (just 16 words long, with four words in each stanza), the work is relatively colorful: Not only do the colors “red” (l. 3) and “white” (l. 7) contrast with (and thus intensify) each other, but even

the word *glazed* implies a kind of glossy light. The poem juxtaposes a man-made object (the wheelbarrow) with rain, sunlight, and chickens (all of which seem to symbolize nature). The poem also juxtaposes stasis (the parked wheelbarrow) and movement (the presumably wandering chickens). In short, the poem is more complex than it seems; it is not as shapeless or as formless as it might at first appear.

What, if anything, does it all amount to? Surely Williams intended the work as a kind of “antipoem”—a rejection of all the grand rhetoric and grand subjects so often associated with conventional verse. This poem urges us to pause, linger over, and think about a few seemingly simple facts—the kinds of facts we too often ignore and too often fail to appreciate. As does a skillful painting or photograph, this poem invites us to notice (and ponder) small details we might otherwise fail to apprehend or enjoy. Williams chooses the most commonplace, least “lofty” sorts of objects (a wheelbarrow; chickens) and invites us to contemplate their beauty, especially when they are juxtaposed in a brief moment of time and in an appealing natural setting. The poem is thus, in some ways, a romantic poem written in an antiromantic style.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Ezra Pound's poem “In a Station of the Metro.” How are they similar in imagery, design, and final effect? How are they different in all these ways? In which poem is the title more significant? Discuss the settings of the two works.
2. Read H. D.'s poem “Oread” and then discuss the ways in which it is similar to and/or different from Williams's poem. In particular, discuss such matters as point of view, tone of voice, use of figurative language, and use of devices of sound. Does Williams employ any sound devices? (For example, can you find any examples of assonance in his poem?)
3. This poem is often cited, by those unsympathetic to modernist poetry, as an especially memorable example of the flaws of that kind of writing. For such critics, the work seems trivial,

pointless, and not especially skillful. Whether you agree or disagree with such claims, how would you defend the poem against them?

“Spring and All” (1923)

This poem describes the first awakenings of life in a bleak, deserted landscape that is full of mud and weeds—a landscape that is just recovering from winter.

The poem opens with a striking reference to a “contagious hospital” (l. 1)—that is, an institution for treating diseases easily spread from one person to the next. By the end of the work, however, the poem will have described life and vitality awakening first in one plant and then in another and another. The landscape on the road to the hospital exists under the moving “surge” (with perhaps a pun on *serge*, to suggest the appearance of ribbed wool) of “blue / mottled clouds” (ll. 2–3), but then all this movement stops short (ironically) with the abrupt appearance of two heavily accented words (“cold wind”) that make the tone of the work seem suddenly bleak. The ensuing details suggest a lifeless wasteland, where even the potentially life-giving water seems distributed in puny, stagnant mud holes (l. 7). Significantly, the word *standing* is repeated in adjacent lines (ll. 6–7) to emphasize the sense of dead stasis. Meanwhile, the language of the poem—like the landscape it describes—seems bare, naked, and nearly inanimate. The anonymous speaker makes no comments and issues no judgments; he merely describes.

Sometimes the syntax (or sentence structure) of the poem is so stripped down that it is impossible, at first, to know how lines are combined. Lines 7–8, for instance, seem to stand off by themselves, disconnected from the lines before them (thus creating a momentary confusion in the reading). Likewise, lines 9–13 amount to an extended, nongrammatical fragment, brimming with adjectives but cut off from any tight logical connection with either the two preceding fragments (ll. 7–8) or the grammatically coherent thought that follows (ll. 14–15). It is as if Williams seeks to imitate, in the broken syntax

of his poem, the desolate, discontinuous setting he describes, where nothing seems quite connected except by a pervading atmosphere of forbidding bleakness. Even spring, when it makes its first hesitant appearance, seems “Lifeless,” “sluggish,” and “dazed” (ll. 14–15). And then, just when we feel satisfied that after seven lines of fragments (ll. 6–13), we finally have a complete, coherent thought (ll. 14–15), Williams disorients us again, referring mysteriously to an unspecified “They” who “enter the new world naked, / cold, uncertain of all / save that they enter” (ll. 16–18). Who are these “They”? At first the word might imply newborn humans, especially in view of the terms *naked* and *uncertain* (the latter word implying the ability to think or feel). Eventually it seems that the speaker is referring to the small plants that are now beginning to push sprouts above the surface of the ground. The momentary confusion seems deliberate, not only because Williams wants to keep his readers off their feet as they make their way through this poem, but also because he probably wants us to recognize the resemblance between our own lives and the lives of these newly budding plants—which will someday, of course, turn into the same kind of dead vegetation scattered about in the poem’s opening half.

The shift from end of winter to start of spring occurs, in fact, at exactly the midpoint of the work (thus exemplifying the ways in which Williams’s poems are often more subtly structured than they may first appear). In the closing lines Williams lists details of life that begin to counteract the details of death with which the poem opened. Significantly, the last line ends with an unpunctuated verb (“to awaken”) that is full of vitality and promise.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*. How are the two works similar and/or different in imagery, mood, symbolism, and diction? How is Williams’s poem in some ways a response to Eliot’s?
2. Examine Williams’s poem alongside ROBERT FROST’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” How do both poets use details of scenery to evoke mood and imply larger meanings?

- Discuss the point of view used in each poem. Who is speaking in the Williams work? What does each poem imply about the nature of life?
3. Discuss the sound effects of this poem. How does Williams use rhythm, alliteration, assonance, punctuation, enjambment, and other such devices to give the poem maximum impact? How and why is the poem more effective (if at all) when read aloud rather than when read silently?

“The Dead Baby” (1927, 1935)

The speaker of this poem urges the cleaning of a house in preparation for the arrival (from a hospital) of a distraught couple's dead baby. The body of the baby, “surrounded by fresh flowers” (l. 25), will then be put on display for friends and acquaintances who seem more like “curious / holiday seekers” (ll. 2–3) than true mourners.

Williams, who was a pediatrician himself and who delivered several thousand babies over a long career, surely had personal familiarity with many cases of stillbirths. The poem could easily have been mawkish or sentimental; instead, it seems strangely boisterous, with a strong undercurrent of sarcasm aimed at mourners who seem less interested in consoling the grieving parents than in gawking at the tiny corpse. For them, the baby is mainly a strange spectacle, a “curiosity” (l. 24), rather than a real person, whose loss is truly significant. Ironically, however, the present poem itself can be accused of much the same kind of gruesome insensitivity. The speaker seems at least as guilty as the “curious” mourners (l. 2) of treating the baby's death as merely an odd spectacle. It is the speaker, after all, who turns the death into an occasion for a poem in which the focus is as least as much on the speaker's own peculiar attitudes and tone of voice as it is on anyone or anything else. Presumably the speaker intends to impress us with his unconventional lack of sentimentality, but there are times (such as lines 18–19, with its weird echo of earlier uses of the word *sweep*) when his tone seems merely crude—almost as if

he were making a self-conscious and somewhat clumsy joke at a most inappropriate time. Like the speaker of Williams's poem “Tract,” the speaker here sometimes seems a bit too full of himself to be taken completely seriously.

The poem begins with a vigorous and heavily accented verb (*Sweep*) that sets a hectic tone for much of the rest of the work. The domestic details of the first four lines are then suddenly juxtaposed with the flat but shocking announcement in line 5 that “the baby is dead”—a statement made all the more surprising and emphatic by the poem's single use of rhyme. The speaker adopts the tone of a brusque, busy observer; his one bit of emotional commentary on the scene (when he refers to the father as “pitiful” [l. 11]) seems almost insipid; certainly it lacks any kind of subtlety. The speaker seems impressed by his own take-charge fervor; he issues constant commands (“Sweep the house” [l. 1]; “Sweep the house clean” [l. 13]; “Hurry up!” [l. 20]); these, presumably, are meant to make readers feel personally involved in the action of the poem, almost as if we ourselves are being addressed. In the final analysis, however, many readers are likely to feel more “curiosity” about the oddly detached and self-absorbed speaker than about the unfortunately dead baby.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Williams's poem “Tract,” particularly in such matters as tone, attitude, imagery, diction, and theme. How is death treated in both works? Explain in detail your responses to the speakers of both works.
2. Read this poem alongside CARL SANDBURG's “Grass.” Discuss the roles of the speakers in both poems; discuss the use of irony in both works; discuss the tones of the two poems and the attitudes toward death implied by each.
3. Discuss the use of dashes in this poem. How do they contribute to its tone? How do they almost mimic the actions the poem calls for? In what other ways does the poem create and achieve its peculiar tone?

“This Is Just to Say” (1934)

The speaker apologizes to an unknown addressee for having prematurely eaten luscious plums that were probably being saved for breakfast.

It is easy to imagine this poem being written as a note by a shamefaced husband to a potentially disapproving wife and being taped to the door of a refrigerator (or icebox). The work is typical of Williams in numerous ways, including its conventionally “unpoetic” subject matter, its simplicity of diction and structure, its almost prosaic rhythms, and its avoidance of all the typical features we commonly associate with figurative, “literary,” “lyric” language, such as metaphors, similes, alliteration, and assonance, not to mention rhyme and meter. Nevertheless, as is often true of Williams’s works, the poem is a bit more complex and structured than it might at first appear. It consists, for instance, of three stanzas of four lines each. The first stanza focuses on the speaker; the second stanza focuses on the addressee; the final stanza (in its first line) joins the two previous subjects, but then it immediately shifts to an emphasis on the plums themselves. The poem is also more rhythmically astute than a first reading might suggest. Thus, in the first stanza the accents all fall on the key final words, which, taken together, provide a quick summary of the poem’s plot: “eaten . . . / plums . . . / in . . . icebox” (ll. 1–4). In lines 1 and 4 the accents fall on the first syllable of two-syllable words; in lines 2 and 3 the accents fall on monosyllabic words. In stanza 2, on the other hand, the accents are much more randomly distributed, whereas in stanza 3 the accents fall back into a discernible pattern: In lines 9–10 the stresses emphasize the penultimate (that is, the next-to-last) syllables, whereas in the final two lines they accentuate the final words of each line.

The opening stanza states a simple fact about the speaker’s behavior; the second stanza considers the probable (and prior) intention of another person; the first line of the third stanza briefly raises a moral perspective; but the final three lines stress the sheer physical pleasure of the eating. Sensuous joy literally gets the final word. Each final adjective (*delicious*, *sweet*, *cold*) becomes progressively

less abstract, progressively more physical. Ironically, the poem ends with a word (*cold*) that often carries negative connotations but that, in this case, implies intense sensual pleasure. The apology gets two words (l. 9); the recollection and celebration of the joy of eating get eight (ll. 10–11). The poem, which appears modest and well shaped on the page, exults in a minor orgy of physical satisfaction. It is a romantic poem in a domestic setting, exemplifying Williams’s tendency to find joy (when he can) in the details of everyday life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the similarities and differences between this work and Wallace Stevens’s poem “Anecdote of a Jar.” In particular, discuss such matters as tone, point of view, imagery, and final effect. Which work is more conventional in its use of poetic devices and structure?
2. Using encyclopedias and the Internet, read several overviews of Williams’s typical stylistic traits, and then discuss—in as much detail as you can—the ways in which this poem is typical of his writing in such matters as diction, form, imagery, and tone.

Paterson (1946–1958)

Williams himself described this five-part work as “a long poem upon the resemblance between the mind of modern man and a city.” He sought to use “the multiple facets which a city presented as representatives for comparable facets of contemporary thought thus to be able to objectify the man himself as we know him and love him and hate him.” He also considered the poem to be about “the search of the poet for his language, his own language” (*Paterson* xii–xiii).

Even critics who have often been unsympathetic in their comments on other works by Williams have found aspects to value in *Paterson*—or at least in parts of it. The poem has been praised for its ambitious scope, its imaginative invention, its intriguing imagery, its suggestive combinations of verse and prose, its rhythmic energy, and its general success

as a suburban American epic that explores the complexities of modern life in language that is often colloquial and vernacular. As Kelli Larson notes (66–103), analysts have commented on such matters as the ways the poem treats the conflict between the real and the ideal; the use of images of women; the autobiographical aspects of the text; the thematic emphasis on destruction, change, and renewal; the use of techniques of interlacing and juxtaposition; the interpenetration of past and present; the employment of irony, comedy, and multiple voices; the similarities between the techniques of this poem and the techniques of various modern painters; the emphasis on a specific, local, American setting; the anthropomorphic treatment of landscape (comparing a place to a human being); the emphasis on social and cultural satire; the ways the poem engages in dialogue (and sometimes conflict) with works by other modern writers (such as Eliot and Pound); the influence of Whitman and other pre-modern precursors; the poem's complex use of symbolism, especially geographical symbols; the poem's overt and implied commentary on economics; the difficulties of writing a long poem in an essentially imagist style; the poet's constant wrestlings with matters of form; the use of the so-called variable foot to structure individual lines; the poem as a meditation on the making of poetry; the appearance of "real people" (including the poet's mother) as presences in the work; the relation between the poem and contemporary theories of literature; the poem's pervasive use of wordplay and punning; the ways in which the poem is a reaction against the influence of British literature; the use of metaphors of marriage and divorce; the role of sexual symbolism; and the various kinds of unity that may exist beneath an apparently fragmentary surface. This list could easily be hugely extended, but enough has already been said to suggest the sheer complexity of the work, the ways in which it has fascinated and intrigued numerous critics, and the potential riches it has in store for any reader who is open to its style and methods. Although many critics argued (especially as the individual parts of the poem first appeared) that the work declined in quality with each successive addition, becoming less coherent as it evolved, today the

poem is widely considered not only Williams's masterpiece but also one of the best long poems written anywhere during the 20th century.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read at least one book of *Paterson* alongside a comparably long section of Ezra Pound's epic *The Cantos*. Discuss resemblances and/or differences between the poems in terms of such matters as themes, techniques, styles, tones, and diction. Are there any ways in which Williams's poem can be seen as a self-conscious response to Pound's?
2. Choose one relatively short section of *Paterson* and then discuss that section as a "representative" portion of the work as a whole. How does the selection epitomize what Williams was trying to do and achieve in the larger work, especially in terms of theme, rhythm, and language?

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1962)

The poem responds to a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525?–69) that depicts the fall of Icarus, a mythical youth whose father crafted wings for him that were assembled from feathers stuck together with wax. Icarus, however, despite his father's warnings, flew too near the sun; the wax melted; and Icarus plunged into the sea and drowned. In the Brueghel painting, Icarus's leg can barely be seen sticking from the water off to the side of the painting.

In this late poem, Williams uses brief, abrupt lines; they lack any punctuation, and they also lack any capitalization. It is up to the reader, then, to determine through trial and error the syntax (or sentence structure) of the work. Each stanza consists of three lines; the lines range in length anywhere from one to six syllables; and only once (in stanzas 2 and 7) is the same pattern of syllables repeated. The first stanza serves as a kind of introduction; it mentions the painter, Icarus himself, and the springtime setting. The next three stanzas then focus on that setting; the final three deal with the plunge itself. In that sense, then, the poem has a symmetrical structure—a pattern that underlies its apparently

5. Compare and contrast Williams's *Paterson* sequence with the wartime *Trilogy* by H. D. How are they similar and/or different in setting, theme, diction, techniques, and larger purpose? How is each work a response to its particular historical moment?
6. Williams detested the work of T. S. Eliot. Do some research, and then try to explain why he reacted to Eliot's work as he did. Next, choose two "representative" works by Williams and Eliot and discuss the ways in which these two particular texts exemplify the distinct styles, concerns, and purposes of the two writers.
7. Women often play important roles in Williams's poems. Choose between five and 10 lyrics by Williams and discuss the ways women are presented in them. What continuities and/or differences do you see? How might a current feminist respond to Williams's depictions of women? (Explain why.)
8. Initially Williams was not widely read or widely valued in Britain. Why? Which poets were most often admired in Britain during the early to mid-20th century? How did the writings of those poets tend to differ from the work Williams was trying to do? Does Williams's emphasis on "American" phrasing automatically limit the appeal of his poems?
9. Read through the poems discussed earlier. What kinds of social and/or political stances (if any) do they seem to imply? What role(s) do they seem to imply for the poet? How does Williams's engagement with the world resemble and/or differ from the engagements of such other modern poets as Ezra Pound or Wallace Stevens or T. S. Eliot?
10. Using the volume edited by Charles Doyle, trace the development of Williams's reputation. What kinds of faults have critics found with his poetry? What kinds of virtues have they identified? Do you see those faults and/or those virtues exemplified in any of the poems by Williams you have read? Which poem by

Williams appeals to you the most? Explain why in detail.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Doyle, Charles, ed. *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Larson, Kelli A. *Guide to the Poetry of William Carlos Williams*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1995.
- Mariani, Paul. *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.
- . *William Carlos Williams: The Poet and His Critics*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1975.
- Mazzaro, Jerome, ed. *Profile of William Carlos Williams*. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971.
- Nelson, Cary. "Modern American Poetry: William Carlos Williams." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/williams/williams.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Wagner, Linda Welshimer. *The Poems of William Carlos Williams: A Critical Study*. Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963.
- . "William Carlos Williams." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, 573–585. New York: Norton, 1973.
- . "William Carlos Williams." In *Sixteen Modern American Authors. Vol. 2, A Survey of Research and Criticism since 1972*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990.
- William Carlos Williams Review. Available online. URL: <http://english.ttu.edu/WCWR>. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. Vol. 1, 1909–1939*. Edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1986.
- . *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. Vol. 2, 1939–1962*. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1986.
- . *Paterson*. Rev. ed. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1992.

Robert C. Evans



RICHARD WRIGHT (1908–1960)

I felt that the Negro could not live a full, human life under the conditions imposed upon him by America; and I felt, too, that America, for different reasons, could not live a full, human life. It seemed to me, then, that if the Negro solved his problem, he would be solving infinitely more than his problem alone.

(*Black Boy*)

Richard Wright rose from a background of poverty, hunger, abuse, abandonment, and crushing racial discrimination to become one of the most highly respected and widely read authors of his day. For a time he was considered the leading black fiction writer in the United States and perhaps the world, and although his reputation eventually declined after its brief high point, he is still regarded today as one of the most important and influential of all African-American writers. His most notable novel, *Native Son*, was an instant best seller, as was *Black Boy*, his memorable autobiography. Both books were at once highly praised, and both have remained continuously in print. Unfortunately Wright's premature death when he was only in his early fifties silenced an eloquent voice that might have continued to develop and evolve. Equally unfortunately Wright never lived to see the massive social changes that his own work helped inspire.

Born on September 4, 1908, on a farm near Natchez, Mississippi, Richard Nathaniel Wright was the son of Nathan Wright, an uneducated tenant farmer, and Ella Wilson Wright, who briefly taught school before later working in a series of service jobs. Ella's family considered the marriage a mistake, and certainly the young couple struggled financially. In 1911 Richard; his new young brother, Leon Allan (born in 1910); and their mother moved in with her parents in Natchez, to

be joined later by Nathan, who began working in a sawmill. It was while living with his grandparents that Richard, at age four, inadvertently set their house on fire—an incident vividly described in *Black Boy*. Wright claims that as punishment he was brutally beaten by his mother—one of many incidents in his young life that supposedly resulted in severe physical discipline. Even so, his relations with his mother were mostly positive, while his dealings with his father were anything but. In *Black Boy* the father is presented as shiftless, egocentric, and irresponsible—especially when he leaves his wife for another woman after the family had moved to Memphis in 1913. After not having seen his father for a quarter-century, Wright later describes him as a white-haired, toothless farmer, bent and broken by years of peasant labor (*Black Boy* 34–35).

After the father's desertion, Wright's existence was mainly shaped by contact with his mother, her parents, and her siblings. Ella Wright worked for a time in Memphis as a cook, but by early 1916, when Ella became extremely sick, Wright's maternal grandmother became a major influence on his life. She briefly moved to Memphis, and then Wright returned with her to Jackson, Mississippi (after spending a short time in a Memphis orphanage). Eventually Wright, his brother, and his mother moved to Elaine, Arkansas, where they lived with his mother's sister, Maggie, whose husband, Silas Hoskins, operated a prosperous liquor store. When

Hoskins was violently killed by whites who coveted his property, Wright and his family fled briefly to West Helena, Arkansas, then for a time to Jackson, and then finally back to West Helena, where Wright's mother and aunt found work as domestics and where Wright was able to attend school for a time. However, when his mother's health deteriorated once more, he was forced to drop out of school and take odd jobs to earn money. Finally, when his mother suffered a debilitating stroke, the small family moved back to Mississippi, where Wright stayed mostly with his grandparents but also (for a time) with a somewhat distant aunt and uncle. Wright's assertive grandmother was a devout Seventh-Day Adventist, and the young boy soon found himself in constant conflict with her (and an aunt) about religion. Even at this early age he was strongly independent and resisted most efforts to make him conform to others' expectations. Nevertheless, he usually did well in school (whenever he was able to attend), and he was also capable of making friends, even becoming the unofficial leader of a small group of boys whose fun is reflected in the opening pages of his remarkable later story "Big Boy Leaves Home."

By the time Wright was an adolescent, his grandmother had ceased trying to convert him (although he did later allow himself to be baptized as a Methodist, chiefly to placate his mother). He took a wide variety of odd jobs when not attending school, and he also fell in love with reading, devouring as many books, magazines, and newspapers as he could lay his hands on. By eighth grade he had actually written a story of his own, and by the time he graduated from ninth grade in 1925 he was even selected as valedictorian—although, typically enough, he refused to read the speech the principal had written for him, insisting instead on delivering one of his own. After briefly attending high school that fall, he dropped out in order to work, but although his formal education had now ended, his informal self-schooling never ceased. Especially after he moved later in 1925 to Memphis (where he worked at various jobs, including one in an optical factory), his reading was voracious, particularly in recent American fiction. A white coworker allowed him

to use the coworker's library card, although Wright sometimes had to resort to clever deceptions to get access to all the books he wanted. Once, for instance, he handed the librarian a note (supposedly written by the coworker, but actually authored by Wright) that read, "*Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy . . . have some books by H. L. Mencken?*" When the librarian worried that Wright himself might want to read the books, he deferentially (and falsely) replied, "Oh, no, ma'am. I can't read" (*Black Boy* 236). However, reading had in fact now become Wright's chief obsession, and the joint activities of reading and writing would become the main means by which he would eventually move beyond his present poverty and degradation.

That transition, of course, did not happen overnight, but new horizons slowly began to open for Wright after he moved to Chicago in December 1927. After attempting in 1928 to win employment with the postal service (an attempt that failed at first because of his poor health), he eventually did secure a steady post office job in 1929—a position that not only gave him a modicum of financial security but also allowed him to make friends with various coworkers. He began associating with other local black writers, but the onslaught of the Great Depression (which hit in October 1929) eventually meant that Wright, as did many others, soon lost his steady position and was plunged into enormous economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, while working various jobs (including stints as an insurance agent and political campaigner), he continued to read and write, even managing, in 1931, to publish a short story in an African-American magazine. By this time he had also (like many impoverished Americans) become increasingly interested in communism, and by 1933, after working a further variety of odd and often menial jobs, he actually joined a group of mostly white writers affiliated with the Communist Party. He soon became prominent in the group, both as a leader and an author, and in 1934 he joined the party itself. He published widely in party journals (although he still had to do manual labor to earn an actual living), and he continued to read widely, especially in the works of great novelists. By 1935 he had himself finished a

novel called “Cesspool” (published decades later as *Lawd Today!*), had published a number of poems, and was also at work on one of his best stories, “Big Boy Leaves Home.” He also had begun lecturing and writing on literature and politics, producing journalism, and working for the Federal Writers’ Project. Increasingly he thought of himself—and was seen by others—as a professional writer, no matter how he earned his actual income.

By 1936 Wright was centrally involved in various literary and cultural activities in the Chicago area, including the Federal Theatre Project, the Negro Federal Theatre, the South Side Writers’ Group, and the Middle West Writers’ Conference. Although still a leftist and still often using his writing to champion leftist causes, by 1937 he had become increasingly uncomfortable with the demands made on his time, and the strictures placed on his intellectual independence, by the local Communist Party, from which he became more and more alienated. His experiences in Chicago, especially his relations with his former comrades, were now frequently tense. Therefore, rejecting the offer of a comfortable and permanent position with the Chicago post office, he moved in 1937 to New York City to pursue his literary ambitions. Despite his experiences in Chicago, he worked in New York as an editor for the communist newspaper the *Daily Worker*, eventually writing hundreds of articles on a wide variety of topics. By this time, though, he had also produced another novel (“Tarbaby’s Dawn,” which has never been published) as well as a story (“Fire and Cloud”) that won first prize in a major national contest. By 1938 a collection of his stories called *Uncle Tom’s Children: Four Novellas* was published and received highly positive reviews, and by the end of the year he had finished the first version of the novel that would soon make him famous: *Native Son*.

In 1939 Wright received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, and, although attracted to two different white women (Ellen Poplar and Dhima Rose Meadman), he chose to marry the latter. One of his stories—“Bright and Morning Star”—was now being dramatized and was also selected for inclusion in two important anthologies, and

Wright had also begun work on a new novel (“Little Sister”). Most important of all, however, he had finished *Native Son*, which was not only published by March 1940 but was also chosen as a main offering of the Book-of-the-Month Club, instantly guaranteeing the work a huge audience. In less than a month, nearly a quarter-million copies had been sold, and Wright—the onetime impoverished and hungry grandson of former slaves—was now perceived as one of America’s most talented writers and perhaps the most prominent black author of fiction anywhere in the world. Flush with money and glowing with his new-found fame, Wright now not only began to travel but also to involve himself in projects with other prominent artists, including the director John Houseman and the great actor-director-impresario Orson Welles, who both hoped to dramatize *Native Son*. Meanwhile, by the end of 1940, a new and expanded edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* had appeared, and another of Wright’s stories had been included in another major anthology. His personal life, however, was less fortunate: His marriage broke down, and by the end of the year he was living with Ellen Poplar. After divorcing his first wife, he married Poplar on March 12, 1941.

Besides his new marriage, Wright had other reasons to be happy in 1941. He received a major award from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the dramatic version of *Native Son* was a success; work began on a new novel (“Black Hope,” which was never finished); one of his songs was recorded by the noted black bass-baritone Paul Robeson; and Wright’s book *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* was published to wide acclaim. By year’s end Wright had also completed the first version of yet another novel, “The Man Who Lived Underground,” which later (in a revised version) became the basis of a novella by the same title. When the United States entered World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Wright (who could not be accepted for combat because he was his family’s sole provider) unsuccessfully volunteered for service as a propagandist. Meanwhile, in 1942 he further distanced himself from the Communist Party, even

though by this point the United States had technically allied itself with the Soviet Union and even though the U.S. government would now secretly monitor Wright for the rest of his life because of his continuing Leftist sympathies. By 1943 he had begun work on his autobiography, titled *American Hunger*, which traced his life from his boyhood in the racist South to his eventual disillusionment with the northern communists. However, when the text was submitted to the Book-of-the-Month-Club in 1944, Wright was told that the club was interested only in the first half. Thus the section dealing with his time in the North and his struggles with communism was dropped (although some of it appeared as magazine articles), while the first half, retitled *Black Boy*, was issued in 1945 and became an enormous best seller. By early 1946 more than a half-million copies had been purchased, and some critics were calling the book an even better work than *Native Son*. Nevertheless, despite this success, Wright was becoming increasingly disillusioned with his life as a black in the United States, and so in 1947, having spent some time in France, he and his wife decided to move there for good. Thus, for the last decade or so of his life, Wright became an expatriate.

While living in Paris Wright led an active intellectual and social existence. He was befriended by many key figures in French cultural life and was as involved as ever in various literary and political groups. During the next half-dozen years he traveled widely throughout Europe, South America, and Africa, and, collaborating with a French director, he even agreed to star as Bigger Thomas in a film version of *Native Son*, which finally appeared (to mixed reviews) in 1951. In 1952 he completed the first draft of a new novel, *The Outsider*, which reflected the influence of his recent interest in French existentialism, but when the book was published in the United States in 1953, it was neither a critical nor a popular success. Even so, Wright continued to produce: In 1954 he published a book on Africa titled *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* as well as a new novel called *Savage Holiday* (which was rejected by the prominent U.S. company that had published his previous books). In 1955 a work of political journalism was published in French

and was then issued in 1956 in the United States as *The Color Curtain: A Report of the Bandung Conference*. In 1957 his book *Pagan Spain* appeared, as did a collection of essays titled *White Man, Listen!* Meanwhile, by 1958 he had finished a new novel (*The Long Dream*) set in Mississippi and had begun work on a sequel (set in France). By now his relations with other blacks in Paris had deteriorated; moreover, when *The Long Dream* was published in 1958, it was both a critical and a commercial disappointment. By the end of the year his mother's health had greatly deteriorated, his longtime editor had died; and Wright himself, increasingly isolated in Paris, was contemplating a move to England. However, if 1958 was bad, the next year was even worse. In January he learned that his mother was dead; his new novel was sent back with a request for substantial changes; his request for a major grant was rejected; a severe illness struck in June and then lingered; and the move to England was complicated by difficulties concerning his request for a resident visa—a request eventually rejected. Thus, 1960 found Wright living alone in France. He was facing growing worries about money, continuing poor health, and increasing disenchantment with his social and political circumstances. Nonetheless, he had been working on thousands of brief poems, had started a new novel, and looked forward to the imminent publication of *Eight Men*, a new collection of stories. Yet his sudden death of a heart attack on November 28 extinguished any hope of future work. He died just as the 1960s—the dynamic, transformative decade he would have been well qualified to interpret—had only just begun.

***Uncle Tom's Children* (1938, 1940)**

The title of this collection of stories alludes to Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous pre-Civil War abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), whose title character, a loyal slave, has long been a symbol of black subservience to whites. Wright's collection not only depicts the vestiges and unfortunate consequences of such compliance, but also, more significantly, shows the growth of defiance and resistance

among its African-American characters. Most of the stories describe the violence that, in Wright's view, always lurked just beneath the surface of relations between whites and blacks, especially in the "Jim Crow" South, where racism was more overt than in the North and where it enjoyed extensive legal protection.

The collection opens with a personal essay titled "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch." Wright here recounts many of the same incidents later treated at much greater length in *Black Boy*, his full-scale depiction of his youth. In some cases the accounts differ—a fact that has led some scholars to question Wright's fidelity to facts. In any case, here (as in *Black Boy*) he emphasizes the brutality of his youth (including some brutal treatment at the hands of relatives) as well as his growing distrust and fear of whites and his inevitable realization that his life down South could and would be stunted merely because of his race. In nine brief sections, he quickly recounts various incidents that educated him in the grim facts of life for African Americans, and he ends by quoting a black southern friend whose words foreshadowed the rebelliousness that eventually engulfed the region: "Lawd, man! Ef it wuzn't fer them polices 'n' them ol' lynch-mobs, there wouldn't be nothin' but uproar down here!" (237).

"Big Boy Leaves Home," the first piece of fiction in the collection, is a particularly powerful story. It opens by depicting the relaxed, jovial friendship of four young black males in the rural South; as they joke, josh, and sing, readers are lulled into a sense of complacent joy; we share in the boys' adolescent fun, taking no more seriously than they do the chance that they might really be "*lynched*" (as Big Boy warns [242]) if they dare to swim in a local pond considered off-limits to blacks. The story's tone suddenly changes, however, when they realize that a white woman has wandered near the pond; not only does she see them swimming, but she also sees them naked as they try hurriedly to retrieve their clothes. As she screams, her husband approaches with a rifle and, in seconds, joy gives way to horror as two of the boys are shot dead. When Big Boy tries to wrestle the husband for the gun, the husband himself is killed. The rest of

the story recounts, in rapid and gruesome detail, the efforts of Big Boy, aided by his community, to escape to the North as well as the disgusting torture and execution of the other surviving boy, whose torment Big Boy overhears from his hiding place. The story's style is crisp and clear; its pace is first leisurely and then frenetic; and its second half is dominated by gripping suspense and irresistible terror. This tale offers an unforgettable opening to the collection and establishes many central themes of the entire book. It shows how easily, in the racially charged South, life can instantly shift from peace to murderous chaos. The story's characterizations are superb; its structure and design are excellent; and its style is terse and efficient.

"Down by the Riverside," the next story, is often considered a less effective tale than "Big Boy Leaves Home," partly because it allegedly relies too much on improbable coincidence. Mann, the central character, is a loving husband whose pregnant wife finds herself in protracted labor just as flood waters are surrounding their small house. A friend steals them a white man's boat, but, as luck would have it, as Mann battles the current in the dark, he happens to steer the boat directly to the home of its owner, who recognizes the craft as his and begins firing at its occupants. Desperate, Mann pulls out a pistol, fires twice, and kills the angry white man. When he finally succeeds in steering the boat to the hospital, he discovers that his wife has died, but he is immediately put to work rescuing other people from the flood. As luck would once again have it, he is sent in the boat to the home of the very same white family whose father he has recently killed; when the family recognize him, he is tempted to kill them, but luck again intervenes: The house suddenly tilts, and so Mann, instead of murdering the family, pulls them to safety. Later, however, when everyone is on dry land, the family members turn him in to authorities, and, in a desperate effort to escape, he is shot and killed. The final paragraph focuses on his outstretched hand as it trails in the surging river. Admittedly this story's plot twists are somewhat implausible and the tale itself is perhaps overlong; nevertheless, Wright does succeed in creating a memorable atmosphere; in addition, many

details of mood and setting are convincing, and the tone is realistically tense.

“Long Black Song,” the collection’s next tale, is often considered one of Wright’s best works and is therefore discussed separately later; it is followed by “Fire and Cloud,” a story often praised by the volume’s first reviewers. It describes the conflicting pressures faced by the Reverend Mr. Taylor, a prominent black in a small southern city whose people are clamoring for relief from hunger during the depression. Some citizens want Taylor to help lead a communist-inspired protest march; the white mayor tries to persuade him not to lend his support; a devious figure in his own church tries to undermine Taylor’s authority; and members of Taylor’s own family offer conflicting advice. The mood of Taylor and the whole community becomes more decisive and determined, however, after he and others are brutally beaten by white thugs; only then does Taylor realize (in the story’s final words) “*Freedom belongs to the strong!*” (406). The work concludes with a Marxist vision of poor blacks and whites united against oppression. If the tale sometimes seems too didactic and even a bit contrived (particularly in its middle sections, where Taylor shuttles from one room to another as he tries to juggle multiple meetings with conflicting pressure groups), it nonetheless suggests the kind of political solution Wright hoped for; in “Black Boy Leaves Home,” the only alternative to oppression is escape, whereas in “Fire and Cloud” the oppressed stay and stand together.

Political themes are even more explicit in “Bright and Morning Star,” the story added to the 1940 printing of *Uncle Tom’s Children*. In this tale, Sue is the once-pious mother of two sons who are committed communists; one already has been imprisoned for his activities, but the other (Johnny-Boy) is out on a rainy night, informing local comrades of a forthcoming meeting. However, soon Reva (a local white girl with a romantic interest in the son) arrives at Sue’s home to inform her that the local sheriff knows of the meeting and that the Party members must be warned not to attend—a mission Johnny-Boy undertakes as soon as he returns. After he leaves, the sheriff and other whites arrive at Sue’s home, beat her when she refuses to answer their

questions about her son, and then depart in search of him. When Sue later realizes that she has revealed the names of the party members to a white traitor named Booker (an obvious dig at BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, the turn-of-the-century black leader whom many African Americans considered an “Uncle Tom”), she heads out into the night, carrying a gun and looking for Johnny-Boy and the treacherous Booker. She does find her son, who has been beaten nearly to death by the sheriff and his gang; she is forced to watch as the men further torture him as he refuses to reveal the names of the party members, just as Sue herself also refuses to reveal the names despite witnessing the torture. When Booker suddenly arrives and begins to reveal the names, Sue, using the hidden gun, shoots him dead, and then she witnesses the killing of Johnny-Boy just before being executed herself. She dies, however, with the satisfaction of knowing that neither she nor her son capitulated and that she killed the traitor before he could betray anyone else. She and Johnny-Boy suffer for a cause larger than they are, and their suffering prevents the suffering of others. In place of the non-violent resistance that concludes “Fire and Cloud,” the resistance here is violent, desperate, and at least partially effective.

Readers of *Uncle Tom’s Children* have praised the book for its lucid style, its vivid dialect, its rapid pace, its emotional restraint, its skillful dialogue, and its emphasis on dramatic action. On the other hand, the book has sometimes also been criticized for lack of variety, for monotonous characterization (particularly in its depiction of evil whites), for inept reproduction of black speech, and for sensationalism in both its action and its style. Nearly all readers have admitted, however, that the work is frequently powerful and often unforgettable, and, as Wright’s first published book, it stands as a remarkable debut.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast “Big Boy Leaves Home” with Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. How are the works similar in their use of humor, their depictions of boyhood, their shifts in tone, and their concluding passages; how do they differ in

their depictions of race relations, their presentations of violence, and their portraits of their central black characters?

2. Compare and contrast “Down by the Riverside” with the description of the storm and flood in ZORA NEALE HURSTON’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In what ways are the two storms symbolic? What do they suggest about man’s relationship with nature? How do the storms help to advance the plots of both works and emphasize central themes?
3. Compare and contrast the presentation of political pressures and political dilemmas in Wright’s “Fire and Cloud” and in W. E. B. DUBOIS’s novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. How do such factors as class, gender, and setting affect the presentation of these pressures? For instance, how much difference does it make that one work is largely set in Washington, D.C., and deals with middle-class characters, whereas the other is set in a small southern town and focuses on the poor? How are the scenes of interracial violence in the two works comparable?
4. How is “Bright and Morning Star” in some ways a response to, and refutation of, Booker T. Washington’s famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech? What do the two works suggest about the relations between blacks and whites in the South? What do they suggest about the most productive forms of political action? What do they imply about the role of religion in achieving full civil liberties?
5. Choose a particular theme, symbol, image, or type of character and trace its appearances over the course of more than one of the stories. How is it used distinctively in each work? How are the tales in this collection bound together? What common motifs or concerns do they share? How are they similar—and/or distinct—in style, methods, and/or effectiveness?

“Long Black Song” (1938, 1940)

This story, the third in Wright’s collection titled *Uncle Tom’s Children*, focuses at first on Sarah, a

young black wife and mother in the rural South, who thinks of Tom (with whom she was once in love, but who is now away at war) as she and her infant await the return of her hardworking husband, Silas, who has been gone for several days, selling cotton and buying supplies. As her baby plays with a broken clock, Sarah hears the approach of a white traveling salesman; although she refuses to buy the “graphophone” he tries to sell her, she feels powerless to resist when he forces himself on her sexually. Not long after the salesman departs, Silas returns, discovers evidence of the sexual encounter, and becomes enraged; Sarah escapes, but from a distance she watches as Silas commits murderous revenge when the salesman and a companion return; Silas then uses his gun to resist the white mob who descend on his house and who burn it (with him in it) to the ground.

“Long Black Song” is sometimes considered the best story in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, particularly because of its skillful and complicated depiction of Sarah and its effective use of imagery. Nevertheless, the work has also been criticized for its allegedly simplistic presentation of Silas and for its purportedly overblown description of the sexual encounter between Sarah and the salesman. That encounter, however, seems tantalizingly complex; Sarah obviously dreads the prospect of having adulterous sex, especially with a white man; at the same time, and on another level, she seems lonely and desirous. From one perspective the encounter is a rape; from another perspective it is something more complicated, and Wright’s nuanced description of Sarah’s feelings and reactions makes her an especially intriguing character. On the one hand, she clearly loves and admires Silas; on the other hand, she just as clearly wonders how life might have been different—and better—if she had married Tom. Similarly, on the one hand, she tries to resist the salesman, but, on the other hand, she obviously is aroused by the encounter: “A wave of warm blood swept into her stomach and loins. She felt his lips touching her throat and where he kissed her burned” (338). In short, in creating Sarah, Wright also created one of the most complicated and fascinating female characters in his fiction. Although he is

often criticized by feminists for his allegedly sexist presentations of women, it is possible to argue that Sarah is an exception to this supposed rule.

Silas's discovery of the sexual encounter has been criticized as improbable: First, he finds the white man's straw hat in the couple's bedroom, then he notices a "short yellow pencil" (an ironic phallic symbol? [343]) on the quilt of the bed, and finally he literally uncovers (in a moment reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Othello*) the salesman's handkerchief in the couple's bedclothes. His violent reaction is appropriately shocking but is also comprehensible on several levels: He not only feels betrayed as a man by Sarah but also feels violated as a black man by the white visitor. As a hardworking African-American male, Silas has tried to play by the rules of bourgeois society, but now he feels as if all his devotion and diligence have been mocked and undermined. However, his bloody confrontation with the gang of whites at the end of the tale is merely personal and is also literally self-destructive; unlike the antiwhite violence that concludes "Bright and Morning Star," it advances no larger cause.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wright claimed to have admired, and to have been influenced by, GERTRUDE STEIN's short story "Melanctha" in her collection titled *Three Lives*. Can you detect such influence here? How are Wright's story and Stein's comparable or contrasting in their use of dialect, their depiction of black female sexuality, and their presentation of psychological complexity? In which story is plot more important, and in which are racial politics a more obviously central concern?
2. Compare and contrast the relations between African-American males and females presented in this story and in W. E. B. DUBOIS's novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. How does each writer emphasize the complexity of those relations, and how does each imply the ways those relations are affected by social circumstances?
3. In what ways is Silas, in this story, the ideal black man as imagined by Booker T. Washington? What does the fate of Silas suggest about the ideals Washington championed in his "Atlanta Compromise" speech? On the other hand, how is Silas's situation too particular to be relevant as a refutation of Washington's ideas?
4. Discuss the complexity of characterization—and/or the failure to achieve such complexity—in this tale. How, and to what extent, does Wright succeed in making his characters three-dimensional? How, specifically, does he depict them as complicated human beings rather than as stereotypes? Which characters do you find the most—and least—successful in this respect?

"The Man Who Was Almost a Man" (1939, 1961)

Dave Saunders is a 17-year-old youth who works as a farmhand with other blacks on the plantation of a southern landowner named Jim Hawkins. Because he feels unrespected by his fellow workers and thinks that owning a gun will help him impress them, he convinces his reluctant mother to allow him to buy a pistol for his father, which Dave himself plans to shoot. While practicing in Hawkins's field one day, Dave accidentally kills Jenny, the mule; although he tries to claim the death resulted when the mule fell on its plow, his parents force him to admit the truth and his father orders him to work to repay the cost of the animal, but Dave instead decides, at the end of the story, to fire the gun a few more times and then hop a train for the North, where he hopes to fulfill his dreams of manhood.

In this often-anthologized story, racial tensions are far less prominent than is true of many of Wright's other works; instead, Dave's main conflicts are with other blacks, particularly his fellow fieldworkers and even members of his own family. Jim Hawkins, despite his status as the owner of a plantation, is not the cruel brute he might have been: Even after discovering that Dave has killed his mule, he seems more understanding than one might have expected of a powerful white man in a different work by Wright. The story thus has a broader, more universal appeal than is true of some of Wright's other fiction; it deals with themes, situations, and

character types to which nearly any reader, of any color, can relate. It focuses, for instance, on the basic human transition from adolescence to adulthood and on the often complicated relations within nearly all families, particularly between teenagers and parents. Moreover, unlike many of Wright's other works, this story depicts a relatively stable, intact African-American family (with hardworking parents and two basically respectful children), and it presents that family as respected members of a relatively benign and benevolent community that includes both whites and blacks, who work together and seem to share basic values and even a common sense of humor. Ironically the only person who calls Dave a "nigger" in this story is his own mother (16), and the only other person who refers to others as "niggers" is Dave himself (11). The story features a much stronger sense of humor than is typical in work by Wright, particularly in its affectionate depiction of Dave's mother, who is presented as a no-nonsense parent who nonetheless possesses a genuine soft spot for her son. The tale benefits from many features that contribute to the effectiveness of other works by Wright, including its skillful manipulation of point of view (which shifts between Dave's perspective and that of the omniscient narrator), its convincing use of dialect, its adept use of dialogue both to enhance characterization and to advance the plot, and its "local color" realism, which communicates a strong sense of the details of day-to-day life in a small southern rural community. The abrupt shift of tone from basically comic to fundamentally serious adds to the impact of the tale, and the story benefits by seeming non-didactic: It has no obvious "message" to push or "lesson" to teach, and Dave is neither an obvious hero nor a simple victim. He is, instead, a typically complicated teenage boy whose story is presented in simple, direct, straightforward phrasing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the frustration that Dave feels about his life in the South with the similar frustration felt by the central character of NELLA LARSEN's novel *Quicksand*. Ironically, how and why are other black people, in both cases, a main source of frustration? What kinds of options are open to both characters, particularly in view of such matters as age, social class, and gender?
2. Compare and contrast this story with "Queer" by SHERWOOD ANDERSON. How are the two works similar and/or different in plot, characterization, and theme? Which of the two central characters is more appealing, and why? How are they alike in their basic motivations and in their relations with other characters?
3. Compare and contrast Dave with Bigger Thomas in Wright's novel *Native Son*. How do the two characters differ in psychology, social circumstances, and ultimate fate? What role does an accidental killing play in the plots of both works, but how do the tones of the two works differ? How do Dave's experiences with whites seem to differ from those of Bigger?
4. What different character traits of different persons in this story appeal to you most, and why? What, specifically, makes you admire the various characters you find most appealing? What ethical traits do those characters exhibit? What kind of morality does the story implicitly endorse, if any?

Native Son (1940)

Bigger Thomas is a black youth who lives with his mother, brother, and sister in a tiny, rundown apartment in the Chicago slums; he spends much of the rest of his time with a gang of friends, committing petty robberies. Although his fortune seems to improve when he is hired to work for the wealthy white Dalton family, his life turns truly tragic when he accidentally kills Mary Dalton (the daughter) and then murders his own girlfriend to keep the first killing a secret. Eventually caught and put on trial, he is defended by a left-wing lawyer, whose lengthy pleas on his behalf, emphasizing his status as a black man in a racist culture, cannot prevent his eventual conviction and execution.

Native Son was an instant best seller; it immediately propelled Wright to the front rank of African-American novelists and made him a national celebrity. Early reviewers almost uniformly praised

the book (or at least the first two of its three long sections) as fast-paced, exciting, and gripping. Wright offered insight into a kind of world and a kind of character that had previously received relatively little recognition in serious fiction; he deliberately chose to focus on a so-called bad nigger in order to preclude the kind of sentimental reaction sometimes provoked by the obvious victims featured in *Uncle Tom's Children*, his earlier collection of stories set in the Jim Crow South. Instead, Wright set *Native Son* in a large northern city and made his protagonist somewhat sullen, amoral, and even occasionally violent; rather than making the protagonist confront redneck racists bent on lynching any black who showed initiative, Wright instead placed Bigger in the home of wealthy white philanthropists ostensibly interested in helping to lift blacks out of poverty. Moreover, he made the murder victims not only a progressive young woman even more outspokenly committed to the welfare of blacks than her parents but also a pitiful young black woman whose chief desire is to please the man who kills her. In short, *Native Son* is a more ethically complex work than some of Wright's earlier fiction. It is hard to feel entirely sympathetic toward Bigger, and yet Wright sets himself the difficult task of trying to make Bigger not only comprehensible but even somewhat appealing.

The novel opens with a memorable scene in which Bigger and his family awake in their small apartment and begin to dress. The apartment is so confined that Bigger and his brother must look away while their mother and sister hurriedly put on their clothes, and then the females must do the same while the males also dress. Immediately, then, Wright effectively dramatizes one of his major themes: the almost claustrophobic confinement poor blacks suffer in nearly every aspect of their lives, from the moment they awake in the morning until the moment they sleep again at night. Bigger lives and moves and has his being in a world that seems cramped and narrow, both physically and psychologically. Almost instantly, too, Wright reveals his skill for often creating convincing, realistic, and fluid dialogue; each member of Bigger's family is quickly and deftly sketched through his

or her words and tones. Finally, the opening scene is effective for yet another reason: Sudden dramatic action breaks out when Bigger's mother sees a large black rat and frantically begs Bigger to kill it. The wild scramble that ensues as Bigger and his young brother Buddy try to trap and destroy the intruder foreshadows the frenzied excitement that will also dominate large later portions of the novel, when it is Bigger himself who is hunted. When Bigger does eventually succeed in killing the rat by hurling a heavy skillet at it, we catch a glimpse of his own skill at violence, and when he then torments his younger sister, Vera, with the rat's dangling corpse, we briefly sense his own penchant for cruelty. In a few fast-moving pages, therefore, Wright manages to establish many major concerns of the rest of the book and to begin sketching a complex portrait of his novel's central character.

Our sense of Bigger's complexity grows as the novel proceeds. Ironically it is Bigger's own mother who offers some of the harshest assessments of him. She accuses him of often being irrational, self-centered, unmotivated, and irresponsible, particularly in seeking or accepting the kind of employment that might offer both him and his family some hope of a better life. She even prophesies his eventual unfortunate fate (452), and although Bigger has long since grown tired of her constant criticism, Wright does not immediately or obviously deny the validity of her views. Although Bigger feels powerless to help his family, and although this sense of impotence breeds the potential for violence (453), he never responds fully or cogently to his mother's sensible advice, particularly her insistence that he should seek employment and that he should definitely take the job he has now been offered. He cannot share her plain religious faith, but neither does he seem to share her confidence in a simple ethic of work, even when she reminds him that if he does not take the offered job, his family may starve. He imagines that if he takes the job, his life will be miserable, but it is hard to see how his existence could be much more miserable than it presently is (455–456). As he leaves the cramped apartment and considers his options for the day, he considers buying a magazine, watching a film, spending time in a billiards hall with his gang,

or perhaps just killing time (456). The one option he does not seriously consider is acting immediately on his mother's advice. Instead, he indulges in pointless fantasies, and although he complains about lacking money, he still is not sure that he intends to take the job with the rich Dalton family (456–457). From a middle-class point of view, or even from the perspective of a member of the working poor, Bigger is not at first an especially appealing protagonist; many of his mother's criticisms seem just, and Wright has certainly achieved his announced aim of creating a central character who does not initially arouse much empathy or sympathy.

Bigger's interactions with his "gang"—whose other members are three young blacks, Gus, G. H., and Jack—add to Wright's complex characterization of his novel's central figure. Bigger and the others have long been contemplating robbing a local white merchant (having previously robbed other blacks without hesitation), but so far they have been reluctant to proceed for fear of the official retribution that might follow if they commit a crime against a white. Although Bigger is warned by his sister to stay away from the "gang," and although he realizes that he will be sent to prison (not simply a reformatory, as in the past) if he is found guilty of another theft, he does not immediately dismiss the idea of thieving once more (458). Instead, when talking with Gus, he expresses regret that because of his race he will never have a chance to be an airplane pilot (460), even though the novel has presented no evidence so far that he has ever attempted seriously to pursue any more practical ambition. Nevertheless, there is no denying that Bigger's prospects are cramped and distorted by the racism of his society, and Wright achieves one of the novel's few comic moments when he has Bigger and Gus "play 'white'" (461), as they humorously imitate the speech and mannerisms of various Caucasian authority figures. For understandable reasons, comedy and humor are not prominent traits in much of Wright's fiction (except, for instance, in his splendid story "Big Boy Leaves Home" and, to a lesser degree, in his tale "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"), but in this scene of *Native Son* he shows his skill in a kind of

writing that adds not only to our sense of Bigger's total personality but also to the tonal complexity of the novel as a whole. When Bigger is with his young male friends, he can relax and show a more attractive (even if sarcastic) side of himself than is usually glimpsed by others.

It is not long, however, before the humor gives way to bitterness—a bitterness that seems intensified (in fact) by the preceding comedy. With his skill for authentic dialect and convincing conversation, Wright soon has Bigger complaining to Gus about racist oppression and restrictions: "God-dammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail" (463). Some African-American readers, when the novel was first published, worried that Wright, in depicting Bigger as he does, would merely reinforce many negative stereotypes about blacks as shiftless, unmotivated, and self-pitying, and indeed a number of white reviewers (particularly in the South) did in fact condemn Bigger on precisely these grounds. His life, they alleged, is no harder than the lives of most poor people, whatever their color or background, and these reviewers also complained that Bigger makes no great effort to improve his condition. Nevertheless, it would be hard for any fair-minded reader to disagree with the words just quoted: Bigger's life *is* (and has been) distorted by the racism of his society, and if he reacts against his oppression with more bitterness and anger than other blacks the novel describes (including most of his own family and many of his own friends), perhaps that is partly because he is more sensitive and observant and feels a greater sense of self-respect. That, at least, is how many of the book's first and later readers reacted to his plight. For them, Bigger symbolized all the potential that African Americans had been denied by their presence in a society that refused to accord them full human rights, equal opportunity, and even basic dignity. Many of the book's initial readers wondered (as Bigger himself wonders) what the novel's protagonist might have achieved, and how differently his life might have evolved, if he had merely been given the same chances whites could assume as their birthright.

Wright adds further to our sense of Bigger's complexity when describing his discussion, with his friends, of whether or not to rob the white merchant. On the one hand, Bigger himself fears committing the crime; on the other hand, he is afraid to confess his fear, and he even shows contempt and hatred for Gus when the latter more openly demonstrates the reluctance that Bigger himself tries to conceal (468–469). This passage is one of a number in the novel that add to the psychological subtlety of the book, and the complicated nature of Bigger's personality is underlined even more boldly when he later pulls a knife on Gus and makes him lick its blade (480–481). Partly his anger with Gus expresses his anger with himself, and, in his willingness to reveal the latent violence that lurks just beneath the surface of Bigger's personality, Wright not only helps explain the novel's later events, but also shows that he is willing to create a protagonist who may not be entirely sympathetic but who is definitely complicated, interesting, and credible. In the first 50 or so pages of the novel, when Bigger is interacting with his family and friends, Wright is clearly describing a world, and a mindset, he knows intimately, from the inside out; rarely do these opening pages strike a false note, and a reader today can only imagine the sense of shock and revelation that must have been felt when the book was first published. Nothing quite like this had ever appeared before in serious (or even nonserious) American fiction, and reviewer after reviewer commented on the convincing portrait Wright had drawn of Bigger and his cramped, confining environment. For the first time the life of the black urban ghetto had been opened up and laid bare.

Wright seems on slightly less firm ground when he tries to describe the personalities and lifestyle of the wealthy Dalton family, with whom Bigger has been offered employment through a local agency. Mr. Dalton, a millionaire, has become rich partly by renting rundown apartments to Chicago's black poor (in fact he is, indirectly, Bigger's own landlord); he salves his social conscience not only by donating large sums to African-American charities but also by routinely employing a live-in black chauffeur—the position Bigger is offered

and accepts. Mrs. Dalton, meanwhile, is a kindly white-haired woman who also happens to be blind (a repeated pattern of symbolism suggesting the imperceptiveness not only of the Dalton family in particular but of whites in general). Mr. and Mrs. Dalton seem reasonably kind, thoughtful, and generous; Wright resists the temptation to make them obvious villains, and he even has the white Irish maid testify positively on their behalf (497). Bigger himself finds the Daltons (especially Mrs. Dalton) appealing (502)—a fact that only enhances our sense of the tragedy that will soon ensue. That tragedy results from Bigger's interactions with the daughter, Mary Dalton, and her communist boyfriend, Jan Erlone. On Bigger's first assignment as a chauffeur, the young couple try to befriend him, but their instant intimacy seems ostentatious and even somewhat condescending. It is as if they want to prove (partly to Bigger but mostly to themselves) their own left-wing good faith rather than genuinely considering how to make Bigger feel most comfortable. They talk him into taking them to a “typical” black restaurant, make him sit there and eat with them, get him and themselves partly drunk, and then require him to drive them around a park as they become intimate on the car's back seat.

Bigger himself is stimulated by what he watches in the rearview mirror: Here and elsewhere Wright dares to describe a black man's erotic attraction to a white woman—a taboo subject in much American fiction and culture before *Native Son* was published. Eventually Bigger drops Jan off at his apartment, but when he arrives back at the Dalton home with Mary, she is so drunk that he decides he must carry her to her bedroom (and feels aroused as he does so). As he places her on the bed, her mother unexpectedly enters the room. Terrified by what might happen if he, a black man, were found alone in the bedroom of a “vulnerable” white woman, Bigger (in a scene reminiscent of the murder of Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*) inadvertently smothers Mary with a pillow as he tries to stifle the noise she has begun to make in the presence of her blind mother. When Mrs. Dalton leaves the room, Bigger realizes that he has killed the girl. Desperate to dis-

pose of the body, he hauls it to the basement and tries to stuff it into the large coal furnace; when it will not fit, he frantically hacks off its head, forces both pieces into the furnace, and stokes the fire. From this point forward, the novel's pace momentarily quickens as Bigger at first succeeds in disguising his crime and then even tries to extort money (through a concocted and somewhat improbable "ransom note") from the distressed couple. Eventually, however, his responsibility for the murder is discovered, and, as he is pursued in a huge citywide manhunt, he even kills own girlfriend, Bessie, lest she reveal his guilt. As the exciting second part of the novel concludes, Bigger has been apprehended, beaten, and thrown into jail.

In part 3 of the book, the narrative slows considerably, and many readers have complained about the abrupt shift in pace, tone, and technique. Much of this section reports the inquest and trial, and Bigger himself suddenly recedes in importance. Center stage is now occupied instead by his left-wing defense attorney, Boris Max (whose last name suggests his status as a spokesman for Wright's own Marxist views). At the trial, Max offers a lengthy (and partly tedious) argument on Bigger's behalf. He essentially indicts American racism and capitalism for the guilt of Bigger's crime; he accuses Mr. Dalton of cheap charity, and he even turns on the blind mother, proclaiming, "And to Mrs. Dalton, I say: 'Your philanthropy was as tragically blind as your sightless eyes!'" (814). Of the murder itself, Max insists, "It was the first act of [Bigger's] life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight" (817). This may be good existentialist philosophizing; whether it is an effective defense strategy is another question, and indeed much of this latter section of the book can sound literally like special pleading, as if Wright were suddenly less interested in convincing characterization or a credible plot than in scoring sometimes dubious political points. Meanwhile, the arguments of the prosecutor sometimes seem even less credible than those of Max; Wright for

once seems to stoop to the temptation to introduce an obvious villain and bogeyman. (In his defense, however, it must be noted that he took many details of the trial and its seemingly insane press coverage from an actual trial that occurred in Chicago not long before he wrote his novel.) Given the practical shortcomings of some of Max's arguments and the fact that the system is rigged from the start against the defendant, it is not surprising that Bigger is convicted and sentenced to death. In the end, however, he accepts and even affirms his status as a murderer, arguing to a terrified Max, "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (849).

From the beginning, *Native Son* provoked widespread commentary, most of it highly positive. Reviewers and critics praised the book for its realism, suspense, excitement, dialogue, dialect, crisp prose, vivid imagery, gripping terror, psychological subtlety, and general lack of sentimentality. On the other hand, the novel was sometimes variously criticized by early reviewers, who faulted its alleged melodrama, preachiness, repetitiveness, improbable plot developments (especially after the first murder), and lack of memorable or complex characters aside from Bigger himself. Numerous reviewers complained that Bigger was often presented inconsistently: Sometimes he seemed largely thoughtless and inarticulate; sometimes he seemed more reflective and eloquent than either his education, his environment, or his characterization elsewhere would lead us to believe. Some reviewers thought that toward the end of the book Bigger became merely a convenient prop to be used in Max's unconvincing speeches, while others found those speeches themselves both moving and persuasive. By some reviewers Wright was accused of slandering communists (especially Jan), while other reviewers argued that the communists were (rightly or wrongly) the true heroes of the book. Some commentators considered Bigger an unappealing thug; others found him a sympathetic victim and even, to some degree, a tragic hero. Few early reviewers, however, and even fewer critics and commentators since, questioned the genuine power of much of Wright's book.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Many critics have noted both resemblances and differences between *Native Son* and THEODORE DREISER's novel *An American Tragedy*. Discuss the two works in terms of the personalities of their central characters, the significance of the accidental killings, and the effectiveness of the trial scenes. How does race add a complicating factor to Wright's book not present in Dreiser's? How do the two works differ in their literary styles?
2. Examine the killings in *Native Son*. What is Bigger's motivation in each case? Is he at all sympathetic? What difference does it make that his victims are female?
3. *Native Son* has sometimes been compared to Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*. How are the two works similar in plot, protagonist, themes, tone, and atmosphere? How do the novels differ in the authors' attitudes toward the central figures and in the ultimate fate of both characters? What is the role of religion in each work? How is conscience presented in each novel?

"The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942, 1944, 1961)

Fred Daniels is a black man who has been forced by police to confess to a murder he did not commit; having escaped their custody, he takes refuge in the city sewer system, where he sets up residence in a small "cave" from which he ventures out on exploratory expeditions. He gains access to the basements of many different buildings and is able to observe (while being unobserved himself) the activities of many different kinds of people—a perspective that gives him a new and disillusioned insight into the life of the "normal," aboveground world. He is able to steal money, diamonds, and other objects with which to decorate his "cave," but when he eventually turns himself in to the police and offers to reveal his underground lair, an officer shoots him because he now knows too much.

This obviously allegorical story is clearly indebted to such literary predecessors as Homer's *Odyssey*,

Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, and Plato's philosophical allegory of the cave. The tale is often highly praised for its depiction of the dark underbelly of American civilization in particular and of human life in general. Although Fred Daniels is black and although he definitely is persecuted because of his race, many critics see him as a kind of Everyman figure who represents not merely the sufferings of African Americans but also the larger predicament of mankind in general, which is haunted by feelings of guilt, alienation, rootlessness, and absurdity. Wright's "message" here seems more existentialist than Marxist; in other words, he seems more concerned with the basically bleak and perhaps inescapable conditions of man's meaningless existence than with proposing any specific political or economic remedy. Daniels finally dies not because he is guilty of any real "crime" but merely because he is a potentially disruptive, subversive presence in a civilization that prefers complacency and ignorance to any sort of genuinely disturbing insight. As the officer who kills him explains, "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things" (92).

Anyone approaching this story as a "realistic" tale is likely to be disappointed. Daniels's activities in the sewers—particularly his ability to access so many different buildings so easily and so rapidly without ever being discovered, and especially his ability to determine the combination of the safe from which he steals the money and diamonds—seem almost ridiculously improbable, especially since (for much the story) he depends simply on a few matches to provide necessary light. Daniels himself is not especially interesting or complex; he is, instead, more a literary symbol to whom a quick succession of symbolic events happen; he moves in a setting that is often vividly described but that does not seem especially believable. He observes and eventually even speaks with other characters who rarely seem convincing as "real" human beings; the policemen at the end, in particular, seem to function more as props than as genuinely credible persons. However, to judge either Daniels or his story by the criteria of conventional "realism" is probably to miss Wright's intended purpose. He wanted, in

this story, to deal with abstract ideas rather than with convincingly real people, events, or things, and many readers apparently find his treatment of these ideas themselves a sufficient reward for reading this exceptionally long and relentlessly event-filled allegory.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this story with T. S. ELIOT's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Specifically, discuss the works in terms of their presentation of existence in a large city, their emphasis on individual alienation and isolation, and their use of grotesque imagery. How do matters of race and class complicate any comparison of the two works?
2. Compare and contrast this story with Dante's *Inferno* in terms of structure, imagery, tone, and purpose. What is the role of religious belief in each work? How is Wright's story in some ways even darker in tone than Dante's?
3. Compare and contrast this work with JACK LONDON's novel *The Sea-Wolf*. In particular, compare the ways both works plunge their protagonists into strange new modes of existence. Discuss how each protagonist copes with the unfamiliar challenges he faces. How does the philosophy of Fred Daniels resemble and/or differ from that of Wolf Larsen?
4. Discuss the specific ways in which Wright presents his protagonist so that the latter seems a symbol of humanity in general rather than of one race in particular. To what extent, and in what respects, does the character function in both ways?

***Black Boy* (1945)**

Black Boy was originally the first part of a substantially longer autobiography in which Wright described his life from his bleak early childhood to his break in adulthood with the Communist Party. However, Wright's publisher suggested that the first half of the book be issued separately with a distinct title, and so *Black Boy* recounts Wright's

boyhood until his late teens, when he left the racist South and headed, full of hopes, for Chicago. The book emphasizes the real and threatened conflict and violence he often suffered in his dealings not only with his own family but also with the intolerant whites with whom he had increasing contact.

The opening episode of *Black Boy* variously sets the tone for the rest of the book. Wright recounts how, as a four-year-old, he defied the authority of his parents and other family members by literally playing with fire, thereby starting an accidental conflagration that destroyed much of the house. To escape punishment, he crawled under the burning home and hid; when his frantic parents finally found and retrieved him, his mother allegedly beat him so harshly that he supposedly lapsed into unconsciousness, ran a high fever, and was even in danger of dying. This, in any case, is the dramatic story with which the book begins, thus establishing some major themes of the work as a whole. Even at the age of four the willfulness and independence that will become major elements of young Richard's character are apparent; we see him rejecting, even then, the authority of others, particularly his family, and suffering often violent consequences. These patterns will be repeated again and again as the book proceeds.

However, the opening episode already raises some troubling questions about the book's credibility—questions that have bothered many readers. Is it believable that Wright could remember so distinctly an episode from so early in his life? Is it plausible that he could remember (and faithfully reproduce) the detailed dialogue spoken at that time? Was his mother's reaction quite as violent as he claims, and was his young life really in such mortal danger from a beating? Possibly the answer to all these questions is "yes," but many readers have found the book sometimes difficult to accept entirely at face value. Doubts have been raised repeatedly about its factual reliability; Wright has often been suspected of exaggerating for dramatic effect, of playing somewhat fast and loose with historical "truth," and of making himself seem more a victim (and more central to his own story) than simple facts or historical probability might suggest. Critics have sometimes noted that

Wright's accounts of events in *Black Boy* contradict accounts he offered elsewhere, while biographers have sometimes found discrepancies between the narrative provided in his autobiography and the records or testimony available from contemporary sources. For some readers, these kinds of concerns raise significant problems with the book; other readers, instead, believe that Wright merely used artistic license to draw a self-portrait that, while perhaps not strictly accurate in every single respect, nevertheless powerfully conveys an inner emotional truth—a truth that effectively exemplifies representative truths about the lives of black people in general in the American South in the first decades of the 20th century.

The pattern established by the opening description of the fire is repeated consistently throughout the book: Young Richard challenges or defies authority and is swiftly punished, and often the punishment is at the hands of his own family. Perhaps even more memorable (and credible) than the fire episode is the anecdote in which Richard's father, angered by the noise a kitten is making while the father is trying to sleep, impulsively orders his young sons to kill the cat—never assuming that Richard might actually take him at his word. Richard, though, sees the order as an opportunity to defy his father by (paradoxically) obeying him to the letter. Therefore, against his younger brother's protests, Richard lynches the kitten, thus achieving a symbolic victory in a contest of wills with his unappealing parent (12–13). When Richard's mother discovers his deed, she punishes him (this time) not by beating him senseless but by playing on his guilty conscience, thus establishing another repeated pattern: Of the two parents, the mother is the more admirable (despite her occasional violence). Much more than the shiftless, irresponsible, and disloyal father (who later deserts the mother and children for another woman), Richard's mother emerges as a source of moral authority: She is hardworking, self-sacrificing, and devoted to her children, although eventually her persistent ill health prevents her from playing a major role in the narrative. Wright has sometimes been criticized for describing his mother (and indeed many members of his family) with little obvious warmth or

affection, and it is true that he often emphasizes their harshness and sometimes even their cruelty. Defenders of Wright, however, have argued that we should not be surprised if black adults—living in a racist society that denied them much dignity or autonomy—sometimes exercised what may have been excessive authority in dealing with their own children. Moreover, Wright's defenders have also suggested that young Richard innately resisted nearly any and all authority, and so it was only to be expected that he would clash with the people with whom he most often interacted. To be an authentic person (Wright seems to have felt) he needed to assert his independence from everyone and everything, perhaps especially including the people who raised him.

For some readers, Wright's emphasis on the negative aspects of his own family makes the book seem more convincing, as if Wright intended to tell the whole, unvarnished truth, sparing no one in the process. However, even readers willing to accept his unattractive depiction of his relatives have often been troubled by his comments on blacks as a whole, especially since those comments are not the impulsive responses of an immature boy but the considered, retrospective reflections of the adult narrator. In one of the book's most notorious passages, Wright comments on what he calls "the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair." He says that when he "brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man" (37). Wright, it is true, immediately notes that "Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it," and thus that any defects in their culture resulted from their oppression. Nevertheless, many readers (both black and white) have objected to his charge that blacks lacked kindness and tenderness, arguing that the

book itself implicitly refutes this view, particularly when it shows Wright's relatives responding with generosity and compassion to his mother's illness. Indeed, some readers have alleged that it is Wright himself who displays, in this book, defects of kindness and tenderness, not only toward his own family and race but also toward humanity in general and whites in particular, whom he rarely depicts in a favorable light—as if he never encountered a decent or thoughtful Caucasian. In the view of many commentators of both colors, the book is flawed by Wright's allegedly innate egotism, his tendency to focus only on his own thoughts and feelings, his lack of genuine interest in the motives and psychology of others, and his habit of making self-justification and self-aggrandizement major themes of the book. The work, these critics claim, is too unbalanced, too unsubtle, too lacking in shades of gray. Wright's defenders, on the other hand, have argued that his grim pictures of southern racism are accurate, that the narrative is presented with dignity and even restraint, and that the phrasing is clear, vivid, and at times even lyrically beautiful.

Again and again in *Black Boy*, young Richard resists the people and forces that try to control and oppress him. He resists his authoritarian "Granny," with her rigid views of religion, and he resists his domineering aunt Addie, who (both at school as his teacher and at home as his relative) tries to impose her narrow ideas of discipline on him. He resists the school principal who wants to dictate the content of his valedictory speech, and he resists many whites when he can do so safely (as when he refuses to sell a dog to a white woman who wants to buy it). He soon learns, however, that openly defying some whites can be dangerous, and he also learns that some whites will not hesitate to abuse their authority by seeking to intimidate blacks and prevent them from progressing. As the chapters pass and Richard ages, his detailed memories seem more credible and the book becomes more consistently convincing and effective. For instance, his account of his terrified dealings with two racist coworkers is (unfortunately) all too credible and frightening, while his description of his desperate but ingenious efforts to gain access to a local library carries the

ring of truth. There is even a hint of the kind of tenderness that often seems missing from the book when Wright describes his encounters with a kindly widow and her daughter in Memphis, not long before the narrator decides to abandon the South and head for Chicago. Although this move north was not originally intended to end the book (for Wright had written a whole second section detailing his disappointments once he arrived there), in its initially published form *Black Boy* ends on a note of artificial optimism. Its last sentence stresses the "terror" from which the narrator "fled" (246) rather than the new frustrations he would soon face.

Reviewers and commentators have often reacted to *Black Boy* with strongly varying responses. Critics of the book, for instance, have sometimes suggested that the Wright who emerges from this text is so unappealingly self-involved and humorless that he makes a poor representative of his race; such readers contend that the Wright who appears in this book is so antisocial that he would have been unhappy no matter what his color. Readers who dislike the book also argue that its prose is undistinguished and that its psychology is superficial; they contend that the chronology is often unclear, that the text conveys little convincing sense of the larger era and environment, and that Wright tries to base generalizations about black American life on experiences that are far too idiosyncratic and abnormal to be truly representative. These readers often consider the autobiography a less powerful work than *Native Son*. In contrast, numerous other readers have praised *Black Boy* as a highly effective work, sometimes judging it even better than the novel in its style, psychology, and political effectiveness. The book has been praised for its accuracy, its frankness, its skillful characterization, and the insights it provides into the social and family life of African Americans, including their folklore and even their superstitions. Wright's book has been compared to European autobiographies (which tend to emphasize certain key ideas rather than merely relating one event after another), and his emphases on such concepts as language, authenticity, loneliness, tragedy, and hunger (both literal and metaphorical) have been particularly

praised. Admirers have extolled the work for avoiding clichéd responses and for resisting the impulse to propagandize, while more than one commentator has expressed astonishment that Wright, in view of his impoverished environment and degrading early experiences, was able to resist turning either violent or indolent but instead turned his sufferings into the stuff of real intellectual achievement and great art.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *Black Boy* with BOOKER T. WASHINGTON's autobiography titled *Up from Slavery*. Discuss the works in terms of their underlying assumptions, their tones, their credibility, their stylistic traits, and the purposes for which they seem to have been written. Discuss the ways they present "secondary" characters as well as the ways each author presents himself. In what ways does *Native Son* seem to be a deliberate response to, and refutation of, *Up from Slavery*?
2. Compare and contrast *Black Boy* and W. E. B. DuBois's book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In what ways does Wright's book confirm many claims made by DuBois about the South? How do Wright and DuBois seem to differ in their presentations of African-American culture and society? When *Black Boy* was published, DuBois reviewed it and had some fairly negative things to say about the book. Which aspects of *The Souls of Black Folk* would lead you to expect that DuBois might dislike *Black Boy*?
3. Although *Black Boy* is ostensibly a work of non-fiction, and although ZORA NEALE HURSTON's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is ostensibly a work of fiction, how can the works be compared and contrasted in terms of such traits as characterization, dialogue, dialect, symbolism, and imagery? Which work offers a more complex or convincing picture of life in the South or of relations between the races? How do the protagonists of each work face similar challenges? How are their problems distinct?
4. How would you defend Wright against the various criticisms the book has provoked? What are some of the specific arguments you might use?

In the final analysis, how convincing do you find the kinds of objections that have been raised to the book?

***American Hunger* (1977)**

This text was originally conceived as the second part of Wright's autobiography, but while the first part was published separately as *Black Boy* in 1945, the second section remained partially unprinted (except in excerpts) until the 1970s. The book describes Wright's arrival in Chicago, his growth as a writer, and his increasing involvement in (and eventual disillusionment with) the Communist Party. The oppression Wright describes in this work is more ideological than strictly racial, and, as in *Black Boy*, he recounts his efforts to assert and maintain his individuality in the face of numerous pressures to conform.

Whereas the 1945 version of *Black Boy* has received extensive critical attention, relatively little has been published about *American Hunger*, partly because the whole text was not printed until 1977, when interest in Wright's work had temporarily declined from its initial high point in the 1940s. *American Hunger* is also significantly shorter than *Black Boy*, and, because it paints a largely unattractive picture of American communism, reactions to the work have often been affected, for good or ill, by the political orientations of its reviewers and commentators. Most Americans could agree that the racism depicted in *Black Boy* was reprehensible, but in the 1940s and even later, many Americans were less inclined to condemn communism with equal vehemence. Wright himself, in fact, never turned his back completely on Marxist ideas, even though he suspected communists of having helped suppress the originally planned publication of *American Hunger* in the 1940s. Critical reaction to the book when it was finally published in the 1970s varied, but much of it was tepid. Although a few commentators considered the work as powerful, precise, and masterful as *Black Boy*, many others thought it lacked the impact and the skill of its predecessor. These critics found the book too dry, didactic, and

autobiography depend on our ability to find the protagonist appealing in some way? What qualities, in your opinion, make an autobiography worth reading, and how (if at all) do Wright's autobiographies satisfy your criteria?

4. One of Wright's initial admirers was James Baldwin, but Baldwin later attacked Wright on more than one occasion. Research Baldwin's comments on Wright, examine the evidence he presented to support his views, and then explain whether or not you think his later opinions of Wright were justifiable.
5. Wright's political opinions differed significantly from those of Zora Neale Hurston. Research the political views of the two writers and compare and contrast their points of view. Should our political agreement or disagreement with a novelist affect our reactions to the writer's works of fiction? Is it possible to admire the work of a creative writer whose political opinions differ from our own? Discuss the relevance of Ezra Pound's political opinions to this question.
6. When Wright's *Native Son* was first published, it was often compared to JOHN STEINBECK's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Do some research into the economic and political conditions of the United States in the 1930s, and then discuss the ways in which both novels reflect the specific eras in which they were written. In particular, discuss the ways both books intervene in the political debates of the time. How do they seem similar and/or distinct in their political points of view?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Butler, Robert J., ed. *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995.
- Felgar, Robert. *Student Companion to Richard Wright*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Hakutani, Yoshinobu, ed. *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982.
- Kinnamon, Keneth, ed. *Critical Essays on Richard Wright's Native Son*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Mullen, Bill. "Modern American Poetry: Richard Wright." Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/r_r_wright/r_wright.htm. Accessed April 7, 2009.
- Rampersad, Arnold. "Chronology." In *Early Works: Lawd Today! Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son*. By Richard Wright. New York: Library of America, 1991.
- Reilly, John M., ed. *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception*. N.p.: Burt Franklin, 1978.
- Wright, Richard. *Early Works: Lawd Today! Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad. New York: Library of America, 1991.
- . *Eight Men*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1987.
- . *Later Works: Black Boy (American Hunger), The Outsider*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad. New York: Library of America, 1991.

Robert C. Evans

APPENDIX I

Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Adams, Henry	1838–1918	Volume 2	Collins, Billy	1941–	Volume 5
Adams, John, and Abigail Adams	1735–1826 1744–1818	Volume 1	Columbus, Christopher	1451–1506	Volume 1
Albee, Edward	1928–	Volume 4	Cooper, James Fenimore	1789–1851	Volume 1
Alcott, Louisa May	1832–1888	Volume 2	Crane, Hart	1899–1932	Volume 3
Alvarez, Julia	1950–	Volume 5	Crane, Stephen	1871–1900	Volume 2
Anaya, Rudolfo	1937–	Volume 5	Crèvecoeur, J. Hector	1735–1813	Volume 1
Anderson, Sherwood	1876–1942	Volume 3	St. John de Cullen, Countee	1903–1946	Volume 3
Angelou, Maya	1928–	Volume 5	Cummings, E. E.	1894–1962	Volume 3
Baca, Jimmy Santiago	1952–	Volume 5	Davis, Rebecca Harding	1831–1910	Volume 2
Baldwin, James	1924–1987	Volume 4	Dickinson, Emily	1830–1886	Volume 2
Bambara, Toni Cade	1939–	Volume 5	Dos Passos, John	1896–1970	Volume 3
Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Douglass, Frederick	1818–1895	Volume 2
Bellow, Saul	1915–2005	Volume 4	Dove, Rita	1952–	Volume 5
Bierce, Ambrose	1842–1914?	Volume 2	Dreiser, Theodore	1871–1945	Volume 3
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911–1979	Volume 4	DuBois, W. E. B.	1868–1963	Volume 3
Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Dunbar, Paul Laurence	1872–1906	Volume 2
Bradbury, Ray	1920–	Volume 4	Edwards, Jonathan	1703–1758	Volume 1
Bradford, William	1590–1657	Volume 1	Eliot, T. S.	1888–1965	Volume 3
Bradstreet, Anne	1612–1672	Volume 1	Ellison, Ralph	1914–1994	Volume 4
Brooks, Gwendolyn	1917–2000	Volume 4	Emerson, Ralph Waldo	1803–1882	Volume 2
Brown, Charles Brockden	1771–1810	Volume 1	Equiano, Olaudah	1745–1797	Volume 1
Bryant, William Cullen	1794–1878	Volume 1	Erdrich, Louise	1954–	Volume 5
Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez	1490–1556	Volume 1	Faulkner, William	1897–1962	Volume 3
Capote, Truman	1924–1984	Volume 4	Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	1920–	Volume 4
Carver, Raymond	1938–1988	Volume 5	Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Cather, Willa	1873–1947	Volume 3	Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1896–1940	Volume 3
Champlain, Samuel de	1570–1635	Volume 1	Forché, Carolyn	1950–	Volume 5
Cheever, John	1912–1982	Volume 4	Foster, Hannah Webster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Chesnutt, Charles	1858–1932	Volume 2	Franklin, Benjamin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Child, Lydia Maria	1802–1880	Volume 2	Freeman, Mary Eleanor	1852–1930	Volume 2
Chopin, Kate	1850–1904	Volume 2	Wilkins		
Cisneros, Sandra	1954–	Volume 5	Freneau, Philip Morin	1752–1832	Volume 1
Cofer, Judith Ortiz	1952–	Volume 5	Frost, Robert	1874–1963	Volume 3
			Fuller, Margaret	1810–1850	Volume 2
			Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	1860–1935	Volume 2

Ginsberg, Allen	1926–1997	Volume 4	McCarthy, Cormac	1933–	Volume 5
Giovanni, Nikki	1943–	Volume 5	McKay, Claude	1890–1948	Volume 3
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	McMurtry, Larry	1936–	Volume 5
Haley, Alex	1921–1992	Volume 4	Melville, Herman	1819–1891	Volume 2
Hammon, Jupiter	1711–1806	Volume 1	Millay, Edna St. Vincent	1892–1950	Volume 3
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Miller, Arthur	1915–2005	Volume 4
Hansberry, Lorraine	1930–1965	Volume 4	Momaday, N. Scott	1934–	Volume 4
Harjo, Joy	1951–	Volume 5	Moore, Marianne	1887–1972	Volume 3
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins	1825–1911	Volume 2	Mora, Pat	1942–	Volume 5
Harris, Joel Chandler	1848–1908	Volume 2	Morrison, Toni	1931–	Volume 5
Harte, Bret	1836–1902	Volume 2	Morton, Thomas	1579–1647	Volume 1
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	1804–1864	Volume 2	Murray, Judith Sargent	1751–1820	Volume 1
Hayden, Robert	1913–1980	Volume 4	Oates, Joyce Carol	1938–	Volume 5
Heller, Joseph	1923–1999	Volume 4	O'Brien, Tim	1946–	Volume 5
Hemingway, Ernest	1899–1961	Volume 3	Occom, Samson	1723–1792	Volume 1
Howells, William Dean	1837–1920	Volume 2	O'Connor, Flannery	1925–1964	Volume 4
Hughes, Langston	1871–1967	Volume 3	Oliver, Mary	1935–	Volume 5
Hurston, Zora Neale	1891–1960	Volume 3	O'Neill, Eugene	1888–1953	Volume 3
Irving, Washington	1783–1859	Volume 1	Ortiz, Simon J.	1941–	Volume 5
Jackson, Shirley	1919–1965	Volume 4	Paine, Thomas	1737–1809	Volume 1
Jacobs, Harriet	1813–1897	Volume 2	Piatt, Sarah M. B.	1836–1919	Volume 2
James, Henry	1843–1916	Volume 2	Pinsky, Robert	1940–	Volume 5
Jarrell, Randall	1914–1965	Volume 4	Plath, Sylvia	1932–1963	Volume 4
Jefferson, Thomas	1743–1826	Volume 1	Poe, Edgar Allan	1809–1849	Volume 2
Jewett, Sarah Orne	1849–1909	Volume 2	Porter, Katherine Anne	1890–1980	Volume 3
Kerouac, Jack	1922–1969	Volume 4	Potok, Chaim	1929–2002	Volume 4
Kesey, Ken	1935–2001	Volume 4	Pound, Ezra	1885–1972	Volume 3
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4	Rand, Ayn	1905–1982	Volume 4
Kingsolver, Barbara	1955–	Volume 5	Reed, Ishmael	1938–	Volume 5
Kingston, Maxine Hong	1940–	Volume 5	Rich, Adrienne	1929–	Volume 5
Knowles, John	1926–2001	Volume 4	Robinson, Edwin Arlington	1869–1935	Volume 3
Komunyakaa, Yusef	1947–	Volume 5	Roethke, Theodore	1908–1963	Volume 4
Larsen, Nella	1891–1964	Volume 3	Roth, Philip	1933–	Volume 4
Lee, Chang-rae	1965–	Volume 5	Rowson,	1762–1824	Volume 1
Lee, Harper	1926–	Volume 4	Susanna Haswell		
Levertov, Denise	1923–1997	Volume 4	Salinger, J. D.	1919–2010	Volume 4
London, Jack	1876–1916	Volume 3	Sandburg, Carl	1878–1967	Volume 3
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth	1807–1882	Volume 2	Sedgwick, Catharine Maria	1789–1867	Volume 1
Lowell, Robert	1917–1977	Volume 4	Sexton, Anne	1928–1974	Volume 4
Malamud, Bernard	1914–1986	Volume 4	Silko, Leslie Marmon	1948–	Volume 5
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4	Smith, John	1580–1631	Volume 1
Marshall, Paule	1929–	Volume 4	Snyder, Gary	1930–	Volume 5
Mather, Cotton	1663–1728	Volume 1	Soto, Gary	1952–	Volume 5

Stein, Gertrude	1874–1946	Volume 3	Walker, Alice	1944–	Volume 5
Steinbeck, John	1902–1968	Volume 3	Warren, Robert Penn	1905–1989	Volume 4
Stevens, Wallace	1879–1955	Volume 3	Washington, Booker T.	1856–1915	Volume 3
Stowe, Harriet Beecher	1811–1896	Volume 2	Welty, Eudora	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Wharton, Edith	1862–1937	Volume 3
Swenson, May	1913–1989	Volume 4	Wheatley, Phillis	1753–1784	Volume 1
Tan, Amy	1952–	Volume 5	Whitman, Walt	1819–1892	Volume 2
Taylor, Edward	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Wilbur, Richard	1921–	Volume 4
Thoreau, Henry David	1817–1862	Volume 2	Wilder, Thornton	1897–1975	Volume 3
Toomer, Jean	1894–1967	Volume 3	Williams, Tennessee	1911–1983	Volume 4
Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2	Williams, William Carlos	1883–1961	Volume 3
Updike, John	1932–2009	Volume 4	Wilson, August	1945–2005	Volume 5
Viramontes, Helena María	1954–	Volume 5	Wilson, Harriet E.	1825–1900	Volume 2
Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4	Winthrop, John	1588–1649	Volume 1
			Wright, Richard	1908–1960	Volume 3

APPENDIX II

Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, by Birth Date

Note that authors are placed in the volume that covers the period during which they published their most important works. Some authors published their works relatively early or relatively late in their lives. This explains why, for example, certain authors placed in Volume 3 were actually born before certain authors placed in volume 2.

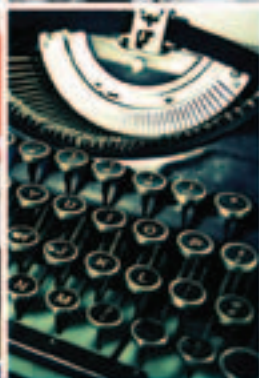
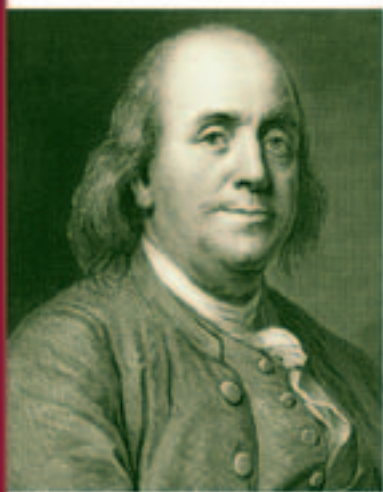
Christopher Columbus	1451–1506	Volume 1	William Cullen Bryant	1794–1878	Volume 1
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	1490–1556	Volume 1	Lydia Maria Child	1802–1880	Volume 2
Samuel de Champlain	1570–1635	Volume 1	Ralph Waldo Emerson	1803–1882	Volume 2
Thomas Morton	1579–1647	Volume 1	Nathaniel Hawthorne	1804–1864	Volume 2
John Smith	1580–1631	Volume 1	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	1807–1882	Volume 2
John Winthrop	1588–1649	Volume 1	Edgar Allan Poe	1809–1849	Volume 2
William Bradford	1590–1657	Volume 1	Margaret Fuller	1810–1850	Volume 2
Anne Bradstreet	1612–1672	Volume 1	Fanny Fern	1811–1872	Volume 2
Edward Taylor	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	(Sara Willis Parton)		
Cotton Mather	1663–1728	Volume 1	Harriet Beecher Stowe	1811–1896	Volume 2
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	Volume 1	Harriet Jacobs	1813–1897	Volume 2
Benjamin Franklin	1706–1790	Volume 1	Henry David Thoreau	1817–1862	Volume 2
Jupiter Hammon	1711–1806	Volume 1	Frederick Douglass	1818–1895	Volume 2
Samson Occom	1723–1792	Volume 1	Herman Melville	1819–1891	Volume 2
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	1735–1813	Volume 1	Walt Whitman	1819–1892	Volume 2
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	1825–1911	Volume 2
John Adams	1735–1826	Volume 1	Harriet E. Wilson	1825–1900	Volume 2
Thomas Paine	1737–1809	Volume 1	Emily Dickinson	1830–1886	Volume 2
Thomas Jefferson	1743–1826	Volume 1	Rebecca Harding Davis	1831–1910	Volume 2
Abigail Adams	1744–1818	Volume 1	Louisa May Alcott	1832–1888	Volume 2
Olaudah Equiano	1745–1797	Volume 1	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Judith Sargent Murray	1751–1820	Volume 1	Bret Harte	1836–1902	Volume 2
Philip Morin Freneau	1752–1832	Volume 1	Sarah M. B. Piatt	1836–1919	Volume 2
Phillis Wheatley	1753–1784	Volume 1	William Dean Howells	1837–1920	Volume 2
Hannah Webster Foster	1758–1840	Volume 1	Henry Adams	1838–1918	Volume 2
Susanna Haswell Rowson	1762–1824	Volume 1	Ambrose Bierce	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Charles Brockden Brown	1771–1810	Volume 1	Henry James	1843–1916	Volume 2
Washington Irving	1783–1859	Volume 1	Joel Chandler Harris	1848–1908	Volume 2
James Fenimore Cooper	1789–1851	Volume 1	Sarah Orne Jewett	1849–1909	Volume 2
Catharine Maria Sedgwick	1789–1867	Volume 1			

Kate Chopin	1850–1904	Volume 2	Countee Cullen	1903–1946	Volume 3
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	1852–1930	Volume 2	Ayn Rand	1905–1982	Volume 4
Booker T. Washington	1856–1915	Volume 3	Robert Penn Warren	1905–1989	Volume 4
Charles Chesnutt	1858–1932	Volume 2	Richard Wright	1908–1960	Volume 3
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	1860–1935	Volume 2	Theodore Roethke	1908–1963	Volume 4
Edith Wharton	1862–1937	Volume 3	Eudora Welty	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Elizabeth Bishop	1911–1979	Volume 4
W. E. B. DuBois	1868–1963	Volume 3	Tennessee Williams	1911–1983	Volume 4
Edwin Arlington Robinson	1869–1935	Volume 3	John Cheever	1912–1982	Volume 4
Stephen Crane	1871–1900	Volume 2	Robert Hayden	1913–1980	Volume 4
Theodore Dreiser	1871–1945	Volume 3	May Swenson	1913–1989	Volume 4
Langston Hughes	1871–1967	Volume 3	Randall Jarrell	1914–1965	Volume 4
Paul Laurence Dunbar	1872–1906	Volume 2	Bernard Malamud	1914–1986	Volume 4
Willa Cather	1873–1947	Volume 3	Ralph Ellison	1914–1994	Volume 4
Gertrude Stein	1874–1946	Volume 3	Saul Bellow	1915–2005	Volume 4
Robert Frost	1874–1963	Volume 3	Arthur Miller	1915–2005	Volume 4
Jack London	1876–1916	Volume 3	Robert Lowell	1917–1977	Volume 4
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Gwendolyn Brooks	1917–2000	Volume 4
Sherwood Anderson	1876–1942	Volume 3	Shirley Jackson	1919–1965	Volume 4
Carl Sandburg	1878–1967	Volume 3	J. D. Salinger	1919–2010	Volume 4
Wallace Stevens	1879–1955	Volume 3	Ray Bradbury	1920–	Volume 4
William Carlos Williams	1883–1961	Volume 3	Lawrence Ferlinghetti	1920–	Volume 4
Ezra Pound	1885–1972	Volume 3	Richard Wilbur	1921–	Volume 4
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	Alex Haley	1921–1992	Volume 4
Marianne Moore	1887–1972	Volume 3	Jack Kerouac	1922–1969	Volume 4
Eugene O’Neill	1888–1953	Volume 3	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4
T. S. Eliot	1888–1965	Volume 3	Denise Levertov	1923–1997	Volume 4
Claude McKay	1890–1948	Volume 3	Joseph Heller	1923–1999	Volume 4
Katherine Anne Porter	1890–1980	Volume 3	James Baldwin	1924–1987	Volume 4
Zora Neale Hurston	1891–1960	Volume 3	Truman Capote	1924–1984	Volume 4
Nella Larsen	1891–1964	Volume 3	Flannery O’Connor	1925–1964	Volume 4
Edna St. Vincent Millay	1892–1950	Volume 3	Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
E. E. Cummings	1894–1962	Volume 3	Harper Lee	1926–	Volume 4
Jean Toomer	1894–1967	Volume 3	Allen Ginsberg	1926–1997	Volume 4
F. Scott Fitzgerald	1896–1940	Volume 3	John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
John Dos Passos	1896–1970	Volume 3	John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
William Faulkner	1897–1962	Volume 3	Edward Albee	1928–	Volume 4
Thornton Wilder	1897–1975	Volume 3	Maya Angelou	1928–	Volume 5
Hart Crane	1899–1932	Volume 3	Anne Sexton	1928–1974	Volume 4
Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961	Volume 3	Paule Marshall	1929–	Volume 4
John Steinbeck	1902–1968	Volume 3	Adrienne Rich	1929–	Volume 5
			Martin Luther King, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
			Chaim Potok	1929–2002	Volume 4
			Gary Snyder	1930–	Volume 5
			Lorraine Hansberry	1930–1965	Volume 4
			Toni Morrison	1931–	Volume 5

Sylvia Plath	1932–1963	Volume 4	Nikki Giovanni	1943–	Volume 5
John Updike	1932–2009	Volume 4	Alice Walker	1944–	Volume 5
Cormac McCarthy	1933–	Volume 5	August Wilson	1945–2005	Volume 5
Philip Roth	1933–	Volume 4	Tim O'Brien	1946–	Volume 5
N. Scott Momaday	1934–	Volume 4	Yusef Komunyakaa	1947–	Volume 5
Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Leslie Marmon Silko	1948–	Volume 5
Mary Oliver	1935–	Volume 5	Julia Alvarez	1950–	Volume 5
Ken Kesey	1935–2001	Volume 4	Carolyn Forché	1950–	Volume 5
Larry McMurtry	1936–	Volume 5	Joy Harjo	1951–	Volume 5
Rudolfo Anaya	1937–	Volume 5	Jimmy Santiago Baca	1952–	Volume 5
Joyce Carol Oates	1938–	Volume 5	Judith Ortiz Cofer	1952–	Volume 5
Ishmael Reed	1938–	Volume 5	Rita Dove	1952–	Volume 5
Raymond Carver	1938–1988	Volume 5	Gary Soto	1952–	Volume 5
Toni Cade Bambara	1939–	Volume 5	Amy Tan	1952–	Volume 5
Maxine Hong Kingston	1940–	Volume 5	Sandra Cisneros	1954–	Volume 5
Robert Pinsky	1940–	Volume 5	Louise Erdrich	1954–	Volume 5
Billy Collins	1941–	Volume 5	Helena María Viramontes	1954–	Volume 5
Simon J. Ortiz	1941–	Volume 5	Barbara Kingsolver	1955–	Volume 5
Pat Mora	1942–	Volume 5	Chang-rae Lee	1965–	Volume 5

STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS





**STUDENT'S
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
GREAT AMERICAN
WRITERS**

VOLUME IV: 1945 TO 1970



STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

VOLUME IV: 1945 TO 1970

BLAKE HOBBY

PATRICIA M. GANTT, GENERAL EDITOR

 **Facts On File**
An imprint of Infobase Publishing

Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers, 1945 to 1970

Copyright © 2010 by Blake Hobby

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Student's encyclopedia of great American writers / Patricia Gantt, general editor.
v. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: [1] Beginnings to 1830 / Andrea Tinnemeyer — [2] 1830 to 1900 / Paul Crumbley — [3] 1900 to 1945 / Robert C. Evans — [4] 1945 to 1970 / Blake Hobby — [5] 1970 to the present / Patricia Gantt.

ISBN 978-0-8160-6087-0 (hardcover: acid-free paper) ISBN 978-1-4381-3125-2 (e-book) 1.
Authors, American—Biography—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. 2. American literature—Encyclopedias,
Juvenile. I. Tinnemeyer, Andrea. II. Gantt, Patricia M., 1943–
PS129.S83 2009
810.9'0003—dc22
[B]

2009030783

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text design by Annie O'Donnell
Composition by Mary Susan Ryan-Flynn
Cover printed by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Book printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Date printed: June 2010
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

List of Writers and Works Included	vi	Malcolm X	310
Series Preface	xi	Paule Marshall	322
Volume Introduction	xii	Arthur Miller	336
Edward Albee	1	N. Scott Momaday	352
James Baldwin	13	Flannery O'Connor	366
Saul Bellow	33	Sylvia Plath	383
Elizabeth Bishop	46	Chaim Potok	402
Ray Bradbury	63	Ayn Rand	412
Gwendolyn Brooks	76	Theodore Roethke	425
Truman Capote	90	Philip Roth	438
John Cheever	96	J. D. Salinger	451
Ralph Ellison	107	Anne Sexton	466
Lawrence Ferlinghetti	121	May Swenson	479
Allen Ginsberg	131	John Updike	491
Alex Haley	145	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	504
Lorraine Hansberry	151	Robert Penn Warren	521
Robert Hayden	163	Eudora Welty	535
Joseph Heller	178	Richard Wilbur	548
Shirley Jackson	191	Tennessee Williams	559
Randall Jarrell	196		
Jack Kerouac	206		
Ken Kesey	218	Appendix I: Alphabetical List of Writers	
Martin Luther King, Jr.	227	Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's</i>	
John Knowles	243	<i>Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i>	576
Harper Lee	252	Appendix II: Chronological List of Writers	
Denise Levertov	261	Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's</i>	
Robert Lowell	279	<i>Encyclopedia of Great American Writers,</i>	
Bernard Malamud	296	by Birth Date	579

LIST OF WRITERS AND WORKS INCLUDED

Edward Albee	1	“The Moose” (1972)	
<i>The Zoo Story</i> (1959)		“One Art” (1976)	
<i>The Sandbox</i> (1960)		“Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” (1948)	
<i>Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> (1962)			
James Baldwin	13	Ray Bradbury	63
<i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> (1953)		<i>The Martian Chronicles</i> (1950)	
<i>Notes of a Native Son</i> (1955)		“There Will Come Soft Rains” (1950)	
<i>Giovanni’s Room</i> (1956)		<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> (1953)	
“Sonny’s Blues” (1957)		<i>Dandelion Wine</i> (1957)	
<i>The Fire Next Time</i> (1963)		Gwendolyn Brooks	76
<i>Blues for Mr. Charlie</i> (1964)		“kitchenette building” (1945)	
“The Rockpile” (in <i>Going to Meet the Man</i> , 1965)		“the mother” (1945)	
Saul Bellow	33	“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (1960)	
“Looking for Mr. Green” (1951)		“The Chicago <i>Defender</i> Sends a Man to Little Rock” (1960)	
<i>The Adventures of Augie March</i> (1954)		“We Real Cool” (1960)	
<i>Seize the Day</i> (1956)		“Riot” (1969)	
<i>Herzog</i> (1964)			
<i>Humboldt’s Gift</i> (1975)			
Elizabeth Bishop	46	Truman Capote	90
“The Man-Moth” (1936)		<i>In Cold Blood</i> (1965)	
“The Unbeliever” (1938)			
“The Fish” (1940)		John Cheever	96
“At the Fishhouses” (1948)		“The Enormous Radio” (1947)	
“Questions of Travel” (1956)		<i>The Wapshot Chronicle</i> (1957)	
“Filling Station” (1964)		“The Death of Justina” (1961)	
“Sestina” (1964)		“The Swimmer” (1964)	
“In the Waiting Room” (1971)			

- Ralph Ellison** 107
 “King of the Bingo Game” (1944)
 “Flying Home” (1944)
Invisible Man (1952)
 “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” (1953)
 “The World and the Jug” (1963, 1964)
 “A Party Down the Square” (1996)
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti** 121
 “Constantly Risking Absurdity” (1958)
 “Dove Sta Amore” (1958)
 “I Am Waiting” (1958)
 “In Golden Gate Park That Day” (1958)
 “In Goya’s Greatest Scenes We Seem to See” (1958)
 “The Old Italians Dying” (1979)
 “A Dark Portrait” (1984)
 “Monet’s Lilies Shuddering” (1988)
- Allen Ginsberg** 131
 “On Burroughs’ Work” (1954)
 “A Supermarket in California” (1955)
 “Sunflower Sutra” (1955)
 “America” (1956)
 “Howl” (1956)
 “To Aunt Rose” (1958)
 “Ego Confession” (1974)
- Alex Haley** 145
Roots: The Saga of an American Family (1976)
- Lorraine Hansberry** 151
A Raisin in the Sun (1959)
 “On Summer” (1960)
The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality (1964)
- The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window** (1964)
- Robert Hayden** 163
 “Frederick Douglass” (1946)
 “Homage to the Empress of the Blues” (1962)
 “Middle Passage” (1962)
 “Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sundays” (1962)
 “Runagate Runagate” (1962)
 “Summertime and the Living . . .” (1962)
 “Those Winter Sundays” (1962)
 “Tour 5” (1962)
 “The Night-Blooming Cereus” (1972)
 “Free Fantasia: Tiger Flowers” (1975)
- Joseph Heller** 178
Catch-22 (1961)
Something Happened (1974)
- Shirley Jackson** 191
 “The Lottery” (1948)
- Randall Jarrell** 196
 “90 North” (1942)
 “Losses” (1945)
 “Protocols” (1945)
 “Second Air Force” (1945)
 “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (1945)
 “Next Day” (1965)
 “Well Water” (1965)
- Jack Kerouac** 206
On the Road (1957)
The Dharma Bums (1958)
The Subterraneans (1958)
 “The Vanishing American Hobo” (1960)

- Ken Kesey** 218
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962)
Sometimes a Great Notion (1964)
- Martin Luther King, Jr.** 227
Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (1958)
"I Have a Dream" (1963)
"Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963)
Why We Can't Wait (1964)
Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (1967)
"I've Been to the Mountaintop" (1969)
- John Knowles** 243
A Separate Peace (1959)
Peace Breaks Out (1981)
- Harper Lee** 252
To Kill a Mockingbird (1960)
- Denise Levertov** 261
"Illustrious Ancestors" (1958)
"To the Snake" (1960)
"A Solitude" (1961)
"September 1961" (1961)
"The Jacob's Ladder" (1961)
"In Mind" (1964)
"What Were They Like?" (1967)
"A Woman Alone" (1978)
"Death in Mexico" (1978)
"The May Mornings" (1982)
"Caedmon" (1987)
"Making Peace" (1987)
- Robert Lowell** 279
"Colloquy in Black Rock" (1946)
"Mr. Edwards and the Spider" (1946)
- "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (1946)
"Memories of West Street and Lepke" (1959)
"My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" (1959)
"Skunk Hour" (1959)
"For the Union Dead" (1960)
"Night Sweat" (1963)
"For Theodore Roethke" (1967)
"Near the Ocean" (1967)
- Bernard Malamud** 296
"The First Seven Years" (1950)
The Natural (1952)
"The Magic Barrel" (1954)
"Black Is My Favorite Color" (1963)
"The Jewbird" (1963)
- Malcolm X** 310
The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley (1965)
Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (1965)
By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X (1970)
- Paule Marshall** 322
Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959)
The Chosen Place, the Timeless People (1969)
"To Da-duh, in Memoriam" (1976)
Praisesong for the Widow (1983)
- Arthur Miller** 336
Death of a Salesman (1949)
The Crucible (1953)
A View from the Bridge (1955, revised 1956)

N. Scott Momaday	352	Theodore Roethke	425
<i>House Made of Dawn</i> (1968)		“The Adamant” (1941)	
<i>The Way to Rainy Mountain</i> (1969)		“The Light Comes Brighter” (1941)	
<i>The Names: A Memoir</i> (1976)		“Big Wind” (1948)	
		“Cuttings”/“Cuttings (later)” (1948)	
Flannery O’Connor	366	“My Papa’s Waltz” (1948)	
“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1953)		“Root Cellar” (1948)	
“The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953)		“The Lost Son” (1948)	
“A Circle in the Fire” (1954)		“Weed Puller” (1948)	
“The Displaced Person” (1954, revised 1955)		“The Waking” (1953)	
“Good Country People” (1955)		“Elegy” (1958)	
“Everything That Rises Must Converge” (1961)		“Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz” (1958)	
“Revelation” (1964)		“The Far Field” (1964)	
		Philip Roth	438
Sylvia Plath	383	<i>Goodbye, Columbus</i> (1959)	
“Morning Song” (1961)		“Defender of the Faith” (1959)	
“Blackberrying” (1961)		<i>Portnoy’s Complaint</i> (1969)	
“For a Fatherless Son” (1962)		<i>American Pastoral</i> (1997)	
“Daddy” (1962)		<i>The Human Stain</i> (2000)	
“Fever 103°” (1962)			
“Ariel” (1962)		J. D. Salinger	451
“Lady Lazarus” (1962)		“A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (1948)	
“Child” (1963)		“For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” (1950)	
“Mirror” (1963)		<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> (1951)	
<i>The Bell Jar</i> (1963)		“Teddy” (1953)	
		“Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” (1955)	
Chaim Potok	402	<i>Franny and Zooey</i> (1961)	
<i>The Chosen</i> (1967)			
<i>The Promise</i> (1969)		Anne Sexton	466
<i>My Name Is Asher Lev</i> (1972)		“Her Kind” (1960)	
		“Housewife” (1962)	
Ayn Rand	412	<i>The Death of the Fathers</i> (1962)	
<i>We the Living</i> (1936)		“The Starry Night” (1962)	
<i>Anthem</i> (1938)		<i>The Truth the Dead Know</i> (1962)	
<i>The Fountainhead</i> (1943)			
<i>Atlas Shrugged</i> (1957)			

- “Young” (1962)
 “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” (1966)
 “Somewhere in Africa” (1966)
- May Swenson** 479
 “By Morning” (1952)
 “Deciding” (1954)
 “Question” (1954)
 “The Centaur” (1954)
 “Water Picture” (1955)
 “The Truth Is Forced” (1961)
 “The Woods at Night” (1962)
 “Blue”/“A Trellis for R.” (1967)
- John Updike** 491
Rabbit, Run (1960)
 “A&P” (1961)
 “Separating” (1975)
The Witches of Eastwick (1984)
 “Brother Grasshopper” (1987)
 “The Brown Chest” (1992)
- Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.** 504
 “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” (1950)
 “Harrison Bergeron” (1961)
Cat’s Cradle (1963)
Slaughterhouse-Five; or, The Children’s Crusade, A Duty-Dance with Death (1969)
Breakfast of Champions; or, Goodbye Blue Monday! (1973)
- Robert Penn Warren** 521
 “Bearded Oaks” (1942)
All the King’s Men (1946)
- “Gold Glade” (1957)
Audubon: A Vision (1969)
 “American Portrait: Old Style” (1976)
 “Evening Hawk” (1977)
 “Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn” (1980)
 “After the Dinner Party” (1985)
 “Mortal Limit” (1985)
- Eudora Welty** 535
 “Petrified Man” (1939)
 “Why I Live at the P.O.” (1941)
 “A Worn Path” (1941)
 “The Wide Net” (1942)
 “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (1963)
One Writer’s Beginnings (1984)
- Richard Wilbur** 548
 “The Beautiful Changes” (1947)
 “A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness” (1950)
 “Ceremony” (1950)
 “The Death of a Toad” (1950)
 “Years-End” (1950)
 “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” (1956)
 “The Mind-Reader” (1976)
- Tennessee Williams** 559
The Glass Menagerie (1944)
A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955)
The Night of the Iguana (1961)

SERIES PREFACE

The *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* is a unique reference intended to help high school students meet standards for literature education and prepare themselves for literature study in college. It offers extensive entries on important authors, as well as providing additional interpretive helps for students and their teachers. The set has been designed and written in the context of the national standards for English language arts, created by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, the two professional organizations that have the most at stake in high school language arts education (see <http://www.ncte.org/standards>).

The volume editors and many of the contributors to this set not only are university scholars but also have experience in secondary school literature education, ranging from working as readers of Advanced Placement examinations, to developing high school literature curricula, to having taught in high school English classrooms. Although the volume editors all have extensive experience as scholars and university professors, they all have strong roots in high school education and have drawn on their experience to ensure that entries are stylistically appealing and contain the necessary content for students.

The set's five volumes are organized chronologically, as many literature textbooks and anthologies are. This system is convenient for students and also facilitates cross-disciplinary study, increasingly common in high schools. For example, a section on the Civil War in history class might be accompanied by the study of Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane in English class. To help students find what they need, each volume contains two lists of all the authors included in the set: one organized chronologically and the other alphabetically.

Within each volume, authors are presented alphabetically. Each author entry contains a biography and then subentries on the author's major works.

After each subentry on a work is a set of questions for discussion and/or writing. Another set of broader discussion questions appears near the end of each author entry, followed by a bibliography. The entire five-volume set therefore contains more than 1000 discussion questions. These questions make up perhaps the most important and useful features of the set, encouraging further creative thought and helping students get started on their own writing. Many of the questions reference not only the subject literary work or author but also related works and authors, thus helping students to make additional literary connections, as emphasized by the literature standards.

The authors and works included in the set were selected primarily from among those most popular in the high school classrooms—that is, those often featured in secondary-school literary anthologies and textbooks; those often appearing on age-appropriate reading lists; and those most often searched for in Facts On File's online literary database Bloom's Literature Online, used primarily in high schools. In addition, we have endeavored to include a range of writers from different backgrounds in all periods, as well as writers who, though not perhaps among the very most popular today, appear to have been unjustly neglected and are gaining in popularity. No selection could be perfect, and those writers favored by scholars and critics are not always as popular in the high school classroom, but the general editor and volumes editors have attempted to make the set's coverage as useful to students as possible.

Above all, we hope that this set serves not only to instruct but also to inspire students with the love of literature shared by all the editors and contributors who worked on this set.

Patricia M. Gantt

VOLUME INTRODUCTION

As with the founding of the United States and the fighting of the Civil War, the period of 1945–70 was a time of civic unrest. Great writers from this era witnessed the seismic social changes taking place—everything from the sprawling of American cities to the end of Jim Crow laws—and used language to reflect the social order and to challenge it, undermine it, and change it. During this time literature became a far more democratic enterprise. Drawing upon a wide range of voices and cultures, American writers, as bards of an emerging culture, forged meaning out of isolation, suffering, violence, and pain. They recorded the turbulent past, lamented the broken present, and envisioned a better future, all the while presenting us with remarkable aesthetic creations. Literature from this period (often called the postwar period) not only helped define an age but also helped shape an emerging American consciousness. Important, socially conscious books from this period, such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both of which were best sellers that raised moral questions and addressed sensitive issues of race, have been read by generations of American readers and writers. Other major writers of the time, such as James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Randall Jarrell, Bernard Malamud, J. D. Salinger, Ayn Rand, John Updike, Eudora Welty, and Richard Wilbur, also raised perplexing questions. They questioned what we have known and can know and have done and should have done and what we might do tomorrow. This period contained the seeds from which our present multicultural society has grown.

When we read postwar American literature, rather than find definitive moral truths or easy answers, we confront questions: Who are we? How do we respond to global conflicts, mass genocide, nuclear proliferation, and civil unrest? How can we, as a nation in which technology and mass pro-

duction play an ever-increasing role, establish more humane ways of organizing society and living with one another? It was during this 25-year span that we learned the horrific details of Adolf Hitler’s “final solution”; witnessed the Nuremberg trials; integrated public schools, colleges, and universities; met such American civil rights heroes and heroines as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks; fought the Korean and cold wars; witnessed the sexual revolution; grew to love television; and sent astronauts to the Moon. While we prospered as a society, we confronted bitter truths about our own inhumane actions, both at home and abroad, and about the underlying issues that plagued and continue to haunt American society: xenophobia, racism, sexism, classism. During this key period of American history, authors wrestled with concerns central to our identity. Thus, the voices of great American writers from this period range from deep skepticism to unbridled optimism and encompass a variety of perspectives hitherto unknown in America’s literature: Kurt Vonnegut and Edward Albee’s comic, absurd imaginings; Flannery O’Connor and Tennessee Williams’s southern grotesqueries; Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X’s demands for justice; Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, and Alan Ginsberg’s radical “Beatnik” creations; Philip Roth’s sex-obsessed fictions; Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton’s confessional poetry.

To examine this literature is to confront paradox. Here we encounter literature’s wily nature, its resistance to simple interpretations, and its reflection of what we sometimes refer to as the ensuing action: the many things that are influential in history making. There is no doubt that we crave solutions, seek answers, and rely upon writers to help us identify what we might hold on to, what we might let go of, and what we need to make anew. But the literature from this period focuses on the fragmented experience of postwar America, one that

differs from the experience of the first half of the 20th century. Many writers from the first half of the century employed complex systems of symbols and intricate narrative techniques while attempting to elevate art to the status of religion. These writers, whom we often refer to as modernists, viewed art as a substitute for failed meaning-making systems. Modernist writers made things new in an effort to correct what many thought was a fallen world, where our connection with the divine had been severed. Many of them thought that only art could reconnect us with what had been lost and offer a chance for redemption. Here we find William Faulkner hunting for “verities” in “The Bear,” F. Scott Fitzgerald watching above *The Great Gatsby*’s Valley of the Ashes, and Zora Neale Hurston weaving folklore and myth into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While such literature attempts to provide a moral corrective, postwar literature is far less attached to sacred truths.

Challenging accepted conventions and what we normally conceive of as formal literature, postwar American writers often adopted new language and employed novel forms. For example, Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* (1961) follows what John Becker calls “a minimalist approach to plot, characterization, stage setting, and dialogue, which is filled with clichéd phrases and meaningless exchanges.” In doing so, Albee criticizes what he sees as an illusion, the postwar American ideal of happiness, one predicated on attaining material goods, wealth, and status. In the tradition of Mark Twain, Horatio Alger, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Albee provides social commentary, toying with our expectations, foiling them at every turn, and ultimately leading us to reimagine our lives. So too do the “beatniks”—Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg—refract postwar life, forcing us to look at the dark side of the American dream and speaking out on a range of issues, from drug use to the Vietnam War to the nuclear arms race to gay rights. Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) assails us with the percussive language of the streets, decries social injustice, and speaks for a generation disillusioned by the ter-

ror of Joseph McCarthy, who sought to purge the social order of dissidents, often labeled by McCarthy as communists. Ginsberg’s poetry survived an obscenity trial that became a landmark case for the freedom of speech. Writing about what Earen Rast calls “the control American cultural values exert on individual psyches,” Arthur Miller not only created the McCarthy-trial allegory *The Crucible*, but also gave us *Death of a Salesman*, where Willy Loman’s ideals are “embodied within the American mythos—self-reliance, economic salvation, individual freedom.” These principles, taken by many as American’s promise of freedom, become nightmares for Miller. As Rast tells us, “Cleaved from these values, Willy is an empty shell. In the final confrontation, Biff eviscerates not only everything Willy considers meaningful, but also the distinction between American ‘reality’ and American mythology.”

Known for his wit, comically absurd works, and humanitarian vision, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—perhaps the greatest American satirist since Mark Twain—became an icon for the “baby-boomer” generation, those born during post–World War II years. Idolized by the American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, Kurt Vonnegut spoke to a generation disillusioned by ineffective institutions, the nuclear arms race, and the Vietnam War. Although some consider him to be a period writer, Vonnegut’s works continue to be read and taught, especially his powerful exploration of the bombing of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Although Vonnegut abhorred being called a science-fiction writer, he created experimental, fantastic worlds populated with grotesque characters in order to address contemporary sociopolitical concerns. As Vonnegut says, “I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘science fiction’ . . . and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal” (*Wampeters* 1). Questioning who we are, why we are here, and what it is that we as social beings should be doing, Vonnegut’s bitterly satirical works depict a world in which God is strangely absent, where stock characters and fantastical creations negotiate chance

events, often amid alien creatures and with the aid of time-traveling machines and horrific forms of technology. Vonnegut comments on the limits of reason, the illusion of progress, the horrors of war, the absurdity of nuclear proliferation, the reality of class differences, the construct of race, and the need for human beings to erect systems of meaning, such as the religion of Bokonon in his 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle*. Combining high hilarity with what some consider pessimistic depictions of humanity's frailty and self-centered tendencies, Vonnegut examines the delusions that distract us from real, pressing social concerns. By lauding the power of fiction to reenvision our place in the world, and by challenging us to create a better, more humane society, Vonnegut earned himself a secure place in the canon of American fiction.

While Vonnegut addressed social concerns as a comic writer, Robert Penn Warren addressed them as a tragic writer. In his great novel *All the King's Men*, he uses the experience of Jack Burden to examine American society and the American political system. Jack is ambivalent about his own actions and interpretations and is ambivalent about his mentor, Willie Stark, the literary counterpart of the real Louisiana governor Huey Long. Yet Jack accepts "the awful responsibility of Time": how his own ideas, actions, and words have meanings that affect everyone joined in the "web of being." As the narrative progresses and as Jack learns about the complex web of the political world, we also learn about Willie's disillusionment and about the many questionable decisions he makes. As do Sophocles' Oedipus and many other tragic figures, Willie Stark fails to reach his potential. Ultimately, *All the King's Men* explores such grand themes as the way history affects the present, the inherent dangers of power (which in the novel is portrayed as a corruptive, blinding force), the alienation of the individual in the modern world, and the duty we all have to understand ourselves, come to terms with our past, and accept responsibility for our lives and the ways they affect others. These themes emerge as Jack Burden realizes his identity against the mercu-rial rise and fall of Willie Stark. History functions in the novel as the backdrop against which War-

ren explores our lives and the tragic nature of the human condition.

During this same period, much American poetry was confessional in nature, especially the work of Anne Sexton, May Swenson, and Sylvia Plath. By introducing unheard voices of those who suffer from roles imposed upon them by society, these authors cause us to consider the condition of women in postwar America. Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* portrays a suffering woman artist fighting with her own demons, laboring to know herself, searching for an acceptable role to play, and seeking fulfillment and joy. As does the work of Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf, the novel speaks to those trapped with self-doubts, groping to find a way through the seemingly endless corridors of the mind. It deals with understanding, the struggle between self *and* other, interior *and* exterior, with its dream-filled visions and nightmarish pain. As Esther says near the end of the novel, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream." As Esther does, we all seek a stable self, one free of the psychological and social knots that bind us. While the novel depicts a suffocating world, it also conveys the power of art, the way it can not only lead us to empathize with others but also help us to understand ourselves. Whether we choose to read *The Bell Jar* as an autobiography, as fiction, as a psychological portrait, as a representation of women in the 1950s, as a sociological essay on the sexual experience of women, or for the style of the narration and construction of the novel's form, which in many ways mirrors the disjunctive experience of its narrator, we empathize with Esther, who, as we have, has an emphatic need to confront radical instability and make sense of the world.

The literature from this period includes some of the finest African-American orators, poets, dramatists, and fiction writers in the American literary tradition: Gwendolyn Brooks; Ralph Ellison; Alex Haley; Lorraine Hansberry; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; and Paule Marshall. Gwendolyn Brooks's 1945 collection of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, established her place in the American

literary canon. To understand Brooks's eloquence and her ability to speak not only for herself but also for the dispossessed, we might consider her poem "the mother," a powerful work that deals with the aftermath of an abortion. The speaker of the poem, the mother, is divided: On the one hand, she affirms the decisions she has made; on the other hand, she questions those same decisions, groping for words to express the clashing feelings she harbors, laboring to use language to express how "the truth is to be said." The mother's memory and imagination link her to what she has lost, leading her to conjure the things her aborted children might have done and to speak directly to them throughout the poem. In this way, the poem has a dreamlike quality; the mother grapples with reality but also fantasizes about what might have been, creating an overall nostalgic tone that is suffused with pathos, that strange artistic quality that evokes tenderness, pity, and sorrow all at once. As in many of the other poems in *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks here deals with children, the innocent who suffer in an adult world and who grapple for space in a harsh environment. Yet despite Brook's interest in children and her compassion for their plight, "the mother" focuses on the consciousness of the would-be child bearer, the one who has elected to not carry children into a bleak world. The lost children stand as reminders of the harshness of the impoverished surroundings the speaker inhabits; the mother expresses concern for those who might have been introduced to those surroundings. Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* and proponent of Brooks's poetry, read "the mother" and thought the subject inappropriate for *A Street in Bronzeville*. While Wright may have been correct about the climate of the times, it is difficult to imagine a more effective poem. By presenting a woman who has aborted her children in a stark, realistic manner, Brooks offers a moving depiction of the destitute urban woman. Even though this woman regrets

her actions, she keeps the lost alive in her memory, weighing what might have been, what she believes, what she knows, what she struggles with, what she has lost, and what does not make sense to her. Thus, the mother is a complex character, a woman who inhabits a difficult world, where day-to-day survival means choosing from a host of real possibilities that defy any abstract, idealized notion of what it means to be human.

While they may differ in style and outlook, the works examined in this volume all place great demands on the reader. At times it seems as if the reader herself is responsible for reconstructing the world in which the characters live. A prime example is the work of M. Scott Momaday, particularly his *House Made of Dawn*, which marked the beginning of what Kenneth Lincoln calls the "Native American Renaissance." Momaday's characters are from decimated cultures. While they celebrate the heritage of their ancestors and draw strength from the wonders of the natural world, they live broken lives, ever reaching to the past and envisioning a future in which they may be whole. While American literature before this era may have imagined that the American experience was somehow universal, postwar literature recognizes the many and varied elements of American society, as well the necessity of giving voice to the voiceless. To begin this process is to know the pain of birth, the daily ritual of confronting, examining, representing, critiquing, and satirizing that describes the process of literary creation. More explicitly than ever before, the imaginative literature of the period 1945–70 is wedded to American society and culture. With this close cultural relationship in mind, this volume examines many stunning aesthetic creations and their response to and influence upon the American way of life, revealing the way great American writers have fashioned our story.

Blake Hobby



EDWARD ALBEE (1928–)

[The] health of a nation, a society, can be determined by the art it demands. We have insisted of television and our movies that they not have anything to do with anything, that they be our never-never land; and if we demand this same function of our live theatre, what will be left of the visual-auditory arts—save the dance (in which nobody talks) and music (to which nobody listens)?

(“Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 February 1962)

Edward Franklin Albee, one of America’s foremost dramatists, was born on March 12, 1928, either in Virginia or in Washington, D.C. Two weeks after his birth, Frances and Reed Albee, the inheritor of a large stake in Keith-Albee Orpheum, a coast-to-coast chain of vaudeville theaters, adopted him. Edward grew up in their affluent home in Larchmont, New York. From the age of six Albee knew Frances and Reed were not his biological parents; he later claimed he was adopted to fulfill his ailing grandfather’s wish for a grandson. With a controlling mother and emotionally distant father, Albee felt alienated during his early years. This feeling of abandonment greatly influenced his art, inspiring the biting satire and profound sense of estrangement found in many of his works. Author of more than 30 plays—three of which garnered the Pulitzer Prize in drama—Albee led a generation of American playwrights throughout the 1960s with his overtly critical, often controversial dramas. Responding to the American dream-inspired, conformist culture of the 1950s, Albee shocked audiences, rendering the failure of social institutions—especially the family—in the moment of their collapse.

At an early age Edward was sent in the family limousine to Broadway matinees, where he developed a love for the stage. He formed an especially strong relationship with his nanny, who exposed him to opera and classical music. Edward also met

famous theater performers; the Albees entertained many celebrities at their mansion, including the comedians Jimmy Durante, William Gaxton, and Ed Wynn and the Academy Award winner Walter Pidgeon. During his adolescence Albee wrote poetry; he finished his first play, a sex farce named *Aliqueen*, at the age of 12. Despite his literary interests and productivity, Albee was expelled from three private schools before settling in at the Choate School in Connecticut, where he wrote poems, short stories, a play, and a novel with the encouragement of his teachers there. His first published work, a poem, appeared in the Texas magazine the *Kaleidoscope* in 1945. Graduating from Choate, he attended Trinity College for a year and a half before he was dismissed for nonattendance (1947); the same year, his mother found out he was homosexual and forced him to leave home.

Moving to the Greenwich Village area of New York City, Albee worked a variety of jobs before he inherited the majority of his grandmother’s trust fund at the age of 30. These jobs included a program-writing stint at a radio station, an office position at an advertising agency, sales, and a job delivering telegrams for Western Union. During this time, Albee immersed himself in 1950s bohemian culture, viewing art exhibits, mingling with other writers and artists, and attending Broadway shows. Three years after he arrived in New York, Albee moved in with his lover and mentor, William

Flanagan, a composer and music critic for the *Herald Tribune*. Though none of Albee's work from this 10-year period has been published, he purportedly wrote volumes of material. Seeking advice, Albee showed some of his poems to the noted poet W. H. Auden and the novelist-playwright Thornton Wilder. At the recommendation of Wilder, Albee decided to concentrate solely on playwriting, which proved to be a sound course.

On the eve of his 30th birthday Albee sat down at his kitchen table with a stolen Western Union typewriter and wrote *The Zoo Story* (1958) as a birthday present to himself. A one-hour, one-act play with two characters and a lengthy narrative, *The Zoo Story* script was turned down by New York producers but soon was produced in Berlin, where it was performed for the first time on September 28, 1959, in German to critical acclaim. Premiering in New York in early 1960, *The Zoo Story* established Albee's reputation and won him a *Village Voice* Obie award. Performed alongside Samuel Beckett's short play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *The Zoo Story* marked the beginning of Albee's association with the "theater of the absurd" movement. This movement in mid-century drama—taking some of its inspiration from French existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus—focused on the failure of humanity's attempts to construct rational explanations and ordering principles of the world. According to this perspective, posing methodical and tidy answers to the larger questions we encounter as mortal, suffering beings—questions regarding our seeming lack of purpose, the absence or presence of God, and so forth—breeds ignorance, disguising the fundamental absurdity of life. The challenge for the absurdist playwright then is either to strip commonly held illusions from the action of the play or to create a play that tries to make its audience aware of the inadequacy of these illusions.

Though most of the playwrights who belong to this movement—Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and others—created plays with surrealist elements, Albee's works are often characterized as more "realistic," depicting concrete situations that are often jarring but less

pessimistic than those of his European absurdist counterparts. Four months after *The Zoo Story*'s New York debut, Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960) and *The Sandbox* (1960) were performed. Premiering in Germany, *The Death of Bessie Smith* was inspired by the back of an album cover, which related the tragic circumstances surrounding the famous blues diva's demise. Dealing with racism in American culture, the play contains two interwoven plots with eight scenes in five different locations.

The Sandbox was written as a commission for the Festival of Two Worlds at the Spoleto Festival in Italy, where it was not performed. Instead, the play was first produced in New York in 1960. Rather than writing completely new material for the festival commission, Albee used characters from his work in progress, *The American Dream* (1961), and placed them in a different context. Lasting only 14 minutes, this play resembles works by absurdist playwrights, for instance, in the constant presence of a young man performing gym exercises in the background, who (as the stage directions indicate) represents the "Angel of Death." This fantastical figure deviates from what most theatergoers consider plausible. It is ironic that Albee's most implausible scenario at that date had the largest number of elements drawn directly from his life: Albee modeled the play's central character after his recently deceased grandmother (to whom he dedicated the play) and created dismal caricatures of his adoptive parents in the characters Mommy and Daddy. The strategy of using nonspecific names based on broad character types enhances the degree of abstraction in *The Sandbox* and is employed by Albee in many of his plays. *The American Dream* (1961) shares these autobiographical elements with *The Sandbox*. Both contain theater of the absurd thematic and stylistic elements.

Abandoning the realism of *The Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*, Albee followed a minimalist, abstract approach to plot, characterization, stage setting, and dialogue, which is filled with clichéd phrases and meaningless exchanges. The triviality and callous detachment of the characters, with the exception of the grandmother, foreground the artificial and dehumanizing nature of Daddy and

Mommy's illusion—the 1950s American ideal of the modern, “normal” nuclear family. The overriding concerns of Mommy and Daddy, especially in *The American Dream*, center on material goods and conforming to rigid expectations. Albee attacks such indifference, implying that American consumerism and conformity create a sense of isolation.

Opening in January 1961, *The American Dream* was double-billed with Albee's operatic adaptation of the Herman Melville short story “Bartleby” (1853). After poor reception of the latter, it was paired with *The Death of Bessie Smith*. Both of these plays won the Foreign Press Association Award. In the same year Albee traveled with a production of *The Zoo Story* to parts of South America on a cultural-exchange program. During this trip, Albee's adoptive father, Reed, passed away. Returning to New York, Albee completed his first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in January 1962. The play garnered Albee worldwide recognition and won numerous prizes despite reviewers' polarized reactions.

A psychological portrait of a delusional and dysfunctional marriage that, as Albee suggests, can be read as an allegory for contemporary America or the decline of the West, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* sparked a critical controversy. Running for 664 performances, it won five Tony Awards and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play and narrowly missed winning the Pulitzer Prize. When the Pulitzer Prize drama panel voted to award Albee the year's drama prize, the Pulitzer Committee overrode their choice because the play did not represent a “wholesome” view of American life. The play's success on Broadway earned him an invitation to the White House, where he met President John F. Kennedy. A 1966 screen adaptation of the play directed by Mike Nichols and starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton received even more positive press than the play. In 1967 the cast and crew won five Academy Awards; the play was nominated in eight other categories.

After the financial success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee championed playwrights excluded from the mainstream commercial theater. Fostering a generation of experimentalism and cre-

ative independence in American drama, he helped form the Playwrights Unit in Greenwich Village, a workshop that subsidized more than 100 performances of works by unknown young writers. Instrumental to the “off-off Broadway” movement of the 1960s, the workshop supported controversial and recognized dramatists, including the Pulitzer Prize winners Sam Shepard and Lanford Wilson.

Albee's strikingly autobiographical play *A Delicate Balance* premiered on Broadway in 1966 and won the Pulitzer Prize. The play centers once again on an upper-class couple resembling Albee's foster parents, but with an additional character based on his alcoholic aunt Jane. Focusing on the sanity of each character as he or she relates to the sense of familial belonging they all share, Albee returned in *A Delicate Balance* to themes found in his early work, especially the emptiness and frailty of social institutions that people construct to shield themselves from terrifying realities. Tony Richardson directed Katherine Hepburn and Paul Scofield in a 1973 film version of the play.

Finishing another adaptation (Giles Cooper's play *Everything in the Garden*) in 1967, Albee wrote his two most experimental works: *Box* (1968) and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968), which were designed to be performed together. *Box* is an offstage monologue bemoaning the current state of art and society while the audience stares at a box. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* has three characters—the Long-Winded Lady, Chairman Mao, and the Old Lady—reciting monologues that are related to the *Box* monologue. *Box* was supposed to be performed before and after *Quotations*. Albee intended the performance to be musical in structure, the speeches functioning as notes or motifs that converge and diverge around the themes of social and moral decline in the *Box* monologue. This experimentation in dramatic form did not win Albee a large audience, but it demonstrated his creative independence and integrity as an artist.

The 1970s and 1980s marked a drop in Albee's prolific productivity of the prior decade. His next play, 1971's *All Over*, was inspired by the death of his longtime friend and mentor, William Flanagan.

Originally entitled "Death," *All Over* centers on the imminent demise of a doctor in his screened hospital bed. Albee explores the complex and often selfish reactions people have to death, focusing on the interactions that transpire between the doctor's attendant family and friends.

All Over's planned companion piece, "Life," was revised into Albee's second Pulitzer winner, *Seascape* (1975). Having the closest thing to a happy ending in Albee's work, *Seascape* is set on a beach where an elderly retired couple contemplates their future when they are accosted by two large lizards hoping to make the transition from sea to land. The lizards, also a couple, are invited to stay with their human counterparts at the play's close. By dramatizing a confrontation between humans and creatures on the brink of change, the play introduces the concept of evolution into Albee's ongoing exploration of life and death.

After completing two short experimental plays in 1977 (*Counting the Ways* and *Listening*), Albee wrote a number of plays that, when initially produced, were not successful: *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), the 1981 adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955), and *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1982). This, in effect, forced Albee from Broadway for over a decade. During this hiatus he wrote four plays that were performed at American university theaters and overseas. Two one-acts from this period, *Finding the Sun* (1983) and *Marriage Play* (1987), found their way to New York stages in the mid-1990s. The former play is significant in that it is Albee's first work to deal directly with homosexuality.

In 1989 Albee's adoptive mother, Frances, passed away, leaving none of her assets to him. This scathing rejection prompted Albee to write the two-act play *Three Tall Women* (1991), his most autobiographical work. Perhaps an attempt by Albee to put his antagonistic relationship with his foster mother behind him, the first act is set in A's (an elderly rich woman's) bedroom. Two women, B and C, attend A as she tells various stories about her past. A has a stroke at the end of act 1; the second act opens with the three characters in a hospital room gathered around a mannequin corpse. Each now represents

A at different stages in her life, and the discussion that ensues includes an examination of their stormy relationship with their son, who enters and leaves without saying a word. The conversation ends with a debate about which time in their life was the happiest. A wins the argument, insisting that the end was the happiest, prompting all three to exhale. Running for 582 performances, *Three Tall Women* resurrected Albee's career, winning him his third Pulitzer, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and an Obie Lifetime Achievement Award.

Since his reemergence Albee has written the experimental and improvisatory *Fragments* (1993), *The Play about the Baby* (1998), and a homage to the sculptor Louise Nevelson entitled *Occupant* (2002). Marking his return to Broadway, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2002) is one of Albee's most controversial plays. The play's premise centers on Martin's estranged relationship with his wife, Stevie, and homosexual son, Billy, after Martin admits to being strongly attracted to a goat named Sylvia. Referencing the ancient Greek sacrifice of a goat to the god Dionysus that precedes tragedy, the play ends as Stevie kills the goat and takes it back to their apartment. Winning a Tony Award for best play among other distinctions, the play explores the unpredictable nature of love and its often harsh consequences. In 2005 Albee received another Lifetime Achievement Award (this time from the American Theater Wing) and published a collection of essays dating back to 1960 entitled *Stretching My Mind: The Collected Essays 1960 to 2005*.

***The Zoo Story* (1959)**

The Zoo Story (Berlin, 1959; New York, 1960) is a one-act play with two characters: Peter, a middle class publishing executive reading on a bench in Central Park, and Jerry, a lonely bohemian man in his late 30s, who says he has been to the zoo. As the two talk and Jerry asks persistent questions, the audience sees how the two characters differ. In the midst of their conversation, Jerry abandons his interrogatorlike posture to deliver a lengthy monologue entitled "The Story of Jerry and the

Dog,” which deals with his landlady and her black dog Jerry has bribed and poisoned. Justifying his actions, Jerry explains that his desire to make the dog understand, through acts of love and hate, is motivated by his profound isolation from man and animal alike. Peter and Jerry then fight, and Jerry ultimately intentionally impales himself on a knife in Peter’s hands. Jerry, dying, explains he planned the whole encounter, which was a reenactment of a scene he witnessed at the zoo. Albee places many of the play’s critical lines in Jerry’s mouth. Thus, his ideas and language not only critique a character but also make social statements, harsh critiques that rang sharply in a conservative age enjoying material goods and prosperity, an age focused on the home front and terrified about the cold war and the spread of communism. Notably, Jerry’s lines target Peter’s middle-class, “bourgeois” values and the conventional role Peter plays.

Thematically, *The Zoo Story* deals with failed communication in a complacent society characterized by anonymity. Throughout the play Jerry tries to communicate across many socially constructed boundaries, sharing with Peter his anguish, his distinctive way of knowing. Through the subtle use of foreshadowing and Jerry’s explicit linking of the situation to his confrontation with the dog, Albee suggests that the entire action of the play lies within the confines of the zoo Jerry has visited. Thus, the two characters can be seen as animals separated from one another by cages that inhibit communication. Jerry, as he announces in his first line of dialogue, is intimately acquainted with this isolation and desperately tries to convey it to Peter, a man comfortably deceived by his middle-class nuclear family status. Through Jerry’s suicide—an act motivated by his loneliness and desire to force Peter from his complacent position—Albee comments that sacrifice is essential in overcoming and conveying an understanding of the illusions that mutually bind the characters, and, by analogy, humanity. Through the exchange the two men share, Albee renders the power of art to overcome such illusions, both the ability for language to mediate the many paradoxes that the two characters embody and the power of the stage to challenge the status quo.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Jerry is a “beatnik character,” an antiestablishment, countercultural hero who resembles characters and ideas of Beat generation writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. Consult an encyclopedia or trustworthy Web site and learn about the Beats. What Beat values does Jerry portray? What outlook on society does Jerry embody? Explain your answer, giving support from the play.
2. At the conclusion of “The Story of Jerry and the Dog,” Jerry states, “I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves, independent of each other, creates any effect beyond themselves; and I have learned that the two combined, together, at the same time, are the teaching emotion” (*Zoo Story* 43–44). Beyond Jerry’s treatment of the dog, what do his actions teach? Why are his actions significant?
3. Jerry claims in his dying remarks that Peter has been “dispossessed” of his bench in the process of “defending [his] honor,” that he is no longer a vegetable anymore, but an animal like Jerry (61). The predicament the two characters are left in at the end of the play is remarkably similar to George and Martha’s relation to their dead imaginary son at the close of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Both Peter and George and Martha have defended their dignity in the face of severe scrutiny and lost their “bench”—in the latter case, the comforting lie of having a child. Nonetheless, Albee implies in both cases that these characters have progressed in some way to a better state. What have they gained? What should we make of Jerry’s pronouncement that, in such encounters, “what is gain is loss” (44)?

The Sandbox (1960)

One of the shortest of Albee’s plays to date, *The Sandbox* was written for, but never performed at, the Spoleto Festival and uses several characters who later appear in *The American Dream*: a hostile, cruel mother; an ineffectual, powerless father; and a genuine grandmother terrorized by her own

daughter. Albee dedicated *The Sandbox* to his recently deceased maternal grandmother, whose dramatic likeness appears in both plays. Simple characterization, a minimalist stage setting, and surreal elements characterize *The Sandbox*, which, with its empty dialogue and meaningless and virtually nonexistent plot, is an absurdist play that parallels the works of Samuel Beckett. As do Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Albee's *Sandbox* characters engage in inane conversation as they wait. While in Beckett's play the two vaudevillesque bums wait for the mysterious "Godot," who never arrives, in Albee's play the characters wait for Grandma's death.

A one-act play taking less than 15 minutes to perform, *The Sandbox* takes place on a beach where a handsome Young Man exercises behind a large raked sandbox. He says hello to Mommy and Daddy, who arrive with Grandma and have a Musician to ease Grandma's dying in the sandbox, her resting place. After telling the audience about her sad past and talking with the Young Man about his biceps and acting, Grandma buries herself in sand and plays dead so Mommy and Daddy will leave. After they depart swiftly, Grandma, who resembles Winnie, the central character of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* (1960) buried in sand throughout the play, realizes she cannot move under the sand she has piled on herself. At this point, the Young Man tells Grandma he is the Angel of Death and kisses her on the forehead; she dies after consoling him about his acting ability.

Contributing to the play's absurdity, the actors break character and comment upon the play itself. In literary studies this technique is often called *self-reflexivity* or *self-referentiality*, a technique that calls attention to the way the play is constructed and breaks with realistic conventions. The result of using such techniques is that the audience reflects on the artificiality of the play. While such devices can be found in literature from all ages, including William's Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), in which the title character enacts a play within a play to comment upon the action taking place, this technique is one of the hallmarks of postmodern style. Toward the middle of the play, Grandma, cruelly

ignored by her family, addresses the audience to complain about how she is being treated (149). After "breaking the fourth wall" (a phrase referring to the usual, invisible barrier between stage and audience), Grandma proceeds to talk with the Young Man in a manner that slowly reveals that they are aware of being actors on a stage. This culminates in the Young Man's hilarious line: "Uh . . . ma'am; I . . . I have a line here" (157).

The most interesting example of self-awareness in the play is Grandma's direction of lighting cues. For example, she commands that it be nighttime by shouting offstage, "Shouldn't it be getting dark now dear?" (152). These acts demonstrate that Grandma is fully aware: When addressing the audience or controlling the set, Grandma sees past the illusion of her situation and is able to interact with it. In a play filled with the clichéd and unconvincing language of Mommy and Daddy, only Grandma's lines contain genuine emotion: Her language is expressive when she tells the audience about her suffering or uses her last breath to comfort the Young Man. Though she does not control her fate in the ceremony, a ceremony presided over by Mommy, Grandma interacts with everyone in the theater.

Defined by the initial stage note as having "names [empty of] affection [that] point up the pre-senility and vacuity of their characters," Mommy and Daddy are cruel, boring people (143). Like Grandma, they are modeled after Albee's parents Frances and Reed. Mommy, resembling Albee's descriptions of Frances, tries to orchestrate her mother's death. Daddy, who is submissive to Mommy for the entire play aside from the occasional selfish whine, captures Reed's nonpresence in Albee's life.

Neither Mommy nor Daddy is given much depth. Even their dialogue reveals nothing further about their personalities. As they sit down and wait for Grandma to die, Daddy tries to start a conversation, which ends quickly when both he and Mommy recognize they have nothing to talk about. This inability to communicate, a common thread in Albee's plays, shows how hollow people can be when they are content to accept the role society has

offered them. Their complacency prevents the couple from hearing anything that Grandma says save indecipherable outbursts that sound like “a cross between a baby’s laugh and cry” (147). If regarded in terms of each character’s breaking of dramatic convention, this hollowness also prevents Mommy from controlling the scene according to her desires as Grandma does. Though the death ceremony continues onstage according to Grandma’s directions, Mommy can only hear offstage events and follow the script of a “grieving daughter.” Her lack of depth and myopic vision are clear as she repeatedly speaks “over” the audience when addressing it (148–149).

As Grandma announces to the audience, the couple do not respect her. She describes how Mommy and Daddy were “decent” enough to make a place for her under the stove in their large townhouse. Mommy and Daddy treat Grandma sadistically. As they would a troublesome pet, they put her in a pen and ignore her.

Mommy and Daddy’s cruelty and inability to communicate fully have the same source: They live exclusively in the illusion created by their social expectations. Going through the motions of taking care of Grandma and eventually laying her to rest, neither of them is capable of caring except when it is necessary for them to maintain a facade. Mommy’s fit of tears at the first “offstage rumble” is a prime example of this type of ignorance: Mommy knows her cue to start mourning, whispering through her new-found tears, “It means the time has come for poor Grandma . . . and I can’t bear it!” (153–154). As soon as daylight officially marks the end of their “long night” of mourning, Mommy and Daddy take a brief look at Grandma’s corpse, convince themselves that she is happy, and then go about their business.

The Sandbox is, along with *The American Dream*, *A Delicate Balance*, and *Three Tall Women*, one of Albee’s most autobiographical plays. Even after the meteoric success of the three-hour *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee maintained in interviews that *The Sandbox* was his best work. Indebted to absurdist playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, *The Sandbox* conveys the para-

doxical nature of the human condition. Critical of American culture’s lack of authentic engagement and the treatment of the elderly, Albee presents a poignant depiction of a woman who is able to see through illusions but unable to change her fate.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *The American Dream*, the Young Man is actually Mommy and Daddy’s son. How does this reflect on the interactions and similarities between the couple and the no-name pretty boy in *The Sandbox*?
2. George, in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, takes the play to a close by dispelling illusions. He does this by symbolically killing and burying an imaginary son. Though Mommy and Daddy perform a similar ritual in *The Sandbox*, the insensitivity they demonstrate in the ceremony remains intact. Compare these death rituals and their respective consequences.
3. In the process of dying, Grandma seems to be the liveliest character in the play. What does Albee convey to the audience through her portrayal?
4. Explore the significance of the surreal elements in the play. As noted, the unrealistic quality of these elements distances the play from the everyday, but why does Albee, for instance, specifically choose a beach setting? Or a sandbox as a deathbed?
5. By having characters break established dramatic convention, Albee involves his audience in the action of the play. Discuss how this affects *The Sandbox*’s deviation from realism and its social commentary.

***Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)**

Consisting of three acts spanning more than three hours, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was Albee’s first attempt at a full-length play and drew much attention during its long run on Broadway. Though widely recognized as a pivotal work in American drama, *Woolf* has polarized critics since its debut, often provoking charges of nihilism and

immorality due to the play's ambiguous ending, its profanity, its disturbing depiction of a perverse marriage characterized by vicious psychological attacks, and its scathing critique of American culture. Despite or rather because of these aspects, *Wolf* is one of Albee's most highly regarded works and defined the rest of his career.

Albee originally intended to call the play *The Exorcism*. But he recalled seeing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" scrawled on a mirror behind a bar in Greenwich Village and changed the title while working on a draft. Seemingly random, the title, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, is somewhat misleading: Virginia Woolf, a famous British modernist known for her innovative and groundbreaking novels, appears to have little to do with the play itself. This superficial disparity is not insurmountable: The characters in the play cope as illusion and reality are blurred and then unraveled, a characteristic shared by much of Virginia Woolf's fiction. This unraveling, painful and traumatic, forces the characters as well as the audience to question what they believe to be true.

Set in the fictional town of New Carthage, the play begins as George and Martha return home at two in the morning from a dinner party at the house of Martha's father. George is a history professor at the college that his father-in-law oversees. George does not know that Martha has invited Nick, a handsome new biology professor, and his wife, Honey, over for a cocktail. George and Martha exchange insults over a drink before the guests' arrival and, after very brief pleasantries, drag Nick and Honey into the verbal brawl as well. Massive amounts of alcohol are consumed during the "fun and games" that follow. To use George's metaphor, by the end of act 2 each character has been peeled to the bone. Profane, witty, and merciless, these exchanges get out of hand; Martha and Nick commit adultery. The melee ends in act 3 as George announces that the son he and Martha have referred to throughout the night has been killed in an automobile accident. George's announcement is intended to reveal that their son does not exist; he is a fiction they have both created as a sort

of comforting "bean bag" (Albee 98). Nick and Honey then exit, leaving George and Martha to go upstairs together at dawn, unsure about the future. The question "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" repeated throughout the play in recitations of a nursery rhyme is finally answered by Martha: "I . . . am . . . George . . . I . . . am." (Albee 242).

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? primarily examines the relationship between George and Martha. The play centers on their failure to communicate and often-sadistic attempts to get through to one another. George is a run-down history professor who never made a "splash" at the college; Martha resents him for not being the protégé her aging father needs to continue his legacy. George's professional failure, according to Martha, is due to a lack of "guts," leading her to such statements as "if you existed I'd divorce you" (Albee 16). Six years George's senior, Martha is a braying alcoholic who has lived under the shadow of her father for most of her life. Desperately wanting a child, Martha frequently mentions her "son" in an attempt to cope with her inability to have one.

Conversely, Nick and Honey initially possess many of the wholesome and desirable qualities that George and Martha lack. A fit and youthful biology professor specializing in genetics, Nick is ambitious and epitomizes the qualities Martha looks for in George. Honey is similarly imbued with qualities that Martha lacks, seemingly supportive and non-confrontational. The superficial well-being of the younger couple is demolished during the course of the evening. We learn at the beginning of act 2 that Nick was forced to marry Honey by a false pregnancy and was partially motivated to do so by her large inheritance. Nick's depravity is fully realized when he has sex with Martha at the end of act 2 in order to secure his advancement at the college. Honey, an innocent victim for most of the play, is revealed to have been using birth control without Nick's knowledge because she is afraid of the pain accompanying childbirth.

All of these intimate details are made known during the four "games" that transpire: "Humiliate the Host," "Get the Guests," "Hump the Host-

ess,” and “Bringing Up Baby” (Albee 140, 214). Motivated primarily by vindictiveness and revenge, the games strip the illusory façade each character hides behind. George explicitly describes this process of revealing in visceral terms during the third act: the games are like the act of peeling labels off a bottle, except the games peel off layers of skin and muscle to reveal bone and, finally, marrow (Albee 212–213).

With the exception of “Hump the Hostess,” the games in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* strip away the characters’ disguises by blurring the boundary between reality and illusion. “Humiliate the Host,” for instance, takes a chain of events and moves it back and forth across this boundary. When they are left alone, George tells Nick a purportedly true story about a college chum who accidentally kills both of his parents. Later on, Martha reveals it is the plot of George’s novel. After a pause, Martha says that the novel was autobiographical. The story moves from being real, to being fiction, and back again. George’s response, “Get the Guests,” involves the same sort of transformation: After hearing Nick’s disclosure of the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Honey, George provides the group with a summary of his second novel. The summary is exactly what Nick confided to George earlier. Again, reality and fiction meld.

The revealing function of these vicious interactions is hinted at in Albee’s title for the second act. *Walpurgisnacht* is a term from German folklore originally denoting a ritual congregation of witches that took place on May Day Eve. During these rites pagan gods were summoned and celebrated. After Christianity spread to Germany, the holiday represented a purging of evil spirits, coinciding with spring’s final victory over winter. Similarly, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a ritual where psychological demons are unearthed.

The ritualistic aspect of the play is most clearly seen in the final game “Bringing Up Baby,” where George and Martha narrate the details of their imaginary son’s childhood while George recites a Roman Catholic burial chant in Latin from the Requiem Mass. Their fabricated story leads to a

vicious argument over who is to blame for their son’s absence and leads to a sustained finale: Speaking together, George recites the requiem as Martha proclaims that the only hope she has had in the “darkness” of their marriage is their son. George then “exorcises” him, announcing that a telegram has come reporting his death.

Finally at the “marrow,” Albee leaves George and Martha with nothing: What has been revealed at their core turns out to be an illusion. All that remains after the exorcism are mutual fear and doubt. Furthermore, everything preceding the exorcism is called into question since the distinction between illusion and reality in the play has been blurred so thoroughly. The fact that George makes his son die under circumstances similar to events in his autobiography underscores this. Albee, however, does seem to hint that George and Martha will go on to construct another illusion in place of their dead “son.” But, as Martha’s ambivalent responses to George indicate, Albee leaves the ending of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* ambiguous, open to interpretation.

The demons exorcised during this ritual are not solely autobiographical. Albee implies that certain characters—George and Nick particularly—represent general aspects of history, culture, and philosophical thought. Albee has admitted that he named George and Martha after George and Martha Washington, the first president and first lady of the United States. Nick, on the other hand, was named after the cold war–era Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. Premiering during the same month as the Cuban missile crisis, Albee’s play contains political allusions that are impossible to miss. Nick’s namesake held the fate of the world in his hands just as the United States threatened military action against Cuba for having Soviet-manned nuclear missile batteries on its territory, an event that marked the height of cold war hostilities.

This political allusion is strengthened by George’s argument against what he perceives to be the threat Nick and his scientific colleagues represent to humanity. Once it is established that Nick conducts genetics research, George levels the

accusation: “You people are rearranging my genes, so that everyone will be like everyone else” (Albee 37). He goes further, portraying Nick as an example of a new generation of scientists who will alter the human race, eradicating unwanted genetic traits, and, according to George, destroying individuality and ethnic diversity in the process. The emergence of this “race of glorious men” made in Nick’s image will produce an end to the arts as well as the chaotic “sea-changing rhythm of . . . history” (Albee 66–67). The notion that history can be made sense of through scientific reasoning, the systematic censorship of art, and the privileging of state concerns over individual rights are just a few issues common to both George’s rants against Nick and prevalent criticisms of Soviet-style communism.

Putting Nick’s namesake aside, these hyperbolic accusations redefine George and Nick’s characters in other important ways. Young and ambitious, Nick embodies the future, with the scientific drive to find and make order. Older and jaded by past failures, George embodies history and the recognition of its disorderliness. With these perspectives Albee presents two differing aspects or views of civilization: one sees (perhaps naively) inevitable progress; the other remains skeptical of prolonged success. This is most forcefully hinted at in act 2 when George recites a passage from a similarly themed philosophical text he has been reading, Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918) (Albee 174).

The historical and philosophical allusions, though only hinted at and therefore incomplete, add significance to other elements in the play. By making George and Martha (the first couple) childless, Albee comments on the notion that there is a trouble-free existence awaiting those who blindly conform to the American dream. This allegory is particularly sophisticated because it captures a sense of the complacency and ignorance that develop from holding ideals that are impossible to attain. Until “The Exorcism” Albee’s couple propagates a lie that does not satisfy their needs because they are afraid to start over, to admit

that there is nothing in their relationship but themselves. The lie causes strife and selfish conflict until it is finally purged, revealing George and Martha alone, finally communicating with one other and fearing what the future will entail. Albee suggests that American culture needs a similar purging, a reassessment during which illusions passing for truth can be reevaluated. In the process of this expurgation, a common humanity might be more clearly recognized.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When the curtains close, the end that George precipitates calls everything in the world of the play into question. After numerous illusions are shed, George reveals that what is left—the “marrow”—is in fact fictitious. This, in effect, turns the play into an illusion filled with illusions. How does this change the role of an audience? Does it place the audience closer to the characters (who are themselves an audience of sorts), or does it do something else? Justify your answer.
2. Martha’s character defies many of the prescribed gender roles prevalent in 1962. Though many of her traits would still be considered deplorable, especially her alcoholism and infidelity, in what ways does her character anticipate changes in contemporary gender roles? In what ways does Martha seem trapped in traditional ideas of womanhood?
3. Should George view Nick and his fellow scientists as enemies? The dangers of technology and how it might be misused continue to be debated, especially with regard to genetic research. Does *Who’s Afraid of Woolf?* have anything to offer to these debates? If so, what? Explain.
4. In Albee’s *The Zoo Story* (1959) Jerry speaks of “the teaching emotion.” This emotion is the product of both love and hatred. Jerry tries to evoke this emotion in Peter so that they can really communicate. There are many instances in *Woolf* where characters speak about communication. How does the “teaching emotion” fit into the play’s characters’ interactions? Does Peter

- , ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Brustein, Robert. *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1964.
- Cohn, Ruby. *Edward Albee*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.
- Davis, J. Madison, and Philip C. Kolin, eds. *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986.
- Debusscher, Gilbert. *Edward Albee: Tradition and Renewal*. Brussels: Center for American Studies, 1969.
- Debusscher, Gilbert et al., eds. *News Essays on American Drama*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989.
- De La Fuente, Patricia et al., eds. *Edward Albee: Planted Wilderness: Interview, Essays, and Bibliography*. Edinburg, Tex.: Pan American University, 1980.
- “Edward Albee News—The New York Times.” *New York Times*. 27 June 2006. Available online. URL: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/edward_albee/index.html. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961, 225–227.
- Giantvalley, Scott. *Edward Albee: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.
- Gussow, Mel. *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Hayman, Ronald. *Edward Albee*. New York: Ungar, 1973.
- Hirsch, Foster. *Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?* Berkeley, Calif.: Creative Arts, 1978.
- Jenckes, Norma, ed. *American Drama* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1993). Special edition of journal dedicated to essays on Albee.
- Kolin, Philip, and C. J. Madison Davis, ed. *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*. Boston: Hall, 1986.
- Luere, Jeane. “Terror and Violence in Edward Albee? From *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to *Marriage Play*.” *South Central Review* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 50–58.
- Mann, Bruce J, ed. *Edward Albee: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- McCarthy, Gerry. *Edward Albee*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.
- Nilan, Mary M. “Albee's *The Zoo Story*: Alienated Man and the Nature of Love.” *Modern Drama* 16 (1973): 55–59.
- Paolucci, Anne. *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972.
- Post, Robert M. “Salvation or Damnation? Death in the Plays of Edward Albee.” *American Drama* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 32–49.
- Roudané, Matthew C. “Communication as Therapy in the Theater of Edward Albee.” *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 6, nos. 3/4 (August 1985): 302–314.
- . *Understanding Edward Albee*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.
- . *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Necessary Fictions, Terrifying Realities*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Rutenberg, Michael E. *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest*. New York: Avon Books, 1970.
- Sarotte, Georges-Michel. “Edward Albee: Homosexual Playwright in Spite of Himself.” In *Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theater from Herman Melville to James Baldwin*. Translated by Richard Miller. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978.
- Solomon, Rakesh H. “Crafting Script into Performance: Edward Albee in Rehearsal.” *American Drama* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 76–99.
- . “Text, Subtext, and Performance: Edward Albee on Directing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” *Theatre Survey* 34, no. 2 (November 1993): 95–110.
- Stenz, Anita Marie. *Edward Albee: The Poet of Loss*. New York: Mouton, 1978.
- Vos, Nelvin. *Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee: A Critical Essay*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968.
- Wallace, Robert S. “The Zoo Story: Albee's Attack on Fiction.” *Modern Drama* 16 (1973): 49–54.
- Wasserman, Julian N. et al., eds. *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*. Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1983.

John Becker



JAMES BALDWIN (1924–1987)

For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

("Sonny's Blues")

James Baldwin was born in Harlem, August 2, 1924, the son of Emma Berdis Jones and a father whose name he never knew. David Baldwin, a figure who looms large in Baldwin's life and work, adopted him three years later. This powerful figure was the source of the central conflict in Baldwin's life; Baldwin felt that he withheld his approval and love, thus fueling Baldwin's lifelong quest for approval. In one of his most famous essays, "Notes of a Native Son," he begins to gain a compassionate understanding of the difficulties of his father's life and of the lessons for Baldwin, as an adult, from that life. Furthermore, their relationship becomes a metaphor for his relationship with his home country, "America, the Land of the Free." Throughout his work, especially the early work, Baldwin insists on two things he learned in those relationships: that truth—difficult, heart-breaking truth—and love, difficult and heartbreaking, must be embraced at whatever cost.

Baldwin learned additional lessons about love and constancy in his home. He had eight younger half brothers and sisters, for whom he helped his mother care. In several accounts of his life, his mother is quoted as describing him with "a book in one hand and the latest baby in the other." His mother constantly supported him in his pursuit of learning about life beyond their narrow world, while his father (he always referred to David Baldwin as his father rather than his stepfather) disapproved of his involvement in books, movies, and "worldly" activities in general.

Luckily his mother was not his only support. Early on Baldwin attracted the attention and help of people who responded to his gifts by helping him develop and increase them.

He found his first help of this kind in Harlem's Public School 24, where the principal, Gertrude Ayer (the first black principal of the New York school system) noted his academic talent and encouraged Orilla Miller (Bill was her nickname), a young white woman assigned through work with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to assist in this school, to give him special attention and help. His father was resistant, but, according to Baldwin, because she was white, his father found it difficult to forbid his son the opportunities she provided, such as attending plays and movies, among other "worldly enrichments." She also assisted the family, in the midst of the depression, through at least one very difficult winter. Baldwin credits this relationship with Bill Miller for preventing him from ever truly hating and condemning the white race. Bill's interaction with him and his family was an antidote to the harshness of his daily encounters in Harlem with whites such as the police.

His second set of mentor-teachers discovered him in their midst at Frederick Douglass Junior High School: Countee Cullen (a poet famous in his own right during the Harlem Renaissance) and Herman Porter (perhaps less famous but no less influential for the young Baldwin). Cullen was the adviser of

the Douglass Literary Club and Porter of the school magazine, which Baldwin contributed to and edited. Cullen commented on his writing, and Porter, among other things, claimed credit for introducing Baldwin to the 42nd Street library, thus enlarging his reading sphere (also over his father's objections). By this age, Baldwin's passion for reading and writing began to blossom. Among his favorite books were Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which he later astutely critiqued in one of his famous essays about the inherent weaknesses of protest literature. He is said to have read these two, in particular, repeatedly. He also began to read the works of Henry James and other notable literary talents during this time, all of which later provided both models and inspiration for his own work.

But it was while he was editing and writing for the DeWitt High School magazine, *The Magpie*, that one of his peers introduced him to a man who confirmed and validated his dedication to the arts—Beauford Delaney, an African-American painter living at that time in Greenwich Village. He credits Delaney with teaching him how to see. They remained lifelong friends, meeting again in Paris several years later.

Perhaps Baldwin's most famous mentor, however, was Richard Wright, whom he met in the early 1940s (sources cite both 1943 and 1944 as the year they met). Wright's recommendation secured Baldwin a Eugene Saxton Memorial Trust Award in 1945. Baldwin essentially followed Wright to Paris, where both writers joined a colony of African-American writers and artists. The expatriate community in Paris in those days included an international group of writers and artists. But African-American artists and musicians felt even more strongly that Paris provided them with greater freedom to pursue their arts than the United States. Once there, however, the two writers had a major parting of the ways; Baldwin published two essays in which he severely criticized Wright's *Native Son* ("Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone"). Before this breach, while still in the United States, Wright's influence, among other factors, helped him get his first reviews as a critic published in the *Nation*, the *New Leader* and *Commentary*. In 1947–48 Baldwin published 17

reviews and essays in these journals. In 1948, both his first essay ("The Harlem Ghetto") and his first short story ("Previous Condition") were published in *Commentary*. This work, plus the support of influential friends like Wright, helped him secure the Rosenwald Fellowship in 1948. He used the money to purchase his ticket to Paris, where he claims to have arrived with only \$40 and a Bessie Smith record to begin his life as an expatriate.

In 1953 with the publication of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, his literary career began to receive public and critical attention. For the next few years, Baldwin experimented with different genres—fiction, essays, and plays—and he continued to explore questions of identity from the vantage point of his French surroundings.

Baldwin's first stint as an expatriate ended, however, in 1957, when he returned to the United States. By that time, he had successfully published two novels and a collection of essays, so his work as a writer was established. In addition, during the time he had been mostly absent from the United States (except for a brief return around 1954 to participate in the staging of his play *Amen Corner* by Owen Dodson and the Howard Players), the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum from the Montgomery bus boycott and the Supreme Court ruling ending segregation in the public schools. He had read and heard about these events and was drawn to learn more about this struggle. An editor proposed that he tour the South (his first venture there) and write a series of essays about his own observations. His participation in the movement began with this trip and continued throughout the remainder of his life. He met and worked with many leaders of the struggle, from MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., and Medgar Evers to MALCOLM X. His association with these figures, as well as the interviews he conducted with the young people integrating schools throughout the South and with the people he met and listened to behind closed doors as he traveled with Evers to investigate a murder of a black man fueled his work over the next decade. His response to what he saw and heard in those days is nowhere more vividly expressed than in his *The Fire Next Time*, a text that earned for him the labels "prophet" and "witness." During this period

(until about the end of the 1970s), Baldwin divided his time among many places, but he was in the States as much as he was out of them. He contributed to the civil rights movement by his presence as well as by extensive lecturing in an effort to raise money for the struggle. This activity in addition to his essays and continued writing (he produced another novel and two additional essay collections as well as another play—*Blues for Mr. Charlie* specifically in response to the Emmett Till murder) made this the period of his greatest fame.

Yet Baldwin's search for truth and identity did not end with coming to terms with his identity as an African American. Early in his stay in Paris, he noted the differences in outlook and experience of the Africans he met. He continued to ponder these differences during his many travels from continent to continent, including his first trip to Africa in 1962. Baldwin used his travels, especially his times out of the United States, as times to complete more work and as refuges for rethinking his observations and concerns about life and race relations. Even in Africa, his thoughts seemed to focus on what he was learning and beginning to understand his American identity more deeply.

Baldwin's career can be roughly divided into three parts—his early works (the late 1940s through late 1950s), the middle period (the 1960s and 1970s), and the late work (the 1980s). In the first part of his career, his exploration of identity focuses on the personal, trying to discover who he really is as a person and how that personal identity relates to anything larger. This is especially captured in the title essay of his first collection, "Notes of a Native Son." The second phase of his work encompasses the political upheaval of the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath in the black revolutionary movement. By this time, Baldwin was an established writer, adding his voice eloquently to those calling for the end of segregation and for full equality. His work during this period has a decidedly more political edge but continues to be rooted in his actual, lived experience and the contemplation of that experience. His work from this period often focuses on the experiences of other African Americans he interviewed, observed, and lived among during that time. This work also reveals

a growing disillusionment with the idea that America will change its ways. Works like *The Fire Next Time* represent this phase. But by the third and last part of his career, he focused on young people and on necessary social change. Works like his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, with its two young protagonists, articulate his concerns for the future.

Baldwin's place in the literary pantheon was captured in the massive funeral held for him at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in 1987. Many celebrities, writers, artists, politicians, and dignitaries participated, including a representative of the French government, which had awarded him the Legion of Honor in 1986. Notably, the United States conferred no similar honor on its native son; nor was there a representative of the American publishing industry in the proceedings. Yet writers as diverse as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka paid tribute to him at his funeral, acknowledging the powerful witness of his words, both spoken and written, throughout his life.

For a time, Baldwin's works were overpowered as the subject of critical study as African-American literary artists and the accompanying scholars produced a wave of work. But somewhere toward the end of the 1990s, critical interest in Baldwin's work began gaining momentum, assisted by the interest in both queer studies and in cultural studies. *Intersectionality* became a popular term in critical circles. An approach to sociology, cultural studies, and other social sciences connected with activism and social work, intersectionality describes how differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, and class act together. Almost all of Baldwin's work examines the connections among identities: African American, gay, American, expatriate, artist, political activist, and critic. His work is being reexamined through the lens of cross-culturalism or transnationality. This critical study is providing new and interesting ways to consider his texts as well as his life.

Baldwin left a rich body of work, including six novels (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country*, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just above My Head*) and a short story collection (*Going to Meet the Man*). He also published four essay collections (*Notes*

of *a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street*), two long essays (*The Devil Finds Work* and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*), two plays (*Blues for Mr. Charlie*, *The Amen Corner*). His work also includes a children's book (*Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood*) and two book-length conversations (*A Rap on Race* with Margaret Mead and *A Dialogue* with Nikki Giovanni) plus additional texts, 22 titles altogether.

Much of what James Baldwin writes is rooted in the autobiographical, which then becomes the occasion for meditation on broader issues. He focuses on discovering identity, on the nature and effects of racism for both the oppressor and the oppressed, on the necessity of facing our collective past as Americans and as individuals, and the power of love. He called himself a “witness” and was hailed by others as a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, calling us to acknowledge our individual and collective sins against each other, especially in the arena of race, and warning us of impending destruction should we fail to heed the call and change our ways. David Leeming, one of Baldwin's biographers, writing about Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, identifies common themes throughout Baldwin's work: “the search for identity in a world that because of its racial myths cannot recognize reality; the acceptance of one's inheritance (‘the conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American’) as one claims one's birthright (‘my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives, and to everyone, forever,’ the loneliness of the artist's quest, the urgent necessity of love” (100).

***Go Tell It on The Mountain* (1953)**

Alfred Knopf published James Baldwin's first novel in 1953. It is one of Baldwin's best known and highest praised works, closely patterned after his own life. Set primarily in two Harlem locations—the crowded tenement apartment John shares with his family and storefront church of which they are members—this is 14-year-old John Grimes's coming of age story. The novel begins as John awakens on the morning of his 14th birthday and continues to the following morning. In the ensuing time, John has several important

insights, culminating in his salvation on the “threshing floor” and ending in the ambiguous promise of new horizons for him. The key characters are John; his father, Gabriel; and his mother, Elizabeth. Other significant figures include his brother, Roy; his aunt, Florence (his father's sister); and the “saints” of the church, including Elisha.

The story of John and Gabriel locked in conflict frames and shapes the story. Gabriel is complex, a self-righteous man who has answered a call to the ministry. When we meet him, his preaching days are nearly over (he seems unable to avoid alienating everyone with whom he has contact), but he is a formidable elder in this small congregation. His favorite text is “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” For Gabriel this involves adhering strictly to a fundamentalist view of Christianity that forbids all worldly pleasures (such as going to movies) and limits contact with the world. With the additional restrictions imposed on life by poverty and racism, John and his whole family live in a narrow world from which he rebels, as his brother Roy does.

In the course of the novel, we discover that Gabriel married Elizabeth, whose son, John, had been born out of wedlock. John, however, does not know this, yet he is aware of the difference in the ways Gabriel treats him and his younger brother and sister (both Gabriel's biological children). Although Gabriel initially agreed to raise John as his own (and he does provide for him and labors to raise him well by his lights), he cannot seem to escape his sense of John's having been born in sin. Because of Gabriel's attitude toward him, John's life is complicated by the struggle for his father's attention and approval, both unavailable to him. John finds some relief, however, through his school life and his imaginative life (stirred by the books and movies his father would forbid him) and in the company of friends like Elisha, his slightly older role model at church.

But such relief is not enough. As the story unfolds and the pressures of his life continue to build, we become aware that John is facing a crisis. Entering puberty causes him to be acutely aware of his body, and at the same time he becomes just as acutely aware of the constraints of his poverty and race on him and

his fellow Harlemites. He sees the boys and girls he has grown up with changing in front of him, menaced by the street life that surrounds them. He hears the urgent warnings of the saints about the perils and pitfalls of worldly life, and he is afraid—filled with a sense of dread and a conviction of his sinfulness. These pressures and the growing animosity between him and his father catapult John into the emotionally charged atmosphere in the church on the evening of his birthday. He is seeking safety and relief and being urged toward salvation by the joint efforts of all the saints. In response to the complex emotions at war both inside and outside him, he finds himself on the “threshing floor,” literally fighting for his life (and soul, according to the saints). When he rises, we are led to believe he has achieved a new position, but the story ends a bit ominously as he faces his unsmiling father, announcing, “I’m ready. . . . I’m coming. I’m on my way.”

This is not simply a story of one young man’s salvation, but a complex narrative providing insight into the way the past shapes the present. Baldwin accomplishes some of this through the stories of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth. They, too, were young people enmeshed in a variety of circumstances from which they struggled to extricate themselves. In the present, they each continue to wrestle with private longings and contradictions as well as their inability to express the longings of their hearts clearly. Their inarticulateness also grows out of a fear of facing their demons. One of Baldwin’s concerns, one that he returns to several times, is the grief characters bring on themselves, but most unforgivably on those they love, when they willingly deceive themselves. This “willed innocence” he describes as a great sin, exploring its ramifications more deeply in his second novel, *Giovanni’s Room*.

Go Tell It on the Mountain also comments on religion, especially the highly emotional brand of fundamental Christianity portrayed through this storefront church. He implies some hypocrisy here and a good deal of fear. In a scene where young Elisha and Ella Mae are called out in front of the church family for their innocent attentions to each other, it seems clear that this way of worshipping driven by fear precludes normal interaction. Both

young people have had spotless reputations to that point and seem simply to enjoy each other’s company. However, afterward, Ella seems hurt and distanced from the group. Baldwin also captures the enormous pressure the saints exert on John to be saved. They almost force him, it seems, to clutch at this “salvation” to save himself from the normal confusions and rites of passage of adolescence. But several questions remain: What is John being saved from? What is he really submitting to? What type of salvation is this anyway?

For Discussion or Writing

1. The final scene of the novel, on the threshing floor, is a long and complex one. Reread it carefully and identify the stages through which John progresses. How does Baldwin “mark” each stage? How does he indicate the onset of the next stage? Can you identify a “focus” for each of these stages?
2. Florence, Elizabeth, and Gabriel all have their own chapter conveying their individual stories. What patterns can you identify among them? How does a comparison of their circumstances provide a deeper insight into John’s story? Explain each response.
3. One way that Baldwin has of making the central conflict clearer is by mirroring it in several smaller scenes. For example, Gabriel’s lover and the birth of his unacknowledged son, Royal, mirror Elizabeth’s pregnancy and John’s illegitimacy. In an ironic way, the legitimate status of Deborah (Gabriel’s first wife) and her barrenness also mirror and comment on this whole issue. Locate other major concerns or issues presented in the novel that are clarified by these mirrored segments.
4. The novel is divided into three parts. Each part begins with a quote and in part 2, “The Prayers of the Saints,” each saint’s prayer begins with a different quote. Select one of these quotes:
 - (a) Explain what you think the quote means. What questions does the quote raise? What ideas about the story does the quote suggest? Use what you know about how the story ends.

- (b) Reread the section introduced by that quote. After rereading it, compare your expectations to what you found. How has focusing on the quote affected your rereading?
- The book uses references to traditional Christianity throughout. John, Gabriel, Elizabeth, Esther, Elisha, and Deborah are all biblical characters. Choose any one of them, and research their biblical counterpart. For example, Deborah is mentioned in the Old Testament. What is her story there? How does her biblical story compare with the Deborah character in the novel? What does it help you understand the points Baldwin seems to be making? Why or why not?
 - Go Tell It on the Mountain* belongs to a literary tradition called “the coming of age” story, or Bildungsroman, a novel that chronicles its protagonist’s development, his or her “education” in the world. What other stories, movies, and plays can you think of that have young characters coming of age, typically young teenagers moving toward adulthood? Identify two other stories like this (e.g., *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson or *Star Wars*, either episodes 4–6 or 1–3). What are the main issues with which each character struggles? Are those struggles completely resolved by the end of the story? If so, how? Can you figure out a pattern of such stories? How does thinking about this *type* of story help you understand the novel?
 - John goes through a crisis at the end of the novel, but in part 2, Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth all experience crises as well. How does each meet that individual crisis? What does the nature of each crisis as well as the way in which each character handles his or her crisis reveal about that character?
 - The big question at the end of the novel is “How real is John’s salvation?” Divide into teams to defend one of the following: “John is truly ‘saved’ in both the spiritual and the psychological way.” Or “John’s ‘salvation’ is not real. It is another desperate act that will deepen the conflicts he is already facing.” Remember to use the *text* as evidence.

***Notes of a Native Son* (1955)**

“One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.” In this quotation, from the “Autobiographical Notes” in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin describes the inspiration for all his work, both fiction and nonfiction. His essays often had a greater impact and, in general, garnered higher praise than most of his other work, with the exception of his first two novels. What continues to attract readers to these essays is Baldwin’s willingness to probe his own life so deeply, examining the darkest corners, but not in a confessional way. He examines his life experiences and his responses to them for the lessons they can teach him and for the ways they can illuminate his connection to the world.

In 1955 Beacon Press published this collection, but many of the essays in it had been published earlier. The collection comprises the following works, in the order in which they appear in the text, with their original dates of publication in parentheses:

PART 1

- “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949)
- “Many Thousands Gone” (1951)
- “Carmen Jones: The Dark Is Light Enough” (1955)

PART 2

- “The Harlem Ghetto” (1948)
- “Journey to Atlanta” (1948)
- “Notes of a Native Son” (1955)

PART 3

- “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown” (1950)
- “A Question of Identity” (1954)
- “Equal in Paris” (1955)
- “Stranger in the Village” (1953)

Baldwin’s biographer and critic David Leeming comments on the collection’s form and themes: “*Notes of a Native Son* is divided into three parts. The first is concerned with the identity of the ‘Negro’ and

with the African American as artist. The second contains three essays on black life in America, culminating in the great autobiographical essay ‘Notes of a Native Son,’ which is the record of a painful search for self as well as for ethnic identity. The last part is made up of four essays written to America from the expatriate in Europe” (102).

The two essays that open the book, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone,” helped establish Baldwin’s reputation early in his career; he uses them to analyze and critique the work of the literary giant Richard Wright. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” he examines the limits of that form for artistic expression, looking specifically at Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and at Wright’s *Native Son*. Both novels had been considered “cutting edge” and were very popular in their day for almost the same reasons. Each directly addresses the primary racial problem of the particular time in which it appeared—Stowe’s protest against slavery, Wright’s protest against the economic, social, and political oppression of blacks by law and by custom. Each aims primarily at white audiences and presents an argument against these practices by dramatically rendering the extreme negative effects they can have. Baldwin takes them to task, however, for allowing their “mission” to cloud their artistic vision. He calls into question the characters presented in each text, accusing the writers of ignoring the complexities of real people in their eagerness to communicate ideas. He also particularly reviews Wright’s presentation of relations between the liberal whites of his book (as represented by Jan) and the novel’s protagonist. The acuteness of Baldwin’s critique is reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s examination of race represented in fiction in her demanding text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

Unfortunately for Baldwin, Wright, who had done so much to help him just a few years before, read these essays as a personal attack. He is reported never to have forgiven Baldwin, giving rise to the accusation that Baldwin’s pattern was to seek a father/mentor figure, then, as he progressed, attack that figure publicly. To a lesser extent this happened with Langston Hughes as well, although Hughes seems to have taken it better, even returning volleys to some of

Baldwin’s later works. Still, Baldwin is establishing his direct gaze and address of painful, difficult topics in these essays.

Another important essay in this collection is “Stranger in the Village,” in which Baldwin examines his experience as the only black man in a Swiss village to which he has gone as a refuge in which to write. A friend’s family has given him the use of a chateau; he arrives there the first time as a guest and returns alone the second time. It is a small village, and the villagers, while not exactly hostile, make Baldwin aware of his “otherness.” This provides him an opportunity—distance, time, space—to think again about the meaning of race, particularly of the divisions—social, historical, and psychological—between whites and blacks. One of the villagers assures him that they have a custom in which every year several of the village children dress up as blacks (using black face makeup and straw or other materials to create “wigs”) and collect money from the villagers to “buy” Africans. The idea is to provide money for missionaries striving to save African souls. The villager imparts this information to Baldwin as an attempt to show that they are kindly disposed to him and “his people.” Naturally, it has a different effect, though Baldwin takes note of the kind intent. In his reflection on his experience as an outsider in this village, he develops the “stranger” motif as a metaphor for the experience of African Americans, at least, in Western culture. He ends his ruminations with the observation that, because of the involvement of European cultures with African cultures, it will no longer be possible for the West to think of itself as wholly white ever again, announcing another Baldwin theme that African Americans and whites are permanently and inextricably interconnected.

But by far the most powerful and significant piece in this text is the title essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” a meditation on the nature of love and the price of fear and hatred. Baldwin wrote this essay as he reflected on his father’s death and the meaning of his father’s life and death in his own life: “When his life [Baldwin’s father’s] had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own” (“Notes of a Native Son”). Using the lens of his own life, he probes his father’s

world, struggling with the meaning of their complicated and disheartening relationship. He uses this examination to explore the nature and complications of familial love—the importance of confronting and exorcising hate, the difficult necessity of forgiveness. Furthermore, he considers the price of trying to understand as well as the price of *not* understanding race relations in America. For race in America, Baldwin insists, deals with *family* relations—desperate, intimate family relations. Therein, he tells us, lie both the hope for working things out and the tragedy should we fail to do so.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart” (“Notes of a Native Son”). Examine this quote carefully. Discuss several ways the essay shows the truth of this analysis, both literally and figuratively. For example, what are some different ways one might interpret the phrase “my *real* life”?
2. Consider a situation in which you have been an outsider and very aware of your outsider status. Tell the story of that situation. Who was involved? What happened? How did you come to be in this situation? Why were you an outsider? Next analyze it. When and how did you become most aware of being an outsider? What were your feelings at that time? How did you react? What do you think about both the situation and your reaction to it now? Did you learn anything from this encounter or has anything about that encounter continued to affect your attitudes and/or behavior now? Explain.
3. Baldwin said that he read Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* repeatedly as a child. It was a favorite of his. Yet in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” he critiques it severely. Examine some book or movie from your own past that you have known well and loved that you feel much differently about today. Explain your change of opinion.
4. In these essays, Baldwin, as do many other essayists (E. B. White, Alice Walker, Anna Quindlen, Amy Tan, among others), chooses some specific

personal experience and uses that as a platform from which to contemplate or comment on some related but larger ideas in the world. Think about your own experiences. Which ones do you think of as “typical” (i.e., first date, first day of school, fights with brothers or sisters)? Is there material here that you could use to examine in terms of what this experience could explain about the “way the world works” in 21st-century America? Consider the first day of school stories. How was yours the same as many others that you know? If it was your first day of attending any school, were you nervous? Excited? About what? Was one or both of your parents with you? Why? Was there some effort to “prepare” you for the day? Was it treated as a special day? If so, why? When you think back on it, how does your experience help us think about how we as Americans value education, for instance? What do the details of your experience, especially as they overlap with or are “typical” of the experiences of others, reveal about American values? How might race, class, ethnicity, or gender differences affect both the experience itself and what that experience might reveal?

***Giovanni’s Room* (1956)**

James Baldwin uses aspects of his personal experience to probe, question, and meditate on meaning in his works. Most notably, he investigates the idea of romantic love in his second novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, published by Dial Press in 1956. A daring novel for the 1950s, *Giovanni’s Room* explores a homosexual relationship. All of the characters are white; Baldwin clearly wants to avoid what might have become a different story about race. Instead, he fashions a story about a young American man, David, unwilling to acknowledge his love for Giovanni, a beautiful young Italian man he meets in a Parisian bar, because he is unwilling to accept his attraction to males and the fact that he has fallen for Giovanni in particular. That internal conflict becomes a meditation on integrity and the meaning of love, on what we value and what humanizes and dehumanizes us.

Giovanni's Room is told in two parts: The first part is composed of three chapters; the second unfolds in five. As *Go Tell It on the Mountain* does, it begins on one day and concludes the following morning. But in between Baldwin employs flashback and other devices to tell the story. Set in France, most of the narrative actually occurs in Paris. The settings include the bar in which the two men first meet and the room that becomes both a refuge and a kind of prison for David and Giovanni. Baldwin creates the sense of Parisian life as experienced at the bohemian fringe of the society—cafés, bars, and nightlife. Nobody in this novel appears to have a day job, because so much of the action revolves around a certain aspect of Paris nightlife. Yet within this exotic setting, Baldwin crafts a story about human relations, not exotic ones.

Early in the novel, for example, David gets good advice from one of the other significant characters—Jacques—who exhorts him to pay attention to and embrace this love. Jacques cautions David that such love is rare and missing it or throwing it away will have lifelong consequences for him. But David tries both to avoid acknowledging the depth of his feeling for Giovanni and any commitment to him and to maintain the relationship. That basic dishonesty and cowardice end up destroying both men, as well as causing significant collateral damage. Two deaths are attributable, at least in part, to David's behavior. His is the kind of "willed blindness" that Baldwin identified as the "unforgivable sin," because it allows the innocent to cause great harm yet deny responsibility for that harm. *Giovanni's Room* tells David's story as he faces the willfulness and destructiveness of his "innocence."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Even now, homosexual love is a controversial topic. It was much more controversial when this novel was first published, so much so that Baldwin had a difficult time finding a publisher. Research the initial critical reception of the novel. What do you think critics would say about it now? Compare its treatment of romantic love between two men to that theme treated in recent films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).
2. In this novel, as in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the coming dawn signals more than just the literal new day. Examine the ironies of David's situation in view of this dawn. What "new day" is this for David? What new way of life does it usher in for him? What "dark night" does it end? How does his emotional state match the expectations one might have at this point?
3. Look at the consequences of David's "willed blindness." Besides Giovanni, who suffers because of this sin? How? How might the story have been different had David been able to face the truth about himself?
4. Trudier Harris, a critic and scholar, has written a book about Baldwin's women. Look at the women in this novel. Besides Hella, there are two or three additional female figures. Identify them. What do you note about these women and their placement in the text? How has Baldwin crafted their characters? How do they fare in comparison to other minor characters in the text?
5. Has Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality contributed to or challenged stereotypes? Gather supporting details for your opinion from the specifics of the text.
6. David's sins include what seems to be total selfishness. Everyone who has ever cared for him is sacrificed to his intense need to maintain a certain image of himself. In light of this, how do you read his final response to Giovanni's situation? Is he a man finally moved to deep compassion and remorse, or has he simply become obsessed with his own guilt and so once again become totally self-absorbed? Use the text to support your view.
7. Money or the lack of it seems to drive much of the action of this book. In what ways can you imagine a different outcome had the economic realities of the story been different? (For example, what might have happened to the relationship if Giovanni had been independently wealthy?)

"Sonny's Blues" (1957)

First published in *Partisan Review* in the summer 1957 issue, "Sonny's Blues" is a short story that

expresses many of Baldwin's recurrent themes. It is set in a "modern" Harlem, the ghetto Harlem of the 1950s and 1960s, rather than the Harlem of the earlier cultural explosion referred to as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. It is a story of two brothers. The one who narrates the tale is a high school math teacher, with a wife and children, who lives in a housing project that reveals his middle-class aspirations but that on further analysis is not very different from the ghetto in which he and his brother were raised. The other is Sonny, the quintessential artist/musician who struggles with a heroin addiction.

The story opens as the brother reads of Sonny's arrest, and he tries to untangle the mystery of how they have both arrived at this day. A former friend of Sonny's has sought out his brother to give him this bad news, which he already knows. As they talk, the world Sonny's brother seeks to inhabit and the world that actually surrounds him clash. What is even clearer is the brother's willful blindness to the complexity and some of the beauty that coexist in this world. He refuses to try to help Sonny out of this present trouble, partly out of a sense that he cannot really help and partly from his sense of previous injury from being dismissed by Sonny the last time they had seen each other.

As the story unfolds, however, and the protagonist loses his own young daughter, he says, "My trouble made Sonny's real," so he writes to him. When Sonny writes back, compassionately and humbly, expressing his sorrow about Grace's death and saying how happy he is to hear from him, they begin a correspondence, which ends by his inviting Sonny to stay with his family when he is released. Sonny's brother works hard at trying to discover who Sonny is and to understand his life in the hope that he can solve the mystery of Sonny's addiction and protect him from falling again. His efforts take him back to various scenes of their youth, specifically an encounter with his mother before she died in which he learns for the first time of his father's brother. She tells him the story of his uncle's tragic death at the hands of careless joyriding whites as an explanation of his father's secret sadness and anger and as a parable warning him about the dangers that may lie in wait for these brothers. She ends by asking him to

look after his brother, and when he promises that he will not let anything happen to him, she says, "You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you's there." Now that Sonny has reentered his life, he tries to make good on this promise. Yet he struggles to understand what seems to be at the core of Sonny's being, his life as a jazz and blues musician. He is equally baffled and afraid of Sonny's addiction, suspecting that the two are somehow linked.

The story reaches its climax when he attends a club at which Sonny is playing again for the first time since he has been released. It is the first time he has entered Sonny's world. Here Sonny is greeted as a "prince," a gifted artist charged with the mission of all serious artists—to help us face ourselves, even in our darkness, and bear compassionate witness to each other. The tale ends as he salutes his brother's art, finally understanding the terrible price exacted from the artist for his art (as with Robert Johnson and those who try to play his guitar in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, where the physical act of playing this music literally cuts up their fingers as they make contact with the strings). As he reaches some understanding of Sonny's calling and the complexities and real dangers (past addiction) of Sonny's effort to heed that call, he also faces truths about himself as an individual and as part of the greater human family.

"Sonny's Blues" is a complex work that interweaves ideas about the role of the artist, and the twin necessities of facing difficult truths about ourselves and treating each other with compassion. Baldwin develops character through his use of dialogue and his subtle use of point of view. The story challenges our notions of what is good by making Sonny, a drug addict and felon, the central character and hero of the story. While Sonny's brother has all the trappings we recognize of a desired lifestyle, a good job, a wife and family, and a home, crucial elements are missing. From the beginning of the story, he is confused, unable to understand the lives of those around him, including the students he aims to educate. Because he does not seem able to recognize or understand their lives, he seems unable to reach them, as he has been unable to reach Sonny. Therefore, he must seek what he is missing—what he has simply been unwilling or

unable to face about the similarity of all their lives. Likewise, Sonny raises questions not easily answered. Is it necessary for the artist to self-destruct in the service of his art? Is there a way to attend seriously to the “call” of art, especially within the constraints of racial and economic injustice, without succumbing to self-destruction? The story also raises questions about what we owe each other and what we can really do to assist each other on life’s journey.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the ways in which Baldwin introduces and develops his key themes in this story. Focus on the two conversations the brothers have when they are alone: the first, which occurs after their mother’s funeral, and the second after Sonny has been released from prison:
 - (a) What is the *content*, the subject of these conversations?
 - (b) What is each brother’s attitude toward the other in these conversations? What words, phrases, or other details indicate this?
 - (c) Describe the changes that occur during the course of these conversations.
 - (d) How do these details reveal Baldwin’s themes?
2. Compare Sonny’s brother’s reaction to the gospel street singers he views from the window of his apartment to Sonny’s response to them, both as his brother observes him and later as he talks about that scene with him. What do reactions reveal about their different characters?
3. Baldwin chooses to tell this tale primarily through the eyes of Sonny’s brother. Look closely at the way he opens and closes the story. What effect does it have on the story to limit what we know of his view?

The Fire Next Time (1963)

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others—do not falter in

our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!”

(James Baldwin)

The Fire Next Time is a Baldwin classic; much of his reputation was built on this work. Published at what some call the height of civil rights activity (the march on Washington occurred in August of the year in which it was published), it marks a distinct shift in Baldwin’s articulation of his ideas about the threat of racial prejudice. In earlier works like *Notes of a Native Son*, he primarily examined the threats to the black psyche of living with racial hatred, describing such hatred as an infectious disease that could infect and kill the black man. In this text he enlarges on that theme and more urgently warns both black and white audiences of what may await us if we fail in this hour of need. He calls himself a witness but speaks to us in language that earned him the rightful title of prophet. Written and published after he had ended his expatriate period and begun participating in the civil rights struggle, *The Fire Next Time* anticipates the riots and escalating violence of the late 1960s and 1970s. Readers are struck by the ominous resonance of the quote, which ends the book.

This collection is composed of two essays beginning with an open letter to Baldwin’s nephew, his namesake. The younger James is apparently turning 15, so on this occasion, coinciding with the nation’s 100th anniversary of the emancipation of its slave population, Baldwin writes “My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation.” In this letter Baldwin announces his intention to pass on his strategies for survival in a hostile environment. More than that, he wants to offer a way for his nephew to achieve full manhood, full humanity, in a world where the odds are against him. Letters like this, from elders to the next generation, form a small genre of their own, especially in African-American writing. Baldwin’s famous one was followed soon after in 1968 by Bob

Teague's *Letters to a Black Boy* written to his son and, more recently in 1992, Marian Wright Edelman's *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*. They share a sense of urgency—the wisdom the writers seek to pass on must be passed on at this point to be useful to the recipient. They also share admonitions, especially those from the African-American community, about the necessity of achieving a fully adult, conscious, and compassionately human stance.

The second essay of the collection, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” is a letter to the American public. It echoes and enlarges on themes sounded in the first essay, but this time Baldwin uses two important personal encounters. Revisiting lessons he learned at 14 through his own experience of salvation, he explores its aftermath and an evening with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in Chicago at the height of the Black Muslim movement to launch his analysis of the current American dilemma. Together, the two essays move, in Baldwin's classic style, from the personal, one-on-one intimacy of passing wisdom to a beloved nephew (he reminds him never to forget that love) to a conversation with the entire U.S. populace. He evokes not only the history of black and white Americans but also their connections through that history to the West and to the whole world.

At the heart of his letter to his nephew, and therefore to all black children and children of the oppressed, are three messages: (1) Do not believe what the world tries to tell you about your worth; (2) Know your real past in order to learn who you really are; and (3) Accept responsibility but avoid hatred.

Baldwin begins with the admonition that his nephew (and nieces, too) should face a difficult but important truth: “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*” (14). He acknowledges that everything in the world of a poor black boy born in Harlem is constructed to make him believe in his worthlessness and in his inability ever to overcome what he sees all around him—despair and destruction. Baldwin points out that this not only is his nephew's dilemma but has been the problem the black man has wrestled with throughout American history. His own brother,

young James's father, has also struggled with this reality. The fact that the struggle remains the same and that those who cause it do not acknowledge its existence makes it so insidious:

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they are destroying hundreds and thousands of lives and do not know and do not want to know it. . . . But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime. (15–16)

Baldwin explains this condition, explicitly naming racism as its root cause. “You were born where you were born and faced the future you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*” (18). He thinks it is vital that those living within the constraints of racism accurately perceive and name what constrains them and then make it their business to understand how and why. He labors to provide those answers, at least in part, through his analysis in the rest of the essay. Again he exhorts his nephew to learn about his past in order to understand the present and construct a livable future. To this he adds the most important message of all. Despite the details of black history, the documentation of oppression both personal and impersonal, it is imperative, according to Baldwin's view, that young James not give in to hatred and bitterness:

Please be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality behind the words *acceptance* and *integration*. There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. (19)

He was both lauded and criticized in the 1970s and 1980s for this stance. When it was originally published, it was hailed as courageous and “straight from the shoulder.” But in the heyday of the black arts movement, critics pointed to this call for love in the face of hatred, this call for black people to “save” undeserving whites, as evidence that Baldwin was still a “Negro” rather than a black man, someone seeking the understanding (and perhaps approval) of at least the white intellectual and arts community. And while Baldwin makes an eloquent case for the necessity that his nephew and other blacks achieve the last goal, this letter fails to explain how such a thing is to be accomplished. Yet, what the next essay makes much clearer is *why* he thinks this is the Black Man’s Burden.

“Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” the second essay, opens with the irony of the quote from Rudyard Kipling about taking up “the White Man’s Burden,” immediately followed by a quote from a hymn about seeking salvation and cleansing “down at the cross.” These two quotes establish major concerns. First, they dispel delusions whites have harbored about their relations to all non-white peoples and especially white Americans in their relations to black Americans. Second, they show the necessity of acknowledging these “sins” and taking collective responsibility to seek cleansing from them, a cleansing that has already required blood and may require more.

It is aptly subtitled “From a Region in My Mind” because the essay ranges over a large territory. The ground it covers includes personal experiences analyzed for their meanings within the context of sociological, political, historical, and ethical contexts. Baldwin examines his salvation, for example, analyzing it through the lens of the cultural factors and pressures that conspired to bring him to his knees, seeking shelter from the harsh realities that menaced him in his Harlem neighborhood. He determines that many people seek the shelter of the church for the same reasons he did—because they begin to recognize that the menace of the streets is a personal menace from which they need shelter. But, for Baldwin, the church is no hiding place; it poses the same threat—to take one’s life—but under a different guise.

Likewise, he describes an evening spent in the company of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and a group of his followers, analyzing the ideology of the Black Muslim movement for what it offers for black Americans. As he does so, he provides an outline of the theology of the movement, a discussion of its connections to earlier similar movements, and he explores the economic factors funding the movement itself and the economic strategy it offers its followers. He also analyzes why these ideas have appealed to large groups of African Americans who were drawn to the Black Muslim camp in the 1960s, and the equally intriguing response of the white power establishment to that phenomenon. Baldwin describes the police officers assigned to keep an eye on the crowds drawn to the Muslim preachers in the parks as being afraid. He goes to some lengths to explain that he cannot argue with the truth of the Black Muslim assessment of race relations in the United States, nor with Malcolm X’s analysis that it is unreasonable to expect that black people should be any more patient, loving, and forgiving than any other humans. In fact, Baldwin himself is so critical of the inadequacies and blindness of white responses to racism that after one televised appearance, a man says that he expects Baldwin will be calling himself “X” soon.

But Baldwin argues:

The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. . . . I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes make to do to others what has been done to them. (112–113)

This is the crux of his argument in both letters. With his salvation story and the Elijah Muhammad story in mind, he critiques Christianity. He seeks to identify the source of the delusions that whites and blacks have succumbed to, contrasting these distortions with considerations of alternate views of history: what the Holocaust reveals about Western depravity and what the treatment of black

soldiers in World War II reveals about American hypocrisy. In doing so, he criticizes white liberalism, in particular, and warns all of us about the seductions of power. In one of the most powerful parts of this text, Baldwin issues a warning that resonates in a special way in the United States after Sept. 11, 2001.

It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so. . . . But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears. (125)

This is a message readers can consider to be applicable to many current situations.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the title of the first letter, “My Dungeon Shook,” and the quote that it is taken from, stated at the opening of the text. It seems to allude to the story of St. Paul, who, when he found himself in a Roman dungeon awaiting trial, had the miraculous experience of rescue by an angel, when his “chains fell off.” How might this story help illuminate or underline the points Baldwin makes in this essay? What other ways can you think of to interpret the title?
2. In terms of your reading of the letter to his nephew, what assumptions does Baldwin seem to make about what the younger James does or does not know about black history?
3. Select any historical event Baldwin identifies in the second essay and investigate it further. What seems to be the common way to interpret this event? For example, what are the reasons commonly given for the Cuban response to communist/socialist politics? How does this explanation fit with Baldwin’s?
4. Many writers of fiction are also essayists. Their essays are often inspired by some cause with which they are passionately aligned. Choose a well-known fiction writer who is also an essayist, such as Alice Walker, Barbara Kingsolver, or Wendell Berry. Read at least two of their essays and (a) identify the target audience if you can, (b) articulate the problem the essay outlines, and (c) detail the solutions it proposes. Compare that work to Baldwin’s.
5. Miriama Ba, a Senegalese woman, has written a novel called *So Long a Letter* that treats a variety of social customs and ills in the context of the story it tells. Likewise, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is a novel written in letter form. Use one of these works or choose another—a novel written as letters—to compare with Baldwin’s nonfiction letters. What similarities and differences do you observe? How do those differences in form affect meaning or impact?
6. Consider Baldwin’s call to radical love, outside the bounds of religion, as a means to social and political salvation. Investigate other calls like his from different sources—bell hooks and Alice Walker, for example. Is there anyone on the political scene these days who espouses such a doctrine? If so, how does that person’s call compare with Baldwin’s? How is it received?
7. Look closely at Baldwin’s language in either of the letters. Identify two passages that you think express his message powerfully. Explain your response.
8. In terms of the critique he offers in these letters, how would Baldwin evaluate Hemingway’s male characters or those of Faulkner? Choose one specific novel. Identify the traits of the male heroes in that novel. What would Baldwin agree were heroic traits? Which ones would he challenge?
9. In Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, as in other contemporary tales of Native American life, the young men seek their identities. On the basis of your reading of Baldwin’s work, recast his letter to address young Native Americans. What would you have to change? What could remain the same? Why?

***Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964)**

The dedication to this play “To the memory of Medgar Evers, and his wife and his children and to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham,” places it both in time and in attitude. Written and published in the wake of the Emmett Till case and after the death of Medgar Evers, *Blues for Mr. Charlie* was also published immediately after four girls were killed when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed on a Sunday morning.

Baldwin returned to the United States in 1957 and toured the South for the first time out of his personal need to observe what was happening there as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum. He used this opportunity and helped finance his travels by agreeing to write his observations for *Partisan Review* and *Harpers Magazine*. During that tour, he met many leaders of the Civil Rights movement, most notably MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. He saw King in action, met with him personally, and heard him preach. Baldwin also learned about racial violence, southern style, in this and subsequent trips. These observations would fuel his writing for the coming years. The Emmett Till case, for example, inspired the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie*. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old black youth from Chicago visiting relatives in Mississippi during the summer of 1955. Till reportedly looked at and said something deemed inappropriate to the white wife of the store’s proprietor. Later that day, he was taken from his relatives’ home, beaten, and shot. His body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River. His case caused a sensation when his mother demanded that the casket be opened so that the world could see what was done to her son. This became a celebrated cause among civil rights activists. As early as 1959, Baldwin promised Elia Kazan a play based on this story, but circumstances had not yet come together.

In subsequent trips to the South, Baldwin’s commitment to active participation in the movement grew. On one of those trips, he met and accompanied Medgar Evers as he investigated for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) murders that were reported as being com-

mitted against blacks because of racial hatred. Evers himself was murdered three months after Baldwin left the South in 1963. David Leeming reports that “his outrage at the Evers murder spurred him on in his work on *Blues for Mr. Charlie*.”

Then, in September 1963, four girls (three were 14 and one was 11) died in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. In each of these three cases, the perpetrators were identified and arrested. But when they came to trial, all were exonerated the first time. (Efforts to bring about justice were eventually successful, but only after years of persistence. For example, Evers’s murderer was only successfully convicted in 1994, over 30 years after the murder).

These events are part of the violent backdrop for the play, as escalating violence and a growing sense of futility engendered a shift in attitude among blacks agitating for racial justice. A debate about methods, represented on one hand by the nonviolent methods of Martin Luther King, Jr., and on the other by the militant resistance of Malcolm X and later the Black Panther Party gathered momentum in the early 1960s. *Blues for Mr. Charlie* incorporates that debate.

The play is structured in three acts; Baldwin’s stage directions establish the primary settings as “the Negro church” for the first two acts and the courthouse for the final act. He also divides stage between two primary locations, identified as BlackTown and WhiteTown.

The play begins as Lorenzo Britten, a white store owner and family man, drops the body of Richard Henry and says, “And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger, face down in the weeds!” The focus of the play is bringing Britten to trial and revealing the racial injustice that has led to Richard’s murder. The play also becomes a vehicle for examining the root of this shift in the temper of the times.

Meridian Henry is the black preacher/Martin Luther King, Jr., leader figure. He is Richard Henry’s father, and Richard is the black man who has been murdered. In the first scene, Meridian is drilling a group of young people in nonviolent methods when the group is joined by another group of

protesters fresh from the field of battle. One of the newly arrived protesters articulates the growing bitterness and impatience of the young people with these techniques in the face of the continuing hostility of whites:

We've been demonstrating—*non-violently*—for more than a year now and all that's happened is that now they'll let us into that crummy library downtown which was obsolete in 1897. . . . For that we paid I don't know how many thousands of dollars in fines, Jerome is still in the hospital, and we all know Ruthie is never again going to be the swinging little chick she used to be. . . . And we *still* can't get licensed to be electricians or plumbers, we still can't walk through the park, our kids still can't use the swimming pool in town. We still can't vote, we can't even get registered. Is it worth it? And these people trying to kill us, too?

Meridian's responses, including his expressed belief that the agitation of Parnell, the white editor of the local paper, will get a warrant issued for Britten's arrest, is met with skepticism and near-scorn by the black students. However, Parnell does come through though he leaves them on his way to alert Britten, his friend, that the warrant is on the way.

Baldwin strives to render the complexities of racial relations in the South as well as the complexities of individual characters. Thus, Parnell professes and tries to demonstrate his friendship for both parties. Yet Meridian challenges Parnell's motives and his willingness to pursue justice by demanding that he should seek to find out the truth about Britten's responsibility for Richard's murder and act accordingly, for his own sake. Furthermore, when Britten next appears on stage, he is holding his baby. In this intimate family scene he is a family man who really loves his wife and child, reminiscent of the people described in Gwendolyn Brooks's "The *Chicago Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock," where the mob "hurling spittle, rock, Garbage and fruit" at the children attempting to integrate the high school "are like people everywhere." This is echoed in the scene in which the white community joins together to offer

moral support to the Britten family. These folks are then implicated in violence in the scene of black community members' calling to warn each other that the whites are out setting bombs and in other ways seeking to intimidate, if not injure, blacks. Nor is Richard, the murdered man, the pristine hero who might have been expected. He has returned home to deal with his addiction. And though he does not initiate the hostility that ends in his death, he certainly exacerbates it in his encounter with Britten and his wife in their store.

The play ends by suggesting a limited hope in the joining of forces between the white liberals and the black community in a continued effort to seek justice. But it also leaves the challenges and questions Lorenzo voices in the beginning of the play ringing in the air. The title suggests that "the white day is done" ("Dream Variations," Langston Hughes), but it ends with no immediate achievement of that sought-for justice in sight.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Baldwin uses the scenes with intimate conversations between characters to undermine stereotyping. Look at two scenes—one between two black characters and another between two white characters. What do these characters talk about when they are alone? How do their reactions differ from what you might expect? What additional information does each scene provide about the characters? About the plot? About the themes?
2. Baldwin often asserted that the root of racial violence was in the close association of race with sex. Is there evidence of this in the play? What associations are made between race and sex? Who makes these associations? How are these connected to the violence in the play?
3. Another issue that surfaces is the connection of religion to the struggle for racial equality. What is the role of religion in the play? Who speaks for religion? How is the role of religion questioned or challenged? Look for details in the setting as well as in the dialogue to support your ideas.
4. What roles do women play in *Blues for Mr. Charlie*? Is there any distinction between the roles of the white women and those of the black women?

If so, what are they? If not, what meaning does this convey?

5. Plays unfold primarily through dialogue. And the success of a play often depends on how well the dialogue captures the audience's idea of how "real" people talk, how clearly it conveys the plot, and how effectively it moves the plot along. Select one scene and use these standards to analyze Baldwin's work in this play.
6. In his earliest years, Baldwin gained a reputation by denouncing Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as protest novels that fall short of art by emphasizing "message." In his critiques, Baldwin argues that their efforts cause them to exaggerate features of their characters to embody the ideas each writer wants to discuss. Consider this critique as it applies to this play. What evidence from the play can you use to support the idea that *Blues for Mr. Charlie* is a protest play or that it avoids the failings of protest literature?
7. The most common themes in blues music are about love lost or the agonies of love. This play can be interpreted in this light on several different levels. That is, different kinds of love lost and gone wrong can be identified in this text. Which ones can you identify?

"The Rockpile"

(in *Going to Meet the Man* 1965)

"The Rockpile" is a version of an incident incorporated in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published for the first time in his collection of short stories. It focuses on the relationship between John Grimes and his brother, Roy. John is the protagonist of the novel; likewise, he is the central figure of this short story. Through this story, readers see his relationship to each of his parents as well as to his surroundings.

The story opens on a Saturday morning. Both brothers are sitting on the fire escape outside of their Harlem apartment, several stories above street level. They are confined to this space because they are forbidden to go down into the street to play with

the other boys. They are especially forbidden to join those boys on the rock pile. The rock pile of the title is apparently the closest thing to a playground available in that neighborhood and has become a kind of proving ground for boys growing up there. It is a place where they hang out and challenge each other. In the story it is described as "a mass of natural rock jutting out of the ground," and its slippery surface provides the boys with an element of danger and some excitement to alleviate the tedium of poverty.

But Gabriel, John and Roy's father, refuses to allow them to play there. Elizabeth, their mother, agrees, but not for the same reasons. Thus we are introduced to the first set of conflicts. Gabriel will not give his permission because he does not want them associating with worldly people; for him, the boys as well as the other people in the neighborhood who are not members of his church are part of the evil temptations of the world. Elizabeth, on the other hand, refuses her permission because of the physical dangers the rock pile itself poses to life and limb. So the boys are relegated to watching other boys play there from their fire escape.

Predictably, their parents' refusal makes the rock pile alluring to both boys. However, the boys respond differently to this attraction. John fears the rock pile and the tough boys who seem to rule over it. He is fascinated with watching their play but seems happy enough to simply observe from a distance. Although he is also restless in his confinement, he seems more willing to accept this imposed safety. Besides, John has the comfort of a book, his mother not too far away, and his father out of the house for the moment. Roy is a different case altogether. We can see how Roy chafes at being forbidden this physical play and from associating with "regular" guys.

So on this particular Saturday, Roy slips out to join his friends there. They have been urging him to join them. He takes the opportunity presented when his mother is deep in conversation with a church member, Sister McCandless, to defy his older brother and join them. For his part, John does not tell his mother or try very hard to stop him. For a time, he simply watches, primarily worried for both of them should his brother be caught by their father, who is scheduled to return from work shortly. Roy is injured,

however, and this injury heightens the tension of the story and reveals the depths of the family tensions.

Each individual's reactions illuminate the troubled relationships of the characters. Elizabeth's anxious anticipation of Gabriel's reaction, which surpasses her concern about Roy's injury once she ascertains that it is not life-threatening, makes readers question the nature of her relationship with her husband. Likewise, even Sister McCandless offers to meet Gabriel as he ascends the stairs in order to soften his reaction. Indeed, everyone is more concerned with his reaction than with Roy's wound after it has been established that Roy will be all right.

In this way, Baldwin creates and maintains suspense. But he also creates a character who looms over the whole story, but whom, we realize in retrospect we do not meet until almost halfway through it. Such is Gabriel's power and influence over those around him. We are affected by the growing dread with which all of the participants await his entry, particularly John. We are somewhat unprepared, however, for the explosiveness and the direction of Gabriel's response to the situation. Baldwin creates memorable characters and paints a vivid portrait of a family struggling within both internal and external trip wires. The Harlem streets, we recognize, *are* dangerous for these boys—physically as well as in every other way (see “Sonny's Blues”), but the story raises questions about which environment is more dangerous to them—their father's protection or the city streets.

The themes Baldwin treats here are similar to those in many of his other works—the search for identity manifested in confusion John feels as he examines himself in comparison to his brother, the neighborhood boys, and his father's expectations. He also returns to an analysis of adult relationships through the tension between Elizabeth and Gabriel. Baldwin continues, also, to question the effect of Christianity, interpreted through Gabriel's fundamentalist rigidity, on the lives of humans struggling for truth in relationships and life. This last theme is especially interesting to think about in comparison with writers like FLANNERY O'CONNOR, and Reynolds Price, and especially evoked in similar

ways in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. Gabriel's rigidity and the destructiveness of his controlling efforts also evoke comparisons with Mr. in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Both brothers resist their father. Compare their forms of resistance and examine the effectiveness of each.
2. Look at the relationship of the two women (Sister McCandless and Elizabeth) to each other and in their reactions to the boys as well as to Gabriel's return home. What does an examination of their differences reveal?
3. The short story format needs to provide information about character, plot, theme, and setting quickly and clearly. That means that the details must be sharp and sometimes accomplish multiple tasks. Writers accomplish this, for example, by using one descriptive phrase that furthers the action of the story while it also provides insight into the character. Identify three or four such details in this story. Look carefully at the word choices and the phrasing. How much work is being done by each of your selections? Be specific.
4. Examine the details of the external setting (outside the apartment). How does Baldwin indicate the dangers in it? How does he indicate the dangers within the household? Who is endangered by whom and in what ways? Which dangers seem greatest to you and why?
5. Find the section in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in which Roy is wounded. How is he injured, according to the novel? What details of the scene remain the same? Which have been changed? What is gained and what is lost in the different versions of this episode?
6. Compare the parent-child relationships in this story to others that you know: for example, Scout and Atticus in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Hannah and Eva in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, the mother and son in Ernest Gaines's “The Sky Is Gray,” or the grandmother and all her relations in Flannery O'Connor's “A Good Man Is Hard to

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- "American Masters. James Baldwin | PBS." *American Masters*. PBS. July 6, 2006. Available online. URL: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/baldwin_j.html. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Baldwin, James. *The Amen Corner: A Play*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1968.
- . *Blues for Mr. Charlie: A Play*. New York: Dial Press, 1964.
- . *Early Novels and Stories*. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- . *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dell, 1962.
- . *Giovanni's Room: A Novel*. New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1956.
- . *Going to Meet the Man*. New York: Dial Press, 1965.
- . *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Dell (A Laurel Book), 1952.
- . *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *James Baldwin*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2006.
- Campbell, James. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Harris, Trudier. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985.
- , ed. *New Essays on "Go Tell It on the Mountain."* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Henderson, Carol E. *James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain: Historical and Critical Essays*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.
- Kinnamon, Keneth, ed. *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974.
- Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.
- McBride, Dwight A., ed. *James Baldwin Now*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Miller, D. Quentin, ed. *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.
- O'Daniel, Therman B., ed. *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1977.
- "Online Media: UC Berkeley Lectures and Events (James Baldwin Audio Recordings)." *Online Media: UC Berkeley Lectures and Events*. Library, University of California, Berkeley Press, July 6, 2006. Available online. URL: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/audiofiles.html#baldwina>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Porter, Horace. *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.
- Pratt, Louis H. *James Baldwin*. Boston: Twayne, 1978.
- Rosset, Lisa. *James Baldwin*. New York: Chelsea House, 1989.
- Scott, Lynn Orilla. *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002.
- Standley Fred L., and Nancy V. Burt, eds. *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988.
- Troupe, Quincy, ed. *James Baldwin: The Legacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.
- Weatherby, W. J. *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*. New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989.

Deborah James



SAUL BELLOW (1915–2005)

The novel can't be compared to the epic, or to the monuments of poetic drama. But it is the best we can do just now. It is a sort of latter-day lean-to, a hovel in which the spirit takes shelter. A novel is balanced between a few true impressions and the multitude of false ones that make up most of what we call life. It tells us that for every human being there is a diversity of existences, that the single existence is itself an illusion in part, that these many existences signify something, tend to something, fulfill something; it promises us meaning, harmony and even justice.

(Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1976)

Saul Bellow was born on June 10, 1915, in a multiethnic suburb of Montreal called Lachine, the younger son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Lescha and Abraham Bellow. Bellow's parents moved to a Jewish neighborhood in Montreal a few years after his birth to escape their hardscrabble existence in working-class Lachine. Although Bellow was born in the New World, his family's recent immigrant past would haunt the author throughout his life. The youngest of four children, he was the only member of his family to be born in Canada; his elder brothers, Sam and Maurice, and his sister, Jane, were born and spent their earliest years in St. Petersburg, Russia, during one of their father's ill-fated attempts to start a business outside the Pale of Settlement usually reserved for Jewish habitation.

Even the author's name was marked by this immigrant Jewish past. A meddlesome Canadian border bureaucrat changed the family's name from *Belo* to *Bellow* in 1913, and Saul himself transformed his name from the more traditionally Jewish *Solomon* to *Saul* when he decided to embark upon a writing career. Most notably, though, the imprint of Bellow's early life can be felt in the remarkable innovation of his prose, which many critics have argued is inflected with the Yiddish spoken during his childhood by his parents and others in their Jewish neighborhood in Montreal. Bellow returned to this early life once and again in his prose. In works from the semiauto-

biographical *The Adventures of Augie March*, perhaps his most celebrated work, to a number of fragments of memoir, Bellow details his childhood. In a speech given in 1970, he described his early life in Canada as "blessed with a sense of the exotic." He goes on: "I don't see how this could have been avoided. Say in my case: I was born in a French-Canadian village of Russian-Jewish parents in 1915. We had Indians, French-Canadians, Scottish and Irish, Ukrainians, Jews, Russians and so on. Every language was spoken in the streets—from Iroquois to Hebrew. How could you avoid the feeling that you were in an enchanted place?" ("Saul Bellow on America and American Jewish Writers"). Bellow carried this "exotic" upbringing throughout his life, making it the prototype for many of the enchanted landscapes he would paint in his fiction, as well as the launching pad for the standpoint of alienated observer he would often adopt for his gifted raconteur protagonists.

In 1924 the Bellow family moved from this exotic multiethnic space to the great American city of Chicago—itsself a city defined by its plurality of nationalities and diversity of languages. It was the heyday of the city's industrial might, an era during which the midwestern Mecca played host to a number of waves of immigration, Jewish and other. Bellow and his siblings fit right into the Humboldt Park immigrant neighborhood where his family settled in search of higher wages and more job security. The local toughs and spectacular urban beauty that feature in

Bellow's novels and short story collections from *The Adventures of Augie March* to *Him with His Foot in His Mouth* arose from the author's romanticization of his upbringing in this archetypal American city, where the smells wafting from the slaughterhouses and the many ethnic bakeries competed for attention. The fact that Chicago was simultaneously a business and manufacturing center of the United States and a locale far from the intellectual and cultural elitism of the East Coast metropolises, New York and Boston, combined to influence Bellow's democratic vision and the petty criminals and autodidactic intellectuals who swam through his work. As James Atlas has noted in his definitive biography of the author, Chicago played the urban muse for many of Bellow's most popular works.

Along with a number of would-be young Jewish artists and intellectuals from his neighborhood, Bellow attended Tuley High School in Chicago, where academic achievement and literary ambition were prized far above athletic prowess or social acumen. A competent student who wrote a newspaper column, Bellow was nonetheless overshadowed by his brilliant best friend, Isaac Rosenfeld, who had early success as a writer in New York City after college, only to die young and without the clout of his fellow Tuley grad. When Bellow was in his last year of high school, his mother, Lescha—the parent to whom he was closer—died. As Bellow puts it, “I was never the same after my mother died. . . . I was grieving” (Atlas 35). The theme of unceasing grief for a lost mother would recur in many of Bellow's later works, most notably his novella *Seize the Day* (1956). After high school the melancholic Bellow worked intermittently at his father's coal transport company, encountering the colorful characters and rogue's gallery of grotesques he would depict in his fiction, particularly the autobiographical *The Adventures of Augie March*. Bellow also became a perennial student at this time, first at the University of Chicago and later at Northwestern, where he received his B.A. in anthropology in 1937. Bellow studied with the famous anthropologist Melville Herskovitz at Northwestern; a short time after Bellow was his student, Herskovitz would compose his famous work, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, often seen as the foundation of African-American stud-

ies. Bellow was profoundly influenced by his professor's work on race, as well as the work of the earlier anthropologist Franz Boas, whose study of the Inuit tribes of the North inspired Bellow to write his senior thesis on what he perceived as a fascinating “primitive” Eskimo tribe. Although Bellow did not graduate from the University of Chicago and often mocked the pretensions of its Great Books curriculum, he often returned to it in both his fiction and his personal life. For many years, he served as a professor in the Committee for Social Thought at the esteemed Chicago university, developing friendships with a number of well-known academics who resided at the school, such as Allan Bloom and Leo Strauss.

After graduating from Northwestern, Bellow began graduate work in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin. Bellow's preoccupation with describing the minutiae of daily life and social interactions from an anthropological remove in his fiction resulted from this period of study. Although he was interested in pursuing graduate studies in English literature, he chose anthropology, he later said, because it was a field of study friendlier to working-class Jewish boys like him. At the time that Bellow attended university, literature departments were still primarily the domain of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) elite, self-conscious gatekeepers of the English tradition. Many future critics agreed that it was precisely Bellow's eschewal of the hallowed halls of the English literary tradition that led to his own literary freedom and sense of linguistic play, as well as the pluralistic viewpoint of his fiction.

After a short time at Wisconsin, Bellow dropped out to pursue his creative passions. On winter break, he married the University of Chicago student Anita Goshkin and decided to stay on with his new wife in Chicago. Bellow soon found work, a part-time teaching post at a local teacher's college that paid little but allowed the budding artist time to concentrate on his craft. It was the depression, and Bellow was happy to have a position that would allow him to leave the ranks of the city's many unemployed. Despite the fee he earned teaching, however, Bellow applied for and received federal aid from FDR's Works Progress Administration (WPA). Along with noted Chicago writers such as James Farrell, Bellow worked at the

Federal Writers' Project, composing biographical entries on famous authors to keep busy. Soon after his first piece of fiction, entitled "Two Morning Monologues," was published in *Partisan Review*, Bellow's wife, Anita, gave birth to their son Gregory.

Dangling Man, Bellow's first novel, was loosely based on his young economically strapped married life in Chicago as the inhabitant of a claustrophobic home with his wife and her parents. Bellow finished the novel during his brief service with the U.S. Merchant Marine. The novel, published in 1944, relates the story of a young wannabe writer, Joseph, who is living with his wife and her family and dreaming of a career as an exemplar of American letters. In this novella Bellow evinced his first engagement with a theme that would recur throughout the pages of his fiction: the collision between the individual and world history. In *Dangling Man*, Bellow's protagonist waits in existential limbo to be drafted into war, trying to carve out an artistic life in the shadow of staggering global events. In this early work and *The Victim*, published in 1947, Bellow manifested his devotion and indebtedness to the 19th-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. Originally called *Notes of a Dangling Man*, Bellow's 1944 work was written as a clear homage to the Russian great's *Notes from Underground*, a meticulously rendered novella about one disaffected young man's search for meaning and the tortured consciousness that results from his quest. *The Victim*, too, tells a Dostoevskian story, this time of an individual and the doppelgänger, or double, that haunts him. In Bellow's second work—his first to be published after the global catastrophes of World War II—he hints at the offstage tragedies and mass victimization of the war, focusing on how a Jewish man named Leventhal is made a victim by his passivity and the guilt he feels about not being able to help his increasingly anti-Semitic double, Albee. In an interview with Philip Roth, Bellow later called these early short novels "apprentice works," analogous to the master's degree one must complete before beginning to work on a Ph.D. thesis. In order to impress the *Partisan Review* crew, the Trotskyite New York intellectuals who edited and wrote for the small, intellectually rigorous magazine and literary tastemaker of the time, Bellow also wrote and pub-

lished a short story about the exile of Stalin's former second in command called "The Mexican General."

In *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Bellow dazzled readers with a new tone far from the formal one he had employed in his early works. While Bellow sought to demonstrate his capacity to mimic the masters of 19th-century European prose, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, in his young prose, *The Adventures of Augie March* marked the moment when the author developed a voice of his own. The voice that narrates the picaresque adventures of young Augie March, a Jewish boy growing up in a Chicago neighborhood much like the one in which Bellow spent his youth, is a mature, yet rollicking one, inflected with tones of immigrant life and the spirit of play that characterized much subsequent Jewish-American fiction from Philip Roth's to Cynthia Ozick's. *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow's third novel, won the National Book Award for fiction in 1954.

During this period, Bellow began to engage with historical questions in his work, an unsurprising fact given how often he was just offstage during the major events of 20th-century world history. Bellow went to Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948, not long after the end of World War II and the occupation of France by the Nazis. Bellow's fellowship allowed him to spend two years living in Paris and traveling in Europe, including Spain, the nation so central to the consciousness of socialists during its civil war in the 1930s. It was during this time, while witnessing the aftereffects of the war and struggling to write his later-abandoned manuscript "The Crab and the Butterfly," that he began *The Adventures of Augie March*. Later, during the 1967 Six Day War in Israel, he served as a correspondent for *Newsday*, a move that inspired his first extended nonfiction work, *To Jerusalem and Back*, as well as the Israeli travelogue of Arthur Sammler in Bellow's controversial 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Bellow's next work, *Seize the Day* (1956), too, engaged with history. *Seize the Day* was a shorter work, a tour-de-force novella about the strained relationship between a father and his ne'er-do-well son and the historical forces of 1950s America that keep them stuck in conflict with one another.

Like many intellectuals of the time, Bellow was influenced by the popularity of Freud and psychoanalysis and transcendental movements, such as those led by Wilhelm Reich and Rudolph Steiner. Under the sway of these theorizers of the self, Bellow went on to write the experimental *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). *Henderson* details the adventures of a Hemingwayesque hero who travels to Africa to find himself. Henderson's encounters with an African tribe and a Western-educated Reichian African chief provide comic relief and philosophical speculation in equal measure.

While Bellow was achieving success in his career during this period, his relationship with his wife, Anita, was experiencing unprecedented strain. Bellow was plagued by romantic trouble throughout his life; his novels and stories are filled with men and women who are either terribly unlucky in love or afraid to commit themselves. Bellow married four times after his marriage to Anita dissolved in 1953 and was famous for casting his dramatic relationships in print. Soon after he divorced Anita, he married Sondra Tschachasov, the model for the histrionic Madeleine in his later novel *Herzog*. His son Adam, from this first marriage, was born in 1957. His marriage to Sondra soon foundered, and Bellow married the writer Susan Glassman, with whom he had his son, Daniel. Later, he shared a brief marriage with the Eastern European mathematician Alexandra Tulcea. He spent his last years married to his former student Janis Freedman, with whom he had a daughter Naomi in 2000, five years before his death.

Throughout his life, Bellow looked to colleagues and literary friends for the stability and companionship he never received from wives and lovers. In New York, where Bellow moved for a time early in his career, the author tried to reignite old friendships and to meld with the *Partisan Review* circle, which included the editor Philip Rahv and the young future critical superstar Alfred Kazin. It was not, however, until he moved back to Chicago and began keeping company with the writer Richard Stern and his childhood friend Sam Freifeld that Bellow truly felt at home.

Bellow returned to Chicago after he experienced great success as a writer. *Herzog* marked a turning point in Bellow's career. While he had some degree of renown before his 1964 novel, *Herzog* catapulted the middle-aged author into the pantheon of American literary stars. In 1965 Bellow was awarded the International Literary Prize for *Herzog*, becoming the first American to receive the prize. In January 1968, the Republic of France awarded him the Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres, the highest literary distinction awarded by that nation to noncitizens. Later that year, he received an award from an organization that recalled his origins in Montreal's Jewish neighborhood when he was given the B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Award for "excellence in Jewish literature." Both *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) were awarded the National Book Award for fiction. *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), a thinly veiled parable about the writer Delmore Schwartz and his experiences with artistry and madness, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1976, Bellow received the Nobel Prize in literature. In his oft-quoted acceptance speech, Bellow discussed his indebtedness to great modern authors, particularly Joseph Conrad, who dealt with what he called "the essence" of things, the large existential questions that weave through and motivate much of Bellow's fiction, from the plight of the individual in a mass society to the painful split between body and mind.

When Bellow was asked whether he thought he was awarded the Nobel Prize as a "Jewish writer" or an "American writer," he replied that he thought he had been given the prize simply for being "a writer." This discomfort with being defined as a Jewish writer is a theme that runs throughout Bellow's work. In a letter to the writer Cynthia Ozick, Bellow acknowledged the ambivalence that Jewish writers of his generation felt when faced with their immigrant Jewish pasts. He admitted that he and his fellow post-World War II Jewish-American writers had been particularly uncomfortable when addressing the issue of Jewishness because of the association with the Holocaust that Jewishness carried in the postwar era. Bellow wondered: How could American Jewish authors write about the Holocaust without casting Jews as

eternal victims? How could Jewish-American writers compete in the world of high literature if they always had to be representative men, rather than individuals? While Bellow remained somewhat ambivalent about being described as a Jewish writer throughout his life, he increasingly engaged with explicitly Jewish themes in his fiction and analyzed how being Jewish had affected his own path as an author. Rather than mask the ethnic orientation of his hand-wringing intellectual antiheroes, as he did in his early work, the aged Bellow began to write autobiographical paeans to ambitious Jewish men not unlike him and the friends he had grown up with in Humboldt Park. In a speech he gave in 1970, he said:

The American Jews, the Jewish writers, are descendants of immigrants of the first part of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and they fell in love with English and American poetry and life. It was a love affair, there was nothing contrived about it. You went to school, you read these great books and poems, and you were just shot down by them. The question whether they had a right to this language and to this literature was a lively question. In their own eyes they sometimes felt that they didn't have the right because they weren't born to the manor, and American society—at least its elite Anglo-Saxon elements—told them that they didn't come by it naturally and that it didn't really belong to them. But the evidence of the streets was different, because a new life was forming in American society which belonged to nobody, and therefore there was no reason why an American writer should accept the words of Henry James in his book *The American Scene*, for instance, in which he was so distressed by the Jewish East Side of New York and by what was happening to the English language on the East Side. . . . That is what I did and this is what many others like me did. (“Saul Bellow on America and American Jewish Writers”)

Bellow's meditations on both the anxiety that being Jewish evoked in many young writers and the power that resulted from the fact that “a new life was form-

ing in American society which belonged to nobody” are powerful ideas that echo in Bellow's prose.

Bellow is renowned for many aspects of his literary gift, most notably his facility with language and the spirit of play and the “street” that he gave to his fiction. The lack of fear that Bellow gathered from his childhood in an America far from the world of Henry James allowed him to become the ultimate literary Renaissance man. While Bellow is best known for his work as a novelist and short story writer, he also wrote a number of plays, including *The Last Analysis* and three short plays, collectively entitled *Under the Weather*, which were produced on Broadway in 1966. Bellow also wrote a number of works of criticism and creative nonfiction during his literary career. He published a compendium of his essays, *It All Adds Up*, in 1994. His criticism appeared in such renowned publications as the *New York Times Book Review*, *Commentary*, and the *New Republic*. After a raucous life filled with failed marriages and unparalleled literary success, Bellow died in 2005 at the age of 90.

“Looking for Mr. Green” (1951)

“Looking for Mr. Green,” a short story Bellow published in *Commentary* magazine in 1951, tells the tale of George Grebe, an overeducated classics instructor who finds himself delivering relief checks during the depression. Grebe, the son of one of the last liveried butlers along Chicago's wealthy Gold Coast, finds himself in reduced circumstances in Bellow's celebrated story, forced to rely upon FDR's WPA for a job during the economic downswing of the 1930s. Assigned to deliver checks to the poorest of the poor in Chicago's black neighborhoods, Grebe is admonished by his cynical superior, Raynor, that he will experience difficulty locating the aid recipients because of their distrust for authority figures, particularly white authority figures. Armed with a briefcase full of youthful idealism and little else, Grebe fails at delivering relief checks but becomes obsessed with his inability to find a particular recipient, Tulliver Green, the “Mr. Green” of the story's

title. Grebe's desperate search for this man becomes a nightmarish Virgilian tour through the poorest districts of Chicago and a metaphor for the experience of aimlessness and lack of purpose experienced by the many unemployed during the era.

This short early piece foreshadows a number of the concerns Bellow explored in later works. Like Bernard Malamud, the Jewish-American author and relative contemporary with whom Bellow was most often linked, the Chicago-bred writer was deeply engaged with questions of race throughout his career. In "Looking for Mr. Green," as in Malamud's early short stories "Angel Levine" and "Black Is My Favorite Color," Bellow manifests a belief in the possibility for profound interracial sympathy. George Grebe scorns the racist Italian grocer he meets during his relief rounds and experiences a moment of poignant identification with an elderly black relief recipient and war veteran. As Malamud's was, Bellow's perception of the possibility for interracial sympathy was strongly challenged by the Black Power movement in the late 1960s. His later works that deal with race relations, most notably the controversial *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), a novel roughly contemporaneous with Malamud's dystopian *The Tenants*, depict a grotesque land of urban decay where black characters are representatives of violence and the primitive.

The character of George Grebe prefigures, too, Bellow's penchant for portraying down-on-their-luck intellectuals, who are unable to prosper in a culture where "the green," money, rules. Most notably, Grebe could be likened to Bellow's famously forlorn academic Moses Herzog, but he also resembles other Bellovian heroes, such as Humboldt von Fleischer, the Delmore Schwartzesque depressive of *Humboldt's Gift*, and Ravelstein, the protagonist of Bellow's last novel and a character closely based on the writer's friend Professor Allan Bloom.

The philosophical speculation and engagement with the great thinkers of the 20th century for which Bellow would become known find early expression in "Looking for Mr. Green." Particularly, Bellow creates lovely moments when the youthful Grebe pauses in his relief work to contemplate whether the poverty and degradation he sees are a part of the fleeting world of appearances or something more essen-

tial and immutable. Grebe's conversations with his supervisor Raynor, in which he becomes a stand-in for the principles of idealism against Raynor's jaded cynicism, often revolve around the question of whether the world, replete with poor relief recipients and dirty city streets, is a realm of appearance or reality. The introduction of the large and noisy Mrs. Staika and her five dirty-faced children into the relief offices makes ironic these casual interrogations of the nature of reality. Juxtaposing meditations on the abstract with the might of his concrete descriptions of the poor living in what he calls the "city-wilderness" of depression era Chicago, "In Search of Mr. Green" proves an incomparable introduction to the early work of Saul Bellow.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Looking for Mr. Green" is one of Saul Bellow's most historically informed stories. The epigraph to Bellow's story, "Whatsoever the hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might," has particular resonance in the era in which the search for Mr. Green takes place. Look up the history of the WPA in an encyclopedia or trustworthy online source and discuss the implications of George Grebe's simultaneous search for Mr. Green and a purpose in life in Bellow's 1951 story. What does Bellow suggest is the fate of the idealistic intellectual in a money-making society?
2. Saul Bellow's interest in the possibility for sympathy between people of different races is a primary theme in "Looking for Mr. Green." It is also a strong element of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow's 1970 novel set in New York City. How has Bellow's attitude toward racial questions changed in this later work? How do racial questions become inscribed on the urban landscapes of Chicago and New York City in the detailed descriptive passages of these two works?
3. Invisibility is an important theme in "Looking for Mr. Green." From the always-invisible Mr. Green to the many faceless aid recipients whom Grebe cannot begin to imagine, Bellow interweaves the idea of invisibility with race, poverty, and the death of the individual in society throughout his short story. How does Bellow's use of the theme

of invisibility in this story compare to the use of invisibility by his friend and contemporary RALPH ELLISON in the famous novel *Invisible Man*?

4. The conflict between the worlds of appearance and essence is played out in a number of ways in “Looking for Mr. Green.” This conflict is dramatized particularly in the characters of Mrs. Staika, the demanding relief recipient, and the naked black woman who appears as a proxy for Mr. Green in the last pages of the story. Using these characters, analyze the importance of the disjuncture between appearance and reality in Bellow’s imaginary universe. What do these two characters have in common? How do they support or undermine the philosophical questions introduced in Grebe’s conversations with his supervisor, Raynor? Why are both these characters women?

***The Adventures of Augie March* (1954)**

Bellow’s third novel was heralded as one of the most remarkable novels in the history of American letters. Moving from the staid prose and elegant formalism of *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, Bellow composed *The Adventures of Augie March* as an exuberant ode to the wild world of his Chicago youth. While Bellow continued to be interested in literary modernism, *The Adventures of Augie March* was less interested in exploring the world of an alienated modern hero trapped in the absurdity of the modern city, as many modernist novels were, than in providing a rollicking and nostalgic romp through the world of the young rogue Augie and his family. Colorful characters and baroque, almost Dickensian, descriptions of places and people characterize this novel. Loosely based on Bellow’s early observations of his ragtag next-door neighbors in the working-class Chicago Jewish neighborhood in which he spent most of his childhood, *The Adventures of Augie March* tells the story of the March family, particularly brothers Augie and Simon March, and their fatherless clan. Their boarder and de facto matriarch Grandma Lausch, who rules over her adopted family with an iron fist and the help of her pet poodle, Winnie, dominates the Marches.

The plot of *The Adventures of Augie March* is a convoluted one. Bellow’s narration takes Augie from Chicago to Mexico and back on a series of realistic but enchanted adventures. Contrary to Bellow’s more plot-driven early novels and short stories, *The Adventures of Augie March* proves a chance for Bellow to demonstrate the power of his descriptive gifts. Augie’s neighborhood in Chicago is rendered in minute detail. Bellow seems to have memorized every lamppost and backyard plot in the area and given it a name. Influenced by French existentialist fiction, like that produced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* focuses on the power of the individual to shape his/her own life in a landscape otherwise devoid of meaning. Young Augie’s only allegiance is to his romantic ideas of the self, ideas that, Bellow insists, are eminently transportable, unlike the business ideals espoused by others in his neighborhood.

Most strikingly, in *The Adventures of Augie March* Bellow abandons formal English for a playful and idiomatic Yiddish-inflected American English. The first lines of this novel are famous precisely because they herald Bellow’s embrace of an ordinary American literary voice. Bellow introduces Augie to the reader with the following words: “I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man’s character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn’t any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.” (1). In interviews, Bellow said that he had written his wild third novel with its uniquely American protagonist as a lark of sorts, an attempt to get away from his stilted and unfinished manuscript “The Crab and the Butterfly.”

As does Heraclitus, the heroic figure invoked in the opening lines of *The Adventures of Augie March*, Augie embraces the idea that his fate is determined by character, rather than by biology or environment. Influenced by the Chicago immigrant milieu that Bellow depicts in his 1953 novel, the character-dictating-fate adage takes on added weight. Although

set in the same depression era Chicago as “Looking for Mr. Green,” *The Adventures of Augie March* suggests that it is possible for a poor young boy to escape the bonds of his childhood into the wide world. Like George Grebe in “Looking for Mr. Green,” Augie is a man in search of his fate. In seeking a purpose in life, he tries out a series of ever-more-strange jobs, from dog groomer to smuggler and boxing coach, without ever realizing his dreams of being a teacher. Unlike Grebe’s, however, Augie’s tale is, for the most part, a hopeful one.

Bellow sees his childhood Chicago through a nostalgic veil. Grandma Lausch, boss Einhorn, Five Properties, and Dingbat, some of the colorful characters who make up Augie’s world, are directly out of Bellow’s experience growing up in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago. These characters’ every quirk becomes a part of the fairy tale landscape of the novel.

Part of what is so subversive and powerful about Bellow’s work in *The Adventures of Augie March* results precisely from the fact that the reader is left without a clear idea of how to classify the novel. Is it a fairy tale, as some of the characters and plot points of the novel suggest, or an immigrant saga? In *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow experimented with a number of literary forms, from the Bildungsroman (the coming-of-age novel) to the picaresque adventure tale. His combination of Yiddishisms and wild multiple noun and verb sentences with mythical and biblical allusions simultaneously locates Bellow within the pantheon of English literature and the life of the street he celebrates throughout his groundbreaking novel. In the end, however, the reader is left to question the success of Augie’s unquenchable quest for freedom. Bellow suggests that Augie’s desire for love, symbolized by his affair with Thea Fenchel, is not compatible with his driving refusal of commitment of any sort.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *The Adventures of Augie March* is the first novel in which Saul Bellow attempts to provide his readers with a comprehensive idea of America and American life. As many critics have pointed out, the title of Bellow’s 1953 novel, as well as the playful hero Augie, call to mind the quintessentially American novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why might Bellow have sought to invoke Mark Twain’s novel and the archetypal hero Huck in his depiction of an immigrant boy’s adventures? How does the historical period in which Bellow’s novel is written necessitate a revision of the Huckish protagonist’s adventures? How might we compare these novels?
2. How does Bellow’s preoccupation with the manner in which American business culture structures the possibilities for the individual in American society emerge in *The Adventures of Augie March*? Using Bellow’s later novella, *Seize the Day*, discuss the way in which Bellow uses the relationships among family members to depict the choices available for youth in America during the time in which he was writing. How does Bellow write social conflicts onto familial relations in these two works?
3. Augie is the ultimate proponent of freedom at all costs. Any attempts by a boss or love interest to pin him down send the young, prototypically American hero into flight. How does Augie prefigure a host of subsequent American literary heroes, most notably the highly eloquent and commitment-phobic heroes of PHILIP ROTH’s oeuvre, such as Nathan Zuckerman and Alexander Portnoy? Why might such a character be appealing to a postwar American literary audience?
4. The conflict between determinism and freedom is a central theme in *The Adventures of Augie March* from the first pages of the novel, when Bellow invokes the classical hero Heraclitus to emphasize young Augie’s insistence on avoiding being determined by his background. Why would this theme take on particular significance for an immigrant author? How does Bellow revise this common theme of myth by locating his story in an immigrant neighborhood in depression era Chicago?
5. Many commentators have noted the muscular and vivacious prose style and narrative voice Bellow embraces in *The Adventures of Augie March*. How

does Bellow's use of language affect our reading of the novel? How does it construct the tone of Augie's adventures?

***Seize the Day* (1956)**

Although one of Bellow's shorter works, *Seize the Day* is also one of his most ambitious. Written in an era in which business culture was king, and artists like Bellow were seen as the antidote to the crass consumerism of the masses, *Seize the Day* juxtaposes the high-minded idealism of art and the individual against the excesses of mass culture and the stock market. The story of the abject salesman Tommy Wilhelm that forms the crux of *Seize the Day* is Bellow's take on the American myth of success. Much like Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Willie Loman in ARTHUR MILLER's *Death of a Salesman*, Tommy Wilhelm is a figure whose complete trust in the American idea of economic success and cultural prestige sows the seeds of his destruction.

Throughout *Seize the Day*, Bellow contrasts the sad but majestic individual, Tommy Wilhelm, against the crowd. Tommy is seen amid the rushing crowds of Midtown Manhattan and amid the successful elderly businessmen in his father's apartment complex. *Seize the Day* is primarily the story of a successful father and the son whom he perceives as a failure in business and manhood. Tommy is the ultimate failure. He is unable to achieve success in marriage or as a father or, most particularly, as a son. Equally impressed by high-flying businessmen and the celebrity culture of Hollywood, Tommy is taken in by a series of con men. Basing it in part on an experience Bellow had as a youth, he provides a hilarious satire of America's obsession with Hollywood when he depicts Tommy Wilhelm's audition for a shady showbiz agent. Later in the novella, the pseudopsychologist and stock market speculator Tamkin, a father figure who manipulates the praise-seeking younger man, takes in Tommy.

As in "Looking for Mr. Green" and *Herzog*, in *Seize the Day* Bellow reveals a preoccupation with larger philosophical questions, particularly the question of time and how it works. *Seize the Day*, with its

ironic invocation of the famous Latin phrase "Carpe diem," takes place in one day. The day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm to which Bellow treats his readers stands in for all life, and the inevitable movement toward death that life carries. *Seize the Day* is filled with speculations about time. Tommy's interest in the stock market is about the future and his desire to control it. His interest in psychology and the psychoanalyst Dr. Tamkin arises from his parallel desire to master the past, particularly the death of his mother, about which he feels unbearably guilty because of the nature of his activities on the day she died. So, too, Tommy Wilhelm's relationship with his father is simultaneously about the past, his mother's death, and the child's ("Wilkie," as his father patronizingly calls him) past failures, and about the future, his father's impending death, and the old man's overweening fear of it.

As in David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), a book popular at the time Bellow wrote *Seize the Day*, the power of mass culture is seen to spell the end of the power of the individual in society. As society is ever more governed by the need for conformity, the individual's every response becomes mechanized according to the tastes of the larger public. *Seize the Day* is Bellow's ode to the abject man in the crowd.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In many ways, *Seize the Day* is a story about con men. Dr. Tamkin and the theatrical agent who promises Tommy Wilhelm a bright future as a second banana in pictures are the most obvious con men in the novella. But who else in Bellow's work might be seen as untrustworthy? Can we trust Tommy as a narrator? Is his confession trustworthy? What might Bellow be attempting to say about American culture through his use of con men in this novella?
2. What part do mourning and death play in the novel? As Bellow makes clear throughout *Seize the Day*, both Tommy Wilhelm and his father are in arrested states of mourning and depression. How does Bellow construct the mournful tone of the novella? What do you make of the funeral scene at the end of *Seize the Day* and how might it be

linked to Bellow's choice to make his novella take place during the course of the day?

3. As mentioned, Bellow had an ambivalent relationship to Jewishness throughout his career. How does Jewishness play or not play a role in *Seize the Day*? How does the Holocaust maintain an off-stage presence in this novella about the impossibility of properly mourning?
4. In *Seize the Day*, Bellow explores one of the themes that recur throughout his prose, the conflict between surfaces and depth, another way to render the clash between appearance and reality that George Grebe laments in "Looking for Mr. Green." How does the role of secrets dramatize this conflict in *Seize the Day*? Why does everyone from the man doling out mail at the front desk to Tommy's father have a secret?
5. Like David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd*, *Seize the Day* is deeply invested in the plight of the individual in mass culture. How might Reisman's ideas apply to Bellow's novella? How is *Seize the Day* a novel simultaneously about business culture and the death of the individual in society?

***Herzog* (1964)**

As *Seize the Day* does, *Herzog* focuses on a short time span in the life of a budding failure. *Herzog*, often viewed as the Bellow's midcareer tour de force, tells the story of five days in the life of the narcissistic but silver-tongued intellectual Moses Herzog, a Jewish professor and writer of Bellow's generation and a thinly veiled stand-in for the author himself. After his wife, Madeleine, leaves him for his best friend, the red-haired dandy Valentine Gersbach, Herzog descends into madness. In Bellow's hands, however, Herzog remains lucid in his madness. Between visits to the ridiculous Freudian psychoanalyst Edvig, who also has his wife as a patient, Herzog writes letters to figures from Nietzsche to God, decrying the decay of society in a manner that recalls Spengler's famous *The Decline of Western Civilization*, an early influence on Bellow.

After having been dispossessed by his wife, Herzog retreats to Ludeyville, where he has a small

home in the Berkshire Mountains. Tormented by the filthy and disintegrating house, as well as visions of his wife's infidelity and his best friend's betrayal, Moses begins a letter-writing campaign unlike any seen before. While *Herzog* is primarily a comic novel, it contains many tragic elements and serious meditations on the need for Americans to return to a sense of morality and the social contract.

In this novel, as in his earlier novella *Seize the Day*, Bellow engages with the sorry fate of the individual within the mass culture of the period. At the same time that *Herzog* is a story of the death of the subject, however, it is also a tale of the misadventures of a cuckolded husband. Modeled on Bellow's own breakup with his second wife, Sondra, and his strained relationship with their child, *Herzog* is a wild satire that leaves none of its characters, least of all Herzog himself, unscathed. Perhaps it is for this reason that *Herzog*, Bellow's most ambitious and intellectual work, was also his most popular, going on to become a best seller.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The epistolary style (novel in letter form) is central to Bellow's construction of *Herzog*. Why does Bellow choose to evoke so much through the medium of the letter? What does it say that Bellow constructs an imaginary dialogue between his protagonist and a host of other characters to evoke the pain Herzog experiences as he laments the impossibility of true social connection in the alienated age in which he lives?
2. Throughout Bellow's award-winning novel, the reader is left to question Moses Herzog's sanity and trustworthiness as a narrator. We see the events of Herzog's marriage unfold through his eyes alone. Is Moses mad? How is the theme of madness developed in *Herzog*? How does Bellow's critique of psychoanalysis structure his 1964 novel?
3. When Herzog retires to his house in the Berkshires, he obsesses over the events surrounding his wife's affair with his best friend. As in "Looking for Mr. Green," *Herzog* focuses upon the possibility of discerning the truth beneath the world of appearances that composes modernity. Does

Herzog ever discover the real details of the affair? How does Herzog's pursuit of the details of his wife's affair through interviewing his friends and reviewing his own memories say more about him than about his wife? How does Bellow deal with the theme of realities versus appearances in this novel?

4. *Herzog* has been described as one of the masterpieces of 20th-century American satire. Look up the definition of *satire* in a literary encyclopedia or trustworthy Internet source and outline the principles of the genre. What is Bellow attempting to satirize in *Herzog*? How does he make it clear from the first pages of his novel that he is attempting to parody his characters and themes, even as he develops them? How might the use of satire and parody be Bellow's attempt to write a novel *against* the tradition of modernist solemnity that he espoused in his early works?

***Humboldt's Gift* (1975)**

Published the year before he would receive the coveted Nobel Prize in literature, *Humboldt's Gift* is a masterwork on a smaller scale than *Herzog*. Where *Herzog* gives the reader a tour through much of 20th-century philosophy with the hysterical academic Moses Herzog as guide, *Humboldt's Gift* tells the sad, but comical, tale of foils Charlie Citrine and Humboldt von Fleischer. Humboldt was modeled on the writer Delmore Schwartz, an artist touted as the great new hope of modern poetry in the 1950s, only to die at a young age after a struggle with mental illness and substance abuse. At the beginning of Bellow's 1975 novel, Citrine is himself a middling poet, who wastes his time pursuing troubled women and the excitement of petty crime. Gradually, however, Citrine becomes Bellow's eyes and ears. He sets his penetrating gaze on the failing poet Humboldt and narrates a pitch-perfect tale of the great man's decline that becomes a meditation on the failure of modern society to support artistic genius. All the ideals of modern society, from the science-minded surveys of Kinsey and Gallup to the alienating structures of capitalism and the theories of Freud, combine

to subvert Humboldt's gift, according to Citrine. Humboldt's descent into madness, which Citrine gorgeously and comically narrates in *Humboldt's Gift*, is a metaphor for the larger social decline that he observes in the 20th century.

The 60-year-old Citrine begins to realize that he must leave his home in Chicago and begin a quest for spiritual fulfillment, far from the maddening world that felled Humboldt. In the last pages of the novel, Humboldt sees crocuses pushing up through the cracks in the sidewalk and has a moment of awakening, an "epiphanic" moment in which he begins to see the beauty in the world around him and a means of avoiding the sad fate of the sensitive artist in the cold modern world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. At the time that Bellow wrote *Humboldt's Gift*, he was undergoing his own transformation, coming under the sway of the mystical school of anthroposophy founded by Rudolph Steiner. Consult an encyclopedia or trustworthy Internet site and learn about anthroposophy. How do such transcendental schools of thought and theories of essential self play a part in *Humboldt's Gift*? If you are also familiar with some of Freud's ideas, do you see Bellow commenting on those ideas in the novel? Why or why not?
2. As many readers of the time knew, Humboldt von Fleischer was a thinly veiled stand-in for the poet Delmore Schwartz. Look up Delmore Schwartz in a literary encyclopedia and look at his famous first work, *In Dreams Come Responsibilities*. Why was he such an emblematic author for writers of Bellow's generation? How does his character shine a light on the failures of society in *Humboldt's Gift*?
3. Again, in 1975's *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow focuses on the subject of madness, this time through Humboldt's struggle with manic depression. How does madness work in this novel? How is it employed differently here than in *Herzog*, Bellow's other great novel of madness?
4. Gender plays an important role in *Humboldt's Gift*, as it does elsewhere in Bellow's oeuvre. Compare the portrayal of masculinity in this novel and in

- . “Saul Bellow on America and American Jewish Writers.” Congress Bi-Weekly. December 4, 1970. Available online. URL: <http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=94>. Accessed May 28, 2007.
- Bigler, Walter. *Figures of Madness in Saul Bellow's Longer Fiction*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1998.
- Bloom, Allan. *Closing of the American Mind*. Foreword by Saul Bellow. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Saul Bellow*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- Brahm, Jeanne. *A Sort of Columbus: The American Voyages of Saul Bellow's Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984.
- Cronin, Gloria. *A Room of His Own: In Search of the Feminine in the Novels of Saul Bellow*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001.
- Cronin, Gloria L., and L. H. Goldman, eds. *Saul Bellow in the 1980s: A Collection of Critical Essays*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989.
- Cronin, Gloria L., and Ben Siegel, eds. *Conversations with Saul Bellow*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Eichelberger, Julia. *Prophets of Recognition: Ideology and the Individual in Novels by Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, and Eudora Welty*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.
- Goldman, L. H. *Saul Bellow's Moral Vision: A Critical Study of the Jewish Experience*. New York: Irvington, 1983.
- Harris, Mark. *Saul Bellow: Drumlin Woodchuck*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980.
- Hyland, Peter. *Saul Bellow*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Kramer, Michael, ed. *New Essays on Seize the Day*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- “Literature 1976.” Nobelprize.org. Available online. URL: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1976/index.html. Accessed May 28, 2007.
- Newman, Judie. *Saul Bellow and History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.
- The Official Saul Bellow Society Web site. Available online. URL: <http://www.saulbellow.org/NavigationBar/TheLibrary.html#augiemarch>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Pifer, Ellen. *Saul Bellow against the Grain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.
- Rosenfeld, Isaac. *Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader*. Edited and introduced by Mark Shechner, foreword by Saul Bellow. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.
- Roth, Philip. *Shoptalk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Sicher, Ephraim. *Holocaust Novelists*. Detroit: Gale, 2004.
- Trachtenberg, Stanley. *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979.
- Wasserman, Harriet. *Handsome Is: Adventures with Saul Bellow: A Memoir*. New York: Fromm International, 1997.
- Weber, Donald. *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Wilson, Jonathan. *Herzog: The Limits of Ideas*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.

Jennifer Glaser



ELIZABETH BISHOP (1911–1979)

Oh, must we dream our dreams and have them, too?

(“Questions of Travel”)

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, Elizabeth Bishop died in Boston, a little over 50 miles from the town where she began her life. However, the relative proximity of these two locations belies the fact that Bishop was, in fact, a wanderer, a traveler, an explorer. In truth, her whole life is filled with such contradictions. Seeking a secure and stable home, Bishop was almost always displaced, in motion. Given to deep introspection, she loathed the confessional or indulgent in her own writing; working in a literary/auditory medium, she possessed a painterly eye, and many of her poems are conspicuously visual; striving to complete poems that were as close to fact as memory permitted, she often used reality as a springboard to the fantastic.

Though in her later years Bishop focused intently on her childhood, we have relatively few objective accounts of it. Most information is found either in her recollections in letters, her autobiographical stories, or her poetry. We do know that Bishop was born on February 8, 1911, to William Thomas Bishop and Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, both of Canadian ancestry. William Bishop was a prominent, well-educated builder from a prosperous middle-class family. According to letters from her father announcing her birth, Elizabeth was a welcome addition to a loving home. Nevertheless,

this happiness was short lived. William Bishop died of Bright’s disease (a general catch-all diagnosis in the early 1900s for any sort of kidney-related disease) when Elizabeth was only eight months old. The reality of the loss, however, goes much deeper than Thomas Bishop’s death. While Elizabeth was obviously deprived of her father from a young age, she lost both parents with his passing. Whether her mother was mentally unstable before her husband’s death is not certain, but she suffered a mental breakdown after it and never fully recovered. As a result, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop was only a shadow in young Elizabeth’s life, and though she lived until 1934, the majority of her life was spent in institutions, and she never was able to care for her daughter.

With her father’s death and her mother’s subsequent breakdown, Elizabeth returned with her mother to live in Great Village, Nova Scotia, with the Bulmers. The time spent as a young girl under the care of her grandparents heavily influenced Bishop’s writing. Because of her mother’s frequent hospitalizations, Elizabeth saw herself essentially as an orphan in an isolated, tight-knit community, a “guest,” attended to by older relatives; Great Village later represented for her an idealized childhood and the strong family connections that she attempted to recreate throughout her life. One of

the most direct accounts of Bishop's impressions of that period appears in her short story "In the Village" (*Collected Prose* 251–274). Set against the pastoral backdrop of the comforting, peaceful village and told from a child's perspective, the story details a mother's release from a mental institution and her subsequent return to it at the story's end. The story emphasizes the child's fears and uncertainty about her mother's intrusive presence through two primary opposing symbols: the beautiful, rhythmic clang of a hammer against a blacksmith's anvil (life in the village) and the unsettling dread contained in a woman's scream (her mother). Life in Great Village also stirred in Bishop a love for nature and the outdoors, although she suffered from numerous lung-related infections and was prone to long bouts of bronchitis. As a result, formal education was difficult.

Whatever stability Bishop might have known as a child was overturned after her mother's final hospitalization in 1916, when Elizabeth was forcibly removed from Great Village by her paternal grandparents to live with them in Worcester, Mass. Though well intentioned in their desire to see her raised in the best that they could afford her, Bishop never fully overcame the shock and loss of the life in Great Village. While she lived with her father's parents for less than a year, it marked her deeply. She recounted this sense of displacement in her memoir "The Country Mouse" (*Collected Prose* 13–34). In Worcester, she truly was isolated—assigned formal playmates chosen by her grandmother, raised by servants. Here she began to evidence the debilitating and chronic asthma that plagued her throughout her adult life.

In 1918 Bishop's mother's eldest sister, Maude, liberated young Elizabeth from her grandparents' household. By all accounts, they were forced to concede she was miserable with them and allowed Maude to take Elizabeth to see whether she could do better. While conditions in Maude's home were certainly not "privileged" in any respect, Bishop was always indebted to her aunt Maude's generosity and expressed deep affection for her. She also credited Maude's love of literature and her "teem-

ing bookshelves" as early influences for her writing. Under Maude's care, Elizabeth blossomed, winning her first recognition (a five-dollar gold piece) as a writer at age 12 for an essay on Americanism. She was also able to reunite with her Bulmer grandparents, returning summers to Great Village to spend time with them. Her father's family maintained a strong, active presence in her life; a generous bequest from her father's estate financed her formal education, first at Walnut Hill School for Girls and later at Vassar, where she graduated in 1934.

Apart from completing college, 1934 was a pivotal year in Bishop's life: Her mother died and Bishop was introduced to Marianne Moore. A fellow alumna of Vassar, Moore was a graduate of the famous class of 1933, which served as background for Mary McCarthy's autobiographical novel *The Group*. Moore and Bishop shared a love for animals and nature, with a strong penchant toward the unusual, and their first outing together was to the circus to see the animals and feed the elephants. Animals play an important role throughout many of Bishop's poems including poems titled after their subject, such as "The Rooster," "The Armadillo," and "The Moose." Animal symbolism figures prominently also in poems such as "At the Fishhouses," where a playful seal works as a means of revelation.

Moore also encouraged Bishop greatly in her efforts toward a career as a poet, serving as a mentor and sponsor. In her memoir, "Efforts of Affection," Bishop indicates that Moore's influence left her "inspired, determined to be good, to work harder . . . never to try to publish anything until I thought I'd done my best with it" (*Complete Prose* 137). Like Moore, Bishop was meticulous in the execution of her work, often taking decades to produce a finished poem. Unlike Moore, however, she was reticent to present herself to the public, and it was not until her later years that she followed Moore's pattern of writing, teaching, and giving public readings; however, this course seems to have resulted more from financial necessity than from desire. Under Moore's patronage, Bishop's first

poems were published in 1935 in *Trial Balances*, an anthology of new poets introduced by more established writers.

From 1935 to 1945, Bishop lived primarily in Key West and New York and traveled extensively through Europe, Mexico, and Morocco. Her companion and lover for a majority of this time was Louise Crane, another friend from her Vassar years. Unlike Bishop, who had limited financial resources, Crane came from a wealthy background and attracted many bright and influential people from the worlds of art, literature, and music into her circle. Through Louise Crane, Bishop met Billie Holliday, her inspiration for the poem "Songs for a Colored Singer." Crane also introduced Bishop to the woman who would later provide the most significant personal relationship in her life—Lota de Macedo Soares. Bishop kept extensive journals of her travels from this time, working and publishing poems primarily in the *New Yorker* and the *Partisan Review*. Key West gave Bishop a setting for a number of notable poems, including "The Fish" and "The Bight." The house where she lived with Louise Crane in Key West became the first of the "three loved houses" in "One Art." However, her health still caused problems, primarily due to her asthma and an ever-increasing dependence on alcohol.

In 1946 Bishop was selected to receive the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship for her manuscript *North and South*. Bishop had received a recommendation for the award from Marianne Moore, and the honor carried with it a cash prize of \$1,000 and publication of her book of poems. *North and South* was greeted with great acclaim and established Bishop as a major new American poet. Some of her best-known works including "The Man-Moth," "The Fish," "Florida," and "The Map" appear here.

Apart from the acclaim, an additional benefit Bishop received from the publication of *North and South* was that it called her to the attention of her fellow poet the literary critic RANDALL JARRELL, who reviewed the book. Jarrell introduced Bishop to her second important mentor and friend, ROBERT LOWELL. Whereas Marianne Moore had

influenced Bishop in the way she approached her poetry, Lowell was a much more practical mentor. He helped Bishop understand how to obtain financing through fellowships and grants so that she could continue her work; she was awarded her first Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947. Because her family's legacy was limited, Bishop learned to rely on these monies to support her, and when they proved insufficient in her later years, she turned to teaching. Lowell helped Bishop secure and persuaded her to accept the position of consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress from 1949 to 1951, a precursor to today's poet laureate consultant in poetry.

After her time in this position, Bishop received the first Lucy Martin Donnelly Fellowship in Poetry from Bryn Mawr College. Using this money, Bishop fulfilled a lifelong desire to travel to South America with plans to sail up the Amazon. When she fell ill in Rio de Janeiro after eating the fruit of a cashew tree, she was nursed back to health by one of the acquaintances she was visiting, Lota de Macedo Soares. However, when Bishop was well enough to resume travel, Soares declared her love for Bishop, asking her to stay, promising to build her a writing studio in the home she was constructing north of Rio in the Brazilian countryside. Bishop later wrote of Soares's offer, "It just meant everything to me." Bishop lived with Soares from 1952 until 1967, moving first into Soares's home in Samambaia and later into a home Bishop purchased in Ouro Preto, Brazil. As did the residence in Key West that she shared with Louise Crane, the homes she shared with Lota de Macedo Soares would also figure in her poem "One Art" as the second and third of her "three loved houses."

With the stability and love Soares provided, Bishop entered into one of the most happy and productive periods of her life. Bishop loved Brazil—not only for the beauty of the country, but also for the warmth and generosity of the people. The freedom she enjoyed with Soares allowed her to explore new themes and forms in her work. She began to incorporate childhood memories, and she published her autobiographical short story "In the Village" in the *New Yorker* in 1953. She also

learned Portuguese well enough to translate *The Diary of Helena Morley*, a classic Brazilian memoir of a 12-year-old girl from a rural mining village, published in 1957. *Helena Morley* was a personal favorite for Bishop, who identified strongly with the story of the young heroine's isolation and resilience; unfortunately, the book did not enjoy commercial success. Conversely, a joint effort with the editors of *Life* magazine, where she provided the text for a pictorial book, *Brazil*, published in 1962, was extremely lucrative for Bishop, but artistically unsatisfying.

Her most important work of this period occurred in 1955, when Bishop submitted her second book of poems, *A Cold Spring*, for publication. When the publisher feared that the 20 new poems were insufficient material for a whole volume, Bishop suggested that they be included with a reissue of *North & South*. The new work, *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring*, included such notable poems as “At the Fishhouses,” “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” and “The Bight.” The book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1956.

Though Bishop was happy in her personal life with Soares, political strife in Brazil drove a wedge between them. Empowered by the newly elected governor of the region, Soares became consumed with efforts to reclaim a large section of land (roughly the size of New York's Central Park) and build a “people's park.” When the opposing parties in the government met her efforts with resistance, Soares turned her attention from Bishop to focus more fully on her project. However, the failed effort to construct the park ultimately undermined her health as well as straining her relationship with Bishop, who turned (as was her custom) to alcohol for relief in times of stress.

Bishop received a fellowship from the Academy of American Poets in 1964 and published her third book of poems, *Questions of Travel*, in 1965. This was not sufficient, however, to relieve the financial stress that Soares had placed on them. Because Soares had depleted most of their savings in her efforts to build the people's park, Bishop decided to accept a teaching offer from the University of

Washington in 1966. Soares refused to accompany her to the United States, and when Bishop returned after two semesters as writer in residence, their troubles worsened. Soares was diagnosed with arteriosclerosis and her health deteriorated rapidly, forcing her to resign as head of the park project. Bishop's health was also fragile, and her heavy drinking only contributed to the problems. Doctors recommended a separation for the two, hoping it would allow Soares to recover. However, when Bishop returned to New York, Soares followed shortly thereafter and on her first night with Bishop in the United Stage took a fatal overdose of sleeping pills.

Devastated, Bishop tried to resume life in Brazil, though she was treated badly by former friends and relations there, who held her partially responsible for Soares's death. While she did not publish new work during this time, her next book, a collection entitled *The Complete Poems*, appeared in 1969 and was awarded the National Book Award for poetry.

Recognizing that life in Brazil without Soares was impossible, Bishop moved back to Boston, where she settled permanently. She also began to teach at Harvard, invited by Robert Lowell to teach his courses while he was on leave in England. Brazil still figured prominently in her work, however, and after years of struggle to overcome her grief, in 1976 Bishop produced her final volume of original poetry, *Geography III*. The book combines much of what is distinctly Bishop—precise description, dreamlike visions, and childhood revelations. Containing some of Bishop's most well known poems, “The Moose,” “In the Waiting Room,” “One Art,” and “Crusoe in England,” the book was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award. It is dedicated to Alice Methfessel, whom Bishop met after moving to Boston, and who became the final important love relationship in her life.

That same year Bishop became the first American and the first woman to receive the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Though she expressed a strong desire to retire, finances would not allow her to, and Bishop continued to teach and give public readings of her poetry until her sudden death of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1979. She was

buried in Worcester, her gravestone inscribed with words she chose for her epitaph, the final lines from her poem "The Bight": "All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful" (*Complete Poems* 61).

"The Man-Moth" (1936)

"The Man-Moth" is a fantastical tale of a mysterious underground creature seeking the Moon, troubled by dreams, riding backward on the subway through the night. He is part loner, part urban dweller, but in many ways he is a representation of the artist, whose vision and self-sacrifice provide the basis for the regeneration of others. Said to be inspired by a newspaper misprint of the word *mammoth*, the poem also uses details taken from Bishop's journal notes while living in New York City.

The world of "The Man-Moth" is a world of shadow, similar to the setting of "The Weed," where everything happens at night, in the darkness. The poem concerns two main beings: Man lives above the Earth but cannot see the Moon, aware only of the light cast by it, his shadow, "only as big as his hat" (line 2); Man-Moth emerges from his home underground to investigate the Moon, "a small hole at the top of the sky" (line 14). As does Harold Lloyd, clambering up the side of a building in the silent film *Safety Last*, the Man-Moth scales the skyscrapers of the city in an effort to push his head through the "pinhole" in the sky into the light beyond. Watching from below, Man knows this effort is impossible; Bishop tells us "he has no such illusions" (line 22). However, "what the Man-Moth fears most he must do" (line 23).

Though the Man-Moth's quest is futile, Bishop does not present the lonely creature as an object of ridicule. Indeed, the journey is described in cyclical terms: This happens each time, and the Man-Moth continues in the persistent belief that each time he will succeed. When the Man-Moth returns to the underground, he boards a subway train, "facing the wrong way / and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed, / without a shift in gears or a

gradation of any sort. / He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards" (line 29–32).

If we look at Bishop's own life and her progression as an artist, the poem is eerily prescient. Bishop knows the artist always travels looking backward; however, for her, experience and memory do not provide refuge, but troubled visions instead. In the same manner, "Each night [the Man-Moth] must / be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams" (lines 33–34). It is sad that, there is no destination for the creature—or for the artist; instead, implies Bishop, both are always in motion, and even in rest, there is no satisfaction. Though the idea of death, and permanent rest, is appealing as the Man-Moth rides backward through the night, in the "pale subways of cement he calls home" (line 20), he understands "he does not dare look out the window, / for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison / runs there beside him" (lines 36–38). Death, or more accurately suicide, even though it offers a chance of escape, is seen as an indulgence. Bishop tells us the Man-Moth "regards it as a disease / he has inherited the susceptibility to" (lines 38–39).

In the final stanza of the poem as we encounter the Man-Moth directly, Bishop reveals her view of the value of the artist: "If you catch him; / hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil, / an entire night itself" (lines 41–43). As a reward for this contact, the Man-Moth offers up the only thing he has to give: "one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting" (line 45). But, says Bishop, the gift is not offered easily: "If you're not paying attention / he'll swallow it" (lines 46–47). For Bishop as an artist, the willingness to offer up her "eye," the pain associated with truth, would much more easily be swallowed. She may offer her artistic vision of the world to others in the same manner the Man-Moth reluctantly offers the tear, but contained in the offering is water, "cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink" (line 48).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Bishop's poem "The Weed." As you read it, what comparisons can you make to ideas in

- “The Man-Moth”? How does Bishop attempt to define herself as an artist in both poems?
2. Bishop introduces the third rail of the subway track, the electric rail that runs above the regular track, as a symbol of death. But just as the third rail of the subway is deadly to anyone who might touch it, it also provides power to propel the train. How does the idea of death “energize” the artist?
 3. The tear that the Man-Moth offers to anyone willing to hold a light up to his eye seems to have regenerative powers. Why do you think that Bishop shifts from a third-person view in the poem to second person at this moment? How does this work in with the idea of the Man-Moth as a representation of Bishop’s poetry or art in general?

“The Unbeliever” (1938)

Though Bishop was not religious, certainly not Christian in any traditional sense, she was grounded in Christian theology, and Christian symbols and themes populate much of her work. In “The Unbeliever,” Bishop addresses no-belief as a belief system but also suggests that faith itself is little more than willed ignorance.

Beginning the poem with a reference to the quintessential Puritan handbook, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bishop’s Unbeliever sleeps atop a mast above the sea. He knows that his perch is precarious, dangerous, but he chooses to keep “his eyes fast closed” (line 2). Contrasting the Unbeliever’s fear and desire to stay asleep, Bishop introduces two alternate points of view, illustrating how sight and perception are related to belief. First, we hear from a cloud that imagines that he is founded on marble pillars and never moves. Looking down into the sea, he has all the justification for his beliefs that he needs: “Secure in introspection, he peers at the watery pillars of his own reflection” (lines 14–15).

Next a gull supposes that the air itself is “like marble” (line 18) and that he will forever be buoyed

by “marble wings on my tower-top fly” (line 20). If the cloud envisions a world where he never moves, the gull sees the world as unceasing movement toward heaven. What links the two disparate points of view is the fact that they are so obviously misguided but that they believe what they believe absolutely.

In the last stanza of the poem the gull reads the dream of the Unbeliever: “I must not fall. / The spangled sea below wants me to fall. / It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all” (lines 23–25). Though the Unbeliever is mistaken that the sea is hard as diamonds in the same way the cloud thinks he is perched atop a marble pillar or that the gull thinks his wings are marble, the Unbeliever is correct in his fears—the sea poses the threat of death and destruction.

“The Unbeliever” is unusual for Bishop, in that she never injects herself into the poem. Unlike “The Man-Moth,” where we can discern Bishop’s admiration for and identification with the Man-Moth, in this poem she chooses to give each point of view his own speech, clearly identifying each perspective, but not claiming one for herself. Though the Unbeliever is not a source of ridicule or disdain as are the arrogant, foolish cloud and gull, neither is he a source of inspiration. His choice paralyzes him; though he may have more true knowledge than the other voices in the poem, his knowledge does nothing to liberate or rejuvenate him.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Like “The Unbeliever,” *Pilgrim’s Progress*, written by John Bunyan, is told in the form of a dream where Christian seeks his salvation on a pilgrimage to heaven. Along his journey, he encounters many obstacles that test his faith as well as many characters who are useful in showing him the difference between right and wrong. Why do you think Bishop uses a reference to this overtly Christian text to begin her poem? How can some of the images such as “marble towers” work to identify the cloud or the gull with Christianity? Is the identification complimentary or derogatory?

- In his book on Elizabeth Bishop titled *The Unbeliever*, Robert Dale Parker says that the poem consciously evokes Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* (33). In Melville's story, Ishmael recounts the dull, almost hypnotic chore of sitting atop the mast to scan the sea in search of whales. Because of the extreme height and the instability of the perch, Ishmael warns that it is not a good job for an introspective, reflective man, who might lose himself in his thoughts and possibly fall to his death. How does this idea of introspection as danger work into themes expressed in "The Unbeliever"?
- Read "A Pit—but Heaven over It" by Emily Dickinson. Compare the ideas expressed by Dickinson to those by Bishop. What similarities are there? Where do they differ?

"The Fish" (1940)

Shortly after moving to Key West, Bishop discovered her love for fishing, and her notes from this period detail an outing when she landed a 60-pound amberjack. The excursion, which provides the basis for "The Fish," is more than just a fish tale of "the one that got away," however. When T. S. Eliot first spoke of the "objective correlative," he used the term to explain the foundation by which artists use a given external situation, experience, or object to produce an emotion that is otherwise inexplicable; as the description of the sensory experience ends, the emotional response to it commences. "The Fish," as do other poems that appeared in *North and South* including "Florida" and "The Weed," uses description of a particular event, place, or object to produce just such an emotional response. Unlike "Florida," however, where the description of the place is more contained and less symbolic, or "The Weed," where the representation is more obvious—"In that black place, thought I saw / that each drop contained a light, / a small, illuminated scene" (*Complete Poems* 21)—"The Fish" marks a step forward for Bishop. In this poem she not only uses her keen eye for detail, but also shows that she "sees" what is not directly observable: "I thought of

the coarse white flesh / packed in like feathers, / the big bones and the little bones, / the dramatic reds and blacks / of his shiny entrails" (lines 27–31). As Carol Frost notes in "Elizabeth Bishop's Inner Eye," "What else is at work concerns . . . the inner eye's power to generate, focus, manipulate, and enhance visual images in the mind, and the poem shows the future of that power" (250–251).

Inserting herself into the poem through a first-person narrative point of view, Bishop moves from impartial direct observation to internal speculation and identification as she describes "his gills . . . breathing in / the terrible oxygen /—the frightening gills, / fresh and crisp with blood" (lines 22–25). In the same manner that observation leads to identification, close description of the image and events leads to transformation. In the final part of the poem, as "victory fill[s] up / the little rented boat" (lines 66–67), the fish becomes a metaphor of survival, suggesting the poet herself may overcome adversity. In this way, Bishop suggests that the act of observing and detailing, the act of creating art from experience, sets in motion deeper levels of change and new ways of being.

For Discussion or Writing

- In her poem "Poetry," Marianne Moore says that in reading a good poem, "One discovers in / it after all, a place for the genuine. / Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise. . ." She also exhorts poets, saying, "nor till the poets among us can be / 'literalists of the imagination'—above insolence and triviality and can present / for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them,' shall we have / it." What does Moore mean when she says that poets must be "literalists of the imagination"? How does "The Fish" work in respect to this idea? Has Bishop created an "imaginary garden with a real toad" in her description of the fish where readers can discover a place for the genuine? How so?
- In what ways is Bishop's real fish anthropomorphic? How does she use feminine images to complement or contrast the description of the fish?

3. Bishop delighted in telling friends that the poem was as close to the actual event as she could make it, changing only the number of hooks and lines in the fish's mouth from three to five. But the poem is much more than a mere recounting of a fishing trip. How does the poem differ from a straightforward prose rendition of the event? How does Eliot's "objective correlative" apply to the poem?
4. As an imagist, Bishop used many of the same techniques as poets such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Read Pound's "In a Station at the Metro," and/or Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow." Why do the poets focus on a single image or item? How does description in these poems work to help us understand larger concepts?

"At the Fishhouses" (1948)

"At the Fishhouses" first appeared in the August 9, 1948, issue of the *New Yorker*, a product of notes Bishop made while traveling in Nova Scotia the previous summer. The poem not only marks a return to Bishop's homeland as a place for material, but also points to her interest in studying herself in relation to the landscape and the people who inhabit it with her.

In his literary biography, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, Brett Millier proposes the poem marks a shift in Bishop, moving from observer (as evidenced in earlier poems such as "The Map," published a decade earlier) to geographer, a role that requires a more informed and intimate contact with the landscape. She labels her notes for the poem "GM," which Millier tells us has been suggested as "Geographical Mirror" and was "part of [Bishop's] attempt to find herself in land and sea" (182). Indeed, Bishop describes the coastal setting in terms of a mirror, early on: "All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea, / swelling slowly as if considering spilling over" (lines 13–14).

Nova Scotia had been home to her mother's family, and Bishop explored the connection to fam-

ily in the poem. The narrator meets an old man who "was a friend of my grandfather" (line 33). Together, as they sit talking in the cold light at the edge of the sea, Bishop paints a Wyethesque landscape, her emphasis on the painterly visuals; she highlights such items as the rusted ironwork, decaying fish, lobster pots covered in a shining film of scales to show how time has weathered the village. While the "steeply peaked roofs" of the houses attempt to oppose the eroding effects of time, its deteriorating effects seem nonetheless inevitable. The narrator and the old man talk about "the decline in the population / and of codfish and herring" (lines 34–35).

Bishop not only focuses on the landscape around her, but also considers that which cannot be seen, which remains hidden beneath the sea. In the final lines, Bishop also confirms another aspect of her "geographical" inspection—not only does time destroy: Flux is inevitable, all around us, putting us inside history, "our knowledge . . . historical, flowing, and flown" (line 84).

In the second half of the poem, Bishop shifts her attention to a friendly, familiar seal playing in the water just offshore as she has seen him do before. Bishop notes her religious background and makes a strong connection with the seal, saying, "like me a believer in total immersion, / so I used to sing him Baptist hymns" (line 53–54). Though the reference to hymn singing displays Bishop's self-professed love of hymns, Bishop does not appear interested in immersion in the religious sense. Her desire is to be immersed in experience, the constant flow, just as the seal dives into the icy water, "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear" (63). For Bishop, the water beneath the surface is cold: "your wrist would ache immediately, / your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn / as if the water were a transmutation of fire (lines 73–75). It is a source of truth and nourishment: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free" (lines 79–80).

Whereas a mapmaker is concerned with relationships of objects in relation to one another, the geographer looks at the texture of landscape

in its totality. With “At the Fishhouses,” Bishop moves into the emotional landscape of her own life experience.

For Discussion or Writing

1. During her life Bishop expressed great admiration for and a fascination with the writings of Charles Darwin:

One admires the beautiful and solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (Stevenson 66)

In this passage, Bishop could be describing herself as the narrative voice in “At the Fishhouses.” Where is she like Darwin: lonely, eyes fixed on facts and minute details? Can her concentration in the poem be perceived as “useless”? How does it contribute to a “self-forgetting”?

2. What part does religious symbolism play in the poem? Does Bishop use the religious symbolism ironically? How so?
3. Look at the way Bishop uses another animal, the seagull, in “The Unbeliever.” How does this compare with the seal in “At the Fishhouses”? Compare the images of the sea as it is portrayed in both poems.
4. Read Bishop's earlier poem “The Map.” How does Bishop's depiction of landscape differ in this poem from “At the Fishhouses”?
5. Look at *Bradford House*, painted by Andrew Wyeth. How does Bishop use language to conjure images, moods, and emotions similar to those found in the painting?

“Questions of Travel” (1956)

“Questions of Travel” belongs to the general category of Bishop's poetry that could be called travel poems. As does “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” it uses observations made while traveling to provide a context for the poem. “Questions of Travel” is not so concerned with experience and history, however, and considers other, more personal issues such as the ideas of expectation, displacement, and home.

As the title poem of the volume, “Questions of Travel” is the third poem in the section of the book entitled “Brazil.” The poems in this section are less individualized than poems appearing in the second section: “Elsewhere,” which deal more with Bishop's childhood and other experiences that helped shape her life. However, the poems in the Brazil section are “detached” almost by necessity, as if exploring the physical landscape of her new home allowed the freedom to explore other, more private themes.

The poems that open the “Brazil” section—“Arrival at Santos” (*Complete Poems* 89–90); “Brazil, January 1, 1502” (*Complete Poems* 91–92); and “Questions of Travel”—all deal with various issues arising from living in an unfamiliar environment. While the poems may be concerned with externals of place, they do demonstrate a clear progression and Bishop's increasing identification with the country. The first, “Arrival at Santos,” published shortly after Bishop arrived in Brazil, details the contrast between expectations and reality of the traveler. We see the country through Bishop's eyes, as an outsider: “Here is a coast; here is a harbor” (line 1). Everything is viewed as an oddity, curious, strange: “So that's the flag. I never saw it before. / I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag” (lines 15–16). The narrator (Bishop) seems disdainful of the port city, concerned more with introducing the comforts of home into the new locale, trying to make the new place as much like the old as possible. However, if the judgment on the port city deems it “inferior,” the poem ends with Bishop's looking deeper into Brazil: “We leave Santos at once; we are driving to the interior” (lines 39–40).

The second poem, “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” details a different arrival, the landing of the first Portuguese explorers at the Brazilian bay they believed to be the mouth of a great river, which they named *Rio de Janeiro* (River of January). Here, though, Bishop imagines the reaction of these new arrivals to the foreign landscape, and it is not the disappointed expectations of tourists disembarking in a busy port city. Instead, these explorers see what they have expected to see and nothing more. For them, Brazil is a savage, godless setting waiting to be tamed and civilized. As “they [rip] away into the hanging fabric, / each out to catch an Indian for himself” (lines 49–50), the true beauty of the locale is lost on them. However, as they conquer the land, Bishop suggests they are not able to tame it completely and are doomed to disappointment, the objects of their pursuit “retreating, always retreating” (line 53).

“Questions of Travel” deals again with expectation and disappointment, but this time, the point of view is that of the insider—the traveler who has chosen to stay. But now, the sights have overwhelmed the narrator of the poem when she laments, “There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams / hurry too rapidly to the sea” (lines 1–2). Those waterfalls, like “mile-long, shiny, tearstains” (line 6) force her to reconsider her decision to travel in the first place: “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” (line 15). But Bishop acknowledges that “surely it would have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road” (line 31), to have missed the firsthand experience, to have let her impressions of place be formed by others, which she calls “the whittled fantasies of wooden cages” (line 52). Though she asks the question “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?” (lines 60–61), Bishop ultimately embraces her decision to travel, understanding that flux is the most permanent of conditions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. At the end of the poem, Bishop references a quote by the philosopher Blaise Pascal, who

wrote, “All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.” In the poem, she asks whether he “could have been not entirely right?” Using the poem for support, how does she demonstrate her claim?

2. Read “Arrival at Santos” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” How does Bishop change in her attitude toward Brazil from these poems in “Questions of Travel”? Why do you think she chose to go back in time in the middle poem? How does this add to her insights into Brazil?
3. One of the major themes in “Questions of Travel” is the idea of expectation versus reality. Read “Arrival at the Waldorf” by Wallace Stevens, which was written after Stevens returned from a trip to Guatemala. What do you think Stevens means when he says, “The wild poem is a substitute. . . . After that alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala.” How do Stevens and Bishop compare actual experience and art created from experience?

“Filling Station” (1964)

In her poetry in general, Bishop moves toward a rejection of what she thought of as typical “Dickinson” feminine domain: themes of love, human and divine. However, the role of the feminine still figures as a powerful force in many poems; we see just such an examination of feminine influence as a force of order in “Filling Station.” Written in midcareer, “Filling Station” belongs to the category of Bishop poetry Bonnie Costello describes in *Questions of Mastery* as “immediate beholders . . . record[ing] feelings and emotions in direct observation rather than detached reflection or description” (37).

The point of view in the poem is distinctly feminine, as evidenced in its opening statement, “Oh, but it is so dirty!” (line 1). Uncharacteristically judgmental, the poem introduces the masculine world of the filling station as disturbing and potentially dangerous: “Be careful with that match!” (line

6). When the owner of the station is introduced, he appears brutish, wearing “a dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit” (lines 7–8). However, he is also introduced as “Father,” assisted by two sons, and when the narrator reveals, almost as in confidence “(it’s a family filling station)” (line 12), the tone of the poem shifts from disparaging to questioning.

Conspicuously feminine objects invade the space: a wicker sofa, a doily, a begonia. Not only do they contrast the masculinity of the station itself, with its hard cement surfaces, they seem to absorb and soften it. Bishop describes the wicker furniture as “crushed and grease-impregnated” (lines 17–18), suggesting an abiding female presence that works to counterbalance the male forces: oil-soaked, greasy, saucy. It is the appearance of the feminine that makes the narrator question what life lies within the station—why the plant, why the doily? Costello proposes that Bishop sees this feminine force as both creative and life affirming.

From the objects themselves, the narrator concludes there must be a creator—a “somebody,” as Bishop names her, who cares enough to decorate and order this world: “Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody watered the plant” (lines 34–35). It is the recognition of this unique feminine presence, possessed with both a desire and the ability to transform ugliness into beauty, harshness into civility, that provides the final realization for the poet. The transformative feminine force is both maternal and beneficent, and though the force is never fully revealed, Bishop takes comfort in the final notion that “Somebody loves us all” (line 41).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the fourth stanza of the poem, Bishop notes that certain objects at the filling station are “part of the set.” How does she use this idea of artifice to illustrate her notions of intrusion and reconciliation within the space?
2. Certain objects have distinctly feminine associations or descriptions. Others, such as the “hirsute” begonia, are more ambiguous. List objects that might be more masculine in their connotations—what is the attitude portrayed toward these objects?
3. Read Bishop’s poems “Pink Dog” and “Faustina, or Rock Roses.” How does Bishop deal with gender in these poems as compared to “Filling Station”? How does the notion of class and class sensibilities work in conjunction with or opposition to ideas of gender in these poems?

“Sestina” (1964)

It may seem ironic that “Sestina” appears in *Questions of Travel*, since like “In the Waiting Room,” it is a memory poem of childhood. But as in another poem from the same volume, “First Death in Nova Scotia,” Bishop seems to say to us that memory is a landscape unto itself and worthy of exploration.

Originally titled “Early Sorrow,” the poem depicts a scene probably drawn from Bishop’s childhood, the time immediately after her mother’s removal from the Bulmer house in Great Village. The child in the poem draws pictures of “inscrutable” houses, while the weeping grandmother looks on and oversees the daily tasks of the household. Underpinning the poem are the unspoken loss of the unnamed mother and the inability to express grief openly. While the grandmother believes her tears to be hidden, the fact that they are reported to us makes it obvious they are not. However, the third-person narration of the poem coupled with the naïve childlike perceptions create detachment in the poem, making it difficult to discern who is speaking, unless we can identify the voice as the adult Bishop looking back on the scene. Bishop once told her friend Robert Lowell, “When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived” (qtd. in *One Art* x). This would help to explain the relative isolation of both characters, and that even as they go about their normal routines, it is impossible to overcome the sadness that permeates the world around them. Bishop seems to say that the very activities they participate in—making tea, drawing pictures, telling jokes—are futile attempts to stave off inevitable sorrow.

Using the sestina (song of sixes) form, in which six words are repeated in a rolling pattern of six

stanzas and a concluding three-line envoi, Bishop places emphasis on the repeated words: *grandmother, child, stove, almanac, house, and tears*. The importance of these simple nouns helps the author, as the child, create a “rigid drawing” of the past. It is the child, now grown, who must attempt to express that which has been repressed and unspoken for so long.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read “First Death in Nova Scotia” and compare the first-person narrator to the third-person narration used in “Sestina.” How does the voice in each poem help Bishop inject the reader into the world of the poem? What would be the effect if Bishop inverted these voices, using first-person point of view in “Sestina” and third-person point of view in “First Death in Nova Scotia”?
2. Both poems detail loss, and in both poems, common objects demand our attention. How does Bishop use these objects to signify a greater understanding of the world?
3. Define *inscrutable*. Why do you think that Bishop uses that adjective to define the drawing of the house? How does the word apply to the idea of the poet trying to recapture a moment from the past and the poem as a representation of memory?

“In the Waiting Room” (1971)

Though this poem did not appear until late in Bishop’s career (published in her last volume of poetry, *Geography III*), its roots are in her earliest memories. Set in 1918, toward the end of her troubled stay in her paternal grandparents’ home, the incident that underlies the poem is detailed in the final paragraphs of Bishop’s memoir “The Country Mouse”:

After New Year’s, Aunt Jenny had to go to the dentist, and asked me to go with her. She left me in the waiting room, and gave me a copy of the *National Geographic* to look at. It was still getting dark early, and the room had grown very

dark. There was a big yellow lamp in one corner, a table with magazines, and an overhead chandelier of sorts. There were others waiting, two men and a plump middle-aged lady, all bundled up. I looked at the magazine cover—I could read most of the words—shiny, glazed, yellow and white. The black letters said FEBRUARY 1918. A feeling of absolute and utter desolation came over me. I felt . . . *myself*. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt *I, I, I*, and I looked at the three strangers in panic. I was one of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. “You’re in for it, now,” something said. How had I got tricked into such a false position? I would be like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely every once in a while. The awful sensation passed, then it came back again. “You are you,” something said. “How strange you are, inside looking out. You are not Beppo [her Aunt Jenny’s bull terrier], or the chestnut tree, or Emma [Bishop’s playmate and friend], you are you and you are going to be you forever.” It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. *Why* was I a human being? (*Complete Prose* 32–33)

The poem’s construction is typical for Bishop in that it moves from detailed description in the first half to revelation in the last. However, it also marks a departure for her in that it is the first poem in which Bishop names herself as a character in the poem: “But I felt: you are an *I*, you are an *Elizabeth*” (line 60). The climax of the poem and the prose piece is a rite of passage—at once a realization of individuality, but with that realization recognition of the isolation that individual identity entails. However, with this recognition of self is a second epiphany, that of a connectedness to the world around her, specifically to herself as a woman: “Why should I be my aunt, / or me or anyone? / What similarities— / . . . held us all together / or made us all just one?” (lines 75–84).

Bishop ends the poem with the notice “The War was on” (line 95). Since the poem is set in 1918, the reference to the First World War is obvious.

Yet, there would also seem to be a second layer of conflict implied. War has been declared within the young poet, a war of individual identity and expectation for her both as a woman and as a member of the human community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the prose account of the events Bishop describes in "The Country Mouse" to those in the poem "In the Waiting Room." Which details has she omitted, altered, enhanced? Also, the poem seems to build to a new level of understanding not contained in the prose version. How so?
2. Look at the various ways Bishop shifts perspective in the poem, focusing our attention "inward" or "outward." How does this shift contribute to the meaning of the poem?
3. A "rite of passage" is defined as a journey from innocence to awareness. What is young Elizabeth's rite of passage? Can you recall a similar experience in your own life when you underwent a shift in your perspective to see yourself and the world in a new way?

"The Moose" (1972)

If any poem can be called definitive, "The Moose" may arguably be the definitive Bishop poem. Taking 20 years to complete, it is Bishop's longest poem and unquestionably combines notable representative elements of other poems from throughout Bishop's career. As she did with "The Fish," Bishop claimed that the events narrated within "The Moose" happened almost exactly as she relayed them, altering only minor details of the story's arrangement, and as she does in "The Fish" and "At the Fishhouses," Bishop uses interaction with nature and more specifically, an animal, as a means to revelation. She utilizes travel as a theme much as she does in "Questions of Travel" and the idea that when we are displaced, we are in some ways most at home. As in "Sestina" and her short story "In the Village," Bishop uses "The Moose" to combine ideas of family and loss. And as she does in "The

Unbeliever" and "The Man-Moth," dreamy visions are a means to revelation.

The first six stanzas are one long sentence describing a bus trip from Nova Scotia to Boston—as it happens, the beginning and end points of Bishop's own life. As the bus makes its way through a richly described landscape in the late afternoon, it is portrayed as a battered traveler, with its "dented flank / of blue, beat-up enamel" (line 30). The travelers inside the bus develop an informal community, and as they look out of the bus into the early evening, they observe a variety of communities, each hinting at the lives led by the individuals who dwell in them. But the glimpses into these other worlds are fleeting: "Five islands, Five Houses, / where a woman shakes a tablecloth / out after supper. / A pale flickering. Gone" (lines 58–61). The attitude is amiable, almost adventurous, as the travelers enter the wood, the fog, the night and settle into a surreal state: "A dreamy divagation / begins in the night, / a gentle, auditory / slow hallucination . . ." (lines 87–90). In this section of the poem, the passengers are cocooned within the foggy night, within the bus, within their own worlds. A conversation identified in the poem as "Grandparents' voices" (line 96) relates personal details from a couple's life that Bishop likens to intimate exchanges that happen late at night, "Talking the way they talked / in the old featherbed" (lines 121–122). Yet the conversation is, at the same time, universal, and Bishop describes the old couple "talking, in Eternity" (line 98).

The conversation covers a catalog of disasters: "deaths, deaths and sicknesses" (line 103); there is even mention of someone "the family had / to put . . . away" (line 113–114), echoing Bishop's mother's removal to an institution. But in the list of sorrows, there is also recognition: "A sharp, indrawn breath, half groan, half acceptance, / that means 'Life's like that, / We know *it* (also death)'" (lines 118–120). Bishop indicates that it is impossible to avoid loss; more importantly, she says that loss does not function as a vehicle of transcendence; we need merely accept it as a necessary natural condition.

The reverie of the night is interrupted when the bus driver stops to look at a large moose that

has wandered into the middle of the road. Emerging from “the impenetrable wood” (line 134), the moose becomes a symbol of home:

Towering, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses),
A man’s voice assures us
“Perfectly harmless . . .” (lines 139–144)

Again, as in the earlier passages, there is a sense of shared experience and community among the travelers, but in sharp opposition to the melancholy and sadness of the earlier passages, the moose creates wonder and delight:

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly,
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy? (lines 151–156)

But the journey continues, and though the travelers are granted one last look backward at the moose, they press on into the night, the world of the outer experience and inner reflection combined in “a dim / smell of moose, an acrid smell of gasoline” (lines 156–159).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bishop wrote in a letter to Anne Stevenson:

My outlook is pessimistic. I think we are still barbarians, barbarians who commit a hundred indecencies and cruelties every day of our lives, as just possibly future ages may be able to see. But I think we should be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy—to make life endurable. (quoted in Travisano 204–205)

How does “The Moose” support the idea that we must laugh at life instead of being overwhelmed by it?

2. Since “The Moose” contains many elements common throughout Bishop’s poetry, choose one element from the poem to compare how Bishop uses that same idea or technique in another of her pieces.
3. In an article for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Judith Crews, a specialist in comparative literature and languages, notes that in ancient cultures “Trees and forests . . . took on symbolic divine characteristics, or were seen to represent superlative forces such as courage, endurance or immortality. They were the means of communication between worlds.” Does Bishop use the woods to represent “superlative forces”? If so, then how? Emerging from “the impenetrable wood,” can the moose be seen as a divine messenger in the poem?

“One Art” (1976)

The general theme of the poems in *Geography III*, where “One Art” appears, is the reconsideration of life and experience. As Thomas J. Travisano notes in *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*, Bishop asks that we see her “not in terms of that life’s particular circumstances and decisions . . . , but in terms of its chosen way of thinking and seeing, in terms of a whole bundle of latent assumptions, commitments, and predilections that bind the person and the artist” (176).

To construct the poem, Bishop chose the villanelle, a fixed form consisting of 19 lines in total. In a villanelle, composed of five tercets and a final quatrain, only two rhyme sounds occur, and the first and third lines of the first stanza are repeated, alternately, as the third line of subsequent stanzas until the last, when they appear as the last two lines of the poem. Bishop varied slightly from the form in that she did not repeat lines entirely through the poem but did repeat the final rhyming words—*master* and *disaster*.

The use of these two words points toward the underlying theme of the poem—Bishop’s desire to

master both the art of creation and form as well the art of loss. The poem begins ironically, as she observes, “The art of losing isn’t hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster” (lines 1–3). The second stanza suggests that impermanence is the state of being we must all learn to accept as Bishop exhorts the reader to “lose something every day. Accept the fluster of lost door keys, the hour badly spent” (lines 4–5). However, as the poem progresses and the catalog of items “lost” increases, they become more personal and self-referential. Knowing that Bishop spent her life in motion and was a traveler by nature heightens the pathos when what is lost are “places, and names, and where you meant / to travel” (lines 8–9). The switch to second person *you* in these lines is not only a summons to the reader, but directly references her own loss of persons and places over time.

While Bishop notes the objects lost to her, she only hints at the greater losses they represent. Brett Millier, author of *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, says that in writing the poem, “the poet is giving herself a lesson in . . . losing” (506–507). The loss of a mother’s watch implies a sentimental keepsake but does not mention the sorrow over the loss of the mother herself. The loss of the three loved houses alludes to the houses themselves, but not to the life lived within them. In the final quatrain, Bishop again uses the second person, but this time it is not directed toward the reader or even herself: “—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love) I shan’t have lied” (lines 16–17). Though some critics have speculated that this might be a reference to Alice Methfessel, her last love, it seems also to envelop the loss of Bishop’s beloved Lota. In the final lines of the poem, Bishop again addresses herself (*Write it!*) (line 19), confirming her reticence to address such personal matters in such a public way. However, she also seems willing, within the liberating confines of her art to do so, as if mastering this level of disclosure might be a greater, though ultimately beneficial form of losing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why do you think Bishop chose a fixed form for this poem? How does the form help contribute to the meaning of the poem?
2. Read Theodore Roethke’s villanelle “The Waking.” How does Roethke’s use of waking and learning compare to Bishop’s idea of mastery and losing?
3. Look at the poem “Dreams” by Langston Hughes. He urges readers to “hold fast,” while Bishop seems to offer just the opposite advice. What comments do you imagine he would offer Bishop on “One Art”?
4. Joseph Campbell discusses a ritual in which individuals relinquish items in order to pass from one stage to the next. Each item represents something of larger meaning to the person (as eyeglasses could be used to represent a love of reading). What items would you choose if you were asked to participate in the ritual of seven things?

“Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” (1948)

Though the poem draws on events and recollections from her journals written at Vassar and from Bishop’s travels in Morocco in 1948, “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” did not appear until much later, published in 1955 as a part of the collection *A Cold Spring*.

Divided into three sections or movements, the poem details three different methods of “travel” as a means of gaining knowledge, though each carries with it a certain set of limitations. There is first the orderly study of cataloged details from the concordance; then is the hectic and untidy insight gained from direct observation and experience; finally, there is the insight gained from fictions, the imagined recollections and remembrances resulting from the first two.

The gravity with which the episodes are outlined in the concordance creates a longing in the author for the tidiness they represent. But there is also recognition that with order entails a certain

including “Shampoo” and “Pink Dog.” How does the knowledge of Bishop as a lesbian/feminist writer expand her work? Or does this effort to categorize her limit her?

2. Tennessee Williams writes that *The Glass Menagerie* is a “memory play,” and that memory distorts and colors history. Understanding Bishop’s need for accurate detail, how would she react to this idea? Or does she engage in this filtered perception of history herself?
3. During her lifetime, Bishop did not achieve the popularity of her contemporaries Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore. Moore and Lowell both admired Bishop’s work tremendously, as she did theirs. What general comparisons might you make among these three poets? How is their work similar? What specific influences might you find of one on another?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Collected Prose*. Edited by Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984.
- . *The Complete Poems: 1927–1929*. New York: Noonday Press, 1979.
- . *Edgar Allan Poe and The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*. Edited by Alice Quinn. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006.
- . *One Art: Letters*. Edited by Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994.
- Costello, Bonnie. *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Crews, Judith. “Perceptions of Forests.” *Unasylva: An International Journal of Forestry and Forest Industries* 54, no. 2 (2003). FAO—Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Available online. URL: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y9882e/y9882e08.htm>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- “Elizabeth Bishop: American Poet.” *Elizabeth Bishop at Vassar College*. Elizabeth Bishop Society. Available online. URL: <http://projects.vassar.edu/bishop/index.php>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Frost, Carol. “Elizabeth Bishop’s Inner Eye.” *New England Review* 25 (2004): 250–257.
- Goldensohn, Lorrie. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- MacMahon, Candace W., ed. *Elizabeth Bishop: A Bibliography, 1927–1979*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980.
- McCabe, Susan. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.
- Millier, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Montiero, George, ed. *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Stevenson, Anne. *Elizabeth Bishop*. Edited by Sylvia E. Bowman. Twayne’s United States Authors Series. New York: Twayne, 1966.
- Zona, Kirstin Hottelling. *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

James Driggers



RAY BRADBURY (1920–)

Video games are a waste of time . . . real brains don't do that . . . while they're doing that, I'll go ahead and write another novel.

(interview with James Hibberd)

Though he considers himself a creator of fantasy rather than of “realistic” science fiction worlds, Ray Bradbury remains one of the most famous science fiction writers of the last 100 years. A novelist, poet, essayist, short story writer, playwright, scriptwriter, and novelist, Bradbury has written over 500 works, though he is best known for two novels published early in his career: *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Born in the small town of Waukegan, Illinois, on August 22, 1920, to Leonard Spaulding and Esther Marie Moberg Bradbury, Ray Douglas Bradbury first fed his imagination with the fantastic stories he found in books, comics, magic shows, and movies. In 1923 he and his mother saw the film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which had a huge impact on his young mind, an event he has recounted in several interviews. He also cites a book of fairy tales his aunt gave him at the age of five, L. Frank Baum's Oz books at six, *Amazing Stories* (the first science fiction magazine), Edgar Allan Poe, and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* as the foundation of his long career as a reader. In a genre that celebrates technology and futuristic possibilities, Ray Bradbury often sets his stories in his midwestern upbringing; his story lines spring from the ordinary aspects of everyday life. He juxtaposes his childhood and his imagination, planting the fantastical elements he creates in the middle of small town America. Additionally, Brad-

bury writes literature not set in strange worlds or alternative realities, such as *Dandelion Wine*, an autobiographical novel about a young boy's summer in Green Town, Illinois. These works infuse magic into Bradbury's memories, recreating the nostalgic days of the author's childhood.

Bradbury sees writing as an act of the imagination with which he amuses, purges, and entertains himself. As he states in the introduction of *The Stories of Bradbury*, “For I am that special freak, the man with the child inside who remembers all. I remember the day and the hour I was born. I remember being circumcised on the second day after my birth. I remember suckling at my mother's breast” (Bradbury xiv). He has verified these early details with his mother; this experience later became the impetus for the short story “The Small Assassin,” published in his first collection, *Dark Carnival* (1947), in which an infant possessing preternatural consciousness murders his mother and then his father. This past provides the setting for his stories, both commonplace and fantastic. Bradbury insists that his ability to see the world as a writer stems from his ability to see through the eyes of a child; he continually calls upon his childhood for inspiration.

The Bradbury family did not escape the hardships of the depression. In 1932 Leonard Bradbury moved his family to Tucson for a second time (the first was a year-long trip in 1926 that ended with the death of Bradbury's infant sister), back to Waukegan,

and then finally to Los Angeles in 1934 in order to find work. Before moving, Bradbury became enamored with magic, meeting Blackstone the Magician, participating in Blackstone's act, and later becoming friends with a man called Mr. Electrico:

Reaching out into the audience, his eyes flaming, his white hair standing on end, sparks leaping between his smiling teeth, he brushed an Excalibur sword over the heads of the children, knighting them with fire. When he came to me, he tapped me on both shoulders and then the tip of my nose. The lightning jumped into me. Mr. Electrico cried: "Live forever." . . . A few weeks later I started writing my first short stories about the planet Mars. From that time to this, I have never stopped. God bless Mr. Electrico, the catalyst, wherever he is. (Bradbury xiv–xv)

Mr. Electrico's life-affirming philosophy surfaces in *Dandelion Wine* (1957), where the young hero, Douglas Spaulding, thrashing about in the childish fight of brothers and tasting his own "rusty warm blood," experiences a rush of emotions. As every detail of his life becomes clear, he realizes, "I'm alive." Mr. Electrico shows up a few years later in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), as a townspeople turned sideshow in Mr. Black's evil carnival.

By the time Bradbury reached Los Angeles in 1934 as a teenager, he had developed the habit of writing four hours a day, a habit that evolved into a one-story-a-day goal that structured his career. Bradbury knew 1930's Hollywood, filling his afternoons by searching out homes of movie stars, a habit that became quite fortuitous; after introducing himself to George Burns and Gracie Allen, he not only secured himself a seat in their first live audience, he also began writing comic skits for the show. This resulted in his first paid job as a writer: the ending scene of a Burns and Allen episode. In 1937 he joined the Los Angeles Science Fiction League and developed friendships with leading science fiction writers including Robert Heinlein, Edmond Hamilton, Henry Kuttner, and Forrest J. Ackerman. Kuttner in particular was an important influence on him, telling

the young writer to "shut-up" and keep his ideas and energy for himself, and he did. At 20, Bradbury was still selling newspapers on the street; however, one year after his first paid publication for *Super Science Stories*, a short story titled "Pendulum," the young writer devoted himself to writing full-time. During this period, he developed a friendship with Leigh Brackett, whose writing he admired and imitated. Her technique aided Bradbury in developing his own writing style. After learning craft under her tutelage, he collaborated with her in writing "Lorelei of the Red Mist" (1946). From this period of apprenticeship, he emerged with his own distinctive style and began writing short stories for multiple science fiction publications.

Living in Arizona as a child, Bradbury loved Mexico. While visiting Mexico with his family, he, unlike the rest of his family, instinctively sought to blend in and observe. He remembers feeling embarrassed by his family's behavior and reactions to Mexican culture: His mother was offended by the images of death, his father was large and loud, and his brother simply hated it. Bradbury, however, was impressed by this first exposure to an alien culture. In 1945 he traveled with an artist friend on a two-month-long road trip to collect masks for the Los Angeles County Museum. During this time, the Mexican population was growing rapidly in Southern California and conflicts were common. The young author became interested in the prominent role death played in the culture as well as the culture's seamless union of religion, death, and sensuality and Mexico's veneration of the past. Increasingly aware of the intersections and differences between the two cultures, Bradbury wove Mexican elements and themes into his writing, first in his short story collection *Dark Carnival* (1947). The short story "Next in Line" explores the differing values of Americans and Mexicans. A later story, "The Highway" (1951; in *The Illustrated Man*), depicts a Mexican protagonist, Hernando, who lives a quiet life, occasionally interrupted by tourists who want to take his picture. In it, Bradbury contrasts the two cultures' reactions to nuclear war.

In 1947, after gaining critical attention and drawing an audience for his pulp sci-fi in *Super Science*

Stories and bizarre fantasy stories in *Weird Tales*, he published *Dark Carnival*, a collection of dark fantasy that transcended the science fiction genre. He also received the O. Henry Memorial Award for “The Homecoming” and radio renditions of “The Meadow” and “Riabouchnska,” which aired on ABC and CBS. On September 27, 1947, Ray Bradbury married Marguerite Susan McClure, with whom he would share a 56-year marriage and four daughters. A lover of literature, Marguerite was instrumental in Bradbury’s success. In the early years of their marriage, she maintained a day job so that her husband could stay at home and continue his rigorous schedule of producing at least one short story a day. When she became pregnant in 1949, Maggie provided the impetus for Bradbury to write *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *The Illustrated Man* (1951), establishing his professional reputation.

In 1953 he published *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, a collection of short stories, and the novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Science fiction traditionalists derided these two books and *The Illustrated Man* because Bradbury did not use scientific theory as a basis for the creation of believable new worlds. However, this negative criticism did not hinder the young author, who focused on the constantly changing world around him. Unlike most of his science fiction contemporaries, Bradbury wrote metaphorically of the past while commenting on the present, depicting a bleak future consumed by a vaguely represented technologically based society. As his writing developed, he continued to move outside the science fiction genre. In 1956 he wrote a screenplay for the John Huston adaptation of *Moby-Dick*; the following year he published *Dandelion Wine*. Following that, he published *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), a fantasy set in Green Town, and in many ways a further exploration of *Dandelion Wine*.

In the following years, Bradbury continued to produce fiction but also turned his eye to drama. He published a collection of plays, *The Anthem Sprinters* (1963), and received an Academy Award nomination for his animated film *Icarus Montgolfier Wright*. Next he produced *The World of Bradbury* (1964) in the Coronet Theater in Los Angeles, following it with *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit*. In 1966 the film ver-

sion of *Fahrenheit 451* hit movie theaters, and *Dandelion Wine* the musical debuted at Lincoln Center in New York in 1967. Two years later, *The Illustrated Man* was also adapted for the big screen.

In the next few decades, Bradbury produced an impressive body of work, beginning with the short story collection *I Sing the Body Electric* (1969). He followed the collection with several volumes of poetry, plays, countless short stories and short story collections, essays on writing (*Zen and the Art of Writing*, 1989), and several novels. The last of these, *Let’s All Kill Constance*, was published in 2002. At present, the author’s works have been translated into 13 languages. He has been interviewed over 350 times, received awards too numerous to count, and been included in over 1,200 anthologies. Bradbury writes what he is—an American farm boy, raised in the quiet pre-depression era Midwest, with an imagination voraciously fueled by pulp science fiction, fantasy, scary movies, and adventure stories.

***The Martian Chronicles* (1950)**

After the successful publication of *Dark Carnival* (1947), Bradbury’s editor suggested working on a longer narrative form. Immediately Bradbury began compiling a series of stories he had previously written about the Earth’s colonization of Mars. Adding connecting events and chapters, he published *The Martian Chronicles* in novel form. With these stories, the author joined his dual visions of the idyllic American past, here dubbed “Green Bluff,” and the last frontier for humanity, alien worlds. Written as a series of journal entries with dates heading each chapter, *Martian Chronicles* focuses on action: the colonization of a planet. Thus, the characters are less developed; the sporadic protagonists rarely extend into later chapters. Episodic in form (having a series of incidents that can stand alone but are loosely connected by characters or a setting), the novel contains gaps in time and space between the chapters the reader must fill. The theme of conquest helps unify the work, connecting the plotlines, driving the action

of the novel, and relating its plot to historical realities: the history of Western colonization of Asian, African, and American countries.

After a short chapter depicting a rocket launch that catalyzes Ohio's transition from winter into summer, Bradbury tells the first few stories from the Martian creatures' point of view. Telepathic, they know that the humans' arrival is imminent. After a series of unsuccessful missions, the humans dominate the planet. They unintentionally contaminate Mars, killing off the Martian population. Then an atomic war breaks out on Earth, resulting in the rapid exodus of the Martian colonists back to Earth, fearing for their friends, family, and way of life. The reader is left with a deserted Mars and an ending that marks a new beginning: a group of Earthlings who witness the final days of the war that destroys Earth.

With this initial novel Bradbury appealed to the larger literary community and garnered respect—a feat not often accomplished by pulp sci-fi writers. He also fascinated his core science fiction audience, but the science fiction elements, for example, the Martian world's physical imagery, remain on the periphery, serving metaphorical functions. Concentrating on the telepathy of the aliens and their similarities to and differences from human interpersonal relations, Bradbury conveys an earthly message, examining how the various individual interactions affect and shape the larger communities in which they operate.

In the second chapter, the reader first meets a Martian protagonist: Ylla, a married Martian woman, the first to sense the imminent arrival of Earthlings. Through a telepathic dream state she anticipates the arrival of human explorers. Her dreams are flooded with images of Nathaniel York, one of the two-man crew that is the first to explore the planet. The episode ends as Ylla's husband, out of either anxiety or jealousy (it is unclear), shoots the men on a "hunting" expedition. The following chapters expand on this telepathic phenomenon, with increasingly complicated ends to the successive human visits. The reader experiences the confusion brought about by these strange encounters from both sides of the story, empathizing with the Martian and human communities and giving both the Martian and human characters a voice. While the Martians are relegated to

ghosts early in the narrative, they continue to haunt the story as it progresses.

The fourth attempt is successful, in part because the Martians were infected with chicken pox, which was introduced by the previous human expeditions. This event mirrors the genocide that occurred in the Americas when millions of indigenous peoples died in the first few years of European exploration. The reaction here is one of surprise but not horror, and, in the end, it comes in handy: "Chances are a few of the Martians, if they were smart, escaped to the mountains. But there aren't enough . . . to be a native problem." The genocide does not taint the event for the crew, and in the following chapter the settlers begin to arrive.

Before this happens, however, Bradbury provides a word of caution through Jeff Spender, an archaeologist who knows the annihilation of culture and history about to take place. Of all the crew members only he bemoans the death of the Martian race. Through him, Bradbury explores the ethical responsibility of explorers. Spender stands in opposition to the crew, who get drunk and arrogantly name locations after themselves. This act of naming becomes the symbolic vehicle for the destruction of the Martian culture: "The names we give to the canals and mountains and cities will fall like so much water on the back of a mallard. No matter how we touch Mars, we'll never touch it. And then we'll get mad at it, and you know what we'll do? We'll rip it up, rip the skin off, and change it to fit ourselves." The moral compass or conscience of the story, Spender intends well; however, his reaction to the colonization process also has its roots in American history; he is the well-intentioned frontiersman who loses himself in the alien culture—he defends the extinct Martian species.

Bradbury reexamines the concept of the pioneer spirit in *The Martian Chronicles*, and he portrays for his readers a reckless co-opting of land already inhabited by creatures with thoughts and feelings. The novel challenges the idea that the power or ability possessed by a particular community gives moral permission to that community to act on in order to achieve a self-serving end. He proposes that "science ran too far ahead of us too quickly and people got lost in the mechanical wilderness . . . emphasizing

machines instead of how to run the machines.” Bradbury presents his readers with a hypothetical colonization, one that could be a natural extension of human nomadic exploration, which is at the foundation of American history—if only we were technologically capable. Written in the aftermath of World War II and the atomic bomb and with a prescient awareness of the increasingly imperialistic tendencies of the ever-growing United States and Russian military forces and the increasing threat of nuclear annihilation, *Martian Chronicles* carries a cautionary warning; however, Bradbury does not leave his characters without hope. When the Earth succumbs to a worldwide atomic war, the humans who make their way to Mars have a different intention than the previous explorers who fashioned the world into a satellite planet of Earth. The father of the initial family to return to the deserted planet Mars ritualistically burns old maps and other documents associated with Earth, explaining to his children, “I’m burning a way of life.” Bradbury first introduces a Martian, asking the readers to empathize with a creature about to be destroyed by an invading species. We feel regret for the rapid and untimely end of the Martian species. As the book’s action parallels the history of Western conquest and mirrors many events in our shared cultural past, it allows us to step outside our collective experience and see it as distinct from our own history. In this way we are able to view it more objectively and critically.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bradbury’s novel of the future makes a comment on the American past. Consult a scholarly history source to get background information on the colonization of America. What parallels do you see between the colonization in *The Martian Chronicles* and the United States’ own history as pioneers of the New World? Compare and contrast the Martians’ initial reaction to the Earthlings to that of Native Americans to the first Europeans to reach North America.
2. The chapter “Way in the Middle of the Air,” in which a southern black community builds their own rockets and leaves Earth, continues to generate controversy. As did the Marcus Garvey back to Africa movement of the 1920s, Bradbury presents an image of African Americans emigrating from the United States. Discuss the significance of *The Martian Chronicles* chapter, in reference to the cultural context in which it was written. What does the inclusion of such an event add to Bradbury’s criticism of the American past?
3. In the chapter “And the Moon Be Still as Bright,” both Captain Wilder and the archaeologist Jeff Spender approach Mars with a level of respect that exceeds that of the general crew. Compare and contrast their reactions. Are Spender’s actions more admirable? Why or why not? Consider Wilder’s role at the end of the book in “The Long Years” as well. As one of the few characters appearing in more than one episode, what does he symbolize?
4. Even in his early years, Bradbury’s brand of science fiction stood apart from the larger sci-fi community. Compare and contrast this work with the Isaac Asimov’s *I Robot*, also published in 1950. Would you describe *The Martian Chronicles* as a work of science fiction? Why, or why not?

“There Will Come Soft Rains” (1950)

“There Will Come Soft Rains,” the penultimate chapter of *The Martian Chronicles*, shifts momentarily from the deserted Mars to an empty house on the dying planet Earth. This short episode takes place in an Allendale, California, house after a nuclear holocaust has ended earthly life. The chapter opens with the house’s morning alarm at seven o’clock, “Time to get up, time to get up!” Fully automated and designed to aid in the everyday needs of its inhabitants, the house cooks breakfast, reminds its absent family of important appointments, and cautions that today is a day for raincoats. As the house continues its daily rituals, the omniscient, all-knowing narrator explains that this is the only house left standing in a “ruined city” that glows green with radiation that can be seen for miles at night. Later, as the house winds down the day, creating a warm atmosphere for after-dinner repose, the voice from behind the walls recites a poem, a favorite of Mrs.

McClellan, the home's former mistress. The poem, "There Will Come Soft Rains," describes a time when humankind has perished, "And Spring herself, when woke at dawn / Would scarcely know that we were gone." Immediately after this a tree bough falls on the house, causes a fire, and, in a rushing inferno of prose and mechanical screams, the house falls; a lone voice from the sole surviving wall announces, "Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is. . . ."

This episode encapsulates the author's theme of the dangers of unrestrained technology. The poem that centers the chapter speaks of animals in harmony with the thriving natural world. This natural world sharply contrasts with the world outside the house, which, at present, lies in ruins. The poem, however, also speaks of a future in which the world, impervious to the violence enacted by human beings, will heal itself. In this sentiment Bradbury provides hope that even in this worst-case scenario of utter destruction, there is always a rebirth. The chapter provides a stark portrait of humanity, a cumbersome and unnecessary intrusion on an otherwise peaceful, self-sustaining planet. The poem describes the triumph of nature in the wake of humanity's folly. Though the Earth's most sophisticated creatures have succeeded in destroying themselves, the planet will continue to produce life.

The image of the house demonstrates Bradbury's technique of blending the fantastic with the ordinary. While the house is a futuristic design, it maintains a traditional, all-American atmosphere consistent with Bradbury's nostalgic use of his midwestern past. The kitchen makes eggs and pancakes; the living room provides a warm fireplace to sit by, a perfectly lit cigar to enjoy after dinner, and a Sara Teasdale poem popular during Bradbury's childhood. Ironically, this obsession with technology recreates an idealized past and creates more leisure time, but it also has a high price: the abandonment of ethical thinking and moral decision making. The only sentient character in the chapter, the family dog, suffering from the effects of nuclear radiation, makes his way home to die. As he seeks out his masters, he becomes both follower and victim of the human design: the only example of life on Earth, a painful reminder of the widespread suf-

fering of the poisoned planet. A symbol for faithfulness, "man's best friend," he goes back home to be saved by the humans but is only tormented by locked doors and the smell of food. Here the narrator shows how humanity's destructiveness extends to other species, as it already has to the Martians.

Bradbury equates the rhythms of the house to religious rituals of devotees whose "gods had gone away." Robotic mice emerge from the walls to clean the house, and the kitchen serves up its daily offerings on schedule. Ironically, the human beings, gods of their own technological creations, are now a virtually extinct species. Machines designed to protect and ease human life bring about its end; the house stands like an empty shrine to a failed system. The silhouettes in the front yard are ghostly images on an otherwise blackened wall, images of the absent gods. Their presence deepens the image of reverence created by the house's lonely routine. The silhouettes depicting the family in the yard are reminiscent of the silhouettes found in Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. The use of the image is haunting and, written only a few years after the bombs had been dropped, all too real.

The poem's story tells of a rebirth, but the story in which it is framed is an ending. Immediately after the last refrain, "the house began to die," the narrator describes this death in emotional language. The house screams an alarm, "fire, fire, fire," in an effort to alert sleeping humans; however, it reads like the desperate screams of a trapped victim. Image after image supports the atmosphere of a violent and anguished death. The machine itself, representing the greater technological vehicle that consumed humanity, is the final victim.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Personification is a form of metaphor by which an author applies human characteristics to nonhuman things. Bradbury specifically applies human emotions to various attendants of the mechanized house. Identify examples of personification within the text and discuss how they affect the reading of the story.
2. Why is "There Will Come Soft Rains" central to the larger work? Compare and contrast this chap-

- ter with the images of Mars after the Martians have all succumbed to chicken pox.
3. The image of the dog desperately looking for his humans and trying to get at the food in the kitchen is vivid and painful to read. What is the function of this scene in the story? Discuss your impression of his homecoming and subsequent death.
 4. Compare and contrast the images provided by the poem with the images of the world outside the house as told by the narrator.
 5. Much of the chapter deals with the passing of time, which is chronicled by the house as it meets its end. What is time's function in the chapter? What does the strict routine in the house say about the family who lived there? Does this support Bradbury's critique of technology throughout the novel? Why or why not?

***Fahrenheit 451* (1953)**

Along with *Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451* helped establish Bradbury's literary reputation and earn his works a place in the American literary canon. A popular text filled with social relevance, the book was adapted for film in 1966 and for the stage in 1979. As did many of his longer works, *Fahrenheit 451* started out as a short story, titled "The Fireman," which was published in *Galaxy Science Fiction* (1951). Set in a futuristic society that bans books and fosters complacency through mind-numbing media, the novel focuses on Guy Montag, fireman number 451, who works for a firehouse that burns homes reported to have books inside. Once, in the distant past, the station put fires out instead of setting them, but the past, especially in a world without books, without history, remains a mythical shadow.

Montag's need to discover the past drives the narrative and leads him to seek answers in books. He makes friends with a neighbor, 17-year-old Clarisse McClellan, who questions Montag about his occupation and challenges his unexamined acceptance of society, forcing him to face his own discontent. Frustrated further by his wife's commitment to their superficial world, Montag sees Mildred's sui-

cide attempt as a consequence of their empty lives. Montag becomes obsessed with finding out about the taboo texts; eventually the firefighters target his home after Captain Beatty, the fire chief, discovers Montag's subversive activities. Seeking help from a man named Faber, a retired English professor, Montag escapes the city and finds a vagabond group of intellectuals, led by a man named Granger. They are "the Book People," readers who memorize texts, the preservers of the written word. Montag memorizes Ecclesiastes, the one book he has found and read, and joins them. Ecclesiastes is a book of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament, that ponders human existence, takes a dark view of life, and serves as a repository of wisdom and truths. These words soothe Montag; he finds comfort in the ancient text. Just as he is calming from his flight, bombs strike the city, and an atomic war "begins and ends in an instant." The story concludes as Montag walks with "the Book People" toward the dead city, reciting Ecclesiastes to himself and looking toward a future "with everything to think about and much to remember."

At the onset of the novel, Montag is satisfied with his life. The opening chapter describes the "pleasure" he derives from watching "things eaten, to see things blacken and *changed*." Montag knows the power he wields and takes pride in his social status. He is a respected man, a defender of the peace. A few unexpected encounters, however, cause Montag's world to come apart. During his initial conversation with Clarisse he is uncomfortable, musing that he can literally see "himself in her eyes." Later, as he reflects upon her strange questions, the reader senses that he sees, as he looks back, his own buried discontent. Montag struggles to make sense of his world with mentor figures, his wife and a strangely close family, and through Clarisse's anecdotes. When his faith in the system shatters, he scrambles to find some direction; through much of this process he acts mistakenly and makes misguided decisions. He is an antihero, an ordinary man who is not perfect.

The overarching theme in *Fahrenheit 451* is censorship. The futuristic world that Bradbury creates censors knowledge. Bradbury crafts the book with the present and the many forms of censorship that

occur in our society kept in mind. Thus, while Bradbury speaks to a “present” that is now some 60 years past, the novel is darkly prophetic. Bradbury’s novel features the censorship of books most prominently but also describes a world that limits individuality, freedom of thought, and creativity. As Faber explains to Montag, the books represent dangers the society tries to eradicate: “It’s not books you need, it’s some of the things that once were in books.” The novel depicts a world opposed not only to free thought but also to intellectualism, with liberal arts—subjects such as sociology, philosophy, history, and literature—considered especially dangerous. These ways of seeing the world stimulate individual thinking, which leads to conflict, something the society seeks to prevent at all costs. As Montag demands answers to his questions about the past, his behavior becomes more erratic. After he steals a book from a job and calls in sick, Montag attracts the attention of his boss, Captain Beatty, who can be viewed as Montag’s foil: Beatty’s values and beliefs contrast with the younger fireman’s and serve to highlight Montag’s exceptionalism in the context of the story. Beatty is zealous in his support of the social structure; through him Bradbury fills in what has transpired in the past: the history of the firehouse, how books began to be banned, and how “the word intellectual . . . became the swear word it deserved to be.” An ironic character who burns books yet is also highly literate, Beatty quotes literature and knows history. He is not a numb citizen like Mildred; Beatty is a creator of the system, whereas Mildred is a product of the oppressive social order.

Beatty tells Montag that the trouble with books started when special interest or minority groups found certain passages or works offensive and sought to remove them. He describes a world of growing populations and with them, increasing amounts of minority groups living in ever-closer proximity to each other: “The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that!” Here Beatty raises the challenge of living in a diverse culture. He suggests that the differences between these splintered groups are petty; nonetheless, they disrupt the harmony of the mass population. Beatty describes how, before books began to be banned, abridged cop-

ies of various texts circulated with the controversial bits removed. The media began to address the entire mass audience in an attempt to pacify smaller groups and entertain the whole. The result, Beatty claims, is a peaceful and happy culture. Yet what Beatty calls “peace” and “happiness” translates practically into obedience and complacency. This is illustrated by the reference to Mildred’s suicide attempt as a common phenomenon in the city. What he describes is a natural progression in the shaping of culture, but Beatty does not volunteer the underlying truth that the government’s subtle yet highly effective influence has shaped the course of events. By de-emphasizing authorship and ideas and instead supporting the proliferation of mass media, the establishment numbs people to their differences rather than learning to work with them.

Beatty explains that severe abridgment of texts was the first step. It eliminated diverse and conflicting ideas. In many of these passages we can see parallels to Bradbury’s own experiences as a writer. Bradbury writes long, luxurious passages filled with detail. His images are rich and vivid. As have many widely read authors, Bradbury has often been asked to abridge his works for anthologies and has received unsolicited suggestions to change content. In the coda at the end of *Fahrenheit 451* the author writes, “There is more than one way to burn a book.” He rejects the idea of condensing literary works and argues that every detail is important in his works. Through Faber, the author defends his position on high-quality literature: “The more truthfully recorded details of life per square inch you can fit on a sheet of paper, the more ‘literary’ you are. . . . *Telling detail. Fresh detail.*” Bradbury’s works have been considered controversial; by the time he wrote *Fahrenheit 451* he had witnessed the censorship of literature from schools as well as some book burnings. Written in a time when pieces of literature such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were under attack, Bradbury’s novel addressed pressing issues that we still face today.

These very real issues provide the inspiration for his fantasy. The ramifications of censoring texts are horrifying. Doing so changes knowledge itself. Omitting offending details pacifies the public, but it

also simplifies the content, reducing knowledge to an elementary level. Unchallenged, the citizen's intellect is numbed; ignorance evolves into fear. A significant intellectual gap develops in Montag's society. The majority of people escape through the mass media; however, a few still cling to a lifestyle associated with books. Enter the firemen. The reassignment of the firemen illustrates the intrusion of the government on ideas: "We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought."

What Beatty describes is a natural shift away from books altogether that the people demand. An examination of Mildred exposes this myth. Advertising controls her desires. Mildred listens to a constant stream of ads on the Seashell radio that fits in her ear whenever she is not in the TV parlor—even in her sleep. She seems to be satisfied with her life; however, her suicide attempt suggests that subconsciously the emptiness of her existence haunts her. The next day she cannot even recall her actions. Characters in the novel like Mildred are fragile, both mentally and emotionally. They are threatened by philosophy and literature. When Montag reads a poem to Mildred and her friends, Mrs. Phelps breaks down in tears, Mrs. Bowles becomes enraged, and Mildred is consumed with embarrassment. They distrust the strange words, and each of the three women calls the firehouse, exposing Montag to Captain Beatty.

Montag makes a deliberate break from his society; however, he also seeks safety in the perspective of an old man he had met in the park a year prior. An ostracized professor turned recluse, Faber is all too aware of this phenomenon. Fear eats away at him; he is a victim of the society and, ironically, illustrates the role intellectuals have played in the demise of academia. He is full of fear and acknowledges his own complacency as he watches the world move further and further away from books and art. While Beatty explains the inferiority felt by the layperson, Faber illustrates the sometimes-arrogant superiority of the educated. As he and Montag put together a half-baked plan to wage their own private rebellion, Faber tries to control Montag's actions through a two-way earpiece. There is a schism between Montag, who is the major actor in changing the status quo, and

Faber, the academic who has all the ideas but none of the courage to act. Montag seeks him out for aid in finding his own independence, but in the moment of crisis, Faber becomes just another voice in his ear. His intentions are genuine, but he ends up functioning just as the Seashell and Beatty do. Thus, the animosity felt by the greater population for its brightest minds is warranted.

Much of what we, as 21st-century readers, experience as the past in the narrative had not yet come to fruition when Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). We can now drive 70 miles per hour on the highways; advertisements fill up our empty spaces, while cell phones and portable music fill up our quiet spaces. Rural areas continue to diminish. Our culture witnesses pursuits of fugitives on television, occasionally in live broadcasts, and television is an ever-increasing part of the home. Perhaps the novel is more haunting today, not only in its portrayal of the future, but also in its similarities to the present. As do many writers and historians, Bradbury portrays a negative social phenomenon, in this case censorship, while hoping to prevent it.

The story ends with outcasts' making a new beginning. As in *The Martian Chronicles*, the survivors must use lessons of the past to construct a more intentional and careful future, one where the society will admit complexity and dissension rather than masking conflict with uniformity. The principal tool in that struggle is memory. The characters in *Fahrenheit 451* have no knowledge of what preceded them, and that handicaps their ability to build autonomous lives. While the foundation of a new society lies in the memory of the Book People, the new society must also remember how they arrived at a place where ideas were outlawed, "the temperatures at which books burn" was Fahrenheit 451, and the simplification of mass-released texts mollified the public, making them easy to control. The book, therefore, embraces the careful recording and studying of history and argues that remembering the past is crucial to constructing the future.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do images of the natural world function in the novel? Discuss Clarisse's connection with

nature. How does this affect her view of the world?

2. Montag hides books at the beginning of the novel but does not read them. What becomes significant then is why he finally reads. Analyze the events that lead to Montag's desire to read. Consider the other characters who influence his thinking and decision making. Evaluate why he ultimately begins reading books and why reading is significant to Montag and to the novel.
3. While Beatty ultimately foils Montag and Faber's plans, do the plans the two make seem significant to the novel and its overall message? With that in mind, imagine that Beatty did not interrupt the two rebels. Would the two of them have been able to save the civilization eventually? Why or why not? Additionally, consider why Bradbury creates Beatty as a foil. Is he providing a social commentary by doing so? Why or why not?
4. Part of what makes the novel so powerful is its troubling ending. Do you think Ray Bradbury's conclusion in *Fahrenheit 451* does an adequate job of conveying a message? If so, why? If not, how would you change the ending to make your message more forceful?
5. At the center of the novel lies an important issue to America: freedom of speech, a right guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Research the First Amendment at a trustworthy Web site such as <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/>. After learning about what the amendment says, evaluate the novel in light of free speech in today's world and the many ways it has been challenged. With your research in mind, is *Fahrenheit 451* still relevant today? Is free speech in danger? Why or why not? Write an essay on freedom of speech in the novel.
6. Compare and contrast Beatty and Faber. How does each use his knowledge? Are they both manipulative? Why or why not? What does the reader learn from the juxtaposition of these characters?
7. Considering the elements of *Fahrenheit 451* that depict technology in the 21st century, is Bradbury's future possible? Why, or why not?

***Dandelion Wine* (1957)**

As does the conductor of an orchestra, Douglas Spaulding, the protagonist of *Dandelion Wine*, directs the dawning of a new summer: "He pointed a finger . . . a sprinkle of windows came suddenly alight miles off in dawn country." The summer of Douglas's 12th year is the subject of Bradbury's most autobiographical work. Memories of Bradbury's idyllic childhood fill the book, which takes place in Green Town, Illinois, during the summer of 1928. Douglas's home bustles with life and a cast of characters: parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, boarders—a community of diverse personalities. The narrative memorializes the past and depicts the process of restoring Bradbury's memories. The firstborn, Douglas, has a younger brother, Tom. Although Douglas is the principal explorer and the subject of the novel is his own discovery, it is through Tom that Bradbury remembers his feelings of admiration for an older brother, "even when that brother ditched him" (Bradbury ix). As does Bradbury, Douglas loves movies like *The Phantom of the Opera* and walking home by the ravine at night with his friends. He begins writing early in life. Though Douglas's writing differs from Bradbury's own early stories, Douglas records the summer, chronicling what he calls "Rites and Ceremonies" and reflecting on them in a second part, "Discoveries and Revelations." At the same time, Douglas becomes profoundly aware of existence, his own life, and eventually develops a concept of death. *Dandelion Wine* portrays a child losing his innocence; throughout the text Douglas transitions from child to adolescent in a community swirling in the cycle of life.

While Douglas writes, his grandfather bottles wine from the dandelions growing on the wide lawn, a bottle for every day of summer. The wine is a metaphor: As Douglas's writing does, the wine preserves things and represents the passing of time. Douglas finds, however, that the bottles do not always match his recollections—sometimes shining brighter with happy memories or other times producing dark, cloudy wine on days that were sad. Unlike Douglas's writing, the wine's preservation is temporary, stocked for the following winter to lend a little warmth to the

cold seasons. It will need to be remade as the memory of the summer days fades. Douglas's grandfather cautions him of this; memories, like the wine bottles, will be replaced with new ones and those days become a blur, with one or two unusual moments standing out. Tom insists that he can hold on to every day; Douglas has begun to realize the passing of memory this summer. The dandelion, the harvest, the bottling and later drinking of the wine symbolize the cyclical nature of the seasons and the passing of time.

Memory functions as a motif—an idea or image that recurs throughout the text. It not only recurs in *Dandelion Wine*, but runs throughout Bradbury's works, a sign of preoccupation with preserving the past. Douglas and his friends dub Colonel Freeleigh a "Time Machine" because he tells them stories that delve into his memories and send the children back through time. Fascinated by Freeleigh's stories, the children sense their importance; the tales feed the children's imaginations and enlarge their worldview.

Machines serve as antagonizing elements in the text. Yet, although they resist the passing of time, they eventually succumb to time and use and wear down as they age. The neighbor, Lou Huffman, tries to make a Happiness Machine but ultimately realizes that family provides more happiness than any external structure. The Green Machine, an electric motorcar, symbolizes technology and its dangers. The elderly ladies who own it, Miss Fern and Miss Roberta, have an accident and believe they have killed a man. Here the past, represented by the old ladies, and the new age of technology intersect. The women decide never to use the Green Machine again, and the issue is put to rest; the town trolley, another symbol of the past, is taken off its tracks to make way for a new and faster bus system. Even the Time Machine, Colonel Freeleigh, passes away, though his family tries to protect him, and Douglas's group laments the loss of his valuable memories.

Bradbury transforms the often-troublesome dandelion weed into a symbol of life itself, creating a fantastic story out of everyday, ordinary elements. Here, the author infuses magic into an otherwise realistic tale. *Dandelion Wine* describes the wonder

of discovery and imagination: Douglas's changing, ever-expanding view of the world. Even when the point of view shifts to the minds of adults, his voice remains; the story is filtered through Douglas's consciousness. Douglas's obsession with the tarot card witch at the traveling carnival show illustrates both his and Bradbury's obsession with enchantment. While the carnival is a rundown place with an alcoholic manager, Douglas believes it houses a gypsy fortune-teller in the body of an old wax witch. He thinks that if he can only set her free, through spells and potions found in the library, she will give him a fortune: "It'll say we'll live forever, you and me, Tom, we'll live forever." Similarly, Douglas believes in a magical cure for the illness that strikes him late in the story, a sickness that occurs after his many revelations. Douglas's friend Mr. Jonas, the junkman, has bottles of air from exotic places in the past that cool and revive Douglas. After breathing in the aromatic vapors, Douglas is restored, and his family notices the "scent of cool night and cool water and cool snow" on his breath. There is room here to interpret that the magic occurs not only in Douglas's mind but also in the collective conscious of the family and, to a larger degree, the town. If such conjuring were an accepted part of the characters' lives, it could be called *magical realism*, a literary term used for describing texts where unrealistic elements emerge from otherwise realistic stories. *Dandelion Wine*, however, deals largely with fantasy, infusing imagination into an idyllic world that, although placed in a realistic setting, does not attempt to represent the political and historical realities that can be associated with such magical realist writers as Gunter Grass, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or Isabel Allende.

Dandelion Wine deals with realities we cannot express with scientific explanations, the metaphysical, fantastical elements of our lives: existence, time, memory, death. The more Douglas becomes aware of being alive, the more he experiences loss. Throughout the summer Douglas suffers varying degrees of loss, from the death of his great-grandmother to the relocation of his best friend, John Huff. Douglas tries to deny the existence of loss, distracting himself with the tarot, but eventually faces the inexplicable, temporary nature of our lives

and our ultimate powerlessness over time when he is struck with illness. Miraculously, though, as the summer ends, Douglas still holds on to life's magical qualities and continues to see the world as a place of limitless possibilities. The story ends as new school supplies appear in store windows and Grandpa Spaulding takes the porch swing off the porch for the year. The novel concludes as Douglas looks to the next summer, which will be "even bigger, nights will be longer and darker, more people dying, more babies born, and me in the middle of it." With all of its revelations and surprises; its emphasis on growth, imagination, and wonder, the novel ends as it begins, in the third-story cupola bedroom of Douglas's grandparents' house as he puts the town to bed, "and sleeping, put an end to summer."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast *Dandelion Wine* with Bradbury's short story "The Man Upstairs," a work that also takes place in Green Town, Illinois.
2. The ravine is a strong figure in the story that represents a challenge to various characters. Discuss the symbolism of the ravine and the way it functions in Douglas's life. Contrast this to Miss Lavinia's experiences there.
3. Research the year 1928 and consider why Bradbury set the novel during the summer of this year. Consult a general reference source or a reliable Web site such as <http://www.infoplease.com/year/1928.html>.
4. Using an encyclopedia or trustworthy Web site such as <http://www.raybradbury.com/index.html>, evaluate why Bradbury's works have been so popular. What themes do they contain that make them appealing? What is it about Bradbury's style that draws such a large readership?
5. Both *Dandelion Wine* and John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* are coming-of-age stories in which the novels' protagonists come to terms with loss. Write an essay comparing the two works and the ways the protagonist in each copes with and eventually begins to understand loss.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON BRADBURY AND HIS WORK

1. In literature, attempting to describe a person, place, or event with believable detail is referred to as *verisimilitude*. Does Bradbury achieve verisimilitude in his science fiction works? Consider the details of both the society and the physical surroundings in *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*. What does detail add to or take away from the overall themes of the works?
2. Compare and contrast Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* with George Orwell's *1984*. What do the two have in common regarding their view of the future? What aspects have been actualized in our own society today? Use a scholarly source to familiarize yourself with dystopian literature. How do reading visions of dystopias impact our view of the present world?
3. The American story is replete with successive waves of frontier settlement. Each incoming wave displaced the earlier one: pioneers displaced Indians, pushing them farther west, and led the way for poor settler families, who were later joined and supplanted by middle-class families and professionals. Compare and contrast this process with *The Martian Chronicles*.
4. Hugh Holman's *A Handbook to Literature* defines *science fiction* as "a form of fantasy in which scientific facts, assumptions, or hypotheses form the basis, by logical extrapolation, of adventures in the future, on other planets, in other dimensions in time, or under new variants of scientific law." Is this an apt description of science fiction? If so, how does Bradbury's work fit in?
5. See the Michael Moore film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, whose title is derived from Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Why does Moore use this title? What comparisons between the film and book can be made? Can you see why Bradbury wanted Moore to change the title?
6. See an episode of *Star Trek* or *The X-Files*. What comparisons can you make to Bradbury's works? Do you find that Bradbury influenced the writers of these two television shows? How so?

7. As a child Bradbury read about many myths, especially Greek mythology. What mythological references can you find in his works? How has mythology helped shape Bradbury's vision?
8. Read Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Pit and Pendulum," or "The Cask of Amontillado." What comparisons can you make between Poe's works and Bradbury's? What thematic and stylistic elements do the two authors share?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Aggelis, Steven L. *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.
- Aldiss, Brian W. *Trillion Year Spree*. New York: Avon Books, 1988, 247–248.
- Amis, Kingsley. *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*. New York: Arno Press, 1975, 105–113.
- Attebery, Brian. *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, 133–141.
- Bloom, Harold. *Writers of English: Lives and Works Modern Fantasy Writers*. New York: Chelsea House, 1995.
- Bradbury, Ray. *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*. Knopf, New York: New York, 1980.
- Brians, Paul. "Study Guide for Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*." Dr. Paul Brians' Home Page. Washington State University. Available online. URL: http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/science_fiction/martian_chronicles.html. Accessed June 11, 2006.
- Cherry, Jim. "Future Tense Sci-Fi Legend Ray Bradbury Going Strong." *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*. Edited by Steven L. Aggelis. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.
- Eller, Jonathan. "The Body Electric: Sources of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*." *University of Mississippi Studies in English* 11 (1995): 376–410.
- Eller, Jonathan R., and William F. Touponce. *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004.
- Greenberg, Martin Harry, and Joseph D. Olander, eds. *Ray Bradbury*. New York: Taplinger, 1980.
- Hibberd, James. "Bradbury Is on Fire!" *Salon.com*. August 29, 2001. Available online. URL: <http://archive.salon.com/people/feature/2001/08/29/bradbury/index.html>. Accessed May 15, 2006.
- Hillegas, Mark R. *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Holman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*. 3rd ed. New York: Odyssey Press, 1972.
- Indick, Ben F. *The Drama of Ray Bradbury*. Baltimore: T-K Graphics, 1977.
- Johnson, Wayne L. *Ray Bradbury*. New York: Frederick, 1980.
- McNelly, Willis E. "Ray Bradbury." *Science Fiction Writers: Critical Studies of the Major Authors from the early Nineteenth Century to the Present Day*, edited by E. F. Blieler. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982.
- Mogen, David. *Ray Bradbury*. Boston: Twayne, 1986.
- Nolan, William F. *The Ray Bradbury Companion*. Detroit: Gale, 1975.
- "Ray Bradbury: Celebrating a Life of Wonder and Imagination." 2001. HarperCollins. Available online. URL: <http://www.raybradbury.com>. Accessed May 15, 2006.
- "Ray Bradbury Online." 2001. Space Age City. Available online. URL: <http://www.spaceagecity.com/bradbury/>. Accessed May 15, 2006.
- Schwenger, Peter, and John Whittier Treat. "America's Hiroshima, Hiroshima's America." *Boundary 2* 21, no. 1 (1994): 233–253.
- Slusser, George Edgar. *The Bradbury Chronicles*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1977.
- Touponce, William F. Ray. *Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie: Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Reader*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UNI Research Press, 1984.
- Wands, D. C. "Fantastic Fiction: Ray Bradbury." *FantasticFiction.co.uk*. May 29, 2006. Available online. URL: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/b/ray-bradbury/>. Accessed May 30, 2006.
- Weist, Jerry. *Bradbury: An Illustrated Life: A Journey to Far Metaphor*. New York: Morrow, 2002.
- Weller, Sam. *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury*. New York: William Morrow, 2005.



GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

Art hurts. Art urges voyages—and it is easier to stay at home.

(*A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing*, 1975)

The African-American poet, novelist, and autobiographer Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, at her grandmother's house. Soon after her birth, her parents, David Anderson Brooks and Keziah Corinne Wims Brooks, moved to Chicago, the city that became Gwendolyn Brooks's home and source of poetic inspiration. David, a janitor and housepainter, and Keziah, a former schoolteacher, read to Gwendolyn at an early age, instilling in her a love of words and music and an appreciation for the sound of language: the rhythms and cadences she wove masterfully throughout her life as a poet and teacher. She began writing poetry at age seven; by 13 she had published her first poem, "Eventide," in *American Childhood* magazine. In addition to the support she received from her parents, she was encouraged by James Weldon Johnson, to whom she had written, and by Langston Hughes, whom she met at the Metropolitan Community Church in Chicago. After Brooks sent Johnson some of her poems, he recommended that she read modern(ist) poets like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and e. e. cummings. Hughes sight-read her poetry in person, told her she had talent, encouraged her to keep writing, and later wrote about her potential in his newspaper column. By 16 Brooks had already assembled an impressive poetry portfolio of more than 75 published poems that had appeared in *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper serving Chicago's black population.

After graduating with an associate degree in literature and arts from Wilson Junior College (1936), Brooks worked as a domestic and as a secretary in several offices. Later, she drew upon these experiences in *Maud Martha* (1953) and *In the Mecca* (1968)—before she served as publicity director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) Youth Council in Chicago. She married Henry Lowington Blakely II on September 17, 1939, and gave birth to two children: a son, Henry L. Blakely III (1940), and a daughter, Nora (1951). In 1941 Gwendolyn and Henry attended a poetry class at the South Side Community Arts Center, a formative experience during which she sketched many of the early poems that would make her famous.

During this time she lived in Chicago's "kitchenette buildings," cramped, often-unsanitary apartments that provided the setting for her first collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1954). This first collection, named for the segregated Douglas community area on the South Side of Chicago, introduced many of the themes that would occupy Brooks for the first half of her career. These include the search for dignity and happiness in a society often blind to such basic needs, the reality of racism and poverty in America, life in urban America, the plight of underprivileged black women, mother love, and the trauma of world war. As B. J. Bolden describes, "The compilation of forty-one poems forms a collage of racism, sexism, and classicism of America in

its illumination of the people who strive to survive in Bronzeville. In the background of her portraits looms the shadow of the American struggle to come to grips with its diverse population by entrapping the Black community in a stagnant environment" (14). The collection is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the community of poor blacks she knew and with whom she lived. The second section consists of five portraits, including the long poem (159 lines) "Sunday of Satin-Legs Smith," which Brooks wrote at Richard Wright's suggestion. The third and final section is a 12-sonnet sequence titled "Gay Chaps at the Bar" based on reflections about World War II by men who fought in the war, which she dedicated to her brother, "Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks and every other soldier." Critics praised *A Street in Bronzeville*. With a national reputation and a critically acclaimed book, Brooks received a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters the following year (1946), as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship that year and then another Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947.

In 1950 Brooks received the Pulitzer Prize, the first African American to do so, for her second collection of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949), which describes the life of its title character in four parts: "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," "The Anniad," "Appendix to the Anniad," and "The Womanhood." Unlike *A Street in Bronzeville* with its vignettes and multiple-character focus, *Annie Allen* is a narrative in verse, often experimental, as in the "sonnet-ballads" Brooks fashions from colloquial speech and formal diction that tell of one black girl's development and struggles with poverty and racial identity, a story of dreams deferred and the trials of tenement life. Brooks details her heroine's birth, adolescence, search for self-understanding and love, sacrifices during time of war, betrayal, and growth into womanhood, when she emerges finally alone yet determined and self-reliant and calls out with maturity, wisdom, and hope: "Rise. / Let us combine." [and] "Wizard a track through our own screaming weed."

Brooks followed *Annie Allen* with *Maud Martha* (1953), a largely autobiographical novel dealing with

racism, sexism, and the identity of an African-American woman before, during, and after World War II. Rounding out Brooks's early works is *The Bean Eaters* (1960), a collection of poems that, although rooted in similar experiences as her previous works, explores civil rights issues, which were becoming increasingly important to Brooks, and experiments with free verse. In the collection Brooks deals with such charged issues as the integration of the Little Rock, Arkansas, school system and the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till. But, true to her faithfulness to Chicago, Brooks also continued to write about blacks in the North. As Arthur P. Davis describes, Brooks's works through *The Bean Eaters* are set in a distinct locale, Bronzeville, both a realistic and an imagined space that captures much about the northern black experience:

The scene on which Miss Brooks places her characters is always "a street in Bronzeville," and Bronzeville is not just the Southside of Chicago. It is also Harlem, South Philadelphia, and every other black ghetto in the North. Life in these various Bronzeville streets is seldom gay or happy or satisfying. The Bronzeville world is a world of run-down tenements, or funeral homes, or beauty parlors, of old roomers growing older without graciousness, or "cool" young hoodlums headed for trouble, of young girls having abortions. Unlike the South, it is not a place of racial violence, but in other respects it is worse than the South. It is a drab, impersonalized "corner" of the metropolitan area into which the Negro—rootless and alone—has been pushed. (*CLA Journal* 90–92)

Like the city dwellers in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), Brooks's early characters are ordinary people, many of whom are ghetto dwellers entrapped by social, economic, and racial forces they can neither control nor understand. And, as with Joyce's paralyzed Dubliners, Brooks characters ultimately fail, making choices and acting in ways, often out of fear and insecurity, that perpetuate their suffering.

During this period of Brooks's enormously productive creative life, she also taught creative writing at numerous institutions, including Columbia College (Chicago), Northeastern Illinois University, and the University of Wisconsin. While in teaching she inspired others to learn, express, and grow, she herself was inspired by key African-American writers and activists when she attended the Second Black Writer's Conference at Fisk University, where, among others, she met Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), Ron Milner, and Haki R. Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee). Brooks was impressed by these key figures' vigorous and sometimes aggressive action in pursuing social and political ends, their fight for civil rights, and their leadership in the black nationalist movement, a movement in the 1960s and early 1970s that focused on cultivating a sense of identity among people of African ancestry. With cries such as "Black Power" and "Black is beautiful," the black nationalist leaders cultivated a sense of pride. Although the movement was complex and often controversial, it emphasized the need for the cultural, political, and economic independence of African Americans, and it called for action, all of which appealed to the politically aware and socially concerned Brooks.

Not surprisingly, her next work, *In the Mecca* (1968), a collection of poems largely dealing with events in a Chicago tenement building in which she worked as a young woman called "Mecca," focused on experiences and language unique to black Americans. Here Brooks uses intricate phrasings, rhymes, shifting tones, eccentric characters, fallen black heroes Medgar Evers and MALCOLM X, and a local street gang, the Blackstone Rangers. These poems describe abject poverty, argue for social equality, record tragic deaths, and lament the loss of African-American spirituality. As George Kent describes, "Gwendolyn spends little time evoking the Mecca Building, the former showplace that had become a slum and served as the setting for her framework and related stories. She focuses instead upon what is happening to the holiness of people's souls in a corrupting universe" (211–212). For Muslims, Mecca signifies paradise, heaven on earth. Thus, the title of the collection, which depicted a tenement about as far from heaven on earth as could be imagined, also

enshrined the beauty and sacredness of black culture. In 1968 Brooks succeeded Carl Sandburg as the poet laureate of Illinois, a position she held until her death in 2000. She used this position to encourage young writers and fight for the black cause.

Influenced by activists and young African-American voices as well as becoming increasingly attuned to the civil rights struggle, Brooks continued writing about the black experience. But to say that she wrote explicitly about the African-American plight later in her career misses the point that her subject had always been the black experience. Her next collection, *Riot* (1969), was written during and inspired by the chaotic, incendiary riots following the assassination of MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. This collection also marked her move to Broadside Press, a black Detroit press operated by Dudley Randall, a close friend. Brooks continued in this vein, publishing over 20 works and writing children's books, an autobiography in two parts, advice to young poets, and even a collection of poems, *the Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems* (1986), dealing with apartheid in South Africa.

From 1985 until 1986, Brooks served as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress. She received over 50 honorary doctoral degrees, the 1988 *Essence* Literary Award, was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, became the first black woman to receive the Poetry Society of America's Frost Medal, and received a Senior Fellowship in Literature grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Taken together, Brooks's poems about ordinary people produce a vivid and complex picture of America's poor, with poverty both sign and symbol of racism and injustice. The poor are uneducated (or undereducated), victimized by racism and crime, trapped by society and their own inadequacies. The poet-narrator's attitude toward them is one of wistful sympathy; she herself is a part of the life she describes.

"kitchenette building" (1945)

The first poem from *A Street in Bronzeville*, "kitchenette building," describes life in a tenement build-

ing, where five apartments share one bathroom, and the cramped spaces and a destitute life leave little time to hope and dream. Here Brooks portrays life in the 1930s and 1940s, when those fleeing the Jim Crow South to economic freedom in the North were desperate for housing. To accommodate the population increase and to maintain a segregated Chicago, old mansions on Chicago's South Side were transformed into tenement buildings, with large houses divided into tiny compartments. Here the dwellers face disillusionment: a journey made to freedom whose end lies in low-income, segregated housing. What was to be a possibility for a new life becomes a return to lesser-than status in a northern city, where unspoken, unwritten ideas about segregation dictate that blacks live in squalor. The first poem in the sequence is a central one because it asks what the fate of a dream would be in this world. Would it penetrate the "onion fumes" of garbage and "fried potatoes"? This question hangs in the air like the smell of rotting garbage and grease; it is a haunting question that seems nearly impossible to answer. For the Bronzeville dwellers live in a world of limitations in which any higher aspirations must be put aside for immediate needs: "rent," "feeding a wife," and "satisfying a man."

The poem's dream appears as "white and violet," colors that convey lightness, intransigence, and the irony of privilege and its lack in Bronzeville. As the speaker, in this case the collective "we" voice of the Bronzeville dwellers, wonders whether a dream could take flight or even sing to those who may or may not be able to entertain a message the dream might carry, a terse response follows: "We wonder." But this moment of reveille is short-lived, engulfed by the stark realities of the tenement building, which press upon all who dwell there and confine their sense of hope to life's basic needs, those things, like lukewarm water, that still necessitate patience, resignation. This portrait of urban city life, while forming a bitter social commentary and capturing the poignancy of dashed dreams, still shows human beings making their way in a world of unfathomable odds, a people determined to survive. Regardless of the way we read the poem, "kitchenette building" records the plight of urban black life prior to the civil rights

era. This poem enshrines that time when hope for a future is deferred by the reality of the present, a time when "freedom" was defined according to a set of social precepts dictated by a dominant white culture, which, despite its postwar prosperity and ability to live the American dream, literally has not made space for black America.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Locate Richard Wright's documentary book *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), which contains descriptions of the plight of urban blacks after the northern migration. Note how, on pages 105–110, Wright depicts kitchenette life: "The kitchenette blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them, blinds them to hope, creates problems whose effects can be traced in the characters of its child victims for years afterwards." With this portrayal of kitchenette life in mind, compare what the two have to say about urban youth. Are their thoughts complementary, or do they form two distinctly different visions of childhood? Finally, write a well-developed essay that explores childhood in the kitchenette buildings from the perspective of each author.
2. Read Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred" (an online version can be located at <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Langston-Hughes/2381>). First analyze "kitchenette building" as a response to Hughes's poem, keeping in mind what both have to say about dreams. Next, think about setting. How are the settings of the two poems similar? With both the theme of dreams and the setting of each poem in mind, write a well-developed essay that deals with the urban black experience.
3. Read Rita Dove's "Teach Us to Number Our Days" (1980), from her first full-length volume, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980). Explore the way both Brooks's poem and "Teach Us to Number Our Days" deal with social inequality and dreams. After you consider what both poets have to say, write a well-developed essay on the meaning of dreams and the art of social critique in both poems.

“the mother” (1945)

“The mother” is a 35-line poem in free verse: It has no regular meter or line length and relies on natural speech rhythms and the varying of stressed and unstressed syllables. The irregular meter helps to recreate the mind of the divided mother: the agitated, unsettled mind of a woman still trying to make sense of decisions she has made. Yet Brooks does include full rhymes and some slant rhymes at the end of lines that help to unify the work and cause the last sound and image in the line to remain in the reader's ear. Although the poem deals with difficult subject matter, abortion, the poem is carefully crafted so that it achieves a lyrical sound. Immediately the first line assaults the reader, leaving no doubt about the poem's subject, but the attitude that the speaker takes toward the subject is not easily discerned, for many of the lines ring with an ambiguous, often contradictory tone. In fact, the title itself is ironic; the woman speaking, although she has been pregnant, has not birthed a child, yet she implores the reader at the end of the poem, despite the difficult decisions she has made and the accompanying guilt she has expressed, to believe that she has loved all of the children she has given up.

The mother is divided: On the one hand, she affirms the decisions she has made; on the other hand, she questions those same decisions, groping for words to express the dichotomous feelings she harbors, laboring to use language to express how “the truth is to be said.” The mother's memory and imagination link her to what she has lost, leading her to conjure the things her children might have done and to speak directly to her aborted children throughout the poem. In this way, the poem has a dreamlike quality, one in which the mother grapples with reality but also fantasizes about what might have been, creating an overall nostalgic tone that is suffused with pathos, that strange artistic quality that evokes tenderness, pity, and sorrow all at once. As in many of the other poems in *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks deals with children, the innocent who suffer in an adult world and who grapple for some place in a harsh space where they are often marginalized. Yet, despite Brooks's interest in children and her

compassion for their plight, “the mother” focuses on the consciousness of the would-be child bearer, the one who has elected not to carry children into a bleak world. The lost children stand as reminders of the harshness of the impoverished world the speaker inhabits; the mother expresses concern for those who might have been introduced into a cruel world.

Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* and proponent of Brooks's poetry, read “the mother” and thought the subject inappropriate for *A Street in Bronzeville*. While Wright may have been correct about the climate of the times, it is difficult to imagine a more effective poem: one that breaks with our expectations and presents a portrait, drawn from the harsh reality of street life, of a divided woman. By presenting in a stark, realistic manner, a woman who has aborted her children, Brooks offers a moving depiction of the destitute urban woman. Even though this woman regrets her actions, she keeps the lost alive in her memory, weighing what might have been, what she believes, what she knows, what she struggles with, what she has lost, and what does not make sense to her. Thus, the mother is a complex Brooks character, a woman who inhabits a difficult world, where day-to-day survival necessitates choosing from a host of real possibilities that defy any stereotype, any abstract, idealized notion of what it means to be human.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Keeping in mind that Richard Wright thought “the mother” was inappropriate for publication, evaluate Brooks's treatment of abortion in the poem. Why might the subject matter be difficult for readers in the mid-1940s?
2. Dealing again with Wright's objection, think about the purpose of art and evaluate Wright's assessment of Brooks in light of his controversial novel about an enraged black man (*Native Son*, 1940) published several years before Brooks's poem appeared in print. What do Wright's and Brooks's works have in common? What purpose does art serve for both artists? After learning about and/or reading *Native Son*, do you feel that Wright was being hypocritical in his critique? Why or why not?

3. Commenting on “the mother,” Brooks says, “Hardly your crowned and praised and ‘customary’ Mother; but a Mother not unfamiliar, decides that *she*, rather than her World, will kill her children. The decision is not nice, not simple, and the emotional consequences are neither nice nor simple” (Brooks, *Report from Part One*, 184). Thinking about this quote, compare Brooks’s poem about a mother who kills her children with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novel about a mother who kills her child rather than have it return to slavery. Why do both authors deal with these sensitive subjects?
4. Read Brooks’s two poems “People who have no children can be hard” and “What shall I give my children? who are poor,” both of which can be found in the “The Womanhood” section of *Annie Allen* (these two poems can also be found in *Selected Poems*). With these two poems and “the mother” in mind, write a well-developed essay on motherhood in Brooks’s poetry, analyzing what she says about mothers in general and about black mothers specifically.

“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (1960)

In her well-known poem from her 1960 collection *The Bean Eaters*, Brooks bases “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” on a horrific historical event: the highly publicized lynching of a 14-year-old black youngster, Emmett Till. While originally born in Mississippi, Till moved to Chicago when he was two years old. In 1955, Till and his cousin traveled to Money, Mississippi, to stay with Till’s great-uncle, Moses Wright. Till’s mother was well aware of the racial tension in the South, especially after the United States Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, to end segregation in public schools. It was a landmark case that overturned the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had previously allowed U.S. states and localities to mandate racial segregation.

Thus, Till’s mother had cautioned him about this racially charged area of Mississippi. On August 24, 1955, Emmett Till, entered Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market in the town of Money, Mississippi. Till exited the store; soon afterward, so did Carolyn Bryant, the store owner’s wife. Although it is not clear exactly what transpired (sources vary), the official Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report says that Till whistled at Bryant, who told her husband of the event several days later after he returned from a trip. According to the FBI report, which can be found at <http://foia.fbi.gov/till/till.pdf>: “On August 28, 1955, at approximately 2:30 a.m., Roy Bryant (Carolyn Bryant’s husband), J. W. Milam and at least one other person appeared at the home of Mose Wright, Till’s great uncle, looking for the boy who had ‘done the talking’ in Money and abducted Till from the home.” The men then drove to a plantation, where they beat him, shot him in the head, tied a cotton gin fan around his neck, and threw him into the Tallahatchie River. His body was recovered on August 31, 1955. This nationally reported event fueled the growing Civil Rights movement. On May 10, 2004, the Justice Department reopened the case to determine whether anyone else was liable. While the grand jury found no credible evidence that others were involved and decided not to press charges against Carolyn Bryant, the report provided some sense of closure to a case studied and written about for over 50 years. In addition to Brooks’s work, which memorializes the event, the case inspired many poignant artworks, including the first play by the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, poems by Langston Hughes and Audre Lorde, and a song by Bob Dylan called “The Death of Emmett Till.”

Told through the point of view of Carolyn Bryant, the white mother whose husband had just been acquitted of the murder of Emmett Till, the poem describes Bryant as she burns bacon, her mind occupied with the horrific murder and imagining the story in the form of a ballad. As with lyric poetry and fairy tales, she wants the story to conform to conventions, to fit her worldview and absolve her of guilt. Thus, she thinks of herself as “The milk-white maid” pursued by “the Dark Villain” (Till) and ultimately rescued by “the Fine Prince,” figures that might,

from her dim recollection, appear in a ballad. But the poet is careful to create an ironic distance, noting that she does not even remember what a ballad is. These thoughts, interrupted by the burning of bacon, soon leave her as she dwells on the boy's age and innocence:

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified
 When the Dark villain was a blackish child
 Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be
 dirty,
 And a mouth too young to have lost every
 reminder
 Of its infant success.

As an image of Till rises to meet her, the fairy tale she has woven disintegrates, leaving her with “no thread capable of the necessary Sew-work.” Her meditation on the events, however, ends with hatred not for the boy who has been killed, but for her husband. The kiss he gives her is not of love but of death: “But his mouth would not go away and neither would the / Decapitated exclamation points in the Other Woman's eyes.” The Other Woman is the mother of Emmett Till, and her presence increases the guilt of the Mississippi mother. As the poem ends, her husband pulls her close to kiss her, and she does nothing. Unlike the moment with Till, she just stands there as a hatred for her husband bursts “into glorious flower.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” is a long and unusual title for a long poem. In the poem, details from ordinary life, northern and southern, are interspersed with meditations on the perils of growing up black in America. What holds the poem together?
2. Compare “A Bronzeville Mother” with other poems from *The Bean Eaters*, such as “The Last Quatrain of Emmett Till,” “The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock,” and the “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed.” As with a “Bronzeville Mother,” these poems are rooted in the history of racism, violence—especially lynching—and discrimination. Taken together, what stance do these different poetic voices form? What do they have to say about concrete moments in history? Finally, write a well-documented research paper that explores the historical events Brooks's poems enshrine.
3. Research the history of lynching by visiting <<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>>, which contains photographs and postcards of lynching in America. How does Brooks's poem respond to such atrocities? What value lies in reflecting on a lynching story from a white perspective? How does this affect the tone of the poem?
4. Why do the lines grow briefer at the very end? What effect does this create, and why is this effect significant?
5. Compare this poem with Brooks's poem “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” which reflects on Till's mother. Why does Brooks dedicate so much space to Carolyn Bryant and so little to Till's mother? Consider the style differences between the two poems. Why are these differences important, and how do they affect meaning?

“The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock” (1960)

To understand this poem's significance, it is important to understand the cultural context about which Brooks is writing, one alluded to in the poem's epigraph, “Fall, 1957.” Brooks's poem deals with what is called “the Little Rock Nine” or “the Little Rock crisis,” a landmark moment in the history of civil rights in America. After the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared all laws establishing segregated schools to be unconstitutional and called for the desegregation of American public schools, the NAACP worked to register students in all-white schools in the South. The NAACP supported nine African-American students, who, on September 4, 1957, were blocked from entering Little Rock Central High School by the Arkansas National Guard under orders of the

then-governor, Orval Faubus. President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard, demanded that they return to their armories, and sent the 101st Airborne Division to enforce the federal court order. In what most believe to be a political decision, Faubus closed Little Rock high schools for the 1958–59 school year.

The first-person narrator of the poem, a reporter from the *Chicago Defender*, a paper often read by blacks who migrated from the South and wanted to know about race relations there, is first struck by how unremarkable the people of Little Rock are. They bear children, “comb and part their hair, “watch want ads,” and repair their homes. They sing hymns, which they have rehearsed well and drink lemon teas, eat Lorna Doones, celebrate Christmas, play baseball, have open air concerts, love, show loving kindness to one another, and answer their phones out of courtesy. All of these observations confuse the speaker, who is attempting to understand the people who have purportedly spread hatred. Here we see the poem’s complexity. As readers, we are asked to fill in many blanks, to interject the historical context, remember what has taken place, since we are privy to knowledge that the speaker does not have. This complex way of telling creates a sense of irony; the speaker spends most of the poem observing Little Rock’s normalcy and goodness, something that the reporter/speaker knows the *Chicago Defender* editor will not accept. So the imagined answer of the editor hangs in the air, “Why?” While the poem never provides an answer, it makes a radical shift in the last 10 lines, with the speaker reporting on the white mass of people who spit and throw rocks, garbage, and fruit, harassing the Little Rock Nine as they make their way to the school building and who, in the final lines, are associated with the crucified Christ. Thus, in the end, the reader is left with a jarring juxtaposition, an unresolved set of observations that still need to be processed, examined, and understood.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Visit the *Chicago Defender* homepage, <http://www.chicagodefender.com/>, and learn about its history. Take what you learn about the paper and apply it to Brooks’s poem, thinking about the historical significance of the paper, Brooks’s role as a reporter, and her poem on the subject.
2. Visit the Web site for the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum. There you will find archival documents related to the “Little Rock School Integration Crisis”: <http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/dl/LittleRock/little-rockdocuments.html>. Read both the personal correspondence there as well as the official press releases. Finally, write a well-developed essay that assesses Eisenhower’s role in the integration of the Little Rock school system. What struggles did Eisenhower face? How did his course of action affect civil rights history? As a point of interest, you also may want to explore the correspondence between Jackie Robinson and President Eisenhower, a famous exchange between the first African-American professional baseball player of the modern era in 1957 and the then-president of the United States.
3. Analyze the final lines of Brooks’s poem: “The lariat lynch-wish I deplored.” / “The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.” Here Brooks makes a comparison with the crucifixion of Jesus. With these final lines in mind, trace the religious imagery in the poem. Why does Brooks fill the poem with such images? What is their effect? How does this imagery cast the African Americans known as the Little Rock Nine? How do both reflect a shift in Brooks’s perspective toward race relations in America?
4. Compare this poem with Countee Cullen’s sonnet “Christ Recrucified,” noting how each poem deals with race and religion. How do the Christ images in both poems function, and to whom do they refer? Do the poems employ these images ironically? Why or why not?

“We Real Cool” (1960)

A poem that appeals as much to sound as sight, “We Real Cool” is the most anthologized of Brooks’s poetry, an indication of both the poem’s immediacy and its complexity: the layers of meaning one encounters when pondering just eight short lines. In

a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, Brooks spoke about the poem's rhythm and the way the poem should be read:

Well, ideally, for myself at any rate, the “we” is supposed to be almost an attachment to the word that precedes it, and it's to indicate a sort of lostness and a sort of bewildered clutch at identity, a sort of—a little cry: *we*. And yet this “we” can't come and stand up straight and tall. It's not in These pool players feel that way, although I'm sure that most of them wouldn't be able to express it. (“A Conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks,” Gayles 9)

Here we see Brooks emphasizing the oral aspects of the poem and commenting upon the pool players' identity: how the boys are revealed through careful word choices and a thoughtful reading, with the personality of the players created in the way the poem is intoned.

While what is often stressed is the rhythm of the poem, which is, of course, significant in that it predates rap yet has raplike qualities, this poem also deals with the effects of segregation. Thus, rather than merely interpreting the boys in the poem as idle loafers, which is easy to do when such stereotypes fill the news and movies, the boys can be considered as representatives of the black community, those who have been denied membership in the greater society. As Bolden describes: “The Black men of Bronzeville are not to be taken merely as ‘pool players,’ but as metaphorically indicative of the long term effects of segregation on Black Americans who are entrapped within the confines of their own poverty-stricken communities and ostracized, based upon negative racial stereotypes of the dominant white society” (130). Here, as several critics have noted, we can find an overall consistency in Brooks's works, which forms a continuum dealing with race, class, and gender issues. It is tempting to read this poem without interjecting cultural context, but when we consider the world in which these young men live, we find their own self-doubts, hesitations, and fears. In this sense, the poem speaks about collective identity, which, on the one hand, is representative of the condition of

urban segregation. On the other hand, what these players lack is a sense of self, the sort of autonomous existence that would enable them to sustain themselves, find community, and act in the world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When initially published, “We Real Cool” was banned in some West Virginia and Mississippi schools because the word *jazz* had sexual connotations. Brooks responded to this claim with the following:

I didn't mean that at all. I meant that these young men would have wanted to challenge anything that was accepted by “proper” people, so I thought of something that is accepted by almost everybody, and that is summertime, the month of June. So these pool players, instead of paying customary respect to the loveliness of June—the flowers, the blue sky, honeyed weather—wanted instead to derange it, to scratch their hands in it as if it were a head of hair. This is what went through my head; that is what I meant. However, a space can be permitted for a sexual interpretation. Talking about different interpretations gives me a chance to say something I firmly believe—that poetry is for personal use. When you read a poem, you may not get out of it all the poet put into it, but you are different from the poet. You're different from everybody else who is going to read the poem, so you should take from it what you need. Use it personally. (Howe and Fox, “A Conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks,” Gayles 144)

With Brooks's comments in mind, think about your first reading of the poem. How did it differ from the thoughts Brooks gives here? Thinking on the differences between your initial understanding and your grasp of the poem now and about what Brooks says about the open nature of interpretation, write a well-developed essay that argues multiple ways to read the poem, the many ways readers can internalize this particu-

- lar poem without applying a certain context and without the author's ideas. Evaluate these possible responses. Ultimately, weigh whether knowing what the poet intends is important or not. You might consider looking at Louise Rosenblatt's work of literary criticism *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978), which argues that readers transact with the poem, creating meaning along with the author. After reading Rosenblatt's ideas, evaluate which critical approach you have been taking to interpreting literature and identify the approach you think is most productive.
2. You can hear Brooks reading the poem at Poets.org, the Web site published by the American Academy of Poets: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15433>. After hearing Brooks read, think about how her reading affects your understanding of the poem. What possible interpretations does Brooks's reading invite? After considering these questions, write a well-developed essay that contrasts the experience of reading the poem silently with hearing the author reader her own work. After hearing her read, do you feel as free to interpret as you did before, or has her reading restricted what you feel you have to say?
 3. Read Brooks's "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," which was also banned in a 1974 Virginia public school dispute and in Nebraska. Then, compare the two poems, looking for specific language or images that might be offensive. Can you see why others objected to the poems? Finally, identify what makes both poems unique and vital for understanding Brooks's works and write a well-developed editorial that argues against censorship, using images and quotes from the poems.
 4. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Brooks's "We Real Cool," and RALPH ELLISON's "Flying Home" all address social inequality and the difficulty of changing social status. After reading these works, read Jonathon Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, an indictment of the American school system. With Kozol's ideas in mind, write a well-developed essay that analyzes these three literary works through Kozol's modern sociological lens. What do these works reveal about American education? Finally, consider whether these three black authors' insights still apply to public education in American today.
 5. Read Brooks's poem "The Lovers of the Poor" and then compare it with "We Real Cool." What do the two poems have to say about social inequality, economic deprivation, segregation, and discrimination? With this questions in mind, craft a well-developed essay on the social ramifications of both works.

"Riot" (1969)

Written just two years after Brooks heard black nationalists, including LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), speak, "Riot" is the title poem from a collection Brooks published in 1969 with a black press (Broadside). Opting not to publish with Harper and Row, who, no doubt, would have paid her more, Brooks went as far to donate the royalties from *Riot* to Broadside, which enabled the press to sell the collection for only one dollar per copy and to publish other black poets as well. As James D. Sullivan notes in "Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks's *Riot*", "With *Riot*, not only the poet, but also the publisher, the retailers (primarily African American-run businesses), and crucially the target market of presumed readers were black. The domination of the whole communicative process by African Americans greatly decreased the likelihood of anyone's reading the poem through a lens of universal white humanism" (Winter 2002 *African American Review*). Thus, Brooks targeted a black audience with *Riot*, detailing, in three sections—"Riot, The Third Sermon on the Warpland, and An Aspect of Love, Alive in Ice and Fire"—a specific moment in the history of social inequality and unrest in America, a depiction of present turbulence, and a hopeful vision for future civil rights achievements.

Written in street dialect and marking what many critics view as the beginning of Brooks's overtly political writing, *Riot*, in many ways, is both a tribute to fallen civil rights leaders and a call to action,

a call that echoed the civic unrest America knew in the late 1960s. In the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, assassination on April 4, 1968, protests erupted across America, including Brooks's city, Chicago, which had been home to King in 1966 while he was working to understand the destitute life of South Side residents and the many racist institutions and corrupt practices still in force in the North. *Riot*, the collection, responds to the events following King's assassination, taking its title from the King quote Brooks uses as the poem's epigraph: "A riot is the language of the unheard." Importantly, this period marks a decided shift in Brooks's writing, as Norris B. Clark, in his essay "Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic," describes:

Although she has always written poetry concerned with the black American experience, one that inheres the diversity and complexity of being black and especially being female, her poetics have primarily undergone thematic developments. Her emphasis has shifted from a private, internal, and exclusive assessment of the identity crises of twentieth-century persons to a communal, external, and inclusive assessment of the black experience. (Mootry and Smith, *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction* 84)

To frame the historical moment of the late 1960s, Brooks returns to the past, evoking John Cabot, the Italian navigator and explorer commonly credited as one of the first early modern Europeans to land on the North American mainland, aboard the *Matthew* in 1497. Cabot becomes the ideal representative of human blindness, a racist, ethnocentric figure driven by his own desires who is responsible for the oppression of African Americans. Significantly, Brooks uses Cabot, one of the founders of the "New World," to show the injustice of the new world before her: a society at odds with itself and forced to come to terms with injustice.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Learn about Amiri Baraka, one of the influential young poets at the Fisk conference that inspired Brooks, through a source, such as his Web site: <http://www.amiribaraka.com/>. Notice especially his political statements and poems, which can be found under "Writings." Next, read his poem, "Somebody Blew Up America," his poem dealing with the September 11 World Trade Center tragedy, which makes bold claims about the attacks and why they happened. While Baraka held the position of poet laureate of New Jersey, he was forced to relinquish that position because of the heated debate about this poem (to read Baraka's response, visit: <http://www.amiribaraka.com/speech100202.html>). Next, compare the sentiments expressed in "Somebody Blew Up America" with "Riot." What do the two have in common; where do they differ? Finally, assess, on the basis of your understanding of Brooks—especially as she describes race relations in "Riot"—whether she would have approved of the Baraka poem. Support everything you say with quotes from both poems.
2. In her poetry collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment* (1967), Nikki Giovanni, a leader in the black poetry movement, captures the fervor over civil rights and the raw energy of the Black Power movement. Read several of the poems from this collection and then compare Giovanni's vision of race relations in America with the vision Brooks proffers in "Riot." Can you see how the two poets respond to the same historical situation? What makes both of their responses unique? What do they have in common; how do they differ?
3. While Brooks's early poetry has garnered more critical attention and critics such as Harold Bloom argue that her earlier writing is her strongest, it is important to consider her later works from a cultural perspective, to assess her writing as reflecting the turbulence that followed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. With this cultural context in mind, read another one of Brooks's poems from her 1969 collection *Riot*, "The Third Sermon." Then, think about this poem and "Riot," analyzing what both have to say about the necessity of destruction for creation. Is Brooks condoning violence? Does she approve of or see the value in the civil rights riots that have

Write a well-developed research paper on Brooks's early work, notably *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Bean Eaters*, noting what other critics have to say about this period in Brooks's life. After reading other critics, evaluate Bolden's claim, arguing for or against his stance, quoting Brooks's poetry, and citing other critics.

8. In *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women*, Barbara Christian argues that Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* is a groundbreaking work in which a black woman is portrayed "as an ordinary human being in all the wonder of her complexity" (239). Christian also notes the profound influence *Maud Martha* (1953) had on Paule Marshall, especially her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). With the representation of black female in mind, read both works of literature, analyzing how black women characters are developed. Finally, write a well-developed essay that explores identity according to both authors. In your essay, cite as many parallels as you can between the two works, especially connections that deal with the black women protagonists.
9. Both Gwendolyn Brooks, in *A Street in Bronzeville*, and Rita Dove, in *Thomas Beulah*, write about African-American communities, providing compelling portraits that explore the condition of African-American life in the 20th century. Read both collections, noting their similarities and differences. Finally, write a well-developed essay on the African-American experience as described in the works of these two Pulitzer Prize-winning black poets.
10. In her depiction of black urban life, Brooks also observes faults of the black community. Read "The Ballad of Chocolate Marble" (1945) and "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee" (1945), both of which deal with skin color differences within the black community. What do these two poems tell us about prejudice within black society?
11. Read chapter 1 ("Of Our Spiritual Strivings") of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, whose complete text can be found at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DubSoul.html>. Note what DuBois says about "double-consciousness":

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

After reading and thinking about the DuBois chapter, analyze Brooks's poem "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" with DuBois in mind. To what extent does Satin-Legs Smith embody DuBois's idea of "double-consciousness"? With DuBois and Brooks in mind, write a well-developed essay on "double-consciousness" in "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith."

12. Read two other Brooks poems that can be viewed from the perspective of DuBois's "double consciousness," "Negro Hero" and "Gay Chaps at the Bar," both of which depict black soldiers who fight wars on two fronts: World War II abroad and a race war at home. Demonstrate your understanding of DuBois's ideas and the Brooks poems by writing a well-developed essay that interprets the poems as embodiments of DuBois's ideas. As you do this, think about the value of applying DuBois's ideas. How do these ideas illuminate our understanding of the Brooks poems?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bell-Scott, Patricia et al., eds. *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters*. Boston: Beacon, 1991.
- Bolden, B. J. *Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945–1960*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1999.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing*. Detroit: Broadside, 1975.
- . *Report from Part One*. Detroit: Broadside, 1972.
- Callahan, John F. "Essentially an Essential African": Gwendolyn Brooks and the Awakening to Audi-

- ence." *North Dakota Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 59–73.
- Christian, Barbara. "Afro-American Women Poets: A Historical Introduction." In *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon, 1985.
- Davis, Arthur P. "The Black-and-Tan Motif in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks." *CLA Journal* 60, no. 2 (December 1962): 90–92, 97.
- . *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900–1960*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974.
- Dawson, Emma W. "Vanishing Point: The Rejected Black Woman in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks." *Obsidian II* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1–11.
- Evans, Mari, ed. *Black Women Writers, 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983.
- Gayle, Addison, Jr. "Gwendolyn Brooks: Poet of the Whirlwind." *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, 79–87. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1984.
- Gayles, Gloria Wade, ed. *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.
- "Gwendolyn Brooks." Modern American Poetry. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brooks/brooks.htm. Accessed May 28, 2007.
- Hansell, William H. "The Uncommon Commonplace in the Early Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks." *College Language Association Journal* 30, no. 3 (Mar 1987): 261–277.
- Horvath, Brooke K. "The Satisfactions of What's Difficult in Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry." *American Literature* 62, no. 4 (December 1990): 606–616.
- Hughes, Gertrude R. "Making It Really New: Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the Feminist Potential of Modern Poetry." *American Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (September 1990): 375–401.
- Jimoh, A. Yemisi. "Double Consciousness, Modernism and Womanist Themes in Gwendolyn Brooks's 'The Anniad.'" *MELUS* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 167–187.
- Kent, George E. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.
- Kufrin, Joan. "Gwendolyn Brooks." In *Uncommon Women*. Piscataway, N.J.: New Century Publishers, 1981, 35–51.
- Lindberg, Kathryn V. "Whose Canon? Gwendolyn Brooks: Founder at the Center of the 'Margins.'" In *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, edited by Margaret Dickle and Thomas Travisano. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- Loff, Jon N. "Gwendolyn Brooks: A Bibliography." *College Language Association Journal* 17 (1973): 21–32.
- Madhubuti, Haki R., ed. *Say That the River Turns: The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1987.
- Melhem, D. H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.
- . *Heroism in the New Black Poetry*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.
- Miller, R. Baxter. *Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978.
- Mootry, Maria K., and Gary Smith, eds. *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Poetryfoundation.org. Available online. URL: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=843>. Accessed May 28, 2007.
- Shaw, Harry B. *Gwendolyn Brooks*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.
- Sullivan, James D. "Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks's Riot." *African American Review* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 557–569.
- Tate, Claudia, ed. "Gwendolyn Brooks." In *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983.
- Wright, Stephen Caldwell. *The Chicago Collective: Poems for and Inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks*. Sanford, Fla.: Christopher-Burghardt, 1990.
- . *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.



TRUMAN CAPOTE (1924–1984)

Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor.

(The Dogs Bark)

Novelist, short story writer, journalist, playwright, screenwriter, provocateur, and self-proclaimed father of the nonfiction novel, Truman Capote, originally Truman Streckfus Persons, was born on September 30, 1924, to Archulus (Arch) and Lillie Mae Persons in New Orleans, Louisiana. Arch, a 26-year-old drifter who periodically returned to their hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, sporting “an expensive LaSalle or Packard Phaeton when he had money, sponging off his friends when he was strapped,” married Lillie Mae when she was 17 (Clarke 5). After running out of money on their honeymoon and living with Lillie Mae’s cousins for a time, Arch sent for his pregnant wife after securing a sales job with a steamship company in New Orleans, all the while trying to convince her not to have an abortion. After Truman was born, Arch tried to supplement his salesman’s salary with a variety of schemes: managing a prize fighter, promoting variety acts, publishing magazines and syndicated columns, among others (9). Capote was never very close to Arch, despite his summertime steamboat adventures on the Mississippi with him. Capote later recalled tap-dancing for the passengers with noted jazz musician Louis Armstrong on one of these voyages. Despite these reunions, Capote described his father as untrustworthy, a man who made many promises but fulfilled few of them. None of Arch’s half-baked get-rich schemes paid off, and Lillie Mae became

dissatisfied with their marriage almost immediately after Truman was born, and she began to see other men. With both parents chasing their desires, there was little time left for Truman, who, in his sixth year, was sent to live with Lillie Mae’s family in Monroeville.

The young Truman’s time in Monroeville was formative. Living with his aunts, Capote befriended his next door neighbor, future novelist NELLE HARPER LEE, and became especially close to his cousin, Miss Sook Faulk. Both of these Monroeville friends appear in Capote’s early fiction. By age five, Capote had taught himself to read and write, and by age 11 he had written and submitted “Old Mr. Busybody”—which he has described as a scandalous roman à clef—in a children’s short story contest sponsored by the *Mobile Press Register* (Inge 21). As Capote recounts, this was to be the first of many troubles caused by his blending of fact and fiction: “The first installment appeared one Sunday . . . Only somebody suddenly realized that I was serving up a local scandal as fiction, and the second installment never appeared. Naturally, I didn’t win a thing” (21). Despite this setback, Capote kept writing, and he started to send his stories to magazines and literary journals by the time he was 15. Already convinced that he would eventually become a famous writer, Capote’s persistence bore fruit two years later when he received acceptance letters for three of his short stories on the same day.

By this time, Lillie Mae, remarried to a well-off Cuban businessman, Joe Capote, changed her first name to Nina and moved with Truman to live in New York—only after finding out that she was no longer capable of bearing children. As biographer Gerald Clarke notes, her wayward affections were very traumatic for the young Truman: “. . . after all the years, and after her all her battles to gain custody from Arch . . . she loved him and she did not love him; she wanted him and she did not want him; she was proud to be his mother and she was ashamed of him. Her feelings toward him oscillated between polar extremes, in other words, and from one day to another, sometimes from one hour to another, he could not predict how she would greet him” (Clarke 42). Such abuse would fuel not only Capote’s insatiable desire for fame and acceptance but his fascination with the life of his most famous protagonist and mass murderer, *In Cold Blood’s* Perry Smith.

Truman’s unhappy home life affected his grades at the private schools his mother sent him to. After performing poorly at one school, Nina, who had always thought her son too effeminate, sent him to St. John’s Military Academy in Ossining, New York, where he was sexually abused by older, stronger boys (Clarke 45–46). When the Capotes relocated to Millbrook, Connecticut, Truman was then sent to Greenwich High School, where he was taken under the wing of his English teacher, Catherine Wood. With her guidance and advocacy, Truman began publishing stories in the school’s literary magazine. Three years later, the Capotes moved back to New York, and Truman finished his remaining year of high school at a private school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. A year later, with the World War II raging in the Pacific and across the Atlantic, Truman found work as a copyboy at the understaffed offices of the *New Yorker*. Though he did become friends with the office manager and was given a slight promotion to the art department, where he sorted cartoons, the atmosphere at the magazine was cold, secretive, and gossip-plagued. After a few years, Capote attended a Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in Vermont, where he introduced himself to the poet Robert Frost as an employee of the magazine. Later, when Truman was

perceived to be sneaking out of one of Frost’s poetry readings, the Pulitzer Prize–winning poet took it as an insult from the magazine. The incident got Truman fired, and he proceeded to write full time with the financial support of his stepfather, Joe.

Comparatively free from financial burden and already intimate with wealthy and affluent New Yorkers, Capote began writing short stories for *Story*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Mademoiselle*. These included “My Side of the Matter,” “A Tree of Night,” and “Miriam,” the last of which caught the attention of an editor at Random House, who expressed interest in whatever Capote wrote next. Although since he left the *New Yorker* he had been working on a novel, which was to be called *Summer Crossing* (posthumously published in 2006), Capote soon abandoned the project and, two years later, completed his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Published in 1948 with the help of his friend and fellow writer Carson McCullers, the book received mixed reviews from critics but benefitted from its risqué subject matter and its equally provocative dust jacket, which prominently featured a picture of Capote gazing at the camera in an attitude of seductive repose. Written in a southern gothic style, the novel is a semiautobiographical story of an effeminate 13-year-old, Joel, who is sent from New Orleans to his reclusive quadriplegic father’s rural Alabama plantation after his mother dies. Estranged from his father since birth, Joel befriends a transvestite named Randolph and Idabel, a tomboy who is loosely based on Capote’s Monroeville playmate Harper Lee.

Capote then spent the next 10 years traveling Europe and elsewhere with his longtime partner and novelist Jack Dunphy. During this time, he published an astonishing variety of works, from travel narratives and journalism pieces for the *New Yorker* to original Hollywood screenplays, Broadway adaptations of his fiction, and, perhaps most significantly, an experimental journalistic travel narrative called *The Muses Are Heard: An Account* (1956) and the commercially successful novella *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1958). The first, a literary and journalistic account of an American theatrical production performing in Russia during the cold war, appeared on the pages of the *New*

Yorker before appearing in book form. *The Muses Are Heard* was Capote's first conscious attempt to produce what he considered to be a new sort of writing, a "high" journalism that retains fidelity to facts while presenting them with all of the "fictional technical equipment" a novelist has at his or her disposal (Plimpton, "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel" 26). As Capote himself later wrote in *Music for Chameleons*, "*The Muses Are Heard* had set me to thinking on different lines altogether: I wanted to produce a journalistic novel, something on a large scale that would have the credibility of fact, the immediacy of film, the depth and freedom of prose, and the precision of poetry" (xiv). Capote began to designate this genre experiment as the "nonfiction novel," a term whose paradoxical and contradictory nature has been the source of much critical debate (for an excellent analysis of this, see Heyn).

On November 16, 1959, Capote came across a small notice in the *New York Times* entitled: "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain." Thus began Capote's five-year obsession with the brutal, apparently motiveless murder of the Clutter family at the hands of Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Edward Smith. With his longtime friend Nelle Harper Lee, Capote immediately traveled to the small middle-American farming community of Holcomb, Kansas, to gather information and conduct interviews for what was to become his most famous novel. During the course of his investigation of the crime's mysterious causes and tragic consequences, Capote gained the trust of the criminals, the investigating officers, and many of Holcomb's residents. Capote became especially close to Perry Smith, who entrusted his interviewer with all of his personal effects and journals before his death. What resulted from these researches was one of the most commercially successful novels the publishing industry had ever produced, and Capote's words were again adapted for film in 1967.

After becoming so intimate with two condemned men and watching their repeated appeals fail to save them from the noose, Capote ceased writing and busied himself with arranging what became known as the party of the decade, the famous Black and White Ball, the guest list for which was so illustrious it was published afterward in the *New York*

Times. This event, extravagant, public, and decadent, was to be representative of Capote's life for the next decade. Though he often claimed to be working on a "masterwork" in the same "nonfiction novel" style as *In Cold Blood*, which he called *Answered Prayers* (posthumously published in 1987), his writing habits suffered from his increasing addiction to drugs, alcohol, fame, and the distractions of the jet-set lifestyle. When Capote finally did publish chapters from *Answered Prayers* in *Esquire* starting in 1975, he alienated many of his rich and famous friends, who recognizably appear in the chapters from his work in progress revealing personal and scandalous secrets. Like his "Old Mr. Busybody," "nothing came of it:" Capote's rich friends no longer wanted to socialize with an indiscrete gossipmonger, and his attempt to turn his life into a revealing piece of artful nonfiction was never completed. In the remaining years before his death in 1984, Capote struggled with substance abuse and continued to write, publishing a novella and collection of short pieces entitled *Music for Chameleons: New Writing* (1983). After becoming increasingly ill and despondent, Capote died of a drug overdose in the house of Joanne Carson, the second wife of comedian and talk show host Johnny Carson, on August 25, 1984. Though no one knows if he intended to commit suicide, Capote told Mrs. Carson not to call the paramedics. In 2005, Capote's life and writings were introduced to a new generation of audiences with the success of Bennett Miller's biographical film *Capote*, which focuses on the author's time in Kansas researching *In Cold Blood*. Capote and his most successful novel are recognized for their sociological significance and for their influence on postwar American fiction and nonfiction.

***In Cold Blood* (1965)**

Constructed out of his investigation of the horrific Clutter family murders and the events surrounding the capture, incarceration, and execution of the two men responsible for them, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was first published in four installments by the *New Yorker* in late 1965. *In Cold Blood* is an episodic narrative broken into small chapters of vary-

ing length—some are only a paragraph long, others relate many details in journalistic exposition—and divided into four parts: “The Last to See Them Alive,” “Persons Unknown,” “Answer,” and “The Corner.” The chapters are mostly chronological but are interspersed with lengthy flashbacks and intrusions of purportedly factual accounts, such as the psychological evaluations of Dick and Perry that are placed in the courtroom scene. Such techniques keep the reader’s interest in lieu of the desire for a revelatory and unexpected ending: Nearly all of Capote’s readers knew exactly what happened to the Clutter killers from reading numerous newspaper accounts. By presenting the story from different perspectives—the townspeople’s, the detectives’, the killers’, and the victims’—while adhering to the chronology of a chase, Capote keeps his narrative moving at a quick pace (especially if compared with a piece of conventional journalism). By slowly revealing the grotesque and shocking nature of the crime, and the equally grotesque childhood of the novel’s antihero, Perry Smith, Capote substitutes the full disclosure of every “journalistic” detail—the “why”—for the usual questions a novel might be said to answer—the “what” and the “who.”

The literary protagonist Capote constructs out of his many interviews and records is a pitiable and tragic figure. Perhaps the most unexpected development in Capote’s narrative unveiling of journalistic facts is that Perry—who, we eventually learn, did all of the shooting—seems to be much less callous than his fellow murderer, Dick Hickock, whom he ironically scolds for his lapses of moral fortitude. Whether factually correct or not, Capote’s masterful characterization of Perry yields the most disturbing contradictions of the book. Cajoling his readers into empathizing with such a despicable character by vividly describing his childhood and demented dream life throughout the novel—a harrowing tale of poverty, abandonment, abuse, bad luck, and psychological degeneration—Capote forces us to confront and make sense of a killer’s mind. Capote tricks us into sympathizing with a mass murderer by carefully omitting the most disturbing details of the killings while also retaining the chronological arrangement of a quest narrative, of a detective story where the

culprit is not a person but the varied ingredients of a life plagued by frustration, disappointment, delusion, and a desire for righteous vengeance. And in many respects, Capote was well-equipped to write such a biography because of his own familiarity with adolescent distress: Both author and character had parents who drank too much, seemed always to be on the verge of walking out the door, and denied their children a loving environment in which they could flourish. Such similarities have provoked many critics to claim that Capote not only bended facts and imagined new ones in his supposedly nonfictional account but also partially wrote himself into Perry’s character. Regardless of this question (which, in all honesty, we can never answer if Capote followed through with his claim that he was going to destroy his notes), the result is affecting and disturbing. Like the citizens of Holcomb, who first looked within their community for the sinner, we as readers are forced to question our own motivations and sentiments after being seduced by Capote’s composite psychobiography of a cold-blooded murderer who has been a victim his entire life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Capote clearly empathized with Perry, if not Dick, in his deviation from the facts of the case, as Philip K. Tompkins notes in his fact-checking review of *In Cold Blood* (Malin 44–58). How might this deviation affect the reader’s view of the work and its significance? Does it make the book seem more sensational? Do Capote’s alterations of fact make *In Cold Blood* a more profound meditation on the darker side of human nature? Just as the townspeople of Holcomb looked within their community for the cause of disaster, turning inward to confront the sinful and evil side of their natures, so do readers when they are tempted to empathize with a murderer. Write a well-developed essay on the strategies Capote uses to seduce readers into empathizing with Smith.
2. Capote was often at odds with his contemporary novelists, especially those who were experimenting with creative nonfiction. *New York Magazine*, for instance, describes one of these critical volleys: “In 1980, Capote told an interviewer that while [the

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Capote, Truman. *Answered Prayers: The Unfinished Novel*. New York: Random House, 1987.
- . *Breakfast at Tiffany's: A Short Novel and Three Stories*. New York: Random House, 1958.
- . *The Dogs Bark: Public People and Private Places*. New York: Random House, 1973.
- . *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- . *The Grass Harp*. New York: Random House, 1951.
- . *Music for Chameleons: New Writing*. New York: Random House, 1983.
- . *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. New York: Random House, 1948.
- . *Summer Crossing*. New York: Random House, 2006.
- . *The Thanksgiving Visitor*. New York: Random House, 1968.
- . *A Tree of Night, and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, 1949.
- Clarke, Gerald. *Capote: A Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.
- Garson, Helen S. *Truman Capote*. New York: Ungar, 1980.
- Heyne, Eric. "Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction." *Modern Fiction Studies* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 479–490.
- Hollowell, John. *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1977.
- Inge, M. Thomas, ed. *Truman Capote Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987.
- Kazin, Alfred. "Truman Capote and the Army of Wrongness." *Contemporaries*. New York: Little, Brown, 1962. 250–254.
- Mailer, Norman. "Evaluations—Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room." *Advertisements for Myself*. 1959. Reprint Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992, 463–473.
- Malin, Irving, ed. *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1968.
- Ozick, Cynthia. "Truman Capote Reconsidered." 1973. Reprinted in *Art and Ardor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, 80–89.
- Plimpton, George. "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel." In *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook*, edited by Irving Malin, 25–43. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1968.
- . *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
- Reed, Kenneth T. *Truman Capote*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.
- Tompkins, Philip K. "In Cold Fact." In *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook*, edited by Irving Malin, 44–58. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1968.
- Truman Capote: His Life and Works. (A Sponsored Archive). Available online. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/ads/capote/>. Accessed July 21, 2009.
- Wolfe, Tom. "Pornoviolence." *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967, 178–187.

John Becker



JOHN CHEEVER (1912–1982)

Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less) and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice.

(“The Death of Justina”)

John William Cheever was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on May 27, 1912. His father, Frederick Lincoln Cheever, was a member of an old seafaring family with a strong work ethic and concern for morality; his mother, Mary Lilely Cheever, was an Englishwoman who had emigrated with her parents. The facts of Cheever’s early life are sketchy, the result of conflicting reports he has provided and the fictionalization of his early life in his works. Cheever reports that his father, a successful shoe salesman, owned and operated a shoe factory until the 1929 stock market crash, after which Mary opened a gift shop and became the primary financial provider. His father’s financial ruin and his mother’s business success and subsequent blossoming independence deeply affected the young Cheever, as he stated in a 1977 interview with *Ms.* magazine: “I remained deeply disconcerted by the harm my mother’s working did to my father’s self-esteem.” While on one level these concerns are specific to Cheever’s family, on another level these fiscal and familial anxieties are common to the 21st century, especially in light of the second and third waves of feminism that arose after World War II and the continual struggle for women’s rights. Additionally Cheever was obsessed with a story his family told in which his father had invited an abortionist to dinner during his mother’s pregnancy, an incident Cheever included in both *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957) and *Falconer* (1977). While the veracity of such accounts may be ques-

tioned, it is clear that Cheever felt neglected and ignored as a child, a formative experience that colored his view of the family and of the interpersonal roles family members play. Though many critics have noted the lack of didactic messages in Cheever’s stories, his works explore relevant political and social themes, such as the power relationships between men and women, the postwar American family, life in American suburbs (John Leonard called him “the Chekhov of the suburbs”), and the decline of moral values in modern society. Cheever’s *Letters* (1989) and *Journals* (1991) portray Cheever as a man consumed with guilt about his homosexual affairs. These important posthumously published sources invite readers to compare the social world and moral terrain of Cheever’s fiction with his life. Recently critical studies of his works have focused on Cheever’s bisexuality; the role his divided, often-at-odds-with-himself sexuality played in his works; and the social view of homosexuality his works present.

Cheever claimed to have begun writing stories when he was six. His parents approved of his chosen vocation, only stipulating that he not work for fame or wealth. In addition to the role his parents had in his development as a writer, Cheever was greatly influenced by his older brother, Fred. Their relationship informed several stories, including “Good-by, My Brother,” “The Low-Boy,” “The Brothers,” and the novel *Falconer*. Cheever expressed the intensity of their relationship when he said, “The strongest

love—not the most exciting or the richest or the most brilliant—but the strongest love of my life was for my brother.” Other references to his brother occur in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, where the brothers Moses and Coverly leave home together just as Cheever and his brother left home and lived together in Boston.

While family dynamics helped shape Cheever’s fiction, so did his childhood in Quincy, Massachusetts. Many of Cheever’s works deal with New England’s physical setting, moral obsessions, and social traditions, so much so that some critics have falsely classified him as a mere chronicler of modern manners. Despite his religious and moral upbringing, Cheever was expelled from Thayer Academy in South Braintree, Massachusetts, for bad behavior at the age of 17; this ended his schooling. Though this may seem out of place for a writer who has been called a moralist by a number of critics, Cheever attributed his difficulties to persistent emotional troubles, which stemmed from his parents’ apparent role reversal and the negative effects it had on his father. Furthermore, Cheever’s expulsion enabled him to explore his greatest ambition—becoming a serious writer; he published his first story, “Expelled,” in the *New Republic* in 1930, the year after he was dismissed from the academy.

During the depression years Cheever worked in department stores and at various newspapers while he continued to write and publish. In the early 1930s, he published short stories in a number of magazines, including *Atlantic*, *Colliers*, and the *Yale Review*. Most importantly, however, he published “Brooklyn Rooming House” in the *New Yorker* (1935), beginning a lifelong relationship during which he published 121 of his 200 short stories in the magazine. After a short period of teaching composition at Barnard College, Cheever joined the army during World War II; in 1941 he married Mary M. Winternitz, whose father was the dean of the Yale Medical School. Mary and John Cheever, proud parents of three children, had a marriage Cheever called “extraordinary”; his relationship with Mary provided endless experiences and inspiration for his work.

In 1943, two years after their marriage, Cheever published *The Way Some People Live*, a volume of 30

stories. Though Cheever uses the historical period of World War II as the situational context for eight of the stories, he focuses primarily on human relationships and human experiences, especially the transition from civilian to military life, rather than exploring actual war experiences. Cheever set some of the stories during the depression; such stories as “The Brothers” and “Publick House” closely resemble real events in Cheever’s life, though Cheever has stated that literary works should not be considered “crypto-autobiography.” Several critics also noted the stories’ similarities to Hemingway’s realistic style, including a heavy reliance on dialogue. While *The Way Some People Live* received favorable reviews, several critics found the stories stilted, attributing these aesthetic flaws to Cheever’s relationship with the *New Yorker*, which was thought to insist upon a stipulated formula. Conversely, other critics credit Cheever with establishing the standard story form for which the *New Yorker* is known.

Simultaneously acknowledging and trying to dispel such criticisms, Cheever described his longtime editor at the *New Yorker*, Harold Ross, as a father figure and their partnership “a creative, destructive relationship from which I learned a great deal” (quoted in Grant 53). The magazine continued to publish his stories and allow him to refine his literary abilities while also sustaining him financially. In 1953, Cheever published his second short-story volume, *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*, which, although it contained only 14 stories, was nearly as long as *The Way Some People Live*. Not only are these stories more fully developed narratives, but also they display a greater variety of settings and topics. In several of the stories, such as “Torch Song” and “The Enormous Radio,” Cheever’s more innovative narrative abilities and genre-bending talents emerge. Blending ordinary details with mythic transformations and seemingly magical, or possessed, objects, Cheever moves into a realm of extreme subjectivity, which is often cited as a hallmark of postmodern style. Here the mind’s inner reality and the world’s outer reality clash, setting off unexpected conflicts and drawing out the troubled and sometimes violent feelings that lie beneath his characters’ placid exte-

riors. Though the volume received more favorable reviews than *The Way Some People Live*, some critics, such as Paul Pickrel, noted that Cheever's stories were "too uniformly excellent," another critical stance that seemed to relate to Cheever's association with the *New Yorker*.

Despite his success with short story collections, Cheever was determined to publish a novel. In 1957, he published *The Wapshot Chronicle*, a loosely connected, episodic novel that explores the family life of the Wapshots and their attempts to reconcile their domestic lives with those of their seafaring, adventure-seeking ancestors. The novel won the 1957 National Book Award for fiction, and, until the publication of *Falconer*, it was Cheever's best-selling work. Many critics wrote respectfully of the work, but others connected the episodic form to his prior penchant for writing short stories. Though Cheever publicly denounced autobiographical remnants in the novel, many of the situations and familial relationships parallel his life; Cheever refused to publish the novel until after his mother's death.

Cheever published his third volume of short stories, *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*, in 1958. Because all of these stories take place in the suburb of Shady Hill, other similarities of theme, place, and time have prompted critics to call the work a novel. Many of the stories explore what happens when an individual undergoes a "temporary crisis" and deliberately tries to express himself or herself differently or to test a yet-untried freedom. The individual, however, is often drawn back into the situation that initially catalyzed the temporary conflict, despite its apparent restrictive or negative qualities. Some of his most widely reprinted stories are found in this volume, including "The Country Husband," which won an O. Henry Memorial Award, and "The Five-Forty-Eight," which garnered the Benjamin Franklin Magazine Award.

In 1961, Cheever published his fourth volume of short stories, *Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel*, which met with mixed critical reception. This volume opens with "The Death of Justina" (quoted at the beginning of this entry), with its philosophical statements about art's overcoming chaos; however, Cheever also

includes a false preface that states his growing frustration with many contemporary literary themes and his ideas about how literature can fail us. Many of these stories use America or Italy for their settings, though few of them contain the type of direct sociological and philosophical commentary found in "The Death of Justina." This volume contains some of his darkest work. Frank J. Warnke called it "Cheever's Inferno." Such criticism reflects the shift in tone, plot, and character development of the stories; instead of finding characters who fulfill audience expectations, as in so many of his earlier works, the reader finds characters who exist in an absurd world, one in which they have little or no hope of finding a clear way of making meaning out of their lives.

Three years later, Cheever published both his fifth volume of short stories, *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* (1964), and the sequel to his first novel, *The Wapshot Scandal* (1969). Diverging from his earlier work, many of the short stories focus on women, and some readers see *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* as a preliminary exercise for *The Wapshot Scandal*. However, in keeping with a significant portion of his work, Cheever explores the themes of family dynamics, suburbia, and the delicate balance between the real and the surreal. In this volume, we also find "The Swimmer," a Kafkaesque tale of a young man's attempt to realize his own heroic abilities and ultimate failure, which is the sole Cheever story ever to be made into a movie. Many of the stories also become darker and more sinister, further preparing his readers for his next novel, *Bullet Park* (1969), which is set in suburbia, where madness and death are ubiquitous and undeniable.

In the years after publishing *Bullet Park*, Cheever fell into alcoholism, suffering from alcohol-related health problems and depression, and began having serious marital problems. Despite these personal problems, Cheever published his sixth volume of short stories, *The World of Apples* (1973); this volume was highly praised in literary circles, including the *New York Times Book Review*. Several critics noted the "transfiguring experience" of the work; for the first time Cheever allows the characters' feelings, motivations, and morals to override the factual circumstances in which they find themselves, leaving the reader with

an impression of optimism and rejuvenation. Under pressure from friends and family, he admitted himself to Smithers Alcohol Rehabilitation Center in 1975 and successfully gave up drinking before publishing his last complete novel, *Falconer* (1975).

Falconer explores the issues of justice, alienation, and confinement through the protagonist's experience in prison. *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), a collection of his best short stories, earned Cheever an honorary doctorate from Harvard, the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Edward McDowell Award. Cheever had begun working on a final novella, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* when he died of cancer in 1982, leaving it unfinished. Nevertheless, he was awarded the National Medal for Literature just before his death. An author who has been compared to Nathaniel Hawthorne for his moral focus, to William Faulkner for his keen sense of place, and to Franz Kafka for his ability to blend subjective perception and reality, Cheever warrants recognition and further critical consideration. Despite his categorization as a moralist, Cheever's lyrical style, narrative innovations, commitment to the human truths of everyday experience, and unflinching ability to imbue the mundane with mythic undertones make him one of the most careful observers of contemporary America, a gifted writer whose works have not received the attention they deserve.

"The Enormous Radio" (1947)

"The Enormous Radio" first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1947 and was subsequently published as part of Cheever's second short story collection, *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* (1953). This story helped to solidify Cheever's reputation as a modern literary innovator and to build his popularity; this is his most often reprinted work. As do many of his works, this relatively early story blends fantasy with real aspects of modern family life.

"The Enormous Radio" takes place in the bustling, socially conscious suburbs of New York in the 1940s, presumably just after World War II, when Americans sought the economic prosperity, the

comforts of consumerism, and the social capital that wealth confers upon its possessors. The third-person omniscient narrator introduces the protagonists, Jim and Irene Westcott, with the blandness and inhuman description of a statistical analysis, using phrases like "[they] were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins" and "they went to the theater on an average of 10.3 times a year." On the surface, Jim and Irene are average Americans who strive to improve their economic situation, to preserve their marriage, and to conform to all the social demands placed on them as upwardly mobile individuals.

The one characteristic that separates the Westcotts from their neighbors and friends is the "interest they share in serious music," which they try to conceal, apparently because this interest makes them somehow different from others. When the Westcotts' old radio quits functioning, Jim purchases a new radio as a surprise for Irene. When she arrives home, Irene sees the new radio with its "malevolent green light" as an "aggressive intruder" among her hand-picked home furnishings. The radio functions properly for a few moments before interference—the sound of telephones ringing, electric razors buzzing, and vacuum cleaners humming—overwhelms the music. Here, Cheever demonstrates how modern life, with all its conveniences, intrudes upon even our most private spaces.

The next day, Jim has the radio fixed. When the couple turns on the radio during dinner, instead of interference they unwittingly begin to overhear their neighbors' troubles through the radio's speakers. Though Jim has been too tired "to make even a pretense of sociability" and Irene has been consumed by disinterestedness during dinner, the opportunity to listen in on the trials and private lives of their neighbors piques their curiosity, and the couple spends the evening hours in front of the radio until they are "weak with laughter." At this point, it is clear that Jim and Irene's discussions rarely venture outside the self-deluded, safe conversations of a couple married for a long time. In contrast, the radio broadcasts the very volatile and emotional conversations of their

neighbors, which eventually force Irene to acknowledge how little she really knows and understands about her relationship with Jim.

As the story progresses, Irene becomes obsessed with the radio conversations. The narrator never describes Irene's putting the kids to bed or kissing Jim as he heads off to work; instead, we see Irene's leaving a luncheon early, wondering what secrets her lunch date is concealing, only to go home to listen in on her neighbors. When she and Jim attend a dinner party that night, Irene is again tormented by her suspicions about the private lives of others as she stares at the dinner guests with "an intensity for which she would have punished her children." Finally, Irene's obsession with her neighbors' lives via the radio drives her to begin to question her relationship with Jim. She begins to wonder whether they too live "sordid" lives, full of passions and pain that they try to hide from one another and, in turn, that they both refuse to acknowledge, choosing instead to measure the worth and value of their lives against only the social and economic situations of their friends and neighbors.

In the last scene, Jim berates Irene for her spending, which is also the topic of many of the radio conversations, even blaming her for purchasing the radio. He goes on to list Irene's past misdeeds: "You stole your mother's jewelry before they probated her will. You never gave your sister a cent of that money that was intended for her—not even when she needed it. You made Grace Howland's life miserable, and where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist? I'll never forget how cool you were." Up to this point, the episodic nature of the story and the narrator's choice of details have prevented us, as readers, from seeing how Jim and Irene interact. Most of the reported conversations revolve around relatively trivial matters unless, of course, the conversations are heard over the strange radio. Several critics have noted how this story relates to the Eden story in the Bible, with the radio bestowing a form of new knowledge upon Irene, allowing her to see her everyday life in a new way that she never considered before. The radio, whether magical or possessed or simply malfunctioning, changes her view of the world, and she becomes nervous and preoccupied with the semblance of her own morality and her relationship with Jim.

In keeping with his tendency to blend fantasy and reality, Cheever's story concludes as Irene wants to hear comforting words over the radio after her argument with Jim; instead, she hears a regular news broadcast: "An early morning railroad disaster . . . killed twenty-nine people. . . . The temperature is forty-seven. The humidity is eighty-nine." This broadcast serves to ground the story in the world, where the radio, a real object, changes the way that Irene has naively seen life in her subjective reality. Her self-constructed world's facade of probity and moral conformity is forever cracked, and through this crack, Irene sees the ugliness, uncertainty, and self-absorption that lie beneath the smooth surface of social interaction and even the intimate relationship she shares with Jim.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read several literary works that blend fiction and the fantastic, works we often refer to as *magical realism*. Good examples include Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "The Circular Ruins." Finally, write a well-developed essay that defines magical realism, drawing upon Cheever and other magical realism writers.
2. Several critics have noticed the similarities between "The Enormous Radio" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." Both stories blend fantasy and reality, and both stories question the nature of reality and the validity of individual perception. Read "Young Goodman Brown" and focus on the events or objects that cause Goodman to question his assumptions about his neighbors and that cause him to seek outward signs of their secret guilt. Compare and contrast Goodman and Irene. What does each of these stories tell us about our own self-constructed realities? About public identity? About society and social interaction in general?

***The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957)**

The Wapshot Chronicle, John Cheever's first novel, was published by Harpers in 1957 and won the

National Book Award in 1958. Cheever claimed that writing the novel took 20 years, and many critics see strong similarities between the novel and Cheever's life. Though the novel explores many of Cheever's darker themes, such as the ambiguities of love and familial commitments, several literary scholars have successfully argued that the novel is essentially a comic work in that Cheever accepts the chaos and uncertainty of everyday life and describes how imagination and moral striving can rejuvenate the human spirit.

The Wapshot Chronicle is mainly set in St. Botolphs, a port in Massachusetts, from around 1890 to the 1950s and follows the lives of the Wapshots, a formerly wealthy and adventurous seafaring family. The main characters include Leander, the family patriarch with a penchant for nature, adventure, and amateur philosophy; Sarah, his wife and a local civic leader; Moses and Coverly, their sons; and Cousin Honora, the willful wealthy family matriarch. Though the novel is episodic, the main plot revolves around Leander as he comes to terms with his aging; with his wife, who has become the primary source of income; and with the accident that destroys his boat, the *Topaze*, with which he has ferried passengers from Travertine to Nangasakit for a number of years. Additionally, the novel catalogs the trials of Moses and Coverly as they attempt to find suitable careers and wives who will bear them sons so that they might obtain their wealthy cousin's inheritance.

When the novel was published, many critics took issue with the loosely connected chapters, which, at first glance, seem somewhat unstructured and disorganized. Later critics noted the chapters' artful arrangement, which helps juxtapose Cheever's themes and ideas. Because of the episodic layout, Cheever covers significant periods, highlighting common threads in characters' lives and ruminating about the cyclical nature of life with all of its vicissitudes, its successes and failures. We see especially this circularity through the story of Leander as he attempts to relive the adventures of his predecessors and tries to pass on his life lessons to his sons. Through the correspondence of the father and his sons, we see just how many experiences they end up sharing and how, though time has certainly changed some things, many

of Leander's philosophical musings serve his children quite well. Nevertheless, Cheever's comic tendencies do not altogether crowd out the Cheeverian chaos pervading the human experience or the realistic portrait of tragedy and loss of a family striving to recreate the past while also fostering hope for the future.

Simultaneously painful and hilarious, the novel focuses on love in its many forms: family love and commitment, the love of significant places, the search for a spouse and marriage, and the love of life and its never-ending possibilities. The love motif helps us accept the eccentricities of the characters, makes us both laugh and gasp as Moses precariously tiptoes across the rooftop to his lover's bedroom, and allows us simultaneously to feel the sorrow of Leander's suicide and the relief of knowing that his peculiar notions of beauty and hope live on in his sons.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *The Wapshot Chronicle*, Leander Wapshot often feels a sense of loss when he ponders how his ancestors went to sea to "seek their fortune" while he is relegated to ferrying passengers to and fro from the nearby amusement park. Consider some other, older epic tales that you have read (for example, *The Iliad*, or *Beowulf*) and compare their heroes to the heroes of stories of our time. What are the major differences in either the way the stories are told or the way the heroes compare to one another? Is there anything heroic about Leander? If so, what?
2. Many critics have called this novel a comedy. A comedy is generally a work in which many of the trials and obstacles facing the main characters are neatly dispelled at the end of the work, and many comedies end in a marriage or in a reconciliation of some sort. Given this, how do you view the novel's ending? Do you consider it comic? Why or why not? Could we consider this novel a tragedy? Can we neatly categorize this novel as one or the other?

"The Death of Justina" (1961)

John Cheever's "The Death of Justina" is the first story in his fourth volume of short stories, *Some*

People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel, which was published in 1961. This story, which comments on itself and on writing in general (literary critics often label such works *metanarratives*—stories that comment on the process of making and interpreting stories), includes many first-person observations. It also contains many of the themes found in Cheever's earlier works: the absurdity of the social and occupational demands in the postwar, "postmodern" world; the mutual self-delusions of marriage and mortality; the inhuman essence of our bureaucratic society; and, perhaps most importantly, the role of fiction and art in our lives.

"The Death of Justina" is written from the first-person point of view of Moses Wapshot, one of the protagonists of Cheever's novel *The Wapshot Chronicle*. This story appeared in 1961, four years after *The Wapshot Chronicle* was published, and some critics have complained that even though the narrator is obviously Moses Wapshot, the Moses of this story retains few, if any, of the original Moses characteristics. As the tale opens, Moses laments how time and change confound "one's purest memories and ambitions"; he questions our ability to understand the times in which we live, claiming that in order to overcome chaos, we must rely on art, especially fiction. Even so, he wonders whether "in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive there is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken and that the vision we serve will come to nothing." Here, we perhaps hear the author's voice blending with the voice of the protagonist: Both individuals wonder whether fiction's ability to capture the essence of its time somehow limits its chances of overcoming chaos because the "selection" of what to include and what to exclude may not fully communicate its message across changing times.

After challenging readers to look into their own past for examples of Moses's ideas of ubiquitous chaos, Moses describes how his doctor has recently advised him to quit smoking and drinking, and he catalogs the problems he encounters in trying to do so. He then explains that his wife's cousin, Justina, has arrived for a visit, and though she appears "lively," she unexpectedly dies on his couch while he is at work. When he tells his boss that he must leave

work early because of the family emergency, his boss commands him to finish his work on the upcoming Elixircol commercial before he leaves (another coworker has already left to assist his grandmother, who has fallen off a stepladder). Ironically, Elixircol is hailed as "the true juice of youth." Moses writes the commercial while elucidating his own preoccupation with life, mortality, and the difficulties of growing older. His first version of the commercial includes claims that Elixircol can rejuvenate its users' sexuality, their sense of well-being, and even their perceptions of their spouses; he ends the commercial with the actress's encouraging potential users to "borrow [the cash] from your neighborhood loan shark or hold up a bank."

When he arrives home and phones the family doctor to find out how he should deal with Justina's corpse, Moses learns that his home is located in "Zone B." He also discovers that after a hasty Village Council meeting moved to shut down a proposed funeral home in the area, the council members went too far and mandated that "you not only can't have a funeral home in Zone B—you can't bury anything there and you can't die there." Here, we see other themes common in Cheever's work—the absurdity and inhumanity of governing bureaucracies and the culture's attempts to avoid acknowledging or encountering death. In their attempts to appease the wishes of the masses, bureaucracies often overlook not only individual problems but also problems that everyone will have to face. In fact, when Moses petitions the mayor to grant him an exception, the mayor tells him, "But it's just that it happened in the wrong zone and if I make an exception for you I'll have to make an exception for everyone and this kind of morbidity, when it gets out of hand, can be very depressing. People don't like to live in a neighborhood where this sort of thing goes on all the time." Significantly, Moses faces the inevitability and reality of death that our culture often tries to downplay.

After obtaining the exception, Justina is "removed," and Moses dreams that he is in a supermarket where nothing is labeled and all the items are indiscernible, wrapped in "odd shapes." Proceeding toward the checkout, Moses notices that there are "brutes" waiting at the door, and they tear open each custom-

er's packages. Once they see what they were actually purchasing, "in every case the customer, at the sight of what he had chosen, showed all the symptoms of the deepest guilt; that force that brings us to our knees." Coupled with Moses's last two attempts to write the Elixircol commercial, the first of which claims that "only Elixircol can save you" from the "lethal atomic waste" in the air and the second of which quotes Psalm 23, the dream represents our inability to comprehend death and our inability to understand how many decisions do not have their intended results.

In the final scene, Cheever highlights all the themes he explores in this piece by describing the cemetery where Justina is buried as a place "where [the dead] are transported furtively as knaves and scoundrels and where they lie in an atmosphere of perfect neglect. Justina's life had been exemplary, but by ending it she seemed to have disgraced us all." Here, Cheever emphasizes how the fear of death creates bureaucracies to deal with unwanted problems (e.g., the Village Council) and creates occupations (such as morticians and cemetery attendants) further to distance us, the living, from ever having to confront mortality. Of course, Moses's many failed attempts to market Elixircol tie into these ideas very nicely; Moses himself promotes a product that profits from people's fear of death.

Cheever's selection of specific, meaningful instances from Moses's chaotic life mirrors the way art can overcome the apparent chaos of human experience. The commercial and his bosses' unwillingness to accommodate his family emergency, his aunt's death, his doctor's admonitions concerning smoking and drinking, his concerns about his own life choices, and his dream all deal with the themes of mortality and the absurdity of the modern human experience. Cheever's selections show us a man dealing with intertwined, unavoidable issues. Although it seems as though every facet of Moses's existence ties into these themes, Moses still struggles to overcome the complexities of mortality, absurdity, and the chaos contained therein. As Moses puts it, "How can a people who do not mean to understand death hope to understand love, and who will sound the alarm?"

For Discussion or Writing

1. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* explores some themes that are found in "The Death of Justina," including an examination of our fear of death and our myriad ways of avoiding contact with it. Write a well-developed essay that compares the two works and the "fear of death" theme.
2. This story also explores the absurdity of U.S. commercial enterprises by contrasting their claims with the everyday reality that Moses experiences. Read Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, noting the many references to commerce, advertisements, and popular culture. Finally, write a well-developed essay that compares the way the two authors deal with societies bombarded by advertising.

"The Swimmer" (1964)

Cheever included "The Swimmer" in his fifth volume of short stories, *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*, which was published in 1964 and remains his only work that has been adapted for the big screen. Many readers have noted how Cheever's later stories tend toward a darker, more ominous view of human nature and American society in general, and this certainly seems true of "The Swimmer." This story, as does "The Enormous Radio," consists of a surrealistic blend of reality and fantasy, which is mainly achieved by juxtaposing Neddy Merrill's conflicted inner thoughts with the conversations and interactions of Bullet Park's social elite.

"The Swimmer" takes place among the pools and alcoholic drinks of Bullet Park, an upscale neighborhood in Westchester, New York, on a warm Sunday afternoon. While the afternoon drinkers sit around discussing how they all "drank too much" the night before, Neddy Merrill decides to take on a heroic challenge, swimming through all the pools on his way home, which is eight miles away. As he goes from pool to pool and after he revels in an afternoon thunderstorm, he notices an autumnal chill in the air, and his heroic spirit begins to dwindle. In order to reach home, he must cross a busy freeway, where he suffers from hurled insults and beer cans. He encounters many old friends and acquaintances; some of these

cordially offer him drinks and their condolences concerning his recent tribulations, of which he has no memory, and others, such as his former mistress, treat him with an indifference that masks outright disdain. When he reaches home, he finds the doors locked and the house emptied and in a state of disrepair, as though it has been long abandoned.

The story's surrealistic nature highlights its concerns with memory, perception, and the way time affects both of these. The limited omniscient third-person narrator, privy only to Neddy's thoughts, reports only bits of dialogue throughout the story. Much as does Neddy's memory, which has formerly seemed a "gift for concealing painful facts," the narrator slices through time and significance, leaving the reader to figure out how this story could plausibly take place in one afternoon. In fact, though we learn that Neddy is bankrupt and his four daughters are in some sort of trouble, we never learn the surrounding circumstances or whether the friends who line the Lucinda River, as he has named the pools leading to his house, are even still his friends or whether they only treat him hospitably out of pity. Near the end of his journey, finding his swimming trunks looser than before, Neddy himself wonders whether he has lost weight on his journey, implicitly suggesting that the action of the story may not have taken place in one day. Therefore, though we initially see Neddy's consciousness as coherent and logical, if somewhat childish, we learn that his perceptions do not match the commentary provided by his former neighbors. As with many of Cheever's surrealistic, episodic tales, objective reality and individual perception uneasily stand side by side, each threatening to overtake the other.

The water imagery that pervades the story—from the title to the use of "drank too much" four times in the first paragraph—resembles Neddy's memories and perceptions. As a river seeks the path of least resistance through bedrock, Neddy's memory slips past the events leading up to his bankruptcy and his daughters' troubles. Instead of focusing on the unpleasant, he focuses instead on the good times he has shared with old friends, on the days when the world seemed full of opportunity, and on the times when his social and economic capital allowed him

unfettered access to the pools of his neighbors. Even as Grace Biswanger, whose pool occupies a place on the Lucinda River, mocks him for not replying to her invitations for dinner, he thinks, "She could not deal him a social blow—there was no question about this and he did not flinch." Afterward, her bartender, responding to his employer's remark, serves Neddy rudely. Confronted with this overt hostility, Grace's rude treatment of him, and the knowledge that his former mistress has taken a new lover and now has no interest in him, Neddy enters a vertiginous, unsettled world. Neddy's memories and subsequent perceptions allow him to escape the pain of his recent troubles; however, his elitist friends, with their penchant for gossip, will not fail to mention his plight. Thus, even though the first leg of his journey inspired a youthful determinism and heroism, he finds only questions about his present state, ambivalence, and even thinly veiled aggression after he endures insults while crossing the highway.

As Jim and Irene Westcott in "The Enormous Radio" find their perceptions drastically altered after acquiring their new radio, Neddy's misadventure forces him to face his own past and present. In keeping with several other critical examinations, Samuel Coale writes that "in Cheever's darker tales objects often seem to overwhelm the characters' sense of well-being, as if these people were living in a strange and alien world of obstacles and mysteriously laid traps" (35). In "The Swimmer," Neddy's quest, which is a self-chosen task, reminds him of his repressed past and shows him that he no longer possesses his youthful abilities. Though his journey homeward is intended to fulfill his reputation "as a legendary figure" and to "enlarge and celebrate [the day's] beauty," the experience brings him to tears for "the first time in his adult life." Finally, at the last pool on his journey, he climbs down the ladder and enters the pool, whereas previously he held "an inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools."

In this moment Neddy confronts the delusions he has harbored about his marriage and daughters, his social ties and status, his unaffected optimism, and his indefatigable physical ability. Similarly to Jim Westcott's revelations about his wife's morally ques-

bers than to recognize this tendency in ourselves. Take one day of your life, carry around a journal, and note how these deceptions are made manifest or make themselves known. Are there external representations of these deceptions? If so, what are they? After giving this some thought, discuss the positive and negative attributes of these self-deceptions or self-delusions. What is their function? Are they necessary, or could we get along without them?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Auser, Cortland P. "John Cheever's Myth of Man and Time: 'The Swimmer.'" *CEA Critic* 29 (March 1967): 18–19.
- Bosha, Francis J. *John Cheever: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981.
- . "The John Cheever Manuscript Collection at Brandeis University." *Resources for American Literary Study* 20, no. 1 (1994): 45–53.
- Bracher, Frederick. "John Cheever and Comedy." *Critique* 6 (Spring 1963): 66–77.
- . "John Cheever: A Vision of the World." *Claremont Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1964): 47–57.
- Brans, Jo. "Stories to Comprehend Life: An Interview with John Cheever." *Southwest Review* 65 (1980): 337–345.
- Cheever, John. *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
- . *Bullet Park*. New York: Knopf, 1969.
- . *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1953.
- . *Falconer*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- . *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories*. New York: Harper & Row, 1958.
- . *Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961.
- . *The Stories of John Cheever*. New York: Knopf, 1978.
- . *The Wapshot Chronicle*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.
- . *The Wapshot Scandal*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
- . *The Way Some People Live*. New York: Random House, 1943.
- . *The World of Apples*. New York: Knopf, 1973.
- Cheever, Susan. *Home before Dark*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.
- Coale, Samuel. *John Cheever*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977.
- Collins, Robert G., ed. *Critical Essays on John Cheever*. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1982.
- "Fiction: John Cheever." Available online. URL: <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/fiction/cheever.htm> Accessed July 4, 2006.
- Garrett, George. "John Cheever and the Charms of Innocence: The Craft of *The Wapshot Scandal*." *Hollins Critic* 1 (April 1964): 1–12.
- Greene, Beatrice. "Icarus at St. Botolphs: A Descent to 'Unwonted Otherness.'" *Style* 5 (Spring 1971): 119–137.
- Harmsel, Henrietta T. "'Young Goodman Brown' and 'The Enormous Radio.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 9 (Fall 1972): 407–408.
- Hunt, George W. *John Cheever: The Hobgoblin Company of Love*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983.
- Kendle, Burton. "Cheever's Use of Mythology in 'The Enormous Radio.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 4 (Spring 1967): 262–274.
- Meanor, Patrick. *John Cheever Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1995.
- Moore, S. C. "The Hero on the 5:42: John Cheever's Short Fiction." *Western Humanities Review* 30 (Spring 1976): 147–152.
- O'Hara, James E. *John Cheever: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- "Ovid in Ossining." *Time*, 27 March 1964, pp. 66–70.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Late Twentieth Century, 1945 to the Present—John Cheever." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/cheever.html>. Accessed May 10, 2006.
- Trakas, Deno. "John Cheever: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography (1943–1978)." *Resources for American Literary Study* 9 (1979): 181–199.
- Waldeland, Lynne. *John Cheever*. Boston: Twayne, 1979.



RALPH ELLISON (1913–1994)

No matter how strictly Negroes are segregated socially and politically, on the level of the imagination their ability to achieve freedom is limited only by their individual aspiration, insight, energy and will.

(*Collected Essays* 163)

Although he published only one finished novel, *Invisible Man*, and a small number of self-contained short stories, Ralph Ellison remains one of the most widely honored of all African-American writers of fiction. *Invisible Man* was hailed as a classic almost from the moment of its first appearance, and indeed the enormous praise that greeted the book may have contributed to the exceptional pressure Ellison felt to produce a worthy successor. This pressure resulted, ironically, in years (and then in decades) of creative inhibition, as Ellison worked on a huge manuscript that never did result in a complete and coherent second novel. Excerpts were occasionally published, but when he died in 1994, he had become almost as famous for the absence of his second novel as for the distinction of his first. Nevertheless, his career had been productive in numerous other ways: He often wrote essays, frequently gave speeches, and repeatedly served on boards, commissions, panels, and agencies. Although disdained by many younger black writers (who saw him as reactionary and ungenerous), at his death he was still regarded as the author of one of the most important works of 20th-century American fiction.

Many of the most important facts of Ellison's life are laid out in Arnold Rampersad's biography and in the helpful chronology prepared by Robert Butler (xli–xlv). Although Ellison's birth was often misreported as occurring in 1914, he was actually born

on March 1, 1913, in Oklahoma City, the first son of Lewis Ellison (a small businessman who sold coal and ice) and Ida Milsap Ellison (a loving mother with a strong social conscience). Ellison's first and middle names—*Ralph Waldo*—reflect the fact that he was named after the great 19th-century American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. These given names reflect the ambitions his parents had for him: Ralph's father hoped that his son would become a poet, and Ralph's mother always encouraged his interest in reading and desire to learn. As the son of lower-middle-class blacks who were living outside the Deep South, Ralph began life in a slightly more fortunate position than many other members of his race, but his fortunes soon took a decided turn for the worse when his father died, on July 19, 1916, from an accident when Ralph was three years old. Suddenly the family (which now included a recently born younger brother) found themselves destitute; Ralph's widowed mother could not, at first, even afford to bury her husband, whose body had rapidly begun to deteriorate in the hot Oklahoma summer. Mrs. Ellison soon had to begin working as a maid to support her children, often taking home reading material from the homes where she worked. She also always encouraged her sons to take their schooling seriously. Ralph, in fact, became a good student and a voracious reader; he attended a rigorous high school and often visited the local library. In school he not only studied and played sports but also developed

an intense interest in music, so that by the time he graduated he had become an accomplished trumpet player. He loved both the classics and jazz, eventually aspiring to be a composer who would draw on the traditions of black harmonies, techniques, rhythms, and melodies. In the meantime, Ellison had also been working a series of part-time jobs that gave him exposure to a wide slice of “real life”—life that was often far from pleasant for a poor black youth.

Although Ellison's initial attempts to go to college were frustrated, eventually he was granted a scholarship to study music at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. At that time, Tuskegee was the most famous institution of higher learning for blacks in the United States (if not the world), although it had begun to lose much of the luster it possessed when it was first founded by Booker T. Washington at the end of the 19th century. Arriving in Tuskegee in 1933 after a somewhat harrowing trip in which he had been forced by poverty to hitch an illegal ride on a freight train as it moved through the segregated and often hostile South, Ellison hoped to study at the institute with the noted black composer Walter L. Dawson. He did, but his experiences with the often-distant Dawson were disappointing. In fact, Ellison's entire experience at Tuskegee left much to be desired; he found the school stifling, overregulated, uninspired, and uninspiring. Despite these shortcomings, Ellison did encounter a few mentors who challenged and encouraged him—including an English professor and a friendly librarian. His interests began to shift from music to sculpture, but he was also taking advantage of the school's library. Here Ellison read widely and developed a growing interest in modern American literature—and especially in T. S. Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land*. After finishing his junior year at Tuskegee, financial difficulties (as well as tension with the administrators) made it difficult for Ellison to return for his final year. He thus made the fateful decision to go to New York City, earn some money there, study sculpture with a noted artist, and perhaps return to Tuskegee at some later time. As it happened, he never returned—at least not as a student. When he eventually did, it was to be honored by an alma mater he had not altogether enjoyed.

During his time at the institute, Ellison had happened to meet the noted Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who was known for generously encouraging younger colleagues. As luck would have it, in 1936 Ellison ran into Hughes by chance once again on his second day in New York, where Ellison was staying at the Harlem YMCA. Hughes not only took an interest in him and suggested helpful reading material, but also introduced Ellison to Richard Wright, at that time an up-and-coming black intellectual and fiction writer who would soon produce *Native Son*, one of the most important novels by any African-American author. Wright helped Ellison find employment, encouraged him to write, published his work, discussed ideas with him, and in general provided a valuable role model for the ambitious young man. By this time, Ellison had decided that his main interest lay not in composing or sculpting but in writing, and particularly in writing fiction. As with Wright and Hughes, his politics had become left-wing and he was even involved for a time with the Communist Party (as many intellectuals were during the 1930s, partly in response to the economic ravages of the Great Depression). Ellison began his career as a writer by publishing book reviews and essays and by doing research and writing for the Federal Writers' Project, but it was not long before he produced short stories and tentatively planned to write a novel. The death of his mother in 1937, however, was a major blow; although he had sometimes lost touch with her, Ellison revered her memory for the rest of his life: She had always been a major source of emotional encouragement for him, even keeping him financially afloat (especially during his time in college). It was not long after losing his mother, however, that he also found a wife: On September 16, 1938, he married a young black actress named Rose Poindexter. Although their relationship would not last, at first they were content.

Ellison's first published story (“Slick Gonna Learn”) appeared in 1939; soon a second tale (“The Birthmark”) was not only published in a Leftist magazine, but also selected for inclusion in an anthology, *The Best Stories of 1940*. By 1942 Ellison, whose profile was rising, had become managing editor of the *Negro Quarterly*, where he was in a position to

commission work by other aspiring writers. Ellison's career as an increasingly prominent man of letters was interrupted by his need to take part in the war effort after the United States became involved in World War II. He had no interest in serving in the segregated army, and so he joined the Merchant Marine service, making risky voyages across the submarine-infested Atlantic to deliver supplies to allied forces in Europe. He continued to write during this time, publishing two of his most notable short stories—"King of the Bingo Game" and "Flying Home"—in 1944. The latter work was related to a novel on which Ellison was also working at this time—a novel he never finished and one that he soon abandoned in favor of the new project that would eventually become *Invisible Man*. He was at work on this new book by 1945. By this time he had been divorced by Rose, partly as a result of his affair with a married woman, Fanny Buford. Fanny, too, was soon divorced, and on August 28, 1946, Ralph and she married. Though their marriage was troubled almost from the start, it endured for almost 50 years, generally satisfying both of them (especially in its final decades). Fanny was bright, articulate, and skilled at earning a living when Ralph needed her support and totally devoted to Ralph's career.

Work on *Invisible Man* proceeded more slowly than Ellison had anticipated, but by 1947 the famous "battle royal" section was published separately as a magazine article. Eventually, in 1952, the entire book appeared. White reviewers tended to be extremely enthusiastic in their praise; despite some reservations, many whites considered the book the best novel yet published by an African-American author, and indeed some immediately ranked it among the best American novels by writers of any background. Black commentators, ironically, tended to be less enthused: Many saw the book as being full of unhelpful stereotypes and thought that it offered a severely limited depiction of the black American experience. Enthusiasts of the novel were vindicated, however, when *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award in 1953, beating Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. From that point forward, Ellison was widely considered the most promising black novelist in

the country, and awards, prizes, and appointments came his way with gratifying regularity. In 1954, for instance, he won a Rockefeller Foundation Award, and in 1955–56 he received the Prix de Rome of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He traveled and lectured in Europe, Japan, and the Indian subcontinent. Throughout this period and despite marital troubles resulting from a serious affair with a woman he met in Rome, Ellison was hard at work on a second novel, which he hoped would solidify his reputation as the best black writer in America and perhaps the world. He produced essays, taught at colleges, served on various boards, and published stories derived from his growing manuscript, but the novel itself remained unfinished. Ellison was a perfectionist, and undoubtedly he felt enormous pressure to live up to the extremely high standards he had set for himself by producing *Invisible Man*. The renown that book had achieved continued to grow as the years passed; in 1965, for instance, it was selected by *Book Week* magazine as the best American novel published after World War II. Ellison was gratified, but he also must have wondered whether he could ever equal (let alone surpass) the success of his first book.

In 1967 a fire at one of his homes destroyed part of the manuscript on which he had been working, but the destructiveness of the blaze has sometimes been exaggerated (apparently more of the second book survived than Ellison sometimes claimed). In any case, the reading public continued to wait—and wait—for his new work to appear. Meanwhile, Ellison enjoyed a prosperous and prominent existence. In 1969 he received the Medal of Freedom from President Johnson; in 1970 he was made a *chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres* by the French government, and in the same year he was appointed to a prestigious position at New York University. By this time, too, however, Ellison had also come under increasing attack by younger, more radical black intellectuals. During a time of great racial and civil turmoil—with the country torn apart by racial unrest and disagreements over the Vietnam War—Ellison saw himself as a moderate but was thought by many to be conservative, even reactionary. A proud man and a somewhat aloof figure, Ellison seemed increasingly cut off (by himself

and by others) from the main currents of African-American life in the United States. He moved comfortably among the predominantly white elite and tried to promote the interests of his people from his new place of prominence, but he rejected the radicalism of black nationalists and others. He considered his chief obligation to be one of honing and polishing his art. Meanwhile, work on the second novel continued, and continued, and continued.

A small portion of the book *was* published in 1973, and two years later Ellison was honored again by being elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He had already been elected or appointed to numerous other important organizations, and he continued to receive honorary degrees and other forms of public recognition. In 1986 he published a new collection of essays, but still no second novel appeared. By this time, Ellison had become the butt of jokes in some circles; he had joined that small but intriguing list of significant American authors who launch their careers with a major success and then never quite fulfill the promise suggested by their first books. (Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is one example; J. D. Salinger, author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is another.) In the final years of Ellison's life, he had become almost as famous for not producing a second novel as he had been for producing his first one, and when he died on April 16, 1994, the second book had still not appeared. Ellison, though, had left behind a huge stack of manuscript pages, and from this pile his friend and literary executor, John F. Callahan, assembled (with the approval of Ellison's widow) a novel titled *Juneteenth*, published in 1999 to decidedly mixed reviews. Because this novel included only a small portion of the unpublished manuscript Ellison had spent decades producing, there is a great likelihood that more of his later writings will eventually be published. It seems unlikely, however, that any subsequent publication will ever achieve the fame and respect generated in 1952 by *Invisible Man*.

“King of the Bingo Game” (1944)

A southern black man now living in a northern city is sitting in a movie theater, watching a film he has

already seen before as he thinks about his hunger, his poverty, his inability to find work, and the life-threatening illness of Laura, the woman he loves. Drifting off to sleep, he remembers his fearful life in the South. As he dreams, the sounds he makes disturb the people sitting near him; one of them offers him a drink. Then, after the film concludes, the assembled audience plays a game of bingo, and the unnamed central character wins a chance to press a button that will spin a wheel, allowing him a further chance to win a substantial jackpot. Pressing the button without letting go, the anonymous protagonist is sure that if he holds the button long enough, he will win. As he continues pressing the button and as the wheel continues spinning, the crowd becomes more and more annoyed, until, eventually, the man is struck from behind by two uniformed men—just as the number he had been hoping for appears on the wheel.

As does Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, this story combines elements of realistic description with even stronger elements of surrealistic fantasy and symbolism. At first the story appears to be a straightforward “slice of life” depiction of the existence of a “normal” (if somewhat desperate) human being, but once the unnamed man ascends the stage and begins pressing the button that controls the wheel of fortune, the story takes on a more fantastic tone and a more obviously symbolic resonance. The central character—whose seemingly illogical, irrational behavior in refusing to let go of the button is fed partly by his hunger, partly by the whiskey he has been offered, and partly by the sheer hopelessness of his life—represents the frustrations of American blacks in particular, but he also represents the existential despair of any human being who feels at the end of his or her rope. The protagonist's fixation on winning the prize is driven partly by his intense love for the aptly named “Laura” (the same name given by the great Italian poet Petrarch to the symbolic woman in his collection of poems *The Canzoniere*); she represents a source of affection and of profound meaning in his life, and his intense desire to save her from death helps explain his otherwise bizarre behavior. Without his connection to Laura, he would be even more isolated and alienated than he is already;

in seeking to save her, he seeks to save his own link to a normal, meaningful, and satisfying existence. His strong compulsion to try to “win” at the game of life is a need with which most readers will be able to identify, and it is partly this focus on beating the odds and preserving his dignity that makes the story seem relevant not simply to blacks but to all human beings. Race and racial discrimination per se are less important factors in this work than they are in some of Ellison’s other fiction (such as *Invisible Man*, “Flying Home,” or “A Party Down the Square”); in the present tale, Ellison seems to be dealing with hopes, fears, and desires that any person can take to heart. In this sense, his concerns are existential rather than only cultural. Thus, the hostility the central character faces is as much from black members of the theater audience as from any white oppressors, while the afflictions from which he suffers (hunger, thirst, poverty, alienation, and worry about the health of a loved one) are torments that might easily trouble the life of any human being. If anything, the story is as much about class as it is about race.

Stylistically, the story has a number of strengths: The phrasing is simple, clear, and straightforward; the dialogue is convincingly colloquial; the symbolism (such as the wheel of fortune) does not seem especially heavy-handed; and the odd behavior of the protagonist seems plausible in view of the physical and psychological stress from which he has been suffering. Sometimes the imagery is sharp and vivid (as in the description of the protagonist’s fear that “the rush of blood to his head would burst out in baseball seams of small red droplets”; *King of the Bingo Game* 133), and sometimes the phrasing seems almost Faulknerian in its use of long, convoluted passages with italicized interjections, as in the following memorable sentence:

He had to get away, *vomit* all, and his mind formed an image of himself running with Laura in his arms down the tracks of the subway just ahead of the A train, running desperately *vomit* with people screaming for him to come out but knowing no way of leaving the tracks because to stop would bring the train crashing down upon him and to attempt to leave the tracks would

mean to run into a hot third rail as high as his waist which threw blue sparks that blinded his eyes until he could hardly see. (*King of the Bingo Game* 134)

Passages such as this not only convey—but also recreate in the reader’s mind—the protagonist’s frantic sense of frenzy and disorientation, and although not all the language of the work is as vivid and fresh as the phrasing just quoted, Ellison does manage (especially in the second half of the tale) to achieve memorable psychological effects. Indeed, by the end of the story many readers will have come to share the theater audience’s sense of impatient frustration even as they also find themselves sympathizing with the fanatical protagonist. In style, theme, and impact, this story, with its anonymous central character, seems almost a trial run for Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read this story alongside Claude McKay’s poem “Harlem Shadows” and then discuss the ways both works deal with such issues as poverty, desperation, the desire for dignity, and the need for hope. How do the works differ in diction, imagery, point of view, and ultimate effect?
2. Compare and contrast this story with Zora Neale Hurston’s tale “The Gilded Six-Bits.” Discuss the role of money in each work, particularly the way a desire for money provokes life-altering behavior in both stories. How is the desire for money of the protagonist of Ellison’s story different from the desire for money exhibited by the main characters of Hurston’s tale?

“Flying Home” (1944)

A young black pilot in training named Todd crash-lands his military aircraft in a field owned by a white farmer after the plane collides with a buzzard in the skies above Alabama; when Todd regains consciousness, he is helped by an old black man named Jefferson and a young black boy named Teddy. As Teddy runs off to seek help, Todd and Jefferson talk; during their conversation, Jefferson relates a comic tale about

visiting heaven and speeding around as an angel with just one wing. Todd, offended by Jefferson's story, verbally attacks the old man; he then remembers his own lifelong fascination with planes, before the belligerent and racist white farmer who owns the field shows up and orders him off his land.

In this story Ellison adopts a different strategy from the one he employed in his exceptionally powerful tale "A Party Down the Square." Both texts deal explicitly with racial themes, but whereas in "A Party" Ellison had condemned racism through irony and indirection, here he adopts the overtly moralizing perspective of a young black man who has grown up in a racist society and whose entire life has been warped by racist pressures. We are taken inside his thoughts and feelings and allowed to perceive the world as he does, but we are also given the added perspective of Jefferson, the old man who has spent his entire life in a region controlled by hostile or indifferent whites. The story suggests why Todd cannot be satisfied by the compromises Jefferson has had to endure; at the same time, it also presents Jefferson in a largely sympathetic and attractive light. The old man exhibits kindness, compassion, humor, and thoughtfulness in ways that are less characteristic of Todd. Thus Ellison (in a manner that contributes to the complexity of the story) does not simply present Todd in altogether admirable ways: We glimpse his condescension, his bitterness, and his temper, but we are also led to see how those traits are partly the result of the frustrations he has been forced to suffer in a culture that denies him the opportunities to achieve his deepest goals or feel any genuine self-respect. In one of the most explicit thematic statements in the text, Ellison has Todd reflect as follows:

Between ignorant black men and condescending whites, his course of flight seemed mapped by the nature of things away from all needed and natural landmarks. Under some sealed orders, couched in ever more technical and mysterious terms, his path curved swiftly away from both the shame the old man symbolized and the cloudy terrain of white man's regard. Flying blind, he knew but one point of landing and there he would receive his wings. After that the enemy would appreci-

ate his skill and he would assume his deepest meaning, he thought sadly, neither from those who condescended nor from those who praised without understanding, but from the enemy who would recognize his manhood and skill in terms of hate. (*Flying Home* 152)

Here as elsewhere in the story, Ellison runs the risk of pontificating: The symbolism seems a bit heavy-handed, the extended metaphor is perhaps *too* extended, the character's feelings are explained rather than dramatized, and the passage veers toward a tone that is preachy and propagandistic. "Flying Home" sometimes seems sentimental and overwritten in ways that are never true of "A Party Down the Square," and such flaws are particularly evident when Todd is reminiscing about his childhood. At one point, for instance, Ellison writes, "It was as though an endless series of hangars had been shaken ajar in the airbase of his memory and from each, like a young wasp emerging from its cell, arose the memory of a plane" (*Flying Home* 162). At another point, in an italicized reminiscence, Todd recalls that "*Blossoms hung from the thorny black locust trees like clusters of fragrant white grapes. Butterflies flickered in the sunlight above the short new dew-wet grass*" (*Flying Home* 164). Passages such as these can unfortunately seem overripe; luckily, they are counterbalanced by other segments (such as the long sentence beginning "He was going mysteriously with his mother." [*Flying Home* 169]) or the humorous ending of Jefferson's story about flying in heaven) that prevent the work from sounding excessively contrived. If "Flying Home" lacks the harrowing, unforgettable power of "A Party Down the Square," it nonetheless spells out, about as explicitly as one could wish, many of the central themes and attitudes expressed in Ellison's fiction as well as his fundamental diagnosis of the pervasive ills caused by white American racism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read W. E. B. DuBois's essay "Criteria of Negro Art," and then discuss this story in relation to the ideas expressed there. Would DuBois have been satisfied with Ellison's story? Does the story meet the demands DuBois makes of art? To

what degree and in what ways is Ellison's story an example of the kind of art as propaganda that DuBois commends?

2. In what ways does the protagonist of "Flying Home" resemble and/or differ from the title character of T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"? How and why do both men feel alienated, lonely, and uncertain? How do their responses to their predicaments differ? How are their personalities and temperaments distinct?

***Invisible Man* (1952)**

Invisible Man is narrated by the anonymous title character (whose name is never revealed), who describes his disillusioning experiences as a black youth growing up in the racist South and then his further disillusionment when he attends an all-black southern college (obviously modeled on the Tuskegee Institute). After being expelled from the college because he inadvertently let one of its rich white northern trustees see too much of the seamier side of local life, the narrator heads to New York City, where he works briefly in a paint factory before becoming involved with a radical political organization known as the Brotherhood. Although he rises to a position of leadership in that group, by the end of the novel he has become disillusioned with the regimentation and hypocrisy its members exhibit. As the narrator's story concludes, he is living in isolation, determined to lead a more independent and genuinely authentic existence.

Ellison's novel is widely regarded as one of the most important works of full-length fiction by any African-American writer, and indeed the book is often seen as one of the most significant novels written by any American in the half-century following World War II. The book is often interpreted as a coming-of-age story or novel of development (a *bildungsroman*), in which the main character must undergo a series of tests, trials, rites of passage, and repeated disillusionments before reaching a more mature, more skeptical, and more autonomous way of thinking. At the end of the book, the narrator (whom critics sometimes call "Invisible Man" or even simply

"Invisible") is living alone, unknown, and rent-free "in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" (*Invisible* 5). Obviously his anonymous existence in the basement of a building reserved for whites is symbolic, and indeed the novel is full of symbolism, allegory, allusions, and suggestive imagery. The story, therefore, is not simply the tale of a single man but a representative narrative in which Ellison comments not only on the conditions of all American blacks but indeed on the human condition itself. The novel explores a wide variety of themes, topics, and motifs, and it is partly because of its exploration of these themes that it immediately attracted immense attention—attention that has only grown with the passage of years and decades.

Commentators have called attention to many concepts and ideas that are crucial to Ellison's novel. On the one hand (for instance), the book involves a literal geographical journey from the South to the North, but it also involves a far more important psychological journey in which the narrator grows from adolescence to manhood and from immature naïveté to mature skepticism and self-reliance. By the end of the book he is not only older but wiser, and although his wisdom has been born of a series of painful disillusionments and betrayals, he finally finds himself poised for authentic growth (although Ellison leaves his future unclear and even raises the possibility that the narrator may not entirely have overcome his external or even his internal limitations). The novel reflects the influence of the existential philosophy that was especially prominent during the mid-20th century and exemplified in the works of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher and fiction writer Albert Camus, and the Irish writer Samuel Beckett. Existentialists believed that human life exhibits no fundamental order, purpose, or significance and that existence therefore often seems meaningless and absurd. However, they also believed that each individual person has not only the opportunity but also the obligation to choose his or her own meaning—to live a life that is "authentic" in the sense that each act, and indeed one's entire existence, is the result of free choice. Ellison's narrator undergoes a kind of existential baptism by fire: He tries

to live according to a series of conventional, stereotyped roles that have essentially been imposed upon him by society. After each of those roles fails or disappoints him, he eventually learns that he must free himself from social dictates, make his own choices, and live his own life. At the end of the book he seems ready to do exactly that: He has recognized his own individual complexity and seems prepared to live an authentic life that will not involve self-betrayal.

Ellison's novel, then, is not simply "about" the problems of being black in a racist society (although it is certainly in part about that); it is also "about" the problem of being true to oneself in *any* society. Ellison did not want to write merely a "protest novel"; instead, he wanted to create a work that would confront some of the most basic and elemental dilemmas faced by all human beings, but *especially* by blacks, whose lives (he thought) particularly symbolized the challenges all people must confront. These challenges included constrictions placed on individuality (especially by racism); the limitations caused by narrow ways of thinking and the restrictions imposed by prescribed social roles; the risks of reacting to narrow thinking with equally narrow responses; the problems caused by failing to see clearly, whether that lack of vision involves perceptions of others, perceptions of oneself, or perceptions of society at large; and the need of all human beings to grow in knowledge and especially in self-understanding. The novel's title character is a symbol of the special alienation suffered by blacks in American society, but he is also a symbol of the loneliness and frustration that lie at the core of any inauthentic existence. It is partly because Ellison managed to combine a compelling narrative of black experiences with a broader concern with "the human condition" that his book was so positively embraced by black and white readers alike. Ellison was praised for exploring the inner dimensions of his main character rather than treating him simply as sociological data; the book is a philosophical novel, not merely a piece of journalism that reports superficial facts.

However, just as readers have found Ellison's book compelling because of the themes it explores, so they have also been intrigued by its style, structure, tones, and techniques. The book has been compared to traditional slave narratives because it traces one person's

movement not only from the South to the North but also from bondage to a kind of (limited and potential) freedom. At the same time, however, the novel has also been compared to such classics of Western literature as *The Odyssey* (since both involve lengthy journeys), *The Divine Comedy* (since both involve descents into a bewildering world of darkness and confusion), and *Moby-Dick* (since both are epic in size and scope and deal with an anonymous protagonist's growth to maturity by way of disillusionment). In its focus on a corrupt, chaotic, and decaying culture, as well as in its stylistic diversity, use of symbolism, and emphasis on allusions, the book was obviously influenced by T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (one of Ellison's favorite texts), and in its combination of realism and surrealism it shows Ellison's reading of such modern authors as Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, and especially Richard Wright, who composed the novella "The Man Who Lived Underground." In addition to displaying the breadth and depth of Ellison's reading, the novel reveals his familiarity with black folk culture, rural dialect, urban street lingo, and the richness of the American oral tradition, both black and white. Mark Twain, after all, was another of Ellison's favorite writers, as was Ernest Hemingway—influences reflected in the humor of some parts of the novel and in the spare directness of other sections.

Ellison blends straight "reporting" with dreamlike montages full of fantasies and fears; he recreates convincing dialect and invents credible dialogue at the same time that he employs resonant imagery, pervasive symbolism, and widespread allegorical phrasing. Thus Mr. Norton, the rich white trustee of the black college, is from the North; Homer Barbee, an old black man who gives a speech at the college, is blind, as is his namesake, the Greek poet Homer; a character named Jack is both literally and symbolically one-eyed; a nurturing woman named Mary is an obvious maternal figure; a major character who dies tragically is named Tod (the German word for "death"); and the list goes on and on. Likewise, important motifs recur throughout the book. Thus, chaos takes place in the famous "battle royal" segment early in the novel, but it also appears when the narrator visits a brothel while in college and in a riot near the end

of the book. The narrator is shocked with electricity during the “battle royal,” and the same thing happens again (although to a worse degree) when he is hospitalized after moving north. The narrator is betrayed by the president of the southern college, but he is also betrayed by the leader of the northern Brotherhood. Ellison, in short, created a book that is very carefully designed in every way. It reflects a modernist style of writing that was becoming increasingly prominent at the time of this novel’s composition—a “mixed” style that went beyond naturalistic reporting and tried to transcend hard-boiled plainness by emphasizing symbolism and allegory. It is not a coincidence that Ellison’s book appeared at almost the same moment as Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*—a book that is also full of resonant imagery, evocative symbols, emblematic actions, and iconographic characters. Hemingway’s novel, however, was short and relatively simple; Ellison was painting on an epic scale. *Invisible Man* is his effort to write a book with the same kind of cultural dimensions and intellectual depth as *Moby-Dick*.

Many commentators felt at the time—and have continued to feel—that Ellison largely succeeded in his attempts to write a (if not *the*) great American novel. Admirers have praised the book for its vivid and complex characters, its wide stylistic range, its effective use of irony, its sometimes gripping narrative, its often surrealistic episodes, its inventiveness, its skillful use of symbols and imagery, its frequently nightmarish qualities, its detailed observations of life in Harlem and in the Deep South, and its expert recreation not only of elaborate verbal “set pieces” (such as the several lengthy speeches) but also of the rhythms and diction of day-to-day conversation. Nevertheless, despite the praise heaped on all these aspects of Ellison’s novel, the book has also attracted a good deal of censure. Some critics, for instance, have attacked the book for indulging too often in melodrama, for using phrasing that is overblown in some cases and dull in others, for relying too much on exposition (or explanation) and too little on drama, for being heavy-handed in its use of symbols, and for failing to provide convincingly detailed depictions of its characters, including even the protagonist. Some of the characters have been seen as too simplistic

or one-dimensional, and the novel has struck some readers as being too abstract, allegorical, intellectual, and even pretentious for its own good. Politically oriented critics sometimes accuse the book of being insufficiently radical, and the chapters on the Brotherhood were also often condemned—sometimes by readers who thought that Ellison had been unfair in depicting these Leftist radicals and sometimes by readers who felt that his satire, though deserved, was unconvincing. Numerous readers have objected to the ending of the book: “The Epilogue,” in their view, concludes on a naively affirmative and optimistic note—a note that seems to contradict much of the rest of the novel. It is possible, of course, that Ellison intended this note to be ironic; if he did, however, many readers clearly missed his point. Nevertheless, even commentators who have been strongly critical of *Invisible Man* have frequently conceded its ambitious and innovative nature, and as the decades have passed, dissenting voices have grown weaker and less numerous.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does *Invisible Man* both resemble and differ from Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*? How are the protagonists different in their educational backgrounds, their personal ambitions, and their levels of intellectual development? Which book is more precisely focused on strictly racial themes? How are Leftist political organizations depicted in both works? Discuss the endings of the two novels.
2. Discuss the presentation of the theme of race relations in this novel and in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*. How are both the title character of Ellison’s novel and Joe Christmas in Faulkner’s book similar and/or different in their backgrounds, experiences, aspirations, and final fates? Discuss the roles of women in each novel, and discuss the presentation of socioeconomic class in each book.
3. Discuss the ways black life is presented in this book and in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How are women presented in each work? How is romance presented? Discuss the use of black dialect and folk traditions in both books. How are the plots of the two

novels similar in their focus on the main character's geographical movements and psychological development? How are the endings of the two books comparable?

“Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” (1953)

In this address delivered when Ellison accepted the 1953 National Book Award, he locates his novel *Invisible Man* in relation to past and present fiction, especially in relation to the novel of manners, the naturalistic novel, and the great moral novels of the 19th century. In style, technique, dialogue, and subject matter, Ellison not only sought complexity himself but also recommended it to others, particularly in the treatment of black people, racial issues, and the American national experience.

Ellison begins by saying that if he were asked what he considered to be the most significant aspect of his novel *Invisible Man*, “I would reply: its experimental attitude, and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction” (*Collected* 151). In other words, he stresses the technical, structural, and stylistic innovations of his book, but he also emphasizes its old-fashioned concern with individual conduct and personal choices, particularly those of authors themselves. Writers of the so-called naturalistic school had emphasized that human beings were products of social forces and that they therefore had little control over their own lives. In contrast, Ellison—while acknowledging the achievements of naturalism—favors the example set by earlier writers, who “took a much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy” and whose works were “imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love” (*Collected* 152–153). Unfortunately, the only earlier writer Ellison specifically mentions as an exemplar of the ideals he has in mind is Mark Twain, although he does also commend William Faulkner as a more recent example worth emulating.

In the course of embracing this earlier standard of fictional excellence, Ellison explains why he could not embrace other models—models that included not only naturalism but also the “well-made” fiction associated with Henry James (which seemed too limited in subject matter) and the “hard-boiled” prose style of such writers as Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway’s name is never explicitly mentioned in the essay, but when Ellison mentions such traits as understatement and “monosyllabic utterance,” it is clear that he has Hemingway in mind (*Collected* 152). Although Ellison felt enormous admiration for Hemingway and expresses regard for the author’s prose style both here and elsewhere, he considered such a style too limited, too “embarrassingly austere,” to be useful to him in *Invisible Man* (*Collected* 152). Instead, he wanted to craft a kind of prose that would reflect the numerous complications of American speech—speech that Ellison calls “the rich babel of idiomatic expression around me, a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical canniness” (*Collected* 152). As he recounts the numerous elements that typify American ways of talking, it is clear that what Ellison prizes most in fiction (both in its style and in its substance) is complexity. He does not want his writing to be limited in any way—not in its subject, not in its phrasing, and certainly not by assumptions connected to the race of its author. He endorses a kind of fiction that takes ethical issues seriously and that rejects narrow or rigid prescriptions in either diction or topics. Paradoxically, the kind of writing he advocates is experimental and innovative in its stylistic range but traditional in its concern with moral issues.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Choose a particular chapter or a brief section from *Invisible Man* and discuss the ways it exemplifies the ideals Ellison champions in this essay. How is the chosen section innovative and complex in style? How does it reflect a wide range of American speech? In what ways does it focus on basic ethical problems? How (if at all) does Ellison achieve his ideal of creating a truly complicated and morally responsible work?
2. In this essay, Ellison names Mark Twain as a writer he particularly admires. Using Twain’s

novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a test case, explain as precisely as possible why you think Ellison might have valued that book. What is it about the style, dialogue, settings, plot, and subject matter of that book that would win Ellison's respect? How does *Invisible Man* resemble *Huckleberry Finn* in any of those ways?

“The World and the Jug” (1963, 1964)

In this essay, which was originally composed as two separate exchanges with the noted critic Irving Howe, Ellison resists what he views as Howe's pressure to conform to certain narrow stereotypes of what a black writer is and/or should be. He argues that although (or because) Howe is a Leftist, his views of black authors and of black literature are highly constricted; Howe expects such authors (Ellison alleges) to pattern themselves too closely after the example of Richard Wright, whereas Ellison contends that each writer is an individual and that the complexity of black American life cannot (and should not) be reduced to simplistic formulas. When Howe replied to Ellison's response, Ellison replied in turn, this time in a more vigorous and sarcastic style.

In this lengthy and important piece, Ellison elaborates on points he had already made in his 1953 address “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion.” In both works (and indeed throughout the decades following publication of *Invisible Man*) he insisted on the need for good writers and good writing to be complex, independent, and responsive to the real complications of modern life. He resisted any and all efforts to force him to march to tunes chosen by others, and he particularly resisted efforts to make his writing serve some prefashioned political or sociological agenda. He rejected any idea that a black author must write only about racial suffering or must write mainly as a form of protest or propaganda, and he argued that the life of blacks in the United States was much more complex—and much more dignified—than critics such as Howe tended to assume. The effects of racism on American blacks were (Ellison believed) extremely complicated and multifaceted, and while many of those effects were obviously enor-

mously negative, in some cases racist oppression had provoked toughness, irony, resilience, and strength of character that Howe's view (which emphasized blacks as victims) failed to take into account. Ellison argues that Howe tends to view blacks as abstractions rather than as complex individuals, and he contends that “their resistance to provocation, their coolness under pressure, their sense of timing and their tenacious hold on the ideal of their ultimate freedom are indispensable values in the struggle” for civil rights “and are at least as characteristic of American Negroes as the hatred, fear, and vindictiveness” described by Wright and held up as a model for other black writers by Howe (*Collected* 161).

Ellison argues that Wright himself—an extremely talented and complex man—is a perfect illustration of the fact that blacks cannot be pigeonholed but must be viewed (and treated) as individuals, and he contends that the cultural influences that help shape the best black writers are far more diverse and multicultural than Howe seems to assume. Ellison recounts his own intellectual growth and the valuable impact of authors (including many Europeans) on his own development, and in one of the most stinging sentences in the essay he asserts that “in his effort to resuscitate Wright, Irving Howe would designate the role which Negro writers are to play more rigidly than any Southern politician—and for the best of reasons” (*Collected* 167). Ellison, in short, rejects Howe's ideas as condescending and demeaning, and when Howe replied indignantly to Ellison's critique, Ellison became even more sarcastic: “It would seem . . . that [Howe] approves of angry Negro writers only until one questions his ideas” (*Collected* 168). The second half of Ellison's essay is more witty, biting, colloquial, and humorous than the first, and it is hard not to sympathize with him when he says that he resents being instructed about how to be a “good Negro” (*Collected* 172), whether the instruction is from a prejudiced white southerner or a well-intentioned white northern liberal such as Irving Howe.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Track down the two essays by Howe to which Ellison is here responding. (The essays are available in Howe's book *A World More Attractive*.)

Does Howe make any effective points? Is Ellison fair in his summation of and response to Howe's arguments? Having read both Ellison *and* Howe, which man (in your opinion) makes the more effective logical case? Explain your response. Which essayist is the more effective writer? Explain your response.

2. Choose a work by Ellison *other than Invisible Man* and discuss the ways in which it exemplifies the ideals he outlines in this essay. How does it transcend narrow stereotypes of black writers and black writing in subject matter, style, tone, point of view, and "meaning"? Compare and contrast the chosen work by Ellison with a work by Richard Wright (perhaps one of his short stories). Relate the two works to the debate between Ellison and Howe.

"A Party Down the Square" (1996)

Not published until after Ellison's death but probably written in the late 1930s or early 1940s, "A Party Down the Square" is narrated by a young white man, who tells of being invited one night to a "party" in the town square of a small southern community—a "party" that turns out to be the impromptu public burning of a black man. As a storm blows up, an airplane flies low over the town; when it loses power, it clips the tops off trees and sends power lines falling to the ground, electrocuting a female bystander. After the plane regains its power, the distracted crowd returns its focus to executing the hapless black man, who is incinerated until nothing is left but a few bones and ashes.

In this superb story, Ellison takes the unusual step of writing from the first-person perspective of a bigoted white character. The effect is powerful, for Ellison takes us inside the mind of a young man who simply takes his racism for granted, never bothering to question whether the brutality he describes might be wrong or immoral. Those questions *are* raised, however, in the mind of the reader: Ellison produces a stunning indictment of racism that is all the more effective because it is so indirect and implicit; the story never sounds preachy, propagandistic, or sentiment-

tal, because Ellison manages to stay so convincingly inside the head and voice of his white narrator. The style of the work is lean, crisp, clear, and colloquial; the influence of Hemingway is visible, for instance, in the brevity of the opening sentence and in the lengthy second sentence, with its repeated *and*'s and its matter-of-fact, reportorial tone (*Flying Home* 3). The sudden shift in the third sentence to unexpected paradox ("everybody was mad and quiet") is made all the more wrenching by the abrupt introduction, at the very end of the sentence, of the word *nigger*. The real focus of the story becomes instantly if unexpectedly clear, and the care with which these opening sentences are crafted is typical of the skill and artistry exhibited by the entire work.

Many factors combine to make the story both highly memorable and extremely effective. The setting, characters, and actions are all vividly described; the imagery is precise and haunting; dialect and dialogue are both credible and artfully employed; sentences alternate tellingly in length and rhythm; symbolism is subtly but expertly introduced; and narrative suspense never flags. As in much of Ellison's fiction, sometimes the phrasing seems realistic, even mundane; at other times, surreal and grotesque. The sudden appearance of the plane, for instance, seems like an element of a nightmare. Despite seeming almost too convenient and implausible, Ellison manages to keep it believable, exploiting it to powerfully ironic effect. Thus the plane knocks down power lines that incinerate a white woman even before the black man is burned alive, and the passage in which Ellison describes her body is typical of the vividness of the story as a whole:

I could smell the flesh burning. The first time I'd ever smelled it. I got up close and it was a woman. It must have killed her right off. . . . Her white dress was torn, and I saw one of her tits hanging out in the water and her thighs. . . . The shock had turned the woman almost as black as the nigger. (*Flying Home* 7)

The brevity of the opening sentence, the use of a fragment in the second, the shock of discovering that the victim is one of the women who had gone

- of Ellison's time live up to and/or fall short of the kinds of ideals Ellison seems to endorse?
4. Ellison's depiction of women in *Invisible Man* has been a source of some controversy. Some critics argue that he employs stereotypes of women that are usually negative and narrow. What do you think of this charge? How are women presented in one or more other works by Ellison?
 5. Choose three of Ellison's shorter works of fiction and discuss the ways whites are presented in those works. Are there any common patterns in the ways whites are depicted? Do you detect any underlying attitudes in Ellison's presentations of whites? Is his presentation of them "fair"?
 6. Read Ellison's posthumous novel titled *June-teenth* and then discuss its merits and defects. Why is this book not usually considered as successful as *Invisible Man*? How does it compare to the earlier work in terms of such features as plot, characterization, style, structure, and techniques?
 7. Choose one of the many essays in which Ellison discusses the role, responsibilities, and artistic ideals of the black writer, and then, after choosing one of his fictional works, discuss that work in light of the ideals advocated in the selected essay. How did Ellison try to live up to his own goals for African-American writers? How and to what extent did he succeed and/or fall short in achieving those goals?
 8. Race is obviously a major theme in much of Ellison's fiction, but what role is played by economic status and/or social class? How are the issues of class and race related? Choose one work by Ellison and examine these matters in detail. To what degree, and in what ways, does Ellison use his fictional works to advocate particular social, economic, or political positions?
 9. Read one of Ellison's many essays on music, and then discuss how his comments on that art form are (or are not) relevant to his ideas about writing. In what ways, for instance, does Ellison's fiction show the influence of jazz? What kinds of music did Ellison most value, and how do his tastes in music relate to his tastes in literature?
 10. Robert J. Butler's anthology (see Works Cited and Additional Resources) contains a number of essays that are critical of Ellison, and more such commentary can be found in other sources. Study the kinds of charges that were leveled against Ellison over the years, and then discuss whether or not you think those charges were fair, accurate, and/or persuasive. How (if at all) would you defend Ellison against the attacks by his critics?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Invisible Man: Modern Critical Interpretations*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999.
- . *Ralph Ellison*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 2003.
- Callahan, John F., ed. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Butler, Robert J., ed. *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000.
- Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Edited by John F. Callahan. New York: Modern Library, 1995.
- . *Flying Home and Other Stories*. Edited by John F. Callahan. New York: Random House, 1996.
- . "Interview with Ralph Ellison." *Paris Review* 8. no. 8 (Spring 1955). Available online: URL: <http://theparisreview.org/viewinterview.php/prmMID/5053>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- . *Invisible Man*. New York: Modern Library, 1994.
- Possnock, Ralph, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." Available online. URL: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/ellison-main.html>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 2007.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Ralph Ellison." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/ellison.html>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Tracy, Steven C. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Robert C. Evans



LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI (1919–)

It would have been nice had we provided a nice warm stable and we were feeding them regularly—the care and feeding of poets.

(interview with Jeff Troiano)

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, one of the leading voices of the so-called Beat Generation, was born on March 24, 1919, in Yonkers, New York, to a Jewish mother and an Italian father. His was not an ideal childhood, and by the time he was a year old, his father had died and his mother, Clemence, had been diagnosed as insane and had been admitted to a state mental hospital. At that point, the child was sent to live with his uncle and aunt, Ludwig and Emily Mendes-Monsanto. Their marriage, however, began deteriorating almost as soon as Lawrence began to live with them, with the end result that young Lawrence was put in an orphanage until Emily finally separated from Ludwig and took Lawrence to live in Bronxville, New York.

Ferlinghetti began writing poetry at the age of 16 and soon enlisted in the U.S. Navy, serving during World War II. He attended the University of North Carolina, graduating with a B.A., and then earned his M.A. from Columbia. He then moved to Paris, to attend the Sorbonne, where he took his Ph.D. Significantly, the title of his dissertation was “The City as Symbol in Modern Poetry,” reflecting his concerns with the urban landscape and the role it played in 20th-century poetry. After receiving his Ph.D., he moved to San Francisco in the early 1950s, a move that would impact his career perhaps more than any other decision he would make.

In the San Francisco of the 1950s, there was an artistic movement called the San Francisco Renais-

sance, an explosion of a new kind of art and poetry. The poet Kenneth Rexroth is considered by most literary historians to have been the founder of this movement, out of which sprang poetry with an avant-garde flair. Rexroth, anticipating the Beat poets, was one of the first American poets to explore Asian poetic forms, such as the haiku, as well as being influenced by jazz music. The artistic atmosphere in San Francisco by the time Ferlinghetti arrived was one of exuberant experimentation. There were new things happening musically, artistically, and literarily on the West Coast at this time. Once he arrived in San Francisco, he met Peter Martin, a sociology instructor who also had a passion for both film and books, and, in 1953, they founded the City Lights bookstore, which today still operates in its original location (<http://www.citylights.com>). It was the nation’s first all-paperback bookstore; Martin and Ferlinghetti took the name *City Lights* from the Charlie Chaplin movie of the same name. The bookstore is considered today to be a significant historical landmark of America’s counterculture.

In 1955, Ferlinghetti started a book publishing business allied with the bookstore, City Lights Publishing, which published cheap paperback books by poets and other authors in order to make poetry more accessible to the public, such as the small volumes of poetry published under the Pocket Poets Series imprint. While Ferlinghetti was

starting these businesses, he was also writing, and he published *Pictures of the gone world* with City Lights Publishing in 1955. This volume garnered some critical attention, but Ferlinghetti's next book would be his big breakthrough. In 1958 City Lights published *Coney Island of the Mind*, one of the highest-selling single-author poetry books of the latter part of the 20th century. In the Prologue Ferlinghetti explains the concept behind the book's first section:

The title of this book is taken from Henry Miller's *Into the Night Life*. It is used out of context but expresses the way I felt about these poems as I wrote them—as if they were, taken together, a kind of Coney Island of the mind, a kind of circus of the soul.

This first section contains 29 poems written on a number of different subjects, including childhood memories of candy stores; meditations on artists and writers, such as Francisco Goya and Dante Alighieri; and ruminations on the power of art and the role of religion in American life. The second section, titled Oral Messages, was a group of seven longer poems that were conceived, Ferlinghetti said, “specifically for jazz accompaniment and as such should be considered as simultaneously spoken ‘oral messages’ rather than as poems written for the printed page.” The third section of the book included a selection of poems from his previous work, *Pictures of the gone world*. The book was a huge success; by the time the hardback edition was published 10 years later in 1968, it had already sold 600,000 copies, an extraordinary number for a volume of poetry.

Ferlinghetti's interest in the fusion of jazz and poetry reflected the influence of the growing Beat movement. The Beats were primarily a group of writers who, beginning in the late 1940s, congregated in New York City, including Allan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs. These writers were dissatisfied with the status quo; much of their writing rebels against the conformist attitudes of mid-century American culture. During the 1950s, many of the Beats traveled to the

West Coast and ultimately to San Francisco, where Ferlinghetti became associated with them. Characteristics of Beat literature generally are a dissatisfaction with the status quo, anger or frustration at the more confining or limiting aspects of conservative American culture, a romantic longing for or attachment to nature, and the idea of the journey as a means of self-discovery. Ferlinghetti's own work reflects these; at times his poems feature what might be termed a “Beatnik” speaker and hipster language. His poem “Sometime during Eternity,” for example, features a Beatnik's version of the life of Jesus Christ, wherein the speaker, describing the aftermath of Christ's crucifixion, says that his followers are always “calling Him to come down and sit in on their combo as if he is the king cat who's got to blow / or they can't quite make it.”

Ferlinghetti continued his association with the Beats during the 1950s and 1960s, even publishing Ginsberg's “Howl” and being arrested on obscenity charges for doing so. His interest in the more avant-garde aspects of the movement are reflected in the way he often performed his poetry with jazz music accompaniment and in his interest in poetry as an oral art form. He continued publishing both his own and other writers' poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. He even made the spoken word record *Tyrannus Nix?* in 1970.

As the Beat movement waned in the 1970s and the power of the counterculture began to diminish, Ferlinghetti kept publishing. In 1973, New Directions published his *Open Eye, Open Heart*, a volume that contains poems that are still in “A World Awash with Fascism and Fear,” in which the poem's speaker is appalled at the number of people who are oppressed and, in the poem's final lines, tells us that the world “still cries out for freedom.” As a writer, Ferlinghetti continually addresses the problems of class, social injustice, and the oppression of marginalized groups. He still publishes regularly, and New Directions published his most recent book, *Americus Book I*, in 2004.

In addition to being a poet and a publisher, Ferlinghetti has become a cultural and literary icon. In 1998, he was named San Francisco's poet laureate, and in 2003 he was awarded the Robert

Frost Memorial Medal and elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. As visual artists are often the subject of his poems, it is not surprising that he is also a talented and prolific painter, regularly showing his work around the country and in Europe. In his 90s, Ferlinghetti retains a passion for social justice and for various liberal causes. Perhaps most important of all, he possesses a never-wavering passion for poetry. In 2005, he was awarded the Literarian Award for outstanding service to the literary community, and in part of his acceptance speech he refers both to American culture and to the power of art:

This culture may globalize the world, devastating indigenous historic traditions, but it is not our mainstream culture. The true mainstream is made, not of oil, but of writers and readers, musicians and composers, editors and publishers, bookstores and libraries and universities, and all the institutions that support them.

Ferlinghetti's dedication to the craft of writing reflects the way he has spent his life. His reputation rests chiefly on his passion for poetry and his belief in the ability of poetry to transform the world.

“Constantly Risking Absurdity” (1958)

“Constantly Risking Absurdity” is essentially an *ars poetica*, a poem whose subject is the art of poetry, a form practiced by poets dating from Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, who was born on December 8, 65 B.C., and died on November 27, 8 B.C.). In this particular poem, Ferlinghetti depicts the art of poetry as a high-wire act, a metaphor that captures the precarious nature of both walking wires and creating poetry. The first line reminds us, in fact, that creation involves an inherent risk, a risk related to his readers/audience and whether they will consider the poet to be absurd. The beginning of the poem seems almost a warning, with Ferlinghetti implying that artists risk absurdity especially when they perform “above the heads” (l. 2) of their audience. Ironically, Ferlinghetti uses the metaphor

of the high-wire act to demonstrate how the poet must always remain grounded. We are told that the poet performs “entrechats and sleight-of-foot tricks” but must remain grounded and not mistake “any thing for what it may not be.” Ferlinghetti here demonstrates, both literally and metaphorically, the delicate balance a poet must maintain between highly charged rhetoric and the realities of the concrete world. It is the poet's job, we are told, to “perceive taut truth” and to “advance toward that still higher perch / where Beauty stands and waits” (ll. 11–12). The final artistic goal, according to Ferlinghetti, is to achieve beauty.

Such an achievement, however, Ferlinghetti implies in the final lines, can be difficult. Calling the artist a “little charleychaplin man,” Ferlinghetti tells us that he “may or may not catch / her fair eternal form spreadeagled in the empty air of existence.” The poem is therefore a testament to the difficulty of rendering beauty in language. Ferlinghetti documents the artistic struggle using the metaphor of the high-wire act in part because of the difficulty most artists face in achieving their aesthetic objectives. Because the poem has for its setting the circus, however, Ferlinghetti also comments upon the way the poet is viewed by the rest of society. By setting the poem under the big top, he also implies that poetry is nothing more than a side show to most of the public. The phrase that Ferlinghetti uses in the beginning of the poem, “above the heads,” confirms this. In the end, this poem demonstrates both the absurdity and the seriousness of artistic endeavors.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does Ferlinghetti refer to Charlie Chaplin in this poem? Who was Chaplin, and how might he be related to Ferlinghetti's concept of the poet?
2. According to this poem, what is the role of the artist? What essential functions does Ferlinghetti see the artist performing? What does Ferlinghetti seem to feel about the artistic life?
3. Read Archibald MacLeish's poem “Ars Poetica” (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15222>). Then, compare MacLeish's

poem with Ferlinghetti's. What vision of art and poetry do they share? How do they differ? Next, consult a translation of Horace's "On the Art of Poetry" (<http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/horace/horacepo.htm>). After analyzing and comparing and contrasting all three, define *ars poetica* as a genre.

"Dove Sta Amore" (1958)

This poem is a departure for Ferlinghetti. Instead of the long, spidery lines and sometimes free-wheeling feel of his typical verse despite its serious undertones, "Dove Sta Amore" is a playful, lyrical poem, which features Ferlinghetti performing sonic variations on the Italian phrase *dove sta amore*, translated as "here lies love." While the poem appears playful, however, there is also a serious undercurrent, so that it is not merely a series of playful variations but also a profound meditation on the nature of both love and language.

The poem begins with a refrain that will be repeated at the poem's conclusion with a few slight variations: "Dove sta amore / Where lies love / Dove sta amore / Here lies love" (ll. 1–4). The poem thus begins with both a fairly regular rhythm and a profound question prompted by the speaker's search for love. The middle of the poem sees the speaker again playing with language but also making some profound statements about the nature of desire. After mentioning that a ring dove, a bird, is singing a love song with "lyrical delight," the speaker tells us: "Hear love's hillsong / Love's true willsong / Love's low plainsong / Too sweet painsong / In passages of night" (ll. 7–11). Ferlinghetti here demonstrates a subtle understanding of how rhythm and meter can add to a poem's complexity. Note how lines 7–10 have exactly the same rhythm and then note how, despite the sameness of rhythm, each line expresses a slightly different emotion. The lines that end in *hillsong* and *willsong* seem somehow positive, implying that love's song can be sung from a hilltop or in the countryside and that a love song possesses a lover's "true" will. Even though the rhythm stays the same, however, lines 8 and 9 have an almost despairing

tinge, indicating that the love song is low and plain, and that it may be too self-indulgent ("too sweet") and painful. The conclusion of the poem repeats the opening refrain with a few minor variations: "Dove sta amore / here lies love / The ring dove love / Dove sta amore / here lies love" (ll. 12–16). By mimicking the opening refrain, Ferlinghetti not only imbues the poem with a songlike feel, but also lends the poem a circular feel, as if implying that the cycle of desire is never-ending. Ferlinghetti demonstrates his versatility with this poem but also, with relatively simple form and composition, reminds us that love is an often complex and elusive emotion.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare "Dove Sta Amore" with the anonymous medieval lyrics "Western Wind" and "My Lief Is Faren in Londe":

"Western Wind"

Western wind, when will thou blow
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again

"My Lief Is Faren in Londe"

My lief is faren in londe—
Allas, why is she so?
And I am so sore bonde
I may nat come her to.
She hath myn herte in holde
Wherever she ride or go—
With trewe love a thousand folde.

What are the moods of each poem? How has Ferlinghetti adapted the older lyric conventions to his own love song?

2. How does rhythm function in this poem? How does Ferlinghetti use repetition and rhyme in concert with the poem's subject matter?

"I Am Waiting" (1958)

"I Am Waiting" is a list poem, a type of poem in which the poet provides a catalog of objects or

events, generally all pertaining to a single theme. In this particular poem, Ferlinghetti presents a speaker waiting for a number of events to occur. Most of the events the speaker catalogs are related to either the political or the artistic realm, and the speaker often mixes genuine sociopolitical concerns with sometimes-humorous popular culture references. At one point, for example, the speaker says: “I am waiting / for them to prove / that God is really American / and I am seriously waiting / for Billy Graham and Elvis Presley / to exchange roles seriously” (ll. 32–37). Here, the speaker uses humor to address a pressing topic: the way that Americans define themselves as a religious people. The fact that the speaker is “waiting” for someone to prove God is American implies both that no one has done it yet and that he may not agree with people who think that God really is American. The desire to see Elvis Presley, a famous rock musician and pop culture icon, and Billy Graham, a well-known evangelist, change places also reveals the speaker’s skepticism regarding the power of religion, implying that religion may be no more than show business or mere entertainment.

There is clearly a skeptical tone in this poem, but just as clearly, the repetition of the phrase “I am waiting” also implies earnestness, a desire to see things change and a hope that they eventually will. There is also an underlying seriousness in this poem, indicated by the relative importance of the events the speaker wishes to see occur. Later in the poem, for instance, the speaker tells us that he is waiting “for the atomic tests to end,” “for things to get much worse / before they improve,” and “for the human crowd / to wander off a cliff somewhere / clutching its atomic umbrella” (ll. 57, 58–59, 63–65). The references to atomic war/energy and conditions getting worse reflect the concerns of many Americans during the cold war, and this speaker clearly believes that some sort of catastrophic nuclear event will occur. Near the poem’s conclusion, the speaker becomes less concerned with the political and more concerned with the artistic. Referring to works by Keats and Shelley, two romantic poets, he says, “I am waiting / for some strains of unpremeditated art / to shake

my typewriter,” and he is waiting for “the fleeing lovers on the Grecian Urn / to catch each other up at last / and embrace” (ll. 153–155, 161–163). Thus, the latter part of the poem is more hopeful, and the implicit argument of the poem is that it is perhaps art that can redeem or rescue humanity from itself. It is art, the speaker hopes, that will provide that for which the speaker is ultimately waiting, a “renaissance of wonder” (l. 166).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the repetition of the phrase *I am waiting* help construct the tone of the poem? What is the tone of the poem? What does the speaker seem to want most of the things he lists?
2. Identify all of the things that the speaker wants that are related to religion. What is the speaker’s attitude toward religion?

“In Golden Gate Park That Day” (1958)

This poem is set in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. It describes part of a day that an older couple spends at the park but is not simply a straightforward story about two elderly people. The poem was written in the 1950s, at a time when the so-called counterculture was beginning in America, a growing movement that was dissatisfied with the status quo in this country. The couple, as Ferlinghetti describes them, seem to be members of that culture, or at least two people who do not seem typical of elderly people of the 1950s. Ferlinghetti tells us in the opening lines that “a man and his wife were coming along / thru the enormous meadow which was the meadow of the world” (ll. 1–2). The “meadow of the world” to which Ferlinghetti refers could imply many things. It could be that, as is often the case with the elderly, Ferlinghetti is implying their world has shrunk and that they have relatively simple needs, as evidenced by the fact that they are carrying only a “beat-up flute” and “grapes.” It could also be that the park in which the poem is set is either a metaphor for the entire world or a microcosm of it. As the poem progresses, the park appears as a kind of paradise: “a very still

spot where the trees dreamed / and seemed to have been waiting thru all time for them" (ll. 9–10).

Initially, then, Ferlinghetti appears to be painting an engaging picture of a couple taking their ease among the pastoral pleasures of the park. However, as the poem progresses, we encounter increasingly troubling language. The speaker notes, for example, that the couple sat down on the grass "without looking at each other" and repeats that same phrase one line later when telling us that they ate oranges without looking at one another as well. Later, the man falls asleep without saying anything to his wife, and the wife is left to watch the birds flying in the air. After the man is asleep, the speaker tells us the wife "lay there looking up at nothing" as if she feels lost and disconnected not only from her spouse but also from the world. The last image of the poem is the wife lying on the grass, fingering the old flute, and finally looking over at her husband. This is not, however, a look of love or affection. The speaker notes that she looks at him "without any particular expression except a certain awful look / of terrible depression" (ll. 21–22). The two, the speaker seems to be saying, feel lost and disconnected, as if the hopes they had both for their relationship and for their lives are dashed, ending in disappointment. In this poem, Ferlinghetti laments the loss of both individual happiness and romantic love. It is implied that the couple has been together for a long time. The fact that they no longer look at each other indicates their feelings of alienation and unhappiness, perhaps not just about the way their relationship has turned out, but also at the way the world has. In this sense, "Golden Gate Park" can be read as a fallen paradise.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Late in the poem, the speaker mentions that the birds the old woman sees may be "questioning existence" or "trying to recall something forgotten." How do those descriptions of the birds relate to the poem's theme? What forgotten thing might the birds be trying to recall?
2. Compare this poem to "La Belle Dame sans Merci" by John Keats. How are the moods of the poems similar? How do the settings in each poem affect the speakers' mood or tone of voice?

"In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See" (1958)

"In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See" is also a meditation on a work of art, this time referring to works by the great Spanish painter Francisco Goya, who lived and painted in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His work is known for being dramatic and for often focusing on individuals or groups of people in dramatic situations. In this poem, Ferlinghetti makes an argument similar to the one in "Monet's Lilies Shuddering," an argument about the transcendence and applicability of art. What draws the speaker of the poem to Goya's paintings is the way in which they present the "people of the world / exactly at the moment when they first attained the title of 'suffering humanity'" (ll. 1–2). It is the explicit moment of human suffering that captures the speaker's imagination and draws him into Goya's paintings. The speaker describes in vivid detail the suffering he witnesses in these paintings, telling us that the people he sees "writhe upon the page in a veritable rage of adversity / Heaped up groaning with babies and bayonets under cement skies" (ll. 3–4). The dramatic scenes the speaker is witnessing capture his imagination to the point that he believes they might be real.

At this point, the poem takes a sudden turn, and the setting of the poem is no longer Goya's work but America. Goya's figures "are so bloody real," the speaker tells us, "it is as if they still existed / And they do / Only the landscape is changed" (ll. 4–6). The change that the speaker notes is his own shift of perspective from the scenes in Goya's paintings to scenes of contemporary America. He insists that the people in Goya's painting are now part of America's urban landscape, telling us, "They are the same people only further from home on free-ways fifty lanes wide on a concrete continent" (l. 8). The shift in setting is significant, because it

highlights the fact that although the scenery has changed, the people, their struggles, and the desolation of their surroundings have not; they are now simply residing in a different kind of desolate landscape: America. Ferlinghetti makes two significant points in this poem: one, that works of art, despite being painted centuries ago, are still aesthetically and culturally relevant today, and, two, that present-day America and the people residing in it seem to be no better off than those human figures who are suffering in Goya's paintings. Ferlinghetti thus implies that art can be a vehicle for social change if we pay attention to the lessons it attempts to teach us and apply those lessons to the modern world that we inhabit.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare "In Goya's Greatest Scenes" with "Monet's Lilies Shuddering." What differences do you note in Ferlinghetti's views regarding the power of art?
2. According to the poem's speaker, what are the chief functions of art?
3. Compare "In Goya's Greatest Scenes" with John Keats's "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again." What attitudes does Keats have toward older works of poetry? How does Keats's stance compare with the attitude of the speaker in Ferlinghetti's poem?

"The Old Italians Dying" (1979)

In this long, proselike poem, Ferlinghetti pays homage to the older Italian immigrants of San Francisco and laments their passing. The poem, however, mourns more than the passing of a few Italian individuals; it grieves for the passing of a way of life.

The speaker of the poem is observing old Italians around the city of San Francisco. Through his descriptions it is possible to envision not only the men themselves, but also their attachments to older ways and their homeland. The speaker at one point tells us that there are "the ones who loved Mussolini the old fascists the / ones who loved

Garibaldi the old anarchists reading *L'Umanita / Nuova* the ones who loved Sacco & Vanzetti" (ll. 24–26). These old Italians have retained cultural attachments to their country instead of adapting to American ways; Mussolini and Garibaldi were famous Italian revolutionaries, and Sacco and Vanzetti were two Italian anarchists who may have been wrongly convicted and executed for a murder in Massachusetts. The speaker sees a kind of dignity in the way the Italian immigrants cling to their culture and is clearly sad at their passing; "they are almost gone now," he says at one point. The poem is also filled with images of death. The speaker notes a funeral procession and says "the black hired hearses draw up the black limousines," telling us that "the family mourners step out in stiff suits" and that "the widows walk so slowly up the steps of the cathedral fishnet veils drawn down leaning hard on darkcloth arms" (ll. 35, 40–42). In this scene, we see all of the typical trappings of a funeral, the veils worn by widows, the widows themselves, and the black hearses, among other things.

The poem, however, concerns more than the literal death of an Italian immigrant, or, for that matter many Italian immigrants. The death to which Ferlinghetti refers is the death of a way of life and an entire immigrant culture, and he has written this poem to call attention to their plight. The poem, in fact, is filled with images of grief. Near the poem's conclusion, the speaker focuses not only on the passing of the immigrants, but also on the fact that all of the Italian immigrants who are still alive seem only to be waiting for death themselves. We are told in the final lines that all the old men do is wait; they are waiting "for the bocce ball to stop rolling" and "waiting for the bell to stop tolling & tolling" and for the "unfinished *Paradiso* story." In the end, Ferlinghetti tells us, these men are bereft of hope and are waiting only for their own deaths. But the poem can also be read as a call to action. One of its underlying motives, perhaps, is to encourage us to examine cultures or groups of people with which we might be familiar, and fight to preserve them, or at the very least to see and understand them.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare this poem to Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." What specific characteristics of the group of people mourned in each poem do the poets praise or lament? What seems to be Tate's attitude toward the Confederate dead, and how does that attitude contrast with Ferlinghetti's attitude toward the old Italians?
2. Read Philip Levine's poem "To Cipriano, in the Wind" as a companion piece to "Old Italians Dying." What is Levine's view of the immigrant experience? Many readers might view Levine's poem as more "personal." Why might a reader think this, and how does reading the Levine poem alter your view of Ferlinghetti's?

"A Dark Portrait" (1984)

"A Dark Portrait" is another poem that refers to a work of art, this time a novel. The poem is a short, engaging portrait of a young woman whom the speaker has apparently known, which contains unusual descriptions of the young woman's character and behavior. We are told in the beginning of the poem, "She always said 'tu' in such a way / as if she wanted to sleep with you / or had just had a most passionate orgasm" (ll. 1–3). The way the speaker describes the woman indicates perhaps a false sense of sophistication or worldliness. The woman employs a French word, *tu*, marking her as someone who uses her familiarity with other languages as a way to appear worldly and educated. It also appears as if her sexuality is at least in part deliberately crafted. The speaker therefore implies that the young woman is not quite who she seems to be, as is confirmed later in the poem. The speaker tells us that "she / was really like Nora in *Nightwood* / long-gaited and restless as a mare" (ll. 5–7). The *Nightwood* to which the speaker refers is a modernist novel written by Djuna Barnes and published in 1936. It concerns two disillusioned women who are dissatisfied with their lives and who meet for a brief, seemingly perfect romantic

encounter, but many entanglements and disappointments result. *Nora Flood* is the name of one of the women and it is to her that the speaker is alluding. In the novel, Nora is generally the more honest and idealistic person, again implying that the woman in the poem is less sophisticated than she at first tries to appear.

The poem ends with two distinct images of the woman, one when she is younger and the other later in her life. While the images may initially appear to be incongruous, both images are of someone searching for that which she cannot find. The young woman cannot find a suitable lover, and, it is implied, because she spends her youth in a vain search for a lover who will satisfy her, she spends the end of her life not among people, but animals. Some readers might see the conclusion of the poem as positive since at least the woman has found some sort of companionship. The fact that the young woman is described as a "mare" in the poem and ends up among horses may also imply that she has found, when near the end of her life, the place where she belongs. The poem could also be read as a meditation on the futility of seeking the ideal lover in a world where ideal people of any sort do not exist. The ambiguity of the ending lends itself to either interpretation and indicates the sophisticated way that Ferlinghetti writes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the poem's conclusion. Do you think the woman finally found peace or happiness? Why or why not?
2. What do you think the poem is saying about the nature of desire? If we, as humans, know that the ideal person/lover does not exist, why do we keep searching for the ideal? What does Ferlinghetti seem to think about those who seek for the ideal partner?
3. Compare "A Dark Portrait" with Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 ("My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun"). How do the speakers in each poem view the notion of perfection or an ideal other? What solutions does each seem to be proposing about the dilemma of the search for the ideal?

that his activism alienates the very readers he is trying to reach. After reading the poems, write a well-developed essay that takes a stand on Ferlinghetti's "activism."

3. Read Ferlinghetti's novel *Her*, taking into account the free-association narrative style. Next, read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, noting the narrative strategies Kerouac employs. Then, find a couple of reviews of each of the books. Finally, hypothesize why the books were received so differently.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bartlett, Lee. ed. *The Beats: Essays in Criticism*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1981.
- Charters, Ann. "The Beats: Literary Bohemianism in Postwar America, Pts. I and II." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 16. Columbia, S.C.: Brucoli Clark/Gale, 1983.
- Cherkovski, Neeli. *Ferlinghetti: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 1979.
- Foster, Edward Halsey. *Understanding the Beats*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992.
- French, Warren G. *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance*. New York: Twayne, 1991.
- Herron, Don. *The Literary World of San Francisco and Its Environs*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1985.
- Holmes, John Clellon. *Representative Men*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988.
- Hopkins, Crale D. "The Poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti: A Reconsideration." *Italian Americana* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 59–76.
- Kherdian, David. *Six Poets of the San Francisco Renaissance*. Fresno, Calif.: Giligia Press, 1967.
- "Lawrence Ferlinghetti." *The American Academy of Poets*. Available online. URL: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/367>. Accessed November 23, 2006.
- "Lawrence Ferlinghetti at the Blue Neon Alley." Available online. URL: <http://www.neonalley.org/ferlinghetti.html>. Accessed November 23, 2006.
- Ostergarrd, Geoffrey. *Latter-Day Anarchism: The Politics of the Beat Generation*. Ahmedabad, India: Harold Laski Institute of Political Science, 1964.
- Rigney, Francis J., and Douglas L. Smith. *The Real Bohemia: Sociological and Psychological Study of the "Beats"*. New York: Basic Books, 1961.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Late Twentieth Century, 1945 to the Present—Lawrence Ferlinghetti." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/ferlin.html>. Accessed May 21, 2009.
- Silesky, Barry. *Ferlinghetti, the Artist in His Time*. New York: Warner Books, 1990.
- Skau, Michael. "Constantly Risking Absurdity": *Essays on the Writings of Lawrence Ferlinghetti*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitson, 1989.
- Smith, Larry. *Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Poet-at-Large*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.
- Stephenson, Gregory. *Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.
- Vestere, Richard. "Ferlinghetti: Rebirth of a Beat Poet." *Identity Magazine*, March 1977, pp. 42–44.
- Watson, Steven. *The Birth of the Beat Generation*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.

Gary Ettari



ALLEN GINSBERG (1926–1997)

America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.

(“America”)

The Jewish-American poet Irwin Allen Ginsberg, second son of Louis and Naomi Levy Ginsberg, was born on June 3, 1926. His father, a high school English teacher, was a published poet with several volumes of work and a smattering of publications in journals and newspapers. His brother, Eugene Brooks Ginsberg, had his poetry published in his lifetime but chose to drop *Ginsberg* from his name for most of his adulthood. Both of Ginsberg's parents were socialists, and his mother was an active participant in the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). Her radical beliefs influenced her son's work and political activism. Naomi Ginsberg was also plagued by mental instability and spent much of Allen Ginsberg's life under full-time psychiatric care. Ridden with guilt over his mother's condition and inspired by her activism, Ginsberg wrote *Kaddish and Other Poems* (1961), a title taken from the Jewish prayer for the dead, in which he mourns and celebrates his mother's life, drawing upon her socialist convictions to critique American culture. Equally known as both a popular icon and a literary innovator, Ginsberg was a political activist who spoke out on a wide range of issues, from drug use to the Vietnam War to the nuclear arms race to gay rights. He remains one of the most memorable American icons of the second half of the 20th century.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, Allen Ginsberg attended school in nearby Paterson, subject of Wil-

liam Carlos Williams's epic poem *Paterson* (published between 1946 and 1963). Ginsberg excelled in school and wrote extensively in a journal from age 11 but decided to become a poet in college. In 1943, Ginsberg enrolled at Columbia University in New York City, where he intended to study law or labor economics. After taking an introductory literature class with the renowned essayist Lionel Trilling, Ginsberg chose instead to study English. While living on campus, he befriended Lucien Carr, an attractive and street-smart young man who introduced him to a Harvard graduate, William S. Burroughs. Although Ginsberg did not know it at the time, Burroughs would become one of his closest friends and a major influence. Burroughs introduced Ginsberg to the New York underground, soon to be called the “Beat” movement, a term coined later by Jack Kerouac, and to the works of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Rimbaud, Proust, and Céline.

Jack Kerouac, to whom Ginsberg introduced himself in May 1944, was an even greater influence on Ginsberg's life and works. The two bonded instantly, and after one particularly memorable walk around the Columbia area of the city, Ginsberg said, “I suddenly realized that my own soul and his were akin.” Kerouac and Ginsberg became lifelong friends; Ginsberg shared his deepest secrets with him, even those regarding his sexual identity. From an early age, Ginsberg was aware of his homosexual

feelings but was afraid to express them for fear of persecution. Ginsberg experienced homophobia in many forms, even at Columbia, where he was discouraged from writing a novel that contained a homosexual relationship. Kerouac's tolerance proved vital to Ginsberg's eventual acceptance of his own identity. Through Kerouac, Ginsberg met Neal Cassady, the ruggedly handsome "holy con-man" from Denver with whom Ginsberg would experience intellectual stimulation, sexual attraction, and poetic inspiration. Ginsberg immortalized Cassady in his works, calling him the "secret hero of these poems."

Though Ginsberg maintained good grades at Columbia, he was often subject to disciplinary action, especially as a result of his association with JACK KEROUAC, who was notorious on campus for being involved with suspicious characters. In spring 1945, a cleaning woman on campus filed a complaint against Ginsberg for writing obscene messages on his dorm room window in protest of her failure to wash them. To make matters worse, when the dean of the university showed up in Ginsberg's room, he saw that Kerouac had been staying there illegally. Ginsberg was suspended until he provided proof that he was receiving psychiatric care. Ginsberg was reenrolled by September 1946, after his mother's former psychiatrist pronounced him "psychologically pretty much as sound as they come." He finally completed his degree in 1948.

In the summer of that year, as Ginsberg lay in his bed reading the poetry of William Blake, he claims that he heard the voice of Blake himself reciting several of his poems aloud. This vision is mentioned frequently in Ginsberg's poetry, as it instilled in him the notion of the poet as purveyor of universal and timeless truths. The voice of Blake is also present in much of Ginsberg's work, as Blake's writing style was a major influence on Ginsberg's.

After his visitation by Blake, and in the wake of his mother's lobotomy a year earlier, Ginsberg experienced great difficulty with his writing and his personal life. In February 1949, after multiple refusals, Ginsberg finally consented to let the poet and shady Times Square personality Herbert Huncke move into his apartment. Huncke began

storing stolen property at the apartment; at the end of April, Huncke and Ginsberg were arrested. With the help of his former professors, Ginsberg avoided jail time and was sent instead for an eight-month stay at the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute. There he met Carl Solomon, the mentally unstable genius to whom Ginsberg would dedicate "Howl."

One month after his release from the mental hospital in February 1950, Ginsberg attended a public reading by the modernist poet William Carlos Williams at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Ginsberg was eager to meet the renowned poet from his home state, but since he was intimidated the night of the reading, he mailed Williams a formal letter of introduction with a packet of poems instead. Ginsberg was impressed by Williams's attempts to create poetry out of American talk rhythms rather than conventional meter; however, Ginsberg himself was still attempting to write traditional rhymed and metered poetry. While Williams did not praise the poetry, he also did not turn Ginsberg away, encouraging him to send him more work.

That spring Ginsberg first began to feel part of a writing community. He had recently met and befriended the poet Gregory Corso, and William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac were both writing extensively, often relying on Ginsberg to help them publish their works. Ginsberg was still looking for his own voice and was getting closer each day in his journal entries. He enjoyed moderate success when "Song: Fie My Fum," a collaborative poem written with Kerouac, was published in the eccentric journal *Neurotica*. In 1949, Kerouac created the term *Beat generation*, when referring to the group's weariness of pressure to conform to societal standards. Although he initially used *Beat* to mean tired, he later extended his definition to include *beatific*, or blessed, referring to the notion that the downtrodden were the ones who were truly destined for glory. While the Beats were still gaining recognition, it was during this time that their community of interdependent writers began to solidify.

Unfortunately, the "weariness" of his friends often prompted them to engage in self-destructive

behavior, and after witnessing a high number of his acquaintances die by age 25, Ginsberg needed to spend some time away. He traveled extensively through the United States and Mexico and then made the abrupt decision to move to San Francisco. In the thriving arts scene of the beginnings of the San Francisco poetry renaissance, Ginsberg would again have a writing community, an association that always proved to be most helpful for his writing. Furthermore, the small size and bohemian climate of the city gave Ginsberg a feeling of acceptance that he lacked in New York. He immediately integrated into the scene, hobnobbing with the likes of Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. He was also introduced to Peter Orlovsky, the young poet with whom he fell instantly in love.

In July 1955, Ginsberg enrolled in graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley. More notably, in the fall of that year, after hearing that his friend Carl Solomon had been institutionalized once again, Ginsberg began writing “Howl,” the poem that ignited his career and made the “Beat generation” known. After a celebrated public reading in October 1955, the poem was published by the San Francisco poet LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI. His publishing company City Lights printed *Howl and Other Poems*, a collection including “America,” “Sunflower Sutra,” and “A Supermarket in California.” William Carlos Williams wrote the introduction, which ended with the infamous directive “Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell.” While the book received much critical acclaim after its 1956 publication, the year was darkened by the death of Naomi Ginsberg of a cerebral hemorrhage on June 9. She died at Greystone, a mental institution. At her funeral not enough men had assembled to say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning. Feeling as though this left her death open-ended, Ginsberg began writing “Kaddish,” a poem he did not complete until 1960.

After “Howl” was published, Ginsberg traveled in Morocco and Europe with Peter Orlovsky for almost two years. In summer 1957, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the City Lights bookstore clerk Shig

Murao were tried for publishing and selling (Ginsberg’s) obscene material, defended by lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union. On October 3, Judge Horn ruled that *Howl* had redeeming social value, but at that point, with all the press coverage of the trial and discussion of the groundbreaking poems within literary circles, there was little that anyone could have done to prevent the book’s success.

In July 1958, Ginsberg returned to New York amid wild publicity about the “Beat generation.” In Ginsberg’s absence, Jack Kerouac had unwillingly been titled “King of the Beats,” and the pressure and constant media attention had driven him into depression and alcoholism. Ginsberg, though, thrived on the notoriety. One November night, after his friend Zev Putterman read aloud from the Kaddish in a Jewish prayer book, Ginsberg returned home to resume work on the poem, completing a draft in one amphetamine-induced 40-hour sitting. After polishing “Kaddish” in September 1960, Ginsberg compiled *Kaddish and Other Poems*, which would again be released by City Lights. He also appeared in a film called *Tip My Daisy*, titled after a line from the collaboration between Ginsberg and Kerouac, and distributed sound recordings of his poetry. A friend from Corinth Press expressed interest in publishing *Empty Mirror*, a manuscript of poems that Ginsberg had completed in 1952 but for which he had been unable to find a publisher. Both *Kaddish* and *Empty Mirror* were published in 1961, and a new collection, *Reality Sandwiches*, followed in 1963. Ginsberg’s prodigious writings in the early 1960s finally earned him a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1963–64.

The early 1960s also signaled a period of increased drug experimentation for Ginsberg. Shortly after returning from his trip abroad, Ginsberg participated in a Stanford University study of the effects of LSD. In winter 1960, he tried “magic mushrooms” for the first time under the watch of the Harvard psychiatrist Timothy Leary, who later wrote of that evening, “We started planning the psychedelic revolution.” Already an outspoken proponent of marijuana legalization, Ginsberg preached the gospel of psychedelic drugs to other

artists, meanwhile experimenting with the effects of drugs on his writing. While much of his drug-influenced poetry did not stand up to his best work, some pieces, such as the associative “Television Was a Baby Crawling toward That Death-chamber,” demonstrated his ability to connect subconscious thoughts to create something that resembled Burroughs’s “cut-up” (collage) method of pasting together unrelated lines of writing. In time, though, many of his friends became addicts; after traveling to Israel and India in 1962, Ginsberg decided to write from his own consciousness rather than attempting to reach an altered state of mystical consciousness with drugs. He documented this shift in “The Change.” Although he remained a spokesperson for drug legalization, he redirected his own energy into Eastern practices of meditation and spiritual chants, or mantras, in his attempts at enlightenment.

Also inspired by the peaceful spirituality of Indian culture, Ginsberg became more involved in political activism, particularly in the antiwar movement. He was instrumental in the advancement of “flower power,” which insisted on gentle and peaceful protesting, and served on the planning committee of the hippie festival known as “the Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In” in 1967. While his activism did not leave much time for writing, in 1968 he published *Planet News*, a volume of poems heavily informed by his political experiences.

While traveling throughout the United States and reading his poetry, Ginsberg developed a new technique of “auto poesy,” in which he dictated spontaneous poetry into a tape recorder and later transcribed it. In *The Fall of America: Poems of these States, 1965–1971*, published in 1973, Ginsberg describes his travels and what he observed to be spiritual deterioration along the way. *The Fall of America*, which included the powerful antiwar poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” earned Ginsberg a National Book Award in 1974.

Although Jack Kerouac had instructed Ginsberg in some of the basics of Buddhism in the 1950s, it was not until the early 1970s that Ginsberg began to pursue it seriously. He studied under the Tibetan

lama Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, who founded the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. He officially converted in 1972 and, together with his fellow Buddhist poet Anne Waldman, opened the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute, an arts program in the tradition of Tibetan pedagogy. In 1978, he published a collection of poems, many of which were based on his Buddhist experiences, entitled *Mind Breaths*, referring to the Samatha style of meditation, in which participants pay special attention to breathing in order to heighten awareness.

After accompanying Bob Dylan as a performer on his Rolling Thunder Revue tour, Ginsberg spent the end of 1975 and first few months of 1976 with his father, who was suffering from diseases of the lung and pancreas. Louis Ginsberg passed away on July 8, 1976, and “Don’t Grow Old,” Ginsberg’s moving recounting of his death, was included in *Mind Breaths*. The collection as a whole was something of a departure from his more political work, and while 1982’s *Plutonian Ode* addresses issues of nuclear warfare, his work at this point had withdrawn from its prophetic pedestal and turned to more introspective, lyrical pieces. The title poem of *White Shroud: Poems 1980–1985*, for instance, contains another nostalgic memory of his parents, in which Ginsberg relates a dream about his mother living as a bag lady in New York. Ginsberg’s last poems, many of which were written during the brief period between his diagnosis of liver cancer and his death, are collected in *Death and Fame: Poems, 1993–1997*. Ginsberg continued to tour the country reading his work late into his life and, after struggling with complications of hepatitis and cancer, died on April 5, 1997.

While Ginsberg’s poetry is often hailed as the voice of a generation, to relegate his work to just one generation, or even to just one voice, does not take into account the prodigious career of one of the 20th century’s most influential poets. Ginsberg’s experimentation in his life and in his writing not only led to the creation of a remarkable body of work, but also, as Helen Vendler writes, was “responsible for loosening the breath of American

poetry.” Teeming with rage, humor, insight, and sincerity, the work of Ginsberg not only serves as the voice of his generation but also paves the way for future generations to have voices of their own.

“On Burroughs’ Work” (1954)

“On Burroughs’ Work,” published in his fourth collection of poetry, *Reality Sandwiches*, pays homage to the writer William S. Burroughs, a fellow proponent of the American Beat movement. The first two lines of the poem, “The method must be purest meat / and no symbolic dressing,” refer to the Beats’ insistence that literature relate only a pure and honest record of human life. As with Ginsberg, Burroughs’s brutal honesty (often to the point of relating vivid sexual and drug-related details) led him to face censorship in his writing career. In the third stanza of the poem, Ginsberg alludes to Burroughs’s seminal and experimental work, *Naked Lunch*. The novel graphically recounts a drug addict’s travels through both physical space and hallucinated worlds, which Ginsberg refers to as “Prisons and visions presented / with rare descriptions / corresponding exactly to those / of Alcatraz and Rose.”

The poem also alludes indirectly to Jack Kerouac, another major Beat writer, who suggested the title *Naked Lunch* for Burroughs’s novel. Among other works, Kerouac wrote *On the Road*, one of the most important books of the Beat generation. In the novel, Kerouac writes about his cross-country travels in verbose, page-long paragraphs using a version of the stream-of-consciousness style, in which a character’s thoughts are presented with little regard to grammatical constraints. This unrestrained depiction of consciousness exemplified the writing style of Kerouac, a close friend to Ginsberg, and his artistic influence is seen more clearly in Ginsberg’s later poems.

In the last stanza, Ginsberg uses the phrase *reality sandwiches*, which he adopted as the title of the collection. When asked about the title of his own book, Burroughs described a naked lunch as “a fro-

zen moment in time when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork.” For Ginsberg, this “frozen moment” translates into his trademark spontaneous poetry, in which he composed poems over the course of a few minutes that documented a specific moment in time. He writes that “allegories are so much lettuce,” demonstrating his skepticism of traditional works of literature that use one story to tell another, often moralistic, tale. His last line, “Don’t hide the madness,” is a call to arms to other Beat writers to follow in the tradition of Burroughs’s work and portray the depths of their souls without regard to social norms or literary tradition.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Modernist poetry had roots in imagism, an artistic movement based on the precision and clarity of figurative language. Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” demonstrates the influence of imagism, as does William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow.” What makes Ginsberg’s poem, although it certainly exercises economy of language, different from those modernist standards?
2. Discuss the problems inherent in the phrase *actual visions*. How does the fact that Ginsberg and Burroughs treat visions as reality complicate their philosophy?

“A Supermarket in California” (1955)

“A Supermarket in California” appears in Ginsberg’s renowned 1956 collection *Howl and Other Poems*. Although it is often considered a lesser poem in the collection because of its playful tone, the speaker in “A Supermarket in California” grapples with issues of tremendous importance. As does the landscape in “Howl,” the supermarket serves as a composite of the images of American life in the 1950s. Written while Ginsberg was living in a cottage near the Berkeley campus, the poem reflects the style of the San Francisco Beat poets and also situates itself in the larger tradition of American poetry. In the first line Ginsberg addresses his major influence, Walt

Whitman, simultaneously invoking him as a muse and looking ironically at his unfulfilled prophecy for America. He also writes in long-lined free verse, a technique Whitman pioneered.

At the start of the poem, Ginsberg walks down the moonlit sidewalk to a sprawling grocery store, where he has wandered in a tired, ill-at-ease state while “shopping for images.” Remarking on the families in the store, he encounters Whitman perusing the meats and the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca shopping for produce. This poem is often considered to contain references to Ginsberg’s homosexuality, and with a deliberate play on derogatory slang, he places the gay writers Whitman and Garcia Lorca among the “fruits” in the market. Ginsberg then trails Whitman through the store, following in his footsteps both literally and literarily.

In the last stanza, Ginsberg becomes the inquirer. Significantly, he asks, “Where are we going, Walt Whitman?” In his poetry nearly 100 years earlier, Whitman spoke of America as a vast frontier ripe for exploration. Ginsberg lived in an era characterized by the rise of suburbia, technology, and large chain stores. Whitman’s landscape was one of “green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn”; Ginsberg’s is one of “blue automobiles in driveways.” Ginsberg expresses his resistance to consumer culture and desire to remain the “poet outlaw,” as he and Whitman wander through the store tasting and possessing “and never passing the cashier.” Ginsberg considers the role of the poet as one outside the mainstream world of buyers.

At the end of the last stanza, Ginsberg invokes a different poetic tradition, that of a deceased poet leading a living one through the underworld. As Dante took Virgil as his guide in *The Divine Comedy*, so does Ginsberg follow Whitman to Lethe, one of the rivers that flowed through the ancient Greek mythological underworld Hades. Ginsberg’s use of Lethe, which translates literally as “forgetfulness,” suggests that with Whitman’s death, his vision of “the lost America of love,” is also forgotten. Ginsberg is left alone to ask his “dear father,

graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher,” what America do we have now?

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman talks about laborers working in the fields to grow crops and raise cattle. How is the world that Whitman describes, in which the human “body electric” is immediately present in the production of goods, different from the “neon fruit supermarket,” where artificial lighting and mass-produced foods obscure the labor that went into producing those goods? What is the significance of living in a society where production is divorced from the things being produced, the products?
2. Discuss the significance of the parenthetical comment in the last stanza. How does this break in the speaker’s fantasy affect the rest of the poem? Why might Ginsberg “feel absurd”?

“Sunflower Sutra” (1955)

“Sunflower Sutra” appeared in *Howl and Other Poems* (1956); critics often link it thematically to the title piece because of their shared focus on the corruption of human life. Composed in only 20 minutes, “Sunflower Sutra” embodies the Beat ideal, advanced by Jack Kerouac, of spontaneous flow of perception in poetry. Like “A Supermarket in California,” the poem is set in an unconventional space for inspiration: a rundown and grimy train yard near the docks on the river. Equally out of place is the sunflower that Jack Kerouac spots, growing from the littered ground with “a dead fly in its ear.”

The flower itself is an allusion to William Blake’s 18th-century poem “Ah! Sun-flower” but more importantly relates to Ginsberg’s own experience: “it was my first sunflower, memories of Blake— / my visions—Harlem.” In 1948 in his East Harlem apartment, Ginsberg had an apparition that profoundly affected him for the rest of his life. After reading Blake poems in bed,

Ginsberg heard the voice of Blake reciting several poems to him, among them “Ah! Sun-flower.” Ginsberg’s vision forced him to question his place as a poet in the universe, and he concluded that poetry could transcend space and time to pass on universal truths.

Appropriately, Ginsberg deemed this poem a *sutra*, referring to Buddhist scripture derived from the oral teachings of the Buddha. As does ancient wisdom literature, this poem has the power to bestow its message to readers for eternity. And Ginsberg in the poem takes on the role of priest, as he grabs the sunflower and stands, to “deliver my sermon to my soul, and Kerouac’s soul, and anyone who’ll listen.” Furthermore, Ginsberg moves freely through time and space, responding directly to an encounter with Blake, long dead.

This poem deals with the victimization of natural beauty at the hands of humankind. The sunflower represents the pristine earth, whereas the locomotive represents the destructive industrial power that leaves us all with a “skin of grime.” In the wake of World War II, Ginsberg had seen what the results of technological advances could be, particularly the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atomic bomb. The sunflower is not just nature but also contemporary culture, which is made utterly gray and dead by “that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—modern.” Still, the message of “Sunflower Sutra” is not hopeless. In the last stanza, Ginsberg reminds us, “We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not our dread bleak dusty imageless / locomotive, we’re all golden sunflowers inside.” As Blake and Ginsberg celebrate the lives of sunflowers, so should we celebrate our own lives.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The critic Richard Eberhart called this work “a lyric poem marked by pathos.” Pathos refers to a quality in art that arouses emotion. Do you agree with Eberhart’s statement? If so, where is your sympathy directed? If not, why does Ginsberg fail to effect emotion? What aspects of

this poem could be changed to invoke genuine sentiment?

2. Read William Blake’s poem “Ah! Sun-flower.” Discuss how Blake’s “weary of time” sunflower compares to Ginsberg’s, which seems to be already dead. Discuss how each of the poems deals with the passage of time, particularly as it applies to moving closer to death.

“America” (1956)

“America,” as its second line suggests, was composed on January 17, 1956, and appeared first in *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) and again in the *Black Mountain Review* during Ginsberg’s stint as coeditor. Its spontaneous composition is reflected in the fact that the poem has no consistent structure, switching among multiple tones and styles throughout. Ginsberg’s stream-of-consciousness technique creates a poem that jumps quickly between subjects, from personal to political, holy to vulgar, social to cultural, showing the interconnectedness of those many facets of American life. The poem is arranged as a series of crests and falls; each section gains momentum, climaxes, and then backs off and starts over again.

To understand “America” best, it is important to consider the American political and social climate at the time of its composition. By 1956, the United States had participated in both world wars and was currently involved in an arms race with the Soviet Union, one in which both sides stockpiled nuclear arms. Historians commonly refer to this protracted period of military engagement and espionage as the cold war, which lasted from about 1947 to the period leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991. Ginsberg was profoundly affected by America’s decision to bomb the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, which is perhaps what he refers to in the line “Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.” Furthermore, the United States government in the 1950s had instituted a campaign for nationalism and patriotism, a campaign that

focused on demonizing differing viewpoints, particularly communism. In a democratic nation allegedly founded on freedom of choice, there was very little tolerance for dissent.

Ginsberg plays on the patriotic ramblings of the 1950s and creates his own diatribe, one that turns the unfettered praise of America on its head. Instead of referring to America as an abstract concept like the “land of the free,” Ginsberg boldly addresses the nation directly from the very first line: “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.” In fact, the poem avoids abstractions, opting instead for concrete details plucked from Ginsberg’s personal experience, right down to the amount of money he has in his wallet (“two dollars and twentyseven cents”). The poem reflects the influence of his parents. Both Russian Jewish immigrants, Ginsberg’s parents were sympathetic to socialist causes, his mother even participating actively in the Communist Party USA. Naomi Ginsberg took both of her young sons with her to Communist Party meetings, as Ginsberg documents in the third stanza. Furthermore, while Ginsberg was a self-described anarchist at the time of this poem’s composition, he clearly demonstrates leanings toward socialism, from his sentimental feelings toward the once-powerful International Workers of the World (or “Wobblies,” as he calls them in the first stanza), to his plea to free Tom Mooney, a deceased American labor leader.

Although Ginsberg expresses revolutionary sentiments, he clearly feels a close connection to America and acknowledges his inability to divorce himself from the nation. In the first stanza, he writes, “I refuse to give up my obsession,” and he proves it in the rest of the poem. Although Ginsberg confesses that he smokes marijuana “every chance I get,” and that he was once a communist and feels no regrets about it, he still claims that he aspires to be president. At the poem’s close, he admits that while he opposes war and industrial technology, he still intends to “get right down to the job,” and put his “queer shoulder to the wheel.” But, unfortunately, America will never give back what he puts

in; he merely gives of himself until there is nothing left to give.

Also noteworthy is the way that “America” fits within Ginsberg’s larger body of work. Ginsberg began composing the poem shortly after his landmark first public reading of “Howl” in October 1955. This particularly well-received reading not only admitted him to the San Francisco poetry renaissance scene but also gave him the confidence to confess more about himself openly. As in “Howl” and “Sunflower Sutra,” Ginsberg adopts the voice of a prophet, proclaiming the power of poetry to convey human experience. Still, though, he has not forgotten his influences; he still uses Whitman’s long line, and his question “America when will you be angelic?” noticeably echoes the speaker in Ginsberg’s 1955 poem “A Supermarket in California” who asks the grocery boys, “Are you my Angel?”

Furthermore, Ginsberg expresses disdain for technology, as seen in his 1955 poem “Sunflower Sutra,” in which the symbol of the locomotive portrays industry’s capacity to corrupt natural beauty. In the first stanza of “America,” Ginsberg writes, “Your machinery is too much for me.” Indeed, the depravity of America’s very material culture is a major theme in this poem. When discussing “them bad Russians” toward the end of the poem, Ginsberg writes, “Her wants our auto plants in Siberia.” Here he predicts not just a foreboding of the spread of American industry into other parts of the world but also the increasing conception among Americans that all other countries are obsessed with the United States and want to participate in American culture (“Her needs a Red *Reader’s Digest*.”)

At the poem’s close, Ginsberg attacks American xenophobia. Two years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case that desegregated schools, Ginsberg writes a poem that is obviously aware of the pressure to eliminate racism in the United States. His awareness of racial politics is perhaps most evident at the top of the third stanza, where he writes, “America I am the Scottsboro boys,” thus allying himself with

the group of African-American teens wrongfully accused of rape in the 1930s. Later in the stanza, he pokes fun at the racist domestic policies of America, writing, “Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers.”

And yet, as he closes the poem, Ginsberg admits that all of his information is merely perceived from “looking in the television set.” The irony of issues like racism is that they are so firmly rooted in the perpetuation of harmful images as opposed to lived experience. For Ginsberg one of the most perplexing aspects of the obscenity trial of “Howl” was that the courts were so concerned with mere images, representations of actualities, rather than the monstrosities he attempted to illustrate. Still, as a poet, Ginsberg too, is inextricably tied up with images. By presenting the reader with a poem that jumps illogically from image to image, Ginsberg hopes to represent the irrationality and confusion of America itself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the ways that gendered pronouns operate in this poem. In particular, look at the end of the last stanza, where Russia is personified as female, while America is referred to as “Him.” Slavic people all over the world once referred to Russia as a mother, while Nazi propaganda referred to Germany as the “Fatherland.” What is the significance of being a male versus a female nation? Why does Ginsberg use these classifications in “America”?
2. In their critiques of *Howl and Other Poems*, the critics Lucien Carr and Richard Eberhart remark on the humor of “America,” as compared to the anger in “Howl.” Read both poems, attempting to find humor in each. Why is “Howl” considered an angry poem while “America” is not? Can both be read as funny? As outraged?
3. In the last stanza, the speaker’s voice changes, shifting into a rudimentary, grammatically incorrect English. Why does Ginsberg choose this voice, and how does it reflect upon the subject matter he uses it to discuss?

“Howl” (1956)

“Howl,” the title piece from Ginsberg’s breakthrough collection, was completed in 1956 and circulated in pamphlet form throughout the San Francisco poetry renaissance scene before being formally published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and City Lights in 1956. *Howl and Other Poems* jump-started Ginsberg’s career, receiving both critical acclaim and copious media attention due to the obscenity trial resulting from its publication. Considered one of the principal works of the Beat generation, “Howl” is widely taught in literature classes today and is frequently imitated by and cited as an influence to poets all over the world.

When asked in 1982 how he had mentally and creatively equipped himself to write “Howl,” Ginsberg responded:

You have to be inspired to write something like that. . . . You have to have the right historical information, the right physical combination, the right mental formation, the right courage, the right sense of prophecy, and the right information.

The inspiration for Ginsberg to begin “Howl” was from his friend Carl Solomon, to whom the poem is dedicated. Solomon and Ginsberg met in 1949 at the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute, where Ginsberg was hospitalized in lieu of serving jail time for his involvement in a property theft ring. Solomon, whom Ginsberg immediately recognized as a genius, had spent time in mental institutions before and would continue to do so until the end of his life. One such instance would inspire “Howl”: After Ginsberg heard that Solomon had been committed at the Pilgrim State Hospital, which happened to be the same facility treating Ginsberg’s mother, he became fully convinced that the greatest thinkers he knew had been “destroyed by madness.”

The structure of “Howl,” which Richard Eberhart called “Biblical in its repetitive grammatical build-up,” is reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s long lines, which themselves were derived from the King

James Bible. The first and third sections of the poem also employ Whitman's characteristic listing, with a base word or phrase to unite the lines as a section. In one last nod to Whitman, Ginsberg writes from an intimately personal perspective, opening with first-person singular pronouns ("I saw the best minds of my generation"), not unlike Whitman's opening of "Song of Myself" ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself").

Unlike Whitman, though, Ginsberg uses these pronouns only once. Although he does not refer to himself in the first person for the rest of the first section, he is still present in each line. Ginsberg does not write as an outsider looking in; he is intimately engaged in the lives and events of the poem. In the first section of "Howl," Ginsberg compiles a list of all the minds and spirits that have been ravaged by a mysterious force of "madness," most of them from his personal experience. His litany refers to acquaintances from all parts of his life, from Carl Solomon to his close friend and fellow Beat figure Neal Cassady, even including himself.

While the catalog in the first section refers only to people connected to Ginsberg, the amassing of such a sizable group makes the "angelheaded hipsters" seem to be an entire generation, a cohort of young people searching for connection in a world that rejects them. This sense of alienation characterized the Beat generation, a group of writers and friends who wrote confessional, experimental poetry and prose, often on the happenings of their counterculture lifestyles. However, Ginsberg does not exclusively refer to the Beats; indeed, he pokes fun at them in "Howl," calling them scribblers of "lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish." Ginsberg's howl goes out to all disenchanting Eisenhower era Americans, and the revelation of the intimate details of his life opens up the possibility for readers to recognize similar qualities in themselves and to accept their own nontraditional thoughts and feelings.

Inspired by Jack Kerouac's technique of spontaneous composition, Ginsberg wrote the first section of "Howl" in one sitting, typing his thoughts straight into a typewriter. Just after completing the

first section, he began composing the third. It was not until later that he composed the second section, which forms the bridge between the two and locates the source of the "madness." Unlike for the first and third sections, which required only minor revisions, Ginsberg wrote more than 20 drafts of the second section. This section identifies the source of society's disdain for the characters in section 1 as Moloch, the Canaanite fire god to whom parents would sacrifice their children.

Ginsberg's drug use proved helpful in the composition of the Moloch section of "Howl," as the central image derives from a vision that he experienced while under the influence of peyote, a psychedelic drug. While walking through the streets of San Francisco, Ginsberg encountered the looming façade of the Francis Drake Hotel and saw in it a terrifying monster: the face of Moloch. Furthermore, an urban landmark seemed appropriate for the villain of "Howl," in which Ginsberg hoped to address the horrors of civilization. Indeed, as he describes Moloch he begins to sound more like a cityscape than a god. Although based on a hallucination, Ginsberg's impetus for using Moloch is startlingly clear: After watching so many fellow young people go off to war and die, or lose themselves to the drugs and soullessness of American cities, it truly did seem that children were being fed into a fire.

The third and final section of "Howl" addresses one of these children directly. With each line, Ginsberg comforts his friend Carl Solomon, telling him that he is with him in Rockland (another New York psychiatric hospital where Solomon had spent time). Following each statement of solidarity, Ginsberg provides a snapshot of Solomon's institutionalized life, documenting his feeble but ingenious attempts to stay alive in the world described in the first and second sections. In the last lines of the poem, Ginsberg places Solomon and himself together for his vision of redemption: "where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls/ airplanes roaring over the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs / the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse." Despite the devastating landscape around him, Ginsberg still envisions a time when

bombs will not kill people, hospitals will not need to incarcerate geniuses, and people will not build make-believe divisions between them.

Of the few revisions made on the third section, one of the most important was the change from *I am* to *I'm*. This gave each line the appropriate cadence to be read aloud. Its breath-length lines allow for “the right physical combination,” one of Ginsberg’s self-defined requirements for poetic form. Overall, Ginsberg’s concern with sound and rhythm in “Howl” accounts a great deal for its success. Kerouac’s spontaneous style of composition heavily influenced Ginsberg’s writing of this piece, as did the influence of William Carlos Williams, American vernacular, and, in particular, elements of jazz. Ginsberg described the verses of “Howl” as “long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear the *sound* of.” Michael Schumacher points out in his biography of Ginsberg that sections of “Howl” almost take on the feel of musical movements, particularly the second section, which he divides in three:

the first part with its hot saxophonic expressions, reminiscent of the jazz lines of Charlie Parker and Lester Young; the second part, with short “squawks” or statements, not unlike those played by Miles Davis; and the third part, with a cool bluesy and lyrical feeling similar to the moody music played by John Coltrane. (*Dharma Lion*, 1992)

The connections between “Howl” and jazz music from around the same period help establish the poem as the anthem of a generation.

Notable, too, is the role of “Howl” in the solidification of the Beat generation. Although Jack Kerouac coined the term for their group of friends as early as 1948, and John Clellon Holmes defined and popularized it in a 1952 *New York Times* article, the movement still lacked the publicity it needed for more writers to be published. While William S. Burroughs’s novel *Junkie* had been published under a pen name in 1953, authors like Jack Kerouac, who completed his novel *On the*

Road six years before it was published in 1957, were having trouble gaining a foothold in the literary world. In October 1955, with the help of the San Francisco Renaissance poets Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder, Ginsberg organized a poetry reading at San Francisco’s legendary Six Gallery, where he read “Howl” in public for the first time. His performance was so moving that it brought him and several audience members to tears. His reading, later hailed as “the birth trauma of the Beat Generation,” led Lawrence Ferlinghetti to publish *Howl and Other Poems* as part of his Pocket Poets Series. One year later, the *New York Times* sent the reviewer Richard Eberhart to the Bay Area to write a story about the work of the writers there, in which he named “Howl” “the most remarkable poem of the young group.” Ginsberg’s notoriety only increased in 1957, when Ferlinghetti was tried in San Francisco for “publishing and selling obscene material.” By the end of the trial, *Howl and Other Poems* was in its fourth printing, and the United States was totally aware of the poem itself and the group of writers defending it, but especially of Allen Ginsberg.

For Discussion or Writing

1. While “Howl” is dedicated to Carl Solomon, Ginsberg admits that the poem was an early attempt to deal with the loss of his mother to mental illness. Where is this evident?
2. Compare and contrast “Howl” with T. S. Eliot’s 1925 poem “The Waste Land.” Eliot’s poem was composed in the wake of World War I, and Ginsberg’s just after World War II. Is this difference significant? Discuss the conclusions that each poet draws and what those conclusions say about their individual worldviews.
3. The penultimate line of section 1 of “Howl” contains the Aramaic phrase *eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani*, meaning “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are the attributed last words of Jesus Christ as he died on the cross. Why does Ginsberg choose to incorporate this line, and what is the significance of its placement at the end of the first section?

“To Aunt Rose” (1958)

“To Aunt Rose,” one of the two great elegies that appear in *Kaddish and Other Poems* (1961), laments the loss of Ginsberg’s aunt, his father’s sister. She died when Ginsberg was just 14, but her memory stayed with him throughout his life, as he writes, “I see you walking still, a ghost on Osborne Terrace.” Using a brief series of specific details, Ginsberg gives the reader an entire history of his life with this woman, from an experience in his early puberty to his visit to her in the hospital at the end of her life.

Ginsberg composed “To Aunt Rose” (and many of the poems from *Kaddish*) while on an extended stay in Europe in 1957. Experiencing cities so rich in history, some of which, such as London, had been devastated by World War II, led Ginsberg to conclude that politics was destroying the world. He felt that as a poet he had the responsibility to take over where the leaders of the human race had fallen short. Ginsberg’s struggle with history and political affairs is evident in “To Aunt Rose” with its many historical references. Rose was politically active in her life, and her husband was involved in the Communist Party. As though to comfort the deceased woman in a world gone awry, he assures her that “the war in Spain has ended long ago.”

Furthermore, Ginsberg uses Aunt Rose’s death to signify the collapse of various other structures in his life. For instance, he writes, “Hitler is dead, Hitler is in Eternity; Hitler is with / Tamburlane and Emily Bronte.” Tamburlane is the 14th-century Mongol conqueror; when he is juxtaposed with the British author Emily Bronte the reader is prompted to think of him in literary terms, as in Christopher Marlowe’s 16th-century play about the historical figure. Thus, Ginsberg signifies the death not only of Adolf Hitler but also of the proponents of antiquated styles of literature.

In the next stanza, Ginsberg returns to more personal issues and moves on to discuss various aspects of death in his own family. He mentions his father, “the Poet,” who visits Rose to tell her about his book being published by Liveright. Ginsberg, though, retorts, “Hitler is dead and Liver-

ight’s gone out of business,” as his father’s writing career has been laid to rest as well. Ginsberg goes on to update Aunt Rose on the other failures of the family, including Uncle Harry’s business’s folding, Claire’s decision to quit school, and his grandmother Buba’s removal to a retirement home. The elegy mourns not just the death of Aunt Rose, but the dissolution of Ginsberg’s family in various other ways as well. Despite its somber subject matter, though, “To Aunt Rose” demonstrates Ginsberg’s mastery of the elegiac form and is considered by his biographer Michael Schumacher “one of Ginsberg’s loveliest early works.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast “To Aunt Rose” with “Kaddish,” Ginsberg’s elegy for his mother. Aside from obvious structural differences, how do the poems differ in terms of the way Ginsberg portrays the two women? And how does Ginsberg portray the ways in which both women had an effect on him, particularly with regard to politics?
2. Compare “To Aunt Rose” with Dylan Thomas’s “After the Funeral (In Memory of Ann Jones),” Thomas’s poem composed for his own deceased aunt. What similarities can you find? What differences?

“Ego Confession” (1974)

“Ego Confession” appeared in *Mind Breaths* (1977), Ginsberg’s sixth collection in the City Lights Pocket Poet Series. Although the subject matter is markedly different from that of Ginsberg’s groundbreaking “Howl,” the two poems share an element of risk taking, of baring the poet’s soul, knowing that he might be subject to ridicule and criticism as a result. It is an exercise in unornamented honesty, a spontaneous composition that helped Ginsberg sort out a quandary in his own mind.

The poem begins auspiciously, with the frank statement “I want to be known as the most bril-

4. The height of Ginsberg's career coincides with the American Civil Rights Movement. Although Ginsberg was more closely associated with the antiwar movement, his political activism unquestionably intersected with antiracist movements of the same period. Does Ginsberg speak out against racism in the same way that he does against other oppressive forces in America? Locate passages in "Howl," "America," and "Wichita Vortex Sutra" that might be interpreted as antiracist.
5. While Ginsberg's open homosexuality was radical at the time, does he exhibit progressive attitudes about other aspects of sexuality? Look at the way gender is represented in his work, particularly how he discusses women. In poems like "This Form of Life Needs Sex," Ginsberg employs sexist language to express his frustration about the social disapproval of homosexuality. What are some of the problems with using the very language he tries to critique?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Aviv, Rachel. "Save the Beatniks!" Poetry Foundation. Available online. URL: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/dispatches/dispatches.reading.html?id=178113>. Accessed July 1, 2006.
- Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press, 1959.
- Campbell, James. *This Is the Beat Generation: New York, San Francisco, Paris*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Cassady, Carolyn. *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Caveney, Graham. *Screaming with Joy: The Life of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected Poems 1947–1980*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1984.
- . *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996*. Edited by David Carter. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Holmes, Clellon. "This Is the Beat Generation." *New York Times*, 16 November 1952, p. SM10.
- Hyde, Lewis. *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.
- Kraus, Michelle P. *Allen Ginsberg: An Annotated Bibliography, 1969–1977*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980.
- Lardas, John. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Merrill, Thomas F. *Allen Ginsberg*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.
- Miles, Barry. *Ginsberg: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.
- Morgan, Bill. *The Response to Allen Ginsberg, 1926–1994: A Bibliography of Secondary Sources*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- . *The Works of Allen Ginsberg, 1941–1994: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995.
- Portuges, Paul Cornel. *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Ross-Erikson, 1978.
- Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Reed, Brian. The Allen Ginsberg Trust. Available online. URL: <http://www.allenginsberg.org>. Accessed July 2, 2006.
- Sanders, Ed. *The Poetry and Life of Allen Ginsberg: A Narrative Poem*. Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2000.
- Schumacher, Michael. *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Sullivan, James. "Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997)." *Modern American Poetry*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/ginsberg/ginsberg.htm. Accessed June 30, 2006.
- Tytell, John. *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs*. New York: Grove Press, 1976.
- Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1996.

Caitlin Shanley



ALEX HALEY (1921–1992)

If you tell a people that they have no history, that they have nothing of which to be proud, that they are innately inferior, then they will eventually come to believe it.

(Interview with Jeffrey Eliot, *Negro History Bulletin* 41, no. 1
[January/February 1978]: 785)

A biographer, journalist, and celebrated novelist, Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, New York, on August 11, 1921, the oldest son of Simon Alexander Haley, a college professor, and Bertha George Palmer, an elementary school teacher. Soon after their son's birth, when both parents were in graduate school—his mother at Ithaca Conservatory of Music and his father at Cornell University—Simon and Bertha sent their infant son to Henning, Tennessee, where he was raised largely by his grandmother and aunts.

Haley heard about family history from his grandmother, Cynthia Palmer, who told Alex the family lore, tracing their lineage to a slave taken to America from Africa, named *Kintay*. Alex whiled away the hours listening to tales on his grandmother's porch, tales that would ultimately inspire him to write his highly influential masterwork *Roots*. Kintay refused to accept his christened slave name of *Toby* and frequently tried to escape from his plantation. This story fascinated Haley because of Kintay's pride and determination to retain his African identity. With it in mind, Haley wrote *Roots*, a fictional saga based on research and the tales he heard as a child, an endeavor fueled by Haley's desire to tell his family's story, which he believed as representative of the African-American experience. In addition to this novel, which most Americans knew through a television series, Haley, after extensive interviews, coauthored *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which records the

life of a key figure in the Civil Rights movement as told from Malcom X's perspective. (For more information on this work, see the entry on MALCOLM X.)

Although Haley eventually became an author known to millions, he was not an outstanding student. After graduating from high school and attending Alcorn A&M in Mississippi, Haley transferred to Elizabeth City State Teachers College in North Carolina, where he studied from 1937 to 1939. Haley joined the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II and began writing in his spare time to relieve boredom on long sea voyages. He wrote love letters for his fellow sailors, which they sent to their girlfriends and wives, and began composing adventure stories. Haley also published several magazine articles during this period, eventually working as a Coast Guard journalist. After an illustrious 20-year military career in the Coast Guard, during which he ascended from mess boy to chief journalist, Haley retired in 1959 at the age of 37. He then decided to embark upon a second career as a writer.

After divorcing his first wife and having his pension appropriated to pay for child support, Haley moved to a basement apartment in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, barely subsisting on what little he managed to save or borrow until he could establish himself as a writer. Eventually, Haley's perseverance was rewarded: Haley's articles started appearing in popular magazines, including *Reader's Digest*. These publications led

to a *Playboy* magazine assignment: an interview with the famed jazz musician Miles Davis in 1962. The *Playboy* assignments led Haley to many other candid and insightful interviews with public figures such as Elijah Muhammad, Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, Jr., Quincy Jones, Johnny Carson, and the American Nazi leader George Lincoln Rockwell. In 1963, *Playboy* asked Haley to write an article on Malcolm X, the controversial African-American nationalist. During the interview with Malcolm X, then one of the followers of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X asked Haley to help him tell his life story. As a representative for Elijah Muhammad and as a gifted orator with a busy schedule of speaking engagements, Malcolm X delegated the task of recording his life to Haley. The result of that collaboration, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, was published in 1965 and sold 6 million copies.

Haley wrote the text from notes he made during informal conversations, extended interviews, dictations, and diary entries. Although Malcolm X did not live to see the book published, he read and authorized the semiautobiography before his premature death in February 1965, when he was assassinated by unknown assailants while lecturing at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. The book offered an unexpected portrait of a man many Americans conceived of as a militant racist. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* portrays Malcolm X as both a humane and visionary thinker with great insights into the black experience, a once-militant man (Malcolm X described himself as “the angriest black man in America”) who, after his conversion to Islam, rejected separatist views and embraced what he referred to as a “Human Society.” Haley’s rendering of Malcolm X’s life remains an influential, insightful look at one of the most important and charismatic black leaders during the turbulent fight for civil rights in the 1960s, a leader who, after angrily fighting for the black cause, focused on hope for a peaceful future. Like the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, Haley’s work is an important historical document and a humanistic work of literature now considered part of the American literary canon.

A few weeks after finishing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Haley began researching his family’s genealogy, which led him to write his epic-length and Pulitzer Prize-winning (1977) novel *Roots* (1976). The tales that Haley heard as a young boy in the 1920s and 1930s inspired him in 1964 to research his maternal ancestry. After digging through national and state archives, Haley approached Doubleday with an idea for a novel, which he planned to entitle *Before This Anger*, a record of his family’s history and eventual triumph over slavery. Securing an advance, Haley conducted further research in the United States. This research project widened dramatically in scope when Haley, purportedly after consulting the African linguist Dr. Jan Vansina, learned that certain words his grandmother had spoken were similar to the language spoken by the Mandingo people of Gambia. With the help of another advance, this time from *Reader’s Digest*, Haley traveled to Gambia, eventually locating the region where his ancestor Kunta was abducted. While there, Haley claims to have spoken with a griot—a village historian trained from a young age to memorize and recite an account of the important events that transpired in village life. The griot allegedly told Haley of a villager named Kunta, the eldest son of Omoro Kinte, who disappeared while chopping wood. Haley, convinced he had found the link between his ancestry in colonial America and Gambia, was ecstatic. Over 12 years he researched and wrote this quasi-historical, semifictional story of his family, during which he frequented archives, interviewed relatives, and even traveled to Liberia, taking a ship from there to America to help him reenact the Middle Passage his ancestor Kunta Kinte endured.

Roots tells the story of Haley’s maternal ancestors, their passage to the United States, and their lives as slaves. The book begins with Kinte (Kintay), the young rebellious slave, before he is captured in Gambia and sold into slavery in 1767. It follows the family through their trials, describing the hardship of slave life, until they are emancipated in 1865. The narrative ends in the present day, as Haley reflects on the significance of his family’s story. The original version of the novel appeared in condensed form in *Reader’s Digest*; the full-length work earned critical praise and topped best-seller lists. A year after publication of the

complete book, the 12-hour *Roots* miniseries aired on ABC January 23–30, 1977, seen by an estimated 120 million viewers. ABC's televised version of the novel propelled both the book and the author into overnight fame; *Haley* and *Roots* became household names. Significantly, the series defied network expectations, drew an enormous audience, helped redefine black-oriented programming, and spawned a new television genre: the multiple-evening series.

Roots had a significant impact on literary and television history. To appreciate Haley's contribution to popular culture, the cultural context of America at the time he published *Roots* must be considered: Haley struck a cord with many Americans, offering a well-documented narrative that traced the history of African-American oppression and African-American culture, related from the perspective of individual characters and on a human scale. In 1977, Haley received the Pulitzer Prize for *Roots*, as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) Spingarn Medal. In a survey of university and college administrators conducted by *Scholastic Magazine*, Haley was selected as one of America's foremost literary figures. By December 1978, *Roots* had sold almost 5 million copies and had been reprinted in 23 languages. In 1979, ABC aired a second miniseries, *Roots: The Next Generation*, also written by Haley, which chronicled the family history up until the publishing of *Roots*. James Earl Jones played Haley's character, shown interviewing the American Nazi leader George Lincoln Rockwell and researching his family saga.

After the phenomenal success of *Roots*, Haley's reputation was tarnished when the author faced plagiarism charges. Margaret Walker Alexander, African-American poet and novelist, author of *Jubilee* (1966) and winner of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, charged Haley with copyright infringement on April 20, 1977. Eventually the charges were dropped, but Haley incurred \$100,000 in legal fees. Harold Courlander, a white specialist on African-American folklore, also charged Haley with plagiarism, contending that large passages from *Roots* were taken from his novel *The African* (1968). In an interview held after Haley's death, Judge Robert Ward told the interviewer Philip Nobile he would have

ruled against Haley and had considered charging him with perjury. But on the eve of Judge Ward's decision, Haley agreed to pay Courlander \$650,000, and the case was closed, with Haley conceding that he incorporated passages from Courlander's work. Despite the scandal, Haley continued to write. In 1988, he held a promotional tour for his novella *A Different Kind of Christmas*, which tells of slave escapes in the United States before the Civil War. The story focuses on Fletcher Randall, the son of slave-holding Southern parents, who meets a family of Quaker abolitionists while studying at Princeton. Interestingly, Haley paints the portrait of a man who initially defends slavery but grows to see it as an evil institution. Ultimately Randall works as an agent for the Underground Railroad, helping slaves escape to freedom. In the same year, Haley also promoted a drama, *Roots: The Gift*, a two-hour television special that chronicles the story of two principal characters (slaves) from *Roots* who make a break for freedom on Christmas Eve.

Haley nearly completed a final novel, *Queen* (1993), which tells the story of a mulatto woman who struggles with her identity. Originally intended to have the same scope as *Roots*, with Haley tracing his paternal genealogy through his grandmother's rapist slave master to the shores of Ireland, *Queen* was finished by David Stevens and published as *Alex Haley's Queen*. It was subsequently adapted for the screen in 1993, with the acclaimed actress Halle Berry playing the main character. Thematically, the story explores the hardships and prejudices experienced by a mulatto who overcomes staggering odds to develop her own identity. During Queen's life, she is ridiculed by the black slaves as a child and hated by most of the whites, especially the wife of James Jackson, a man who loves Queen. She tries to pass for white on occasion but is never comfortable living a lie. Many of her own people distrust her; she is treated as an outcast. The story focuses on the struggles of biracial individuals and the fear of miscegenation during a time when biracialism was not tolerated. Besides chronicling Queen's life, the novel explores the complicated relationship between blacks and whites, sweeping from the antebellum South through the Civil War and Reconstruction era to the dawn of the 20th century. Miscegenation, the

mixing or interbreeding of different races or ethnic groups, especially the interbreeding or sexual union of whites and nonwhites, greatly interested Haley. He, like many African Americans, was a product of generational race mixing common on plantations during slavery; the rape and abuse of slave women were implicitly acceptable practices that were unpunished privileges of white slave owners, who often committed such offenses without criminal repercussions. *Queen* details these offenses and the emotional quest of its protagonist, Queen, a fictionalized version of Haley's paternal grandmother, who seeks to know her father and ultimately deduces he is the slave master. Although James Jackson never acknowledges his daughter, the novel does detail how Queen makes her way in the world, marrying a former slave named Haley and bearing three sons who carry her lineage.

Haley's minor works include an unfinished fictionalized recounting of his childhood tentatively entitled "Henning." In a similar vein, he collaborated with Norman Lear to create the television series *Palmerstown, USA* (1980), which was loosely based on his childhood in Tennessee. Haley also started work on a biography of Frank Willis, the security guard who revealed the Watergate break-in, an act that eventually caused the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon.

In 1987, Haley returned to Tennessee to live on a 127-acre estate north of Knoxville after residing in Beverly Hills, California, for a number of years. He died of a heart attack at a hospital in Seattle, Washington. When Haley died in 1992, he was \$1.5 million in debt. One year later his reputation as a scholar and journalist was again called into question when, in February 1993, Philip Nobile, after examining the Haley papers deposited at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and interviewing many people connected to the book, concluded in a famous *Village Voice* cover story: "In fact, virtually every genealogical claim in Haley's story was false. Haley's account of his African fieldwork, particularly his encounter with the *griot*—the heart and soul of *Roots*, was complete fiction. Documents and tapes in Haley's University of Tennessee archives reveal that Haley's family history was fabricated from the beginning."

Despite Haley's questionable research and use of sources without crediting them, *Roots* remains an important work, one that marked a critical juncture in understanding the black experience and, as did Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, created a cultural sensation. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* stands as one of the most significant sources on the life of this prominent member of Black Islam, an indispensable tool accessible to all, one that continues to be read, written about, and studied. A memorial to Alex Haley and Kunta Kinte was unveiled in 2002 in Annapolis, Maryland, on the site where Kinte first set foot on American soil. The Alex Haley Museum also opened in Annapolis in 2002.

***Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976)**

Roots: The Saga of an American Family was highly anticipated and immensely popular at the time of its publication. The two popular miniseries it spawned became some of the most-watched television programs of all time, with more than half of the American populace seeing at least one episode of the saga. *Roots* reached a diverse racial audience and inspired many to learn about their ancestry. The American genealogy craze that swept the country after *Roots* was published was widely attributed to Haley's work. *Roots* dramatized an often-neglected chapter in America's history and inspired many African Americans to connect with their long-lost African ancestry. Wrapped within the profound story of one family's difficult journey from freedom to slavery and eventual return to freedom, *Roots* revealed the complexities of African-American identity to a national audience and helped revitalize the dialogue on race.

Set in Gambia, West Africa, and the southern United States from 1750 to 1967, the novel begins in a small African village named Juffure with the birth of a son, Kunta, to Omoro and Binta Kinte. Kunta, a Mandinka warrior, is captured and taken on a British slave ship to Annapolis, Maryland. The book records the horrors of the Middle Passage, the cruelties and deprivations of slavery, the breakup of families, economic and sexual exploitation, the rise of abolitionist

engagement, the Civil War, emancipation, and eventually the prosperity of the Haley family.

The first part of *Roots* is a bildungsroman—a story of Kunta's passage from innocent adolescence to adulthood. Kunta flourishes in Juffure, learning of his place in the world through the stories of his elders, eventually assuming the responsibility of tending to his father's goats and attending school. This development of Kunta into an adult, a future Mandinka warrior, is interrupted by his tragic capture and enslavement. Gathering wood in the forest near his village so that he can make a new drum, Kunta is abducted and placed on a slave ship bound for America.

Bought in Annapolis by John Waller, who gives him the name *Toby* and takes him back to his plantation to work, Kunta tries to escape four times before he is horrifically punished: forced to choose between having one of his feet amputated and castration, Kunta chooses the former, disfigured for the rest of his life. After being bought by his brother, the physician William Waller, Kunta falls in love with Bell, the household's cook, as she helps him recover. Since he can no longer escape, Kunta drives the doctor around in his carriage. In the course of his travels with Waller, Kunta hears of news from abroad, most notably of Toussaint Louverture's slave revolt in Haiti, which bolsters Kunta's rebellious spirit. Haley, using the news Kunta receives as a narrative device, writes of other historical personages, interjecting corrective accounts of what the founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton thought about slavery.

Told by a third-person narrator, the novel focuses primarily on Kunta, Haley's most fully developed character. Yet the use of third-person narration enables the reader to see the development of other, minor characters, such as Kizzy (the daughter of Kunta and Bell); her clever and resourceful son, Chicken George; and Tom Murray (George's son). Although Bell (Kunta's future wife) and his complacent friend, the fiddler, are one-dimensional or "flat" characters, they provide points of view that differ from that of Kunta, who never fully acquiesces to authority. With other characters, Haley provides readers with poignant psychological portraits. For example,

when Kizzy (the daughter of Kunta and Bell) is sold away from the Waller plantation, the narrative follows her, recording her actions and thoughts on the Lea plantation, consequently showing the emotional and psychological effects of separation and environment. Using this device, the narrative moves from generation to generation, from Kunta Kinte to the author's mother, Bertha Palmer Haley.

Roots details the African-American search for identity while lamenting the loss of African culture. The patriarchal Muslim society in which Kunta Kinte would have thrived has been irrevocably taken from him. By following Kunta's journey, the reader witnesses the horrors of the Middle Passage, feels the disorientation of being plucked from one's homeland and thrust into an alien world, and experiences the confining spaces left to those of other cultures as they painfully struggle to assert their own traditions in the face of coerced assimilation. Forced to live in a radically different culture and denied the most basic of human rights, Kunta must come to terms with his new subservient place in the world, a place filled with pain and humiliation. Victimized by the institution of slavery, which denies his status as a human being, Kunta is considered chattel, often treated worse than the animals he once tended. As are the majority of slaves, Kunta is treated as a child and has no control over his own life.

Haley's belief that one "can never enslave somebody who knows who he is" animates the novel. Thus, the quest for freedom and the search for identity help give the epic story continuity: As does Kunta, the first four generations persevere in the face of adversity, embracing the belief that someday they will be free. Thus, Chicken George refuses to relinquish his dream of saving his family from servitude. As he grows older, Chicken George becomes the apprentice to Uncle Mingo, quickly mastering the art of training gamecocks. Often absent, George is not a faithful husband, but he is a loving father, who, despite his infidelity, lives for his family. Planning to buy their freedom with money he has saved from cockfighting, he loses it all when Tom Lea—with George's consent—bets too much. Forced to travel to England and work for Lord John Russell, George eventually returns to find that his family has been

sold. Lea grants him freedom, however, and George recovers his family at the Murray plantation.

Roots deals with fundamental human rights, setting human dignity as a foil against the institution of slavery. The novel speaks proudly to African Americans, offering a story of hope while proffering Africa as a source of historical continuity, a place of origins. Since few have genealogical or historical records of their ancestry, *Roots* continues to inspire African Americans to reconnect with their African forebears. Haley explains that he assumed this task in part because he recognized how fortunate his family was when compared to many other African-American families, whose “roots” have been irrevocably severed. Near the end of the novel, Haley intrudes as a first-person narrator; doing so enables him to outline the novel’s purpose and serve as a mediating presence affecting how the novel is interpreted. Haley’s character, ruminating near the end of novel, reveals the grand vision the author had for *Roots*:

Flying homeward from Dakar, I decided to write a book. My own ancestors would automatically also be a symbolic saga of all African-descent people—who are without exception the seeds of someone like Kunta who was born and grew up in some black African village, someone who was captured and chained down in one of those slave ships that sailed them across the same ocean, into some succession of plantations, and since then a struggle for freedom.

With this comment, it becomes apparent that the narrator envisions himself as a modern-day griot, narrating the history of his culture for the benefit of all African Americans. Haley, the author and narrator, hopes *Roots* will instill a sense of regaining the past a sense of cultural awareness that will make for a tolerable present and enable African Americans to envision a promise-filled future.

For Discussion or Writing

1. One of the significant themes of *Roots* is Haley’s quest to discover his genealogy by traveling back to Africa; in a tireless effort to connect his African and American identities, he spent 12 years researching his long-lost African ancestry. How do you think Haley’s perception of himself as an African American changed after discovering his genealogical African tribe? What emotional and psychological effects do you think it had on him?
2. *Roots* details how individual family members are sold without regard for emotional needs, psychological effects, or familial ties. What are the repercussions that the characters face when these ties are broken? How can we ever justify the breaking of a family bond?
3. *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Morrison’s lyrical novel, recounts the story of a black man searching for his ancestry, his connection with the past. Read the novel, compare, and contrast the theme of lost identity with Haley’s *Roots*.
4. Read the folktale collected in *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton and then write an essay that discusses the cultural and psychological relevance of flying Africans in the lives of slaves. Why did many believe this myth? How does the oral tradition contribute to the story’s legacy and magic?
5. Compare Haley’s use of the myth of the people who could fly with Toni Morrison’s use of the same myth in *Song of Solomon*. How are the two similar; how do they differ? Why would both authors use this same story?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Adams, Russell. “An Analysis of the Roots Phenomenon in the Context of American Racial Conservatism.” *Présence Africaine* 116, no. 4 (1980): 125–140.
- Blayney, Michael Steward. “*Roots* and the Noble Savage.” *North Dakota Quarterly* 54 (Winter 1986): 1–17.
- Gerber, David. “Haley’s *Roots* and Our Own: An Inquiry into the Nature of a Popular Phenomenon.” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5 (Fall 1977): 87–111.
- Kunte Kinte-Alex-Haley Foundation, Inc. Available online. URL: <http://www.kintehaley.org/>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Mills, Gary B., and Elizabeth Shown Mills. “The Genealogist’s Assessment of Alex Haley’s *Roots*.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 72 (1984): 35–49.
- Moore, Jesse T. “Alex Haley’s *Roots*: Ten Years Later.” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 18 (1994): 70–76.
- Nobile, Philip. “Uncovering Roots.” *Village Voice*, February 23, 1993.

Blake G. Hobby



LORRAINE HANSBERRY (1930–1965)

Though it be a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such times, it is doubly so, doubly dynamic, to be young, gifted and black!

(speech to United Negro College Fund scholarship winners, May 1964)

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was born on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, to Nannie Perry Hansberry and Carl Augustus Hansberry, on May 19, 1930. The youngest of four children, she had an older sister, Mamie, and two older brothers, Carl, Jr., and Perry. The Hansberrys were both educated, cultured southern natives. A former schoolteacher, her mother met her father while working at his Lake Street Bank. By the time Lorraine was born, seven years after her youngest sibling, Mr. Hansberry was a prominent businessman who maintained and rented several properties on Chicago's South Side.

The Hansberrys taught their children to value family and their cultural heritage above all else. Their dinner table was a place of political and social discussion. Her parents encouraged the children to develop their own opinions about political, social, and cultural events and present them intelligently. Hansberry was doubtlessly influenced by many of her family's dinner guests, among them the poet Langston Hughes, the well-known actor/singer Paul Robeson, the musical legend Duke Ellington, the sociologist/political activist/writer W. E. B. DuBois, the director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Walter White, the Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens, and her uncle, Leo Hansberry, one of the first scholars of African antiquity and history and a professor at Howard University.

Hansberry's political sensitivity developed at a defining moment in 1935, when, at the age of five,

her parents gave her a white fur coat, hat, and muff for Christmas. Although the Hansberrys were a middle-class family, it was the middle of the depression and such a luxurious gift seemed extravagant even to a young girl. After winter break her parents insisted she wear the gift to school—a school filled with classmates whose parents were struggling to find work and put food on the table. She was ridiculed and even beaten. Those moments of shame and alienation served as the inspiration for one of her first stories and molded her into the woman she later became.

To understand Hansberry it is important to know about the period in which she was born. In the 1930s and 1940s black families were victims of segregation regardless of their social status. Jim Crow laws in the South forced African Americans to drink from separate water fountains and sit in the back of buses. From 1916 to 1948 racially restrictive laws called covenants gave white property owners a legal right not to sell based only on the buyer's race, thereby creating an area known as the "Black Belt" on Chicago's South Side. Carl Hansberry, helped by NAACP lawyers and white realtors, discovered a loophole in the covenant of one all-white neighborhood. In 1937, he secretly bought two pieces of property. When the family moved into their home on Rhodes Avenue, the neighborhood responded violently, making it clear that the Hansberrys were not wanted. Hansberry was outside playing when a neighborhood mob

began to amass. As she and her family gathered in the front room, a brick flew through the front window, barely missing Lorraine's head. Family friends soon arrived to help guard the house through the night. It was not until a friend went onto the porch with a shotgun that the mob dispersed (McKissack 25). Another pivotal moment in Lorraine's life, it would later inspire her most well-known work, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Hansberry attended Englewood High School, where she excelled in English and history. She was inspired by her English teacher, Kathleen Rigby—dubbed “Pale Hecate”—who loved Shakespeare and challenged her students to live up to their potential. An awkward and overweight adolescent, Hansberry spent most of her time in her room writing poetry. In 1944 she won her first writing prize, for a short story about football. That fall, on a chaperoned date, she saw her first play, *Dark of the Moon*, a “folk musical.” Interested in the theater, she then attended both *The Tempest* and *Othello*, which featured her family friend Paul Robeson, who was at the pinnacle of his popularity. By spring 1945, Lorraine, aged 15, vowed to write a play herself (Cheney 8).

That summer her father bought a home in Palanco, Mexico, a suburb of Mexico City. He had been struggling with high blood pressure, possibly the result of the stress due to his various antiracist lawsuits, and hoped that the change would improve his health. His health improved temporarily, but in 1946, shortly before her 16th birthday, Hansberry's father died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Later, in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, Hansberry asserted that her father's struggles against racism killed him. Back in Chicago, she was elected president of the high school debate society. Her father's work with the NAACP lawyers against racial covenants, her Uncle Leo's studies of ancient and modern Africa, and black students' resistance to racial discrimination had a powerful impact on Hansberry.

After graduating from Englewood High School in January 1948, she entered the University of Wisconsin, where she studied art, geology, stage design, and English. Politically active, she worked on Henry Wallace's campaign and became the chair of the Young Progressives of America. In February 1950,

she left the university; that fall, despite the protests and warnings of her mother, she moved to New York City.

In New York she continued her political activism, writing for *Young Progressives of America* magazine and attending classes at the New School for Social Research, where she learned about Marcus Garvey. A black nationalist and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Garvey, a pan-Africanist, advocated the back-to-Africa movement. A leader during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, he expressed ideas about racial pride and nobility that inspired many writers, politicians, and artists, as well as Hansberry and several of her contemporaries of the 1950s and 1960s, such as MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., and MALCOLM X.

Hansberry's first full-time job as a paid writer and editor began in 1951, when she was hired by Paul Robeson to work for his Harlem newspaper *Freedom*. She wrote a series of articles on communism, black history, and homosexuality. On a picket line at New York University (NYU) protesting the exclusion of blacks from the NYU basketball team, she met Robert Nemiroff. They began to date; Hansberry soon took the white Jewish boy home to meet her family. The family was concerned for the safety of the interracial couple, but as it was obvious they were in love, the family approved. The evening before the wedding, the couple spent the day at a protest against the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were accused of selling atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Hansberry and Nemiroff were married on June 20, 1953, at her mother's home in Chicago.

Hansberry and Nemiroff were committed to art and politics; in their Greenwich Village apartment they entertained long into the night, discussing current events, plays, and films. After the wedding, Hansberry quit her job as associate editor for *Freedom* but continued to write freelance articles. She also studied African history under her family friend W. E. B. DuBois and taught black literature at Jefferson School of Social Science. Then, in May 1954, she wrote the script for the second Harlem rally, *Pulse of the Peoples: A Cultural Salute to Paul Robeson*.

In 1956, Nemiroff, then working in publishing, wrote the hit song “Cindy, Oh Cindy,” the success of which allowed Hansberry to quit working and focus on her writing full time. The result was her most critically important work, *A Raisin in the Sun*. She completed the first draft in 1957 and read it to a friend, the music publisher Philip Rose, one night at dinner. He immediately liked the script and optioned the play for Broadway. A play focused on a black family, concerned with black issues, and written by a black woman was an anomaly in 1957. Most investors and theaters were not willing to take the risk; however, for the next year Rose looked tirelessly, exhausting all resources before finally convincing Harry Belafonte and other black cultural leaders to invest small amounts in a production of the play (Cheney 25).

In January and February 1959 auditions were held for *A Raisin in the Sun* in New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Hansberry’s friend Sidney Poitier was cast as the lead, Walter Lee Younger. As director he suggested Lloyd Richards. Directing jobs for black directors were scarce in the 1950s, and Richards, a Broadway actor and up-and-coming director, leaped at the opportunity to work on the play despite the fact that it was written by an unknown playwright (McKissack 73).

No New York theater would produce the show, so Rose and his coproducer David Cogan arranged for performances in New Haven and Philadelphia. Great reviews prompted the Schuberts to move the play to Hansberry’s hometown of Chicago and then to Broadway as soon as a theater opened up. *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway at the Barrymore Theater on March 11, 1959. It was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike. Competing against plays written by Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill, and Archibald MacLeish, *A Raisin in the Sun* won the 1959 New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. At just 29 years old, Lorraine Hansberry was the first African American, the youngest playwright, and only the fifth woman to win the coveted prize. In her acceptance speech she said, “I can not adequately tell you what recognition and tribute mean to the young writer. . . . One works, one dreams, and, if one is lucky, one actually produces. But true fulfillment

only comes when our fellows say: ‘Ah, we understand, we appreciate, we enjoy.’” (McKissack 80).

As with many plays that deal with complex social issues, *A Raisin in the Sun* caused controversy. Some critics argued that the themes were so universal that the family might as well have been white—a claim that Hansberry vehemently disputed—while others felt that the play was too centered on the black experience. Regardless, Hansberry’s career as a writer was established. Later that year, she was commissioned by NBC to write *The Drinking Gourd*, the first in a series of televised dramas about the Civil War. She chose slavery as her topic, the title based on a spiritual, “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” which communicated information about the Underground Railroad. Her intention was to create an honest portrayal of slavery and debunk the Hollywood myth about happy singing slaves. Although recognizing it as powerful and well written, NBC rejected the script as too controversial. The film was never made.

Her television and film career far from over, she was hired to write the screen adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Excited about her play’s reaching a wider audience but nervous about changes the studio might want to make to the script, Hansberry maintained rights to the project. In 1960 she completed the screenplay, and the studio made minimal changes. Shot in Chicago in 1961, *A Raisin in the Sun* starred Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee and premiered in Chicago to packed houses of both blacks and whites. The film was enormously successful. It was nominated for an Academy Award for best screenplay, and it won an award for Outstanding Human Values at the Cannes Film Festival.

The next two years were prolific for Hansberry. She wrote several new plays—*Les Blancs*, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (originally titled “The Sign in Jenny Reed’s Window”), *What Use Are Flowers?*—and several other works that were never produced. She became increasingly involved in politics, writing newspaper editorials, supporting activities of the southern freedom movement, even challenging then–attorney general Robert Kennedy on civil rights policies, and meeting the Black Power movement leader, MALCOLM X.

In June 1963, months after moving out of New York City to Croton-on-Hudson, Hansberry was diagnosed with cancer of the duodenum—part of the digestive system. While undergoing two surgeries, she continued her work, writing articles and lecturing. She also wrote captions for *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality*, a photojournal documenting the Civil Rights movement. Although she named Robert Nemiroff her literary executor in her will and continued to collaborate with him, the couple obtained a secret Mexican divorce in 1964. Her next play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened at the Longacre Theater on October 15, 1964, to mixed reviews. It was the first time a black playwright had written about white characters, and many people felt she had abandoned the black causes most identified with her work.

Hansberry was admitted to University Hospital the day after the play opened; she had lost her sight and had fallen into a coma. Nemiroff struggled to keep the play open, enlisting actors and friends to use time and money to keep the show running. Over the next several weeks, Hansberry improved. She regained her sight and spent the holidays in the hospital surrounded by friends and family. She lost her struggle with cancer on January 12, 1965. That night the curtain closed on *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* after 101 performances. Her funeral was held at a small church in Harlem on January 15, and she was buried in Croton-on-Hudson.

After Hansberry's death, Nemiroff dedicated himself to her work. In 1969, four years after her death, he published *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, a collection of her essays. He developed the book into a play, which opened at the Cherry Lane Theater in New York. The show toured nationally in 1970–72, reaching a wide and diverse audience and influencing many young writers. Nemiroff completed *Les Blancs* in 1970 and edited and published a collection of Hansberry's work, *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, which includes *The Drinking Gourd* and *What Use Are Flowers?* In 1973, Nemiroff produced *Raisin*, a musical based on *A Raisin in the Sun*, which won a Tony Award for the best Broadway musical.

***A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)**

Opening on Broadway in March 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* changed the course of American theater history. For the first time ever, theatergoers witnessed a Broadway play written by a black woman, which celebrated black culture and portrayed black resistance to white oppression across generations. This groundbreaking work opened the door for other African-American playwrights. It was a landmark in American theater—a trailblazer for black theater that allowed others to get work produced. Woodie King states in his 1979 *Freedomways* article, “To mention all of the artists whose careers were enhanced by their encounters with Hansberry and *A Raisin in the Sun* would read like a Who's Who in the black theater” (King 221).

Strongly influenced by Harlem Renaissance writers such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, Hansberry sought to overcome stereotyped images of African Americans, reclaiming interest and pride in ancestry, while avoiding the romanticizing and exoticism that writers of that period often exhibited. *A Raisin in the Sun* was originally titled “Crystal Stair,” based on a line from the Langston Hughes poem “Mother to Son,” in which a mother encourages her son to be strong even though life is a struggle. Hansberry abandoned the working title for a line in another Hughes poem, “Harlem.” In it Hughes asks the question, “What happens to a dream deferred / Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” While both titles are apt—the play is certainly about a mother-and-son relationship—unfulfilled dreams, dreams deferred, seem to be the central themes of the play, linking all the central characters. Mama Younger dreams of providing a safe home for her family, Walter Lee dreams of becoming a successful businessman, Ruth dreams of raising her children in a home with a yard for them to play in, Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor, while her boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, dreams of returning to Africa to be a leader for his people. The potential for her characters exists side by side with the reality of the life they live within their cramped apartment.

Set in the Youngers' apartment in Chicago's South Side Black Belt, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a domestic, or “kitchen sink,” drama. The Younger

family, Mama (Lena) Younger; her son Walter Lee and his wife, Ruth; their son, Travis; and Mama's daughter Beneatha all live in a roach-infested apartment, each chained to a low-paying service job—Walter a chauffeur, Ruth and Mama both domestics. A life insurance check for Mama's deceased husband, Big Walter, arrives, and their dreams of a better life become possible. Each character dreams of money. It is Mama's money, but in order to support Walter Lee and establish his role as the head of the family, she gives it to him to handle—asking him to put aside a certain amount for his sister, Beneatha's, medical school education. Tragically, Walter Lee uses all of the money to buy a liquor store and is swindled by an unworthy friend, a friend all of the family has cautioned Walter to distrust.

Hansberry's realistic style creates complex, distinct, flawed characters who allow readers to look beyond stereotypes and see “everyman” engaged in family conflict. The issues at stake in *A Raisin in the Sun* are more than the generational and marital conflicts in a family power struggle; they are about larger ideological conflicts and social issues: poverty, race, religion, women's rights, integrity, freedom, and cultural identity. In an interview about writing, Hansberry discussed how her works' realism demanded the imposition of a point of view, showing the audience not only what is, but also what is possible. In a period when many of her contemporaries were involved in the theater of the absurd, which laughs in the face of despair, Hansberry “strove for something more meaningful” (Carter 126).

The universality of the issues depicted in *A Raisin in the Sun* caused even those critics who praised it to misunderstand the central issue of race. Misinterpreting a Hansberry quote from a *New York Times* interview in which she stated that it was not a “negro play,” many critics began to write that the play could just as easily have been about a white family. Other critics believed that the play was a pro-integration statement. Hansberry was incensed. While she had focused on specifics to create universal truths, she felt very strongly that her play was about an African-American family, and not just an African-American family, an African-American South Side Chicago family. Attempting to clarify her vision, Hansberry

said, “The thing I tried to show was the many gradations even in one Negro family, the clash of the old and the new, but most of all the unbelievable courage of the Negro People” (Dannett 62). While she admitted that multigenerational self-sacrificing love was universal, she insisted that her play was intended to be a microcosm for the black experience in America. In a letter to her mother on the night of the play's New Haven opening, Hansberry wrote:

Mama, it is a play that tells the truth about people—Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people understand how we are just as complicated as they are—and just as mixed up—but above all, that we have among our miserable and downtrodden ranks—people who are the very essence of human dignity. That is what, after all the laughter and tears, the play is supposed to say. I hope it will make you very proud. (McKissack 77–78)

Hansberry refuted the charges of critics—black and white—that the central message of the play was assimilationist. Although Hansberry was from a middle-class family, she saw firsthand the tension between wanting to assimilate and maintaining pride in one's own culture. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Youngers want to move to the white neighborhood not to integrate but to stand firm against those people who want to keep them out because of their skin color. In “First Light of a New Day,” Aishah Rahman makes a claim for the essential blackness of the play: “Hansberry also realized that in order to possess a comprehensive world view, black writers must first look inward, and toward their own people. This was the seminal philosophy of the black arts movement of the '60s and made Hansberry the literary foremother of the writers of that period” (quoted in Carter 64).

Throughout the play the characters of Beneatha and Joseph Asagai weigh what it means to be African with what it means to be an African American. In exploring the idea of not truly belonging to either culture, the influence of Hansberry's mentor W. E. B. DuBois is clear. DuBois spoke of a double consciousness existing within the African-American population in his groundbreaking book *The Souls of Black Folk*:

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois 9).

Through the poetry of her characters' speech, Hansberry reveals information about them and adds depth to her drama. With the Younger family, she presents three generations of people with individual speech patterns, musical tastes, and religious beliefs. Yet all are survivors in an oppressive environment trying to make a better future for themselves. The language used for the different characters, black and white, are so accurate that they add authenticity, credibility, and a sense of realism. The variety of speech patterns for the characters reflects the variety of education, social level, interest, opinions, and awareness of oppression. It depicts the breadth of African-American culture. For example, the wisdom in Mama's speech to Beneatha after Walter Lee has lost her medical school tuition in his bad business scheme is accentuated by Hansberry's use of rhythm, repetition, and metaphor:

Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and your family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for him; what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well, then you ain't done learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest point and can't believe in himself 'cause the world done whipped him so. When you start to measure somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is. (135–136)

While most of the dialogue in the play realistically ranges from Mama's southern-influenced

dialect to Joseph Asagai's African colonial speech patterns, there is one expressionistic section. In the scene when Walter Lee returns home drunk and finds Beneatha dressed in a traditional Nigerian robe and performing a dance of welcome to recorded Nigerian music, he is drawn into the ritual himself, posturing as an African warlord, a man he might have been in a different country at a different time, saying: "Listen my black brothers. . . . Do you hear the screeching of the cocks in yonder hills beyond where the chiefs meet in council for the coming of the mighty war. . . . Do you hear the singing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies in the great houses . . . singing the sweet war songs? OH, DO YOU HEAR, MY BLACK BROTHERS!" (69–70). Through Walter Lee's poetic speech and Beneatha's interest in her African heritage Hansberry expresses her pan-Africanism on stage and suggests the importance of understanding one's heritage. Hansberry makes clear that African history is every bit as important to the Youngers and all African Americans as is European history to many European-Americans.

In contrast, when Walter Lee is considering sacrificing his integrity by selling the house back to Mr. Lindner, his speech and actions mimic those of the degrading American minstrel show of mid-1800s to early 1900s: "Captain, Mistuh, Bossman. A-hee-hee-hee! Yasssssuh! Great White Father, just gi' ussen de money, fo' God's sake, and we's ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo' white folks neighborhood." (134). In this scene Walter Lee's character hits an all-time low and his dialogue reflects his desperation.

In addition to dialect, Hansberry uses music throughout the play to explore, define, and encourage her characters. Jazz, blues, spirituals, and African tribal music are interjected throughout the play. At one scene's conclusion, when Mama feels down, she asks Ruth to sing her a spiritual, "Sing that 'No Ways Tired.'" That song always lifts me up so—" (38). Walter Lee finds relief from the stress in his life at the Green Hat, a little jazz bar: "You know what I like about the Green Hat? I like this little cat they got here who blows the sax . . . he's all music" (93). And a rare scene of tenderness between Ruth and Walter Lee depicts them slow dancing to a blues record.

A Raisin in the Sun has earned its place as a hallmark of American drama like that of ARTHUR MILLER's contemporaneous play *Death of a Salesman*. By exploring diversity and universal themes, presenting a variety of personal relationships and human aspirations, celebrating black music, history, and culture through the black perspective and black experience, Hansberry created a work of art that is as relevant today as it was almost 50 years ago. The central truth of the play that every individual must make his or her own life still speaks to audiences today: "What lifts the play, ultimately, into art of a high order is Hansberry's ability to set our imaginations on fire about the extraordinariness of ordinary people, and therefore of ourselves" (Carter 260).

For Discussion or Writing

1. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a classic American drama and as such it has been compared to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, both of which are family-centered dramas that deal with American identity and American culture. Thinking about both families and the central issues each play explores, write a well-developed essay that compares and contrasts the two plays.
2. How does Hansberry's use of language help identity and "deepen" her characters? Examine the differences in the dialects of Mama Younger, Walter Lee, Beneatha, and Joseph Asagai. How does their language inform the audience about their character?
3. Mama's plant is a powerful symbol in the play. What is its significance to Mama, to Ruth, and to the play as a whole?
4. It is very important to Beneatha to get in touch with her African roots. Many critics have suggested that her character is loosely based on Hansberry. On the basis of your knowledge of Hansberry's life, trace the autobiographical elements in the play and then write a persuasive essay that explores those connections. Be sure to indicate, in terms of your research, whether you believe Beneatha's voice speaks for Hansberry or not, qualifying every statement with details from the play and documented details from Hansberry's life.
5. Despite the threat of moving, the family seems upbeat at the end of the play. Considering that Hansberry herself was a victim of violence during integration, write an essay that accounts for the tone at the end of the play.

"On Summer" (1960)

Lorraine Hansberry drew on her life growing up in South Side Chicago as inspiration for much of her writing. "On Summer" is an autobiographical essay in which Hansberry reminisces about her childhood, recalling in particular her dislike of summer. She remembers waking from a nap in a dark, stifling room and feeling very hot as the root of her bias against the season. From that moment on, she harbored a dislike for all things summer, "the too-grainy texture of sand; the too-cold coldness of the various waters we constantly try to escape into, and the icky-perspiry feeling of bathing caps" (416).

Sections of this essay are included in *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, a compilation of selections of her plays, poetry, and writing. Assembled as a play by Robert Nemiroff, *To Be Young Gifted and Black* represents 20 episodes in Hansberry's life. The play toured nationally and was also filmed for television. It inspired a song, of the same title, in 1969 by Nina Simone and Weldon Irvine, Jr. In 1971, Aretha Franklin used the song as the cover for her album "Young Gifted and Black."

In "On Summer," Hansberry recalls the urban summers of her youth—days full of street games and jump rope songs like "Mary Mack" and nights spent on screened-in porches. When nights were especially hot, she and her family would go to the park and sleep under the stars. It may have been there that she learned the art of storytelling. "Those were, of course, the best times of all because the grown-ups were invariably reminded of having been children in rural parts of the country and told the best stories then" (416–417). Hansberry also describes a summer visit at age seven or eight to her elderly grandmother's house in Tennessee. On the drive down, her mother told her and her siblings how her father had hidden from his master in the very Kentucky

hills through which they drove. She recalls wondering about “masters” and what they might be like. She reminisces about meeting her aging grandmother, “She was born in slavery and had memories of it and they didn’t sound anything like *Gone With the Wind*” (417).

Despite these memories, it was not until she was an adult that Hansberry gained respect for summer. She met a cancer patient at a lodge in Maine whose tenacity, courage, and fighting spirit she very much admired. In speaking of her, she could be describing herself: “She had also been of [the] radical viewpoint all her life; one of those people who energetically believe that the world can be changed and for the better and spend their lives doing just that” (418). Hansberry found herself desperately wishing that the woman would live to see one more summer: “Through her eyes I finally gained the sense of what it might mean . . . the gift of another summer with its stark and intimate assertion of neither birth nor death but life at the apex; with the gentlest nights and, above all, the longest days” (419).

For Discussion or Writing

1. While “On Summer” is an autobiographical essay, Hansberry’s plays also contain biographical elements. Read “On Summer,” noting the many biographical details it supplies. Then read one of her plays. How does Hansberry use her own life in her dramas? With that in mind, write a well-developed essay on the relationship between history and fiction in the works of Lorraine Hansberry.
2. On the basis of what you know about Hansberry’s family life, why do you think that Hansberry was confused about who and what a master might be?
3. What is the effect of Hansberry’s colloquial language in the essay, such as *icky-perspiry* and *artsily-craftsily*? Does such language convey important aspects of Hansberry’s cultural experiences? Why or why not? With that in mind, why is it significant that Hansberry weaves such creative expressions in her analytical writings? What does this language suggest about Hansberry’s view of truth and understanding?
4. How do the abundant anecdotes and memories within the essay add to your understanding of the author’s childhood? How do they influence your understanding of her work as an adult?

The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality (1964)

“The main burden of Negro aspiration remains what it has always been: total integration into the fabric of a nation which our slave fathers helped to create. EQUALITY: economic, political, social, civil” (50).

The year 1963 was pivotal in the Civil Rights movement. As riots erupted in the South, Eugene “Bull” Connor, the police commissioner of Birmingham Alabama, responded with fire hoses and dogs. People across the nation joined organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC,) cofounded by Martin Luther King, Jr., to help effect policy change by increasing voter registration. Hansberry, along with JAMES BALDWIN and a select group of performers and activists, met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy to discuss civil rights. There are many different versions of what happened at the meeting. According to one source Hansberry asked for a moral commitment; however, when the talk turned to handing out weapons to aid in the struggle, Kennedy felt he had lost control of the meeting, and Hansberry, seeing that they were not getting anywhere, left.

It was a devastating year personally, socially, and politically for Hansberry. Baldwin and Hansberry were sharply criticized for their perceived militancy in the meeting with Kennedy. The Kennedy administration was popular among black southern voters, and many people did not want to alienate a government they felt was on their side. In addition to her cancer diagnosis, there was the bombing of a church in Birmingham, which killed four young girls; Medgar W. Evers, NAACP field secretary and war hero, was gunned down in his front yard; and President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. While Hansberry’s friends were attending the famous March on Washington, demonstrating for equal rights, more

jobs, and civil rights legislation, she was preparing for surgery. She listened to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech in her hospital bed. It was announced at the march that Hansberry's mentor, W. E. B. DuBois, had died in Ghana at the age of 95. As the Hansberry biographers the McKissacks state, "The sad irony, of course, is that many of the young civil rights volunteers who were there that day didn't even know who DuBois was or that their work was a fulfillment of his dream" (McKissack, 127).

The year 1964 was one of great social upheaval as well. That summer there were riots in major cities across America. Hansberry responded with *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality*, a photo documentary of the Civil Rights movement. Hansberry worked on the book between radiation treatments. Despite her weakness and deteriorating health, she remained a determined activist. Published by the SNCC in 1964, *The Movement* contains stirring commentary accompanying Danny Lyon's poignant photographs. The photos are of ordinary people, black and white, involved in the struggle for equality. There are photos of lynchings, sit-ins, demonstrations, and the effects of racial violence. The subjects are young and old, churchgoers, students, and protesters, all either victims of poverty and injustice or those demanding basic human rights, all emphasizing the historical background of injustice in the United States. She draws readers in with a variety of quotes ranging from southern ministers to Muslim doctrine, slave insurrectionists to NAACP chapter heads, everyday workers to leaders such as Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, and DuBois. Her commentary and Lyon's photographs of the rural South's inhabitants remind readers that racism is not the only cause of suffering and that poverty among both blacks and whites is a persistent problem that needs to be addressed.

Hansberry sums up the last photograph perfectly. It is a photo of a beautiful person whose short hair and high cheekbones make it hard to determine whether it is a young woman or a boy. Rain drips off the face as the eyes confront the camera with confident intelligence: "They stand in the hose fire at Birmingham; they stand in the rain at Hattiesburg. They are young, they are beautiful, they are deter-

mined. It is for us to create, now, an America that deserves them" (122).

For Discussion or Writing

1. *The Movement* opens with a quote from James Baldwin, "It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one can not deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own." What is the significance of that quote to the book?
2. How is *The Movement* different from Hansberry's other works? How is it similar?
3. Hansberry was influenced by two civil rights leaders with contrasting views, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. After exploring speeches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King (perhaps Malcolm X's "The Ballet or the Bullet" and King's "I Have a Dream"), write a well-developed essay in which you argue whose philosophy is reflected more strongly in *The Movement*?

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964)

Premiering on October 15, 1964, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* was Lorraine Hansberry's second and last Broadway play before her death three months later. Although terminally ill with cancer when the play went into rehearsal, she and a private nurse stayed in the nearby Hotel Abby Victoria so that she could attend rehearsals whenever possible.

Hansberry's strong commitment to the humanist tradition inspired her to produce art with a message. In a letter quoted in *To Be Young Gifted and Black* she states:

There are no plays which are not social and no plays that do not have a thesis. . . . The fact is—if (the playwright) really had nothing he wanted us to tell us; nothing he wanted to persuade us of; no partisanship he wanted to evoke—well, he wouldn't have written a play. (119)

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window is an "idea play" full of unpopular views on feminism, homosexuality, drugs, political corruption: ideas

nizations. While much of her advocacy was for the Civil Rights movement, Hansberry consistently wrote articles and letters supporting feminism, black liberation, world peace, and homosexual rights. In 1952, while working for *Freedom*, she attended the International Peace Conference in Uruguay, in the place of Paul Robeson, whose passport was seized by the State Department while the House Committee on Un-American Activities investigated him. Hansberry spoke with other feminists there and became more dedicated to speaking out about women's rights. Upon returning to America, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis—a lesbian organization. She contributed several letters to their publication, *The Ladder*, supporting the lesbian movement and applauding the publication as a crucial platform for women's publishing. Do you find evidence of Hansberry's personal progressive views in the characters of David, Iris, Mavis, and Gloria in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*?

2. Examine the work of Harlem Renaissance writers and thinkers: Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son" and "Harlem," Countee Cullen's "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks" and "Heritage," W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Paul Robeson's amazing career as an advocate for civil and international human rights, the political views of Marcus Garvey. What influences of their work do you see in Hansberry's oeuvre? Can you document the influence of her friends, family, and upbringing in South Side Chicago in her works?
3. The theater of the absurd is a type of drama and performance that conveys life devoid of meaning and purpose. The term was derived from an essay by Albert Camus and originally used by the critic Martin Esslin to describe the work of several playwrights, including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Jean Genet, whose works often portray human beings inhabiting a universe without meaning or purpose. While the prevalent literary style of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* is realistic, Hansberry includes a surrealist drug-alcohol-induced scene in act 3 involving Sidney, David, and Gloria. It is also noteworthy that the character of David Ragin, the playwright, is an absurdist. *What Use Are Flowers?*, a teleplay written in 1961, is a direct response to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. What does Hansberry seem to be saying about surrealism and theater of the absurd? How do the two plays differ in their treatment of, or reaction to, the principles of the theater of the absurd? How are they similar?
4. Hansberry was influenced by Bertold Brecht's play *Mother Courage*, in which Brecht employed a form of expressionism called epic theater. The goal of epic theater, also known as theater of alienation or theater of politics, is to alienate, to distance the audience from familiar situations, so that they watch the scenes more objectively. Characters in epic drama are archetypes or stereotypes, representing opposing sides of an argument. Brecht believed that presenting ideas and allowing the audience to judge them were only achieved by this "alienation effect." Unlike watching a realistic play, in which the audience can relax and suspend disbelief, Brecht wanted his audience to be aware that they were watching a play, and to remain at an emotional distance from the action. Write a persuasive essay that explores the influence of epic theater in Hansberry's late works: *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, and *What Use Are Flowers?*
5. In James Baldwin's book *The Price of a Ticket*, he discusses the lasting impact that Hansberry's work has had on American theater. How does her work foster conversations on race, politics, gender, family, and culture? How does Hansberry use her work as a platform for social change?
6. Compare Hansberry's drama to the other plays nominated for the 1959 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS's *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet*, and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* With your comparison in mind, define what makes Hansberry unique, and what qualities define her place in contemporary American drama.
7. In his article titled "Confrontation and Commitment: A Study of Contemporary American

Drama,” Christopher Bigsby states, “It was in 1959 that American playwrights, like their English predecessors, shed the chief liabilities of their earlier dramatic tradition and began to forge a new drama that could take its place with the most recent and important developments of Europe” (122). He specifically cites *A Raisin in the Sun* as one of the groundbreaking dramas that revealed a rejection of past American and current European models. Examples of classic American drama written before 1959 include Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Can you see a shift in “dramatic tradition”? How do these plays differ from *A Raisin in the Sun*? In what ways are the plays similar?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Carter, Steven R. *Hansberry’s Drama: Commitment amid Complexity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- Cheney, Anne. *Lorraine Hansberry*. Boston: Twayne, 1984.
- Dannett, Sylvia G. L. *Profiles of Negro Womanhood. Vol. 2: 20th Century*. Yonkers, N.Y.: Educational Heritage, 1966.
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003.
- Findlay, Robert R. “Confrontation and Commitment: A Study of Contemporary American Drama, 1959–66.” In *Educational Theatre Journal*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969.
- Hansberry, Lorraine. *Lorraine Hansberry: The Collected Last Plays*. Edited by Robert Nemiroff. New York: Random House, 1972.
- . *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.
- . “On Summer.” In *North Carolina Prentice Hall Literature: Grade Nine, Teacher’s Edition*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.
- . *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Random House, 1959.
- . *A Raisin in the Sun . . . the Unfilmed Original Screenplay*. Edited by Robert Nemiroff. New York: PLUME, 1992.
- . *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*. New York: Signet Books, 1966.
- . *To Be Young Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*. Adapted by Robert Nemiroff. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969.
- Hughes, Langston. “Harlem.” In *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. 3d ed. Edited by Alexander Allison. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970.
- King, Woodie, Jr. “Lorraine Hansberry’s Children: Black Artists and *A Raisin in the Sun*.” *Freedomways* 19, no. 4 (1979): 219–221.
- McKissack, Patricia C., and Fredrick L. McKissack. *Young, Black, and Determined: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*. New York: Holiday House, 1998.
- Reuben, Paul P. “Chapter 8: American Drama—Lorraine Hansberry.” PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap8/hansberry.html>. Accessed October 16, 2006.

Anne Slatton



ROBERT HAYDEN (1913–1980)

There is no such thing as black literature. There's good literature and bad. And that's all.

(Quoted in *American Poets since World War II*, edited by Donald J. Greiner)

Born August 4, 1913, Robert Hayden died on February 25, 1980, the day after an event celebrating his life and work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he had studied years before and had been most recently employed. While he had been too ill to attend, a group of old friends and former students caravanned to his home, where he briefly regaled them with his stories and his humor. The next morning he was dead. Hayden was a poet both vilified and honored, for more or less the same qualities. His work at its best has been described as readily accessible from the surface yet deeply complex as it is probed. His life was full of contradictions. He discovered late in his life that the name he had used throughout it had not been his own. And though he seems to have been greatly loved by his parents, both his birth parents and adopted ones struggled for his affections in ways that left him scarred and insecure. In his life as an artist, he also struggled first to find his voice, to make space for creating his poetry, and then to use his poet's voice according to his own internal lights regardless of the pressures around him. His was a life marked by struggle and conflict yet filled with achievement and grace.

Born Asa Bundy Sheffey, he knew himself as Robert Earl Hayden. After Ruth and Asa Sheffey separated, William and Sue Ellen Hayden of Detroit raised him from the time he was around 18 months old. The confusion about his actual name reveals the

type of unresolved tension that surrounded his early life. When he was in his 40s, his mother told him that his adoption by the Haydens had never been formal, so that his given name remained *Asa Sheffey*. Even though he was then an adult, this revelation shook Hayden deeply. Yet, as the poem he wrote in response to that revelation, "Names," reveals, these very tensions and contradictions became a rich source for his art.

From the beginning of his life, these tensions were manifest; his childhood, for example, was sometimes quite difficult. His family struggled at the brink of poverty "so harshened after each unrelenting day / that they were shouting-angry" ("Summertime and the Living . . ."). The Paradise Valley neighborhood he lived in was a ghetto that pulsed with the ugliness and variety of life, mostly unadorned. In several poems, most notably in "Elegies for Paradise Valley," he examines the characters and life he encountered there, from a dead "junkie in maggots" that he could see from his bedroom window to the "Godfearing elders, even Godless grifters [who] tried as best they could to shelter [the children] there." And still this place was full of richness and disregarded beauty like the sunflowers and the children. Added to the burden of the poverty surrounding him was Hayden's extremely poor eyesight. Until his death, he required thick "Coke-bottle" glasses. Because he was so nearsighted, he was never drawn to the kinds of sports and physical activities expected of boys, and he felt

that both the fathers in his life were disappointed in him. Yet this was also a mixed blessing. Lacking sports skills, living in the midst of harsh surroundings, and knowing an often-tense family life, Hayden retreated into books.

William Hayden ("Pa Hayden") was a laborer and a staunch fundamentalist Christian, a longtime member in good standing of the Second Baptist Church to which Hayden himself would belong while he was a member of that household. Pa Hayden forbade playing jazz and blues that Robert and Sue Hayden loved, on religious principle. And although he seems to have wished that his son would have spent a little less time in books, he always wanted Robert to "get something in his head" and did all he could to support Robert's efforts to get an education. Some of William Hayden's complexities are immortalized in one of Hayden's most frequently anthologized works, "Those Winter Sundays," in which Hayden reflects on his own limited understanding as a child:

What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?
(*"Those Winter Sundays"* ll. 13–14)

His relationship with his mothers was likewise complicated and fruitful. Rose Sheffey, his birth mother, introduced him to the arts and to a creative world beyond the poor streets of Paradise Valley, the Detroit neighborhood where he grew up. Even though her continued presence in his life caused tension, she also seemed to understand him best, helping him get music lessons initially and taking him to shows and entertainments when he visited her in Buffalo, New York. His adopted mother, Sue Ellen Hayden, had her own set of conflicts with her husband (William was her second husband), and she was also struggling with pressures that Hayden as a child did not understand. Yet turning his adult eye toward their conflicts, he produced another significant poem, "The Whipping." And in "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westfield," he provides insight into human motivation, the understanding he gleaned as an adult who had processed his childhood and transformed it into art, imagining a perspective lost on him as a child. He also credits her with intro-

ducing him to African-American history through the stories of her own previous life in the South and through family stories as well as through characters from folktales. This early introduction was the platform from which he launched into his studies of African-American history in earnest during his days working for the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) (1936–40). Throughout his career some of the most memorable poems he created were based on his continued exploration of African-American figures and history: "Middle Passage," "Frederick Douglass," and "Runagate, Runagate," to name only three.

As a black poet in the 1930s and as a child of a Detroit slum, Hayden aspired to leave the world of his youth and was blessed with a strong mind, a facile imagination, and good fortune. Hayden encountered minor miracles throughout his life. Being hired in 1936 by the Federal Writers' Project was one. But as early as his elementary school years, Hayden's passion for words drew attention and help. For example, he was lucky in the notice a public librarian took of the nearsighted boy who was so interested in books. According to Hayden, she would save books of poetry for him, and as he began writing himself, publishing in the local church and community newsletters and such, she would display his work. Added to that encouragement, a social worker observing his carrying books of poetry (one by Countee Cullen) as he stood in line for assistance talked to him about them. He told her that one day *he* would write a book. A few days later she showed up with information about a contact that might help him get into college. He made the contact and thus attended Detroit City College (now Wayne State).

Throughout Hayden's life, in fact, it seems that these "angels" appeared at critical junctures, unbidden. His first book *Heart-shape in the Dust* (1940) was published in a similar way. Another important intervention in his life occurred when he became a Ba'hai in the 1940s (for more information on this religion, consult www.bahai.org). His commitment to the precepts of his faith defined his worldview. Hayden also achieved one of his greatest honors—winning the Grand Prix de la Poésie at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966—through a kind of intervention. He had

not himself submitted his work for consideration. Rosey Poole, a scholar of African-American poetry residing in Great Britain, had been aware of his work and called it to the attention of a friend and colleague, Paul Breman, who published *A Ballad of Remembrance* in 1962. Dr. Poole intervened again when she realized that this work was not in the preliminary list. With help from Langston Hughes (another committee member), Hayden's work was included.

Yet each of these miracles, as it were, was accompanied by strife and difficulty. Although a librarian helped and encouraged him, he had to transfer to a special school for his early high school career because of his worsening eyesight. Yet in his senior year, he transferred again and ended his high school career with a poem in the school arts publication. His year of graduation, however, was 1930, the beginning of the Great Depression. There was no money for him to attend college, so he worked at whatever he could during the day and took night classes with William Hayden's permission. That preceded his attendance at Detroit College. The most dramatic contrast occurred in 1966, however. In the same year that he won the Grand Prix, he was publicly attacked as an "Uncle Tom" and "accommodationist" at the First Black Writers Conference held at Fisk University, where he had been teaching and nurturing aspiring writers for over 20 years. Black artists asserting the necessity of using the arts as a platform for furthering the cause of social justice were exasperated by Hayden's refusal to subordinate craft, from his point of view, to politics. But this attack—public and led by some colleagues and students—was as traumatic for him as winning the Grand Prix was exhilarating. In the last decade of his life, however, his efforts and achievements seem to have coalesced. He published three books of poetry in the 1970s—*Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1972), and *American Journal* (1978). He was also elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Poets in 1975, finally appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress in 1976–77—the first African American to be appointed to that position—and reappointed in 1977–78. Hayden also became a full professor at the University of Michigan and received

several honorary doctorates, among them one at Brown University.

Yet his health began to fail toward the latter half of the decade. Diagnosed with cancer by 1978, he had begun "to get his papers in order," though he was still accepting speaking engagements and hard at work on new poems. The University of Michigan and the Ba'hai community of Ann Arbor collaborated to honor him at "A Tribute to Robert Hayden," the event he missed because of a bout of influenza. Still, what people remembered on hearing of his death the following day were the wit and charm with which he entertained his guests the evening before.

Hayden's was a life distinguished by his devotion to art, specifically to poetry. By some standards his output is quite small—often the new poems in a volume numbered as few as 12 or 13. He published three volumes he later considered to be his "apprentice works," *Heart-shape in the Dust*, *The Lion and the Archer*, and *Figure in Time*. And though he continued publishing, mostly overseas, he took 27 years to place his work with a major American publisher. Throughout that time, however, his notebooks, papers, and, indeed, prior published versions of his work show the meticulousness he lavished on crafting his poetry. There are many revisions, sometimes quite subtle and other times more extensive. His biographers provide an index and insight into these changes. In the end, however, it is this dedication to craftsmanship that marks his work as distinctive and that rewards the careful reader's full attention.

"Frederick Douglass" (1946)

"Frederick Douglass" is a sonnet that ends Hayden's collection entitled *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962). It is part of a suite of poems focused on African-American history: "A Middle Passage," "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," and "Runagate, Runagate." The language is simple and direct, conversational yet lyrical. Some of the music of the poem results from his judicious use of repetition. For example, he repeats "this man . . . this former slave, this Negro." And at the end of his

catalog, he says again, “this man.” Each repetition lends emphasis and actually builds momentum.

The simplicity of the language also adds to its musical effect. The lines “this beautiful and terrible thing, needful to man as air, usable as earth” include no difficult words, no elaborate metaphors. Hayden makes his point about the fundamental or essential quality of freedom through his simple words and the two basic elements to which he compares freedom—earth and air. He tells us that everyone must have freedom to live. It should not be, in his estimation, something awarded only the lucky few, who have earned it or can afford it. It should be like the air we breathe or the earth we walk on and use.

Likewise the language of the poem is accessible to nearly everyone. The only two words perhaps not immediately recognizable are *diastole* and *systole*. Yet they describe the routine action of the heart muscle at work—expanding and contracting. So they extend the point he is making about freedom’s becoming as “instinctual” as the working of the body, not something to decide about or think about, something that just is. By his equation, if one is human, one is free.

Noteworthy, too, is the way he compresses Frederick Douglass’s life into these lines:

this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this
Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered.

Hayden captures the essential qualities of Douglass’s life in these phrases. He uses his situation as a former slave to call for the abolition of slavery. Douglass, the poem says, was no mere “do-gooder”: He had experienced some of the harshest realities of slave life, captured in the phrase “this Negro, beaten to his knees.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the poem, and then look at its parts. Use the punctuation to help you with your reading, espe-

cially the colon, semicolons, and periods. Using these marks to point the way, what seem to be the major divisions or ideas of the poem? How do they relate to each other?

2. Hayden’s use of sonnet form in “Frederick Douglass” has been compared to the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins. After reading and considering “Frederick Douglass” as a poem in its own right, select one of Hopkins’s sonnets (“Pied Beauty” or “God’s Grandeur,” for example) and try to find evidence of Hopkins’s influence on Hayden’s work.

“Homage to the Empress of the Blues” (1962)

“Homage to the Empress of the Blues” first appeared in what Hayden later called one of his “apprentice works,” *The Lion and the Archer*, a publication he collaborated on with Myron O’Higgins. He published six poems in that collection—one of them “Homage.” Although the poem appears in almost every subsequent collection of Hayden’s poetry, only the phrasing of the sixth line changes from “flashed her golden teeth and sang” to “flashed her golden smile and sang.” This one change, however, is an illustration of Hayden’s tinkering and searching for the exact word and image over the years. The smile represents the wonderful generosity of her art and its beauty.

The poem pays tribute to Bessie Smith, one of the most famous blues women. He captures her grace and bravado. Her yards of pearls, her satin and ostrich feathers, make a statement that defies the “riot-squad of statistics” about poor and working-class black women. Her elegance and poise despite the fact that she is singing “my man-done-me-wrong” songs counter the images those statistics present of black life. She cheers her audience with her golden smile and her stage presence, offering them a kind of model of “grace under pressure.”

Hayden called the poems from his early publishing period “baroque,” and if the diction of this poem is compared to that of “Frederick Douglass,” the differences are clear. For example, the

poem opens with the description of a man who is “gracile,” not a word in vernacular vocabulary. According to the dictionary, however, it means “of slender build in a charming or attractive way.” So, while Hayden’s use of this word shows a fondness for unusual words, it also shows his persistence in searching out words that carry exact meaning. *Gracile* seems perfectly to capture the type of man “dangerous as a jaguar” to women—beautiful, sleek, and predatory. Likewise, he uses the word *laths* later in the poem; a lath is a thin flat strip of wood, especially one of a series forming the foundation for the plaster of a wall or the tiles of a roof. Note that in the poem, these foundation strips are beginning to show through, highlighting the economic predicament of people who live in fear of those “statistics” used to devalue them. They fear “alarming fists of snow,” which suggest government intervention or interference from members of the dominant society. In other words, these folks are guilty of being black and poor and so, perhaps judged as “shiftless and lazy.” Thus, despite the unfamiliarity of Hayden’s word choices, they are considered choices. They each help emphasize the setting for the Empress’s performance and the community’s need for a presence like hers.

Robert Hayden pays homage to this empress because she not only sings the blues, turning anguish into art, but offers them as a live demonstration of how to transform life’s indignities—its poverty and pain—into beauty.

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem is structured with two “because” sections, each followed by a description of the woman singer. Look closely at each of these sections. What information does each contain? Then look at the sections that describe the singer. How does each description relate to the section it follows?
2. This homage is to a known blues singer, Bessie Smith. There are pictures of her, especially one frequently used for postcards, and so on. Find a picture and read some about her life, especially her life as a performer. Reread the poem after completing this research. What does that add to your reading and interpretation?

“Middle Passage” (1962)

“Middle Passage” illustrates Robert Hayden’s many poetic skills: his ability to craft a whole from many parts and effectively introduce many voices. It also employs his full narrative, dramatic, and lyrical abilities. Hayden began his research in 1941, shortly after completing his work as a writer for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), conducting much of it at the Schomburg Collection in New York. According to Pontheolla Williams, one of his biographers, four versions of this poem were published from 1941 to 1966, testifying to Hayden’s commitment to craftsmanship (Williams 81–82). “Middle Passage” provides multiple perspectives on the transatlantic slave trade, ending with the story of the *Amistad* revolt. In shaping the poem, Hayden labors to educate his readers—heart, mind, and soul—about the complex human perils and realities this story illustrates.

He establishes mood and setting from the poem’s opening gambit, a list of names of slave ships: “*Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy.*” As names with religious associations, they are ironic; they also call attention to the fact that several European countries, Spain and Portugal, among others, are deeply involved in the transatlantic slave trade. The additional ships’ names later in the poem—“*Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Anne,*” are notably English this time. They help establish the ironic tone of the poem and situate the narrative in the context of actual history.

After this opening, the first voice is heard—an observer/poet/speaker’s voice setting the scene:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
sharks following the moans the fever and the
dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:
voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

Readers are, thus, immediately plunged into the darkness and death of the slave ships.

Hayden also works throughout the poem to establish the complexities and tensions that surround this

venture from first to last without submerging us in sentiment. The strategy he uses most often here is to withhold focusing on the turmoil of the humans in the hold, focusing instead on that of the members of the crew. He evokes the “horror” of the slave ships almost entirely from the vantage point of the captain and crew rather than that of the enslaved Africans. We see and hear the mounting terror of crew members—fear of disease, of rebellion, of the hatred that cannot be “stared down.” The first direct experience readers vicariously participate in is provided through a ship’s log entry dated “10 April 1800.” In this section the writer describes the “terrifying sickness” that has “scratched sight from the Capt.’s eyes” and threatens the rest of the crew. So vivid is this description that the plight of the captives below decks is temporarily held at bay. This strategy, however, makes the point that participating in trading in human life has hellish consequences for everyone.

Hayden also supplies important information to help readers understand the magnitude of this trade. For example, he articulates its major motivation: “black gold, black ivory, black seed.” Trade in human cargo (African cargo, in this case) was a very lucrative enterprise at every point. Even at the point of purchase, it was a “good” business investment if done wisely and well because it could enable the owner to produce “homegrown” captives—those born into captivity. Then the owner, himself, could sell these people to earn a profit as well as to recoup his original investment. Still the reader grows increasingly aware of the cost—physical, mental, moral—of such business practices. Hayden communicates these difficult and distasteful realities through the language and structure of the poem.

One means by which he conveys the complex layers of this story is through his poet persona. Using this voice, he comments on the import or meaning of the details and events the poem communicates, such as in this refrain, a reworking of Ariel’s song in the first act of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
of his bones New England pews are made,
those were altar lights that were his eyes.*

These lines underscore the ironic ways in which Christianity is used in the service of enslaving other humans. Later in the poem, the voice states:

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,
their bright ironical names
like jests of kindness on a murderer’s mouth.

In this commentary we hear a tinge of bitterness and anger. But Hayden is careful to use this device sparingly. His aims are larger than simple protest; he aims to render a complex view of the many perspectives involved in this dark historical moment. Thus the structure of the poem operates as a camera with multiple lenses—drawing readers into individual perspectives then pulling back to provide a wider view.

Returning for a moment to the previously discussed ship’s log entry, readers can appreciate how this works. This entry provides a wider view:

10 April 1800—
Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
their moaning is a prayer for death,
ours and their own.

Through this quote, Hayden establishes certain “facts,” for instance, that rebelliousness and the longing for death of the enslaved were often conditions aboard slave ships. He uses words from the ship’s log to do so. Hayden thereby counters arguments from his own times that the conditions in which Africans were enslaved were mostly humane and that they were, if not content, at least docile and subservient. Thus he accomplishes another pedagogical goal.

He uses other narrative devices as well to tell the many stories intertwined here, such as the segments he offers from legal depositions. One of these, for example, provides the narrative of *The Bella Rose*. Through this segment, readers meet one of the two black individuals whose stories are offered here. This one is the story of a woman, named by the crew “the Guinea Rose.” It brings to life the conditions young women often suffered aboard these ships, ending, in this case, with fiery death, a mad captain, and the anonymous agony of the African men who remained

chained below deck. Yet Hayden limits the focus of this segment to that of the men “who fought to lie with her,” instead of her emotions and reactions. The story is all the more arresting because it is told in such a dispassionate voice.

Hayden also draws on the power of first person; moreover, he uses it to complicate the reader’s view. His first-person narrator is a man who has been a crew member on a slave ship for 20 years or more. The source for the disturbing historical details of African collusion and reciprocal greed in this tale of horror, the sailor tells the story of a chief derisively named *King Anthracite* by white slavers. This chief captures members of other tribes, murdering the old and sick and sending the young off to their horrific fate for “trinkets.” The lust for riches has driven both the sailor and the African chief into perpetrating these crimes, both men succumbing to this particularly virulent “tropical fever.” It is ultimately a very destructive one, eventually ending, in the case of the sailor/narrator, with the “melting [of] his bones.”

The narrative sections of Hayden’s poem are woven together with bits of hymns and prayers that further underscore the ironies of the material presented. For example, “Jesus Savior Pilot Me / Over Life’s Tempestuous Sea” functions on multiple levels. Certainly whoever finds himself or herself on a slave ship, as an enslaved man or woman, one of the enslavers, or an “innocent bystander,” needs spiritual and psychological guidance. And if the person offering up such a prayer is really one of the slavers, he needs more guidance than the words seem to request. In Hayden’s view, that person is “lost” ethically and morally. Someone literally lost on the tempestuous seas of the Atlantic Ocean might also offer these lines. Hayden’s language suggests all these possibilities simultaneously.

Finally, however, the poem arrives at its dramatic conclusion—the tale of the *Amistad* revolt. Hayden has once again made a surprising choice. Instead of using the point of view of the hero—Cinquez—Hayden tells the story in the righteously indignant voice of a Spanish officer, one of the two white survivors of the revolt. Hayden explains the horror of the revolt from the view of the white men slaughtered. The officer expresses outraged disbelief that

not only might such behavior be unpunished, but that Cinquez and his colleagues are being treated in any quarters as possible heroes. But at the end, the poet persona interjects: “The deep immortal human wish, the timeless will . . .,” arguing that the revolt expresses a deep-seated, desperate universal longing for freedom.

Hayden has created a complex, layered, multi-voiced poem. He allows us to experience the horrors of the Middle Passage from a variety of angles, showing readers its corrupting influence on all of its participants. Ending with “Voyage through death to life upon these shores,” he leaves us contemplating the quality of life all slavery’s survivors will encounter.

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem is a complex weaving of many threads. Try to follow just one of them, for example, just the sections with “Jesus Savior” throughout part 1 or just the italicized passages in parts 1 and 2. By looking at just one thread, what can you understand about what it is trying to say and why Hayden has woven it into the poem?
2. Select one of the stories from the poem. Who is telling the story? To whom? Why? How does that particular story fit in with the poem overall?
3. Both T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and Hart Crane’s “The Bridge” are said to have influenced “Middle Passage.” Choose one of these works and compare and contrast it with “Middle Passage.” Be careful to consider theme, language, structure, and tone, among other aspects.

“Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sundays” (1962)

“Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sundays” is part of a set of seven poems in *A Ballad of Remembrance* that people the landscape of Paradise Alley—where Robert Hayden grew up. In *American Journal*, his last published work, he includes an eight-part poem formally titled “Elegies for Paradise Alley,” which provides more specific portraits, but in these poems he begins chronicling the people and experiences he encountered there.

This poem mourns the death of a woman recognized in her community for the beauty of her singing, especially her church singing, on which her neighbors have depended. The manner of her death, gunshot wounds, stuns and saddens them, linking her death to something “Satan sweet-talked” her into doing. They mourn not only her passing but also because the way she died may bar her from heaven.

Although the poem tends toward narrative, we get only a slice of the story. We never know who the woman is exactly, only that she sang so beautifully, so powerfully, that she was considered God’s “fancy warbler.” The speaker asks, “Who’s going to make old hardened sinner men tremble now? . . . Who will sing Jesus down . . . ?” Clearly this is a loss felt by the whole community. This woman’s singing helped them in their “struggling along and doing without and being colored / all through blue Monday.” Who will take her place now? Where will they turn for that help now? Those questions are unanswered. Thus the poem comments, through the way it mourns the loss of this artist, the way art can function in people’s lives.

Its structure also imitates song, like a blues ballad while not strictly adhering to the blues form. The singer died on one of those “blue Mondays.” It also uses repetition in similar ways, as in the line “Who would have thought she’d end this way?” repeated at the end of each alternating stanza. And, as the blues does, it turns mourning into song.

Lord’s lost Him His mockingbird
His fancy warbler;
Satan sweet-talked her,
four bullets hushed her.
Who would have thought
she’d end that way?

The irony of the woman’s situation mimics the irony often found in blues lyrics as well. Although her art was powerful enough to lift her community toward the heavens, it fails her in the end. Whatever transcendence her Sunday singing created did not sustain her through her own troubled time in the weekday world.

More irony arises from the description of her lying in her coffin, looking so natural (as the phrase goes) “among the Broken Hearts and Gates Ajar” that are the symbols of death in this Christian community—the hearts representing the loved ones left behind as the deceased journeys into heaven through the open gates. But whether or not she will be permitted entry is in question in the poem. Thus the poem ends in lamentation—“Who would have thought, / who would have thought she’d end that way?” Unanswered, this final question hangs in the air.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the story that unfolds in this poem? What narrative details are missing? If you were investigating this for a news story, what would you try to find out besides what the poem reveals, as you interviewed the neighbors and church members? (Try to write that story.)
2. What do you notice about how Hayden has structured this poem—for example, how, when, and why does he use repetition? How does his technique affect how you respond to the story?

“Runagate, Runagate” (1962)

“Runagate, Runagate” is the fourth in the series of poems that end *A Ballad of Remembrance* focused on some aspect of the black experience of slavery. This is a two-part, multivoiced poem evoking the terror and trouble of those who ran away; part 1 focuses on the escape of anonymous persons while part 2 focuses on the heroics of Harriet Tubman, one of the most famous escapees. As “Middle Passage” does, “Runagate, Runagate” achieves some of its effectiveness through Hayden’s interspersing of actual quotes (this time from newspaper ads for runaways) with the voices of the runaways themselves as well as that of the speaker/observer.

The poem opens with the perspective of the runaway and the observer at the same time. The language of that opening recreates the runaway’s perceptions:

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into
darkness

and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
 and the hunters pursuing and the hounds
 pursuing
 and the night cold and the night long and the
 river
 to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning
 beckoning
 and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that
 somewhere
 morning and keep going and never turn back
 and keep going

The lack of punctuation creates a stream of consciousness perception of the mental state and emotional condition as well as the physical breathlessness of the pursued. While the perspective is that of the frightened runner (“the night cold and the night long and the river to cross”), the language is that of the speaker/poet (“darkness thicketed with shapes of terror”). Hayden effectively combines them to set the scene and establish the emotional pitch of the poem.

Hayden employs a number of poetic devices in this poem. Notably he introduces rhythm and emphasizes meaning through his use of another kind of repetition, as in the following:

Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air,
 five times calling in the ghosted air.
 Shadow of a face in the scary leaves,
 shadow of a voice in the talking leaves.

The repeated words add music while creating a kind of haunting echo that seems fitting for this scene, ghostly and unnerving. Yet the details (for example, the hoot-owl calling five times) are culled directly from Hayden’s research into accounts of slave escapes.

He weaves the poem together using narrative fragments, devices like repeating words (“Runagate / Runagate / Runagate”) and using lines from spirituals (“And before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave”), along with the quotes from the advertising sources. The narrative fragments create immediacy and build dramatic tension. In part 1, for example, the opening scene could be any runaway’s story, but

it seems specific, immediately involving us as readers and as runners ourselves. In part 2 we get an eyewitness account of someone traveling with Harriet Tubman, which provides a complex view of her courage and determination, echoed in and underscored by the last words of the poem: “Mean mean mean to be free.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. This is one of Hayden’s poems with several voices and different sources. Identify at least three of these specifically—that is, who is speaking? Or where is this segment quoted? Then discuss why it is used in the poem at a particular place. For example, “And before I’ll be a slave / I’ll be buried in my grave” is a segment from a Negro spiritual that ends “and go home to my Lord and be free.” It is often quoted in stories of escape and resistance. In this poem, it seems to be the voice of those running away from enslavement toward freedom, expressing their desperate desire to be free.
2. Look at parts 1 and 2 of this poem. What is the focus of each? How are they connected?
3. How does the poem capture the personality or character of Harriet Tubman? Are you surprised by the way she is depicted here? Why or why not?

“Summertime and the Living . . .” (1962)

Robert Hayden crafts this poem in contrast to the well-known song from the musical *Porgy and Bess*. In the original, the phrase is “Summertime and the living is easy.” It is a song that offers up a vision of black life, even for poor blacks, that is a romantic illusion, full of good food, love, laughter—all to be had for the asking. In the course of the musical (and the DuBose Heyward book on which the musical is based), bad things do happen, love is thwarted, and “living” is seen to be more complicated than the song allows. The version of poor black life offered from an outsider’s perspective misses some critical observations. Hayden’s poem is a corrective.

Hayden first published this poem in one of his “apprentice works,” *Figure of Time*. Looking at the

changes he made, changing the line breaks, the stanza breaks, and a word here or there, provides insight into his effort as craftsman. For example, in the original:

Nobody planted roses, he recalls,
but sunflowers gangled there
sometimes, tough-stalked and bold
and like the vivid children there unplanned.

There circus-poster horses curveted
in trees-of-heaven above
the quarrels and shattered glass
and he was daredevil rider of them all.

As it exists in the more widely distributed later version, these two verses are one verse; he changes *daredevil* to *bareback*. But notice the difference the changes in line breaks make:

Nobody planted roses, he recalls,
but sunflowers gangled there sometimes,
tough-stalked and bold
And like the vivid children there unplanned.
There circus-poster horses curveted
in trees of heaven
above the quarrels and shattered glass,
and he was bareback rider of them all.

The flower imagery—the roses and the sunflowers—provides symbols of economic status. The roses are equated with “deariness” both economic and emotional—requiring the luxuries of time and resources to plant and nurture them. Thus they are available to community members only in death:

No roses there in summer—
Oh, never roses except when people died—

The sunflowers, on the other hand, grew unbidden, unplanned, like the children who grew there—“tough-stalked and bold.” Hayden has employed this symbol in other poems, notably in “Sunflowers, Beaubien Street,” from his first publication, *Heartshape in the Dust*. Again, the distinctive qualities

include the ability to grow and even prosper in unlikely soil, uncultivated—yet be both beautiful and strong if not highly valued.

In fact, a major theme of this poem is the undervaluing of the lives of the occupants of this community. If the children grow and develop largely unattended, it is because the difficulties of living have so stripped the adults, both emotionally and physically.

no vacations for his elders,
so harshened after each unrelenting day
that they were shouting-angry.

Yet the members of this community retain their dreams, embodied in Jack Johnson and his diamond limousine and in their “fantasies of Ethiopia spreading her gorgeous wings.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem recalls the summertimes of Hayden's childhood. What is the tone of those recollections—happy? sad? angry? bewildered? amused? Or some other set of emotions? Or some mix of emotions? What are the details that support your evaluation?
2. This poem uses the title of a famous song from the opera *Porgy and Bess*. Find out about the opera and find the lyrics to the song “Summertime” itself. Compare and contrast Hayden's “Summertime” to the one in the song.

“Those Winter Sundays” (1962)

“Those Winter Sundays” is an often-anthologized Hayden poem. It offers a portrait of a boy's perception of his father, which seems to be based on Hayden's own boyhood. He captures both the attitude of the boy and the adult looking back at his behavior.

The first verse sets the Sunday morning scene, brittle with cold, as the father rises to warm the house for his family. The details are significant—the cold is “blueblack,” the father's hands cracked and aching. But he is silent—no complaint, no comment. Yet, “No one ever thanked him.”

In the second verse Hayden develops the scene with more sensory impressions. This time, the speaker can “hear the cold splintering, breaking.” He points out that his father called for everyone to get up only after “the rooms were warm.” But he explains his own slow response, “fearing the chronic angers of that house.” The speaker here struggles to sort out his feelings as he remembers those days. His father was apparently a good man, responsible and willing to work hard, with cracked and aching hands to provide a physically warm place for his family. But what about these “chronic angers?”

That takes us as readers to a line from another poem in this collection. In “Summertime and the Living . . .,” just two poems earlier, Hayden has described “elders, so harshened after each unrelenting day / that they were shouting-angry,” one way to account for the “chronic angers.” Then again in the very next poem, “The Whipping,” the speaker describes a woman whipping her son until “[she] leans muttering against / a tree, exhausted, purged— / avenged in part for lifelong hidings / she has had to bear.” All three of these poems include this recurring imagery of violence perpetrated on the young as vengeance for the violence life has perpetrated on these adults. So readers’ sympathy is quickened for the boy described in the poem.

But in the final verse, Hayden undercuts our nearly stereotypical and easy sympathy:

Speaking indifferently to him,
 who had driven out the cold
 and polished my good shoes as well.
 What did I know, what did I know
 of love’s austere and lonely offices?

In these few lines, he captures the self-centeredness of youth and the pathos of both adult and child locked in miscommunication. Polishing his son’s shoes goes beyond the expectation of “manhood,” in providing warmth for the family. It is arguably a tender gesture. The father can offer only these tender acts against his “chronic angers.” Yet the boy is indifferent to the father’s acts of tenderness. Neither seems to understand the other.

So the poem ends hauntingly, repeating, as if the speaker himself not only regretful but slightly bewildered and chagrined by the insensitivity of youth. He repeats his question, “what did I know, what did I know . . . ?” And we, too, are challenged to ask ourselves what signs we have been missing. What acts of love have we failed to see?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Hayden starts this poem in the middle—“Sundays, too. . . .” Why? What does that reveal about the character of the father and the life this family lives?
2. What is the overall emotional tone of this poem? What details lead you to that conclusion? How do words like *indifference*, *chronic angers*, and *austere* contribute to that tone? Why?

“Tour 5” (1962)

“Tour 5” is placed directly after the title poem, “A Ballad of Remembrance,” which is set in New Orleans during Mardi Gras and recounts Hayden’s earliest confrontations with race in the complicated social structure of that southern city. In “Tour 5,” however, a seemingly simple incident, stopping at a small town gas station to fill up the tank, becomes another occasion for confronting racial hatred. The man who serves them is “a rawboned man / whose eyes revile us as the enemy.” This hatred is underscored by the beauty of the day on a drive that “winds down through autumn hills / in blazonry of farewell scarlet / and recessional gold.” The physical beauties aside, though, the landscape already reveals past violence; the villages he and his companion pass with names like *Choctaw* and *Chickasaw* “are all that’s left” of these cultures. Readers are forced to contemplate the reasons for the disappearance of these Native Americans. They must also ask who occupies this beautiful land now.

One answer appears in the next verse, images of both the “rawboned man” and “Confederate sentinels” who guard these towns. But whom are they guarding against? What are the guardians protecting or preventing? Hayden never directly addresses these

questions. Instead he turns the reader's attention to the speaker's reaction as the journey continues.

Shrill gorgon silence breathes behind
his taut civility
and in the ever-tautening air,
dark for us despite its Indian summer glow.
We drive on, following the route
of highwaymen and phantoms.

Hayden articulates the growing sense of dread as well as his sense of shock at being hated so impersonally yet so immediately. The very air seems poisoned by this hatred; violence seems barely restrained. The line "dark for us despite its Indian summer glow" also suggests a certain sadness that such ugliness exists to mar what should be a simple loveliness.

So the poem drives on to its conclusion—invoicing slavery and the bloody Civil War. Hayden also calls our attention to the continued marks of that racism—the poverty of "the kindling porches" despite the children who wave to him and his companion from that vantage point. The whole incident has left a bad taste in the speaker's mouth, recalling as it does the blood and anguish ironically underscored by the lushness of the landscape—"its brightness harsh as bloodstained swords."

Ultimately, it is not a protest poem, rather one marked by bewilderment and sadness. It contrasts the gloriousness of the natural world with the ways humans disfigure that loveliness through their hatreds. It is a poem that leaves the reader, like the poet, wondering, "Why?"

For Discussion or Writing

1. Locate the route Hayden traces in "Tour 5." He begins in the South (Georgia). What towns might he have traveled through? Explore the history of the Choctaw and Chickasaw relative to this trail. How does this information help you understand the poem?
2. Hayden paints a picture of his physical surroundings using specific words. Think about the following ones carefully. Why *blazonry*? Why *recessional*? Why *gorgon*? Why *flayed*? Find out the definitions of these words and discuss their connotations as well. Notice where they are used in the poem.

"The Night-Blooming Cereus" (1972)

The title poem from Hayden's 1972 collection includes seven new poems, meditations on the mysterious connections between art and life. For example, "Richard Hunt's 'Arachne'" focuses on the moment of Arachne's transformation from human to spider—caught in Hunt's sculpture. The description of Arachne's change might easily be applied to the work of any artist—"godly vivisection, husking her / gutting her, cutting hubris its fat and bones away." Good art, the reader may assume, attempts that type of change. In addition, "The Peacock Room" contemplates:

"Ars Longa Which is crueler
Vita Brevis life or art?"

That poem sketches the conflict of two men—artist and benefactor—pitted against each other in the creation of this artwork. It presents the irony that the creation has outlived the creators and the conflict itself. The poem ends by identifying art as a "portal" to the even greater mystery of life's meaning.

As part of these meditations, the title poem of the collection focuses on the mystery of creative energy and purpose. The poet and his wife await the blooming of the cereus, which blooms only one night. The poet's attention is directed to the powerful life force of this plant: the mystery of its blossoming, the purpose and source of its alluring scent, not intended for humans. What is the key to its mysterious timing? The cereus seems to respond solely to some deep calling of its own, a response like that of an artist.

The speaker is forcefully attracted to, yet repelled by, "the heavy bud . . . on its neck-like tube." He charts his reactions—a mix of wonderment, uneasiness, and near-dread captured in his description of it as a "snake, eyeless bird-head, beak that would gape with grotesque life-squawk," a birth image. One assumes art, too, in its initial phase is sometimes awkward, perhaps even off-putting. Hayden's description of the plant's preparatory phase, "impelled by stirrings within itself," again evokes comparison to the workings of creativity—alien to some, even slightly disturbing.

Yet not everyone is affected in this way, even by the initial phases of art or life. The speaker notes the difference between his own reaction and that of his wife, who waits with him:

But you, my dear,
conceded less to the bizarre
than to the imminence
of bloom. . . .

He waits in mild apprehension, she in anticipation.

Once the perfume announces that the cactus has bloomed, however, both “dropped trivial tasks and marveling beheld at last the achieved flower.” Yet, in the midst of their celebration, they were aware that the opening of the bloom also signaled its dying.

Lunar presence,
foredoomed, already dying,
it charged the room
with plangency

older than human
cries, ancient as prayer. . . .

So the poem confronts the mystery of all life—all creation dies. Yet this moment is preserved in art. Perhaps one purpose of art, then, as the poems in this collection suggest, is to challenge the brevity, the impermanence of life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem describes waiting for the blooming of this specific plant. Find out what you can about the plant. How does Hayden’s poem convey that information? What does the poem talk about beyond that? Examples?
2. Notice the difference between the ways the two people in the poem await the blooming of this plant. Why do you think Hayden calls the reader’s attention to this difference?
3. Hayden seems to pay close attention to flowers and other natural phenomena. Select one of his other poems that also uses imagery from the plant world to compare and/or contrast the way he uses the cactus in this poem.

“Free Fantasia: Tiger Flowers” (1975)

Published in *Angle of Ascent*, “Free Fantasia” memorializes another African-American figure whose identity and significance had been overlooked and lost within the dominant culture. Tiger Flowers was an African-American middleweight boxing champion in the mid-1920s, who was very successful but died young (32). Flowers is significant because of what he represents, a time of great optimism and excitement for many Americans but particularly for the many African Americans who migrated to major cities in the North. The Harlem Renaissance was at its height in New York with counterparts in Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. The sense that the race was “on the move” was heightened by the successes of figures like Flowers, whose triumphs and sumptuous style of living were the news of the day. Hayden uses Flowers’s life and early death to communicate that shared hope, excitement, and eventual disappointment.

First, he evokes for us the excitement and optimism of his childhood spent partially in his “secret” work for the prostitutes of Paradise Alley—otherwise seen as the slum of his youth. He captures the sense of being drawn to and touching the forbidden. (His strict father, who disapproved of even the jazz and blues of the day, was totally unaware of the young Hayden’s adventures.) He runs errands for the larger-than-life, exotic figures Stack-o-Diamonds, Eula Mae, and Miss Jackie. Demonstrating his poetic exactitude, he calls these women “Dixie odalisques.” An odalisque is a woman at the bottom of the social pool in a harem. She is the servant to women who are concubines but may, if talented or beautiful enough, someday rise to become a concubine herself. That is the actual status of these women in the larger context of the American scene.

The fantasia of the title is exact as well. Each person is caught up in fantasy—the child persona who “thought such gaiety could not die,” the women “speeding through cutglass dark to see the macho angel,” and the whole African-American community who through their fantasies indulge in Flowers’s successes and luxurious life, part of their dreams for themselves—beautiful, exciting,

portray? Do your feelings toward the characters portrayed remain the same after reading the poem two or three times, or do they change? What elements of the poems themselves affect either reaction?

4. Examine closely two poems in which Hayden focuses on one of the visual arts—"Monet's 'Waterlilies'" or Richard Hunt's "Arachne." Look at the artwork he uses then consider what his poem using that work is saying. Next compare and contrast his use of these artworks (for example, thematically or technically).
5. "The Peacock Room" is a meditation on art, life, and the world. Read Hayden's work first, research the history of the room itself, then reread the poem. How does the poem change for you after completing your research?
6. Select one of the following—*The Night-blooming Cereus* or *Angle of Ascent*. Read the whole work and think about how Hayden has put that particular collection together. Choose two or three poems from the collection that seem to "speak to" each other. Discuss them in that light.
7. *Words in the Mourning Time* was originally published in 1970. Research the times (the late 1960s) immediately prior to its publication date. Discuss one of the poems in this collection that seems to respond to something you uncover in your research.
8. In *A Ballad of Remembrance*, the collection ends with several poems that address moments in black history. These are "Middle Passage," "O Daedulus, Fly Away Home," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Runagate, Runagate," and "Frederick Douglass." Select any one of these and examine the historical events connected with the poem. After completing the research, return to the poem. How has your reading of it changed?
9. How does reading one of the black history poems listed change when it is considered as part of a group of poems about slavery and black history?
10. Hayden has two complete groupings of poems that are responses to specific places: One is the section entitled An Inference of Mexico

from *A Ballad of Remembrance*; the second is entitled Elegies for Paradise Alley in *American Journal*. Choose one of these groupings and discuss how he uses place in these poems. For example, what descriptions of place can you find? Then how do the details of place help the reader understand the characters he presents in those places?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- American Poets since World War II*. Vol. 2, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Edited by Donald J. Greiner. Detroit: Gale Research, 1980.
- Fetrow, Fred M. *Robert Hayden*. Boston: Twayne, 1984.
- Glaysner, Frederick, ed. *Collected Poems: Robert Hayden*. New York: Livewright, 1985.
- . *Collected Prose: Robert Hayden*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.
- Goldstein, Laurence, and Robert Chrisman, eds. *Robert Hayden: Essays on Poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Harper, Michael S., and Robert B. Stepto, eds. *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art and Scholarship*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Hatcher, John. *The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1984.
- Hernton, Calvin. "The Passion of Robert Hayden." *Obsidian: Black Literature Review*. Robert Hayden issue, edited by Michael S. Harper. 8, no. 11 (Spring 1981) 176–181.
- "Reading Guide: Robert Hayden." *Poetryfoundation.org*. Available online. URL: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/feature.guidebook.html?id=177415>. Accessed May 10, 2007.
- "Robert Hayden." *Poets.org*. 1997–2007. The Academy of American Poets. Available online. URL: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/196>. Accessed May 10, 2007.
- Williams, Pontheolla. *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Deborah James



JOSEPH HELLER (1923–1999)

War is no comedy; it's a tragedy. . . . People find things to laugh at in *Catch-22* and probably they will in the play, but that's just because laughter is part of life. The things I write are funny only up to a point. Actually I am a very morbid, melancholy person. I'm preoccupied with death, disease and misfortune.

(Interview with Elenore Lester, *New York Times*, 3 December 1967)

The novelist, satirist, short story writer, playwright, and screenplay writer Joseph Heller is best known for *Catch-22* (1961), a postwar novel filled with dark humor that lampoons government bureaucracy, big business, and the military. This novel, along with the work of his contemporaries KURT VONNEGUT and Thomas Pynchon, inaugurated a new era of sociocritical, ironical literary responses to the cold war, post-World War II consumerism, and, eventually, the Vietnam War. Heller holds the honor of introducing a new phrase to the American vocabulary: *Catch-22*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, denotes “a supposed law or regulation containing provisions which are mutually frustrating [or . . .] a set of circumstances in which one requirement [is] dependent upon another, which is in turn dependent upon the first.” This concept, used to characterize how individuals get trapped in the contradictory and absurd machinations of modern bureaucracies, forms the novel's central trope and a dominant theme in Heller's works. Although Heller's subsequent 10 novels, autobiographical memoirs, and plays never received the critical success of his first novel, *Catch-22* is a landmark work in 20th century American fiction that has sold over 18 million copies and continues to be taught and read in high schools and colleges across the United States.

Heller was born on May 1, 1923, to Russian Jewish immigrants, Lena and Isaac Heller, in Brooklyn,

New York. Lena knew very little English, so little that Heller and his two older siblings, Sylvia and Lee, had to coach her so that she could be eligible to vote. Isaac, an agnostic socialist, drove a delivery truck for a bakery until he bled to death after having surgery when young Joseph was five. Heller later recalled in his autobiography, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here* (1998), the profound effect his father's untimely departure had on his psyche: “I was biting my fingernails at the age of seven. And except for two hospital confinements very much later, during which my anxieties were focused on inescapable concerns, I have gone on biting them and still do” (14). These anxieties about death, which preoccupied Heller's mind at a very young age, are reflected in the preoccupations of his protagonists, such as John Yossarian in *Catch-22* and *Closing Time* or Bob Slocum, the narrator of *Something Happened* (1974).

Growing up in moderate poverty amid the ocean beaches and amusement parks of Coney Island, Heller became familiar with the nature of public spectacles, confidence tricks, and rampant capitalism at a young age. On the decline as a tourist destination for Heller's entire childhood, many of the rides and prize stands that populated Coney Island prospered by luring customers to spend money for things of inferior value. As Heller later recalled: “All of this [provided] practical, worldly knowledge that taught us to always look for fair value for money. We also learned at an early age a fact of capitalism that directed us toward

the antithetical principal that it is usually impossible to obtain fair value” (*Now and Then* 51). The contradictory and absurd nature of the predicament consumers found themselves in at Coney Island made a strong impression on Heller. The barkers, who would walk up to passers-by and offer to guess their age, weight, occupation, or other personal information, provided another bit of “practical, worldly knowledge” for the young Heller, who described the spectacle as follows: “The fact was that the barker could never lose. He knew no more about the tricks of the trade than you do, but he always came out ahead, right or wrong, because the customer could never win . . . [because] the prize at stake invariably cost him less, considerably less, than the patron had spent to win it” (51–52). As David Seed has observed, Heller’s comic and absurd vision of the world seems to have been partially gleaned from the showmen who populated his childhood.

Since his siblings already had jobs in Manhattan, Heller had many hours alone at the family apartment to read whatever was available, which included short stories and essays from magazines like *Collier’s*, *Liberty*, and the *New Yorker*. Heller also loved the novels of the British humorist P. G. Wodehouse and the humorous writings of Robert Benchley. Heller attended and graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn. During his years there he distinguished himself as an especially creative student. Early signs of Heller’s artistic leanings include a book report he wrote on Mark Twain’s novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) that was written from Tom Sawyer’s perspective, and an autobiographical, first-person account of the metal used to make the gun that killed Abraham Lincoln (*Now and Then* 15). Heller recalls, “I was born, I remember, in a mine in Chile, in a shovelful of iron ore” (15). These ambitions to write prompted Heller, then 16, to submit a short story inspired by Russia’s recent invasion of Finland to various periodicals. Following the valiant efforts of a lone Finnish soldier trying to fend off Russian invaders, it was rejected.

After graduating from high school in 1941, Heller enrolled in night school at Brooklyn College. Before classes commenced, he dropped out, favoring the

nocturnal social life New York afforded him. In the year that followed, Heller worked various jobs, most notably as a file clerk for a casualty insurance company—an experience he was later to revisit through Bob Slocum’s character in *Something Happened*—before joining the Army Air Corps in 1942.

Stationed with the 488th Squadron of the 340th Bombardment Group at Alisan, Corsica, during the height of World War II, Heller served as a wing bombardier in the twin-engine, medium-range B-25 bomber. From their sunny Mediterranean base, the 488th was assigned to bomb rail and highway bridges in support of the Allied advance through France and Italy. Heller eventually flew 60 missions in the flak-laden skies of southern Europe. Many of the harrowing events John Yossarian, the antihero of *Catch-22*, lives through actually happened to Heller during his time in combat. At first, the routine risks of flying over heavily defended cities did little to affect Heller’s psyche: He remembered these early brushes with potential disaster as like “a fantasy nightmare from which I had luckily escaped without harm in my trusting innocence, like an ingenious kid in a Grimm fairy tale” (*Now and Then* 178).

On August 15, 1944, the day allied forces landed at Normandy, Heller’s squadron incurred heavy casualties during a bombing run on the bridges at Avignon in southern France. After his copilot became temporarily crazy, purposefully diving the plane back into the clouds of flak they had just escaped, Heller had to attend to a wounded fellow crew member. This mission changed the face of the war for Heller, shattering his fearless innocence and serving as the basis for one of the climactic scenes in *Catch-22*. Heller was terrified of flying for the rest of his life, electing to return to the States in a troop carrier when his tour of duty finally ended. In his time overseas Heller was promoted to lieutenant, earning an Air Medal and a Presidential Unit Citation.

After completing his 60th mission—under the protective cover of extra armored vests—Heller had to wait in Alisan for his orders, spending much of his time in front of a borrowed typewriter writing short stories. Although he emulated the works of authors familiar to Heller at the time, such as the novelists

Ernest Hemingway and Jerome Weidman and short story writers William Saroyan and Irwin Shaw, these efforts little resembled the semiautobiographical narratives for which he would become famous. The only surviving work from this period, "I Don't Love You Anymore," chronicles the return of a married serviceman from combat duty and his realization that he no longer loves his wife. His first published work, the 2,000-word piece appeared in the publication *Story* in 1945.

Upon his return, Heller married his affluent girlfriend, Shirley Held, whom he had met at a resort in the Catskills when on leave from the Air Corps, and boarded a train bound for Los Angeles, where he pursued an English degree at the University of Southern California under the GI Bill. Encouraged by his composition instructor Maurice Baudin and the *Story* editor Whit Burnett, Heller wrote a series of fiction and nonfiction pieces and submitted them for publication. Eventually, *Esquire* magazine accepted his short story "Beating the Bangtails," under the title "Bookies, Beware!" (1947). Heller had written the story, a vignette on winning bets on horses at the track by utilizing "pure science," for a freshman composition course. Ironically, the \$200 Heller received for the essay was quickly lost at the track.

Transferring to New York University, Heller continued writing for *Esquire* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, publishing another four stories before he completed his B.A. in 1948. Heller spent the next two years earning his master's degree in English at Columbia University and studying overseas at St. Catherine's College, Oxford, as a Fulbright Scholar. These academic achievements earned him a place on the English faculty at Pennsylvania State College upon his return. Life as an academic proved to be unpalatable to the author, who, after only two years of teaching, decided to move into advertising, accepting a copywriter position at a small advertising agency in 1952. Over the next nine years Heller held various advertising positions at *Time*, *Look*, and, finally, *McCall's*. This prolonged exposure to corporate culture and office politics would eventually form the basis for Heller's second novel, *Something Happened* (1974).

It was during this nine-year stint in advertising that Heller composed his first novel and master-

work, *Catch-22*. In 1955 Heller got the first chapter of *Catch-22* (then entitled *Catch-18*) published in the anthology *New World Writing* #7, a collection that also contained an excerpted chapter from JACK KEROUAC's novel-in-progress *On the Road* (1957). Three years later, he signed a contract with Simon and Schuster for the publication of *Catch-18*, then only one third finished. As the 1961 publication date approached, Heller's editor noticed that a prominent science fiction writer, Leon Uris, was due to publish a novel entitled *Mila 18* the same year. To prevent confusion, Heller chose the number 22 instead, a number that, Heller admitted, fit the novel better since repetition is such a significant device in the narrative.

Despite Heller's obscurity in the publishing world and to the reading public, *Catch-22* enjoyed early financial success as an "underground" hit, partly due to an extensive publicity campaign by the publisher. Critical reception was polarized, with critics such as Whitney Balliet decrying the unconventional and repetitive style of the novel in his review for the *New Yorker*. Others took issue with the unpatriotic attitude of Heller's deserting protagonist or the irreverent sexual references sprinkled throughout the narrative. Nonetheless, many reviewers heaped praise upon Heller's first published effort, as Robert Brustein, in the *New Republic*, proclaimed it to be "one of the most bitterly funny works in the language."

Soon after it became obvious that he could make a living by the pen, Heller quit his promotions manager job at *McCall's* and devoted his full attention to writing. While it took 14 years for Heller to write his next novel, *Something Happened* (1974), he wrote several dramatic works in the intervening years. In 1967, Heller's two-act play, *We Bombed in New Haven*, was produced at Yale. The play contains many allusions to other wars and creates an overall sense of disconnection: The actors play actors who believe they are performing roles as air force servicemen in an unnamed modern war. The action of the play includes both actors performing roles and scenes where the actors reflect on the roles they are playing, thus highlighting the fictional nature of the work. Here Heller casts a wide net, reflecting upon the fictional nature of war news, the way informa-

tion about combat is withheld from both servicemen and the public, and voices a strong antiwar message at the height of the Vietnam War. Heller also created a dramatization of *Catch-22* in 1971, and *Clevenger's Trial*, a one-act play drawn from the eighth chapter of the novel, a flashback in which Yossarian recalls Lieutenant Schiesskopf's fascination with military parades.

Heller's second novel, *Something Happened*, depicts the business world through the eyes of Bob Slocum, who, through dreams and memories, tries to understand what has made him who he is: the "something" that "happened" to him. Through Slocum, a business manager experiencing a midlife crisis, Heller critiques corporate business culture, depicting the vacuous nature and spiritual bankruptcy of upper-middle-class American life. With his next novel, *Good as Gold* (1979), Heller presents a parody of the American Jewish novel through Bruce Gold, an English professor who aspires to a high-ranking governmental position. Again, Heller depicts the federal government, with all of its political machinations and bureaucratic red tape, to comment upon the absurd nature of contemporary American society. Next, Heller wrote *God Knows* (1984), another comic novel, this time one that takes on a subject some considered blasphemous: a first-person biography of King David on his deathbed that is a thinly veiled allegory for the plight of the modern Jew. While writing *God Knows*, Heller developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (for more information on this rare immune disorder, see <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/gbs/gbs.htm>). Eventually Heller became completely paralyzed, suffering with this debilitating condition for two full years before recovery. With his friend Speed Vogel, Heller reflected on this experience in *No Laughing Matter* (1986), which chronicles his illness.

Five works mark the end of Heller's illustrious career: *Picture This* (1987), a meditation on Rembrandt's *Homer Contemplating the Bust of Apollo* (to see an image of the painting, search the Internet for a site such as http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/histart/images/questions/aristotle_bust_homer.jpg), *Closing Time* (1994), a sequel to *Catch-22*, which picks up the life of the twice-divorced Yossarian and is set in Coney Island and New York; *Now and Then: From*

Coney Island to Here (1998), an autobiographical memoir; and the posthumously published *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* (2000), a novel about an elderly author who tries to write a novel that will be as successful as his earlier work, a plot that mirrors Heller's writing career.

In addition to enriching our modern lexicon, *Catch-22* earned Heller the reputation as one of the most significant American novelists in the second half of the 20th century. As did George Orwell's *1984* (1949), *Catch-22* not only spoke to a disillusioned generation but helped form our understanding of the dehumanizing aspects of war; the convoluted, senseless nature of modern institutions; and the absurd nature of bureaucratic doublespeak.

***Catch-22* (1961)**

Inspired by Heller's experiences as a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Corps during the latter half of World War II, *Catch-22* remains one of the greatest satirical works of American fiction in the 20th century. Though belonging to the war novel genre, *Catch-22* has as its major preoccupation the conflict between individuals and what Heller calls "the contemporary regimented business society," a theme he later explored directly in his second novel, *Something Happened* (Heller, *Realist* 30). Heller's protagonist in *Catch-22*, John Yossarian, spends the entire novel trying to stay alive in a world where everybody, he is convinced, is trying to kill him. This conviction, which initially sounds absurd and paranoid, becomes increasingly plausible to the reader as Heller describes the ineptitude, insanity, and prevailing disregard for humanity surrounding Yossarian. At the start of the novel, Yossarian seems mentally unstable, paranoid, cowardly, and depraved. By the end of the narrative, after readers have been inculcated with Heller's vision of modern war and military bureaucracy, Yossarian appears to be the sanest of men, trying to extricate himself from an insane world that values conformity over common sense, profit over ethics, obedience over life.

A darkly humorous and satirical novel, *Catch-22* follows—albeit in an experimental, nonlinear manner—

the wartime trials of Captain John Yossarian, a bombardier stationed on the fictitious island of Pianosa during World War II. Unlike his fellow officers, Yossarian remains unmoved by patriotism or any other rationale for putting his life at risk: For Yossarian, the only goal worth pursuing is staying alive. To this end, Yossarian attempts to ground himself and his squadron from combat missions in various, often humorous ways. All of Yossarian's attempts to avoid combat by claiming insanity are foiled by "catch-22," an unofficial but all-pervasive law that states that anyone concerned for his life in the face of imminent death is rational and therefore not crazy enough to be grounded. This law takes various forms at different points in the narrative but always serves as a mechanism to entrap Yossarian, keeping him anchored to his appointed cog in the big, bureaucratic war machine. Faced with no alternatives and few surviving friends, who are "disappeared" one by one, Yossarian eventually deserts to Sweden.

Though *Catch-22* can and should be considered a part of the war novel genre, as exemplified by such works as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Heller populates Pianosa almost exclusively with flat caricatures of the character types normally used in the genre, often confounding our expectations. The commanding officer of the squadron, for example, Major Major Major, promoted by a glitch in an I.B.M. machine, is a hyperbolic caricature of the inept and out-of-touch superior, a leader so ineffective and distant that he orders his assistant to bar anyone from his office while he is there. Lieutenant Sheisskopf, Yossarian's cuckolded commander while he is being trained to go overseas, who dreams of the day when he can surgically alter his cadets with metal rods so they can march in perfect lockstep, is yet another parody of the incompetent superior, in this case one bent on enforcing total conformity. Major Major Major's executive officer, Major——de Coverley is a humorous example of the brave, steely eyed wartime commander who leads from the front lines. Often present at the head of the allied advance, de Coverley has one significant achievement, his prompt securing of apartments and maids in the recently liberated city of Rome for the squadron's vacationing officers and enlisted men.

Other character types abound in the novel, comically exaggerated beyond the semblance of realism. The affable southerner is represented by the friendly and patriotic Texan Yossarian encounters in the hospital ward whom no one can stand to be around. The various ethnic character types that populate war novels are caricatured by the alcoholic Chief White Halfoat, whose oil-divining Native American family has been chased off whatever land they occupy by oil companies. Here Heller is obviously satirizing the disenfranchisement of Native Americans during and after America's westward expansion, as well as playing off the conventions of the war novel.

Thus, *Catch-22* parodies the war novel genre to great comic effect while depicting war itself in a grotesque, dark, and serious fashion. Heller maintains *Catch-22*'s somber and dark depiction of war by structuring the comic episodes of the novel around retellings of Yossarian's mission to Avignon, during which he sees a crew member, Snowden, slowly die of wounds suffered from an explosion of flak. These flashbacks become incrementally clearer with each repetition, eventually culminating in the disclosure of Snowden's "secret"; after Snowden's innards spill out of a wound Yossarian had not seen or treated, he observes: "Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out of a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all" (*Catch-22* 404). This passage, echoing a line from William Shakespeare's 1608 play *King Lear* (5.2.9), not only articulates the frailty of life—the delicate mortality of human beings—but also marks Yossarian's realization that the institutions that bind him will eventually turn him into "garbage": a man without a soul. This realization jars Yossarian out of his complacency, awakening him to the absurdities inherent in risking one's life for no particularly compelling reason. As the infinitely pragmatic and self-preserving old Italian responsible for injuring Major——de Coverley's eye states, "It is better to live on one's feet than die on one's knees" (*Catch-22* 233). The old man, as becomes clear during his long exchange with Yossarian's young and patriotic friend Nately, embodies and articulates the philosophy of

action Heller's protagonist arrives at after the mission to Avignon: No nation—which the old man describes as “a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries, usually unnatural.”—is worth dying for (232). After this ordeal, a ceremony is held to award Yossarian a medal for his heroism, to which he shows up naked, unadorned by the blood-soaked uniform that has placed him in harm's way and now serves as a testament to Snowden's “secret.” The “madness” Yossarian exhibits throughout the novel is caused by this scarring event, an event that, as it is recounted with more and more detail, justifies Yossarian's temperament and reveals the prevailing insanity that surrounds him.

As we can see in the elaborately conceived outline for *Catch-22* (which can be found in the second appendix of David M. Craig's *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction*), Heller was deliberate in his construction of the novel's chaotic narration, taking great pains to ensure its formal coherency. In this sense, Heller follows the art of the novel as described by Henry James and E. M. Forster. But what makes Heller's work so distinctive, so jarring, is the way he deals with time, the back-and-forth movement that makes the reader of *Catch-22* dizzy. Everything happens at once, and yet nothing is easily sorted out, an effect that, along with Heller's use of repetition, echoes the cognitive illness Yossarian feigns after his roommate in a stateside hospital starts “seeing everything twice.” In this way, Heller comments on the way we think—the random and associational way that thoughts and memories intrude on the present, jarring us from the present and whirling us ceaselessly, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, into the past. In yet another way, this “double vision” Yossarian assumes is an apt metaphor for the comic and tragic elements Heller continually juxtaposes throughout the novel. Incidents that readers are initially inclined to find humorous, such as Yossarian's nakedness at the award ceremony, or the hijinks that ensue when Yossarian and his friends vacation in Rome, are later cast in a dark, grotesque fashion, forcing us to reevaluate them, to “see them twice.” This narrative strategy adds to the sense of absurdity the novel cultivates, mirroring the central concept Heller introduces us to: Just as “catch-22”

—a paradoxical statement or series of statements that undermine their own validity—involves negation, the comic elements of the novel are overtaken by grotesque and tragic depictions of death and loss. Comedy remains, but it coexists with the tragic in a nebulous and chaotic space, a space detached from the reader's common understanding of time.

In addition to repeating the Snowden episode with more clarity as the novel progresses, Heller adds a sense of forward movement to the nonchronological narrative of *Catch-22* by increasing the number of missions Yossarian and the other crew members have to complete before they can be sent home. Colonel Cathcart, the group commander under whom Yossarian serves, is a self-serving and incompetent administrator whose only objective in the war is to produce “tight bomb patterns” for his superiors to admire in postbombing reconnaissance photos. Despite the fact that bomber crews, according to headquarters, need only complete 40 combat missions, Cathcart is convinced that raising the number will make his bomber group seem all the more heroic, a “feather in his cap” that will contribute to a future promotion. In accordance with the laws of “catch-22,” Yossarian and his fellow airmen are officially required to complete 40 missions, but, since they must obey their commanding officer, are compelled to complete as many missions as Cathcart pleases. Thus, one of the only linear elements in *Catch-22*'s plot is the raising of the number of required missions—a progressive lessening of the value of human life—in the name of Cathcart's petty desire for advancement. The only respite for Yossarian and the other airmen lies in the hospital ward or the apartments appropriated for their R&R time in Rome, where alcohol and prostitutes are indulged in with great zeal.

The dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy on the individual, where men become numbers that are mechanistically shuffled about without regard for their humanity, are symbolically represented in the novel by the soldier in white. An airman presumably burned beyond recognition and encased in a full body cast, the soldier in white is a fixture in the hospital ward Yossarian and his friend Dunbar have fled to with feigned illnesses at the beginning of the narrative. With his entire body covered in white gauze,

save for his mouth and two tubes through which the nurses remove his liquid waste, the soldier in white is a symbolic representation of what the military bureaucracy turns human beings into. Yossarian and Dunbar go so far as to speculate whether or not the hidden soldier is alive or even exists. This perceived lack of humanity betrays Heller's scathing view of both war and modern bureaucracy. Prefiguring the fate of many of Yossarian's friends, the unknown soldier is whisked off when no one is looking, "disappeared" by the opaque workings of the military machine, itself a representation of the ever-expanding role of institutions in the contemporary world.

Yet what also traps Yossarian and, by analogy, all of us, is the language we use, the sort of bureaucratic language of which military regulations, business correspondences, and medical terminology are made. The characters who populate Heller's vision of World War II, flat as they are, are stripped of humanity, reduced to insignificant signs. As does the soldier in white, whose presence is only marked by the cast that surrounds him, the characters lack individuality and substance: Their presence—even their existence—is marked only by their name, rank, and serial number. This substitution of language for life is exemplified by the predicament of Doc Daneeka, the group's physician, who, according to the squadron log, has died in a plane crash. Despite the fact that he is very much alive and protesting his deceased status, the world goes on, incapable of recognizing his existence after it has ceased on paper. Yossarian, at the opening of the novel, is engaged in subverting language as he subverts every other form of bureaucratic restraint in the novel, declaring "death to all modifiers" as he censors the letters of enlisted men to their families from his hospital bed. Just as Yossarian's moving of the bomb line on the briefing room map causes the chain of command to postpone the bombing of a heavily fortified city, these acts of subversion catch on. Others who feel marginalized, such as Major Major Major, appropriate "Washington Irving," Yossarian's reversible pen name. Undercover CID men, incompetent equivalents of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, are dispatched by wing headquarters to arrest this Washington Irving, who only exists in official correspondences and personal

letters. Similarly, Yossarian's signing of the "Anabaptist" Chaplain's name to one of these letters makes him a perpetual object of suspicion. In Heller's world of institutions, imaginary people become real and actual characters are "disappeared," through both physical means and language. In either case, the reality of the novel and accounts of reality in the novel become blurred, each exerting a nearly equal effect on the plot. The policing of language on Pianosa and the resulting infestation of C.I.D. men form a thinly veiled commentary on the paranoia, suspicion, and tattletale characteristic of postwar American society during the McCarthy hearings, a time when the mere suggestion of communist sympathies, however unfounded, was enough to attract the attention of the FBI.

Toward the end of the novel, Heller expands this vision of how the modern world dehumanizes people during Yossarian's attempt to find and save "Nately's whore's kid-sister" in the streets of Rome. This Dantesque descent, which catalogs various manifestations of human depravity and cruelty, ends with Yossarian's confronting Aarfy, the bumbling, gentlemanly, and aloof fraternity brother who serves as navigator in his plane, after he pushes a prostitute out of his bedroom window. This morally reprehensible act is unpunished by the police, who immediately put Yossarian under arrest for being in Rome without permission. Again, Heller portrays the military bureaucracy as being more concerned with its own logistical rules and objectives than anything resembling ethical conduct.

In the end, Yossarian's only alternative is to desert to Sweden, following the example of his tent mate, Orr, who, it would seem, fits Heller's conception of what a smart, self-preserving individual should do in Yossarian's predicament. A handyman who builds a gas stove from scratch in their tent, Orr is patient and detail-oriented. Just as he constantly fidgets with the gas valve on the stove, Orr observes the mechanism that has entrapped him and slowly practices escaping, crash landing his plane in the Mediterranean many times before he ditches it and paddles to Sweden in a life raft. Unlike Yossarian's comic acts of resistance and ineffectual attempts to con the system, Orr provides the lasting solution: Leave when no one is looking.

Heller has stated that *Catch-22* has more to do with “the contemporary regimented business society” of postwar America than any of his experiences in Europe (*Realist* 30). Though it is hard to put aside the grotesque and absurd depictions of war in *Catch-22*, one can glimpse the Coney Island barkers, incapable of losing, behind every catch Yossarian encounters. Indeed, much can be made of the satirical lens Heller provides readers to view contemporary, commercialized society: Lieutenant Milo Minderbinder, squadron mess officer, and his one-man corporation, M&M Enterprises, is a splendid representation of capitalism and thinly veiled greed run amok, despite Milo’s seemingly benign and good-hearted intent. Having a natural knack for navigating the often twisted logic of supply and demand, Milo profits from selling eggs for less than he buys them, only erring when he corners the market on Egyptian cotton and cannot sell any of it. An example of good intentions gone awry, Milo tries to cover the cotton in chocolate and feed it to the squadron. The spectacle of Milo’s mercenary courier fleet, comprising of both German and allied bombers, bombing the wing’s own airstrip for a profit is a brilliant, albeit hyperbolic, representation of the absurdities and hypocrisies that result when market forces supplant or remain unchecked by ethical considerations.

Moreover, Heller’s blurring of the war effort with Milo’s empire of black market commerce echoes concerns many had during the cold war (and continue to have) regarding what President Dwight Eisenhower referred to as the “military-industrial complex.” This term denotes the intimate relationship between those in the American government who control the prosecution of foreign policy and the powerful manufacturing firms that produce weaponry and matériel. These corporations, profit-seeking and influential, are often feared to have a negative influence over U.S. foreign policy that is contrary to the will of the American people and not oriented toward peaceful resolutions of potentially violent international conflict.

A hilarious and profound statement on war, American society, and the absurd existential predicament of individuals enveloped by the invasive workings of modern bureaucracy, *Catch-22* continues to be read and taught across the nation. Heller’s unconven-

tional narrative style and adept blend of comic and grotesque elements in his first novel distinguished him as a promising young writer with a unique vision of his craft. By virtue of his performance in *Catch-22*, Heller occupies a place in the history of letters populated by such renowned writers as Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon. Many of the insights Heller fleshed out in the novel still ring true today, offering us an entertaining and biting satire on war and modern bureaucracy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As does *Catch-22*, RANDALL JARRELL’S “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” shows not only the debilitating effects of war but also its long-term psychological effects, which continue to plague both civilian and veteran alike. In Jarrell’s poem, the soldier/child narrator describes his own death, echoing the author’s own tormented psyche. In *Catch-22*, the narrator (Yossarian) recounts the death of Snowden; the memory of his death not only haunts the narrator but also intervenes in the narration so that the form of the book is structured around his remembrances of a catastrophic event. With both works in mind, write a well-developed essay on memory and loss as this theme is played out in Jarrell’s poem and in Heller’s novel.
2. There are many similarities between *Catch-22* and *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War*, an unfinished novel written in 1923 by the Czechoslovakian humorist Jaroslav Hasek. Heller himself, according to Arnošt Lustig, admitted that the composition of his novel would have been impossible had he not read Hasek’s satire, which stands as one of the first antiwar novels published in modern times. After reading Hasek’s novel, write a well-developed essay exploring the similarities between the two works. How does Heller adapt and appropriate Hasek’s World War I satire? Are these changes the result of Heller’s interest in satirizing postwar America, or does Heller have a distinctly unique worldview that necessitates a change in narrative style and content? Be sure to refer to specific sections in the texts to bolster your argument.

3. *Catch-22*, despite its comic and satirical qualities, is a novel about war. Read other examples of the war novel genre: Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Next, compare Heller's treatment of the subject with that of these two other seminal authors known for their sober, realistic depictions of war. Think about the tone of these three works and the way they convey their antiwar messages. Finally, write a well-developed essay that evaluates Heller's work in light of the other two works and considers whether satire is an appropriate medium to deal with loss.
4. Watch Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), a depiction of World War I trench warfare and a story of soldiers, who, when weighing their own value against the futility of fighting, choose to retreat, ultimately being tried and executed for dereliction of duty. Think about what Kubrick accomplishes by using a hyperrealistic depiction of war and then contrast his representation with the graphic scenes in Heller's *Catch-22*. Finally, write a well-developed essay on the representation of violence in fiction, citing both works to support everything you say. Be sure to consider the different mediums and how their differences affect the reader/viewer.
5. As yet another contrast to Heller's representation of war and drawing upon a completely different genre, read section 15 of Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), a poignant tribute to President Abraham Lincoln and a lamentation for those lost in the Civil War. Finally, assess both Heller's and Whitman's depiction of violence. Are the two complementary? Does one justify violence, or do they both vilify the notion of a "just war"?
6. Intertextuality deals with the relationship between texts, the way works of fiction reference one another and relate to one another. Sometimes authors create deliberate relationships; other times authors, working independently, cover similar ground, creating works that resonate with each other. Regardless of whether authors intend their works to be compared, we see them differently when we encounter them in tandem. This is the nature of intertextuality: We negotiate the world through texts that we string together, forging an overall narrative and even a worldview based on our reading/viewing. With this in mind, read *M*A*S*H: A Novel about Three Army Doctors* by Richard Hooker and see Robert Altman's movie *M*A*S*H*. Finally, write a well-developed essay that assesses how these works and *Catch-22* form a composite picture of war in the 20th century.
7. KEN KESEY's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) deals with the institutionalization of individuals considered to be insane. Similarly, those around him consider *Catch-22*'s protagonist, John Yossarian, insane. In a well-developed essay, compare Heller's and Kesey's treatment of madness and how the novel's respective institutions deal with it. Pay special attention to Heller's descriptions of Yossarian's time in hospitals, especially the episode when we are introduced to the man who "sees everything twice." Do Kesey and Heller share similar views regarding institutions? More specifically, compare the strategies John Yossarian and Randle Patrick McMurphy employ to subvert these institutions.

***Something Happened* (1974)**

Published 14 years after *Catch-22*, *Something Happened* is an entirely different world from his first novel. Whereas past trauma existed side by side with the present in the mind of John Yossarian, *Something Happened* introduces us to a world where hopes and dreams are lost in a forgotten past, elided in a distinctive moment that Bob Slocum, the novel's protagonist, cannot remember.

The novel, narrated in the first person, forms a kind of all-encompassing confession, a monologue during which Bob Slocum confides all of his fears, insecurities, and problems, attempting to trace them back to his early adulthood and childhood. His stated motivation for doing this is to find the "something" that happened to him, the event or series of events that marked his loss of self. As he states:

There are long gaps in my past that remain obscure and give no clue. There are cryptic rumblings inside them but no flashes of recall. They are pitch black and remain that way, and all the things I was and all the changes and things that happened to me then will be lost to me forever unless I find them. No one else will. (*Something Happened* 134)

Thus, the project of the novel is for Slocum, a character so inauthentic that even his handwriting is borrowed from someone else, to unearth his identity out of the overabundant facts that make up his life.

Loosely following Heller's own life, Slocum tells us in great detail of his time as a file clerk at an insurance company and his executive position at a corporation, where he "sells selling." Slocum describes the absurdities of office politics and the demoralizing effects they have on his mind as he longs to give a three-minute presentation at the company conference in Puerto Rico. He details numerous infidelities he has committed with prostitutes, coworkers, and acquaintances. He also probes his unfulfilling relationship with his wife, as well as with his two older children, for clues about what has happened to his psyche. His youngest child, Derek, is mentally handicapped and taken care of almost exclusively by a nanny. The Slocums debate whether or not they should stop housing him and send him to an institution. All of these facts are presented in an associational manner by the narrator, who intersperses descriptions of his current situation with reminiscences of childhood and an unconsummated love affair he had as a young file clerk with a girl named Virginia, who ultimately committed suicide. By the end of the novel, Slocum, seems to be suffering from a mental breakdown, causing the narrative to become more and more fragmented. Finally, we learn that Slocum accidentally suffocated his elder son while trying to comfort him after a car hit him.

As *Catch-22* does, *Something Happened* focuses on the tortured psyche of a single protagonist. Unlike *Catch-22*, with its hard-hitting, dark humor and comic absurdities, *Something Happened* tackles the absurdity of cookie-cutter, upper-middle-class suburban life to unveil the ultimate emptiness of

modern society. Instead of discovering that the madness of his protagonist is actually a sane response to a mad world, Heller forces readers of *Something Happened* to recognize how deeply this world permeates the psyche of Slocum, causing the dissolution of his identity. In this sense, the novel presents Heller at his darkest, creating a psychological portrait of an unlikable character with whom it is difficult to empathize. But, lest the book be portrayed as nihilistic, it is important to look at Bob Slocum's desires: the things he wants that the world will not grant. As he tells us near the end of the novel:

I wish I were part of a large family circle and enjoyed it. I would like to fit in. I wish I believed in God. I liked shelled walnuts and raisins at home when I was a child and cracked the walnuts and mixed them all with the raisins in a dish before I began eating. My mother sent out for ice cream often in the spring and summer. In the fall we had good charlotte russes. I would spin tops. I remember the faces of the street cleaners. (*Something Happened* 496)

Here, and throughout his many ruminations, we feel the sort of longing that can be associated with homesickness and lack of a philosophy: the emphatic need to find and make meaning in a world in which love, trust, and community are horrifically absent. Even when thinking about extramarital affairs and the possibility of falling in love, what remains is Slocum's desire to be elsewhere. As he said, "I wish there were someone I could hire by the hour to go through the whole wearying procedure for me from beginning to end, even to experiencing those ritualistic qualms of guilt, concern, and remorse without which a conscience can never feel antiseptically pure again" (*Something Happened* 519).

In short, Slocum cannot participate. Like a Camus character trapped in an existential quandary, a Kafka character who cannot be understood, or a Beckett or Dante character caught in a kind of purgatorial state, Slocum is a tortured man who cannot bridge the gulf between what he wishes to make out of life and what he is capable of doing. Here Heller targets those things that are near and dear to us all, tearing them

asunder and placing them at an unreachable distance. But for those who read the novel and seek to draw meaning from it, the question remains: What is all the misery about, and how can all this misery end?

The answer, of course, is that it is about nothing and it cannot be fixed. As with the ultimate horizon that defines human life—death—the meaninglessness of the world can never be faced straight on. And perhaps this is what makes Heller's work so devastating, so painful to read. The narrator of *Something Happened* is Yossarian's antithesis: Whereas *Catch-22*'s protagonist is well aware of who he is and what he needs to escape from, Bob Slocum opts for being "garbage." He is so entrenched in the bureaucracies and anxieties that surround him that Slocum's spirit, like that of Snowden, the perpetual victim of Heller's first novel, is no longer discernable, even to himself:

Who *am* I? I think I'm beginning to find out. I am a stick: I am a broken waterlogged branch floating with my own crowd in this one nation of ours, indivisible (unfortunately), under God, with liberty and justice for all who are speedy enough to seize them first and hog them away from the rest. . . . I float like algae in a colony of green scum. (*Something Happened* 305–306)

Early in the novel Slocum confesses: "Something did happen to me somewhere that robbed me of confidence and courage and left me with a fear of discovery and change and a positive dread of everything unknown that may occur" (*Something Happened* 8). This dread of the unknown, this fear of change that permeates the entire novel, obviously prefigures Slocum's accidental killing of his eldest son, who is never named in the novel. On a more symbolic level, however, Slocum is terrified of what he will find at the end of his long, sober, and painful self-examination. Perhaps at the core of Slocum's being there is the corpse of a child—the remains of an authentic, whole person—crushed and suffocated by acquiescence and fear, contorted by the strictures of a society that values conformity above all else. The only son of Slocum's who survives is destined to live a life completely derived from and dependent upon others who do not really love him.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his October 6, 1974 review for the *New York Times Book Review*, Kurt Vonnegut said that "*Something Happened* is so astonishingly pessimistic, in fact, that it can be called a daring experiment." Of course, we might question Vonnegut's stance because he is one of America's best-known humorists, but for the purposes of this question, let us assume that Vonnegut means exactly what he says. With Vonnegut's thought in mind, assess Heller's vision as it is given through Bob Slocum. Is Heller a pessimist? If so, why? What makes this novel so dark when compared to *Catch-22*? With well-chosen quotes, argue why you believe the novel either is or is not pessimistic in its outlook.
2. While Kurt Vonnegut labels *Something Happened* a "pessimistic work," critics have levied the same charge about Vonnegut's masterwork, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and about Mark Twain's posthumously published novel *Mysterious Stranger*. With these three works in mind, write a well-developed essay that examines the novels from a humanistic perspective, questioning the "pessimistic" claim and finding moments where future possibilities exist in these works. While these works no doubt work largely by negation, we can, through our own imaginations, supply what the works lack, which may be, in fact, where we can see these writers' optimism: in the blanks we as reader's must fill.
3. Read Albert Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," observing what Camus says about Sisyphus's fate and his heroic qualities. Then, write a well-developed essay that explores how Bob Slocum can be viewed as the absurd, existential hero. To round out your work, you may want to read Camus's companion piece, *The Stranger*, which is narrated by a similarly dispassionate narrator who longs to enter life.
4. In his essay "Joseph Heller's Milk Train: Nothing More to Express" (*Washington Post Book World*, 6 October 1974), Joseph Epstein argues that description in the novel takes the place of plot or character development and this description takes the form of a confession:

question war but also to question what defines rational human behavior: what can be considered to be sane and insane. Heller blurs the line between the “sane” systems human beings have erected and the “irrational” responses individuals have to these systems. With these in mind, how does *Catch-22* compare with Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) on the theme of sanity and insanity? What do both say about the nature of institutions and the relationship of the individual's need for autonomy with institutions' need for order, regulation, and “sane” behavior?

4. Write a well-developed essay on the nature of suffering with the following works in mind: *Catch-22*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and the Book of Job in the Bible. Consider how each of the protagonists suffers and makes meaning out of the suffering.
5. *Catch-22* works largely by negation: the use of irony and double irony that challenges the reader to make sense of the many ironies we encounter in life. Write a well-developed essay that compares Heller's use of negation with Samuel Beckett's use of negation in *Waiting for Godot*. What can be made of the “negative” way? Is it possible to gain positive insights into existence from works of literature that focus on the inherent contradictions and negative things we face as human beings?
6. Read Heller's first play, *We Bombed in New Haven* (1969), noting the many moments when the actors refer to the play itself. Literary critics often call such experiential moments *metafictional*, which is to say that in such moments the play reflects upon itself specifically and on fiction in general. Next, read Bertold Brecht's *Mother Courage*, which also contains such metafictional moments. With both plays in mind, write a well-developed essay on the use of experimental, self-reflective techniques in drama. Focus on how these techniques affect the audience and our understanding of the plays.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bradbury, Malcolm. *Catch-22*. New York: Everyman's Library/Knopf, 1995.
- Craig, David M. *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.
- Dodd, Burr. “Approaches to *Catch-22*.” In *Approaches to the Novel*, edited by John Colmer. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1967.
- Hasek, Jaroslav. *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War*. Translated by Cecil Parrot. New York: Penguin, 1973.
- Heller, Joseph. “Joseph Heller Replies.” *Realist* 50 (1964): 30.
- The Joseph Heller Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/amlit/heller/heller.html>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Keegan, Brenda M. *Joseph Heller: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978.
- Kiley, Frederick T., and Walter McDonald, eds. *A Catch-22 Casebook*. New York: Crowell, 1973.
- Mellard, James M. *Doing Tropology: Analysis of Narrative Discourse*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Merrill, Robert. *Joseph Heller*. Boston: Twayne, 1987.
- Nagel, James, ed., *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984.
- Pinsker, Sanford. *Understanding Joseph Heller*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.
- Potts, Stephen W. *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1995.
- Ruderman, Judith. *Joseph Heller*. New York: Continuum, 1991.
- Seed, David. *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.
- Woodson, Jon. *A Study of Joseph Heller's Catch-22: Going Around Twice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

John Becker



SHIRLEY JACKSON (1919–1965)

It is most agreeable to be a writer of fiction for several reasons—one of the most important being, of course, that you can persuade people that it is really work if you look haggard enough—but perhaps the most useful thing about being a writer of fiction is that nothing is ever wasted; all experience is good for something; you tend to see everything as a potential structure of words.

(*Come Along with Me*)

Shirley Jackson's works have aroused controversy. Among scholars, many of whom doubt their lasting importance, but no one denies that they have had a significant cultural impact on generations of Americans. With this impact and the renewed interest in her works in mind, Jackson warrants consideration as a great postwar American writer.

Jackson's early life was relatively uneventful. Born in San Francisco on December 14, 1919 (a number of accounts erroneously cite 1916 as her birth year), Shirley Hardie Jackson was the daughter of Geraldine Bugbee Jackson and Leslie Hardie Jackson, a child born into "comfort, pleasant surroundings, and social position, but to parents who never truly knew what to make of her, not in childhood and not throughout her entire forty-eight [sic] years" (Oppenheimer 11). When she was six years old, the Jacksons moved from the Ashbury Park section of San Francisco to Burlingame, a suburb some 16 miles to the south of the city. Throughout her childhood, Jackson kept journals and wrote poetry, with existing entries as early as 1932, when she was 13 years old. Although the Jackson family moved to Rochester, New York, when Shirley was 16, the early years in California made a lasting impression. Further, as Oppenheimer points out, Jackson's early diary entries reveal an "increasing interest in superstition and the supernatural," with Jackson noting which days are lucky and unlucky and attributing spiritual portents to periods of time (19).

In 1934, soon after moving to Rochester, Jackson enrolled at Syracuse University, where she studied two years before leaving to dedicate her life to writing full time. After a two-year hiatus, Jackson returned to Syracuse in 1938 and graduated in 1940, during which time she published fiction and nonfiction in campus publications and met Stanley Edgar Hyman, with whom she founded a campus magazine called *The Specter*. This academic partnership continued throughout Jackson's life; she married Hyman in 1940 and raised a family as Hyman pursued a career as an academic. In the same year, upon graduation, the two moved to New York City, where just one year later Jackson's first publication of note, a short story based on her experience working at Macy's department store called "My Life with R. H. Macy," appeared in the *New Republic*, the publication for which Hyman served as editorial assistant. Notably, her story "Come Dance with Me in Ireland" was selected for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories, 1944*. During the five-year period in New York, Jackson continued to publish short stories; gave birth to a son, Laurence; and a daughter, Joanne; and moved to Bennington, Vermont—the academic and spiritual locus Jackson knew the rest of her life—in 1945. Although Hyman and Jackson returned to New York for one year in 1949, and Jackson did publish the story for which she is best known during this significant year when Hyman accepted a post with the *New Yorker*, Bennington remained their home.

With Hyman a faculty member at Bennington College, the couple knew many of the leading scholars, editors, and fiction writers of the middle of the 20th century. These include the eminent novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison, and the literary critic Kenneth Burke. During their Bennington tenure, Jackson also worked as a substitute teacher for Hyman's creative writing course. The Bennington years were fruitful, filled with books and children. The works for which Jackson is best known date from this period: "The Lottery," was published in the *New Yorker* on June 28, 1948, and Jackson's first novel, *The Road through the Wall*, came out in 1949, in addition to *The Lottery, or, The Adventures of James Harris*, a collection of short stories that included its title piece. "The Lottery," a gothic story of a New England town that sacrifices one of its members for the feast of new corn, propelled Jackson to fame; *The New Yorker* was flooded with letters demanding an explanation for this horror story. Although late in life Jackson would lecture on this strong public reaction and even parody the letters the *New Yorker* received, she refrained, as do many fiction writers, from making many comments about the purpose and meaning of this dark story. Nevertheless, influential critics continued to comment on her work, perhaps most significantly some 10 years later when Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren used "The Lottery" as a model in their famous work of literary criticism, *Understanding Fiction* (1959).

Throughout the 1950s, Jackson continued to raise children and to write prolifically, turning out short stories, the novels *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954)—both portrayals of psychological abnormalities and disturbance—a children's book, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956), and short pieces for *Good Housekeeping* and *Mademoiselle*, many of which were included in *Life among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). At the end of the decade, Jackson published three novels that garnered much critical acclaim: *The Sundial* (1962), a gothic suspense tale; *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), a ghost story in which a doctor of philosophy seeks to uncover the darkness lurking in a house for 80 years by inviting guests to stay with him in the house; and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

(1962), a story of an agoraphobe and mass-murderess often said to reflect Jackson's fears and anxieties. In her lecture "Experience and Fiction" collected in *Come Along with Me*, Jackson describes the genesis for *The Haunting of Hill House* and for her interest in the supernatural:

I have recently finished a novel about a haunted house. I was [working] on a novel about a haunted house because I happened by chance, to read a book about a group of people, nineteenth-century psychic researchers, who rented a haunted house and recorded their impressions of the things they saw and heard and felt in order to contribute a learned paper for the Society for Psychic Research. . . . I have always been interested in witchcraft and superstition, but have never had much traffic with ghosts, so I began asking people everywhere what they thought about such things, and I began to find out that there was one common factor—most people have never seen a ghost, and never want or expect to, but almost everyone will admit sometimes they have a sneaking feeling that they just possibly *could* meet a ghost if they weren't careful—if they were to turn a corner too suddenly, perhaps, or open their eyes too soon when they wake up at night, or go into a dark room without hesitating first . . . (201–202)

Such an interest in the occult has led some to label Jackson as a genre writer, but such an interest also conveys a deep awareness of the reading public and in connecting with the popular reader's imagination, something Jackson strove for throughout her life. Late in her career, Jackson reviewed children's books for the *New York Herald Tribune*, continued to write award-winning fiction, taught at the Breadloaf Writer's Conference, lectured at schools and universities, and received the Arents Pioneer Medal for Outstanding Achievement from Syracuse University, her alma mater.

Although many critics have relegated Jackson's to being a one-hit-wonder, a horror writer, and the author of domestic memoirs, Jackson's work is currently being reassessed, especially in terms of its

universal appeal and social significance. One such reassessment is Jonathan Lethem's 1997 *Salon* review of *Just an Ordinary Day*, a posthumous collection of Jackson's works published by two of her children:

To put it most simply, Shirley Jackson wrote about the mundane evils hidden in everyday life and about the warring and subsuming of selves in a family, a community and sometimes even in a single mind. She wrote about prejudice, neurosis and identity. An unfortunate impression persists (one Jackson encouraged, for complicated reasons) that her work is full of ghosts and witches. In truth, few of her greatest stories and just one of her novels, "The Haunting of Hill House," contain a suggestion of genuinely supernatural events. Jackson's forté was psychology and society, people in other words—people disturbed, dispossessed, misunderstanding or thwarting one another compulsively, people colluding absently in monstrous acts. She had a jeweler's eye for the microscopic degrees by which a personality creeps into madness or a relationship turns from dependence to exploitation.

Most recently, Angela Hague (2005) has reconsidered Jackson's writings in light of the condition of mid 20th-century American women:

By focusing on her female characters' isolation, loneliness, and fragmenting identities, their simultaneous inability to relate to the world outside themselves or to function autonomously, and their confrontation with an inner emptiness that often results in mental illness, Jackson displays in pathological terms the position of many women in the 1950s. But her unveiling of this era's dark corners is not limited to one gender, for her apocalyptic consciousness, sinister children, and scathing portraits of nuclear families and their suburban environments, her depiction of a quotidian and predictable world that can suddenly metamorphose into the terrifying and the bizarre, reveal her characters' reactions to a culture of repression, containment, and paranoia. (74)

Hague insists,

Her artful use of ambiguity and understatement has obscured the cultural critique her writing presents, and it is time to approach her work with the same critical rigor that recently has been expended on other overlooked and unappreciated—and sometimes less talented—writers. Rather than being relegated to the obligatory inclusion of "The Lottery" in undergraduate literature textbooks, her fiction should be read as a significant contribution to our understanding of the psychic disruption that has characterized postwar experience. Her "faithful anatomy" deserves a closer look. (90–91)

As a writer who captured the imagination of postwar Americans with the "The Lottery," wrote on both domestic life and the nature of human evil in varied forms that range from the darkly pessimistic to the light and comic, depicted the individual as object of the social world's inhuman rituals, and recorded the chilling aspects of the human psyche, Shirley Jackson will not likely be forgotten.

"The Lottery" (1948)

In an age where *lottery* denotes legal gambling in the form of a public competition, often with scratch-off playing cards and ping-pong machines that mix numbered balls into winning combinations, the significance of Shirley Jackson's short story title may easily be lost. While "casting lots" is mentioned in the Bible and door-prize drawings existed in ancient Rome, modern lottery competitions date back to 17th-century Europe. Jackson's account, however, is both ironic and also macabre. An account of a yearly corn-planting ritual in which the winner of a chance drawing is stoned to death, "The Lottery" initially baffled readers when it appeared in the June 26, 1948, issue of the *New Yorker*. In fact, the story elicited so many letters inquiring about its meaning that Jackson lampooned the letters in a satirical lecture, "Biography of a Story," which later appeared in *Come Along*

Write an essay on the role of the outsider in “The Lottery” that supports King’s thesis.

2. The American writer Stephen King has said that Jackson’s *The Sundial* was one of his inspirations when writing *The Shining*. First, read Jackson’s *The Sundial* and then read *The Shining* with Jackson’s work in mind. Finally, write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two works.
3. To date, two adaptations of *The Haunting of Hill House* have been filmed: a universally acclaimed production in 1963 and a universally panned production in 1999. First, read *The Haunting of Hill House*. Then, view both productions. Finally, write a well-developed essay that argues which film is the more accurate representation of Jackson’s work.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bellman, Samuel Irving. “Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 282–293.
- Bloom, Harold. *Shirley Jackson: Bloom’s Major Short Story Writers*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 2001.
- Friedman, Lenemaja. *Shirley Jackson*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975.
- Hague, Angela. “‘A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times’: Reassessing Shirley Jackson.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 2 (2005): 73–96.
- Hall, Joan. *Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- Hattenhauer, Darryl. *Shirley Jackson’s American Gothic*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Hubbard, Kristen. The Works of Shirley Jackson. Available online. URL: <http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-jkh>. Accessed July 21, 2009.
- Hyman, Laurence J., and S. H. Stewart, eds. *Just an Ordinary Day*. New York: Bantam Books, 1997.
- Hyman, Stanley Edgar, ed. *Come Along With Me*. New York: Viking, 1968.
- . *The Promised End*. New York: World, 1963.
- Jackson, Shirley. *Come Along with Me: Part of a Novel, Sixteen Stories, and Three Lectures*. Edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- . *Shirley Jackson: A Register of Her Papers in the Library of Congress*. Library of Congress. Available online URL: [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?faid/faid:@field\(DOCID+ms996001](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?faid/faid:@field(DOCID+ms996001). Accessed June 4, 2009.
- . *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*. Edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- Lethem, Jonathan. “Monstrous Acts and Little Murders.” Review of *Just an Ordinary Day*. Salon.com. Available online. URL: <http://www.salon.com/jan97/jackson970106.html>. Accessed June 4, 2009.
- Murphy, Bernice. *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*. Jefferson N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005.
- Oppenheimer, Judy. *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. New York: Putnam, 1988.

Blake Hobby



RANDALL JARRELL (1914–1965)

Everybody understands that poems and stories are written by memory and desire, love and hatred, daydreams and nightmares—by a being, not a brain.

(“The Age of Criticism”)

The bushy salt-and-pepper beard and soulful eyes in Randall Jarrell’s later photographs portray the scholarly and artistic wisdom he accumulated during a life of writing and teaching. Unfortunately, Jarrell died at the premature age of 51. One of the leading critics of his age, Jarrell often wrote witty and at times bitter reviews that delighted some readers and angered others. Jarrell’s sharp insight and keen intelligence as a teacher, poet, literary critic, translator, editor, and author of children’s books were tethered to childlike hopes and fears that chased him in his personal life and drove him to find answers through his art. Jarrell’s early years were marked by an insecurity and sadness that plagued him through his adulthood. This profound sorrow can be felt in poems such as “90 North” (1940), “Next Day” (1942), and *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* (1960). Throughout his life Jarrell would attempt to describe, resolve, and rise above the underlying emotional flatness that characterized both his childhood and his adulthood. With great sensitivity and an often dark outlook on life, he wrote about childhood, war, illness, animals, books, loneliness, and, above all, loss: lost children, lost love, lost lives, and a lost world.

On May 6, 1914, just two months before the outbreak of World War I, Randall Jarrell was born. Jarrell’s family moved from Nashville, Tennessee, to his paternal grandparents’ home in California when he was just a year old. His parents separated in 1925;

Jarrell stayed with his beloved grandparents before returning to Nashville to live with his mother. During the time that Jarrell stayed with his father’s parents and his great-grandmother in California, he wrote pain-filled letters to his mother in Nashville. Late in life his mother returned these letters, and they formed the basis for “The Lost World” and “Thinking of the Lost World” (1965). We can see the persistent loneliness of his childhood through the speaker and themes in poems such as “The Lost World” (1962), where “Mama” and “Pop” represent his grandparents and “Anna” his mother. He also returned to his youth in a series of children’s books he wrote, including *The Bat-Poet* (1964) and *The Animal Family* (1965), which was dedicated to his beloved cat. When Jarrell moved back to Nashville at age 12, his mother worked as an English teacher, and her brother, Howell Campbell, helped support his nephews. Randall was a gifted student who did well at Hume-Hogg High School, where he contributed to the school’s yearbook, *The Echo*. During this time he enjoyed open access to one of the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie’s libraries in Nashville. This early love of libraries would find full expression between 1956 and 1958 when Jarrell accepted the post of consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, and in a number of his “library” poems including “Carnegie Library, Juvenile Division” (1942).

Thanks to the generous patronage of his uncle, Howell Campbell, Jarrell attended nearby Vanderbilt

University in 1932 and completed his undergraduate degree in 1935, taking classes during summer sessions at George Peabody College. Graduating with a degree in psychology, Jarrell integrated Sigmund Freud's theories into the themes of his poetry, which foreshadowed his future emotional struggles. His time at Vanderbilt would influence the course of his work and friendships for the rest of his life, especially his connection with the professor, poet, and Rhodes scholar John Crowe Ransom. While at Vanderbilt, Jarrell edited a humor magazine, *The Masquerader*, which also published works by his teachers, including Ransom, Allen Tate, and the future Rhodes scholar and Pulitzer Prize winner ROBERT PENN WARREN (*All the King's Men* 1946). The first of Jarrell's 35 poems published between 1934 and 1940, "Five Poems," was included in the *American Review*, a journal published by the American fascist Seward Collins; the journal also published works by Warren, Ransom, and Tate. This group of Jarrell's mentors, who were not fascists and did not support Hitler or nazism, cofounded and edited one of Vanderbilt's most influential publications, the *Fugitive*, in which they examined southern life in their poetry and essays. Later they joined with nine other academics to contribute essays to the conservative antimodernist manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), which provided an alternative to what they warned was the destruction of southern culture by industrialization. Despite the encouragement and inspiration the southern agrarians and fugitive poets provided, Jarrell showed little interest in southern political and cultural ideas.

Jarrell continued with graduate studies at Vanderbilt and planned on writing his master's thesis on the poetry of the 30-year-old W. H. Auden. Donald Davidson, however, another fugitive poet and contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*, advised him to write about a more established and less contemporary poet, A. E. Houseman. In 1937, when Robert Frost recommended John Crowe Ransom to the president of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, Ransom left Vanderbilt despite Jarrell's and other students' protests. At Kenyon, Ransom served as professor of poetry and as founding editor of a distinguished and influential literary publication, the *Kenyon Review*.

Jarrell and Tate left Vanderbilt to follow Ransom to Kenyon College, where Jarrell's political poem "The Winter's Tale" was included in one of the *Kenyon Review's* earliest issues (1940).

At Kenyon, Randall taught English part-time, coached sports, and completed his thesis, "Implicit Generalization in Houseman," which earned his master's degree in English from Vanderbilt in 1938. ROBERT LOWELL, a rising, though emotionally erratic young poet, left his own undergraduate studies at Harvard to study under Ransom at Vanderbilt. Lowell and Randall became lifelong friends and collaborators after rooming together at Ransom's house, later befriending a fiction writer who would become Jarrell's best friend, Peter Taylor (*A Summons to Memphis*, 1985 Pulitzer Prize). These friendships survived world war, mental illness, and divorces, eventually inspiring a collection of posthumous tributes to Jarrell edited by Lowell, Taylor, and Warren. While Jarrell was at Kenyon College, his girlfriend at Vanderbilt, Amy Breyer, unexpectedly ended their relationship and married a young surgeon. The emotional fallout of that troubled relationship and the abrupt breakup inspired numerous poems, such as "On the Railway Platform" (1940). When Robert Penn Warren joined another fugitive poet, Cleanth Brooks, on the faculty of Louisiana State University's English Department, Warren and Brooks published Jarrell's poetry in the *Southern Review* (1934), in which Jarrell also won a poetry contest in 1935.

After completing his master's degree, Jarrell accepted a position at the University of Texas in Austin, where he met his first wife, Mackie Langham, a member of the English Department. They married in 1940, the same year a collection of 20 previously unpublished poems, "The Rage for the Lost Penny," appeared in *Five Young American Poets*. Jarrell published his first book of poems, *Blood for a Stranger* (1942), at the age of 28 just prior to his enlistment in the army. Dedicated to his former professor, Allen Tate, the collection included "A Picture in the Paper," "For an Emigrant," "A Story," and "The Refugees." The collection was also reproduced in the *New York Times* with a complimentary review: "There is shown not only sensitivity and talent, but that power of

working at his art which is one of the signs of a real poet" (1942). Though Jarrell was unable to fly for the air force, he was ultimately deployed to an Army Air Corps base in Arizona, where he served as a celestial navigation training operator for B-29 pilots until 1946. During his four years of military service Jarrell wrote to his wife daily and corresponded regularly with Lowell, Taylor, and Tate, often chronicling army life and his views on the politics of war. In 1945 he also published his second collection of poems, *Little Friend, Little Friend*, which distinguished him as a noteworthy American war poet. Influenced by Wilfred Owens and Siegfried Sassoon, British poets of World War I, Jarrell depicted the horrors of war in such poems as "Losses," "Protocols," "Second Air Force," and "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"—his most famous poem.

After he was discharged from military service, Jarrell taught for one year at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. In 1946 he won the Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry, enabling him to concentrate solely on writing during 1948 and 1949. During that time, Taylor invited him to join him on the faculty of the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina (now University of North Carolina at Greensboro [UNCG]). Jarrell remained on the faculty at UNCG for the remainder of his life, also serving as a visiting professor at Princeton University, the University of Illinois, and the University of Cincinnati. In 1948 Jarrell published a second collection of war poetry, *Losses*, and in 1951 published *The Seven-League Crutches*. In the summer of that year, while at a writers' conference at the University of Colorado, Jarrell met Mary von Schrader, who would become his wife and intellectual partner in 1952, just days after his divorce from Mackie. Influenced by the method that Jarrell's mentors established to evaluate their own poetry during their weekly discussion groups, Jarrell learned to read and analyze literature closely. This method of close reading later became known as the New Criticism. Yet Jarrell distanced himself from this critical school in his own artful literary criticism. Compiling essays he had previously published in literary journals edited by his former mentors, Jarrell published them as *Poetry and the Age* (1953). Through these essays he

gained recognition as a brilliant and accomplished literary critic.

In 1961 Jarrell received the National Book Award in poetry for his autobiographical *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*. A final book of poetry, *The Lost World*, about lost childhood, was published in 1965. Jarrell's lone piece of prose fiction, *Pictures from an Institution*, a satire of academic life loosely based on his time at Sarah Lawrence College, was published in 1951. His literary life included the publication of numerous works of literary criticism, translations, fairy tales, and children's stories that earned him the Levinson Prize (1948), Oscar Blumenthal Prize (1951), O. Max Gardner Award (1962), and Ingram-Merrill Literary Award (1962). He also edited prestigious literary publications including the *Yale Review*.

Doubts remain over the circumstances of Randall Jarrell's death on 14 October 1965. The *New York Times* printed a North Carolina state trooper's statement that "witnesses reported that the victim had 'lunged into the side of the car that struck him.' 'We are going on the assumption that it was suicide'" (20). Despite this initial report, his death was ultimately ruled as accidental. During his final year, Jarrell experienced a series of health-related problems that resulted in medication changes. These changes caused personality aberrations ranging from hyperelation to depression, for which he was hospitalized. He returned home in July 1964 to resume teaching and planned trips abroad and future literary and critical works. As Jarrell walked home alone along a rural highway in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on October 14, 1965, the life of the beloved teacher, gifted critic, and talented poet was tragically cut short.

"90 North" (1942)

Jarrell's first independent book of poems, *Blood for a Stranger*, included the dark and pain-filled poem "90 North," a poem about a boy's dream to trek to the North Pole and a man's reluctance to return from the top of the world. The collection came out the same year he enlisted in the air force and was published after a selection of his poems ("The Rage

for the Lost Penny”) debuted in 1940. As suggested by the title, which refers to the latitude of the North Pole, the setting takes on an important role in telling the story of loneliness and isolation. Similarly, Jarrell relied on important settings in the concentration camp poem “Protocols,” and in the hot desert poem “Second Air Force.” In “90 North,” the setting is the coldest, darkest, loneliest, harshest place on Earth. A child and an adult speaker alternately express the loneliness and pain of the troubled 26-year-old poet. For the child, who speaks first, the North Pole is a magical world, a place of happiness, joy, and adventure. The child climbs into bed, drifts off to sleep, and dreams. When he meets challenges on his expedition, he wakes from his dream and returns to the comfort of his bed “in [his] flannel gown” (1). The adult speaker has no such retreat, however, and encounters a spinning world where all lines and winds converge in a meaningless whirlpool. With no means to escape his nightmare, the adult speaker says, “Turn as I please, my step is to the south” (13). In the next stanza the speaker’s death is foretold: “the flakes came huddling, / Were they really my end?” (7–8). Here, the child and adult worlds overlap. The speaker gives a short, childlike reason for leaving behind the nightmare of starving, freezing, and suffocating: “In the darkness I turned to my rest” (8). However, to the adult speaker who understands the effects of hyperthermia, “to my rest” is the resigned slip into unconsciousness before life’s final rest. Stephen Burt notes that the child speaker learns a valuable lesson: “Jarrell’s [child] dreamer expected sublimity and wisdom from a summit, but learns instead that he must go back down” (23). For the speaker the experience yields no wisdom. In the famous last line’s defiant declaration, the weathered speaker laments that the experience did not provide the knowledge he sought. Instead, “It is pain” he discovers.

For Discussion or Writing

- Jarrell provides two different speakers with different perspectives about the issues presented in “90 North.” How do these two speakers differ? Why does Jarrell provide two speakers? What effect does this have?
- Compare this poem with Jarrell’s later work “Well Water,” one of his final poems. How does he define meaning in each? If one were to extrapolate a vision of what is real from the poems, how would the two poems differ? With all of this in mind, can you say that Jarrell’s worldview changed, or was it static?
- For many philosophers, the key to life’s meaning lies in suffering and how we respond to it. On one level, this poem deals with the nature of suffering and its meaning. In fact, one might be able to arrive at an explanation of our lives from the poem. What philosophy of life does this poem suggest? What would the consequences of living such a life be?

“Losses” (1945)

“Losses” was published in Jarrell’s second collection of poetry, *Little Friend, Little Friend*, which takes its name from a haunting transcript of the radio communication between the crews of air force planes. In this transcript larger bomber planes are referred to as Big Friend, while smaller fighter planes are called Little Friend. During the exchange, “The bomber had both engines on fire when it called out to the fighter, ‘Little Friend, Little Friend, I got two engines on fire. Can you see me, Little Friend?’ To which the fighter responded, ‘I’m crossing right over you. Let’s go home’” (3). Jarrell does not use the voice of innocence to convey a simpler and more optimistic view of life, as with the child in “90 North,” but to capture the naïve experiences of boys who “burned the cities [they] had learned about in school” (22–23). Jarrell does not provide carefully constructed graphic details to recreate the horrors of war, as Wilfred Owen did in poems such as “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1921). The speaker of Jarrell’s poem, a collective group of soldiers, has nothing but high school to compare death with; the soldiers die not in foreign trenches filled with bloody corpses, but “on the wrong page of the almanac” (6).

Jarrell used common everyday language throughout his career to reveal the deepest understandings of

human experience. "Losses" is narrated by a group of soldiers who liken their deaths not to those of heroic figures, but to the mundane passing of "aunts or pets or foreigners" (10). In this way the dead soldiers speak for themselves, much like the anonymous and departed speaker of Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (1945) does. In the first line of the poem, the speaker trivializes death when he says, "*we* had died before," as if death were commonplace (emphasis added, 2) which, of course, in wartime it was. The soldiers' deaths are minimized further when the speaker relates such routine tasks as writing home to parents and reading mail. By juxtaposing these everyday events with the soldiers' deaths, Jarrell reiterates the speaker's naïveté. Yet in the poem's final stanza, the speaker dreams of being asked by a destroyed city "But why did I die?" (32). The city questions its death, but the soldiers never do. The speaker maintains, "It was not dying—no, not ever dying," a line that reflects the soldier's naïveté and inability to understand the horrors of war (29).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the many ways that Jarrell employs repetition throughout the poem. What is the effect of these repetitions? Do you find them to be effective, distracting, or confusing? Why do you think this thoughtful writer used so many repetitions? How do the repetitions contribute to the poem's meaning and form?
2. Read Jarrell's "Eighth Air Force" and then compare/contrast that poem with "Losses." What do the two say about youth? About soldiers? About war?
3. Compare T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with Jarrell's poem. What do the two have in common? How do they differ?
4. Eliot's *The Four Quartets* was inspired by war experiences, just as Jarrell's poem was, and reflects on the meaning of life from the perspective of death. Read the final Eliot quartet, "Little Gidding," and compare Jarrell's take on loss with Eliot's. Finally, write a well-developed essay that compares/contrasts the two, noting especially how the two poets think about life's meaning and purpose.

"Protocols" (1945)

"Protocols," as do many of Jarrell's poems, employs speakers who are trapped. Like the speaker of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," the two speakers of "Protocols," innocent and vulnerable, are awaiting death, describing its approach in an impressionistic manner. Both poems are examples of how Jarrell juxtaposes the naïveté of youth with the morbid disillusionment we have known since we learned of the "final solution." Jarrell uses this discontinuity between persona and theme to create a vision of the world where birth and death intertwine, a world where lived experience is tragically short. As in "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," anonymous speakers reveal themselves as victims of the Holocaust at the end of "Protocols." This time, though, Jarrell's speakers are vulnerable children who represent the helplessness of the downtrodden at the whim of global powers. In a letter to Robert Lowell, Jarrell wrote, "If you'll notice, I've never written a poem about myself in the army or war, unless you're vain or silly you realize that you, except insofar as you're exactly in the same boat as the others, aren't the primary subject of any sensible writing about the war" (quoted in Goldman 194). Unlike the soldier in "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," who reveals his gruesome death, these child speakers do not know the dangers of the "water in a pipe" (9), the death-camp shower pipe with its fatal gas. The poem's two children might represent the naïveté of European Jews, who did not see the evil threatening them, or, more generally, of the entire world, which was also caught unaware and in denial.

The two child speakers remain unknown, anonymous, and representative of the concentration camp victims at Birkenau and Odessa. Their recollections bleed into one another as they narrate fragments of their respective journeys to the gas chamber and the showers. Their pregnant observations from the grave are immediate, and deceptively simple. Jarrell's metaphor for facing death, "The water there is deeper than the world. . . . And the water drank me," is profoundly cynical, devoid of meaning, a lack, at once grotesque in its depiction, at the same time the poem is imagistic. In this way, the reader experiences a sense of disconnection between the beauty and sim-

plicity of the images and the horror of the events taking place. As with the speakers, so also is the reader confined, trapped, in a narrow interpretive space, yet incapable of feeling any sense of resolution.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read two other Jarrell poems that have child speakers: “The Truth” and “We Are Seven.” Having read these two, compare the speakers in all three. Write an essay that first classifies the three speakers and assesses their role in helping the poem to be understood: How do these speakers engage the reader?
2. Read two poems of SYLVIA PLATH, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” both of which contain Holocaust references. Then, compare the way Plath represents and uses the Holocaust with the way Jarrell represents and uses it in “Protocols.” What do these two poets have in common? How do they differ?
3. Read Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, a short novel about the Holocaust that tells the story of a child who survives the death camp Auschwitz. Then, compare/contrast *Night* with “Protocols.” What do the two have in common? What differences can you find? How do the two authors’ perspectives differ? Why do they differ?
4. Visit one of the Web sites regarding the Holocaust and look for stories about the children of the concentration camp. Then, evaluate Jarrell’s poem. How does it compare with the accounts you have read? How does it differ? Why might a poem be a more effective way to communicate such events than the narrative accounts you have read? Decide ultimately whether Jarrell is successful at what he is trying to accomplish.

“Second Air Force” (1945)

This portrayal of a mother visiting an airfield after the death of her son during the war is another example of how women play an important role in Jarrell’s poetry. They represent the fragility and ineffectualness of the universal mother in protecting her children as seen in works like “Protocols.” They serve as narrators of

empty modern living in *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*. Jarrell also uses women’s voices in “developing a socially respectable way of coming to terms with his own divided sensibility” (Longenbach 50). “Well Water,” published in 1965, features a female speaker musing about the meaning of life while drawing water from a rusty pump. “Second Air Force,” included in *Little Friend, Little Friend*, captures the despair of all the loved ones left behind to grieve by depicting one mother’s grief over the death of her own son. A man’s overt expressions of such vulnerabilities during a time of war would not elicit the same kind of sympathy afforded to mothers anticipating the return of their sons. In his letters, Jarrell stated, “The mother is merely a vehicle of presentation, her situation merely a formal connection of the out-of-this-world field with the world” (quoted in *Letters* 132). If the subject had been a man, maintaining this distance might seem appropriate, but by standing so “far off” (1) from a mother, the reader participates in the woman’s isolation. More tragically, the woman is further distanced from her son by viewing surroundings unfamiliar to her but intimately familiar to her son before his untimely death. In achieving this distance, Jarrell employs “the Wordsworthian and Keatsian dramatic lyric, wherein the speaker and landscape are interdependent” (Beck 69). The landscape provides the tone of desolation and expansive emptiness. In the first line “the plain,” with its imagined expanse, renders the woman small against the enormity of war and the powers that took her son. In the second line, another reference to the landscape shows the degree to which war changes the natural order of things: Artificial hangars appear like “hills,” and “bubbling asphalt” (8) interrupts the “sage,” “the dunes,” and the “ranges” (9). With Jarrell’s reference, once again, to the story of *Little Friend*, the bomber’s fighter escort, the elements in nature, to which every person can relate, are anthropomorphized and “[flames] eat, [the plane] rib by rib” (40). The plane is made human, and the bomber’s life, not the crew’s lives, “stream[s] out” (42).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does the mother mean when she says, “The years meant *this*?” Why is this line significant?

2. Search the Internet for accounts of bomber and fighter pilots from World War II and examine “Second Air Force” and “Eighth Air Force” for details they have in common with actual accounts. In what ways would the details in and tone of “Second Air Force” need to be amended to give a more positive representation of an air force base?

“The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (1945)

The last of the poems in *Little Friend, Little Friend* is perhaps Jarrell’s most well known, a poem horrifying in its simplicity. Jarrell added his own note of explanation for the ball turret:

A ball turret was a Plexiglas sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24, and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine-guns and one man, a short small man. When this gunner tracked with his machine guns a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he looked like the foetus in the womb. The fighters which attacked him were armed with cannon firing explosive shells. The hose was a steam hose. (Jarrell’s note)

In “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” a soldier-child narrates his own shattering death in the style of a journalist relating an everyday event. It is strewn with carefully crafted references to motherhood, childhood, birth, dreams, and death—recurrent themes throughout Jarrell’s poetry. Each image tells multiple and easily recognizable stories. The reference to “wet fur” (2), also present in “90 North” and referred to as “wired fur” in another poem from this collection, “Second Air Force,” is filled with multiple meanings. With nature representing life, Jarrell uses the image of the wet fur found on blind and dependent newborn animals to convey the vulnerability and helplessness of the gunner. Premature babies are also often covered in downy hair, suggesting that this soldier was ill prepared to enter the world created by the state. On a more literal level, Air Corps personnel wore jackets with fur collars that often became wet

with sweat. Jarrell takes this frightened young soldier on a journey above the earth, not into a dreamlike place in the clouds, but away from it; not awakening from a nightmare, but awakening to it. This progression, though horrifyingly sudden, startles the speaker with the recognition that his insignificant life is over. The brutality of the last line is created not just by the image of the soldier’s remains—remains that could be so unceremoniously washed down a drain with a common hose—but also by the abrupt change from two lyrical lines of imagery, lines that could just as easily have taken the story in a heroic direction but instead move to a staccato and sickening end. Jarrell told the story of the gunner in a longer, less brutal, and more detailed poem, “Siegfried,” which also appeared in *Little Friend, Little Friend*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read a number of Wilfred Owen’s and Siegfried Sassoon’s World War I poems, which can be found on the Internet in a number of places, including <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ltg/projects/jtap/tutorials/intro/>. If you explore this site, you will find full texts and actual copies of manuscripts in the poet’s hand, such as the Owen’s manuscripts found here: <http://www.hcu.ox.ac.uk/jtap/warpoems.htm>. Next, read Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” and his poem “Siegfried.” Examine how Jarrell’s poetry differs from the poetry of the two World War I poets. Which aspects have been retained? Why do you think the poetry about these two wars differs?
2. Though it was one of his more famous poems, Jarrell did not think it among his best. Knowing what you do about his life and other poetry, discuss why he might have felt this way.

“Next Day” (1965)

As many of Jarrell’s poems do, “Next Day” contrasts the universal themes of death and dying with a routine, daily experience: an aging woman’s visit to the grocery store a day after her friend’s death. The tone is softer when compared with that of his early work, especially the ferocity of the speaker in “90 North”

after he realizes that wisdom, though promised, can never be possessed. “Next Day” also deals with themes of wisdom and knowledge. In the poem’s first line, Jarrell lures the reader away from any grand themes with names of ordinary household cleaners: Cheer, Joy, All. Immediately thereafter, however, the speaker quotes the American psychologist and philosopher William James, brother of the famous writer Henry James: “Wisdom, said William James, / Is learning what to overlook” (6–7). This reference does not seem in keeping with Jarrell’s desire to write for the common reader, “and not for the more specialized audience that reads modern poetry” (*Kipling, Auden, and Co.* 170). In the *Washington Post*, Karl Shapiro, a fellow World War II poet and publisher of Jarrell’s works, praised Jarrell’s ability to capture the voice of common people and his refusal to “surrender his intelligence and his education to the undergraduate mentality” (quoted in Colum 1942).

The speaker’s elevated syntax, however, allows readers to experience her own regret: Long, lyrical sentences mirror the inner wanderings of a woman trying to piece together a new life from old memories. Jarrell does not, however, let her continue unchecked. In the middle of the second stanza, the real world intrudes—“the boy takes it to my station wagon”—pulling both speaker and reader back to a safe intellectual distance (10). The woman laments the unfulfilled dreams of her youth and states her current crisis: “Now that I’m old, my wish / Is womanish: / That the boy putting groceries in my car / See me” (16–19). Again, in multisyllabic words and complex sentences, the woman drifts off to remember even more vividly what she was like when she was young. In a reminiscent style of Shakespearean wordplay, in which the same word is repeated in the same line with a different meaning, Jarrell writes, “And, holding their flesh within my flesh” to express that the feelings of the woman and her admirers seem to have been mutual (24). The line “Their vile imaginings within my imagining,” however, implies that perhaps it was all in her mind, after all, and not in the desires of others. Just as she approaches an understanding of this mirrorlike quality, two short sentences of single-syllable words snap her back to her

reality—“now the boy pets my dog / and we start home” (27–28).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read “Funeral Blues” by W. H. Auden and then compare it with Jarrell’s “Next Day.” Think especially about the two speakers’ reactions to the death of a friend. Consider the primary focus of the speakers and the ways in which their outlooks on life change as a result of their friend’s death.
2. Jarrell writes the poem from a woman’s perspective. Why does he make this deliberate choice, and how does this choice affect our understanding of the poem? Is his feminine voice successful? Why or why not?

“Well Water” (1965)

By the time Jarrell reached the last years of his life, his poetry had a less bitter tone; he had become resigned, comfortable, even understanding. Less dark and more melancholy than in early works on the same theme, “Well Water” is an elegantly simple description of a woman pumping water from a rusty pump. It was written during the same year that Jarrell received the National Book Award for *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* and was included in the final book of poems published just prior to his death, *The Lost World* (1965). In this poem Jarrell appears to have begun to understand that though there may not be a higher meaning in life, one must savor, “gulp,” meaning from the “dailiness of life” (l. 13). The works of W. H. Auden, William Wordsworth, and Robert Frost influenced Jarrell to focus on a common object, the “rusty pump” (ll. 10–11), and use ordinary language to examine a universal truth about the human condition, in this case, aging. He includes a piece of ordinary dialogue, “‘since you’re up . . .” (l. 3), to help readers relate to the significance he explains explicitly as “Making you a means to / A means to a means to” (ll. 4–5). Jarrell turns to the example of one of his favorite poets, Walt Whitman, employing simple elements from nature to express the tender melancholia of old hands cupping to capture the essence of life. The girl, who calls her task

- . *Blood for A Stranger*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942.
- . *Complete Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.
- . *Fly by Night*. Pictures by Maurice Sendak. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976.
- . *Kipling, Auden, and Co.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.
- . *The Letters of Randall Jarrell*. Edited by Mary von S. Jarrell. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
- . *Little Friend, Little Friend*. New York: Dial, 1945.
- . *The Lost World*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- . Manuscripts and papers at the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
- . Manuscripts and papers at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.
- . Manuscripts and papers in the Poetry Consultant archive of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- . *No Other Book*. Edited by Brad Leithauser. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- . *Pictures from an Institution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- . *Poetry and the Age*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001.
- . *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket: Essays and Fables*. New York: Atheneum, 1962.
- . *The Third Book of Criticism*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.
- . "Two Poems." *Southern Review* 1, no. 1 (July 1935): 84–86.
- Longenbach, James. "Randall Jarrell's Semifeminine Mind." *Southwest Review* 81, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 368–386.
- Lowell, Robert, Peter Taylor, and Robert Penn Warren, eds. *Randall Jarrell 1914–1965*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967.
- Prefaces and Prologues*. Vol. 39. The Harvard Classics. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. Available online. URL: www.bartleby.com/39/. Accessed June 29, 2006.
- Pritchard, William H. *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990.
- Quinn, Sister Bernetta. *Randall Jarrell*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.
- "Randall Jarrell, Poet, Killed by Car in Carolina." *New York Times: Special to the New York Times*. 15 October 1965. Available online. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/01/specials/jarrell-obit.html>. Accessed June 25, 2006.
- "Randall Jarrell 1914–1965." Available online. URL: <http://personal.georgiasouthern.edu/~rflynn/JarrellHomepage.html>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Ransom, John Crowe. *The New Criticism*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: The Four Texts*. Edited by Jonathan Wordsworth. London: Penguin, 1995.
- Wright, Stuart. *Randall Jarrell: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986.

Elizabeth Igarza



JACK KEROUAC (1922–1969)

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”

(*On the Road*)

The *New York Times* obituary read, “Jack Kerouac, Novelist, Dead; Father of the Beat Generation.” By the time he died on October 21, 1969, Kerouac’s name had become synonymous with a social and cultural movement that materialized in the wake of World War II America and included other prominent writers, most notably ALLEN GINSBERG and William Burroughs. Kerouac first heard the term *Beat* from Herbert Huncke, a Times Square hustler who used it to signify poverty and exhaustion. Kerouac, however, appropriated the word to describe a post–World War II generation of restless, curious, and spiritual young people eager to escape staid middle-class values and discover new modes of self-expression. With the 1957 publication of *On the Road*, widely recognized as the Beat “manifesto,” Kerouac became the leading, although involuntary, spokesperson for this alternative culture. And while he published several essays attempting to delineate the term, it is ultimately through his life and literature that we truly understand the ethos of this Beat generation.

Jack Kerouac was born on March 12, 1922, in Lowell, Massachusetts; baptized *Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac*, and affectionately called *Ti Jean* (Little Jack) by his friends and family. Both of his parents—Gabrielle-Ange Lévesque (whom everyone called Mémère) and Leo-Alcide Kerouac—descended from French-Canadian immigrants. They married in 1915 and had two other children before Ti Jean

was born: Gerard, born in 1916, and Caroline, born in 1918. The Kerouacs were a solidly working-class family and devout Catholics. Leo was in the printing business and owned his own press until financial failure forced him to seek work in others’ shops, and Mémère worked intermittently in a shoe factory to supplement the family’s income. Kerouac had a particularly strong attachment to Mémère: He slept in her bed for much of his childhood and lived with her on and off for his entire life.

One traumatic event that contributed to Jack’s strong maternal attachment was the tragic death of his brother, Gerard, in 1926. Gerard was diagnosed with rheumatic fever in 1924 and suffered with the disease for two years. Memories of his brother’s affliction and death would haunt Kerouac for the rest of his life and would later form the basis for his novel *Visions of Gerard* (1963). When Kerouac was only four years old, he became powerfully aware of death and profoundly affected by what he saw as a “world of shadows.”

Kerouac’s strong imagination and interest in fantasy defined his early education. Because French was the only language spoken in the Kerouac home, he did not learn English until he attended school at the age of six. Shortly after he learned to read, young Kerouac began to write stories, as well as draw and narrate his own cartoons. He became particularly fascinated with the comic series *The Shadow*, which originated as a radio show and later became a pulp

weekly. Kerouac would later invoke the title character of *The Shadow* in *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* (1959), which describes his young teenage years and the solemn introspection and social distance that characterized his adolescence.

While, on the one hand, Kerouac was drawn to solitude, on the other hand, he envisioned himself as a romantic hero. Biographers are often quick to point out Kerouac's fragmented personality, and this split emerged in his early years. While Kerouac was a shy boy who cherished his time alone, both in the local woods of the Merrimack Valley and in the Lowell Public Library poring over the classics, he also had dreams of grandeur, not only as a writer but as an athlete. At five feet eight inches, Kerouac was relatively short, but he was strong and fast, becoming a star football player in high school. He was the team captain, was scouted by colleges, and secured a football scholarship to Columbia University.

After graduating high school, Kerouac had to spend a year at Horace Mann School for Boys in New York to obtain the academic preparation necessary for attending Columbia. Kerouac's experience at Horace Mann was his first foray into the world of fortune and privilege, as most of his classmates were members of wealthy Jewish families who sent their kids to school in chauffeured limousines. Kerouac, though, found inspiration in the energy and grittiness of Times Square; he began experimenting for the first time with drugs and alcohol and explored the growing culture of bop jazz. He gradually replaced visions of athletic stardom with dreams of becoming a famous writer.

A football injury during his first season at Columbia gave Kerouac the impetus to make the transition from athlete to aspiring writer. With a broken leg, Kerouac now had leisure time not only to focus on his schoolwork but to explore his own literary interests. Most importantly, he discovered the work of the American novelist Thomas Wolfe, who would become a major influence on his young literary career. In *Vanity of Duloz* (1968), Kerouac tells us that Wolfe "woke [him] up to America as a Poem instead of America as a place to struggle around and sweat in. Mainly this dark-eyed Ameri-

can poet made me want to prowl, and roam, and see the real America that was there and that 'had never been uttered'" (75). By the time his leg had healed, this dream of experiencing America had taken hold of him. In fall 1941 Kerouac left Columbia, signaling his new life as a writer and itinerant explorer of America.

While Kerouac sensed that he was no longer interested in college, an alternative path did not clearly present itself. He worked in a variety of short-term jobs—as a gas station attendant, a short-order cook, a sports reporter—meandering up and down the East Coast as opportunity allowed and writing his first set of short stories, *Atop an Underwood* (first published in 1999). By 1942 America was at war, and, seeing an opportunity for adventure, Kerouac signed up as a scullion on the S.S. *Dorchester*, which was heading for Greenland. Soon after his return, he enlisted in the navy. Kerouac's entrance into military life was dictated more by curiosity and romance than a passionate interest in the war. He had a strong distaste for violence and was ill prepared for the structure and demands of the navy. In an effort to be released, he feigned mental illness and was eventually discharged as having an "indifferent character."

His parents, now living on Long Island, had hoped Kerouac would finish his education at Columbia. He had tried to return to school briefly in 1942 but quickly left again. He always felt that his education was obtained outside the classroom, preferring to pursue "real adventures" in the urban landscape of New York City between 1943 and 1947. During this critical period, he moved in with his girlfriend, Edie Parker, a carefree and wealthy woman from Grosse Pointe, Michigan, who was taking art classes at Columbia. Through Edie and her friends, Kerouac met many of the central figures of the Beat era who would later be immortalized in his novels. Together with William S. Burroughs, Lucien Carr, and Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac formed a type of intellectual commune, discussing authors (such as Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche), collaborating on poetry and prose, exploring emerging jazz forms, and searching for what Ginsberg and Carr called a "new vision."

Though Kerouac found much in the way of inspiration from this collaboration, he also found a fair amount of trouble. His new friends were primarily collegians who were seeking to escape the trappings of mainstream America and locate higher levels of consciousness. Their experiences, however, were not only intellectual but also physical: Heavy drinking and extensive drug use were the norm, occasionally accompanied by violence. One night in August 1944, Lucien Carr stabbed and killed David Kammerer, a man who had fallen in love with the handsome teen and had been stalking him for several years. After the murder, Carr sought Kerouac's help, and eventually Kerouac was arrested and jailed as an accessory. Jack had no independent means of financial support and could not bail himself out. After his father refused to lend him the money, Kerouac turned to Edie for help. Her aunt paid for his bail but insisted that they marry first. Kerouac spent the first night of married life in his jail cell, waiting to be released.

Although Kerouac was eventually acquitted of any charges, the marriage would be over within the year. Kerouac was not in a position to be a responsible husband, as he was working intermittently and could barely feed himself, let alone provide for his wife. More importantly, Kerouac was bingeing on both alcohol and Benzedrine, an amphetamine that was available at the time in over-the-counter inhalers. High on speed, Kerouac would stay awake for days on end, exploring the underworld of New York City with Burroughs and Ginsberg, hanging out with local hustlers and thieves. Although Kerouac completed several pieces of writing during this period (including an unpublished collaborative novel with Burroughs about the Kammerer killing, called *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*), he would later describe this time in New York City as a "year of low, evil decadence" (*Vanity* 259).

Two critical medical events in 1945 forced Kerouac's temporary retreat from this world. His father was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and Kerouac began to spend much of his time at home caring for him. Shortly thereafter, Kerouac himself was hospitalized with his first episode of what would become recurrent thrombophlebitis, or blood clots in the legs, brought on by his excessive use of Benzedrine.

This forced period of retreat was actually crucial to Kerouac's literary career. Immobilized in the hospital for several weeks, Kerouac began to envision the first of his major novels, *The Town and the City* (1950).

After Leo Kerouac's death in spring 1946, Jack sprang to work writing, modeling his efforts on the work of Thomas Wolfe. *The Town and the City* is a semiautobiographical tale of Kerouac's boyhood and of his friends, in which Kerouac himself takes shape in the five sons of the fictionalized Martin family. While working on the novel, in winter 1946, Jack met Neal Cassady, a rebellious Denver native with whom Kerouac shared a close connection almost instantly. Their meeting, and the next several years of Jack's life, would form the basis of Kerouac's second (and best-known) novel, *On the Road* (1955). Embarking on his first cross-country trip in July 1947, Kerouac also gathered the worldly knowledge necessary for him to conclude *The Town and the City*, which closes with one of the Martin boys' turning away from conventional society and toward the open road.

After spending almost two years traveling, Kerouac returned to his mother's home and completed his 1,183-page manuscript of *The Town and the City*. After he shopped the book around to publishers (with the help of Allen Ginsberg), Harcourt Brace accepted the novel in March 1949 and assigned Robert Giroux to edit it into publishable form. It was finally released in 1950 and was met with moderate critical success. For Kerouac the pride of publishing his first novel was overshadowed by his drive to complete his second, which was jump-started by a rambling 40,000-word letter Jack received from Neal Cassady. Neal's fast-paced confessional writing imitated the immediacy of real life, and in utilizing Cassady's influence, Kerouac created what would become his trademark writing style. Inserting a roll of paper into his typewriter so that he would not have to waste time switching pages, Kerouac composed, over the course of about three weeks in spring 1951, a 175,000-word single-spaced paragraph, which would become his controversial novel *On the Road*.

Though it was completed in 1951, *On the Road* would not be published for another six years. While seeking publication, Kerouac embarked upon what

he considered his life's work, an epic multivolume novel in the vein of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27). Kerouac called his saga “the Duluoz Legend,” intending to document his entire life in fictionalized form and go back in his old age to make uniform the many pseudonyms he had invented for his real-life acquaintances. These novels include *Visions of Gerard* (1963), *Maggie Cassidy* (1959), *Tristessa* (1960), and *Desolation Angels* (1965).

In the eyes of some critics, though, Kerouac's dream of a unified epic is overshadowed by the greatness of three novels: *On the Road* (1957), *The Subterraneans* (1958), and *The Dharma Bums* (1958). *The Subterraneans* was written on a three-night Benz-drine binge after Kerouac's breakup with an African-American woman known in the novel as Mardou Fox and is considered one of the finest examples of Kerouac's confessional style, which he dubbed “spontaneous prose.” *The Dharma Bums* recounts a time in Kerouac's life when he was invested in a version of Buddhism and follows an autobiographical character (in this case, named Ray Smith) on trips across the country and to the tops of mountains. *The Dharma Bums*, as does *On the Road*, portrays Kerouac as the pupil of a wiser male friend, in this case, the poet and Buddhist scholar Gary Snyder (renamed Japhy Ryder). These three novels have earned a reputation as his finest and have been continuously in print since their first publications.

The period between 1951 and 1956 also saw the dissolution of Kerouac's second marriage, this time to Joan Haverty. She and Jack had married impulsively in 1950, and Jack left her the following year after she told him she was pregnant with his child. These years also marked the ascendancy of the Beat generation: John Clellon Holmes published his essay “This Is the Beat Generation” in the *New York Times* in November 1952, introducing the word *Beat* into American vernacular as a term for the new generation of countercultural youths. In 1955 Allen Ginsberg and other Beat figures gave a powerful reading at San Francisco's Gallery Six, and Ginsberg's poem “Howl” (1956) sparked a landmark obscenity trial. Even with the growing appreciation of the Beats' unconventional style, Viking Press rejected edited versions of *On the Road* until July 1955, when edi-

tors became convinced that it would be met with widespread acceptance.

Finally published in 1957, *On the Road* received praise from some critics, while many deemed it a nonliterary, self-centered tract encouraging youths to resist civilization and partake in drugs, alcohol, and free-wheeling sexual behavior. Despite critical dispute, *On the Road* was a commercial success and gave Kerouac the freedom to publish subsequent novels with relatively little editorial interference, thus preserving his ideal of spontaneity in literature. The next decade saw the publication of a great body of his work, from novels to books of poetry to compilations of essays.

Unfortunately, Kerouac felt ill at ease with his sudden notoriety as king of the Beats and slipped further into alcoholism and drug use, even participating in psychedelic drug experimentation with the noted drug-culture icon Timothy Leary. He withdrew from his peers; moved in with his mother in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1964; and grew even closer to her in the wake of his sister's death that same year. Though he traveled briefly in Europe, he remained mostly at home, marrying Stella Sampas, the sister of a childhood friend, in 1966. They relocated temporarily to Lowell, where Kerouac completed *Vanity of Duluoz* (1968), the last novel he would publish in his lifetime. They returned to Florida in 1968, just months after Neal Cassady died of congestive heart failure after becoming drunk and wandering away from a wedding party in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Kerouac himself would soon see the end of the road as a result of alcohol abuse. He developed cirrhosis of the liver in 1969, which led to internal hemorrhaging. Kerouac died in Mémère's house on October 21, 1969, at the age of 47.

Though Kerouac's early death is certainly tragic, his absence has led readers to appreciate the prodigious body of literature that he created in his short life. It is in viewing the history of counterculture that one can truly appreciate his contributions to the history of art and literature in America: Kerouac's influence on the rock musicians of the 1960s forever changed the face of contemporary music, and his Beat manifesto *On the Road* continues to inspire readers to question mainstream values. He lives on

as the subject of innumerable literature classes and as the namesake of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics (founded by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman). Though he died without completing his *Duluoz Legend*, Kerouac left behind a legendary and lasting contribution to American literary tradition, and to the history of American counterculture.

***On the Road* (1957)**

Kerouac's most popular novel has retained notoriety not just for its greatness, but also for the mythic story surrounding its creation. Written over the course of a three-week creative spurt in April and May 1951, *On the Road* was first completed as one long paragraph on a roll of teletype paper that Kerouac inserted into his typewriter so that he could transcribe his thoughts freely, without the time-consuming burden of removing and reinserting pages. The result, a 175,000-word single-spaced block of text, would not see publication for six years but would eventually change the face of fiction writing.

In this novel, Kerouac began to experiment with what would become his trademark style of writing, which he called "spontaneous prose." Inspired by a 40,000-word letter he had received from his close friend Neal Cassady, as well as the improvisational style of the jazz music he first became enthralled with as a student in New York City, Kerouac wrote an outpouring of thoughts and emotions, creating repetitious patterns and lengthy sentences that flowed from one idea to the next. Though editors at Viking Press, to make it more publishable, pared down *On the Road*, it retained the raw energy and unique prosody of Kerouac's manuscript and was eventually released in its final form in 1957.

The novel is divided into four major sections, with a brief concluding segment. Like most of Kerouac's novels, *On the Road* is an autobiographical tale presented using the narrative tools of fiction. The novel has a first-person narrator, Sal Paradise, who is based on Kerouac himself. The novel's events span a period of Kerouac's life from around Christmas 1946 to October 1950, although the action of the novel takes

place over the course of 24 months. Each section depicts a cross-country road trip embarked upon by Paradise, and the events in between trips are glossed over in just a few sentences. The months between are not important; the novel's intent is to portray a life lived on the open road.

The book opens with Sal's life-altering introduction to Dean Moriarty, a character based on the charismatic derelict Neal Cassady, a Denver native who ran in the same social circle as Kerouac in New York City in the 1940s. The bohemian group of intellectuals and writers included the future Beat generation greats Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, to whom Kerouac assigns the pseudonyms *Carlo Marx* and *Old Bull Lee*, respectively. Instantly charmed by Dean's naive intellectual yearnings, as well as his ebullience and lust for life, Sal feels inspired to indulge his restless yearnings by traveling to San Francisco. The first section of the novel documents this first road trip, on which Paradise buses and hitchhikes his way from the East Coast to the West, stopping briefly in Denver to visit Carlo and Dean. After arriving in San Francisco, he overstays his welcome at the home of his old friend Remi Boncoeur, and on his way to Los Angeles, he meets a Mexican woman named Terry with whom he becomes romantically involved for the next several weeks. They work seasonal labor together picking cotton, but when the season ends in October, Sal leaves her and returns to New York.

The second section continues the story over a year later, when Paradise is visiting his family in Testament, Virginia, during the Christmas season of 1948. Unexpectedly, Dean shows up with his ex-wife, Marylou, and their friend Ed Dunkel in Dean's then-brand-new car, a Hudson, and the group takes off on a whirlwind cross-country trek, driving non-stop from Testament to New Jersey, back to Testament, to New York, to New Orleans to visit Bull Lee and leave Ed Dunkel with his wife, Galatea, and finally to California. While the trip is exhilarating, it ends, as Sal's first trip, does, in abandonment and disappointment. Dean leaves Marylou (and Sal) to be with Camille, a different girlfriend, with whom he has a daughter, and Sal plans to take a bus back to New York. Before departing, Paradise relates, "We

were all thinking we'd never see one another again and we didn't care" (178).

In section 3, though, Sal and Dean's relationship triggers what the critic Warren French calls the novel's "emotional climax" (French 36). After spending some time alone in Denver to find Dean, Sal brings Dean back to San Francisco, where Sal is living with Camille and their daughter, Amy. Camille kicks Dean out after a huge fight, and Sal suggests that they travel to Italy together. At the moment of his suggestion, the two men briefly stare at each other, and Sal thinks, "It was probably the pivotal point of our friendship when he realized I had actually spent some hours thinking about him and his troubles, and he was trying to place that in his tremendously involved and tormented mental categories" (189–190).

Though Sal demonstrates a brotherly commitment to Dean, their relationship begins to deteriorate, as do Dean's relationships with his friends and family. Galatea Dunkel and the wives of his other friends have wished him ill as a result of his poor treatment of Camille, and upon visiting a cousin and a childhood friend in Denver, Dean is told that his family no longer wishes to be associated with him. He meets a woman named Inez at a party and decides to move in with her, once again abandoning the other women in his life, his daughter, and lastly, Sal.

The novel's fourth section picks up at a point in Kerouac's life after his first novel, *The Town and the City*, had given him moderate financial success. Sal decides to use the money from his book to travel west, this time leaving Dean behind in New York. However, Dean joins Sal in Denver, with the excuse of obtaining a fast, cheap divorce from Camille while in Mexico. Along with their friend Stan Shephard, they venture to the Mexican town of Gregoria, where they encounter a fantasyland of marijuana, alcohol, and prostitutes. After a wild time, they drive on to Mexico City, where Sal develops dysentery and a fever so high that he experiences delirium. Having obtained his divorce papers, Dean rushes back to New York, leaving Sal behind for the last time. Sal narrates, "When I got better I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there,

sick, to get on with his wives and woes" (302). Sal decides not to complain; that is just the way Dean is.

In the brief fifth part, Kerouac wraps up the narrative. Dean divorces Camille, marries Inez, and returns to San Francisco to stay with Camille. Sal meets "the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for," and they agree "to love each other madly" (304). At the end of the novel, Sal bids Dean good-bye and turns to a more stable lifestyle, although he tells the reader that he still thinks of Dean Moriarty when he thinks about the sprawling countryside of the American landscape and the unpredictability of everyday life.

The 1957 publication of *On the Road* not only opened the door for Kerouac's later, more experimental dabbling in "spontaneous prose," but legitimated the work of writers struggling to fit into traditional forms. While the American author Truman Capote responded to *On the Road* with his famous dismissal of it as literature "That's not writing, it's typing," Kerouac's fictionalized account of real-life events paved the way for Capote's work with his own groundbreaking "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood* (1966). And while Kerouac's writing style signals a departure from convention, his novel simultaneously situates itself within Western literary tradition. Kerouac modeled his early writing on the works of the American fiction writer Thomas Wolfe, and while *On the Road* is a departure from Kerouac's earlier imitations, Kerouac credits Wolfe with his initial yearnings to travel and observe the country. Moreover, *On the Road* is a modern example of the picaresque novel, a literary term invented to refer to Spanish novels in the 16th century and used by scholars to define a narrative text that relates episodes in the adventures of a roguish hero. As such, *On the Road* may be associated with such celebrated works as Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1615), Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

In turn, *On the Road* has become a part of the American literary canon as one of the foremost representations of the Beat generation. Harshly criticized at the time of its first publication, *On the Road* represented to many American readers a manual for destroying the fabric of society by engaging in drug

and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and general social upheaval. To others it was one of the first documents of an emerging bohemian counterculture, with which people from all walks of life who felt oppressed by mainstream cultural values could identify and relate. Though in his lifetime Kerouac chose to dissociate himself from both politics and later subcultures like the hippies of the 1960s, his work undeniably influenced artists and activists at a crucial time in post–World War II American culture. And as time has passed, Kerouac's novel continues appeal to those who feel at odds with societal norms, and to inspire others to live and write in unconventional ways.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the roles that Kerouac assigns to women in the novel.
2. Kerouac often uses symbolic names when assigning pseudonyms to his fictionalized characters. Discuss possible symbolic meanings in *On the Road* of the name of Kerouac's character, *Sal Paradise*.
3. At the start of *On the Road*, Sal refers to “the East of my youth and the West of my future,” dreaming of the West as a land of opportunity, natural beauty, and cowboys. After the events of the novel, does Paradise still have the same idealized notion of the West? How do his travels and encounters on the road change the way he thinks about both the East and the West?
4. *On the Road* has been said to have three major characters: Sal, Dean, and the American landscape. Discuss how the setting in this novel is as much a character as either of its two leading men.
5. Warren French writes, “*On the Road* is a traditional tale of youth's disillusionment, perhaps closest in the American tradition to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*” (French 44). Compare and contrast the two novels. How do issues of social class affect each of the novels differently?

***The Dharma Bums* (1958)**

The Dharma Bums is the third of Kerouac's most popular novels, the others being *On the Road* (1957)

and *The Subterraneans* (1958). At the time of its publication, response to the novel was harsh: Critics found that it lacked the energy and edginess of his preceding work. Even his close friend and fellow Beat generation writer Allen Ginsberg, who gave it a supportive review in the *Village Voice*, urged Kerouac to shy away from composing “travelogues” in the future. *The Dharma Bums* is allegedly Kerouac's only novel that was published without revision or rewriting and as such contains both the raw emotion characteristic of Kerouac's confessional style, as well as the technical and structural complications inherent in a first draft.

The novel is divided only by chapter breaks, but larger, informal sections are evident in the text, though critics are in disagreement as to whether to divide the work into thirds or quarters (*On the Road* was in four labeled sections). *The Dharma Bums* documents Kerouac's life in 1955–56, when he was living in Berkeley, California, with Allen Ginsberg. The novel opens with Kerouac's character, in this instance assuming the name *Ray Smith*, riding illegally on a freight train in the company of a wandering bum whose habit of carrying a prayer by Saint Teresa leads Ray to conclude that he is a sort of spiritual figure. *The Dharma Bums* is, from its very first pages, one of Kerouac's most openly spiritual works and was composed during the height of his interest in the Buddhist faith.

Indeed, most of the novel recounts Ray's tutelage at the hands of Japhy Ryder, a Buddhist poet and scholar based on Kerouac's real life friend and mentor Gary Snyder. Japhy teaches Ray about Buddhist poetry, mountain climbing, and liberated sexuality. Though Japhy is not present in a large middle section of the novel, his influence informs Ray's thought processes throughout. When recounting the infamous Gallery Six reading, where Allen Ginsberg delivered his groundbreaking reading of the poem “Howl” in what is known as the “birth trauma of the Beat Generation” (here represented as Alvah Goldbook's reading “Wail”), Kerouac focuses instead on describing Snyder's work, which he considered more “earnest and strong and humanly hopeful” (14).

Some of the most striking passages in the book appear in Kerouac's description of climbing the

California Matterhorn with Japhy and Henry Morley (based on his friend John Montgomery). While much of the novel contains shorter, haiku-inspired sentences, in this section the reader encounters Kerouac's trademark style of "spontaneous prose," in which impressions and ideas are recorded in a fast, associative, jazz-inspired outburst, thus resonating with charged sensation. Describing the landscape of the Matterhorn, he writes:

The woods do that to you, they always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of forgotten song drifting across the water, most of all like golden eternities of past childhood or past manhood and all the living and the dying and the heartbreak that went on a million years ago and the clouds as they pass overhead seem to testify (by their own lonesome familiarity) to this feeling. (62)

Ray's climb symbolizes a retreat from stifling civilization toward an epiphany in the more spiritual setting of nature. Upon returning from their trip, Japhy refers to a "rucksack revolution," in which young people will abandon mainstream consumer culture and travel simply throughout the American landscape. This idea enthralled Kerouac and influenced his later work, such as his 1960 essay "The Vanishing American Hobo."

Still, Ray quickly grows tired of California society, particularly after his friend Cody Pomeray (based on Neal Cassady) leaves his neurotic girlfriend Rosie (based on Natalie Jackson) under Ray's care in her suicide (Pomeray's leaving results). Ray travels to North Carolina to visit his mother and sister but has a personality clash with his sister's husband and returns to Berkeley after a few months. He and Japhy take up residence at the home of a Buddhist family in Northern California, but both seem to be growing weary of their "dharma bum" lifestyle. After one last backpacking trip Japhy goes off to Japan, and Ray, at Japhy's suggestion, takes a job as a lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State. As the novel closes, Ray stands atop the peak and cries out, "Japhy . . . I owe so much to Desola-

tion, thank you forever for guiding me to the place where I learned all" (244).

For Discussion or Writing

1. On his way to camp in Riverside, California, Ray experiences a brief moment of clarity in which it becomes clear to him that "the only alternative to sleeping out, hopping freights, and doing what I wanted . . . would be to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a madhouse, where we could be 'supervised'" (121). The author Ken Kesey manipulates a similar vision in his 1962 novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. How is Kesey's novel similar to *The Dharma Bums*? How does Kesey's intent render his work different from Kerouac's?
2. In Buddhism, the concept of *dharma* refers to the teachings of the Buddha and thus suggests the revelation of ultimate truth. Using this literal definition, discuss what may be implied by Japhy Ryder's term *dharma bum*.
3. Compare and contrast the different interpretations of Buddhist spirituality espoused by Ray, Japhy, and Alvah Goldbook.
4. Both *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* depict Kerouac's character as a pupil and follower of a male hero and friend. How is Dean Moriarty's role in *On the Road* similar to Japhy Ryder's in *The Dharma Bums*? What is the significance of Kerouac's choice to downplay the presence of Neal's character (Cody Pomeray) in *The Dharma Bums*?

The Subterraneans (1958)

Grove Press published *The Subterraneans* in 1958, within months of the publications of both *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac claims to have completed the novel within "three full moon nights of October," while under the influence of the amphetamine Benzedrine. Critical opinion on the novel, as with his other works, is polarized: Some claim that *The Subterraneans* is his finest example of "spontaneous prose," while others find it disorganized, slangy, and basically in need of the editorial

revision seen in the completed versions of *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*.

While Kerouac intended *The Subterraneans* to fit into the massive autobiographical work that he called the Duluoq Legend, the novel's stylistic differences prohibit its full inclusion as part of the saga. It does, however, form an important chronological link, as it documents a period in Kerouac's life during summer 1953. While the events it parallels took place in New York's Greenwich Village, *The Subterraneans* is set in San Francisco; some critics cite this point as a challenge to the supposed believability of Kerouac's other novels. As in his other works, Kerouac centers the narrative on an autobiographical character, this time named *Leo Percepied*. The critic Warren French suggests the translation of the name as "Lion with Pierced-Foot," perhaps to refer to Achilles or Oedipus, though a nod to Kerouac's character as a perceptive observer, and the use of his father's first name, are other likely sources as well.

The plot of the novel follows Leo's two-month relationship with Mardou Fox, a half-black, half-American Indian woman who runs in Percepied's social circle. The novel itself contains as much rambling rumination as plot, as the narrator acknowledges, stating that it is difficult to compose a narrative when you're "such an egomaniac all you can do is take off on big paragraphs about minor details about yourself and the big soul details about others go sitting and waiting around" (3–4). Much of the novel documents explicit sexual encounters of Mardou and Leo, as well as Leo's experiences under the influence of marijuana, or "tea," as he calls it.

Like Leo, Fox is assigned a symbolic name, perhaps to refer to Kerouac's animalistic characterization of her throughout the novel. Leo describes Mardou as "snakelike" and consistently refers to her body in dehumanizing, misogynistic ways. His first thought upon seeing her is "By God, I've got to get involved with that little woman," and even by the end of the novel, he still expresses the idea that "the man can make the little woman bend, she was made to bend" (2, 107). As does *On the Road*, *The Subterraneans* resists categorization as a bildungsroman (coming-of-age story) because the narrator reaches the end of the novel without growing or changing.

Another constant is the narrator's emphasis on his racial difference from the "Negro" Mardou. The morning after their first sexual encounter, as he looks over at the sleeping Mardou, he describes her face alternately as looking like an Aztec mask and having "a boxer nose," which he describes as "slightly Mongoloid" (18). He expresses concern that Mardou is involved with him only to steal his "white man heart," calling her "a Negress sneaking in the world sneaking the holy white men for sacrificial rituals later when they'll be roasted and roiled" (49). Leo's convictions that Mardou and he exist on fundamentally different planes because of their racial difference, coupled with his chauvinist idea that he can mold her desires to fit his own, eventually lead to their turbulent breakup.

Still, gender and racial difference are not the only sources of prejudice in Leo's life. *The Subterraneans* has been critiqued as one of Kerouac's most homophobic novels as well. Percepied refers pejoratively to "fags" throughout the novel and even recounts an instance when he physically and verbally harassed a "queer" when he was younger. Contrary to these statements, Leo endangers his relationship with Mardou by engaging in ambiguously homoerotic behavior throughout the novel. He abandons her to spend a night with Ariel Lavalina (based on Gore Vidal) and seemingly becomes infatuated with a young male member of the subterraneans. Although he does not form any fulfilling relationships with homosexual men, it is safe to assume that homosexual contact played a role in Percepied's (and, in friends' accounts, Kerouac's) life.

But as Ann Charters points out in her biography of Kerouac, "Kerouac's pride in tossing *The Subterraneans* off in three nights gave him more lasting satisfaction than anything that happened between him and the girl that summer" (195). Indeed, in this novel readers can most clearly see the detriment to personal relationships that is the result of Kerouac's insistence on being the constant observer, always removing himself and seeking experience so that he can later document it. Seemingly, the only meaningful relationship he can maintain is with his mother, with whom Kerouac was living at the time *The Subterraneans* takes place. As his relationship with

Mardou falls apart, Leo has a vision of his mother's saying to him, "Poor Little Leo, poor Little Leo, you suffer, men suffer so, you're all alone in the world I'll take care of you, I would very much like to take care of you all your days my angel" (104). This quote harks back to the common theme in Kerouac's writings that all life is suffering. From his early Catholic childhood to his Buddhist quest for Enlightenment, Kerouac advances his theory that even in a world of inspiring music, good friends, and a dynamic landscape, the only constant is anguish.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *The Subterraneans* to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), a novel that Kerouac claimed to have used as a model for his own work.
2. A 1958 *Time* magazine review of *The Subterraneans* called the group to which the title refers a band of "urban Thoreaus' in an existential state of passive resistance to society." Compare the "subterraneans" to Henry Thoreau in *Civil Disobedience* (1849). Does Kerouac's characters' urban status render them utterly different from Thoreau, or are the two comparable?

"The Vanishing American Hobo" (1960)

"The Vanishing American Hobo" first appeared in the March 1960 issue of the now-defunct travel magazine *Holiday*. It is perhaps better known, though, for its republication in the 1960 volume *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac's first outspokenly autobiographical work. Notably, the republication includes the additional last line "The woods are full of wardens." In *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac recalls the years he spent gathering the life experience he compiled in his novels, forsaking in these pieces the guise of fiction while maintaining his trademark Beat style.

In "Vanishing," Kerouac glorifies the hobo and his various manifestations throughout the American landscape, from the California pack rat traveler to the urban street panhandler. According to his biographer Ellis Amburn, the prototype of Kerouac's American hobo is William Holmes "Big Slim" Hubbard, a war

buddy of Jack's with whom he was discharged and transferred back to the United States for reasons of mental instability. As Neal Cassady later would, Big Slim, a fellow former football player, represented to Kerouac a "charming derelict" for whom society would always provide because of his magnetism and his appeal to nurturing women (Amburn 73).

While glorifying his archetypal hobo, Kerouac also criticizes a society that increasingly forces the hobo to vanish. He points out the irony that while camping is a glorified activity for Boy Scouts, a grown man sleeping in the woods can end up in jail for vagrancy. He condemns American society's ever-increasing police force, whom he characterizes as destroyers of freedom, supported by taxpayers' dollars, who seem to have nothing better to do than harass well-meaning hobos. Kerouac recounts an instance when he was walking in an Arizona desert looking for a place to sleep and was accosted by three police cars. The police question him and finally let him go, though they cannot seem to understand why a man would want to sleep outside when he can afford a hotel room.

Kerouac further faults the media, who portray "the cop heroes on TV," for the disappearance of the American hobo. He asserts that the media instill a fear of the hobo in the American people, "because of what newspapers made the hobo to be—the rapist, the strangler, child-eater." He also claims that the end to his hoboing resulted from increasing television stories about "the abominableness of strangers with packs." Writing at the end of the 1950s, Kerouac prophesies the incredible power of the media to shape the opinions of the American people, which would become an integral part of critiques of American culture in the years to come.

Closely linked to the increasing media presence in America is increasing consumerism. Kerouac documents in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) the sentiments of his close friend, the then-aspiring Buddhist guru Gary Snyder, using the fictionalized character of Japhy Ryder. Ryder refers to a "rucksack revolution," in which young people will forsake mainstream consumerist culture and experience true freedom within the American landscape: "Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand

American culture. In light of these stereotypes, discuss the portrayal of women in the work of Jack Kerouac. How do Kerouac's own conceptions of gender show up in his work, particularly as evidenced by the roles in which he places female characters and the way he describes women in his writing?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Amburn, Ellis. *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Jack Kerouac's On the Road*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004.
- Cassady, Carolyn. *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg*. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- Charters, Ann. *Kerouac: A Biography*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973.
- Clark, Tom. *Jack Kerouac: A Biography*. New York: Paragon House, 1990.
- Feied, Frederick. *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac*. New York: Citadel Press, 1964.
- French, Warren. *Jack Kerouac*. Boston: Twayne, 1986.
- Holmes, Clellon. "This Is the Beat Generation." *New York Times* 16 November 1952, p. SM10.
- Hunt, Tim. *Kerouac's Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981.
- "Jack Kerouac Bio and Links." Beatmuseum.org. Available online. URL: <http://www.beatmuseum.org/kerouac/jackkerouac.html>. Accessed May 29, 2007.
- "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Present at the Creation." National Public Radio. September 10, 2002. Available online. URL: <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/ontheroad/>. Accessed February 27, 2007.
- Jones, James T. *Jack Kerouac's Duluoz Legend: The Mythic Form of an Autobiographical Fiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.
- Kerouac, Jack. *Big Sur*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1962.
- . *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Penguin, 1958.
- . *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three*. New York: Grove Press, 1959.
- . *Empty Phantoms: Interviews and Encounters with Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Paul Maher, Jr. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005.
- . *Heaven and Other Poems*. Bolinas, Calif.: Grey Fox Press, 1977.
- . *Lonesome Traveler*. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- . *On The Road*. New York: Penguin, 1955.
- . *The Subterraneans*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- . *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1968.
- . *Visions of Cody*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *Visions of Gerard*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
- McNally, Dennis. *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America*. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Miles, Barry. *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait*. New York: H. Holt, 1998.
- Nicosia, Gerald. *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*. New York: Grove Press, 1983.
- Turner, Steve. *Angelheaded Hipster: A Life of Jack Kerouac*. New York: Viking, 1996.
- Updike, John. "On the Sidewalk." In *Assorted Prose*. New York: Knopf, 1965.
- What Happened to Kerouac?* Directed by Richard Lerner and Lewis MacAdams. DVD. New Yorker Films, 1986.

Caitlin Shanley



KEN KESEY (1935–2001)

True freedom and insanity spring from the same spiritual well, already mixed, just add incentive.

(Interview with Paul Krassner)

Ken Elton Kesey was born September 17, 1935, to the dairy farmers Fred and Geneva Smith Kesey. Though he was born in La Junta, Colorado, his family moved to Springfield, Oregon, just outside Eugene, in 1946, and the landscape of the Pacific Northwest became the backdrop for most of Kesey's life, as well as his writings. In his greatest works, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), the Oregon setting constitutes not just the location but also the landscape of the characters' life experience. Today Kesey is considered not just one of the principal writers of that American region but also of the United States as a whole. His capacity to represent universal human struggles and emotions eloquently and humorously has allowed him to transcend the label of a regional writer, and his major novels are known as some of the greatest to be written during the 1960s.

Kesey and his brother, Chuck, spent a lot of time outside, exploring and hunting in the forests of the Willamette Valley. Kesey also enjoyed comic books and adventure stories, particularly those of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Zane Gray. The latter would even one day become his son's namesake. Kesey attended public schools in Springfield, where he participated on the boxing, wrestling, and football teams and was voted "most likely to succeed" by his high school graduating class. He went on to the University of Oregon, where he continued his wres-

tling career, almost qualifying for the Olympics. He also became active in theater and was a member of a fraternity. Kesey graduated in 1957 with a bachelor's degree in speech and communications.

During his junior year Kesey married his high school sweetheart, Faye Haxby, and shortly after his graduation, they moved together to Los Angeles. Kesey spent a year playing bit roles in Hollywood films and composing his first and still unpublished novel "End of Autumn," about college athletics. He then entered the graduate level writing program at Stanford on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship; there he studied under Frank O'Connor, Malcolm Cowley, and Wallace Stegner, alongside blooming writers like Tillie Olsen, Ernest Gaines, and Ed McClanahan, among others. He spent much of his time working on another unpublished novel, "Zoo," which documented San Francisco's bohemian North Beach community. While at Stanford, Kesey lived on the infamous Perry Lane, the hub of Palo Alto's budding bohemian subculture. There, in 1959, he met Vik Lovell, a psychology graduate student who encouraged him to participate in experiments of "psychomimetic" (imitating a psychotic state) drugs at the Veterans Hospital at Menlo Park, California. There Kesey was introduced to drugs like psilocybin, mescaline, and peyote, but most notably, to LSD.

In 1961 Kesey took a job as a night guard on the psychiatric ward of the same hospital. For-

ever changed by his experiences with drugs, Kesey would go to work under the influence of hallucinogens, which gave him the feeling of being able to see into the faces of the patients on a higher level of consciousness. During one such hallucination, Kesey saw the face of an American Indian, and this vision became the basis for the narrator in his first major novel, Chief Bromden in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The novel takes place in a mental hospital outside Portland, Oregon, where the schizophrenic Bromden has been hospitalized for more than 15 years. Bromden, who pretends to be a deaf and mute to avoid confrontation with the hospital staff, is forever changed by the appearance of Randle Patrick McMurphy, a rambunctious and dynamic convict who has himself committed in order to avoid labor on a work farm and eventually falls victim to a lobotomy by the hospital staff and a mercy killing at the hands of Bromden. Kesey's experiences both with mind-altering substances and with an actual mental institution heavily influenced the novel, as did the work of the writers of the Beat generation, particularly JACK KEROUAC. While Kesey's style differs dramatically from Kerouac's, Kesey admired Kerouac's ability to create a rhythm that moved smoothly through different ideas, as well as his focus on lived experience.

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, published in February 1962, was an instant success, earning Kesey both critical acclaim and popular culture credibility. His popularity soared to greater heights with its translation into a play version in 1963 and even more with the release of the five-time Academy Award winning film version in 1975 that won five Academy Awards, though Kesey denounced the film because it lacked Bromden's narration. With the profits from the novel, Kesey moved briefly with his family to Oregon, where he began researching his next novel. He then returned to California, and after Perry Lane was sold to a developer, Kesey bought property and a house in La Honda, California. This house later became the site of Kesey's infamous gatherings of diverse individuals, from Beat writers to the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, who together engaged in hallucinogenic experiences and wild parties.

At the house in La Honda, Kesey also finished his second published novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, which was released in July 1964. The novel, about a logging family resisting unionization in small-town Oregon, was equal to *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* in quality but received less praise because of its inaccessibility and length (over 600 pages). As does *Cuckoo's Nest*, the novel relies heavily on point of view, but it goes one step further as that point of view switches throughout the text, a style some readers found difficult. Also as its predecessor was, *Sometimes a Great Notion* was made into a film, the first film to be shown on HBO when the channel premiered in 1972. Though it boasted stars like Paul Newman and Henry Fonda and was approved by Kesey himself, the movie, like its novelistic counterpart, could not come close to matching the success of *Cuckoo's Nest*.

The success of his novel, though, was not first on Kesey's mind. In spring 1964, just after completing *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Kesey bought a 1939 International Harvester school bus, which he and his group of friends (who had dubbed themselves the "Merry Pranksters") painted with psychedelic colors and named *Further*. In summer 1964, Kesey and the Pranksters drove cross-country in the bus, piloted by the Beat icon Neal Cassady, on a journey from California to New York, which Ed McClanahan later called America's "first national contact high." They also shot about 40 hours of film for a project they called simply "The Movie," which would later be called *Intrepid Traveler and His Merry Band of Pranksters Look for a Kool Place*.

After returning from the trek, many of the Merry Pranksters took up residence at or around Kesey's house in La Honda and engaged in "happenings" that included music, screenings of "The Movie," and consumption of LSD. At future gatherings, LSD was distributed freely in what the Pranksters called "acid tests," as immortalized in Tom Wolfe's infamous nonfiction novel that documents this period: *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). As the antics of the Pranksters escalated, though, Kesey began to experience problems with the authorities, as well as conflicts within his own

subcultural group, now more firmly solidified as the nascent “hippie” movement. In April 1965, Kesey was arrested for possession of marijuana, and during the following year of trials and appeals, he delved further and further into drug use. When speaking at an antiwar protest in Berkeley, California, he rambled so incoherently that he angered the audience and effectively ostracized himself from the large antiwar faction of the hippies. He also performed several of his large-scale “acid tests” at the rally, alienating him from academic LSD advocates such as Timothy Leary.

Kesey found himself not only in jeopardy with mainstream society but also isolated from antiestablishment society. On January 17, 1966, he was found guilty of an April 1965 marijuana charge, and two days later, while awaiting appeal, he was arrested again for possession of marijuana. Facing a possible five-year jail term, he decided instead to fake his suicide and flee to Mexico, where he was joined by Faye; their children, Jed, Zane, and Shannon; and some of his fellow Pranksters, including the 19-year-old Mountain Girl, who was then pregnant with Kesey's daughter, Sunshine. He returned to the United States in September 1966 and was soon captured by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). After pleading *nolo contendere* to a charge of “knowingly being in a place where marijuana was kept,” Kesey served his two sentences concurrently, spending June to November 1967 at the San Mateo County Jail and the San Mateo County Sheriff's Honor Camp. During his imprisonment, he composed elaborate journals, which were published posthumously as *Kesey's Jail Journal* in 2003.

After his release, Kesey returned to the Willamette Valley of his childhood, as he moved with his family to a farm in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, which would be his home for the rest of his life. From March to June 1969, he and his family lived in London, where Kesey worked with the Beatles' Apple Records on an unsuccessful recording project that featured authors reading their own work. Upon his return to the United States, he refused the Pranksters' pleas to embark on a trip to the Woodstock festival, thus signifying his mov-

ing away from their wild ways and toward a life of farming and family. At the time of his arrest, he expressed distrust with writing as an expressive form, and during the two decades from 1969 to 1989 he was productive intermittently. In 1971 he and Paul Krassner edited *The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog*, and in 1973 he published *Kesey's Garage Sale*, a compilation of his writing and that of his friends, which Kesey ironically titled as such because, as he wrote in the introduction, it was “a familiar maneuver that puts stale outmoded stored members of your ordinary household back into the economic flow of life as we know it today.” Notably, *Garage Sale* included Kesey's screenplay *Over the Border*, a fictionalized account of his experiences as a fugitive in Mexico.

In 1974 Kesey began the roughly annual publication *Spit in the Ocean*, a collaboration of close friends that included his noteworthy Grandma Whittier stories. Later that year, *Rolling Stone* sent Kesey to Egypt to write five “dispatches” about his exploration of the pyramids. The following years, though, were difficult for Kesey both in his work and in his personal life, culminating in 1984 with the tragic death of his younger son, Jed, in a highway accident on a University of Oregon wrestling team trip. In August 1986, Kesey published *Demon Box*, a collection of mostly previously unpublished work (including the *Rolling Stone* articles), which he dedicated “To Jed / across the river / riding point.”

Over the course of three academic terms, from 1989 to 1990, Kesey worked with a group of 13 graduate students in the creative writing program at the University of Oregon to create *Caverns*, a collaborative mystery novel published under the pseudonym *O. U. Levon*, for “University of Oregon novel.” Although 1990 also marked the year of Kesey's publication of *The Further Inquiry*, a screenplay, the completion of *Caverns* reignited Kesey's career as a fiction writer, and he published his first new novel in several decades in 1992. *Sailor Song*, set in a 21st-century Alaskan village after much of the world has been wrecked by human abuse of the environment, was very poorly received, even prompting the *New York Times*

Book Review writer Donald E. Westlake to comment, “*Sailor Song* does not make one particle of sense.” His final novel, prophetically titled *Last Go Round* (1994), did not win the favor of critics either. The 1990s also saw the publication of two children’s books by Kesey, *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear* (1992) and *The Sea Lion: A Story of the Cliff People* (1995), as well as a play, *Twister* (1994).

Ken Kesey spent the last few years of his life in relative obscurity, making infrequent appearances at concerts and literary events. He and a fellow Prankster, Ken Babbs, maintained a Web site, *IntrepidTrips.com*, which Babbs continues to update today. In 2001, Kesey fell ill with liver cancer and in November underwent surgery to remove a tumor and a substantial portion of his liver. On November 10, he died of complications related to the surgery. He was 66. A memorial service, overflowing with countercultural and literary comrades, was held in downtown Eugene, Oregon, on November 14. Though Kesey’s death was a blow, his legacy continues through his friends and his children, who continue to collaborate on projects like the restoration of *Further*. His contribution to the literary canon, too, will not be forgotten. His novels, as well as his revolutionary ideals, have left an indelible imprint on American culture.

***One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962)**

One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Kesey’s first published novel, appeared in 1962. While enrolled in the graduate writing program at Stanford University in 1959, Kesey made extra money as a paid volunteer at the Veterans Hospital in Menlo Park, California, in some of the earliest government drug experiments with LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. In 1961, he took a job as a nighttime aide in the psychiatric ward of the same hospital, and he spent hours talking with the patients there, sometimes under the influence of psychedelic drugs. His hallucinations coupled with his personal experiences primed Kesey to write *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, a story not just about conceptions of

insanity and drug use, but about the macrocosm of post–World War II American society at large.

The novel takes place almost entirely within the walls of a mental institution somewhere outside Portland, Oregon. The narrator, Chief Bromden (nicknamed “Chief Broom” by the aides because his duties include sweeping), feigns deafness and muteness in order to avoid interaction with others in the hospital, as well as to gain access to otherwise restricted spaces. Kesey conceived of Bromden while under the influence of peyote, when the tall and broad American Indian appeared to him as a hallucination. Though Bromden has great physical presence, he, as have the other men in the hospital, has been made to feel small by the dehumanizing efforts of the hospital staff, as well as the larger oppressive network, which Bromden refers to as the “Combine.”

Literally speaking, a combine refers not just to a conspiratorial combination of persons, but also to an agricultural machine that physically cuts down grain. Likewise, the men are cut down until the arrival of a new patient, Randle Patrick McMurphy. McMurphy, whose initials (R.P.M.) also stand for “revolutions per minute,” has been committed to the hospital after convincing the work farm where he was imprisoned for assault and battery of his insanity. He is a rambunctious redhead and immediately fills the ward with the previously unheard sound of laughter. His reintroduction of laughter, along with gambling, sexuality, and general rebelliousness, begins to free the men from the stranglehold of Nurse Ratched, or Big Nurse, the head of the ward and the chief oppressor of the men, along with her black attendants.

The word *ratchet* literally means a set of teeth which mesh with a cog in a machine, and Nurse Ratched is indeed a component of the machinery of the Combine. She strips the men of their power through emasculation, contributing to one of the major themes in the novel: the castration of men at the hands of women. Nearly all of the women in Kesey’s novel are portrayed as threatening to men. In addition to Nurse Ratched, the supervisor of the hospital is a woman, leading Harding, a patient who is tortured by his wife’s overt sexual-

ity, to conclude, "We are victims of a matriarchy here." Another of the patients, Billy Bibbit, is a 31-year-old man whose mother does not allow him to develop into an adult, particularly in terms of sexual development. When Bibbit finally achieves some sense of sexual maturity (after sleeping with a prostitute who is a friend of McMurphy's), Nurse Ratched threatens to tell his mother, leading him to commit suicide. Even Bromden suffers at the hands of an overbearing woman. His father takes his wife's last name and eventually loses his land and his sense of self-worth, later turning to alcoholism, as a result of her henpecking. Though Kesey's portrayal of women has been regarded as a reflection of a culture in which women sought increasing "masculine" qualities, such as independence and power in the workplace and home, it is now widely read as sexist representation.

However, Kesey did not intend to suggest that women were solely responsible for dehumanization; rather, *Cuckoo's Nest* also focuses on the degradation of society and the individual as a result of alienation from nature. Bromden in particular, whose childhood memories are filled with recollections of the natural world, relies on communion with nature in order to maintain his sanity. At the beginning of the novel, Bromden lives in a world clouded by a fog machine created by his own paranoia, as well as his convoluted memories of his time as a soldier. As he regains his sense of self, the fog begins to fade. He begins to reunite with nature, first by looking out his window for the first time in a long while to watch a dog run around the grounds of the hospital and then by venturing outside the hospital with several of the men, led by McMurphy, on a fishing trip. In the end, Bromden is capable of lifting a heavy control panel and throwing it through the window, finally leaving the hospital and reuniting with the outside world.

Bromden's escape suggests Kesey's alliance with an activist reaction to oppression, and in turn, his movement away from existing literary models. As a writer during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kesey was situated near the end of what was called the "Beat generation." The Beats were writers who felt ostracized from mainstream American culture,

which in their minds sought to eliminate individuality and convert creative people into automatons. This ideology is clearly evident in *Cuckoo's Nest*, a tale of men repressed by a symbolic mental hospital. At the same time, though, the Beats' solution to the problem was withdrawing from society and remaining in bohemian communities. Kesey, though, created characters like McMurphy, whose incendiary actions eventually stir up enough trouble that several men are able to escape the hospital system, whether they run away as Bromden does or sign out legitimately as Harding does. His movement away from pessimistic complacency and toward rebellious action helped to instigate a shift in 1960s counterculture and contributed to the great success of *Cuckoo's Nest* with younger student readers.

Another, perhaps more progressive, allusion to the Beats is Kesey's invocation of the American transcendentalists. The transcendentalists believed in the sanctity of nature, coupled with the triumph of the individual spirit. Walt Whitman, through whom transcendentalism was filtered to Beat writers like ALLEN GINSBERG, also added the glorification of the physical body, which Kesey adopted as part of McMurphy's character. For instance, after McMurphy takes his first shower in the hospital and is walking around in a towel, Nurse Ratched confronts his nudity with disgust. She, on the other hand, dresses so as to conceal her large breasts, and the patients interpret her resulting sexual unavailability, her coldness, as an expression of the inhuman institution itself. Kesey also interprets transcendentalist ideals in his focus on the role and responsibilities of the traditional hero, both in *Cuckoo's Nest* and in his later novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. As does *Notion's* Hank Stamper, McMurphy prides himself on his staunch individuality, even at the expense of his own physical and emotional well-being.

Unlike the transcendentalists, though, who pulled their heroic models from classical myth, Kesey's heroes resemble those of superhero comic books, western movies, and other elements of American popular culture. At the close of the patients' party in the ward, Harding references the

Lone Ranger as he speaks of McMurphy's fleeing the ward, saying, "I'd like to stand there at that window with a silver bullet in my hand and ask, 'Who *wawz* that'er masked man?' as you ride—" The alliance of Kesey's characters with such heroes and villains allows their conflicts to be simplified into epic battles of good versus evil. Furthermore, Kesey validates the inclusion of popular culture references in an allegedly highbrow art form and allows the reader to experience some of his early childhood literary influences, such as Marvel comics and the adventure stories of writers like Zane Grey.

Kesey also grew up under the influence of Protestant Christianity, and its effects are evident in McMurphy's role as a Christ-like savior. Throughout the novel, McMurphy's fellow patients are transformed from awed onlookers to devoted disciples, who turn to him to be saved. As with Christ, McMurphy's actions lead him to sacrifice; as McMurphy undergoes shock treatment, he even uses the language of crucifixion, saying to the technician as graphite salve is applied to his temples, "Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?" And after recovering from shock treatments, Bromden, the mute whom McMurphy has made able to speak, returns to the ward proclaiming McMurphy's heroism. In the end, McMurphy's loss of life, as a result of both his lobotomy and his later mercy killing by Bromden, allows the other patients to have real and fulfilling lives.

At the time of its publication, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* received mostly favorable reviews and was adapted into a play in 1963 by Dale Wasserman. In 1975, Milos Forman directed the film version, which won Academy Awards for best picture, best director, best adapted screenplay, best actor (Jack Nicholson), and best actress (Louise Fletcher). Kesey wrote a screenplay for the film, but Forman rejected it, stating that he did not believe that Bromden's narration would translate well to the screen. Kesey then rejected the film and vowed never to watch it. His novel, though, still generates much critical attention and is widely taught as part of the American literary canon. It remains in print

in several editions, including one in the Penguin Great Books of the 20th Century series. It retains its revolutionary power and continues to influence readers and writers alike.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Within the first few pages of the novel, Bromden recounts, "It's the truth even if it didn't happen." In literary studies, the term *unreliable narrator* refers to a narrator whose credibility is compromised for any of a number of reasons, such as bias, naivete, or lack of knowledge. Discuss how Bromden may be read as an unreliable narrator, providing specific examples from the novel.
2. Contemporary readers sometimes consider *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* to be a racist novel. Discuss how nonwhite characters are represented differently from white characters in the novel, particularly Bromden and the black "boys."
3. The film version of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* has become very successful in its own right, although Kesey himself condemned it. Compare the film version to the novel. How does the story change without Bromden's narration?
4. Kesey's experimentation with drugs was an important influence on him as he was writing *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. However, he also had experience working in a mental hospital, where drugs are used in very different ways. How are drugs and drug use represented in the novel?
5. Some scholars suggest that connections exist between *Cuckoo's Nest* and Melville's epic novel *Moby-Dick* (1851). Identify allusions to Melville's novel and discuss why Kesey may have included them.

***Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964)**

Sometimes a Great Notion was published in 1964, just two years after Kesey's first novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In his second published novel, Kesey attempts a much more complicated literary work, writing more than 628 pages, which use

multiple narrative techniques and points of view. Soon after the publication of *Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey spent four months in the coastal town of Florence, Oregon, living and socializing with the loggers there in order to familiarize himself with their jargon and daily routine as research for *Notion*. The story takes place in the 1960s in a small town near the Oregon coast, where one family collides with the local union (and many of the townspeople) as they resist participation in a logging strike. The Stamper family, headed by the patriarchal figures Henry and his son Hank, refuse to strike because of their fiercely individualistic values. These values indicate one of the major themes in both of Kesey's major novels: the struggle to find a balance between the individual and larger society.

As the novel opens, the Stamper logging team, composed of Henry, Hank, and Hank's cousin Joe Ben, struggles to fulfill a contract. Henry has injured his arm and is barely able to work, and the rest of the loggers in town are on strike. Rather than caving in to their seeming inability to complete the task, the Stampers write to seek help from Leland ("Lee") Stamper, Henry's son and Hank's younger half brother, who is in graduate school at Yale University. Lee's return begins the central action in the novel, that of the developing relationship between Hank and Lee. This relationship is complicated by Lee's knowledge that his mother, who committed suicide a year earlier, had an affair with Hank during his teenage years. In a twist on the Oedipal relationship, Lee attempts to exact retribution by seducing Hank's wife, Viv, so that he might transfer the burden of knowledge to Hank.

The novel climaxes in a logging accident, which results in the deaths of both Henry and Joe Ben, as well Lee's concurrent seduction of Viv. Additionally, Viv's increasing awareness of the tension in the relationship of Hank and Lee prompts her finally to leave both of them to start her life over. The falling action highlights Hank's role as the traditional hero in the novel. As McMurphy does for Bromden in *Cuckoo's Nest*, Hank assumes the responsibility of leading another man, in this case, Lee, to full understanding of his capacities as a human being. As does Bromden, Lee lives in a "fog" of his own creation

and requires a model of individualism to free him. Kesey uses imagery of bigness (complete with its phallic connotations) to suggest power; the physical size of the Stampers is related to their manhood. The symbol for Hank's stature throughout the novel is the tree, appropriate because of his profession as a logger and because of its phallic associations. Just before the novel's close, though, Lee notices that he is "a good two inches" taller than Hank, thus symbolizing the completion of his self-actualization. Again like Bromden, who realizes his own massive size at the end of *Cuckoo's Nest* and lifts the control panel in order to escape the hospital, Lee finds himself capable of rising above his complicated history when he becomes aware of his bigness.

Still, Hank proves himself as the novel's hero in the traditional Greek sense as he survives challenges on various levels. At the start of the novel, he must put himself to the test physically, attempting to do more work than he is capable of doing. He faces pressure from the society around him, as his neighbors urge him to join the strike. Finally, he is tested emotionally, as he is faced with losing his father, his cousin (who is like a brother to him), and his wife, all at about the same time. However, he does not allow the trials to break him. The Stamper motto is "Never give an inch," and Hank remains true until the end, when he and Lee finally jointly attempt the seemingly impossible task of floating all of their logs. They even go so far as to hang Henry's amputated arm from a pole in front of the Stamper house, complete with all the fingers tied down except the middle, exhibiting Kesey's characteristic humor in the face of adversity.

Setting plays a crucial role in *Notion*. In addition to providing the appropriate scene for the logging conflict, it sets the stage for Kesey to work out one of his major thematic quandaries: How do time and place (particularly as it relates to nature) contribute to human character and destiny? In his epic narrative, Kesey attempts to explore those intimate relationships, stating that his intent in the novel was to portray "a man, a family, a town, a country, and a time." Such ambitious goals lend a mythical proportion to the novel, one that may be compared to Greek tragedy.

3. In both *Sometimes a Great Notion* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, one man stands out as the traditional hero. However, in both of the novels, other major characters demonstrate heroic qualities, among them the capacity to change and grow and compassion toward others. Defend one of Kesey's other characters as the hero of the novel, such as Lee in *Notion* or Bromden in *Cuckoo's Nest*.
4. Both of Kesey's major novels emphasize individual strength rather than collective action. Consider this ideal within the context of America in the 1960s, especially in light of the antiwar and Civil Rights movements.
5. While Nurse Ratched's representation in *Cuckoo's Nest* is frequently referred to as sexist, some suggest that Viv in *Notion* is a well-developed female character. Discuss how Kesey portrays women in each of his novels. Are his characterizations more progressive in *Notion*?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Fiedler, Leslie A. *The Return of the Vanishing American*. New York: Stein & Day, 1968.
- Kappel, Lawrence. *Readings on One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000.
- Kesey, Ken. *Demon Box*. New York: Viking, 1986.
- . *The Further Inquiry*. New York: Viking, 1990.
- . *Kesey's Garage Sale*. New York: Viking, 1967.
- . *Kesey's Jail Journal: Cut the M***** Loose*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- . *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York: Penguin, 1962.
- . *Sometimes a Great Notion*. New York: Penguin, 1964.
- Leeds, Barry. *Ken Kesey*. New York: Unger, 1981.
- McClanahan, Ed. *Spit in the Ocean #7: All about Kesey*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Porter, M. Gilbert. *The Art of Grit: Ken Kesey's Fiction*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982.
- . *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest: Rising to Heroism*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- Psychedelic 60s: Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters*. February 22, 1999. Available online. URL: <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/exhibits/sixties/kesey.html>. Accessed October 25, 2006.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Late Twentieth Century, 1945 to the Present—Ken Kesey." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/kesey.html>. Accessed December 9, 2006.
- Safer, Elaine B. "The Absurd Quest and Black Humor in Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*." In *The Contemporary American Comic Epic: The Novels of Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey*. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1988.
- Searles, George J. *A Casebook on One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992.
- Tanner, Stephen L. *Ken Kesey*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.
- . "The Western American Context of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*." In *Biographies of Books: The Compositional Histories of Notable American Writings*, edited by James Barbour and Tom Quirk, 291–320. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996.
- Tanner, Tony. "Edge City (Ken Kesey)." In *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950–1970*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

Caitlin Shanley



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (1929–1968)

The democratic ideal of freedom and equality will be fulfilled for all—or all human beings will share in the resulting social and spiritual doom. In short, this crisis has the potential for democracy’s fulfillment or fascism’s triumph; for social progress or retrogression. We can choose either to walk the high road of human brotherhood or to tread the low road of man’s inhumanity to man.

(Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story)

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. His paternal grandfather had been a sharecropper while his maternal grandfather headed Atlanta’s black upper-middle-class Ebenezer Baptist Church. Martin’s father, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., and mother, the schoolteacher Alberta Williams King, raised him and his siblings (Alberta and Alfred) in the “sweet Auburn” neighborhood of Atlanta. Martin went to college through an early-admission program aimed at high school sophomores and juniors. If a student did well on entrance examinations, admission was granted to either Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, or Morehouse College in Atlanta. Martin was admitted in 1944 to Morehouse when he was 15 years old. By 19 he had been ordained as a Baptist minister. After his ordination, King held the position of copastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church until his death 20 years later.

After majoring in sociology at Morehouse, King was accepted by Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, where he earned a bachelor of divinity degree in 1951. That same year he entered Boston University’s Graduate School of Theology, where he was awarded the Ph.D. degree in systemic theology in 1955. His dissertation was entitled “A Comparison of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Wiseman.” While working on his doctorate, King met Coretta Scott, a graduate of Antioch College in Ohio, who was study-

ing at the New England Conservatory of Music. Though she studied in the North, her roots were in rural Alabama. They were married in 1953 and subsequently had four children, Yolanda, Martin Luther III, Dexter, and Bernice.

The Kings relocated to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954 while Martin was still completing his doctorate, and he became the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, a position he retained until 1959. On December 5, 1955, only six months after receiving his doctoral degree, he was elected president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). This group had been formed after the December 1 arrest of Rosa Parks, who was famously charged with violating the city’s segregation ordinances. At the age of 27, King found himself at the center of national attention as African Americans organized to support Rosa Parks and oppose segregation in Montgomery. After a year of economic pressure on public transportation and downtown businesses, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that Montgomery’s ordinances could not be used to segregate the races, ruling them unconstitutional.

In 1957 King formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a regional organization whose purpose was to fight segregation throughout the South using nonviolent strategies such as economic boycotts and picket lines. In addition, King intended the SCLC to act as

a means through which various religious, social, and political groups could coordinate efforts and present unified opposition to segregation. In order to help galvanize support for future efforts, King wrote his first book, *Stride toward Freedom* (1958), a chronicle of how “Jim Crow” segregation laws had been defeated in Montgomery. In this work, King describes the difficulties in coordinating a massive movement, one guided by a basic philosophy:

This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of these expressions was mentioned; the phrase most often heard was “Christian love.” It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action.

It is almost unthinkable when reading such words to imagine that, during a book signing at a New York department store in September 1958, a mentally deranged woman stabbed King in the chest with a letter opener, nearly killing him. King would frequently say for years afterward that the physicians who tended to his wound told him that had he sneezed, he would have severed his aorta and internally bled to death. During his recovery, King sojourned to India for further study of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy and practice of nonviolent protest. A major figure in India's spiritual and political history, Gandhi championed nonviolent protest against British colonial oppression, helping lead the nation to independence in 1948. The experience was a formative one that underscores the importance of Gandhi's example to King's project in the South. As he describes in “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi”: “While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India's Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change” (*Ebony* July 1959). When he returned, King followed the footsteps of his grandfather, moving to Atlanta in 1960 to become copastor of Ebenezer Baptist

Church and direct the activities of the SCLC. Here King ardently advocated the use of nonviolent protest by African-American communities, a strategy that had been employed the previous February in Greensboro, North Carolina. His participation in “sit-ins” at Atlanta eateries resulted in his arrest and a four-month jail sentence. King was subsequently released, but only after the intervention of President John Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

The organizations that supported the SCLC and its nonviolent assault against segregation in the South varied a great deal from each other. Among them were the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”), the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Council of Negro Women. Each was led by strong and talented activists who often challenged the wisdom of adhering to the SCLC's pacifist philosophy and exclusive use of nonviolent means. These tensions within the leadership of King's organization were matched by logistical difficulties and a lack of resources. A CORE-led demonstration tested the ability of the SCLC under King to provide support for its members. In 1961, a CORE faction organized students to ride buses through the South defiantly, violating the Jim Crow ordinances and statutes of several states. Even though King supported the “Freedom Riders,” his endorsement was not much use without the assistance of the NAACP's legal teams: All of their lawyers were needed to defend individuals who had been arrested for testing the 1957 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that banned segregation on interstate transportation.

Even though the protesters succeeded in gaining federal protection, it was not until the bonds of cooperation among civil rights groups had been severely strained. King tempered his need for action with both the NAACP's preference for litigation and the local Christian churches' and more conservative group's need for gradual change. Even though King was frequently accused of being an “outside agitator,” he was prepared to respond by

reminding critics of his southern roots and bases of operation. In Albany, Georgia, though, King experienced frustration and defeat as local authorities withstood the efforts of SNCC, the SCLC, and others. Throughout 1962 the Albany campaign used sit-ins, voter registration drives, and picket lines to push local officials to desegregate public facilities. Hundreds were arrested, including King. National media attention waned and federal support faltered as the protesters were routinely arrested and sequestered. A shaky truce was reached when local officials agreed to abide by federal laws. However, where federal guidelines were absent and local authority remained effective, officials chose to close public facilities rather than make them equally accessible to African Americans.

The year 1963, though, proved to be a pivotal year in the life of Reverend King and the nation. The events surrounding King included the assassinations of Medgar Evers and President Kennedy, the murder of civil rights workers, and bombings that killed four little girls in Birmingham. In 1964, the nation witnessed the largest demonstration for civil rights in history as activists descended on Washington, D.C. The meaning of these events for King was significant. Assassination as a political tool was to be used against him five years later. The violence used by racists to thwart the activities of pacifists was to be counterbalanced by those refusing to continue to turn the other cheek. SNCC, the Deacons for Defense, and others, were to respond with reciprocal defensive violence as they vocally rejected the leadership of Reverend King and his proscriptions. The effectiveness of mass demonstrations began to be questioned as civil rights organizations could no longer agree to unify their efforts despite their philosophical differences happened after the 1965 voter registration campaign in Selma, Alabama. But King could still look back at 1963 as a banner year for successes: The Birmingham campaign not only defeated the strong-arm tactics of Sheriff Eugene “Bull” Connor, but also demonstrated on the world stage how repressive and unjust Jim Crow segregation was. However, televising the plight of African-American children being attacked by vicious dogs and men

with fire hoses was not enough. The Birmingham police and fire departments also precipitated the writing of one of King’s most important works, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which later was published as a chapter in his third book, *Why We Can’t Wait* (1964). In the letter King calls upon the Christian community, especially its leadership, its ministers, and its preachers, to act out of love, a universal value that human beings of all different creeds share:

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Birmingham had been called “America’s most segregated city.” The removal of the city’s segregation ordinances in spring 1963 was seen as one of the most important victories in King’s career. But it was bested that summer by what may have been the greatest speech given in the 20th century. In 1963, the march on Washington took place in the nation’s capital with 250,000 people demanding Congress pass a comprehensive civil rights act. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King offered his vision of America’s future in his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech, calling for hope and faith and prophesying freedom.

Although King’s reputation grew, his street-level activities showed signs of stalling in 1964. In the same year, the SCLC campaign to end segregation in St. Augustine, Florida, which was celebrating its 400th anniversary, was defeated when federal authorities refused to intervene and local officials successfully banned public demonstrations. Also, “Freedom Summer,” the campaign in Mississippi, saw civil rights workers killed as they worked to register voters. King’s ability to coordinate the movement’s chief organizations was also under pressure as the SCLC found itself at odds with SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP. In addition, local politics in Mississippi led by Fannie Lou Hamer challenged

the conservative leadership of the Democratic Party as delegates were chosen to attend the national convention. Hamer's Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) confronted the leadership on the floor of the Democratic National Convention. Such efforts represented a breaking away from the traditional actions of the Civil Rights movement. A new era was dawning, and King frequently found himself defending the use of strategies that seemed to be discordant with the times. By 1965, it was apparent that the approach and alliances that had worked for the past 10 years were no longer adequate. The Selma campaign proved to be the last major coordination of mass protest in the civil rights era. On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, Alabama state troopers met demonstrators led by SNCC on the Edmond Pettus Bridge. Again, with the national press watching, troopers used vicious force to turn back peaceful protesters. The situation proved impossible for the students to accept. After Selma, King's credibility among students and in the urban North was severely questioned.

In 1966, King moved north to Chicago and began to refocus the movement's emphasis from segregation in the South to poverty throughout the nation. By July, he was calling for an end to discrimination in housing, employment, and education. He was met with violent local resistance. Plagued by setbacks, King left Chicago without tangibly improving the lives of the poor. He did, however, increase national awareness of the economic condition of the poor and its disparity with the overall wealth of the nation. For King, such disparities were immoral, violations of what he increasingly defined as human rights. King's transition in emphasis from civil rights to human rights was to include not just southern African Americans or those living in areas of urban poverty in the North. King also advocated for the destitute populations of various nations in Africa, India, and Asia. The year 1967 saw King's position shift in other ways, too. He announced his opposition to the war in Vietnam at the Riverside Church in New York, a move that many viewed as meddling in affairs too far afield from the fight against racism and poverty. Despite these criticisms, King's stance on Vietnam

is clearly consistent with his pacifist efforts for the preceding decade.

Though King started to speak out on a broader range of issues, he did not lose sight of the plight of the poor: In 1967 he announced the formation of the Poor People's Campaign, which sought to secure a guaranteed annual minimum income for those unable to work. The campaign also sought to end housing discrimination and the passage of a \$12 billion economic bill of rights that guaranteed employment to the able-bodied. In 1968, King traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, in order to support striking sanitation workers, who merely wanted to unionize and have their salaries raised to the federally mandated minimum wage. The march King led through downtown Memphis turned unexpectedly violent as marchers confronted and fought with police. As King regrouped and met with striking families, he urged them to remain nonviolent. For the rally at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple of God in Christ heard King gave his inspiring speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop," which, in effect, was a final farewell to his followers. It was his last public speech before he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, while he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Martin Luther King, Jr., received a great deal of recognition and many awards and honors both during his lifetime and after his death. In 1957, he received several after the success of the Montgomery campaign, winning the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP and being selected by *Time* magazine as one of the most influential personalities of the year. King also won the Russwurm Award from the National Newspaper Publishers and the Second Annual Achievement Award from the Association of the New York City Police Department. A second wave of recognition for his accomplishments followed the events of 1963. These included being named Man of the Year by *Time* magazine and being awarded the John Dewey Award from the United Federation of Teachers and the John F. Kennedy Award from the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago in 1964. King's highest honor, though, was the Nobel Peace Prize. King was the youngest person ever to receive this presti-

gious award when it was given to him in 1964. The 35-year-old responded by giving the \$54,000 prize money to further the civil rights campaign in the United States. The prize is also noteworthy because of the acceptance speech King gave in Oslo, Norway, upon receiving it. The third wave of recognition was posthumous. In 1968, King was awarded the Marcus Garvey Prize for Human Rights from the government of Jamaica, the Rosa Parks Award from the SCLC, and many others that are archived in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Center for Nonviolent Social Change. The President's Medal of Freedom was also awarded to King posthumously in 1970. In addition to these personal accolades, King is recognized for his contribution to significant legislative accomplishments. In 1964, Congress passed the most comprehensive protection of civil rights since the Reconstruction era. The Civil Rights Act was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. These three major pieces of legislation were Congress's confirmation of Supreme Court decisions that reversed the nation's long-standing position on the segregation of the races.

Currently, Stanford University holds the majority of King's writings as part of the King Papers Project, whose Internet site is <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>. Since the 1980s, scholars have debated King's use of scholarly sources. While there seems to be a critical consensus that King's writings do contain plagiarism, the issue remains what to make of it and how to assess his writings. Perhaps the most balanced view of these issues lies in Clayborne Carson's assessment from "Editing Martin Luther King, Jr.: Political and Scholarly Issues," originally published in the Bornstein and Williams book *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), which can be found on the Internet at http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/additional_resources/articles/palimp.htm:

What can we conclude, therefore, about the biographical and historical significance of King's papers? Although I concede that the King Papers Project would not exist if not for

the widespread belief among American elites in the notion that Great Men and their ideas alter the course of history, I suggest that the papers reveal less about King's impact on the world than about the religions and intellectual influences that shaped his public persona. Documentary editions undoubtedly reinforce the notion that great leaders and their ideas alter the course of history, but they can also become valuable sources of knowledge about the social forces that make possible the emergence of new leaders. Although readers of the King papers will undoubtedly learn more about King, they should not expect his inner mind to be fully revealed through his papers. We must face the possibility that King's public persona may have obscured aspects of his personality and opinions or that King's diction served purposes other than to communicate his inner thoughts. Plagiarized academic writings may have been more effective than more original writings in allowing King to play his chosen role as an African-American leader seeking [to] influence white Americans. King used his writings and his speeches and sermons not only to express ideas, but more important, to influence his multiracial audience. King has already been the focus of numerous serious biographical works, but our study of his papers convinces us that he will remain both a compelling and an elusive subject for research for many years to come.

***Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958)**

Stride toward Freedom, King's first book, is an account of what happened during the Montgomery bus boycott. In it, King discusses in detail the events that led up to and constituted the yearlong boycott of the city's bus system. Even though he was only 27 when elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), King wrote *Stride* with the wisdom of someone much older. His discussion of the MIA and the forces in opposition to its goals was (and still is)

instructive for those wanting to employ nonviolent direct action to effect social change; it was a model for future boycotts across the South. More importantly, *Stride toward Freedom* is an explanation of why the boycott happened. To this end, King explains the philosophy that justified the actions in Montgomery, mixing accounts of day-to-day happenings with a description of the evolution of his own ideas regarding the practical application of pacifism. King detailed the tenets of nonviolent direct action, allowing them to be used by others seeking to change Jim Crow segregation laws. These principles were the core of King's public actions for the rest of his life. It was in Montgomery, though, where they were first tested and witnessed by the nation. As *Stride toward Freedom* tells us, the first step in this approach to social change is for injustice to be thoroughly documented: The problem must be clearly established and understood. According to King, injustice is easily identifiable, for it assaults the dignity of those it oppresses. Fundamentally evil in nature, injustice humiliates and degrades individuals. King then calls for constructive negotiation, an informed exchange between the oppressed and the oppressor, one predicated on open dialogue rather than force or coercion. In these exchanges, King calls for the parties concerned to identify "immoral behavior." Often, however, those who perpetuate injustice are unwilling to accept change. At this point, King demands that each individual must commit himself or herself to practicing passive resistance.

Passive resistance does not, for King, mean docility. Nor does it mean doing nothing. He describes it as active intervention designed to advance justice, intervention that must always proceed out of love, never hate. Following the example of Jesus and Gandhi—his two great teachers—King believed that only by actually living a philosophy based on love could human beings realize their full potential. For King, violence and hate emanate from our base nature, one above which we must rise, responding to the call of love, and acting in the world. This process of moving toward nonviolent action was tempered by King's cautionary warning to potential activists about the dangers and consequences of

civil disobedience: Participants must be willing to pay the price for their actions. There must be full awareness of the likely outcomes so that individuals will be prepared for whatever sacrifice is demanded of them. King's book describes examples experienced in Montgomery at each of these stages. The names and places of those who participated are given so that the nation can see that everyday people can bring about significant social change.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What negative consequences could result from the publication of MIA specifics such as the identities of participants and their tactics? Any positive consequences?
2. After the publication of this book King was stabbed and nearly killed. Predict his response to his attacker on the basis of what is advocated in this book.
3. To understand what it was like to live under the Jim Crow laws that King and his followers fought so hard against, read RALPH ELLISON's *Invisible Man* (1952), an earlier work that describes both the Jim Crow South and the black flight to the North. Next, consult the following Web site and read the reviews of the novel there: http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/resources/lessonplans/amlit_lp_ellison.htm. With all three reviews of the novel in mind, write a well-developed essay that evaluates each review in light of Jim Crow segregation. If both Ellison and King articulate the many dehumanizing aspects of this practice, why did the American public let it continue for so long? Support everything you say with quotes from King's speech, the novel, and these reviews.

"I Have a Dream" (1963)

This speech was given on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for jobs and freedom. With a civil rights bill before Congress, 250,000 people gathered before the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to advocate its passage. At this highly anticipated event, throughout the day King cited

several important reasons why Congress should continue what the Supreme Court had initiated with their historic decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. Many have considered this speech to be one of the greatest speeches given during the 20th century. King's impressive oratory uses techniques commonly found in sermons to advance his political cause. We can listen to this and other King speeches on the many sites with King audio files on the Internet, such as *History and Politics Out Loud*: <http://www.hpol.org/record.php?id=72>. As one can discern when listening to the speech, the pace of King's delivery ebbs and flows as he weaves an account of the historical events that made the March on Washington possible. Even the modulation of his voice changes as he emphasizes points: King uses a gentle but emphatic tone to describe his children and then smoothly transitions to a harsh voice when he refers to southern officials as they use "nullification and interposition" as justifications for fighting desegregation.

When we listen to King's speeches, we can understand how King used the technique of "call and response"—a tradition that African bondsmen and women took to the New World, one transmitted over centuries and manifesting itself in various forms of expression, including religious observance and public gatherings and in black music—to move his audience from merely listening to actually participating. As the listeners become enraptured participants, comments can be heard as King pauses. "All right now," "Amen," and "Yeah, that's right" echo in the background. At the speech's conclusion King's use of this rhetorical technique, refined over his years in the pulpit, succeeds in inciting the audience to anticipate his words, nearly drowning out his own voice—as they recite with him a stanza from a well-known Negro spiritual.

Not only does King deliver "I Have a Dream" in a style familiar to members of the black church, but also he speaks from a perspective common among African Americans, and not unknown to whites as well. Using the conventions of a Baptist preacher, King recalls biblical scenes in which God communicated with patriarchs. For example, King employs

Joseph's prophetic dream of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, which allowed Egypt to prepare for and eventually avoid disaster. He also references Jacob's dream of climbing a ladder used by angels to go back and forth to heaven, allowing him to see that God would not leave him alone to face his challenges. King also drew parallels between his own position and that of Moses, whose vision of the land of milk and honey allowed him the satisfaction of knowing that he had led his people to the promised land. King used these and other Christian images to remind the audience that, as a leader deeply influenced by biblical teachings, he was not acting solely of his own volition. In effect, King stated that the March on Washington and the entire Civil Rights movement were under divine direction and, as such, would be blessed with a victorious outcome if they remained true to their faith. But it must also be remembered that this was a diverse audience. King understood that solely depending on references that would resonate only with black and white Christians could not unify such a gathering. Thus, King blended these references with others rooted in more commonly held beliefs. Appealing to his audience's patriotism, King insisted that the United States was founded on the principles he and the Civil Rights movement were fighting for, principles that applied to all Americans—and all peoples.

King refers throughout the speech to the great American experiment first initiated with the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. From the declaration he recited the fundamental assumption that the United States was founded on—"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." From the Constitution, King recited its assurance "that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Invoking the fundamental tenets of American political philosophy lends King's oratory great power. King saw no contradiction between the political goals of the Civil Rights movement and his role as a Christian, spiritual leader. By the end of the speech, he combines these two in stating that a part of his dream for the nation's future is that one day "all

of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, 'My Country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountain-side, let freedom ring.'" Such fervent patriotism rhetorically reminded his listeners that King's spiritually moving dream for the nation was the dream the nation had for itself.

Fittingly, freedom is a recurrent theme throughout the speech, as it is central to both the Civil Rights movement and the nation's very existence. As King's speech makes clear, freedom must be realized in every region, for everyone. For King, freedom means having full citizenship in a system that is just and provides equal opportunity for all. It is important to note that in 1963 the nation had not dealt with racial bigotry, with many citizens still believing that blacks genetically were inferior to whites and that their position in society should reflect these differences. It was practically impossible for African Americans to vote in most of the South. It was not possible for a motorist to stay in any hotel, eat at any restaurant, or use any public facility without first heeding signs that specified which conveniences were for blacks and which were for whites. In the speech, King identified southern states as not being places of freedom for blacks. He challenged his audience to go to Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana and work for change. For southerners this was outrageous. "Outside agitators" and "communists" were seen as the root cause of much of the disruption of the southern way of life. For King to recommend that individuals and organizations enter local communities and work for freedom was insulting to "southern traditions." This call to action further confirmed southern suspicions when King recounted his dream of the future, a dream where "little black boys and black girls will be able to join little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers." For many, this vision fueled prejudiced fears of interracial marriage. Marriage and sex across the color line were unthinkable offensive to many people at the time: Polls showed a large majority of white Americans opposed full social and political integration. King's fellow marchers, however, dis-

agreed. By the conclusion of the speech, they had become participants in the delivery as they voiced their agreement and support of King's vision. King ended by noting that freedom would ring regardless of what obstacles lay before it. He chose the national anthem's references to mountainsides to illustrate again where freedom was most needed.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the same year that King gave this speech, MALCOLM X gave a speech that, when compared with "I Have a Dream," seems a nightmarish vision of America. Read Malcolm X's *God's Judgment of White America*, thinking about these ideas in terms of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Then, write a well-developed essay comparing the two speeches that argues which is more convincing and why.
2. Research the March on Washington where King delivered his address, using a trustworthy source of information (such as the Web site for the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, which can be found at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/encyclopedia/index.htm>). What were the responses of the President and Congress to the march and to the speech? Were any of the demands of the marchers met?

"Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963)

An open letter written in response to criticisms leveled by eight white clergymen, King published this piece in a Birmingham newspaper to defend his calls for civil disobedience. When he composed the letter, Sheriff Eugene "Bull" Connor had arrested him for protesting segregation in the city. When King wrote this essay, most of the South as well as most of America remained unconvinced that Jim Crow-style segregation should be ended. Even President John F. Kennedy, a northern liberal, had not emphatically moved to support the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision nationwide, opting only to act in jurisdictions facing emergencies as protesters were openly attacked and

arrested by officials refusing to desegregate. In Birmingham, King sought to create another such circumstance. Even many African Americans were not convinced that King was correct to advocate such fundamental changes in race relations: Participating in street protests was dangerous and could result in retaliation from the white community. Being “blacklisted” could mean unemployment, foreclosure, eviction, or worse. Many who lived in the South personally knew of individuals who had been subjected to the “justice” of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization infamous for burning and bombing homes, flogging protest instigators, or even lynching participants.

Another reason why many African Americans resisted King’s plan for ending segregation was rooted in history: Fifty years earlier Booker T. Washington had taught the principles of “accommodationism,” arguing that African Americans should not prioritize the attainment of equal political or social status with that of whites. Instead, African Americans should focus on proving themselves as valuable assets to their regions. In their doing so, whites would gladly accept blacks as members of the community. According to this philosophy, forcing integration on whites through the law or through social action would only retard progress that would otherwise occur if blacks would just work hard and be patient. Even in Washington’s day, the majority of southern whites agreed with accommodationism: If blacks could “know their place,” then the southern way of life could continue. Believers in accommodationism saw King as an outside agitator, suspecting him of being influenced by communist agents. In the paranoid and suspicious climate of cold war America, a climate that had given rise to numerous communist witch hunts, such charges were taken seriously.

In addition to these concerns, some of King’s fellow clergymen had denounced him: Numerous ministers, bishops, and a rabbi signed an open letter stating that he had overstepped his place. According to these men, to be involved with acts that precipitated violence and to make radical demands that bypassed the courts and legislatures were not the roles of a Christian pastor. They held that the

tenets of accommodationism agreed with the principles of gradual social reform held by many whites. Gradualists felt that, given sufficient time, race relations would improve and that this slow evolutionary process could not be forced.

Sheriff “Bull” Connor enforced such beliefs, ordering his police officers to confront protesters with billy clubs and vicious dogs. The Birmingham Fire Department joined in, using their high-pressure fire hoses to wash the streets clean of protesters. The world and the U.S. citizenry watched in horror as pictures aired every evening on the national and international news. Even with his own community divided, King persisted. At the nadir of the confrontation, just as most of his followers were being arrested, and the tide of local opinion seemed to be against him, King abruptly joined the marchers and was arrested. King was arrested 29 times throughout his career. Each time, especially in Alabama under sheriffs like “Bull” Connor, it was feared he would meet with a fatal accident. Despite these dangers, King was determined to persuade others to join the protests.

The rhetoric used in this essay is often cited as an exemplar of persuasive writing and the powerful effect it can have. King recognized that he had several audiences and used logic and evidence to reach each one, targeting clergymen, African Americans in Birmingham, white moderate sympathizers, and the global community. A Christian minister first and a trained theologian, King followed the Bible’s precepts, applying them to his life and using them as the basis for his actions. Accordingly, he opened his response by criticizing his fellow men of the cloth with references to biblical settings, asking them to contemplate what would have happened if Jesus Christ had accepted the Greco-Roman world’s status quo. What would have happened if Jesus Christ had seen himself as an outsider to the concerns of those who did not live in Nazareth? What meaning, King asks, would the gospel have if Jesus had been restricted to his hometown? King applies such logic to his presence in Birmingham, stressing the interrelatedness of all communities. For King, to be idle while people are treated badly

is immoral: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Throughout his letter, King cites evidence of the use of overwhelming force as well as subversion of the law and Constitutional guarantees to support his logic. Chief among the evidence he cites is the use of violence against the black community repeatedly throughout history, referring to examples from 340 years of race relations. The legacy of this history of violence, slavery, and forced segregation has resulted in despair, humiliation, and fear. And it was being used again against peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham. Rather than complimenting law enforcement officers for maintaining order, King maintained, critics should, instead, witness their brutality against children and the elderly. He thoroughly describes the abusive and intolerable nature of the institution of segregation along with those enforcing it. King wanted to leave his readers with no middle ground to retreat to: Put simply, King implied that either you oppose segregation and support others who oppose it, or you tolerate it and thereby support the segregationists and their evils.

King tempered his call for immediate mass action, making it clear that significant danger faced those who opposed the status quo. A commitment to the Civil Rights movement required that participants have full knowledge of the significance their subsequent actions may have. Civil disobedience required individuals to accept consequences, a fact that made the title of King's letter so pointed. King wrote from a Birmingham jail knowing that he was at his jailers' mercy. This strengthened King's position in the eyes of his audience, who knew that he was personally willing to pay the price for freedom.

Another salient point that should be noted in reading "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is King's extended criticism of white moderates. For a man in King's position, it was easy to respond to the unjust actions and policies of segregationists. Responding to his community's hesitation, as they weighed the dangers of joining the protests, was more difficult.

But it was much more difficult simultaneously to criticize and to appeal to those who occupied the middle ground, black and white citizens who were unwilling to take action and yet vital to the success of the Civil Rights movement. The middle ground is often seen as the place most in need of positive influence by exerting moral pressure on it. King did just that.

He spent a significant portion of the essay calling out whites who saw themselves as generally supportive of desegregation but against immediate action. He attacked whites who favored arguments in favor of gradualism for their willingness to accept conditions for blacks that they would never tolerate for themselves. King demands in his letter that these people explain what constitutes "well timed" social change: When, according to their evolutionary time frame, can blacks be considered fully human? How much patience can the impoverished have when they are surrounded by affluence? As King succinctly observes: "Justice too long delayed is justice denied." Citing Martin Luther, Thomas Jefferson, and Jesus Christ as historical examples of "extremists" who took active measures during difficult times to effect lasting, positive social change, King insisted enacting change meant confronting injustice.

King was also harsh in his assessment of the institutions white moderates supported, claiming that the churches, synagogues, city offices, and law enforcement agencies they depended on did not deserve their trust and support. By indicting these institutions, King challenged more than white moderate complacency. For King, laws are not worthy of obedience if they perpetuate injustice. Such laws, according to King, are evil. This evil, King insists, must be confronted. Again, King left no middle ground for readers.

King was also very much aware of the international audience witnessing the disruptions in Birmingham: Foreign journalists from news agencies around the world reported on the events in Alabama. The government of the Soviet Union said that such discriminatory treatment revealed the hypocrisy of America's foreign policy

stance, which purportedly championed freedom and democracy around the world. Throughout Europe, the events in Birmingham were perceived as symptoms of an archaic and unjust social hierarchy that should have been dismantled long ago. In Johannesburg, South Africa, nationalist groups to oppose apartheid in South Africa adopted the nonviolent approach of the Civil Rights movement. King's letter and the Birmingham protests that it was born of became international topics of discussion. Many of these dialogues concerned whether the United States—a nation that allowed systematic violations of civil rights—could claim to be a moral force in the international community. For many around the world, King's writings and actions in Birmingham confirmed the stereotypes they had of southerners' being bigoted and ignorant. Conversely, there were brutal responses to King's work and his message in South Africa, where South African police shot and killed nonviolent demonstrators inspired by King.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Contrast King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" with Malcolm X's "The Afro-American's Right to Self Defense" speech. In these seminal works, both thinkers explain and justify their methods of furthering civil rights. After reading both, write a well-developed essay that considers which argument is the stronger and why. Whose rhetoric is more persuasive? Whose ideas are more applicable today?
2. King encouraged elementary and high school students to join the demonstrators. If you were a teacher, what would you have said to parents? What would you have said to the administrators for whom you worked?
3. Birmingham's response during the demonstrations damaged U.S. national interests abroad. Was this sufficient cause for federal intervention? What other reasons might have been used to allow the president to intervene in Birmingham?
4. Are there conditions today that call for civil disobedience? If so, argue persuasively for it.

Why We Can't Wait (1964)

Written at the height of the Civil Rights movement and of King's fame (King was proclaimed Man of the Year by *Time* magazine on January 3, 1964; in December of that year he received the Nobel Prize for peace), *Why We Can't Wait* recounts the efforts to desegregate Birmingham, the coordinated efforts of 1963 that were televised across the nation and throughout the world. In addition to reestablishing the grounds for his approach, King refines the ideas he first articulated in *Stride toward Freedom*. For example, rather than explore the philosophical and practical expressions of passive resistance, King answers critics and addresses concrete issues. King did not educate the reading public about civil disobedience. Instead, he defended its use. His audiences included many of those who questioned the efficacy of prayer, love, and pacifism as a means of resistance. In *Why We Can't Wait* and in his later work *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos and Community?* (1967), King employs the Exodus event during which the Israelites fled from their Egyptian oppressors as a metaphor for the Civil Rights movement, offering nonviolent solutions to social injustice.

King responded to critics—including segregationists, white racists, white moderates, black nationalists, and various civil rights organizations—with passionate, informed responses. The title of this book, *Why We Can't Wait*, provided a different answer to each of these groups. For those opposed to segregation, it was an immediate response to their threats and acts of violence. At the time, this was obvious when the bombings of homes and churches, the public burning of crosses and other forms of intimidation, and the ongoing shootings and disappearances of civil rights workers were considered. The whole nation watched as the Birmingham Public Safety Commission, when thousands of children stayed home from school to protest, turned fire hoses on children, hoses powerful enough to break their bones and roll them down the street. Those images told millions why African Americans could no longer wait for jus-

tice to arrive. Justice would never be delivered if it were to be delivered by Alabama's public officials. The book was also speaking to white moderates, most eloquently in its fifth chapter. There, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was reprinted. In it, King argued that moderation in the face of injustice is not an option: There can be no middle ground between good, sanctioned by God, and evil, epitomized by segregation. King argued that churches, schools, businesses, and other institutions must change radically for a desegregated future to be realized.

Why We Can't Wait was also addressed to black nationalists and others eager for social justice. King cautioned that the Civil Rights movement could not rest on its laurels. Victories were won in Montgomery, Little Rock, and Birmingham, but much more had yet to be accomplished: The civil rights bill had not yet been passed by Congress or signed by the president, and African Americans still could not vote in most of the South. Additionally, massive economic development was sorely needed for employment, housing, and the education and cultivation of a civil society. For various civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, CORE, and the Urban League, the book called for a united front against social inequity. King argued for forbearance and due diligence, the need to continue to press for the immediate redress of grievances. King called these groups to use all their professional and organizational talents even though many were weary of the fight. King's book admonished them to persevere.

For Discussion or Writing

1. King was awarded the Nobel Prize in peace in the year after the publication of *Why We Can't Wait*. Read the Nobel Peace Prize Presentation Speech made to King, which can be found on the Internet at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/press.html. Next, analyze how the Nobel committee's reasons for awarding the prize can be supported in *Why We Can't Wait*. Finally, write a well-developed essay that argues why King deserved the prize, supporting everything you say with quotes from *Why We Can't Wait* and from the Nobel Peace Prize Presentation Speech.
2. The day after the assassination of King in 1968, *Why We Can't Wait* was reprinted and copies sold by the thousands. In a well-developed essay that relies on the details and arguments King proffers in his text, speculate why this work sold so many copies after his death.

Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (1967)

This book was the last to be published during King's lifetime. In it, King summarized the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement but was more interested in addressing his growing concerns regarding key developments of the late 1960s. King addressed the self-defensive, sometimes revolutionary use of violence advocated by "Black Power," the social dichotomy of rich and poor living within the United States, and the growing similarities between capitalism and Soviet-style communism, and offered his vision of the day when we could all live in "the world house." Just as in many of his other writings, King used his book to respond to the context of his immediate surroundings. He was fully aware of the difficult times in which he lived. Yet he sought to harmonize differences between him and other leaders and organizations. For example, King felt that the objectives of the nonviolent civil rights organizations and those adhering to the tenets of black nationalism were not in opposition to each other. They, instead, differed on means. The challenge, though, was resolving the tension between the rich and poor living in the United States. For King, the status of African Americans was an extreme example of the problems brought on by unfettered capitalism. He referred to the wealthy white suburbs surrounding inner cities of poverty and blight as metaphors for global conditions. The United States and Western Europe were surrounded by increasingly impoverished nations whose populations were unwilling to watch as the West grew more affluent.

King argued that communism was flawed because it justified using any means available to achieve its utopian end of class equality. King criticized this because for him the ends could not be used to justify the means. Yet, capitalism did the same. He found that in the pursuit of maximizing profits capitalism was willing to justify any means available to it—at the time, even war. On this basis and for other reasons King opposed the war in Vietnam. He instead advocated what he called the “world house.” In the post–cold war 21st century King’s description of the world house looks remarkably like the “global community” of today.

Unfortunately, many of King’s warnings were not heeded. The responses to this book were disappointing to King. Many ignored it as a vestige of days gone by from a leader who had failed to keep up with the times. Others saw it as wishful thinking. Even today, views of this book are limited to those who can find a copy in the used book sections of dealers—*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* is out of print. Yet it speaks to a number of challenges faced by those living in the early 21st century. Racially disparate outcomes in education, discriminatory housing patterns in urban areas, poor health care, and ballooning imprisonment rates are all addressed through King’s prism. His use of history and the place of African Americans in it, his experiences dealing with presidential politics, and the values of his Christian ministry were all used to assess where the United States was headed and the consequences of present actions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does King mean by “Beloved Community”? How does this contrast with his description of the Black Power movement?
2. What does poverty mean to King? What do you think when he compares it to the violence of racism?
3. What criticisms would King have today about the following aspects of US foreign policy—the war in Iraq, the war against terrorism, the United States immigration policies toward Latin America, U.S. prisons?
4. While often contrasted, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X also converged on a number of issues. Looking for connections between King’s *Where Do We Go from Here* and Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet.” From your knowledge of these two thinkers or from researching an encyclopedia or reliable Web site, evaluate in what ways and areas the two converged during the last two years both were alive. As you make your assessment, think about whether their stances enabled them to bridge their disagreements.

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (1969)

Martin Luther King, Jr., gave this speech at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple Church of God in Christ on April 3, 1969. Memphis sanitation workers, mostly African American, were on strike, demanding that the city pay them the federal minimum wage. King’s speech at the rally reminded the workers that they were fighting for dignity, proclaiming the eventual success of unified, non-violent action. Presciently, King assured them that their cause would succeed regardless of what happened to him. He was assassinated soon after.

There are several significant features of this speech. Key among these is the context within which he gave it. The strike had been difficult: Rather than participate in good faith negotiations with the strikers, city officials had refused all talks. They declared the strike to be illegal and local courts agreed, issuing injunctions that prevented demonstrations. A previous march by the workers had been met with tear gas, and violence had erupted. For the first time in King’s career, a peaceful demonstration he had organized developed into a riot that resulted in vandalizing and looting of businesses. Protesters engaged in hand-to-hand fights with police.

Another major element of the speech’s context was the ever-present harassment of King by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) led by J. Edgar Hoover. Few knew that the FBI had targeted King for years and that Hoover considered him “one of

the most dangerous Negroes” in the United States. Congress did not even know about the FBI’s secret counterintelligence program called COINTEL-PRO. Its purpose was to monitor and disrupt the organizations and activities of groups identified by Hoover as “un-American.” Congressional hearings that followed King’s assassination revealed that Hoover had placed tremendous pressure on King to commit suicide. The FBI director used anonymous notes, scandalous rumors, and death threats designed to dispirit and discredit King as a leader. Many who were close to King recalled that he was suffering from severe depression and fatigue at the time of the speech.

King was a master of the delivery style of southern black Baptist ministers. He did not just deliver a speech by reading prepared notes. On this night, he spoke without notes because he had not actually planned to attend the rally. It was not until his aides saw the packed church that they returned to the hotel and pleaded with him to go there and say a few words of encouragement. In the spirit and style of the black pulpit, King used a “call and response” delivery that was familiar to his audience. This style invited the strikers and their families to join in with words of encouragement as King reached his climatic conclusion. On several occasions, spontaneous applause interrupted his impromptu address. And that was to be expected and accepted as approval of the specific points being made.

The imagery used by King took his listeners through history as he compared great events in the development of the West to what was happening in Memphis that night. He intertwined this with references to biblical scenes. By the end of the speech, it became apparent that King used the journey of Moses and the children of Israel as a simile for the journey he had made with the Civil Rights movement over the past 13 years. And like Moses looking down into the promised land from the summit of Mount Nebo he, too, must be satisfied with having successfully made the journey. He suggested that like Moses he was willing to die and not share freedom with his people. The audience

grew still as King concluded his remarks by saying that he had received threats from “some of our sick white brothers” but that “it doesn’t matter with me now.” At that moment the audience grew still as rain, thunder, and lightning seemed to emphasize his points.

Despite the personal distress he was feeling, King offered an optimistic message. As a feature of most of his work, it must be remembered that he was extraordinarily hopeful, even in the face of overwhelming odds. The conclusion of this speech was no exception. He clearly believed that his people would be free and so his safety did not matter. “I’m not worried about anything! I’m not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Lord!”

For Discussion or Writing

1. King frequently used hymns and Negro spirituals in his speeches and sermons. Visit <http://www.negrospirituals.com/> and determine from what song the last phrase of this speech is taken. Why would it be familiar to his audience? After thinking through the song and its meaning, write a well-developed essay that argues why King deliberately chose this song to support his message and connect with the audience.
2. If the assassination attempt had failed, would this still be considered one of King’s most memorable speeches? Why? Why not?
3. King believed in progress. He used history to confirm that events are connected and culminate in expressions of God’s will. Are there other views that might challenge these assumptions?
4. King spoke to an African-American audience at the Mason Temple. In 2009, a significant number of the sanitation workers and others living in society’s periphery may be Latino. In what ways would this event have been altered?
5. To understand King’s speech and see it in a cultural context, visit <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/memphis-v-mlk/activities.html>, consulting the primary documents there and completing the “Documents Lesson Plan:

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Abernathy, Ralph David. *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Ralph Abernathy, An Autobiography*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1990.
- Albert, Peter J., and Ronald Hoffman, eds. *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle*. New York: Pantheon Books in cooperation with the United States Capitol Historical Society, 1990.
- Bennett, Lerone, Jr. *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Chicago: Johnson, 1976.
- Branch, Taylor. *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965–68*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- . *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
- . *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963–65*. New York: Schuster, 1998.
- Carson, Clayborne, and Kris Shepard, eds. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner Books, 2000.
- Carson, Clayborne, et al. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Cone, James H. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Touchstone, 2000.
- Garrow, David. *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Penguin Books, 1983.
- Hansen, Drew. *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Speech That Inspired a Nation*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- Jackson, Thomas F. *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
- King, Dexter Scott (with Ralph Wiley). *Growing Up King: An Intimate Memoir*. New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 2003.
- Lewis, David Levering. *King: A Critical Biography*. New York: Praeger, 1970.
- Lincoln, C. Eric, ed. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1970.
- “Martin Luther King, Jr. F.B.I. Files.” Federal Bureau of Investigation. Available online. URL: <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/malcolmx.htm>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- “Martin Luther King Online.” MLK Online. Available online. URL: <http://www.mlkonline.net/>. Accessed on May 21, 2007.
- “Martin Luther King: The Nobel Peace Prize 1964.” Nobelprize.org. Available online. URL: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/index.html. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Oates, Stephens. *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Mentor Books, 1982.
- Pepper, William F. *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*. New York: Verso, 2003.
- “The King Center.” Available online. URL: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/index.asp>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- “The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute.” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Available online. URL: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>. Accessed May 27, 2007.
- Walton, Hanes, Jr. *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971.
- Washington, James M. *A Testament of Hope: Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.

Dwight B. Mullen



JOHN KNOWLES (1926–2001)

It seemed clear that wars were not made by generations and their special stupidities, but that wars were made instead by something ignorant in the human heart.

(*A Separate Peace*)

The American author John Knowles was born in 1926 in Fairmont, West Virginia. Both Knowles's father—who worked in the coal industry—and his mother were originally from Massachusetts. According to Knowles, his parents felt that the preparatory schools of the Northeast were the only institutions offering a genuinely broad education. Thus, Knowles's brother enrolled at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania, attending Dartmouth College afterward in New Hampshire. Knowles was also expected to continue this tradition and head to Mercersburg but found an academic prospectus for Phillips Exeter Academy with an accompanying application form and, in his own words, “just for the hell of it, filled it out and mailed it.” Consequently, at the age of 15, he enrolled as a student at Phillips Exeter Academy, a well-known boarding school in New Hampshire. This academy bears a striking resemblance to Devon, the fictional school that features in his critically acclaimed work, *A Separate Peace*. In 1945, John Knowles graduated from Exeter but chose to defer his entry to college, preferring instead to enlist and join the war effort as a member of the U.S. Army Air Corps' Aviation Cadet Program. He duly enrolled as a student at Yale University after spending several months with the aviation cadets and obtained his bachelor's degree in English literature in 1949 from Yale.

For some time after his graduation, Knowles moved to and traveled within Europe, working in the

field of journalism until the middle of the 1950s. This experience led him to compile something of an early oeuvre consisting of freelance articles and short stories. In 1957, John Knowles returned to the United States from Europe and landed a position as an associate editor at *Holiday* magazine. After encouragement from the playwright Thornton Wilder, who expressed keen interest in Knowles's writing, he then began work toward his first published text, *A Separate Peace*. Indeed Thornton Wilder was significant in his encouraging Knowles to write about compelling experiences from his past. After his novel gained success and status with the American reading community, Knowles found himself in a position to resign from his employment with *Holiday* and devote himself to writing full time.

A Separate Peace is based largely upon Knowles's experiences at Exeter during summer 1943. Despite the resemblance of the Devon School to Phillips Exeter, readers are urged not to consider the plot autobiographical, although Knowles himself confirmed that a considerable amount of the elements in the novel derive from his own personal experiences in this place and at this time. In his memoir entitled *Palimpsest*, Gore Vidal reveals that he and John Knowles attended Phillips Exeter together, with Vidal being two years older. Gore Vidal also makes it clear that Knowles informed him that Brinker, a central character, is modeled on Vidal himself. “We have been friends for many years now,” Vidal said, “and I

admire the novel that he based on our school days, *A Separate Peace*.”

In addition to *A Separate Peace*, John Knowles published eight other books; he also wrote a travel book and published a collection of short stories. Knowles's other major works are *Morning in Antibes* (1962), *Double Vision: American Thoughts Abroad* (1964), *Indian Summer* (1964), *The Paragon* (1971), and *Peace Breaks Out* (1981). Despite his early success, none of the later works was as well received as *A Separate Peace*. In 1960, John Knowles won the William Faulkner Foundation Award for a notable first novel and the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In addition to these honors, Knowles was rewarded with appointments as writer in residence at both Princeton University and the University of North Carolina. Toward the end of his life and in his later years, Knowles lectured at various academic institutions throughout the United States.

Knowles's major success was his first novel, and none of his other novels achieved the status that *A Separate Peace* has enjoyed; however, as in his first work, his main themes are greed, competitiveness, and corruption in the lives of wealthy American characters. In an interview, Knowles revealed that his time at Exeter was formative to both his writing and his personal life; the experience took him from the hills of West Virginia, forced him to learn the craft and practice of study and academic scholarship, moved him into Yale, and inspired him to write *A Separate Peace*, which ensured him a lifetime of fame and financial security. He recalled from Exeter “a lively, congenial group of students in Peabody Hall that summer, many of them from other schools, accelerating like me.” One such student was David Hackett, who hailed from Milton Academy; he provided the model for Knowles's protagonist Phineas in *A Separate Peace*. During his first summer Knowles realized he had “fallen in love with Exeter.” He attributed much of this love to the two consecutive summers he spent at Exeter, in 1943 and 1944. He spent virtually all of his time at Exeter from September 1942 through August 1944, when he graduated. It was, in his own words, “total Exeter immersion.”

Knowles maintained that Exeter “really did have a club whose members jumped from the branch of a very high tree into the river as initiation. The only elements in *A Separate Peace* which were not in that summer were anger, envy, violence, and hatred. There was only friendship, athleticism, and loyalty.” Knowles recalled that after returning to Exeter for the fall term of 1943, he discovered that the motivated, passionate, and driven time that he had experienced on entering the school had dissipated. By this time, virtually all the young, enthusiastic masters slowly left and moved away, one by one, leaving the more senior staff to teach: “Too old to be in any way companions to us, they forced the class of 1943 to be reliant very much on itself, isolated.” For Knowles, one of his most influential academic mentors was a Latin teacher named Mr. Galbraith, who taught him the intricacies of language, crucially influencing his thinking and his manner of expression. Accordingly, Knowles stated, “I am the writer I am because of him.” He maintained that the best teaching he received was at Exeter.

After moving to Yale soon after his graduation from Exeter, Knowles swiftly became disillusioned with the nature of the academic system, claiming that the style of teaching he endured at Yale was “a distinct let-down.” He found that the academics either read out their recycled lectures en masse in large auditoriums, or, when meeting students in small tutorials, had an unwelcome preoccupation with their careers away from undergraduates. The academics seemed to be there for their own self-development, as opposed to the benefit of the students. For Knowles, Exeter taught him how to approach fresh and different material, organize his ideas, and express what he knew, felt, and experienced. This fascination with transforming his lived experience into both fiction and travel writing is indicative of Knowles's works. Running throughout his corpus is the theme of our inherently irrational nature, which Knowles juxtaposes with the social order. Often relying on global conflicts, such as World War II or the Algerian war of the late 1950s, Knowles places his protagonists in existential crises during which they must define themselves in the midst of cataclysmic events. In the present age

of cultural diversity and an increasing awareness of class differences, Knowles's novels feel antiquated, enshrouding a white world of privilege. Yet as he creates characters who come to terms with human suffering, especially the sort of suffering we all know in that difficult rite of passage that we refer to as adolescence, his works have universal appeal. There is little doubt he will continue to be known for his first novel, the story of a war veteran who reflects upon his life and, in returning to the school where he began to understand himself and from which he left to confront the world, finds a strange mix of emotions: pride in his achievements, nostalgia for a lost era, and guilt over the losses he has known.

***A Separate Peace* (1959)**

A Separate Peace, whose title is taken from Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, centers around the complex relationship between two students at the Devon School in New Hampshire: Gene and Phineas, who is referred to as "Finny" during much of the narrative. The novel is set in a New England boarding school very much like the famed Phillips Exeter Academy (<http://www.exeter.edu/>), an elitist institution that has long served as a feeder school for Ivy League colleges. Significantly, Exeter's motto, at the time of the novel's composition and at the time Knowles attended, was *Huc venite, pueri, ut viri sitis*, "Come hither boys so that ye may become men." Of course, in light of the novel, which is a coming-of-age story depicting teenagers who will soon be drafted into the Second World War, such a motto resounds with irony, for it is this movement from innocence into the horrific experience of battle that the novel depicts.

Narrated by Gene after his return as an adult to the school, Gene observes that it has taken on the qualities of a memorial or museum, lacking any sense of personal engagement or feeling. Yet this in itself intensifies Gene's recollection of the experiences he encountered there. As Gene moves over the playing fields, he observes the dominant feature of both the narrative and the landscape: a large tree overlooking a river. This is the site of the dynamic upon which the

narrative rests; at this point Gene begins to recollect 15 years prior, the time when he and Phineas successfully scaled the tree and jumped from it into the river. This challenge is normally reserved for the academy's senior scholars, but Phineas persuades Gene to attempt it, much to the admiration and envy of his peers. This scene establishes Gene as a conservative who does not allow for breaking rules and Phineas as a provocative catalyst, one who incites others to act contrary to their usual instincts. Of course, Gene relates all the novel's description from an adult perspective; the novel relies heavily upon the constant dialogue between the historical and the present, and the striking contrasts between a mature man and his adolescent self. In describing his former experiences at Exeter, Gene recounts his experiences as if they occurred, not in the past, but in the present, forcing the reader to realize all Gene's recollections are informed by his present state of mind and subject to the accuracy of his memory. Gene's language in this opening section emphasizes the rigid, strict, and regimented order of the Devon School and its students who are expected to succeed within its traditional, rigorous, and sports-oriented education. That Gene observes this in the present highlights the school's adherence to its staunch conservatism and Puritanism after the boys' departure.

Emphasizing the importance of the tree in the chronology of events and the evolution of Gene's feelings about the past, the narrator describes the tree in military language: "It had loomed in my memory as a huge lone spike dominating the riverbank, forbidding as an artillery piece, high as a beanstalk." With this language the tree takes on the qualities of an immense, severe mass, yet when Gene finally observes the tree, it has changed dramatically: "absolutely smaller, shrunken with age." The tree's change in shape emphasizes the way emotional and historical factors skew one's memory and makes evident a dominant theme in the novel: memory and its relationship with reality.

As a consequence of their brief transgression of the rules, Gene and Phineas are prohibited from attending a formal academy event that evening. Mr. Prud'homme, one of the more senior masters, notes the boys' absence and confronts them about it. After

he inquires, Phineas concocts a ludicrous excuse yet does so with such panache that the normally stern scholar spares them punishment. This act, repeated later in the chapter after a more outlandish prank, brings about more potential conflict between the students and the authorities. In terms of his character, Phineas is an anomaly and a rogue when compared with other students in the Devon School; his academic and sporting prowess is impressive, yet his nonconformity to expectations contrasts directly with his unerring knack of being able to flout the rules and escape without penalty. Similarly, Gene recalls that he is also treated less severely because he is not old enough to be considered for the draft and thus adopts a childlike innocence and ignorance of the escalating war, which exists outside the cloistered and enclosed walls of Devon.

After their escape without censure, the pair devise another opportunity to jump. This time the two form a group called "The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session," whose entire ethos is devoted to carrying out activities characterized by their danger and bravura. The initiation ritual for this society is straightforward: Jump from the tree. As Phineas and Gene attempt their initiation jump, Gene loses his balance before Phineas intervenes and prevents his fall, effectively saving Gene's life. Importantly, after thanking Phineas for his actions, Gene later accuses him of deliberately creating the situation as an act that would simultaneously place Gene in danger and allow Phineas to engage in more self-aggrandizement and self promotion by acting as the hero. This sequence of events demonstrates important aspects of the text in terms of the atmosphere Knowles cultivates and his portrayal of the fickle relationships that are formed at the height of adolescence.

As the "The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session" progresses and Phineas revels in both his power and his reputation among peers, an element of competition and jealousy begins to foment between him and Gene, who feels that his part of the friendship is both forced and verging on obligation, describing it as a "straitjacket." Further examples of this simmering row include mutual accusations after the normally scholarly Gene performs poorly on a test and Phineas breaks the school swimming record

during an unofficial swim but refuses to go for the record under formal conditions. During this series of antagonisms, the differences between Phineas and Gene become more evident, with Phineas seemingly a wrongly accused victim and Gene a vindictive, envious villain seeking a scapegoat for his suspicion and inferiority.

This conflict and friction between the two are important as they foreshadow a future encounter that will force these problems to the surface. When the clash occurs, it reveals a malevolent and vicious part of Gene's personality. As Phineas and Gene climb the tree to jump once more, they mirror the earlier climb when Phineas saved Gene's life. In this instance, Gene shakes the limb; Phineas falls from the tree and shatters his leg. Whether Gene intended to cause Phineas to fall is never clear. This deliberate ambiguity opens a space for the reader to interpret the actions, but the event weighs heavily on Gene's conscience. The importance of this point in the narrative is highlighted by Knowles's lengthy and extensive psychological examination of his protagonist: first Gene's denial of complicity and culpability, then his paranoia regarding the revealing of the truth by his peers, and finally his dressing in Phineas's clothes. In reference to his final act, Gene declares he "would never stumble through the confusions of [his] own character again," yet it is clear the delusions he suffers indicate a crisis of identity.

Phineas does not return to Devon for the start of the new term, leaving Gene to occupy their double room. As Gene progresses through the opening of the term, it becomes apparent that the relaxing of the standards during the summer has precipitated problems among the students; hence the masters (teachers) now exact a greater degree of severity with recalcitrant students. In an atmosphere of greater tension and suspicion, Brinker Hadley visits Gene and immediately accuses him of deliberately causing Phineas's accident to obtain his room. Gene reacts with a series of fervent protestations and, because Brinker's comments torment his already guilty conscience, he attempts to distract Brinker by suggesting they go and smoke in the Butt Room in the lower reaches of the building. When they are both ensconced, Brinker openly declares Gene's guilt in

front of his peers, creating a mock trial. His peers participate with a direct line of questioning about his “crime,” and Gene maintains the conceit, hiding the genuine guilt by responding with sarcastic remarks. His successful refutation of the accusations leads him to think that the suspicions dogging him have dissipated, but he remains disturbed by the incident.

By this point in the narrative, the war has escalated and impinges upon the students’ lives; with patriotic fervor, their peers and relatives enlist to go to war. This in itself causes further intergenerational conflict, with staff and students’ clashing about questions of duty. Gene sees his fellow student, Leper, leave the academy and enter the service, while his own decision is prolonged by Phineas’s return to Exeter. The narrative and plot accelerate toward their conclusion as the war’s influence and eventual end near. Chronologically, time moves swiftly, and Gene enters the armed service after his graduation. But his training proves to be in vain as the war finishes and he fails to see active service. After his discharge, Gene visits Leper at his home in Vermont. Leper has been discharged from the service for health reasons, and this seems to have resulted in the deterioration of his mental faculties. Leper levels the same accusation at Gene as Brinker, namely, citing his involvement in Phineas’s injury, to which Gene reacts violently and attacks Leper before swiftly apologizing. Symbolically, Leper represents the war’s effects on the young generation, the corruption of innocence through harsh reality. Yet despite using such a damning symbol for the effects of war, Knowles then provides Leper with a moment of acute analysis and perception as he refers to Gene: “You always were a savage underneath,” he tells Gene, “a swell guy, except when the chips were down.” This in itself is as precise a commentary on Gene’s instability and unpredictability as can be found in the narrative, a foretelling of the final act in the text.

After they return, Brinker confronts Gene once more, as though he has begun to represent a symbol of youthful conscience. Gene again rejects this notion, and Brinker forces the culmination of this ongoing inquisition by dragging both Gene and Phineas into the “First Building,” to which Brinker has retained access. Brinker calls the ubiquitous Leper as

his witness, given that he was present when Phineas was injured. After Leper reveals that he saw Gene deliberately push Phineas, the convalescing victim rushes out of the room, freakishly falling on the steps outside and breaking his leg once more. After he is transported to a hospital, Phineas becomes agitated and emotional when Gene arrives to visit him. The doctor informs Gene that Phineas must undergo an operation, and Gene leaves, concerned about the reception he received. Upon his return, Gene is informed that Phineas died during surgery; the war claims a victim who was not even in the combat zone. Throughout this swift yet somber conclusion there is a dual sense of mourning and reconciliation, from Gene’s reaction after speaking with Phineas at the hospital to his recounting of their relationship as he walks around the notable spots where they spent their formative times. For Gene, the gym had “a significance much deeper and far more real than [he] had noticed before,” and the landscape has become “intensely meaningful.” Both seem as if they would tell him something “very pressing and entirely undecipherable.” In the wake of wars mental and physical, having found a peace within himself, Gene is now ready to listen.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As the title of the novel is derived from Hemingway, read *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway’s bitter remembrance of the atrocities of war. After reading the book, speculate why Knowles borrowed this title. Does the title convey something integral to the novel? Does it reveal anything about the novel’s protagonist? Weigh these issues as you formulate a response.
2. Both *A Separate Peace* and J. D. SALINGER’S *The Catcher in the Rye* are concerned with alienated adolescence in postwar America. With this in mind, contrast the two works, evaluating how each deals with alienation within that cultural context. How do the two works intersect; how do they diverge from one another?
3. Critics have debated whether Phineas and Gene are homosexuals, or whether their relationship contains elements of homoerotic desire. While for some critics this way of interpreting the novel

is fruitless, for others it is a profitable way of approaching fraternity, one of the novel's many themes. What does the novel have to say about fraternity: the need for brotherhood, friendship, and camaraderie?

4. Discuss whether *A Separate Peace* could be considered an antiwar novel, with its emphasis on characters' denial, trauma, and its ultimately tragic conclusion.
5. Both Gene and Phineas are flawed characters in their own way, be it through jealousy or egotism. Discuss the convergences and departures in their relationship throughout and whether the conclusion is "satisfactory."
6. The speaker of Robert Frost's poem "Birches" longs to recapture the innocence of youth. Throughout the poem the speaker contrasts the ideal with the real. Read "Birches" and compare Frost's vision of lost youth with Knowles's depiction of lost youth in *A Separate Peace*. What do these two works share? How could "Birches" be used as an introduction to Knowles's novel?

***Peace Breaks Out* (1981)**

Published in 1981, *Peace Breaks Out* is John Knowles's sequel to his earlier best-selling novel *A Separate Peace*. Set immediately after World War II, *Peace Breaks Out* transpires during the uneasy days after Germany's and Japan's surrender, taking readers back to Devon School, a microcosmic battleground of guilt and remorse. In a tale marked by warm nostalgia and adolescent poignancy, Knowles employs a distant, third-person narrator to explore a different dynamic than Gene and Phineas's pupil-pupil relationship. His protagonists, in this instance, are Wexford, a cunning and subtly unruly pupil who subverts authority to exercise his own, and Pete Hallam, a teacher of American history who begins to recognize the ideological tensions underlying a nation in transition.

Peace Breaks Out begins in September 1945 with Hallam's return from World War II Italy to teach at his alma mater. A former prisoner of war who suffered leg injuries from shrapnel, Hallam is accorded iconic

status by the majority of his pupils and the staff, who are currently living on the mythologies of returning war heroes. As he drives through the town of Devon, everything appears "smaller in size" than he remembered. Knowles returns to the narrative technique he used with such efficacy in *A Separate Peace*, in which Gene also visits a Devon unlike the one he once knew. The relationship between memory and reality preoccupies this section of the narrative: The emotional and physical experiences Hallam endured in World War II have ensured that "life itself was going to be smaller now, now that the great and terrible drama was over, all of the dead were buried."

As Hallam settles into Devon, he is accosted by his former Latin teacher, Roscoe Bannerman Latch, who invites him to attend a faculty social so that he may be introduced as a staff member and included in the community at Devon. Hallam notes that his former Latin teacher taught him what "the words 'discipline' and 'precision' and 'ceaseless energy' and 'personal authority' really meant." This in itself highlights the emphasis placed upon such personal characteristics and relates further to the image of Devon as an academy whose graduates adhere to the wholesome, disciplined, and well-rounded mold that had shaped so many patriots for military service.

Postwar conflict and ideological tension are clearly present as Pete presides over his first American history class. Initially posing the question "What is your view of American history?" Pete receives heated and antithetical answers from his pupils (15). Tensions within the group swiftly become apparent: The fervently patriotic Blackburn declares it "one long success story" but is contradicted by Hochschwender, a student of German descent, who responds with an overt and politicized paraphrasing of the ethos and principles of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (16). This, in turn, is opposed by a student of Irish descent, Wexford, who establishes the main dynamic of the narrative: the interrelationship between postwar politics and societal beliefs. This classroom argument becomes a debate about the true nature of democracy and freedom of speech in the press and media, which would appear to be Knowles's greater debate articulated through the passionate rivalries of teenage students.

The ongoing tensions and provocations between Hochschwender and Wexford take a range of forms, including the publication of inflammatory letters to and from the school newspaper, run by Wexford, and eventually the decision to erect a memorial window in honor of those from the Devon School who fought and died in World War II. The memorial is seen as a counterpoint to Hochschwender's own assault on the traditions and values these students died for in the Second World War and ignites a series of recriminations and actions among the students who take "justice" into their own hands.

After the commemoration of the memorial, tensions remain high between Wexford and Hochschwender, who continue writing polemical exchanges in the school newspaper. One morning it is revealed, however, that the memorial window has been smashed by persons unknown. Wexford, assuming Hochschwender to be the culprit, immediately assumes the role of chief inquisitor. A second suspect is Tug Blackburn, a member of the ski team who holds the keys to the chapel bearing the memorial window. After breaking his leg, Blackburn suffered from delusions before being hospitalized. Unable to recall whether or not he desecrated the memorial, Blackburn and Hochschwender are scapegoated. Despite his protestations and charges of conspiracy, Hochschwender remains under suspicion until a group of the sporting fraternity, the Pembroke Boys, finally take matters into their own hands.

As Hochschwender rows alone on the lakes, nostalgically longing for the now-departed Adolf Hitler, he is confronted by classmates about the damage to the memorial. After distracting his friends, they fight with Hochschwender, who is repeatedly forced under water until he faints. The group panics when they are unable to revive the stricken student. Meanwhile, Hochschwender's roommate is interrogated about his role in the act of vandalism. This interrogation concludes that Hochschwender, "top student Nazi or not, had nothing to do with the shattering of the Memorial Window" (149).

Hochschwender ultimately dies of complications caused by a heart condition, and an official inquiry

ensues with accusations leveled against his assailants. Wexford rationalizes that they were vindicated in their actions because of the frustration and anger they felt about both missing World War II and the act of vandalism perpetrated against the memory of their much-envied predecessors. After the inquiry into Hochschwender's death, Tug Blackburn implicates Wexford when he recalls that Wexford also had access to the chapel. Wexford denies ever possessing a key to the chapel. He proceeds to exploit Hochschwender's death by collaborating with Dr. Wherry of Devon School to report it in the newspaper as an accident in which the suspects went to his aid too late. Wexford then sees an opportunity to expose the Pembroke Boys and divert attention from his wrongdoing by asking Mrs. Quimby, who was present at Hochschwender's death, whether he said anything before dying. After she reveals that he said, "They drowned me," Wexford feels confident that the Pembroke Boys will attract whatever punishment results. Hallam challenges Wexford as to whether the keys were returned to Tug Blackburn. Wexford responds that Blackburn received them before the memorial was broken, in direct contradiction to his assertion that he had never possessed the keys. It becomes evident that Wexford broke the window to implicate Hochschwender, but Wexford cannot be prosecuted because he holds the information about the Pembroke Boys' assault against Hochschwender.

In this conclusion, Hallam speaks for a generation tempered by war and weary of a future that simultaneously creates and dispenses with people like Wexford:

He (Wexford) is an incipient monster. . . . For the last dozen years we've seen in the world how monsters can come to the top and just what horrors they can achieve. And those monsters were once adolescents. Here there seems to be one more of them forming, and in Vladivostok or the Belgian Congo or France there are perhaps others forming, and one of these days people will have to try to cope with them, confront them, risk everything in defeating them, defeating them once again, for a time.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Among the main themes of *Peace Breaks Out* are disillusionment and adjustment in the postwar years. Think about the novel in light of other texts that deal with soldiers returning from conflict, such as KURT VONNEGUT'S *Slaughterhouse-Five* or Tim O'Brien's *If I Should Die in a Combat Zone*. With all three works in mind, write a well-developed essay on disillusionment in postwar America.
2. Does *Peace Breaks Out* offer a nostalgic or critical evaluation of postwar society? Write a well-developed essay in which you think particularly about the different opinions expressed about patriotism, freedom of speech, and the proposals placed in opposition to these opinions. What stance does the author assume; how do you know this? Be sure to cite the text to support everything you say.
3. *Peace Breaks Out* depicts the paranoia prevalent in postwar America, a time when the cold war, the McCarthy hearings, and the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg occupied the popular imagination. Compare Knowles's treatment of this social mentality of suspicion and Arthur Miller's depiction of it with *The Crucible* and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. While all three writers address similar themes, they use different fictional strategies to induce us to reenvision contemporary America. Evaluate Knowles's use of the prep-school environment, Miller's use of Puritan-era witch hunts as an allegory for McCarthyism, and Doctorow's approach to the Rosenberg case through historical fiction. Which is most effective? Write a well-developed essay that argues the strengths and weaknesses of these different approaches. To learn more about the events these authors are responding to, visit reliable Web sites such as <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/rosenb/ROSENB.HTM> or http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/McCarthy_Transcripts.htm.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON KNOWLES AND HIS WORK

1. On one level, *A Separate Peace* deals with the loss of innocence and the movement into disillusionment, the painful process of understanding that most of us experience. William Blake, a famous romantic poet, formed an entire collection of poems around this theme: *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Choose one poem from the "Songs of Innocence" and one from "Songs of Experience" (two excellent poems to contrast are "The Lamb" and "The Tyger"). Finally, write a well-developed essay comparing Blake's vision of innocence and experience with Knowles's vision in *A Separate Peace*.
2. In his introduction to John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, Harold Bloom argues:

Unfortunately, Knowles could not resist the temptation of making Finny Christ-like, so that the tree from which he falls intimates the cross. The novel's great virtue, its lightness of style, cannot sustain that heavy symbolism.

With Bloom's thoughts in mind, write a well-developed essay on the Christ imagery in the novel, ultimately assessing whether this symbolism strengthens or weakens *A Separate Peace*.

3. Both Gene in *A Separate Peace* and Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have confrontations with the darker aspects of their natures, aspects that are personified in Finny and Kurtz, respectively. Write a well-developed essay that explores how both authors use a character to represent and/or project this dark side of his respective protagonists. What does Phineas represent for Gene? Does Knowles, as Conrad does with Kurtz, associate Phineas with much larger human tendencies? Can the novel sustain such levels of abstraction?
4. Knowles is not the only author to use a group of struggling adolescents as an allegorical representation of society at large. William Golding

does so in *Lord of the Flies*, another such novel, depicting a group of children stranded on an island who try and fail to govern themselves. Golding's work is often seen as a powerful statement regarding the limits of human nature with regard to community. Taken together, what worldview is suggested in *A Separate Peace*, *Peace Breaks Out*, and *Lord of the Flies*? If all are taken as allegories for society at large, do they pose the same concerns? Write a well-developed essay that compares Golding's allegory with those of Knowles.

5. Considering the success of *A Separate Peace* and its inclusion in many high school English curriculums, hypothesize why the novel has been often taught and whether it will continue to be taught. Have we reached a moment when the book seems dated, a "period piece," or does the work have lasting value? To frame your response you might consider another adolescent literature classic, such as Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon* or HARPER LEE's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In your evaluation of three, consider what makes a "classic" work of literature.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *John Knowles's A Separate Peace*. New York: Chelsea House, 2002.
- Bryant, Hallman Bell. *A Separate Peace: The War Within*. New York: Twayne, 1990.
- Carragher, Bernard. "There Really Was a Super Suicide Society," *New York Times*, 8 October 1972, section 2, p. 2.
- Ellis, James. "A Separate Peace: The Fall from Innocence." *English Journal* 53 (May 1964): 313-318.
- Gardner, John. "More Smog from the Dark, Satanic Mills." *Southern Review*, 5 (Winter 1969): 224-244.
- Greiling, Franziska Lynne. "The Theme of Freedom in *A Separate Peace*." *English Journal* 56 (December 1967): 1269-1272.
- Halio, Jay L. "John Knowles's Short Novels." *Studies in Short Fiction* 1 (Winter 1964): 107-112.
- Henkel, Wayne J. "Pas de Feu," *Washington Post Book World*, 23 June 1974, p. 2.
- Karson, Jill. *Readings on A Separate Peace*. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1999.
- Knowles, John. "A Special Time, a Special School." Available online. URL: http://www.exeter.edu/libraries/4513_4621.aspx. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- MacDonald, James L. "The Novels of John Knowles." *Arizona Quarterly* 23 (Winter 1967): 335-342.
- McGavran, James Holt. "Fear's Echo and Unhinged Joy: Crossing Homosocial Boundaries" in *A Separate Peace*. *Children's Literature* 30 (2002): 67-80.
- Slethaug, Gordon E. "The Play of the Double in *A Separate Peace*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 15(3) (Fall 1984): 259-270.
- Veitch, Colin R. "The Devon School Fiction of John Knowles." *Arete: The Journal of Sport Literature* 3 (Spring 1986): 101-113.
- Weber, Ronald. "Narrative Method in *A Separate Peace*." *Studies in Short Fiction* 3 (Fall 1965): 63-72.

Martyn J. Colebrook



HARPER LEE (1926–)

As you know, the South is still made up of thousands of tiny towns. There is a very definite social pattern in these towns that fascinates me. I think it is a rich social pattern. I would simply like to put down all I know about this because I believe that there is something universal in this little world, something decent to be said for it, and something to lament in its passing. In other words all I want to be is the Jane Austen of south Alabama.

(Interview with Roy Newquist, March 1964)

Nelle Harper Lee was born April 28, 1926, in a small Alabama town where she still lives today. Unlike most sleepy, southern towns, Monroeville welcomes thousands of visitors each year; millions of readers know it as Maycomb, Alabama—the hometown of the fictional Finch family in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Lee’s only novel has never been out of print and, since its publication, has sold millions of copies. *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. The novel, according to a 1989 survey, was one of the top five books taught in high schools across the nation (Applebee 27) and was named as second only to the Bible in making a difference in the lives of 5,000 respondents according to a 1991 Book-of-the-Month Club survey (Shields 1). Jean Louise Finch (“Scout”); her brother, Jem; their father, Atticus; Jem and Scout’s friend, Dill; and Tom Robinson, the falsely accused man Atticus defends—all are characters whose lives in Maycomb have fascinated readers for over 40 years.

Lee was the youngest of Frances Finch and Amasa Coleman Lee’s four children. Her father, a financial adviser, lawyer, newspaper owner, state legislator, and successful businessman, moved to Monroeville in 1912 with his wife and first child, Alice. As a young lawyer, A. C. Lee inspired his novelist daughter, defending two African-American men, confronting the Ku Klux Klan as they marched in Monroeville, and expressing intolerance for bigotry, racism, and political corruption in frequent newspaper editori-

als. Unlike the mother in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who dies when Scout is two, Frances Finch Lee lived until Harper Lee was 25. However, Mrs. Lee suffered from poor health, which her family called a nervous disorder, for years before her death. Because she experienced severe mood swings and eccentric, unpredictable behavior, the Lee family depended on Hattie Belle Clausell, an African-American woman, who cared and cooked for them. She appears in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as Calpurnia, the cook and caretaker. Mrs. Lee may have inspired Aunt Alexandra, whom Scout describes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as “analogous to Mount Everest . . . cold and there.”

Harper Lee, known always as Nelle (her maternal grandmother’s name spelled backward) to her friends and family, was a precocious, athletic girl who often aggravated her teachers with her impertinence. Lee’s best friend in Monroeville was a small, intelligent boy sent by his mother from Meridian, Mississippi, to Monroeville first in the summer of 1928, then by 1930 to live for several years with his relatives the Faulks, next-door neighbors to the Lees. Truman Persons, later adopted by a stepfather whose surname was Capote, remained Harper Lee’s close friend until near the end of his life. As children they played word games, read voraciously, wrote stories, and dramatized them. In a 1967 interview with Gloria Steinem, TRUMAN CAPOTE described Lee and himself as “apart people” (quoted in Shields 44). They were drawn to each other not only by their intelligence and creative

imagination but also through their shared ambition to be writers.

Characters in these early stories and later ones by Lee and Capote often drew on the eccentricities of their South Alabama Avenue neighbors. One Monroeville household proved to be an especially rich source of material. Mr. and Mrs. Boleware lived in a shabby, rundown house with their two daughters and one son, called Son, who as a teenager was imprisoned in his house, supposedly tied to his bed, as punishment by his father. Son was said to emerge occasionally at night as a peeping tom, but few ever saw him or heard his strange-sounding voice. Children were not allowed in the Bolewares' yard even to retrieve the occasional ball hit from the nearby schoolyard. Though not as feared as the Bolewares, other neighbors on South Alabama Avenue provided character detail, sneaking bourbon into their iced tea, dipping tobacco, playing the fiddle, and loudly quarreling among themselves (Shields 52–53). Harper Lee explained in a 1964 interview that life in a small town “naturally produces more writers than, say, an environment like 82nd Street in New York. In small town life and in rural life you know your neighbors. Not only do you know everything about your neighbors, but you know everything about them from the time they came to the country” (quoted in Shields 51). Remembering these neighbors she knew so well would be invaluable for Harper Lee as she created her own small-town characters.

While Lee describes growing up in Monroeville with little money and few luxuries, typical circumstances of Depression era children, she was the child of educated, upper-middle-class parents. Her mother was a graduate of the Alabama Girls' Industrial School, where she studied Latin and English and excelled in music. Lee's father taught for three years, served as a bookkeeper and financial manager for a law firm, and several years later became a lawyer and partner in the firm. He purchased the local paper in 1929; ran it with his oldest daughter, Alice; wrote editorials for it; and served in the Alabama State Legislature. Lee's childhood was much more affluent than that of most children growing up in southern Alabama in the 1930s, particularly that of

the children of poor farmers and laborers, black and white. She was always able to attend school—her parents could have sent her to private school if they had so chosen. She also knew she would go to college, as had her older sisters and brother—a luxury that many children all over the nation, but especially in the South, would not have.

Lee graduated from Monroe County High School in 1944 and enrolled that fall in Huntingdon College, a college for women in Montgomery, Alabama. Huntingdon required attendance at chapel every morning and enforced strict rules dictating their students' dress code and behavior. An instructor seated with students during meals checked to see that students' feet remained flat on the floor and all used the proper silverware while eating. Huntingdon College did not prove to be particularly suitable for the headstrong, nonconformist Nelle Harper Lee. Classmates remember her smoking a pipe, swearing freely, wearing no makeup, and preferring jeans or Bermuda shorts to skirts, cardigan sweaters, and pearls (Shields 72). In the spring of her first and only year at Huntingdon, Lee was one of seven students inducted into the national literary society, Chi Delta Phi, and had two pieces of fiction published in the college's literary magazine—the beginning of her career as a published writer.

In fall 1945, Lee transferred to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. That September, World War II officially ended; once again there were men as well as women attending the university (women had far outnumbered men during the war years). As at Huntingdon, Harper Lee refused to conform to the expected mores of a young southern woman. She smoked openly, wore men's pajamas, and sported jeans as she left campus to go golfing. She wrote for the campus humor magazine, the *Rammer Jammer*, later becoming its editor, and contributed pieces for the newspaper, *Crimson White*. Lee often expressed in her sometimes sarcastic, satirical articles liberal views on race, reflecting what she had learned at home. During her junior year (1946–47) Lee applied and was admitted to the University of Alabama School of Law. By 1948, having completed her second year of law school, Lee informed her

father she was dissatisfied. Hoping to appease her, he agreed to send her to study in Oxford, England, for the summer. On her return, Lee attended one more semester before leaving during Christmas break without finishing her degree or taking her qualifying law exams.

Though A. C. Lee longed for his youngest child to become a lawyer and join his law practice along with her older sister, Harper Lee was determined to be a writer. Her friend, Truman Capote, had already published his first work, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, in 1948. A character in Capote's first novel is a forceful young woman who envies the freedom of being a male; Isabel Thompkins in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* resembles the young Harper Lee. Twelve years later, Harper Lee would use Truman Capote as a model for the character Dill in her novel. After she moved to New York City in 1949 to be a writer, Lee supported herself by working a number of uninspiring jobs, including reservations clerk with Eastern Airlines and British Overseas Airways. She wrote nights and weekends and traveled back and forth to Monroeville to see her family. One very difficult return to Monroeville was for the funeral of her mother in 1951. Tragically, six weeks later, Lee's older brother, Edwin, died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 30. Soon after their deaths, Mr. Lee moved to a brick ranch-style house with his daughters. But Harper Lee returned to New York, determined to fulfill her dream of publishing fiction.

By November 1956, Harper Lee had completed a series of stories. With help from friends she met with an agent, Maurice Crain, and his wife, Annie Laurie Williams. They encouraged her to develop one of her stories into a novel. That Christmas, Lee's friends, Joy and Michael Brown, surprised her with a generous check that allowed her to quit her job and write full time for one year. Lee insisted their gift was to be a loan and eventually repaid them. In 1957, now writing full-time, Lee began a novel she entitled *Go Set a Watchman*, a title later changed to *Atticus*. She submitted her unsolicited manuscript to J. B. Lippincott, who gave her a several-thousand-dollar advance in October 1957 for the publishing rights. For the next year, Lee revised the novel with her Lippincott editor, Tay Hohoff. In 1958 after many revisions the

manuscript had a new title, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and its author became known as *Harper Lee*, rather than *Nelle Lee* (she feared her name would be mispronounced as "Nellie").

Set during the 1930s, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, depicting oppression and exclusion in a closed southern community was published at a time when the United States was confronting the evils of racial discrimination. As with many authors, Harper Lee drew heavily on her own experiences in creating her coming-of-age novel. The Finch family of Maycomb—a family like the Lees of Monroeville, Alabama—differed from the predominant image of southern families in the first half of the 20th century, for the Lees and their fictional counterparts the Finches were liberal, well-educated, compassionate people aware of the suffering of others around them in the impoverished South of the 1930s.

In November 1959, while awaiting the novel's galley, Harper Lee accepted Truman Capote's invitation to accompany him to Kansas as his research assistant. Capote had read about a family of four being murdered in their rural home; the *New Yorker* agreed to publish Capote's investigative article, which eventually became his nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1965), an exemplar of what literary critics have dubbed "New Journalism." Charles Shields in his biography of Lee argues that she was instrumental in helping Capote obtain interviews and recording details about the Clutter family (163–164), who were brutally murdered. The recent film *Capote* (2005) depicts this period in Harper Lee's life. *Capote* shows Lee, played by Catherine Keener, and Truman Capote, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, working together. According to Shields, Lee "was shocked" to receive no acknowledgment when *In Cold Blood* (1965) was published. Harper Lee's only recognition was Capote's brief dedication: "For Jack Dunphy and Harper Lee, with my love and gratitude" (Shields 253).

Many wonder why Lee has not produced another novel. Though Harper Lee and her only novel have continued to receive awards and accolades for more than 40 years, the author has refused to be a public figure; no other fictional works by Harper

Lee have ever appeared. While Lee has never been clear about why she has not published again, in a 1964 interview with Roy Newquist, she described how overwhelming the experience of becoming famous was:

Well, I can't say that it was one of surprise. It was one of sheer numbness. It was like being hit over the head and knocked cold. You see, I never expected any sort of success with *Mockingbird*. I didn't expect the book to sell in the first place. I was hoping for a quick and merciful death at the hands of reviewers, but at the same time I sort of hoped that maybe someone would like it enough to give me encouragement. Public encouragement. I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I'd expected.

Nelle Harper Lee continues to live a private life with her older sister in the family home in Monroeville, Alabama, with occasional stays in her New York apartment. A celebrity who refuses to act like one, Lee has led a quiet, unpublicized life since the late 1960s. It is doubtful that Nelle Harper Lee, at 80 years old, will give up her private persona. Nevertheless, she will always be recognized as a best-selling author who told the story of three children and one black man from South Alabama and made their experiences universal ones. They, as we, grow up in a world that is unjust and learn that to understand others different from us we must walk in their shoes—the advice Atticus gives Scout:

“First of all,” he said, “if you learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—”

“Sir?”

“—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

Atticus's lesson for Scout is still relevant more than 40 years later.

***To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)**

To Kill a Mockingbird is composed of two plots told by two narrative voices, the adult Jean Louise Finch, a grown-up Scout remembering three years of her childhood, and the young Scout Finch when she is around six until she is nine. The opening story is of three children, Scout; her brother, Jem; and their friend, Dill, who try to ferret out their invisible, mysterious neighbor, Boo Radley. Imprisoned in his house by his mean father for years, Boo has become a Maycomb, Alabama, legend—a fear-inducing, night-stalking, shape-shifting bogeyman. The children are curious and fearful but determined to confront their strange neighbor. They suspect he is aware of them and is the secret giver of trinkets they find in the hollow of a tree. There are encounters with other eccentric neighbors, a mad dog, a house that burns, shots fired in the night, and eventually Boo Radley himself. At the beginning of the ninth chapter, Boo Radley fades into the background as a second plot is introduced. Atticus Finch has been appointed to defend Tom Robinson, an African-American man falsely accused of rape by a poor white woman. The children watch as their father is targeted as a “nigger lover,” withstands an angry mob set on doing harm to Robinson, and is then defeated in his skillful courtroom defense of Robinson.

The two stories converge at the end of the novel when Scout and her brother, Jem, are attacked because of their father's courtroom tactics but are rescued by Boo Radley, who kills Mr. Ewell. This concluding incident is foreshadowed by the first sentence of the novel: “When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow.” Three hundred pages later readers know how fortunate Jem is to have only a broken arm. In the beginning, the adult narrator signals to readers that she is remembering her childhood and the near-disastrous encounter that caused her brother always to have a shorter left arm. All is said to begin one summer several years earlier when Dill “came to us.” Scout is almost six and Jem nearly 10 when they first meet a short almost seven-year-old boy nicknamed Dill, from Mississippi. He has arrived in Maycomb, Alabama, in 1933 to stay with his aunts for the summer. By the novel's end, the children are older and

wiser, having learned of prejudice, injustice, tolerance, and understanding. They know what it is to be a mockingbird, a defenseless outsider, who deserves respect and understanding even if that outsider is an eccentric recluse, a poor child who cannot read, a farmer with no money, or an African-American man in Alabama in the 1930s. The novel concludes with a wiser, more-mature Scout remarking there is little else for Jem and her to learn except algebra.

Harper Lee used her family, acquaintances, hometown, and childhood experiences in South Alabama to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Yet the novel is more than a thinly veiled remembrance of the past. Rather Lee shaped her content not only mindful of the 1930s but also clearly aware of the 1950s. As in much fiction, some of the historical details Lee incorporates are not factually accurate. Lee includes in chapter 3, set in 1933, a reference to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was created in 1935. She has Mrs. Merriwether scornful of Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting with black people at the Southern Conference on Human Welfare in Birmingham in 1938, but Mrs. Merriwether's remarks take place in 1935. Critics have noted that these and other real events, such as the complicated legal wrangling over the Scottsboro case and the impoverishment of much of the nation, particularly the South, in the years after the 1929 stock market crash, are important in understanding Harper Lee's world. Though they may be reshaped to happen at another time, real events stored in a writer's memory influence her imagination and thus her fiction.

Scholars have frequently noted the similarities of the trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the 1931–37 trials of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young African-American men accused of raping two young white women on March 25, 1931 (see Johnson *Student Casebook*, 15–82). However, Charles Shields, author of a 2006 biography of Harper Lee, cites a letter written by Lee to Hazel Rowley, author of *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. In this correspondence, Lee says she had another trial in mind. Rather than the ongoing drama of the Scottsboro case spanning two decades, Lee explains that she remembered a crime that occurred in Monroeville, reported on November 9, 1933, in the *Monroe Jour-*

nal, the local newspaper owned and edited by Lee's father. Walter Lett was accused of raping a white woman, Naomi Lowery. Lett, an African-American man in his thirties, had already served time in prison. Lowery, a poor white woman in her twenties, claimed Lett had raped her near a brick factory south of Monroeville. Lett, tried in March 1934, was found guilty of the capital crime of rape and sentenced for execution that May. However, prominent citizens of Monroeville appealed his case, and after several stays of execution, the governor commuted his sentence from death to life imprisonment. Lett then suffered a mental breakdown while on death row and was committed to a mental institution, where he died of tuberculosis in 1937.

Patrick Chura acknowledges the relevance of events that happened when *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set but argues that those happening as Harper Lee wrote the book are also influential:

In other words, racial events and ideology of the 1950s/early civil rights era—the period concurrent with the novel's production—leach into the depiction of Lee's 1930 history, orienting large sections of the text not to the Depression era but to social conditions of the civil rights era. The mid 1950s/early civil rights era is therefore the context from which the novel is best understood as the intersection of cultural and literary ideology.

Chura's premise is that discovering the historical and imaginative truth of the novel depends on knowing both the historical present of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the time of its production. To the Scottsboro and Lett cases, Chura adds the lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago, brutally murdered by a Mississippi Delta mob on August 28, 1955. This shocking event and the trial in 1955 in which Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, accused of murdering Till, were acquitted made national headlines and coincided with the time when the adult Scout was considering her childhood. The narrator's creator, Harper Lee, would have been most aware of the growing racial unrest of the nation, particularly in the South. All states were concerned with the

May 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* striking down the legal fiction of decision of “separate but equal.” America was being forced to examine its political and social injustices, and race relations were under scrutiny as they had never been before.

The real-life trials of the Scottsboro Boys and Walter Lett and the fictional trial of Tom Robinson are strikingly similar; they share juries who judged more on race than evidence. All took place in the Deep South in the 1930s, centered around interracial rape charges—black men and white women. The defendants pled not guilty but were found to be guilty by an all-white male jury on the basis of the accuser’s testimony rather than substantive evidence. The accusers were poor white women with questionable backgrounds; juries chose to believe the white women’s testimony despite contradictions in their accounts. Eight of the nine Scottsboro Boys were sentenced to death (only the 12-year-old was spared), as was Walter Lett and Robinson in the novel. In the Scottsboro case, two diligent attorneys continued to argue for their clients and eventually won parole, pardon, or freedom for eight of the nine. In the case of Lett, petitions from many leading citizens of Monroe County persuaded the governor of Alabama. Harper Lee’s father, A. C. Lee, may well have been one of these influential people standing up for the rights of a black man. Mr. Lee, as a young attorney in his twenties, had defended two black men accused of murder in his first criminal case. Lee lost the case, his clients were hanged, and their bodies mutilated after death. According to Charles Shields in *Mockingbird*, A. C. Lee never accepted another criminal case (121). Harper Lee, aware of her father’s haunting experience and of other trials involving black men and white women, was able to reshape her material into the unforgettable injustice of Tom Robinson and Mayella Ewell.

Patrick Chura adds that the Emmett Till case and the fictional case of Tom Robinson also share striking details such as the suspected affront of a white woman by a black male; the all-white, all male juries; verdicts that upheld the white power structure; and the mutilation of the bodies. He also believes it is no coincidence that Till is killed on August 28 and that

Robinson is killed when “August was on the brink of September” (Lee 260). Tom Robinson’s trial in the novel and film has been the focus of a number of scholars interested in law and literature. Harper Lee herself suggested that justice was a major theme of the novel. In her 1966 letter to the *Richmond News Leader* after the Hanover County Board of Education banned her book from county schools, Lee wrote, “Surely it is plain to the simplest intelligence that ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’ spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners” (quoted in Shields 255).

But what about codes, complicated and contradictory, that do not protect the mockingbirds of society, even when they have the counsel of honorable defenders? The paradox of how differently black people are treated than white people under the same set of laws is a difficult lesson for Scout and Jem to absorb. That they question this contradictory code is a valuable part of the narrative. Events before and during the trial allow Scout, Jem, and Dill to encounter other characters besides Calpurnia who are black. They attend Calpurnia’s church, sit with the minister during the trial, hear Tom Robinson’s reasons why he was submissive to a young white woman, and talk with Mr. Dolphus Raymond, the white man who has mixed-race children. These characters become real people for the children, not just subservient folks unworthy of their attention. The children also become very aware of what Claudia Durst Johnson calls “disjunctive legal codes: the codes people profess and those they choose to live by” (94). In her 1994 study of the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*, Johnson cites Atticus’s closing speech to the jury when he reminds them of the most important principle of America’s judicial system: All men are created equal. Atticus acknowledges inequalities in social status, wealth, and intelligence but thinks that such inequality should not exist in the courts of law. Yet the members of the jury, the people who live in Maycomb, and even the good church ladies who sympathize with the children of Africa do not live by this code. Rather, their behavior follows their belief in white supremacy, not equality.

There are many other methods of analysis for *To Kill a Mockingbird* beyond the thematic approaches of justice and race. Maycomb's social pattern that Harper Lee incorporates suggests a caste system—those with education and professional jobs, proud but poor farmers, white trash who are mean and racist, and blacks. It is impossible to miss the motif of birds and mockingbirds; readers learn, as do Scout and Jem, that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. Other critics have explored the gothic elements of the novel, particularly in the Boo Radley sections. Superstition, elements of fear, hypocrisy, and education are recurring motifs interwoven in the two plots. Other studies analyze characters who cross boundaries delimiting gender, race, and social patterns. The children call their distinguished father by his first name. Calpurnia chastises Scout for her poor manners, especially with the lunchless Walter Cunningham, who goes home from school to eat with the children. Scout's character offers numerous examples of transcending boundaries; she does not act like the young southern lady Aunt Alexandria thinks she should be.

When it was first published, some reviewers criticized the novel for the use of stock characters and sentimental tone, others criticized the use of two plots, while some found fault with the narrative voices and the two-plot structure. However, the critics Theodore and Grace-Ann Hovet, in their article “‘Fine Fancy Gentlemen’ and ‘Yappy Folk’: Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” note that in recent years, Lee's novel, always popular but not critically acclaimed, has received increasing critical respect. Scholars have praised it for its complexity, evocative use of place, skillfully drawn characters, and critique of racism and prejudice. The Hovets argue that through the contending, contradictory voices of a female child and the child as an adult, Lee demonstrates how a community may oppress and exclude individuals because of their race, gender, and class. The adult narrator in *To Kill a Mockingbird* tells about one small community because the story is an important one for all to hear.

Dean Shakelford also praises Harper Lee's use of the female voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He argues that because of this critical female voice questioning tradition readers are able to see a parallel with the

South forced to question its reliance on racism and tradition. Scout refuses to grow up to be a southern lady; she rejects what has always been accepted. The South too had to refuse to be the Old South any longer and grow beyond its superficial gentility. Scholars such as Shakelford, the Hovets, Claudia Durst Johnson, and many others value Harper Lee's skill in creating her one work of fiction. Their admiration converges with the popular acclaim of readers who have bought millions of copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the thousands of teachers who want their students to read and appreciate it. Forty years after the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, when asked by Richard Chalfin, owner of the Better Book Getter in New York, why she had never written another novel, replied, “I said what I had to say” (quoted in Shields 280). If a writer is to write only one novel, then saying what one had to say as Harper Lee did in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a worthy goal.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Atticus is the wise father passing on an honorable code of conduct to his children. Describe three important values Atticus imparts to them. Which of Atticus's adages or memorable quotes are associated with these lessons? (An example is the passage of walking in another's skin quoted earlier).
2. According to Gary Richards, author of *Lovers and Beloveds*, “Maycomb is thus, for all its demands for gender conformity, an arena of dizzyingly varied gender performances” (137). In *To Kill a Mockingbird* who or what demands gender conformity? Who are the characters of Maycomb who defy these demands and cross gender boundaries?
3. On Christmas Day 1962 Universal Pictures released a movie based on the book starring Gregory Peck, who received an Academy Award for the role of Atticus Finch. The film won multiple awards and is considered to be a classic, one of the finest screen adaptations of a literary work. After reading the novel and watching the film, choose one segment of the novel and analyze how the film depicts that segment. Note the dialogue of the characters and the details used in setting the scene. Do you agree with Thomas

voice? Finally, read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a work known for its distinctive voice. With these two novels in mind, write a well-developed essay on both the strengths and the limitations of writing novels from the perspective of youth.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Abernathy, Jeff. *To Hell and Back: Race and Betrayal in the Southern Novel*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003.
- Applebee, Arthur N. "Stability and Change in the High-School Canon." *English Journal* 81, no. 5 (September 1992): 27–32.
- Bellafante, Ginia. "Harper Lee, Gregarious for a Day." *New York Times* Online edition. Available online. URL: <http://nytimes.com/2006/01/30/books/30lee.html>. Accessed January 30, 2006.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Modern Critical Interpretations*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Books, 1999.
- Capote*. Directed by Bennett Miller. With Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Catherine Keener, Clifton Collins, Jr., Chris Cooper, Bruce Greenwood. Sony Pictures, 2005.
- Chura, Patrick. "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmett Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Southern Literary Journal* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 1–26.
- Flora, Joseph. "Harper Lee." In *Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Joseph M. Gloga and Amber Vogel. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006.
- "Harper Lee Makes Rare Appearance." BBC News. Available online. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4572477.stm>. Accessed May 5, 2005.
- Hovet, Theodore R., and Grace-Ann Hovet. "'Fine Fancy Gentlemen' and 'Yappy Folk': Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Southern Quarterly* 40 (Fall 2001): 67–78.
- Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. New York: Twayne, 1994.
- . *To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook on Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Lee, Harper. *A Letter from Harper Lee. O The Oprah Magazine*, July 2006, pp. 151–152.
- . *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 1960. Reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 2002.
- Mallon, Thomas. "Big Bird." *New Yorker*, 29 May 2006, pp. 79–82.
- Maslin, Janet. "A Biography of Harper Lee, Author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *New York Times*. Available online. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/books/08masl.html>. Accessed June 8, 2006.
- Newquist, Roy. "Interview with Harper Lee." In *Counterpoint*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964.
- Remler, Nancy Lawson, and Hugh Lawson. "Situating Atticus in the Zone: A Lawyer and His Daughter Read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*." In *Literature and Law*, edited by Michael Meyer. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004.
- Richards, Gary. *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936–1961*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.
- Shakelford, Dean. "The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel." In *To Kill a Mockingbird: Modern Critical Interpretations*, edited by Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999.
- Shields, Charles J. *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*. New York: Henry Holt, 2006.
- To Kill a Mockingbird*. Screenplay by Horton Foote. Directed by Robert Mulligan. With Gregory Peck, Robert Duvall, and Mary Badham. Mulligan and Brentwood Productions, 1962.

Gwen McNeill Ashburn



DENISE LEVERTOV (1923–1997)

Life is continuously surprising one with its events and its people and you know, the unforeseeable is constantly occurring in life. So why not in poetry?

(Interview with Kenneth John Atchity, 1979)

Born in Ilford, Essex, England, Denise Levertov never understood the success that resulted from her living and writing in America. Rather, she arrived at the “American” idiom through a conscious effort to listen to and read distinctly American voices. In a 1965 interview with Walter Sutton, she expressed her awareness of that process: “I had to accustom my ears to American speech and my whole nervous system to the pace of American life before it really began to come through to me” (“A Conversation” 5). Despite living more than half her life in the United States, however, she never considered herself fully assimilated.

Her varied background and heritage help explain some of the ambivalence she felt in regard to claiming a nationality, a home, or even a single cultural foundation. She was born on October 24, 1923, to a Welsh mother, Beatrice Spooner, who was the daughter of a tailor and preacher, and a Russian Jewish father, Paul Philip Levertoff, who converted to Christianity and later became an Anglican clergyman. Denise changed the spelling of her family name to avoid confusion with her sister, Olga, also a poet. Denise Levertov came to life under the care and influence of parents who held diverse and politically sensitive views of the world. Besides having non-English parents, Levertov did not share with other British children in the experience of an English education. Except for ballet lessons, Levertov was educated at home by her parents until she was

12, after which she mostly educated herself by reading many of the books the Levertoffs had in their substantial collection and by visiting museums. As she suggested in a 1979 interview with Kenneth John Atchity, “Perhaps you could say I am a child of the London streets, I am a child of the Victoria and Albert Museum, I am a child of my mother’s girlhood memories of Wales, I am a child of my father’s Hasidic tales, I am a child of the Christian upbringing that I had” (“A Conversation” 103). Indeed, all of those childhood influences affected her poetry.

Although Levertov did not attend school as a child, her parents did expect their daughter eventually to attend university. World War II, however, led her to work through her twenties as a civilian nurse in London. After the war she took odd jobs in the city until she worked again as a nurse in Paris, France. Although the war interrupted her informal education and prevented a formal one, Levertov developed her artistic sensibilities during those years. Encouraged by her elder sister, Olga, she devoted considerable energy to dance, learned to paint, and, perhaps most significantly, wrote poetry. At the age of 12 she sent T. S. Eliot a sample of her poems. He responded with a letter of support in which he advised her to learn to read poetry in a second language, as she later did. At age 17 she published her first poem, “Listening to Distant Guns,” in *Poetry Quarterly*, and at age 23 she published her first book of poetry, *The Double Image*.

Her early “British” work received critical praise and was even anthologized in Kenneth Rexroth’s *New British Poets* (1948), yet the influential life experience for the development of her poetry did not occur until 1948: She left behind the English literary scene, which, as she described to William Packard, “was in the doldrums,” and moved with her husband, Mitch Goodman, to New York City. The move slowed her youthful productivity considerably as she adjusted to a new culture, learned a new style of speech, and raised her son, Nikolai. She did not publish her next book until 1956. She did, however, immerse herself in American letters as well as literary and political life. Besides participating in the Ban the Bomb movement of the 1950s, she quickly became friends with poets such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and, significantly, William Carlos Williams, who, more than any other poet, became a mentor to Levertov.

As she many times commented, Williams’s poetry gave her a way to cope with American speech patterns. His work invited her to look at poetry in a new light while affirming some of the already established poetic beliefs she held. She read Williams’s *In the American Grain* while traveling around Europe with her husband, supported by the American G.I. Bill. She immediately sensed the importance of the book and of Williams’s use of common idiom but did not know how, as she put it, to *hear* his poetry. After returning to the United States for an extended time and acquainting herself with American styles of speaking, she learned the cadences and rhythms of his voice. She later decided that the norm of poetic language must be the everyday use of language. As she explained in an interview with William Sutton, “It is a question of the individual’s idiom, of writing in your own language within your own or up to the limits of your own range of vocabulary, not in some preconceived literary language” (“A Conversation” 6).

Her ideas on “natural” poetic language, stemming from Williams’s influence, related to another of her defining poetic beliefs, that of organic form. She cited both T. S. Eliot’s “objective correlative” and Williams’s dictum “no ideas but in things” as influential to her early writing practices. For Levertov this meant a discovery of structure through the

close observation of objects. She clarified her position in an interview with Reid, explaining, “Rather than breathing life into dust, though, I see it as perceiving the life inherent in the dust” (Reid 71). Thus, she wrote poetry under the assumption that objects have intrinsic form and that a poem’s language and its structure can arise from that objective essence. She borrowed Gerard Manley Hopkins’s term *inshape* to describe the inner core that is part of an object. She called a poem attentive to an object’s “inshape” organic because it does not impose its own structure but rather adopts the object’s characteristic structure.

Her concern with organic form and natural idiom continued to inform her work, even as she and her critics began to discuss more frequently the abstract subject matter of her later poetry, which deals with the politics of war, feminism, and religion. After publishing several successful books of poetry in the United States and winning awards, critical recognition, popular praise, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Levertov began teaching. She took her first position in 1964 at the Young Men’s and Women’s Christian Association Poetry Center in New York City. That same year she became an honorary scholar at Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, and by 1965 she was teaching at City College of New York and at Drew University, in Madison, New Jersey. In the following years she taught at a number of different institutions for higher education, ranging from Tufts University in Massachusetts to the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to her continuous output of critically acclaimed poetry, Levertov taught, enabling her to get to know students and participate in student life.

The vibrant and active student population of the 1960s fed her social activism during a time of particularly heated political protest in America. In a discussion of the influence that teaching had on her writing, she explained to William Packard, “It’s had a profound effect on my life in bringing me into contact with the student generation, and with political activism on the various campuses. If I hadn’t been teaching I might easily have found myself very isolated politically, and perhaps would not have developed” (“Craft Interview” 37). Her political development led

to increased involvement throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Among other forms of activism, she coinitiated the movement of Writers and Artists Protest against the war in Vietnam, traveled to Hanoi with fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser, and participated in an antidraft organization called RESIST, which eventually led to her husband's arrest. Throughout her years of protest she continued to write; her poetry became increasingly fixated on political issues, especially the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Many critics point out that Levertov's moralizing in the face of bloodshed was not new to her in the 1960s and 1970s. Even her first published poem observed, "That low pulsation in the east is war," hinting at the stance of pacifism she later took (*Selected Poems* 1). The sound of distant guns, however, seems to have grown closer to Levertov and to her poetry. By 1967 the sense of "sad expectancy" found in her earlier poetry turned to disdain for explicit violence: "burned human flesh is smelling in Viet Nam as I write," she declares in a poem called "Life at War" (*Selected Poems* 65). As Levertov publicly denounced political violence, her tendency to speak out against social failures led her writing away from the subject matter that made her famous—those mundane objects within which she found life.

Naturally, not every one of her early supporters cared for her development as a protest poet. In contrast to her generally acclaimed early works, the poetry Levertov published after 1967 became the subject of divisive debate among friends, fans, and critics. Some considered the obviously left-leaning outcries against the Vietnam War preachy, overly sentimental, and even bombastic. One critic, Paul Breslin, wrote in an essay for *Poetry* magazine that "the moralist turned into a bully: I agreed with her horrified opposition to the war, but not with her frequent suggestion that poets are morally superior because they are poets, and therefore charged with lecturing the less sensitive on their failures of moral imagination" (163). Even her good friend and fellow poet Robert Duncan reacted to some of her particularly harsh war imagery by asking, "What is going on?" The comment led to a falling out between the two, who had been closely associated through their work and their friendship.

Levertov admitted that she sometimes published only "sort-of" poems. She cited one example in particular from her book *Candles in Babylon*, called "A Speech: For Antidraft Rally, D.C., March 22, 1980." She was aware of the criticism she opened herself up to, saying in an interview with Penelope Moffet, "I'm sure it's not going to help my reputation any. If any reviewer wants to criticize that book when it comes out, they've got an obvious place to begin—'well, it's not poetry, this ranting and roaring and speech-making'" (Moffet 122). And although many critics did in fact level such criticism, Levertov never apologized for the strong political nature of her poems. She traced her social awareness to her upbringing and continued to insist that she would never use poetry itself to further a political agenda. Rather, as she said in an interview with Joan F. Hallisey, Levertov worked "through poetry, to stir others' minds or to articulate what readers feel but have not found words for" ("Invocations of Humanity" 145).

After divorcing her husband and during the post-Vietnam War period, Levertov turned toward religion. Although her parents had raised her in a spiritually rich household, it was not until the early 1980s that her work took on explicitly religious overtones. With poems such as "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" and "'In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being'" she drew Christianity into her work and recognized God as "the air enveloping the whole / globe of being" (*Selected Poems* 194). Rather than giving up on social activism to deal with exclusively spiritual matters, she joined religion and politics, as *El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation*, her 1983 libretto with music by W. Newell Hendricks, attests. Religion for Levertov did not mean having an unquestioning faith. It did, however, aid her in regaining perspective on the splendor of life while also continuing her humanistic project through poetry. As she explained to Lorrie Smith, "I now define myself as a Christian, but not a very orthodox one, and I think that there is a way of looking at Christian faith as involving the cooperation of man" ("An Interview" 141). Throughout her career, Levertov's poetry developed according to her interests. Just as she insisted, however, there was no disconnection between her life and her writing

nor between one period of her poetry and another. Estrangement from dominant social practices during the 1960s and 1970s did not interrupt her concern with organic form any more than her interest in Christianity estranged her from political awareness.

When she died in Seattle, Washington, in 1997 of complications of lymphoma, she had melded European, British, American, Christian, and Jewish personal history and life experience. She admitted late in her life that her diction was often closer to British than American English and that her sentiments for the “mother land” never faded. Yet Levertov remained a hugely influential poet in the United States, known for her complex sense of rhythm, experiments in form, and precise language. It is exactly that sense of complexity in her life and her poetry, the fact that she was and is “many things and no one thing,” that established her as a prominent author and that continues to intrigue readers today (Sutton, “A Conversation” 4).

“Illustrious Ancestors” (1958)

Published in 1958, “Illustrious Ancestors” appeared in *Overland to the Islands*, which critics often call Levertov’s second “American” collection. Her references to a distinctly non-American history, however, show us how she tempered her assimilation by including her ancestral past among her contemporary experiences. The poem begins with a name, “The Rav / of Northern White Russia,” and a nearly fantastic recollection of his youth: He declined “to learn the / language of birds” (*Selected Poems* 8). As the poem continues, we encounter a tailor, Angel Jones of Mold. On first reading, those references to unfamiliar names and fablelike biographies seem mystifying. Here it helps to know something of Levertov’s life.

In an essay titled “The Sack Full of Wings” included in *Tesserae*, published more than 30 years after “Illustrious Ancestors,” she explains that “the Rav” is her father’s great-grandfather, Schneour Zalman, founder of the Habad branch of Hasidism (1). From other sources we learn that Angel Jones of Mold is part of her mother’s ancestry and was a

tailor, teacher, and preacher. Although the two men had similar interests and lived during the same period (the late 1700s and early 1800s), they were separated by culture, religious prejudice, and language. Levertov, then, becomes the link that joins their disparate lineages.

Knowing that the two men, the “Illustrious Ancestors,” stem from Levertov’s family tree helps the reader understand her position as the poem’s first-person narrator, the third character the reader encounters. In the final section Levertov writes: “Well, I would like to make, / thinking some line still taut between me and them, / poems . . .” (9). We can read the poem as more than merely paying homage to well-respected family members. It also describes her aspirations as a poet. The last portion of the poem serves to clarify the seemingly inexplicable first parts about learning the language of birds and sewing meditations into britches.

In quick succession the reader learns the favorable traits Levertov wants to draw upon: directness, hardness, soundness, and mysteriousness. Interestingly, Kenneth Rexroth, one of Levertov’s earliest endorsers, praises her early poetry with the characterization “Nothing could be harder, more irreducible, than these poems” (Rexroth 14). And many critics have commented upon the careful attention to sound (such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony) in Levertov’s work. In that way, her poems do appropriate characteristics of her great-great-grandfather’s floor and bench.

Knowledge of Levertov’s poetic sensibilities and personal history, however, does not render “Illustrious Ancestors” completely understandable, methodical, or interpretable. While the first three nouns she admires—*directness*, *hardness*, *soundness*—suggest clarity, the last—*mysteriousness*—introduces a paradox. How can she write unambiguous poems that are, at the same time, mysterious? The poem’s final image actually provides an example of the way Levertov does just that.

To condition *mysteriousness*, last of the four nouns, we have a “silence” produced “when the tailor / would pause with his needle in the air” (8). The clarity of the description allows the reader to form

a clear image of the tailor piercing the air with his most basic instrument. The tailor's action, however, does not reveal a single or particular meaning within the context of the poem. Here, Levertov uses poetic imagery not only to describe mysteriousness but also to produce a sense of mystery. The close relationship between image and idea as well as content and form continued to concern Levertov and inform her poetry throughout her entire career.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In many of her interviews and essays, Denise Levertov discussed the important influence her family had on her creative work. "Illustrious Ancestors" is only one example in which specific references to her personal biography take on a significant role in her poetry. Consider some of her other poems, such as "Olga Poems," "A Soul-Cake," or "Wings in the Pedlar's Pack," and write an essay about the author's life as it figures into her work. Must a reader be intimate with the facts of Levertov's history to make sense of her poems? What are the assumptions an author makes when making such personal references?
2. As discussed, "Illustrious Ancestors" lists four nouns to which Levertov hoped her poetry might adhere. Choose any of her poems—use "Illustrious Ancestors" even—and discuss the ways in which she does or does not achieve the goal.
3. Consider the relationship in "Illustrious Ancestors" between the abstract and the tangible. When Levertov writes of praying with "the bench and the floor" or of putting meditations "into coats and britches," what sort of creative leaps does she take? How do prayers and meditations relate to physical objects, and what does the connection imply about the poem as a whole?

"To the Snake" (1960)

Appearing in her third book of "American" poetry, *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, published in 1960, "To the Snake" provides us with a good example of Levertov's objective poetry. Recall from the previous discussion of organic form that Levertov

believes objects are inherently ordered. Careful attention allows poets to discover an essential structure, which may not immediately present itself. With that artistic theory informing her writing, she carefully describes and elucidates particular objects she observes.

"To the Snake" focuses on an experience with a green snake. The scene takes shape through the voice of a first-person narrator who encounters the snake while with friends. The speaker leaves much of the context for this meeting out of the poem and instead concentrates on the snake itself as an object of stimulation. As Levertov explains in her essay "Some Notes on Organic Form" from *Poet in the World*, poets see certain things that move them to speech. In this case, the visceral touch of a snake encourages the narrator to describe the snake's "cold, pulsing throat," "arrowy gold scales," and the "whispering silver" of its "dryness" (*Selected Poems* 14). Here we see the deep pleasure that Levertov takes in nature and the experience of tangible things, both of which recur throughout her poetry.

"To the Snake," however, provides a look into the darker side of Levertov's adoration of the concrete. While we may read the poem as nothing more than a charming description of a brief moment in nature, the sensual adjectives and strong emotional connotations resonate with deeper meanings and contradictions. In the last line Levertov describes the speaker as both "smiling and haunted" (14). The conjunction of the two suggests that part of the enjoyment of handling the snake is derived from the sense of danger. Many critics go so far as to read the poem as a metaphor for erotic pleasure. Such an understanding gives the snake symbolic importance as a typical phallic image or, alternately, as an allusion to the biblical story of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Whether or not we wish to read the snake as symbolic, the poem still presents challenges to consider. Both the brevity of the moment and the fleeting pleasure that it provides find expression in the structure of Levertov's free verse poem. The term *free verse* describes poetry that does not organize its lines according to a regular metric pattern. True to her belief in intrinsic form, Levertov organizes "To the Snake" by indenting every second line.

The indentations create a sense of slithering quickly down the page until the last coiled stanza, which describes the snake fading “into the pattern / of grass and shadows.” Although the snake leaves “a long wake of pleasure,” the speaker can hold on to it only momentarily (14). Speaker and reader alike are left to ponder the experience and re-create it in language as concrete as the event itself.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read several other descriptive poems by Levertov, such as “Pleasures” and “The Tulips,” and compare the imagery to that of “To the Snake.” Do they all draw from nature? Do they all include strong connotative meanings? What other similarities or differences do you detect?
2. Considering the symbolic possibilities of the snake, reevaluate the poem’s meaning(s). You may include a discussion of the common associations we make with snakes. Do those associations change as a result of the specification of a green snake?
3. Notice that the poem is written to the snake, addressing it as “you.” What effect does this have on our understanding of the relationship between the speaker and the snake?
4. The title presents an ambiguity. While “To the Snake” might mean *for* the snake, as in the poem is written to the snake, “To the Snake” might also suggest movement, as in, *toward* the snake. Consider the different possibilities implied by each.

“A Solitude” (1961)

Published in *The Jacob’s Ladder* (1961) before the majority of her most outspoken political poems, “A Solitude,” as does much of her earlier poetry, deals with specificity and the speaker’s personal reflection on the fleeting moments of life. Through a simple narrative about a brief encounter on the subway with a blind man, “A Solitude” explores the way difference affects relationships. Many critics laud the poem for its tenderness, but the speaker exhibits profound ambivalence about her position in relation to the blind man. Rather than offering a simple

moral about assisting the disabled, Levertov raises questions about the way we universalize individual perceptions.

The first two stanzas prevent readers from establishing a firm grounding within the poem’s narrative. They do not provide details about place, time, or character—all the things we expect from a story. Instead they present a narrator questioning her perception. She states simply, “I can stare at him” and immediately wonders about his ability to perceive her presence, asking, “Or does he know?” (*Poems 1960–1967* 70). The second stanza compounds the sense of doubt. The narrator raises the question of her own desire to stare, proclaiming first, “O, strange joy, / to gaze my fill at a stranger’s face.” The next line, however, negates her satisfaction: “No, my thirst is greater than before” (70). By refusing to provide a logical explanation for her actions, or even a fixed dynamic between the speaker and the blind man, Levertov leaves the reader to fill in the gaps. Her use of fragmentation adds to the challenge and further invites (or forces) the reader to participate in the process of constructing meaning(s) from the material given. Take, for example, the first sentence, “A blind man.” The incomplete thought says nothing of who this blind man is and offers no conclusive idea about his role as the subject of the poem. He simply exists. The final sentence, “He says, **I am,**” echoes the first in that it confirms existence without determining its meaning (72). This final line demonstrates the poem’s tendency toward visual suggestion. The use of boldface text highlights certain aspects of the poem. Presumably Levertov means to draw attention to those highlighted words. The reason why, however, remains open to interpretation. The poem’s visual organization does not help fix meaning but sensitizes the reader to perceptual ambiguities. The pattern of three-line stanzas creates divisions in linear thoughts. And line breaks isolate particularly resonant phrases that take on new meaning when separated from grammatical contexts. For instance, “he is blind?” “Solitude,” and “I see him” all take on additional connotative meanings when considered as distinct statements.

As we explore the possibilities that “A Solitude” presents, some formulations of meaning will seem

more credible than others. Accounting for specific parts before comprehending the whole, however, agrees with Levertov's notion that the formation of a community depends on individual development. Exploration of our own ambiguous perceptions and social positions allows for interaction across our differences without erasing them. As the speaker says about the blind man, "he continues / his thoughts alone. But his hand and mine / know one another" (72).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read "O Taste and See," another well-known poem by Levertov, in which she uses boldface to highlight certain words. Compare the two poems, focusing on the use of the visual aspects of poetry. Do they employ the boldface text in similar ways? What other visual characteristics does each poem have? Using specific examples from the poems, discuss how the look of each adds or detracts from possible meanings.
2. Levertov openly confessed the influence Rainer Maria Rilke had on her writing, even using a poem of his as a starting point for one of her own. And as she did, he wrote on solitude. In a letter Rilke once purported that "a good marriage is that in which each appoints the other guardian of his solitude" (57). What do you think he means by "guardian" of solitude? Why might solitude be so important to him? And how does his comment illuminate Levertov's poem? Feel free to incorporate Rilke's writing into your discussion.
3. The speaker sets herself apart from the other passengers on the train by saying that they only glance at the blind man, that they are not "thirsty," as she is. What point(s) is she trying to make? How does it affect the poem? Does the dissociation change the reader's relationship to the speaker?

"September 1961" (1961)

"September 1961" appears in *O Taste and See* (1964), Levertov's fifth collection of poetry written and published in America. Upon moving to the United States, Levertov quickly became acquainted—through read-

ing and in person—with American poets of her own and previous generations. By the time she published this poem she was already an established poet among her contemporaries and considered fully mature in her style. Unlike some young writers working to distinguish themselves in a competitive literary market, however, Levertov never shied away from discussing the poets who had a marked influence on her work. "September 1961" names three important American authors to dramatize her relationship with an earlier generation of poets and hint at the anxiety caused by their influence.

Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) are among America's most widely read modernist poets, all of whom suffered in their later years from the debilitating effects of age and mental deterioration. Interestingly, both Pound and H. D. spent the majority of their adult lives in Europe as expatriates, much as Levertov was a European expatriate living in the United States. Williams, though, became the most important to Levertov's life and work. She spoke in several interviews of visiting him at his home in New Jersey during the later years of his life, after he had suffered several strokes and when he did not have complete control over his voice. He was alive when she wrote the poem, although he died in March 1963, before she published *O Taste and See*. H. D.'s death, the first of the three, inspired the title "September 1961."

While some critics consider the poem to be no more than a timely tribute to three of her favorite poets, Levertov uses a complex (if well-trodden) symbol to express her anxiety over a generational shift in the landscape of American authorship. She starts by saying that 1961 "is the year the old ones, / the old great ones / leave us alone on the road" (*Selected Poems* 34). The road, which "leads to the sea," acts as a symbol that, unlike a metaphor, cannot be reduced to a one-to-one correlation between itself and the thing it symbolizes. By using symbolism, Levertov leaves the meaning open to speculation, allowing the reader to make any number of connections. A cliché comes to mind: "the road of life." However, by mentioning "the words in our pockets," "the language into our hands," Levertov expands the symbol to

incorporate one of her primary poetic concerns, the process of writing poetry (34–35).

As she said frequently, these “old great ones” gave her a language with which to think, write, and express. Williams in particular helped Levertov define her voice as a poet by exhibiting the clarity and richness of idiomatic speech. Her anxiety can be felt as a preoccupation with having to write after such enabling influences have fallen silent. She also worries, though, about succeeding them and becoming an old great one herself. Knowing that the new generation of poets cannot simply repeat their predecessors, she writes, “One can’t reach / the sea on this endless / road to the sea unless / one turns aside at the end” (35). New paths must be forged through the “deep woods.” And yet, arriving at the sea also becomes laden with the weight of double meaning. While it implies that one has achieved a certain status, it also means facing a fate of silence, as do the three poets ahead of her. The poem ends with an ellipsis, omitting finality and acknowledging the still unfurling road ahead.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “September 1961” employs the first-person plural *we* in speaking of a generation of poets. Whose voice does the poem represent? Why would Levertov choose to speak for a plurality rather than for herself only?
2. A tension exists in “September 1961” between nature and modern civilization. “Urban light-haze” confuses and trucks dazzle while an owl “silently glides.” Explore the tension in a discussion about its relation to the rest of the poem’s meanings. Look at work by any of the three poets mentioned. How do they treat nature and modern civilization in their work? Do you think Levertov shares attitudes with any of them? Be specific in citing examples.
3. As did Levertov, Donald Barthelme frequently discussed the writers who had influenced his work. He often referred to his predecessors as “dead fathers” and considered it necessary to read a substantial number of them before being able to write anything worthwhile. Read his novel *The Dead Father* and compare his anxiety over influ-

ence and generationality to Levertov’s. Do not limit your investigation to “September 1961.” Consider any of her writing that may be pertinent, including her letters to William Carlos Williams, essays, and even interviews.

“The Jacob’s Ladder” (1961)

“The Jacob’s Ladder” serves as the title poem to a collection published in 1961 that also includes a poem Levertov considered to be her first obviously political poem, “During the Eichmann Trial: ‘When We Look Up.’” “The Jacob’s Ladder” takes its title and subject from a biblical passage. Once again, we see that Levertov establishes her major poetic themes even before exploring them more thoroughly many years later. Furthermore, “The Jacob’s Ladder” incorporates her interest in the poetic as a topic of poetry as well as elements from her Hasidic heritage.

Background on the title’s religious allusion helps in understanding the basic content of the poem. The epigraph of her collection *The Jacob’s Ladder* explains not only the origin of the reference, but also Levertov’s interest in it. She quotes a portion of Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*:

Rabbi Moshe (of Kobryn) taught: It is written: “And he dreamed and beheld a ladder set up on earth.” The “he” is every man. Every man must know: I am clay, I am one of the countless shards of clay, but “the top of it reached to heaven”—my soul reaches to heaven; “and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it”—even the ascent and descent of the angels depend on my deeds. (*Poems 1960–1967* 2)

The quoted portions are from the Bible story in Genesis of Jacob’s falling asleep and dreaming of a ladder that reaches to heaven. When he wakes up, God, standing at the top, promises him the land he slept on so that his “offspring shall be like the dust of the earth” and spread in all directions (28:14). Levertov, however, claims that her interest in the story has more to do with the Hasidic interpretation.

As the rabbi says, much depends on the deeds of every man, just as the angels' ascent and descent depend on the dreams of Jacob. Levertov, as a poet, feels a responsibility to use her voice to stir people's minds and articulate feelings for which others may not have words. While such a belief later leads her to activism, in "The Jacob's Ladder" it leads to the romantic idea of transcendence. Levertov's earliest critics grouped her among England's "new romantics" because she often depicts art as exceeding the limits of the physical world, as well as locating a spiritual element in the earthly.

Notice that in "The Jacob's Ladder" the stairway is not "for angels' feet that only glance in their tread, and need not / touch the stone" (25). Rather, it is built of sharp-angled stone that men scrape their knees on while trying to climb. Levertov uses the ladder as an image to express the difficulty of human achievement. She ends, however, on a note of possibility. With awkward and hard work, the product of man might join the angels in ascension. The last line, "The poem ascends," suggests that in the midst of earthliness, hope remains for revealing a divine truth that surpasses the material world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The second stanza describes "a rosy stone" that looks soft and "a doubtful, a doubting" gray sky. What place does such a dark and dubious image have in a poem about a solid stone stairway? What point(s) does Levertov make by including the second stanza among the others? Does it add contrast, or does it build upon a singular theme in the poem?
2. Read the Bible story of Jacob found in chapter 28 of Genesis. Does the rabbi's interpretation make sense to you? Do you see other possibilities for interpreting the passage, and if so, how do those interpretations lend themselves to understanding Levertov's poem?
3. Note the extreme variance of line length in "The Jacob's Ladder." What does the contrast of short and long lines suggest, and how does it affect the poem's structure?
4. Why might art and religion seek to transcend the physical and material world? What does a poem expressing such a desire suggest about materiality? Explore the relationship between art and religion. Do they serve similar social purposes?

"In Mind" (1964)

Appearing in her 1964 collection *O Taste and See*, "In Mind" was written relatively early in Levertov's career. It demonstrates, however, a stylistic and a conceptual maturity that mark the height of her power as a poet. Although it first seems a simple description of two different, or even opposite, women, an attempt to interpret the poem makes clear its propelling suggestive force.

Beginning with the title, Levertov positions the poem to comment on more than simply two specific women. "In Mind" leads to (at least) two possibilities. As the first line explains, the women exist "in my mind." Many critics understand *my* to mean Levertov herself, or, more generally, the mind of a poet. That reading suggests that the two women symbolize distinct parts of the poet's consciousness. Levertov often commented on the complexity of her own psyche as well as the psyches of artists in general. However, we can also read the first line as the speaker's understanding of two distinct stereotypes of women, not necessarily having anything to do with the poet herself.

Either way we decide to read the poem, the first line and the title taken together imply some sort of conflict between the two women. First we read of an "unadorned" and "clean" woman described as having straight brown hair and smelling of familiar objects, "apples or grass" (*Selected Poems* 43). As far as white women within the Western literary tradition go, she is very plain. The second half of the poem describes a more colorful woman adorned with opals and feathers, a woman "who knows strange songs" (43). The speaker conditions both descriptions with qualifiers stated in the negative. The plain woman "has / no imagination." The "turbulent moon-ridden" woman "is not kind" (43).

By highlighting what the women do not have, the speaker implies a lack in their personalities. Lacking

those qualities—imagination and kindness—the characters seem incomplete and therefore somehow unappealing. The use of enjambment reinforces the tension caused by imperfections. *Enjambment* is the breaking of a line at an unnatural pause, where it does not end with a comma, a period, or another form of punctuation that forces the reader to pause or stop. Levertov wrote and spoke extensively on the poetic line. She said on numerous occasions that she considered an enjambed line break to be a minor pause in the reading rhythm, something like a half-comma.

Using her rule, then, we notice that the majority of lines in the poem include a pause in places we would not normally add one. The effect breaks up our natural rhythm by disrupting single thoughts. As two women exist within the consciousness of one mind, two ideas often exist within one thought. Notice places in the poem where enjambment creates almost conflicting ideas. For example, Levertov divides “but she has / no imagination” so that reading the first part we assume that the woman has something. The second half of the sentence, however, turns to describe something that she does not have.

A similar tension characterizes the entire poem, which dramatizes the conflict between contrasting but similarly incomplete women. Levertov does not seek to resolve the conflict or the tension. She constructs a relationship between these women and leaves the reader to ponder why they are entangled and what the entanglement means. As Levertov herself always encouraged social involvement, “In Mind” encourages reader involvement by provoking a desire to understand the relationship it describes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Levertov's poems “Earthwoman and Waterwoman” and “The Woman” use similar imagery to create a separation between two types of women. Read all three poems and compare the effect such divisions have on each poem. Do all three create the same sort of tension? Does such a persistent tension have larger implications for Levertov's depiction of women in poetry?
2. Assuming that Levertov made conscious and careful decisions about the imagery she uses in “In Mind,” write a paper about her intentions. What particular type of women did she want readers to imagine? Where have you encountered women like these in literature before? Do you consider her descriptions archetypal or specific to Levertov's mind?
3. Knowing that Levertov pays particular attention to lineation, notice how she groups lines in “In Mind.” What do the patterns and indentations suggest about the poem as a whole?

“What Were They Like?” (1967)

“What Were They Like?” first appeared in *The Sorrow Dance*, published in 1967. A few years later it also appeared in *To Stay Alive* (1971) along with several other previously published poems, including “Olga Poems,” “Life at War,” and “Tenebrae.” She explains in the preface that she included the already published material in *To Stay Alive* because she began to see them as steps toward a larger work dealing with political, social, and ethical concerns. Seen in two different contexts, “What Were They Like?” spans the years of Levertov's most focused political protest against the war in Vietnam. As a part of *The Sorrow Dance* it illustrates her burgeoning interest in the poetics of social activism. *To Stay Alive*, however, represents the height of Levertov's outcry against violence in Vietnam, making “What Were They Like?” also part of her most potent efforts to increase awareness and effect change through her writing.

As an author who experimented with poetic form, Levertov always sought a structure natural to the content rather than a structure prescribed by tradition. “What Were They Like?” exemplifies her freedom from convention by adopting an unusual organizational device. Rather than separating the poem into typical lines and stanzas, she uses questions and answers. The poem requires us to try out different reading tactics that we might not otherwise consider. For example, reading the poem line by line may prove difficult because the questions easily slip into the background while we are making sense of

the more elaborate responses. Readers may find it more useful to proceed by reading each response directly after the corresponding answer. By forcing readers to reevaluate their reading strategies, the poem's structure suggests new or alternative methods to approaching particular problems.

The interrogative structure complements the poem's somewhat journalistic tone and may remind readers of the pervasive media coverage of the Vietnam War. A concise and formal diction marks the questions, while the passive voice in the answers ("It is not remembered," "the bones were charred," and "It was reported," for example) creates a distance by neglecting to assign certain actions to anyone in particular (*Poems 1960–1967* 234). However, by including alliterative lines and descriptive images, the poem avoids becoming mere journalese. Levertov manages to combine the standardized language of news reporters with a heightened poetic awareness that captures an aspect of the war that many media cannot express.

Rather than taking the angle of facts, statistics, or government policy, Levertov draws attention to the violence waged against an entire culture. Each answer details a particular part of the culture lost to war, from the possibility of laughter asked about in question three to the characteristics of speech asked about in question six. The sixth and final answer leaves a particularly poignant impression by describing the remaining voice of Vietnam as an "echo." The people cannot speak through the rubble of their war-torn country and culture. The poem ends in silence, emphasizing the very thing against which Levertov's protest poetry struggles. "What Were They Like?" does not restore Vietnam's culture, but it does draw our attention to the loss of that culture. By approaching the subject of war in an unconventional way, the poem creates an opportunity to raise reader consciousness and increase public sympathy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Several of the answers address the anonymous questioner as "Sir." Why would Levertov include a gender-specific title for an otherwise unidentified speaker? What does the gender specification suggest? Notice also that answer five mentions
2. fathers and sons in response to the question about an epic poem. Do these indications of gender add or detract from the poem's overall effectiveness?
3. The last question asks whether "they distinguish between speech and singing." Explore the relationship between speaking and singing. What do you think the poem suggests by relating the two? How does the relationship function to construct an image of the Vietnamese people?
4. Read Levertov's poem "Life at War," which appears in the same two collections as "What Were They Like?" and also describes violence in Vietnam. How do the two poems differ? Do you think they accomplish the same thing or two different things?
5. Find a recent news article about war or some other form of organized violence, such as terrorism. Compare and contrast the language in the article to the language in "What Were They Like?" Do the two different genres of writing convey the same information? How do the two pieces of writing affect you as a reader differently?

"A Woman Alone" (1978)

Published in 1978 as part of *Life in the Forest*, "A Woman Alone" belongs to a transitional period in Levertov's career. She had already passed her most outwardly political stage but had not yet become explicit about her religious beliefs. Instead, she focuses on her very personal life. Other notable poems from the collection include "The 90th Year" and "A Soul-Cake," both about her mother's death; "Chekhov on the West Heath," about her childhood; and "Wedding-Ring," about the remnants of her marriage. Although indirectly, "A Woman Alone" also deals with her divorce from Mitchell Goodman, which took place in 1974.

The poem begins with three incomplete sentences that each end in an ellipsis. Those initial sentences describe different freedoms and luxuries ranging from the joys of being sexually liberated to the pleasure of disconnecting the phone, "to sleep till noon . . ." On first read the unfinished sentences may create an uneasy anticipation. Because

they leave us without an immediate answer, we begin to imagine several possibilities. Although it seems fairly clear that these freedoms are pleasant and appreciated, the first line sets a tone of uncertainty. “When she cannot be sure” not only betrays doubt in the subject’s mind but also leaves the reader wondering who the subject “she” is (*Selected Poems* 110).

Along with the understanding that “she” is the woman alone, much of the discomfort dissipates as the tone shifts. Moving from a proselike description of personal liberties, the poem assumes a tighter voice with precise images and closely cropped lines. The poem returns to its initial tone at later points, but for a moment at least, it efficiently dramatizes the tension between struggling with and enjoying solitude. Notably, the initial ambiguity found in the poem’s first line does not completely resolve itself with the shift in tone. We learn that “She has fears, but not about loneliness; / fears about how to deal with the aging / of her body.” She believes “in her future as an old woman,” but photographs and mirrors constantly remind her of her age (110).

The problem of “how to deal / with photographs and the mirror” raises questions about stereotypes based on gender (110). In an earlier poem called “Abel’s Bride,” Levertov uses the mirror as a symbol for women’s self-consciousness. As a result of societal demands and popular images of femininity, the physical appearance of women attracts scrutiny. Consider the common image of a half-mad “spinster” living alone with more cats than wits, or the image of an aging widow, lost in the world without her husband. Having overcome loneliness, a woman alone also has to overcome stereotypes and judgments that might depreciate her single life. That “She feels / so much younger and more beautiful / than she looks” speaks to the difficulty of trusting one’s own sense of self rather than the superficial attitudes of a visual society obsessed with youth (110).

“A Woman Alone” does not minimize that difficulty, but it does reach past it. By believing in her future she hopes to become “tough and wise” while also remaining content with her current position. The poem ends “without shame or deceit” by praising the solitude she has learned to enjoy (111).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although she received the support and acclaim of many feminist critics, Levertov refused to count herself among many of her contemporaries as a “women’s liberation” writer. Explain your understanding of feminism and describe how a “A Woman Alone” does or does not fit within that framework. Would you consider Levertov a feminist poet, despite her objections?
2. Read Levertov’s poem “Living Alone,” parts 1, 2, and 3, all of which were published in *The Freeing of the Dust* only three years before *Life in the Forest*. How do Levertov’s attitudes toward living alone seem to change? Use specific examples from both poems to support your answer.
3. Levertov often discussed “confessional poetry” with a certain disdain. In an interview with Sybil Estess conducted the year *Life in the Forest* was published, Levertov argued, “The confessional poem has as its motivational force the desire to *unburden* the poet of something which he or she finds oppressive. But the danger here is reducing a work of art simply into a process of *excretion*. A poem is not *vomit*” (“Denise Levertov” 97). Compare “A Woman Alone” to SYLVIA PLATH’s “Daddy,” perhaps America’s most famous confessional poem. Although their topics differ, do you find similarities in the technique, voice, attitude, or intent? Citing specific examples, discuss the ways in which Levertov may be more or less confessional than Plath.

“Death in Mexico” (1978)

Included in Levertov’s 1978 collection *Life in the Forest*, “Death in Mexico” was published at a time when reflection and contemplation played crucial roles in her creative life. She was still grappling with her divorce from Mitchell Goodman, coming to terms with international violence even after the end of the Vietnam War, and processing the pain of losing her mother. Several of her poems in *Life in the Forest* touch on the subject of her mother’s death, and others that do not mention it explicitly seem to hint at an underlying grief. Although many

of the highly personal poems deal with the poet's suffering, they never slip into the confessional mode she vocally discredited. Published the year after the event, "Death in Mexico" approaches the subject of loss from a unique angle to address more universally resonant images of death and dying.

The poem begins by establishing the ground scenario, fixing the reader in a period "two weeks after her fall, / three weeks before she died" and introducing the poem's dramatic focal point, "the garden / began to vanish" (*Poems 1972–1982* 103). Rather than focus directly on her dying mother, Levertov tracks the passing of time and a degenerating physical condition through a description of the garden's decline. Without its caretaker tending to it, the garden slips into a chaotic mess of broken fences, flourishing weeds, and littered children's toys. Peripheral views of Levertov's mother sneak in, mirroring the garden's state and offering readers a view of her desperate condition. For instance, Levertov writes, "For two weeks no one watered it, except / I did, twice, but then I left. She was still conscious then," implying a later loss of consciousness (103).

By taking the garden, rather than Levertov's mother, as a primary subject, "Death in Mexico" avoids the problem of becoming overly abstract or sentimental. The garden provides a tangible image of deterioration and loss, making Levertov's expression of pain more tangible as well. While it would be naive to say that the poem reduces abstract concerns with death to the physical, it does put those questions into symbolic language. By attaching meaning to previously unencumbered objects, we open up an opportunity to create new perspectives and generate new ideas.

"Death in Mexico" invites us to think about dying as a natural return to the untidy from an ordered ideal. Levertov writes that "there was green, still, / but the garden was disappearing—each day / less sign of the ordered" (104). She suggests that death may not be the wilting, drying up, and relinquishing of life that we often imagine. Rather, it might be an inevitable undoing of controlled existence, a return to the more organic "jungle green," a time when old gods take "back their own" (104–105). Levertov, however, does not eschew the pain of loss

or become overly optimistic. The stone gaze of the gods "is utterly still, fixed, absolute" (105). It does not allow for tenderness; nor does it recognize life, even as vines and scorpions crawl across its face.

As Levertov describes in "Talking to Grief," another poem from *Life in the Forest*, she strives to live with her grief. That closeness and honesty allow for poems like "Death in Mexico," in which she accepts death as a natural process while acknowledging the violence of nature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Many of Levertov's poems deal with religion directly and in very clear terms. Her interest in religion, however, does not cease when she delves into less specifically religious subject matter. How might a poem like "Death in Mexico" engage theological perspectives? Do you recognize in the poem any relationship between the Christian parable of the Garden of Eden and the stone representations of indigenous gods?
2. At the end of the poem Levertov acknowledges that she and her mother were both foreign to Mexico. How, then, does the sense of place add to the poem? Why is it important that "Her death / was not Mexico's business"? And to what end does the title draw our attention to setting?
3. Read another poem from *Life in the Forest* that deals with the death of Levertov's mother, "The 90th Year" or "A Soul-Cake," for example. Look at line break, stanza, and indentation in a comparison of the poems' structure. In what ways do they differ? Expand your discussion to general tone and feeling. How does Levertov seem to cope with and express her mother's death differently?

"The May Mornings" (1982)

"The May Mornings" appears in *Candles in Babylon* (1982), one of Levertov's later collections. Her earlier political poems had by this time earned her negative criticism for their graphic descriptions of violence, proselike quality, and didactic moral messages. Her

work published in the late 1970s and early 1980s returned to a more personal, reflective mode of expression and a new interest in religious content. Yet it would be inaccurate to say that Levertov backed away from her political stances as an outspoken proponent of peace and leftist agendas. Rather, poems such as “The May Mornings” prove that she could be subtle, tender, and lyrical while also maintaining a critically aware position on social issues. Far from a throwback to her earlier romanticism, the poem uses her strong observational skills and appreciation of nature to comment on the beauty that we lose to war and disinterest.

“The May Mornings” opens with a carefully constructed sentence that sounds as pleasing to the ear as the image it describes appears to the eye. Levertov uses alliteration and consonance to affect a softness that complements the description of “cashmere shawls” and “burnished silk” (*Poems 1972–1982* 198). The repetition of *s* and *sh* sounds, strategically punctuated by harder *t*, *d*, and *b* sounds, eases the reader into a quiet lull without becoming muddy or unclear. The following lines remind us that we see these May mornings “approaching / over lawns, trailing / dewdark shadows and footprints” (198). Yet, we have forgotten.

The forgetting becomes the poem’s dramatic crux, complicating the simplicity of attractive images and sounds while pulling it away from a purely descriptive endeavor to become critical and proscriptive. Levertov explains the value of remembering the natural beauty:

what solace it would have been
to think of them,
what solace
it would be in the bitter violence
of fire then ice again . . . (198).

By calling readers to remember the May mornings, Levertov suggests that imaginative concentration on beauty may act as an antidote to the “bitter violence / of fire then ice” (198). During the cold war years she grew increasingly concerned about nuclear warfare and the effect it could have on the world. In one interview she said, “The possibility of total

annihilation that mankind faces as a real possibility in our time has never had a precedent” (Andre 54). Levertov may also be alluding to Robert Frost’s poem “Fire and Ice,” which briefly alludes to the world’s end.

“The May Mornings” does not describe the violence in horrific detail as some of her earlier poems do (“Life at War,” for example). Rather, it leaves it in the background and returns to more pleasant description. The end of the poem, however, does not carry the initial attitude of quiet beauty. The tone changes to something more resigned. She concedes that “it seems the May mornings / are a presence known / only as they pass” (198). Although the poem expresses hope through images of life and “wakening flowers,” a sense of despair acknowledges the threat of violence and indifference.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Levertov sometimes combines words to make an unusual compound word. “The May Mornings” contains three such words: *dewdark*, *lightstepped*, and *leaflined*. What does she achieve by making them one word instead of the grammatically correct two? Would the poem lose something by adhering to convention?
2. Toward the end of the poem, Levertov describes the May mornings as “seriously smiling.” Would you consider that an oxymoron? If so, what does the paradox suggest? How does it challenge the reader to rethink common assumptions? If not, how do you reconcile the attitudinal rift between being serious and smiling? Use specific examples from the poem to bolster your argument.
3. Read William Butler Yeats’s famous poem “The Second Coming,” which he wrote in the aftermath of World War I. Although written at very different points in history, “The Second Coming” and “The May Mornings” share a similar anxiety about the world’s end. Compare their specific references, the lyrical quality of each, and the general attitudes the two poems present. Which poem do you, as a reader years away from either historical context, think holds more relevance today?

“Caedmon” (1987)

Appearing in the 1987 collection *Breathing the Water*, “Caedmon” stands alongside other religiously themed and historically specific poems such as “The Servant Girl at Emmaus,” “I learned that her name was Proverb,” and “The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342–1426.” Although we can appreciate the aesthetic and technical achievements of the poem without delving into the allusions, when trying to appreciate the poem’s different layers of meaning it becomes necessary to have some background information.

Levertov gives us obvious clues for beginning an investigation. The title “Caedmon” is the name of a herdsman who worked for a monastery most of his life. The Venerable Bede tells his story in book 4, chapter 24 of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (History of the English church and people). Herdsmen commonly entertained themselves by singing and playing music to each other in turn. Caedmon, who did not know how to sing, would leave the party before his turn and on one such occasion went out to the stable to stay with the animals. He dreamed that night of a man who asked him to sing. Caedmon replied that he did not know how to sing, but the man insisted, offering the suggestion that Caedmon sing of creation. Caedmon suddenly burst forth in verse that praised God with words he had never before heard. When he woke he remembered the words and added more verses. Sharing his gift with others, including learned men, Caedmon became famous as a gifted poet who had the ability to turn scripture into song. Although little is known about the actual man, many consider him the first English poet.

Levertov writes a dramatic monologue from Caedmon’s first-person perspective based on the Bede’s history. This particular poem demonstrates the reason we tend not to assume that the speaker of a poem and its author are one in the same. It also, however, demonstrates the naïveté of assuming that no connection exists between author and speaker. Levertov makes slight changes to the story to align it more closely to her own sense of the poetic. For instance, Caedmon is awake in her version of the story, and rather than a man, an angel appears to incite his

speech. By depicting a fiery angel who touches Caedmon’s tongue, Levertov enriches the poem with biblical allusions. The scorched tongue could, for example, refer either to the Pentecost or to chapter 6 in the Book of Isaiah, in which Isaiah’s tongue is burned with a coal so that he can tell the world about God.

In addition to playing with allusive meanings, Levertov uses form to add depth to the poem. The first 24 lines of “Caedmon” loosely mimic the Old English style of verse, which uses stressed syllables and alliteration to create balanced halves within each line. Notice, for example, the use of alliteration to organize the following lines: “I’d wipe *my* / *mouth* and *wend* / unnoticed *back* to the *barn* / to *be* with the warm *beasts*” (italics mine). With the word *Until*, however, the angel appears and the poem takes on a freer form, using indentations and repetition to suggest the liberty of being able to use language as one chooses (*Selected Poems* 149).

For Discussion or Writing

1. The poem begins and ends with the same image of “the ring of the dance.” What effect does the repetition have, and what significance might it have for the poem as a whole?
2. In “Caedmon” and other poems, Levertov uses religion to define the creative process. What sort of relationship does she establish or suggest between art and religion?
3. Levertov considered “St. Peter and the Angel,” published three years earlier in *Oblique Prayers*, a companion piece to “Caedmon.” Compare the two poems and, using specific examples from each, explain why they do or do not relate.

“Making Peace” (1987)

Published in 1987 as part of a collection titled *Breathing the Water*, “Making Peace” was written at a time when Levertov had already established herself as a politically engaged poet, having written, published, and protested throughout the Vietnam War. Although previous to *Breathing the Water*, the 1980s saw a period of concern with more explicitly religious matters, social issues never left her sphere of

- protest poetry both express sentiments common in America during the period, what can you say about the U.S. political climate surrounding the Vietnam War? Does your comparison of the two artistic statements lead you to draw any conclusions about American culture?
2. Levertov once claimed that the question of how gender has influenced her work “is as baffling as it would be to be asked how my life has been affected by having brown eyes.” And yet, Levertov frequently wrote provocatively about sexism and the experience of being a woman, leading critics to group her together with contemporaries such as Adrienne Rich and Muriel Rukeyser under the common heading “feminist.” Read Levertov’s “Hypocrite Women,” Rukeyser’s “Despitals,” and Rich’s “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” all of which challenge both the dominance of masculinity and feminist responses to it. Why might these three poets avoid the label *feminist* or the attitudes subsumed under it? Can a woman (or a man) be considered feminist if he or she criticizes feminism? Finally, consider Levertov’s body of work; where does she fall in relation to the lines drawn around feminism?
 3. Many of Levertov’s early critics claimed that by focusing on the objects of everyday perceptual experience, such as toilet seats (see “Matins”), she produced banal poetry. Levertov, however, believed that poetic language exposed the intrinsic beauty of such commonplace items. Choose several examples of her poetry that focus on subjects that might not seem appropriate literary content. Does her writing draw new meaning from or reveal the beauty of such mundane objects? Is she more successful in some poems than others? Cite specific examples to support your argument.
 4. Many poets believe that only so many poetic forms exist and that one cannot help but repeat them. Levertov, however, sought new forms to address her subject matter better. Read “Merritt Parkway,” “Relearning the Alphabet,” “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus,” and “What Were They Like?” Do you consider any of the poems to use a unique or new form? What does Levertov’s willingness to experiment allow her to achieve that a traditional form—such as the sonnet or villanelle—might prevent?
 5. Levertov often expressed her reluctance to claim a particular cultural identity. She preferred to acknowledge her varied background in an effort to maintain its unique combinations of intellectual, spiritual, and geographical influences. While the diversity undoubtedly served to enrich her poetry, it also resists any attempt to categorize her or her writing. Reflecting on your own experience, what does it mean to be an American artist? Must one possess certain characteristic traits to be American? And, finally, considering Levertov’s poetry, does she qualify, in your mind, as an American author? Using specific examples from her body of work, explain why or why not.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Barthelme, Donald. *The Dead Father*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975.
- Bede the Venerable. *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. Translated by Leo Sherley-Price. New York: Penguin, 1968.
- Breslin, Paul. “Black Mountain Reunion.” *Poetry* (June 2000): 159–170.
- Buber, Martin. *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*. New York: Chicken Books, 1948.
- Capps, Donald. *The Poet’s Gift: Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993.
- Colclough Little, Anne, and Susie Paul, eds. *Denise Levertov: New Perspectives*. West Cornwall, Conn.: Locust Hill Press, 2000.
- Corrigan, Chris. “Poems by Denise Levertov.” Available online. URL: <http://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/levertov.htm>. Accessed November 2006.
- Gelpi, Albert, ed. *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Halliesy, Joan F., ed. “Denise Levertov (b. 1923).” Available online. URL: <http://college.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/levertov.html>. Accessed November 26, 2006.
- Kinnahan, Linda A. *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

- Lancashire, Ian. "Caedmon (f. 658–680)." University of Toronto. 2005. Available online. URL: <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/369.html>. Accessed November 26, 2006.
- Levertov, Denise. "A Conversation with Denise Levertov." By Kenneth John Atchity. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "A Conversation with Denise Levertov." By Walter Sutton. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "Craft Interview with Denise Levertov." By William Packard. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "Denise Levertov." By Sybil Estess. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "Everyman's Land: Ian Reid Interviews Denise Levertov." By Ian Reid. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "An Interview with Denise Levertov." By Maureen Smith. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "An Interview with Denise Levertov." By Terrell Crouch. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . "Invocations of Humanity: Denise Levertov's Poetry of Emotion and Belief." By Joan F. Hallisey. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . *The Jacob's Ladder*. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- . "Levertov: A Poet Heeds the Socio-Political Call." By Penelope Moffet. In *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . *Poems 1960–1967*. New York: New Directions, 1983.
- . *Poems 1972–1982*. New York: New Directions, 2001.
- . *Poet in the World*. New York: New Directions, 1973.
- . "A Sack Full of Wings." In *Tesserae: Memoirs and Suppositions*. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- . *Selected Poems*. Edited by Paul A. Lacey. New York: New Directions, 2002.
- MacGowan, Christopher, ed. *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1998.
- Marten, Harry. *Understanding Denise Levertov*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- Mersmann, James. *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry against the War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974.
- Modern American Poetry. "Denise Levertov (1923–1997)." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/levertov/levertov.htm. Accessed November 26, 2006.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.
- Rexroth, Kenneth. "The Poetry of Denise Levertov." In *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, edited by Albert Gelpi. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1892–1910*. Translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton. New York: Norton, 1945.
- Rodgers, Audrey T. *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993.
- Spears Brooker, Jewel, ed. *Conversations with Denise Levertov*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1959.

David D. Squires



ROBERT LOWELL (1917–1977)

A lot of poetry seems to me very good in the tradition but just doesn't move me very much because it doesn't have personal vibrance to it. I probably exaggerate the value of it, but it's precious to me.

(*Paris Review* interview)

Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV was born March 1, 1917, to Robert Traill Spence Lowell III and Charlotte Winslow Lowell. He grew up in Boston as their only child, attending the private Brimmer School as a child and St. Mark's Preparatory as a young man. The Lowell family has a prominent lineage that traces back to the earliest Protestant settlers in New England. This lineage includes the poets James Russell Lowell, a contemporary of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Amy Lowell, a contemporary of Ezra Pound, as well as an assortment of successful academicians and military officers. Although the family name had lost some of its luster by the early to mid-20th century, it once held the public interest strongly enough to be included in John Collins Bossidy's famous toast:

And this is good old Boston,
The home of the bean and the cod,
Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots,
And the Cabots talk only to God.

Lowell's father graduated from Harvard, joined the navy, and, after a mediocre career as a naval officer, left the military at his wife's urging to work as a businessman for the Lever Brothers' Soap Company. In "91 Revere Street," a narrative fragment that constitutes the second section of *Life Studies* (1959), Lowell writes about his "father's downhill progress as a civilian and Bostonian" (147). In

contrast to the Lowell ancestors, the photographs and the toy soldiers to which Lowell compared his father, the soap executive, appears tragic and buffoonish. In Lowell's rendering, his mother becomes a dominating figure whose marriage forces her to squander her energies. Of himself he writes, "I was less rather than more bookish than most children" (135). By other accounts, however, Lowell decided to become a poet at a young age, spent his free time studying the English tradition, and forced friends to read works that interested him so they would have a common ground for discussion.

At St. Mark's Preparatory, Lowell studied under the direction of Richard Eberhart, who encouraged him to write. Although Lowell never had a class with Eberhart, they spent time together discussing and reading poetry. After four years at St. Mark's Lowell followed a family tradition and enrolled at Harvard. While there he met and fell in love with a woman named Anne Dick. The romance and proposed marriage led to a dispute with Lowell's parents, and Lowell, enraged, physically attacked his father. Both the poem "Rebellion" from *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) and "Anne Dick 1. 1986" from *History* (1973) mention the event. His parents called upon the poet and psychologist Merrill Moore to assess their son's mental state. Grasping the difficulties that he was having at Harvard, Merrill suggested that Lowell study with a poet, thus inspiring Lowell's looking

south for cultural sanctuary from industrial New England. At about the same time, Lowell had met the poet Allen Tate, who became an important mentor and who also encouraged him to study with a poet. After two years he left Harvard to begin studying with the poet-critic John Crowe Ransom, one of Tate's mentors, at Kenyon College in Ohio. Many years later in an interview for the *Paris Review*, Lowell talked about his parents' reaction to the move, saying only that "it seemed to them a queer but orderly step" (29).

The summer before starting at Kenyon, Lowell traveled to Clarksville, Tennessee, to visit Allen and Caroline Tate. In *Paris Review* he explained that, having three guests already and no place to put him, the Tates jokingly suggested that he would have to pitch a tent on their lawn. He explained that "the Tates were too polite to tell me that what they'd said had been just a figure of speech. I stayed two months in my tent and ate with the Tates" (30). Under Tate's influence Lowell continued writing poetry and contemplating its practice while also sharing his work and spending time with important literary figures, such as Ford Maddox Ford, who passed through the Tate home. He left their yard to begin study at Kenyon in fall 1937. While there he befriended RANDALL JARRELL and Peter Taylor, both of whom went on to have successful writing careers. By 1940 he had graduated summa cum laude with a degree in classics and decided to marry the writer Jean Stafford.

That same year Lowell moved to Baton Rouge to continue his studies with the critic Cleanth Brooks and the author ROBERT PENN WARREN at Louisiana State University. There his training focused more directly on English. The time Lowell spent in the South helped him get through a difficult period in his life and have a successful university career. More than that, though, it shaped him as a writer and a thinker, giving him a new framework within which he could explore his early poetic sensibilities. Although New Criticism had not yet become an institutionalized literary movement or theory, all of Lowell's mentors—Tate, Ransom, Warren, and Brooks—were among its foundational members and earliest proponents. Their interest in poetic form,

tradition, and the text as an autonomous object of art influenced his first years of writing poetry. In those years he also eschewed his Protestant heritage and converted to Roman Catholicism, which seemed to him much more sincere and authentic. Having struck his father, left Harvard, moved to the South, and finally rejected Protestantism, Lowell estranged himself from his family.

He continued to separate himself when he refused military induction in 1943. When the United States joined War World II in 1941, Lowell volunteered his service but was turned down because of his poor eyesight. By the time he received a conscription notice in 1943 he could no longer justify the nation's war efforts, having learned of innocent Germans firebombed in Dresden. He declared himself a conscientious objector and, as a result, served five months in prison at the West Street Detention Center in New York and the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut. He completed the sentence doing community service in Black Rock, Connecticut. His time in jail provided the material for his poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke," while his community service time gave him an opportunity to finish work on his first book, *Land of Unlikeness*, which was published in 1944.

Despite Allen Tate's generous introduction, *Land of Unlikeness* received no notable critical acclaim. Lowell spent the next two years living in Maine, working on revisions of many of the poems included in his first effort. His work during that time produced a second body of new poetry that included several poems from the first collection. Lowell took the title for his second book from the violent old Scottish ballad "Lambkin" and published the collection in 1946. *Lord Weary's Castle* attracted much more attention than *Land of Unlikeness*, earned Lowell a Pulitzer Prize, and secured his place among important young writers emerging in the middle of the 20th century. Each poem in the book makes use of a formal pattern, whether of the poet's own creation or borrowed from some other poet and adapted to the specific circumstances. The work as a whole marks an important beginning for Lowell, who was struggling with his

new Catholic faith against the background of his Protestant history. Furthermore, his use of more traditional, formal poetic structures marks a turn away from the free-verse experimentalism ushered in by modernist poets such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and E.E. Cummings.

In the five years between *Lord Weary's Castle* and his third book, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), Lowell's life underwent a number of drastic changes. He and Jean Stafford separated, and he left the Catholic Church, moved to New York, befriended William Carlos Williams, spent time in a psychiatric hospital, married the writer Elizabeth Hardwick, lost his father, and moved to Europe. The poetry he wrote during those years, however, remained very similar to what he had published in his first two books. In the years following publication of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, however, Lowell began teaching a younger generation of poets and, at the suggestion of psychiatrists, began writing about his childhood. After years of intense self-reflection along with the influence of Williams's more colloquial poetry, Lowell started to work on much looser verse. He published his groundbreaking collection *Life Studies*, which explored the relationship between his own psyche and his surroundings, in 1959. While some of his longtime endorsers, such as Tate, disliked his new style of writing, many consider it as an important development in American poetry, on par with T. S. Eliot's publication of *The Waste Land* (1922). His personal and largely autobiographical poems quickly became the foundation for an entire movement of American verse, earning him the somewhat bombastic title "Father of Confessional Poetry."

The year after publishing *Life Studies*, Lowell read his famous poem "For the Union Dead" at the Boston Arts Festival, for which he wrote it. "For the Union Dead," which later became the title poem for his 1964 collection, exhibits Lowell's more politically conscious side as an artist. Despite his tumultuous personal life, marred by mental and emotional illness as well as continuous difficulty in marriage, he managed to live a rather public life. In 1965 he declined President Johnson's invitation to the White House Arts Festival because of his oppo-

sition to the Vietnam War. He wrote in a letter to the president, "I thought of such an occasion as a purely artistic flourish, even though every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments" (*New York Times*, June 3, 1965, p. 2). In 1967 he joined Norman Mailer, DENISE LEVERTOV, ALLEN GINSBERG, and many others in the march on the Pentagon, to protest the Vietnam War once again.

In addition to capturing his political discontent, "For the Union Dead" stands at the pinnacle of Lowell's career as perhaps the most successful of his poems to blend personal and public history. After divorcing Elizabeth Hardwick and marrying Caroline Blackwood in 1972, he released three books at the same time, all of which were based on the earlier collection *Notebook* (1969). *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* present a vast collection of poems based on the sonnet—most composed of 14 lines using roughly iambic pentameter, but few of them rhymed—that document his reactions to contemporary events and his musings on American history intertwined with details about his ancestral history and the difficulties of his personal life. His efforts to fuse the personal and the public in *The Dolphin* earned him another Pulitzer Prize. Many critics, however, argue that the length of the three books, their adherence to the sonnet form, and the overly personal details create a mediocre version of what he accomplished in his early collections.

Despite criticisms of some of those later works, Lowell continues to be remembered as one of America's most important postwar poets. While writing he also taught at a number of prominent American schools, including Harvard University, the Kenyon School of Letters, and Boston University. His students included ANNE SEXTON, SYLVIA PLATH, and W. D. Snodgrass, all of whom carried Lowell's influence into their most important works. During his career he published translations of poetry, translations of plays, his own plays, prose, and a prolific body of poetry that situates the author within personal and public experience that spans the entirety of Anglo-American history. For all his literary successes, however, he never found complete fulfillment in his personal life. In 1977

he left Caroline Blackwood in England to return to his former wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. He suffered a heart attack and died during the cab ride from the airport to her home in Manhattan. *Day by Day*, Lowell's last collection of original poetry, was published the same year.

“Colloquy in Black Rock” (1946)

Lowell wrote “Colloquy in Black Rock” while living in Black Rock, Connecticut, completing his parole as a conscientious objector. He was sentenced to “A year and a day,” as he writes in the third stanza, for refusing to take part in World War II, which he considered an immoral war because of the number of civilian deaths resulting from American bombing. He worked there in a Catholic nurses' dormitory as a janitor. According to Lowell, he had not written anything for a year when he sat down to write “Colloquy.” The poem was written at a point in Lowell's life when he was struggling with his rejection of the Protestant faith. He had converted to Catholicism, and the poem draws much of its imagery and symbolic content from Catholic tradition. As much of Lowell's poetry does, “Colloquy” combines his personal experiences with a broader social context of historical and political attitudes.

On one level the poem depicts the town of Black Rock, and its mudflats, Black Mud, both of which are located just south of Bridgeport, Connecticut. It includes mention of the “Hungarian workmen” who composed a large segment of Bridgeport's population, working at the town's helicopter factory and attending St. Stephen's Catholic Church. “Colloquy” goes on to connect the community's name to its physical characteristics: “Black Mud: a name to conjure with: O mud / For watermelons gutted to the crust, / Mud for the mole-tide harbor, for the mouse, / Mud for the armored Diesel fishing tubs that thud” (11). By repeating the word *mud* within the string of associational descriptions Lowell consolidates his vocabulary to one main descriptor. He presents a

dense image of the town itself concurrent with his experience of it.

More than just the poem's most prominent image, mud also serves as a unifying symbol that ties together the religious and psychological content. The first four stanzas present a dark vision of the dirty industrial city, where “the jack-hammer jabs into the ocean” and “All discussions / End in the mud-flat detritus of death” (11). Through Lowell's perception, mud represents the violence of life. In the first and third stanzas that violence tends toward descriptive expression, reflecting on the author's psyche. The second and fourth stanzas, however, introduce religious imagery by mentioning the martyr Stephen, with a particular focus on death, blood, and, of course, mud.

The final stanza extends the religious content to include another martyr, Jesus Christ. Unlike St. Stephen, Christ does not die in the mud but rather walks on top of “the black water” (11). Here Lowell is alluding to a Bible verse, John 6:19, in which Jesus walks across the turbulent sea to meet the disciples and then calms the waters after they take him into his boat. The kingfisher, fabled to have calming powers over wind and waves, connects Jesus to the transformative act of the last lines. By escaping life's mud, the bird reasserts the sacrificial image of blood and cleanses the heart with fire.

Trying to tie the poem's symbolic meanings back into Lowell's biography presents some difficulties. Can we say that he sees himself as a martyr suffering for his conscientious objection to war? Is “Colloquy” a prayer for redemption from the sins, or mud, of this world? Regardless of what we decide about Lowell's place in the poem, it presents a sense of hope that many critics refuse to allow the poet. Through his poetry, though, Lowell reveals himself as a complex character, in both hope and despair.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the first stanza of “Colloquy in Black Rock” Lowell uses the racialized term *nigger-brass percussions*. The description derives its denotative meaning from derogatory remarks about

black music in the first half of the 20th century. Jazz bands in New Orleans, for example, were often called “nigger brass” and regarded by genteel folks as culturally and physically dangerous. What additional meanings does the word assume when used in the context of “Colloquy,” a poem that uses blackness as both a descriptive adjective and a proper noun? What does the poem say, or not say, about race? Expand your discussion by comparing the role of race in “Colloquy” to the role of race in “For the Union Dead.”

2. A *colloquy* is a formal discussion or a written dialogue and implies the presence of more than one voice. Considering the poem’s structure, syntax, and diction, does anything about “Colloquy in Black Rock” suggest a conversation? How does the claim “All discussions / End in the mud-flat detritus of death” change your understanding of the title’s overall significance to the poem’s meaning?

“Mr. Edwards and the Spider” (1946)

Published in *Lord Weary’s Castle*, “Mr. Edwards and the Spider” incorporates passages from three different texts by the Protestant preacher Jonathan Edwards. Associated with early American Puritanism, Edwards’s writings defend Calvinism and epitomize the fire-and-brimstone approach to preaching. He generally articulated a pessimistic view on the state of humanity, often attempting to strike fear into the hearts of his congregation by telling of an all-powerful God who held modern people in contempt. That position developed from one of Calvinism’s five main tenets, which holds that God’s grace alone saves an individual and that there is nothing anyone can do to save himself or herself.

Considering the poem’s context within *Lord Weary’s Castle*, most critics read “Mr. Edwards and the Spider” as a resolute condemnation of Edwards and his theology, meant to portray him as treacherous and angry. Although not entirely unfounded,

such one-sided readings fail to recognize the complexity of the source material and ignore Lowell’s relationship to it. The poem presents Edwards’s voice in the first person, allowing us to encounter the preacher directly and encouraging us to note the rhetoric. If they prove anything about him, Edwards’s dramatic sermons attest to his skill as a master rhetorician. Lowell preserves the original language used in the three essays he draws from as faithfully as possible, managing to fit it within the poem’s strict structure.

The first stanza summarizes a passage from the essay “Of Insects,” which Edwards wrote at age 11. Notice the awe-inspired image of “spiders marching through the air,” which Lowell takes directly from the essay (59). The first lines of “Mr. Edwards and the Spider” highlight Edwards’s fascination with nature and the simple wonders of the world. Although the second half of the stanza begins to reveal a fascination with death, our initial impression of Edwards gives his character humanity.

By the third stanza, however, Edwards’s mild preoccupation with powerlessness in the face of destruction becomes much more morbid. Borrowed from the essay “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” we read: “It’s well / If God who holds you to the pit of hell / Much as one holds a spider, will destroy / Baffle and dissipate your soul” (59). It is difficult to understand circumstances under which it is good that God might destroy a human soul. Lowell manifests his unspoken criticisms by displaying Edwards’s violent fanaticism.

The last stanza, though, connects Lowell to the poem’s content and makes clear his ambivalence toward both Edwards and the Protestant faith he represents. When we read the name *Josiah Hawley*, we realize that the entire fiery monologue is directed at an individual: The poem admonishes the soul of Edwards’s uncle because he committed suicide, which introduces Lowell into the poem by way of his own well-documented bouts of mental illness and depression. The poet endures most of the preacher’s Protestant-informed warning against impropriety through depression. In this case, though, Lowell is both the victim and the product

of Edwards's moralizing by virtue of his cultural and religious background. This complex portrait of an important Puritan figure, then, explores the different, and sometimes conflicted, aspects of Lowell's identity. Far from simple, the poem actually moderates some of the "fire breathing" Catholicism present elsewhere in his poetry.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Lowell structured "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" using John Donne's "A Nocturnal on St. Lucy's Day" as a model. Although the content of the poems differ drastically, Lowell made a conscious decision in choosing the stanzas' pattern and rhyme scheme. Read each and compare the use of indentation, line break, rhyme, and meter. How does the structure of "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" take on meaning in the poem?
2. The three Edwards essays Lowell uses to compose "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" deal with themes that run throughout *Lord Weary's Castle*, and yet Lowell is not wholly sympathetic to Edwards's ideas about despair, eternity, suicide, and living in the presence of a great God. Read "Of Insects" "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and "The Future Punishment of the Wicked." How do the two authors approach the same subjects in different ways? Discuss different points of departure.
3. "After the Surprising Conversions" directly follows "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" in *Lord Weary's Castle*, and they are often read in conjunction. "After the Surprising Conversions" also draws upon a Jonathan Edwards letter known as "Narrative of Surprising Conversions" as its main source of content. Read both and discuss differences and similarities, focusing on tone and diction.
4. The final lines of "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" tell what death is: "To die and know it. This is the Black Widow, death" (60). Consider those last lines in relation to the rest of the poem. Do they finalize what has already been said in the poem? Why does Lowell only name a specific spider at the end? What does his description of death mean to you?

"The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (1946)

Dedicated to his cousin Warren Winslow, who died while serving in World War II, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" first appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1945. It was later revised and collected in *Lord Weary's Castle* with additional passages not originally published. Structured in seven parts, with various rhyme schemes, the poem exhibits Lowell's early preoccupation with formalism and the aural qualities of his poetry. It also demonstrates his tendency to pull together literary, biblical, classical, historical, and biographical allusions into one complicated arrangement. Allusion in poetry functions by indirectly referencing another work and thereby incorporating already established symbolic meaning. Many critics argue that "Graveyard" exemplifies Lowell's ability to cultivate powerful symbolism by alluding to the long tradition within which he writes. Others, however, argue that the barrage of references convolutes the meaning and detracts from the poem's overall success.

Whether successful or not, the poem certainly demands that the reader have a lot of prior knowledge in order to attempt to understand even its most basic meanings. It helps to know, for instance, that Ahab is in Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* (1851) and is captain of a ship named the *Pequod*. Ahab hunts Moby Dick, the mythical white sperm whale, for revenge but eventually drowns trying to kill him. Lowell associates this character with America's fanatical idealism. In an interview he explained, "I always think there are two great symbolic figures that stand behind American ambition and culture. One is [John] Milton's Lucifer and the other is Captain Ahab: these two sublime ambitions that are doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence" (Meyers 105). "Graveyard" includes numerous mentions of Ahab's enemy, the white whale, but they do not establish a clear significance. He appears alternately as the "hurt beast" and the "whited monster," embodying contradictory personae that resist interpretation with a single symbolic value.

The sea—actually the Atlantic Ocean—takes on similarly complicated and contradictory meanings in the poem. Toward the end of the first section, Lowell writes, “When you are powerless / To sandbag this Atlantic bulwark, faced / By the earth-shaker” (14). The “earth-shaker” refers to Poseidon, the Greek god of the seas and earthquakes, and suggests a violent and defensive sea. In that sense we can understand Moby Dick, the whale, as being an agent of the sea’s anger, or an instrument of God. There are also several references throughout the poem to leviathans, which in the Bible is a scaly sea monster. In the more secular usage, though, the word *leviathan* refers to large creatures and has been used to describe both whales and ships. The different denotations complicate Lowell’s meaning, of course, as the reader attempts to parse out the relationships among the sea, the seagoers, and the sea creatures.

The sea’s changing demeanor makes it difficult to settle on any absolute understanding. In the first section we find an unforgiving and powerful sea. In the second we see an image of the sea as vulnerable as the Quakers it kills: “The wind’s wings beat upon the stones, / Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush / At the sea’s throat and wring it in the slush” (15). Finally, at the end of the poem we learn that the Atlantic is “fouled” by people, monsters, and fishes, suggesting that it once had a purity found in none of the others.

The poem fails to attach particular values to its many images and allusions. That failure, though, allows Lowell to convey the difficulty of working within such a large and violent tradition. “Graveyard” takes on symbolism as a sinking ship takes on water. By becoming inundated it demonstrates the hardship of relating to a tradition that presents contradictions and confusions. Under Lowell’s control, however, the rhythmic structures and imagery retain clarity and make reading the poem an engaging experience. The final passage, for instance, suggests resolution through a careful shift in tone. The last line, however, has sparked a deluge of critical curiosity and speculation denying us a resolution and instead forcing us to reconsider the poem at every turn.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The first half of the first stanza borrows imagery from the first chapter of Henry David Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* (1865). Lowell’s later poem “The Dolphin” repeats the imagery of drowning entangled by knots. Read each of the examples and discuss how the same image can be used to create different meanings. Pay particular attention to tone and structuring technique.
2. In the third section, the initials *IS* appear to describe “the whited monster.” The whited monster probably is Moby Dick, the sperm whale, while *IS* may be less certain. The first printings of the poem read, “Of is, the swashing castle.” Some say the edit introduced a typo into the text, while others believe that *IS* references *Iesus Salvator*, Latin for “Jesus the Savior.” If *IS* signifies Jesus Christ, then Lowell invites the reader to associate Moby Dick with the Son of God. What implications would that understanding have for the rest of the poem?
3. The sixth section of “Graveyard” breaks sharply from the New England scene to describe the Carmelite Monastery of Walsingham, in Norfolk, England, which was a popular shrine to Mary before being destroyed in 1538. How does this section relate to the rest of the poem? What does Lowell accomplish by including it? Feel free to conduct additional research on the monastery, Catholicism, or Lowell to include in your response.

“Memories of West Street and Lepke” (1959)

First collected in *Life Studies*, “Memories of West Street and Lepke” documents the 10 days Lowell spent in the West Street, New York City, jail for being a conscientious objector. As do “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” and many other poems in this groundbreaking book, the poem employs a much more conversational diction than his early poetry. Unlike “My Last Afternoon,” however, this poem retains some of the traditional poetic characteristics that defined his early work.

For instance, Lowell rhymes much of “Memories of West Street and Lepke.” In the first stanza we see “book-worming / each morning,” “man / cans / Republican,” and “daughter / granddaughter / infant’s wear.” By varying the rhythm and tightness of rhyme, however, the structure resists a particular scheme or pattern. Lowell builds a very subtle aural relationship between the lines that differs aesthetically from both his very traditional mode of writing and his strictly free-verse mode.

Lowell uses the more moderate style to explore the extremes of his political position within a rapidly changing society. The poem begins by making several observations about his personal living situation and the general 1950s cultural scenario. The first three lines describe the author as a domesticated professor tucked away in his large, mundane house. The quote about Marlborough Street hints at Lowell’s discontent with his dispassionate environment. The following lines make that discontent more explicit by satirically commenting upon the homogeneity of his upper-middle-class neighborhood. After establishing himself as a professor, father, and rich white man—ostensible aspects of institutionalized America—Lowell launches into a recollection of his “seedtime” during the 1940s.

As a “fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,” Lowell spent time in jail, where the population seemed much more dangerous and diverse than his “Young Republican” neighbors. He tells of a “Negro boy,” a vegetarian, a Jehovah’s Witness, two “Hollywood pimps” (actually extortionists), and Louis “Lepke” Buchalter, head of a band of murderers for hire nicknamed *Murder Incorporated*. The subtly humorous description of jail adds a tone of levity to the poem, even endearing some of the prisoners to the reader. The final image, however, uses that sympathy for Lepke to take the tone down to a more serious level. We see him concentrating on his demise, the electric chair, before Lowell finishes the poem with two abstract and inexplicable lines: “hanging like an oasis in his air / of lost connections. . . .” (ellipses Lowell’s 188).

Many critics assess the poem as ultimately pessimistic on the basis of those final lines. We could read the image of Lowell’s young, brightly clothed

daughter as a hopeful symbol of the future, but even he, old enough to be her grandfather, suggests wasted years of misdirection. With that in mind, the final two lines connect Lepke to Lowell through the experience of “lost connections.” We see in “Memories of West Street and Lepke” the poet looking back over the past two decades of his life and reevaluating his political, social, and artistic positions. Rather than offer us a wholly optimistic or pessimistic perspective, Lowell attempts to reconcile contradictory aspects of his life by connecting them in his writing.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In “Colloquy in Black Rock” Lowell uses the racialized phrase “nigger-brass percussions” (11). “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” written about 10 years later during an era of heightened racial awareness, includes an updated phrase, “Negro boy.” Despite the change in terminology, how do the two poems signal and use race in a similar way? Does the more politically correct use of *Negro* lessen the political repercussions of Lowell’s depiction of race?
2. In the second stanza Lowell asks, “Ought I to regret my seedtime?” (187). The suggestion that he might regret the idealism of his youth seems peculiar in a poem so critical of the tranquillity of his middle age. What else might Lowell mean by the word *regret*? In your own words, what does the question ask?
3. Lowell greatly admired Ezra Pound’s poetry and helped award him the Bolligen Prize. He mentioned several times that he particularly liked Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* (1948), which discuss Pound’s time incarcerated. Read the *Pisan Cantos* and the way Pound and Lowell treat the experience of imprisonment.

“My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” (1959)

Lowell rewrote sections of “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” several times and published part 3 in *Botteghe Oscure* before collect-

ing the poem as a whole in his most famous book, *Life Studies*. *Life Studies* was published in 1959, eight years after *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, and marked a great redirection in Lowell's writing. In the wake of several emotional and mental breakdowns, he sought psychological treatment, which led him to write about his childhood. The frankly personal prose he produced became the source of many of the poems included in *Life Studies*, particularly in the fourth section of the book. "My Last Afternoon" is the first poem in that section.

Unlike the formal verse of *Lord Weary's Castle* or the epic monologues of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, *Life Studies* includes free-verse poems that detail the specificities of Lowell's life and disclose the troubled state of his mind. Part I exemplifies the more relaxed tone of Lowell's so-called confessional poetry: "One afternoon in 1922, / I sat on the stone porch, looking through / screens as black-grained as drifting coal" (163). The natural voice, although divided into lines, reads as prose. Indeed, much of the poem was derived from Lowell's autobiographical notes, and, taking a cue from William Carlos Williams, he tried to achieve "a tone that sounded a little like conversation" (Axelrod, *Life and Art* 95).

Some critics have lambasted *Life Studies* in general and "My Last Afternoon" in particular for the loss of the intensity found in Lowell's earlier works. While they tend to make concessions for certain poems—such as "Skunk Hour"—the common argument runs that the work relaxes to the point of becoming slack. One particularly critical writer, William Bedford, claims:

Not only does there appear to be no poetic logic behind the choice of line lengths, or behind the random selection of detail . . . not only does the technique fail utterly to generate any sense of moral urgency or significance; but the very flatness of the language leaves one with a strong suspicion that Lowell has merely sought to make verses out of his prose material simply in order to have sufficient poems to fill a volume. (*Mosaic* 19, no. 4 [Fall 1986]: 121–132)

Despite such assessments, however, "My Last Afternoon" does retain distinctly poetic attributes. Part 3, for instance, demonstrates concision, introduces strong images, and makes subtle use of slant rhyme.

On the whole, "My Last Afternoon" signals a simpler and more understated poetic voice for Lowell, while the content continues to involve complex subjects. The plain language renders difficult pictures of failed commitments, family tensions, and chronic illness, all seen in relation to Lowell as a five-and-a-half-year-old. The language may lack a certain dramatic pitch that Lowell is capable of, but its naked honesty reveals the intensity of his familial history and his psychological state by giving readers the raw material that always seemed in his life to be "troubling the waters" (165).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Lowell writes "My Last Afternoon" as an adult remembering his childhood. The poem, however, includes the child's sensibilities and perspectives by describing the world as he saw it at age five. Locate parts of the poem where Lowell switches or mixes the perspectives. How does he navigate to the consciousnesses to create a sense of irony in the poem? How does that irony relate to the poem's overall tone?
2. An image of young Lowell playing in the dirt recurs several times throughout the poem. He writes in part 1, "One of my hands was cool on a pile / of black earth, the other warm / on a pile of lime," setting the two substances apart as opposites (163). The final lines in "My Last Afternoon" set the two values apart again and then say "Come winter, / Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color" (167). What might Lowell mean by "one color"? If we take the soil and lime as symbols of opposite value, what meaning might their blending hold for the other symbolic images in the poem?
3. In part 4 of "My Last Afternoon," Lowell calls himself Agrippina, sister of the Roman emperor Caligula and mother of Nero. Apparently Lowell's uncle read him stories about Nero's kingdom. Agrippina, interestingly, had many elicit

and taboo sexual relationships, including open participation in Caligula's court, marriage to her uncle, and incestuous encounters with her son. Nero eventually banished her from the kingdom. What then does this metaphor about Lowell's identity suggest about his childhood and his familial relationships?

“Skunk Hour” (1959)

Perhaps Lowell's best-known poem, “Skunk Hour” is the last poem in the seminal book *Life Studies*. At the end of a very personal book filled with informal diction, “Skunk Hour” leaves the reader with a description of the decaying New England town of Castine. The short lines, irregular rhymes, and careful use of sound and rhythm in “Skunk Hour” suggest an element of control that most of the poems in *Life Studies* lack. Also, the emphasis on imagery and description rather than autobiographic disclosure broadens the scope of the poem's implications, removing it from a purely confessional context. Despite the limited authorial presence, however, “Skunk Hour” remains one of Lowell's most personal and revealing poems.

What exactly the poem reveals is, of course, subject to critical debate. The most significant point of contention falls on the final image of the skunks waddling through town. In a letter to John Berryman, Lowell wrote that the skunks “are horrible blind energy.” Many people read them along those lines as the literal stench of a decomposing society. This interpretation figures the skunks as the remaining life source in a dead environment, scavenging for human waste. Others, however, see the skunks as a cheerful image. Rather than seeing a hopeless situation deteriorating to animal instincts, critics such as Charles Altieri and James E. B. Breslin argue that the skunks suggest an opportunity to refigure religious fanaticism as secular ritual. The reformation, while not completely freeing, does allow the poem's speaker, presumably Lowell, to stand back at the end of the scene to “breathe the rich air” (192).

While differing on the final implications of “Skunk Hour,” both sides of the debate acknowledge the general malaise of the poem's initial observations. The heiress is in her dotage, buying up property and letting it fall apart. The summer millionaire auctioned off his yawl and left town. And the token gay decorator uses tools of the town's once-prosperous industry as ornamentation. Despite the tone of understated humor, Lowell describes the collapse of a social structure.

The critic Paul Breslin, however, points out that the severity of the problems wanes when compared to most other destitute populations in the country: “The sinister language of illness (‘the season's ill’) and contamination (‘A red fox stain covers Blue Hill’) does not rest on a convincing portrayal of anything sinister in the environment; it is only intelligible as the projection of the poet's internal sense of foreboding” (69). Although limited, the use of personal pronouns gives “Skunk Hour” its intimacy. When Lowell writes “My mind's not right,” he conditions all of the previous observations as based upon his questionable perspective (191). In that sense, the social deterioration described in “Skunk Hour” dramatizes the tensions of Lowell's psychological state. Within the context of a mind that quotes Satan from John Milton's 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost* (“I myself am hell”), we begin to see the extent of Lowell's anxious relationship with the world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Lowell dedicates “Skunk Hour” to his friend and fellow poet ELIZABETH BISHOP. Read Bishop's poem “The Armadillo” and compare her use of the personal pronoun *I* to Lowell's. How does the authorial presence differ in each of the poems? Also, consider the presence of animals at the end of each poem and how the authors related differently to those animals.
2. The fourth stanza of “Skunk Hour” introduces a gay character whom Lowell chooses to describe as “our fairy / decorator” who would rather marry than find lucrative work. What does the character add to Lowell's description of the traditional New England town? How does the dec-

orator's profession factor into the town's general economic situation? And how does Lowell's use of the word *our* position the decorator in relation to the rest of the town's population?

3. Lowell ends "Skunk Hour" by stating that the mother skunk "will not scare" (192). Of what might the skunk be scared? What does its persistence determine about the skunks' place within the town's social structure?

"For the Union Dead" (1960)

Asked to write a poem for the Boston Arts Festival, Lowell produced "For the Union Dead." He read it at the festival in 1960 under the title "Colonel Shaw and the Massachusetts' 54th," included it in the first paperback edition of *Life Studies*, and then changed the title to "For the Union Dead" before publishing it in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1960 and collecting it in the 1964 book of the same title. As Lowell explained before reading it at the festival, the poem "is about childhood memories, the evisceration of our modern cities, civil rights, nuclear warfare and more particularly, Colonel Robert Shaw and his Negro regiment, the Massachusetts 54th" (Doreski 109). Through the image of "St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief," a monument memorializing the 54th infantry, Lowell works outward to touch on Boston's social history in regard to its changing cultural values.

Some historical context helps bring out the poem's significant political implications. After President Abraham Lincoln decided in 1863 to admit black soldiers into the Union Army, the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry became the first black regiment recruited in the North. Colonel Shaw, a white abolitionist from Boston, volunteered to command the unit. Under his leadership the 54th unsuccessfully attacked Fort Wagner in South Carolina. More than 250 of their soldiers died, including Shaw, but the North used the heroic story to encourage blacks to join Union forces. In 1897 Boston commemorated the event with a bronze bas-relief monument by Augustus Saint-Gauden, which

included a quote from James Russell Lowell's poem "Memoriae Positum R.G.S."

Although not always an outspoken critic of racism, Lowell did make public comments about the importance of resolving racial conflict by ending systematic oppression. The epigraph to "For the Union Dead," in fact, rewrites an inscription on the statue that translated means "he leaves all behind to protect the state." Lowell's version reads, "they leave. . .," thereby honoring the sacrifice each member of the infantry made. The poem itself does not serve as a corrective to the social ills Lowell points out but rather serves as an indictment. By describing Boston's fallen monuments—the dilapidated aquarium, the girdled statehouse, the splinted Civil War statue—Lowell accuses his home city of failing to remember and honor its noble public history.

Unlike much of his earlier poetry, "For the Union Dead" looks to the city's Brahmin past as an ethical model for its future. "Their monument sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat," reminding everyone that we must remember the causes for which the 54th Infantry fought and died. The scope of the poem reaches from the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement, making the point that institutionalized racism still exists in America and in Boston. Lowell writes, "When I crouch to my television set, / the drained faces of Negro schoolchildren rise like balloons" (377). That image of rising balloons harks back to "the bubbles / drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish" in the second stanza and the "bell-checked Negro infantry" in the sixth stanza. Not only does it draw a correlation between the schoolchildren and the captive fish, but it implicates Lowell in the white racism of American culture as well, by showing the similarly voyeuristic relationship he has to both fish and civil rights activists. His self-awareness shows a realization that even as a critic he is caught up in the "savage servility" that he denounces (378).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Lowell's mentor Allen Tate wrote "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in 1928. His agrarian poem presents the dilemma of a man standing

at the gate of a Confederate graveyard. While he understands the impossibility of returning to the grandeur of a pre-Civil War South, he feels lost in the desolate present. Read both "Ode to the Confederate Dead" and "For the Union Dead" and discuss their similarities and differences. How does Lowell's recontextualization of Tate's theme produce new and different meanings?

2. In the epigraph Lowell makes a point of honoring all the men who served in the 54th Infantry. The poem proper, though, seems to give particular focus to Colonel Shaw himself, fleshing out the historical figure with descriptions of both his physical appearance and his character. What sort of historical realities might prevent Lowell from exploring the character of a specific black soldier? Does Lowell unduly glorify Shaw at the expense of the other soldiers by not addressing those realities?
3. The critic Paul Doherty points out a number of historical inaccuracies in "For the Union Dead." For instance, he mentions that Lowell seems to attribute the use of the word *niggers* to Shaw's father, when in fact, it was a Confederate officer who used the word to describe where Shaw was buried. Doherty, though, argues that Lowell achieves an ethical truth, even if specific facts mislead the reader. Do you think that an ethical truth is possible if an author does not take care to present information as accurately as possible? Outline what you understand the poem's intent to be and formulate an argument to defend your position on the importance of historical accuracy in "For the Union Dead."
4. In stanzas 14 and 15, Lowell mentions an advertisement for Mosler Safes that uses an image of Hiroshima. Apparently one of their safes survived the atomic explosion, a fact that Lowell does not believe justifies a commercial image of Hiroshima being bombed. Find an advertisement that somehow incorporates a political or historical event. What are the ad's political implications? Citing specific examples from the poem, explain how the ad you found does or does not relate to Lowell's critical depiction of a

society overrun by commercial incentive in "For the Union Dead."

"Night Sweat" (1963)

First published in the *Encounter* in 1963, then a second time in the *Kenyon Review* in 1964, "Night Sweat" was collected in Lowell's 1964 book *For the Union Dead*, with slight revisions. After the drastic aesthetic changes that his poetry underwent in the 1950s, which culminated in the informal confessions of *Life Studies*, Lowell seems to have drifted back toward the traditionalism of his earlier writing without ever reverting to the careful hyperbole of *Lord Weary's Castle*. Instead, *For the Union Dead* captures some of the drama of his early poems through the use of more idiomatic American diction. "Night Sweat" in particular demonstrates Lowell's ability to rejuvenate old poetic forms with vibrant language.

He divides the poem in two halves, each one a sonnet. We see in the first half a nighttime scene that dramatizes the pain of living and writing. The author depicts himself in the throes of a nightmare, a panic attack, or an equally terrifying experience. The poem does not explicitly say what accosts the speaker, but the language used to describe the night sweat suggests despair and agitation. We learn that the experience recurs frequently: "for ten nights now I've felt the creeping damp" (375). The calm phrasing of the line—with its colloquial "now I've"—gives a sense of resignation, while the phrase "creeping damp" adds a frightening dimension to the poem's tone.

The second stanza moves from the dark of night into the light of day. Lowell writes, "I feel the light lighten my leaded eyelids" as he awakes into a world considerably less painful than the experience described in the first stanza. Instead of living and writing alone, with the "bias of existing" wringing him dry, he encounters an Other. The "You!" of the first line, we discover in the eighth, is his wife, whose "lightness alters everything" (375). We can infer that part of his misery in the first half of the poem stems from the difficulties of marriage.

The problems of the first stanza regarding his inability to write outside himself arise again in the second. The poem ends with an act of supplication. He begs, “if I cannot clear / the surface of these troubled waters here, / absolve me, help me, Dear Heart” (375). Clearing the surface of troubled waters metaphorically addresses Lowell’s attempt to communicate with another person. In many of his poems on marriage we see only sadness. “Night Sweat,” with its dual sonnets, provides a balance unlike poems such as “Man and Wife” or “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage.” Rather than acquiescing to depression, he tries to understand it as a process of failed communication. In the end, though, he fails to accept responsibility, expecting, instead, that his wife will forgive him while also “bearing this world’s dead weight and cycle on [her] back” (375).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Lowell’s later book *The Dolphin* is composed completely of sonnets, many of which deal with his last two marriages. Pick any poem from the collection and discuss its use of form and content as compared to “Night Sweat.” Do the poems use the same form to address similar feelings? If not, why use the same form?
2. In 1961 Lowell praised a poem by Yves Winters called “The Marriage.” The line in “Night Sweat” that mentions the urn alludes to Winters’s poem. Read both and discuss the difference. How does Lowell recontextualize the urn image to make it his own?

“For Theodore Roethke” (1967)

Originally collected in *Near the Ocean*, “For Theodore Roethke” also appeared in Lowell’s later book, *History*, under the title “Theodore Roethke 1908–63.” Although the two versions differ in significant ways, they remain closely related, not only through subject and general intent to honor a fellow poet, but also in the reuse of many of the same phrasings and images. The first version consists of four unrhymed stanzas, each four lines

long. The second, like all the poems in *History*, is an unrhymed sonnet. Aside from the structure, the first three lines of the second version present the most drastic change. Rather than opening with an account of the speaker’s psyche, it opens with a recollection of THEODORE ROETHKE’s time at Yaddo, an estate in Saratoga Springs, New York, that offers residencies to artists. Lowell writes directly to Roethke, “you shared a bathroom with a bag / tree-painter whose boobs bounced in the basin, / your blues basin where you wished to plunge your head. . . .” (*ellipsis Lowell’s* 533).

By including the personal information about Roethke, whether accurate or not, Lowell explicitly introduces his fellow poet’s struggle with mental illness and depression. As did Lowell, Roethke suffered several bouts of severe mental instability, resulting in repeated hospitalization and psychiatric treatment. *History* deals at length with Lowell’s personal life, including his psychological struggles. Any reader who reads as far as “Theodore Roethke 1908–63” in the collection, or any reader who has even basic knowledge of Lowell’s biography, will grasp the personal connection that he draws between himself and Roethke. The similarities between the authors abound, and others have drawn similar connections before. They were close in age, dealt with similar issues in their lives, included many of those issues in their poetry, and struggled to find a poetic form between the strict meter and rhyme of formalism and the looser forms of more contemporary free verse.

Lowell wrote his homage to Roethke after Roethke’s premature death in 1963. Unexpectedly suffering a heart attack upon diving into a friend’s pool, he drowned. He was only 55 years old when he died and at the height of his powers as a poet. The suddenness of his death prompted a number of tributes, honoring the poet for his knowledge of and attention to nature, for his skill in using rhyme and meter, and for his skill in representing truths through the subjective nature of individual experience. Interestingly, Lowell’s tribute reads as not quite in praise of Roethke. Clearly Lowell respected Roethke, as the third stanza evidences: “The black stump of your hand / just touched the waters

under the earth, / and left them quickened with your name . . ." (*ellipsis Lowell's* 396). The second stanza, however, describes Roethke in less pleasant terms: "Sheeplike, unsociable reptilian." Lowell, so often open about his own life's inadequacies, does not romanticize Roethke's. Instead, his tribute pays homage to the poet by addressing Roethke's life as accurately as he can envision it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Lowell wrote a number of poems named after poet friends of his for *History*. Read the poems on Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, or any of his other contemporaries. How does he treat them in comparison to Theodore Roethke? Do they seem to be friends, colleagues, historical figures, or all three? Why might Lowell take other literary figures so seriously when thinking about and practicing his own writing?
2. Read several Roethke poems from different periods in his career. Start with selections from his first book, *Open House* (1941), followed by something from *The Waking* (1953), and, finally, read selections of his posthumously published *The Far Field* (1964). How does his style change over the course of his career? Do his aesthetic reconsiderations relate in any way to Lowell's?
3. Read both versions of "For Theodore Roethke (1908–63)." Citing specific examples, make an argument for which has greater success in addressing the particularities of Roethke's life. Which works better as a poem? Include in your argument a discussion of structure, line length, diction, and imagery.

"Near the Ocean" (1967)

Published in 1967, *Near the Ocean* was written at the height of Lowell's political activism. In 1965 he refused to attend the White House Festival of the Arts, to which President Lyndon B. Johnson had invited him. The public protest against U.S. involvement in Vietnam earned Lowell more attention than did most of his writing career. In the

wake of the publicity, he felt the need to write a more public form of poetry in order to address the issues he suddenly found himself discussing. To do that, Lowell returned to the formal metrical patterns and strict rhyme schemes of his early verse. The collection includes a number of loose translations of Horace, Juvenal, and Dante, along with several original poems. The most politically relevant of those poems are contained within the opening series of five poems, titled *Near the Ocean*, the last of which is also titled, "Near the Ocean."

The first poem, "Waking Early Sunday Morning," opens with an existentialist lament for the order and beauty of pastoral poetry, which, in the past, captured the image of a simpler, freer world. Lowell read existentialist philosophers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre and openly discussed them in terms of early poems such as "Skunk Hour." In the first stanza of "Waking Early Sunday Morning" Lowell dramatizes one of existentialism's central tenets, that existence is absurd. The first lines seem to praise the idea of liberty: "O to break loose, like the chinook / salmon jumping and falling back." By the end of the stanza, however, the salmon becomes a symbol of futility: Its pointless task of swimming upstream to seek freedom only culminates in arriving "alive enough to spawn and die" (383).

That opening passage colors the shifting tones of each poem in the series. Lowell goes through his usual gamut of criticisms, starting with religion; then moving on to American militarism, politics, contemporary culture, social conflict; and finally ending with his deeply affected views on marriage. Unlike in many of his early poems and criticisms, however, Lowell makes very specific attacks on the different institutions he writes about, rather than depending heavily on allusion and metaphor. For example, the fourth poem, "Central Park," uses two different cat images to address poverty in America by describing the "deserter's rich / Welfare lying out of reach" (392). His general discontent culminates in "Near the Ocean," a poem he dedicated to his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick.

Love Poems.” Compare and contrast the ways in which each poet uses personal information about a lover as material for poetry. Do you think Rich is discreet enough to justify her criticisms of Lowell?

3. Lowell worked on a number of translations during his career as a poet. Often he published them alongside his own poetry. In his collection *Imitations*, however, he focuses on translations. The introduction explains that he has “been reckless with literal meaning, and labored hard to get the tone. Most often this has been *a* tone, for *the* tone is something that will always more or less escape transference to another language and cultural moment” (195). As Lowell, many poets do not believe in the possibility of a literal translation. He takes it further, though, arguing that neither literal meaning nor similar tone can be achieved when transferring poems between languages and cultures. Choose several of the poems in *Imitations*. Read both Lowell’s translation and another poet’s translation, then discuss the differences. Do you think Lowell is correct in his attitudes toward translating poetry?
4. Sylvia Plath, one of Lowell’s students, became as controversial a literary figure as Lowell himself. Interestingly, they both suffered traumatic experiences with their fathers, which each later incorporated in poems. Plath’s father died when she was young, while Lowell and his father had a falling out. Read Plath’s well-known poem “Daddy” (from the 1965 collection *Ariel*) and Lowell’s poems “Rebellion” and “Father,” then compare the different functions of the father role in each writer’s poetry. How do representations of gender figure into the different depictions of their respective fathers?
5. Read T. S. Eliot’s essay titled “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920). Eliot attempts to argue for a theoretical framework within which we might understand our canon and what deserves to be part of it. He discusses individual talent in terms of one’s historical position and the ability to engage the tradition from within which one writes. Lowell, of

course, was obsessed with his relationship to tradition and his position within history. He does not, however, conform to all of Eliot’s standards for writing credible poetry. Read “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and discuss the ways in which Lowell does and does not ascribe to its tenets. A full-text version of the essay is available online: <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Altieri, Charles. “Poetry in a Prose World: Robert Lowell’s ‘Life Studies.’” In *Modern Poetry Studies*, edited by Jerome Mazzaro. Columbus, Ohio: C. E. Merrill, 1971.
- . “Robert Lowell and the Difficulties of Escaping Modernism.” In *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1979.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*. Princeton, N.J.: University of Princeton Press, 1978.
- Bedford, William. “The Morality of Form in the Poetry of Robert Lowell.” *Ariel* 9, no. 1 (January 1978): 3–17.
- Bell, Vereen M. *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Breslin, James E. B. *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945–1965*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 137–139.
- Breslin, Paul. *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 68–70.
- Doherty, Paul. “The Poet as Historian: ‘For the Union Dead’ by Robert Lowell.” *Concerning Poetry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1968): 37–41.
- Doreski, William. *Robert Lowell’s Shifting Colors*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999.
- Edwards, Jonathan. “Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1.” Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Available online. URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1.i.xxiv.html>. Accessed March 12, 2007.
- Fein, Richard J. *Robert Lowell*. Boston: Twayne, 1970.

- “The Festival Guest Here Beat His Breast.” *Time*, 11 June 1965, 29.
- Ford, Karen, and Cary Nelson. “Sylvia Plath (1932–1963).” *Modern American Poetry*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/plath.htm. Accessed March 12, 2007.
- Jenks, Philip. “On the Poetics of Possibility in Robert Lowell.” Available online. URL: <http://www.culturalsociety.org/lowell.htm>. Accessed March 12, 2007.
- Kalstone, David. “Robert Lowell: The Uses of History.” In *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 41–76.
- Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003.
- . *Collected Prose*. Edited by Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987.
- Mariani, Paul. *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994.
- Meyers, Jeffrey, ed. *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Munk, Linda. “Mr. Edwards, Mr. Lowell, and the Spider.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 790–795. Available online. URL: http://www.utpjournals.com/product/utq/683/683_review_munk.html. Accessed March 12, 2007.
- Nelson, Cary, and Walter Kalaidjian. “Theodore Roethke (1908–1963).” *Modern American Poetry*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/roethke/roethke.htm. Accessed March 12, 2007.
- Rich, Adrienne. *The Dream of a Common Language*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.
- Thurston, Michael. “Robert Lowell (1917–1977).” *Modern American Poetry*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lowell/lowell.htm. March 12, 2007.
- . “Robert Lowell’s Monumental Vision: History, Poetic Form, and the Cultural Work of Postwar Lyric.” *American Literary History* (Spring 2000): 79–112.
- Travisano, Thomas. *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Makeup of a Postmodern Aesthetic*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Wallingford, Katharine. “Robert Lowell and Free Association.” *Mosaic* 19, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 121–132.
- Wiebe, Dallas E. “Mr. Lowell and Mr. Edwards.” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*. Poetry Explication Issue 3, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1962): 21–31.
- Williamson, Alan. *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974.

David Squires



BERNARD MALAMUD (1914–1986)

Art, in essence, celebrates life and gives us our measure.

(interview with Daniel Stern)

Among the most important American fiction writers of the second half of the 20th century, Bernard Malamud distinguished himself as both a novelist and short story writer. Though he did not write exclusively about the Jewish experience, he is considered one of the foremost Jewish novelists of his time, often viewed alongside SAUL BELLOW and PHILIP ROTH.

As many of his fictional characters are, Bernard Malamud was a child of immigrant Jews. His father, Max (or Mendel), and his mother, Bertha (whose maiden name, *Fidelman*, he would later assign to one of his best-known characters), were both Russian-born, immigrating to the United States in the early part of the 20th century. They married, settled in Brooklyn, and made a precarious living running a grocery store. Bernard was born in 1914. He attended public grammar school and then went on to Erasmus High School, one of New York's best public high schools, yet he described his home as modest: "There were no books that I remember in the house, no records, music, pictures on the wall" (Stern 43). When Bernard was ill as a child, his father bought 20 volumes of *The Book of Knowledge*, and he had access to the radio and the Yiddish theater. Already he had contributed short stories to the Erasmus High literary magazine, and even in grammar school, Malamud stated, "I lived in a state of self-enhancing discovery. I turned school assignments into stories" ("Reflections" 15). After high school

he enrolled at the City College of New York, where he received a B.A. in 1936. His formal education was completed by an M.A. in literature awarded by Columbia University in 1942.

Malamud had already begun to face the need to earn his living, while still striving to become a writer. His mother had died, his father was poor, and the young man felt unwilling to rely on him for support. Thus, he began teaching, first, at Lafayette High School, then—after a move to Washington, D.C., where he worked at an undemanding and well-remunerated job as a Census Bureau clerk and (as Walt Whitman had) wrote his own work at his government desk—again in New York, teaching in Brooklyn at night, then for a year in Harlem. In 1949 he accepted an offer to teach English at Oregon State College, in Corvallis; he was surprised to learn on arrival that it was a land-grant college, and his lack of a Ph.D. kept him teaching exclusively composition for years. Though his time at Corvallis obviously supplies some of the inspiration for his 1961 novel *A New Life*, readers who identify him too closely with the miserable S. Levin of that novel overlook the 12 years Malamud spent in Oregon (Levin flees at the end of a year) and the books and stories he was able to write and publish in those years, including *The Natural* (1952), *The Assistant* (1957), and *A New Life* (1961); moreover, his first book of short fiction, *The Magic Barrel*, including some stories he had been writing since the 1940s,

appeared in 1958 and won the National Book Award in 1959. With *The Assistant*, Malamud had turned to what would become his acknowledged subject, the lives of Jews. “I thought of him”—his father, who had mourned Bernard’s marriage to a gentile but later softened—“as I began *The Assistant* and felt I would often be writing about Jews, in celebration and expiation, though perhaps that was having it both ways” (*Stories* ix).

The Assistant does indeed attend to the poverty and suffering many Jewish immigrants experienced. The title refers to Frank Alpine, the assistant to a Jewish grocer, Morris Bober, whose life may reflect some of the realities of Max Malamud’s life as a hard-pressed grocer. The plot includes Jewish-gentile conflict, crime, violence, surprising redemption, and an ambiguous ending. *A New Life* is Malamud’s contribution to the flourishing college novel genre. It places an eastern Jew of radical opinions, S. Levin, in an alien setting, the English Department of Cascadia College, which has sometimes been seen as a sinister burlesque of Oregon State. Levin’s humanistic aspirations are thwarted by the mechanistic and deadening ideas about teaching that constrain him. Likewise, his erotic life, including an ultimately disastrous affair with a student, is a continuing arena of strife. Though he ends by seducing the wife of his chief academic tormentor, it is hardly a happy conclusion, since he is not entirely sure he wants her and the cost of his “success” is the loss of his teaching career. As his reputation grew, the English Department relieved him from exclusive assignment to composition and permitted him to teach some literature classes.

In 1961 the Malamuds (the family now included his wife, the former Ann de Chiara, and children Paul and Janna) returned to the East, where Bernard was appointed to the faculty at Bennington College in Vermont; the appointment continued until his death in 1986. At Bennington, he said, his teachers were his colleagues Howard Nemerov, the poet; Stanley Edgar Hyman, a leading critic; and the poet Ben Belitt, along with his “other teachers . . . my students, whom I taught to teach me” (“Reflections” 18). He taught courses in imagina-

tive writing, despite his doubts about their value. He explained, “Talent is always in short supply, although I had a handful of good writing students whom I enjoyed teaching and learning from. In essence one doesn’t teach writing; he encourages talented people whom he may be able to do something for. I feel that writing courses are of limited value although they do induce some students to read fiction with care” (*Stories* xi). On the other hand, Malamud noted that teaching never interfered with his writing.

During the Bennington years, Malamud published four additional novels: *The Fixer* (1966), *The Tenants* (1971), *Dubin’s Lives* (1979), and *God’s Grace* (1982). Set in czarist Russia, *The Fixer* is a more straightforward look at anti-Semitism than Malamud had presented in his earlier fictions and, as Joel Salzberg emphasizes, a more politicized book than its predecessors. His protagonist, Yakov Bok, suffers a series of torments, including, at one point, a version of the blood libel, the historic accusation of Jews as child killers. *The Fixer* won Malamud his second National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize and for many critics is his greatest achievement; in a 1966 interview Malamud said that he considered it his strongest book thus far. As was always his practice, he alternated between publishing novels and short stories, which appeared in the collections *Idiots First* (1963), *Rembrandt’s Hat* (1973), and *The Stories of Bernard Malamud*, with his introduction (1983). Other collections appeared after his death. *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* (1969), though its chapters had been published separately as stories, has a novelesque unity in being composed of scenes in the life, artistic and erotic, of Arthur Fidelman, a painter and schlemiel.

The Tenants juxtaposes a Jewish writer, Harry Lesser, with an African-American writer, Willie Spearmint. They are the only tenants of a slum, and their rivalry includes differing ideas about writing, competition over a woman, growing political tensions along the black-Jewish fault line, and eventually horrific violence. As in a number of his short stories, here Malamud reflects his own urban experience and his time teaching in Harlem, exploring issues divid-

ing blacks and Jews, both historical victims of racism, without offering any easy answers.

Malamud received a number of honors for his work. In 1972 he was appointed to a three-year term as honorary consultant in American letters to the Library of Congress. He won an O. Henry Memorial Award for his story "Man in the Drawer," and a Notable Book citation from the American Library Association for *Dubin's Lives*. In the early 1980s he received Brandeis University's Creative Arts Award in fiction, a Gold Medal for fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award for fiction, the Mondello Prize from Italy, and an honorary degree from his alma mater, City College of the City University of New York. Several grants assisted his work, perhaps the most important being a Partisan Review-Rockefeller Foundation Grant that coincided with a sabbatical from Oregon State in 1956 and permitted a stay in Italy. He wrote stories including "The Magic Barrel" in Rome, and the Italian experience both contributed to later fiction and gave him a fresh approach when he returned to Corvallis.

Toward the end of his life, as he grew increasingly celebrated for his life's work, Malamud's new fiction met with a less positive critical response. When *Dubin's Lives* appeared in 1979, reviews were very mixed. This account of a writer (the biographer William Dubin) and his affair with a much younger woman was uneasily tagged as possible self-revelation or self-projection, and Janna Malamud Smith's biography of her father correlates it with an affair between Malamud and a student at Bennington in the early 1960s, a relationship renewed while he was writing *Dubin's Lives*. *God's Grace* (1982) is unlike any of his other novels, a fable of a world swept by nuclear war and depopulated by another flood sent by a disappointed God. Calvin Cohn, however, has survived underwater at the time of the catastrophe, and he forms a postapocalyptic community with three apes on an island. With two chimpanzees and a gorilla he tries to remake a humane life, and with one of them, Mary Madelyn, he fathers a daughter. Perhaps because it differs so noticeably from his usual fictional approach (though Malamud has never shied away from fantasy, and

elements of allegory are present as far back as *The Natural*), perhaps because of weakness in Malamud's realization of his ambitious idea, it puzzled and disappointed many reviewers. Some deplored the "chimp humor"; others admired the audacity of the fable, taking in as it does Jewish-Christian relations, a new Robinson Crusoe, U.S.-Soviet politics, and a new fall. At the time of his death Malamud had completed about three-quarters of a novel called "The People," in which a Russian Jew has adventures in the 19th-century American West. It was published in its unfinished state in 1989, as part of *The People, and Uncollected Stories*.

Bernard Malamud was, in important ways, a pure artist. His life was mostly a private one, despite his awards and his work with American PEN, of which he was president from 1979 to 1981. He taught, but his idea of the writer's life was of devotion to the craft. He mostly avoided publicity and was seldom quoted on matters of public controversy. His relatively quiet life and dedication to the artistic vocation help explain his lowered visibility in the decades since his death. For some years there was no authorized biography, owing partly to the objections of his survivors, led by his daughter Janna. She later reversed her position and wrote a book of her own, *My Father Is a Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud* (2006), a sort of joint memoir of her and her father. She acknowledges her father's "complex sense of privacy" (ix). This sense of privacy probably stems from Malamud's conviction that the work is what matters most.

In 1984 he explained his calling, in part, by saying:

In writing I had to say what had happened to me, yet present it as though it had been magically revealed. I began to write seriously when I had taught myself the discipline necessary to achieve what I wanted. When I touched that time, my words announced themselves to me. I have given my life to writing without regret, except when I consider what in my work I might have done better. I wanted my writing to be as good as it must be, and on the whole I think it is. ("Reflections" 18)

“The First Seven Years” (1950)

Jewish subject matter occupies one of Malamud’s first stories to be published in a major journal, the *Partisan Review*. The author told Daniel Stern, “Like many writers I’m influenced especially by the Bible, both Testaments. I respond in particular to the East European immigrants of my father’s and mother’s generations; many of them were Jews of the Pale as described by the classic Yiddish writers” (56). “The First Seven Years” refers to the Genesis story of Jacob and Rachel; to win Rachel as his wife, Jacob promises to work for her father, Laban, for seven years.

The characters are the immigrant Jews of the Pale and their American-born offspring. The story is told from the point of view of Feld, the shoemaker, a Polish Jew who has done relatively well in his shop. Though he is slow to realize it, his success is largely due to the skill and hard work of his assistant, Sobel, an unprepossessing Polish refugee he has hired and taught the cobbler’s business. Sobel is by now so good at it that Feld need not work hard; he can lie in bed in the morning, because he trusts Sobel to do the work, to open and close. Though Feld knows that Sobel deserves to earn more for his hard work and has sometimes offered him a raise, he thinks of him with some contempt. Sobel, after all, is a penniless 35-year-old, homely, bald, with no prospects—not so different, perhaps, from Feld at one point, but having made good, the shoemaker now looks down on Sobel. Feld also aspires for a social rise for his daughter, Miriam.

Miriam is a bit of a puzzle; 19, pretty (at least by her father’s account), intelligent, and bookish, she has shown no interest in college and gone to work in order to be independent. Still, Feld would like to see her with a man of distinction, and he has selected Max, the son of a peddler who is a college student, making something of himself, and thus his idea of a good match for Miriam. His matchmaking efforts provoke Sobel, listening in the background, to a fury of hammering that Feld cannot understand, ending in his smashing his last and walking out.

“The First Seven Years” is rich in ironies. The reader will be aware, long before Feld realizes any-

thing, that Sobel is in love with Miriam. He has been her adviser, lending her books and discussing ideas, for years. Miriam provides the clearest explanation for her father’s blindness; commenting on her boredom with Max, whom she has dated twice, she says:

“He’s nothing more than a materialist.”

“What means this word?”

“He has no soul. He’s only interested in things.” (21)

That Feld himself is equally materialist helps explain his attraction to Max and his indifference to Sobel. He banks on Max’s college attendance, though a bit chagrined to find that he is studying accountancy, not medicine or law; he discounts Sobel’s reading and thinking, ignoring the fact that he is clearly an intellectual with a soul. The narrator tells us that Feld once asked Sobel why he read so much: “He read, he said, to know. But to know what, the shoemaker demanded, and to know, why? Sobel never explained, which proved he read so much because he was queer” (22–23). And, as he brutally tells Sobel when they finally discuss Miriam, “Sobel, you are crazy. . . . She will never marry a man so old and ugly like you” (24).

This comment (though Feld grudgingly takes back *ugly*) precipitates the denouement, in which the shoemaker sadly accepts the love between his daughter and the refugee, as well as the fact that his ambitions for her life to be better materially than that of her parents have failed. Whether Feld’s yielding to Sobel is motivated by his need for him in the business (his inability to get along without him is what has led him to visit Sobel) or by his sudden pity for him is difficult to say. There is some insight into the life of the assistant, whose behavior up to this point has been either of no interest or just “queer.” As Sobel bitterly cries,

“Why do you think I worked so long for you?”

Sobel cried out. “For the stingy wages I sacrificed five years of my life so you could have to eat and drink and where to sleep?”

“Then for what?” shouted the shoemaker.

“For Miriam,” he blurted—“for her.”

The shoemaker, after a time, managed to say, "I pay wages in cash, Sobel," and lapsed into silence. (23)

When Feld insists that Sobel wait two more years before asking for Miriam's hand and the next morning walks in to find his assistant "pounding leather for love" (25), the biblical allusion to the Laban-Jacob relationship is clear.

In his introduction to *The Stories of Bernard Malamud*, the author writes, "I love the pleasures of the short story. One of them is the fast payoff. . . . Somewhere I've said that a short story packs a self in a few pages predicating a lifetime. . . . In a few pages a good story portrays the complexity of a life while producing the surprise and effect of knowledge—not a bad payoff" (xii). "The First Seven Years" is a good illustration of these strengths. It is 12 pages long; within it lies a searching examination of what has been called "the American dream"—a dream that, based as it is on the idea of "making it" and "self-improvement," often is what Miriam would call materialistic. And yet, it is natural for a father to want a better life for his daughter. The question is: What is "better?" The reader is granted insight into the gradations of immigrant Jewry, as Feld simultaneously disdains Sobel the Polish refugee and sympathizes with his narrow escape from Adolf Hitler. (His question whether Sobel ever went to college indicates a bland ignorance of conditions beyond the Pale, however.)

Despite the father's disappointment, the story does deliver a payoff of promising love between two people who value what is important and have found it in each other. And yet—the *first* seven years? In the Bible, Jacob's first seven years ended only with his betrayal and marriage to Rachel's sister, after which he had to work another seven years to win Rachel. The "lifetime" that this story predicates is more troubling than it may appear.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is Max indeed a "materialist" in the sense Miriam means? Or, is she finding reasons to reject her father's candidate for her hand in favor of her own preference?
2. Think of other American texts that focus on the idea of the social rise—through hard work, luck, fortunate marriage, or whatever—that is sometimes thought of as "the American dream," such as LORRAINE HANSBERRY's *A Raisin in the Sun* and ARTHUR MILLER's *Death of a Salesman*. With these two works and their protagonists in mind, argue what constitutes the American dream, what its dangers are, and whether the protagonists in these works are responsible for the ideals they choose to follow. Are they as individuals to blame, or does society bear responsibility for their downfall?
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is about American success and about working to succeed for a beloved woman. Is Feld, on a much smaller scale, a Gatsbyesque figure? Defend your answer to this question in a well-formulated essay that compares the two works, using quotations and textual references to support your statements.
4. There is a proverb, emphasizing persistence, about a cobbler sticking to his last. (A last is the form on which a cobbler shapes shoes.) Does this have relevance to Sobel's behavior? How about when he smashes the last after hearing Feld's recruitment of Max for his daughter?

The Natural (1952)

Malamud published seven novels. Considering his ongoing concern with the lives of American Jews, his first novel is his most anomalous. It has nothing to do with Jewish life, immigrants, and the complexities of relations among ethnic groups in urban America. Yet, *The Natural* is probably the best known of his books, certainly today the best selling of his novels, though the explanation has much to do with its 1984 incarnation as a film starring Robert Redford, a version in which much of what made Malamud's book powerful was filtered out and its ending almost reversed.

Malamud's own professorial appearance and his stories of students and schlemiels may make his interest in baseball, the subject of *The Natural*, seem odd, but his childhood in Brooklyn prepared him for it;

as he told Daniel Stern, “As a kid, for entertainment I turned to the movies and dime novels. Maybe *The Natural* derives from Frank Merriwell”—a Yale-educated hero of virtuous endeavor and crime detection as well as baseball, football, and other sports, much loved in magazine and dime novel form by American boys—“as well as the adventures of the Brooklyn Dodgers in Ebbets Field” (43). In *The Natural* he created a rich plot that contained elements of a Frank Merriwell-type figure, Roy Hobbs, who lacks Frank’s firmness and comes to grief through cruel fate and his own weaknesses, a life similar to Babe Ruth’s, seriocomic fantastic events reminiscent of the American tall-tale tradition, and a mythic substrate indebted to Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*.

The central story is of a hero brought low by human weaknesses, including overweening ambition and misplaced love. Roy Hobbs first appears, a naive young ballplayer, on a train headed for the big city, accompanied by his mentor, Sam Simpson, an aging baseball scout who has discovered Roy, whose enormous skills promise some redemption for his futile life. At a stop along the way Whammer Wambold, the reigning home-run king, shows off for a mysterious girl called Harriet Bird, and Roy, stung by insults to Sam, strikes him out on three straight pitches. This proves disastrous not only because his third pitch wounds Sam fatally but also because he turns Harriet Bird’s attentions from the Whammer to him; she, a sort of Fury who shoots outstanding athletes, having induced Roy to state that he will be the best ever, shoots him in a Chicago hotel.

This is the overture to the novel. When Roy appears again, he is a worn version of his youthful self, almost too old to be a player, who joins the dreadful New York Knights. Denied a chance to play by the petulant manager, he finally gets into a game and wins it by literally knocking the cover off the ball. He becomes a hero for the Knights, particularly after Bump Bailey, their previous star, stung by his rivalry, kills himself. Roy falls in love with Bump’s girl, Memo Paris, though she is clearly trouble; after a brief affair with a clearly good woman, Iris Lemon, he rejects her for the faithless and treacherous Memo.

Roy is surrounded by a nefarious crew including Memo; Max Mercy, an interfering sportswriter who was on the train the day he struck out the Whammer; and Judge Banner, the sinister owner of the Knights. His appetites for success, for Memo, for money, for everything at once, get him into trouble, as he gambles recklessly and eats obsessively, eventually winding up in the hospital with abdominal damage. Lured on by Memo, he accepts a bribe to throw the crucial game, and though he changes his mind, he fails and is disgraced nonetheless, his career at an end, his life a failure. As the novel ends, a small boy asks him, “Say it ain’t true, Roy”—echoing the “Say it ain’t so, Joe” associated with the disgraced White Sox gambler Shoeless Joe Jackson.

The Natural is, in one way, about the destruction of innocence. The Roy of the beginning is almost unbelievably provincial. Though without arrogance, he is also without guile, and his ready admission that he will be the best ever invokes his punishment from Harriet Bird. Even years later he is still a relative innocent, unable to understand (for instance) Memo Paris’s complexity and unreliability. The worst are full of passionate intensity, and Roy is no match for them.

There is an archetypal athlete’s story here, too, that of the unsophisticated man who gets too much too soon and is undone by a goddess figure. Kevin Baker invokes other baseball lives: Pistol Pete Reiser, a Dodger who (like Bump Bailey) ran into walls, though not fatally; Eddie Waitkus, also shot by a woman in a hotel room; and Babe Ruth, whose overeating produced a bellyache that affected the outcome of a game (xi). In his dislike for the press and the fans Roy follows Ted Williams. He becomes unpleasant with success and, one might argue, displays hubris that predicts if not ensures his downfall.

The most interesting feature of the novel is not its use of familiar baseball topoi but its mythic underpinnings, which have been much discussed. They include magic, from Roy’s superhuman feats at the park to an unexplained moment in a nightclub where he pulls silver dollars from a bookie’s nose, a her-ring from Max Mercy’s mouth, and a bunny from Memo’s purse. The language and detail of the novel

insist on the mythic background. For instance, the opposing pitcher looking in “saw Roy, in full armor, mounted on a black charger” (225). There are important thematic details, from Roy’s royal name, to his joining the Knights, to the name of their manager, Pop Kingfisher (i.e., Fisher King), and Roy’s success in healing the wounded Pop, resurrecting the dying Knights, and bringing rain to a wasteland (his first hit produces a three-day downpour), to his descent into the underworld, the gambling den staffed with masked devils. He has a miraculous weapon, Wonderboy, a bat he made for himself from a lightning-struck tree; with it, he is invincible, but as his powers fail, “Wonderboy resembled a sagging baloney” (140), and the end is near when Wonderboy splits during the climactic game, before Roy (like Mighty Casey) strikes out.

This patterning of a baseball story on the Holy Grail legend might mean only that Malamud sees heroes in both realms. Iris Lemon, whose name and nature leave her somewhat outside the Grail story, tells Roy that she hates to see a hero fail and that “it’s their function to be the best and for the rest of us to understand what they represent and guide ourselves accordingly” (148). Roy obtusely misunderstands her notion of heroism as being about breaking records, just as he crudely misunderstands Iris in other ways.

When asked why he employed the mythology in *The Natural*, Malamud responded:

Because baseball flat is baseball flat. I had to do something else to enrich the subject. I love metaphor. It provides two loaves where there seems to be one. Sometimes it throws in a load of fish. The mythological analogy is a system of metaphor. It enriches the vision without resorting to montage. This guy gets up with his baseball bat and all at once he is, through the ages, a knight—somewhat battered—with a lance; not to mention a guy with a blackjack, or someone attempting murder with a flower. You relate to the past and predict the future. I’m not talented as a conceptual thinker but I am in the uses of metaphor. The mythological and symbolic excite my imagination. (Stern 52)

Through metaphor and myth Malamud’s baseball novel can appeal to readers for whom sports are trivial and make Roy Hobbs—who is, after all, a limited man, coarse, uneducated, brutal, thoughtless, given to bad decisions, cruel to the woman who loves him and abject to the one who hates him, whom Fortune has made the best pitcher and, later, the best hitter in the world—a hero like Percival or Roland, and his failure to get a hit in a baseball game a tragedy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you consider *The Natural* tragic? That is, does Roy Hobbs’s downfall have the kind of significance appropriate to that genre? Is he a satisfactory tragic hero?
2. Are the female characters credible to you, or is it the case that they function schematically—femme fatale, avenging Fury, redeeming angel, and so on? Which of them seems most convincingly developed?
3. *The Natural* mixes mythological matter with naturalistic detail. How important is the baseball information? Would the novel be accessible to a reader who knew, or cared, nothing about baseball?
4. What are some of the meanings of *natural* that could illuminate Malamud’s choice of title?
5. Consider other modern novels founded on baseball—Robert Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.*, Mark Harris’s *Bang the Drum Slowly*, W. P. Kinsella’s *Shoeless Joe*, Philip Roth’s *The Great American Novel*, Douglass Wallop’s *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*—and ponder why baseball, rather than football or Nascar racing or the NBA, is the literary subject par excellence in the United States.
6. F. Scott Fitzgerald declared that “there are no second acts in American lives.” Does that claim (whether you think it is true or not) illuminate Roy Hobbs’s quest after his first disaster and its outcome?
7. Must greatness in one dimension be purchased by deficiency somewhere else? Consider Roy Hobbs’s intellectual mediocrity, his indefatigable pursuit of the wrong woman, and his cruelty to Iris Lemon. Are these the price of unequalled baseball

skill? How does the flawed hero of *The Natural* compare with, say, Achilles in *The Iliad* or Sir Lancelot?

“The Magic Barrel” (1954)

Marriage, in its accomplished state or in prospect, is important subject matter in “The Jewbird,” “The First Seven Years,” and “Black Is My Favorite Color.” It is also at the heart of Malamud’s best-known short story, “The Magic Barrel,” which, though not as fantastic as “The Jewbird,” also touches on the supernatural.

Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student, resolves to take a wife—not because he needs love or feels passion, but because he believes it will help him with his future congregation. Knowing no women, he employs a marriage broker, the plausible, slightly fishy Salzman, but Salzman’s efforts, despite his powerful salesmanship, do not bear fruit. Of his hyped prospects, one, Lily Hirschorn, interests Finkle enough to arrange a meeting; she is described by Salzman as “this fine girl that she speaks four languages and has personally in the bank ten thousand dollars? Also her father guarantees further twelve thousand. Also she has a new car, wonderful clothes, talks on all subjects, and she will give you a first-class home and children. How near do we come in our life to paradise?” (132). Salzman has suavely lowered her acknowledged age from the original 32 to 29, but Finkle later judges her as past 35. His conversation with her, though it is hopeless for finding a mate, leads to a surprising acknowledgment: Asked when he became “enamored of God,” he admits that he “came to God not because I loved him but because I did not” (134). This epiphany leads to another, even starker realization when Finkle admits that he had never loved anyone but his parents, and “his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he really was—unloved and loveless” (135).

This realization—which the narrator rather oddly says was bitter but not unexpected—changes Finkle’s ideas about women and love, leading him to decide that he no longer wants an arranged marriage but

prefers to love someone first, then marry. When Salzman leaves him a selection of photographs, he finds them all disappointing but for one, included by mistake supposedly, that “gave him the impression of youth—spring flowers, yet age—a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted; this came from the eyes, which were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange” (138–139). The more he stares at this photograph, which seems obscurely evil and inspires both fear and fascination, the more he loves the woman in it.

He finds Salzman in the Bronx and extorts from him the admission that the picture is of his disgraced daughter, Stella, who is described as wild, not the wife for a rabbi—apparently a prostitute. Finkle insists on meeting her, and as the story ends, he sees her standing on a corner smoking and wearing “white with red shoes, which fitted his expectations”; Finkle “ran forward with flowers outthrust,” while nearby, hidden, Salzman “chanted prayers for the dead” (143).

The title of the story reflects Salzman’s claim that he has so many female clients he has to keep their details in a barrel. The barrel does not exist, but there is a touch of magic about the marriage broker, whose office, his wife tells Finkle, is in the air; when Finkle returns home after failing to find him, Salzman is mysteriously already waiting for him there.

“The Magic Barrel” invites a number of different interpretations. One is that it is a trickster fable, in which the shrewd Salzman manipulates the unworldly Finkle into marrying his damaged-goods daughter, pretending to be horrified by the idea but somehow arranging for the photograph that so bewitches the rabbinical student to appear in his fishy-smelling briefcase. Even Finkle, having insisted on meeting Stella, leaves “afflicted by a tormenting suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way” (143).

But *has* Finkle been tricked, betrayed? Perhaps it is the opposite. Perhaps the desiccated, finicky, loveless, and almost antilife student has been saved, and Pinye Salzman is his redeemer. Despite his brief suspicion, Finkle is faced with real life and a possibility of love (for once in his life), as the story ends, and if Stella is his salvation, then Salzman is the agent of that salvation. Interpretations of Salzman,

summarized by Gary Sloan, make him “an insoluble mixture of the preternatural and the prosaic, ethereal mentor and plebeian hustler,” a shaman, the god Pan, a “scheming pimp,” a prophet, and nearly everything in between (51). Sloan leans toward the view of Salzman as tricky procurer, manipulating Finkle from the beginning toward a union with his daughter, who, he suggests, may be no more a prostitute than Finkle is a clergyman (the narrator says that she waits for him “uneasily and shyly,” her eyes “filled with desperate innocence” [143]). In stark contradiction, Stephen Bluestone identifies Salzman as God—initially just a “matchmaker-God,” but in his conclusion insisting that “God, as parent and matchmaker, is left at the end to justify to himself the painful and glorious ways in which He has been defined by a Creation in whose making He has allowed himself to share” (406).

Sidney Richman sees the story as about Leo Finkle's rebirth, the conclusion as the salvation for his secretive heart, and its Salzman as “half criminal, half messenger of God” (327). And indeed Finkle reads his story this way: “He pictured, in her, his own redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky” (143).

But, Malamud has added the final one-sentence paragraph: “Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead.” Is he mourning for his daughter, of whom he has insisted that through living like an animal she has made herself dead to him? Or for Finkle? And if Finkle, is it the dead shell of the frigid rabbi, the old dead Finkle, to be replaced by new life? Or is it for Pinye Salzman and his own guilty role? Sloan briskly declares that the “dead are Stella Salzman and Leo Finkle” (57). As Richman says, such multiple possibilities enrich the story: “If the ironies undercutting the story preserve it from a kind of mythic schmaltz, the myth preserves the story from the irony” (331).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do you believe the end of the story is to be read and interpreted?
2. The story begins with Leo Finkle, and in its course he learns something about himself and, perhaps, finds love. But, it ends with Salzman. In what way is he the focus of Malamud's fiction?
3. How does this story fit into the literary tradition of the “marriage plot”—as seen, for instance, in a classic Victorian novel such as Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* or Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*? What is significant about this tradition and the way each of the authors draws upon it?
4. Compare this story with CHAIM POTOK's novel *The Chosen*, which also deals with a protagonist wrestling with faith and religious beliefs. What do both works reveal about identity and how it is formed?

“Black Is My Favorite Color” (1963)

First published in the *Reporter* in 1963 and collected in *Idiots First*, in the same year, “Black Is My Favorite Color” is the first story in which Malamud used a first-person narrator. Nat Lime is a 44-year-old bachelor who owns a liquor store in Harlem; the story is largely about his relations with African Americans. Nat has a good heart, and his declarations of humanistic tolerance are not dishonest, but he is not terribly perceptive, and his understanding of the conditions blacks live under is a shallow one. In some ways he is reminiscent of the narrator of Herman Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener,” another bachelor who is unaware of life's complexities and darkneses and whose kindness is always mixed with condescension.

The first-person technique is combined with an artful framing. The story begins with Nat's speaking in present tense about Charity Quietness, his once-a-week cleaning woman. Nat, lonely “after Ornita left” (*Stories* 74)—a detail that becomes more important later on—has asked Charity to sit down with him to eat her lunch, but after a failed attempt she has taken to eating her lunch in the toilet. He reflects, “It's my fate with colored people” (75), and this triggers a retrospective of his experiences. The first is a baffling rejection, in childhood, by a black neighbor he had tried to befriend. The second is the frustration of his attempt at an interracial love affair with Ornita.

Nat has grown up poor, but even as a child he realized that the African Americans living in his

neighborhood were much worse off than his family. He describes a complex feeling of attraction to their lives—because of the vitality, the parties and music and good times—mixed with dread, both of an indefinite darkness and of genuine fights he has witnessed, in one of which Buster's father stabbed a man with a chisel and was beaten and arrested. Something of the same complicated mixture of friendliness and condescension accompanies his overtures to Buster.

Though he says "source questions are piddling" (Stern 53), Malamud has given one autobiographical comment that helps illuminate "Black Is My Favorite Color." He told the interviewer Daniel Stern in 1975, when asked about the sources of his stories and novel about blacks:

I lived on the edge of a black neighborhood in Brooklyn when I was a boy. I played with blacks in the Flatbush Boys Club. I had a friend—Buster; we used to go to his house every so often. I swiped dimes so we could go to the movies together on a couple of Saturday afternoons. (61)

Nat Lime also had a black childhood friend called Buster; he stole money from his mother's pocketbook and took Buster to the movies, but, though Buster went, he walked home by himself. His "friendship" ends with a painful confrontation:

One day when I wasn't expecting it he hit me in the teeth. I felt like crying but not because of the pain. I spit blood and said, "What did you hit me for? What did I do to you?"

"Because you a Jew bastard. Take your Jew movies and your Jew candy and shove them up your Jew ass."

And he ran away.

I thought to myself how was I to know he didn't like the movies. When I was a man I thought, you can't force it. (77)

His primary black-Jewish interaction as a man is with Mrs. Ornita Harris. He makes her acquaintance first by picking up a glove she has dropped, though she reacts with irritation. Later he gives her a discount at the liquor store, and over months a relationship

develops, leading eventually to going out on dates. Nat is pleased to reflect that the passersby notice "how pretty she was for a man my type" (79). Despite Ornita's hesitation, they become lovers. As if in some sort of complex counterweight to the advance he has made, Nat is robbed the same week by two black men with revolvers and hospitalized when one of them pistol-whips him. Meanwhile Nat's mother has died, leaving him free to propose marriage to Ornita, but, despite vacillations, she is unwilling.

The story climaxes with another anti-Semitic assault on Nat by black men, who confront the couple as Nat, because of a taxi strike, has taken Ornita to Harlem on the subway and is walking her to her house. Three men accost them, insult Ornita, accuse Nat of being a Jew slumlord, and, when Nat tries to defend Ornita from one who has slapped her, beat him and leave him in the gutter. This ends their affair, though Nat wishes to continue.

Though this is obviously the most important background to Nat's invitation to Charity, which is renewed as the story ends, there is a small coda, another memory of an effort to help "a blind man" on Eighth Avenue, rejected by the man, who can tell Nat is white, and by a black woman who shoves him aside into a fire hydrant. "That's how it is. I give my heart and they kick me in my teeth" (84).

The explorations of black-Jewish relations in this short story are subtle. There is a historical context: The early 1960s was a time when the traditional consensus that progressive Jews and blacks were natural allies had begun to be questioned. The question of where blacks fit into the big picture of anti-Semitism is raised when Nat remembers his mother's saying, "If you ever forget you are a Jew a guy will remind you" (80). Similarly, even the muggers indicate the economic motive for some resentment of Jews, the accusation that they financially exploit blacks, and even Nat's defense—he is no landlord; he runs a liquor store in Harlem—is hardly exculpatory.

In an early comment, reflecting on Charity's choice to eat her hard-boiled eggs by herself in his bathroom, Nat says, "That's how it goes, only don't get the idea of ghettos. If there's a ghetto I'm the one that's in it" (73), a comment that not only connects blacks and Jews through the experience of the

ghetto but points to a psychological ghettoization that Nat, not without some reason, feels as his generous but clumsy outreach fails again.

For Discussion or Writing

1. While Nat finds himself attracted to African Americans, he wonders why he is not close to blacks, seeking sources to blame other than himself for the difficulties he encounters in relating.
2. In having Nat tell his own story, Malamud makes a deliberate choice. Regardless of what he intends, he causes the reader to confront many uncomfortable issues surrounding interracial relationships. This is especially true for Malamud's readership at the time this work was written, a time marked by racial tension and social inequality. Has this work become a "period piece," documenting social anxieties during the civil rights era, or does the insight Malamud's story provides have value in our attempts to make meaning? To form community? To understand others? If indeed Malamud implicates the reader as much as Nat, what implications does this have for us and the world in which we live? Do the questions Malamud raises remain unanswered today? Write a well-developed essay that addresses these questions, providing real-world examples, citing civil rights documents such as those that can be found online at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/civilrights/home.html>, and quoting from the story.
3. How would this story read differently if told from the point of view of Ornita Harris? What would the reader like to know about her that Nat cannot tell us?
4. With Malamud's exploration of black-white relations in the 1960s in mind, read JAMES BALDWIN's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, and FLANNERY O'CONNOR's "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Taken in tandem, what do these works of literature tell us about race relations in 1950s and 1960s America? Additionally, consider the value of using white protagonists to consider these issues versus using black characters. What fundamental differences or similarities can you find: How do

these differences and similarities inform us about American culture?

5. Melville's narrator in "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a rather superficial bachelor, who, before his frustrating encounters with Bartleby, "had never experienced aught but a not-unpleasing sadness" but finds his deeper emotions involved. Do you think the comparison with Nat Lime is justified by Nat's realizations?

"The Jewbird" (1963)

According to Malamud's account, the story was suggested by reading a poem, "Digressions upon a Crow," by his friend and Bennington colleague Howard Nemerov. It seems likely that the mysterious irruption of Edgar Allan Poe's talking bird in "The Raven" had a role, too. Malamud changes the crow to an old Jew, and, unlike Poe's raven, the Jewbird has a large vocabulary, a prayer life, touchy emotions, and mathematical skill.

The story begins with abrupt action and homespun philosophy as a narrator, whose demotic, slightly Yiddish-inflected language sounds a bit like that of the Jewbird itself, announces, "The window was open so the skinny bird flew in. Flap-pity-flap with its frazzled black wings. That's how it goes. It's open, you're in. Closed, you're out and that's your fate" (144). The skinny bird has flown into the Cohen household, where Cohen, his wife, Edie, and their unpromising son, Maurie, are eating dinner, and unfortunately almost lands on Cohen's lamb chop. As he swipes at it, driving the bird to the top of the door, the story reveals its fantastic dimension: The bird cries out, "Gevalt, a pogrom!" (145).

From the beginning the bird proves a register of character, as the three Cohens react in different ways. Edie is surprised by the talking bird; Maurie notes that it is Jewish; Cohen's annoyed response is "Wise guy." Asked what he is running from, the bird (later identified as Schwartz) says, "Anti-Semecets," and in the ensuing conversation, "proves" that he is a Jewbird by divining, or praying in Hebrew. Again, Edie and Maurie, who rocks back and forth with the pray-

ing, show respect; Cohen, by contrast, is suspicious: “No hat, no phylacteries?” (146).

What the Jewbird wants are a refuge and feeding. Cohen grudgingly permits Schwartz to stay, though at first only overnight and later only because he is a companion to Maurie. Eventually, Schwartz earns his keep by helping Maurie with his mathematics homework. Still, Cohen resents his presence and the food he eats and insists on his living in an outdoor birdhouse on the ledge. Schwartz is not always even-tempered, reacting to his unwilling host’s provocation by calling him “*Grubber yung*” (Yiddish for “coarse young man”) or occasionally complaining:

I would rather have a human roof over my head. You know how it is at my age. I like the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking. I would also be glad to see once in a while the Jewish Morning Journal and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God. But whatever you give me, you won’t hear complaints. (148)

Cohen simmers with anger: The bird smells bad, he snores noisily, he refuses to migrate, and he eats human food rather than corn. In a clear sign of alpha-male rivalry, Cohen even accuses Schwartz of wanting to sleep in the bed with his wife. Unwilling simply to banish the bird, he tries to drive him out by tampering with his food, making noises to disturb his sleep, and even taking home a cat to torment Schwartz.

The story builds on an occult relationship between the bird and Cohen’s mother. When it begins, the Cohens are in the city only because the older Mrs. Cohen is ill; it rises to its climax after she dies—perhaps freeing her son from some lingering respect for a bird who is also an elderly Jew. Unfortunately at this time Maurie receives a zero on a test. Cohen attacks the bird, which fights back by seizing his nose in its beak; eventually the man wins and throws the battered bird from the window, followed by his birdhouse.

The melancholy conclusion occurs in the spring; Maurie finds the dead bird in the melted snow and weeps, “Who did it to you, Mr. Schwartz?”

“Anti-Semeets,” Edie said later (154).

The role of anti-Semitism in this story is complicated. Schwartz is, finally, a victim of Cohen’s intolerance, but Cohen is the one who refuses to accept the existence of a Jewbird and declares, “He’s a foxy bastard. He thinks he’s a Jew” (147). Robert Solaratoff comments that “to an unusual degree for a Malamud story, ‘The Jewbird’ deals with that great theme of twentieth-century Jewish-American fiction, assimilation. Malamud’s usual position is that the degree to which a Jew is assimilated corresponds to the degree that he has been corrupted by contemporary American society, and he does not deviate from this stance in the story” (79). By this standard, Cohen’s assimilationist aspirations are shown by his successful, modernizing job, selling frozen foods; his ambitions (ludicrous, based on his obtaining C minus grades) to get Maurie into an Ivy League college; and, thus, his furious resentment of the Old World Jewish presence in his life represented by the bird. Cohen, then is the anti-Semeet named in Edie’s final comment.

Power relationships are also unequally distributed along gender lines. Edie is a kind woman, who gives Schwartz the herring he likes, potato pancake, “and even a bit of soupmeat when Cohen wasn’t looking” (148). While Cohen suspects the bird of being a dybbuk, or a ghost, and later possibly a “goddamn devil,” Edie advances the theory that he might be “an old Jew changed into a bird by somebody” (146). But, she is cowed and helpless. The first description of the couple makes this clear, oddly enough by describing their clothing: “Cohen, a heavy man with hairy chest and beefy shorts; Edie, in skinny yellow shorts and red halter” (145). How can skinny shorts and reverent sympathy compete with beefy shorts, a hairy chest, impatience, and violence?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do you consider Schwartz an anti-Semite (or “anti-Semeet,” a pronunciation suggestive of Yiddish)? If so, does this story comment on Jewish self-hatred, and what does it say?
2. Read Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” which contains a bird messenger. Then, evaluate Malamud’s use of the same device in “The Jewbird.” What

- Baker, Kevin. "Introduction." In *The Natural*, by Bernard Malamud. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003.
- Bernard Malamud Papers. Available online. URL: <http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/specialcollections/coll/malamud/index.html>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Bluestone, Stephen. "God as Matchmaker: A Reading of Malamud's 'The Magic Barrel.'" *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 41 (Summer 2000): 403–410.
- Carino, Peter. "History as Myth in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*." *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 14 (2005): 67–77.
- Cheuse, Alan, and Nicholas Delbanco, eds. *Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Hanson, Philip. "Horror and Ethnic Identify in 'The Jewbird.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (1993): 359–366.
- Heltzman, Jeffrey. *Understanding Bernard Malamud*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985.
- Lasher, Lawrence, ed. *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- Lyons, Bonnie. "The Female Characters in Bernard Malamud's Stories." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 17 (1998): 129–136.
- Malamud, Bernard. "Audio Interview with Robert Giroux." Wired for Books. Available online. URL: <http://wiredforbooks.org/robertgiroux/>. Accessed March 6, 2007.
- . *The Natural*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1952.
- . "Reflections of a Writer: Long Work, Short Life." *New York Times Book Review*, 20 March 1988, pp. 15–16, 18.
- . *The Stories of Bernard Malamud*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983.
- Mesher, David. "Malamud's Jewish Metaphors." *Judaism* 26 (1977): 18–26.
- Ozick, Cynthia. "Literary Blacks and Jews." *Midstream* 18 (June–July 1972): 10–24.
- Pinsker, Sanford. *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Bernard Malamud." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/malamud.html>. Accessed March 6, 2007.
- Richman, Sidney. "The Stories." In *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, edited by Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, 305–331. New York: New York University Press, 1970.
- Ruland, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Viking, 1991.
- Salzberg, Joel, ed. *Critical Essays on Bernard Malamud*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.
- Sloan, Gary. "Malamud's Unmagic Barrel." *Studies in Short Fiction* 22 (1995): 51–57.
- Smith, Janna Malamud. *My Father Is a Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Solaratoff, Robert. *Bernard Malamud: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- Stern, Daniel. "The Art of Fiction, No. 52: Bernard Malamud." *Paris Review* 61 (Spring 1975): 41–64.
- Storey, Michael L. "Pinye Salzman, Pan, and 'The Magic Barrel.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (Spring 1981): 180–183.
- Turner, Frederick W., III. "Myth Inside and Out: Malamud's 'The Natural.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 1 (Winter 1968): 133–139.
- Walden, Daniel, and Eileen H. Watts. "Prospects for the Study of Bernard Malamud." *Resources for American Literary Study* 27 (2001): 1–16.
- Watts, Eileen H. "Jewish Self-Hatred in Malamud's 'The Jewbird.'" *MELUS* 21 (Summer 1996): 157–163.
- Merritt Moseley



MALCOLM X

(MALCOLM LITTLE; EL-HAJJ MALIK EL-SHABAZZ) (1925–1965)

But it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest joy can come; it is only after slavery and prison that the sweetest appreciation of freedom can come.

(The Autobiography of Malcolm X)

The fourth child of Earl and Louise Norton Little and the seventh child of his father, the civil rights activist Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925. Malcolm Little's father, Earl, was an outspoken opponent of white oppression, a Baptist preacher who supported the controversial Marcus Garvey (a pan-Africanist who advocated the mass exodus of blacks to Africa), and a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Earl, nearly illiterate, was raised in Georgia during an era when lynching was still common (for more information on the horrific history of lynching in America, visit *Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America*: <http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>). As a black community leader, Earl Little was dogged by racism throughout his life, something that deeply impressed Malcolm. Eventually, Earl moved the family first to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and then Lansing, Michigan, all the while preaching Garvey's message of African unity and liberation. Malcolm felt especially close to his father, attending Garveyite meetings with him at a young age. Shortly after they moved into a predominantly white community near Lansing, the Littles were evicted because their lease prohibited nonwhites from occupying the land. They were offered no compensation and held financially responsible for court costs and litigation fees (Perry 9). Before they were able to move out, the

farmhouse was burned to the ground. Earl told local authorities that white assailants had started the blaze but was eventually accused of arson by police investigators (Perry 10). When Louise and Earl relocated to another all-white neighborhood near Lansing, they were swindled by the seller, who owed taxes on half of the land (Perry 11). Forced from one home to another, dogged by discrimination, the Littles had great difficulty making ends meet. Even though *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Malcolm X with a great deal of assistance from ALEX HALEY, and subsequent Malcolm X biographies often disagree about the details of Malcolm X's early life and whether his family was threatened by the notorious white supremacist organization the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), there is no doubt he and his family experienced the trauma of racially motivated injustice.

Tragically, Earl was killed under the wheels of a trolley when Malcolm was just six years old. Louise, unconvinced by the account of her husband's "accidental" death, believed white men had murdered him (Perry 12). Much later in his *Autobiography*, Malcolm alleged that his father was assassinated by the Black Legion, a white supremacist group that was active in Michigan and Ohio for most of the 1930s. In any case, this staggering loss greatly affected Malcolm, both emotionally and economically. Though Earl had two life insurance policies,

one of the companies labeled his death a suicide, leaving the Little family destitute. As he reports in the *Autobiography*, Malcolm began to act out his inner turmoil, misbehaving and shoplifting items from a local grocery store. As he grew older, he learned about the life insurance injustice and about the way the white community had viewed his father. Unfortunately, Malcolm soon found himself alone in the world when his mother, after battling depression and suffering a mental breakdown, was committed to a state mental hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Malcolm was subsequently sent to live in a series of foster homes before going to Boston in 1941 to live with his older half sister.

As a teenager, Malcolm worked a variety of jobs including shoe shining, dishwashing, and working as a steward for the New Haven Railroad, a job that eventually led him to New York. It was during this time that he became involved in petty criminal activities. This quickly escalated to full-time “hustling” as he made money through prostitution, larceny, drug trafficking, and burglary. Malcolm avoided being drafted into the U.S. Army for service during World War II by convincing military psychiatrists that he was mentally unfit for active duty, acting like a black militant who wanted to kill southern whites. While he did escape battle, he did not escape the law; in 1946, after returning to Boston, Malcolm Little was arrested and convicted of a variety of crimes, including breaking and entering with his friend Malcolm “Shorty” Jarvis and two white women. While Malcolm and Shorty received 10-year sentences, the two women were each sentenced to one year of probation.

Here Malcolm saw firsthand how unjust the American legal system could be. He was sent to Charlestown Prison—a rat-infested, overcrowded facility with no running water—and then transferred to an experimental prison in nearby Norfolk, Massachusetts. Charlestown was anything but inspiring, whereas Norfolk offered unlimited access to a good library. Malcolm chose to use this time of incarceration to better himself: During the six years he served in prisons, Malcolm broke his addiction to cocaine, initiated his own

reading program, and, most important, converted to the teachings of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a religious organization led by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad that advocated racial separatism.

In 1952 Malcolm became a member and subsequent minister of the NOI and was given an X as a replacement for his surname, *Little*. The X was meant to symbolize the unknown African name of his enslaved ancestors. Malcolm’s name changed throughout his life. As Charles Hoyt notes in his essay “The Five Faces of Malcolm X,” these names correlate to the political and spiritual conversions he experienced. As the *Autobiography* documents, Malcolm’s dramatic transformations came about after powerful epiphanies. For example, when Malcolm was introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, he recounts the awakening he felt upon their first face-to-face meeting in revelatory terms:

I stared at the great man who had taken the time to write to me when I was a convict whom he knew nothing about. He was the man whom I had been told had spent years of his life in suffering and sacrifice to lead us, the black people, because he loved us so much. And then, hearing his voice, I sat leaning forward, riveted upon his words. . . . Concluding, pausing for breath, he called my name. It was like an electric shock. (*Autobiography* 200–201)

These transformations played a major, formative role throughout Malcolm’s life. By 1954 Malcolm X, now a minister, had started NOI temples in Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. In addition to founding temples across urban America, Malcolm founded a nationally distributed newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*; led an effort to organize local businesses that catered to ghetto communities; and established schools for men, women, and children. In recognition of these achievements, Elijah Muhammad elected Malcolm X as the national spokesman for the NOI. For nearly 10 years he was one of the Nation of Islam’s strongest and most effective voices.

However, by the early 1960s a rift had formed between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad. As the biographer Bruce Perry argues, Malcolm had been questioning the Nation's ideology and methods for some time (206). In 1959, Malcolm made his first trip overseas, visiting Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, and Ghana as Elijah Muhammad's ambassador. When he returned from his trip, Malcolm privately expressed reservations about Muhammad's characterization of all white-skinned people as "devils" incapable of treating African Americans as human beings (Perry 206). Another point of contention was Elijah Muhammad's prohibition of political involvement by NOI members. As Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., and other civil rights leaders led large protests against racial bigotry that garnered international attention, Malcolm's requests to stage similar events were repeatedly vetoed by his mentor. Eventually, Malcolm's confrontation of racial injustice, which to the NOI entailed making a political statement, provoked the NOI leadership to charge he was abusing his position as national spokesman and advancing his own agenda. According to the *Autobiography*, Malcolm felt betrayed when he discovered that many of the leaders of the NOI were personally profiting from their positions in the organization. He was particularly troubled by Elijah Muhammad's illicit sexual liaisons with female followers. After the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X was suspended from the NOI for delivering a fiery speech that not only condemned the recently deceased leader for his lack of action on civil rights but characterized his assassination as an instance of "chickens coming home to roost." In March 1964 Malcolm responded by announcing his break with the NOI. For the next year his efforts would be geared toward organizing a black nationalist political party. He sought to use national and international means to achieve this end.

In April and May 1964 Malcolm X traveled throughout the Middle East and Africa. Many of the countries he visited received him as an honored guest of state. While in Saudi Arabia as a guest of Prince Faisal, Malcolm completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, or hajj, an expectation of all Muslims that

at least once in their lifetime they pray before the Kaaba in the holy city of Mecca. Malcolm X experienced a personal transformation as he completed the hajj. Though many of the statements Malcolm had made since his last visit overseas betrayed a new and more inclusive political consciousness, his fulfillment of the hajj marked a distinct change in Malcolm. As he explains in the *Autobiography*:

You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth. (337)

For the first time in his life, Malcolm X saw people of all races unified as one during the hajj. He also studied orthodox Islam and discovered dramatic differences between its teachings and those of the NOI. He subsequently adopted a new name to signify his new understanding. Although he continued to answer to the name *Malcolm X*, he was also known as *El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz*. This transformation was also marked by changes in his physical appearance: Just as he had stopped conking his hair and wearing faddish clothes when he converted to the NOI, upon his return from Mecca, Malcolm X sported a beard. In the United States, this superficial change was seen as a sign of his further radicalized notion of black nationalism. Describing this transformative experience, Malcolm said:

My thinking had been opened up wide in Mecca. I wrote long letters to my friends, in which I tried to convey to them my new insights into the American black man's struggle and his problems as well as the depths of my search for truth and justice. "I've had enough of some-

one else's propaganda," I had written to these friends. "I am for truth, no matter who tells it. I am for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I am a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole." . . . They called me "the angriest Negro in America." I wouldn't deny that charge; I spoke exactly as I felt. I believe in anger. I believe it is a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. I am for violence if non-violence means that we continue postponing or even delaying a solution to the American black man's problem. (*Autobiography* 373)

It is significant that Malcolm also expanded his international base of support by visiting newly independent nations. These nations, recently independent from European colonial powers, welcomed Malcolm X as a leader in the same type of fight that had resulted in their liberation. Malcolm X visited Egypt, Lebanon, Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Morocco, and Algeria in 1964. He returned to Africa in July, touring 11 nations as he sought international support for a petition drive asking the United Nations to investigate the United States for human rights violations against the African-American and Native American populations. During late 1964 and early 1965, Malcolm spent time in London, giving speeches, lectures, and interviews. He also participated in a debate over the use of extremism as a political tool hosted by Oxford University. Interestingly, students in Paris were denied a similarly planned event when the government refused to allow him to enter the country. These events attest to the controversial and polarizing reaction the civil rights leader provoked: The French government refused him entry, while students at Oxford University applauded his oratory.

Such reactions were to be expected: Malcolm X advocated the use of violence. In the United States, he famously used the phrase "by any means necessary" to describe what African Americans must do to achieve freedom and equality. In Great Britain, this was an equally radical proposition, though

many thought that Malcolm brilliantly defended it before a packed audience during the Oxford debates. A compelling part of his justification for such a radical stance was that a similar rationale had been used by the founding fathers of the United States as they rejected the European belief in the divine right of kings to rule and ignited the American Revolution.

In February 1965 Malcolm returned to the United States to continue to organize his political party, the Organization for Afro American Unity (OAAU). Despite repeated death threats, he arranged a public meeting of the OAAU in the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. On February 21, just as he was beginning his speech, he was shot several times by at least three men in the audience identified as members of the NOI. Malcolm X was pronounced dead on arrival at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital across the street from the Audubon Ballroom. He was survived by his wife, Betty, and four daughters, Attallah, Qubilah, Ilyasah, and Gamilah, and his twin daughters Malaak and Malikah, who were born eight months after their father's death.

Though the NOI had a clear motive for killing Malcolm and reportedly attempted to do so several times, there has been much speculation regarding who exactly was behind his assassination. This speculation has been fueled by the fact that Malcolm was subjected to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) surveillance from 1953 onward (the results of which can be found on the FBI's Web site at <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/malcolmx.htm>). With help from the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (which monitored his movements overseas), as well as the New York Police Department's Bureau of Special Services, FBI investigators amassed more than 4,000 pages of information on Malcolm (Perry 324). Many claim that his entry into France was thwarted by government intervention. J. Edgar Hoover, the now-infamous head and founder of the FBI, reportedly tried to aggravate the existing conflict between Malcolm and the NOI and may have indirectly caused his death (Goldman 429–430). Malcolm's stated intention of taking the plight of

African Americans before the United Nations, a spectacle that would have seriously damaged the international stature of the U.S. government, has also been cited as a possible motive for his assassination (Jenkins and Tryman 42). However, speculation about government complicity in the assassination plot has been overshadowed by the fact that Elijah Muhammad and other NOI members did not deny that they were responsible for ordering Malcolm's death (Perry 373–374). When Malcolm returned from Mecca, he confessed: "In the past I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I will never be guilty of that again." Such statements show a dynamic human being wrestling with the world, a man willing to change and admit error. This portrait, although not the one captured by common representations of him in the media, reveals a rare, complex human being, one deeply affected by personal loss and attuned to social injustice.

***The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (1965)**

Written by Alex Haley after extensive interviews, informal conversations, and research, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* chronicles the life and times of a key figure in the Civil Rights movement and provides an essential understanding of the social context for black nationalism. In addition to its value as a historical document, Malcolm X's *Autobiography* tells a human story, a story of a man who rose from poverty to become one of the most important and revolutionary spokespersons for the rights of African Americans in the 20th century. The transformation of Malcolm Little, a boy in an oppressed family in Nebraska, into Malcolm X, staunch defender of his people against the "white devil," and, finally, the reflective humanist El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, testifies to the protean nature of the human mind. Moreover, it traces the ceaseless movement of an intellect receptive to new ideas and modes of living. This spiritual journey is set against the backdrop of an unjust world, a world that Malcolm X reflects upon after embracing

orthodox Islam and traveling to Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Though the *Autobiography* stands as an important historical and political document, it is also a literary work, a work that draws from multiple literary traditions. Malcolm's story, fashioned by Haley, resembles the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, both of whom recount their experiences of racial oppression, followed by their self-education, and, ultimately, their emancipation from slavery. As Benjamin Franklin's autobiography does, Haley's narrative presents Malcolm's life as a process of diligent self-improvement, not only a quest for knowledge and truth, but also a continuous effort to find the best way to live—both privately, that is to say, spiritually, and as a social being. But, as the theorist and commentator bell hooks points out, Malcolm's *Autobiography* possesses a psychological depth lacking from the texts it draws upon: "Only Malcolm X charts the decolonization of a black mind in a manner that far surpasses any experience described in slave narratives" (hooks 79). Hooks attributes this depth to the distinctly religious and spiritual nature of Malcolm's "journey of self-realization," a journey that ultimately leads him to Mecca and his subsequent recognition of the oneness of humanity before a benevolent God (hooks 80).

The book can be divided into three major sections. First are the early years. At a young age, Malcolm Little's experiences often mirrored those of others in the African-American community. After the death of his father, Malcolm's mother struggled as a single parent reliant on inadequate social welfare policies, as did so many other single African-American women. Upon entering the workforce, racial segregation and discouragement from his teachers prevented Malcolm from becoming a lawyer, and he resorted to shoe shining, a career soon abandoned for the lucrative opportunities afforded by "hustling." Moving first to Boston and then New York City, a zoot suit–sporting Malcolm became enamored of the glamorous life afforded by selling marijuana and frequenting nightclubs. Despite the dangers of this life, Malcolm Little excelled as "Detroit Red," an alias he chose while hustling on

the streets of Harlem. Reflecting on the way people lived in Harlem and his own descent into activities associated with hustling, an older and wiser Malcolm X observes: “In the ghettos the white man has built for us, he has forced us not to aspire to greater things, but to view everyday living as *survival*—and in that kind of a community, survival is what is expected” (*Autobiography* 93).

In Harlem, Malcolm used drugs, sold drugs, lived a life of crime, carried multiple firearms, and earned a reputation as a man not to cross. Now engaging in prostitution, burglary, robbery, and bootlegging, “Detroit Red” was involved in activities that put him into contact with the Mafia. Malcolm learned much about corruption in American society from his apprenticeship in the criminal underworld, claiming, “The country’s entire social, political, and economic structure, the criminal, the law, and the politicians were actually inseparable partners” (*Autobiography* 119). As might be expected, this life of violent excess landed Malcolm in jail after nearly being murdered. He was arrested for breaking into a residence with his friend Shorty and two white women. Malcolm was outraged when he discovered that the involvement of the white women caused his sentence to be severe.

In her analysis of the *Autobiography* as spiritual journey, bell hooks likens Malcolm’s time as a hustler to the “wandering in the wilderness” most protagonists of traditional religious literature endure before a spiritual awakening (hooks 80). As Dante, for example, finds himself in a dark wood before embarking on his journey through hell, then purgatory, and finally paradise, so does Malcolm descend from the streets of Harlem into the bowels of the American justice system.

Malcolm’s imprisonment in Massachusetts marks the second major phase of his life story. While incarcerated, a time characterized by hooks as his “dark night of the soul,” Malcolm began to believe that no matter the enormity of a sinner’s error, redemption is forever possible (hooks 80). This was a dramatic change for Malcolm, whose atheism and cursing of God after arriving had earned him the nickname *Satan*. Malcolm saw a chance for his salvation after receiving a letter from

his brother, Reginald, who wrote of the Nation of Islam (NOI). With the encouragement of his family, now members of the NOI in Detroit, Malcolm started corresponding with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad while still in prison, finally meeting him in Chicago after his release in 1952. Not long after this meeting, Malcolm Little replaced his last name with the letter *X*: a letter symbolizing the namelessness of his enslaved ancestors. During his time in prison, Malcolm reflected upon his life and the world of knowledge available to him in the prison library. As he says in *The Autobiography*, “I would just like to study. I mean ranging study, because I have a wide-open mind” (*Autobiography* 388). With a renewed sense of self and an ever-expanding mind, Malcolm was ready to reach out to the world and make a difference in others’ lives.

For the next decade, Malcolm X endeavored to redeem the community he now recognized as his own, tirelessly working on behalf of his people by whatever means necessary while espousing values he thought would benefit and nurture the “so-called Negro.” As a spokesperson for the NOI, most of Malcolm’s statements were dictated by the organizations’ ideology, an ideology that espoused the values of the American dream—material prosperity, self-reliance, individual responsibility—while also advocating racial separatism. Redeemed and motivated to do good, Malcolm X strove to make this dream a reality for those who believed in the leadership and teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm X’s discovery of corruption in the upper ranks of the NOI ushered in the third phase of his life story and the text’s narrative. Berating the leadership for elevating themselves above the rest of NOI members, Malcolm X describes various abuses of power by Elijah Muhammad and his lieutenants. This corruption could not help but remind him of the world he had explored as “Detroit Red”: For Malcolm X, both of these situations—street hustling and NOI rivalries—were rotten with corruption, situations that would inevitably lead to envy, jealousy, greed, and murder. Malcolm’s feud with Elijah Muhammad, who had assumed a godlike stature in his mind, has been compared by bell hooks to “the anguish [of

Christ] in the garden of Gethesmane, expressed in his tortured cry ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” (hooks 87). This crisis of faith ultimately leads Malcolm again to question his beliefs and worldly conduct, resulting in the ultimate fulfillment of the spiritual narrative running throughout the *Autobiography*. No longer under the spell of the Nation of Islam and its racist policies, the last section of *The Autobiography* chronicles Malcolm X’s intellectual development after making the hajj. Journeying to Mecca, Malcolm witnessed harmonious interracial relations for the first time in his life as he prayed with thousands of others from different parts of the world at the Kaaba. He was also exposed to the orthodox teachings of Islam, teachings that did not demonize people according to the color of their skin. The man who emerged, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, accepted responsibility for the improvement of his community, a task he associated with a much greater and more ambitious goal: to improve the lives of those living in all parts of the postcolonial, undeveloped world.

Malcolm X’s teachings on black nationalism were deeply influenced by his extensive travels in former colonies. More inclusive and independent than his previous ways of thinking, these teachings are partially reflected in the tone and perspective from which *The Autobiography* is told. However, as Haley states in his epilogue, Malcolm had expressed concern over the glowing descriptions of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI that he had written in the *Autobiography* before his break with them, ultimately deciding to let them go unchanged (*Autobiography* 419). Such details raise more general concerns about the perspective of the narrative, concerns that become even more complicated with the intervention of Haley in the composition process. In his essay “Malcolm X across the Genres,” the critic Neil Painter asserts that

autobiography, even when it is not “told to” another but is written by the person who lived the life, reworks existential fragments into a meaningful new whole, as seen from a particular vantage point. Even when the autobiography

is not a collaboration, the narrator passes over much in silence and highlights certain themes that become salient in light of what the narrator concludes he or she has become. (Painter 433)

Though it is generally agreed that Haley was faithful to Malcolm’s wishes regarding how his life was to be portrayed, Malcolm never saw the final product (which includes a 70-page epilogue penned by Haley after Malcolm’s death). Recognizing such issues should not detract from the power and validity of the *Autobiography* and the insights it contains, but merely emphasize the text’s status as a work of literature, rather than an unadulterated historical account of one man’s life. Commenting on Malcolm’s re-creation and alteration of events, the writer and critic David Bradley asserts that such discrepancies point to the aesthetic achievement of the *Autobiography* as a “literary expression,” a “consciously crafted [myth] of struggle and uplift” (Bradley 42).

By the time Malcolm finished collaborating with Haley, he knew his fate and prophesied not only his death but also the stereotypical and reactionary way he would be viewed in the last pages of the *Autobiography*:

[Each] day I live as if I am already dead, and I tell you what I would like for you to do. When I *am* dead—I say it that way because from the things I *know*, I do not expect to live long enough to read this book in its finished form—I want you to just watch and see if I’m not right in what I say: that the white man, in his press, is going to identify me with “hate.” (*Autobiography* 388–389)

When Malcolm X was murdered, his family was left fatherless, his community was left with one less capable leader, and violence was proven, once again, to be an effective political weapon. Despite Malcolm’s failure to found a viable black nationalist party or take the case of African-American human rights before the United Nations, his life, as captured in his *Autobiography*, was one of triumph.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In what ways does the story of Malcolm X offer validation of the belief that “life is significant because of its journey, not its final destination”?
2. Using Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*, write a well-developed essay that explores how the American dream of “lifting yourself up by your bootstraps” weighs against the corruptions that accompany successful attainment of power, status, and privilege. How can the *Autobiography* be read as a critique of the American dream and its insistence that self-reliance is the key to success? What characteristics are common to both Malcolm X’s life and the American dream?
3. As Malcolm matured, he focused first on the level of comfort available to him as an individual followed by the level of achievement realized by the Afro-American community. The third phase of his life concludes with his developing concern about the status of the world’s underserved peoples. Are there examples that support this view of his life? With these examples in mind, construct a well-developed essay on the stages of Malcolm X’s life, detailing his thinking and the way it changed during each of these phases.
4. Read Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*. Next, think about the issues both Malcolm X and Douglass had to face. Finally, write a well-developed essay that compares the solutions each provides and the audience each addresses. How, in both cases, does the audience determine what is said and how it is said?

***Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (1965)**

This work was published immediately after Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965. This collection of speeches and interviews represents the major tenets of his political and social beliefs in the last years of his life. Chief among the writings in this book are the speeches “Message to the Grassroots,” which advocates unity among progressive people, especially their leadership, in pursuing their goal; “The Ballot or the Bullet,” which is a response to

the Congress’s hesitation in passing the civil rights bill; and “The Black Revolution,” which defends the use of violence in achieving political ends.

The poignancy of these speeches is most apparent when they are seen or heard. As did the West African griots, Malcolm X made significant contributions to oral literature and rarely wrote for publication. His wit and humor readily made his ideas appealing to his audience. Even though it often appeared that he was speaking ad hoc, he was not. He prepared extensive notes for his speeches yet used them only as guides as he read the crowd and adjusted accordingly, using the call-and-response style commonly used among African-American orators, as well as Judeo-Christian liturgies heard across the world (you can listen to many Malcolm X speeches on the Web at such sites as <http://www.brothermalcolm.net/mxwords/whathesaidarchive.html>).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Commenting on religion and resistance, Malcolm X argues:

There is nothing in our book, the Koran, that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That’s a good religion. In fact, that’s that old time religion. That’s the one that Ma and Pa used to talk about: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and a head for a head, and a life for a life. That’s a good religion. And nobody resents that kind of religion being taught but a wolf, who intends to make you his meal. . . . No, preserve your life, it’s the best thing you’ve got. And if you’ve got to give it up, let it be even-steven. (*Malcolm X Speaks* 12–13)

What does Malcolm X mean by “a wolf”? Is he serious when he encourages blacks to make things “even-steven”? On the basis of your reading of Malcolm X’s essays, argue whether Malcolm X is justifying violence.

2. Consider the following passage from Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots":

I would like to make a few comments concerning the difference between the black revolution and the Negro revolution. There's a difference. Are they both the same? And if they're not, what is the difference? What is the difference between a black revolution and a Negro revolution? First, what is a revolution? Sometimes I'm inclined to believe that many of our people are using this word "revolution" loosely, without taking careful consideration [of] what this word actually means, and what its historic characteristics are. When you study the historic nature of revolutions, the motive of a revolution, the objective of a revolution, and the result of a revolution, and the methods used in a revolution, you may change words. You may devise another program. You may change your goal and you may change your mind.

Look at the American Revolution in 1776. That revolution was for what? For land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed. Number one, it was based on land, the basis of independence. And the only way they could get it was bloodshed. The French Revolution—what was it based on? The land-less against the landlord. What was it for? Land. How did they get it? Bloodshed. Was no love lost; was no compromise; was no negotiation. I'm telling you, you don't know what a revolution is. 'Cause when you find out what it is, you'll get back in the alley; you'll get out of the way. The Russian Revolution—what was it based on? Land. The land-less against the landlord. How did they bring it about? Bloodshed. You haven't got a revolution that doesn't involve bloodshed. And you're afraid to bleed. I said, you're afraid to bleed.

With Malcolm X's thoughts in mind, write a well-developed essay on the nature of revolution, arguing whether you think Malcolm X was right. If so, what are the consequences? If not, why not? Are the idealistic reasons that people hold for revolt wrong? Is what Malcolm says about land correct?

By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X
(1970)

As does *Malcolm X Speaks*, this book includes significant speeches and interviews that represent major aspects of Malcolm X's political thought. What sets this work apart from *Malcolm X Speaks* is that it is exclusively comprised of materials pertinent to Malcolm X's views after his estrangement from the Nation of Islam. Rather than speaking in the name of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, in *By Any Means Necessary* Malcolm X conveys his profoundly changed views on theology, politics, and social conventions.

In each of these areas, he expressed views that were no longer parochially confined to the teachings and daily dictates of the NOI's commander in chief. Instead of referring to *Message to the Blackman* or *How to Eat to Live*, both authored by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm relies on the Qur'an as his ultimate authority in this collection. Rather than place all of his emphasis on the development of different components of the NOI, such as its paramilitary organization the Fruit of Islam or the official newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, Malcolm X organized a political party designed to attract black people of all religious beliefs. Instead of seeing the world in exclusively black and white racial terms that focused on civil rights, he broadened his view by offering means for multiracial and international considerations, as human rights became his central focus. Finally, this book is significant because Betty Shabazz authorized it after her husband's death. She was not identified as the editor, but it is clear that her copyright of the work was intended as her approval of its contents.

in Vietnam, and the assassinations of Medgar Evers in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. Research these movements by finding a reliable Internet site or a detailed reference work such as an encyclopedia dealing with civil rights. Finally, write a well-developed essay that argues why black nationalism came to be, what black separatism means, and how these ideas relate to our society today.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Benson, Thomas W. "Malcolm X." In *American Orators of the Twentieth Century: Critical Studies and Sources*, edited by Bernard K. Duffy and Halford R. Ryan, 317–322. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Alex Haley and Malcolm X's The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Chelsea House, 1996.
- Bradley, David. "Malcolm's Mythmaking." *Transition* 56 (1992): 20–46.
- Breitman, George. *The Assassination of Malcolm X*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991.
- Carangelo, Audrey. "What's in a Name? Understanding Malcolm X." 2006. Discovery Education. Available online. URL: <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/malcolmx/>. Accessed June 16, 2006.
- Carson, Clayborne. *Malcolm X: The FBI File*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1991.
- Clark, John Henrik. *The Man and His Times*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1969.
- Cone, James. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Cruse, Harold. *Rebellion or Revolution?* New York: Morrow, 1968.
- Davis, Lenwood. *Malcolm X: A Selected Bibliography*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Davis, Thulani. *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1993.
- DeCaro, Louis A., Jr. *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- . *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Doctor, Bernard. *Malcolm X for Beginners*. Danbury, Conn.: Writers & Readers, 1992.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Epps, Archie. *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard*. New York: Paragon House, 1991.
- Essien-Udom, E. U. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Evanzz, Karl. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.
- Gallen, David. *Malcolm X as They Knew Him*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992.
- Gardell, Mattias. *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Goldman, Peter L. *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*. 2d ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Haley, Alex. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine, 1965.
- hooks, bell. "Sitting at the Feet of the Messenger: Remembering Malcolm X." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.
- Jamal, Hakim A. *From the Dead Level: Malcolm X and Me*. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Jenkins, Robert L., and Mfanya Donald Tryman, eds. "Conspiracy Theories of the Assassination of Malcolm X." In *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Johnson, Timothy V. *Malcolm X: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1986.
- Kelley, Robert D. G. "House Negroes on the Loose: Malcolm X and the Black Bourgeoisie." *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 419–435.
- Lincoln, C. Eric. *Black Muslims in America*. New York: Kayode, 1991.

- Leeman, Richard W., ed. *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Lomax, Louis E. *When the Word Is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World*. New York: Signet Books, 1964.
- Malcolm X. Interview by A. B. Spellman (New York, March 19, 1964). In *By Any Means Necessary*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992, 23–35.
- Malcolm X*. Directed by Spike Lee. DVD. Warner Brothers, 2005.
- “Malcolm X F.B.I. Files.” Federal Bureau of Investigation. Available online. URL: <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/malcolmX.htm>. Accessed October 29, 2009.
- “Malcolm X House Site.” We Shall Overcome: Historic Places of the Civil Rights movement. Available online. URL: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/ne1.htm>. Accessed October 29, 2009.
- Malcolm X Museum Web site. Available online. URL: <http://www.themalcolmXmuseum.org/>. Accessed June 16, 2006.
- Malcolm-X.org. Available online. URL: <http://www.malcolm-x.org>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Malcolm X Project at Columbia University, 2001–2006. Columbia University Center for Contemporary Black History Institute for Research in African-American Studies. Available online. URL: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/>. Accessed June 16, 2006.
- “Malcolm X Webliography.” brothermalcolm.net. Available online. URL: <http://www.brothermalcolm.net/research/webliography.html>. Accessed June 16, 2006.
- Marable, Manning. *The Malcolm X Reader: His Life, His Thought, His Legacy*. New York: New American Library, 1993.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978.
- . *Message to the Blackman in America*. Philadelphia: Hakim’s, 1965.
- Muhammad, Elijah. *How to Eat to Live*. Atlanta: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 1967.
- The Official Web Site of Malcolm X. Estate of Malcolm X c/o CMG Worldwide. Available online. URL: <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/malcolm/index.htm>. Accessed June 16, 2006.
- Painter, Neil. “Malcolm X across the Gennes.” *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1994): 396–404.
- Perry, Bruce. *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1991.
- . *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989.
- “The Smoking Gun: The Malcolm X Files.” thesmokinggun.com. Available online. URL: <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/malcolmX/malcolmX.html>. Accessed June 16, 2006.
- Strickland, William. *Malcolm X Make It Plain*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Wolfenstein, Eugene Victor. *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution*. New York: Guilford, 1993.
- Wood, Joe, ed. *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992.
- John Becker, Blake G. Hobby,
and Dwight Mullen



PAULE MARSHALL (1929–)

True, I am indebted to those writers, white and black, whom I read during my formative years and still read for instruction and pleasure. But they were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledged before all others: the group of women around the table long ago.

("From the Poets in the Kitchen,"
originally published as part of the Making of a Writer series
in the *New York Times Book Review*, January 9, 1983)

The daughter of Barbadian-American immigrants, Paule Marshall was born Valenza Pauline Burke in Brooklyn, New York, on April 9, 1929. As did many immigrants the world over, Marshall's parents, Samuel and Ada Clement Burke, traveled to the United States hoping to achieve the American dream and the economic prosperity it promised. Despite growing up in an urban environment quite different from the world her parents knew, Marshall was never without Caribbean culture. In her mother's kitchen, a young Marshall heard of her people's past, told through the words of other island women. The rhythms of their voices entranced Marshall at an early age, and she later recognized these women as poets with a lasting and profound influence on her work. Until her first trip to Barbados at the age of nine, these kitchen poets and her parents' stories were Marshall's only connection to her parents' homeland. After witnessing the Caribbean people, culture, and landscapes for herself, Marshall, like the kitchen poets of Brooklyn, was inspired to re-create the majesty of the land through words. She returned from her year-long stay in Barbados with her own accent and several poems celebrating all she had seen. Marshall drew from these experiences in her later writings, in particular the autobiographical short story "To Da-duh, in Memoriam."

Marshall soon lost her accent after being teased by her Brooklyn schoolmates, but she never lost her

fascination with the land of her ancestors. When she was a child, Barbados stirred Marshall to poetry; when she was an adult, island culture inspired her to write complex novels examining the differences between the American and Caribbean ways of life. Marshall's adult writing began at Brooklyn College, where she majored in English after a friend encouraged her to write. This decision to pursue a career with words was not surprising: In addition to the poetry she heard in her mother's kitchen, Marshall spent countless hours in the library, reveling in the works of 19th-century novelists such as William Thackeray and Charles Dickens.

Though she lived vicariously through such books as a young girl, Marshall never saw herself in them. Victorian England, distant from Brooklyn and Barbados, led Marshall to believe that in these great works something she "couldn't quite define was missing" ("Poets in the Kitchen"). What Marshall sought at this young age was a literature that better represented her own heritage and experience, not that of someone else. She eventually found what she was seeking in a collection of poems by the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Marshall had heard the African-American dialects found in Dunbar's poetry before but had never seen them on a printed page. Dunbar's characters, though without Caribbean accents, reminded Marshall of her own family, and for the first time she met a people like her through the written word.

From this point on, Marshall continued to read African-American authors outside school, complaining much later that such influential and historically important African-American authors as Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth were conspicuously absent from her education. Later, at Brooklyn College, Marshall read great European writers such as Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad, both of whom she cites as major influences on her work. Upon Marshall's foray into the literary world, experimentation was increasingly common; many writers began using postmodern techniques, manipulating language and emphasizing the artificiality of their works. Rather than adopting such a style, Marshall clung fast to psychological realism and defended the traditional novel's value. She would later prove the form's worth in her own novels, which provide keen insights into the psyches of her characters. Her work couples the stylistic qualities of the early modernists with the thematic concerns of many African-American writers, whom she would not read with much consistency until her graduation from Brooklyn College in 1953.

Shortly after graduation, Marshall soon found work writing for *Our World*, a small black magazine similar to *Ebony*, and enrolled at Hunter College two years later to continue her studies. Marshall also returned to the New York public libraries of her childhood, this time as a librarian. In 1954, she published her first short story, "The Valley Between," her only work to focus exclusively on white characters. She married Kenneth Marshall in 1950 and gave birth to a son, Evan-Keith Marshall, before divorcing her husband in 1963. She would later marry Nourry Menard, a Haitian businessman, in 1970. While writing for *Our World*, which assigned her to cover stories in the Caribbean and South America, Marshall also began to write about *her* world. After her workdays writing for the magazine, Marshall spent her nights penning her autobiographical first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959).

Marshall was by no means the only African-American woman writing at this time. GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S *Maud Martha* was published in 1953,

the year Marshall graduated from Brooklyn College. Yet, she would not read or know of Brooks's seminal novel until the 1960s, along with the works of several other African-American women not mentioned in her schools. Many of these writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, were forgotten relics of the Harlem Renaissance, a golden age of African-American arts. When Marshall's parents immigrated to the United States in the 1920s and even when Marshall was born in 1929, African-American musicians, painters, poets, and writers received unprecedented critical and public attention throughout the world. The movement lasted into the 1930s, at which point the Great Depression and its economic repercussions overshadowed the success of African-American artists in the previous decade.

Had Marshall written *Brown Girl, Brownstones* at this time, it would have been very successful. Instead, Marshall's first novel appeared when African Americans struggled not to be recognized as artists but as people, people worthy of the rights denied them by a segregated America. Marshall began her writing amid the Civil Rights movement, a time characterized by sit-ins, marches, and nationwide protests against unjust laws that denied African Americans equal rights. RALPH ELLISON'S *Invisible Man* (1952) spoke for an African-American population unseen as individuals worthy of equality, three decades after the Harlem Renaissance. Ellison's novel was an unprecedented success. As one of few authors to address African-American concerns, Ellison had a large influence on black authors, especially Marshall, who later deemed his collection of essays *Shadow and Act* (1964) her "literary bible."

With racial tension reaching fever pitch across the United States, many readers embraced novels like *Invisible Man* regardless of their race. Authors such as Ellison sought to illuminate the African-American's individuality and humanity. While the majority of the reading public knew the works of African-American male writers such as Ellison and Richard Wright, female African-American authors, including Brooks and Marshall, remained obscure and unappreciated: *Brown Girl, Brownstones*,

though applauded by critics, did not garner much attention outside the literati.

Marshall received similar reviews for her collection of novellas, *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), as well as her second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969). Like her first novel, these works were reviewed favorably by critics but virtually ignored by the public. Marshall remained in relative obscurity until 1981, when the Feminist Press republished the then-out-of-print *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Much had happened in the two decades following the book's initial publication to warrant a second printing: Women joined the Civil Rights movement alongside African Americans and other minorities in the struggle for equality, igniting a demand for literature that represented such marginalized groups. Feminist criticism emerged, and within it black feminist criticism. These efforts to balance what many viewed as a homogeneous, white, and European literary tradition helped bring Marshall's works to light, as well as works by Brooks and other African-American women. In the years before the reprinting of Marshall's first novel, a newer generation of African-American women writers surfaced, including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor. These women would tackle in their literature the themes Marshall had 20 years prior. Their works, as do those of Marshall, investigate not only what it means to be black but what it means to be black *and* a woman. Marshall's first novel and its second printing helped usher in a new group of writers equally dedicated to examining the inner consciousness of the black woman in America.

In this way, Marshall transcends what W. E. B. DuBois called "double-consciousness"—the problem of being black and an American—and reveals the complexities inherent in being black, female, American, and of Caribbean descent. As such, literary critics have branded Marshall as a writer with myriad classifications: feminist, pan-Africanist, African American, Caribbean. Marshall is none of these and yet all; she falls into many categories because she focuses on themes and characters that provoke many questions about identity. Marshall's characters do not just face the "two warring ideals"

of which DuBois spoke. Rather, they journey across foreign lands and ideologies searching for a single identity pulled from multiple sources. Marshall encountered this upon growing up in Brooklyn as a black female: The landscapes of the Caribbean are as much a part of Marshall's own identity as the brownstone apartments in which she lived. Her life and works emphasize the theme of reconciliation, of synthesizing often different or contradictory lifestyles into a single identity.

Reconciliation and identity are universal themes found not only in Brooklyn and Barbados but the world over. Specifically, however, Marshall targets the African diaspora, a term referring to people of African descent throughout the world. Many Africans were taken aboard slave ships bound for the United States, but a large number were also transported to South America and the Caribbean. Thus, Marshall and her family trace their ancestry from Africa to the Caribbean, from the Caribbean to the United States. As her characters do, Marshall possesses a hybrid identity composed of several geographies and lifestyles. In her texts, she paints beautiful pictures of her characters' island homelands. Yet, this is not to say she focuses solely on the lands from which her characters, as well as she, are displaced. She never loses sight of America, setting the Caribbean lifestyle against the American way of life, as seen most notably in her second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. In Marshall's fiction, America is as influential a setting as Africa or the Caribbean, for it represents an important shard of a splintered identity. As the title of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* suggests, Marshall's conception of her own identity was formed in Brooklyn long before spreading to the shores of Barbados.

All of Marshall's works exhibit this delineation between place and displacement, between home and homeland. Rather than advocating a return to a geographic location, her works encourage a return to and reappraisal of the past. Her third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), which won the Before Columbus American Book Award, relies heavily on African folklore and mythology. As Marshall's autobiographical character Selina Boyce demonstrates, it is through the past that people—

especially displaced people of the diaspora—better understand themselves: By knowing where they are from, they can more firmly grasp who they are. Postcolonial critics, who are often concerned with how to reclaim cultural identity and autonomy after they have been effaced and repressed by imperialism, have praised Marshall's works for their penetrating insights into the effects of colonialism on the colonized.

Marshall published her collection of short stories *Reena and Other Stories* in 1983, again with the aid of the Feminist Press. In 1991, she published *Daughters*, a novel focusing on a father-daughter relationship much like hers with her father. A year later, in 1992, she received the MacArthur Prize Fellowship for lifetime achievement. She published her fifth novel, *The Fisher King*, to positive reviews in 2000. In addition to her writings, Marshall has taught or lectured at such esteemed institutions as Yale University, Oxford University, Cornell University, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Students and scholars continue to read Marshall's work, especially as interest in feminist, postcolonial, and cultural criticism increases. As so many black women writers have attested, Marshall's work has inspired multiple generations of authors and has led many to rethink their definition of blackness. She affords her readers a vision of the modern, multiethnic woman of color struggling to survive in a racially divided world. Through her apt characterizations and poetic language, Marshall leads us to imagine possibilities: the many ways we can rethink and re-create, out of the dustbin of the past, a culture that preserves the vitality of what has been and envisions what may be.

***Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)**

As a coming-of-age tale, or bildungsroman, Marshall's first novel belongs beside Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. SALINGER's *The Catcher in the Rye* as an American exemplar of the form. Each of these works charts

a young person's path from innocence to experience, but unlike Twain and Salinger's protagonists, Marshall's main character must make sense of not just *the* world but several worlds. Contributing to its lack of popular success when first published in 1959, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* appeared at a time when African-American literature more often told the journey from boyhood to manhood, and well-developed female characters were all but absent. Now, along with Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953), Marshall's novel is considered one of the first works of American literature to explore the maturation of a young black woman realistically.

As its title suggests, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* tells the story of Selina Boyce, a young girl of Barbadian descent living with her family in one of Brooklyn's many brownstone apartments. These apartments are symbolic of the American dream that lured many immigrants to New York, many from the Caribbean. Most of these residents desire to "buy house," and it is this materialistic ideal more than any other that generates the novel's conflict. In a reversal of Barbadian and American gender roles, Selina's mother, Silla, works long hours in a munitions factory so that one day they can purchase their rented brownstone, while her father, Deighton, who dreams of his homeland, desires only to make enough money to return to Barbados and build a house on his newly inherited property. Sharing Silla's dreams of upward mobility is the Barbadian Homeowners Association, of which she and many other Barbadian immigrants are members.

Although the novel is not set in Barbados, the island country functions as a character; it shapes Selina and her family, who dream of returning to the island while so many other Barbadian immigrants, after losing touch with their homeland, desire only a brownstone home in the multiethnic community of Brooklyn. The brownstones the immigrants strive to own represent materialism and American capitalism. They instill in the Barbadian community thoughts of homeownership and wealth, and these principles elicit opposing reactions within the Boyce family: Silla struggles to achieve the American dream, Deighton rejects these priorities, and

young Selina tries to glean from her parents the values most significant to her. On her journey to womanhood, Selina's identity is also shaped by the racism and sexism she encounters growing up as a young black woman in America. Her attempts at identifying with others are further complicated by her Barbadian heritage: Though the other immigrants and members of the Barbadian Homeowners Association share her heritage, they desire to assimilate into the American way of life, unlike Deighton, who detests the avaricious materialism of America and wishes to return to Barbados.

As a child, Selina sides with her father, whose eyes gleam every time he speaks of Barbados. An idealistic young girl, Selina shares her father's enthusiasm for returning to Barbados and sees her mother as an enemy, a threat to her father. Yet as she blossoms into a young woman, Selina notices how much she resembles her mother. She tries to control a later lover, Clive Springer (a failed Barbadian artist not unlike Deighton Boyce), in the same way her mother attempted to control her father. Both are strong-willed women upon whom men depend, and both will take any measures to achieve their goals. When Deighton foolishly spends the money from selling his property, Silla has him deported back to Barbados, where, within sight of his homeland, he either jumps or is pushed off the boat and drowns. Similarly, Selina manipulates the Barbadian Homeowners Association so as to win one of their scholarships through her dancing and with this money leave Brooklyn.

Women hold the power in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. This is in marked contrast to earlier African-American literature, which focused almost exclusively on black men. When female characters appeared in these earlier works, they rarely transcended the stereotype of an African-American woman at the time. Marshall is one of the first novelists to empower her female characters with the autonomy and independence typically granted to men. Though Silla and Selina's determination is not always admirable, their ambition and drive mark a distinct change in African-American literature.

Within the streets of Brooklyn, outside the walls of her brownstone, Selina hears more than her

parents' arguments. Mrs. Thompson, an elderly hairdresser from the South, is a source of wisdom to Selina. In the beauty salon, Selina first understands her place in a society divided by race and gender. Selina's Barbadian friend Suggie, a maid in the white suburbs of New York, provides another voice for Selina to consult as she approaches womanhood. Suggie's calypso dancing and frequent dates entice the young Selina to investigate further both her heritage and her burgeoning sexuality. Many of these characters, including Suggie, speak the same Barbadian dialect and vocabulary Marshall heard as a young girl. From the way in which they use the same adjective twice, such as *poor-poor*, to emphasize a phrase, to the way in which they employ contrary adjectives such as *beautiful-ugly* to neutralize a statement's power, Marshall draws from the words of the kitchen poets she heard as a child. In doing so, she manifests the heritage and identity of her characters through this hybridized Barbadian English, a throwback to another time made modern in Brooklyn.

Brown Girl, Brownstones was conceived as the first part of a trilogy that would later include *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. None of the characters present in the first novel reappears in the next two. Rather, Marshall continues to explore the same themes of identity, displacement, and reconnection with the past in her next novels, and characters similar to Selina Boyce reinforce these themes. As Selina does, many of Marshall's characters embark upon a journey to find themselves.

But just as *Brown Girl, Brownstones* chronicles Selina's journey to womanhood, it also charts her passage from Brooklyn to Barbados. This decision reflects her deceased father's desires yet is made with the same determination her mother used to keep the family in Brooklyn. At the end of the novel, Selina has become aware of all that has shaped her: her parents' domestic struggle, the Barbadian Homeowners Association, the racism and sexism aimed at African-American girls, and, most distinctly, a Caribbean heritage she has yet to grasp fully. With an eye toward Barbados and her back toward Brooklyn, she tosses a single silver bangle

toward the brownstone, not to leave its memory in Brooklyn, but to leave a piece of herself with it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As Paule Marshall does, Jamaica Kincaid blends historical fact and autobiography. Read Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*, thinking about how the protagonist envisions her past, present, and future. Then, write a well-developed essay contrasting the two novels' protagonists. In what ways do these characters change as they pass into womanhood? Can both books be considered coming-of-age novels, the form that in literary studies we call the "bildungsroman"? Why or why not? Also, take into account the relationship the two protagonists have with the culture they know and seek to reconnect with, using specific passages from the novels to support your points.
2. Read Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, comparing the female protagonist with Selina Boyce. In a well-developed essay, explore how both characters inhabit urban spaces while trying to reconcile their current lives with an idealized homeland.
3. The American dream stands at the forefront of many a great American novel, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Compare the vision of the American dream in these novels with the one presented in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. How do Marshall's (and Selina's) unique background and immigrant status change her portrayal of the American dream? How do Selina's family's expectations differ than those of Jay Gatsby or the Joads?

The Chosen Place, the Timeless People (1969)

Though Marshall's second novel shares no characters with her first, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* begins where *Brown Girl, Brownstones* ends: with a journey from America to the Caribbean. Unlike Selina Boyce, the Americans in this novel

do not travel to the fictional Bourne Island in search of their heritage. Instead, the novel follows a group of anthropologists sent by the Center of Applied Research, not to discover the island's past, but to plan its future. Yet, as the novel attests, any planning of Bourne Island's future is ill conceived without first acknowledging the island's history: The island is a microcosm of the postcolonial third world; with its sugarcane industry and stratified class structure, it is not far removed from its slave trade days. Just as the island represents colonized countries, the anthropologists assume the role of colonizers. They wish to usher in progress to the people of Bourne Island, but on their own terms. Still, the Americans are not stereotypes of Western imperialism: Saul Amron, a Jewish-American anthropologist, is from a people with a history of suffering; his wife, Harriet, descends from a family who once profited from shipping slaves from the island; and Allen Fuso, a research assistant, identifies more with the island than his native home of America. Soon after their arrival, the group realizes that their efforts to modernize Bourne Island are futile and that only by revisiting the island's past can its people then see the future. In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Marshall explores the two themes most emblematic of her work: "the importance of truly confronting the past, both in personal and historical terms, and the necessity of reversing the present order" ("Shaping the World of My Art" 123).

The Chosen Place, the Timeless People is Marshall's only novel set exclusively in the Caribbean. Though Bourne Island is one of several islands situated somewhere between North and South America, it breaks from the other islands and faces east toward "the colossus of Africa," foreshadowing the African traditions and rituals that are the basis for later sections of the novel (13). Flying over the island for the first time, the Americans observe another significant characteristic of the island's geography. On this isolated island, a small section of land clashes with the rest of the island's picturesque scenery:

To the west stretched the wide, gently undulating plain with its neatly ordered fields and the

town poised at its southern edge. To the east and sealed off from that bright green world lay a kind of valley which occupied less than a quarter of the land space on the island. Viewed from the plane, it resembled a ruined amphitheater whose other half had crumbled away and fallen into the sea. (14)

It is in this “ruined amphitheater” that the stage of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is set. This ravaged land is Bournehills. When it is viewed from above, the Americans notice a large ridge alienating Bournehills and its people from the rest of the island. When it is viewed from below, among the people of the island, the Americans notice further divisions. As with most of Marshall's characters, the land is a powerful force in shaping the lives and personalities of the people residing on it. The residents of Bournehills are the island's most poor and oppressed; they form the bottom rung of the class system left over from the island's time in the slave trade. Above them is the island's working class, and above both classes are the island's white businesspeople. Hundreds of years have not broken the bonds once placed on the people of Bournehills. The manner in which the past haunts the people of Bournehills is best expressed in the novel's epigraph, a saying from the Tiv of West Africa: “Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end.”

The Americans are quick to perform these “ceremonies of reconciliation”—namely, providing modern technology for the island's sugarcane industry—but the people of Bournehills are not so quick to forgive. They refuse to use such offerings, even though the machines would ease their burdens in the workplace. Rather, they live their lives in much the same way as the people of Bournehills centuries prior. They cling to such a past; they distrust any move toward the colonization that exploited their ancestors so long ago. Yet, by refusing any sort of change, they remain static characters destined to repeat the past.

The novel's protagonist, Merle Kinbona, knows the island's history well: A native of the island, Merle left to study in England, where she also married and had a daughter with a Ugandan student. Her husband left with the daughter for Africa, however, after discovering a secret Merle had kept from him: She was the daughter of a mulatto businessman. Merle, in turn, leaves for Bourne Island when she learns her father is dying. In seeking out her homeland, Merle also seeks herself. Like the land, Merle is divided: She descends from two different races and divides time between two vastly different islands, yet she identifies with her homeland and works to effect change for Bournehills and its people. She realizes what the people of Bournehills do not: that a balance must be struck with modernity in order to guarantee the island's progress, a balance that preserves the island's rich heritage. As such, Merle functions as an intercessor between the Americans and the islanders.

As a history teacher as well as a native of the island, Merle understands the importance of tradition coupled with social progress and equality. More than any of the novel's characters, Merle is capable of wedding the island's past with a more prosperous future. In addition to political change, Merle facilitates personal change. In particular, she forms an intimate bond with Saul in which the two reach a greater self-awareness. As Merle does, Saul begins to realize how important the local customs and rituals are to the people of Bournehills, and the two share similar visions for the island's development. Saul's Jewish heritage allows him a more sympathetic view of the islanders, though he can never assimilate into their culture completely. In their relationship, both Saul and Merle heal themselves in order to heal the land, for as Marshall's novel attests, political change begins with personal revolution.

Harriet, of course, does not desire a revolution. With ties to the country's slave trade, she represents Western imperialism and its often myopic idea of development, which thrives on global technology and abandons local tradition. Harriet views Bournehills as a “mysterious and obscured region

of the mind which ordinary consciousness did not dare admit to light” (21). Her perception of the foreign land is much the same as Marlow’s upon first entering the Congo in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a novella Marshall cites as an early influence. In both works, these ominous descriptions dramatize the oppressor’s fear of the oppressed, a fear of bringing to light what has been cloaked in darkness for so long.

Wary of change, the people of Bournehills remain in darkness, unsure of how to reconcile the pain of the past with a progressive future. Yet in their annual reenactment of Cuffee Ned’s slave rebellion, they show themselves desirous of change if not quite capable of it. Every year, they relive their past through Cuffee Ned’s uprising; every year, they witness Cuffee Ned murdering those who enslaved him. If for only a few days a year, the people of Bournehills believe such change is possible. The account of Cuffee Ned reiterates a major theme of the novel, that political change can be and often is ignited by an individual. At the novel’s conclusion, Saul reflects on the possibility of such a change:

Because it’s true in a way what everyone’s always saying about the place, that it’s not going to change—at least not on any terms but its own. I’ve come to believe that also. But I felt that if we went about the project the right way we might do some good, if only in helping Bournehills people to feel a little less powerless and forgotten. Then, hopefully, they’d take matters into their own hands. (453)

Saul leaves for America, Merle for Africa, and it is unclear whether the people of Bournehills will rise up and demand the change of which they dream. But at least they dream: Every year, with drums echoing and hands clapping, the people of Bournehills rejoice about what was and will be, and the past seems evermore the present.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a seminal text in understanding the psychology of imperialism. How are the Africans depicted in Conrad’s novel, specifically by Kurtz and Marlow? How are these perceptions similar to or different from the ways the Americans perceive the islanders in Marshall’s novel? Consider particularly ideas of civilization: What does it mean in the Western world to be civilized? Who are the most civilized characters in each novel?
2. Throughout much of her fiction, Marshall uses the automobile as a symbol of Western technology. In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Vere builds a race car as a status symbol yet is ultimately killed while driving it. How is the car, perhaps more than any other machine, symbolic of Western industrialism? Be sure to consider Marshall’s description of Merle’s Bentley.
3. In the novel, Harriet, whose family once profited from Bourne Island’s slave trade, represents colonizing countries, whereas the residents of Bournehills, who have made little progress from those slave days, represent the colonized. Though such characters seem quite opposite, compare the ways in which Harriet and the people of Bournehills are similar, noting how each refuses to change. Why can or will these characters not change, and what does this mean for their futures? Is one future more promising than the other?
4. Every year the people of Bournehills reenact the slave rebellion of Cuffee Ned. In doing so, they idolize the hero for his actions, yet because of this they fail to see the possibility of change within “ordinary” people like them. In what ways does such hero worship suppress their potential for change? What does Marshall seem to be saying about the relationship between hero worship and social change? By depicting a people who remain stagnant—preferring to live in squalor and remembering the one act of rebellion committed by their ancestors—is Marshall implying that the people of Bournehills need to change the way they venerate Cuffee Ned? Write a well-developed essay in which you take a firm stance on this issue, using evidence from the text to support your statements.

“To Da-duh, in Memoriam” (1976)

Surveying the entire body of Marshall's work, it is easy to see why the author proclaims herself “an unabashed ancestor worshipper” (Reena 95). Her characters seek a past they may have never known, and guiding them back to these earlier times are Marshall's ancestor figures: Mrs. Thompson in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; Leesy Walkes in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*; Aunt Cuney and Lebert Joseph in *Praisesong for the Widow*; and Da-duh in the often anthologized short story “To Da-duh, in Memoriam.” According to Marshall, this last story is her most autobiographical, inspired by a visit to her grandmother in Barbados at the age of nine. Reminiscing on the year she spent with her grandmother, Marshall likens their relationship to a power struggle: “It was as if we both knew, at a level beyond words, that I had come into the world not only to love her and to continue her line but to take her very life in order that I might live” (95). Da-duh, as do Marshall's other ancestor figures, encourages a return to traditional values. Yet, while she goes to great lengths to share with her granddaughter all Barbados has to offer, she does so partially out of fear: New York City frightens Da-duh, and it is through her granddaughter that she truly realizes the difference between Barbados and the world at large, a discovery the narrator laments only upon reaching adulthood.

The tension between Da-duh and her granddaughter, and thus the old and new worlds, is evident in their first encounter. Rather than sharing a conventional greeting, the two challenge each other by locking gazes for an extended period. Da-duh turns away first, dismissing her granddaughter as “one of those New York terrors” (98). Yet, she does not surrender this easily, let alone in her own territory. She leads her granddaughter on a tour of the land, inquiring as to whether or not mango trees and sugarcane can be found in New York: “I said I know you don't have anything this nice where you come from” (100). Though she momentarily has the upper hand, the old woman is as curious about Brooklyn as the young girl is about Barbados. When she asks the narrator about

snow, the girl seizes her chance to exaggerate what she knows her grandmother has never seen. Afterward, she assaults her grandmother with dances and songs learned on the streets and playgrounds of Brooklyn, appearing to the woman as “a creature from Mars, an emissary from some world she did not know but which intrigued her and whose power she both felt and feared” (102). During their walks about the island, the girl re-creates the myriad technologies within reach of a New Yorker: “refrigerators, radios, gas stoves, elevators, trolley cars, wringer washing machines, movies, airplanes, the cyclone at Coney Island, subways, toasters, electric lights” (103).

With each description of this fantastic world, the grandmother weakens a bit. She displays a childlike curiosity about her granddaughter's world, yet she holds within herself a fear and distrust of technology, much as the people of Bournehills in Marshall's earlier novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* do. It is not simply her own world that dissolves in each description of New York, but a world wherein past generations walked, not below buildings, but between rows of sugarcane. A source of pride for Da-duh, these canes intimidate the granddaughter just as the buildings frighten the grandmother. In each case, the foreign world looms large in each character's mind, forcing her to consider worlds outside her own.

In a final showdown, the two trek deep into the gully, where Da-duh displays to her granddaughter a single tree towering above the rest. She implores the girl to tell her whether New York City claims anything so tall. Her granddaughter tells Da-duh of the many buildings rising high over New York, specifically the Empire State Building, which was at that time “the tallest in the world” (104). Da-duh refuses to believe and even raises a hand as if to strike her granddaughter before the girl promises to send a postcard of the building upon her return home.

As Marshall's character Avey Johnson discovers in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the industrial world hides the natural world and prevents its residents from experiencing a connection and bond with the land. After hearing of New York's buildings,

Da-duh does not see the canes and trees in front of her, for “Some huge, monolithic shape had imposed itself, it seemed, between her and the land, obstructing her vision” (104). It is not simply the land Da-duh can no longer see, but the entire culture that thrived upon it. In realizing the difference between the old world and the new, between the traditional and the modern, Da-duh envisions herself as a dying person and soon takes ill. When English planes fly low over the island to intimidate strikers, everyone but Da-duh flees into the sugar-cane. When they return, they find Da-duh dead. Such an overwhelming display of technology validates her fears, and she passes away as a relic of a time forever spoiled, its innocence lost within the machines of the world.

In the story’s final paragraph, the narrator remembers her grandmother from an adult perspective as an artist in downtown New York:

She died and I lived, but always, to this day even, within the shadow of her death. For a brief period after I was grown I went to live alone, like one doing penance, in a loft above a noisy factory in downtown New York and there painted seas of sugar-cane and huge swirling Van Gogh suns and palm trees striding like brightly-plumed Tutsi warriors across a tropical landscape, while the thunderous tread of the machines downstairs jarred the floor beneath my easel, mocking my efforts. (106)

As an adult living in New York—a place both geographically and culturally distant from the Caribbean—the narrator, much as Selina Boyce does in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, seeks to reconnect with the land of her ancestors. Yet, technology and industrialism prevent her from experiencing a connection with the natural world, just as they did with Da-duh. Upon her first trip to Barbados, the narrator was intimidated by the Caribbean landscape and “longed then for the familiar” (99). By painting the world of Barbados, she attempts to lessen the feeling of separation between her and the land of her ancestors. Still, she cannot escape the modern world, though she tries. As an adult,

the narrator realizes the difficulty in preserving one’s traditional values and heritage in a world bereft of magic, where skyscrapers shoot from land where trees once stood.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In Marshall’s fiction, the Caribbean landscape takes on a mythic quality. While the narrator of “To Da-duh, in Memoriam” is enthralled by the unfamiliar sights of Barbados, Da-duh is equally curious about Brooklyn. Write a well-developed essay exploring the mythic dimensions of Da-duh’s Caribbean world and the narrator’s Brooklyn. In what ways are the girl’s descriptions of the city mythic to Da-duh? What values do these mythic representations seem to suggest? Does Marshall leave readers with any sense that these respective sets of values can be reconciled?
2. Marshall frequently uses sugarcane to symbolize the past to which Da-duh clings. Marshall’s use of this imagery is intriguing, as sugarcane was introduced to the Caribbean by Europeans and harvested by African slaves under horrific conditions. Similarly, the narrator of Marshall’s short story carries the technological marvels of New York to the island, culminating in Da-duh’s death. In a well-developed essay, compare Marshall’s depiction of encroaching technology with her treatment of the subject in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, noting the historical significance of sugarcane. Is Da-duh’s reticence the same as that of the people of Bournehills? Though Da-duh boasts of the island’s staple crop and takes comfort in its presence, is it so different from the buildings of which her granddaughter speaks or the development the anthropologists plan for Bourne Island?
3. It is clear toward the end of “To Da-duh, in Memoriam” that the narrator is lamenting the loss of her own innocence as well as her grandmother’s death. Compare the narrator’s perception of Da-duh as a child and as an adult. How does the narrator’s memory of her grandmother change with age? What does Marshall accomplish by equating Caribbean traditions with the narrator’s youth?

***Praisesong for the Widow* (1983)**

A winner of the American Book Award, *Praisesong for the Widow* is often considered Marshall's finest and most widely read work. The novel makes up the last of a trilogy that started with *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, followed by *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. Not surprisingly, the novel again charts a journey. At the age of 64, Avey Johnson is much older than Selina Boyce and Merle Kinbona, the protagonists of the trilogy's earlier novels. Yet, as these women do, Avey travels to the Caribbean to find herself, to discover pieces of herself long since gone. Avey does not hail from the area, as Selina and Merle do, but traces her connection with the Caribbean to a tale heard as a child: On Tatem Island, off the coast of South Carolina, Avey's great-aunt Cuney related to her the history of the Ibo, a group of African people who, after being taken to those very same shores as slaves, turned and walked across the water back to their homeland. Through her tales of the Ibo, Cuney instilled in Avey an appreciation for a culture that sprung from the same continent as her ancestors'. Later in life, however, the adult Avey forgets her aunt and the stories she told, turning away from her African roots in favor of the American dream. After her husband's death and literally sickened by her current lifestyle, Avey boards a cruise to the Caribbean in hopes of reconnecting not just with the Ibo but with African culture in its entirety. In the final entry of her trilogy, Marshall proves herself a mapmaker of the African diaspora, charting the geographic and spiritual journeys of her characters with the aid of an African legend.

The Ibo people of the legend are important characters in the novel, for they represent the reconnection with Africa that Avey seeks. Having foreseen all the hardships that would befall them in America, they walked across the ocean back to their homeland, despite being bound in heavy chains. Though she is not literally imprisoned, Avey also suffers in America. Early in her marriage, Avey badgered her husband into financial pursuits, despite being happy otherwise. As a result, her husband, Jay, dedicated the rest of his life to acquiring wealth and status, and the couple's marriage

suffered as a result. Avey's visit to the Caribbean after her husband's death represents her desire to identify again with her culture, as first described to her by her great-aunt, Cuney. To do so, Avey must abandon all of the luxuries and comforts of the life she shared with her husband.

At first, Avey's return to her roots is not a conscious decision but a subconscious reaction. On board the cruise ship, she becomes sick after eating a parfait in the ship's posh Versailles Room. The name of the ship, the *Bianca Pride*, translates into English as "white pride." Similarly, Avey lives in a middle-class New York suburb called White Plains. Avey's mind and body are finally reacting against the white culture she has consumed for so long. In these references to white culture, Marshall is not disparaging the culture of another race but showing the effects of ignoring one's own culture for economic reasons. Not unlike Silla and Deighton Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Avey and Jay struggle to get by in a Brooklyn apartment, a source of arguments over money. But, whereas Deighton Boyce refuses to accept the American dream and its promises of wealth and success, Jay pursues it, if only in response to his wife's longings. During the first years of their marriage, Avey and Jay lived in Harlem, an area vastly different from the white suburbs they would later inhabit. It was here Avey encountered many modes of black experience: Negro spirituals on the weekends, her husband's reciting the poetry of Langston Hughes, jazz and blues music. In addition to their time in Harlem, the two made an annual pilgrimage to Tatem Island, the grounds upon which the Ibo myth took place. These trips to Tatem Island ceased with Jay's new approach to life, one exclusively focused on material possessions. In one of the novel's more poignant passages, Avey remembers not crying at Jay's funeral because she believed her husband died many years prior. In his wake Jerome Johnson emerged, a slave to materialism and status, concerned more with what others think of him and his possessions than the culture upon which his life and marriage were initially founded.

In addition to remembering the early days of her marriage, Avey dreams of her great-aunt Cuney

and is plagued by memories of her childhood. These dreams and memories are symptoms of Avey's sickness. To illustrate Avey's vertigo further, Marshall often employs a stream-of-consciousness technique, much like of that the modernists James Joyce and William Faulkner. The past haunts Avey, and yet she knows it was only during this time that she was ever happy. She leaves her friends aboard the ship and walks alone along a beach, thinking of her past. When she meets Lebert Joseph, an owner of a rum shop, Avey is given a chance to acknowledge this past in a ceremony called the Carriacou Excursion, a trip to the island of Carriacou to honor the island's ancestors. Lebert is something of an authority on these "Old Parents" and asks Avey from which African nation she comes (165). Though Lebert rattles off a long list of nations—Arada, Cromanti, Yarraba, Moko, Temne, Manding—Avey cannot name the nation of her descent. In taking Avey, an "out-islander," on the trip to Carriacou, Lebert intends to reunite her with her nation, for he knows well the importance of knowing one's ancestry: "They can turn your life around in a minute, you know. All of a sudden everything start gon' wrong and you don' know the reason. You can't figger it out all you try. Is the Old Parents, oui" (165). Over the course of the novel, Lebert introduces Avey to her heritage and thus heals her of her sickness.

Though Avey is not familiar with the dances and rituals on Carriacou, they remind her of her days in Harlem and the sense of community among the other African Americans in the city. Overwhelmed by emotion at the Dance of Nations, Avey joins the dance even though she is an "out-islander" who does not know her heritage. The dance is natural for Avey; she remembers doing similar dances on the shores of Tatem Island with her great-aunt Cuney. After seeing Avey dance, Lebert is sure that she descends from the Arada people of Africa. Of course, Avey will never know for sure; she is too far removed and displaced from her "Old Parents." Yet, through Lebert and the Dance of Nations, Avey reconnects, not with her specific heritage, but with her African roots in general. After the dance, Avey once again goes by the name her great-aunt Cuney

gave her so long ago: *Avatara*. Because she does not claim a specific people but rather the entire continent of Africa, Avey represents all people displaced from Africa, whether they live in Carriacou, Tatem Island, or Harlem. Though Marshall celebrates her Caribbean heritage in her life and work, she proves herself a pan-Africanist in *Praisesong for the Widow*, honoring all people displaced from Africa.

Upon returning to the States, Avey—now Avatara—intends to share her experience with others removed from Africa, envisioning herself as a wild woman shouting wisdom to a younger generation. She wishes to unify all of these displaced people under a single black heritage consisting of many different nations and cultures. Though she will never know which nation she belongs to, Avatara ultimately identifies with the continent of Africa as a whole. As do Selina Boyce of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Merle Kinbona of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Avey Johnson embarks upon a search for herself in the lands of her people. At the novel's end, Avatara remembers something her great-aunt Cuney said of her grandmother: "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos" (254–255).

For Discussion or Writing

1. A distinguishing characteristic of the Ibo people is their ability to see into the past and future. As a result, they see time in a cyclical, rather than linear, fashion. Read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Though Marshall and García Márquez have markedly different styles, the view of time presented in these two novels is very similar. Write a well-developed essay exploring this cyclical view of time, noting any differences you find. How does Avey see time in a cyclical fashion? What do her recurring dreams and memories suggest of her perception of time? How do these novelists incorporate a cyclical view of time into their narratives?
2. Read Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "To the Diaspora." In a well-developed essay, compare Avey's journey and psychological transformation

vage the past. In these works, Marshall seems to be engaged in a project not dissimilar to that of the romantic poet William Wordsworth, who tried to recapture the essence of youth in order to explore our experience of the natural world without the prejudices acquired by our entrance into the adult world. Read some of Wordsworth's poetry, especially "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," and compare his characterization of his experiences as a boy with Marshall's description of Da-duh's world and Avey's ecstatic experiences at the end of *Praisesong*. What attitudes do these respective authors have toward the past, nature, and childhood? After reading their works, would you consider Marshall to be a romantic?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Billingslea-Brown, Alma J. *Crossing Borders through Folklore: African-American Women's Fiction and Art*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999.
- Brownley, Martine W. *Deferrals of Domain: Contemporary Women Novelists and the State*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.
- Christian, Barbara. "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Callaloo* 6 (Spring-Summer 1983): 74-84.
- Coser, Stelamaris. *Bridging the Americas: The Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gail Jones*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia C. *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom: The Fiction of Paule Marshall*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- . "Women, Silence, and History in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*." *Callaloo* 16 (Winter 1993): 227-242.
- Denniston, Dorothy H. *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.
- Elia, Nada. *Trances, Dances, and Vociferations: Agency and Resistance in Africana Women's Narratives*. New York: Garland, 2001.
- Gadsby, Meredith. *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.
- Hathaway, Heather. *Caribbean Waves*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Marshall, Paule. "Audio Interview with Don Swaim." wiredforbooks.org. Available online. URL: <http://wiredforbooks.org/paulemarshall/index.htm>. Accessed July 4, 2007.
- . *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. New York: Random House, 1959.
- . *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.
- . *Daughters*. New York: Atheneum, 1991.
- . *The Fisher King: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- . "From the Poets in the Kitchen." *New York Times Book Review*, January 9, 1983. Available online. URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F02E3DC1238F93AA35752C0A965948260&sec=&cspon=&pagewanted=1>. Accessed July 4, 2007.
- . *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Putnam, 1983.
- . *Reena and Other Stories*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1983.
- . "Shaping the World of My Art." *New Letters* 40 (Autumn 1973): 97-112.
- . *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*. New York: Atheneum, 1961.
- Pettis, Joyce. *Toward a Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- "Voices from the Gaps, Women Writers of Color: Paule Marshall." University of Minnesota. Available online. URL: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/marshall_paule.html. Accessed July 4, 2007.

Daniel Hartis



ARTHUR MILLER (1915–2005)

The social drama . . . is the drama of the whole man. It seeks to deal with his differences from others not *per se*, but toward the end that, if only through drama, we may know how much the same we are, for if we lose that knowledge we shall have nothing left at all.

(“On Social Plays”)

Best known for a handful of plays he composed between 1947 and 1955, Arthur Miller was an accomplished dramatist, short story writer, novelist, essayist, and screenwriter, whose career spanned six decades. Among the most recognizable figures in 20th-century American letters, Miller was also famous for his sensational marriage to Marilyn Monroe, his leftist political beliefs, and his altercations with U.S. government officials. During the 1950s and 1960s, his public opposition to American red scare tactics made him an icon of political counterculture, giving him as much notoriety as his literary and dramatic works. Today, with cold war fears a relic of America’s past, Miller’s legacy rests, not on his political posturing, but on his contributions to the American stage. Together with his contemporary TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, Miller altered traditional conceptions about tragedy, broadening its scope to include the “common man.” Miller’s best works reveal how society intervenes, as cosmic forces do in ancient Greek tragedies, to produce inescapable and devastating consequences, not only for individuals, but also for families and communities. In his essay “Tragedy and the Common Man,” Miller explains, “If the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it” (*Theater Essays* 3–4).

The second child of Isidore Miller and Augusta Barnett, Arthur Asher Miller was born in New York City on October 17, 1915, into a well-to-do Jewish family. Miller’s father emigrated from Poland at age six and, without learning how to read, established a successful garment manufacturing firm. Just before the stock market crash in 1929, his business, the Miltex Coat and Suit Company, employed a thousand workers. Miller’s mother was a first-generation American, also of Polish descent. Miller spent his youth and early adolescence in a large apartment overlooking Central Park, but when the Great Depression wiped out the family’s savings and decimated Miltex, the Miller clan relocated to a small Brooklyn apartment, where the young Arthur shared a tiny bedroom with his maternal grandfather. The change in fortune took a heavy toll. Accustomed to luxury, Augusta grew bitter, and without the business success on which his identity was staked, Isidore struggled with depression. Although Miller’s parents’ marriage survived, a constant tension lingered between them. The gloomy household atmosphere left a lasting impression on Miller; his work frequently examines the psychological strain individuals and families endure when their dreams collapse. For Miller, as for other writers of his era, the depression was an important turning point in his social consciousness, a revelation that demonstrated how important economic systems are to the identity of Americans.

Although affected by the Great Depression's toll on American life, Miller did not write about it during adolescence. Attending James Madison High and later transferring to Abraham Lincoln High, Miller was, at best, a mediocre student: He placed a low priority on education, excelling in athletics rather than academics. To help make ends meet, he worked several odd jobs before graduating in June 1933. That year, he applied to the University of Michigan but was rejected for poor grades. During the next application cycle, while clerking at an auto-parts warehouse, Miller wrote a letter to University of Michigan administrators requesting the reconsideration of his application. His perseverance paid off, and he was accepted on a probationary basis, matriculating in the 1934 autumn semester.

Miller thrived in Ann Arbor. With a reputation for both academic excellence and political radicalism, the University of Michigan shaped his career. He discovered a latent writing talent while working for the school newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*, for which he covered, among other issues, the creation of the United Auto Workers union. Journalism provided Miller an opportunity to use his developing intellect to investigate and analyze the working class, with whom he identified throughout his life. After reading the works of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Henrik Ibsen, Miller began writing creatively, hoping to translate his nascent social and political views onto the stage. In 1936, he wrote his first play, *No Villain*, which won Michigan's prestigious Hopwood Award. By the time Miller graduated in June 1938, he had won a second Hopwood for *Honors at Dawn* and a competition sponsored by the Theater Guild for *They Too Arise*.

Between 1938 and 1944, Miller continued to develop his craft. Hired out of college by the Federal Theatre and Federal Writer's Projects, a government-sponsored collective with a reputation for harboring communist sympathizers, Miller became a victim of politically motivated cutbacks, losing the job within months. Two years later, he married his college sweetheart, Mary Grace Slatery, with whom he had two children, Jane and Robert. As he settled into family life, World War

II engulfed Europe. Because of a high school football injury, Miller was exempted from service. His Jewish heritage, coupled with his growing social conscience, left him searching for a way to contest anti-Semitism, which had reached a fevered pitch both at home and abroad. Much as the depression did, the specter of Nazism preoccupied Miller for the rest of his career. In the six years following Miller's college graduation, he experimented with different genres, writing several radio plays, a failed film script, a journalistic account of American soldiers preparing for World War II (*Situation Normal*, 1944), and a novel, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. The story of a man unable to enjoy his unlimited good fortune, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* examines what Miller calls "the law of life," namely, that "people are always frustrated in some important regard" (*Theater Essays* 125). Unable to find a publisher for the novel, he rewrote it for the stage. On November 23, 1944, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, Miller's first professionally produced play, opened at New York's Forrest Theatre. The success of seeing his work on Broadway was short lived; scathing reviews and poor turnout limited the play's run to four performances. Disillusioned by the negative reception, Miller swore never to write another play. Instead, he returned to prose fiction, publishing *Focus*, a commercially successful novel about anti-Semitism, in 1945.

After completing *Focus*, Miller regained the courage to write for the stage, vowing to quit for good should his next effort fail. Equipped with a self-imposed ultimatum, Miller changed his approach to playwriting, aiming to appeal to a mass audience. Accustomed to composing plays in a few weeks, Miller spent two years writing *All My Sons*, which premiered at the Coronet Theatre on January 29, 1947. Reviews were mixed, but the *New York Times*, the city's most influential newspaper, affirmed Miller's talent: "*All My Sons* is an honest, forceful drama, an original play of superior quality by a playwright who knows his craft." Audiences agreed. Under Elia Kazan's direction, *All My Sons* ran for 328 performances and earned many of Broadway's most prestigious honors, including the

Donaldson, Tony, and Drama Critics Circle Awards. Set in post-World War II middle America, *All My Sons* focuses on a family. In the serene atmosphere of an upper-middle-class backyard, the family patriarch and aging factory owner Joe Keller witnesses the unraveling of his “normal” life when his wife and son acknowledge Keller’s dirty secret that he knowingly sold defective airplane engines to the military, causing the death of 21 American pilots. Faced with the enormity of his crime and unable to regain his family’s trust, Keller commits suicide. *All My Sons* marked a departure for Miller, not only giving him his first taste of success, but also ushering him into his mature period as a writer. Widely considered his first structurally sound play, *All My Sons* owes much to the 19th-century Norwegian playwright Ibsen, who introduced theatergoers to social realism. As does *All My Sons*, Ibsen’s most celebrated dramas progress in a linear direction; depict rational, photographically rendered characters; and advocate social reform.

Written in common language and stripped of psychological complexity, *All My Sons* achieved what Miller intended, namely, to make tragedy accessible to a nonspecialized, working-class audience. In his early years, Miller theorized, “The structure of a play is always the story of how the birds came home to roost,” his metaphor for the way the past returns, not only haunting us but also affecting our present lives (*Theater Essays* 179). In his early works, Miller failed to put his theory into practice, often creating convoluted structures that, while they appealed to academics, did not necessarily connect with a common audience. However, with *All My Sons* he crafts a play with a clear, easy-to-follow structure, enabling a larger audience to appreciate his art. As Steven R. Centola writes, Miller’s breakthrough occurred when he learned to create “dramatic action that, by its very movement—by its creation, suspension, and resolution of tension; its inexorable rush toward tragic confrontation—proves that the past is always present and cannot be ignored, forgotten, or denied” (*Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* 50).

After *All My Sons*, Miller found himself in unfamiliar territory. In just a few months, his literary reputation had skyrocketed. Within a year, he was

considered one of America’s most promising young playwrights. Yet, feeling as if he had exhausted the “Greco-Ibsen form,” he longed to make a unique stamp on the theater. The result was *Death of a Salesman*, which premiered at the Morosco Theatre on February 10, 1949. As does Joe Keller, the *Salesman* protagonist, Willy Loman, commits suicide when past failures become unbearable. Unlike *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* combines present action with interior monologue and psychological confusion, weaving past and present into a tapestry of misguided optimism and false hope. Abandoning the linear progression of his earlier dramas, Miller explores the collapse of the American dream in a collage of fabricated memories and irrational convictions. Routinely cited as the greatest 20th-century American play, *Salesman* was an immediate and lasting success. Its initial Broadway run lasted 742 performances and netted all the major New York drama awards as well as the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to the original production, the play has enjoyed three critically acclaimed Broadway revivals—in 1975, 1984, and 1999, starring, respectively, George C. Scott, Dustin Hoffman, and Brian Dennehy.

Miller was a staunch critic of U.S. capitalism throughout his life. Beginning in his Michigan days, he defended socialism as an alternative to what he considered a dehumanizing socioeconomic American landscape. As the depression faded and the United States regained its economic footing, the American socialist movement lost its momentum. Meanwhile, with cold war tensions erupting, many Americans, both inside and outside government, branded communist sympathizers as traitors. Between 1949 and 1954, the red scare dominated Miller’s career. In 1950, he wrote an adaptation of Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, the tale of a man whose neighbors ostracize him for opposing an unethical town proposal, despite its economic benefits. In the preface to the published text, Miller argued that the play’s chief concern is “the central theme of our social life today. . . . It is the question of whether the democratic guarantees protecting political minorities ought to be set aside in time of crisis. More personally, it is the question of whether one’s

vision of the truth ought to be a source of guilt at a time when the mass of men condemn it as a dangerous and devilish lie" (*Theater Essays* 17).

In Miller's next major project, *The Crucible* (1953), the hero, John Proctor, chooses to die rather than falsely accuse others of witchcraft. Disguised as a period piece about the 1692 Salem witch trials, *The Crucible* is an allegory for the communist witch hunts of the late 1940s and early 1950s, especially the McCarthy hearings. The play premiered just months after Miller and Elia Kazan had a falling out. The two had worked closely on a number of projects, including *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and a failed screenplay, *The Hook*. In a 1952 hearing before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Kazan revealed the names of several communist sympathizers, many of whom Miller knew. After Kazan and Miller cut ties, Kazan directed *On the Waterfront* (1954), a film in which the lead character incriminates several corrupt mob bosses. Shortly afterward, Miller wrote *A View from the Bridge* (1954). Set in the same Brooklyn neighborhood as *On the Waterfront*, *Bridge* features a character, Eddie Carbone, whose community ostracizes him for betraying their code of silence. Compared with *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, neither *The Crucible* nor *A View from the Bridge* fared well at the box office. Reviews were mixed; their combined Broadway runs amounted to fewer than 350 performances, a disappointment for a playwright of Miller's stature. Over the next few decades, audience appreciation of these neglected plays grew. Frequently performed throughout the world, both plays remain in the active repertory.

Over the next decade, Miller lived in the public spotlight. Off the stage, 1956 was an eventful year for him. In the span of one month, he divorced Mary Slattery, married Marilyn Monroe, and testified before HUAC. True to John Proctor's example, Miller refused to "name names." Fortunately, Miller did not face Proctor's fate: Convicted of contempt in federal district court the following year, he was forced to pay a fine and sentenced to one month in jail. The conviction was overturned on appeal. In 1957, Viking published *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, which included an original intro-

duction still considered required reading for drama students. At the time, however, Miller had turned his attentions away from the stage. He set his sights on Hollywood, where he wrote the screenplay for *The Misfits*, a film starring Monroe and Clark Gable. During production, his marriage collapsed. Within a week of *The Misfits's* February 1, 1961, release, Monroe was granted a divorce. A year later, Miller married Inga Morath. The couple had two children: Rebecca, now a successful filmmaker, and Daniel, who was born with Down syndrome and committed to a home for the mentally retarded, about whom Miller never spoke in public.

After a nine-year hiatus from playwrighting, Miller produced *After the Fall* in 1964, an expressionistic exploration of denial, guilt, and the Holocaust. The play ran for 59 performances at New York's Lincoln Center, inciting controversy for its portrayal of Maggie, the female lead, whom many considered a Monroe replica. Several commentators thought Miller was exploiting his now-deceased former wife, who had overdosed on sleeping pills in 1962. Miller followed *After the Fall* with *Incident at Vichy* (1964), another examination of the Holocaust. As its predecessor, *Vichy* was met with mixed reviews and low audience turnout. In 1968, with his career on a two-decade decline, Miller enjoyed his greatest success since *Death of a Salesman* with *The Price*, which premiered on February 7 and ran for 429 performances. The story of two brothers who dredge up their personal histories in order to sort out their recently deceased father's estate, *The Price* revisits a favorite Miller theme, namely, the inseparability of past and present.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Miller was actively involved in politics. He spoke frequently in opposition to the Vietnam War, attended the chaotic 1968 Democratic National Convention, and, as the president of PEN, advocated the release of imprisoned writers. As a writer, Miller remained productive until he died, but after *The Price* he never wrote another Broadway hit. In 1987 he published *Timebends: A Life*, in which, in addition to reflecting on his literary and political career, he openly discussed his marriage to Monroe for the first time. *Broken Glass*, a 1994 play about Jewish

persecution in pre–World War II Europe, was Miller's greatest late-career achievement. Nominated for a Tony, it was even more popular in England, where it won London's coveted Olivier Award as best new play. In 1996, Miller wrote an Academy Award–nominated screen adaptation of *The Crucible*. Nearly a decade later, when Miller was 88 years old, he completed his aptly titled final play, *Finishing the Picture* (2004). On February 10, 2005, Miller succumbed to congestive heart failure at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut.

***Death of a Salesman* (1949)**

After a trial run in Philadelphia, *Death of a Salesman* premiered on February 10, 1949, at New York's Morosco Theatre. Miller's most successful Broadway play, *Salesman* had a run of 742 performances. Within a year of its debut, it had found the stage in every major U.S. city. *Salesman* swept the major American drama awards, garnering Miller his second Tony, Donaldson, and Drama Critics Circle Awards, as well as his first and only Pulitzer Prize. Though he would go on to write a handful of successful works in his later career, Miller never again matched the critical acclaim he received for *Salesman*; however, as other works from the mid-20th century have lost favor with drama critics and theatergoers, *Salesman*'s luster has yet to fade. According to the Miller scholar Brenda Murphy, "since its premiere, there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world" (70).

In two acts, neither of which contains scene breaks, *Death of a Salesman* dramatizes the last two days of Willy Loman's life. With his career and sanity on the decline, Willy, a lifelong traveling salesman, returns to his Brooklyn home "tired to the death," unable to make his New England sales calls. As his wife, Linda, comforts him, their two adult sons, Biff and Happy, both home for a brief stay, discuss Willy's unstable mood, odd behavior, and propensity for talking to himself. Seamlessly shifting between past and present, Act 1 fills in the family's history and develops the play's principal

characters. Willy, at best a mediocre salesman in his younger days, has become so inept he must borrow money from his neighbor, Charley, to pay his mortgage and monthly life insurance premium. Meanwhile, Linda suppresses fears of financial collapse, wearing a cheerful mask in order to buoy Willy's fragile self-esteem. Biff, having long ago rejected his father's yes-man approach to business success, has nothing to show for two decades of working "twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs." His dreams vanished in high school when he flunked 12th-grade math, nullifying his University of Virginia football scholarship. Conversely, Happy earns a good living in the business world, but neither the money nor his frequent one-night stands satisfy him.

Act 1 rises and falls in a series of waves. Willy oscillates between hope and despair, truth and lies, self-confidence and self-doubt. He boasts that he's "very well liked" throughout New England, then confesses, "I'm not noticed. . . . I'm fat. I'm very foolish to look at." As his odds for personal success fade, Willy seeks solace in Biff's achievements. Willy fondly recalls Biff's football glory, reveling in his son's adolescent charisma and popularity. Yet, Biff's adult failures haunt and confound Willy. In the same breath, he chastises Biff as a "lazy bum," then lauds his work ethic: "There's one thing about Biff—he's not lazy." The disjunction between Willy's imagined Biff and the Biff the audience encounters underscores the rift between Willy's reality and everyone else's. It also foreshadows Willy's absurd demise. As all tragic heroes do, Willy gropes for immortality. He wants others to remember him, but as he grows older, he realizes that his middling sales career will not suffice. Thus, he turns to his older son, hoping Biff will continue his legacy. For 16 years Willy has longed for Biff to triumph where Willy failed, to parlay his youthful charm into financial success. Act 1 concludes on a hopeful crescendo, as Biff promises to seek a loan from his former boss in order to start a sporting goods company.

As the curtain rises on Act 2, Willy wakes refreshed, soothed in his hope that Biff will finally settle down in New York. Biff and Happy have

already left for the city, and Willy looks forward to a celebratory steak dinner that evening with his sons. Before the three gather at the restaurant, Willy stops by company headquarters to request a local assignment, pleading exhaustion from spending 34 years on the road. Willy's boss, Howard, wrecks Willy's optimistic mood, not only rejecting the request, but firing him for lack of production. In need of money, Willy drops by Charley's office to ask for another loan. There he meets Bernard—Charley's son and Biff's boyhood friend—now a successful lawyer, who reminds Willy of Biff's failures. Agitated, confused, and despondent, Willy joins Biff and Happy at Frank's Chop House, the setting for most of Act 2. Having failed to secure a loan for his newfangled business scheme, Biff determines to break family tradition by telling his father the truth. Biff's meeting with Bill Oliver sparks an epiphany, which he divulges to Happy: "He gave me one look and I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years." Biff's proclamation resonates on two levels, not only indicting his family's fallacious communication habits, but also revealing the hollow foundation on which the American dream is built. In this context, "dream" is stripped of its optimistic, idealistic connotations. Instead, the term signifies unreality, the depletion of meaning, and the inability to escape the past. Sensing that Biff's insight negates his own life, Willy refuses to listen, losing himself in another reverie. He recalls an evening 15 years earlier when Biff traveled to Boston to confess flunking out of school only to discover Willy with a mistress. The incident clarifies Willy's paternal inadequacy and explains Biff's demoralized demeanor.

The play's action builds toward an event that has already occurred, an episode illuminating the central characters' motives and convictions. In a creative twist, Miller inverts conventional dramatic progression, in which time unfolds linearly, unleashing a climactic accumulation of past events. Conversely, *Salesman's* present action—that is, the final 24 hours of Willy's life—climaxes in a scene set a decade and a half in the past. Biff's adolescent insight—that his father is a "phony little fake"—is

the logical precursor of his present epiphany, namely, that he too has led a phony, fake existence. The scene occurs in Willy's mind, making the epiphany Willy's as well as Biff's. Willy's daydream prepares the audience for the play's inevitable confrontation, Biff's last-ditch effort to force his father to "hear the truth." With the declaration "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you," Biff begs Willy to "take that phony dream and burn it," a plea with a twofold meaning: Just as he wants Willy to free the family from the shackles of the American dream, Biff yearns for Willy to escape the waking dreams that dominate his life and embrace tangible, present reality. On one level, Biff's appeal moves Willy, who exclaims, "Isn't that remarkable? Biff—he likes me!" On a deeper level, however, Willy misses Biff's point, retreating almost immediately into fantasy, telling his imaginary brother how Biff, when given the \$20,000 life insurance payout, will become a magnificent success. Shortly thereafter, Willy drives wildly into the night, presumably to commit suicide. After Act 2, a short requiem documents the Loman family's grief. Set at Willy's graveside, the final scene closes on a sentimental note as Linda tells her dead husband, "I made the last payment on the house today. . . . And there'll be nobody home. We're free and clear. We're free. . . . We're free."

Although Miller had employed elements of realism in his early plays, *Death of a Salesman* was his first original contribution to the form. A term denoting any literary work about the everyday existence of lower-class people, *realism*, according to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, usually focuses on "the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (Harman 428). Unlike Miller's previous play, *All My Sons*—a paean to the renowned realist Henrik Ibsen—*Death of a Salesman* stretches the boundaries of traditional realism. As his surname indicates, Willy is a low man. With their unadorned speech and working-class struggles, the Loman family's life exemplifies the realistic subject. Yet, *Salesman* departs from "immediate, here and now" storytelling. Instead, oscillating between past and present, between external action and internal thought, the

play prompts audiences to reconsider what “realistic” means. Through the Lomans’ story, Miller demonstrates how memory and reflection are as “real” as tangible stimuli. Were the audience not privy to Willy’s consciousness, *Salesman* could not have succeeded in exposing what Miller considered the American dream’s “real” consequences. *Salesman* fuses several thematic issues, but none is more crucial than the control American cultural values exert on individuals’ psyches. Willy’s hopes and fears are social creations. Principles embodied within the American myths—self-reliance, economic salvation, individual freedom—create Willy’s identity. Cleft from these values, Willy is an empty shell. In the final confrontation, Biff eviscerates not only everything Willy considers meaningful, but also the distinction between American “reality” and American mythology.

Immediately after *Salesman*’s premier, critics began debating the play’s tragic merits. Traditional conceptions of tragedy limit the form to stories about noble characters undone by fate or inherent psychological flaws. In *Poetics*, Aristotle hypothesized that by viewing tragedies, audiences experienced an emotional cleansing of pity and fear. Thomas Hardy called tragedy the “worthy encompassed by the inevitable.” *Salesman* is plainly tragic in the colloquial sense: The Loman family suffers several personal misfortunes, including the needless death of its patriarch. Some scholars, however, suggest that Willy lacks the nobility and “worthiness” to assume the hero’s mantle; therefore, his story is not a tragedy in the strict sense. Angst-ridden and petty, Willy hardly fits the mold of Oedipus or Othello. His “low” status raises the question of whether his demise brings about a catharsis or sentimental pathos. Is his anguish universal or isolated? Miller never meant for Willy to fit the classic archetype. Modernity, he contends, renders the requirement of regality moot: “If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the

mind of an Elizabethan king” (*Theater Essays* 5). In place of cosmic forces, social conditions—in this case, unreasonable expectations encoded in the American dream—create inevitable tragic consequences. Harold Bloom, a prominent American literary critic, adjudicates a compromise. Willy, he contends, sustains the “aesthetic dignity” inherent in all tragic heroes, and although he does not have “the authentic dignity of the protagonist . . . his sincere pathos does have authentic aesthetic dignity, because he does not die the death of a salesman. He dies the death of a father, perhaps not the universal father, but a father central enough to touch anguish of the universal” (7).

If universal appeal is the mark of tragedy, then *Salesman*’s best case may be empirical. In its 1983 Beijing run, Chinese audience members wept openly. Brenda Murphy describes an even more remarkable example of the play’s ability to capture disparate imaginations: “*Death of a Salesman* has been played before a native audience in a small Arctic village with the same villagers returning night after night to witness the performance in a language they did not understand” (106). Regardless of whether *Salesman* is a “real” tragedy or not, it continues to inspire audiences, even those who have never experienced the pressures of the American dream.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Develop a list of qualities embodied in the “American dream.” Discuss each character’s reactions to and ideas about this dream. What does it mean to each character? What does it mean to you? Is it an attainable ideal for everyone or a hollow ruse that damages individuals’ psyches, distracting them from more meaningful existences?
2. Although Happy never expresses ill will toward his father for favoring Biff, Biff is clearly the prodigal son. Yet, with his career choices and preference for felicitous deception over uncomfortable truth, Happy bears a sharper resemblance to his father than does Biff. Discuss the effect of Willy’s parenting style on Happy and Biff. Why does Biff rebel against his father’s

wishes? Why is Happy content to follow in Willy's footsteps? With your own experiences in mind, discuss the influence parents exert over their children's futures. How much freedom should parents give their children to choose their own destinies?

3. After reading (or viewing a performance of) Miller's 1947 play *All My Sons*, discuss similarities and differences between it and *Death of a Salesman*. Consider such subcomparisons as the following:
 - (a) Compare Joe Keller with Willy Loman. Do they commit suicide for the same reason(s)? What are the dilemmas each man faces? What overlap between their predicaments do you recognize? Does either character resonate as an "everyman," or are their stories exclusive to their particular situations?
 - (b) Compare Miller's use of structure as a developmental tool, keeping in mind Miller's conviction that every "catastrophe was the story of how the birds came home to roost. . . , that a play without a past is a mere shadow of a play" (*Theater Essays* 548). How does the past reveal its effect on the present in each play? Which method of structural development is more conducive to making the past-present relationship evident: the linear progression of *All My Sons* or the collage of overlapping memories, the blending of external action with internal consciousness in *Death of a Salesman*?
 - (c) Miller attributed his Broadway breakthrough to a "simple shift of relationships. . . , a shift which did not and could not solve the problem of [his earlier plays], but . . . made at least two . . . plays that followed possible, and a great deal else besides" (*Theater Essays* 126). The two plays are *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*; they were "made possible" by Miller's realization that he was unconsciously preoccupied with "the father-son relationship." Both plays depict a father whose two sons follow disparate courses. Compare the triangular relationship of father, older son, and younger son

in both plays. How does the father-son relationship contribute to the tragedy of each story? When children become disillusioned with their parental models, is tragedy an inevitable outcome?

4. Why does *Death of a Salesman* continue to resonate with contemporary audiences? In an interview with Mathew Roudané, Miller hypothesized that the play has "more or less the same effect everywhere there is a dominating technology" (*Theater Essays* 420). What does Miller mean by a dominating technology? What is the dominating technology in Willy's time? In our time?
5. Discuss the tragic merits of *Death of a Salesman*. Does Willy Loman's story precipitate a catharsis of pity and fear, or does it merely elicit sentimental compassion for a single broken man? In order to answer this question, read Aristotle's section on tragedy in *Poetics* and Miller's "Tragedy and the Common Man." Does *Death of a Salesman* warrant a reconsideration of Aristotle's definition?
6. The opening stage directions of *Death of a Salesman* are among the most famous in American drama. The published version of the play begins, "A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon." Miller's lyrical language contrasts with traditional stage directions, which in Shakespeare's time were typically limited to two or three words. What, if anything, do Miller's directions contribute to the play? How do they set the mood? Does the music add to or detract from Miller's tragic intentions?

***The Crucible* (1953)**

When *The Crucible* premiered on January 22, 1953, at New York's Martin Beck Theatre, Miller was already considered one of the leading playwrights of his generation. *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) combined for more than a thousand Broadway performances, two Drama Critics Circle Awards, two Donaldson Awards, two Tony

Awards, and one Pulitzer Prize. Despite opening to mixed reviews, *The Crucible* cemented Miller's literary reputation, placing him in the company of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. Yet, while the play secured Miller's standing alongside the giants of American drama, it drew the ire of political conservatives and thrust Miller into the center of a national controversy. Citing Miller's "communist sympathies," the State Department revoked his passport and prevented him from traveling to Belgium for *The Crucible's* international premier. Three years later, after his refusal to identify other communist artists, the U.S. House of Representatives held Miller in contempt, a crime for which he received a one-month suspended jail sentence and a \$500 fine. Since then, the communist threat has dissipated, but *The Crucible* remains popular. It was made into a film starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder in 1996 and is routinely staged in the United States and abroad.

Part morality play, part personal tragedy, part social commentary, *The Crucible* dramatizes the notorious Salem witch trials of 1692. When the town preacher's daughter, Betty Parris, descends into a catatonic stupor after participating in a ritualistic campfire ceremony, rumor of satanic infiltration spreads throughout Salem, a small Massachusetts enclave of Puritan colonials. Reverend Parris suspects Betty's cousin, Abigail Williams, of spreading witchcraft among the town's girls, and, when pressed, Abigail claims to have fallen, along with Betty and a dozen others, under the spell of the Parris family's slave, Tituba. The accusation sets off a series of forced confessions and accusations. In a matter of days, the Massachusetts government establishes a tribunal to root out witchcraft. Within the atmosphere of suspicion and fear, a few opportunistic individuals exact vengeance on local rivals, accusing them of "trucking with the devil," hoping to seize vacated land, or, in Abigail's case, a former lover's attention. Abigail's zeal forces John Proctor into a hero's role. Having had an affair with Abigail sometime prior to the action on stage, Proctor is trying to repair his marriage when Abigail accuses his wife, Elizabeth, of witchcraft. Proctor's refusal to surrender Elizabeth to the authorities puts him

under suspicion, but unlike the majority of the accused, he refuses to implicate his neighbors. In the final scene, Proctor declines to sign a confession, crying out, "I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" Disappointed, Deputy Governor Danforth sentences Proctor to death.

On the most literal level, *The Crucible* is a work of historical fiction. Before composing a word, Miller sifted through thousands of pages of land deeds, personal correspondence, and trial proceedings. Although he used considerable dramatic license, his characters are based on historical figures. Like his dramatic counterpart, Reverend Parris was a divisive preacher who elicited dread from parishioners and drove away several independent-minded churchgoers. His daughter, Betty, and niece, Abigail, generated suspicions of satanic infiltration when, after experimenting with the occult, they fell ill. Records also verify that Anne Putnam held a grudge against Rebecca Nurse, who, despite a reputation for benevolence, was hanged on July 19, 1692. The real-life John Proctor had an independent streak that angered his fellows; as in the play, he opposed the witch hunt from the outset. His indignation is a matter of public record: "If [the afflicted girls] were let alone, we should all be devils and witches quickly. They should rather be had to the whipping post [where one might] thrash the Devil out of [them]" (quoted in Hansen 53). In all, between June 1692 and May 1693, 20 people were executed; five more died in prison. More than 200 were incarcerated. Because of the mysterious nature of witchcraft, the only "evidence" required for conviction was the testimony of another townsman.

From a contemporary vantage, the Salem witch trials might seem an isolated bout of communal insanity. Such an interpretation, however, neglects the historical record; the episode was not a mere aberration. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, European women were routinely burned at the stake for practicing witchcraft. Almost no one questioned the existence of witches. They were recognized not only in the Bible, but also in legal codes, philosophical treatises, scientific literature, and medical textbooks. Within a century, witchcraft became an obsolete explanation for ill-

ness, accidents, and other calamities. *The Crucible* counts on the audience's inability to identify with late 17th-century worldviews. In doing so, the play underscores the changing nature of cultural belief systems, questions the legitimacy of judging others on the basis of these systems, and casts doubt on ethical, religious, and political "certainties." Reverend Hale, who, during the play's course, undergoes the greatest personal growth, voices these sentiments: "The very crowns of holy law I brought, and what I touched with my bright confidence, it died; and where I turned the eye of my great faith, blood flowed up. . . . Life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it" (*Collected Plays 1945–1961* 444). Miller wants audiences and readers to probe their own moral views, bearing in mind that the passing of time will likely render them antiquated and barbaric. He suggests that just as we look upon the Salem hysteria with contempt and amusement, so too will future generations look upon our own times. Seen in this light, the Salem episode demonstrates the need for moral restraint and social acceptance.

Miller also wants audiences to recognize parallels between the Salem witch hunts and the red scare that swept the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Few failed to see the connection in 1953, when *witch hunt* was common parlance for congressional efforts to root out communist infiltration in the United States. In order to appreciate the play in today's post-cold war era, it must be placed in historical context. Eight years before *The Crucible* reached the stage, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the only viable global leaders. Never comfortable allies during the war, their uneasy partnership quickly devolved into a fierce competition for economic and political allies. In 1947, the United States began offering financial support to overseas anticommunist regimes, no matter how corrupt or abusive. The same year, by executive order, President Harry Truman instituted "loyalty" review boards to bar communist sympathizers from government employment. Meanwhile, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigated communist subversion, both

inside and outside the government. Among the committee's targets, Hollywood screenwriters and directors were the most prominent. Several were accused of disseminating communist propaganda and were cited for contempt when, in their own defense, they invoked the First Amendment. Public fear, already high, peaked in 1949 when the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. On February 9, 1950, Joseph McCarthy, Wisconsin's little-known junior senator, delivered a now-infamous speech in which he claimed to have a list of State Department employees who were "known members of the Communist Party." The speech was not recorded, and the audience was small. Nevertheless, rumor of the allegation spread quickly. Within weeks, the Senate created an ad hoc panel—the Tydings Committee—to investigate McCarthy's charges. When pressed, McCarthy whittled his list of communist State Department workers from 205 to nine. All were exonerated. By then, however, McCarthy had captured the public's imagination. After he was reelected in 1952, McCarthy was appointed chairman of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, which, together with HUAC, forced thousands to explain their political beliefs and profess loyalty to the United States. In the wake of the anticommunist crusade, McCarthy and other politicians ruined thousands of careers. Even when cleared of illegal activity, the accused were often fired, shunned by friends and coworkers, and shut out of community organizations.

In early 1953, when *The Crucible* opened on Broadway, few had the courage to criticize McCarthy's tactics. High-visibility anticommunists such as McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and J. Edgar Hoover did not tolerate dissent. These men divided Americans into two camps, echoing Danforth's warning to Francis Nurse in Act 3: "A person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between" (416). Using the same polarizing logic, McCarthy bullied witnesses and political opponents, branding anyone who disagreed with his browbeating methods a "traitor." In one of the great examples of life imitating art, political opponents considered *The Crucible* as evidence that its creator was an enemy

of the United States. The play called Miller to the attention of HUAC, which summoned him to testify in 1956. As did Proctor, Miller pleaded guilty—he had dabbled in socialism during his college years—but he refused to incriminate others. Resembling the Salem trials, the McCarthy and HUAC hearings promised absolution to defendants willing to “name names.” The year before *The Crucible* premiered, Miller felt personally betrayed when one of his closest friends, the stage and film director Elia Kazan, exposed a handful of Miller’s colleagues during a HUAC deposition. Just as it had during the Salem witch hunts, politics turned friends into foes, rivals into enemies. Leaders in both eras used public anxiety to turn neighbors against one another. Accusing a rival of communist sympathies—so-called red-baiting—became an effective measure for seizing power in both political and business arenas, just as accusing George Jacob of witchcraft enables Thomas Putnam to seize the imprisoned man’s land. In 1989, 36 years after he wrote *The Crucible*, Miller commented, “I could not imagine spending so much time [writing] what seemed to me so obvious a tale. But as the anti-Communist crusade settled in, and showed signs of becoming the permanent derangement of the American psyche, a kind of mystery began to emerge from its melodramas and comedies. We were all behaving differently than we used to; we had drunk from the cup of suspicion of one another. . . . We had entered a mysterious pall from which there seemed no exit” (*Theater Essays* 461).

Two of the most bizarre and appalling episodes in American history—the Salem trials and the communist witch hunts—ended when exhaustion and moral outrage overwhelmed anxiety and fear. *The Crucible* does not dramatize the aftermath of the Salem episode, primarily because its contemporary analog, the red scare, was still in full swing when it reached the stage. A year after the play opened on Broadway, James Welch, special counsel for the army, humiliated McCarthy on national television, asking him, “Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left

no sense of decency?” Within months, the Senate formally censured McCarthy for abusing his power. By the time Miller published his *Collected Plays* in 1957, he considered it safe to discuss *The Crucible*’s allegory. The republished text of the play includes supplemental commentary linking the characters and stories to the communist witch hunts. Half a century later, with McCarthy in his grave, HUAC decommissioned, and communism no longer a threat, the red scare has joined the Salem witch trials in the history books. In the intervening years, public sentiment vindicates Miller’s interpretation of both events—that they are, above all, shameful.

With cold war hysteria a distant memory, *The Crucible*’s continued popularity defied many mid-20th-century critical expectations. There are several explanations for the play’s endurance. In terms of pure entertainment value, few 20th-century American plays can match *The Crucible*. Beyond this, the play still resonates with readers and audiences, who recognize an irrational “us and them” attitude in 21st-century American culture. Bloom suggests that the play lacks the aesthetic range of a genuine tragedy, but the “social benignity is . . . beyond questioning. . . . We would have to mature beyond our national tendency to moral and religious self-righteousness for *The Crucible* to dwindle into another period-piece, and that maturation is nowhere in sight” (*Modern Critical Interpretations: The Crucible* 2). Miller thinks it taps into something even more basic, “something very fundamental in the human animal: the fear of the unknown, and particularly the dread of social isolation” (*Theater Essays* 463). If he is right, *The Crucible* will fascinate for decades to come.

For Discussion or Writing

1. After watching the 2005 film *Good Night and Good Luck*, compare the Salem and communist witch hunts. Discuss the similarities and differences between (a) John Proctor and the American journalist Edward R. Murrow or (b) Deputy Governor Danforth and Joseph McCarthy.

2. Keeping *The Crucible* in mind, discuss the conflict between security and liberty. Why are these two values so often at odds with each other? How might the conflict be resolved? Consider researching a historical period in which these questions were the topic of national or international debate and compare the conditions to those depicted in *The Crucible*. Potential areas of inquiry include domestic spying and indefinite detention of “enemy combatants” in post-9/11 America, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the suppression of “heresy” during the Spanish Inquisition, and the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution.
3. Although Miller based *The Crucible* on real events and people, he alters key facts to heighten the play’s dramatic effect. For example, Miller fabricated the affair between John Proctor and Abigail Williams; in reality, Proctor was 60 years old when he was tried and executed, while Williams was only 11. With this in mind, discuss the pros and cons of “dramatic license.” Should authors be limited in their straying from documented fact when they build a work on a historical foundation? Is there a sharp distinction between “history” and “fiction”? What does “Based on a True Story” mean?
4. Discuss the portrayal of gender in *The Crucible*. Given that most of the Salem witch hunt victims were female, is it significant that the play’s hero is male? Why or why not?
5. Critics generally agree that *The Crucible* succeeds as a social critique of mid-20th-century American politics. However, both shortly after the play’s premiere and decades later, critics have disagreed on the play’s merits as a tragedy. In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines *tragedy* as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts

determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.” Does *The Crucible* meet these criteria? Does the play depict lasting, universal qualities of human existence, or is it a period piece destined to fade as its political relevance diminishes?

***A View from the Bridge* (1955, revised 1956)**

Miller originally conceived *A View from the Bridge* as a one-act “curtain raiser” for *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955). Upon completing the first draft, he decided *Bridge* should headline the bill. After trial runs in New Haven and Boston, both plays premiered on September 29, 1955, at New York’s Coronet Theatre. Reviews were largely negative; the play ran for only 149 performances. Critics complained that *Bridge*’s structure, language, and characterization failed to engage audiences. Miller rewrote the play the following year, dividing it into two acts, transcribing the chorus’s verse lines into prose, prescribing a more realistic set design, and enlarging the central characters’ emotional range. Unwilling to allow the New York critical community to run it “through the mill again,” Miller chose London for the expanded version’s October 1956 premiere. The changes to the script, not to mention the locale, paid off. Warm reviews from the London press and a successful run in Paris the following year led Miller to publish the second version, which has since become the standard edition.

A View from the Bridge dramatizes the last few weeks in the life of Eddie Carbone, an Italian longshoreman in the impoverished bayside Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook. The action begins when Eddie’s wife, Beatrice, opens their home to two Sicilian relatives, Marco and Rodolfo. Though he is initially happy to help Beatrice’s family, Eddie’s support withers when Rodolfo courts his live-in niece, Catherine, whom Eddie has raised as his own child. At first, his objections seem to be normal fatherly behavior, but as the play progresses, Eddie reveals a

long-suppressed sexual passion for Catherine, a passion that drives Eddie to break Red Hook's strict loyalty code. When Eddie reports Rodolfo and Marco to the Immigration Bureau, the community ostracizes him and Marco vows revenge. While awaiting deportation, Marco confronts Eddie about the betrayal. Hoping to earn back the community's respect, Eddie lodges counter-accusations and a fight ensues, which ends when Marco turns Eddie's knife on him. The final curtain drops as Eddie dies in Beatrice's arms.

A View from the Bridge grew out of an anecdote Miller heard while researching corruption and Mafia influence in Brooklyn's waterfront labor unions. In 1947, seeking a project to follow *All My Sons*, Miller became fascinated with Red Hook, which despite its proximity—Miller lived only blocks away—was foreign and enigmatic. A lifelong New Yorker, Miller nonetheless felt disconnected from the disparate cultures that made New York the world's most cosmopolitan city. The play's title captures the feeling of detachment: As did Miller, most of the city's residents only glimpsed Red Hook from the Brooklyn Bridge. Hoping to forge a deeper connection, Miller spent a year hobnobbing in Red Hook bars and attending morning dockside roll calls when longshoremen jockeyed for a day's work. He also traveled to Sicily, witnessing the crippling poverty that drove thousands of local residents, seeking work and a better life, to the United States. On the basis of these experiences, he collaborated with the prospective director, Elia Kazan, on a screenplay, *The Hook*. Studio executives quashed the film, refusing to provide financial backing for a movie with an "un-American" attitude. Miller declined to revise the screenplay, and *The Hook* eventually morphed into two separate projects. Kazan commissioned Bud Schulberg to write *On the Waterfront* (1954), a critically acclaimed film starring Marlon Brando in an Oscar-winning performance as the longshoreman Terry Malloy. The following year *A View from the Bridge* appeared on Broadway. Although they both portray life in Red Hook, *Waterfront* and *Bridge* draw differing conclusions about the virtue of loyalty. In Kazan's film, Malloy heroically defies Red

Hook's code of silence to bring down a tyrannical Mafia union leader. In contrast, Eddie Carbone dies a traitor after selling out his wife's cousins. Both stories allegorize the U.S. government's crusade against communist infiltration. In 1952, while testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Kazan disclosed the names of several American communist supporters. *On the Waterfront* was Kazan's answer to Miller and other critics who considered Kazan's testimony an unforgivable betrayal. Two years later, Miller received a contempt citation for refusing to "name names" during his own HUAC deposition. Miller intended *Bridge* to capture the tragedy of contravening social taboos.

A View from the Bridge is more than a sociopolitical statement. It is also an attempt at contemporary Greek tragedy. In a 1983 interview, Miller told Mathew Roudané:

When I heard this story the first time . . . it struck me even then how Greek it was. You knew from the first minute that it would be a disaster. Everybody around him with any intelligence would have told Eddie that it would be a disaster if he didn't give up his obsession. But it's the nature of the obsession that it can't be given up. The obsession becomes more powerful than the individual it inhabits, like a force from another world. (*Theater Essays* 426)

With *Bridge*, Miller replicates several features of Greek tragedy. Although antiquity's tragic heroes are never of common stock, they share Eddie's inability to control external forces. Eddie's unacceptable desire brings him down, just as fate destroys Oedipus and hubris ruins Agamemnon. The lawyer Alfieri functions as a Greek chorus, an intermediary between the audience and the characters. His communal role as an attorney mirrors this in-between space. As an Italian, he operates within the Red Hook community, but unlike the longshoremen, he is educated and relatively wealthy. His status as both/neither insider and/nor outsider allows him not only to counsel Eddie against betraying Marco and Rodolfo and to

his first Broadway success, he sought to escape Ibsen's shadow. Read—or, if you can, watch a production of—Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and/or *An Enemy of the People*. Compare Ibsen's plays with one or more of Miller's. How do Ibsen and Miller use drama as social commentary? What commonalities in structure, style, and tone do you recognize? Where do Miller and Ibsen diverge? If you are familiar with *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, discuss the reduction in Ibsen's influence in the latter play. For more in-depth study, compare Miller's adaptation of Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* with the original.

2. Born only four years apart, two of America's greatest playwrights, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, gained prominence at the same time—*The Glass Menagerie*, Williams's first Broadway hit, debuted three years before *All My Sons*. Like Miller, Williams is primarily remembered for a handful of early plays. After reading or viewing *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, compare and contrast Miller's work with Williams's. How does each author use drama to comment on social problems? Which writer is more concerned with the individual's psyche? With political issues?
3. *All My Sons* portrays a middle-aged man leading a comfortable upper-middle-class lifestyle in post-World War II America. As the play progresses, the audience learns that he made his fortune during the war manufacturing weapons, some of which failed, killing American soldiers. In the wake of the U.S.-led Iraq war and the subsequent allegations of war profiteering by companies like Bechtel and Halliburton, *All My Sons* has had a resurgence of popularity. How relevant is the play to contemporary war-time politics?
4. In his introduction to the revised version of *A View from the Bridge*, Miller laments what he saw, at that time, as a “retreat into psycho-sexual romanticism” in American theater. Because he is known primarily for his political and social

commentary, Miller's treatment of sexuality is often overlooked. Yet in three of his most famous works—*Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and *A View from the Bridge*—a suppressed sexual relationship lies at the center of conflict. Discuss Miller's treatment of sexuality, perhaps by comparing it to the more overt—and famous—treatment Tennessee Williams gives it.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Abbotson, Susan C. W. *Student Companion to Arthur Miller*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Arthur Miller Society Official Web site. Available online. URL: <http://www.ibiblio.org/miller/>. Accessed May 16, 2007.
- Bigsby, Christopher. *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- . *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. Vol. 2: *Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Bigsby, Christopher, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Bloom, Harold. *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 1996.
- . *Arthur Miller's The Crucible*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House, 1996.
- Brater, Enoch. *Arthur Miller: A Playwright's Life and Works*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.
- . *Arthur Miller's America: Theater and Culture in a Time of Change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.
- Centola, Steven R. “All My Sons.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, edited by C. W. E. Bigsby, 48–59. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Corrigan, Robert W., ed. *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969.
- Ferres, John H., ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Crucible*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972.
- Fried, Albert. *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- Fried, Richard M. *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Galvin, Rachel. "Arthur Miller Biography." National Endowment for the Humanities. Available online. URL: <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/miller/biography.html>. Accessed May 16, 2007.
- Gottfried, Martin. *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2003.
- Gould, Jean. *Modern American Playwrights*. New York: Dodd, 1966.
- Griffin, Alice. *Understanding Arthur Miller*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.
- Hansen, Chadwick. *Witchcraft at Salem*. New York: George Braziller, 1969.
- Harmon, William, C. Hugh Holman, William Flint Thrall, eds. *A Handbook to Literature*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000.
- Hayman, Robert. *Arthur Miller*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972.
- Hill, Frances. *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2000.
- Koon, Helene Wickham, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1983.
- Koorey, Stefani. *Arthur Miller's Life and Literature: An Annotated and Comprehensive Guide*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2000.
- Martine, James J., ed. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979.
- Miller, Arthur. *Collected Plays 1944–1961*. New York: Library of America, 2006.
- . *Collected Plays, Volume I*. New York: Viking, 1957.
- . *Collected Plays, Volume II*. New York: Viking, 1981.
- . *Echoes down the Corridor: Collected Essays 1944–2000*. Edited by Steven R. Centola. New York: Viking, 2000.
- . *I Don't Need You Anymore: Stories by Arthur Miller*. New York: Viking, 1967.
- . *Resurrection Blues*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- . *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. Edited by Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996.
- . *Timebends: A Life*. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- Moss, Leonard. *Arthur Miller*. New Haven, Conn.: College & University Press, 1967.
- Murphy, Brenda. *Miller: Death of a Salesman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Roach, Marilynne K. *The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege*. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002.
- Roudané, Mathew, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Miller's Death of a Salesman*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995.
- Welland, Dennis. *Miller: The Playwright*. London: Methuen, 1979.

J. Earen Rast



N. SCOTT MOMADAY (1934–)

Oral tradition is the other side of the miracle of language. That tradition is especially and above all the seat of the imagination, and the imagination is a kind of divine blindness in which we see not with our eyes, but with our minds and souls, in which we dream the world and our being in it.

(*The Man Made of Words*)

Navarre Scott Momaday, the only child of Alfred (Al) Morris and Mayme Natachee Scott Momaday, was born on February 27, 1934, at the Kiowa and Comanche Indian Hospital in Lawton, Oklahoma. Momaday's family history spans several cultures and ethnicities. Growing up on reservations and in pueblos in the Southwest, Momaday lived among Navajo, Apache, Hispanic, and Anglo families. These experiences, along with his father's Kiowa and to some extent his mother's French, Scottish, and Cherokee heritage, have had a great impact on Momaday's works, which often fuse diverse cultural beliefs.

When he was six months old, Momaday traveled with his parents to the Black Hills, a solitary mountain range straddling the South Dakota–Wyoming border. In the shadow of Devil's Tower, the first U.S. national monument, they met Pohd-lohk, a Kiowa elder, who gave Momaday his Indian name, *Tsoai-talee*. The name links Momaday to a Kiowa myth in which a young boy transforms into a bear and hunts his seven sisters. In order to escape their bear-brother, the sisters scramble up a magic tree stump, which grows as they climb. Frustrated, the bear rends the bark from the tree, which becomes Tsoai, or "rock-tree," the Kiowa name for Devil's Tower, a large rock formation in Wyoming (for pictures of the Devil's Tower monument visit the National Park Service's Web site: <http://www.nps.gov/deto/>). Fascinated with the mythic origins of

his Kiowa name, translated as "Rock-tree Boy," Momaday incorporates the myth in all four of his longer works: *House Made of Dawn* (1968), *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), *The Names! Memoir* (1976), and *The Ancient Child* (1989). The bear myth connects him with Kiowa oral tradition and culture, and the bear-boy's metamorphosis mirrors Momaday's struggle to negotiate oft-conflicting cultures.

When he was two, Momaday's parents left the Kiowa people for the Southwest, where they found work as teachers. For the next 10 years, the Momadays found jobs near the Navajo Reservation in Arizona and New Mexico. In 1946, they settled in Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico, where Al and Natachee ran a two-teacher day school. Momaday traveled to Bernalillo and Albuquerque, 30 and 60 miles from their remote home, to attend high school. With encouragement from his parents, who wanted him to experience financial and artistic success outside the reservation, Momaday spent his senior year at the Augustus Military Academy, an elite, predominately white private school in Fort Defiance, Virginia.

After first attending the University of New Mexico (UNM), Momaday transferred in 1956 to the University of Virginia, where he intended to study law. He abandoned this plan a year later, returning to UNM, where he graduated in 1958 with a degree in political science and minors in

English and speech. Recruited by the State Department of Education, Momaday taught English to Apache students at a K–12 school in Dulce, New Mexico, a small town on the Jicarilla Reservation. On the advice of a friend, Momaday applied for and received the Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford University during his first year of teaching. There, he studied under Yvor Winters, a leading mid-20th-century poet and literary critic. Winters immediately noted Momaday's talent, predicting he would be "a famous man . . . perhaps even a great one." While under Winters's tutelage at Stanford, Momaday wrote several poems later collected in *Angle of Geese* (1974) and *The Gourd Dancer* (1976). Although Momaday planned to stay in California for only one year, the close relationship he developed with Winters led him to pursue an advanced degree. Having written his dissertation on the little-known 19th-century American poet Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, Momaday received a doctorate in English literature four years after arriving at Stanford.

Momaday took his first university teaching position at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he created a course on the American Indian oral tradition and researched Kiowa history and myth. During this period, Momaday's grandmother informed him that the Tai-me bundle, a sacred Kiowa relic, existed. According to Kiowa tradition, a keeper or priest is charged with guarding Tai-me. Until 1887, the keeper performed an essential role in the Sun Dance, an ancient ceremony vital to the tribe's cultural identity. In the late 19th century, facing the U.S. Cavalry and increasing pressure to assimilate with white culture, the Kiowa abandoned the Sun Dance ritual. By the time Momaday grew interested in it, Tai-me was virtually forgotten. Learning of its location, Momaday traveled to Oklahoma, visited the home of the keeper, and, using customary, ritualistic gestures, viewed the medicine bundle. The experience had a profound effect on him. His attempts to uncover the history and importance of Tai-me led to his first major work, *The Journey of Tai-me* (1967), a collection of Kiowa myths and legends privately printed.

In 1966, while composing *The Journey of Tai-me*, he traveled to Amherst, Massachusetts, on a Guggenheim scholarship. There he prepared a critical study on Emily Dickinson. He also worked on a third project, one he completed in 1968. That year Harper & Row invited Momaday to submit a collection of poetry. Instead, he submitted a novel entitled *House Made of Dawn*. Set in two locations—on the Jemez Reservation and in Los Angeles—*House Made of Dawn* explores the alienation contemporary Native Americans often experience when trying to assimilate into white society and also when following traditional ways far removed from modern life. The book earned critical acclaim and received the 1969 Pulitzer Prize in fiction. *House Made of Dawn* marked a major breakthrough not only for Momaday but also for Native American authors, who drew inspiration from Momaday's text. In fact, critics often refer to the outpouring of Native American texts since *House Made of Dawn*'s 1969 publication as the "Native American renaissance," an expression coined by Kenneth Lincoln. In 1969 Momaday left Santa Barbara for the University of California, Berkeley. There he completed and published his next major work, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), which combined personal memoir, Kiowa myth, and tribal history with pictographic illustrations drawn by his father, Al.

Though 20 years elapsed before Momaday published another novel, his career flourished throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1970, he wrote "An American Land Ethic," the first of several essays supporting the conservation movement. After three years at Berkeley, Momaday accepted a job offer from Stanford, where he taught for nine years. In 1973, he teamed with the photographer David Muench to produce the nonfiction work *Colorado*, a poetical sketchbook celebrating the Rocky Mountains. The following year, having received temporary leave from Stanford, Momaday accepted a visiting professorship at the University of Moscow, where he taught the school's first course in American literature. In Russia, he experienced a burst of creative energy; as his father, a successful painter, Momaday began to draw and paint. Since

then he has exhibited his work, won awards, and adorned his major written works with sketches and paintings.

At the same time he discovered his talent for visual art, Momaday returned to poetry. While in Moscow, he wrote the poems assembled in part 3 of *The Gourd Dancer* (1976), the first collection of Momaday's poetry available to a wide audience. *The Gourd Dancer* reprinted all the poems published in the chapbook *Angle of Geese and Other Poems* (1974), many of which, including "The Bear," "Buteo Regalis," and "Angle of Geese," Momaday wrote as a graduate student, using the rigid syllabic guidelines Winters had taught him. When he returned to writing poetry several years later, his lyrical voice changed. The poems collected in part 2 of *The Gourd Dancer* document this shift. Although Momaday uses syllabic verse in "The Omen" and "The Eagle-Feather Fan," most of the pieces are prose poems, a form suitable to the rhythms of Indian storytelling and ceremony. Meanwhile, Momaday continued to write prose. The same year *The Gourd Dancer* appeared in bookstores, he published *The Names: A Memoir* (1976). While *The Way to Rainy Mountain* blends autobiographical elements with Kiowa myth and history, *The Names* chronicles Momaday's youth and adolescence. In this work, Momaday focuses on the power of the imagination, which he considers vital to creating an identity. Growing up among Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache Indians, Momaday had to rely on his imagination to connect with his ancestors' Plains culture.

Although Momaday has written less since the late 1970s, his reputation continues to grow; his works continue to be taught and read. In 1981 he took a teaching position at the University of Arizona, where he has remained for a quarter-century. He currently occupies the Regents Professorship in the Humanities. In the early 1980s, with the Native American renaissance in full bloom, his works received a great deal of critical attention. By the time Momaday completed his second novel, *The Ancient Child* (1989), several major studies of his earlier works had been published.

The Ancient Child solidified his literary reputation, particularly with university scholars, who

often value complex texts. With its many literary, philosophical, and mythological allusions, *The Ancient Child* is a demanding novel. The story centers on Set, a Kiowa painter who, as does Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, has a spiritual awakening when he immerses himself in native cultural traditions. After arriving in Oklahoma for his grandmother's funeral, Set meets Grey, a young medicine woman, who helps him confront a mysterious "ancient child," the same mythological boy-turned-bear with whom Momaday himself identifies. As Momaday does, Set discovers an inner spiritual connection not only with the legendary bear-boy but with myth in general.

Throughout the 1990s, Momaday continued to broaden his artistic scope. In 1992, he published *In the Presence of the Sun*, a collection of poetry, prose, drawings, and paintings. Two years later, he produced a children's book, *Circle of Wonder: A Native American Christmas Story*. His 1997 essay collection *The Man Made of Words* offers a comprehensive view of Momaday's evolving thought on subjects ranging from environmental conservation to racism. With his latest offering, *In the Bear's House* (1999), he explores his lifelong fascination with bears, using theaterlike dialogue, formal and informal poetry, short stories, and paintings to express his thoughts. In this work, his many talents are obvious: his command of language, his skill with a paintbrush, his ability to synthesize European and Native American tradition and literary forms, and his ability to transcend conventional literary genres.

In 2005, the University of Oklahoma awarded him an honorary doctorate of humane letters, his 13th honorary degree. The same year, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) rewarded Momaday for his work in teaching others about Native American history and traditions, recognizing him as a UNESCO Artist for Peace. Often called the "dean" of Native American writers, Momaday has earned a distinguished place in the American literary canon. With his use of myth and traditions from many cultures and his respect for the natural world, Momaday speaks to a contemporary world

still coming to terms with varying ethnic traditions and cultural differences, a world focused on preserving what exists, recovering what has been lost, and venerating the earth, which, for Momaday, is not only the source of life but also our connection with ourselves and with others: the ground upon which the past has been founded and upon which the future will be made.

***House Made of Dawn* (1968)**

When *House Made of Dawn* won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize in fiction, the jury announced the arrival of a new literary voice in the United States, calling Momaday “a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americas.” Widely cited as the work that launched the “Native American renaissance,” Momaday’s first novel fuses Euro-American novel form with traditional Kiowa, Pueblo, and Navajo storytelling. Divided into four chapters and a prologue, *House Made of Dawn* tells the story of Abel, who struggles to find inner peace and a coherent identity. As with Homer’s *Odyssey* and Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, *House Made of Dawn* tells the story of a homecoming, Abel’s return to Walatowa, New Mexico, after serving in World War II. Since his horrific experience fighting in the war, Abel finds it difficult to be a part of Pueblo life. Lost, seemingly affected with something like posttraumatic stress disorder, Abel cannot connect to others or the culture to which he belongs. *House Made of Dawn* tells of Abel’s journey toward wholeness and his battle to find a place in the world.

Spanning a two-week period in 1945, part 1, “The Longhair,” recounts Abel’s sexual affair with a white woman and his murder of an albino Indian. The remainder of the novel details a four-week period after Abel is released from prison in 1952. Set in Los Angeles, parts 2 and 3—“The Priest of the Sun” and “The Night Chanter”—recount Abel’s failed attempts to assimilate into white society, his struggle with alcoholism, and his attraction to violence. In part 4, “The Dawn Runner,” Abel returns to Walatowa, where he attends to his grandfather, presiding over his deathbed and

arranging his funeral. Part 4 ends as Abel enters a sacred native race. With dawn breaking across the horizon, he covers himself in soot and begins to run. As the novel closes, he finds peace by setting his pace to the rhythmic chant of the Navajo Night Chant.

After the lyrical prologue, which establishes the novel’s relationship to Pueblo and Navajo oral customs, the action begins in part 1, “The Longhair,” when Abel arrives in his small Pueblo village home in northwestern New Mexico. Abel steps off the bus drunk and barely recognizes his grandfather. This scene is significant; it establishes Abel’s fallen state and serves as a commentary on alcoholism among Native Americans, which became a severe problem for veterans. Upon returning to the United States, many Native American war veterans found themselves alienated from the U.S. government and white society, which continued to view them as second-class citizens despite their contribution to the war effort, as well as alienated from their own people, who could not imagine the horrors they had experienced. When we first encounter Abel, he is both physically and psychologically sick. The question driving *House Made of Dawn* is, How can Abel and those similarly alienated heal? Answering this question requires understanding the illness.

In “The Longhair,” Momaday explores the causes of Abel’s alienation. When Abel arrives in Walatowa, he “does not know” or greet Francisco, who nurtured the young Abel by introducing him to traditional Pueblo customs. Abel’s inability to recognize his grandfather, his closest living relative, indicates the depth of his estrangement. It also highlights Abel’s most striking characteristic: silence. He is the novel’s protagonist, and yet other voices—whether Tosamah’s, Benally’s, or even Francisco’s—drown out Abel’s voice. His silence is not “the older and better part of custom,” or the sign of wisdom; rather, Abel is inarticulate, unable to use language to relate to anything or anyone.

Abel’s silence mirrors his inability to connect to the world, preventing him from creating an authentic identity, a sense of self. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a psychological illness combat veterans often experience, accounts for only part of

Abel's psychological isolation; a sense of rootlessness is conveyed in the novel's flashbacks and narrative breaks. Several events and factors contribute to Abel's alienation prior to the war. He never knew his father, who was "a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway, which made him and his mother and [his brother] Vidal somehow foreign and strange." His mother and brother died while Abel was young, further disaffecting him from traditional familial structures. Abel's care fell to his grandfather, Francisco, who may have been fathered by the corrupt priest Nicolas. Of the many memories the narrator explores in "The Longhair," Abel's recollection of his hunt with the Eagle Watchers Society is particularly telling. A lifelong member, Francisco introduces Abel to the organization of medicine men and soothsayers. Descendants of the Bahkyush, an ancient Indian tribe reduced to near-extinction in the 19th century, the Eagle Watchers Society is a band of outsiders who never fully assimilated into the Pueblo society. On their yearly hunt, Abel captures and binds a giant female eagle, earning the respect of the group's members. Yet, he quickly forsakes his newfound identity with the group. Ashamed of holding the eagle captive, he kills it rather than see it imprisoned. After recounting this memory, the narrative flashes forward to Abel's departure from Walatowa to join the military. Waiting for a cab to arrive, Abel has "no one to wish him well or tell him how it would be." As Abel rides away, he ignores the passing landscape, focusing instead on the noise and speed of the car.

The departure scene iterates a motif that recurs throughout Momaday's work: the modern struggle between technology and nature. For Momaday, our obsession with technology distances us from nature, a presence in our lives that promises to provide personal and communal wholeness. The narrator notes that Abel could remember "everything in advance of his going . . . [in] whole and in detail. It was the recent past, the intervention of days and years without meaning, of . . . time always immediate and confused, that he could not put together in his mind." Without a sense of place to ground his experiences, Abel's memory becomes fragmented.

As an act of imagination, memory is, for Momaday, necessary to our survival, to the creation of a sense of self. In the first and fourth parts of *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday fuses memory and place by supplementing Abel and Francisco's recollections with long, poetic descriptions of the landscape. In order for Abel to heal, he must revive his connection to his homeland.

In addition to the chapter's memory sequences, two events in the immediate action illustrate Abel's alienation. The first focuses on Abel's relationship with Angela St. John, a married white woman seeking the recuperative qualities of New Mexico's clean air. Soon after returning to Walatowa, Abel takes a job chopping firewood for her and ultimately has a sexual affair with the already-pregnant Angela. Although she fancies herself tolerant and open-minded, Angela stereotypes Abel and the other Native Americans living in the pueblo, making it difficult to gauge her relationship to Abel. By having sex with Angela, Abel further alienates himself from traditional Pueblo society, which, as the narrator notes, has never approved of fornication with outsiders. Neither does the affair allow Abel to connect with Euro-American culture. If anything, it deepens the rift he feels.

The second event is more difficult to interpret. Although it is loaded with symbolic meaning, the narrator does not provide Abel's motivation for murdering the albino. Though Abel never admits it, he appears to be offended when the albino flails him with a rooster during the feast of Santiago. Abel's embarrassment signals his feelings of inadequacy, for, unlike the albino, Abel fails to pluck the rooster from the ground. Abel's reaction also indicates the depth of his detachment from his native culture. The albino's hostile gesture is appropriate to the ceremonial occasion; Abel's vengeance is not. Yet, the albino is not a hapless victim. He commands an ominous and "unnatural" presence. His eyes are "dead and raw," his mouth "evil," his laugh painful, a "strange, inhuman cry." Associating the albino with a devil-like serpent, Momaday draws freely on biblical imagery in the last scene of "The Longhair," imagery that resonates with Abel's biblical namesake. Briefly, we are

led to believe Abel reverses the curse of his Genesis predecessor; however, rather than freeing him, Abel's revenge only leads to his own condemnation. While the biblical language of the murder scene may not be obvious, the significance of the albino's skin color is. In the final two paragraphs alone, the narrator uses the word *white* more than 20 times, aligning the albino's wickedness with the white-skinned Europeans, who, using warfare and forced assimilation policies, annihilated Native American ways of life. Just as killing the albino fails to heal Abel's fractured psyche, so also would taking revenge against white society be futile. Yet, the albino does not merely stand for a dominating culture. Rather, he represents Abel's inner demons, especially his inability to solve problems peacefully. When the albino upstages Abel in the rooster ceremony, Abel recognizes the extent of his isolation and strikes out, responding as though he is still fighting in Europe.

We learn of Abel's failure midway through the next chapter, when we encounter him badly beaten on a beach outside Los Angeles seven years later. Like the small silver fish the narrator describes in the opening paragraph, Abel is trapped in a cycle of self-sabotage that allows others to take advantage of him. "The Priest of the Sun" continues the novel's memory-driven narrative, filling in Abel's past, including his murder trial, his wartime experiences, and his romantic relationship with Milly, a social worker overseeing Abel's postimprisonment reintegration. Momaday bookends these memories with two sermons by John Big Bluff Tosamah, also known as the Priest of the Sun. First appearing halfway through *House Made of Dawn*, Tosamah articulates some common Momaday themes. In his first sermon, "The Gospel According to John," Tosamah probes the use and abuse of language. Though his homily contains a good dose of irony—the lengthy monologue excoriates those who talk too much—Tosamah echoes Momaday's "The Man Made of Words." Despite differing in tone, both Tosamah's speech and Momaday's essay emphasize the importance of language in identity formation. The sermon also exposes how speakers and writers manipulate language to increase their own or their

culture's power. In the second sermon, "The Way to Rainy Mountain," the distinction between Tosamah and Momaday vanishes. In what later becomes the introduction to a full-length work of the same name, Momaday projects his family biography into the voice of Tosamah, who, as Momaday was, was removed in early childhood from the seat of Kiowa culture. Recalling his grandmother's reverence for the Sun and the Plains, Tosamah/Momaday ponders the links among place, identity, oral tradition, and imagination. Yet Tosamah's ironic persona undercuts his sincerity, forcing other characters—Abel and Benally, for example—to sort through rather than merely accept what he says. "Always showing off and making fun of things," Tosamah is a trickster, an archetypal character common in Native American mythology. The trickster persona varies—some are playful, others sinister. Whatever form the trickster takes, he or she typically uses wit and mischief to teach a lesson. Tosamah performs this function with Abel, willfully antagonizing him for his "long-hair" ways and inability to assimilate. Tosamah triggers a psychotic rage in Abel, who trips over his own feet while lunging at the grinning Priest of the Sun. Tosamah's chiding initiates Abel's final descent and recovery. Never returning to work, he drinks heavily and finally awakens bruised and battered on the beach.

"The Night Chanter" continues the novel's experimentation with shifting perspectives and style, replacing the poetic voice of both the third-person narration and Tosamah's sermons with a down-to-earth first-person account. The Night Chanter is Ben Benally, an assimilated Navajo. A potential model for Abel, Benally represents the person Abel might become were he to renounce his Pueblo heritage and embrace the American dream. Ultimately, Benally's superficial relationship with his native culture proves an unacceptable consequence for Abel. Benally engages in his native customs as if they are mere relics. He sings the Night Chant for amusement while getting drunk. Like the reservation lands he calls "empty and dead," the Night Chant has lost its vitality and cultural significance. Benally's plan to meet Abel for one last Night Chant recital signals his desire to make a

clean break from the past, from his homeland, and from Navajo culture. Fittingly, the trickster figure intervenes: Tosamah calls this dream of becoming a part of American culture a “Jesus scheme” bent on shackling nonconformists. Benally discounts the tirade as an attempt to “show off.” Despite his silence and his quarrel with Tosamah, Abel understands the older man’s point: Forced assimilation and imprisonment are essentially the same.

Assimilation is, in fact, the most severe kind of incarceration. Without a cultural center, Abel also lacks his own identity. “The Dawn Runner” presents an alternative to Benally’s model. Abel returns to Walatowa, dresses his grandfather according to tribal custom, and departs for the fields outside town, where he joins the ceremonial runners in the annual dawn race. In the last section, by far the shortest of the four, Momaday returns to the style he used in “The Longhair.” In contrast to the first section, in which Abel’s fragmented memory emphasizes his dislocation, Francisco’s memories resonate with the rhythmic wholeness Abel discovers in ritual. Burying his grandfather according to tradition, joining the dawn runners, and, finally, intoning the Navajo Night Chant as he sprints across the desert, Abel discovers a way to articulate himself, to connect with something vital and meaningful: “He was running and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of the song.”

The form of *House Made of Dawn* mirrors Abel’s engagement with ceremony, myth, and oral tradition. The text itself presents an alternative to Benally’s connection with the Night Chant. Unlike Benally, who treats the ceremony as a relic independent of and irrelevant to contemporary America, Momaday shows it can be incorporated into modernity. Opening and closing with identical images—Abel running—the narrative is circular. Momaday encourages us to reconsider simplistic notions of linear time, notions that Benally harbors when he wonders why anyone would want to live on the reservation, since that lifestyle had been “surpassed” by industrialization and consumerism. Momaday rejects this idea. Through memory, imagination, and ritual, the

past comes to life, overlapping with the present and future. Time, like the narrative, is circular. Once Abel realizes this, he no longer feels alienated. He becomes a part of something much larger than his pain-filled present.

For Momaday, the oral tradition captures the potential of human imagination. Through an unending process of telling, listening, and retelling, oral forms adapt according to a culture’s present needs. The oral tradition connects listeners with a past, but the connection is dynamic rather than static. Momaday invokes the oral tradition with the novel’s first and last words: *Dypolah* and *Qtsedaba* are traditional signals Jemez storytellers use to open and close a mythical tale. With *House Made of Dawn* Momaday blends the modern novel and ancient oral customs; through his imagination, we witness Abel as he struggles to heal. *House Made of Dawn* is an enigmatic narrative that renders the beauty and pain of the Native American experience. Drawn into a strange world of wondrous images and beautiful language, we take on the story. As we grapple with the novel’s time shifts, narrative breaks, omissions, and poetic language, we know Abel’s homesickness: the desire to be elsewhere in a world that demands conformity and denies difference, a world where hope lies in the not-so-distant horizon, where we, as does Abel, behold the breathtaking light of dawn.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although a comic character, Tosamah tells the story of his Kiowa grandmother with reverence. The story mirrors the one Momaday tells of his own grandmother in the introduction to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Read the prologue and introduction of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. How does this alter your interpretation of Tosamah? How does it change your idea of Momaday?
2. Using an encyclopedia and/or a reliable Web site, identify key passages in *House Made of Dawn* that allude to or quote the Night Chant and explain their significance to the novel, especially Abel’s healing process (the fourth day of the Night Chant, which Momaday uses in *House*

Made of Dawn, can be found in a number of places, including online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/nav/nmps/nmps06.htm>). How does familiarity with the Night Chant deepen your understanding of *House Made of Dawn*?

3. Some readers have interpreted the albino as a symbolic representation of white society, concluding that *House Made of Dawn* portrays both as intrinsically evil. Most Momaday scholars, however, reject this reading as overly simplistic and misguided. Analyze the albino's character, paying special attention to both the Santiago feast and murder scenes in "The Longhair." What is the significance, if any, of the albino's skin color? What do you think the novel says about American race relations?
4. In very different ways, *House Made of Dawn* and John Woo's 2002 film *Windtalkers* explore Native American involvement in World War II. Watch the film, taking note of its portrayal Navajo soldiers. How does this representation compare with Abel's experiences and memories? Why does Woo concentrate on the Navajos' wartime heroics, while Momaday focuses on the years that follow?

***The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969)**

Published just one year after his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is widely regarded as his greatest work. Thematically, both works deal with alienation, personal identity, place, and the oral tradition; however, the texts differ in two important ways. First, unlike *House Made of Dawn*, which is set in the American Southwest and incorporates aspects of Navajo culture, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is set on the southern Plains and focuses on the Kiowa culture. Second, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is not a novel. Part myth, part ethnographic commentary, part autobiography, and experimental in form, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* defies the categories we usually use for literary works. Part of the work's originality derives from its unusual style; however, its reexamination of

both Euro-American and Native American culture marks its uniqueness.

Encouraged to excel in the U.S. educational system, Momaday had, until his early thirties, focused his intellectual energy on learning Western history and poetic forms. In 1963, having just completed a Ph.D. in a traditional English literature program, Momaday suddenly realized that, by spending his formative years studying Western cultural forms, he had ignored the Kiowa legacy. Grounded in a rich history of tradition and myth, the Kiowa culture was decimated not only by the U.S. military assault on Native Americans in the decades after the Civil War but also by a century of forced assimilation. Upon leaving Stanford, Momaday followed the advice of his graduate school mentor, Yvor Winters, who stressed the importance of grasping one's personal history. For Momaday, this meant uncovering his Kiowa roots. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is Momaday's attempt to learn this background, to understand how it has shaped him, and to probe its potential for exposing his readers to an alternate way of conceiving reality.

As with *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday began writing *The Way to Rainy Mountain* several years prior to publishing it. In this case, the work took shape over the course of six years, beginning in 1963, when Aho, Momaday's grandmother, told him that the most sacred Kiowa relic, Tai-me, was still in existence. With Aho and his father, Al, Momaday set out for Oklahoma to view the Tai-me bundle. He would later describe the incident as "the most intensely religious experience" he had ever had. Shortly thereafter, Aho died, prompting Momaday to return to Oklahoma, where he visited the Rainy Mountain cemetery near Lawton, the final resting place for many Kiowa elders. Together, these experiences instilled in Momaday a passion to learn about his tribal forebears. As part of his research, he retraced the early 18th-century Kiowa migration route from the mountains of southern Montana to the plains of western Oklahoma. The more he delved into his cultural past, the more he felt compelled to write about it.

While the decision to recover the Kiowa story was easy, the actual recovery proved difficult. Bound

up in a web of oral myths and legends, the history of the Kiowa has not been well preserved. Such is the nature of oral traditions: Without storytellers, the stories fade. Through education, the U.S. government encouraged American Indians to speak English instead of their native tongue, to believe scientific explanations of natural phenomena instead of mythical ones, and to accept the Euro-American version of history instead of their tribe's. By the time Momaday undertook the recuperation project, little material, written or spoken, remained. Further complicating matters, Momaday did not speak Kiowa. This meant he had to rely on a translator for conducting interviews and deciphering the few remaining written records, a responsibility that fell to Momaday's father, Al, who not only collaborated with Momaday throughout the research and composition process but also drew several illustrations included in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

Although the language and subject matter present no major difficulties to the reader, the text's intricate and stylized structure can be daunting. Because the work lacks a conventional form, the structure is key to understanding how the many fragments unify into a cohesive whole. The prose portion of the text begins with a prologue and introduction, proceeds in three chapterlike movements, and concludes with an epilogue. Two short poems, "Headwaters" and "Rainy Mountain Cemetery," bookend the work, capturing several themes Momaday explores in the middle. Describing a primordial energy, "Headwaters" evokes a creative beginning. Using the imagery of silence and death, "Rainy Mountain Cemetery" evokes a destructive end. The first quatrain of "Headwaters" depicts a marshy woodland in which a hollow, weather-stained log lies on the forest floor. In the second quatrain, Momaday employs a rhythmic cadence to portray an unknown "archaic force," which disrupts the scene's peacefulness. We are not told what the force is or what it signifies.

The poem asks, "What moves?" The prologue answers, "The Kiowas." Their existence, Momaday writes, began and ended with two struggles: the first to escape a hollow log, where, according to their creation myth, they entered the world; the second to survive in a world turned upside down by

white hunters and soldiers. When, between 1874 and 1886, hide hunters reduced the buffalo population from 30 million to less than 1,000, hunters destroyed not only the Kiowas' principal source of food and shelter but also its cultural identity.

The Way to Rainy Mountain focuses on the interim period between the Kiowa tribe's mythic beginning and its historical end, a period of "great adventure and nobility and fulfillment." As its title indicates, the book concerns a journey, or more precisely, several journeys. Some of these journeys are physical: the Kiowa migration in the early 18th century to Rainy Mountain, a knoll that rises out of the Oklahoma plain; Momaday's own trips to see the Tai-me bundle, to interview Kiowa elders, and to retrace the original Kiowa southern route. Other journeys are metaphorical. An important Kiowa landmark, Rainy Mountain symbolizes the culture and knowledge Momaday wants to recover. By writing the book, he begins an odyssey of self-exploration, seeking a personal identity in the traditions Rainy Mountain represents. This journey, however, is not merely personal. As Momaday writes,

The way to Rainy Mountain is preeminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself. . . . The verbal tradition by which it has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay—and of course the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. That is the miracle.

For Momaday, the erosion of Kiowa culture is part of a broader decay of human imagination, which Western society deemphasizes in favor of scientific and historical fact. Part of what makes us human, part of what makes life worth living, resides in our common need to tell stories about the world and ourselves in order to make sense of both. Thus, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* becomes the very thing it triumphs: The work is an act of imagination, one that synthesizes Western and Kiowa forms of knowledge into a cohesive worldview.

For Momaday, imagination and storytelling link people with the land they inhabit. Understanding

a culture requires understanding the culture's relationship to its surroundings. Momaday establishes these ideas in the introduction. Combining his grandmother's traditional Kiowa stories with his own imaginative interpretation of the land between Montana and Oklahoma, Momaday sketches the relationship between the southern Plains and Kiowa tribal identity. It was not until they migrated from the Yellowstone Mountains to the areas in northern Texas, western Oklahoma, southern Kansas, and eastern Colorado that the Kiowa became Kiowa. Leaving behind the confinement of the mountains, where they were "bent and blind in the wilderness," they developed a talent for horse riding and a reverence for the Sun and buffalo, the central emblems of the Kiowa religion. "The sun," Momaday writes, "is at home on the plains. Precisely there does it have the certain character of a god." The holy regard the Kiowa held for the Sun, now "all but gone out of mankind," occupied the central place in their ceremonies, the most important of which was the sacred Sun Dance. Calling for a buffalo sacrifice, the ritual was last performed in 1887, when the U.S. government outlawed it as an act of barbarism. By then the buffalo, the animal representation of the Sun, were nearly extinct. The only personal link Momaday had with the Sun Dance died with his grandmother; Aho was seven when she attended the ceremony. Although the Kiowa still have the Tai-me bundle, the sacred Sun Dance fetish, Momaday confesses that his grandmother's house and the culture it embodied for him have grown silent.

Only imagination and memory can break the silence, a task Momaday undertakes in the text's central section, which he divides into three movements—"The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In." Taken together, these movements pay homage to the past while building hope for the future. Momaday separates each movement into several units of three paragraphs, or triads. Although the thematic content of the triads varies, they share a formulaic structure. The first paragraph is mythological and employs the cadence and diction of oral storytelling. The second is anthropological or historical; its style is precise and impersonal. The third paragraph is biographical

and lyrical. Each paragraph reflects upon the other two, sometimes in ways the reader may struggle to discern. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* forces readers to make their own connections, compelling them to use their own imagination. The first paragraph in each triad reestablishes myth, legend, and lore as legitimate explanations for reality. Rather than oppose the first paragraph, the second paragraph complements it, augmenting each myth or legend with a historical fact about the Kiowa. Momaday culled many of these facts from white anthropologists such as James Mooney and Alice Marriott. The third paragraph synthesizes the first two. Poetically crafted and rendered in the first person, the third paragraph integrates two different ways of seeing the world. The result is a book that reflects Momaday's Native American and non-Native American experiences, memories, and identity.

The Way to Rainy Mountain proceeds chronologically. Each of the text's movements treats a period of Kiowa history, both factual and mythical. In 11 triads, "The Setting Out" traces Kiowa origin, beginning with the tribe's mythic emergence from a hollow log. The myths in this section often seem thematically unrelated: One explains how dogs came to the Kiowas; another recounts the origin of Tai-me; four others proceed serially, filling out the Kiowa lineage in relation to a personified Sun god. Many of the "Setting Out" stories (myths) attempt to explain something's cause. As disparate from one another as these stories are, they share a common feature: Each deals with Kiowa culture before it developed the identity of its "golden age," a period that began in the mid-18th century when the Kiowa arrived in the southern Plains and reached its peak around 1830, and then declined gradually until 1875, when tribal leaders surrendered to U.S. soldiers at Fort Mill, Oklahoma. Momaday orders the second movement, "The Going On," around the golden age. This section depicts a fully formed, elaborate culture, one made up of brave warriors, skilled riders, expert arrow makers, and clever tricksters. Their mythological origins established, the Kiowa stories in "The Going On" portray a self-assured, powerful, and free people. Although one might expect the final movement, "The Closing

In,” to treat the Kiowa imprisonment and cultural collapse, Momaday takes a subtle tack, representing the decline as a gradual depletion of tribal memory. Beginning with the story of two courageous brothers, each story that follows is less assured than the one preceding it. They also proceed from a legendary, unspecified time to the present. The mythic and legendary give way to the personal. In the next to the last anecdote, Momaday’s grandmother, Aho, is the central figure. The last living elder Momaday knows, Aho witnesses the unexplained yet symbolic toppling of Tai-me while visiting the relic’s official keeper. In the final triad, Momaday’s perspective takes over. He assumes responsibility for not only the third paragraph’s synthesis but also the first paragraph’s oral story and the second’s factual description. The oral tradition becomes his, and significantly, he begins the first and third paragraphs with an identical opening phrase, “East of my grandmother’s house . . .”

Although *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a deeply personal work, Momaday wanted it to resonate with others. Abandoning the inward reflective style of the other biographical anecdotes, Momaday concludes “The Closing In” with an appeal:

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. . . . He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience. . . . He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season. . . . He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

Momaday returns to several key themes in this passage: the link between imagination and the landscape, the connection between one’s personal identity and a sense of place, and the ability of memory to enliven the past. One theme, however, is new: Momaday shifts from personal recollection to moral prescription. Set off by *He ought* constructions, the last triad ends with several moral directives. For Momaday, a person forms an authentic sense of self only when he or she identifies with a particular place. Otherwise, the individual remains incomplete.

Momaday prevents readers from taking comfort in the idea of a simple retreat into nature. Death imagery dominates the epilogue and closing poem, “Rainy Mountain Cemetery,” in which Momaday stands silent before his grandmother’s gravestone. As somber as the closing poem is, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is not a simple lamentation or yearning for the past. The epilogue demonstrates how the Plains Indian culture, though no longer physically active, continues to thrive in his imagination. Kosahn, an “old-old” woman, among the last to have experienced the 1887 Sun Dance, is probably dead. Yet, her story lives in Momaday’s mind; her memory becomes his, which he keeps alive by retelling it. In the process of recovering Kiowa culture, Momaday reveals it not as an artifact for silent viewing but as alive, adapting, changing, and carried on in his own imagination. As so many of his works do, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* deals with identity and the way that Momaday and we use language to understand the present, shape our future, and recover the past.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A committed environmentalist, Momaday has written several essays in favor of conservation. Focusing on legal and political arguments, research the present-day U.S. conservation movement. Then, read Momaday’s essay “An American Land Ethic” (*The Man Made of Words* 1997), noting the similarities and differences in their reasoning. Are Momaday’s arguments supporting conservation more persuasive than the arguments offered by many environmentalists? How does your reading of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* shape your views?
2. Although myth and legend are often conflated in everyday conversation, literary scholars distinguish between the two. *Myths* are stories involving sacred and/or supernatural beings. They are integrated into the religious or spiritual tapestry of a community and encode the cultural worldview of a people, setting parameters for acceptable behavior. *Legends*, though similar, usually have a discernible factual link but a weaker connection to the divine. Reread the first paragraph of each triad, deciding whether the story quali-

fies as myth, legend, or neither. Next, identify at least two myths and two legends from your own culture. Compare and contrast the similarities and differences between your own cultural myths and legends and those you encounter in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Do your own myths and legends seem more plausible? If so, would an outsider agree with you?

***The Names: A Memoir* (1976)**

In the 1970 essay “The Man Made of Words,” Momaday wrote, “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists of our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and *that* we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (55). Six years after publishing these words, Momaday released his autobiography, *The Names: A Memoir*, a chronicle of his youth and adolescence. With this work, he imagines himself, creating a Kiowa poet identity.

The Names consists of an explanatory introduction, a prologue, four main sections, and an epilogue. Part 1 describes Momaday’s ancestry and establishes his multicultural roots. He introduces several colorful characters, giving equal weight to his mother’s Scottish, French, and Cherokee forebears and his father’s Kiowa lineage. Part 2 chronicles Momaday’s boyhood as he adjusts to life in Arizona and New Mexico. Living among the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, Momaday melds the Plains and Southwest cultures and landscape. In part 3, Momaday describes his struggle to accommodate conflicting worldviews. As he grows older, his worldly awareness expands; his psyche grows more tortured. Momaday captures the pain and confusion in stream of consciousness, a narrative technique that attempts to approximate the patterns of thought by abandoning conventional punctuation and narrative progression. Finally, part 4 explores Momaday’s life in Jemez, New Mexico, where he spent the remainder of his adolescent years.

As Momaday’s other prose works do, *The Names* demands much of its readers. Instead of giving a

straightforward account of his life, Momaday creates a collage of memories, myths, landscapes, and lengthy commentary. As with *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, frequent digressions make it difficult to piece together events in chronological order. Sometimes readers struggle to separate “reality” from imagination, what “actually” happened from what transpired in Momaday’s mind. Each of these techniques mirrors the novel’s function, demonstrating the complexities involved in forming an identity. Using himself as the example, Momaday illustrates how we are more than our experiences in the physical world and how our memories, desires, wants, needs, and pains help form our sense of self.

As with Momaday’s other works, the structure of *The Names* provides important clues to the text’s meaning. By arranging the book into four major sections, Momaday invokes a sacred number. For many Native American cultures, the number 4 represents the seasons and cardinal directions, which, taken together, symbolize balance, beauty, and harmony. In a certain respect *The Names* documents Momaday’s internal search for balance and beauty, a search that, if completed, will uncover his inner Kiowa spirit. The question for Momaday is, What connects me to a culture from which I have been separated since infancy? The answer: language, myth, and imagination. Momaday emphasizes the importance of language in the memoir’s opening line: “*My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tsoai-talee; therefore I am.*” The passage reworks René Descartes’s famous dictum, “I think, therefore, I am.” Descartes, a 17th-century French philosopher and one of the premier figures of the Enlightenment, was also worried about identity but in a much broader sense. Unlike Momaday, Descartes wanted to establish foundational truths about human existence. The phrase *I am*, however, has a much more personal meaning for Momaday. It does not simply mean “I exist,” but rather “I am connected to something meaningful; my identity is secured; I understand who I am.” Although Momaday’s Indian name, *Tsoai-talee*, is only a word, it is his principal bond to the Kiowa tribe and its rich mythic tradition. Given to him by a Kiowa elder

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Native American Writers*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998.
- Brill de Ramirez, Susan Berry. *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999.
- Brumble, H. David, III. *American Indian Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Fleck, Richard F., ed. *Critical Perspective on Native American Literature*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1993.
- Isernhagen, Hartwig. *Momaday, Vizenor, Armstrong: Conversations on American Indian Writing*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.
- Krupat, Arnold. *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- Larson, Charles. *American Indian Fiction*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978.
- Lincoln, Kenneth. *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Lundquist, Suzanne. *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Momaday, N. Scott. *The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- . *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.
- "N. Scott Momaday (1934–)." Modern American Poetry. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/momaday/momaday.htm. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Owens, Louis. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- Porter, Joy, and Kenneth M. Roemer, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Roemer, Kenneth M., ed. *Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain*. New York: MLA, 1988.
- Scarberry-García, Susan. *Landmarks of Healing: A Study of House Made of Dawn*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990.
- Schubnell, Mathias. *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- Schubnell, Mathias, ed. *Conversations with N. Scott Momaday*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.
- Swann, Brian, and Arnold Krupat, eds. *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Trimble, Martha Scott. *N. Scott Momaday*. Boise, Idaho: Boise State College Press, 1973.
- Velie, Alan R. *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.
- Wiget, Andrew, ed. *Critical Essays on American Indian Literature*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985.
- . *Handbook of Native American Literature*. New York: Garland, 1996.
- Winters, Yvor. *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English*. Chicago: Alan Swallow, 1967.
- Witherspoon, Gary. *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977.

J. Earen Rast



FLANNERY O'CONNOR (1925–1964)

I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

(“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”)

Mary Flannery O'Connor, the only child of Edward Francis and Regina Cline O'Connor, was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925. For 12 years Flannery O'Connor's imagination formed in this city steeped in southern tradition, a city of blossoming magnolias, soaring oaks, hanging moss, public parks, monuments, and the impressive Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Savannah's Roman Catholic community nurtured the young Flannery, who, growing up with devout parents, developed a strong faith in her early years, a faith to which she held dearly for the rest of her life and upon which she reflected in her fiction, essays, reviews, and lectures. Influenced by Savannah's historical culture and educated in parochial schools, O'Connor developed an appreciation for southern culture and a disciplined, educated mind. Despite her relatively sheltered childhood, her artistic vision grew to embrace universal humanity, which she depicted through a regional lens and in a grotesque “southern gothic” style.

In early 1938, after he was diagnosed with lupus, the autoimmune disease from which he would die just three years later, Edward Francis O'Connor took a job with the Federal Housing Administration in Atlanta. Regina and Flannery stayed in Atlanta for only one year, long enough for Flannery to complete seventh grade at a parochial school. At the end of the school term Flannery and her mother moved to the small Georgia town of Milledgeville

to live in the Cline home, her mother's birthplace and home to the family since before the Civil War. O'Connor's father remained in Atlanta during the week and traveled to Milledgeville on weekends. Although the O'Connor family remained members of a close-knit Catholic community, Milledgeville exposed O'Connor to rural southern culture and to Protestant Christianity. O'Connor excelled at Peabody High School, a public school, where she wrote and illustrated books in her spare time. O'Connor graduated the year after her father died and enrolled in what is now Georgia College and State University (then the Georgia State College for Women), where she majored in English and social science. She edited the school newspaper, the yearbook, and the literary quarterly, the *Corinthian*. During this time she submitted cartoons to the *New Yorker*, which, despite giving her strong encouragement, never published her work.

O'Connor's many successes at the Georgia State College for Women convinced her to take up writing as a profession. In fall 1945, at the encouragement of her philosophy professor, George Beiswanger, O'Connor submitted writing she had done for the *Corinthian* and was awarded a Rinehart Fellowship at the Iowa School for Writers. While it is now common to study creative writing in graduate school, it was not in 1945. The Iowa School for Writers was one of the first such programs in the United States; for 20 years

the school had allowed students to submit creative work for master's degrees. O'Connor's thesis, "The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories" (1947), contained six works. Of these, "The Geranium" was published in the summer 1946 issue of *Accent*. During her stay at Iowa, O'Connor met and received advice from a number of visiting authors, including John Crowe Ransom, ROBERT PENN WARREN, and Allen Tate, whose first wife, Caroline Gordon, became O'Connor's mentor, later guiding her as she wrote the first of her two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952), which O'Connor began at the Yaddo Artist Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. She stayed there after graduation from Iowa and then lived briefly in New York City.

In February 1949 ROBERT LOWELL introduced her to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. The Fitzgeralds, who shared her Catholic faith, became two of O'Connor's closest friends; they provided a refuge for O'Connor to work in their Connecticut home. Robert Fitzgerald, whose translations of Homer, Virgil, and Sophocles remain among the finest in English, introduced O'Connor to many works of literature and endowed her with an appreciation for the great works of antiquity, especially Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. For the rest of her life she corresponded with the Fitzgeralds. After O'Connor's death, Robert served as O'Connor's literary executor and published *Mystery and Manners* (1969), a collection of O'Connor's lectures and magazine articles. After Robert died, Sally collected many of O'Connor's letters in *The Habit of Being* (1979). She also edited material for O'Connor's *Collected Works* (1988) and lectured on O'Connor's life and writings.

In 1949 O'Connor's health began to deteriorate. That same year she traveled to Milledgeville for kidney surgery. She returned briefly to Connecticut, where she completed a draft of *Wise Blood* but became desperately ill on a return train trip to Milledgeville in December 1950. At that time, O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus, the disease that had claimed her father's life some 10 years before. Systemic lupus erythematosus is a chronic immune disease in which a person's immune system

attacks the body's healthy tissue, causing inflammation throughout the body, damage to internal organs, and persistent pain. Upon receiving the diagnosis, O'Connor returned to Milledgeville and moved with her mother to a dairy farm they called "Andalusia." Although O'Connor continued to work until the time of her death in 1964, she never permanently left the farm.

Four chapters of *Wise Blood* were published in *Mademoiselle*, the *Sewanee Review*, and the *Partisan Review* in 1948 and 1949; the complete work appeared in print in 1952. Often compared with William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* for its depiction of regional characters and compared with Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* for its grotesque, darkly comic qualities and spiritual subject matter, *Wise Blood* received unsympathetic criticism. Most reviewers complained that the novel's strange plot and bizarre characters were difficult to understand. Nevertheless, soon after *Wise Blood*'s publication, O'Connor began to work on another novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). O'Connor took the title from the Douay translation of Matthew 11:12 in the Bible: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." As do *Wise Blood* and many of her short stories, *The Violent Bear It Away* contained violence leading to spiritual awakenings. Partly because of her physical limitations and partly because of the difficulty of taking on another novel, O'Connor returned to writing stories. Between fall 1952 and mid-1955, she labored on *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), a collection of 10 stories, many of which—the title piece, "The Displaced Person," "The Artificial Nigger," and "Good Country People"—critics maintain are among her finest writing. At Andalusia, O'Connor lived a simple life, writing two to three hours every morning, eating with her mother, writing letters, and watching the farm animals, including her pet peacocks. She did make several short trips, delivering public readings of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and lecturing at such respected institutions as Notre Dame, Vanderbilt, and the University of Chicago. She also made pilgrimages

to Lourdes and to Rome, where, in May 1958, she had an audience with Pope Pius XII.

Throughout her struggle with lupus, O'Connor received massive doses of cortisone. While the treatments enabled her to function, they also weakened her bones. By fall 1953 her hip joints had become so weak that she had to use crutches. Fighting lupus and increasingly concerned about the negative reviews she received, O'Connor wrote darker tales. She also became further disillusioned about modern society, which she considered as fallen. Despite what was for all practical purposes a long bout with depression, she held fast to the Catholic faith and, especially during her final years, read and reviewed theological texts, most notably those of the French priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In a 1960 book review O'Connor called Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) the most important book published in the last three decades. Teilhard de Chardin envisioned a divine center of convergence, a conception of spiritual evolution at work in history. O'Connor drew upon his ideas when compiling the posthumously published *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), which included, in addition to the title story, "The Enduring Chill," "Revelation," "Greenleaf," and "The Lame Shall Enter First." The characters in these stories, in one way or another, resist convergence, the pull of God's grace. Yet, many of the characters have a chance at redemption after their false selves have been stripped away, often in dramatic, violent scenes.

Throughout her works O'Connor focused on religious themes and often depicted life in the largely Protestant South. Pinning down O'Connor's specific theological stance, however, is difficult to do. Her ironic, grotesque, and violent texts, which capture a time of social unrest and radical change in southern culture, do not yield easy interpretations and are not easily reduced to a specific theology. O'Connor had little patience with religious dogmatism yet often created evangelical Protestant characters who, like her, were filled with a burning desire for transcendence.

O'Connor remains not only one of the most significant figures in modern southern fiction but also

one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Her short stories are considered models of the art form. Because of her use of grotesque or "southern gothic" style, which she achieved by blending the humorous and the horrible, the absurd and the tragic, her works present challenging paradoxes. She is known for her religious thinking, which has tempted many to read her works as Christian allegories, and for her comic vision, often presented through everyday characters, dramatic irony, a playful tone, and absurd situations. O'Connor's representation of African Americans and of racial conflicts during the civil rights era have sparked critical controversy. Alice Walker, for example, expressed her critical reservations and ambivalent feeling about O'Connor in "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 1983). Walker, after critiquing O'Connor's letters and personal statements, was disturbed by O'Connor's use of racist language and her lack of explicit statements on racial injustice. Nevertheless, Walker concedes that the "essential O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture" (53). Ultimately Walker concludes that "whether one 'understands' [O'Connor's] fiction or not, one knows that her characters are new and wondrous creations in the world and that not one of her stories . . . could have been written by anyone else" (56).

Despite having written relatively little—two novels, two collections of short stories, and a few occasional pieces of nonfiction—O'Connor crafted language of such originality that her works continue to be read and studied. If, as Harold Bloom has said, one of the hallmarks of great literature is its "strangeness," then few other American writers have created such a bizarre collection of works. With a sharp eye for detail, a keen ability to depict common humanity, and a wildly comic imagination, O'Connor rendered what she called "the Christ-haunted South." Filled with religious fervor and the ability to record the region's oddities—its exaggerations, its dialects, its resistance to change, its social contradictions, its contentious race relations—O'Connor captured the South at a time of

radical change. The portrait she paints could only have been created by one of the country's master parodists. In 39 short years, Flannery created unforgettable characters and masterfully crafted short stories, earning her a permanent place in the American literary canon.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953)

Debuting in *Modern Writing I* (1953), "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the title piece of O'Connor's first collection of short stories, was published by Harcourt, Brace in June 1955. A comic story with a tragic ending, the story begins with a family traveling from Atlanta to Florida on vacation with grandmother in tow. Along the way the unnamed grandmother convinces her son, Bailey, to take an unplanned detour to a plantation she remembers from her youth. Hearing the grandmother's romantic tales about the house, the grandchildren grow excited and nag Bailey until he agrees to deviate from his intended route. Moments later, the grandmother realizes they are nowhere near the plantation, which exists not in Georgia, but in Tennessee. Out of embarrassment, she fidgets nervously and disturbs Pitty Sing, the family cat she stowed secretly in a basket on the car's floorboard. Startled, the cat leaps onto Bailey's shoulder, causing him to crash into a ditch. Although the family walks away from the accident with minor injuries, the "Misfit," an escaped felon, and his henchmen arrive and execute the family members one by one. While this plot sounds morbid, the story is filled with dark, grotesque humor created largely by the story's many ironies. For example, in the first paragraph the grandmother vows not to take her children near the Misfit, whose crime spree she has been following in the newspaper, yet her detour pushes the family into direct contact with the man she seeks to avoid.

As do many of O'Connor's works, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" deals with good and evil and the action of grace. From a Roman Catholic theological perspective, grace is a gift freely given by God, but one that humans, by exercising free

will, can and often do reject. Her characters, who sometimes accept and other times reject salvation, often have a warped self-image, especially of their moral status and of the morality of their actions. Thus, on the surface, the grandmother professes to live a good life, yet the reader encounters her as a manipulative figure, one who is obstinate, inconsiderate, and determined to get her way. By telling the story from a third-person limited omniscient perspective, O'Connor enables the reader to question the grandmother's words and actions, which rarely align. She says one thing but then does another. She belittles her grandchildren; chides her daughter-in-law; refers to an underprivileged black child by a racial epithet, as a "pickaninny," revealing her prejudicial view of race relations; and then proceeds to negotiate her life by both flattering the Misfit and attempting to make him feel guilty. On one level the story chronicles her movement toward grace, a movement that occurs in the final scene when she comes to terms with her own mortality and need for salvation. The grandmother's final words signal the possibility of a spiritual awakening; she tells the Misfit, "You're one of my own children," a comment that causes the Misfit to recoil in horror "as if a snake had bitten him" before shooting her three times in the chest. Were this the only way of interpreting the story, then "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" would be little more than a theological essay containing a dogmatic message.

Even though told from the grandmother's perspective, the story contains many voices, one of the most interesting of which is the Misfit's, which echoes in the story's ambiguous conclusion. For the Misfit, life is pointless. Although he seems to be a man of modest means, the Misfit philosophizes and theologizes as the story concludes. He weighs life's meaning and purpose. The Misfit begins his theological tract by commenting on the arbitrary nature of salvation, ruminating on the two thieves whose crosses stood next to Jesus': "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?" This theological question is the same one that obsesses Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, a play in which two vaudevillelike bums—Estragon and Vladimir—

debate why one thief is saved and another, without explanation, is condemned. Here the Misfit appears as a modern nihilist who views the ambiguity at the heart of human life as an indication that life has no meaning. When the grandmother, searching for words that will spare her life, pleads, “Jesus,” the Misfit exclaims, “Jesus thrown everything off balance,” comparing himself with the Son of God.

According to the Misfit, Jesus’ actions create a theological quandary. “If he did what he said,” according to the Misfit, “then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him,” echoing Jesus’ command to his disciples. While according to Christian orthodoxy this command to follow Jesus grants life purpose, for the Misfit this exhortation leaves all human life empty, leaving literally “nothing for you to do” but follow blindly, accepting that meaning and purpose lie beyond human understanding. The Misfit continues his philosophical reflection by commenting that if Jesus did not raise the dead, “then it’s nothing for you to do but to enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down the house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.” This second proposition describes a world devoid of Jesus’ saving grace. By erecting these two equally nihilistic poles, the Misfit makes bold assertions about human limitations and about the uncertainty of the human condition.

On one level, then, he may be seen to represent a questioning agnostic, someone who does not know whether God exists and discerns no relevance of God’s existence to a broken world. On another level he may be viewed as a profound commentator on the nature of modernity, in which people endure without purpose or hope or belief or faith. Further complicating this issue, the Misfit may be seen an instrument of God, someone who induces the grandmother in her last moments to accept God’s grace and surrender her life in love. The story ends with a number of puzzling points to untangle. Is it possible for good to come out of evil? Is the Misfit truly an evil man, or, paradoxically, is he really an instrument of God, one whose violent acts bring about change, a radical, life-changing reorientation

to the nature of reality that a lost world needs? By withholding answers to these questions, O’Connor leaves the reader with serious interpretive challenges. While it may be easy to pronounce the story a theological message, O’Connor re-creates, through a fictive lens, philosophical issues that have plagued theologians for centuries and that occupy believers and nonbelievers alike. In this way the story comments on the difficulty of finding and defining goodness in a confused world, one where a good man is indeed hard to find.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A complex literary device, irony is the use of language to imply something other than what is stated on the surface. *Dramatic irony* describes a situation in which the reader understands what is occurring or is privy to information and a character is not. After reading “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” one can detect the story’s many ironic elements. With that in mind, reread the story, noting the many times O’Connor employs irony. Locate ironic situations and discuss how O’Connor uses irony to complicate the story’s meaning(s).
2. Discuss the significance of the Misfit’s penultimate line in the story: “She would have been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”
3. Compare the Misfit’s discussion of the two thieves crucified with Jesus and Vladimir and Estragon’s debate on the same issue in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. What similarities and differences can be found? Can O’Connor’s text be seen to comment on Beckett’s? Why or why not?

“The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953)

“The Life You Save May Be Your Own” appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in spring 1953, two years before Harcourt, Brace published it in the O’Connor short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. It later appeared in the 1954 *O. Henry Prize*

Stories and was sold to *General Electric Playhouse*, which performed the piece on February 1, 1956, with Gene Kelly in the role of the con artist (the televised version eliminated the troublesome ending and had the central character return for his bride). In the short story a drifter, Tom T. Shiftlet, appears at sunset on the farm of Mrs. Lucynell Crater, where, after convincing Mrs. Crater that he has noble intentions, he repairs a fence and hog pen; teaches her mute grown daughter, Lucynell, to say her first word (*bird*); and then fixes a broken-down automobile. When Mrs. Crater offers him her daughter's hand in marriage and a sum of money, Shiftlet weds Lucynell, takes her on a road trip, and abandons her at the Hot Spot, a roadside diner. After he drives away, he picks up a hostile hitchhiker, who soon jumps out of the car. Storm clouds appear, and Shiftlet passes a common 1950s highway safety sign reading, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." As "fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops" fall, Shiftlet steps on the gas and races the rain shower to Mobile.

Significantly, the story is framed by two dramatic manifestations of nature: the setting of the Sun and the fury of a thunderstorm. One signals the arrival of Shiftlet; the other signals his speedy flight. Both provide religious imagery. In the first, Mr. Shiftlet looks toward the Sun in a moment of adoration; his figure forms a "crooked cross." In the second Shiftlet feels that "the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him," and cries, "Oh Lord! . . . Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!" just after a fleeing hitchhiker tells Shiftlet, "You go to the devil." The central demonic figure of the story, Shiftlet neither displays awareness of nor feels remorse for treating others with malice. Interestingly, as with "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor places prophetic, theological language in the mouth of the story's villain. Just as the Misfit debates theological issues, so does Mr. Shiftlet comment on the rotten world and the human heart, much like the disillusioned protagonist does in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." Shiftlet also ruminates on the nature of the ever-shifting soul, admits to having a "moral intelligence," raises theological concerns and ques-

tions, and, as do the chorus in *Antigone* and the prince of Denmark in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, comments on "what is man."

As with "Good Country People," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" deals with deception: the mutual games Mrs. Crater and Tom Shiftlet play, one passing off her 30-year-old mentally disabled daughter as 15 or 16, the other conning his way to someone's money and automobile. They treat Mrs. Crater's daughter as an object to be bartered and traded. Lucynell is an innocent being, an "angel of Gawd," something Shiftlet and the waiter in the roadside café recognize. She is a potential agent of salvation, an angelic being with "eyes as blue as a peacock's neck," one of the many descriptions that compare her with the Virgin Mary. Yet, as with William Faulkner's Benji in *The Sound and the Fury*, her presence cannot negate a rotten world in which Shiftlet, despite having his prayers answered and his desires fulfilled, refuses to repent.

The story ends without closure. Unlike "Good Country People," in which O'Connor shifts perspective after the con man has made off with Joy-Hulga's wooden leg, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" focuses solely on Shiftlet as he races down the road. After leaving Lucynell at the Hot Spot, he is "more depressed than ever," a soul in torment. Lonely and filled with an ironic sense of remorse for someone who has just left his mute wife alone at a roadside diner in the middle of nowhere, Shiftlet picks up a hitchhiker because "he felt that a man with a car had a responsibility to others." As he talks with the hitchhiker, Shiftlet creates an idealized portrait of his mother, one who taught him to pray, loved him, taught him right from wrong, and whom like Lucynell, an "angel of Gawd," he abandoned. O'Connor is careful to show that he is a man of reason with a strong moral sense who freely chooses his immoral course. The story's violent moment of awareness, common in O'Connor's works, occurs when the hitchhiker responds, "You go to the devil! . . . My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" After the hitchhiker jumps out of the car, Mr. Shiftlet reflects and utters an emphatic prayer: "Oh Lord! . . . Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!" Ironically, his

prayer is answered when storm clouds unleash their fury on him. Then Shiftlet steps on the gas, leaving responsibility and salvation behind.

Although Shiftlet utters a prayer at the end of the story, he, unlike the mother in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” does not move toward grace. Instead, he speaks truths that resonate with the reader but that he himself neither accepts nor practices. Unable to save even himself, Shiftlet continues to wander lost. He chooses emptiness over fullness, all the while haunted by his need to connect with others, plagued by a profound lack of self-fulfillment. He is literally deformed—he has one short arm—and spiritually bereft, a fallen figure who chooses freedom over responsibility, the road to death over the life that he can save.

For Discussion or Writing

- O'Connor's story is set in the 1950s, a time of materialism in which the automobile became increasingly important. Consider Tom Shiftlet's obsession with both the automobile and money. Why are these things significant? How does O'Connor's depiction of the automobile comment on postwar American society?
- Like William Faulkner's Benji in *The Sound and the Fury*, Lucynell Crater has a disability. Although the story does not state it explicitly, her lack of verbal skills, actions, and the narrator's comment that Shiftlet tips his hat to her “as if she were not in the least way afflicted” suggest that she may be mentally handicapped. Consider O'Connor's representation of the girl and of Joy-Hulga Hopewell's disability in “Good Country People.” From a 21st-century perspective, is O'Connor's representation of Lucynell charitable? Compare and contrast O'Connor's and Faulkner's portrayal of the disabled and how these characters contribute to their works. After you answer this question from a 21st-century perspective, consider it in terms of America in the 1950s. From your knowledge of mid-20th-century America, would you answer the question the same way? With all of this in mind, is it fair to hold authors accountable for the characters they create?
- Evaluate O'Connor's descriptions of the natural world in the story. How do these descriptions contribute to the story's meaning(s)?

“A Circle in the Fire” (1954)

“A Circle in the Fire” appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in 1954, one year before Harcourt, Brace published it in the O'Connor short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955). That same year the story appeared in *Prize Stories 1955: The O. Henry Awards* and in *The Best American Short Stories of 1955*, helping to establish O'Connor as one of America's most important short story writers. As with several of O'Connor's works, “A Circle in the Fire” takes place presumably on a Georgia farm and involves outsiders who arrive mysteriously and disrupt the usually uneventful farm life, much like Manley Pointer in “Good Country People” and Tom T. Shiftlet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” two other stories in the same collection. The three boys who arrive mysteriously at the Cope farm—the son of a former employee and his two friends from Atlanta—turn out to be arsonists who cause Mrs. Cope to realize her worst fears: that she will be disobeyed and her property, which she tends as she does her weeds and nut grass “as if they were evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place,” will be consumed by fire.

The story opens with a conversation between Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard, who works on the farm with her husband and daughter. Through Sally Virginia, Mrs. Cope's 12-year-old daughter, who overhears their banter while eavesdropping from a second-story window in the house, the reader learns that the two women engage in cyclical conversations. As always Mrs. Pritchard, ever the pessimist, annoys Mrs. Cope, only to be irritated by Mrs. Cope's daft optimism. After a short period the narrator exposes Mrs. Cope's obsession with her property and material gain, an obsession neither Mrs. Pritchard nor the African-

American farmworkers share. Thus, Mrs. Cope exists in an insular world, impervious to those who surround her.

When the three boys arrive, the narrator conveys that Mrs. Cope views her black farm workers “as destructive and impersonal as the nut grass.” By observing Mrs. Cope’s “minions,” who share neither her zeal for productivity nor her false wisdom, industry, and religious devotion, the reader learns of Mrs. Cope’s darker side, one governed by self-righteousness, racism, and excessive pride. She is one of O’Connor’s self-consumed characters. Ironically, those who surround her possess greater wisdom, especially knowledge about human nature, than their hypocritical employer. It is significant that much of the story is told through the eyes of a child. An awakening character and a moral compass for the story, Sally Virginia decides to confront the boys in the woods but ultimately is unable to act. This perspective highlights Mrs. Cope’s naïveté; she, as does Sally Virginia, confronts the inability to control her life and the anxiety accompanying modern life, the undergirding presence shown on Mrs. Cope’s face in the final paragraph: “It was a face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself.”

In this moment, Sally Virginia also hears the prophetic voices of the boys in the distance. While literally the boys act as a foil and serve the role of antagonists in the story, they also function as symbolic representations whose significance lies in the embedded literary allusion O’Connor employs. The story’s title and final scene are borrowed from the Book of Daniel, in which the tyrannical King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon throws three Jewish boys—Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego—into a fiery furnace. Miraculously, the three boys are spared by God’s intervention and are unharmed by the flames. The use of such biblical parallels is referred to as an *allusion*. In the biblical story the three boys are messengers from God who refuse to accede to Nebuchadnezzar’s decrees. O’Connor’s story portrays them less sympathetically, especially

as the reader’s take on the boys is conditioned by the thoughts of Sally Virginia, who is both an innocent child and an objective observer not yet pulled into the complex social world her mother and Mrs. Cope inhabit. Sally Virginia sees the boys as evil and wants to confront them, to eradicate their presence. Her strategy for confronting the boys directly opposes the passive way Mrs. Cope tries to deal with them. Yet ultimately, even though Sally Virginia intends to act, she is unable to do so.

As the story ends, the reader senses that Mrs. Cope, despite all of her religious pretense and eternal optimism, has been an imprisoning force encircling the farm. As Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego do, the farmworkers refuse to be burned by Mrs. Cope. Unlike the biblical prophets, the farmworkers have longed for both Mrs. Cope’s and the farm’s demise. As with many of O’Connor’s tales, the violence shocks both Mrs. Cope and Sally Virginia into a sudden awareness. The fire creates a theophanous revelation, an unfolding of the world’s frailty and vulnerability for Sally Virginia, but this revelation also unveils the arrogant blindness of Mrs. Cope, who comes to terms with herself as she finally beholds the fire.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The historical context of “A Circle in the Fire” is important to consider. When “A Circle in the Fire” was published, the South was governed by the Jim Crow laws that relegated African Americans to lesser roles and often encouraged their mistreatment. After consulting an encyclopedia or trustworthy Web site that addresses civil rights abuses during this period and the impact of Jim Crow laws, assess the black characters in the story and the way Mrs. Cope treats them. Is O’Connor presenting social commentary, especially with the character Culver? Why or why not?
2. By making a parallel between her farm story and a biblical story, O’Connor uses a literary allusion, a reference by one text to another text. What is the significance of the biblical allusion from which O’Connor derives the story title and the

fiery ending, in which Sally stands tall, listening to “a few wild shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them?” How does this allusion contribute to the story's meaning?

“The Displaced Person” (1954, revised 1955)

A short version of “The Displaced Person” was printed in the fall 1954 *Sewanee Review*. One year later, Harcourt, Brace published it in its revised, expanded, and final form as part of O'Connor's collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. As many of O'Connor's stories do, “The Displaced Person” takes place on a rural farm where the presence of an outsider changes not only the way people on the farm live but also the way they think about the world. The farm owner, Mrs. McIntyre, a three-times-married 60-year-old woman, worries about money and the general laziness of her workers. She has seen several generations of white farmhands come and go and has learned the ways of the black farmworkers, originally employed by Mrs. McIntyre's first, deceased husband, the Judge. Unlike other O'Connor stories in which outsiders are often con artists who manipulate gullible others, this story focuses on characters who are, in one way or another, displaced, meaning “they ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go.” The most notable of these displaced persons is a Polish émigré, Mr. Guizac, who, with his family, becomes the subject of gossip not only among the other farmworkers but also among xenophobic townfolk who feel threatened by Guizac's industriousness, pleasant demeanor, and foreign tongue.

The story opens with a peacock that follows Mrs. Shortley, the wife of Mrs. McIntyre's most recently hired farmhand, Chancey Shortley. O'Connor introduces the reader to the farm through the eyes of the ironically named Mrs. Shortley, who stands “on tremendous legs . . . with the self-confidence of a mountain” and peers through “two icy blue points of light,” “surveying everything.” The peacock appears throughout the story, always accompanied by descriptive language that hints at its symbolic

qualities. Although Mrs. McIntyre views the bird as another mouth to feed, the narrator shrouds the animal in mystery and makes it the object of Father Flynn's affection. In this way, O'Connor frames the mundane world with the sacred, hinting at the grace-filled wonder of the bird that appears in a supernatural light as a black car appears on the horizon. O'Connor contrasts the peacock's mystical presence with Mrs. Shortley's worldly, skeptical, and fundamentalist thinking.

The first part of the story paints a picture of the farm, reveals the personalities of its inhabitants, and relates the Guizac family's arrival. Father Flynn, who frequently visits Mrs. McIntyre with the aim of converting her to Catholicism, has driven out this day to deliver Mr. Guizac, whom Mrs. McIntyre hires to work on the farm. The first section details how Mr. Guizac's industriousness jeopardizes Shortley's livelihood and how the Shortleys quickly abandon the farm when they find out that Mrs. McIntyre plans to fire Chancey. The second part of the story focuses on the ways that Guizac threatens the black farmworkers. Hoping to turn Mrs. McIntyre against the Pole, the workers reveal Guizac's plan to bring his cousin to the farm so that she can marry one of the farmhands. Enraged by Guizac's manipulations, she vows to fire him, proclaiming, “I am not responsible for the world's misery.” Later, toward the story's conclusion, the ironic comment returns to haunt her. In part 3 Mr. Shortley returns the farm (his wife has died of a sudden heart attack). Embittered, Shortley badgers Mrs. McIntyre and the townfolk about Guizac's demonic presence. The story ends with a violent scene: A large tractor runs over Guizac, who, after receiving last rites from the priest, dies before the others, who crowd around an ambulance.

Referred to by McIntyre as the “Displaced Person” or simply “D.P.,” Guizac is a concentration camp survivor, who, with the priest's and Mrs. McIntyre's assistance, immigrates to America with his wife and children. Skeptical of the foreigner, Mrs. Shortley calls him “Gobblehook,” even though his presence reminds her of a newsreel of “a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people,” a vision of the Holocaust.

Despite Mrs. Shortley's reservations and her visions of others' suffering, she demonizes the displaced Pole. Yet, he becomes a saintlike figure in Mrs. McIntyre's eyes. An "expert mechanic, carpenter, and a mason," Guizac works quickly and efficiently. Unlike Mr. Shortley, Guizac is clean and does not smoke. He is Mrs. McIntyre's ideal worker, a strong man capable of running the farm and generating the income she craves. Guizac, however, becomes the object of her scorn when she discovers that he is trying to save another displaced person, his cousin, a victim of Nazi Germany's campaign to eradicate cultural and racial difference.

The story concludes with one of O'Connor's grand moments of realization, the violent death of the "D.P.," during which Mrs. McIntyre's eyes "and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in a look that froze them in collusion forever." By not doing anything, by not speaking or acting, they become complicit partners in Guizac's death, demonstrating how little the people on the farm understand about humanity and how little they are aware of grace at work in the world. Mrs. McIntyre equates Guizac with Christ: "Christ was just another D.P." Symbolically, they all participate in Guizac's crucifixion, an act that unites them and leads them to see their own displacement, their lack of connection with the divine. In the story's ultimate reversal Mrs. McIntyre sees herself as lost, another "D.P.": "Her mind was not taking a hold of all that was happening. She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance." Unable to process this moment of revelation, the farmworkers leave, and Mrs. McIntyre deteriorates. Refusing to understand and respond to suffering, she becomes, with the farm's peacock, the recipient of the priest's care. Whether she accepts the vision she has been given and moves toward salvation remains unclear. The short paragraph that ends the story describes Mrs. McIntyre as blind and mute, a displaced person among a world of others, who, as she has, have fallen from grace. While this vision of the world is indeed a dark one, the beautiful peacock

remains, an outward, visible sign of the potential for salvation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Both Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" and Ruby Turpin in O'Connor's story "Revelation" experience visions. How do these visions compare? Why are their visions significant?
2. The story often describes eyes and their color. Why is this significant? How do seeing and understanding figure into "The Displaced Person"?
3. The peacock, an object of the priest's affection, is often described in colorful language and figures prominently in the story. Is the peacock symbolic? What does its presence add to the narrative?
4. Compare and contrast Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person" with the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In what ways can both be said to experience an awakening?

"Good Country People" (1955)

O'Connor added "Good Country People" to the short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* at the last minute, after she had already negotiated the collection's contents. The story appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in July 1955, the same month the collection was published by Harcourt, Brace. At the center of the story lies Joy (Hulga) Hopewell, a 32-year-old woman with a heart condition and an artificial leg—her father shot her leg off during a hunting trip when she was 10 years old—who earned a Ph.D. in philosophy and who, inspired by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, changed her name to *Hulga*. Joy-Hulga reluctantly lives with her mother, a divorcée, on the family farm. After establishing the setting and describing Joy, Mrs. Hopewell, and Mrs. Hopewell's friend and tenant farmer Mrs. Freeman, the action of the story begins the morning after a 19-year-old Bible salesman with a phallic name, *Manley Pointer*, has visited the Hopewell home, a farm much like O'Connor's beloved Andalusia. In a flashback to

the previous evening, the reader learns that Manley professes to have a heart condition, has dedicated his life to “Chrastian [sic] service,” and he and Joy-Hulga have agreed to go for a picnic the following day. She, viewing the salesman as inferior and impressionable, has dreamed during the night that she will seduce Manley and teach him about philosophy, exposing the weaknesses of what she sees as his finite belief system and revealing that God does not exist. Ironically, Manley becomes the seducer, the one who leads Joy-Hulga into a hayloft, convinces her to allow him to remove her artificial leg, shares with her a whiskey flask hidden in a hollowed-out Bible, lays out pornographic playing cards, gives her a box of condoms, leaves her marooned in the hayloft, and comments, “You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” as he makes off with Joy’s glasses and artificial limb. After this stunning climax, the story returns to the banter of Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who, seeing Manley leave the barn, comment on his dullness and simplicity.

The story plays with different possibilities for understanding; the ways that people negotiate the world, interpret others’ actions, and arrive at their own ways of making meaning. It also deals with the manipulative way human beings vie for control and the many games that ensue from the desire to master others and, ultimately, life’s purpose. The chief example of such a tricky figure is Joy Hopewell, who in graduate school changes her name to *Hulga*: something ugly, unthinkable, the Germanic name that declares her nihilistic enlightenment and philosophical affinities. Joy-Hulga believes that she has risen above the farm’s banalities and the limitations of the surrounding community’s adherence to a literal interpretation of religious teaching. Whereas her mother and Mrs. Freeman attribute worldly actions to a divine plan, Joy-Hulga deduces that nothing matters, that life lacks purpose. As with many of her works, O’Connor gives the reader not-so-subtle signs of Joy-Hulga’s fallen nature: her absurd name, her desire to seduce Manley, and her physical afflictions—a wooden leg (she treats it “as someone else would his soul”) and weak heart, both metaphors for spiritual sickness.

Having failed to escape what she views as the simplistic farm world inhabited by the “good country people” her mother holds in the highest regard, Joy-Hulga stomps around the house disparaging rural life. Here O’Connor depicts the radical conflict between worldviews of unsophisticated farm people who fail to see beyond outward appearances and those of university-formed intellectuals who, in their exalted pride, dismiss the possibility of grace and blind themselves to the ways of the world.

While Joy-Hulga is determined to create her own, differentiated reality, she also is a game player, someone who derives pleasure from toying with the Bible salesman and dreams of pulling apart what she considers to be his crude worldview. Ironically, she becomes trapped in her own game, the victim of a con man. Even though she possesses a great intellect, her mother, Mrs. Freeman, and Manley understand her vulnerability and childlike nature. Although O’Connor lampoons Joy-Hulga in the story, she, unlike the other characters, experiences an epiphany, one in which, in the face of hardship, she confronts her own weakness, blindness, and lost innocence. The story ends with the closest thing to romance O’Connor offers: a foodless picnic in which two manipulators try to outfox each other. As Manley unveils his intelligence, his equally nihilistic worldview, and the licentious tools of his trade, Joy-Hulga gasps, “Aren’t you . . . just good country people?” Here, she reveals the naïveté that she and her mother share. In a typical O’Connor moment of revelation, Joy-Hulga confronts her own blindness and, like many of O’Connor’s protagonists, is shocked into awareness. She, her mother, Mrs. Freeman, and Manley mirror one another in their self-absorbed visions of the world, but the reader is left with Joy-Hulga’s epiphany and her potential for both seeing the fallen nature of the world and accepting grace. As her mother and Mrs. Freeman have, Joy-Hulga has fallen for a clichéd notion of human nature. O’Connor describes Joy-Hulga in “dusty sunlight” as she turns “her churning face toward the opening” and sees Manley moving over the “green speckled lake.” While the language here hints that she has gained a new understanding of the world, O’Connor leaves the

reader to stitch together the story's details, imagine what Joy-Hulga now sees, and evaluate the motives behind the characters' shocking actions. In this final moment the narrator leaves Joy-Hulga and returns to her mother and Mrs. Freeman, who still see Manley as an exemplar of the simple life. "The world," Mrs. Hopewell says, "would be better off if we were all that simple." Of course, this vision of the world, one of false appearances and game players, cannot sustain itself. As Mrs. Freeman pulls an "evil-smelling onion shoot" from the earth, she concedes, "Some can't be that simple. . . . I know I never could." These final words ring of a truth that Joy-Hulga's epiphany makes manifest, one in which goodness lies just beyond reach, and the evils of the world rise each day anew.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the ways that Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman, and Joy-Hulga use language. What emphasis do they place on words; what significance does this emphasis have?
2. On one level, this story, like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, is a romance that deals with seduction, sin, and redemption. Compare and contrast O'Connor's story and Hawthorne's novel. Why is it significant that both focus on similar subjects?

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961)

Set during the beginning of the Civil Rights movement when the South was still segregated, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" first appeared in the October 1961 issue of *New World Writing*. The story won the first-place prize in the 1962 O. Henry Memorial Award competition. Significantly, O'Connor's story includes what is commonly referred to as an *O. Henry twist*, a literary term derived from O. Henry's stories, which usually include an unexpected conclusion or climax. These surprise endings often cause the audience to review the story from a different perspective by revealing new information about the characters or plot. Upon

a second reading, the reader can detect the many clues and foreshadowing devices that lead to the story's unexpected climax. On a first reading, however, as with many works of literature, the story's many ironies may not be noticed. Of course, as with most literature, the reader should view the first reading as a primary investigation that will require further readings and analysis to plumb the story's depth.

The plot of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is easily summarized: A mother who does not wish to ride the bus alone insists that her son, Julian, accompany her to a weight-reducing class at the downtown YWCA. The story begins on the bus; focuses on significant exchanges among Julian, his mother, and the other bus riders, including an African-American woman traveling with her young son; and concludes with the bus's arrival and the death of Julian's mother on a downtown sidewalk.

O'Connor's story is told from a limited third-person narrative point of view, in which the narrator focuses on the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of a single character, in this case, Julian. Because the reader encounters events through Julian's eyes, the reader may resist judging Julian, or at least withhold judgment until the end of the story, when Julian's many contradictions come to light. Were one to read "Everything That Rises" considering the narrator's ironic position—the subtle way the story's tone and words convey Julian's thoughts, feelings, and intentions—then the story becomes a comic exploration of human flaws. While tragedy takes as its subject human suffering, comedy tends to showcase human foibles. Thus, even though the reader may ultimately experience Julian and his mother's blindness—their self-possession, resistance to change, and disdain for those with whom they interact—the narrator presents their flaws from a comic perspective, one that acknowledges human weakness. In that sense, the story contains dramatic irony, in which the reader ultimately understands the characters' faults, and a cosmic vision of convergence, one O'Connor derives from the writings of the French Roman Catholic priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The story's title is taken from Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, a mystical work in which he argues that, despite frailty, blindness, weakness, and a tendency

to see their selves and not others, human beings are being drawn to a point of convergence, an “Omega Point,” a form of human evolution resulting in self-awareness and ultimately a form of supreme consciousness (for more information on this idea, see question number 2). Such an understanding of the story does not present itself after one isolated read. Rather, it is important to read “Everything That Rises Must Converge” in light of the other stories in the collection of the same name, which was published after O’Connor’s death, and consider O’Connor’s comments on the collection’s title, its source (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin), and the reviews O’Connor wrote about Teilhard de Chardin’s works.

In her review of *The Phenomenon of Man* in the fall 1961 issue of the *American Scholar*, O’Connor writes that Teilhard de Chardin offers “a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it” (“Outstanding Books, 1931–1961,” *American Scholar* 618). Part of the way that O’Connor “penetrates matter” lies in her use of irony. The title of the story, for example, although drawn from Teilhard de Chardin, also alludes to the “rising” of the mother’s blood pressure, which ultimately leads to her death. Although Julian presents himself as an independent intellectual, a close examination of the story’s language and descriptions reveals that he is actually dependent on his mother’s continued financial and emotional support. She has made significant sacrifices to pay for Julian’s education, so many that the purchase of a \$7.50 hat causes her to worry. Julian tries to convince his mother that the purchase is justified, not considering the economic pressure she feels, which Julian exacerbates by continuing to rely on her.

Julian views the trip to the Y as a personal sacrifice and sees himself as a martyr, yet the narrator also reveals Julian’s self-doubts and his acknowledgment of his mother’s sacrifices. At the beginning of the story, the parent-child relationship seems to be reversed. By the end of the story, however, it is clear that Julian, though an adult with a college education, is still very much a child, one dependent on his mother’s money, care, and guidance. Despite having earned a college degree, Julian remains set apart,

incapable of acting or supporting himself, lost in his interior world. Although he states, “True culture is in the mind,” Julian is an idealist out of touch with reality, a man of modest intellectual means trapped in a limited worldview. Furthermore, although Julian purports to have progressive views on race relations and social issues, claiming that his mother lives “according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which she never sets foot,” Julian fantasizes about hurting his mother by taking home a black friend or biracial girlfriend. He also dreams about conversing with educated African Americans with whom he can share his world of ideas. As further irony, for all his so-called liberal views on race relations, Julian longs for the aristocratic past he has been denied, one afforded by the exploitation of African Americans. His dreams, however, never actualize; he remains a man of conflicted thoughts incapable of performing noble deeds.

If one considers the literary term *theme* in its broadest sense—any significant, recurring, or developed concept or argument in a work of literature—then several interrelated themes emerge in the story: the fallen nature of the modern world; the struggle for social class and status; morals, morality, and moral responsibility; racism in the South; the impact of integration in the South; intellectualism and elitism; knowledge and ignorance; self-deception versus self-understanding; the manipulation of others; thinking versus acting; the ideal verses the real; appearance versus reality. These are a few of the many possible subjects to explore in writing about and discussing the story.

As with O’Connor’s very best works, “Everything That Rises Must Converge” contains grotesque characters who wrestle with meaning, sacredness, and understanding. This particular story also highlights the longing for love that is a part of universal humanity. In writing about the struggle between races, a region divided between the old and new, and a mother and son who even in their seeming differences care for each other, O’Connor presents seekers in the modern world, those confronting the bitter taste of enmity and the reality of change in spite of their blindness, their pride-filled distortion of what it means to be alive. As James

Joyce's "Araby" does, O'Connor's tale ends in a "tide of darkness," the "world of guilt and sorrow" that both Julian and the reader encounter. To perceive this world is to perceive contradiction—the intersection of past and present, secular and sacred, self and other, hate and love, the convergence of paradoxes that form the American experience.

For Discussion or Writing

1. One of the issues teachers and students alike wrestle with is characterization—the way in which an author's characters represent things in the real world. With this in mind, assess the African-American characters in the story. What ideas, characteristics, or qualities do they embody? How do these characters compare or contrast with O'Connor's white characters? To explore this subject further, read other O'Connor stories that contain, describe, or quote black characters, such as "Greenleaf," "Revelation," and "The Enduring Chill." With O'Connor's descriptions in mind, evaluate her representation of African Americans. Explain your assessment with details from the stories. Test your hypothesis by asking the typical questions used to evaluate literary characters: Are the characters full and round, or are they simple and flat? Do the characters change? If so, how? If not, why is that important?
2. O'Connor derives the story's title from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Roman Catholic priest, mystic, and paleontologist, whose works O'Connor read and reviewed in 1960 and 1961. For Teilhard de Chardin, no human being is fixed. Instead, all human beings evolve toward a point of transcendence—universal love—a point where the outside world and the inside world converge in Christ. Yet O'Connor's protagonists in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and in the posthumously published short story collection of the same name do not reach the "Omega Point." Why is this significant? Why would O'Connor use such a positive, life-affirming title for a collection of stories that has so many failed characters? In addition to the title story, read other stories from the collection, perhaps "Greenleaf," "A View from the Woods,"
3. "The Lame Shall Enter First," "Revelation," and "Judgment Day." Think about the protagonists' struggles and moments of awareness. With those in mind, evaluate how O'Connor incorporates Teilhard de Chardin's vision of humanity.

3. "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is set at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Choose a reliable information source such as an online or print encyclopedia and learn more about the movement. Then, discuss how knowing about civil rights helps readers understand the story's conflict.

"Revelation" (1964)

"Revelation" was published in the 1964 spring issue of the *Sewanee Review*; it was the last story to appear separately before O'Connor's death that summer. Many critics consider it her finest work. At the center of the story is Ruby Turpin, a 180-pound middle-class white woman who is obsessed with class-consciousness and racial relations. The story takes place in two locations: a doctor's office, where Ruby and her husband have gone to have a cow-kick-induced ulcer on his leg treated, and at the Turpin farm, where the story's climactic scene occurs at the Turpins' "pig parlor," a pen raised on a slab of concrete the Turpins hose down every evening. In many ways the story is the culmination of O'Connor's writing career and spiritual vision, with the final scene containing the most comprehensive epiphany in all of her works: a vision of "a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling towards heaven." As with many of her works, especially those in the posthumously published collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the central character, Mrs. Turpin, witnesses a moment of "convergence" as it might be described by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Roman Catholic priest, mystic, and paleontologist whose works O'Connor read and reviewed in 1960 and 1961. She called Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* "a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is

revealed in it" ("Outstanding Books, 1931–1961," *American Scholar* 618). O'Connor was drawn to Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the "Omega Point," a scientific explanation of human evolution, a movement toward self-awareness that would ultimately lead to a form of supreme consciousness. For Teilhard de Chardin, no human being is fixed. Instead, all human beings evolve toward a point of transcendence—universal love—a point where the outside world and the inside world converge in Christ.

Ruby Turpin reaches this grand epiphany after a series of disillusionments, the most significant of which occurs in the doctor's office when a homely acne-covered girl aptly named "Mary Grace" assaults Turpin with a book—entitled *Human Development*—and then wrestles her to the floor. Before the girl can be sedated, Mrs. Turpin insists that the girl has something to say to her, that she knows her and can see through her. In reply Mary Grace exclaims, "Go back to hell where you come from, you old wart hog!" As O'Connor readers come to expect, this moment is suffused with comedy and pathos. It is the sort of violent scene usually accompanying sudden moments of awareness in O'Connor's works. Prior to this violent encounter, Ruby Turpin has been sizing up the members of the waiting room, judging their social status according to their clothes, shoes, and sense of propriety. Mrs. Turpin is haunted by the social pecking order; her thoughts often veer from the waiting room to the materialist and racial hierarchy with which she classifies human beings. She literally holds simultaneous conversations inside her head and aloud in the waiting room, at times conversing with those waiting for the doctor, at other times responding to her own thoughts with verbal utterances and even emphatic praises of thanks to Jesus, who has created her with a little bit of everything and spared her the shame of being an underprivileged white person or a person of color.

After she spends the afternoon in bed with an ice pack over her left eye, a sign of renewed vision, Turpin makes her way to the pig parlor, where she questions God. Believing that the encounter with Mary Grace is the result of divine providence, Turpin asks, "What do you send me a message

like that for. . . . How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" Finally, after mulling over about her social status and religious standing, Turpin demands, "Who do you think you are?" an impassioned cry that has been building in her since her confrontation in the doctor's office. In a moment that mirrors the epiphany the grandmother has in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Mrs. Turpin is struck speechless. She then experiences an unfolding of mystery as "a visionary light settled in her eyes." She sees the various stratified members of southern society "rumbling toward heaven." As her vision ends, she hears "the voices of souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah." It is the most complete moment of awareness in all of O'Connor's works, one that embodies the inclusive vision of grace O'Connor held throughout her life.

In the end Ruby Turpin may form O'Connor's strongest social commentary. Turpin embodies a bigoted southern culture consumed by notions of race and class, a culture O'Connor often represents and comments upon in her stories. Among those who represent the stratified ranks of southern society, Mrs. Turpin confronts her self-image, one over which she stewes during waking and sleeping hours. In a recurrent nightmare reminiscent of the exportation of Jews during the Holocaust, Mrs. Turpin sees "all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head," dreaming "they were all crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven." This vision not only haunts Mrs. Turpin, also it forms the vision of humanity given by O'Connor in her other works, one in which violence provokes in both her characters and her readers dramatic epiphanies, moments of awareness in which the blind indeed do learn to see—the stuff of which biblical revelations are made.

For Discussion or Writing

1. On one level, "Revelation" deals with social and religious hypocrisy. With this in mind, read other O'Connor works treating a similar theme, such as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Displaced Person," "Greenleaf," "Everything

- Caron, Timothy Paul. *Struggles over the Word: Race and Religion in O'Connor, Faulkner, Hurston, and Wright*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000.
- Cash, Jean W. *Flannery O'Connor: A Life*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002.
- Clark, Beverly L., and Melvin J. Friedman, eds. *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985.
- Coles, Robert. *Flannery O'Connor's South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.
- Eggenschwiler, David. *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor*. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1972.
- Enjolras, Laurence. *Flannery O'Connor's Characters*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998.
- Farmer, David R. *Flannery O'Connor: A Descriptive Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1981.
- Feeley, Kathleen. *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1972.
- The Flannery O'Connor–Andalusia Foundation. Available online. URL: <http://www.andalusiafarm.org/>. Accessed March 24, 2009.
- "Flannery O'Connor Collection." Georgia College and State University. Available online. URL: <http://library.gcsu.edu/~sc/foc.html>. Accessed April 2, 2006.
- Friedman, Melvin J., and Lewis A. Lawson, eds. *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1966.
- Gentry, Marshall B. *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.
- Giannone, Richard. *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Gordon, Sarah. *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000.
- Grimshaw, James A. *The Flannery O'Connor Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Johansen, Ruthann K. *The Narrative Secret of Flannery O'Connor: The Trickster as Interpreter*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995.
- Logsdon, Loren, and Charles W. Mayer, eds. *Since Flannery O'Connor: Essays on the Contemporary American Short Story*. Macomb: Western Illinois University Press, 1987.
- Martin, Carter W. *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*. Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969.
- McFarland, Dorothy T. *Flannery O'Connor*. New York: F. Ungar, 1976.
- McKenzie, Barbara. *Flannery O'Connor's Georgia*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980.
- Muller, Gilbert H. *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Collected Works*. New York: Library of America, 1988.
- Orvell, Miles. *Flannery O'Connor: An Introduction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- Paulson, Suzanne M. *Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.
- Ragen, Brian A. *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus: Innocence, Guilt, and Conversion in Flannery O'Connor*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Late Twentieth Century: 1945 to the Present—Flannery O'Connor." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/oconnor.html>. Accessed May 5, 2005.
- Scott, R. Neil. *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism*. Milledgeville, Ga.: Timberlane Books, 2002.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Walters, Dorothy. *Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Twayne, 1973.
- Whitt, Margaret Earley. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

Blake G. Hobby



SYLVIA PLATH (1932–1963)

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am.

(The Bell Jar)

By the time she took her own life on February 11, 1963, the poet, novelist, short story writer, and essayist Sylvia Plath was known in England (for the most part, Americans had not heard of Plath until her death) as an exceptionally gifted writer and champion of the feminine cause. Her poetry, fiction, and prose had earned her a reputation as a skillful artist capable of honing her craft, and she was especially seen as a gifted young poet of great potential. Yet, her personal life had become a nightmare, one that both inspired her to create poems with amazing alacrity and had taken her to utter despair. Unlike the American myth of success in which people ascend into greatness, knowing health and wealth and fame, Sylvia's is a tragic story imbued with mythology, the tale of an inimitable artist who suffered greatly. Although her life was filled with accomplishments, her works, especially her late and best-known works such as "Ariel," "Daddy," and "Lady Lazarus," are most often viewed from the perspective of her death. In fact, much Plath criticism deals with the impact of her mental illness on her work and on the relationship between her life and her works. Critics are now reassessing her work from perspectives not tied to her psychological disposition and suicide. What remains clear is that Plath's works deal with transformation, the power to confront pain, to reimagine the unimaginable, to create art out of experience, and to enter life again.

Born in Boston on October 27, 1932, Sylvia Plath was the first child of Otto Emil Plath, a German-born immigrant, bee expert, and Boston University professor, and Aurelia Schober Plath, a teacher 21 years younger than her husband (the two met when Aurelia registered to take a German course Otto was teaching; Otto was married although estranged from his wife at the time). Two and a half years later, after the birth of her brother, Warren, the family moved to Aurelia's hometown, Winthrop Bay, Massachusetts, just east of Boston, where the young Sylvia's imagination was fed by the sounds, beauty, and power of the sea, the inspiration for many of the rhythms and images found in her poems. After developing gangrene, having his leg amputated, contracting pneumonia, and suffering an embolism, the result of undiagnosed diabetes, Otto Plath died in 1940, leaving his wife with two young children and little money. Otto's death haunted Sylvia, who at the impressionable age of eight watched as someone she loved died after a long, painful illness. Before his illness, her father had been a strong man, one whose scholarly endeavors determined how the house and family schedule were structured. Thus, Sylvia felt his absence intensely and remarked to her mother that she would never speak to God again after her father's death. Two years later Aurelia moved with her children and her parents to Wellesley, Massachusetts, to teach medical secretarial courses. Although her mother did her best to provide her children with

the finest education possible, Sylvia's early years were marked by insecurities about money and social status, an anxious sense of self-doubt she masked as both a child and adult but that had a profound influence on both her writing and personality.

Writing voraciously in journals at a young age, a practice she continued throughout her life, Sylvia led a productive life, impressing many with her talent as both an artist and a writer. By the time she graduated from high school, Sylvia had published poems in newspapers and written more than 50 stories, one of which, "Summer Will Not Come Again," appeared in *Seventeen* magazine (August 1950). The recipient of the Olive Higgins Prouty Fund scholarship, Plath attended Smith College, a competitive school with a long reputation of academic excellence. Although she felt enormous pressure and lived with a plaguing sense of self-doubt, Sylvia performed well, distinguishing herself socially and academically, writing for the school newspaper and journal, and serving in various leadership positions, including editor of the *Smith Review*, correspondent to the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, and a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle*, for which she interviewed famous writers, including Elizabeth Bowen, RICHARD WILBUR, and George Steiner. After three hard years of pushing herself, Plath suffered a mental breakdown, for which she underwent hospitalization, psychiatric treatment, and electric shock therapy, all paid for by her Smith sponsor, Olive Higgins Prouty. By all accounts the treatment was successful; Plath returned to Smith in the winter of 1953–54 and graduated on June 6, 1955, *summa cum laude*.

After receiving a Fulbright Scholarship, Plath attended Newnham College in Cambridge, England, one of two women's colleges dating from the Victorian period. In Cambridge she met Edward James Hughes (a gifted, rising poet known as "Ted Hughes"); they were married in London in June 1956. In 1957 the couple returned to the United States and lived in Northampton, where Plath taught at Smith for a year. Despite her success and popularity, Plath felt inadequate as a teacher, overwhelmed by the demands of teaching and unable to dedicate the time she needed to writing. The couple then stayed in Boston for a year. In spring 1959 Plath attended

Yaddo, a writer's colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. Next, the couple made a cross-country camping trip before returning to England. When they arrived, Plath was two months pregnant. Their first child, Frieda Rebecca, was born at home with the help of a midwife in London on April 1, 1960.

Sylvia's first book, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, whose title poem dealt with her relationship with her father, was published in England in October 1960 and in the United States in 1962. The poems in *Colossus* date from the 1950s, including her time at Yaddo, when her style began to change dramatically. From 1956 Plath sought a publisher for the poems, all the while editing, reworking, and altering them, as well as adding new ones. Some critics, viewing *Colossus* in light of her late poems, often see Plath's first published collection as belonging to a period of apprenticeship, one in which she often wrote poems as exercises, composing deliberately; experimenting with meter, sound, and rhyme; and working, at least according to Hughes, "very slowly with an open Thesaurus on her knee" (Orr 170). Yet, as Pamela Smith, in "Architectonics: Sylvia Plath's *Colossus*," argues, "*The Colossus* emerges as something more significant than a poet's workbook, more than some literary equivalent of the Hanon exercises of piano" (Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* 113). Similarly, Linda Wagner-Martin, in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, argues:

Ted Hughes and others—Plath's college roommates among them—have given us the familiar image of Sylvia writing poems, sitting with the heavy, red-covered thesaurus that was her father's open on her lap, consulting it frequently. But as early as 1956, even before she had met Hughes, Sylvia had begun trying to write poems that spoke more colloquially. She had come to think of the poet as song-maker, not as scholar with her head buried in books. (166)

Thus, the late *Colossus* poems shift in diction, rhythm, and sound, defying previous conventions. By the close of the decade Plath's poetry was informed by oral conventions and relying on comparatively low diction: This immediate language without the

poetic distance of her previous work cannot be classified as “apprenticeship” work or mere exercises. In fact, by the March 18, 1961, composition of “Tulips,” Plath’s method had radically changed. She now wrote quickly, urgently, transforming the act of composition into an ecstatic experience, entering the personae she created and infusing them with an intensity not known previously. As Steven Gold Axelrod in “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath” describes, most of the *Colossus* poems are from what he calls a “second stage” of her development, “a period of growth and experiment” (Gill 76). As Axelrod further notes, this poetry “has not received the attention it deserves.” *Crossing the Water*, published posthumously in 1971, also contains poems written around the time that *Colossus* was published. Jo Gill, in “*The Colossus* and *Crossing the Water*,” maintains that, rather than the work of an apprentice, the poems in both collections contain “multiple voices, personae and perspectives at play . . . sometimes contradictory, often indeterminate,” poems that “merit attention: their allusiveness and elusiveness, their variety and range, their complexity and above all their sophisticated self-reflexivity” (Gill 104).

On February 6, 1961, Plath had a miscarriage, an experience she chronicled in “Parliament Hill Fields” (February 11, 1961), in which the poem’s speaker, walking alone, mourns her loss: “Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack.” Later that month she underwent an appendectomy, which provided the inspiration for “Tulips” and “In Plaster.” During 1961 she wrote *The Bell Jar* about her experiences from 1953 (the novel was published in 1963 under the pseudonym *Victoria Lucas* one month before her death): the guest editorship at a woman’s magazine, the bout with depression, and the failed suicide attempt. As early as June 13, 1959, Plath wrote in her journal: “Read COSMOPOLITAN from cover to cover. Two mental-health articles. I *must* write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED. And a story, a novel even” (*Unabridged Journals* 495). Thus, she had been thinking about the novel and about revisiting the time of her breakdown for several years. In the same year Plath and Hughes traveled southwest of London to Devon, where, enthralled with a thatch-roofed

house that had been a former rectory, they decided to relocate to “Court Greene”—a manor home with nine rooms, horse stables, a tennis court, three acres of land, and an apple orchard. Although Plath and Hughes had to spend a great deal of time fixing up the house, Court Greene afforded them both with an ideal writing environment, Plath enjoying a second-floor study with a view of the front lawn, a wall separating the property from the adjacent church, and two trees that appear in her poetry: a yew tree and a giant wych elm.

On January 17, 1962, Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas Farrar Hughes. She was becoming known in London literary circles as a poet; in June 1962 she recorded some of her poems and provided commentary on them for the BBC *Living Poet* series. She wrote *The Women*, a radio play for the BBC. During this frantic year, Ted had an extramarital affair, the couple separated, Ted moved out of the Devon house, and Sylvia and the children moved to London to a house once occupied by William Butler Yeats.

In the five months preceding her death on February 11, 1963, Plath wrote most of the poems collected posthumously as *Ariel*, at times as many as two or three a day. According to Hughes, Plath had selected and ordered the *Ariel* poems in a binder so that the collection opened with the word *love*, which opens the poem “Morning Song,” and concluded with the word *spring*, the final word of the poem “Wintering.” Omitting 12 poems that dealt with what Hughes felt were inappropriate, hurtful, and overly personal subjects—many dealing with Plath’s anger over his extramarital affair—Hughes edited the first edition of *Ariel*, which appeared on March 11, 1965. So many copies were sold that the collection immediately needed to be reprinted. It was not until 1981 that Hughes, in the notes section of Plath’s *Collected Poems*, revealed that his ordering of the *Ariel* poems differed from Plath’s intentions. The reader learns this from a simple statement Hughes makes in the introduction, which refers to page 295 of the text on which Plath’s intended ordering appears. In the introduction Hughes downplayed the heavy-handed editing he did: “The *Ariel* eventually published in 1965 was a somewhat different volume from the

one she planned. . . . It omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962.” Critics have taken Hughes to task for this decision; many feminist readings of Plath’s poems were inspired by Hughes’s omissions and admissions. The *Ariel* poems attest to the growing sense of isolation and desperation Plath felt. Violent, direct, and often fixated with self-annihilation, these poems are shockingly truthful, as in “A Birthday Present”: “And the knife not carve, but enter / Pure and clean as the cry of a baby, / And the universe slide from my side” and in the famous line from “Lady Lazarus”: “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” and in the images of mutilation that occur in “Daddy,” the speaker confesses: “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two— / The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, / Seven years, if you want to know,” lines that, although they are from a persona Plath has created, nevertheless have poignant autobiographical correspondences and speak of a liberation that will only occur through murderous violence.

As the executor of Plath’s estate, Hughes has overseen not only her personal effects but also the publication of her prose, fiction, letters, journals, and poetry, the body of work that we know. Hughes’s role has been questioned because no one is sure whether Plath had filed for divorce before her death. Had she petitioned for divorce, Hughes’s inheritance would have been disputed. In letters to her mother and Richard Murphy, Plath writes that she is applying for a divorce. However, Hughes has maintained that the separation was not permanent and that the couple continued to talk about a future together. In 1982, when *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems* appeared in print, Plath received a Pulitzer Prize, the fourth author at the time to have been awarded the prize posthumously (Amy Lowell, Stephen Vincent Benét, and William Carlos Williams died before their awards were given in 1926, 1944, and 1963, respectively).

Plath began keeping a diary at the age of 11 and kept journals until her suicide in February 1963. In the journals, Hughes has also faced criticism for his role in handling them: Plath’s last journal, which contains entries from winter 1962 up to her death,

was destroyed by Hughes. Her adult diaries, starting from her freshman year at Smith College in 1950, were first published in 1980 as *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Frances McCullough. In 1982, when Smith College acquired all of Plath’s remaining journals, Hughes sealed two of them until February 11, 2013, marking the 50th anniversary of her death. In 1998, shortly before his death, he unsealed the two journals and left the project to Freida and Nicholas, who passed it on to Karen V. Kukil. After Kukil finished her edits in December 1999, Anchor Books published *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* in 2000. Hughes was poet laureate of England from 1984 until his death on October 28, 1998. In 1998 he published *Birthday Letters*, a collection of poems he had written over the years reflecting on his courtship, marriage, and life with Plath and of his life after her death. A number of the *Birthday Letters* poems were published previously in Hughes’s *New Selected Poems, 1957–1994*. These works remain contentious; many critics question Hughes’s intent and find the collection troubling. Nevertheless, this collection along with *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) and *Ariel: The Restored Edition—A Facsimile of Plath’s Manuscript, Reinstating Her Original Selection and Arrangement* (2004) with a foreword by Frieda Hughes have created new interest in Plath’s works, which continue to be read and studied by the general public and academicians alike.

“Morning Song” (1961)

The first poem Plath selected for *Ariel*, “Morning Song,” opens with the word *love*, a deliberate choice for a poem about birth, motherhood, and love, and a symbolic choice for the collection as a whole, which begins with “Morning Song” and ends with “Wintering,” a poem anticipating the new birth of spring yet wondering whether nature will survive. Unexpectedly, ringing like a lost voice of youth, the writer who portrayed birth in *The Bell Jar* as a cataclysmic event threatening to sever the self from its foundations and a process often controlled by men, turns away from the confining and pain-filled aspects of childbirth in “Morning Song” and pens a

work filled with nurturing images and promises of growth. In six tercets, the speaker focuses on sounds: a baby's first cry, the elated voices of a midwife and a mother who greet the newborn, a distant sea, and the "clear vowels" of the infant that rouse its mother and "rise like balloons." Here it is difficult not to collapse the poem's speaker with Plath, who, in this poem, appears as a lactating mother, stumbling from bed "cow-heavy" and wondering at the miracle of life. Unlike so many of Plath's poems, "Morning Song" is an intimate work devoid of irony, angst, and struggle. In short, it is a hymn to life with all of its possibilities. Yet, as in so much of Plath's writing, here the speaker stands apart, a "statue" in a "drafty museum," an observer dissociated from her own child, a listener trying to understand, a woman clothed in a "Victorian nightgown" separated from the naked purity of her child but basking in its beauty and aware of its needs.

Throughout the poem "the elements" provide a sense of cosmic wonder, as the baby's voice and the wind create a scene that is also contained in a small "window square" filling with snow. The speaker depicts a world in microcosm, one where the simplicity and infinite creativity of a child mask, at least temporarily, the world's weariness. In this still moment a child's cry and prelinguistic utterances inspire the artist, leaving her to contemplate the coming of the new day and the potential for rebirth the morning will bring. Capturing a reverential moment, "Morning Song" is a poignant recollection, one that reveals Plath in a moment of fulfillment. Yet, whether it is because we know of Plath's death, her many other tortured images, the impending failure of her relationship with Ted Hughes, or the bleak London midwinter that enclosed her final days, the poem's sense of hope appears transient, ephemeral, a short-lived respite from lived experience; a wish fulfillment of what the artist either could have been or may be.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read other Plath poems that deal with the love of a mother for her children, "By Candlelight," "Child," and "Balloons," noting the persona of the speaker. Who is speaking? How does this persona express itself? According to Susan Basnett,
- "The poems to children have a directness about them that brings the reader in straight away to share the beauty of the picture. In these poems there seems to be no I-persona, no intermediary fictionalized figure that intervenes between the I-that-is-writer and the I-that-is-narrator within the poem. The mother who writes so powerfully about her children is also the speaker and the poems are like love letters to those children, messages without ambiguity" (95). Do you agree with Basnett's assessment of these poems? If so, what message does Plath provide? If not, what ambiguities exist, and what is their significance?
2. Compare "The Manor Garden," an early mother monologue poem, with later mother poems such as "Morning Song," "You're," and "Balloons." How does "The Manor Garden" anticipate the later poems; how do the later poems relate to "The Manor Garden"? After analyzing and comparing these poems, write a well-developed essay on the role of the speaker in Plath's motherhood poems.
 3. Compare "Morning Song" with "Barren Woman," a poem Plath wrote the same week. Are the two poems complementary, or do they define polar opposites? Importantly, why does Plath rely upon the image of a museum in each poem? What connections can be made, and why are these connections significant?

"Blackberrying" (1961)

First published in the posthumous collection *Crossing the Water* (1971), "Blackberrying" is from what critics call Plath's "transitional period," the time between *Colossus* and the *Ariel* poems when Plath and Hughes had returned to England and after the birth of their daughter. During this period Plath wrote several landscape poems, including "Stars over the Dordogne," "Blackberrying," and "Finisterre." With its triple negations, "Blackberrying" opens in a dark alleyway, a void where the blackberries themselves, "Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes," "squander their juices" on the speaker's fingers, creating a sacramental bond, an

unmasked-for “blood sisterhood” the speaker assumes is an indication of the love the berries feel for her. Ironically, the first stanza depicts an inhuman world, yet the speaker personifies the blackberries staining her hands, which she collects in a milk bottle. As the speaker stands before this haunting scene, at the end of the alleyway, undulating sea, to which the speaker is mysteriously drawn, awaits. The speaker does not describe the ocean, however, because she cannot see it. Thus, the speaker implies that the sea’s heaving can only be heard.

The second stanza shifts from the view of the path to the sky, where crows, crowlike birds, fill the space with their cries and spin in the wind. Their voices protest, although the speaker is not clear about the object of their objections. Such ominous images reflect the speaker’s interior world, a dark, paranoid space into which she is increasingly drawn, or “hooked,” as the speaker describes at the end of stanza 2. As this stanza reveals, the speaker doubts that she will ever reach the sea, perhaps because she is increasingly caught up in the blackberries, especially one bush covered in flies that are stunned, as the speaker is, at the berries’ alluring sweetness, an allure that inspires belief in the unseen, whether it be heaven, as in line 8, or the sea that appears as “a great space / Of white and pewter lights” ringing like a silversmith beating metal at the end of the final stanza. In the final lines of the poem the speaker again peers out into a great nothingness, this time the sea upon which she comes after climbing a steep path with wind “Slapping its phantom laundry” at her. Such an awe-inspiring scene is reminiscent of a romantic vision of the sublime. Yet, while romantic poets might envision a connection with the divine in such an awesome scene created by the inimitable powers of the natural world, here the speaker stands alone before another void, this one stretching endlessly out before her. Whether this exterior journey mirrors an interior journey that the speaker, and by analogy Plath, is making, the final image, bleak, astounding—a scene of great beauty, unbelievable horror, and overwhelming despair—may represent a vision of the final frontier: the realm of death into which we are all ultimately drawn.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “Blackberrying” and “Finisterre,” another of Plath’s poems written in September 1961, are both set on the coast and can be compared with Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West,” which also examines the natural world and comments on the nature of poetic perception, the faculty that vies for presence in a world of absence, creating order out of chaos. While for the romantic poets the imagination was the poet’s link with the divine, for Stevens the imagination is the tool we use to create fulfillment in our lives, the sort of order that is both necessary for our survival and a creative power that gives our seemingly purposeless lives meaning. On this level, all three poems may be said to deal with the role of art in our lives. With that in mind, analyze the Plath poems as responses to Stevens, keeping the following questions in mind: What is the relationship between the imagination and reality in art? What does art do for or to its perceiver? Where does art originate?
2. Both Plath’s “Blackberrying” and Galway Kinnell’s “Blackberry Eating” are self-reflexive poems, poems that reflect on the art of poetry and comment on the nature of language. First, compare the two poems and their focus on language/poetry/the imagination. Then write a well-developed essay that analyzes how the Kinnell poem both relates to and comments upon the Plath poem.
3. Compare “Blackberrying” with earlier Plath landscape poems such as “Point Shirley” and “Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows.” What vision of Plath and the world do these poems depict? What notions of the self do the poems present? With your observations in mind, write a well-developed essay that persuades the reader of the significance of Plath’s landscape poems.
4. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” also deals with both the natural world and what may lie beyond. Focusing on both poems’ supernatural and religious imagery, write a well-developed essay on the relationship between religion and the natural world in Plath’s poetry.

“For a Fatherless Son” (1962)

On September 26, 1962, with the composition of “For a Fatherless Son,” Plath began furiously composing poetry over a six-week period, at the end of which she had written 30 poems. “For a Fatherless Son,” as Tim Kendall describes, “introduces a period of intense creativity, during which most of the work later collected in *Ariel* was written. Plath’s treatment of the theme of adultery in these poems modulates into an elaborate power struggle between betrayer and betrayed, and challenges the rigidity of these categories” (105). The poem opens with a direct, second-person address in which the speaker, with far-reaching similes, prepares a young boy for the absence of his father, who is portrayed as a “death tree” struck by lightning, denuded of its color and life (line 3). The tree stands as an illusion against the sky, which appears as a pig’s rear end. Here, in the first stanza, the speaker prophesies that the young boy, although currently naive and innocent, will know absence, which will increase throughout his life. Significantly, the first line of the poem ends with a paradox (“absence, presently”), which sets up another paradox at the end of the stanza (“lack of attention”).

The second stanza, grotesquely comic in nature, describes the boy as “dumb” and “blind” and his face as a mirror, another of Plath’s many reflective images. As the speaker peers at her son, she sees only herself, a sight that seems to be painful for her yet comic to him. For the present the son’s amusement benefits the speaker. But, as she reveals in the third stanza, the speaker knows that one day, beyond the time of grabbing noses, as children often do, her son will know loss and will feel the pain and anger she knows, the sense of betrayal that has set her adrift in the world, stripped of her illusions and hopes. This disillusionment and abandonment are tempered in the penultimate line of the poem, focused on the child’s smile, which sustains her as would an unexpected gift or “found money.” Thus, “For a Fatherless Son” is a poem of paradoxes juxtaposing childlike wonder with an adult’s bitter disillusionment and foretelling the future pain that will be a part of the child’s growth: the necessary recognition of loss, whether it

be a father, as with Ted Hughes, or of a mother, as with Plath, who, estranged from the world and abandoned, will take her own life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. It is possible to read “For a Fatherless Son” from a biographical perspective, noting how the poem comments on the collapse of Plath’s marriage. Read other Plath poems that can be read from a similar perspective—“Word heard, by accident, over the phone,” “Burning the Letters,” “The Courage of Shutting-Up,” and “Lesbos”—keeping in mind the biographical details from the last year of Plath’s life. Next, respond to the following questions in a well-developed essay: Are facts about Plath’s life relevant to your understanding of her works? Are characters and incidents in the work versions of the writer’s own experiences? How are they treated in these poems?
2. “For a Fatherless Son” is in the collection *Winter Trees*, which also contains the experimental poem “Three Women,” a dramatic poem on childbirth written from three different points of view and with three speakers. With motherhood and childbirth in mind, compare and contrast how the two poems depict motherhood. Why does Plath focus so much on this subject? What significance do these poems have for understanding both Plath the woman and her works?
3. In her 1973 book *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work*, Eileen Aird argues that Plath’s originality “lies in her insistence that what has been traditionally regarded as a woman’s world of domesticity, childbearing, marriage, is also a world which can contain the tragic” (17). With Aird’s ideas in mind, analyze “For a Fatherless Son,” arguing how this poem elucidates Plath’s unique contributions to the literary world.

“Daddy” (1962)

The 34th poem Plath slated for *Ariel*, “Daddy” is a controversial poem much debated by critics; Plath wrote the poem just four months before her death.

It opens as a child's poem, the speaker a daughter talking directly to her father for 80 lines divided into 16 five-line stanzas, notably employing childlike rhymes and an allusion to the nursery rhyme "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe" in the first stanza. The poem's content and increasingly violent language, however, are anything but childlike. The poem focuses on the liberation of a woman, who has lived for "thirty years," haunted by her relationship with her father, a man who died many years before but still occupies the speaker's imagination, a ghostly specter the speaker vows to kill. Rather than create a realistic portrait of a father, Plath weaves alarming images, ranging from an all-powerful God to a misogynistic Nazi to a sadistic devil to a blood-sucking vampire—a figure she has known personally, privately, and also a superhistorical figure capable of embodying everything from such abstract notions as evil and control to realistic crimes against humanity.

The poem is never clear about whether the historical references are meant as a social, political commentary or whether the exalted images merely represent the overreaching imagination of an embittered woman plagued by a psychological disposition that imbues her with nightmarish, schizophrenic, psychotic visions. What is clear is that the speaker is deeply divided and intends to commit patricide, exorcising the daddy figure who has towered over her throughout her life, intimidated her, controlled her, and left her paralyzed, unable to escape her father's clutches or interact with the world, imprisoned in the space to which she has been confined, and emotionally scarred.

Before the poem was published, Plath read it for a BBC radio broadcast in October 1962. Introducing the poem she said: "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 293 n. 183). While it would seem clear from Plath's description that the poem is about a persona she created, many critics have read the poem as a portrait of her father, or at

least a dramatized, hyperbolic image of her father inflected with Plath's own psychological disposition. Such biographical cues as the story Aurelia Plath has told of the young Sylvia's vowing never to pray to God again after her father died are woven into the text, tempting readers and critics to interpret "Daddy" as an autobiographical work. One of the many critics to take offense at the poem's content and follow an autobiographical interpretation, Leon Wieseltier wrote in his 1976 review for the *New York Review of Books*, "Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews" (20). As with so many of Plath's works, such a reading discounts the universal qualities of the poem, which, in violent language and arresting images, captures a woman haunted by her past relationship with her father and the husband who, for seven years, has controlled her. In order to survive, she has to relinquish the past, to allow it to die, requiring going through the grieving process, whose many stages include admitting anger. Her vitriolic poem announces her desire to be free, voices the courage she has mustered, and reveals the knowledge she has gleaned about herself. Thus, despite its anger and anguish, the poem deals with understanding the self and facing the past: the process of regeneration necessary to heal. What remains to be resolved, however, is how much the speaker really understands about herself and what she plans to do next. Subtle cues such as "The Black telephone's off at the root, / The voices just can't worm through" (stanza 14) and "I'm through" (end of stanza 16), imply action, something the speaker will do to remedy her torment. The question remains, What will she do? Will she take her own life (she has already told us, "At twenty I tried to die" in stanza 12)? Will she seek treatment? Will she be able to face the pain and survive? The poem ends without a sense of resolution, leaving the reader with an anguished feeling that mirrors the speaker's fragmented self, a deliberate lack of closure that enables the poem to be read in many different ways.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Find a copy of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying*. In it, she identifies five stages

that dying patients and those who have lost a loved one experience. Find connections between Kubler-Ross's ideas and Plath's poem. Reflecting on these, what psychological insights does Plath's poem offer?

2. What similes and metaphors does Plath use in this poem to help convey the speaker's feelings about her father?
3. As does "Daddy," Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* portrays a woman, Sethe, who is attempting to come to terms with the past. Of course, Morrison and Plath are different writers writing at different times. Nevertheless, interesting comparisons between the two characters can be made. Read *Beloved* and then write an essay comparing the women who battle the past. How do both deal with loss? How do both intend to heal?

"Fever 103°" (1962)

Written just one week after "Daddy," "Fever 103°" "perfects," as Tim Kendall observes, "the normally short-lined triplets which immediately become Plath's standardized pattern: she employs them on seven occasions over the following nine days. Their effect is vertiginous: although 'Fever 103°' does sometimes return to the relative stability of an iambic pentameter. . . , usually the lines are shorter, often enjambed, and their downward spiral mimics the velocity of the speaker's thoughts and desires without allowing pause for a breath" (162). Introducing the poem for her BBC reading of the poem, Plath said: "[It] is about two kinds of fire—the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second" (*Collected Poems* 293). In "Fever 103°" the speaker vacillates between feverish delusions and astounding insights, "flickering, off, on, off, on" all night long (10.2). As do the Pilgrim in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, and Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the speaker performs a ritualistic descent, traveling to the gates of hell, where she is reborn, as her old self dissolves and ascends to paradise. As in Jesus' death and resur-

rection, the speaker has suffered for "Three days. Three nights." (11). Here Plath weaves myth with the sickness she has known, providing nightmarish images of hell and of Hiroshima and hallucinogenic visions of becoming her own thermometer as she travels to the bathroom and sees gifts that friends have left to encourage her recovery: She is "Attended by roses, / By kisses, by cherubim, / By whatever these pink things mean" (16.3–17.2). Plath also evokes other figures who have suffered emotionally and psychologically, such as the reference to Isadora Duncan (stanzas 4 and 5), who was strangled with her own scarf in the wheel of a car after the death of her two children.

Packed with autobiographical material, literary allusions, references to minority groups, and historical atrocities—larger-than-life, real-world references that some critics have questioned—"Fever 103°" presents serious challenges for readers. Yet, for Plath, such a blend of personal, literary, and historical events constitutes art. In an interview with Peter Orr, for example, Plath described how poetry dealing with personal experiences should "be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (170). So, regardless of the criticism she has received for co-opting others' experiences and cataclysmic events for her own purposes, "Fever 103°" illustrates Plath's poetic vision of what art should accomplish, a vision she developed over time and arrived at late in her short life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Tracy Brain argues that the poem's "images of melting and forced fusion also reflect postwar and cold war concerns with the effects of nuclear explosions on the human body. The 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, directed by Alan Renais and written by Marguerite Duras, seems a likely influence here" (118). First, visit the Hiroshima Archive maintained by Lewis and Clark College: <http://www.lclark.edu/~history/HIROSHIMA/>. After seeing the devastation of the bomb, view *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Finally, evaluate Brain's claims in a well-developed essay. Is Brain justified in making such bold statements? If so, do the

images in the poem form a sociopolitical commentary, or do you feel that Plath's allusions are gratuitous?

2. "Fever 103°" can be seen as an elegy, a poetic form that takes its name from the Greek *elegos*, a reflection on the death of someone or on sorrow in general. Compare "Fever 103°" with other famous elegies such as Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd" (1865). What do these three poems have in common? Create a well-developed essay that synthesizes the three works and enables readers to appreciate Plath's poem as part of the elegiac tradition.
3. "Tulips" (March 18, 1962), *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices* (March 1962), and "Fever 103°" (October 20, 1962) all deal with hospitals and sickness. With this in mind, write a well-developed essay that analyzes the three works and addresses Plath's hospital obsession. To extend this essay, you may want to read *The Bell Jar* with all of its hospital scenes, which are often horrific. Do these scenes, largely autobiographical, inform Plath's late poetry?
4. Note Plath's incorporation of the Holocaust in "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Mary's Song" and of Hiroshima in "Fever 103°" and "Mary's Song." Early critics often accused Plath of using these events for her own purposes. Do you agree that Plath overstepped her bounds in incorporating these atavistic horrors, or do you subscribe to the aesthetic Plath aspires to, one in which personal events should be linked with larger issues? As you wrestle with this issue, you may want to examine first-person accounts of these events, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1958) and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), or second-generation accounts such as Joy Kogowa's *Obasan* (1981) or Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Consider who has the right to tell of such atrocities and what his or her moral obligations are in doing so. After weighing this evidence, write a well-developed essay on Plath's incorporation of the Holocaust and of Hiroshima in her works.

"Ariel" (1962)

Written on Plath's 30th birthday, "Ariel" depicts a frenzied horse ride through the English countryside, the speaker's movement into the unknown out of the stable (the "Stasis in darkness") and toward "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning." Plath ordered her collection *Ariel* so that this poem would appear as the 15th work. *Ariel* was the name of the horse Plath rode near the Devon village where she and Ted Hughes had purchased an old church rectory the year before. Yet, rather than merely record a true experience on her horse (Ted Hughes confirmed after Sylvia's death that she had had such an experience, when her horse ran uncontrollably and she held on for her life as the horse raced back to the stable), Plath creates a mythic morning ride filled with literary allusions. For example, Plath wrote "God's lioness" on a draft of the poem: the literal translation of the Hebrew word *Ariel*, which in Isaiah 29:1–3 and 5–7 stands for Jerusalem, the holy city chosen by God and the city whose fiery end Isaiah prophesies. The destruction of Jerusalem is an apocalyptic event as Isaiah describes it, one that leaves the temple, the connection with divinity and source of religious life, in ruins. "Ariel" focuses on a similarly destructive experience—one in which the self as it is known is transformed at the end of a harrowing ride.

The speaker clings to the horse's neck while berry bushes with hooks threaten and then appear as "Black sweet blood mouthfuls." One with the horse, who hauls her through the air, the speaker is a "White Godiva": Lady Godiva riding naked ("I unpeel——") and a pale, ghostlike goddess who appears corpse-like ("Dead hands, dead stringencies"). Capturing the madness of the ride and all of its rushing images, the poem assaults the reader, leaving us with few concrete ideas to hold on to and a string of unprocessed images and sensory details, creating a jarring effect, at once the experience of the loss of self and the violent ride on a horse out of control. As the horse speeds along, the speaker joins the landscape: "And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas." As a child's cry rings in the air, the speaker becomes both arrow and morning dew, both of which fly toward redness, the arrow toward the target's center and the dew evaporating in "the cauldron of morning."

Plath associates the speaker's movement and transformation in the poem with a radical transformation of the self arrived at through suffering, a kind of purgatorial religious experience. While the poem's title refers to Plath's horse and the city of Jerusalem, "Ariel" also refers to the magical, androgynous sprite in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1611), who, freed from a witch's spell by Prospero, conjures the tempest that causes both the play's shipwreck and mischief. From a Shakespearean perspective, Ariel symbolizes emancipation, the liberation that Prospero grants the elfin sprite. In the Plath poem, this sense of freedom is arrived at after the speaker travels into the sun. As many scholars have, it is tempting to read the poem as an allegory of the end of Plath's marriage and the beginning of her new journey alone. Regardless of the autobiographical elements, the poem describes the disintegration of an old self and the possibility of renewal. The poem portrays a powerful woman, sexualized, one with a wild animal, heading into the morning light, a place where the self, as the morning dew, dissolves in the air.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In one of his *Birthday Letters* addressed to Plath, Ted Hughes writes, "Red was your color. / . . . [Red] Was what you wrapped around you." How does Plath use the color red in "Ariel"? What does the color red signify, and why is it important to the poem's possible meanings?
2. Consider the structure of the poem: 10 three-line stanzas with a single closing line. That structure appears to be straightforward; with such a structure one might expect some sort of continuity between the stanzas, yet the stanzas are often difficult to decipher; one often has to reread to tell where one image or subject ends and another begins. With this in mind, what effect does the structure have? How does Plath wed content and form in the poem?
3. "Ariel" is a violent poem containing sexual images. What does the poem's violence signify? Why is it necessary to sexualize the speaker? What significance do the poem's violent, sexual images have?
4. After consulting a reliable Internet source such as <http://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/LadyGodiva.htm>, analyze how Plath works with the traditional myth of Lady Godiva in "Ariel." What similarities can you find? What differences? Why is it significant that Plath chose this literary allusion? After considering these questions, write a well-developed essay that explores Plath's poem and the Lady Godiva myth.
5. In her novel *The Bell Jar* Plath uses an arrow metaphor to describe the relationship between genders: "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from." With this metaphorical description in mind, write a well-developed essay on the arrow imagery/metaphor in "Ariel."

"Lady Lazarus" (1962)

Written soon after Ted Hughes had moved out, "Lady Lazarus," the seventh in the collection Plath called *Ariel*, captures the emotional intensity of an embittered woman who, despite her agony and desire for revenge, is determined to restore herself to life again, taking her own life and regenerating herself from the smoldering ashes containing only remnants of what she has been, relics that include a cake of soap, a wedding ring, and a gold filling. Suicide is the "art of dying" the speaker does so well, a subversive act that thwarts all attempts that others have made to contain her. The title of the poem alludes to a biblical story found in John 11:2 in which Jesus raises a good friend, Lazarus, from the dead. In the Plath poem, the speaker describes how she, as a cat with nine lives, has resurrected herself repeatedly, restoring her flesh eaten by the grave to life. The poem also concludes with another resurrection motif: the phoenix bird rising out of the ashes, a malevolent being with "red hair" ready to seek retributive justice, ready to "eat men like air." Introducing the poem in a reading for BBC radio, Plath said:

The speaker is a woman who had the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a

good, plain, very resourceful woman. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 294)

“Lady Lazarus” is a confessional poem, a self-revelatory work that records the speaker’s state of mind, in this case, a powerful self-examination of repressed desires, anger, aggression, powerlessness, and the need for vengeance delivered in a vitriolic voice that is not only defensive but also bitterly ironic, filled with a dark humor that captures pain and self-loathing, each unearthed in the process of learning to understand the self. These thoughts flow as if the speaker is speaking to an analyst, a patient unveiling herself to her doctor.

In 28 irregularly rhyming tercets (stanzas of three lines linked by a rhyme scheme), the speaker identifies herself as a Holocaust victim. The allusion “Nazi lampshade” refers to a widely publicized image emblematic of Nazi atrocities: a lampshade made out of stretched, tattooed human skin, captured by Billy Wilder in his 1945 documentary of Buchenwald, a German concentration camp. In the third to the last stanza, what remain are only remnants, objects that would not burn, an allusion to Auschwitz, where blankets were made of human hair and soap of human fat, rings were looted from the ashes, horrific medical experiments were conducted on inmates by Josef Mengele, the chief medical officer, and gold fillings were removed by death-camp dentists. Thus, “Herr Doktor,” “Herr Enemy,” “Herr God,” and “Herr Lucifer” evoke a monstrous, horrific image, one that haunts the poem’s speaker, refers to historical personages, and describes the experience of psychoanalysis, during which the speaker becomes the doctor’s “opus,” his work of art made from the dissected pieces of his subject.

In the poem this process of revealing the self is also compared to a strip tease, an event during which the speaker becomes a thing to be consumed by others’ eyes, an erotic spectacle over which much is made. Also, this image can be seen, as can the image of the doctor laboring over his artifice, with the nature of poetry: the way that the poet reveals herself in her works. In that sense, “Lady Lazarus” is one of Plath’s most self-reflexive poems, a poem that comments upon her own works with an ironic eye,

not only envisioning how she will be interpreted—how her own life poured into language will become a spectacle—but also comically reflecting on mortality, the subject of so many of her poems, the subject of “Dying . . . an art like everything else,” that the speaker does “exceptionally well.” It is one of Plath’s most famous poems, a work containing Plath’s dark form of parody, in which, by incorporating news, history, psychoanalytic terminology, sexual and racial stereotypes; commenting on her own artistic process as an artist; and revealing her deep-seated fears and anger, she creates a lyric poem capable of generating many, many meanings. To hear Plath reading a version of the poem for a BBC broadcast, visit: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/poetry/outloud/plath.shtml>.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What can be made of the numerous Nazi images in the poem? How do they affect the poem’s tone and enrich its possible meanings? Are they justified? What is their purpose?
2. Read the story of Lazarus in the Bible (John 11:41–44) and then think about why the speaker of the poem calls herself “Lady Lazarus.” What is the significance of the biblical allusion? Why is it significant that this Lazarus is a woman?
3. In JOHN KNOWLES’s *A Separate Peace* (1959) the character of Phineas is compared with Lazarus, the biblical character. With Knowles’s characterization of Phineas in mind, write an essay that compares Plath’s use of the Lazarus story in “Lady Lazarus” with Phineas in the Knowles novel.
4. On one level, “Lady Lazarus” implicates its readers, who witness a ritualistic death performance. What position does the reader occupy in relationship to the speaker? How can this relationship be characterized? To extend this topic, explore several Plath poems that address specific individuals: the mother figure in “Medusa,” another woman in “Lesbos,” an uncle in “Stopped Dead,” a lover in “Fever 103°,” the speaker’s child in “By Candlelight,” and the maiden aunt in “The Tour.” How do the speakers of these poems portray, characterize, or position the audience to whom the poems are addressed? What role does the audience play in these poems? What statement

can Plath be said to be making about the relationship between text and reader, art and spectator, actor and audience?

“Child” (1963)

Composed during the last week she wrote and just 14 days before she took her own life, “Child” juxtaposes images of a beautiful child with a troubled speaker. In the first stanza the speaker describes the exquisite, singular beauty of her child’s eye, which appears throughout the poem as a clear pool, one the speaker desires to fill with love and hope-filled dreams. Yet, the speaker herself, wringing her hands as if debating the inevitable end of things, perhaps even her own demise, stares at a “Ceiling without a star.” As with all of Plath’s works, “Child” is a carefully crafted work of art filled with stunning descriptions. Thus, the speaker does not merely want to teach the child and help it discover the world but to fill its eye with “The zoo of the new.” Just as the poet plays with language, so does the child meditate on sonorous words, names such as “April snowdrop, Indian pipe, / Little.” Innocent, open, ready to receive the world and all it has to offer, the child appears as a vessel capable of infinite love, a tender creature dependent upon love, nurturing, and understanding for growth. Yet the speaker knows that even though she can understand the child and its embracing of the world, this world is not hers. As if ruminating on her own poetry and her own wish fulfillment, the speaker, as does Plath, wants to create a different kind of art for the child, one that is “grand and classical” rather than the “troublous” art she weaves. But, as with the speaker, this is not the world Plath inhabited; even such a poem as “Child,” which speaks with tender love and appreciation for childlike wonder, also acknowledges the dark vision that plagued her life and animates her poetry. While we may do a disservice to Plath’s poetry when we read it in terms of her own life and not for its aesthetic merits, knowing Plath’s destiny makes reading “Child” a bittersweet experience, as we feel the love she has for her own children, her desire to preserve their innocence, and her ability

to envision their growth, all the while unable to escape the devastation she feels with her separation from Hughes, the bleak midwinter in London, her own demons. If one of the hallmarks of all great art is the expression of paradox, then “Child” is surely a great work that captures the wonder of life and the inevitability of death, the boundaries that frame human life and make up our day-to-day existence. That Plath in her final days was still able to imagine innocence and joy and order artful creations is the sort of paradox that lies outside any sort of reasoned understanding. It is this paradox that “Child” captures; it is this paradox that makes “Child” one of Plath’s most poignant works.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read other Plath poems that deal with children, such as “For a Fatherless Son,” “By Candlelight,” “Nick and the Candlestick,” “The Night Dances,” and “Edge.” What image of motherhood emerges when you think about these poems together? To extend this comparison, read *The Bell Jar*, noting the many references to birth and motherhood. Does the novel present similar notions of motherhood? How do the novel and poems differ? After thinking these questions through, write a well-developed essay on mother imagery in Plath’s works.
2. Like “Child,” William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Circus Animals” is a self-reflexive poem, one that takes a critical survey of his works of art. With these two poems in mind, compare the two writers’ visions of their own creations. Why is it significant that both reflect in their art on the art they have fashioned?

“Mirror” (1963)

“Mirror” first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1963 and was later published in *Crossing the Water: Transitional Poems* (1971), a posthumous collection containing both poems written during the time Plath wrote *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and those that predate and coincide with the *Ariel* poems, which, published in 1965, just two years

after her death, propelled her into fame. Like *Crossing the Water's* title poem with its ominous language ("The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes"), "Mirror" is a dark, brooding poem, one in which the speaker—a personified mirror on a wall, "silver and exact"—reflects a terrifying vision of the self. In the first several lines the mirror describes itself as objective, without "preconceptions" and "unmistaken by love or dislike"—an impartial observer that swallows everything it sees. Ironically, although the mirror is personified, it comments on the world with detached, unemotional observations that, despite the speaker's claim of being "not cruel, only truthful," lack the sympathetic, understanding attributes we normally associate with human perception. The first stanza opens with descriptions we often associate with a child's game, descriptive statements designed to engender guessing, clues given as if a riddle is being posed. Here the juxtaposition of a childlike tone and bleak images creates not only ambiguity but also confusion, leading the reader to question the veracity of the speaker's statements and observations. Distanced from the reader with its narcissistic vision, the mirror gazes at a pink, speckled wall, which, although the speaker believes (note the connotative language and shift to subjectivity) is part of the mirror's heart, remembers the many times that mirror and wall have been separated by "faces and darkness." Pivoting on this spectral image, the speaker in the second stanza describes itself as a lake—an image of depth, the unknown, drowning, and death—over which a woman seeking to understand herself bends. The speaker, which has described itself as a "little god" distanced from human affairs in the opening stanza, now admits it derives a sadistic pleasure in the reflection it provides, seeing the woman's increasing agitation and tears as a "reward." In this way it describes itself as a distant, destructive yet creative force, a thing from which a woman derives her notions of what is real. As the speaker, now a lake, depicts how the woman's image "replaces the darkness," the speaker reveals that it is aware of the powerful effect it has and the increasing toll time has taken on the woman. The water's reflective surface dashes the vision of a young girl the woman has harbored and replaces it with a

horrific image of an old woman rising "toward her day after day, like a terrible fish." Thus, the speaker, both mirror and lake, makes the woman aware of time, change, and mortality. She gazes into the watery surface, seeking a vision of what is truthful and simultaneously recoiling from the horrific vision that supplants any idealist vision of herself and separates her from her environment. As a meditation on Plath's increasing instability, a vision of her mortality, a foreshadowing of her suicide, "The Mirror" portrays a desperate woman who seeks to see a whole, integrated human being but who is bound, as is Shakespeare's Ophelia or Virginia Woolf, to a watery pool.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Many of Plath's poems contain mirror images. Explore mirror images in the following poems: "Face Lift," "Totem," "Last Words," "Morning Song," "Insomniac," "The Courage of Shutting Up," "Leaving Early," "Purdah," and "The Couriers." What do these images have in common? How do they differ? With your own insights in mind, write a well-developed essay on mirror imagery in Plath's poetry.
2. Read Claribel Alegría's "I Am Mirror" (1978). Then, compare the ways Alegría uses the mirror to reflect Salvadoran life with the way Plath uses the mirror to reflect the speaker's self and the world. After considering both poets' use of mirrors, write an essay that explores Alegría's poem as a response to Plath's.
3. The first line of the second stanza, "Now I am a lake," alludes to the mythological figure Narcissus. Read about the Narcissus myth in *Bullfinch's Mythology*, which can be accessed at <http://www.bartleby.com/181/132.html>, and note the way other writers have used the myth. With the knowledge you have acquired in mind, think about why Plath evokes this mythological figure. Write a well-developed essay that explores Plath's use of the Narcissus myth and its significance in interpreting "Mirror."
4. "Mirror" deals with representation: the way things in the real world are reflected in literature. If, on one level, the poem is about poetry, what

- is Plath saying about poetic perception and about the act of creating poetry?
5. The final image in the poem is alarming and stands in stark contrast to the more objective reflections the mirror provides. First of all, consider the difference between objective and subjective perception, the way the two relate and are also complementary. Then, write an essay on the significance of this final image, which, depending on the way you interpret it, may be seen as a more subjective reflection of the speaker.
 6. As Tracy Brain describes, two interesting lines from “Mirror” did not make the final edit. In these lines, “the eponymous speaker imagines itself with legs, walking from its room and into the world so that it can show others their reflections: ‘The trees and the stones would know where they stood. / The trees would not dream of redness, nor the stones of transparency’” (29). In a well-developed essay, argue where these two lines might fit best in the poem and how such an addition might alter the poem’s meaning(s).

***The Bell Jar* (1963)**

William Heinemann published *The Bell Jar* in England on January 14, 1963, less than one month before Plath took her own life and died of asphyxiation. The novel appeared under her own name in 1966 (Plath originally employed the pseudonym *Victoria Lucas*) but did not appear in the United States until 1971, in part because Plath’s mother, Aurelia, objected to the content, which she felt was uncharitable to those Plath had known and might adversely affect her reputation as a writer. Of course, between Plath’s death and the American release of the novel, Sylvia Plath’s had become a well-known name; her dramatic death had elevated her works to cult status. Plath came upon the idea of writing about a woman imprisoned by society and mental illness around the time of her third pregnancy, during which she wrote in her journal: “There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don’t relive it, recreate it” (*Journals* 495). While Plath wrote the novel in 1961, the action of the novel is set in the

1950s and is informed largely by Plath’s experience in 1953: her month-long internship as an editor at a woman’s magazine in New York City and the depressive episode, mental breakdown, and suicide attempt that followed. While it is tempting and even revealing to read the novel as an autobiography, Plath accomplishes more in the novel than record her own life and prefigure her own death. She captures America at a key moment in history, one in which women’s roles were clearly defined.

To understand *The Bell Jar* it is important to consider it within the context of 1950s America, a time of postwar prosperity and a time before the “second wave” of feminism that brought about so much change in the 1970s. As today’s fashion magazines offer unrealistic ideals of physical perfection and beauty, the stereotypical woman portrayed in 1950s magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* was a stay-at-home mother and submissive wife who lived to keep the pantry stocked, cook, and focus on making her husband happy. Marriage was depicted as the way to happiness, and the fulfillment of sexual satisfaction was equated with motherhood. After 1945 and the end of the World War II, the birth rate rose 18.5 percent, giving rise to a new generation of children dubbed the “baby boomers.” Corporate employment was seen as a goal; men were expected to be loyal to family and business; this society, in which members of the population were highly mobile, gave rise to the nuclear, isolated family unit, with a shift of women’s responsibilities to raising children. For Plath, the “bell jar” represented the confining 1950s patriarchal structure; her novel defied social norms. Of course, as with so much of Plath’s life, here we find a contradiction: a woman who tried to play the ideal role in society while creating subversive art.

The novel traces seven months in the life of Esther Greenwood, who has finished her junior year in college and is now working as a writing intern at a New York fashion magazine. As the novel opens, it is June 1953, the same month that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed by electrocution after being convicted of treason for giving the Soviets atomic secrets, an event that is referred to throughout the novel. In the first half of the novel Esther narrates her experiences during her first month in

New York as one of 12 editors working on a college issue of *Ladies' Day* magazine. As she runs from one event to the next—from photo shoots to meetings to lunches to dates to dances—Esther experiences a gradual mental collapse. On her last night in New York, in a highly symbolic scene, Esther strips on a rooftop and discards the clothes that have formed her identity: “Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one’s ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York.” The second part and majority of the novel takes place back home in Boston, where Esther wanders the streets, becoming more and more unstable, and ultimately is hospitalized after swallowing a bottle of pills. What follows is a slow, harrowing recovery that consists of electroshock therapy and hours spent with psychiatrists. When she finally encounters the humane Dr. Nolan, Esther begins to recover, regaining a sense of her self and feeling the “bell jar” lift. As the book ends, Esther, filled with “question marks,” is called to a weekly doctors’ board meeting to be considered for dismissal: “The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room.”

Typically, the novel is interpreted two ways: (1) as the story of a beautiful, accomplished woman who kills herself and becomes a martyr for women’s rights; (2) as a demonstration of Plath’s mental instability. Yet, there is more at play than a profeminist diatribe or a psychoanalytic portrait of an author. The novel is very much about identity—the disorientation of the self, the necessity of filtering social messages, and the construction of a sense of self despite terrible odds. As such, it speaks for late adolescence and becomes a metaphor for the human condition. Like Holden Caulfield in J. D. SALINGER’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Esther is a social misfit, a protagonist doomed from the beginning who bears witness to the powerlessness of the individual in relation to the collective. By using the metaphor of illness or insanity, Plath employs an ironic strategy, one that causes us to rethink who/

what is really sane: a disturbed individual or the social world. Throughout the book we see the disparity between maternity (conception, pregnancy, nurturing of infants) and motherhood (daily child care that necessitates a specific role to be played). Thus, on one level, the novel causes us to question whether motherhood is indeed “mutable”—a kind of sociological construct that must first be confronted and deconstructed before it can be escaped.

The Bell Jar portrays a suffering woman artist fighting with her own demons, laboring to know herself, searching for an acceptable role to play, and seeking fulfillment, joy. While it is difficult not to conceive of the novel in a semiautobiographical context, we do *The Bell Jar* injustice when we do not consider the literary value it holds. As do works by Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, or Virginia Woolf, the novel speaks to those trapped with self-doubts, groping to find a way through the seemingly endless corridors of the mind. As it captures a woman in the middle of 20th-century America making sense out of pain and laments the insensitivity of an often-cruel world, it deals with understanding, the struggle between self and other, interior and exterior, with its dream-filled visions and nightmarish pain. As Esther says near the end of the novel, “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.” As Esther does, we all seek a stable self, one not bound by the psychological knots that confine us, one not tethered to the social exchanges that define us. While the novel depicts a suffocating world, it also conveys the power of art, the way fiction can provide a needed distance from suffering, the way novels can not only lead us to empathize with others but also help us to understand ourselves. Whether we choose to read *The Bell Jar* as an autobiography, as fiction, as a psychological portrait, as a representation of women in the 1950s, as a sociological essay on the sexual experience of women, or for the style of the narration and construction of the novel’s form, which in many ways mirrors the disjunctive experience of its narrator, we are drawn into a close

tion of Dickinson's poems at Bartleby.com, which contains the text of the 1924 edition of her *Complete Poems* and includes an index: <http://www.bartleby.com/113/4053.html>. How many poems there deal with death, time, or mortality? How many can be compared with Plath's works? Write an essay that compares and contrasts the two women's works and argues why death is central to understanding each author's oeuvre.

4. Many of Plath's poems and her novel *The Bell Jar* deal with suicide. Thinking of other women characters who commit suicide—Emma Bovary in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) or perhaps Anna Karenina in the 1877 Tolstoy novel of the same name—why is it significant that major authors use suicide when revealing women characters?
5. Read Albert Camus's introduction to *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in which he argues that the only significant question is whether to kill oneself or not. After considering Camus's ideas, evaluate whether Plath would agree with him. Why or why not?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Aird, Eileen. *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- Alexander, Paul. *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- . *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Viking, 1991.
- Alvarez, A. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971.
- Axelrod, Steven G. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Barnard, Caroline King. *Sylvia Plath*. Boston: Twayne, 1978.
- Basnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath*. Towata, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1987.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Sylvia Plath*. Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House, 1989.
- Brain, Tracy. *The Other Sylvia Plath*. London: Pearson, 2001.
- Brennan, Claire. *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Breslin, Paul. *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Sylvia Plath*. Plymouth, England: Northcote House (in Association with the British Council), 1998.
- Bundtzen, Lynda K. *The Other Ariel*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.
- . *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.
- Butsche, Edward, ed. *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and Her Work*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1977.
- Dickie, Margaret. *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Collected Poems*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1924. Available online. URL: <http://www.bartleby.com>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Gill, Jo, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hargrove, Nancy D. *The Journey toward Ariel: Sylvia Plath's Poems of 1956–1959*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994.
- Hall, Caroline. *Sylvia Plath, Revised*. Boston: Twayne, 1998.
- Hayman, Ronald. *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath, Revised*. New York: Twayne, 1998.
- Holbrook, David. *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*. London: Athlone Press, 1976.
- Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber & Faber, 1998.
- Kendall, Tim. *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. London: Faber & Faber, 2001.
- Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Lane, Gary. *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- Lane, Gary, and Maria Stevens. *Sylvia Plath: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978.

- Macpherson, Pat. *Reflecting on the Bell Jar*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.
- Markey, Janice. *A Journey into the Red Eye: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Garland, 1986.
- Meyering, Sheryl L. *Sylvia Plath: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990.
- Newman, Charles H., ed. *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970.
- Northouse, Cameron. *Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1974.
- Orr, Peter, ed. *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Peel, Robin. *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: The Restored Edition: A Facsimile of Plath's Manuscript, Reinstating Her Original Selection and Arrangement*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004. "A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr." *Modern American Poetry*. 1966. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm. Accessed June 22, 2006.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kulik. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Ries, Lawrence R. *Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Poetry*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. London: Virago Press, 1991.
- Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979.
- Saldívar, Toni. *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self*. New York: Lang, 1992.
- Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- Strangeways, Al. *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows*. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998.
- Sylvia Plath Forum. Available online. URL: <http://www.sylviaplathforum.com>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Uroff, Margaret Dickie. *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- . *Voices and Visions: Sylvia Plath*. New York: Mystic Fire Video, 1988.
- Wagner, Erica. *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the Story of Birthday Letters*. London: Faber & Faber, 2000.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties*. New York: Twayne, 1992.
- . *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.
- , ed. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984.
- . *Sylvia Plath, the Critical Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Wieseltier, Leon. "In a Universe of Ghosts." *New York Review of Books*, 25 November 1976, pp. 20–23.
- Wood, David J. *A Critical Study of the Birth Imagery of Sylvia Plath, American Poet 1932–1963*. New York: Mellen, 1992.

Blake G. Hobby



CHAIM POTOK (1929–2002)

What happens when two ultimate commitments—one from your subculture, the other from the umbrella culture—meet in you and you love them both and they are antithetical one to the other? . . . How do you talk on the phone, go to school, ride a train, cross the street, attend class, relate to others, talk to your parents and friends, go out on a date, read texts? What are your dreams? What are your loves, your hates?

(“Culture Confrontation in Urban America: a Writer’s Beginnings”)

Herman Harold Potok was born on February 17, 1929, in the Bronx, New York City, to Polish immigrant parents. In accordance with Jewish naming customs, he also had a Hebrew name: *Chaim Tsvi*. However, it is the combination of his Hebrew and non-Hebrew names with which students will be most familiar: *Chaim Potok*. And, it is a fitting combination, because he was a man who spent his career attempting to reconcile his Jewish faith with his growing awareness of the secular world around him.

Potok was educated in Orthodox Jewish parochial schools—schools that combine learning the Talmud (a sacred Jewish text) with secular courses like mathematics and English. Although an understanding of Judaism is not necessary to read any of Potok’s novels, it is important to know that growing up as a Hasidic Jew meant that his family upheld a strict observance of Jewish customs and rituals. Unlike Orthodox Jews, Hasidic Jews stand out in physical appearance, wearing black suits, a *gartel*/girdle around the waist, sometimes a round fur-trimmed hat called a *shtreiml*, and a beard. The physical appearance of the Hasidim signifies their separation from the rest of the world. The Potok home was not marked by the distinct physical appearance of the Hasidim, but they did observe the strict rituals and followed the Hasidic prayer book.

Study of the Talmud is highly prized in the Orthodox community, so when Potok showed

an aptitude for visual arts around the age of 10, many conflicts ensued. Judaism adheres to the Ten Commandments, one of which prescribes: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). Thus, the visual arts are not as valued as talmudic scholarship among Orthodox Jews. Though Potok’s mother indulged his creativity while he was young, after his bar mitzvah she could no longer support him; his father never accepted Potok’s foray into visual arts. To his father the visual arts belonged to the secular world—a world from which they were set apart. Nevertheless, Potok’s creative drive never ceased; when he was an adult, oil painting and photography remained two of his hobbies.

By the time Potok turned 16, he had discovered a new form of artistic expression in fictional writing. He cites Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* as the novel that inspired him to explore writing. James Joyce’s novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* had a similar effect. He was moved by the emotions and experiences he felt while reading the novels despite his unfamiliarity with the worlds depicted by the authors. He submitted his first written story to a publisher, who did not accept the story but encouraged him by inquiring into whether Potok was ever going to write a novel. By the time he entered Yeshiva Uni-

versity in 1946, he had made a commitment to be a writer.

Potok's choice to become a writer was met with disappointment in his Hasidic community: The choice alienated him from friends, family, and former teachers. Yet, what sets Potok apart from other writers who discuss the collision of faith and the secular world is that he chose to remain devout. Leaving behind the Hasidic culture he knew, he became a Conservative Jew. However, by removing himself from a culture he had known for so long, he had to reevaluate everything he knew. In interviews, Potok referred to this period in his life, claiming this experience as one catalyst for his recurring theme of "core-to-core cultural confrontation." Because he chose to pursue writing fiction, he encountered emerging theories about scholarship and identity that challenged and later would reinforce his faith. He was able to face many crises of faith and emerge established more firmly in his beliefs.

In 1950 he graduated *summa cum laude* from Yeshiva University with a B.A. in English literature. Prior to entering seminary, he knew that he wanted to be a writer who would explore Judaism and the 20th century. He went on to the Jewish Theological Seminary in order to gain a better understanding of Judaism, and he graduated with an M.H.L. degree in 1954. In the year that followed he served as the national director of the Leaders Training Fellowship at the seminary. Potok then joined the U.S. Army in 1956 and served as a chaplain in the Korean War for one year. His service as chaplain fulfilled the seminary requirement for rabbinical ordination, but he knew that his place was not at a pulpit.

Potok referred to his experience in the Korean War as the period during which his beliefs were most tested. He was forced into the unfamiliar culture of Asia, and his internal struggles with his faith would become the inspiration for all of his novels. In a 1981 interview with S. Lillian Kremer, he explained about his experience in Korea: "I had been brought up to believe that Judaism made a fundamental difference in the world and I ended up in a world in which Judaism meant nothing. . . . It [being in Korea and experiencing the culture] required a lot of

rethinking" (37). He has said that, ironically, it was in Korea, immersed in the secular world, that he first understood beauty.

Returning to America in 1957, Potok took residence as an instructor at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles for two years. In 1958, he married Adena Sara Mosevitzsky, with whom he would later have three daughters. Still haunted by his experiences in Korea, he spent time dealing with his crises of faith. In the interview with Kremer, Potok said that he started backward, contemplating the boy who went to Korea rather than the conflicted soul who left. His experience in Korea became the inspiration for his first novel, which was not accepted by publishers but would later be published as *I Am the Clay* in 1992. In fact, Potok has admitted that most of the books written by 1981 had main characters who were representations of him—each of the characters confronting something that he had dealt with while coming to terms with his faith.

Potok took on several different positions in the Jewish community before his first novel would be published in 1967. He served as the scholar in residence at Har Zion Temple in Philadelphia in 1959–63. He joined the faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1963–64 and worked as the managing editor of *Conservative Judaism* in 1964–65. While holding these various positions, he also worked toward his Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania in 1965. He did not stay at the university to complete the course of study but instead moved to Jerusalem while studying secular philosophy with the intention of getting a better understanding of Western culture—much in the same way he had entered the seminary to understand Judaism better. Two years later, when *The Chosen* (1967) was published, he was serving as editor in chief of the Jewish Publication Society.

The Chosen met with critical acclaim and remained on best-seller lists for six months, even reaching the number one position. This novel remains his most-taught work and has been translated into many languages. The novel explores Potok's notion of "core-to-core cultural confrontation"—his exploration of what happens when someone embedded in one culture encounters a culture markedly different.

His writing has been described as semiautobiographical because many of the questions that his characters deal with are issues that he wanted to answer for himself. He returns to the core-to-core cultural confrontation theme in all of his fiction novels: It is Freud for Danny Saunders; it is a scientific approach to the Talmud for Reuven Malter; it is anti-Semitism for David Lurie; it is art for Asher Lev; and it is feminism for Davita Chandal. Because he explores this theme throughout his work, critics have considered this a weakness in his books. Some critics also object to his use of simple language and the fact that none of his characters ever completely leaves behind Judaism. In a world affected by the teachings of Darwin and Freud and haunted by the atrocities of the Holocaust, most authors who approached religion tended to do so negatively. Any type of religious observance was met with the attitude that people who chose to have faith were uninformed and ignorant. However, Potok argued differently: In his novels, and in his life, faith and knowledge coexist.

In spite of the many criticisms Potok has endured for the style of his novels, *The Chosen* marks the beginning of a long career as rabbi, scholar, and novelist. Potok wrote almost 20 works of nonfiction and fiction, as well as countless articles and commentaries. His articles appeared in publications such as *Tri-Quarterly*, *Esquire*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *New England Review*, and *American Judaism*. He also wrote three children's books: *The Tree of Here* (1993), *The Sky of Now* (1995), and *Zebra and Other Stories* (1998).

He received numerous accolades for his work, including a National Book Award nomination and the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for *The Chosen*; the Athenaeum Prize for *The Promise*; the Jewish National Book Award for *The Gift of Asher Lev*; the National Foundation for Jewish Culture Achievement Award; an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from La Sierra University; the Barrymore Award for Outstanding New Play for his adaptation of *The Chosen*; the O. Henry Memorial Award for "Moon"; and the Distinguished Arts Award from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Potok was actively engaged in the Jewish community as well as in the world of fiction. He had

membership in the Authors' Guild, the Dramatists' Guild, the Authors' League of America, the Rabbinical Assembly, PEN, and Artists' Equity. Potok spent his life dealing with cultural confrontation, but he never failed to create a new understanding of the world that included both of the cultures that he loved. Because of his continued scholarship, Potok spent much of his life as a lecturer at various universities, teaching at the University of Pennsylvania (1983, 1992–98), Bryn Mawr College (1985), and Johns Hopkins University (1995–98).

Although he was diagnosed with brain cancer at the turn of the 21st century, Potok did not slow down his research and writing. His last novel, *Old Men at Midnight*, was published in 2001, one year before his death, on July 23, 2002. Potok spent more than 30 years contributing to contemporary American fiction, exploring themes such as racial bigotry, anti-Semitism, the horrors of war, and Jewish identity. His books have received international renown, having been translated into a number of different languages.

Often labeled a "Jewish-American" writer, Potok accepted that the label needed to exist for purposes of studying literature but always expressed distaste for the term. In one of his later interviews with Elaine M. Kauvar, he responded, "I think the proper way to categorize, if I were to do it, is to say that all of us are American writers with different kinds of subjects and territories" (Walden 77). He did not see himself as a "Jewish" writer in the same manner as SAUL BELLOW, PHILIP ROTH, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Unlike Roth and the early work of Bellow, Potok worked from within the core of Judaism. He claimed that most of the heralded Jewish authors were writing about a Jewish experience different from what he wrote about—they wrote about Judaism from a peripheral understanding. Whereas he had done extensive research into the customs and language, his fellow Jewish-American authors would often misquote or misrepresent Jewish culture. His novels take place in the heart of Judaism and address questions of identity from within the Jewish community.

However, he felt that his novels had universal appeal; he did not think that "core-to-core cultural confrontation" was a new idea, nor specific to Juda-

ism. Danny Saunders has contact with Freud much in the same way that a devout Christian or Muslim might. For someone to remain devout in any faith, in the face of 20th-century developments in science and psychology, he or she would have to undergo the same struggles that face his Jewish characters. In a posthumous article entitled “The Orthodoxies of Chaim Potok,” George Jochnowitz wrote that “Potok chose to write about inner struggles concerning belief and identity rather than love or money. He defined his own area of exploration. His understanding of the characters he created, with all their internal contradictions, is what makes him a great novelist.” Potok focused on one group of people because that was what he knew best, and he believed, as did James Joyce, that “in the particular is contained the universal.” And while there is an underlying darkness to all of his novels, he approached his fiction with the firm belief that there are a benevolent creator and a purpose to life.

***The Chosen* (1967)**

Although he was labeled a “Jewish-American” writer, Potok’s first novel received critical acclaim and is often required reading for high school students. The novel also became a commercial hit, gracing best-seller lists for six months after publication in 1967, even hitting the number one spot. The novel has also been adapted to stage and screen: in 1982 as a movie by Twentieth Century Fox, in 1987 as a musical in New York City, and in 2002 as a play cowritten by Potok.

The novel tells the story of an unlikely friendship between an Orthodox Jew, Reuven Malter, and a Hasidic Jew, Danny Saunders, spanning the years of 1944 and 1950. The novel is broken into three parts, each section exploring a specific problem in the boys’ friendship. In book 1, they meet and must confront their feelings of hatred toward each other; in book 2, they learn more about each other’s different beliefs, while coping with World War II; and in book 3, they have to deal with the silence between them that results from their fathers’ differing views toward the Zionist movement.

The novel opens on an inter-yeshiva (*yeshiva* is the name for the system of schools that teach Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud) baseball game between Reuven Malter’s and Danny Saunders’s schools. Most of Reuven’s team is afraid of the other team because that team has never lost and because Danny has a reputation as an intense athlete. Potok builds up the religious tensions between Orthodox and Hasidim when Danny refers to Reuven as an *apikorsim*, a term that is usually applied to a nonpracticing Jew. Reuven notes that “I was an apikoros to Danny Saunders, despite my belief in God and Torah, because I did not have side curls and was attending a parochial school where too many English subjects were offered and where Jewish subjects were taught in Hebrew instead of Yiddish” (chapter 1). However, the religious tensions between the two characters do not last through the first part of the novel; the term *apikoros* becomes a joke for the two later on in the novel.

When the baseball game begins to go in the favor of Reuven’s team, and he has managed to pitch two strikes against Danny, Danny intentionally hits the ball directly at Reuven, who, rather than duck, attempts to catch it. Because Danny had intended to injure Reuven, the ball moves too fast for Reuven to react in time and hits his glasses, leaving a shard in his eye. Reuven undergoes surgery to remove the glass, only to learn that his eye may never heal properly. While in the hospital, Reuven meets Billy, a blind boy, and Tony Savo, an injured boxer. Both of the characters serve as reminders to Reuven that health is fleeting, and he is most affected by Billy’s story. He does not want his sight to be permanently damaged.

His father, David Malter, visits him frequently and enigmatically instructs him to make Danny his friend, a concept in Judaism that carries heavy significance. As his father explains, acquiring a teacher and choosing a friend are two things that the Torah instructs a Jew to do for himself. Choosing a friend, in the sense that David Malter speaks, is something that is necessary for Jews to do in order to learn and understand themselves better. Friends are, as Aristotle wrote, two halves of one soul. A silent understanding exists between the boys throughout the novel, acknowledging the depth of their friendship—

through hardship and ease—with the repeated statement “If only I’d have ducked.” When the visits of Danny Saunders and David Malter collide, Reuven and Danny recognize his father’s role in their friendship: David Malter had been instructing Danny on the non-Jewish books to read while in the library.

The first part of the novel closes as Reuven and Danny have established a firm friendship and Reuven’s eye has healed. As book 2 begins, Reuven remarks on how changed the world appears. He comments that “there was a newness everywhere, a feeling that I had been away a long time in a dark place and was now returning home to sunlight” (chapter 5). Before much of the narrative begins, Potok provides a lengthy section on the history of the Hasidic sect, as told through David Malter. This history is just one of several narrative interruptions in the text that help non-Jewish readers understand more about the novel and Jewish culture. The section is noted for its sympathetic approach to Hasidism as it provides a stark contrast to what Danny reads in Graetz’s *History of the Jews*.

Most of book 2 follows the development of Danny and Reuven’s perceptions of the world. Reuven, with his newfound eyesight, looks at everything with a different perspective, although he distrusts and disapproves of Reb Saunders’s treatment of Danny. When he meets Danny’s father for the first time, it is during a Shabbos service where Reb Saunders intentionally quotes the Talmud incorrectly to see whether Danny will catch the mistake. He does, and the two characters engage in a heated debate about Talmud and commentaries that intimidates Reuven, who cannot understand how a father and son only speak when discussing Talmud. Meanwhile, Danny, who has begun to read Freud and various writings on Hasidism, is disturbed by what he learns, although he never wavers in his faith. When Reuven questions him about it, Danny shrugs off the question and never seems unsettled by the conflict between Judaism and psychoanalysis. However, the more Danny learns about psychology, the less he wants to inherit his father’s position as tzaddik, a Hasidic rabbi.

As book 2 closes and book 3 opens, the impending creation of a Jewish state becomes the focus of the novel, and the two boys enter Hirsh University and

are caught between fathers with two different sets of beliefs. When World War II ended, many countries felt obligated to help Jewish people because of the atrocities of the Holocaust (and arguably, many nations felt guilty for their inaction). The movement of Zionism, which advocated a country for Jews, separate from the rest of the world, developed; they believed Jews deserved this for the suffering and the loss they had endured. In 1947 the world agreed, and in 1948 the nation of Israel emerged.

In the novel David Malter becomes very active in the Zionist movement, whereas Reb Saunders stands in staunch opposition. Tensions escalate at Hirsh so that “there was almost a fistfight, and the two students were kept apart with difficulty by members of their respective sides [and] the incident left a bitter taste in everyone’s mouth” (chapter 13). After a large Zionist rally in Madison Square Garden, where David Malter had spoken, Reb Saunders refuses to let Danny interact with Reuven. The boys spend most of their first two years of college apart from each other: “Not Freud but Zionism had finally shattered our friendship” (chapter 13).

The separation of the characters causes Reuven to spend more time studying the Talmud. He begins to analyze the variant texts of the Talmud, an approach that plays a significant role in *The Promise* (1969), in which he is one of the main characters. The chronology of the novel begins to move faster, and at the close of chapter 15, the anti-Zionist movement at Hirsch ends because a graduate is killed during a skirmish in Israel. As Reuven begins his third year, Danny approaches him and explains, “The ban has been lifted” (chapter 16).

The final two chapters focus on Reuven’s fear of confronting Reb Saunders about Danny’s interest in psychology. Potok provides hints at Danny’s anxiety about approaching his father about choosing psychology and not the tzaddik (in Hasidism, the rabbinical positions are inherited, and as the son of the rabbi, Danny would inherit the role of a rabbi/tzaddik); he has to consider the effect on him, his father, his family, the congregation, as well as a betrothed. Danny receives three acceptance letters from various graduate programs and, upon returning home, finds the letters left in the entry area of his home.

Yet, his father does not say anything about the letters until weeks later. Invited over to the Saunders' home during Passover, Reuven, Danny, and Reb Saunders finally talk.

The confrontation with Reb Saunders marks the conclusion of *The Chosen*. They meet in his office, at first discussing Reuven's plans to enter the rabbinate. The final chapter centers on Reb Saunders. He provides explanations for raising Danny in silence and gives his blessing for Danny to go into psychology. Having taught his son to have a soul, to have compassion for people's sufferings, Reb Saunders believes that "all his [Danny's] life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik" (chapter 18). The novel ends with both boys' graduating summa cum laude.

Critics herald *The Chosen* for Potok's minimalist prose and the approachability of the Jewish world he creates. He explains an unfamiliar Jewish world without bogging down the narrative with technicalities of Judaism that might lose readers. Potok adds interruptions in the novel's narrative to provide a basic understanding of Judaism—in the form of David Malter's lesson on Hasidism or with short sentences explaining the meanings of Yiddish and Hebrew phrases. It is important to remember that *The Chosen* stands as the first of many novels where Potok explores his notion of "core-to-core cultural confrontation." While neither character leaves the Jewish faith, neither character is as fully immersed in his culture as he was; Reuven and Danny have to concede certain aspects of their beliefs.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the opening chapter of *The Chosen*, Danny Saunders intentionally hits the baseball toward Reuven Malter, who does not duck but attempts to catch the ball, which breaks his glasses and causes a shard to enter his eye. As a result, Reuven has to undergo surgery to repair his eye. When he leaves the hospital, he remarks that "everything looked suddenly bright and fresh and clean. . . . And there was a newness everywhere, a feeling that I had been away a long time in a dark place and was now returning home to sunlight" (chapter 5). Is Reuven's new vision a result of the surgery, or is Potok suggesting something more? What might Reuven have experienced and learned while in the hospital that would affect his perception of the world? If so, how? Do any other characters undergo a change in physical sight (eyesight that worsens) that also suggests a change in their perceptions of the world? How does this character's perspective change? How does this character relate to Reuven Malter's experiences? Would you say that this novel, while dealing with the theme of vision and perception, supports Potok's belief in core-to-core cultural confrontation? Why or why not? What choices do the two boys have to make in the novel, while changing their preconceived ideas about each other and their religious beliefs?
2. Think about the role perception plays in *The Chosen*. Reuven Malter is the narrator of the novel, but the story is not about just him; it is also about Danny Saunders. How does Reuven's perspective influence the way you view Danny and his father, Reb Saunders? Why do you think Potok tells this story through Reuven, rather than Danny? How would the story have been different if both boys were either Hasidic or Orthodox Jews, in terms of what you have learned about both sects from the novel? How is Reuven able to help Danny, and how is Danny able to help Reuven? Why is it better for the characters that they are different? What lessons can they learn from each other? Why do you think David Malter was so adamant that they become friends?
3. Chaim Potok wrote a sequel to *The Chosen*, entitled *The Promise* (1969). In the novel, Reuven and Danny are much older and are both working on graduate degrees. Like the first novel, the story is not centered on only Reuven Malter; Michael Gordon is a teenager suffering from an unidentified psychological problem who can only open up around Reuven. In another book, *Davita's Harp* (1985), Reuven appears again, although in this novel, he is still a teenager in yeshiva. In this novel, he refuses to accept an award from his yeshiva, an award that is the equivalent to the valedictorian award, because he knows that Davita deserves to receive it. Why might it be important for Reuven's

character development that he encounter such varied people and their sufferings? How might the lessons he learns with Danny, Michael, and Davita assist him later? How does Reb Saunders's belief that a rabbi needs to have a heart and compassion help you understand what Reuven has to experience before he can become a rabbi? Why is it so important for a rabbi to have these characteristics? Why might these characteristics be even more important in a post-Holocaust world? Reflect on David Malter's statement "Now we will need teachers and rabbis to lead our people. . . . The Jewish world is changed. . . . If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people" (chapter 11).

4. In 1959 JOHN KNOWLES published his famous novel *A Separate Peace*. In that novel, two boys, Gene and Phineas, become friends while enrolled in the summer session at the Devon School in 1942. How might this story parallel the friendship of Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders? How does World War II affect the narratives of both novels? Why might the characters view the war differently? What aspects of their culture might force them to consider the war from different perspectives? Are the two sets of friends similar to each other? How so? In what ways are they different? What might account for those differences? Compare and contrast these two sets of characters.

***The Promise* (1969)**

Potok wrote several paired novels; *The Chosen* and *The Promise* are his first attempts at continuing character development into another novel. *The Promise* begins at the end of summer 1950, after Reuven and Danny have graduated. As both characters are headed off to graduate programs, they are brought together by Michael Gordon, a boy who is deeply disturbed but who refuses to speak about his psychological afflictions.

While Reuven struggles to deal with his new Talmud instructor, Rav Kalman, Danny struggles to find the answers for Michael's problems. Rav Kalman

and Michael are angry with the world; however, they demonstrate their anger in different ways. Rav Kalman, a Holocaust survivor, immigrates to America with strong ideas about Talmud and the rabbinate. Because Reuven uses textual criticism, Rav Kalman threatens his *smicha* (rabbinical ordination). Michael, hating his father for being an excommunicated Jew, despises overly religious Jews, repeatedly telling people, "You're like all the others. . . . You're no different than the others" (chapter 1). As the novel concludes, the obstacles experienced by Reuven and Danny ease. The problems have not ended, but for the moment the tensions have subsided. Rav Kalman grants Reuven *smicha* but does not agree with his method of textual criticism; Michael admits to hating his parents but still has to undergo therapy with Danny for complete healing.

Critics consider *The Promise* to be the most stylistically weak of all of Potok's novels. They argue that he tries to juggle three distinct narratives in Reuven, Danny, and Michael, and each of the characters' stories is weakened as a result. He does not blend his explanations of psychology into the text as well as he did with the information in *The Chosen*. In spite of the criticisms of the text, Potok does deal with weighty issues in Judaism and 20th-century thought: How do Jewish people, the supposed chosen of God, account for the horrors of the Holocaust? How do people rebuild when everything they have has been destroyed? How can European Jewry and American Jewry coexist to create a stronger Jewish community?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Before the narrative of *The Promise* begins, Potok quotes the rebbe of Kotzk: "If Thou [God] dost not keep Thy Covenant [that the Jews would be God's special people and He would always care for them], then neither will I keep that Promise [the promise to worship only one God], and it is all over, we are through being Thy chosen people, Thy peculiar treasure." How might this statement apply to some of the characters in the novel? Which characters seem most troubled by post-Holocaust events? How does Potok treat issues of faith in this novel?

2. In *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, Reuven encounters other Jewish people with different notions of religious faith, who cause him distress. Reb Saunders (*The Chosen*) stands between him and his friendship with Danny when Reuven's father becomes active in the Zionist movement; Rav Kalman (*The Promise*) stands between him and his *smicha* when he defends his father's textual criticism of the Talmud. Consider the character development of Reb Saunders and Rav Kalman: Are these men sympathetic characters? Defend your answer. Does Reuven learn something about himself and the world through these men? Does Potok provide any explanation for why these men are the way they are?

***My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972)**

Three years after the publication of *The Promise*, Potok published *My Name Is Asher Lev*. The novel garnered a better reception than his previous novel, and he was applauded for the different approach to the narration and subject. Potok creates a character who matures in writing—sentence structures and subject matter grow in complexity as Asher ages. However, critics still questioned Potok's return to characters with an unwavering faith in Judaism. Asher may paint crucifixions, but he observes Shabbos, the Jewish holy day of rest, and the Commandments.

The novel begins as a memoir, spanning 1943 to 1970. Asher Lev writes directly to the reader, opening the first chapter with an acknowledgment of his latest paintings (*Brooklyn Crucifixion I* and *Brooklyn Crucifixion II*) and the controversy that they have generated. The opening sections read as if he is trying to explain why he has chosen to paint crucifixions. It is not a surprising way to begin the narrative because as the novel ends, Asher is unable to explain to his parents why he painted the images, something he feels he has to do in order to ease their pain.

The novel has been called a glimpse into the development of genius. In the course of the novel, Asher goes from being a young child using cigarette ashes to provide proper shading to a teenager studying under the fictional artist Jacob Kahn, capable of

using any artistic medium he wants. Kahn instructs him that he has to become a great artist because “that will be the only justification for all of the pain [he] will cause.” While under the tutelage of Kahn, Asher eases himself into the inevitable confrontation between his life as an artist and his life as a religious Hasidic Jew.

The continual father-son conflict in the novel results from his father's disapproval of art and the rebbe's unexpected support for Asher. His mother, Rivkeh, supports Asher by purchasing art supplies without his father's knowledge. However, the family relationships change when his parents attend the art show with the crucifixion pieces. Having begun to accept Asher's art career, his parents feel betrayed at his use of an image that represents so much Jewish bloodshed. He damages relationships with his family and Hasidic community, so much that the rebbe asks him to leave.

Explaining his motivation, Asher remarks that “if you are driven to paint it, you have no other way.” In a section that reads as a plea, he entreats his audience: “I would not be a whore to my own existence. Can you understand that? I would not be a whore to my own existence” (chapter 13).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the passages that Asher Lev reads from *The Art of Spirit* (chapter 8). If “every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race,” then how must Asher Lev free himself? From what ideas and traditions does he break away? Why might his “mythic ancestor” have such a heavy presence throughout the novel? Why might Asher continually feel the need to assert his identity apart from his faith and his father (think about how often he states, “My name is Asher Lev”)? Knowing that Potok revered James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, what connections do you see between Asher Lev and Stephen Dedalus? How do both characters free themselves of family, nation, and race? Do they free themselves in the same way?
2. The crucifixion is a strong image in Christendom, symbolizing Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of Christians, which has dominated art history for

Potok's novels, how might he react to that statement? Would he agree or disagree? Defend your position. How does Potok's Jewish faith relate to Campbell's notion of mythology? Would Judaism provide a mythology that might give people a sense of identity and purpose? How so? How might his characters have turned out differently if they did not have their Jewish faith? Would their obstacles have been the same? Would they react the same way to Zionism and the Holocaust if they were not firmly established in their Jewish mythology?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Diner, Hasia R., Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger, eds. *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Goren, Arthur A. *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Jochowitz, George. "The Orthodoxies of Chaim Potok." Editorial. *Midstream* 50, no. 6 (September–October 2004): 24–26.
- Kremer, S. Lillian. "An Interview with Chaim Potok." *Studies in Jewish Literature* 4 (1985): 84–99.
- Potok, Chaim. *The Book of Lights*. New York: Knopf, 1981.
- . *The Chosen*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.
- . "Culture Confrontation in Urban America: A Writer's Beginnings." In *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann C. Watts, 161–167. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1981.
- . *Davita's Harp*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1985.
- . *The Gift of Asher Lev*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- . *I Am the Clay*. New York: Knopf, 1992.
- . *In the Beginning*. New York: Knopf, 1975.
- . *My Name Is Asher Lev*. New York: Knopf, 1972.
- . *Old Men at Midnight*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.
- . *The Promise*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969.
- . *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews*. New York: Knopf, 1978.
- Roskies, David G., ed. *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- Rubenstein, Richard L. *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. 2d ed. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Silver, Elizabeth. "Silent Territory: Author Chaim Potok Maps His Past through His Writing, Part I." JVibe. Available online. URL: <http://www.jvibe.com/popculture/potok.shtml>. Accessed May 21, 2006.
- . "Silent Territory: Author Chaim Potok Maps His Past through His Writing, Part II." JVibe. Available online. URL: <http://www.jvibe.com/popculture/potok2.shtml>. Accessed May 21, 2006.
- Wade, Stephen. *Jewish American Literature since 1945: An Introduction*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999.
- Walden, Daniel, ed. *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.
- . *Studies in American Jewish Literature, Number 4*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1985.
- Wirth-Nesher, Hana, ed. *What Is Jewish Literature?* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994.

Sarah R. Fish



AYN RAND (1905–1982)

What is accomplished if the man attains power and prominence at the cost of this playing down to the masses? It is not *he* that triumphs, it is not his ideas and standards.

("From Ayn Rand's Unpublished Writings: Philosophical Journal,"
Objectivist Forum, August 1983)

Ayn Rand, a writer who accomplished the rare task of working out a formal system of philosophy through fiction writing, was born Alissa (Russian for *Alice*) Zinovieva Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905, in the Russian city of St. Petersburg to secular Jewish parents, Zinovy "Fronz" Zakharovich Rosenbaum and Anna Borisovna Rosenbaum. As such, she was profoundly affected by two Russian revolutions, the first in February 1917, which she supported, and the second, in October of the same year, which she opposed. She was a young partisan of the first, led by Alexander Kerensky. She has called this Russian epoch the only time she "was synchronized with history."

The second, the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, which she opposed, resulted in her father's business's being nationalized. At the age of 12, Rand lost the pleasant and affluent life of foreign travel and resort vacations to which she had grown accustomed. As the revolutions transformed St. Petersburg into Petrograd, then into Leningrad, life had become a struggle with scarcity and long lines waiting for bare necessities. In 1918, her family fled these privations to live in Crimea until 1921.

Despite all this, Rand did attend Leningrad State University, studying math, history, philosophy, and engineering; she graduated in 1924. Having known since childhood that her greatest ambition was to become a writer, she entered the State Institute for Cinema Arts to study screenwriting in 1924. Soon,

however, she despaired of finding the intellectual freedom she needed to fulfill her goal in Soviet Russia; for this reason, she obtained a passport in 1925 and traveled to the United States in 1926, apparently intending never to return.

As people sometimes do when starting a new life, Alissa Rosenbaum changed her name. For her first name, she adopted *Ayn*, (rhymes with *mine*), and for her new last name, she chose *Rand*, according to some sources, because it was the name of the typewriter she was using. After staying with an aunt in Chicago for six months, she tried to "make it" as a Hollywood scriptwriter. While working toward this goal, she supported herself with many less glamorous jobs, including waitressing, envelope stuffing, and wardrobe clerking. Standing in line one day, she caught the eye of the director Cecil B. DeMille, who hired her as a movie extra. More important than those few walk-ons, however, was her meeting another movie extra, Francis (Frank) O'Connor, whom she married on April 15, 1929. Giving up acting, O'Connor tried his hand at a number of professions, including flower arranging and painting, but he would forever be most famous as the husband of Ayn Rand. Besides the support and inspiration that Rand credited to O'Connor, their marriage enabled her to become a naturalized American citizen on March 13, 1931.

Finally in a good position to concentrate on her writing, Rand was able to focus on her first novel,

We the Living, begun in 1930 and finished in 1933, although it was not published until 1936. Its protagonist, Kira Argounova, a young woman who wishes to become an engineer, struggles against the Soviet ideal of citizens' renouncing all "selfish" ambitions to live for the state. This heroine, the most autobiographical of all Rand's characters, struggled, as did the young Alissa Rosenbaum, with the added burden of upper-class parents. While Alissa managed to leave, however, Kira's fate was far less kind and she is left to fight, along with Leo (Lev) Kovalensky, a former aristocrat himself, and Andrei Taganov, an idealistic young Communist Party member, to fight for self-expression and happiness against a system of grinding oppression. This struggle against collectivism set the tone for all Rand's future works.

In the meantime, after writing several movie scenarios and scripts (one of which became a movie), Rand dramatized this struggle between the one and the many and enjoyed her first public success as a writer when her play *Woman on Trial* (original title *Penthouse Legend*) premiered in Los Angeles in 1934. Shortly thereafter, Rand and her husband moved to New York City for the 1935 Broadway premiere of the same play, renamed *The Night of January 16th*. Built around the trial of a woman, Karen Andre, accused of killing her lover, the entrepreneur Bjorn Faulkner, the play introduced the unique device of drawing jury members from the audience. Despite a constant battle between Rand and her producer, the value-driven arguments remained an intrinsic part of the play for its successful six-month run; this rhetorical strategy also set the tone for Rand's future writings.

In 1935, having already begun writing the novel that was to become her greatest publishing success, *The Fountainhead*, Rand paused to complete her novella *Anthem* in 1937. Published in England the following year, it did not find a U.S. publisher until 1946. This novella is unlike anything Rand wrote before or after in the simple, yet poetic language of its first-person narration, as well as the accessible, parablelike quality of the story. It is also unique in that its brevity and its expired copyright have made it

one of the most widely available works of fiction on the Internet.

Again, this story pits the individual against the collective. However, this tale's narrator lives in some future society where individuality is so suppressed that he has no name and no conception of the word *I*. Labeled *Equality 7-2521* for convenience sake, the narrator begins his account, "It is a sin to write this." The sin is not just in the writing itself, since the Council of Vocations has deemed him fit only to clean the streets, but also in the fact that *Equality 7-2521* is writing for no one but himself. In fact, the very condition of being alone is a sin. Contrary to an older tradition of creating future utopias of collective societies, this work creates the opposite, called a dystopia, which shows the worst possible result of what Rand saw as society's slide into a more and more collectivist mindset. The result is a medieval stagnation symbolized by reliance on candles for light and refusal to allow progress not generated by collective "research." When *Equality 7-2521* reinvents an electrical form of light, the Council of Science shrinks back in terror and condemns him and his invention to destruction. This is the clearest introduction to Rand's opposition of collective stagnation and championing of individualistic progress.

As stated previously, her next novel, *The Fountainhead*, established Rand's reputation as a fiction writer and an advocate of individualism. By the fourth decade after its initial publication in 1943, it had already sold 4 million copies. Shortly after its initial publication, Hollywood paid Rand \$50,000 for the rights, then hired her to write a screenplay for the movie that eventually starred Gary Cooper as the novel's architect protagonist, Howard Roark, and Patricia Neal as his self-destructive love interest, Dominique Francon. Rand and O'Connor returned to Hollywood so that she could work on this and other screenplays.

While her later work, *Atlas Shrugged*, demonstrated a more refined political and philosophically complete analysis of the struggle for self-determination, *The Fountainhead* is widely perceived as more psychologically compelling. As she did in *The*

Night of January 16th, Rand used courtroom drama and the persuasive speeches embedded in such drama in *The Fountainhead* to argue the rights of individuals against collective pressure. Howard Roark, the novel's protagonist, is tried for dynamiting Cortlandt Homes, a low-cost-housing project that he designed for Peter Keating, another architect and also his foil. Roark does so knowing that the widespread rejection of his modernist designs will make it impossible for his project to be built otherwise. He lets Keating, who is far inferior as an architect, take credit for the design on the one condition that it be built exactly as Roark designed it. Roark argues so persuasively for the rights of the individual over the products of his own mind that the jury acquits him.

This fiction writing as advocacy, which some critics have called "polemics," is expanded greatly in the television speech of John Galt, the idealized inventor/protagonist of Rand's last novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. In fact, Rand's philosophy of objectivism seemed to grow at the expense of her fiction. As she refined and elaborated her thinking on how we know things, character and plot "take a back seat" to philosophical debate and explanation. For instance, Kira Argounova's arguments with her Communist friend in *We the Living* expand into the courtroom rhetoric of *The Fountainhead* and then mushroom into Galt's three-hour TV speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, interrupting the action of the novel for almost 60 pages. It is perhaps to be expected, therefore, that *Atlas Shrugged* would be Rand's last work of fiction as she dedicated herself entirely to explicating her epistemology in her articles for the *Objectivist Newsletter*, renamed the *Objectivist*, and, later still, the *Ayn Rand Letter*.

Before this long speech, however, the novel has established that all the world's true innovators (Atlases) have shrugged off the world's burdens and gone on strike. Two of the last hold-outs against this strike, Hank Rearden and Dagny Taggart, have struggled to keep things from spinning apart, all the while trying to solve the mystery of where all the rest of the world's innovators are disappearing to and why. Rearden, who invents a metal stronger and lighter than steel, and Dagny Taggart, who heroically keeps her family's railroad running while her brother, James, takes the credit, are eventually won

over and end up with Galt in their capitalist utopia, Mulligan's Valley, or Galt's Gulch, as it is also called. As some critics have pointed out, this shift from the more character-driven story of *The Fountainhead* to the more idea-driven writing of *Atlas Shrugged* is signaled by the naming of their respective parts; sections of *The Fountainhead* are named for characters, whereas sections of *Atlas Shrugged* are labeled according to Aristotle's principles of logic such as "Non-Contradiction" and "A is A."

Thereafter, while Rand taught fiction-writing classes in 1958, her own writing focused on a more straightforward exposition of her evolving political, economic, and philosophical defense of selfishness and capitalism. Rand also spoke at such venues as Queens College, Yale University, and the Ford Hall Forum on issues such as the destructive force of faith and the "Intellectual Bankruptcy of Our Age" and received an honorary doctorate from Lewis and Clark University in 1963. Along with Nathaniel Branden, who focused on the psychological aspects of the philosophy that had become known as *objectivism*, Rand continued to explain her views in articles for the *Objectivist Newsletter*, started in 1962 and later called the *Objectivist* (1966). She also helped Branden establish his own Nathaniel Branden Institute, offering both live and recorded lectures on objectivism and psychology. Rand even appeared on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* in 1967.

In 1969, Rand published *The Romantic Manifesto*, which bemoaned the death of romanticism in all but a few "bright spots in a stagnant gray fog." By this time, objectivism was developing schisms. In the first issue of her new *Ayn Rand Letter*, which she began publishing in 1974, she excoriated Branden and explained their falling out in philosophical, rather than personal, terms. However, it seems clear in retrospect that a broken affair played a large part in the dispute that was to destroy objectivism's unity as a movement and spell the death of the institute. See Barbara Branden's book *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (1986) or the film (1999) of the same name for more details on the personal and tumultuous events leading to the splintering of objectivism.

While she continued to deliver speeches at West Point (1974) and Ford Hall Forum (1977), to

write, and to glean such honors as inclusion at a White House dinner for Alan Greenspan's swearing in (1974) and another honoring Malcolm Fraser (1976), as well as a Ford Hall Forum luncheon in her own honor, all was not well. Besides her intellectual and professional disputes with former followers, Rand's health had begun to fail. After losing part of a lung to cancer, Rand suffered an even greater loss in the death of her husband and lifelong love in November 1979. By 1980, she had broken with most of her "inner circle"; she died in New York, in her 34th Street apartment, on March 6, 1982.

While her intellectual legacy is still quite controversial, this much is clear: Her system of philosophy and epistemology called objectivism remains a force to be reckoned with. More than 25 years after her death, Rand is a palpable Internet presence with several sites dedicated to keeping her ideas alive. Her books still sell very well, continuing to attract new followers, especially among the young. While some critics have accused her of creating an elitist philosophy reminiscent of that of Frederick Nietzsche, she herself pointed out that Nietzsche's "rebellion against altruism consisted of replacing the sacrifice of oneself to others by the sacrifice of others to oneself," abandoning reason and principle. In fact, one may see in *The Fountainhead's* characters Howard Roark and his foil, architectural critic Ellsworth Toohey, exemplars of "healthy" and "unhealthy elitism." As Roark argues at his trial, selfishness and egoism are the ultimate virtues, since it is only through them that an individual can pursue his or her goals and, thus, contribute to society's progress. Unlike other defenders of capitalism, Rand did not defend the selfishness of the marketplace as a private vice yielding public good, but as a virtue in and of itself.

***We the Living* (1936)**

Having written and sold a screenplay, *Red Pawn* (1932), as well as a stage play, *The Night of January 16th* (1934), Rand completed her first novel, *We the Living*, in 1934. The U.S. publisher the Macmillan Company and the English publisher Cassells and Company did not publish it, however, until 1936.

A stage adaptation titled *The Unconquered* was performed on Broadway in 1940, and the novel was also filmed in Italy in 1942. Rand called this film "excellent" and praised especially the actor playing the role of Kira.

In short, the novel traces the intersecting struggles of three young people, Kira Argounova, whose family is returning to Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) when we meet her; Lev Kovalensky, an aristocrat also known as Leo, who has lost both his wealth and his status through the revolutions; and Andrei Taganov, an idealistic Communist Party member, against a system that preaches the credo that people should live for the state. As do her later fictions, this novel pits individuals, with their dreams and talents, against the crushing power of collectivism. Unlike later novels, such as *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, *We the Living* focuses more on character and plot and thus may be seen as her most successful novel in terms of its story and artistic coherence.

Rand has called *We the Living* the most autobiographical of her novels, in terms of its ideas, not in the facts of her life, although there are a few parallels. She and her young heroine Kira both accomplished those most difficult "coming of age" tasks under the new Soviet rule; both were from well-off families whose businesses were nationalized by the Communists; both fled with their families to Crimea, then returned to the newly named city of Petrograd; and both were ambitious, intelligent individualists. While Rand aspired to be a writer and a philosopher, her heroine, Kira, wanted to be an engineer and a builder of bridges.

From the novel's first sentence, however, we sense the grimness in Kira's new environment, which foreshadows her ultimate defeat. Moreover, by opening with "Petrograd smelt of carbolic acid," Rand also signals the shabbiness of the new totalitarian state. Carbolic acid is used to kill lice; as such it symbolizes the poverty of the unclean, crowded masses. For a child of the upper middle class, as the young heroine, Kira, is, the contrast between her sweet accustomed life and these choking acidic fumes in the swarming gray city is palpable. When we first meet them, Kira and her family are crowded into the train. However, Kira is the only one who seems impervious to the

sadness of “humans . . . bundled in ragged overcoats and shawls.” In contrast to the weariness all around her, she stands “straight, motionless, with the graceful indifference of a traveler on a luxurious ocean liner.” In fact, her calm, composed indifference to even her own shabbiness is described as the “defiant, enraptured, solemnly and fearfully expectant look of a warrior who is entering a strange city and is not quite sure whether he is entering it as a conqueror or a captive.” As with most of her idealized heroes, Rand describes Kira as straight, slim, and graceful. The warrior reference, together with several reminders of Kira’s gray eyes, can be read as an allusion to the Greek goddess Athena.

Traveling with her are her father, Alexander Dimitrievitch Argounov, who is weary but not ready to give up on life, believing that this Soviet regime cannot survive and he will, at last, be able to resume his life as a self-made entrepreneur. Kira’s mother, Galina Petrovna, covers the book she is reading so other passengers cannot see that it is written in French. In contrast, Kira’s older sister, Lydia, flaunts the fading remnants of her lost status, the lace at her throat, her darned silk gloves, and a bottle of perfume. Kira, Lev, and Andrei, plus family members, both immediate and extended, reflect many possible attitudes toward the new Soviet state. Kira, for instance, is intent on her own goals and observations, with the confidence of the young that she can keep herself above the gray muck of everyday life. At one point, however, she tries to leave Soviet Russia with Lev, the handsome young aristocrat she falls in love with at first sight. Lev has nothing but arrogant contempt for his country’s new leaders; however, he is already in trouble with them. While Kira’s love for Lev is unshakable, her relationship with Andrei, the idealistic young Communist Party member, is far more interesting. While disagreeing on everything political, they seem destined to be friends, and he risks his own party standing to help her, and Lev, several times.

Kira’s cousin, Victor Dunaev, is a foil to all three main characters and the ultimate opportunist who will use every ounce of his considerable crowd-pleasing charm to advance his own career. He betrays the woman he loves to marry someone more

politically advantageous. As a party member from the ruined aristocracy, he must work doubly hard to prove himself loyal; he does this by betraying his own sister for hiding her counterrevolutionary lover from the state police. The young couple marry in the hope of being sent to the same prison in Siberia, at least. When they learn that the marriage makes no difference and they are still being sent to prisons far apart, they make one last appeal to Victor to intervene. Despite the fact that people usually did not survive a 20-year prison sentence in Siberia, Victor refuses them even this one humble request that they be allowed to die together. After betraying them to gain his new standing in the party, he fears that any intervention on their behalf, no matter how small, would compromise his hard-won status.

While Kira doggedly pursues her dreams of love, she loses her chance of a career when children of all formerly upper-class citizens are expelled from the university. Then, Lev contracts tuberculosis and Kira has no money to send him to a private sanatorium; after fruitless months of trying to find him a place in a state-run institution, she fears he will die soon. In the meantime, Andrei has declared his love for her, and she, despite her respect for him, lies to him about her need for money to save her family from starvation. She becomes Andrei’s mistress and uses the money he gives her to save Leo. When Leo returns, recovered in health but corrupted in spirit, it is in the company of an appalling and vulgarly pretentious but wealthy woman, Tonia, whose desire for Leo is not much of a secret. Leo is caught in a black-market deal with Tonia and her husband, Koko, involving another Communist Party member, Pavel Syerov, Andrei’s enemy.

In fact, in his cynical, self-serving black marketeering, Pavel is the perfect foil for the idealist Andrei Taganov. In a novel where the good are overwhelmed by the grim oppression and corruption around them, it makes perfect sense that Lev would be scapegoated and Andrei would rescue him for Kira’s sake, only to give up on his own dream of a life in a noble Soviet Russia with the woman he loves; Andrei commits suicide.

Released, Lev can no longer deal with the situation and leaves with Tonia, who can support him

and get him out of Soviet Russia. His prostituting himself for Tonia is a far more corrupt version of Kira's affair with Andrei, since it lacks both respect and the motivation of saving a loved one's life. Kira is ultimately shot in her attempt to escape across the border in the frozen north. In her last scenes, we watch her struggle to keep walking through the blinding whiteness in the wedding gown she wore as camouflage against the white snow, while her heart's blood seeps slowly into the precious lace and falls to the ground. Her last vision is one of her beloved Lev in a nightclub and she smiles "her last smile to all that could have been." Perhaps it is the tragic nature of this story that lends it the literary structure that some find lacking in Rand's later novels.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *Bildungsroman* (from Ger. *Bildung*, or "development," and Fr. *roman*, or "story") is the literary term for a novel of a sensitive young protagonist coming of age and finding her or his place in society. How does the story's setting in the newly established Soviet system complicate Kira Argounova's development?
2. Given that marriage is usually part of a character's *Bildung*, especially that of a female protagonist, discuss the irony of the outfit Kira is wearing when she is shot. Look up the word *irony* in any good literary reference work or college Web site if you have any doubts about its meaning.
3. In "The Goal of My Writing," from her nonfiction work *The Romantic Manifesto* (1969), Rand wrote, "The motive and purpose of my writing is the projection of an ideal man." Considering this: (a) discuss how each character meets or fails to meet this goal as an ideal character, and (b) discuss the three main characters, Kira, Leo (Lev), and Andrei—in terms of their *hamartia*, meaning "characteristics that help to cause the characters' downfall," often referred to as a "tragic flaw." How does their *hamartia* contribute to each of their tragic fates?
4. Compare Kira to other *Bildungsroman* characters, such as Holden Caulfield of J. D. SALINGER's *The Catcher in the Rye* or Nick Carraway of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.
5. Do Kira, Lev, and Andrei seem destined to be defeated? Why or why not?

Anthem (1938)

Published in England in 1938, *Anthem* did not find an American publisher until Pamphleteers, Inc., picked it up in 1946. As Leonard Read explained in the publisher's foreword: "We had not intended to publish novels. But the purpose of our publishing venture is to further the cause of freedom and individualism. So we decided to offer you this novel."

Rand's novella, *Anthem*, shows us a bleak world in which the struggle between the individual and society has been settled in society's favor. This dystopian vision of the future can also be found in examples of speculative fiction such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Simply put, this genre contradicts the traditional 19th-century utopian tradition in which collectivism is posited as something that could work. While a utopian novel portrays the "best of all possible worlds," a future in which all conflict is settled and all live in harmony, a dystopian (or dystopic) novel portrays the "worst of all possible worlds," usually one in which individuals have lost all power of self-determination.

In fact, *Anthem's* world is one in which all individuality has been suppressed to the point where the word *I* has been lost altogether and "alone time" forbidden. "It is a sin to write this," the novel begins. "It is a sin to think words no others think," it continues, "and to put them down upon paper no others are to see." "Our name," the protagonist tells us, "is Equality 7-2521," a name that is written on his copy of the iron identity bracelet everyone wears. The tale of this society after its "Great Rebirth" is told in the simple language of a parable and largely in flashback. The "Unmentionable Times" have passed away, and all live now with the "Great Truth" that "all men are one and that there is no will save the will of all men together." Equality 7-2521 is alone in a dark tunnel because he has escaped the collec-

tivist oppression of his society, but he did so not just to save himself but also to save his great invention, condemned by the stagnant authority of the World Council of Scholars.

An exceptional man in a society that abhors exceptional men, Equality had been condemned to live his life as a street sweeper, a fate he accepted as his just punishment for the sin of pride, the "Transgression of Preference." He had imagined that the Council of Vocations might, if he wished it hard enough in the dark privacy of his own mind while his peers slept, send him to the collective Home of the Scholars when it was time for him to leave the Council of Students. He accepts their judgment with a fervent wish that it will help him work to atone for his sin of pride against his brothers.

Try as he might to avoid it, however, Equality 7-2521 seems destined to live out the same struggle against conformity and oppression that all of Rand's exceptional heroes do. Working one day with the feeble-minded Union 5-3992 and the tall, strong International 4-8818 (his friend, although such a label is forbidden), Equality stumbles upon an artifact from the dark, distant Unmentionable Times. He descends into what turns out to be an old subway entrance, arguing that it cannot be forbidden since the council does not know about it. By accident, he rediscovers that most forbidden of all pleasures, a private place. Predictably, he begins to invent opportunities to sneak away to work privately on all the mysteries he finds there, expanding upon the limited knowledge written in the manuscripts he has stolen. He uses the wiring and "globes of glass" he finds in his tunnel to reinvent the lightbulb. Thinking what an advance the creation of light without burning wax candles would be, Equality determines to confess his crime so that he may offer his invention for the benefit of all.

In the meantime, he has met another who attracts his forbidden attention, a woman named Liberty 5-3000, whom he renames, for himself only, *the Golden One*. They have been communicating privately, since their conversations demonstrate a further Transgression of Preference (selecting appropriate mates is another function of the state, this one administered by the Council of Eugenics).

Despite his best efforts, Equality cannot convince the Council of Scholars that his lightbulb would be anything more than a fearful disruption of the established routines and settled lives of the collective and the Department of Candles, especially. So mired in a nearly medieval stagnation that they cannot allow so much progress, they condemn Equality to death and his invention to destruction. He escapes from the city into the Uncharted Forest to save his invention and await the "certain fate" of being torn asunder by wild animals.

Showing her own courage and initiative, Liberty 5-3000 tracks him through the forest until she catches up with him. Together, as Adam and Eve after their expulsion from Eden, Equality and Liberty find themselves with the world all before them and, in the process of exploring the forest, find a house filled with all the abandoned wonders of our modern age. For Equality and Liberty the first and most obvious wonder of this house, however, is its size. Accustomed to living communally and sleeping in enormous halls, they are stunned by the wonder of a house so small that it can hold so few. Having lost the concept of the nuclear family, they are staggered to discover a bedroom with only one bed in it.

The greatest glory of this house, however, is its library, filled with books wherein the couple rediscovers the word *I*, among other lost wonders. Thereafter, they rename each other *Gaia*, for the ancient Greek earth mother, and *Prometheus*, for the benefactor who stole fire from the gods as a gift for all mankind. Soon, they vow, they will return to the gray collective city to rescue those few among their "brothers," such as International 4-8818, whom they need to re-create a world where the recovery of the ego and individualism will establish a new age of progress for the human race.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *Anthem* to other dystopian novels such as George Orwell's *1984*. After looking up the meaning of *determinism*, in both a philosophical and a literary sense, consider how this concept might explain why *Anthem* ends happily while *1984* does not.

2. Other collective dystopias, such as Orwell's *1984*, show tyrants using advanced technology to enforce their tyranny, while technology in Rand's *Anthem* has all but vanished. How would you account for this difference?
3. On a much smaller scale, *Anthem* traces the same postapocalyptic scenario as does Rand's last novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. In other words, it belongs to the genre of literature in which a new "race of men" emerges as the world's true leaders after its present leaders have made a thorough mess of things. Research this genre and consider how both *Anthem* and *Atlas Shrugged* fit this genre.

***The Fountainhead* (1943)**

Rand began work on *The Fountainhead* in 1935. Interestingly enough, she researched her topic by working, without pay, as an architect's secretary for a year. Rand found an American publisher (Bobs-Merrill) in 1943 and an English publisher (Cassell) in 1947. By August 1945, *The Fountainhead* had reached number 6 on the *New York Times* best-seller list. This novel, centered on the creative-genius-architect Howard Roark, is Rand's true claim to fame; within four decades of its first publication date, *The Fountainhead* had sold 4 million copies. By the end of its first year in print, Rand had already sold the rights to Hollywood for \$50,000, which was a substantial sum of money at the time. She returned to Hollywood with her husband, Frank O'Connor, to write the screenplay that would become a movie starring the box-office stars Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal in 1949.

The Fountainhead focuses on characterization. As such, the novel makes extensive use of foils, or characters whose attributes or circumstances can be fruitfully compared and contrasted to clarify both characters and themes. Several such pairs of foils spring to mind. Howard Roark, for instance, the self-determined genius of modernist architecture, is strongly contrasted with another architect, Peter Keating, whose craven need for approval makes him pander to the mob and the beaux-arts architectural clichés of their time. While Peter Keating's confor-

mity wins him acclaim as a student and a cushy job upon graduation, Roark's rebellion against the cant of his time and trade causes him to be expelled from school and prevents him from finding work as an architect.

"Howard Roark laughed" is our introduction to Rand's protagonist; then, "He stood naked at the edge of a cliff." In contrast, here is our true introduction to Keating: "Peter Keating looked at the streets of New York. The people, he observed, were extremely well dressed." Typically, Roark is alone, happy in his own skin and content with his own thoughts despite having just been expelled from school. Also typically, Keating is outer-directed, overly concerned with appearance, and looking for clues from those around him, for this is where he must acquire his sense of self.

As did Victor Dunaev in Rand's *We the Living*, Peter Keating of *The Fountainhead* abandons the woman he truly loves, the quiet, unassuming, and unremarkable Catherine Halsey, to make a more advantageous marriage, in this case, to the assertive and beautiful Dominique Francon, the boss's neurotically self-destructive daughter. Obviously, Dominique and Katie, as Peter calls her, can be seen as another pair of foils. Simple and sweet, Catherine trusts Peter and is crushed into cynical career obsession by his betrayal. Tracing an opposing trajectory in character development, Dominique begins in cynical defeat, believing that evil and mediocrity will destroy all that is singular and excellent, to have her faith in the human power of creative individualism restored through Howard Roark's victories.

Gail Wynand, another foil for Howard Roark, shares Roark's excellent mind and creative potential. However, Wynand has engineered his own corrupt defeat by using all his talent to pander to the masses through his newspaper the *New York Banner*, famous as "the most vulgar newspaper in the country." Unlike Roark, Wynand is scarred by the poverty of his youth and willing to do whatever it takes to create his own empire and get rich. While Roark is selfish in the sense of caring passionately about his own creative individualism and the products of that talent, he cares little for money.

Ellsworth Toohey, the novel's villain, writes for Wynand's newspaper as its architectural critic; not surprisingly, he champions Keating and vows to destroy Howard Roark. Toohey's brand of elitism, which has been explained as unhealthy, versus Roark's (and Rand's) healthy elitism, makes him, in some critic's eyes, an "apostle of collectivism." While Toohey and Wynand share both the ego and the will to win, when they come into conflict over Roark's work, Toohey speaks for the people in demonizing Roark's designs. Too late, Wynand recognizes a cause worth fighting for but finds that the public, whose tastes he had once believed he could control, abandons him the first time he tries to use his own newspaper for a cause in which he actually believes. Too late, he recognizes that he has betrayed himself; closes down the newspaper; gives Roark his biggest commission yet, vowing never to see him again; and then disappears from the novel.

Dominique Francon can also be seen as one of Roark's foils. While she has the intellectual power to appreciate Roark and his work, she tries, at first, to destroy him before the mob does. Interestingly enough, she "marries her way up" to the romantic ideal of Howard Roark by starting cynically with Peter Keating, labeled a "second-rater," then moving on to Gail Wynand, who betrayed all that he knew was right, and finally, after his great victory, becomes Mrs. Howard Roark. We last see her ascending a construction elevator to join him at the top of the skyscraper commissioned by Wynand.

The aforementioned victory serves as the courtroom-drama climax of the novel. With no work coming his way, Roark is hungry, not for money, but for the sight of his work made manifest. At the same time, his foil Peter Keating, fearful always that his work, while neatly mimicking the fashionable taste of the time, will never be quite good enough, asks Roark for help. Keating has been assigned Cortlandt Homes, a public housing project at Francon's firm where he works (and meets Dominique).

Roark had already been working on the challenging task of designing an aesthetically appealing, but inexpensive public housing project. When Keating begs him for help, Roark agrees to let him use his plan on one proviso—that the project be built exactly

as designed. While Keating agrees to this, he has neither the strength nor the will to prevent the board, another collective, from making many ludicrous and expensive changes to Roark's elegant design. When Roark sees the half-finished product, the betrayal is patent and he vows to take matters into his own hands. Ensuring that no one is hurt, Roark, with Dominique's help, dynamites the project and is naturally brought up on charges.

Roark acts as his own attorney at his trial. During his speech he argues that the rights of the individual to the fruits of his own mind are essential to American democracy and capitalism. A precursor to the later and more extended rhetorical appeal of John Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, Roark's defense, surprisingly, works. When he is acquitted, Dominique Francon's faith in the individual is restored, while Gail Wynand's faith in himself, based on cynical assumptions about the inevitable destruction of greatness, is destroyed. While both Dominique and Gail are proven wrong, Dominique is able to recover from that discovery while Wynand is not; thus they are foils.

Roark's appeal to the jury has been described as an argument for the "liberal ethic based on the principle, handed down from the Enlightenment, for the equal rights of all individuals to be left alone [with its] economic expression [as] laissez-faire capitalism." Here Roark's (and Rand's) advocacy of minimal government and free enterprise can be seen as an expression of the "classical Americanism" of other writers, such as the novelist and critic Isabel Paterson of *The God of the Machine*, published in 1943.

Critical response to *The Fountainhead* was even more polarized than response to Rand's previous novels *We the Living* and *Anthem*. While *We the Living*, for instance, was occasionally dismissed as "good reading; bad pleading," *Anthem* was far less argumentative in its approach and, as more of a parable, less subject to rhetorical or philosophical critique. *The Fountainhead*, on the other hand, struck a nerve with many who viewed collectivism, as practiced by the Soviets, for instance, as a noble cause, albeit one that had been betrayed. Capitalism, on the other hand, was often viewed as a more or less workable system that somehow transformed

the private vice of selfishness into something that benefited society at large. Rand, as *The Fountainhead* made clear, condemned the group-think that touted the public good over all else as intrinsically evil, while she lauded selfishness, as expressed in private enterprise, as intrinsically virtuous. In addition to the unorthodox stance, Rand's stated position on other issues alienated her from both ends of the political spectrum: Her dismissal of religion as mysticism angered social political conservatives; her insistence that individuals must decide between right and wrong on the basis of objective standards alienated liberals who subscribed to relativism. This polarization would only increase as Rand carefully worked out a fully systematic epistemology through her next, and last, novel, *Atlas Shrugged*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. We first meet Howard Roark, as stated previously, alone at the edge of a cliff. Consider the description that follows: "The lake lay below him. A frozen explosion of granite burst in flight to the sky over motionless water. The water seemed immovable, the stone flowing. The stone had the stillness of a brief moment in battle when thrust meets thrust and the currents are held in a pause more dynamic than motion. The stone flowed, wet with sunrays." Why is this an appropriate introduction to Roark as the self-determined architect of the modernist (versus traditional) style?
2. Find a literary definition of the world *lyricism* and consider the previous quote as an example of lyrical writing, as well as Rand's intriguing use of paradox in this description.
3. Many critics read the first sexual encounter between Dominique and Roark as a rape scene. Do you agree? How would you defend Rand's choice on artistic and/or psychological grounds?
4. Find reviews of Isabel Paterson's *The God of the Machine*, published in 1943, and compare its political philosophy to that expressed in Rand's *The Fountainhead*.
5. Tragic heroes are those with noble qualities who suffer and fall, at least in part, through their own *hamartia* (from Greek, meaning "error" and in

the theological tradition "sin" and often discussed as a "tragic flaw"), combined with circumstances over which they have no control. Compare Gail Wynand of *The Fountainhead* to Jay Gatsby of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, in terms of their respective *hamartia* as it affects their failed attempt to achieve the American dream and keep the women they love.

Atlas Shrugged (1957)

After 12 years of writing, Rand finished her 1,160-page magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, in 1957. In all likelihood because of the success of *The Fountainhead*, Rand's novel was published only months after its completion in March 1957. Although Rand considered *Atlas Shrugged* her greatest artistic achievement and a major statement of her evolving epistemology, the intellectuals of her day tended to view the book with a good deal of hostility. Initial reviews tended toward the savage: Some labeled the novel "execrable claptrap" or "grotesque eccentricity." One wit found it "longer than life and twice as preposterous." In fact, the conservative critic Whitaker Chambers, quoted later in this article, stated that one could discern the command on every page, "To a gas chamber—go!" This is far more indicative of the extreme hostility the book evoked than any careful reading of its text. In fact, Galt's speech, the climax of the novel, explicitly prohibits such horrors, stating, "So long as men desire to live together, no man may initiate . . . do you hear me? No man may start—the use of physical force against others." Fair or not, such reviews created initial sales so disappointing that Random House assumed the book would be a commercial failure.

As the title suggests, the novel is based on the premise that Atlas, of Greek myth, finally abandons his task of holding up the entire weight of the world. In this case, Atlas is represented by the world's self-made inventors, financiers, scientists, industrialists, and artists, among others: the creative elite represented by Kira Argounova in *We the Living*, Equality 7-2521 in *Anthem*, and Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. This time, however,

these people are recruited to go on strike by the most intellectually creative and independent of them all, John Galt. Among those who “shrug off” the weight of the world’s moochers by giving up power, position, and wealth for humbler jobs are Francisco d’Anconia, who destroys his own family’s copper mines while pretending to be no more than a worthless, globetrotting playboy; Quentin Daniels, who leaves a promising career as a scientist to become a night watchman; Calvin Atwood, who leaves behind his own Light and Power Company to become a shoemaker; Dr. Hugh Akston, teacher and mentor to Galt, who leaves his position as head of a university’s Philosophy Department to work in a roadside diner in Wyoming; Ragnar Danneskjöld, a philosopher turned pirate, sinking government relief ships; and the woman he finally marries, Kay Ludlow, a beautiful actress who goes on strike by retiring from the movies to protest the rapid decline of the world’s artistic standards. While Galt occupies the apex of the elite pyramid in this novel, he is one of the last characters we meet.

Once again, as in *The Fountainhead*, Rand uses foils to great and pointed effect. Dagny Taggart and James Taggart, for instance, represent two contrasting positions in their family railroad; while James heads his family’s company, he is actually one of the “moochers” of the novel, who takes credit for the achievements of his sister, Dagny, who carries the true burden of responsibility for keeping the trains rolling and accident-free in a rapidly disintegrating society. Hank Rearden and his brother, Philip, on the other hand, represent true and false creativity. Hank, the inventor, lets himself be condemned as heartless because of his dedication to his work, while Philip condemns his older brother’s materialism while living off his money.

While so many of their creative peers are mysteriously disappearing, people like Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden struggle to keep things working. Once Hank has invented his own metal, both stronger and lighter than steel, it becomes inevitable that he and Dagny meet. She needs his product and is the only one in her company brave enough to believe the evidence of her own mind and purchase the new material. When Rearden first sees Dagny, he feels

strong sexual desire. Taught to revile such base feelings, Rearden responds to his own desire for Dagny with self-loathing.

Lillian and Dagny also serve as perfect foils. Lillian pours all her energy into being the well-supported wife of a man she does not love, using his own guilt to “control” him passively. Alternately, Dagny is kinetic and creative, answering Rearden’s desire with her own.

Dagny and Hank spend most of the novel trying to solve the mystery of the vanishing “movers and shakers” while struggling to survive in and support a more and more collectivized America, whose mystifying slogan has become “Who is John Galt?”

While looking for Galt—the “destroyer” who is draining the world of its creative energy—Dagny is also seeking another man, an inventor who created a revolutionary motor she has found abandoned. Ironically, Dagny discovers that John Galt is the inventor of the mysterious machine when she crash-lands her small plane in Galt’s Gulch. A utopia for independent thinkers Galt has established in the Colorado Rockies, Galt’s Gulch is where the strikers now live and thrive, out from under the world’s crushing burden.

The use of foils also helps to propel the plot toward its climactic scenes: At the opposite end of the moral spectrum from Galt’s former philosophy professor and mentor, Dr. Hugh Akston, is Dr. Robert Stadler. Akston and Stadler had been colleagues at Patrick Henry University and competitors for the loyalty of their students Galt and his first two “followers,” Francisco d’Anconia and Ragnar Danneskjöld. Stadler, the world’s greatest physicist, advocates that force is the only practical motivator of human behavior. When he becomes a stooge for the government by supporting the creation of their State Science Institute, Galt leaves his graduate studies in protest. Eventually, Stadler and another scientist, Floyd Ferris, compose two halves of an evil entity. Stadler provides the scientific understanding necessary for Ferris create deadly new weapons for the government. Fittingly, Stadler dies in an explosion his research helped to create. Ferris, who becomes top coordinator of the State Science Institute, creates

modern versions of this genre such as Larry Niven's *Lucifer's Hammer*, Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth but I Must Scream," KURT VONNEGUT's *Cat's Cradle*, or Stephen King's *The Stand*:

- Rand's 1946 introduction to *Anthem* warns that the distant future she wrote of is not all that far away. For instance, she cites the establishment of Councils of Vocations and Councils of Eugenics, as well as a World Council, as evidence that the world was, in 1946, well on its way to actualizing her fictional dystopia. She excoriates those around her, who, she claims, support "plans specifically designed to achieve serfdom, but hide behind the empty assertion that they are lovers of freedom. . . . They expect, when they find themselves in a world of bloody ruins and concentration camps," she continues, "to escape moral responsibility by wailing: 'But I didn't mean *this!*'" "Those who want slavery should have the grace to name it by its proper name," she concludes. Research the era in which Rand wrote this introduction to create a little historical-political context for yourself. Consider, on the basis of this research, to what extent Rand's warning was justified

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- "Ayn Rand." In *Ethics: Ready Reference Series*. Salem, Mass.: Salem Press, 1994.
- Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life*. Directed by Michael Paxton. Performed by Sharon Gless, Michael S. Berliner, Harry Binswanger, and Sylvia Bokor. 1998. DVD. Image, 1999.
- "The Ayn Rand Institute: The Center for the Advancement of Objectivism." Available online. URL: <http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer>. Accessed January 27, 2007.
- "The Ayn Rand Society: A Professional Society Affiliated with the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division." Available online. URL: <http://www.aynrandociety.org/>. Accessed February 14, 2007.
- Berger, Peter L. "Adam Smith Meets Nietzsche." *New York Times Book Review*, 6 July 1986, p. 13.
- Branden, Barbara. *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. New York: Anchor Books, 1987.
- Branden, Nathaniel. *Who Is Ayn Rand? An Analysis of the Novels of Ayn Rand*. New York: Random House, 1962.
- "The Cato Institute." Edited by Andrew Mast. Available online. URL: <http://www.cato.org/special/three-women/rand.html>. Accessed February 14, 2007.
- Chambers, Whittaker. "Big Sister Is Watching You." *National Review*, 20 December 1957, 594–596.
- Gladstein, Mimi Reisel. *The Ayn Rand Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Gordon, Philip. "The Extrojective Hero: A Look at Ayn Rand." *Journal of Popular Culture*, 10, no. 4 (Spring 1977): 701–710. Magill Literature Plus through Ebscohost. Available online. URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost>. Accessed January 2, 2007.
- Heller, Peter B. "Ayn Rand." *Cyclopedia of World Authors*. 4th rev. ed. Salem, Mass.: Salem Press, 2004.
- Hicks, Stephen R. "Ayn Rand." *World Philosophers and Their Works*. Salem, Mass.: Salem Press, 2000.
- The Passion of Ayn Rand*. Directed by Christopher Menaul. Performed by Helen Mirren, Eric Stolz, Julie Delpy, and Peter Fonda. 1999. DVD. Showtime, 2001.
- Rand, Ayn. *America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business*. New York: Nathaniel Branden Institute, 1962.
- . *For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. New York: Random House, 1961.
- . *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. Enlarged ed. Edited by Harry Binswanger and Leonard Peikoff. New York: New American Library, 1990.
- . *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*. Enlarged ed. New York: New American Library, 1975.
- Rand, Ayn, with Nathaniel Branden. *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. New York: New American Library, 1964.
- Rand, Ayn, with Nathaniel Branden, Alan Greenspan, and Robert Hessen. *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. New York: New American Library, 1966.
- "Solo: Sense of Life Objectivists." Edited by Ross Elliot. Available online. URL: <http://www.solopassion.com>. Accessed February 14, 2007.
- Valliant, James. *The Passion of Ayn Rand's Critics*. London: Durbin House. 2005.



THEODORE ROETHKE (1908–1963)

Love begets love. This torment is my joy.

(“The Motion”)

Theodore Roethke, one of the most famous poets of mid-century America, was born in Saginaw, Michigan, on May 25, 1908, to Otto and Helen Roethke. Roethke’s father owned a greenhouse; the family’s business would figure largely in Roethke’s poetic development. The familial ties to flora extended back even further than Otto. Wilhelm Roethke, Otto’s father, had owned a flower shop in Berlin in the 1870s. Otto himself seemed to have been a lover of the outdoors and was known around Saginaw as an avid hunter. Theodore Roethke was a poet of prodigious power and vision, and he is especially known for his emphasis on rhythm and for his focus on the natural world and how human beings can or should seek a connection with it. He grew up in and around the greenhouses in which his father kept the plants on which the family livelihood depended. Roethke’s relationship with the natural world seems generally to have been more comfortable and soothing to him than his relationship with his father, which was complex. Otto Roethke did not seem to be a particularly demonstrative man, and young Theodore seems to have longed for his approval. Roethke’s biographer Allan Seager, citing an essay that Roethke wrote at college, states that Roethke seemed to have thought of his father “as a stern, short-tempered man whose love he doubted” (26).

In 1921, Roethke entered high school, where he occasionally ran track and read voraciously. As

a high school student, he read widely, from Pater to Stevenson, and owned his own copies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. He also wrote short pieces for the high school paper and was a good, if not outstanding student. Soon, however, Roethke’s domestic life began to unravel. In 1922, Otto and Charlie Roethke, Otto’s brother, had a falling out over how the family greenhouse business was being run, and the argument ultimately escalated to a point that, in October of that year, Charlie bought out Otto’s interest in the greenhouse. Charles Roethke, who by all accounts had never been the most emotionally stable individual, committed suicide in February 1923. At about this same time, Otto was diagnosed with cancer, and he died just two months after Charlie, in April 1923. Theodore apparently bore the latter death in silence, but, as one might expect, it had a profound effect on him, as confirmed by the presence of his father in many of his poems, including one titled simply “Otto.”

After high school, Roethke attended college at the University of Michigan from 1925 to 1929. There he came into his own as a scholar, graduating magna cum laude. The family pressured him to attend law school, but Roethke, dissatisfied with that career path, dropped out after only one semester. He decided, in lieu of law school, to attend graduate classes at the University of Michigan and, significantly, at Harvard University, where he

encountered his first true mentor, the poet Robert Hillyer. Because of financial difficulties exacerbated by the Great Depression, Roethke was compelled to leave Harvard and taught for four years (1931–35) at Lafayette College, in Easton, Pennsylvania, where they still hold a biannual Roethke Humanities Festival in his honor. The next few years would play a significant role in Roethke's development as a writer. In fall 1935, Roethke took his second full-time teaching job, at Michigan State College (later Michigan State University) in Lansing. There he formed a circle of friends and colleagues who would encourage and aid him in his development as an artist. At Michigan State College he met Stanley Kunitz, his friend and ardent supporter, and a poet of an already growing reputation in his own right. Most important, however, may be that he met Rolfe Humphries, who was a renowned critic and translator (known for his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*) as well as a poet. Humphries encouraged Roethke's writing and also introduced him to Louise Bogan, the brilliant, though sometimes emotionally unstable, poet.

While these people were to have a profound influence on Roethke, it was during this time that he began having bouts of depression severe enough for him to be hospitalized. These episodes, too, influenced him, and it is reported by more than one biographer that Roethke actually used the time during these periods to explore more deeply his inner self. During the decade of the 1930s Roethke began to garner a reputation as a poet. From 1936 to 1943, he taught at Penn State University, and it was during this time that his reputation as a poet began to flourish. In 1941, his first volume of poems, *Open House*, was published and was favorably reviewed in some of the most prestigious publications of the day, including the *New Yorker* and the *Kenyon Review*. Before the book had even been published, Roethke had had individual poems appear in literary journals such as *Poetry* and the *Sewanee Review*. As a book of poetry, *Open House* contains more than the fruits of Roethke's labors. It is also a record of Roethke's early influences, with clear links evident between Roethke's verse and the work of

contemporary poets like Kunitz and Bogan, but also earlier poets, such as John Donne.

After the success of *Open House*, Roethke became widely recognized as a writer of merit. In 1943, he left Penn State and began teaching at Bennington College in Vermont. Each of Roethke's destinations seems to have provided him with nurturing friends and colleagues. At Bennington, he befriended Leonie Adams and Kenneth Burke, two influential and talented writers. During his time at Bennington he wrote the poems that would compose his second volume, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. This book contains the so-called greenhouse poems, a series of short lyrics that describe and reflect upon the youthful days Roethke spent among the greenhouses of his father's business. The youthful feel of the book may have something to do with the poetic rhythms Roethke employed. According to his biographer Allan Seager, Roethke had borrowed from Seager a copy of the *Rhymes of Mother Goose* and apparently spent a great deal of time reading and memorizing many of the verses. Partly because of Roethke's facility with rhythm and meter, *The Lost Son* garnered a great deal of praise from reviewers. Babette Deutsch, in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, remarked that Roethke's lyrics "have a delicate music, and . . . a tenderness that is quite clean of sentimentality."

Roethke again changed teaching positions in August 1947, when he left Bennington to take an associate professor position at the University of Washington, where he founded one of the most prominent creative writing programs in the country. Conditions were not always wonderful for Roethke, however, despite his literary successes. In fall 1949 he was admitted to Fairfax Hospital and diagnosed with "hyperactivity and disorganized behavior," probably a manic episode. Despite such setbacks, of which there were more than one, Roethke continued writing, and in 1951 *Praise to the Lamb* was published. The book contained longer poems than his previous volumes and is evidence that Roethke never ceased trying to expand his poetic repertoire, even in the face of substantial life changes. In January 1953 he married Beatrice

O'Connell, a former student of his at Bennington, and in February 1954 Helen, his mother, died of a heart attack. Just a few short weeks after her death, Roethke was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his volume *The Waking: Poems 1933–1953*.

Having achieved a greater literary fame than he had had previously, Roethke applied for and won a Fulbright award in 1955. This award allowed him and Beatrice to travel throughout Europe and provided time in which to write. During the Fulbright year, he completed the manuscript for his next collection of poems, titled *Words for the Wind*, which was published in 1957. This volume garnered perhaps the greatest acclaim; for this work, Roethke was awarded the Bollingen Prize, the National Book Award, and the Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize, among others. He was a poet at the height of his power, and he was able to parlay his fame into reading tours in New York and Europe. He therefore taught rather intermittently at the University of Washington, considering his absences because of both illness and funded lecture and reading tours. Nonetheless, he made his mark there, as evidenced by the fact that each year the university continues to hold the Roethke Memorial Reading. He also did a great deal to publicize poetry as a literary art; therefore, his sudden death by heart attack in 1963 was a great loss to the field. His last poems, written in the final year of his life, were published in *The Far Field*, which won the National Book Award in 1964.

As a poet, Roethke left a lasting legacy, a body of work that exemplifies the power and vigor of American mid-century poetry. In particular, the attention he paid to rhythm and sound distinguishes him among his contemporaries, even those like James Wright, who also wrote more formal verse. The reasons his work continues to be popular are his dedication to the craft of poetry, to making poems sound wonderful, and the universal themes of his poetry. The open, honest, and lyrical way he writes of lost childhood, of people he knew, and of the importance of nature continues to fire the imaginations of his readers. Roethke's poems are a lasting record of a sensi-

tive, intelligent individual's reaction to both the world without and the world within.

“The Adamant” (1941)

This poem, from Roethke's first collection, *Open House*, published in 1941, is a meditation on the nature of truth and the strength of an individual's convictions. *Adamant* can have many meanings, most of them associated with hardness or impenetrability. As an adjective, it usually means something similar to “unyielding” or “impenetrable.” An adamant is also a legendary stone, one said to be impenetrable and diamondlike in its hardness. The structure of this poem is important to its theme. Note that in each of the three stanzas, Roethke first mentions something that cannot penetrate or alter the true nature of something else. In the first stanza, he speaks of “the great sledge” (l. 2); in the second, of “the teeth of knitted gears,” (l. 5); in the third of “compression” (l. 9). These are all images of a kind of destructive external pressure being applied to something that does not yield. Because this poem is more abstract than many of Roethke's other poems, it is difficult to understand what the “adamant” of the title might symbolize, but Roethke gives clues at various points. In the first stanza, he plainly says it is “truth,” noting, “Truth is never undone; / its shafts remain” (ll. 3–4). Later in the poem, Roethke also uses the phrases “true substance” (l. 7) and “a center so congealed” (l. 10). This seems to imply that the “truth,” whatever it might be, is impervious to external forces and so is what is able to endure in an often chaotic and unsure world. The “truth” Roethke mentions may also refer to that which resides in the human being, and perhaps more specifically, the artist. One of the difficulties facing a poet in Roethke's time, and indeed, still today, was that many circumstances conspire against living the life of an artist, particularly a poet. It is demanding and rigorous work and offers no pay, unless one is very successful. Perhaps in this poem Roethke is offering each of us solace by telling us that the truth of our convictions, of the way we live

our lives, cannot be altered or diminished by external circumstances.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does living a life of “truth” mean to you? What does it seem to mean to the speaker in the poem?
2. What are some of the forces that might be symbolized by the sledgehammer and other images in the poem? What prevents us from living “truthful” lives?
3. The last two lines of the poem are “The tool can chip no flake; / The core lies sealed” (ll. 11–12). What do you suppose this means? Why did Roethke use the word *sealed*?

“The Light Comes Brighter” (1941)

In this poem, from early in his career, Roethke uses a fairly regular iambic rhythm to meditate on the seasons and the changes they introduce. The poem opens with the speaker taking an early morning winter walk. It is a sharp and cold morning, he tells us, noting that “a walker at the river’s edge may hear / A cannon crack announce an early thaw” (ll. 3–4). Although it is winter, the “sun cuts deep” into a snowbank, reminding the speaker that as harsh as winter may feel, spring and its accompanying warmth are never far away. In fact, the speaker seems optimistic about the approaching spring and the consequent end of winter, especially since most of the images in the poem suggest life and vitality even in the midst of the winter landscape. At various points, the speaker tells us that “the cold roots stir below,” “buckled ice begins to shift,” and “Soon field and wood will wear an April look” (ll. 7, 12–13). The majority of the poem, in fact, seems to be simply a description of a winter landscape as seen through the eyes of someone who anticipates spring. However, as with most of Roethke’s work, there is something deeper at work, particularly in the last stanza, which reads: “And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene, / The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled, / Will turn its private substance into green, / And young

shoots spread upon our inner world” (ll. 17–20). Here, a deeper meaning and resonance are evident. The workings of nature, the speaker seems to be saying, are simultaneously hidden from us (the “hidden scene”) and, perhaps, impossibly beyond our ability to comprehend (the “young shoots” intruding upon our “inner world”). The adjective *inner* implies that our world, the small world of our sensory experience and memory, is dwarfed by the larger, more complex, and hidden machinations of nature. Note, too, Roethke’s implication that even nature itself is possessed of intelligence and will (the “leafy mind” and “private substance”).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the poem aloud to get a sense of how it sounds. What might the rhythm and meter have to do with the poem’s subject matter?
2. Compare the poem to Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night.” In what ways do both poets use rhythm to underscore the main theme of the poem? Do the poems “sound” different when read aloud? If so, why might this be the case?
3. Compare this poem to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.” How do both poets discuss the cycle of the seasons? How do their attitudes differ toward nature?

“Big Wind” (1948)

This poem, from Roethke’s second collection, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, published in 1948, describes the effects of a severe rainstorm on the greenhouses that Roethke’s family owned. The poem, however, is not merely a description of a difficult night in the life of a greenhouse owner but an engaging meditation on both the power of nature and the lengths to which humans will go to claim their part of it. The opening lines of the poem detail the damage the storm has done. The lines “Where were the greenhouses going, / Lunging into the lashing / Wind driving water / So far down the river” (ll. 1–4) indicate that many of the greenhouses have been washed away by the

now-flooded river. The majority of the rest of the poem details the efforts of the speaker and his family to save both the “rose-house” (the greenhouse containing roses) and the roses growing in it. During the middle part of the poem, the speaker figures the greenhouse as if it is a ship being tossed about on the sea, noting that “she rode it out / That old rose-house / She hove into the teeth of it” (ll. 21–23). This image is taken up again when Roethke concludes the poem with the night’s storm abating and morning approaching, telling us the greenhouse “sailed until the calm morning / Carrying her full cargo of roses” (ll. 32–33). While the image of the greenhouse as a cargo ship tossed upon a stormy sea might seem to be just an interesting metaphor, the implications of such an image are far-reaching. The family, whose business is cultivating plants, in effect ordering and controlling nature, is suddenly at the mercy of the storm, another aspect of nature. What Roethke offers us in this poem is a meditation on the folly of human beings’ thinking that they are ultimately in control of their environment, even, perhaps especially, if they are people who spend their lives growing, pruning, and cultivating nature. The poem reminds us that nature, whether benign or angry, always has the final say.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Roethke use images of water in this poem? Is there anything ironic about the way he describes water?
2. Examine the middle of the poem, where the family is working to save the roses. How do they feel about their livelihood? Is it more than a simple vocation?
3. First read Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, focusing on what Dillard says about nature. Next, compare Roethke’s vision of nature with Dillard’s. How do the two describe nature? How do they both reflect their vision of nature in their writing style? With both authors in mind, write a well-developed essay that explores the relationship between art and nature and the role of the poet’s imagination in inducing us to examine/experience nature.

“Cuttings”/“Cuttings (later)” (1948)

This pair of poems is also from *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. They are the opening poems of the volume and are good examples of both the sharp attention Roethke paid to the details of the natural world and the way he reflects upon how that natural world impacts the viewer. The first poem, “Cuttings,” is a fairly straightforward description of floral cuttings, in a vase or some type of container, drooping over the “sugary loam” of earth (l. 1). Note the speaker’s fascination with the plant’s workings, as if the poem is a kind of affirmation of life even though the cuttings “droop” and “stem-fur dries” (ll. 1, 2). Despite these signs of decay, the speaker notes that “the delicate slips keep coaxing up water” (l. 3) and that “the small cells bulge” (l. 4). The plant thus still goes about the business of living even while it is dying. The poem closes with another image of life, the “nub of growth” (l. 5), probably a nascent bud, pushing through to nudge “a sand crumb loose” and poking its “pale tendrilous horn” through a sheath (ll. 7–8).

This poem, if it stood alone, would principally be a short meditation on the energy and growth of nature in spite of impending death and decay. When coupled with “Cuttings (later),” however, it becomes something more. In the second of the paired poems, the speaker takes a more philosophical tone, asking, “What saint strained so much, / Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?” (ll. 3–4). This philosophical stance leads the speaker to reflect on his relationship with the natural world: “I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing, / In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—” (ll. 5–6). Here, it is almost as if he projects himself into the process that the plant undergoes in order to draw water up into itself, implying that there is a link, whether we recognize it or not, between humans and the rest of the natural world they inhabit. At the poem’s conclusion, the speaker further aligns himself with the plant, noting, “When sprouts break out, / Slippery as fish, / I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.” (ll. 9–11) The speaker ultimately both reminds us of the importance of our links with the natural world and demonstrates that that world carries the possibility of renewal. Note that he leans

to “beginnings” rather than focusing on the imminent death of the cuttings, reminding us, perhaps, that nature, even in the midst of death, still contains life and energy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the observer in this poem with the observer in James Wright's poem “Fear Is What Quickens Me.” Wright, who was a student of Roethke's at the University of Washington, also is a keen observer of nature, but his nature poems offer a different perspective than do Roethke's. Compare the speakers in each poem. Where and how do they differ in their attitudes about what they see and feel?
2. What are the effects of the hyphenated words and phrases in the first poem? Why do you suppose Roethke hyphenated those words? How do those words/phrases affect the rhythm of the poem?
3. Identify an experience or two in your own life when you felt a connection or a particularly powerful emotional response to some aspect of the natural world. What feelings did this experience evoke, and how do they compare to what Roethke's attitude seems to be about nature?

“My Papa's Waltz” (1948)

As John J. McKenna demonstrates in his spring 1998 *ANQ* article, “Roethke's Revisions and the Tone of ‘My Papa's Waltz,’” this early poem, despite its brevity and straightforwardness, was deliberately crafted by Roethke to create a sense of ambiguity, resulting in a poem that can be read as both a positive and a negative recollection of a father-son relationship. From one perspective, the father and son, rabble-rousers, enact a familiar, at times comic ritual in which they express affection for each other. From another perspective, a drunken father engages in a form of roughhousing with his son that is abusive. For McKenna, the ambiguity is achieved through word choices that create both a playful and a terrifying tone. Yet, whether one examines the poem for word choices

or considers the radical disjunction that occurs between the graphic violence depicted in the poem and the poem's lilting rhyme scheme, there is no doubt that reading the poem elicits a range of complex emotions we might associate with a grown man's thinking about the relationship, fraught with the complications and physical altercations, he shared with his father. His palm caked with dirt, the father appears as a laborer, a powerful human being toughened by toil whose death now hangs on his son as the son, then a boy, hung unto his father's shirt as they brawled. A poem of contrasts, “My Papa's Waltz” juxtaposes the innocence of a child with the drunken breath of a violent man, leaving us to weigh, as does the speaker, what can be made of this intimate relationship filled with emotions at odds with themselves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the rhyme and meter of “My Papa's Waltz.” Normally, we would associate such a rhyme scheme and such meter with a child's nursery rhyme. What is the effect of the rhyme and rhythm when coupled with the poem's subject matter? How does the speaker seem to feel about his father, and why is he using these particular rhythms and rhymes to tell us his story? Is the poem's rhythm indicative of an actual childhood song that is in three-quarter time such as “Hickory, Dickory, Dock”?
2. Thinking of the details that characterize the father in this poem, write an essay on the father's actions. As you write, consider how Roethke constructs the father through connotative word choices.

“Root Cellar” (1948)

The subject of this poem, as the title suggests, is a root cellar, a type of cellar that is partially or even wholly underground and covered with earth. A root cellar is typically a place where root crops and even other kinds of vegetables are stored. This poem is an homage, a tribute to something the poet thinks is important. At first glance, a dank

and dirty root cellar does not seem particularly inspiring or noteworthy, but part of the poem's point is that we often dismiss as unimportant those things that can help us more deeply understand both ourselves and the world in which we live. For Roethke, one of these is a root cellar, a place where "nothing would sleep" (l. 1). By telling us that nothing would sleep in the cellar, Roethke implies that even in this place that is "dank as a ditch" (l. 1) there is life. And indeed, in the very next lines, the speaker notes that "bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark, / Shoots dangled and drooped" (ll. 2–3). The way that Roethke imbues seemingly inanimate things with life demonstrates how even things that we would not normally think of as alive strive to continue to exist. Note that the bulbs break out of their boxes, as if the boxes were a kind of prison, and "hunt," as if alive, for "chinks" where they can put down roots. For Roethke, the cellar represents a fertile and nurturing place, a place that is "silo-rich" (l. 8) and full of "leaf-mold" and "manure" (l. 9), two substances that aid plants in their growth. The poem's conclusion affirms this, particularly the lines where the speaker notes that "nothing would give up life: / Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath" (ll. 10–11). Such observations serve to underline the poet's main point, that even those elements of our environment that we tend to dismiss or overlook still, in some way, live. Even though we may recognize that dirt plays a vital role in the propagation of plants, Roethke seems to be asking, Do we also recognize that it, too, breathes and perhaps yearns for life in the way that any other organism might?

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem encourages us to pay closer attention to our surroundings. Identify an object that you pass by or see every day and take for granted, then do what Roethke does in this poem. Meditate on that object, describe it, and think about the ways in which it might be more significant than you first thought.
2. Why does the root cellar, such a dark and cramped place, seem to be such an endearing place for the speaker?

"The Lost Son" (1948)

"The Lost Son" is a longer, meditative poem in five sections. Each section is set in a different time and place, and most critics agree that the occasion that triggered this poem was the death of Roethke's father, Otto, in 1923, when Roethke was only 14 years old. The poem is not only a meditation on death but also a reflection on childhood and the ways in which humans make their way through the world despite tragic losses. The first section, "The Flight," is set in a cemetery; the speaker tells us, "At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry," and he was "lulled by the slamming of iron" (ll. 1–2). The speaker is understandably disoriented after the death of a loved one and later in the section is sitting in an "empty house" asking "which is the way I take" (l. 25). These questions trigger a remembrance of earlier childhood and of a time when the speaker ran through fields to a river bog. The second section, "The Pit," is a short section containing a series of questions such as "Where do the roots go?" and "Who put the moss there?" Such questions could be interpreted to indicate that the young speaker is still looking at the forest floor and being reminded of the grave he saw in the first section. The third section, "The Gibber," is very loosely held together and is the section most difficult to read. This befits the title of the section, since *gibber* means "to talk nonsense." It is almost as if the speaker, still suffering from the loss of his father, has lost his way and can no longer make sense of his world. This section alternates fairly concrete imagery and narrative ("What gliding shape / Beckoning through halls, / Stood poised on the stair, / Fell dreamily down?") with somewhat more disjointed images and questions ("My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast out their fire?"). The fourth section, "The Return," finds the speaker returning in time to the greenhouse he haunted as a boy. In this section, the speaker begins to find a peace within, and again, the natural world exhibits redemptive qualities, especially when the speaker notices that "the roses kept breathing in the dark." This feeling of hope or recovery is also present in the last section, titled "It was beginning winter." This section begins with a description of winter, of "blue snow"

on the ground and the “bones of weeds” “swinging in the wind.” Since winter is traditionally the season of death, one might assume that the speaker is still focusing on the loss of this father, but by the end of the section, the speaker mentions “clear air,” “light,” and the word *alive*, signaling that perhaps he has entered the realm of the living again. The final lines of the poem would seem to bear this out. After his journey through death, depression, and loneliness, the speaker concludes the poem with this: “A lively understandable spirit / Once entertained you. / It will come again. / Be still. / Wait.” The speaker, therefore, has gone from a place of great despair and loss to a place of hope. The closing lines indicate that if one can endure difficult times, one cultivates the patience needed to anticipate better days.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the fourth section carefully. How does Roethke use images to propel the reader from despair to hope?
2. What is the speaker's attitude about death in each section? How does Roethke indicate the speaker's changing attitude?
3. Make a list of all of the references to animals in the poem. Why would Roethke use so many images of animals?

“Weed Puller” (1948)

This poem, another one from *The Lost Son*, is told from the point of view of a boy (probably Roethke as a child) who is weeding “under the concrete benches,” which are probably in a formal garden. The poem essentially narrates an individual's struggle against the seemingly unstoppable forces of nature. The young boy in the poem sees the weeds against which he pits himself as somehow threatening. The monkey tails are “lewd,” the “fern shapes” are “tough,” and all of the weeds are evidence of a kind of “perverse life.” The language, while it is highly charged, is understandable in the context of the gardener's unending battle against the elements. Cultivated gardens represent the

human propensity to impose order upon nature, and it is therefore understandable, perhaps even expected, that any gardener, even a boy, would find weeds a nuisance. Once again, however, the speaker's perceptions about nature expand and deepen the more he spends in the natural realm. In the second half of the poem, the speaker makes a clear distinction between the weeds he is trying to eliminate and the more aesthetically pleasing parts of the garden. He mentions the “indignity” of having to pull weeds while “Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses” bloom above him, but he goes even further at the close of the poem. After contemplating the beauty of the blooming flowers, the speaker comments on the indignity of his job, telling us that he is “Crawling on all fours, / Alive, in a slippery grave.” The arresting final image of a grave is particularly interesting, especially after having read poems such as “Root Cellar,” where Roethke appears to be making an argument about how there is life even in dank, dark places. In this poem, however, that feeling is reversed and the speaker complains of feeling buried alive. This poem contains a darker image of nature, perhaps, but also one with which Roethke would have been familiar. In other poems, he has explored how nature symbolizes the yin and yang of life and death, and the fact that he ends this particular poem with the image of a grave might, in Roethke's case, symbolize the complex relationship between life and death rather than simply the cessation of all life. The weeds, after all, keep returning, no matter how many times they are pulled.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the middle of the poem, the speaker calls the weeds “perverse life.” What does this term imply?
2. Does the speaker feel that what he is doing has any value? Why or why not?

“The Waking” (1953)

This poem, one of Roethke's greatest, deals with the conflict between thinking and feeling, the

way we abstract the world in an effort to make sense out of it versus the way we respond to the world as it actually presents itself. Thus, the poem is filled with the sort of paradoxes our reasoning minds yearn to resolve but continue to find irresolvable: the paradox of waking to sleep, living to die, shaking to keep steady, or falling away to stay near. Such conflicts occur throughout human history and, at least for the speaker of this poem, are interconnected with our fascination with reason, the Enlightenment principle for understanding the world and making it a better place to inhabit. While we use reason to sort out our lives, to make sense of them and find meaning and purpose, we also encounter many things that lie beyond reason's hold. Literally, we and the speaker of the poem desire to understand but ultimately confront things outside our mind's ability to comprehend. In this sense, the poem is a deeply metaphysical poem concerned with how we know things, how we come to understand things, and how we may be part of something greater than we can think or articulate.

The poem is a variation of a *villanelle*, a strict form in which lines or phrases are repeated at the end of stanzas as a kind of refrain. The poem contrasts waking and sleeping, metaphors for not only the pattern we follow day to day, but also the pattern of our lives. As in the opening words of the requiem, the mass for the dead, "in the midst of life we are in death": Our lives are transient; no matter how hard we seek to create a better world, to reason out the purpose of our lives, and to sustain human life, we die. To see this process as "waking" is to entertain paradox, which for the speaker of the poem means confronting death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Waking" and "Four for John Davies" are both famous Roethke poems in the form of villanelles, six-stanza poems built on two rhymes, with two lines repeated alternately as the final lines of each of the first five stanzas and used together in the final stanza, which has four lines. First, mark the repeated lines in both poems. After doing so, consider why Roethke chose to highlight these sets of lines in the two poems. Other than their form, do the poems share any thematic concerns? With these questions in mind, write a well-developed essay that compares the two villanelles, seeking to explain why Roethke may have chosen identical forms for two different poems.
2. Read Roethke's "In Evening Air," another poem in which the poet speaks of the desire to wake. After considering how Roethke describes waking in both "In Evening Air" and "The Waking," write a well-developed essay that contrasts the two and is focused on the image of waking.

"Elegy" (1958)

Roethke wrote this poem later in his career; it appears in *The Far Field*, a posthumous volume published in 1964 that was awarded the National Book Award for that year. On the whole, *The Far Field* is more deeply meditative than some of Roethke's other collections, and the subject matter, along with the poet's voice, bears this out. This poem, for instance, is indeed an elegy, a type of poem written to commemorate the death of a person, usually but not always, someone the poet knew personally. Unlike many elegies, however, this one does not idealize the dead person, the speaker's aunt Tilly, but rather describes her in plain, simple language that is often anything but flattering. The poem opens, for example, by telling us that Aunt Tilly's face was like "a rain beaten stone on the day she rolled off / With the dark hearse" (ll. 1–2). Note, too, the line break and the way it seems to accentuate the casual nature of the death. If we stop reading at line 1 it seems as if Aunt Tilly simply rolled out of this life nonchalantly. Despite this unflinching, almost casual language, however, Aunt Tilly is recalled to the speaker's mind with great affection, such as when he remembers how she "sat with the dead . . . fed and tended the infirm" and "faced up to the worst" (ll. 8–9, 11). For all of the reminiscences about his aunt, however, the speaker does not avoid the difficult facts of her death, telling us that "she died

in agony, / Her tongue, at the last, thick, black as an ox's" (ll. 16–17). This unflinching portrait of a loved one's death may be shocking to us, but the speaker clearly wants us to know the truth about both Aunt Tilly's life and her death. It is in this way that he has chosen to honor her. The affectionate portrait continues in the poem's conclusion, where the speaker calls his aunt the "terror of cops, bill collectors and betrayers of the poor" (l. 18) and pictures her "in some celestial supermarket, / Moving serenely among the leeks and cabbages" (ll. 19–20). The poem thus presents a complex portrait of a beloved member of the speaker's family, a portrait that captures the grace and generosity of Aunt Tilly as well as the almost casual facts of her death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Reflect upon your own experiences with death. Have you lost someone close to you? If so, how did your feelings compare to the speaker's feelings in "Elegy"? What was different/similar about the way you felt?
2. Why does Roethke end the poem with Aunt Tilly's staring down the butcher? What is he trying to tell us about her personality? What is Aunt Tilly's personality? Describe it using evidence from the poem.
3. Why do we tend to idealize someone when he or she dies? What is Roethke trying to tell us with the way he deliberately avoids idealizing Aunt Tilly?
4. Compare Roethke's poem with Thomas Gunn's "The Beautician," from his 1992 book entitled *The Man with Night Sweats*. The book includes many poems set in the context of AIDS-plagued San Francisco in the 1980s. Gunn was born in Gravesend, Kent, England, in 1929 and lived most of his adult life in San Francisco, where he died in his home in 2004. With both poets' lives in mind, how do these two poems comment on the nature of loss? What does each have to say about memory and idealization of those who have died? How do both poems complement and diverge from each other?

"Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" (1958)

This is another poem from *The Lost Son and Other Poems*; it concerns three elderly women who used to work at the Roethke greenhouse. Like "Elegy," this poem is a fond remembrance of people who meant a great deal to the speaker, but it is also a celebration of work. These "three ancient ladies" (l. 1) were responsible for tying drooping plants upright and generally for the well-being of "carnations" and "red chrysanthemums" (ll. 8, 9), among other plants. Roethke remembers them as active and vital to the operations of the greenhouse despite their age; verbs and adjectives he uses to describe their actions are *sprinkled*, *shook*, *flew*, and *twinkling*, among others. Roethke's choice of these active words demonstrates the life inherent even in the aged women whose responsibility it is to keep "creation at ease." The poem, though, goes even further: In its latter half, the three "fraus" are presented to us as not merely energetic, conscientious employees but as almost supernatural guardians of a world perhaps even beyond the greenhouse. The speaker notes that the women "flew along rows" "like witches" (l. 19) and that they "sewed up the air with a stem" (l. 22) and even "trellised the sun; they plotted for more than themselves" (l. 25). These women are thus not merely women but almost sacred guardians of nature. This idea is borne out in the fact that they can sew up the air and trellis the Sun, two abilities that are traditionally considered to be beyond human control. By presenting them to us as personages who have almost supernatural abilities, Roethke sets up the reader for the final moving image, for these women, powerful and perhaps supernatural as they are, still inhabit a place in the speaker's memory and thus retain their power even though they are deceased. The speaker in fact claims that when he is "alone and cold in [his] bed" (l. 30) they "hover over [him]" (l. 31), as if they are indeed spirits. The poem concludes as the speaker tells us that "their snuff-laden breath [blows] lightly over me in my first sleep" (l. 35). The speaker's remembrance of these women, therefore, is a testament to the

enduring nature of the women and hence their work. The speaker recalls not only the physical work they did in and around the greenhouse but the women themselves, thus linking the importance of physical labor, especially labor spent in cultivating plants, with the enduring nature of both memory and the human spirit.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Determine the speaker's view of labor by reading the poem carefully, then compare it to your own. What argument does the poem make about the value of work, and how does your own view of work compare with the speaker's?
2. Why, if this is a fond remembrance of the speaker, does he describe the fraus as "witches" and "leathery crones"? What are the different connotations of the word *crone*?
3. What role does memory play in the poem? Compare the speaker's memories with a fond memory of your own. What function does memory play in our lives?

"The Far Field" (1964)

This poem is another extended meditation, written in four separate sections, and is the title poem of the last and posthumously published collection of poems by Roethke. It is the story of a long and complex life's journey, and it shows a gifted poet at the height of his powers. We are told that the poem is about journeys in the first line: "I dream of journeys repeatedly" (l. 1). Just what those journeys are, we are left to interpret, but the concluding lines of the first section probably refer to the progression from old age to death since we are provided with an image of a stalled car "churning in a snowdrift / Until the headlights darken" (ll. 11–12). The second section of the poem is set in the speaker's youth, and the majority of images in this section are from the fields the speaker haunted as a boy. He speaks of the "nesting place of the field mouse" and of "the shrunken face of a dead rat." This section is not, however, a mere litany of images. We are given important information about the

early part of the speaker's life journey, particularly when he claims that it was by closely observing the natural world that "one learned of the eternal" and further that he "learned not to fear infinity." The transformations that he observed in the field, the life and also the death, taught him that the process of living was inevitably bound up with the process of dying. In the third section, the speaker speaks of growing older, noting that he feels "a weightless change, a moving forward" as if he is recognizing the passage of time. The chief metaphor in this section is a river, which symbolizes the inevitable passing of time. At the end of this section, Roethke again returns to the idea of not fearing death. The speaker at one point says, "I am renewed by death" and takes comfort in the fact that what he loves "is near at hand/Always, in earth and air." The fourth and final section extends and complicates the river/water metaphor. The speaker speaks of the sea as perhaps the final destination, noting, "The lost self changes, / Turning toward the sea," and there is an impression that the speaker is in the very last stages of his life and is thinking about what lies beyond. This is supported by the poem's conclusion, when the speaker tells us, "All finite things reveal infinitude" and when he ends with another image of water: "Silence of water above a sunken tree: / The pure serene of memory in one man,— / A ripple widening from a single stone / Winding around the waters of the world." Roethke's use of the image of a stone being thrown into water and the ripples that emanate from it symbolizes both a single human life and that life's connectedness to all that it contacts. It is Roethke's final statement on the importance of recognizing our place within the fabric of existence.

For Discussion or Writing

1. There are many images of water in this poem, particularly in its latter half. Make a list of all of the different things that water can symbolize. Which ones do you think were utmost in Roethke's mind when he was writing this poem and why?
2. Reflect upon your own life's journey. What do you feel about your life so far, and what do you

- Kalaidjian, Walter B. *Understanding Theodore Roethke*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.
- La Belle, Jenijoy. *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1976.
- . “Martyr to a Motion Not His Own: Theodore Roethke’s Love Poems.” *Ball State University Forum* 16, no. 2 (1975): 71–75.
- Lee, Charlotte I. “Roethke Writes about Women.” *Literature in Performance: A Journal of Literary and Performing Art* 1, no. 1 (1980): 23–32.
- Lewandowska, M. L. “The Words of Their Roaring: Roethke’s Use of the Psalms of David.” In *The David Myth in Western Literature*, edited by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik, 156–167. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1980.
- McClatchy, J. D. “Sweating Light from a Stone: Identifying Theodore Roethke.” *Modern Poetry Studies* 3 (1972): 1–24.
- McKenna, John J. “Roethke’s Revisions and the Tone of ‘My Papa’s Waltz.’” *ANQ* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 34–38.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. “The Background of Theodore Roethke’s ‘Elegy for Jane,’” *Resources for American Literary Study* 15, no. 2 (Autumn 1985): 138–144.
- O’Sullivan, Michael. “‘Bare Life’ and the Garden Politics of Roethke and Heaney.” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 38, no. 4 (December 2005): 17–34.
- Parini, Jay. “Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic.” *Texas Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1978): 99–114.
- Ramsey, Jarold. “Roethke in the Greenhouse.” *Western Humanities Review* 26 (1972): 35–47.
- Rivinus, Timothy. “Waltzing with Papa, Dancing with the Bears: Illness, Alcoholism and Creative Rebirth in Theodore Roethke’s Poetry.” In *Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics*, edited by Sue Vice, Matthew Campbell, and Tim Armstrong, 40–57. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academy, 1994.
- Seager, Allan. *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Smith, R. T. “Critical Introduction to the Poetry of Theodore Roethke (1909–1963).” *Green River Review* 14, no. 2 (1983): 11–16.
- Spanier, Sandra Whipple. “The Unity of the Greenhouse Sequence: Roethke’s Portrait of the Artist.” *Concerning Poetry* 12, no. 1 (1979): 53–60.
- Stout, Janis P. “Theodore Roethke and the Journey of the Solitary Self.” *Interpretations* 16 (1985): 86–93.
- Sullivan, Rosemary. *Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976.
- “Theodore Roethke.” *Modern American Poetry*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/roethke/roethke.htm. Accessed November 26, 2006.
- Trudayaraj, A. Noel Joseph. “Theodore Roethke’s ‘Elegy for Jane’: An Analysis.” *Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages Bulletin* 17, no. 1 (1981): 25–33.

Gary Ettari



PHILIP ROTH (1933–)

And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of other people . . . ? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again.

(*American Pastoral* 35)

Philip Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, on March 19, 1933. The second of Bess and Herman Roth's two sons, Roth was born into an ethnic interwar neighborhood. His immigrant parents raised Philip and his brother in a predominantly Jewish, lower-middle-class Newark neighborhood called Weequahic. Herman Roth, like the protagonist's father in Roth's well-known novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), was a traveling insurance salesman, who attempted to sell umbrella policies to poor families during the darkest days of the depression. In his nonfiction work *Patrimony* (1991), Roth relates how stressful this job was for his father and details the effects it had on his own childhood. In particular, the failure of his father's career to get past the anti-Semitic gatekeepers of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) establishment that ran the insurance company made a deep impression on young Roth. Bess, a homemaker, was her youngest son's greatest fan and, Roth has insisted, does not resemble any of the Jewish maternal figures he has featured in a number of his works.

The Newark of Roth's childhood, Weequahic in particular, is immortalized in countless Roth novels. Newark is to Roth's oeuvre what the fictional Yoknapatawpha County was to that of WILLIAM FAULKNER, a combined muse and amanuensis through which the author could weave his startling insights into American culture. In works from his

controversial *Portnoy's Complaint to American Pastoral* (1997), the first novel in his so-called American trilogy, Roth portrays the Newark of his youth in painstaking detail. Often seen through a veil of nostalgia, the New Jersey of Roth's youth is portrayed with nuance and intricacy. At times, he represents Newark as an American utopia, far from the racial and economic ills that would swallow the city during the 1960s and 1970s. At other moments in Roth's work, such as *The Plot against America* (2004), Newark becomes the subject of a prolonged meditation on what he views as the decline of the American city during the 20th century.

Like many of the upwardly mobile characters in Roth's works, especially in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), the members of the community he grew up in were caught between their desire to retain a separate, distinct culture and the socioeconomic pressure to assimilate into the secular world. The conflicts that arise between these tendencies—the preservation of Jewish cultural identity and the seductive pull of a homogenizing America—are central to Roth's work.

In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Roth emphasizes how this widespread Jewish-American dilemma impacts its artists and writers, who often feel an excessive pressure to act as representatives of their people. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's frequent literary alter ego, makes his first appearance in this work. As Roth himself had, Zuckerman has his

first taste of commercial and critical success undermined by the rabid criticism he receives from members of the Jewish community when he publishes material that fails to cast the most flattering light on Jews. A cosmopolitan sophisticate in New York City, Zuckerman receives letters from his parents begging him to refrain from depicting the darker depths of Jewish life. *The Human Stain* (2000), too, contrasts “the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum* . . . [with] the raw I with all its agility” (108). Additionally, Roth is deeply invested in exploring what it means to be an American in the 20th century. One of his most recent novels, *The Plot against America* (2004), chronicles the childhood experiences of a fictional “Philip Roth” who is frequently caught between his family’s zeal for America, with its espousal of democracy, and the latent anti-Semitism he encounters. Roth has been exploring such themes since a very young age.

After graduating from high school, the precocious Roth moved to New Brunswick to study at Rutgers, then on to Bucknell University in rural Pennsylvania. Receiving his B.A. there, he then moved to Chicago to pursue graduate studies in English literature. There Roth obtained his first teaching position and befriended his fellow Jewish-American novelist and mentor, SAUL BELLOW; Roth also met his first wife, a blond midwesterner named Mary Ann Martinson. Roth’s marriage to Martinson—a perfect example of the unattainable ideal he celebrated and stereotyped throughout his career—was fraught with trouble, leading to their separation in 1963. Martinson later died in a car crash in 1968, the year before *Portnoy’s Complaint* was published. As he later admitted in his experimental memoir, *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography* (1988), Roth based the self-destructive female protagonist of his third novel, *When She Was Good* (1967), on his former wife—one of his few novels that do not take place in Newark. Other female characters inspired by Martinson would find subsequent form in many of Roth’s novels, including Maureen Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man* (1974), the Polish-American oncology nurse Wanda Jane

“Jinx” Possesski of *Operation Shylock* (1993), and Faunia Farley in *The Human Stain*.

Roth joined the U.S. Army in 1955 but received an early discharge because of an injury sustained during training. Roth devoted much of his time while enlisted to writing. Many of the stories in his first published work, *Goodbye, Columbus*, were written during this period. Composed of a number of short stories and a novella of the same name, *Goodbye, Columbus* won the National Book Award in 1960, surprising many literary tastemakers, who argued that the previously unpublished 28-year-old had only won the coveted award because no established contemporary writer had published during 1959. Other critics saw Roth’s rapid rise in literary circles as a sign of things to come. His subsequent success bore out these predictions.

Goodbye, Columbus contains many of the themes that would recur in Roth’s subsequent work, from Jewish-American assimilation to gender politics and sexual license in postwar America. The two works that followed, *Letting Go* (1962) and *When She Was Good*, were less successful and deviated from their predecessor in substituting a psychological realism and high seriousness for the rollicking Jewish angst of his first work. This new style was heavily indebted to the American author Henry James, whom Roth had studied in college and graduate school and continued to admire throughout his career. After these ill-received works, Roth published the immensely popular and controversial *Portnoy’s Complaint* in 1969. A fictional confession, the novel follows the life of Alexander Portnoy, who pursues sexual freedom and adventure, yet who is incessantly undermined by the ethical hand wringing caused by his Jewish upbringing. Roth’s novel became an instant classic, ushering in a period of great critical success for the young author.

Although Roth received widespread critical accolades and commercial success with this groundbreaking glimpse into the psyche of a Jewish neurotic, his skills continued to develop. During the 1970s and 1980s Roth produced a number of notable works, such as the remarkable *The Ghost Writer*, which introduced his alter ego, the writer Nathan

Zuckerman. In this novel, Roth explores his Jewish identity with newfound satirical zeal. Zuckerman's mentor, E. I. Lonoff, is a thinly veiled caricature of fellow Jewish-American writer BERNARD MALAMUD, and Zuckerman's love interest is the Holocaust victim Anne Frank. In 1986 Roth wrote one of his most experimental works, *The Counterlife*. In this novel Roth probes the boundaries between fact and fiction in writing and sends Zuckerman to Israel to make sense of long-standing conflicts between Israeli and diasporic Jews.

During this time Roth became increasingly preoccupied with Eastern and Central Europe—then still under the oppressive sway of Soviet-style communism—and the need for American writers to enter into dialogue with their brethren behind the iron curtain. To this end Roth inaugurated the Writers from the Other Europe series in 1974. Published by Penguin Books, this series gave noted writers such as Tadeusz Borowski, Milan Kundera, Bruno Schulz, and Ivan Klima a chance to reach a wider audience in America. Roth remained editor of this series until 1989.

Roth's work with the Writers from the Other Europe series is only one example of his engagement with political issues throughout his career. Other examples include his 1970 novel *Our Gang*, which lampooned Richard Nixon-era politics by imagining the key players in the Watergate scandal as members of a failing baseball team. *The Human Stain* dealt with a more recent national debacle, President Bill Clinton's alleged affair with a White House intern, Monica Lewinski, and the frenzy to impeach him. Roth's efforts in the Other Europe series are also indicative of his long-standing preoccupation with investigating the ever-changing role of writers in the 20th century. Prior to the project Roth had long been known for his collegial relationship with other writers and his interest in discussing craft with his favorite fellow artists. Roth collected the myriad interviews he had conducted with writers over the years into a single volume, entitled *Shoptalk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (2001). After Bellow's death, excerpts from Roth's illuminating *Shoptalk* interviews with the writer were published in the *New Yorker* as a fit-

ting postscript to the literary giant's life. The Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld, also profiled in *Shoptalk*, appears in Roth's *Operation Shylock*. *Operation Shylock* features a fictionalized version of Appelfeld, one of the American Jewish writer's great friends and the catalyst for his burgeoning interest in the meaning of the Jewish diaspora.

As in *Operation Shylock*, Roth's work has often been irreverent. In *The Breast* (1972), Roth plays upon Franz Kafka's famous novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915), by telling the story of David Kepesh, who wakes up one day to find himself transformed not into a bug but into a breast, the erotic object that has dominated his life up until that point. Kepesh appears in other humorous works by Roth, such as *The Professor of Desire* (1977), and somber ones such as *The Dying Animal* (2001), a meditation on mortality, sexuality, and the human body. Roth's interest in playing with form has elicited comparisons of his work with that of the equally prolific American writer JOHN UPDIKE. Both are preoccupied with national and personal history, as well as the capacity of literary realism to represent the lives of Americans. The flights of fancy that characterize a number of Roth's work during the 1980s and early 1990s never eclipsed his commitment to literary realism. Even Roth's most experimental works, such as 1986's *The Counterlife* or 1993's *Operation Shylock*, feature finely wrought characters facing realistic situations that foreground the perils of their complicated ethnic and national histories.

Critics have often questioned the autobiographical component of Roth's fiction. Although his disastrous first marriage had led Roth to vow that he would never wed again, he and the British stage and screen actress Claire Bloom were married in 1990 (after many years of dating). After their relationship ended acrimoniously, Bloom published a memoir, *Leaving a Doll's House* (1996), that detailed her problems with Roth. When Roth wrote *I Married a Communist* (1998), the second and least well-received volume in his American trilogy, many critics noted the similarity between Bloom and the hysterical actress figure in the novel, viewing her as a thinly veiled representation of his

former wife. Further, Roth's adoption of hyperarticulate, lascivious Jewish men to narrate his novels has led many to question whether the author is writing memoir or fiction. He has disavowed such an intimate link between his fiction and life during countless interviews and in his 1988 memoir, *The Facts*. In this work Roth further complicates the nature of his fiction by writing a straight autobiography that is interspersed by comments from his fictional alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, who challenges the veracity of what is being written. Roth's narrative strategy undermines the conventions of the memoir, as Roth so often does in other novels such as *The Counterlife*.

The controversial *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) has aroused wildly mixed reactions among critics. Some, such as Harold Bloom, call it Roth's masterpiece. The novel features Mickey Sabbath, "The Evangelist of Fornication," a 64-year-old arthritic puppeteer and academic, an aging version of Alex Portnoy. Sabbath obsesses about sex and death, mourns the loss of his mistress, and feels an "uncontrollable tenderness for his own shit-filled life," which has taken a downward turn since a phone-sex tape scandal during which he was forced to resign from a teaching position. Yet Sabbath, with his "laughable hunger for more," cries out for more life: "More defeat! More disappointment! More deceit! More loneliness! More arthritis. . . . More disastrous entanglement in everything." Throughout the work Roth weaves literary allusions to a range of works by literary greats as Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, William Shakespeare, and William Butler Yeats, creating a tour de force for which Roth received his second National Book Award (the first was for *Goodbye, Columbus*).

Roth has twice been honored with the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Roth also received the 1997 Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *American Pastoral* and the National Medal of Arts at the White House the following year. In 2001 he received the Gold Medal in fiction, the American Academy of Arts and Letters' highest award, for his entire body of work. Despite his varied, numerous achievements, Roth's unwavering narrative voice has remained consistent throughout

his illustrious career: It jumps off the page or, as young Nathan Zuckerman puts it, "comes from just behind the knees." Comical, poignant, muscular, biting, and brilliant, Roth's work provides his readers with an unparalleled portrait of postwar America.

***Goodbye, Columbus* (1959)**

Published when he was just 28, *Goodbye, Columbus* marked the beginning of Roth's literary career. Composed of a similarly titled novella and five thematically linked short stories, the collection touched a nerve in postwar America, particularly among Jewish Americans who were facing many of the difficulties experienced by the characters in Roth's work. The novella itself was a sensation, sparking a series of imitators and a cinematic adaptation starring the Jewish heartthrob Richard Benjamin (1969).

As does *Marjorie Morningstar*, Herman Wouk's 1955 best-selling look at the life of the Jewish everywoman Marjorie Morgenstern, *Goodbye, Columbus* contains the first of many hyperarticulate male protagonists/narrators. Although Neil Klugman is a college graduate, he remains a lower-middle-class Jewish boy, toiling in the Newark library and staying with his aunt Gladys and uncle Max in a working-class neighborhood. When Klugman meets the Jewish beauty Brenda Potimkin, he is carried into a world of wealth and privilege far from his accustomed landscape. The Potimkin clan lives of leisure and conspicuous consumption in Short Hills, a wealthy area far removed from the Newark Neil calls home. The Potimkins tan by the pool and engage in multihour tennis matches. Brenda's brother, instead of attending a local college, travels to Ohio for university, successfully mixing with the goyim in a way Neil could never imagine.

Brenda's family challenges Neil's class expectations and sets the scene for a typically acerbic Roth satire on the excesses of the nouveau riche. While Brenda's father, Ben, has the same working-class background as Neil, he takes great pains to separate his children from the world of their immigrant

forebears—an increasingly common scenario in middle-class Jewish-American life, according to Roth. While Neil experiences alienation due to the Potimkins' wealth, their lifestyle also collides with his notions of Jewishness: The upwardly mobile Potimkin tribe is engaged in sloughing off not only their lower-class past but their ethnic and racial identities.

If Roth's honest depiction of the complexities of assimilation for American Jews drew readers to *Goodbye, Columbus*, it was his unusually frank discussion of Brenda and Neil's lustful sexuality that kept them reading. Prefiguring his more ribald literary creations, particularly *Portnoy's Complaint*, *My Life as a Man*, and *The Professor of Desire*, *Goodbye, Columbus* witnessed the beginnings of Roth's interest in exposing the subterranean excesses of sexuality in postwar America.

Goodbye, Columbus, which won the coveted National Book Award in 1960, introduced many of the themes that were to preoccupy both Roth and his audience throughout his career. It also heralded the entrance of a new voice on the literary scene—one that would produce an unprecedented number of books chronicling both the American and the Jewish-American experience.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *Goodbye, Columbus* is filled with issues surrounding class in postwar America. How does Roth use his unique descriptive gifts to render class? In what way do objects and consumption play a role in the way class is depicted in *Goodbye, Columbus*? How does Roth's novella respond to its particular cultural moment—an era of unrivaled economic success and rising birth rate?
2. *Marjorie Morningstar*, a mass-market best seller published in 1955, had distinctly fewer literary ambitions than did Roth's 1959 collection. Nonetheless, there are striking similarities between Herman Wouk's narrative about upper-middle-class American Jewry and Roth's biting *Goodbye, Columbus*. How do these works contribute to our understanding of assimilation in the American Jewish community after World War II? How do *Marjorie Morningstar* and *Goodbye, Columbus* portray Jewish femininity, and how do they inscribe their critiques of Jewish upward mobility and economic consumption onto Jewish women?
3. *Goodbye, Columbus* was Roth's first published book. Although it is less formally innovative than some of his later works, it shares a number of themes with them. Most notably, in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth is concerned with what we might call the rhetoric of Jewish "chosenness." Roth came under fire for the way in which he portrayed both the cronyism of the Potimkins and that of the Jewish soldier Grossbart in "Defender of the Faith," one of the other pieces in the collection. How does Roth begin a critique of what he will later call (in his novel *The Human Stain*) the "coercive 'we'" of ethnic identity in his first published book?
4. At work in the library, the protagonist, Neil Klugman, meets a young African-American child who wants help finding reproductions of the artist Paul Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes. When Neil meets this youth, he is mired in worries about his Jewishness and his relationship to his working-class roots. Why does this child appear when he does? How do the Tahitian landscapes the child is seeking function as a portal to an authentic racial identity for him, and how does this pursuit of authentic identity relate to Klugman's own search for meaning in *Goodbye, Columbus*?

"Defender of the Faith" (1959)

One of the most controversial short stories collected in *Goodbye, Columbus*, "Defender of the Faith" relates the tale of Sergeant Nathan Marx, who has just returned from World War II, in which he has been "fortunate enough to develop an infantryman's heart, which, like his feet, at first aches and swells but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing." Despite his newly benumbed state, Marx soon finds himself annoyed by a series of incidents involving the soldiers whom he has been appointed

to lead. The strident Jewish private Sheldon Grossbart introduces himself to Marx and begins asking questions intending to ferret out whether the new sergeant is Jewish, like Grossbart and his fellow privates, Fishbein and Halpern. After agreeing to help Grossbart and his friends attend Jewish services on Friday night, Marx increasingly finds himself required to grant special privileges to the men because of their shared Jewish heritage. He is often called upon to act as a translator to the platoon leader, Captain Barrett, who marvels at the demands of the Jewish soldiers.

Despite resenting the role of mediator and spokesperson placed upon him, Roth suggests that Marx often feels powerless to refuse them. Marx has witnessed the destruction of once-great European cities and people. Without any way of making sense of the devastation that he has seen and the decimation of European Jewry, he turns to an atavistic sense of his Jewishness for comfort. He is moved by the way Grossbart and his friends “touched a deep memory. . . . It was a pleasant memory for a young man so far from peace and home, and it brought so many recollections with it.”

Gradually, however, Marx begins to doubt whether his Jewish soldiers possess any authentic Jewish feeling or are merely trying to gain favors from their Jewish superior. After finding out that Grossbart has managed—through his incessant cronyism and expectation of personal favors—to exempt himself from being sent to the Pacific along with the rest of his squad, Marx decides to exact revenge. Roth’s story was poorly received by many members of the Jewish community, who saw his critique of Jewish nepotism and tribal unity as an embarrassment and an incident of Jewish self-hatred, a frequent critique of Roth in future years.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although it is not explicitly discussed in “Defender of the Faith,” the Holocaust pervades the story. Research the effects of the Holocaust on American Jewry. How is the relationship between Marx and Grossbart informed by this catastrophe?
2. In “Writing about Jews,” Philip Roth takes exception to Jewish critics of his work who emphasize the need not to shame the Jewish people in front of “the goyim.” Read “Writing about Jews,” published in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975). How does it reiterate or abandon the themes introduced in “Defender of the Faith”?
3. Why is Roth’s short story called “Defender of the Faith”? Is anyone in the story actually “defending” the faith? How does it compare to other stories in Roth’s volume, particularly “Eli, the Fanatic”?
4. How does Marx’s experience of war affect his response to Grossbart? In what way does Roth describe the effects of war on the soldier? How can the contemporary phenomenon we refer to as posttraumatic stress disorder be applied to “Defender of the Faith”?
5. In this short story, Roth manifests a profound interest in ethical questions. How are Marx’s acts ethical or not ethical? How does he rationalize his behaviors?

Portnoy’s Complaint (1969)

After publishing two tepidly received books, Roth composed *Portnoy’s Complaint* under the pressure to live up to the promise of his first collection of fiction. With the publication of his third full-length novel, Roth not only exceeded the critical expectations set up by *Goodbye, Columbus* but also scandalized a whole new sector of the American reading public. The title is indicative of the relationship at the heart of this novel: that of a patient and his psychoanalyst. As Roth defines it, “Portnoy’s Complaint” is “a disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature” (*Portnoy’s Complaint* 1). Beginning from this pseudomedical diagnosis, Roth’s novel is structured as the neurotic patient Alexander Portnoy’s monologue, one that explores his competing impulses. *Portnoy’s Complaint* is a dramatic set piece, an interwoven series of scenes

that touch on the significant developments in its narrator's life. The scenes are thematically joined by their capacity to illustrate the tenet at the heart of Roth's 1969 novel: that good Jewish boys like Portnoy find their every primordial sexual urge unmoored by their desire to remain good Jewish boys. In some ways *Portnoy's Complaint* is a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel: He provides glimpses into the development of young Portnoy's consciousness and describes the psychic purging necessary before he can truly "begin" his life.

Portnoy's Complaint famously begins with the narrator's description of his relationship with his Jewish mother. From kindergarten onward, Alex marvels at her ability to be everywhere and see everything her young son is doing, functioning as the "superego" that keeps young Alex's roiling "id" in check. Using this Jewish mother figure as a starting point, Roth returns to the theme of Jewish identity that structured *Goodbye, Columbus* (and that he had abandoned in his subsequent novels), dealing particularly with the assertion that Jews like Alex's parents divide the world between Jews and non-Jews. Alex claims that his parents' entire worldview is circumscribed by their ethnic and religious identity.

The most striking aspect of *Portnoy's Complaint*, however, is the candid sexual nature of Roth's tale. Alex's adolescence is spent masturbating and fantasizing. In one particularly memorable scene, he masturbates with a side of beef. In another, his sister's bra is transformed into an erotic fetish. Portnoy spends his youth lusting after unattainable blond-haired shikshas and his adult years attempting to convince women of every conceivable ethnicity to engage in sexual activity with him. It becomes increasingly clear as the novel progresses that these women are less human beings than tropes for Portnoy and, by extension, for Roth and America. Portnoy confesses to his psychiatrist: "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer* America—maybe that's more like it. Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington—now Portnoy."

With the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth came under fire from both Jewish groups and readers uncomfortable with his representation of male sexuality run amok. He also drew the ire of many women, who were distressed at the depiction of women in the novel. From his dysfunctional but sexually insatiable lover "the Monkey," who critics contend is yet another variation on Roth's first wife, to "the Pumpkin" and "the Pilgrim," college-era conquests who demonstrate his ability to take on American "Supergoys," Portnoy's women are stereotypes who aid in their narcissistic lover's pursuit of sexual freedom.

Despite its detractors, however, many hailed *Portnoy's Complaint* as a masterpiece. As did his literary antecedent Saul Bellow, who distinguished himself by breaking free of literary and linguistic constraints in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Roth let loose his irrepressible narrative voice in *Portnoy's Complaint* and forever cemented his reputation as a great American writer.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Roth uses a number of psychoanalytic terms in *Portnoy's Complaint*. Look in an online dictionary of psychoanalytic terms or check a reference volume in the library. How do these terms—particularly the *id*, *ego*, *superego*, and *castration complex*—function in Roth's 1969 novel? How do they structure both the life of Alexander Portnoy (via the many developmental epochs Roth describes) and the novel itself?
2. It can easily be said that *Portnoy's Complaint* both anticipates and epitomizes the sexual revolution that would sweep America during the late 1960s and 1970s. Contrast the depiction of sexuality in the novel with Roth's earlier representation of sexual mores in *Goodbye, Columbus*. How do the changes in Roth's portrayal of sexuality in these two works mark historical and cultural shifts?
3. Many critics, particularly feminist critics, have remarked upon Roth's portrayal of women in *Portnoy's Complaint*. From Alexander Portnoy's mother to his perverse companions "the Mon-

key” and “the Pilgrim,” the women of Roth’s novel are often figured as overbearing, sexually insatiable, or otherwise dysfunctional. How can we read *Portnoy’s Complaint* alongside the precepts of the feminist movement that was gathering steam at the time Roth was writing his novel?

4. How does masculinity, or anxiety over masculinity, function in Roth’s novel? While Portnoy’s relationship to his mother overshadows much of the novel, it is from his relationship to his father, the itinerant salesman, that young Alex gathers his concept of a particularly Jewish brand of masculinity. What do you make of the scene between father and son in the steam room and the emphasis placed on the Portnoy paterfamilias’s constipation? In *Patrimony*, Roth’s memoir of his relationship with his father, he expresses ambivalence about the model of masculinity offered by Herman Roth in a manner similar to that expressed by Alexander Portnoy about his father. Compare the father-son relationships in these two books, one ostensibly fictional and the other autobiographical.
5. In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth returns to a theme he had abandoned after the success of his Jewish-themed *Goodbye, Columbus*: the complexity and anxieties of Jewish identity in postwar America. Early on in the novel, Portnoy contends that his parents understand the world through the binary opposition between Jews and “Goys” (all non-Jews). Although the budding sexual adventurer tries to slough off these distinctions to embrace his universal “humanity,” he still views the world through much the same lens as his parents, but with wildly different results. How does the distinction between Jews and gentiles structure *Portnoy’s Complaint*? What is Portnoy’s relationship to his Jewishness?
6. *Portnoy’s Complaint* was published five years after Saul Bellow’s celebrated novel of a tortured intellectual, *Herzog*. How does Herzog compare to Portnoy? Why do both Bellow and

Roth provide their readers a glimpse into the landscape of postwar Jewish America through the psyche of an individual? What can we make of this focus on the guilt-ridden Jewish male intellectual in the works of Bellow and Roth?

***American Pastoral* (1997)**

The prolific Roth became known throughout the 1980s and early 1990s for producing irreverent postmodern works such as *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, books that play with the readers’ expectations while still delivering inimitable first-person prose. In 1997, however, Roth yet again defied expectations by producing a dense, detailed, and realistic novel.

American Pastoral, the first book in what would come to be known as the author’s American trilogy, was a striking departure for Roth in a number of ways. Whereas readers had come to expect Roth’s novels to feature an in-depth portrait of a tortured and verbose male protagonist (often, critics argued, at the expense of gaining insight into other characters), *American Pastoral* was painted on a wider social canvas and featured penetrating analyses of a number of central characters. Taking aim at the vast shifts in society caused by the Vietnam War, the excesses of 1960s radicalism, and the cultural and racial enmity to which, according to Roth, they gave rise, *American Pastoral* is preoccupied with history on both the personal and national levels. As does John Updike, the fellow postwar American author to whom he is often compared, Roth attempts to combine a psychological account of his main characters with a broader social commentary on the aspirations of America during its continued industrialization after World War II. This marked a return to the realist roots that Roth had abandoned after lukewarm critical response to his early novels *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*.

American Pastoral is primarily the story of Seymour “Swede” Levov, a hometown hero who finds his world turned upside down when his college-aged daughter, Merry, becomes a bomb-toting member

of the 1960s counterculture. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's literary alter ego in many novels, returns in *American Pastoral*, but this time to tell another's story, rather than his own. When a now-aging Nathan Zuckerman returns to his high school for a 45th reunion celebration, he meets Swede Levov's younger brother, Jerry, and is told the story of his older classmate's heroic rise and fall. Fascinated by Jerry's tale, Zuckerman takes it upon himself to re-create the details of his deceased classmate's life and the events that led to his premature demise.

Part of Zuckerman's fascination with Swede Levov arises from the fact that this former Jewish classmate was widely regarded as truly "American" in a way that his other school friends could never hope to be. From his success as an athlete to his blond hair and blue eyes, Swede is viewed as the student most likely to succeed. Zuckerman provides the reader with an in-depth analysis of the events of postwar America—from the Vietnam War to Watergate, the Newark race riots, and the obsolescence of family-run businesses—to explain why Swede does not live up to the expectations that surround him in his youth. Many critics see *American Pastoral* as perhaps Roth's strongest and most lasting contribution to American letters; the novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 and made *Time* magazine's prestigious 2005 list of the "All-Time 100 Greatest Novels."

For Discussion or Writing

1. *American Pastoral*—often labeled the first in a trilogy that extends from the author's treatment of Swede Levov's postwar America to the McCarthy era of *I Married a Communist* and the culture wars of *The Human Stain*—marked a turning point in Roth's literary career. Is *American Pastoral* appropriately viewed as the first of a trilogy? Why would these works be grouped together? What themes recur in these works by Roth?
2. Roth's most recent works have all manifested an increasing interest in American history. How does Roth's portrayal of the United States in *American Pastoral* compare to his portrayal of the Jewish romance with America in *The Plot against America*, his 2004 dystopian novel about Nazism come home to roost on U.S. shores?
3. Look up a definition for the literary convention *pastoral*. How does the concept of "the pastoral" function as a defining principle of the narrative? Is Roth's novel a uniquely American pastoral? How do the title and the ideology of the pastoral relate to the frequent Genesis imagery in *American Pastoral*?
4. Although critics often distinguish *American Pastoral* from Roth's earlier works, the novel also marks the return of Nathan Zuckerman, the alter ego who saw Roth through so many novels. Why this return? What role does Zuckerman play in *American Pastoral*? How does Roth use his position and his cobbled-together narrative as a commentary on the role of the writer and on the possibility of establishing the truth about another's life?
5. In *American Pastoral* Roth begins explicitly to address the theme of race and postwar race relations, a topic that had remained mostly subtextual in his earlier works. What can we make of Roth's depiction of the Newark race riots in *American Pastoral*? Do they manifest a particularly cynical response to the rise of black nationalism and the political radicalism of the 1960s? How does Roth's representation of the waning of Jewish racial difference in *American Pastoral* play a part in this depiction? How does *American Pastoral* compare to *The Human Stain*, Roth's 2000 novel about race in America?
6. Like John Updike, Roth is preoccupied with regional American decline. In *American Pastoral* he attempts to re-create the world of Swede Levov and his antecedents in the glove manufacturing business with painstaking detail. He also focuses much of his text on the destruction of Newark and the area surrounding it. How can Roth's representation of regional decline in New Jersey (often read through the decline of the glove trade) be compared to Updike's depiction of Pennsylvania in his Rabbit tetralogy?

***The Human Stain* (2000)**

Published during the heyday of identity politics and the academic culture wars to which they gave rise, *The Human Stain* is yet another of Roth's highly literate and entertaining fictions and a work that reflects pressing social concerns. Coleman Silk, the protagonist of this meditation on race and the self, leaves home and family at the age of 18 to join the U.S. Navy. When he leaves his comfortably lower-middle-class African-American family for life on the seas, he sloughs off what he perceives as the anchor of his race and uses his light complexion and indeterminate physiognomy to "pass" as a white man. Coleman Silk, high school valedictorian and favored son of the Silk clan, is intoxicated by the freedom that this transformation affords him. Returning to the United States, he continues his racial masquerade and adopts the identity of a Jewish man in order to fit in with the other dusky-skinned Jewish intellectuals flooding New York University on the G.I. Bill. While in New York, Silk meets Iris Gittelman, a woman similarly in flight, in her case from her radical Jewish background. Silk marries Iris for "that sinuous thicket of hair that was far more Negroid than" his own, a canny decision based on the desire to preempt any future doubts about the origin of their offspring's hair texture (136).

Coleman never tells his wife his secret and dissociates himself from his family so as to live the life of a postwar Jewish intellectual. Silk and his wife move to WASP-dominated New England, where Coleman gets a position as a classics professor at Athena College, a small liberal arts institution. *The Human Stain* begins years later, when Coleman Silk has retired from his position as dean and returned to the classroom. Five weeks into the semester, when two students in his roll book have not shown up for class, he "open[s] the session by asking, 'Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?'" (6). Silk's joke is woe-fully misinterpreted. The two missing students, "who turned out to be black," hear about Dean Silk's use of the word *spooks*, a derogatory term for African Americans, and make a complaint to Silk's

superior (6). The new dean of faculty calls the distinguished professor into his office later in the day to face charges of racism.

The charge of racism is ironic on a number of levels: Apart from his true race, as one of Athena College's first "Jewish" hires and its first "Jewish" academic dean, Silk has greatly changed the landscape of the university, firing blond and blue-eyed legacies (individuals who had received academic jobs mostly because of their money and connections). Viewed as an aggressive Jewish upstart by the old guard of WASP professors, Silk also hires the college's first African-American professors, most notably Herb Keble, an eminent black political scientist who refuses to vouch for Silk when he is accused of racial insensitivity.

The charges enrage Silk and give Roth a springboard from which to comment on the complexities of race in America. They also provide both protagonist and author with a chance to meditate upon changes in the composition of the American university. The rising literary scholar Delphine Roux, chairperson of the English Department of Athena, punishes the aging professor for his transgression and becomes a symbol for Silk of the antihumanistic thrust of the contemporary university. He scoffs at her embrace of the importance of "private" identities (racial, ethnic, or gender affiliations) in what he deems the "public" institution of the university. Conversely, Roux takes a particular dislike to the macho posturing of Dean Silk and his burgeoning relationship with the illiterate cleaning woman Faunia Farley. This conflict allows Roth to weigh in on the battle over multiculturalism and the academy that was raging at the time of *The Human Stain's* composition.

Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's longtime narrator, appears in *The Human Stain* (2000) to tell the story of the vanquished Coleman Silk. When Zuckerman meets his neighbor Silk, the professor has just ignominiously resigned from Athena College after being accused of racism. His wife, Iris, has passed away, the stress from the scandal causing her to have a massive stroke. Silk is at work on a vengeful memoir about his experiences at Athena,

entitled *Spooks*. The title of Silk's text is ironic not only because it recalls the term the aging professor uttered in the classroom, but because there is a specter at the heart of Silk's memoir: his own masked racial history. Never mentioned in the vitriolic volume Silk shares with Zuckerman is the fact that he, like the accusing students, is African American. Nonetheless, after Silk dies in a violent car wreck with his scandalously younger lover Faunia Farley, Zuckerman finds out his friend's secret and attempts to understand the professor's life in light of this omission.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Roth often uses a text-within-a-text in his works. In *The Human Stain*, there are a number of such instances: Coleman Silk is at work on the tell-all *Spooks*, Nathan Zuckerman is engaged in writing his own version of the Silk affair, and Delphine Roux sends an e-mail that exposes her misdeeds. Why all of these texts? What role does the text-within-a-text play in *The Human Stain*? How can these internal texts be compared to similar texts in earlier Roth novels, most notably *Operation Shylock* and *The Counterlife*, not to mention *The Ghost Writer*?
2. While the complexity of Jewish racial identity in America arises as a theme in a number of Roth's works, it takes on new dimensions in *The Human Stain*, where Roth's "Jewish" protagonist grew up as an African American. What can we learn about race from the life of Coleman Silk? The critic Werner Sollors has argued that race and ethnic identity in America are complex and involve an interaction between relationships of consent (relationships we choose) and relationships of descent (those we are born into). How does Silk embody or not embody this conflict between consent and descent? Is there a comparison between African-American and Jewish racial identity in America drawn by Roth in *The Human Stain*?
3. *The Human Stain* is considered the third work in Roth's American trilogy of novels. It is a work deeply concerned with contemporary history, opening with the events surrounding President Bill Clinton's impeachment hearing in the 1990s and going on to provide a commentary on the changing nature of ethnic identity in postwar America. How does Roth interweave personal and national history in *The Human Stain*? In what way do the trials of Coleman Silk, Delphine Roux, and Faunia Farley illuminate the historical era in which he is writing?
4. Roth has long been deemed a preeminent American author. In *The Human Stain*, one way he manifests this place in the genealogy of American writing is by referring frequently to the 19th-century American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. What role does Hawthorne, particularly his "romantic" novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), play in the world of *The Human Stain*? How does Roth's theme of stigma and Puritanism relate to Hawthorne's use of these tropes?
5. When Roth wrote *The Human Stain*, the story of Anatole Broyard was being discussed throughout America. Broyard was a popular writer and intellectual in the 1950s who disguised his African-American identity throughout his life. It was only after his death in the 1990s that people began discussing this lifelong example of racial passing. Research the history of Anatole Broyard. How do you think this narrative influenced Roth? What light does Broyard's story shed on race in America?
6. The literature of passing has a long history in American letters. Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) are two notable examples of the genre. How does Coleman Silk compare to the protagonists of these two works about racial transformation and masquerade in America? How should our reading of *The Human Stain* be affected by the fact that it is written by a white man? What should we make of this instance of racial ventriloquism, Roth's donning the voice of a race not his own, just as Silk dons another race?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ROTH AND HIS WORK

1. While Philip Roth is often classified with his fellow Jewish writers, particularly Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, he is a member of a newer generation than these authors. How does Roth's status as what we might call a "second-generation" Jewish-American author affect his reading of Jewish life and his reception as an exemplary American author? Moreover, how might we compare Roth's work to that of "third-generation" Jewish authors, such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Allegra Goodman, or Michael Chabon? How might Roth respond to this creation of a canon of Jewish writers with him at its center?
2. Roth has long expressed ambivalence toward his Jewish identity. In "Writing about Jews," published in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), one of Roth's many published works of nonfiction, he takes up the issue of being asked to answer critics about his representation of Jewish identity in his fiction. Although he expresses anger about being required to act as a representative for the Jewish people throughout this piece, he suggests that Jewish-American writers and fiction might be more appropriately representative of American Jews than the rabbi and his empty platitudes. How does this complex attitude toward Jewishness manifest itself throughout Roth's prose?
3. Roth's anxiety about the responsibility of being representative is comparable to that expressed by African-American fiction writers called upon to speak for and about other black Americans. While writers such as JAMES BALDWIN and Richard Wright seemed better able to grapple with these issues, RALPH ELLISON, in particular, scoffed at the call to be a representative. Are Roth and Ellison comparable? How does *The Human Stain*, Roth's novel about a "black" academic in the Ellison model, factor into this comparison?
4. Roth has long been interested in using his fiction to depict the changing nature of postwar America. In *The Plot against America*, in particular, the reader gains insight into Roth's ideas about a particularly Jewish relationship to America. Trace Roth's ideas about Jews in America from *Goodbye, Columbus*, his first published collection, to this later work. What has changed and what has remained the same in his portrayal of this complex relationship?
5. Throughout his career, Roth has been plagued by criticisms of his representation of women. Is there a theme to Roth's depiction of women throughout his oeuvre? Should an acknowledgment of Roth's sexism affect our reading of his novels? What about Roth's representation of masculinity in his novels: Does an evaluation of his representation of masculinity complicate our understanding of the role gender plays in his work?
6. Roth's novels have often focused on the body and representing the materiality of the body in all its manifestations. From works such as *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) and *The Dying Animal* (2001), Roth has provided a detailed description of the human body, whether in sexual ecstasy, physical pain, or the throes of death. What can we make of his preoccupation with human bodies, their messiness, and pleasure?
7. Roth's work often manifests a profound commitment to literary realism. At the same time, it is highly experimental, formally innovative, and voice-driven—like much postmodern American fiction produced during the same period. Can we rightly compare Roth to such writers as Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, or David Foster Wallace—all of whom eschew commitments to realism in order to play with the conventions of fiction? Or, is Roth's work more akin to that of his fellow Jewish authors Bellow and Malamud?
8. Roth is one of America's most prolific and critically successful authors. He is often marked as *the* postwar American author. With this label in mind, is it appropriate to call Roth a "Jewish author" at all? Does Jewish writing merit a separate subcategory of literature as

African-American or Chicano literature does? Or, is Roth too much an American author to necessitate this form of ethnic separatism or differentiation?

9. Roth has long drawn attention to the haziness of the line between fact and fiction in his work. How do works like *The Counterlife*, *The Plot against America*, or *Operation Shylock* complicate our notions of the division between autobiography and fiction? Why might Roth be playing with readers' expectations about the boundary between life and literature in this way? How do his many nonfiction works, from his memoirs *The Facts* and *Patrimony* to critical collections such as *Reading Myself and Others* and *Shoptalk* further add to this collision between fiction and fact?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Appelfeld, Aharon. *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth*. Translated by Jeffrey M. Green. New York: Fromm International, 1993.
- Berryman, Charles. "Philip Roth and Nathan Zuckerman: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Prometheus." *Contemporary Literature* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 177–190.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Philip Roth*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Cooper, Alan. *Philip Roth and the Jews*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Furman, Andrew. *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Multiculturalism and the Jews*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Greenberg, Robert M. "Transgression in the Fiction of Philip Roth." *Twentieth Century Literature* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 487–506.
- Kartiganer, Donald. "Ghost-Writing: Philip Roth's Portrait of the Artist." *AJS Review* 13, nos. 1–2 (Spring 1988): 153–169.
- Kremer, S. Lillian. "Philip Roth's Self-Reflexive Fiction." *Modern Language Studies* 28, nos. 3–4 (Autumn 1998): 57–72.
- Omer-Sherman, Ranen. *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 2002.
- Parrish, Timothy L. "Imagining Jews in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*." *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 575–602.
- "Philip Roth Society." Available online. URL: <http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/rothsoc>. Accessed July 23, 2009.
- "Philip Roth Studies." Available online. URL: <http://www.heldref.org/roth.php>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Posnock, Ross. *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Roth, Philip. *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988.
- . *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Royal Derek, Parker, ed. *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*. Foreword by Daniel Walden. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2005.
- Shostak, Debra B. *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004.
- . "Return to the Breast: The Body, the Masculine Subject, and Philip Roth." *Twentieth Century Literature* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 317–335.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Solotaroff, Ted, and Nessa Rapoport, eds. *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers*. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.
- Wallace, James D. "This Nation of Narrators: Transgression, Revenge and Desire in *Zuckerman Bound*." *Modern Language Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 17–34.

Jennifer Glaser



J. D. SALINGER (1919–2010)

What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though.

(The Catcher in the Rye)

Among the most famous literary figures of the 20th century, J(erome) D(avid) Salinger is known both for his writing, especially his only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and for his refusal to become a celebrity figure. The biographer Ian Hamilton described Salinger as a man “famous for not wanting to be famous”. Until his death in 2010, Salinger’s reclusive lifestyle, unmatched in tenacity by any author in living memory—with the exception of the American novelist Thomas Pynchon, who is said to have “out-Salingered Salinger”—engendered a cultlike mystique. His fan base is uncommonly loyal and ardent. Although Salinger published no new fiction after 1965, his collected works continue to sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year. Yet, in spite of his popularity, Salinger’s personal history remains a collage of sketchy details and uncorroborated anecdotes. Salinger’s withdrawal from the public domain creates a paradox for curious admirers and serious biographers alike. On the one hand, the author always refused to explain his motives or give a first-person account of his life. On the other hand, Salinger’s stories, particularly those published in the 1940s and early 1950s, invite readers into his private sphere, for they are heavily indebted to the author’s personal experiences. Unlike Holden Caulfield’s dream author, Salinger often seemed contemptuous of his readership, a fact that begs the question, How can we really know J. D. Salinger?

The second child and only son of Sol and Miriam Jillich, Salinger was born in Manhattan on New Year’s Day 1919. Known by his family as “Sonny,” Salinger was raised in a Jewish household, one that moved frequently during the boy’s early years. In 1932, the same year Sonny celebrated his bar mitzvah, the Salingers settled into an apartment on Park Avenue. Located in one of New York City’s most exclusive neighborhoods, the new home verified Sol’s success in the competitive import-export business and became an outward sign that the family had “made it” in upper-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture. Around the same time, Salinger and his older sister, Doris, discovered that Miriam was born a Christian into a Scotch-Irish home and had, around the time she converted to Judaism, changed her name from *Marie* to appease Sol’s family. The revelation coincided with Salinger’s first enrollment in a private Christian academy, the McBurney School, where Sol received special dispensation for his son to attend. Never more than a mediocre student, Salinger received poor grades and, after two years, was asked not to return. Thinking his son needed discipline, Sol sent Salinger to Valley Forge Military Academy, a boarding school in nearby Pennsylvania, where, despite another mediocre academic résumé, he graduated in 1936.

Salinger followed high school with a half-hearted attempt at college, attending New York University

for two semesters before dropping out. By this time Salinger had been composing stories in his spare time for a few years and had even begun to dream of a career as a writer. His father had other plans. In 1937, growing impatient with his son's lack of interest in academia and the family business, Sol sent Salinger to Europe to learn the meat and cheese importing trade. Salinger spent most of his time in Vienna and Bydgoszcz, a small city in northern Poland. The trip had the opposite effect Sol intended: While shadowing a family friend who bought and sold pigs for the ham industry, Salinger was so disgusted he vowed never to follow in his father's footsteps. He sojourned in Austria and Poland at a critical time in European history. Adolf Hitler had been German chancellor for nearly five years when Salinger arrived. Just months after Salinger returned home, Austria ceded political autonomy to the Nazis. A year later, Germany invaded Poland, marking the official beginning of World War II. During Salinger's stay in both countries, anti-Semitism had reached a fevered pitch, and although Salinger has never publicly commented on his European stay, the agitation and terror consuming the Continent during the late 1930s made a lasting impression. Four years later, when the United States declared war on Germany and Japan, Salinger volunteered for military duty.

In the years between touring Europe and joining the army, Salinger developed his craft. He made a second run at postsecondary education in 1938, attending Ursinas College in Collegetown, Pennsylvania. In the nine weeks he studied there, he wrote a weekly humor column for the school newspaper, earning a reputation as a witty essayist and storyteller. The following semester, once again living with his parents, Salinger audited a short-story writing course at Columbia University. The class instructor, Whit Burnett, quickly recognized Salinger's potential. Burnett had a keen eye for gifted young writers; his literary journal, *Story*, published early works by several now-famous authors, including TRUMAN CAPOTE, JOSEPH HELLER, Norman Mailer, Carson McCullers, TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, and Richard Wright.

In 1940, when "The Young Folks" appeared in the March–April issue of *Story*, Salinger joined the list of writers Burnett had "discovered." Primarily because of Burnett's reputation, several editors of popular magazines took notice. From 1940 until he stopped publishing in the mid-1960s, Salinger experienced little difficulty finding a public venue for his work. Over the next two years, Salinger published three more stories: "Go See Eddie" (1940) in *University of Kansas City Review*, "The Hang of It" (1941) in *Collier's*, and "The Heart of a Broken Story" (1941) in *Esquire*. Joining the military did not slow Salinger's momentum. Between 1942 and 1945 he produced 12 stories, three of which appeared in Burnett's journal. The other nine were published in so-called slicks, popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, and *Esquire*, which enjoyed wide readerships despite lackluster literary reputations. Read in chronological order, these stories chart Salinger's developing style, including his ear for local speech patterns and his preference for dialogue. They also map a growing disillusionment with social constructs, which, in his later works, cripple the individual autonomy of his characters, making it nearly impossible for them to form an authentic sense of self. By 1945 Salinger's sentimental tone had given way to pessimism.

The attitude shift makes sense in light of the author's experiences. On June 6, 1944, after spending more than two years training for military action, Salinger landed on Utah Beach with the army's Fourth Infantry Division, part of the Allies' D-day invasion of Nazi-occupied France. In the ensuing 11 months, Salinger fought in several of the war's deadliest campaigns, including the Battle of Hurtgen Forest and the Battle of the Bulge. Between D-day and the end of the war in Europe (May 8, 1945), the Fourth Division incurred an average of 2,000 casualties per month. The carnage took its toll on Salinger's psyche. Two months after the end of combat operations, probably suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, Salinger checked into a military hospital in Nuremburg, where he recuperated for several weeks. Once released, he

remained in Europe as a private contractor for the Department of Defense; during that time he met and married a young woman named Sylvia, about whom little is known. Although she relocated to the United States with Salinger in May 1946, Sylvia returned almost immediately to Europe, where she filed for divorce.

Later that year Salinger endured another blow. For some time Burnett had wanted to collect Salinger's best work under the working title *The Young Folks*. After Burnett and Salinger ironed out the details, Lippincott declined to publish the book. When the deal fell through, Salinger blamed Burnett. In the blink of an eye the trust Burnett had earned as Salinger's mentor and first publisher evaporated, and until Burnett's 1973 death, Salinger refused to work with him. The setbacks notwithstanding, 1946 was a milestone year for Salinger. On December 21, the *New Yorker* published "Slight Rebellion off Madison," kicking off a long relationship between the magazine and one of its most famous contributors. Among American weeklies, the *New Yorker* was unique; at that time it was the only widely read and well-respected literary venue. It could afford to pay contributors well without sacrificing its esteem among scholars and critics. An early version of *Catcher in the Rye*, "Slight Rebellion" had been gathering dust at the *New Yorker's* headquarters for five years. Approved for publication in late 1941, the story was shelved after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, an event that made the tale of a self-absorbed adolescent seem trite. When the war ended, American life began returning to normal, and the *New Yorker* finally printed "Slight Rebellion." Salinger's popularity with both critics and general audiences skyrocketed.

In early 1948, after placing stories in *Mademoiselle* and *Cosmopolitan*, Salinger published "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" in the *New Yorker*. The story of a young war veteran's suicide, "Bananafish" marked the beginning of Salinger's most critically acclaimed period. During that time he published all of his *Nine Stories* as well as his only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. First conceived as a novella, *Catcher* grew to novel length over the

course of a decade. Upon its 1951 publication the book expanded Salinger's audience beyond magazine readers; within a few years of its release it had become standard reading for members of early 1950s counterculture. *Catcher's* popularity thrust Salinger into the limelight. Uncomfortable with fame, he quickly grew impatient with the public. In 1953 he moved from the New York area to Cornish, New Hampshire, a remote rural community where he could escape interview-seeking journalists and autograph-hunting admirers.

Also in 1953 Salinger published his second book, *Nine Stories*. A collection of his best short work, it cemented Salinger's reputation with "serious" critics and academics. Unlike *Catcher*, which garnered mixed reviews, *Nine Stories* was met with near-universal acclaim. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author EUDORA WELTY heaped praise on the book in her *New York Times* review, declaring Salinger's writing "original, first rate, serious, and beautiful." Although *Nine Stories* consists entirely of previously released material, scholars have often treated it as a short story cycle, a collection binding individual narratives into a unified whole. In this case, each of the *Nine Stories* portrays a different way of confronting a hollow, materialistic world. From Seymour Glass's suicide in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" to Teddy McArde's serene acceptance of death in "Teddy," Salinger explores the clash between the individual's search for spiritual meaning and the social mechanisms that stand in his or her way.

After *Nine Stories*, Salinger's writing changed. He remained preoccupied with the individual's struggle to cope in a "plastic," materialist world, but his tone became didactic. From the early 1950s onward Salinger developed a religious perspective combining Zen Buddhism, Vedanta Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity. At the same time, he adopted a vision of the artist popular among 19th-century romantics. According to this view, the artist is an exceedingly rare individual in touch with a divine imagination, which he transmits onto the page, canvas, or musical score. The central figure in Salinger's later stories, Seymour Glass, is the paradigmatic example of what

the author calls the “artist-seer,” a person through whom we glimpse the sublime. Together, “Franny” (1955), “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” (1955), “Zooey” (1957), “Seymour: An Introduction” (1959), and “Hapworth 16, 1924” (1965) proffer a vision in which art and spiritual transcendence coalesce, affording individuals their only escape from a “phony” world. These stories depart from Salinger’s earlier work in style as well as substance, often abandoning the narrative control and linguistic precision for which he was known. The shift was gradual but unmistakable. Critics chided him for it. Although the reaction to “Carpenters” was generally positive, reviewers were largely unsympathetic to Salinger’s other post-1953 efforts. Nevertheless, his popularity with general audiences, especially the young, did not taper. In 1961, with *Catcher’s* fame at an all-time high, *Franny and Zooey* topped the *New York Times* best-seller list for six months. *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* was the third-best-selling book of 1963.

The same year the *New Yorker* printed “Franny” and “Carpenters,” Salinger married Claire Douglas. The couple had two children—Margaret in 1955, Mathew in 1960—but, after 12 rocky years, Claire filed for divorce. Since Salinger stopped publishing in 1965, a few incidents have drawn him to the public’s attention. In 1972, at the age of 53, he wooed an 18-year-old college freshman, Joyce Maynard, who dropped out of Yale and moved into Salinger’s home. The affair lasted nine months. For many, including the Salinger biographer Paul Alexander, the incident confirmed a long-held suspicion: Salinger harbored an unhealthy predilection for young girls. In 1974 Salinger sued a San Francisco bookseller for publishing a pirated edition of his uncollected works. The suit was settled 12 years later in Salinger’s favor, the same year he filed a legal injunction to prevent Ian Hamilton from publishing an unauthorized biography that included the author’s private correspondence. The suit went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which sided with Salinger in 1987. After a decade outside the public eye, Joyce Maynard published *At Home in the World*, breaking a 26-year silence

about her involvement with Salinger. In 2000 Margaret Salinger’s memoir, *Dream Catcher*, created another stir, largely because it revealed intimate, often disparaging details about her father. Although many Salinger fans accused Maynard and Margaret Salinger of exploiting the writer’s fame, their accounts reshaped Salinger’s image, painting a more nuanced, darker portrait of a man who continues to intrigue Americans. Salinger died in 2010 at his home in Cornish, New Hampshire.

“A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (1948)

The first of Salinger’s critically acclaimed *Nine Stories* (1953), “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” was originally published in the *New Yorker* on January 31, 1948. Perhaps his most famous short story, and, together with “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” (1950), his most frequently praised, it is often cited as a model of the short fiction genre.

Set in post-World War II America, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” depicts a failing marriage. Little more than a common surname unites Muriel and Seymour Glass. The depth of their separation and the contrast between their worldviews are reflected in the narrative: They neither interact nor share the same physical space until the story’s final paragraph. Nearly all the action transpires in two scenes. The first is set in a beachfront hotel room, where sunburned Muriel converses with her mother on the telephone. They talk mostly about Seymour: his discharge from the military, his release from a mental facility, and his erratic behavior. Growing impatient with her mother’s anxiety concerning Seymour’s perceived instability, Muriel ends the conversation abruptly. The second scene is roughly contemporaneous with the first and is set on the beach just outside the hotel. Here, Seymour meets four-year-old Sybil Carpenter, with whom he shares a pleasant dialogue, goes for a swim, and relates a tale about the fabled “bananafish.” In the brief final scene, Seymour returns to his room, glances at Muriel, and shoots himself with his military-issue pistol.

“A Perfect Day for Bananafish” laments the shallow, materialistic culture Salinger associates with

the modern world, particularly mid-20th century America. Typical of his postwar work, this story is devastating and pessimistic, presenting a protagonist burdened with posttraumatic stress disorder and severed from the shallow, materialistic world his wife inhabits. Muriel, though patient with her husband's eccentricities, inhabits a cultural wasteland where meaning and happiness are found in "women's magazines" and the latest fashions.

The bananafish allegory captures Salinger's vision of modernity. Yellow has long symbolized cowardice; its association with gold also evokes imagery of wealth. With their explosion in U.S. popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, bananas have often been associated with hedonism and materialistic excess. The bananafish, however, is illusory, a fabrication with no material reality. When Sybil claims to see one, she reveals not only her own neophyte material ambitions but also the vapid nature of these ambitions. By not disabusing Sybil of her fantasy, Seymour bears a resemblance to Holden Caulfield, who, at the end of *The Catcher in the Rye*, admits he cannot protect Phoebe from a "phony" world.

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" set off two important phases in Salinger's career. It is the first in the *Nine Stories* cycle. It is also the first story in the Glass family saga. Later in his career Salinger grew obsessed with Seymour and his siblings, using them as a vehicle to flesh out his own growing commitment to Vedanta Hinduism. From 1955 to 1965, when Salinger ceased releasing his work to the public, Salinger's only publications treated the Glass family. Though he would not return to Seymour for several years, no character proved more fascinating to his creator.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The epigraph to T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, reads, "With my own eyes I saw the Sybil of Cumae hanging in a bottle; and when the boys said to her: 'Sybil, what do you want?' she replied, 'I want to die.'" Some critics have conjectured that Sybil Carpenter is named after the Sybil of Cumae, an ancient pagan priestess with remarkable powers of foresight. Like *The Waste Land*, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is set just after a world war and captures the disillusionment that followed. Read Eliot's poem and compare his vision with Salinger's. Is one more optimistic than the other? Why would Salinger name a four-year-old after an ancient seer of death?
2. Many critics have suggested that Salinger changed his outlook between the publication of *Nine Stories* and that of his later works. Despite this, Seymour Glass remained on Salinger's mind, growing into something of an obsession toward the end of the author's publishing career. After reading at least one other Seymour narrative ("Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters," "Seymour: An Introduction," "Hapworth 16, 1924"), compare the characterization of Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" with that found in a later story. Is he the same character, or is Salinger's characterization inconsistent? Does he change? If so, how? Write a well-developed essay that examines Salinger's development through his characterizations of Seymour.

"For Esmé—with Love and Squalor"

(1950)

The sixth tale in the *Nine Stories* collection, "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," first appeared on April 8, 1950, in the *New Yorker*. Since its initial publication, professional critics and casual readers have admired the story, considered, alongside *The Catcher in the Rye* and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," among Salinger's finest works.

As "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" opens, the unnamed narrator, a writer and former soldier, reveals his occasion for writing the story: He has recently received a wedding invitation from Esmé, a girl with whom he has not spoken in six years. The invitation prompts him to recall a promise he made the day he met Esmé, to write a story for her, preferably one "about squalor." Two stylistically distinct vignettes make up "For Esmé." In the first, the narrator recalls, in the first person, his first and

only direct contact with Esmé while in London during World War II. Having just finished special operations training for the imminent D-day invasions, the narrator enjoys some rare time away from his fellow soldiers, watching a children's choir practice before sitting down for a cup of tea at a local café. Thirteen-year-old Esmé, a member of the choir, enters shortly afterward and strikes up a conversation with the narrator, expressing interest in English and American cultural differences. Upon her departure with her caretaker aunt and young brother, Esmé promises to correspond with the soldier, requests a story of "squalor," and expresses hope that the narrator will return with his "faculties in tact." The second vignette transpires roughly a year later, shortly after the Allied victory in Europe. Set in a small Bavarian town, the narration shifts to third person, describing "Sergeant X's" failure to keep his faculties intact. Suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, Sergeant X discusses a series of trivialities with a fellow soldier before discovering a misplaced package from Esmé, which turns out to contain her deceased father's watch and the letter she had promised. Lost for more than a year, the correspondence and gift make him sleepy for the first time in months.

As all of Salinger's pre-Glass family stories do, "For Esmé" ends on an ambiguous note, leaving the conclusion open for interpretation. However, for most readers, Sergeant X's sleepiness signals the return of his faculties, a recovery prompted by the kindness of another. Esmé's generous spirit—love, as the story's title suggests—enables the narrator to remember what love feels like, a feeling that prompts him to write the story he promised. Although the second vignette makes up "the squalid part of the story," the closing paragraphs take the story full circle. Sandwiched between two acts of benevolence, squalor appears as a temporary human condition, one that love can undo. Even in his darkest moments, Sergeant X foreshadows the theme, quoting Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*: "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love."

Salinger composed "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" at the height of his powers, both as

a short story writer and as an observer of human psychology. While many of his earlier stories realistically capture individual experiences in the modern West, their tone and characterization are often myopic and pessimistic. In them there is little room for human potential. Salinger's later works, especially the Glass family saga, allow for human potential but suggest that only spiritually enlightened geniuses possess it. These stories are didactic, presenting a model for the unenlightened majority to mimic. "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" finds a rare middle ground, capturing the horrors of modernity without resorting to despair or finger wagging.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Salinger is famous for his fascination with young characters, especially those struggling with their own immaturity. Esmé, on the other hand, is uncommonly mature for a 13-year-old. In this respect, she shares an important personality trait with the title character in "Teddy," the final tale in the *Nine Stories* collection. After reading both stories, compare Esmé with Teddy. What do they have in common? Is one character more believable than the other? To answer this question, list each character's strengths and weaknesses. Which is the more fallible individual? Which is the more believable? Is there a link between fallibility and "being human"?
2. Locate the passages in "For Esmé" when the narrator underscores wartime differences between civilians and soldiers. Use these as jumping-off points to discuss whether those who do not have combat experience can relate to those who have. Is Salinger making an antiwar statement?
3. While researching posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), read a few accounts of soldiers, who, upon returning from combat, suffer from PTSD. Try to find one account from World War II and another from a more recent conflict, such as the U.S.-led war in Iraq. If time permits, read "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," noting Seymour Glass's postwar instability. Compare Salinger's fictional accounts with the nonfictional ones.

***The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)**

In summer 1951, when Little, Brown published *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger had been writing and revising it for a decade. Two of Salinger's early, uncollected stories show the evolution of Salinger's first and only novel: "I'm Crazy" (*Collier's*, December 22, 1945) was an early prototype of Holden's visit with Spencer in chapters 1 and 2; "Slight Rebellion off Madison" (*New Yorker*, December 21, 1946) grew into the Holden/Sally Hayes episode in chapter 17. At the time of their publication, neither story seemed destined to grow into one of the 20th century's most successful novels. The Salinger scholar Joel Salzberg sums up the novel's impact: "*The Catcher in the Rye* has enjoyed a readership that has transcended the boundaries of age, education and culture, a phenomenon unparalleled in the history of modern and contemporary literature" (*Critical Essays on Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye* 1).

A story of adolescent angst in post-World War II America, *The Catcher in the Rye* is Holden Caulfield's first-person account of the days after his dismissal from Pencey Prep, a private boarding school in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. Having suffered a psychological collapse, Holden recounts the novel's events several months later from a psychiatric hospital. In the first of three movements, Holden leads the reader through his final hours at Pencey: his guilt-ridden conversation with a concerned teacher, his aggravated encounter with his unhygienic dorm neighbor, and his angry confrontation with his roommate. Growing increasingly agitated, Holden leaves the campus earlier than planned, taking a train to nearby New York, where he plans to "lay up" in a hotel for a few days before skulking home to his disappointed parents. The New York hotel sequence marks the novel's second movement, when Holden initiates a series of failed attempts to connect with old friends and new acquaintances. The final movement begins when, in a last-ditch effort to communicate with a kindred spirit, Holden goes home late at night, sneaks into his parents' apartment, and awakens his 10-year-old sister, Phoebe. Speaking to her in an unusually candid way, he confesses his desire to save other children from the

"phony" world that has driven him crazy. When Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield return from a party, Holden slips out and takes a cab to the nearby home of a former teacher, Mr. Antolini, who, in the past, has offered sound paternal advice. On this night, however, Antolini's compassion borders on sexual affection, and Holden, frightened and disillusioned, abruptly departs. The following day, determined to leave his life behind and make a new start "out west," Holden meets Phoebe at an art gallery to say good-bye, but Phoebe derails his plans when she arrives with her own suitcase. Instead of leaving town, Holden takes Phoebe to the nearby carousel, where he finds a sudden, inexplicable joy watching his sister go "around and around."

The Catcher in the Rye is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story tracking the protagonist's psychological, moral, and/or intellectual development. Although critics debate the extent of Holden's maturation, most agree that a subtle change becomes evident in the novel's closing paragraphs. For most of the narrative, however, he is static. As do many of the people he criticizes, Holden suffers from an inability to see the world from alternate points of view. Holden's limitations notwithstanding, *Catcher* portrays a psychologically nuanced, conflicted young man who is alternately kind and misanthropic, depressed and elated, gullible and cynical, arrogant and self-deprecating, imaginative and paralyzed. As Holden cycles through contradictory personality traits, he struggles to fuse his inner and outer selves into a consistent whole. In scene after scene Holden's behavior—his performance in the exterior world—contradicts his interior monologue. For instance, while talking to Stradlater in the bathroom, Holden professes to "hate the movies like poison" but imitates them with an "exhibitionist" tap dance routine; elsewhere, he lambastes "phonies" and "phoniness," yet he exaggerates his experiences and often lies without any discernible motivation. His ideas and actions wedged apart, Holden searches in vain for an authentic identity.

Holden's lack of personal integrity underscores one of *Catcher's* central themes: Through social and cultural influence, the external world undermines individual autonomy, forcing the genuine

self to wither or disappear altogether. Much of the narrative records Holden's gut-level reaction to his own lack of autonomy, a reaction that leads him to dismiss everyone else—with the exception of young children and his dead brother, Allie—as a phony. Although Holden never defines *phony*, he uses it to describe a person whose beliefs and actions mirror prevailing cultural mores. As it turns out, every adolescent and adult meets the criterion, including, paradoxically, Holden himself. In a revealing passage Holden describes the intermission of the play he attends with Sally Hayes: "At the end of the first act we went out with all the other jerks for a cigarette. What a deal that was. You never saw so many phonies in all your life, everybody smoking their ears off and talking about the play so that everybody could hear and know how sharp they were". Ironically, Holden precedes this tirade with his own assessment of the play. Like the phonies with whom he shares a cigarette, he is determined to prove his intelligence.

Although he would never admit it, Holden suspects he is, like everyone else, a phony. Underneath his adolescent complaints lies a deep-seated fear of losing control over his identity, of becoming another drone in a swarm of human bees. The terror causes him to retreat inward and eventually precipitates a nervous breakdown. He finds the pressure to conform so debilitating that, when asked what he wants to do in life, he fails to imagine a single realistic answer. Instead, he misappropriates a Robert Burns poem, telling Phoebe he would enjoy being in charge of catching "little kids playing . . . in this big field of rye [when] they start to go over the cliff." While the impracticality of his career ambitions points to an underlying psychological illness, the passage underscores Holden's desire to save others from experiencing similar anguish. On the other side of the "cliff" the phony world awaits. Having seen its horrors, having succumbed to its pressures, Holden naively hopes to prevent children from replicating his mistakes.

Like that of many of Salinger's short stories, *Catcher's* ending is ambiguous. As the novel closes, a question lingers: Given the infeasibility of Holden's catcher in the rye model, is there an alterna-

tive for saving the innocent? While this question remains open to interpretation, the final scene points to a possible answer. For Holden, Phoebe symbolizes innocence. She is a living example of the children Holden wants to "catch" before they succumb to a phony, materialistic existence. As Phoebe rides the carousel, Holden notes, "All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the . . . horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything" (273–274). For Holden the gold ring symbolizes phony decadence. When Phoebe reaches for it, she, as do the children on the edge of a "crazy cliff," risks falling from innocence. Yet, Holden no longer wants to play the savior's role. Phoebe must face the risk on her own terms. So too must Holden, though it remains unclear whether he accepts responsibility for himself. Throughout the novel Holden searches for a savior, but each candidate disappoints. Rather than assuaging his isolation, Mr. Spencer, Sunny, Sally, Horwitz, and Mr. Antolini leave him feeling ever more estranged. With each encounter, however, Holden overlooks an obvious source of redemption; he never considers saving himself. The oversight appears early in the book when Holden wonders how the ducks in Central Park survive the winter. He theorizes that "some guy" must arrive "in a truck" and take them away. It never occurs to Holden that the ducks survive by their own ingenuity, swimming around the lagoon to keep the encroaching ice at bay. We never discover whether Holden develops his own method for protecting himself from a wintry, desolate world; however, he seems to lay the foundation for it. As the carousel turns, while everyone around him scrambles to escape a rainstorm, Holden sits peacefully on a bench. Willing to face the deluge alone, Holden depends on his hunting cap to shield him. Goofy looking but functional, the cap is Holden's token of independence. By relying on it—rather than a nearby overhang—Holden displays his first act of self-reliance.

Catcher's resolution occurs when the central character accepts—rather than withdraws from—

the world. It remains unclear whether at the time he wrote the novel, Salinger considered acceptance a viable remedy for suffering. In his later works Salinger arrives at a different conclusion. Beginning with “Teddy” in 1953, Salinger’s characters find relief from a depressing reality through spiritual transcendence. Holden’s redemption materializes when he chooses to engage the world rather than escaping “out west” or retreating into his mind. Conversely, Teddy McArdle and Seymour Glass escape material pettiness by embracing death and the afterlife. Most critics think Salinger changed his outlook in the early 1950s, but because he has not discussed the topic publicly, readers must glean what clues they can from Salinger’s fiction. In *Catcher*, Salinger’s tone is often ironic, particularly toward Holden. For example, in spite of his immaturity, Holden considers himself more enlightened than everyone else; Holden claims to be an atheist but defends Jesus on several occasions; he values innocence but curses, drinks, smokes, and hires a prostitute. The disjunction between Holden’s self-image and his behavior undermines his authority. As a result, readers must decide whether or not to accept Holden’s example. In contrast with Salinger’s later works *Catcher* does not tell others how to live.

One of the most recognizable titles in American letters, *The Catcher in the Rye* has retained remarkable staying power. More than a half-century after its initial publication, 250,000 copies sell every year. Despite its popularity, or perhaps because of it, *Catcher* has weathered its share of controversy. A target of censorship from the beginning, the book’s explicit language and sexual content have roiled social and religious conservatives for decades. Between 1966 and 1975 it was the most frequently banned book in American schools. Thirty years later, the American Library Association ranked it among the top 10 most challenged books of 2005. The most controversial moment in *Catcher*’s history occurred on December 8, 1980, when Mark David Chapman murdered John Lennon. Obsessed with *Catcher*, which he was carrying at the time of his arrest, Chapman attributed his motive to the novel, which

he claimed awakened him to the toxic phoniness Lennon imparted to American youths. Although it innervated censorship advocates, the incident failed to stem *Catcher*’s popularity. To this day it remains one of the most commonly taught novels in the American educational system, and perhaps the best example of adolescent literature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *The Catcher in the Rye* is often compared to another great American coming-of-age story, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. After reading Mark Twain’s novel, discuss similarities and differences between the works. Who matures more—Huck or Holden? How does each story benefit from Twain’s and Salinger’s ability to capture his respective era’s youthful vernacular? Both novels are frequent targets of censorship. Why? What do *Huck Finn* and *Catcher* have in common that makes some parents bristle when their children are assigned them in class?
2. *The Catcher in The Rye* has exerted tremendous influence on American literary and popular culture. Salinger is often credited for making adolescence a legitimate topic of serious literature. Since *Catcher*’s publication, countless novels, plays, and films about youth culture have been produced. As a class, make a list of books and movies that feature adolescent or young adult characters. How many of them have something in common with *Catcher*?
3. *The Catcher in the Rye* is often credited with capturing the universal experience of adolescent angst in modern America. Yet, Holden has attended some of the best private schools on the East Coast and his family lives in one of Manhattan’s wealthiest districts. How do socioeconomic factors limit Holden’s understanding of the world? Given these limitations, is it possible to distill a “universal” experience from his story?
4. Holden’s hunting cap and the gold ring Phoebe chases on the carousel are two of the many symbols Salinger employs to convey ideas in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Make a list of other symbols and discuss their meaning in the context of the novel.

“Teddy” (1953)

The last of Salinger's *Nine Stories*, “Teddy” was first published in the *New Yorker's* January 31, 1953, issue. Named after its central character, 10-year-old Teddy McArdle, the story tracks a figure unlike any other in the collection, one who manages life's absurdities with grace and sophistication. Typical of Salinger's works, the action is minimal and can be summed up in a few sentences. While traveling by ship from England to the United States, Teddy has a conversation with his parents, during which Teddy's father orders the boy to recover the family's camera from Booper, Teddy's six-year-old sister. Teddy finds her on the upper deck, convinces her to return the camera, and sits on a lounge chair to compose his daily journal entry. Within a few minutes Bob Nicholson, a young adult Teddy has met on the ship, reclines on an adjacent chair and engages the boy in conversation. During their discussion, while divulging his commitment to Hinduism, Teddy emotionlessly describes the conditions of his own death, which he cryptically predicts will occur later that morning in a poolside accident. After 20 minutes Teddy leaves to meet Booper at the pool on a lower deck. After a moment's contemplation Nicholson decides to find Teddy but arrives on the pool deck only to hear Booper's shrill scream, presumably verifying Teddy's prediction.

For readers of Salinger's previous works, such as *The Catcher in the Rye* and the other short stories in *Nine Stories*, the style and themes in “Teddy” are familiar. The story is character-driven and dialogue-intensive. It explores the evisceration of spiritual meaning amid rampant materialism. However, “Teddy” marks a new direction for its author, sketching, for the first time, an outline of a fully mature human, one unfettered by material or emotional attachments. Teddy is sophisticated, a natural philosopher. The narrator calls Teddy “whole and pure,” noting that his face reflects “real beauty.” More important, Teddy recognizes beauty in objects others find boring or repulsive. “Life,” he writes in his diary, “is a gift horse.” Unlike his argumentative, irritable parents, Teddy is calm, affable, and honest.

Although “Teddy” was first published in a magazine and can be read without reference to Salinger's other work, its full reach must be understood in the context of *Nine Stories*. As does the collection's opening tale, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” “Teddy” ends with a death. The circumstances surrounding the deaths mirror and oppose one another. Seymour Glass and Teddy McArdle respond to identical stimuli—the modern world's shallowness—in opposite ways. Where Seymour finds pain too intense to bear, Teddy finds beauty and serenity.

The most optimistic story in the collection, “Teddy” is also the most didactic. Teddy has no flaws, making it difficult to avoid reading him as a model. Teddy presumes to know the “real” way of envisioning reality, thereby circumscribing alternative viewpoints as false and misguided. The story tends to polarize readers. Where some find a refreshing solution for the myriad problems Salinger raises elsewhere, others discern a story with an unjustifiably preachy and judgmental tone. The latter readership is likely to identify an unintended irony: Teddy is the nonjudgmental figure par excellence, yet at times, the narrative seems scornful of Teddy's relatives, particularly his father and sister. Whichever interpretation readers choose, one aspect of the story is certain. “Teddy” marks a dramatic shift in Salinger's approach to storytelling. Every collected work that follows is suffused with the same religiosity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The setting of “Teddy” strikes many readers as strange. Why might Salinger have chosen a multilayered steamship for the story's locale? Do you recognize a link between Teddy's explanation of Vedanta Hinduism and the setting? If possible, research Vedanta Hinduism before discussing these questions.
2. When *The Catcher in the Rye* thrust Salinger into the limelight, readers were fascinated with the author's ability to render a realistic vision of American adolescence. Over a short period Salinger developed a reputation for constructing believable, realistic characters. With this in

mind, do you find Teddy believable? If possible, read another story or two in the collection. Citing examples of Teddy's speech and journal writing, compare Teddy with another Salinger character. How are they similar? Different?

“Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” (1955)

By the time “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” appeared in the November 19, 1955, issue of the *New Yorker*, Salinger had been funneling all his creative energy into the Glass family saga for two years. The *New Yorker* had published “Franny” six months earlier; the three stories to follow—“Zoocy,” “Seymour: An Introduction,” and “Hapworth 16, 1924”—continued the trend. When Salinger ceased releasing his work to the public in the mid-1960s, he had not published anything other than Glass stories for more than a decade.

“Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” documents the wedding day of the eldest Glass sibling, Seymour, whose 1948 suicide was the subject of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” Some 13 years after the planned wedding, Seymour's younger brother, the aspiring writer Buddy, recalls the events of June 4, 1942. Ironically, on this wedding day, no wedding takes place, for Seymour leaves his fiancée, Muriel Fedder, waiting at the altar. The story focuses on Buddy's misadventures in the hours after Seymour's no-show. Unsure of what to do, Buddy joins a few members of the bride's wedding party in a car headed back to the Fedders' home. Thwarted by a parade and other trivial obstacles, they stop at Seymour's vacant apartment, share a few strong drinks, and discover, via telephone, that Seymour and Muriel have eloped. When Buddy's company leaves for the impromptu reception (sans bride and groom), Buddy passes out from drunken exhaustion.

The story's central conflict occurs between Seymour's champions—Buddy and, to a lesser degree, Boo, the eldest Glass sister—and his adversaries—the matron of honor and Mrs. Fedder, Muriel's

mother, both of whom find Seymour immature, insensitive, and possibly insane. The tension between the Glasses and Fedders calls attention to underlying conflicts Salinger explores throughout his works: spirituality versus materialism, the real versus the artificial, the interior versus the exterior self, intellectualism versus anti-intellectualism. Each of these conflicts underscores Salinger's fascination with the presence—and possible transcendence—of alienation in the modern world.

Although four stories featuring Glass family members had appeared previously, “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” marked a departure. Not only was it the story that introduced Buddy Glass, whom critics often call Salinger's alter ego, but it was the first to include all the family members in a single narrative. Furthermore, it was the first story situating Seymour at the center of the family's saga, a kind of absent presence, a sounding board for his siblings' psyches. In a certain respect, through his diaries, notes, letters, and most important, his influence, Seymour continues to live long after he shoots himself.

Of all the Glass progeny, Buddy's reverence for Seymour runs deepest, often bordering on deification. In this light, “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” is a story of one man's grail quest, his search for enlightenment and escape from a materialistic, artificial, exterior-oriented, and anti-intellectual world. For Buddy, Seymour is the Holy Grail, a man with unique insight, which, because of Seymour's suicide, remains forever out of reach.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In another Glass family tale, “Zoocy,” Buddy divulges his admiration for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, calling it his “Tom Sawyer.” Warren French, an accomplished Salinger scholar, has remarked that “‘Raise High’ is much more indebted to *Gatsby* than has been recognized” (*J. D. Salinger, Revisited* 101). Read *Gatsby*, paying particular attention to two similarities, the first between Buddy Glass and Nick Carraway, the second between Seymour Glass and Jay Gatsby. How is Buddy's relationship with Seymour similar to Nick's relationship

- with *Gatsby*? Do you recognize other affinities between Salinger's story and Fitzgerald's novel?
2. Discuss the significance of Charlotte Mayhew, the beautiful actress at whom Seymour threw a rock when both were children. What does this incident say about Seymour's character? What, if anything, does it say about Salinger's treatment of women?

***Franny and Zooey* (1961)**

Although frequently called a novel, *Franny and Zooey* is two intertwined short stories, each of which was published separately in the *New Yorker*: "Franny" in January 1955 and "Zooey" in May 1957. When Bantam collected and published the stories in 1961, Salinger's post-*Catcher* popularity, especially with adolescents and young adult readers, propelled *Franny and Zooey* to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list, where it stayed for six months.

The last of the tightly controlled stories of Salinger's critically acclaimed middle period (1945–55), "Franny" paints a portrait of a young woman on the precipice of nervous collapse. Most of the action transpires at Sickler's restaurant in an unnamed college town, a symbol for what Salinger considers a diseased intellectual environment. Both "Franny" and "Zooey" dislike the hollow Ivy League lifestyle, which, for Salinger, functions as a microcosm of American culture. In a conversation with her boyfriend, Lane Coutrell, Franny reveals her distaste for academia, the gender divide, psychoanalysis, and, like Holden Caulfield, all things "phony." Midway through the story, Franny divulges an enigmatic infatuation with *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a book she has recently read. In it, she discovers the "Jesus Prayer," a kind of recipe for discovering one's untapped spirituality through the ceaseless recitation of a simple prayer. Lane, a stock character representing the deficiencies of modern social reality, grows visibly bored when Franny discusses her newfound interest in *Pilgrim* and her desire to locate meaning outside

academe. As Lane's interest fades, anxiety overwhelms Franny. Feeling sick, she runs to the bathroom but faints before getting there. When she awakens, she begins "forming soundless words," her lips moving without cessation, presumably repeating the Jesus Prayer.

"Zooey" picks up a few days later in the Glass family's New York apartment. Franny has returned home in a near-catatonic state. The story's first half takes place in the bathroom, where, in a long, often humorous conversation, Bessie, the Glass family matriarch, begs Zooey to comfort his younger sister. Impatient to rid himself of his nagging mother, Zooey agrees to talk to Franny. The remainder of the story is their discussion. Zooey monopolizes the exchange, using it as an opportunity to "hold forth" on a number of issues including the responsibility of the artist, the importance of maintaining an even temper in the face of "phoniness," and the necessity of developing a holistic spiritual perspective. Ironically, the often mean-spirited Zooey advises Franny to focus on improving herself rather than criticizing others.

Despite *Franny and Zooey*'s prolific sales, most critics consider it Salinger's least successful work. JOHN UPDIKE captures the critical consensus:

Salinger loves the Glasses more than God loves them. He loves them too exclusively. Their invention has become a hermitage for him. He loves them to the detriment of artistic moderation. "Zooey" is just too long; there are too many cigarettes, too many goddams, too much verbal ado about not quite enough. (*If You Really Want to Hear about It* 124)

Though many readers have fallen in love with the Glass children, "Zooey" works only for readers who share Salinger's religious perspective. Over the years many have found Zooey's harangues inspirational, and many others have found them arrogant. As with Salinger's later work, readers must decide for themselves whether or not Salinger's vision is attractive.

false distinctions that distract us from a work's meaning?

4. In the 1993 film adaptation of John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*, the lead character, Paul, delivers a monologue about *The Catcher in the Rye* and the lack of imagination in modern society. A brilliant con man with a gift for shining on rich people, Paul analyzes Salinger's novel, supposedly summarizing his master's thesis (in reality, Paul never attended college). Despite the false pretense of its delivery, the summary gives a fresh perspective on the novel. After viewing the film discuss the following:
 - (a) How does Paul's "master's thesis" change your interpretation of the novel? Do you agree with Paul that Holden suffers from a deficient imagination? Does Paul suffer the same deficiency?
 - (b) Given that all the major characters in *The Catcher in the Rye* are white and rich, Paul, a poor black man, is an unlikely candidate to carry Holden's torch. Do you recognize similarities between the two? How does Paul's character ironize Holden?
 - (c) In order to blend in to upper-class Manhattan society, Paul becomes phony—he pretends to be someone he is not. Yet, Paul is arguably the film's most genuine character. How does Guare's screenplay expand upon and/or critique Holden's concept of phony-ness? In order to answer this question, first define what Holden means by *phony*. Next, isolate moments in *Six Degrees of Separation* when Paul seems most genuine. Is his speech about *Catcher* one of those moments? If so, does this mean that, in Paul's world, Holden is a phony?
5. Despite the popularity of *The Catcher in the Rye*, many critics consider Salinger's short stories his best work. Several scholars have suggested that *Catcher* is an overly drawn-out short story, while others consider the novel a series of self-contained vignettes. Paying attention to form, compare the short stories in *Nine Stories* with *Catcher*. While most novels develop more than one individual, Holden and Phoebe are the

only characters who appear in multiple scenes in *Catcher*, and Phoebe shows up in only two. All the minor characters—such as Mr. Spencer, Ackley, Sunny, Phoebe, and Mr. Antolini—are foils for Holden. Does this lessen the story's novelistic range? How would the book change if Holden were not the only central character?

6. Of the many filmmakers Salinger has influenced, none has reinvented Salinger's works quite as Wes Anderson has. Two of Anderson's films feature modern-day incarnations of Salinger's characters: *The Rushmore* (1998) protagonist Max Fischer, who, as does Holden Caulfield, is kicked out of a prestigious prep school, is a feistier version of the *Catcher* hero; the story of a family of child protégés, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) owes a debt to Salinger's Glass family saga. Watch *Rushmore* and *Tenenbaums*, though not solely in terms of whether they are indebted to Salinger. Discuss the similarities and differences between Salinger's characters and stories and Anderson's reinventions of them. How does Anderson's tone differ from Salinger's? Is Salinger's sense of humor as absurd as Anderson's? Are Anderson's films simple dedications or ironic reinterpretations?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alexander, Paul. *Salinger: A Biography*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999.
- Alsen, Eberhard. *A Reader's Guide to J. D. Salinger*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- . *Salinger's Glass Stories as a Composite Novel*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1983.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *J. D. Salinger: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
- Crawford, Catherine, ed. *If You Really Want to Hear about It: Writers on J. D. Salinger and His Work*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006.
- Eppe, Betty. "What I Did Last Summer." *Paris Review* 80 (1981): 221–239.
- French, Warren G. *J. D. Salinger, Revisited*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.
- Galloway, David. *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, Salinger*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

- Grunwald, Henry Anatole, ed. *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962.
- Gwynn, Frederick L., and Joseph L. Blotner. *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1958.
- French, Warren. *J. D. Salinger*. Boston: Twayne, 1976.
- . *J. D. Salinger, Revisited*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.
- Hamilton, Ian. *In Search of J. D. Salinger*. New York: Random House, 1988.
- Laser, Marvin, and Norman Fruman, eds. *Studies in J. D. Salinger: Reviews, Essays, and Critiques of The Catcher in the Rye and Other Fiction*. New York: Odyssey Press, 1963.
- Lundquist, James. *J. D. Salinger*. New York: Ungar, 1979.
- Maynard, Joyce. *At Home in the World: A Memoir*. New York: Picador USA, 1998.
- Miller, James E. *J. D. Salinger*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
- Newman, Jon. "District Court Ruling, *Salinger v. Random House*." Available online. URL: http://www.law.cornell.edu/copyright/cases/811_F2d_90.htm. Accessed June 3, 2007.
- Rosen, Gerald. *Zen in the Art of J. D. Salinger*. Berkeley, Calif.: Creative Arts Book Co., 1977.
- Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Little, Brown, 1945.
- . *Franny and Zooey*. New York: Little, Brown, 1961.
- . *Nine Stories*. New York: Little, Brown, 1953.
- . *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. New York: Little, Brown, 1963.
- . "Uncollected Writings of J. D. Salinger." Available online. URL: <http://www.freeweb.hu/tchl/salinger/>. Accessed June 3, 2007.
- Salinger, Margaret A. *Dream Catcher: A Memoir*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2000.
- Salinger.org. Available online. URL: http://salinger.org/index.php?title=Main_Page. Accessed June 3, 2007.
- Salzberg, Joel. *Critical Essays on Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990.
- Salzman, Jack, ed. *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Sommers, Michael A. *J. D. Salinger*. New York: Rosen, 2006.
- Sova, Dawn B. *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Social Grounds*, edited by Ken Wachsberger. New York: Facts On File, 1998.
- Steed, J. P., ed. *The Catcher in the Rye: New Essays*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.
- Updike, John. "Anxious Day for the Glass Family." In *If You Really Want to Hear About It*, edited by Catherine Crawford, 121–126. New York: Thunders Mouth, 2006.
- Weaver, Brett E. *An Annotated Bibliography of J. D. Salinger*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.
- Wenke, John. *J. D. Salinger: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.

J. Earen Rast



ANNE SEXTON (1928–1974)

Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life.

(Letter to W. D. Snodgrass, 1959)

Anne Gray Harvey Sexton's restless lifelong search for her own identity shaped her poetry, which has often been labeled confessional because of its frank, personal subject matter. She wrote of her struggles to cope with the roles imposed on her from a strong, unapologetic woman's point of view, leading more recent critics to label her poetry feminist. The classification of her work as confessional is one that Sexton disdained, and she paid little attention to the politics of feminism. Sexton's bold poetry of intimate self-scrutiny, however, undeniably challenged stereotypes of women just as the American women's movement did during the decades of the mid-20th century. Her poems gave powerful voice to the deep pain of wounded human beings, as well as to the everyday experiences common to women everywhere. Neither the urge to confess secret sins nor emerging feminism, however, can fully explain the contour of Anne Sexton's life. Complicated by her art, her addictions, and her psychosis, Sexton's life, like her poetry, was dramatic and weighted down with turmoil.

She was born in comfortable New England surroundings on November 9, 1928, her future, on the surface, seemingly predictable. Her parents, Ralph and Mary Gray Staples Harvey, were affluent country club members who had conventional expectations of their three daughters. Anne's mother and father were extremely strong influences in her life. Their hypercritical, unsympathetic presence continued to

dominate her thoughts and behavior, as well as her writing, throughout her life. The family tree also included relations on both sides who had suffered from various forms of mental instability, and the family tendency to mental illness would haunt the poet her entire life.

Anne's early life, filled with the social trappings of her wealthy community, followed the pattern her parents set for her. A beautiful and popular young woman, she attended a private boarding school and enjoyed a whirl of dates, parties, proms, a social debut, and marriage at the age of 19 to Alfred Muller Sexton II. Post-World War II society glorified the "natural" feminine image of wife and mother, and Anne yielded to their appeal. Outwardly, she fulfilled the roles that were expected of her, acting first as the flirty, fashionable, intellectually indifferent student, and then as the young suburban housewife, all the while carrying within her the seeds of something more artistic as well as something more perverse that eventually emerged in the voices of her poems.

The relationships produced by socially approved roles were consistently fragmented and unsatisfactory for her. As a child, she had one extremely close, motherly relationship, with her great-aunt, "Nana"—Anna Dingley—who offered her unconditional approval, warmth, and friendship. Nana suffered a mental breakdown while Anne was in her early teens, but she recovered and remained close to Anne until her death. The maternal Nana appeared in several of Sex-

ton's works, particularly her play *Mercy Street*, as the writer explored the complex nature of motherhood.

Sexton's adult life was dominated by her own mental illness, for while she appeared to be the model housewife of the American 1950s, she was essentially a disturbed woman unable to care for her two daughters. She frequently heard voices that urged her to kill herself. Shortly after the birth of her children, in 1956, beset with depression and anxiety, she attempted suicide and was hospitalized. In the course of her treatment, her therapist sought to find something she could do to enhance her self-esteem and develop her creativity. He eventually suggested that she write about her own experiences. In response, she began to write poems. Her early poems were raw and unstructured, but from the first, they contained intensely personal subject matter and images of her own life. As a way of fighting insanity, she sought to compose her thoughts and retrieve her memories in verses that reflected her feelings about guilt and madness, family relationships, social confusion, female sexuality, and death. As a mental patient, she searched for the real Anne beneath all the roles and expectations pressed on her by others. The therapist's praise gave her the reinforcement she craved; he urged her to keep writing not only for herself but for the sake of others. Sexton often referred to this encouragement as the source of her feeling that she had a role to play that was all her own. Writing poems became not only therapy but obsession and vocation. Throughout her life she continued to write, even as her mental health wavered.

In 1957 Sexton timidly began attending a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education. At that workshop she met the instructor, the poet John Holmes, as well as a poet who became her lifelong friend, Maxine Kumin. By her own admission, Sexton had not been interested enough in school to study poetry. Lacking literary allusions that could evoke associations in educated readers, Sexton's poems plainly reflected her own experience. As a result, her language was accessible, straightforward, and explicit. Sexton's critics often took issue with her dwelling on the wretched, even repulsive aspects of her experience, but she relished the power she found

in graphically depicting the irrationality that was her reality.

What she learned and developed in the workshop was the *craft* of poetry, the techniques—she called them “tricks”—of making elegant poems with intricate rhyme schemes and patterns. She read, wrote, and revised endlessly. In early 1958 her first poem was printed, in the local *Fiddlehead Review*. Soon after, she had poems accepted by the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Harper's*, and the *New Yorker*. Sexton's work was often set in New England and was concerned with difficult family relationships. The voices in her poems reflected her troubled interactions with her parents; in a number of poems (such as “Young,” “The Death of the Fathers,” and “The Truth the Dead Know”) Sexton explored the complex bond between a daughter and her father.

When Sexton read W. D. Snodgrass's poem “Heart's Needle,” about a divorced father struggling to cope with separation from his daughter, she immediately identified with the wrenching personal theme of the poem and recognized a kindred spirit. Autobiographical, direct, and emotional, the poem achieved exactly what she hoped to accomplish in her own work. She arranged to study at a workshop Snodgrass was leading at the Writers' Conference at Antioch College in Ohio in summer 1958. There she sought, with his guidance, to locate her own individual voice, and Snodgrass reinforced her instinct to write autobiographical, “confessional” poetry. Snodgrass, who was to become her mentor and friend, had been a student of the well-known poet ROBERT LOWELL. Lowell, after a traumatic period in his life, was working on his own collection of autobiographical and self-analytical poetry. Sexton enrolled in a class that Lowell taught at Boston University in the fall and winter of 1958–59, where she was influenced by his style. As confessional poets, Lowell, Snodgrass, and Sexton all presented their experience in a stark and direct manner; they wrote about loneliness and alienation, and they spoke plainly about contemplating suicide. About Lowell, Sexton said in a 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles, “He didn't teach me what to put into a poem, but what to leave out. What he taught me was taste. Perhaps that's the

only thing a poet can be taught" (McClatchy 11). In Lowell's class, she met for the first time another young woman poet from the suburbs of Boston, SYLVIA PLATH, and they formed the habit of continuing their intense discussions of poetry, psychiatrists, and suicide attempts after class over drinks. The highly educated, mentally tormented Plath had been writing modernist poetry with stiff, formal diction. Her association with Lowell and Sexton seemed to influence her to write more personal verse, and her work is now often grouped with theirs in the confessional school.

In early 1958 Sexton wrote a complex poem about the relationship between mothers and daughters, "The Double Image." The poem is an example of a form Sexton used frequently, the dramatic monologue, filled with images that startle the reader with their clarity. Concrete, often surprising images are the means by which Sexton sought to connect with her audience. In "The Double Image," for example, she describes the voices compelling her to suicide as "green witches in my head, letting doom / leak like a broken faucet." In her poem "Music Swims Back to Me," the stars she sees through the bars of her window at the mental hospital are "strapped to the sky" as she is strapped to her bed. The night nurse "walks on two erasers" in "Lullaby." Her "Ghosts" are women with "breasts as limp as killed fish," and "fat, white-bellied men. / wearing their genitals like old rags." The stark realism of her language often offended readers who were accustomed to more distance, more formality, and more restraint in their poetry. The prestigious *Hudson Review* accepted "The Double Image" for publication late in 1958. In early 1959, encouraged by Lowell's praise, Sexton began assembling her poems for publication in her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Before the book saw print in May 1960, her parents had both died—Mary Gray of cancer and Ralph Harvey after a stroke. The same year Sexton was invited to give a reading at Harvard and won two notable awards: the Robert Frost Fellowship to study at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and the annual poetry prize from the Boston literary journal *Audience*. She won an appointment as a Radcliffe Scholar in 1961. While *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was under con-

sideration for the National Book Award, she quickly began writing the poems for her second collection, *All My Pretty Ones*, which received excellent reviews on its publication in 1962. In the fall of that year, Sexton won *Poetry* magazine's Levinson Prize, and the following year she won a traveling fellowship sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Over the course of the next decade, according to her biographer Diane Middlebrook, Sexton's work won "most of the prizes, honors, awards, and fellowships available to American poets" (193). She continued to extend the boundaries of her achievements. Between 1963 and 1974 Sexton collaborated with her friend Maxine Kumin on four children's books. Her 1967 collection of poems, *Live or Die*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. This represented the high point of her critical acceptance, and her popularity among the general public continued to grow.

Despite Sexton's writing success, she continued to suffer from mental instability, surviving several more bouts of depression, suicide attempts, and hospitalizations. She became dependent on a variety of medications and increasingly on alcohol to ease her nerves. As a result, family and professional relationships deteriorated, providing even more material for her poetry.

In contrast to its chaotic subject matter, Sexton's verse, in her first collections, was carefully bound by rules of rhythm, rhyme, and meter. She claimed in interviews that when she started writing, she felt the need to harness the overflow of her emotions and experiences with strict, deliberate forms. Enclosing her experience of madness within meticulously ordered rhythms provided the poet with some control over unmanageable situations, and she enjoyed the fact that her brilliant, improbable images shocked readers and increased her popularity. Eventually, Sexton relinquished the controlled form she had cultivated in the earliest poems, and by the end of her third collection, *Live or Die*, even though she was still dealing with psychologically intense material, she loosened her dependence on the techniques and wrote in free verse.

In 1967, as part of a pilot program, Sexton took a position teaching English literature at a Massachusetts high school despite her lack of a college degree.

Throughout her life other writers mentored her, and she read literature voraciously to make up for having a spotty background in the subject. In 1968 she was awarded an honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, the first time a woman had ever been selected to join that chapter. In 1969 she published *Love Poems*; continued to work on her play, *Mercy Street*; and began teaching a seminar in poetry at Boston University. In 1971 she earned a full professorship at Boston University and published *Transformations*, 17 updated adaptations of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. These poems show Sexton's shift from the self-obsessed poetry of psychotherapy to an ironic assessment of the wider consequences of women's roles. In her cynical, often humorous retellings, Sexton peppers the traditional stories with unexpected images from popular culture, while exploring her themes of madness, expectations, love, and death. Cinderella's stepsisters have "hearts like blackjacks," the sooty Cinderella herself looks "like Al Jolson," and the prince's ball is "a marriage market." She updates the Grimms' tales faithfully but surprisingly, often telling us in the narrator's wise voice what life has taught her: Happily ever after is a fraud. In 1972 Sexton published her sixth collection of poems, *The Book of Folly*, followed by *The Death Notebooks* in 1974 and *The Awful Rowing toward God*, posthumously, in 1975. Additional work, including her play *Mercy Street*, was published after Sexton died of carbon monoxide poisoning, at her own hand, in 1974.

From an early age Sexton had shown an interest in performing. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, as her poetry became more popular, she became a professional performer, teaching, giving readings, and eventually traveling with her own "chamber rock" group, "Anne Sexton and Her Kind." She referred to herself as an actress, and in 1958 she wrote, "I suspect that I have no self so I produce a different one for different people." Though these "multiple selves" did not assuage her mental confusion, they did feed her rich, dramatic poetry. By creating the personae of her poems, Sexton was able to try on an assortment of roles and explore the voices of her subjects in ways that were both biographically and psychologically revealing. Because of her bold, accessible writing,

she earned a large contemporary audience as well as a place among the notable poets of the mid-20th century. Fearlessly writing of her own mental, physical, and spiritual struggles, holding back nothing, she conveyed vitality, wit, and sensuality to a widespread readership. Her ability to create startlingly apt images led her poetry to achieve the goal she, quoting Franz Kafka, asks of it in the introduction to her second collection: They "serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us." In the 21st century Sexton's poetry continues to reach her audience with the clear voice of a woman passionate about life, love, and death.

"Her Kind" (1960)

In a 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton claimed that her intention in writing the poems that make up her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, was to "give the experience of madness" (qtd. in McClatchy 13). The last poem that Sexton wrote for the book, "Her Kind," became the poem with which Sexton most wanted to be identified; she gave a dramatic performance of it to open all of her poetry readings. In the short, three-stanza poem Sexton created a disturbing but powerful persona to show what kind of person and poet she was: a dangerous madwoman-witch.

In a tightly structured format the poem hints at the roles Sexton has played in her own life. The rhyme scheme of *ababcbe* is formal and serves to control the material, a description of a woman clearly out of control. As with much of Sexton's early poetry, she has worked hard to impose stylistic order on disordered content. The key line in each stanza is the penultimate one, in which the narrator describes "a woman like that." Each of the descriptions is followed by the five monosyllabic words that leave no question of the author/narrator's attitude toward this disturbing persona: "I have been her kind."

The woman described, though troubled, however, is not a passive victim of fate; in each stanza she is active. She haunts and dreams, finds and fills, waves and survives. Sexton's imagery invokes witches, night, evil, loneliness, domesticity, sensuality, and pain. She combines third and first persons

in narrating the poem, blurring the line between the other and the self. The first stanza introduces “a possessed witch” who haunts the night. She has “done [her] hitch,” indicating a duty fulfilled, rather than a choice made, over “the plain houses” where normal people live. The abnormality of the narrator is confirmed by her being “twelve-fingered.” Sexton reinforces her deformity in the final B line: “A woman like that is not a woman, quite,” before the first and third persons merge: “I have been her kind.”

The second stanza raises images of the home and hearth: “skillets, carvings, shelves, closets, silks, innumerable goods.” These common domestic items, however, carry the taint of the witch who uses them. She fills “warm caves in the woods” with these things and uses them to fix meals for an unusual kind of family: “the worms and the elves: / whining, rearranging the disaligned.” After this unsettling image, the tone of line C becomes an almost humorous understatement: “A woman like that is misunderstood.”

The third stanza addresses a specific audience, the driver of a cart. It is possible to envision Sexton's therapist in such a role. In the presence of this guide who has taken her on a painful journey, whose “flames still bite [her] thigh” and whose wheels have cracked her mental ribs, she feels herself stripped to “nude arms” that wave at villages as she searches for her own route. Recovery and survival may be the goals, but the narrator ultimately reasserts the power of this sensual housewife-witch: “A woman like that is not ashamed to die.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. What connotation does the phrase “her kind” usually carry? Contrast the colloquial use of the term with the manner in which it is used in this poem. Analyze the tone of the final *cbc* triplet in each stanza.
2. Compare the voice and role of the narrator in “Her Kind” with those of “The Double Image” and “The Starry Night.” What similarities do you see in the ways Sexton creates the persona of narrator? How does she achieve the masking and revealing of the speaker?
3. Confessional poetry involves autobiographical self-revelation. Sexton said that “Her Kind” emerged from and was a means of describing her own experience of madness and exploration of identity during her early psychotherapy. Yet, she resisted the confessional label for her work. Analyze “Her Kind,” evaluating its potential to exist as a poem on its own, without the reader's knowing details of Sexton's life. Has she managed, for example, to create pleasing and meaningful word patterns and images that provide more than a representation of the author?
4. Sexton is noted for the power of her images. Examine the imagery of each stanza and try to penetrate its meanings. For example, in stanza 2, consider the domestic images and the manner in which Sexton twists their normal implications. Who are the worms and elves? Who is whining? Who are the disaligned in need of rearrangement? What do the warm caves in the woods mean to a mad housewife-witch?

“Housewife” (1962)

“Housewife” appears in Sexton's second collection, *All My Pretty Ones*, in which, she later said, she was trying to convey the causes of madness. The short poem represents a meditation on the way a traditional role can affect a woman who accepts it. The housewife that the narrator describes is married literally to a house. The house is a body; it is alive and has organs that allow it to function. Sexton draws attention to the kneeling posture of women who are wedded to their homes. In the lines “See how she sits on her knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down,” the narrator appeals to the reader to look at what happens to a housewife: She becomes the house; it is her own organs that she must spend her day cleaning, as a domesticated animal does. This endless cleaning, however, is fruitless; the dirt is incapable of being permanently removed.

Men do not have entrée into the house/wife; they must “enter by force,” and for them the wife is a “fleshy mother,” to whom they are “drawn back like Jonah.” The final twist gives the woman yet another

role: not house, not wife, but mother: “A woman *is* her mother. / That’s the main thing.” In the conversational phrase “That’s the main thing,” Sexton reveals that both the man and the house are ultimately irrelevant. The woman’s fate is determined long before either one of them has entered her life; the woman’s mother is her identity, her inescapable destiny.

Domestic imagery yields to biological imagery in this poem. The woman is enclosed by a structure, a house, but this house is her body, with skin, “a heart, / a mouth, a liver, and bowel movements.” It is fleshy, with pink, permanent walls. The house, to which the role of wife confines her, is her, and this is a truth she has learned from her mother, who also is her. The narrator clearly feels trapped by the demands of these living, breathing, needy enclosures—not just her house but also her body—just as she feels about her original enveloping, fleshy enclosure, her mother. Raised and trained by her mother, she sees herself as a product of her mother, unable to stop duplicating the behavior that has made her mad.

Sexton employs no formal rhyme scheme in “Housewife.” One image fades into the next, leading us away from house and into mother.

Sexton’s personal development and constant questioning of her roles paralleled the feminist movement of the 1960s. Betty Friedan’s work *The Feminine Mystique* had been published in 1963 and started a national conversation about women’s happiness. It questioned a woman’s fulfillment in the housewife role that Sexton had been attempting to play to satisfy both her mother’s expectations and her own. Friedan’s book suggested that women’s mental health was in jeopardy from dutifully accepting a role that gave little outlet to their creativity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of the biblical allusion Sexton makes in referencing Jonah? How does knowing the Bible story contribute to your understanding Sexton’s suggestion about men’s relationships to their houses?
2. Read the first chapter of Betty Friedan’s controversial book *The Feminine Mystique* (available online) and compare the ideas she presents with those in Sexton’s poem.
3. Compare Sexton’s tone in the phrase “That’s the main thing” with the narrator’s commentary sprinkled through “Cinderella,” published in *Transformations* (1970).

***The Death of the Fathers* (1962)**

The Death of the Fathers is a poem sequence published in 1962’s *Book of Folly*, which gives an overall impression of Sexton’s complex relationship with her father. It was written when Sexton was 42, 11 years after his death, and it reflects the poet’s complicated feelings about his place in her life. The man depicted in this sequence of memories is dashing, cruel, and repeatedly complicit in the loss of his daughter’s innocence. As she writes in section 4, though, he is not guilty alone: “we were conspirators, / secret actors.” Throughout the entire sequence, there is a sense of incestuous corruption that is being transferred from one generation to the next.

The first section, “Oysters,” recounts a time when, as she says, “the child was defeated.” Her childish reluctance to eat oysters is overcome under the tutelage of her martini-swiggling father. His presence at “the death of [her] childhood” is causal. He has presented her with a challenge: “father-food” to consume. Her sensual, suggestive language re-creates the unappetizing task before her and leads to the center of the poem: “I swallowed.” As an initiation into her father’s secret society, eating oysters at the Union Oyster House represents for the narrator a loss of innocence and an acceptance, at 15, of the daughter’s familial and social roles.

The second section, “How We Danced,” continues the narrator’s account of significant interactions with her father. She recalls dancing with her father at a family wedding. The images reinforce the couple’s intimacy; they “orbited” “like angels washing themselves,” “like two birds on fire.” Her father leads—her role is to follow, of course—but after the center statement, “and we were dear, / very dear,” the images

shift, and his presence is described as lurking, dangerous. In her memory, she dwells on the champagne they drank together and what was happening outside the intimate father zone. The crystal, the bride and groom, and her mother dancing with 20 men provide background for the intimacy-turned-assault of her father's inappropriate physical desire: "the serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me / like a great god and we bent together / like two lonely swans."

In "The Boat," which follows, the young narrator captures vividly a close encounter with death in a speedboat being driven dangerously fast by her father. The father's role is again destructive; he puts his family's lives in danger. Sexton's images are unexpected: She tumbles "like a loose kumquat," and the occupants of the boat are "scissors" that cut through the sea. Colors and textures are memorable, including waves as boulders, the sea as a "pitiless" "green room." With her, we hold our breath underwater (emphasized by repetition, "Under. Under. Under.") until they surface. She knows that they have been "clasped" by a "cold wing," but death holds no appeal for her at that age. "The dead are very close," but she does not belong with them yet: "You have no business. / No business here."

"Santa" and "Friends" continue the recollections of times her father has failed her and chronicle the narrator's descent into corruption. Images are increasingly sexual, emphasizing her physical pain as well as her emotional distance from her father-protector.

The final, long section deals with Sexton's concern that her father was not, indeed, her real father. In "Bogat," she tells the story of the "monster of doubt" that has arisen. Her images are sharp and biological, full of pain and disillusionment as she questions her conception, her history, and her identity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the descriptive images in "Oysters." How has Sexton conveyed her distaste as well as her delight to be part of her father's world?
2. How do the word choices and sentence composition in "The Boat" provide an appropriate voice for describing the incident?
3. Compare the images that Sexton associates with her father with those with which Sylvia Plath portrays her own, in "Daddy."

"The Starry Night" (1962)

In "The Starry Night," published in her second collection, *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton relies on dazzling images to probe her desire to be incorporated into the divine. Crafting an evocative description of Vincent Van Gogh's famous expressionistic painting, Sexton plays with the idea of death. As the poet's was, Van Gogh's life was tormented and ended in suicide. Including the quotation from Van Gogh's letter, Sexton stresses a connection between the starry night and religion, between the heavens and Heaven. Her poetry often involves a religious quest, as well as a fascination with death; those themes combine here with a longing to control her own death, which she emphasizes in her twice-repeated phrase "This is how / I want to die." After the final repetition, she elaborates on her desire for a death that is dramatic, natural, but somehow lacking in physicality—she wishes to be "sucked up" by some unseen divine force, to be pulled without fanfare or pain into the spinning star-filled night sky: "sucked up by that great dragon, to split / from my life with no flag, / no belly/ no cry."

Sexton's images describe the movement and power of Van Gogh's painting. For her, the silent, angularly drawn town is not important; it is the curling, coiling lines that she focuses on, for in the movement, she sees life and strength. The most prominent image in the foreground of the painting is the dark, waving vegetation that reaches up into the sky. Sexton finds it ominously personal: "one black haired tree slips up like a drowned woman into the hot sky." She emphasizes heat: "The night boils with eleven stars." She evokes an invisible authority that moves and controls the heavens—"The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars"—and gives the Moon godly attributes: it "bulges in its orange irons / to push children, like a god, from its eye."

Sexton's style in this poem, as usual, is deliberately colloquial and accessible. In two simple six-line

verses and one five-line extended sentence, she shows us her interpretation of Van Gogh's painting and overlays it with her own longing to know spirituality and death. She depends on the use of short direct statements interspersed among complex descriptions: "The town is silent." "It moves. They are all alive." "This is how / I want to die." Her many monosyllabic word choices effectively convey the sense of the painting, as well as her own quest for a physical and spiritual transformation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the painting by Van Gogh to Sexton's poem that evokes it. You can find a copy of the painting at <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starrynight.html>.
2. Read the poem aloud and listen for repetition of the sounds. What sound do you hear most? Does recognizing frequent sound repetition help you get a sense of the mood or meaning of the poem that otherwise might escape you?

"The Truth the Dead Know" (1962)

"The Truth the Dead Know" is a poem Sexton wrote in response to the deaths of her parents, which occurred within three months of each other in 1959. It begins starkly, "Gone, I say and walk from the church," and the theme of rigid, unchangeable death persists throughout the poem. When her loved ones have gone from her, the exhausted narrator leaves the scene, unwilling to follow meaningless funeral traditions. She rejects the conventional rites that surround the end of life, choosing to walk, rather than take the traditional, formal ride with the interment motorcade. She then escapes to the seashore, where she tries to take refuge in human contact while she numbly reflects on what it means to be dead, as well as what it means to be alive when both parents are gone. In this poem, the narrator recognizes and grapples fiercely with the hardest reality of living, our human mortality.

"The Truth the Dead Know" is part of her second collection of poems, *All My Pretty Ones*, which, Sexton claimed later, were written to communicate

the causes of madness. Two significant deaths within a short time of each other crushed her spirit, threatening her always-fragile mental health. The narrator, despite trying to separate herself physically from the reality of death, finds it waiting for her in her refuge by the sea. She continues to be haunted by her parents' deaths and the harsh afterlife she envisions for them.

This poem is a good example of Sexton's ability to write bare narrative lines, such as "I am tired of being brave," that frankly convey her reaction to months of bearing witness to suffering. The poem shows her powerful use of imagery and controlled rhyme in a structured *abab cdcd* form. The images she chose for this poem are uniformly hard, reflecting the inflexibility of death, beginning with "the stiff procession" from the church. When she flees to the sea, it is not the soft Cape Cod summer seashore that we might expect, for "the sun gutters in the sky" and "the sea swings in like an iron gate." Nature reflects her despair. The wind "falls in like stones," reinforcing the depths of her grief, but she finds temporary comfort in the human touch, in the realization that "No one's alone." The hard images return as Sexton imagines her dead parents as stone bodies in stone boats, shoeless and without need of the formal blessings of the church, which cannot penetrate their rock surroundings anyway. Just as she has refused the "stiff procession" from the church, so they "refuse / to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone." No heavenly afterlife for them; they lie like stone, among stone, as the sea rocks beneath them.

In this four-quatrain poem, the poet once more works to take control of extremely painful events in her life by forcing pattern and meaning on them. Her friend the poet Maxine Kumin recalls that this is one of the poems that Sexton revised repeatedly, working to streamline the language and cleanse it of biographical or sentimental details. Long-vowel rhymes such as *cultivate* and *iron gate, more like stone and knucklebone*, emphasize the finality and the unforgiving nature of death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Truth the Dead Know" appeared in Sexton's second collection of poems, *All My Pretty*

Ones. Look up the literary allusion of the title phrase, examine its context, and relate it to the content of this poem.

2. Compare this poem with Sylvia Plath's "Full Fathom Five" (<http://www.angelfire.com/tn/plath/ff5.html>) and "All the Dead Dears" (<http://www.angelfire.com/tn/plath/dears.html>). How are the ways the two poets envision the dead similar? Note how their styles and images and the tones of their narrators differ. Evaluate the effects of each of the poems on their audiences.
3. Compare the isolated afterlife Sexton foresees for her parents with that she describes for her mentor, the poet John Holmes, in "Somewhere in Africa."

"Young" (1962)

"Young," published in *All My Pretty Ones*, views a nostalgic youthful memory through a lens of adult cynicism. The poem takes the shape of one long sensuous sentence, recollecting the child's "brand new body / which was not a woman's yet" lying on the grass looking up at the summer night sky, "a thousand doors ago." Doors represent choices and changes; for the narrator, not just time, but opportunities have passed since she was an innocent child looking up into the night sky.

In her privileged childhood summer existence on Squirrel Island, where she did indeed live in a "big house with four / garages," young Anne Sexton must have experienced many such nights. As the narrator lies on the grass by herself, throwing questions up at the stars, Mother and Father have a background presence; they are remote and separate, not only from the lonely narrator, but also from each other. Mother is represented by her window: "a funnel / of yellow heat running out." Her father's window is "half-shut / an eye where sleepers pass." The images associated with the parents reflect Sexton's memory of her mother's cold materialism and her father's alcoholism, both of which caused her to feel isolated.

Throughout the poem Sexton's lines are short and filled with idyllic summer images such as clover wrinkling and crickets ticking. The theme of this

poem is innocence, but the innocence is unexpectedly mocked near the end of the poem-sentence. The narrative voice of the poem establishes a mood of carefree childish summer happiness that is challenged by her choice of words near the end: "*thought* God could really see." The adult narrator has suddenly intruded, reflecting that she once was young enough to trust that "God could really see / the heat and the painted light." Though the child had faith, the adult, looking back, knows that neither parents nor God was really able to see her. The distance between the child and the parents and between the child and the heavens reinforces the atmosphere of loneliness, for God turns out to be no more present than the parents. After that revelation, the narrator becomes the child again and finishes with her only rhyming line: "elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the images in "Young." How do they set the mood for the poem? Why is establishing such a mood important in order for the ending of the poem to be effective?
2. Contrast this poem with "Old," also published in her book *All My Pretty Ones*, the collection of poems that Sexton later said were written to explain the causes of her madness.
3. Confessional poets seem to want their audiences to see the persona of the poem and writer as one and the same. Do you think the use of biographical details is limiting to the appeal of the poem, or do they enhance its impact?

"Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" (1966)

Sexton wrote "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" for her daughter Linda's, 11th birthday. In the poem, published as part of Sexton's 1966 collection, *Live or Die*, she reflects with pride on the girl's approaching physical maturation. While recalling her own confusing experience of puberty, she celebrates her daughter's budding sexuality. Comparing the emerging woman to "an acre of yellow beans" they had once planted that turned out to

be “too much” to consume, she creates a sequence of associations and advice.

“Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” continues Sexton’s examination of the delineations between generations. The poet encourages her daughter to accept the changes puberty will introduce, to believe in newness, potential, and growth: “What I want to say, Linda, / is that there is nothing in your body that lies. / All that is new is telling the truth.” She acknowledges both closeness and distance between mother and daughter, suggesting that she wishes Linda to diverge from the path of self-doubt that has been modeled within the family. Remembering her own isolation at that age, when she “waited like a target,” and no one offered her guidance, the poet’s birthday gifts to her daughter are reassurance, solidarity, and advice: “Let your body in / let it tie you in / in comfort.” The calm counsel of her narrator/self stands in contrast to the persistent difficulties that the suicidal Sexton has had in accepting the continued existence of her own body. She encourages her daughter to embrace the woman’s life that awaits her, to be independent and secure. Yet, as did Sexton’s own mother, whose portrait hung in the family home on the wall opposite her own, the poet remains proudly, powerfully, perhaps threateningly, present in her daughter’s life: “I’m here. That somebody else, / an old tree in the background.”

The age of 12—high noon, the “ghost hour”—signifies for the poet the time at which the girl child becomes available to men, who will scale walls to get to her. Sexton is not a conventionally protective mother whose vision of motherhood might include shielding Linda from the invading “men bare to the waist.” For the always-sensual Sexton, men *belong* there; they are a natural part of the landscape of young womanhood. Her main concern is not to preserve Linda’s sexual innocence but to reassure her daughter before the men arrive that she is strong: Her “bones are lovely.” The girl already has structures of strength and support within herself.

Twice Sexton repeats, “What I want to say, Linda,” as if her meaning might be lost in the stunning array of images. She fills “Little Girl” with striking evocations of garden and of womb. Things that grow, that are full of sensuality, appear in each section: “mush-

rooms and garlic buds all engorged,” “apples beginning to swell,” “sprouts,” a glut of string beans. The imagery is lush with potential, a celebration of physical abundance.

This poem, while delighting in life and its possibilities, ultimately blurs the lines between mother and daughter. Once again it becomes clear that in the mind of this poet, the older generation remains a powerful presence, for good or for ill, in its children.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the tone of various sections of this poem. Does the speaker maintain a single attitude toward her subject throughout, or can you discern differences?
2. Why do you think Sexton scatters words and phrases in italics throughout the poem? How do your observations help you better understand the poem’s significance?
3. Audiences were often moved when Sexton read “Little Girl” in the presence of her daughter. Many heard it as a mother’s proud celebration of Linda’s life, while others found it more troubling. Read the poem carefully several times and compose an argument for a positive or a negative reading of the poem.
4. Read Sexton’s earlier poems “Housewife” and “The Double Image.” In what ways can you find thematic similarities? Are there significant differences in the poems’ resolutions?

“Somewhere in Africa” (1966)

“Somewhere in Africa” is an elegy written to John Holmes, the Boston poet who had been one of Sexton’s first teachers and mentors. In his workshop she had learned the techniques that allowed her to harness the wild images of her unconscious mind. Yet, Holmes had discouraged her from publishing her first collection, viewing the poems as too intimate, too embarrassingly frank in their presentation of her madness. Holmes preferred a more conservative approach to poetry, one that depended on erudite literary allusions and traditional forms. Upon his death, in his honor, Sexton constructed one of her

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in “The Poet,” wrote, “The experience of each new age requires a new confession.” Discuss what “confessional” poetry is. In which of Sexton’s poems do you see the most evidence that she fits into this school?
5. Compare “Man and Wife,” from Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (winner of the National Book Award in 1959), with Sexton’s 1963 poem named “Man and Wife.” What similarities and differences do you see between the two poems?
6. Robert Lowell referred to his writing before *Life Studies* as “cooked,” meaning it was formal and impersonal, while the new way of writing he was exploring in the late 1950s was “raw” and painfully personal. *Life Studies* is credited with starting the confessional movement in poetry. Identify the raw elements of Lowell’s and Sexton’s poetry, and discuss why the confessional way of writing might have offended their audiences. What do you think they hoped to gain by sharing such raw information with the public? Do you think the creation of art requires some reshaping and “cooking”? Point to specific poems by Sexton, Lowell, and Sylvia Plath to support your conclusions.
7. Another woman from New England who wrote poetry about her life and observations, her religious strivings and doubts, and the presence of death in life was Emily Dickinson. Compare Dickinson’s “Much madness is divinest sense” with Sexton’s “Her Kind” and/or Dickinson’s “Faith Is a fine invention” with Sexton’s “The Poet of Ignorance” from her posthumous collection *The Awful Rowing toward God*.
8. Sexton’s images are central to her poetry, and she occasionally called herself an “imagist.” Compare her poems “The Kite” and “Ghosts” to William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” and Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” two examples of the early-20th-century imagist movement. Do you think Sexton demonstrates their poetic principles sufficiently to be classified with them?
9. Read some of Sexton’s poem adaptations of the Grimms’ fairy tales, published in 1971 as *Transformations*. How does her use of images from popular culture both enhance the impact of her interpretations of the tales and, perhaps, distance a 21st-century reader from them?
10. The women’s movement created the opportunity for women to write about issues that had not traditionally been themes of poetry, including the frustrations some women felt in their roles as wives and mothers. Compare some of the poems about motherhood written by Sexton (such as “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman”) with those of Audre Lorde (“The Woman Thing,” “Black Mother Woman”) and Sylvia Plath (“Morning Song”). How does this group of contemporary women poets represent mothering?
11. Another contemporary of Sexton’s is the poet Adrienne Rich, with whom she shares themes identified as “feminist.” They both wrote explicitly about the experiences of women and their own identities as women artists. Read Rich’s poem “Integrity” and Sexton’s poem “Her Kind,” and compare the ways in which the narrator defines herself in each one.
12. Sexton enjoyed the role of storyteller; many of her poems (“Some Foreign Letters,” “The Double Image,” “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward”) can be described as dramatic narratives with characters, scenes, and a story to tell. Read other dramatic narrative poems, such as Robert Frost’s “Home Burial,” and look for similarities and differences in language, images, composition, and effect.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- “Anne Sexton.” Modern American Poetry. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/sexton.htm. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- “Anne Sexton.” Poets.org. Available online. URL: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/14>. Accessed by May 21, 2007.
- Cam, Heather. “Sylvia Plath’s Debt to Anne Sexton.” *American Literature* 59, no. 3. (October 1987): 429–432.

- Colburn, Steven E., ed. *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- . *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose of Anne Sexton*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985.
- Davison, Peter. "A New Skin: Anne Sexton, 1956–1961." In *The Fading Smile*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.
- Gallagher, Brian. "The Expanded Use of Simile in Anne Sexton's Transformations." *Notes on Modern American Literature* 3 (Summer 1979): 9–13.
- George, Diana Hume. *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- George, Diana Hume, ed. *Sexton: Selected Criticism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Hall, Caroline King Barnard. *Anne Sexton*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.
- Harrison, B. G. "The Dead Poetess Society." *Mademoiselle* 97 (December 1991): 80.
- Hoffmann, Nancy Jo. "Reading Women's Poetry: The Meaning and Our Lives." *College English* 34 (October 1972): 48–62.
- Jones, A. R. "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton." *Critical Quarterly* 6 (Spring 1965): 11–30.
- Juhasz, Susanne. "'The Excitable Gift': The Poetry of Anne Sexton." In *Naked and Fiery Forms, Modern American Poetry by Women, a New Tradition*. New York: Octagon Books, 1978.
- Markey, Janice. *A New Tradition? The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich: A Study of Feminism and Poetry*. New York: Peter Lang, 1985.
- McClatchy, J. D., ed. *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- McGill, W. J. "Anne Sexton and God." *Commonweal* 104 (May 13, 1977): 304–306.
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
- . "Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton." *New England Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (December 1983): 483–503.
- Mills, Ralph J. *Creation's Very Self: On the Personal Element in Recent American Poetry*. Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University, 1969, 33–34.
- . "A Note on the Personal Element in Recent American Poetry." *Chicago Circle Studies* 1 (December 1965): 7–11.
- Morton, Richard E. *Anne Sexton's Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.
- Northouse, Cameron, and Thomas P. Walsh. *Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1974.
- Phillips, Robert. *The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Sexton, Linda Gray. "A Daughter's Story: I Knew Her Best." *New York Times Book Review*, 18 August 1991, p. 20.
- Sexton, Linda Gray, and Lois Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Vendler, Helen. "Anne Sexton." In *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda W., ed. *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989.

Eileen Crowe



MAY SWENSON (1913–1989)

What is the experience of poetry? Choosing to analyze this experience for myself after an engrossment of many years, I see it based in a craving to get through the curtains of things as they *appear*, to things as they *are*, and then into the larger, wilder space of things as they *are becoming*.

(“The Poet as Anti-Specialist”)

According to Harold Bloom, the influential American literary critic and scholar, the poet May Swenson ranks with Marianne Moore and ELIZABETH BISHOP as one of the three top women poets of the 20th century, and her impressive publication record and list of literary awards reinforce Bloom’s assertion, in spite of its sexist overtones, (275). During her lifetime Swenson’s poems were published in *Antaeus*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Carleton Miscellany*, the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Parnassus*, and *Poetry*. She received numerous grants and fellowships, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Ford Foundation Poet-Playwright Grant, an Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

To say that Swenson’s subject matter was wide and varied does not begin to describe the depth and visual clarity with which she approached the world. Some of her poems might be categorized by readers unfamiliar with her work into simple groupings labeled space, science, sound, sex, and sports, but all of her poems address human nature, invention, and the natural world, themes that she reveled in exploring.

Born to pioneering parents, May Swenson was the first child of Margaret Hellberg and Dan Arthur Swenson, who were immigrants from Sweden and converts to the Mormon religion. Dan Swenson immigrated to America in 1894, and after returning

to Sweden to serve a Mormon mission, he met Margaret Hellberg in church. The two were married on August 21, 1912. Margaret and Dan decided to start their family right away, and on May 28, 1913, Anna Thilda May Swenson was born in Logan, Utah. In Swenson’s earlier publications, scholars of her work will frequently encounter conflicting data that report her birth in 1919, an error that was of Swenson’s own making. She wanted publishers, readers, and her peers to believe that she was younger than she actually was, and so she simply shaved off six years and reported her birth year as 1919.

May was the first of the Swensons’ 10 children, and as were many first-born daughters, she was expected to help with the laundry, the housework, and the cooking. Her father even installed a low sink in the kitchen so the children could help with the dishes. May preferred the outdoor work in the family’s garden and orchard, but her childhood was not composed entirely of work. May’s childhood friends remember that she spent hours alone reading, but they also remember jumping rope with her and playing games like jacks and kick the can. At about the age of 12, May began to keep a journal. “One day, May showed a page to her older cousin Edna—nicknamed ‘Sunny’—who read the page aloud, noticed that the sentences scanned, and remarked that May was writing poetry in her diary” (Knudson and Bigelow 27). Although that moment in May’s childhood is often described as the first time anyone called her

a poet, she had known that she wanted to be a writer much earlier than that. A biographical note in *Utah Sings* (1934), one of Swenson's earliest publications, quotes her as saying, "I determined to be a writer when I was seven years old" (274).

Storytelling was another of Swenson's early literary talents. Her siblings remember her making up stories about the family and telling them while she cut their hair and scrubbed the floors. Swenson's first publication was the result of a contest at Logan High School. Her short story called "Christmas Day" won the Vernon Short Story Medal, \$25, and a place in the school's newspaper, the *Grizzly*, in 1929.

After high school, Swenson followed in her father's footsteps by enrolling at Utah State Agricultural College (USAC), where she wrote for the campus newspaper *Student Life*. By her junior year Swenson had her own humor column in *Student Life*, which she called "Station Hooey: Over the U.S.A.C. Network." The logo for her column depicted a winking gentleman in a suit coat and tie, with shiny black hair parted in the middle and slicked back, in front of a round radio-broadcasting microphone. The tone and humor in "Station Hooey" would have reminded college students at USAC of contemporary radio programs. Swenson also contributed to the *Scribble*, the campus literary magazine, where her first poem, "Three Hues of Melody" was published in 1932. It was through her association with the *Scribble* that Swenson met and formed lasting friendships with a creative and engaging community of writers, including Edith Welch, who became Swenson's closest friend at USAC; Austin Fife, who became a well-known folklorist; Ray B. West, Jr., who would eventually found the *Rocky Mountain Review* and publish some of Swenson's poetry; and the poets Veneta Nielsen and Grant Redford, who both went on to become English professors. Nielsen and Redford kept in touch with Swenson and often read her published work to their classes.

After obtaining her bachelor's degree from SAG, Swenson spent a little time writing for the *Herald*, the local Logan newspaper, but quickly persuaded her parents to let her move to Salt Lake City to live with her cousin Sunny. Swenson found work in the

advertising department for a newspaper there, but by 1936, she knew she had to leave Utah in order to make her own way. This time she convinced her parents to let her travel with Sunny, who was on her way to pick up a new car. Swenson borrowed \$200 from her parents to pay for the "vacation," which they had lent willingly because she had not told them about her real plan. Sunny and May boarded the Greyhound bus intending to stop in Michigan for the new car and then drive on to New York. Although Sunny was only going for a visit, May planned to stay.

In the late 1930s, the United States was fully immersed in the Great Depression, and as Swenson settled in to life in New York City, she realized that she would not be able to find work as a newspaper reporter. Instead, "May advertised as a writer's helper, and after many interviews with 'crackpots' she found 'bosses' who paid her small sums as an editor and ghostwriter" (Knudson and Bigelow 39). Swenson accepted one of these positions with Anzia Yezierska, whose fiction from the 1920s had been successful enough to be made into film. However, Yezierska was also struggling financially and was unable to offer much of a salary. She introduced Swenson to her nephew, Arnold Kates, who worked in advertising and had a large apartment. In order to make ends meet, Swenson cleaned his apartment. Swenson was too proud to ask her family for help, and she rejected Yezierska's suggestion that she marry Kates as a solution her financial problems.

Instead, Swenson applied for a job with the Federal Writers Project. In order to be eligible for this program, artists had to be "indigent" and receiving welfare, and so she had to lie. Swenson claimed that she had no relatives, no insurance, no money, and no one to support her, even though she knew her father would have been able to help her if he had known about her circumstances. Swenson was accepted into the program and was able to work for a year before her lie was discovered. She worked with the Living Lore Unit of the Federal Writers Project interviewing working-class people in New York City. Swenson lost her job with the project when a relief worker discovered that she had lied on her application. She worked for a while with the United States Travel Bureau, but when the war

began, travel decreased and Swenson soon found herself out of work again.

Swenson's next employment opportunity was as a typist with the Federal Wholesale Druggists' Association, where she was employed for the next eight years (1942–49). She accepted this position with the intention of finding a way to utilize her writing skills. She wrote news releases, letters, and convention speeches and eventually became the editor of the *Federal Pharmacist* and the *Federal News Capsule*, which were two industry publications. At this job she earned \$75 per week, and by the time she decided to take a year off to write, she had saved \$1,000 from her salary. The goal was to have her poetry published, and she knew that meant two things: spending a great deal of time writing and tackling the “messy business” of making contacts in the publishing world (Knudson and Bigelow 56).

As a member of the Raven Poetry Club, Swenson had already met Alfred Kreyborg, a friend who shared her love of chess. Kreyborg had been the president of the Poetry Society of America from 1943 to 1945 and had been instrumental in helping poets such as Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams gain recognition. On January 26, 1949, Swenson invited Kreyborg to tea, asking him to suggest influential magazines where she might submit her work. At tea, Swenson asked him whether he would be willing to recommend her and her poetry to some of these editors. The result of this meeting took the form of a letter dated February 9, 1949, from William Rose Benet, one of the editors of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. It reads: “Mr. Kreyborg spoke to me about you, and I am glad that you sent in your poems. I like the ones called ‘Haymaking’ and ‘Goodnight,’ and am showing them to the other editors” (Knudson and Bigelow 56). Swenson's first breakthrough occurred the same year with the publication of “Haymaking” in the *Saturday Review of Literature* along with the publication of a group of poems in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*. Swenson's poetry was featured alongside the works of authors such as Henry Miller, Jean Genet, and Jorge Luis Borges, all controversial and experimental writers, because James Laughlin, her editor at *New Direc-*

tions, was interested in publishing literature that moved in “new directions.”

Many doors of opportunity opened to Swenson after the publication of her poems. In fall 1950 she received an invitation to Yaddo, a residence and retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York, for artists, writers, and composers, where she met the poet ELIZABETH BISHOP. They cultivated a lifelong friendship through correspondence, beginning with a letter dated December 12, 1950, in which Swenson invited Bishop to visit her in Greenwich Village over Christmas. Although Bishop declined the invitation, the two continued to write more than 200 letters over a 29-year period, the breadth and depth of which Gardner McFall has called a “vast correspondence . . . between supplicant and master” (McFall 5). It is clear from their letters that the two poets admired each other's work, and it is common to find one offering comments on the other's drafts. In their initial correspondence, Bishop often positioned herself as the mentor, and Swenson's grateful tone reinforces that notion. As their communication progressed, however, Swenson gained ground and their letters began to sound like correspondence between two equals.

By the mid-1950s Swenson took a part-time job with James Laughlin at *New Directions* reading manuscript submissions. She worked there for 12 years and was also “chief writer of rejection letters” (Knudson and Bigelow 57), a task that must have been difficult for someone accustomed to receiving them herself. Swenson had received eight rejections from Howard Moss, editor at the *New Yorker*, for example, before he called in 1952 to accept her poem “By Morning.”

Swenson's next major accomplishment was the acceptance of her first collection of poetry, *Another Animal*. The correspondence from John Hall Wheelock, an editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, arrived on May 28, 1953. She was delighted by his letter, which congratulated her on the quality and originality of her poetry, in part because Wheelock himself was a poet. Swenson replied immediately, “I hope that when I next see you I can tell you what a great delight your letter brought—it came on my birthday” (Knudson and Bigelow 59). Swenson was 40 years old.

Over the next 10 years, Swenson would take short-term and part-time jobs as a typist and dictaphone operator so that she would be free to quit and write poetry. She made it a practice to save parts of her salary until she had enough to retreat again at Yaddo or MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, another artist's retreat. During these retreats Swenson was able to engage with a vibrant community of artists. At Yaddo, Swenson attended regular séances with Ted Hughes and SYLVIA PLATH, in which she helped them "tip the table," an experience that inspired her poem "The Fingers." She played chess with Marcel Duchamp and sat for portraits with numerous artists, including Beauford Delaney, whose portrait of Swenson now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Other friendships included the composer Ruth Anderson, the biographer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, the poet Louise Bogan, and the artist Milton Avery.

In 1957 Swenson left another job to attend the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont, in part because the poet John Ciardi had named her the Robert Frost Fellow that year. She hoped the conference would be an opportunity to find an editor for her new collection, *A Cage of Spines*. She also planned to meet Robert Frost, who she hoped might even like her poetry. Although she was able to have a short interview with Frost, his response to her book was to say simply that it "reeks with poetry," a response that puzzled Swenson. She writes, "He said no more. His handsome old face had an impassive ruffian look. . . . Ponderously he stood up. And I never did find out what he meant. I was too paralyzed to ask" (Knudson and Bigelow 68). At Bread Loaf that summer Swenson made another friend, Alma Routsong, who later asked her to read a manuscript called *Patience and Sarah*, which eventually became a classic but was not being published despite Alma's efforts. Swenson loved the novel and encouraged Alma not to give up.

Another result of Swenson's efforts at Bread Loaf was the 1958 publication of her second book, *A Cage of Spines*. In 1959 she began a reading tour of college campuses, which included a homecoming and reading in Logan, Utah. Swenson was surprised to find that she enjoyed reading for large groups in

Logan, because she was often very nervous before public readings. To overcome her fear she would practice her poems aloud, recording them over and over again into a tape recorder. Swenson continued to travel and do public readings in order to supplement her meager income.

Finally, Swenson was able to quit the reading circuit and take a leave from her job at *New Directions* when she won a Guggenheim Foundation grant and an Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship. In 1960 Swenson and her companion, Pearl Schwartz, used the money to purchase camping gear and a French car and camped their way through Italy, Spain, and France. Swenson's poetry during this time reflects on both the natural and the artistic beauty that she encountered in Europe.

From 1959 to 1966 Swenson served as editor at *New Directions*. In 1965 she won a theater-association grant from the Ford Foundation, which enabled her to spend a year doing research and writing a play. She read her favorite playwrights, Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, among others, and attended rehearsals of *The Changeling* to learn from the director Elia Kazan. Swenson's play *The Floor* was the result of her year-long efforts; as a comedy of the absurd that deals specifically with time and space, it clearly reflects the influence of both Beckett and Ionesco.

During the academic year of 1966–67 Swenson accepted a position as a writer in residence at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana. Her salary was \$20,000 for teaching 12 students once a week. It was an opportunity she could not pass up, despite her fear of teaching. During her time at Purdue she met a fellow faculty member, Rozanne Knudson, who shared her love of poetry. "Zan" introduced her to the world of sports, and in turn, Swenson introduced Zan to a birder's perspective. The two women shared a chemistry and camaraderie that evolved into a loving life partnership. Swenson wrote several sporting poems, such as "Analysis of Baseball" and "Watching the Jets Lose to Buffalo at Shea" as a result of Zan's affinity for sporting events. At the end of her year at Purdue, Swenson and Knudson purchased a summer home together in Sea Cliff, Long Island. Swenson nicknamed the house "Kestrel's Nest" after iden-

tifying a hawk that lived nearby. A series of nature and water poems were inspired by the views from Sea Cliff; Swenson could see the Long Island Sound from every room.

The 1970s gave Swenson some new and interesting challenges. Swenson's first language was Swedish, and in the 1960s a Bollingen Foundation prize had sponsored her translation of the Swedish poets Ingemar Gustafson, Werner Aspenström, Eric Lindgren, Gunnar Ekelöf, Harry Martinson, and Karin Boye, which Swenson included in her 1967 collection called *Half Sun Half Sleep*. In the early 1970s the University of Pittsburgh Press asked her to translate a collection by Tomas Tranströmer, a noted Swedish poet, for an American audience. Swenson enjoyed the challenge and thought of the work as a kind of puzzle to be solved. At the same time Swenson's science poems were being recognized. She was delighted to be included in anthologies that placed her work beside the likes of Sir Isaac Newton, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and James D. Watson. Although Swenson never enjoyed public speaking, she did accept short teaching assignments at the University of Lethbridge in Canada; at the University of California, Riverside; and at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

In the early 1980s Swenson was named a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and in 1981 she received Yale's Bollingen Prize for poetry, joining the ranks of previous winners such as Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost. Swenson often took refuge each spring and autumn in a house in Bethany Beach, Delaware, where she was able to escape the social pressures that were continuing to encroach on her writing time. In 1987 she returned to Logan, Utah, to receive an honorary doctorate from Utah State University. While she was in Logan, Swenson received word that she had been awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in the amount of \$380,000. She gave each of her brothers and sisters a \$3,000 "Swenson Fellowship" in celebration.

In 1989 Swenson observed her 76th birthday during a family reunion in Utah. She was tired from the asthma attacks she had experienced on her recent trip to the University of Washington in Seattle, where she had just given the THEODORE ROETHKE reading,

but she decided to go ahead with plans for a family dinner on her return trip to Sea Cliff. It was the last time she would be with all of her family in Utah. She treated the Swenson clan to an expensive meal at a French restaurant and presented each member with a copy of a new poem she had written for them called "Night Visits with the Family II."

In December 1989 Swenson and Knudson moved to their winter residence in Ocean View, Delaware, the "large house" that Swenson refers to in her poem "Last Day." The first few lines are contemplative and the imagery indicates that Swenson was aware she was nearing the end of her life:

I'm having a sunbath on the rug
alone in a large house facing south.
A tall window admits a golden trough
the length of a coffin in which I lie
in December, the last day of the year. (Knudson
and Bigelow 123)

Swenson died of a heart attack on December 4, 1989, the result of high blood pressure and severe asthma. During her lifetime she had published 11 volumes of poetry and received numerous awards and extensive recognition for her work.

"By Morning" (1952)

This poem was the first of 59 poems Swenson would publish with Howard Moss and the *New Yorker* over 38 years. "By Morning" is one of Swenson's early shape poems, an experimentation in which she uses white space or capitalization to give a poem a unique shape or form. She explains in a note from *Iconographs*, a collection of her shape poems, that her intention was to "cause an instant object-to-eye-encounter with each poem before it is read word-for-word. To have simultaneity as well as sequence. To make an existence in space, as well as time, for the poem." "By Morning" is also one of Swenson's riddle poems, which flirt with meaning rather than facing it directly. These riddle poems are evocative and playful; they invite the reader to guess at the subject matter with the hints Swenson provides. The

first two stanzas of “By Morning” abandon punctuation entirely and utilize quirky spacing to hint at a specific, fluttery kind of weather:

Some for everyone
plenty

and more coming

Fresh dainty airily arriving
everywhere at once.

Although the spaces and repetition clearly suggest a breathy, tumbling type of precipitation, Moss believed that readers might not fully understand the concept of a riddling poem, and so he asked whether Swenson would be willing to publish it with a different title. She agreed because she was delighted at the prospect of seeing “*Snow by Morning*” in the *New Yorker’s* prominent literary pages.

Swenson uses an obvious metaphor for snow, the imagery of a blanket, but then makes it fresh again by allowing the blanket magically to change the city into a more rural and pastoral landscape, where

Streets will be fields
cars be fumbling sheep

A deep bright harvest will be seeded
in a night.

“By Morning” is a celebratory poem that acknowledges the playful power of nature to soften the hard edges of both the city and its inhabitants. By morning, Swenson concludes, “we’ll be children / feeding on manna / a new loaf on every doorsill.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Spend some time outdoors observing nature. Identify a common natural phenomenon or a familiar animal as the subject and attempt your own shape or riddle poem. Pay particular attention to your description and try to make the com-

mon and familiar subject seem new by looking at it with a fresh perspective.

2. Read the full text of Swenson’s poem “By Morning,” and compare or contrast it to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem “The Snow Storm” and Emily Dickinson’s poem “It Sifts from Leaden Sieves” circa 1862. Identify the central images in each poem and be prepared to discuss the differences in stance, style, and tone that each author employs.

“Deciding” (1954)

There is an underlying sexuality in the poem “Deciding,” which is a casual discussion and acceptance of both Swenson’s gender identity and society’s opinion of her sexual orientation. The poet Mark Doty observes that one of Swenson’s techniques is her playfulness, where she “is not only hiding in plain sight, but *flaunting*, as they used to say, a celebration of sexual pleasure” (95). Swenson originally published the poem “Deciding” under the heading “Part 2: Targets in the Brain” in her collection *A Cage of Spines*, a clear indication that this topic was on her mind. She later collected “Deciding” as a “Riddling Poem” in the 1963 collection *To Mix with Time*, a volume that preceded Swenson’s *Poems to Solve* by three years. Perhaps Swenson was not quite ready for “Deciding” to be solved; perhaps she preferred that her sexual orientation remain a riddle. When *Nature: Poems Old and New* was published posthumously in 2000, “Deciding” was finally collected under the grouping “Selves.”

This celebratory “coming-out” poem playfully asks readers to consider lesbian sexuality as a delightful romp, while we reflect on the emerging lesbian as potato:

Deciding to go on digging doing it
what they said outside wasn’t any use
inside hiding it made it get ambitious
like a potato in a dark bin it grew
white grabbers for light

out of its navel-eyes not priding
 itself much just deciding.
 (Swenson, *A Cage of Spines* 56)

However, Swenson does not necessarily want her readers to forget that “hiding it made it get ambitious,” a line that could be read as either cautionary or celebratory. “Deciding” is a decidedly open-ended poem. The lack of punctuation throughout the poem and the potential for readers to base meaning on their own insertions of a pause where commas and periods might be allude to this open-endedness. A reader might scan the first line and read it in this way: Deciding to go on, digging, doing it,” which suggests a kind of plodding persistence. Or, another reader might scan the first line like this: “Deciding to go on! Digging, doing it.” which is a reading that sounds much more hopeful. Finally, Swenson may have been playing around with the potato metaphor and the “Beat generation’s” definition of *digging it* with the following reading of the first line: “Deciding! To go on digging doing *it*.” To *dig it* meant to “like, enjoy, or take pleasure in” something, in this case “doing it,” which is an obvious, if a bit juvenile, reference to sex. By leaving out the punctuation, Swenson does not make any decisions for her readers; in fact, she does not ever conclusively “decide” that coming out is the best option, even for herself. Swenson is deciding that despite the “outside thumps” and societal pressure to conform to stereotypical gender roles that she has seriously considered, she is “going to go on digging doing it,” but she allows her readers to make their own decisions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Review the entire text of Swenson’s poem “Deciding.” As a writing exercise, add your own punctuation to the poem and then read it aloud. Compare your version to two other students’ and analyze the differences in meaning.
2. Consider the effect of the “outside thumps” that the speaker of the poem describes in the middle stanza. What roles do discouragement and imagination play in your life? Write your own poem or creative nonfiction essay exploring these topics.

“Question” (1954)

“Question” originally appeared in Swenson’s first collection of poetry, *Another Animal*, published in 1954 by Charles Scribner’s Sons. As the title of the book implies, Swenson was interested in the interaction and similarities between animal and human worlds. In the first stanza Swenson addresses her own body directly, calling it “my house / my horse my hound,” and asks the ultimate question about death: “what will I do / when you are fallen”? The metaphor of the body as a house for the soul would have been familiar religious imagery to Swenson, because it would not have been uncommon for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to understand the self as both separate from and part of the physical human body. However, Swenson’s next line, “my horse my hound,” complicates the metaphor. The poem begins as a loving and laudatory song but moves quickly into a nervous and fearful plea. The next stanza is concerned primarily with the action of a living body, and the language in the second stanza is parallel to the first. “Where will I sleep” is a direct question for “Body my house,” and “How will I ride / What will I hunt” are queries for “my horse my hound.”

In this poem Swenson uses all the question words in an interesting pattern. When separated from the rest of the poem, the plea becomes more pronounced and intense: *what where how what where how how how*. The only question in this poem that is not a question is *when*. Swenson’s use of the word makes it clear that the speaker in the poem knows that death is inevitable. The timing of the event is not the most important detail; rather, “how will it be” and “how will I hide” are of the utmost concern. If the central question of this poem is seeking to identify the self—what is it? where is it?—then Swenson asks the reader to consider what it means when “Body my good / bright dog is dead”?

The fourth stanza imaginatively suggests that shedding our bodies might be a liberating experience: “How will it be / to lie in the sky / without roof or door / and wind for eye,” but the final two lines worry: “With cloud for a shift / how will I hide?” The speaker also fears that a loss of the body

might simply leave her *self* naked and exposed. The only punctuation found in the poem is a question mark after the final line.

For Discussion or Writing

1. After reading Swenson's "Question," read Walt Whitman's poem "I Sing the Body Electric" and consider the delight and doubt about the human body that are contained in both poems. Write an essay informed by these two poems that considers how gender identity might influence delight or doubt in adolescent body images.
2. In small groups, discuss life's biggest questions; identify what they are, where they will affect you, and how you intend to answer them.

"The Centaur" (1954)

This poem is an imaginative description of a 10-year-old child's summer activities. A recurring theme in Swenson's poetry is the fusing of animal and human behavior to illuminate her reader's understanding of both worlds, and "The Centaur" is a perfect example of how these metaphors work in her poetry. The poem begins with a child who goes out to play in a willow grove. She cuts a willow with her brother's jackknife and fashions it into "a long, limber horse / with a good thick knob for a head" and "a few leaves for the tail." She cinches her brother's belt "around his head for a rein" and then goes riding. As her play intensifies, she imagines herself as "the horse and the rider, / and the leather I slapped to his rump / spanked my own behind." At this moment, the reader begins to see the significance of this poem's title clearly.

But the poem is about more than a simple summer afternoon. Because the speaker in the poem is wearing a dress, we understand that she is, indeed, female. But, the imagery throughout the poem underscores her desire to be more like her brother. She has his belt and his jackknife, and she takes pleasure in riding the willow as it jounces between her thighs. In this poem Swenson is engaging in a playful dialogue that challenges conventional gender roles. But, when

the little girl returns from her adventures, her mother asks what she has been doing because of her startling appearance: The child is a mess. She does not look neat and clean, *as a girl should*. Her hair is out of place and her dress is stretched out from the weight of the jackknife in her pocket. Although the mother in this poem tells her daughter to "go tie back your hair," she also does not scold her for playing too roughly. This poem playfully and joyfully allows the young girl to "try on" the different identities of both horse and boy, suggesting, through the imagery of a centaur, that a nice balance between the characteristics of human and animal, male and female, might be able to coexist peacefully in one child's personality and might even be acceptable to a concerned mother.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Write a poem about a specific childhood memory from which a larger meaning can be extrapolated. Use specific imagery like feelings, sounds, smells, textures, and even taste.
2. After reading "The Centaur," read also "The Ballad of the Light-Eyed Little Girl" by GWENDOLYN BROOKS, "My Lost Youth" by Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, "There Was a Child Went Forth" by Walt Whitman, and "Rough" by Stephen Spender. Compare and contrast the different poetic forms found in these five poems with similar subject matter.
3. Ezra Pound said: "Poetry is a centaur. The thinking, word-arranging, clarifying faculty must move and leap with the energizing, sentient, musical faculties." Swenson quoted this passage in an article called "The Poet as Anti-Specialist." How does this illuminate your reading of "The Centaur"?

"Water Picture" (1955)

This poem first appeared in Swenson's second collection of poetry, *A Cage of Spines*, published in 1958, and was collected again in a number of her subsequent publications, including *To Mix with Time* and *Poems to Solve*. The fact that "Water Picture" was collected so many times may indicate that it was one

of Swenson's favorites. This poem is about imagery and reflection; it is an observation of nature and one of Swenson's many riddle poems.

The four stanzas are rich with repetition and alliteration, which highlight the fact that in this poem, all of the images are doubled and upside down. The poem begins with "In the pond in the park / all things are doubled:" and launches into a lyrical description of a world turned on its head. "Dogs go by, / barking on their backs," and "A flag / wags like a fishhook/ down there in the sky." Although readers are familiar with seeing reflections in water, Swenson's descriptions of the common landscape in a park seem both strange and silly. In a world where "A baby, taken to feed the / ducks, dangles upside-down, / a pink balloon for a buoy," and where "Tree-tops deploy a haze of / cherry bloom for roots," it is comforting to observe a swan fondly kissing herself, ultimately splintering the ridiculousness of a reflected reality. The absurdity of the imagery in Swenson's "Water Picture" serves to remind her readers that the love of one's self is more important than the perception of others.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compose an artistic photograph of yourself with the intention of giving it the title "Self-Representation." Discuss or write about the way you choose to represent yourself to the world in this photograph by answering the following questions.
 - (a) What composition choices did you make?
 - (b) Are they the same or different from the ways in which you represent yourself daily?
 - (c) If you choose to share this photo with others, will they be surprised?
 - (d) How would you like to be categorized?

"The Truth Is Forced" (1961)

This poem, which Swenson began in 1961, was not published until 2000, when it appeared posthumously in a volume of poetry called *Nature: Poems Old and New*. "The Truth Is Forced" is a playfully

honest and yet completely suggestive poem and has since intrigued and engaged new Swenson scholars as the poem that reveals the most of Swenson's own self. The fact that she wrote this poem and also chose not to publish it during her lifetime is especially tantalizing. In the first few lines, Swenson engages her readers in what amounts to a poetic striptease:

Not able to be honest in person
 I wish to be honest in poetry.
 Speaking to you, eye to eye, I lie
 because I cannot bear
 to be conspicuous with the truth.
 Saying it—all of it—would be
 taking off my clothes. (Swenson, *Nature*
 11–12)

As does any striptease, the poem hints that there is more to reveal about the speaker's identity. It is easy to read this poem as Swenson's own musings about her craft and her "most precious properties: / distance, secrecy, privacy" because of the decision she made to keep her sexual orientation private. The poet Mark Doty agrees and validates Swenson's need for mystery. He says: "Naked directness, unadorned, sanitized, tends to work against desire; the power of Eros often lies in what is withheld, at least for awhile." After all, he argues, "What is less sexy than a nudist camp?" (92).

In the second stanza of "The Truth Is Forced," Swenson acknowledges the duplicity of using words to obscure meaning. She realizes that her sensuous, wordy game of hide and seek will only make her readers look harder for what is hidden and she admits that:

One must be honest somewhere. I wish
 to be honest in poetry.
 With the written word.
 Where I can say and cross out
 and say over and say around
 and say on top of and say in between
 and say in symbol, in riddle,
 in double meaning, under masks
 of any feature, in the skins
 of every creature.

And in my own skin, naked.
I am glad, indeed I dearly crave
to become naked in poetry, . . . (Swenson,
Nature 11–12)

These lines are suggestive and at the same time revealing. While they are obviously discussing poetry and her delight in wordplay, they also illuminate possible reasons for her decision to become a poet. Swenson wanted desperately to find meaning in the truth and lay it bare. “By leaving the core of things unvoiced” she offers “a dummy” in place of herself. And yet, she argues in the final lines, “to force the truth / through a poem” will eventually lead to a greater understanding; when two people looking eye to eye can tell “me / and then you” the whole truth with their whole selves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Emily Dickinson's poem “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” and compare it to Swenson's poem “The Truth Is Forced.” In a persuasive essay explore the implications of telling the truth gradually; is honesty always the best policy? Convince your audience of your stance on this ethical question.
2. Swenson's poem highlights some of the beautiful difficulties of conveying a message or meaning through language. As a student of poetry, analyze how poetic devices such as metaphor and simile can both clarify and confuse a subject.

“The Woods at Night” (1962)

Swenson started work on this poem on April 28, 1962, and it was originally published alone in the *Nation* on January 26, 1963. It appeared in her collection *To Mix with Time* that same year. In 1966 “The Woods at Night” was collected in *Poems to Solve* as one of four bird poems. Swenson's love of birds would inspire many other birding poems throughout her career.

When read aloud, “The Woods at Night” sounds like a bird's song. It is extremely focused in that it leaves everything out of the woods except the birds. Swenson uses alliteration and rhyme patterns in

this piece to keep the poem moving along at a brisk tempo, even as most of the birds are sleeping. The reader sees the woods sharply through the nocturnal eyes of the “binocular owl” and is nearly lulled into sleepy observation by the poem's rhymes. In the second stanza Swenson's owl sees and lists six sleeping birds in their natural habitats, naming the “towhee under leaves,” the “titmouse deep / in a twighouse,” the “sapsucker gripped / to a knothole lip,” the “redwing in the reeds,” the “swallow in the willow,” and the “flicker in the oak.” This list concludes with a seventh bird, the one the owl “cannot see.” The distinction “poor whippoorwill” foreshadows what readers assume will be its fate.

By the end of “The Woods at Night,” the reader is reminded of the owl's predatory nature. Our suspicions are nearly confirmed when we discover that the only other bird awake in the forest is the “poor whippoorwill,” whose “stricken eye” is “flayed by the moon” as “her brindled breast / repeats, repeats, repeats, its plea / for cruelty.” As in many of Swenson's poems, the conclusion is open-ended. We do not discover whether the whippoorwill's taunt is answered. Although this poem stops short of directly acknowledging the violence in nature, Swenson hints at it, leaving readers with a more authentic sense of “The Woods at Night.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Robert Frost's “The Oven Bird” in conjunction with Swenson's “The Woods at Night.” Both poems attempt to tell the truth about nature through the eyes of a particular bird. Consider the different perspectives that are presented in each of the poems and articulate how they affect the overall tone and message in each poem respectively.
2. Read Marianne Moore's poem “Bird-Witted” along with “The Woods at Night.” Analyze their playful tones and consider how gender is presented in each poem.

“Blue”/“A Trellis for R.” (1967)

“Blue” is one of Swenson's famous love poems, which often employ vivid imagery from the natu-

3. Finding or getting at the truth and being able to convey it through language are central themes in Swenson's work. How does she define truth, and what reflection does that have on the poet or her readership?
4. Swenson was not a mother in the strict traditional sense, but she thought of her poems as her children. Considering her body of work and her dedication to the craft of poetry, would you say that Swenson was a good mother? And how does this new conception of motherhood inform the more traditional vocation of motherhood?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Herald. *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*. New York: Riverhead, 1995.
- Doty, Mark. "Queer Sweet Thrills: Reading May Swenson." *Yale Review* 88, no. 1 (2000): 86–110.
- Knudson, R. R., and Suzanne Bigelow. *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996.
- "May Swenson." Poets.org. Available online. URL: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/168>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- McFall, Gardner. "Introduction." In *Made with Words*. By May Swenson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
- Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
- Russell, Sue. "A Mysterious and Lavish Power: How Things Continue to Take Place in the Work of May Swenson." *Kenyon Review* 16, no. 3 (1994): 128–139.
- Stearman, Roberta. "The Journey Would Not Be Entirely Foolish: May Swenson's Utah Origins." *Utah English Journal* 25 (1997): 14–19.
- Swenson, May. "Another Animal: Poems." In *Poets of Today*. Introduction by John Hall Wheelock. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.
- . *A Cage of Spines*. New York: Rinehart, 1958.
- . *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- . *The Complete Poems to Solve*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.
- . *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems and Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000.
- . *The Guess and Spell Coloring Book*. Drawings by Lise Gladstone. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.
- . *Half Sun, Half Sleep: New Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.
- . *Iconographs Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.
- . *In Other Words New Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
- . *The Love Poems*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.
- . *May Out West: Poems of May Swenson*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996.
- . *More Poems to Solve*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.
- . *Nature: Poems Old and New*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- . *New and Selected Things Taking Place*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1978.
- . *Poems to Solve*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
- . "The Poet as Anti-Specialist." *Saturday Review*, January 30, 1965, p. 16.
- . *To Mix with Time: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.
- Zona, Kirstin Hotelling. *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Maure Smith



JOHN UPDIKE (1932–2009)

Let literature concern itself, as the Gospels do, with the inner lives of hidden men.

(“Updike on Updike,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1981)

The old anecdote goes like this: Sherwood Anderson, author of *Winesburg, Ohio*, met a young aspiring author named William Faulkner while both were living in New Orleans. At the time, Faulkner was struggling to find his voice. Anderson advised him to return to Mississippi and to write about the world that he knew: to find his own little postage stamp. In this same tradition, much of John Updike’s own writing bares the transparency of his own life and experiences.

Generally regarded as one of 20th-century America’s greatest men of letters, John Hoyer Updike, born in West Reading, Pennsylvania, on March 18, 1932, was the only child of Wesley Russell Updike and Linda Grace Hoyer Updike. They lived with John’s maternal grandparents at 117 Philadelphia Avenue, in Shillington, a suburb of Reading. Updike attended Shillington High School, from which he graduated as senior class president and co-valedictorian in 1950. While he was in ninth grade, his family moved to the farmhouse originally owned by the Hoyers, 11 miles south of Shillington in Plowville. This move, and Updike’s subsequent boredom, are recorded in the short story “The Brown Chest” (1992). While in high school, Updike developed his interest in drawing and writing. He contributed 285 drawings, articles, and poems to the Shillington High School *Chatterbox*.

A life in Shillington, however, was not meant to be for Updike. In Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, a

young aspiring writer named George Willard realizes that if he is to be a great writer, he must leave the small town of Winesburg. While his father earns a living in Winesburg, his mother encourages George to leave town to realize his ambition. Updike’s situation paralleled the fictional life of George Willard. In “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington” Updike writes, “My avenging mission beckoned. Shillington in my mother’s vision was small town—small minds, small concerns, small hopes. We were above all that, though my father drew a living from it” (37–38). Yet he would draw upon Shillington and his memories of it numerous times in his works.

Updike notes in his memoirs, *Self-Consciousness* (1989), that several circumstances led him to be a writer. First, writing was his mother Linda’s passion, and she strongly encouraged John to enter the profession she desired. Additionally, Updike suffered from psoriasis and stuttering. The psoriasis contributed to his writer’s discipline, and his prodigious volume of work was a response to his speech problems. These conditions caused Updike to become a prodigious reader, as well. The move to the farm in Plowville also gave John the motivation to entertain himself with books.

In 1950 he entered Harvard University on a tuition scholarship and studied English. During his first year at Harvard he wrote poems and contributed drawings for the *Harvard Lampoon*. During his

senior year Updike was named editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*. On Updike 26, he married Mary Pennington, a Radcliffe fine arts student. Mary's father was a minister of the First Unitarian Church in Hyde Park, Chicago, and would be the inspiration, both personally and theologically, for several Updike characters. Updike graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in 1954. He won a Knox Fellowship for his thesis, "Non-Horatian Elements in Robert Herrick's Imitations and Echoes of Horace," which enabled him to study at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford. While at Oxford, Updike met Katharine and E. B. White. Katharine, who was the fiction editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, offered him a job at the magazine. In 1955 the Updikes returned to New York and John became a "Talk of the Town" reporter.

In 1957 the Updikes moved to Ipswich, Massachusetts, and in 1958 Harper and Brothers published his first book, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures* (a collection of 55 poems). His first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, and first collection of stories, *The Same Door*, were both published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1959, marking the beginning of a long publishing relationship that continues to this day. He also won a Guggenheim Fellowship, which enabled him to write *Rabbit, Run*. His short story "A Gift from the City" was selected for *The Best American Short Stories 1959*. The following year, Knopf published Updike's most famous novel, *Rabbit, Run*. Set in a fictionalized version of Reading, Pennsylvania, known as Brewer, *Rabbit, Run* is one of many stories in which Updike draws from his childhood, in setting or experience. His Olinger stories, collected in one volume in 1964, are set in a fictionalized Shillington, Pennsylvania. For many of his stories and novels the settings will ostensibly be either Reading, Pennsylvania, or greater New England. This connects him with many American writers who draw upon their sense of place as the foundation for their works. His essay "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington" recalls his early years in Shillington and is set during a midlife return to his hometown, when Updike reflects upon the changes along the main street and reminiscences about its place in his fiction.

In the late 1950s, Updike began reading several theologians, including Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, whose theology would play a significant role in many of Updike's works, beginning with the theological debate in *Rabbit, Run*. Barth sees God as "inconceivable," in that humans cannot recognize God unless God *reveals* himself first. God cannot be found "in the pantheon of human piety and religious inventive skill": He is remote from human consciousness and can be witnessed only through his acts, most notably in the presence of Jesus Christ. Like God, "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man." Barth claims that man is at the boundary between heaven and Earth. Both physically and spiritually humans are bound by their own mortality, and the human landscape represents these limits. For Updike, the landscape represents the extent to which people can unify the physical with the spiritual. The horizon represents the edge of human vision, and what lies beyond the horizon is the product of the narrator's imagination. On a textual level, Updike seeks the ability to unify the body and soul.

While the theme of adultery is present in *Rabbit, Run*, the significance of this theme in Updike's writing began to take shape in the mid-1960s. After a passionate love affair and the contemplation of divorce in 1962, Updike's writing began a period of emphasis on adultery and its consequences. In 1963 he wrote the short story "Couples," which would be developed into the 1968 novel, and was composing the first drafts of *Marry Me*, which would be published in 1976. His stories and poems of this period brooded over the effects and consequences of adultery. Many, including the short story "Leaves," were collected in *The Music School* in 1966. While adultery would be present in most of Updike's fiction, the tone that surrounds it emerged in the 1970s as less brooding and more playful, often giving readers the false impression that Updike endorsed adultery.

During the 1960s Updike's position as a major man of letters in America was taking shape. His novel *The Centaur* won the National Book Award in 1963, and the following year he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, one of

the youngest persons so honored. That same year he received an honorary doctor of letters degree from Ursinus College, the school his mother had attended. In 1966 his story "The Bulgarian Princess" won an O. Henry Prize. In 1968 his novel *Couples* was published and remained on the best-seller list for a year. He also appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, as the subject of the cover story, "The Adulterous Society." His story "Your Lover Just Called" was included in *O. Henry Prize Stories 1968*. Later that year the Updikes moved to London to avoid the Vietnam War protests. While there, Updike began researching President James Buchanan, the only president from Pennsylvania. Buchanan would become the subject of two works: the play *Buchanan Dying* (1974) and the novel *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992).

In 1970 Updike published *Bech: A Book*, the first of three works about Updike's fictional alter ego, Henry Bech. The three volumes (including *Bech Is Back*, 1982, and *Bech at Bay*, 1998) are short story cycles, in the same tradition as Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* or James Joyce's *Dubliners*. The following year, the second Rabbit novel, *Rabbit Redux*, was published, and Updike won the Signet Society Medal for Achievement in the Arts.

In 1975 the tour-de-force novel *A Month of Sundays* was published. It is the first of Updike's *Scarlet Letter* trilogy, in which he examines each of the three main characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel. Updike's interest in Hawthorne, while evident in many of his works, presents itself overtly for the first time in *A Month of Sundays*. James Schiff, in his discussion of Updike's "retelling" of *The Scarlet Letter* (*A Month of Sundays*, *Roger's Version*, and *S.*), suggests that Updike establishes a dialogue with Hawthorne through this retelling. For while Updike's novels remain true to Hawthorne's original myth, Updike takes Hawthorne's novel into the late 20th century to be scrutinized under a postmodern lens. Each novel in the trilogy offers the perspective of one of the main characters (122–130). However, none of the three novels is a straight retelling of *The Scarlet Letter*. *A Month of Sundays* provides Arthur Dimmesdale's perspective, *Roger's Version* (1986) examines the myth

through the mind of Roger Chillingworth, and the epistolary *S.* (1988) offers Hester Prynne's opinions on the events of *The Scarlet Letter*. Updike is not so much interested in the story as he is in the issues that constitute "America's national myth." As a fellow New Englander and product of Hawthorne's literary legacy, Updike shares an interest in many of the issues that concerned Hawthorne.

The subjects of adultery and spirituality, as well as the dichotomy between body and soul, are integral components of many of Updike's novels. Updike was often noted for being the only practicing Christian among America's premier contemporary writers. His Christian spirituality is evident in most of his writings, often juxtaposed with the physical subjects of adultery and sex. The dilemma of the matter/spirit dichotomy no doubt troubled Updike, who once claimed, "Matter and spirit are inevitably at war." To understand this dilemma he turns to Hawthorne. Through a dialogue with Hawthorne, Updike attempts to reconcile matter and spirit in terms of both literary plot and literary structure.

Updike and his wife, Mary, separated in 1974, and he moved into an apartment in Boston. The slow disintegration of their marriage is chronicled in the stories of Richard and Joan Maples (collected in *Too Far to Go*, 1979). As do the Maples, John and Mary Updike received a "no-fault" divorce in 1976. The following year he married Martha Ruggles Bernhard. Also in 1976, *Marry Me: A Romance* was published and Updike was elected to the 50-member American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Rabbit Is Rich, the third novel about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, was published in 1981 and received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, and the American Book Award for fiction. Updike also received the Edward MacDowell Medal for literature. The 1980s saw Updike win several awards, and he continued writing at a prodigious rate, publishing a book a year, including six novels, by the end of the decade. Later years found Updike "tidying up his desk," so to speak. This period began with his memoirs, *Self-Consciousness* (1989), and much of

his stories and fiction reflects his sense of himself as aging. Whereas the younger Updike often did not write about old age and death, the older Updike saw the proximity of death very clearly. Indeed, death is Harry Angstrom's preoccupation in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990).

John Updike died on January 27, 2009. At his death, he had published nearly 60 books, including novels, collections of stories, poems, criticism, children's books, and a play. His most recent novel, *Terrorist*, was published in October 2006.

***Rabbit, Run* (1960)**

Rabbit, Run, first published in 1960, along with its sequels, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), constitute Updike's best-known work. The novels chronicle the life of American literature's iconic everyman, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. *Rabbit, Run* is Updike's second novel and captures the transitional period between the 1950s and 1960s.

The story opens with Harry walking home after a day's work. He is 26 and sells Magi-Peel kitchen gadgets. On the way home he joins some kids in a pick-up game of basketball, a sport at which Harry excelled in high school. He finds renewed energy from this game, tossing out his cigarettes and heading home with a lilt in his step. His newfound affirmation of life is quickly squashed when he arrives home to find his pregnant wife, Janice, drunk and watching *The Mickey Mouse Club* on TV. The scene immediately depresses Harry, and when Janice asks him to pick her up some cigarettes along with their car and son, Nelson, the reality of it all is too much, and Harry runs away. He starts to drive south, but by the time he reaches West Virginia, he has forgotten his motivation for leaving and returns to Brewer. Instead of returning to the house, however, he visits his high school basketball coach, Marty Tothoro, who introduces him to a prostitute named Ruth Leonard. He moves in with her, entering into an affair until his daughter, Rebecca, is born, and his family convinces him to return home. Shortly afterward he abandons Janice

again, and in her grief she accidentally drowns their newborn baby. Harry returns for the funeral only to face the accusing stares of his family. After blaming Janice for the drowning, he returns to Ruth. She informs him that she is pregnant, and Harry, once again, runs away.

While Harry may seem indecisive and noncommittal, the novel reveals that he is a man of conviction who is on a spiritual quest. His values are not absent, just incongruous with the environment around him. This creates for Harry what Tony Tanner calls "a compromised environment" (Tanner 37). *Rabbit, Run* is a multifaceted work, and while the plot is thin, it is rich with Updike's descriptive prose, diverse characters, and relevant themes. Many of the novel's themes, such as religion, suburban adultery, and death, will appear in many more works to follow. The theme of entrapment is particularly prevalent here.

Updike acknowledged that the subtext for the novel is *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Indeed, the "flow-erpot city" of Brewer provides the setting from which Harry finds himself unable to escape. The symbols of entrapment take many forms: In the early scenes, Harry's brown suit, a symbol of adulthood, contrasts with his ability in basketball, the sport he mastered in high school. His age has slowed him down, and the brown suit is a symbol of those advancing years. Likewise, his apartment, with the abandoned toy moldering under the steps, represents death and decay. Janice seems to be atrophying as she sits in the dim room drinking old-fashioned and watching *The Mickey Mouse Club*. The juxtaposition is significant in that the more Janice clings to her childhood, the more paralyzing are the effects of adulthood. Throughout the novel she is inert: She gives birth to the baby but then drowns it when she is drunk. As a symbol of adulthood, the drinking is associated with death and decay.

Certainly marriage is presented as confining in the novel, but only because of the complacency that it fosters. As a subject that Updike will develop throughout his career, marriage is an institution that primarily gives comfort, but at the price of complacency. One no longer needs to try in a marriage. This is seen clearly in the marriage of Lucy

and Jack Eccles, the Episcopalian minister who befriends Harry. Repeatedly Lucy begs Jack to care more about her and their family than he does Harry. Harry and Janice's relationship demonstrates how a marriage requires constant attention. Ironically, Lucy Eccles calls Harry and Janice's marriage a "bad marriage," when it is the one that will endure for 30 years, while her own marriage will not.

Updike confronts the issues of religion and faith through the Reverend Jack Eccles. The young minister presents a modern, progressive faith by tending to the social problems of his parishioners. He gives Harry the soft sell and through their friendship (which Eccles enjoys as well) convinces Harry to return to Janice when the baby, Rebecca, is born. However, both his wife, Lucy, and the Angstrom's Lutheran minister, Fritz Kruppenbach, challenge Eccles's faith-through-ministry. Kruppenbach reprimands Eccles for becoming involved in social problems at the expense of his spiritual ministry. Kruppenbach admonishes Eccles to "make yourself an exemplar of faith" and tells him that comfort is gained from faith. He calls the busyness of meddling in lives "Devil's work." Lucy Eccles, who is interested in Freudian psychology, challenges Jack's faith. In this relationship Updike shows that if one opens up religion to psychology, faith is destroyed, a topic Nathaniel Hawthorne dealt with in "Young Goodman Brown" (1835).

Since Eccles is a significant presence in the novel, the casual reader might see his theology as reflecting Updike's. However, like Rabbit, Eccles is more representative of the changing culture than the author's persona. While Eccles is a sincere and likable character, Lucy and Kruppenbach provide rational reasons for why he is wrong. For Harry to achieve the grace he desires, he needs the "hardness of heart" exemplified by Kruppenbach. Updike studied Karl Barth, upon whom Kruppenbach is based. Barth argues that "concrete action [is] more or less hopeless in producing any absolute result." God is "wholly other" and exists only through the desire to know him. Thus, Harry's desire to gain grace, to find "that thing that wants me to find it," connects him with God.

A significant theme introduced in *Rabbit, Run* is that of adultery. Ruth, a part-time prostitute, is

attracted to Rabbit's energy and optimism, which counterbalance her own cynicism. But, Harry does not merely have an affair with Ruth; he moves in with her. This seems ironic in light of his desire to break free of the confinement of his marriage. Updike challenges the philosophy of contentment that he feels plagues the middle class. The rise in affluence of the middle class in the 1950s hides a darker undercurrent: As people gained material wealth, Updike implies, they lost spiritual wealth. Harry does not reject marriage, just the empty symbol of success. Thus, he seeks fulfillment within the context of the domestic relationship. This is seen in his sexually fulfilling relationship with Ruth, and his desire for sex with Janice after she returns from the hospital. Throughout the Rabbit tetralogy, sex is a ritual act for Rabbit, representing his search for fulfillment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss differences in social class between the Angstroms and Janice's parents, the Springers. Is one family's fortune rising while the other's is in decline? How do their religions, symbolized by their pastors, reflect their place in the middle class?
2. Examine the scene in which Harry goes to work as a gardener for Mrs. Smith. How does this scene function in the novel? What does Smith say to Harry that contradicts what Ruth says about him?
3. At the end of the novel, Harry imagines the world as "an empty baseball field, a dark factory, and then over a brook into a dirt road, he doesn't know. He pictures a huge vacant field of cinders and his heart goes hollow." In what ways is this image reflective of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925)?

"A&P" (1961)

"A&P," first published in the *New Yorker* in 1961 and collected in *Pigeon Feathers* in 1962, is Updike's most anthologized short story. Set in the

mid-1950s, "A&P" tells the story of the events leading up to Sammy's decision to quit his job as a checker at the A&P grocery store. In the story, three girls walk into the store dressed in only their bathing suits. They stroll through the store as three young men, including Sammy, stare at them. After selecting only a jar of herring snacks in cream sauce, they proceed to Sammy's lane. While they are making their purchase, the manager, Lengle, admonishes them for their attire, ordering them to be properly dressed the next time they enter the store. In a hasty moment of futile heroism, Sammy quits his job, hoping to gain the admiration of the girls. However, when he walks out of the store, the girls are long gone, and Sammy realizes his decision to quit will have consequences.

The story begins quickly: "In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I'm in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I didn't see them until they're over by the bread." Updike dispenses with establishing the scene and protagonist and jumps right into the action. Implicit is the idea that the story and Sammy's fateful act begin when the girls walk into the store. In this way the urgency with which the story begins parallels the urgency with which Sammy quits. This emphasizes that his decision to quit is rash and unpremeditated.

It would seem that Sammy is standing up for the girls—for their freedom and their right to respect, although early in the story he objectifies them. The confusion is normal in a boy of his age: His actions are more mimicry and reaction than anything motivated by established personal values. This represents the key theme in the story: the shift of American culture and the emergence of the "generation gap." While the values that govern Lengle, Sammy, the girls, and their parents are inherent in their culture, in practice we see youthful rebellion. The girls are rejecting their parents' values (their mothers would not walk into the grocery store dressed only in their bathing suits), until they are challenged by Lengle, at which point they cling to the privilege of their social class by saying, "But we are decent." Yet, the girls, dressed as they are, are behaving in a

way that is counter to their upbringing. They are dressed provocatively and are, by strolling in the grocery, selling themselves. They are flirting with prostitution. This is not to say that they would follow through, but they are associating themselves with the working classes and rejecting their own conventional upbringing. They are rebelling against convention, which dictates a more conservative dress code in public. This rebellion is underscored by their reaction to Lengle when he strictly admonishes them about their behavior. By referring to her parents, Queenie reminds us and Lengle of her upper-middle-class upbringing, one, presumably, better than his. Yet, his admonishment reminds them that their behavior is not in accord with their class and in excess of what society will accept. The indifference of their display foretells the cultural shift that is occurring: Women are starting to assert control of their own bodies and the commodification of them is on their own terms.

This feminist theme can also be seen in Sammy's behavior. When the girls first enter the store, Sammy describes them in physical terms. He studies their appearance and assesses their characters on the basis of their physical qualities: "This clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty." This simile is a faint allusion to Jake Barnes's description of Brett Ashley in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) as having a body "built like a racing yacht." It is an interesting blend of feminine and mechanical beauty, consistent with his age and hormonal rush. Yet, Sammy's simile reflects his unrefined upbringing. Instead of an upscale yacht, he compares her to an unrefined, though flashy object. While reflective of Sammy's perspective, it is important to note that his—and the reader's—view of the girls is affected by his own background: The shock that infuses his tone at the beginning originates in his humble circumstances. This shock changes into objectification and then pity for the girls, ultimately leading to his chivalric gesture.

Another theme evident in "A&P" is the emergence of modern consumerism. The A&P sits in

the center of town, historically a place occupied by a church. Nevertheless, the existence of the A&P in such a central place represents society's shift from a religious culture to a consumption-oriented one. The A&P helps us satisfy our wants and needs. The herring snacks are not a staple, but a luxury, representative of the girls' upper middle class. However, the reactions by Sammy, Stoeskie, and McMahon indicate that the girls are objects of desire, much like the herring snacks. While it is acceptable to be dressed in bathing suits at the beach, where the glare is so strong that "nobody can look at each other much anyway," the lighting in the grocery store is designed to enhance and encourage the buying experience. By association, the girls are selling themselves—they are becoming part of the consumer culture, but as a commodity. They are objectifying themselves, for they present themselves, in a way that competes for the shopper's attention. Because of this, they are commodities, too.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare "A&P" to James Joyce's "Araby" in the collection *Dubliners* (1914). How do both protagonists suffer from the same romantic idealism? How is the epiphany Sammy experiences at the end of "A&P" similar to that experienced by the narrator of "Araby"?
2. Sammy's comment that the woman who watches his register would have burned "over in Salem," combined with the reference to the church across the street, connects this story to the early Puritan settlers in Massachusetts. The Puritans' values were hard and fast. In contrast, the values implied by Sammy and the girls are in transition. Who in the story represents these Puritan values? In terms of the events in the story, does the author side with the old values or the new ones?
3. Upon reading the manuscript, Updike's wife, Mary, remarked that "A&P" reminded her too much of J. D. SALINGER. Looking closely at the language and tone, how is Sammy similar to Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)?

"Separating" (1975)

"Separating" originally appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1975. It was later collected in *Problems and Other Stories* (1979) and *Too Far to Go* (1979), a collection of Maple stories. "Separating" tells the story of the parents Richard and Joan Maple's announcement to their children that they will be separating. While Richard and Joan had carefully planned the event, as so often happens, events do not go exactly as planned, and Richard is forced to confront the issue personally with each child, ultimately realizing the depravity of his decision.

The characters in "Separating" are Richard and Joan Maple, and their four children: Judith, 19; Richard, Jr., also referred to as "Dickie," 17; John, 14; and Margaret, 13, who is also called "Bean." The children's reactions to the parents' news are more reflective of gender than age, and Judith and Margaret react more passively than the two boys do. This distinction reveals one of the themes in the story: the role of the father. Like many of Updike's male protagonists, Richard Maple is at once self-conscious and self-absorbed. At two points in the story, Joan's comments hint at Richard's preference for work over family. When Joan states that telling the kids is "not just some corporate obstacle to your freedom," and Richard says to John, "You were the only one who ever tried to help me with all the goddam [sic] jobs around this place," it is suggested that Richard values the tangible, solvable problems of the business world over the intangible, amorphous emotions of his family. The second passage implies that because John helped, he loved his father more than the others did. Indeed, John's comment "What do you care about *us*? We're just little things you *had*" recognizes Richard's emotional distance from his family. The subsequent conversation with John, about his miserable school year, reflects Richard's lack of awareness of his family. Later, when he is driving Dickie home, we learn that he has a lover, whom he plans to marry. His attention is focused outside his home and family.

While John and Dickie seem troubled, the two daughters, Judith and Margaret, appear more stoically resolved. Margaret reacts with relief, and

Judith responds pragmatically, saying, "I think it's silly. You should either live together or get divorced." The girls' reactions seemingly echo Joan's stoic resolve, and they innately align themselves with her. Traditionally, the mother is the bedrock of the family, and the kids know that Joan would never leave them. Consequently, they realize that it is Richard who is leaving. John's reaction is disappointment that his father, a role model, is failing to reinforce values and family.

Likewise, the "gutted fort" of the church is another irony in the story. The values promoted by Christianity are supposed to strengthen marriage and family. But, while Richard may attend church regularly, his actions across the green undermine what the church represents. Ultimately, the church is ineffectual at keeping their marriage intact. Symbols like the church, the tennis court, and the house suggest that no matter what people build to structure their lives, they cannot ward off the disorder that plagues human relationships.

John's initial reaction at the table, "Why didn't you *tell* us? You should have *told* us you weren't getting along" reflects a common reaction of children, who feel somehow responsible for the dissolution of their parents' marriage and thus can change the outcome. Up until this point in the story, Richard's emotions are brewing, yet the children seem oblivious to them. His repairing of the lock appears to be a normal event, yet his reasons for doing so reveal the complex emotions of the adult world. Despite Richard's apparent lack of awareness of his family, he perceives the symbolic value of the world around him: He sees the need to repair the locks and windows as a need to protect his family from the truth of his own irresponsible actions. The image of Richard repairing the house is the controlling image in the story. He is repairing the physical house, while the emotional home is left in a state of disrepair.

As one of the Maple stories, "Separating" is also contained in the collection *Too Far to Go*. While the story offers much to be considered on its own merits, students might also want to consider the story in the context of the other Maples stories. In this context, "Separating" details the climax of

their relationship. Chronologically, it is preceded by "Nakedness" and followed by the clever "Here Come the Maples," the story of their no-fault divorce trial. Reading the stories in the collection, one gets a clearer understanding of the characters and the reasons for their split.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The story begins, "The day was fair. Brilliant." This sets the tone for the story because it shows the conflict of the Maples' internal misery and the indifferent world around them. This theme is closely tied to naturalism, which emphasizes nature's indifference to human suffering. Discuss some other examples in the story that reflect nature's indifference to human trials and suffering.
2. Discuss the ways in which the tennis court is a metaphor for the Maples' marriage.
3. The children react to their father's news in various ways. Discuss how the varied reactions reflect his failure as a father and their frustration about this failure.

The Witches of Eastwick (1984)

Published in 1984, *The Witches of Eastwick* is a novel about three witches, Sukie Rougemont, Jane Smart, and Alexandra "Lexa" Spofford, who have divorced their husbands, pursue their careers, and form a relationship with a mysterious "scientist" from New York, Darryl Van Horne. Van Horne seduces the witches by encouraging them to develop their talents. He uses them to get to Jenny Gabriel, the daughter of Sukie's lover. Darryl marries Jenny, and she becomes pregnant. But, the spurned witches cast a spell on Jenny, giving her cancer. After she dies, Van Horne gives a parodic sermon at the Unitarian church, then leaves town with Jenny's brother, Christopher, his new lover. The novel ends with the witches using spells to conjure new husbands and leaving Eastwick.

The two main themes in the novel are the emergence of evil in middle-class society and the relation of evil to feminism. The novel takes place in

the 1960s during the Vietnam War. Eastwick is presented as a small middle-class Rhode Island town, distinguished by its provincialism. Yet this small town also seems to be a vortex of supernatural power, for not only does it attract the satanic Van Horne from New York, but the three witches claim that their powers increased when they arrived in Eastwick.

As a “scientist,” Van Horne is attempting to find a way to circumvent the second law of thermodynamics: entropy. By this he is attempting to consolidate and preserve power. This functions metaphorically, because, under his tutelage, the three witches’ powers increase. Van Horne seduces the women by pandering to their desire for power. However, by depending on Van Horne to feed their desires for power, they weaken their independence. Thus, ultimately Van Horne’s power increases.

Power is the central metaphor, especially as it applies to feminism. While *The Witches of Eastwick* presents some of Updike’s strongest female characters, his caveat is what happens when feminism is unchecked. The hedonism of the townsfolk reflects the shifting morals in the feminist age. As wives and mothers, the witches had existed in an entropic universe, not unlike Harry Angstrom’s world in the Rabbit tetralogy. The witches represent Harry’s worst fear: In their desire for power, women abandon their role as wife and mother. Ironically, their emotional attachment to a man (Van Horne) ultimately becomes their undoing. Moreover, Updike offers a double blow when it is revealed that while Van Horne used the witches to get to Jenny, he used Jenny to get to her brother, Chris. When he finally leaves town with Chris as his new lover, he deflates the witches’ power.

Ultimately, *The Witches of Eastwick* is an anti-feminist argument. First Van Horne rejects the witches in favor of the more demure Jenny. This makes him the model husband, a role the witches mocked at the beginning of the novel. The final twist—that Van Horne was really in love with Chris—indicates that he would prefer another man as a lover to a liberated woman. The resolution of Van Horne’s finding happiness with Chris and each of the women’s casting spells to create her ideal

husband implies that the search for personal happiness triumphs over social ideology.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his sketch “Sights from a Steeple,” Nathaniel Hawthorne claims that the ideal narrator should be omniscient. However, the narrator’s desire for omniscience is presented as a threat to God, who alone is omniscient. Updike employs the third-person omniscient point of view in the novel. Discuss Updike’s use of a godlike persona to tell the story of the devil and three witches.
2. Why does Darryl Van Horne reference the dictionary and not the Bible when he delivers his sermon? How is the development of the dictionary similar to Adam’s job of naming the animals? What does it say about the foundation of religion?
3. Near the end of the novel, Jane says to Alexandra, “Lexa, don’t you understand? There was never anything there. We imagined him” (298). Explain the possibility that the existence of Darryl Van Horne was a figment of their collective imagination. Considering that their witchcraft was fantastic, is it possible that the whole story is, too?

“Brother Grasshopper” (1987)

“Brother Grasshopper” is a contemporary variation on Aesop’s “The Ant and the Grasshopper.” In the fable, a grasshopper, enjoying the summer, sees an ant busily storing food for the winter. The grasshopper mockingly asks the ant to join him at play. But, the ant insists that he must store up food for the winter and suggests that the grasshopper do the same. The grasshopper, content in the moment, replies, “Why bother about winter?” When winter begins, the ants have plenty of food, while the grasshopper dies of hunger. The moral of the story: It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.

“Brother Grasshopper,” first printed in the *New Yorker* (December 14, 1987) and then collected in *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), tells the story of Fred Emmet’s relationship with

his brother-in-law, Carlyle Saughterfield, over the course of about 25 years. As the ant, Fred is thrifty and hardworking, characteristics emphasized by his contrast with Carlyle, who, in Fred's eyes, is eccentric and conspicuously wasteful. Told in the third person, the story covers a broad span of time yet focuses on one aspect of Fred's life: his relationship with Carlyle.

A major theme in the story is perspective. The story begins with Fred Emmet's reflection on his father's relationship with his brother. Fred, who is an only child, has only one view of life. His father's brother gave his father an additional perspective—a second way of looking at the world. To Fred, Carlyle, who is first his “brother in courtship” and later his brother-in-law, becomes that second perspective. The story chronicles the events leading to Fred's epiphany at the end. The lesson ultimately learned fills the lack that is implied at the beginning. As an only child, Fred lacked completeness. He lacked the fulfillment of a sibling. When he marries, it is to supply “himself with another roommate.” A spouse should “augment” one's existence and give it an additional dimension available to him all his life.

Central to this theme of perspective is the camera. Carlyle “had become a fervent photographer, first with Nikons and then with Leicas, until he discovered that an even more expensive camera could be bought—a Hasselblad” (35). Fred sees the cameras in terms of cost, but they are different types of cameras—a single-lens reflex (SLR), a rangefinder, and a square format camera—and thus capture the images differently. Carlyle uses a variety of cameras to see the world diversely and to capture memories in different ways. In contrast, Fred sees the world in only one way. It is not until the end of the story—presented as a photographic moment—that Fred realizes that Carlyle has been desperately trying to forge and capture memories for his family. The appearance of the sun as an “instant of illumination” functions as a camera flash and represents the moment of Fred's epiphany.

In Aesop's fable the ant stores seeds for the winter, while the grasshopper plays. In Updike's story Fred, as the ant, is the embodiment of America's

Protestant work ethic. Yet, Fred seems to be at once critical and admiring of the indolent Carlyle. There is something celebratory in Carlyle's love of life and eternal optimism. Whereas Fred works hard and slowly accumulates wealth, Carlyle, born wealthy, is careless with his money, but nonetheless creative. In addition to his interest in photography, cooking, and movies, he has six children (overindulgence in Fred's eyes). Fred realizes in the end that Carlyle's creative impulse offsets his fragile health. In the end Carlyle is referred to as “the dead man,” a nameless corpse, emphasizing how we will all end. How we live our lives will not change our fate but will affect other people's lives.

Updike draws from the Disney version of the fable, which casts the grasshopper as a musician—an artist—who has at least some value. In the end of this version the grasshopper earns his keep by entertaining the ants. Produced during the heart of the depression, the Disney version effectively argues for the value of entertainment in a time when movies were perceived as an indulgence but also a way to escape. While the movie industry was a viable business in the 1960s, Carlyle's investment in “blue movies” undercuts his legitimacy. This is the facet of Hollywood still considered indulgent and countercultural in America.

In many ways the characters in “Brother Grasshopper” are evocative of the characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Early in the story Fred's view of Carlyle is reminiscent of Nick's view of Tom Buchanan. Both are strong and athletically intimidating and have “confident access to the skills and equipment of expensive sports” (30). Both are conspicuous in their spending. As the story develops, Carlyle's love of life and eternal optimism suggest the romanticism of Jay Gatsby. Just as Nick is subsumed by Gatsby, Carlyle's personality overshadows Fred's. Yet, it is Gatsby's fatal flaw, his inability to deviate from his goal and his blind adherence to his code, that links him to Fred. Like Gatsby, who follows a strict daily schedule, as prescribed by Benjamin Franklin, and religiously adheres to achieving his goal, Fred is fundamentally shaped by his Protestant work ethic. Throughout the story, his view

of Carlyle is tainted by this ethic. When he turns down Carlyle's invitation to invest in his film project, his rejection becomes a rhetorical death sentence for Carlyle. The significance of this similarity to *Gatsby* indicates Updike's message that, while Aesop provides good advice for conducting our lives, life in contemporary America is more complex. Moreover, while Fred gives Carlyle the "brotherly lesson in limits" that kills him, Carlyle gives Fred the final lesson. Although we all return to the earth (ashes to ashes, dust to dust), we leave behind a legacy of human relationships forged over time. In the end Fred has a much larger family than he began with.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The story is based on the fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper." In the fable the ant is industrious and the grasshopper is lazy. How does Updike develop the ant and grasshopper into characters who have both positive and negative traits?
2. Several times in the story Fred sees a "watery warm-eyed look" in Carlyle. What does this look represent? Does it reveal Carlyle's helplessness or his introspection?
3. At the end of the film *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Sam Spade describes the falcon statue as "the stuff that dreams are made of." Carlyle's foray into the movie business represents a uniquely American passion that leads to "the stuff that dreams are made of." Carlyle is seduced by the Southern California lifestyle, and this seduction leads to his death. How do Carlyle's forays into business and artistic ventures and finally film ventures reflect his lack of dreams?

"The Brown Chest" (1992)

Originally published in the *Atlantic* (May 1992) and then collected in *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), "The Brown Chest" is one of Updike's mature stories, reflecting his own aging and the loss of his own mother. Short on plot, the story is symbolically rich with multiple layers of meaning. The story relates the narrator's relationship to a

brown chest his mother kept in the attic during his childhood. The chest contained mementos of her life and those of her family. The chest was a source of anxiety for the narrator, and its presence and recurrence in the narrator's life have a distinctly haunting quality. Eventually, when the narrator's mother dies, the narrator is forced to take possession of the trunk and its contents. While the contents of the chest are not a secret per se, the opening of the chest by his future daughter-in-law results in a Pandora-like outpouring of the memories tied to it.

The story is told from the third-person limited omniscient point of view. This perspective focuses exclusively on the consciousness of the main character and his relationship with the chest and his environment. In this story Updike draws from John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820), employs gothic elements, and alludes to the Pandora myth to emphasize the narrator's fear of the past. Unlike Keats's urn, which is decorated with images of humans in action, Updike's chest is devoid of the presence of society or civilization. This absence contributes to the speaker's fear of worlds without people—he existed in unpopulated space. This relationship to his space lends the story its gothic elements.

The opening paragraph introduces the gothic component of the story. The chest and the boy exist within the house he lives in with his parents and maternal grandparents, and the boy has divided the house into sections containing "popular cheerful places," "haunted places," and places that existed not physically, but psychologically, "in between" (225). One such "in between" space is the guest bedroom. This room is where his relationship with his mother is formed, and it is a space for spiritual growth. The mother prevents the room from becoming haunted. She also keeps the chest. As the keeper of the chest and the recorder of memories, she is the narrator's link to the past. However, he sees her mostly as a means of protecting him from the past. Only when she dies is he forced to take ownership of the chest. In fact, his fear of the chest is linked to a fear of the attic. The narrator explains that he has defined these spaces and that the chest

romance unique. How do Updike's novels fit Hawthorne's form?

3. In his essay collection "Nature" (1836), Ralph Waldo Emerson states that "a work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature." Most of Updike's novels and stories are set in rural or suburban settings, and often within these larger contexts, the drama is confined to a small area. In what ways do the stories and themes in Updike's works represent "the world in miniature"?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bailey, Peter J. *Rabbit (Un)Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction*. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006.
- Boswell, Marshall. *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.
- De Bellis, Jack. *The John Updike Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Greiner, Donald J. *Adultery in the American Novel: Updike, James, and Hawthorne*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985.
- Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: New American Library, 1940.
- Hunt, George. *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion and Art*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980.
- "Life and Times: John Updike." New York Times Online. Available online. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/06/lifetimes/updike.html>. Accessed March 25, 2009.
- Markel, Joyce B. *Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the Novels of John Updike*. New York: New York University Press, 1973.
- Olster, Stacey, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Plath, James, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Pritchard, William H. *Updike: America's Man of Letters*. South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth, 2000.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: John Updike." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/updike.html>. Accessed March 11, 2007.
- Schiff, James A. *Updike's Version: Rewriting The Scarlet Letter*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992.
- Tanner, Tony. "A Compromised Environment." In *John Updike*, edited by Harold Bloom: New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
- Updike, John. "Audio John Updike Interview with Don Swain." Wired for Books. Available online. URL: <http://wiredforbooks.org/johnupdike/>. Accessed March 11, 2007.
- Yerkes, James, ed. *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999.

Dean R. Cooledge



KURT VONNEGUT, JR. (1922–2007)

We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane.

(Kilgore Trout's epitaph, *Breakfast of Champions*)

Known for his wit, comically absurd works, and humanitarian vision, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—perhaps the greatest American satirist since Mark Twain—became an icon for the “baby-boomer” generation, those born during post–World War II years. Idolized by the American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, Vonnegut spoke to a generation disillusioned by ineffective institutions, the nuclear arms race, and the Vietnam War. Significantly, although some consider him to be a period writer, Vonnegut’s works continue to be read and taught, especially his powerful testimony to the bombing of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Although often labeled a science fiction writer, a designation that Vonnegut abhorred, he created experimental, fantastic worlds populated with grotesque characters to address contemporary sociopolitical concerns. As Vonnegut said, “I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘science fiction’ . . . and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal” (*Wampeters 1*). Questioning who we are, why we are here, and what it is that we as social beings should be doing, Vonnegut’s often-scathing, bitterly satirical works depict a world in which God is strangely absent, a place where stock characters and fantastical creations negotiate a world of chance. There, amid alien creatures and with the aid of time-traveling machines and horrific forms of technology, Vonnegut’s creations

bear witness to the various shortcomings that make us fallible, comic creatures. They often touch upon the limits of reason, the illusion of progress, the horrors of war, the absurdity of nuclear proliferation, the reality of class differences, the construct of race, and the need for human beings to erect meaning-making systems, such as the facetious religion of Bokonon in his 1963 novel *Cat’s Cradle*. Combining high hilarity with what some consider pessimistic depictions of humanity’s frailty and self-centered tendencies, Vonnegut commented upon the delusions that round our lives and often distract us from real, pressing social concerns. By showing us who we are through a distorted, funhouse mirror, by lauding the power of fiction to reenvision our place in the world, and by challenging us to create a better, more humane society, Vonnegut earned himself a secure place in the canon of postmodern American fiction.

Born on November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Edith and Kurt Vonnegut, German Americans who already had two children, Vonnegut grew up in an upper-class home. His father was an architect; his mother was the daughter of a wealthy brewer, Peter Lieber. Vonnegut’s older brother and sister had many advantages, including a live-in governess and private schooling. Yet, with the advent of Prohibition, which banned alcohol consumption, and the beginning of the Great Depression, the Vonnegut family could not afford these same luxuries

for Kurt, Jr. During this time Vonnegut's father, the first to be licensed as an architect in Indiana, had no work for 10 years, although the family, as a result of the Lieber fortune, never went without. Nevertheless, Vonnegut was aware of the many hopes and dreams that were dashed during that period, a theme he would return to time and time again in books that often show the futility of the American dream, whose myth of self-ascendancy, as witnessed in both the Lieber and Vonnegut families, rarely held true for other Americans. Vonnegut's grandfathers both immigrated to America in 1848, German immigrants during a wave of immigration that marked mid-19th-century America. While both men became prosperous, they and their families knew the sort of discrimination often experienced by émigrés and sought refuge in the tight-knit German community of Indianapolis. Thus, even at an early age, Vonnegut developed both a sensitivity to social conditions and an awareness for others' needs despite his own family's relative well-being.

At an early age Vonnegut established himself as a man of letters, writing for the first daily high school paper in the United States, serving as both a correspondent and editor. From 1940 to 1942 Vonnegut attended Cornell University, where he majored in biochemistry and wrote for the school's newspaper, the *Sun*, where he often opposed U.S. intervention in World War II. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, however, Vonnegut enlisted in the army. He was educated as an engineer by the army and then sent to serve as an infantry scout with the 106th Infantry Division in Europe. There, Vonnegut took part in the Battle of the Bulge, where he was captured by the Germans, taken to a prison camp, and later forced to labor in Dresden, a German city laid to waste during the devastating firebombing by Allied forces on the evening of February 13, 1945. With his fellow prisoners Vonnegut helped pull bodies from the debris and took them to be cremated. This event became a foundational experience to which Vonnegut would return time and time again, most notably in his masterwork, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Yet, before Dresden's bombing Vonnegut experienced another devastating loss when his mother, Edith, a longtime depres-

sion sufferer, committed suicide during a specially arranged Mother's Day visit home.

After the war Vonnegut returned to Indianapolis; married his high school sweetheart, Jane Marie Cox; and then moved to Chicago, where he pursued a graduate degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago and worked as a police reporter. When the university rejected his thesis, which he later described as "my prettiest contribution to my culture" (*Palm Sunday* 312), Vonnegut took a job with General Electric in Schenectady, New York, where he worked as a public relations copywriter. These years led Vonnegut to disdain corporate institutions, which he viewed as inhumane, and taught him about the destructive potential of science, two obsessions he explored in numerous works, including his first published story, "The Barnhouse Effect" (1950), and his first novel, *Player Piano* (1952). Strongly autobiographical, *Player Piano* transpires in a dystopian future where the protagonist rebels against the Illium works, a thinly disguised depiction of General Electric and corporate America. Here, and throughout his corpus, Vonnegut often intervenes in the text, interjecting commentary through the creation of a writer-character—in this case, Ed, and in later works often Kilgore Trout, a hack science fiction writer whose works appear in pornographic magazines—who reflects upon the action at hand and its significance while parodying the role of the author in creating the text.

Vonnegut's disillusionment with his General Electric job led him in 1951 to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where he devoted his life to writing, sustaining himself with short stories he submitted to numerous popular magazines, including *Collier's*, which published his first story. In Cape Cod, Vonnegut and Jane had three children, whom the author raised with the income he garnered as a writer. When the market demand for short stories waned in the late 1950s, Vonnegut turned to novel writing, publishing *The Sirens of Titan* (1959)—the story of Malachi Constant, a wealthy playboy who eventually travels to space, gets lost on Mercury, returns to Earth, and ultimately is banished to Titan. Such absurd works dealing with science in a nonrealistic manner caused

many critics to identify Vonnegut as a science fiction writer, an ironic characterization because the novel can also be read as a parody of the genre. Vonnegut defied this mischaracterization with his next novel, *Mother Night* (1962), whose name Vonnegut lifted from a speech Mephistopheles gives in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808). Written in the form of a memoir by Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who is an Allied spy during World War II posing as a Nazi propagandist, *Mother Night* provides a more realistic plot and setting, thus departing from the more fantastical worlds of his first two works.

With *Cat's Cradle* (1963) Vonnegut first received a wide readership. An apocalyptic novel about an island society with a comic figure, Bokonon, who creates a religion the islanders know is all "lies" (foma) and writes the "The Books of Bokonon," *Cat's Cradle* includes a comic retelling of the Genesis creation story, descriptions of sacred foot rituals, and many fictive terms such as *wampeter*, *duprass*, and *karass* that appear throughout the novel. As his cult following grew, *Cat's Cradle* propelled Vonnegut into the mainstream, eventually becoming required reading in many high schools and colleges. While *Cat's Cradle* is certainly more than a period piece, the novel spoke to a generation disillusioned with war, institutions, and religious dogma. In this way the novel fostered the counterculture of the 1960s. At stake in the novel are the increasing paranoia over the cold war and the very real threat of nuclear annihilation. Thus, the substance that ends the world, Ice-Nine, can be understood as an example of the sort of technology that, in attempting to better the world, actually has the power to end all life on the planet. Again, Vonnegut draws on his own life in Schenectady, mirroring the science-obsessed researchers he encountered at General Electric with Dr. Felix Hoenikker and Vonnegut's own family with the three Hoenikker children. As with other works Vonnegut embeds a writer in the text, in this case, the narrator, Jonah/John, who is writing a book that mirrors both *Cat's Cradle* and the Books of Bokonon, called *The Day the World Ended*.

Vonnegut's next work, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), is a story devoid of science fiction elements yet filled with Vonnegut grotesquerie in

which a sexual eunuch, Eliot Rosewater, describing himself as "a drunkard, a Utopian dreamer, a tin-horn saint, an aimless fool," gives out money by the droves from the millions of dollars he has inherited. Rosewater is a comical figure, a satirical image of the "bleeding-heart" liberal turned philanthropist. Described through a series of vignettes that chronicle Eliot's life among the citizens of Rosewater County, Indiana, Rosewater is a tool for Vonnegut to lampoon social injustice, especially economic inequality and the illusion of welfare that self-promoting philanthropists often create. Significantly, this novel is the first of Vonnegut's works to include the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, whom Eliot greatly admires; the narrative makes Trout into a messianic figure. As it describes social inequity, the absurdity of the legal system, and the consequences of self-interest, *Rosewater* challenges us to look beyond the hypocrisy found in modern society and to see the need for compassion in a world bent on economic gain. While Vonnegut earned his living from novels, he continued to write short stories and collected previously written, intertwined stories in *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968), which contains stories ranging from the well-known "Harrison Bergeron" to "Report on the Barnhouse Effect" and "EPICAC."

In *Slaughterhouse-Five: or, The Children's Crusade* (1969), Vonnegut recalls the foundational absurd experience that formed his vision of the world: the bombing of Dresden. Through Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, who becomes "unstuck" in time, traveling to the future and being abducted by aliens who place him in a zoo cage with a porn star, Montana Wildhack, for their own entertainment, Vonnegut creates a world equally absurd. Additionally, Vonnegut ends the novel by referencing key current events that take place at the time he was writing the novel, including the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., and the Vietnam War. In this way Vonnegut points out the cyclical nature of violence, the way history is repeating itself. Like *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an antinovel, one that challenges linear conceptions of time and the conventions of narrative fiction we normally associate with verisimilitude, the appearance of reality. Yet, although Pilgrim is not real, the view he

affords of human history and the destructive potential of humanity underscores many of the themes he explored in previous works and will elaborate upon for the remainder of his career: the need for fiction to engage moral issues, to represent suffering, and to serve as a foil for the confusing state of modernity, which often seems to be a lost cause. A novel about the inhumanity of war, about fiction, and about Vonnegut's own life experiences, it remains the exemplar against which all of his other works have been judged.

After the publication of *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the two most widely taught of Vonnegut's works, the author continued to be prolific, writing over a dozen novels, collections of essays, two plays, and short stories and working as an artist. While Vonnegut's works have often received mixed critical reviews, the novels have sold well and remain in print. Notably, *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) showcases Vonnegut the visual artist, who provides hand-drawn artwork in a narrative that connects the lives of two comic characters: Dwayne Hoover, a Pontiac dealer, and Kilgore Trout, the recurring Vonnegut alter ego found in so many of his books. Vonnegut married his second wife, Jill Krentz, a photographer, in 1979; with her he had a daughter. His last work, published in 2005, was a best-selling, politically charged collection of autobiographical essays that show Vonnegut at his satirical best, offering wry observations about everyday life; making bold, often controversial claims about politics; lambasting President George W. Bush; and employing the dark humor seen by some as pessimism for which he is known. When the collection sold well, Vonnegut referred to it as "a nice glass of champagne at the end of a life."

Vonnegut wrestled with demons throughout this life, born both of his emotional disposition and of cataclysmic events: the bombing of Dresden, the suicide of his mother, the tragic death of his sister and her husband in a 48-hour period, and his own attempted suicide in 1984. Nevertheless, he managed to generate meaning from his own personal struggles. His language was humorous, imaginative, and whimsical, and yet the hallmark of his post-modern style was simplicity rather than complex-

ity. Thus, we can read Vonnegut quickly and easily, often consuming entire works in one sitting. In this way Vonnegut is a model contemporary stylist who shapes language so that it can be read with alacrity in a world where the speed of communication demands writing that can be processed with ease. Here it is worth quoting Vonnegut's advice on "How to Write with Style" from a 1981 issue of *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communications*, which can be found on the Internet:

Find a subject you care about.

Do not ramble, though.

Keep it simple.

Sound like yourself.

Say what you mean to say.

Pity the readers.

For really detailed advice . . . I commend to your attention *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. (Macmillan, 1979)

In pairing down word choices, in writing concisely, in directly engaging the reader, Vonnegut targeted a wide audience. His work continues to attract readers all over the world. His major themes are the mechanized world and the way it determines our lives, the way the desire for material goods controls us, the failures of religion and science to improve our lot, the nature of art as artifice rather than truth, and the way events occur randomly in a world where we desperately grasp for order and meaning.

"Report on the Barnhouse Effect" (1950)

Vonnegut's first short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," was published in *Collier's* magazine on February 11, 1950, and later collected in *Welcome to the Monkeyhouse* (1968), around the time when Vonnegut resigned his position at General Electric to move to Cape Cod in order to write full time.

"Report on the Barnhouse Effect" describes the pressures applied to a scientist who courageously chooses to face real problems rather than to accept the comforting illusions that military men offer him. He dares to question the morality of using

a humanitarian invention as a destructive military weapon. When Professor Barnhouse first discovers the power of dynamopsychism, he looks upon it as only a toy, as a way to amuse himself by causing dice to produce the combinations he requests. Gradually the absent-minded psychology professor practices and perfects this power to the point where he can destroy individuals, houses, even mountains. While he would have preferred to use this power to run generators “where there isn’t any coal or waterpower” and to irrigate deserts, the U.S. Army feels that this priceless gift should be used as a weapon since “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom” (165). Because this time-worn cliché is so much patriotic bilge as far as Vonnegut is concerned, it becomes clear that Barnhouse eventually must oppose the military establishment.

When Barnhouse turns to his graduate research assistant for advice, he repeatedly asks him such questions as “Think we should have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?” and “Think every new piece of scientific information is a good thing for humanity?” (161). This line of questioning echoes an episode in Vonnegut’s first novel, *Player Piano*, when Paul Proteus is asked to tell a lie during his trial so that his lie detector can be calibrated, replying “every new piece of scientific knowledge is a good thing for humanity” (297). The turning point for Barnhouse occurs when military officials request that he prove how powerful his gift is by destroying a number of missiles and ships during “Operation Barnhouse.” He reacts by declaring that he finds the idea “childish and insanely expensive” (164). While the military officials are exulting over Barnhouse’s successful destruction of the weapons, he quietly makes his escape. The scientist, from his secluded sanctuary, spends the next few years destroying all military stockpiles despite the outraged cries of “stouthearted patriots” (168). Vonnegut concludes his story by revealing that the narrator, Barnhouse’s former research assistant, is planning to flee and assume his former mentor’s antiwar activities so that the elderly scientist’s death will not result in the resumption of hostilities.

“Report on the Barnhouse Effect” provides a rather unsatisfactory answer to the question of how

humans are to control scientific and technological advances. Barnhouse is a godlike figure who, when asked by the military establishment to do what he feels is morally wrong, personally guarantees the safety of the world by destroying all weapons; such a scientist who values human life over research in pure science, does not appear either in *Cat’s Cradle* or in *Player Piano* to help Paul Proteus or John. If Vonnegut means to imply that the world is in such dire straits that no mere mortal, but only a man with superhuman power like Barnhouse, can solve its problems, then his cosmic view is a pessimistic one indeed. He seems to modify this view, however, in his short story “EPICAC” (1950).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Professor Barnhouse and his assistant are scientists aware of the unintended destructive harm technological innovation can cause and take active measures to prevent the progress they have made from being inappropriately used. Compare Vonnegut’s portrayal of scientists in “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” with Dr. Felix Hoenikker in his novel *Cat’s Cradle*. Why does Vonnegut continue to use flat character types when he creates scientists? What significance do these flat scientist characters have in understanding Vonnegut’s worldview?
2. As “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” does, “EPICAC,” “Thanasphere,” and “The Euphio Question” form commentaries on science and technology. Here and throughout his works Vonnegut seems skeptical about technological progress. With these four stories in mind, write a well-developed essay on Vonnegut’s understanding of technology and the dangers Vonnegut sees in developing these tools of “progress.”

“Harrison Bergeron” (1961)

“Harrison Bergeron” was first published in the October 1961 issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Vonnegut’s third publication in a science fiction magazine, the story is set in a future dystopian society where the government imposes restraints to

equalize all members of the society. Those who are not equal—those who are not “normal,” which for the story means “perfectly average”—receive grotesque handicaps: hideous masks, clown noses, thick glasses, headsets that disrupt thinking with jarring sounds, and “sashweights and bags of birdshot” to impair movement. Instituted by constitutional amendments, egalitarian laws are enforced by “the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General,” or (Diana Moon Glampers), who strangely resembles Harrison’s “perfectly average” mother, and the “H-G men” (an obvious play on *G-men*, the 1940s and 1950s slang term for Federal Bureau of Investigation and Secret Service agents, also known as “government men”), who lead the “abnormal” 14-year-old Harrison Bergeron away in the clammy month of April. Unlike Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, in which April’s showers bring new life and the hope for renewal, everything in Harrison’s world, including the heralding of spring, is portrayed as a grotesque nightmare.

As the story opens, Harrison Bergeron, the genius, an athletic, good-looking boy of 14, has been taken away by the H-G men because he poses a threat to society. He is exceptional in every single way, the vision of excellence and perfection that the society has labored to control.

As in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Harlan Ellison’s “‘Repent Harlequin!’ Said the Tocktock Man” (1965), Vonnegut’s police state squelches all forms of civil disobedience; all three stories form a commentary on the nature of power, corruption, and blindness that often ensues when the desire to build the perfect society is unchecked. In Vonnegut’s work the Handicapper General eradicates difference, denies individual rights, and sees freewill as antithetical to the common good: Society members are cogs in a wheel, all subjugating themselves to the needs of the whole. Vonnegut’s ideal society resembles those in Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), where a totalitarian government enforces the social code, guaranteeing a unified collective. Such a conformist society also mirrors the socialist and communist societies of the Soviet Union and China, who, at the time Vonnegut’s story was published,

were seen as threats to the United States and to democratic institutions. Because it is so masterfully constructed and the subject so thoroughly satirized, Vonnegut’s story can be seen as both a critique of communism itself and a commentary on the increasing paranoia over communism in the United States, the paranoia rampant after World War II that fueled the cold war, during which both the United States and the USSR stockpiled nuclear weapons and spent enormous amounts of money developing “military intelligence,” which, for Vonnegut, would be an oxymoronic term.

Similarly, the story also satirizes an American culture that devalues intellectualism while poking fun at those who challenge the status quo, for Harrison is an overachiever who questions authority and demands to be free of his handicaps. He speaks what no one else can or is willing to say. In this sense he is the novel’s protagonist, the one who propels the outrageous action at the end of the story, during which Harrison, after freeing the musicians of their handicaps, instructing them how to play the music correctly, and choosing one of the ballerinas as his empress, shows the world the meaning of the word *dance*. Harrison not only defies constitutional amendments in his dancing, but also defies the laws of gravity as he kisses the ceiling, a fantastic moment that signals his breaking free of the adamant chains that have bound him. Yet, Vonnegut’s art prevents the story from becoming a simple moral lesson or political allegory. While Harrison is a rebel of great intellect, Vonnegut does not present him as someone to emulate. Instead, Vonnegut fashions an antihero in Harrison Bergeron, a seven-foot-tall Adonis who is a megalomaniac, crying, “I am the Emperor! Everybody must do as I say at once!” as he stamps his foot on the stage. Vonnegut achieves a great deal of ambiguity in this fantastic tale in which both the perpetrators of handicapping and those who rise above the handicaps imposed fall prey to Vonnegut’s satirical vision. Simultaneously a critique of institutions and thought systems that deny the individual expression, which do not admit intelligence, beauty, and grace, and a cautionary tale, rather than exalt the autonomous self, the story leaves room, with all of its ironies and careful juxtapositions, for

the possibility of community. Thus, the story is at once comic and maudlin, optimistic and pessimistic, invested in individual freedom and cautious about the will of the individual left unchecked.

By seeing how much lies within Vonnegut's satirical grasp, readers can begin to appreciate the nature of satire, the form that showcases human follies of all sorts. The story did not receive any critical attention, however, until 1968, when it appeared in Vonnegut's collection *Welcome to the Monkey House*, a collection of 25 short stories written between 1950 and 1968. In a classic example of Vonnegut's dark humor, Harrison's parents are so enrapt with the television that they ultimately forget about the horrific death of their son, even though they have just seen it along with the rest of the news bulletin watchers. Like the rest of their dystopian society, the Bergerons are automatons controlled by the government and pacified by an insipid form of entertainment, that, as do the handicaps parceled out to those with intelligence, numbs the mind and distracts anyone who might conjure a contrary thought, any idea differing from the norm. Interestingly, the story was reprinted on November 16, 1965, in *National Review*, the political conservative magazine edited by William F. Buckley, Jr.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why is the first line of the story significant? What does it suggest? What does it establish?
2. What do the United States Handicapper General agents do, and why do they do it? What threats to society do they target? What present circumstances in our society could lead to such absurdities?
3. What actual developments, policies, or trends does Vonnegut parody in the story?
4. Why is Harrison Bergeron such a threat to society? How has he been "handicapped"?
5. What is the significance of the dance that Harrison performs with the ballerina?
6. "Harrison Bergeron," RAY BRADBURY'S *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and AYN RAND'S *Anthem* (1938) deal with conformist societies in which the government polices "equality." First, compare the techniques the government uses in Bradbury's

and Rand's texts. What are the consequences of creating "equal" societies in both works?

Cat's Cradle (1963)

The novel's title is taken from a child's game called cat's cradle, a series of string figures made of one's fingers. While the game may explain the book's strung-together, multichapter form, we do not learn of the game's symbolic significance until the narrator/protagonist discusses it with a scientist's son, whose father enjoyed playing the game and then taunting him, making him a disillusioned "little person" at odds with the world. Set in both the United States and a mythical Caribbean republic called San Lorenzo, where the military dictator, Papa Monzano, conspires with the inventor of the island's religion, Bokonon, *Cat's Cradle* has a simple plot. A writer researching a book on the bombing of Hiroshima contacts the three children of an atomic bomb scientist (Dr. Felix Hoenikker); journeys to San Lorenzo to speak with the middle child, Frank, who has become the minister of science and progress on the island; eventually meets all three Hoenikker children; falls in love with the island's object of beauty, Mona; converts to the island's religion of Bokononism; and witnesses the end of the world brought about by one of Dr. Hoenikker's inventions: Ice-Nine.

We arrive at the island of San Lorenzo and an understanding of the Hoenikker family, the religion of Bokonon, and the inhumanity of science through the eyes of the storyteller: a man named *John* who calls himself *Jonah*, a name with tragicomic biblical overtones. Jonah/John is obsessed with a single cataclysmic moment in human history: August 6, 1945, the day the United States dropped "Little Boy"—an atomic bomb possessing the power of 16 kilotons of TNT—on Hiroshima, Japan, killing more than 140,000 people. But, unlike the bombing of Hiroshima, the Book of Jonah in the Bible and *Cat's Cradle* are comic stories. In the biblical story God sends Jonah to the sinful city of Nineveh to prophesy its destruction. Ironically, rather than make this trip, Jonah immediately boards a ship to

another city (Tarshish). When God sees this, he creates a mighty storm. The other sailors on the ship realize that Jonah has incurred the wrath of God and throw him overboard, where, in the tempestuous seas, he is swallowed by a whale for three days and three nights. God then sends Jonah on this mission again; this time Jonah prophesies gloom and doom: the end of the world. Ironically, God saves Nineveh, making Jonah a failed, dejected prophet. There are many interesting comparisons here to be made. One lies in Vonnegut's "outsider" status as a social critic; he is a kind of gloom-and-doom prophet whose warnings are not heeded. But, the story of Jonah also reveals the mystery of God: the strange way that justice, which is not absolute, lies beyond human understanding. In this way Jonah in the Bible, John/Jonah in his novel about the end of the world, Bokonon in his sacred books, and Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* perform prophetic roles for lost worlds, places where human beings, with their inward-focused vision and with their desire to control, lose sight of moral concerns. At the center of Vonnegut's world and perhaps of Jonah/John's karass—one of Bokonon's terms, referring in this case to a group of people who, without knowing one another, are fated to complete or take part in a historical event—are the Hoenikker children, abandoned by their often nihilistic father, who invests himself fully only in science. The Hoenikker children live in a world without morals, a world where God is absent.

Like spokes on a wheel, the Hoenikker children, all freaks of nature in one way or another, are obsessed with the doomsday substance their father has made, all covertly carrying pieces of it wherever they go. Angela, the eldest child, who is taken out of high school in her sophomore year to be a housekeeper and stand-in wife for her father, marries Harrison C. Connors, who desperately wants Ice-Nine. Her younger brother, Frank, who has lived in the basement of a hobby shop, has fashioned a perfect island country out of plywood, houses ants in a glass prison, and, as his father, has strong ideas but cannot face the public, becomes the minister of science and progress of San Lorenzo after bribing the dictator with Ice-Nine. Last is Newt, the youngest Hoennik-

ker child, who is psychically wounded by his cat's cradle play time with his father, is sent to a school for grotesque children (Newt is a "little person") and creates paintings that are cynical depictions of the meaninglessness of life. While these characters are over-the-top creations who are not found in the real world, they collectively show how modern society worships technology and science, how we all desire power and control, and how easily power and knowledge can corrupt and deform.

As so many experimental novelists do, Vonnegut draws upon his own experiences in his creations. Significantly, Vonnegut's idea for the novel originated in his time working for General Electric and his work with a particular scientist, whom Vonnegut satirized with the character of Felix Hoenikker. In a *Paris Review* interview, Vonnegut explains the genesis of the Felix Hoenikker character and "Ice-Nine":

Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the absentminded scientist, was a caricature of Dr. Irving Langmuir, the star of the GE research laboratory. I knew him some. My brother worked with him. Langmuir was wonderfully absentminded. He wondered out loud one time whether, when turtles pulled in their heads, their spines buckled or contracted. I put that in the book. One time he left a tip under his plate after his wife served him breakfast at home. I put that in. His most important contribution, though, was the idea for what I called "Ice-9," a form of frozen water that was stable at room temperature. He didn't tell it directly to me. It was a legend around the laboratory—about the time H. G. Wells came to Schenectady. That was long before my time. I was just a little boy when it happened—listening to the radio, building model airplanes. . . . Anyway—Wells came to Schenectady, and Langmuir was told to be his host. Langmuir thought he might entertain Wells with an idea for a science-fiction story—about a form of ice that was stable at room temperature. Wells was uninterested, or at least never used the idea. And then Wells died, and then, finally, Langmuir died. I thought to myself: finders, keepers—the idea is

mine. Langmuir, incidentally, was the first scientist in private industry to win a Nobel Prize.

As with so many of his works, Vonnegut draws upon real world events and actual people in his far-reaching social satires. Speaking to a generation of youth disillusioned by the Vietnam War and the cold war, *Cat's Cradle* made Vonnegut a household name and the subject of many college-classroom discussions. The University of Chicago granted Vonnegut his master's degree in anthropology many years after his original thesis was rejected, accepting *Cat's Cradle* in its place.

To grasp the significance of *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut's first commercial success, we should think about the tradition of realism usually associated with the novel form. Especially in the late 19th century, American authors were concerned with *verisimilitude*, the appearance of reality in fiction and conforming to the long tradition of representation that Aristotle refers to in his *Poetics* as *mimesis*. Thus, Herman Melville, for example, provides pages and pages of taxonomical descriptions of whales—a sort of scientific grounding for his novel—at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*. With *Cat's Cradle*, however, Vonnegut breaks from this tradition and creates an “antinovel,” an experimental form with no pretensions of realism (verisimilitude). For Samuel Beckett, Michel Butor, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, significant experimental novelists who prefigure Vonnegut's work, the novel is an elastic form with which both authors play. In Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable* (1953), for example, the world is eclipsed; we find ourselves in the mind of a head severed from its body, a head placed in a restaurant window beside the menu. Thus, the antinovel is often bizarre and absurd and relies on the reader to provide both concrete references and meaning. Characteristics of the antinovel include experiments with vocabulary, punctuation, syntax, variations of time sequence, alternate endings and beginnings, and collage, a form that allows authors to piece together discontinuous fragments. The antinovel can also lack plot, character development, and many other traditional elements we associate with literature. So, the question remains, What makes *Cat's Cradle* an antinovel?

With its opening epigraph, “Nothing in this book is true,” both Vonnegut's chosen line and an excerpt from the book embedded in the novel called “The Books of Bokonon,” the author breaks with the tradition of representing reality in fiction: *Cat's Cradle*, as does the nonexistent religious text it frequently describes, announces its own status as artifice even before the narrative starts. This self-referential quality, as fiction calls attention to its own status as art, is a hallmark of what is often referred to as *metafictional* writing. Though many novels throughout the literary tradition exhibit some metafictional qualities, they predominate in contemporary fiction, especially in the works of authors such as Italo Calvino, Gabriel García Márquez, and others who are known for their breaking with the conventions of realism. Vonnegut's novel about the end of the world contains a mixture of forms in its 127 short chapters, including parables, poetry, saints, and even sinners. It is a kind of Bible. Readers note the close resemblance of “The Books of Bokonon,” Lionel Boyd Johnson's religious text in Vonnegut's work, to the Book of Mormon, the sacred text purportedly dictated to Joseph Smith that forms the basis for the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Not only does Vonnegut make fun of Mormonism but of organized religion as a whole in this book, in which religious followers know they believe in lies and rub their feet in a sacred communion ritual. Thus, throughout the novel Vonnegut satirizes everything from religion to law to science to technology to nuclear proliferation to the cold war. Though Vonnegut's works depart from the tradition of realism we associate with the conventional novel, his use of satire attempts to amend vices Vonnegut sees in our world, vices especially relevant to the period during which he was writing, when the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a heated arms race and many Americans were beginning to protest the Vietnam War.

According to Jonathan Swift, a writer considered to be one of the finest satirists in the English language, “Satire is a sort of looking glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason for the kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very

few are” (“The Preface of the Author”). Like Swift, Vonnegut is a master satirist who is often misunderstood. Satire is a flexible form that enables Vonnegut to replace the conventions of realism with grotesque characters, an unbelievable plot, and an apocalyptic setting, one where a technological creation of a scientist lacking a moral vision destroys the world. This scientist, Dr. Felix Hoenikker, helps form Vonnegut’s bitter assault on our obsession with science, technology, and progress. In the end, *Cat’s Cradle* is a work that can be described by the last lines of “The Books of Bokonon,” which are both chilling and hilarious. As Bokonon does, Vonnegut creates a history of human stupidity, one that challenges us to think about our foibles, horrifies us with our own destructive potential, shows us the bankrupt nature of social institutions and the many delusional aspects of organized religions, and leads us to reimagine our place in a world where, although there may be “No damn cat. No damn cradle,” we must create ways of living that are more humane and come to grips with the paradox central to Bokononist thought: “the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it” (284).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the Book of Jonah in the Bible. After reading this story, consider the literary allusion Vonnegut employs when he names *Cat’s Cradle’s* narrator Jonah/John. Why is this naming significant? What connections can you make between *Cat’s Cradle* and the Book of Jonah?
2. How does Vonnegut satirize organized religion in the novel? What does Vonnegut’s satirical portrait of religion accomplish; how is it significant?
3. Both *Cat’s Cradle* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) deal with nuclear proliferation and the terror of the cold war. View the film *Dr. Strangelove* and consider the comedic approach both the movie and Vonnegut’s novel take toward this serious subject. Why do both employ humor? Why is their humor effective? What happens when writers and filmmakers use comedy to deal with serious issues?
4. The novel contains several artists and writers, including Newt Hoenikker, Julian Castle, and Jonah/John. Why does Vonnegut include these figures? Is Vonnegut making a statement about art, its meaning and purpose, by including such figures in his book? Consider Newt’s painting, Julian’s writings and paintings, and Jonah/John’s text. What do these things have in common? Why are the similarities and subject matter of their art significant to the novel as a whole?
5. Before the novel begins, Vonnegut provides a table of contents with many chapter names. Looking at the table of contents by itself, what connections can you make? Why would Vonnegut include the table of contents? Why is it significant that the book is composed of so many short chapters?

***Slaughterhouse-Five; or, The Children’s Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death* (1969)**

Slaughterhouse-Five tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a middle-aged optometrist and World War II veteran who survives the Allied bombing of Dresden, Germany, with other prisoners of war in the underground cellar of a slaughterhouse-turned-syrup-factory operated by the Nazis. While the novel is never clear about whether Billy is sane or insane, and therefore either having unworldly adventures or hallucinating, the narrator details Billy’s life in the war, his abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore, his life on Tralfamadore—where he is kept in a zoo with Montana Wildhack, a movie star who births his child—and his public life after a plane crash from which he sustains a head injury. After his recovery and space travels, enlightened by the Tralfamadorans about the nature of living and dying and their conception of the interconnected, nonlinear nature of time, Billy preaches Tralfamadore philosophy to anyone who will listen. Although Billy’s story occupies the main part of the narrative, the book opens and closes with lengthy authorial intrusions, moments when Vonnegut speaks directly to the reader as “Kurt Vonnegut,” a man living, as is Billy, in upstate New York. By framing the book in this way, Vonnegut establishes that his experience as a

prisoner of war during the firebombing of Dresden is the primary experience or conflict around which the book is constructed. Furthermore, by equating the firebombing of Dresden with the Children's Crusade of 1213, when 30,000 children journeyed to Palestine to wage war and most of them were either shipwrecked or sold as slaves, Vonnegut comments on the way that youth are called upon to fight wars whose causes and purpose they do not understand.

The novel's structure mirrors its content in many ways. As Billy becomes "unstuck in time," shifting back and forth to pivotal moments in his life, the story is told with a radical narrative technique, one that presents often-painful moments in Billy's life in a seemingly random order. In this respect the novel is an antinovel, one that thwarts readers' usual expectations of what a novel may be. Additionally, Billy is an antihero, an innocent man who, as does Jesus, witnesses the world's brokenness and becomes the victim of a tragic fate. Vonnegut identifies Billy with Jesus throughout the novel, most notably in the novel's epigraph, an excerpt from the Christmas carol "Away in a Manger." By associating these two Vonnegut presents the universal nature of Billy's experience. Because it contains many elements of the genre, critics often refer to *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a science fiction work. As with many works of science fiction, the novel contains fantastic elements, surreal occurrences that defy the tradition of realism so often associated with the novel form and make it difficult for the reader to suspend disbelief, a process that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the author of such romantic poems such as "Kubla Kahn" (1798), says is necessary when dealing with literature. Thus, the novel defies usual expectations, presenting what Vonnegut refers to as a "schizophrenic" style that embodies Billy's experience, his mental state, and the psychological malady often experienced by war veterans known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Significant because it deals with the Dresden bombing, an event often overlooked when examining the Allied forces' role in World War II, the novel was written and published during the Vietnam War and makes one of the strongest antiwar statements in 20th-century literature. As does JOSEPH HELLER'S *Catch-22* (1961), *Slaughterhouse-Five* conveys

the inhumanity of war and focuses on a key moment that has traumatized its central character. Vonnegut compares the firebombing of Dresden, during which more than 130,000 people lost their lives and the city was reduced to rubble, with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, an earth-shattering event that reveals the way that human beings of the technologically advanced 20th century, despite priding themselves on being "civilized," behaved barbarically. By representing horrifying events and commenting on the ever-warring nature of human beings, Vonnegut offers a scathing critique of human history, which, from Vonnegut's perspective, neither progresses nor moves toward a distinct goal and instead repeats itself in a terrifying cycle, at the center of which lie an unchecked will to power and the violent nature of humanity. In this sense the novel is a postmodern work of art, one that challenges accepted notions of truth, questions the nature of authority, and, rather than making meaning out of chaos and suffering, represents the fragmented nature of the modern world.

Billy Pilgrim, surviving the masochist whims of Roland Weary (mock-hero named for Roland from *The Song of Roland*, an epic poem dating from A.D. 1000), the voyeuristic torture of the zoo-obsessed Tralfamadorans, the nightmarish barbershop quartet singing of the "Febs" (Four-Eyed Bastards), and the unthinkable devastation of Dresden, learns that the universe is really a bunch of spaghetti. Nothing is off limits for Vonnegut. He tackles everything from the ridiculous to the sublime, from Sears furniture to war, with a satirical blowtorch that scorches cherished institutions such as love, war, Christianity, and family life, all of which melt under his fire. Not unlike English satirist Jonathan Swift's use of fantastical, imaginary societies in his novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Vonnegut creates Tralfamadore—a safely distant, make-believe world populated by beings from the "fourth dimension" who communicate telepathically and perceive all of spatial and temporal reality at once—to critique a modern myopia.

Forming the central trope for the human blindness that Vonnegut so powerfully satirizes is the bombing of Dresden in 1945, one of the many atavistic horrors of the 20th century. Dresden's bombing is

an unspeakable memory, a psychological imprint that changes Billy Pilgrim and Kurt Vonnegut. In dealing with this pivotal event, Vonnegut does not paint it in a melodramatic manner or try to make meaning out of what seems to be senseless. Instead, he makes a horrific event comic.

While wars are not usually the stuff of which comedy is made, Vonnegut takes a German concentration camp, for example, and creates a fallen city. In this city, Brits and Americans battle continually over the correct, “civilized” way to comport themselves in time of war, and Billy Pilgrim appears as a pantaloone in an undersized jacket continually pursued by the avengers of Roland, who has announced to his fellow deportees, train-imprisoned and concentration-camp-bound, that Billy is responsible for his death. Yet, this revenge quest is not tragic but comic, for Billy learns that life is a never-ending maze of simultaneity that can be entered at any point, place, and time. Thus, Billy’s own death, his assassination during a public lecture on space aliens that he has already witnessed in his time travel, is not a threat to him, but one thin strand in Billy’s own spaghetti-like conception of life that can be nibbled at or eaten around with ease, an inconsequential act that does not cancel out previous moments or end life but merely forms one instance in a never-ending experience.

Although Vonnegut is merciless, slamming institutions, entrenched beliefs, and values, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a powerful affirmation of life. It challenges the world’s myopic vision by presenting an alternative to our conceptions of history, truth, and godliness. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, therefore, is an engaging, provoking examination of our humanity, with all of its imperfections, which will engender strong readings for generations to come. The novel is widely viewed as Vonnegut’s most significant work. It earned him an international reputation and enabled him to record an experience that he had wanted to write about for 23 years. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity to experiment, to liberate his style from the previous conventions to which he felt bound. Coinciding with 1960s protests and the peace movement, the novel appealed to youth, those for whom the Vietnam War was an ever-present danger. The novel was adapted for a film produced by

George Roy Hill in 1972 and received critical praise. In commenting on war, human dignity, and genocide, Vonnegut also details the process of creating fiction and the inherent problems therein. By placing himself in the novel and by creating a science fiction novelist character, Kilgore Trout, whose works parallel the action of the book, Vonnegut reveals his anxiety about fiction making and the effectiveness of the techniques he employs. He creates a “self-referential” text, one that comments on itself and on writing, that foils the expectations of readers and forces them to construct a cohesive story line from a disjunctive narrative. Despite its authorial intrusions and self-reflexive commentary, the novel relies on the reader. In this sense Vonnegut relinquishes control over the event that has haunted him and leaves the reader to make sense out of the atavistic past and of the increasing inhumanity of the Vietnam experience. As a work incumbent upon the reader for its construction and interpretation, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not merely a platform for Vonnegut’s ideas. It is an artwork that sustains multiple readings, one that can be applied to many different situations, including the many contemporary conflicts in which the world continues to engage. As such, it remains a pivotal 20th-century American novel, a bold experiment in narrative form that addresses significant social issues.

Because of its realistic and frequent depiction of what many consider to be foul language and sexually explicit content, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been viewed as unfit for young minds. In fact, it is one of the most frequently banned works in American literature and has often been removed from school libraries and curriculums. Yet, many schools include the book as part of their curriculum and spend a good bit of time defending its worth. The Supreme Court of the United States even weighed the book’s merits in a landmark case, where it was one of the works scrutinized in *Island Trees School District v. Pico* 457 US 853 (1982). The novel appears on the American Library Association list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000 at number 69. Like Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, James Joyce, and many other great writers, Vonnegut is often misunderstood and accused of being a pessimistic, amoral writer. Yet,

he remains one of America's great satirists and most profound moral thinkers. *Slaughterhouse-Five* marks the beginning of Vonnegut's fame and the launching of a long and illustrious career. This work, perhaps more than any of his others, challenges the status quo, causes us to rethink the way we live, leads us to imagine a new way of understanding our mortality, and shows us the brutality of war. To do all of this in the realm of comedy is no small feat. *Slaughterhouse-Five* remains a testimony to Vonnegut's humor and depth, his biting satire and compassion for humanity. As such it remains a vital, pertinent work from which we all can learn not only about the culture in which we live but also about the way we all attempt to survive with some sense of dignity. In the words of the novel's litany, one that follows every death it accounts for: And so it goes.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Just as Vonnegut is best known for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel that deals with war, so also are Ernest Hemingway and Stephen Crane known for war novels that help define their writing style, their view toward humanity, and their vision of war. Read Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the novel Edward Derby reads to Billy Pilgrim as he recovers in the hospital and is heavily sedated on morphine. Although the focus of these three novels is a specific war—World War II, World War I, and the Civil War, respectively—each uses different techniques to capture the war experience. With this in mind, first compare and contrast each of the authors' views on war. Next, compare and contrast the style, tone, characters, literary devices, and narrative techniques of the three novels. How does each novel help define and/or express the time during which it was written?
2. Read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and compare it with *Slaughterhouse-Five*. How do these two novels represent war? What literary techniques and devices do both use? How does time sequence come into play in both, and why is that significant?
3. Research the bombing of Dresden and the bombing of Hiroshima. In terms of the information you find, is Vonnegut justified in saying that the Dresden bombing is "worse" than Hiroshima? Why or why not?
4. Compare and contrast the tone and visual style of the movie version of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972) with those of other antiwar films, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), *M*A*S*H** (1970), and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987).
5. Vonnegut employs authorial intrusions in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, moments when he speaks directly to the reader. How does this affect the novel? What purpose do these intrusions serve?
6. What does Billy learn from the Trafamadorans, and why is what he learns significant?
7. Visit the American Library Association site on challenged or banned books (<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/challengedbanned/challengedbanned.htm>). After learning about why books are challenged, count the number of books by major American authors that have been challenged. What do you make of this? Evaluate *Slaughterhouse-Five* and judge whether it is a suitable book for young adults. If so, at what age is the book appropriate to be taught?

***Breakfast of Champions; or, Goodbye Blue Monday!* (1973)**

Marking his return to the novel form as well as his recovery from a bout of depression, Vonnegut wrote *Breakfast of Champions* as a "fiftieth birthday present" to himself, a therapeutic book. As Vonnegut stated in a 1973 interview with *Playboy*:

Writers get a break in one way, at least: They can treat their mental illnesses every day. If I'm lucky, the books have amounted to more than that. I'd like to be a useful citizen, a specialized cell in the body politic. I have a feeling that *Breakfast* will be the last of the therapeutic books, which is probably too bad. Crazy makes for some beautiful accidents in art. (*Conversations* 109)

These remarks betray the intensely personal nature of *Breakfast of Champions*, a work that also includes numerous authorial intrusions, so many that the line between author and character is blurred. Yet, despite the therapeutic value of the work for Vonnegut, *Breakfast* remains a biting, hilarious social commentary, a “tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet that was dying fast” (7). As Christopher Lehmann-Haupt writes in a *New York Times* May 3, 1973, review:

He makes pornography seem like old plumbing, violence like lovemaking, innocence like evil, and guilt like child’s play. He wheels out all of the latest fashionable complaints about America—her racism, her gift for destroying language, her technological greed and selfishness—and makes them seem fresh, funny, outrageous, hateful, and lovable, all at the same time.

Vonnegut peppers this whimsical narrative with felt-tip pen drawings, all of which depict life on Earth, and plot descriptions for the works of the pulp-science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, who, in this novel, is a spiritual guru for the Pontiac dealer Dwayne Hoover, an insane but wealthy businessman on a quest for truth, who, at one time, painted a 500-pound bomb to be dropped on Hamburg, Germany, with the following inscription: “Good-bye Blue Monday.” Incidentally, Hoover is also convinced that everyone on Earth aside from him is a robot. The action of the novel takes place in Midland City, Ohio—“The asshole of the universe”—as Trout has been invited to speak at the city arts festival. Trout arrives unshaven and filthy after hitchhiking from New York. During his travels he has been beaten and robbed. But, his disheveled appearance that day is usual. All the while, everyone is being watched over by an authorial presence from within the narrative who dictates their lives: Kurt Vonnegut. Trout and Hoover meet via Eliot Rosewater, an eccentric man of wealth, who idealizes Trout. As one might expect from Vonnegut’s scatological imagination, Trout publishes his novels through a pornographic press that fills his works with unrelated, sexually graphic illustrations. When he arrives

in Midland City, where antipersonnel bombs and body bags are manufactured, Trout finds a Holiday Inn where Hoover’s son, Bunny, is playing the piano at the bar. There, Hoover and the character Vonnegut wait. When they meet, Hoover, in a flight of frenzy, grabs one of Trout’s books, *Now It Can Be Told*, the story of an autonomous man alone in a world of humanoid robots placed there to amuse him. Luckily, Hoover is a speed reader and quickly makes his way through the book. Unfortunately, Hoover mistakes the plot for reality, becomes insane, hits Bunny, bites Trout’s ring finger, smashes Vonnegut’s watch, and crushes his big toe. At the end of the novel, Vonnegut reveals to Trout that he is his creator and that he intends to set him free. As they part ways, ostensibly for good, the narrative ends with Trout’s pleading with Vonnegut to make him young.

Trout’s emancipation is a symbolically significant act, not only for Vonnegut, who, as he states, tries with the writing of *Breakfast of Champions* to “clear [his] head of all the junk in there—the assholes, the flags, the underpants,” but also for American society as Vonnegut envisions it (*Breakfast* 5). As Vonnegut tries to get rid of “all the junk,” he relinquishes his control of Trout. This emancipation signals not only the liberation of a character, but also the liberation of fiction, which, for Vonnegut, means rethinking fiction’s purpose and the relationship between the social world and art. Thus, the novel, with all of its stock characters, becomes a parody of the American experience, which, for Vonnegut, dehumanizes us, making of us mere automatons. These concerns become explicit in the last section of the novel, where the narrator/author intrudes, speaking directly to the reader:

As I approached my fiftieth birthday, I had become more and more enraged and mystified by the idiot decisions made by my countrymen. And then I had come suddenly to pity them, for I understood how innocent and natural it was for them to behave so abominably, and with such abominable results: They were doing their best to live like people invented in story books. This was the reason Americans shot each other

Vonnegut's works, such as *Cat's Cradle*, with one of Twain's, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) or his posthumously published novel *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916). What do Vonnegut's and Twain's work have in common? How do they differ?

5. If you enjoy Vonnegut, you will probably enjoy reading works of T. C. Boyle. Read a short story of Boyle's such as "Modern Love." What do you find that Boyle and Vonnegut share? How is their humor similar; how does it differ?
6. In several of his interviews and essays Vonnegut talks about meeting the reader's needs, which he views as every writer's responsibility. How do you see Vonnegut targeting our needs as readers? What can you learn from Vonnegut about your own writing? How can you incorporate elements of Vonnegut's style so that your writing is compelling?
7. In *Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction*, Vonnegut gives "Eight rules for writing fiction":

- Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
- Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
- Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
- Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
- Start as close to the end as possible.
- Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
- Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
- Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

With Vonnegut's thoughts on writing in mind, assess his general style. Does he follow the rules he gives? If so, how effective is his writing? If not, why?

8. Many of Vonnegut's novels emphasize the implausibility of humans' ever finding a lasting peace: Violence, in Vonnegut's fictional landscapes, is a prominent and inescapable by-product of humanity's technological and social being. After researching evolutionary biology and taking an ecotourism cruise with his wife to the Galápagos Islands, a small chain of islands in the South Pacific crucial to the studies of the naturalist Charles Darwin and his formulation of the theory of evolution, Vonnegut composed *Galapagos* (1985). The novel depicts a future when survivors of nuclear Armageddon, marooned on one of the islands in the Galápagos chain, evolve into peaceful seagoing creatures with smaller brains and flippers. Read *Galapagos*, a late Vonnegut work, and compare it with his earlier work *Cat's Cradle*. Finally, write a well-developed essay that extrapolates Vonnegut's worldview as he has aged. Would you consider *Galapagos* more optimistic? Why or why not?
9. If we consider *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Galapagos* as works of science fiction (a literary form in which a background of science is integral, containing elements within the realm of future possibility), how is scientific theory central to Vonnegut's works? How does Vonnegut use science in his novels?
10. On one level Vonnegut's works are satires (a literary form that attacks human vice or folly through irony, derision, or wit). What elements of late-20th-century life do Vonnegut's satires target? Why?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Allen, William Rodney, ed. *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988.
- . *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.
- Boon, Kevin A., ed. *At Millennium's End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.

- . *Chaos Theory and the Interpretation of Literary Texts: The Case of Kurt Vonnegut*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Kurt Vonnegut*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000.
- Bly, William. *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*. Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron's Educational Series, 1985.
- Broer, Lawrence R. *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*. 2d. ed. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994.
- Chernuchin, Michael, ed. *Vonnegut Talks!* Forest Hills, N.Y.: Pylon Press, 1977.
- Giannone, Richard. *Vonnegut: A Preface to His Novels*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977.
- Goldsmith, David H. *Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Kurt Vonnegut*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- . "Papers Relating to Kurt Vonnegut: 1969–1978." University of Delaware Special Collections Department. Available online. URL: <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/findaids/klinkvon.htm>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- . *Slaughterhouse-Five: Reforming the Novel and the World*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- . *The Vonnegut Effect*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004.
- . *Vonnegut in Fact: The Public Spokesmanship of Personal Fiction*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.
- Leeds, Marc. *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia: An Authorized Compendium*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995.
- Leeds, Marc, and Peter J. Reed. *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000.
- Lundquist, James. *Kurt Vonnegut*. New York: Ungar, 1977.
- Marvin, Thomas F. *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.
- Mayo, Clark. *Kurt Vonnegut: The Gospel from Outer Space*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1977.
- Merrill, Robert, ed. *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990.
- Morse, Donald E. *Kurt Vonnegut*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1992.
- . *Novels of Kurt Vonnegut: Imagining Being an American*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003.
- Mustazza, Leonard, ed. *Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994.
- . *Forever Pursuing Genesis: The Myth of Eden in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1990.
- Pieratt, Asa B., Julie Huffman-Klinkowitz, and Jerome Klinkowitz. *Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography*. North Haven, Conn.: Archon Books, 1987.
- Rackstraw, Loree, ed. *Draftings in Vonnegut: The Paradox of Hope*. Cedar Falls: University of Northern Iowa Press, 1988.
- Reed, Peter J. *Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997.
- Reed, Peter J., and Marc Leeds, eds. *Vonnegut Chronicles: Interviews and Essays*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Late Twentieth Century: 1945 to the Present—Kurt Vonnegut." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/vonnegut.html>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Schatt, Stanley. *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Boston: Twayne, 1976.
- Swift, Jonathan. "The Preface of the Author. The Battle of the Books." Available online. URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/623/623-h/623-h.htm>. Accessed November 2, 2009.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999.
- . Interview by David Hayman, David Michaelis, Richard Rhodes. "The Art of Fiction 64." *The Paris Review* 64 (Spring 1977). Available online. URL: <http://www.theparisreview.com/viewinterview.php/prmMID/3605>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- . *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon*. New York: Dell, 1974.
- Yarmolinsky, Jane Vonnegut. *Angels without Wings: A Courageous Family's Triumph over Tragedy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.



ROBERT PENN WARREN (1905–1989)

A poem you don't feel to your toes is not a very good one. But it also takes a person who knows how to feel to his toes to read a poem.

(Interview with Alvin P. Sanoff)

Best known for his exploration of moral dilemmas and a changing South, the poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, educator, literary critic, and editor Robert Penn Warren was a towering figure in 20th-century American letters, a writer and thinker whose poetry, novels, and critical writings continue to influence the way Americans approach literary studies. As James A. Grimshaw, Jr., noted, Warren “earned every major literary award that this country bestows on its authors, published in every major literary genre, and in collaboration with his friend and colleague, Cleanth Brooks, helped change the way literature was taught in this country before mid-century” (*Understanding Robert Penn Warren* 1). Warren collaborated with Cleanth Brooks on the seminal *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, two volumes that inspired the literary world to reimagine how and why books are read, interpreted, and taught. He authored two Pulitzer Prize-winning collections of poetry and the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the King's Men* (published in 1946; prize awarded in 1947), a political tale inspired by the career of the Louisiana governor and senator Huey P. Long. This work and its film adaptation gave Warren fame. He changed the way we view literary texts, authored landmark novels, and channeled his passion into 15 volumes of poetry, the most significant of which was written and recognized in his late life, securing his place in the American literary canon.

Robert Penn Warren was born in Guthrie, Kentucky, on April 24, 1905, just 40 years after the Civil War ended, into a middle-class family and a segregated southern society. The first child of Anna Ruth Penn, a schoolteacher, and Robert Franklin Warren, a businessman, Robert Penn Warren grew up on a Kentucky tobacco farm, hearing Civil War tales from his grandfathers, who had fought for the Confederacy. Warren was a precocious child who loved literature and southern history, which he commanded at an early age. As a teenager he had several selections appear in the *Purple and the Gold*, a monthly collection published at his high school in Clarkesville, Tennessee (1921). The same year, while reclining in his family's backyard, he was accidentally struck by a chunk of coal his brother tossed and was blinded in his left eye. This incident ended Warren's dreams of entering the U.S. Naval Academy. Instead, he entered Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, as a 16-year-old; there he had the good fortune of taking a freshman English class with John Crowe Ransom, a well-known literary critic who inspired Warren to become a man of letters.

Ransom invited Warren to take advanced literature classes and asked him to join a group of Vanderbilt teachers and students and local businessmen who had been meeting informally since around 1915 to discuss trends in American life and literature. They called themselves the “Fugitives,” among whose illustrious members were Donald Davidson, John

Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate, Warren's Vanderbilt roommate. By 1922, the year Warren joined the group, their discussions focused primarily on poetry and the purpose and use of literature. They also had founded a literary journal, the *Fugitive*, which featured criticism and poetry heavily influenced by classical verse and metaphysical poets such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell. The *Fugitive* published 23 of Warren's poems in the three and one-half years the journal appeared.

After graduating summa cum laude from Vanderbilt in summer 1925, Warren studied at the University of California, Berkeley (M.A. in English, 1927), where he met his future wife, Emma "Cinina" Brescia, then entered the Yale doctoral program before attending the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. During this time he published poems in a number of prestigious publications such as *Poetry*, *New Republic*, and *Saturday Review of Literature* and completed a biography, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929). The biography focuses on a man much like Warren's later characters and contains themes that can be found in his later writing: Both *All the King's Men* (1947) and *Brother to Dragons* (1953) feature characters who, as did Brown, follow personal ideals to murderous extremes. During this period Warren also produced his first extended piece of prose fiction, a novelette entitled *Prime Leaf* that would remain unpublished until it appeared in *American Caravan IV* in 1931. At Ransom's request Warren also contributed an essay, "The Briar Patch," to the anthology *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), in which he rejected northern industrialism in favor of Old South agrarian values and a "separate but equal" southern society, one in which racial segregation continued. The essays in *I'll Take My Stand* argued for a farm-based southern society, the sort of society that in Warren's day was becoming a thing of the past. "The Briar Patch" addressed the role of African Americans in the agriculture-based economy. Importantly, he did not support "separate but equal" policies later in life and recanted the position he took in this early essay.

Also in 1930, Warren began his teaching career at Southwestern Presbyterian College (now Rhodes College) in Memphis, where he taught for one

year before transferring to Vanderbilt (1931), where he served as an assistant professor for three years. In 1934 Warren accepted an assistant professorship at the Louisiana State University (LSU), where his good friend Cleanth Brooks taught and with whom he helped found the *Southern Review*. The two coauthored *An Approach to Literature* (1936), *Understanding Poetry* (1938), *Understanding Fiction* (1943), and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949), all of which played a major role in the institutionalization of the New Criticism, an approach to interpreting literature that sees literary works as artifacts whose structure and substance should be analyzed without respect to social, biographical, and political details. This approach revolutionized the way literature was taught, emphasizing the form of literary works and close reading of texts. Even though current university scholars tend to scoff at the New Critical method, opting to view literature from the perspective of race, class, and gender issues, Warren's methodology became the norm for generations of scholars and is still often the first approach taught children from grade school through high school and demanded on standardized college-placement tests. While at LSU, Warren also published the collection *Thirty-six Poems* (1936), containing such significant early works as "The Return: An Elegy," "To a Face in the Crowd," and the cycle "Kentucky Mountain Farm."

Rekindling what would be a lifelong interest in historical fiction and what he perceived to be the corrupt, fallen nature of our lives, Warren published his first novel, *Night Rider* (1939), a story set during the tobacco wars in western Kentucky at the beginning of the 20th century. *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* appeared in April of that year; the collection included one of Warren's most often anthologized poems, the Andrew Marvell-influenced "Bearded Oaks," as well as "Original Sin: A Short Story," a key work in understanding Warren's view of humanity and our need for redemption. In the poem Warren describes original sin as a nightmare, one that accompanies us in our sleeping and waking hours. For Warren, original sin is not a terminal disease brought about by a lone, distant biblical ancestor (progenitor) but rather an internal reality: a weakness or sickness threatening to overcome us at any moment. This ominous,

archetypal presence lurks in the shadows, residing in our subconscious and infecting our day-to-day lives. It is a primal force that must be dealt with, one that can only be combated by the often pained-filled journey within: the journey to understand the self. Original sin appears as a tragic flaw, woven into our lives. For Warren, we are single threads in a complex web; everything we do and touch ripples through the universe, affecting all of creation. This “web of being” is the central metaphor in his best-known text, the novel *All the King's Men* (1946), a reworking of *Proud Flesh*, a play Warren had published seven years prior (1939).

The year 1946 also marked the publication of “Blackberry Winter,” the often-anthologized work considered by many to be one of the finest short stories in American literature. The story describes a boy's coming of age and his encounter with, as in Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, a shadowy figure who acquaints him with evil for the first time. “Blackberry Winter,” a classic initiation story like Nathaniel Hawthorne's “Young Goodman Brown,” chronicles the movement from innocence to experience and focuses on the same themes and worldview that pervade “Original Sin” and *All the King's Men*. Thus, “Original Sin,” *All the King's Men*, and “Blackberry Winter” provide an excellent introduction to Warren's oeuvre, demonstrating his command of divergent literary forms and the thematic continuity for which he is known.

After occupying a brief post at the University of Minnesota and publishing another ambitious historical novel, *World Enough and Time* (1950), based on the 1825 murder of Colonel Solomon Sharp by Jereboam O. Beauchamp in Frankfort, Kentucky, Warren accepted a professorship at Yale, which he held until 1955. Warren and Cinina divorced on June 28, 1951. Warren remarried in 1952, this time to the writer Eleanor Crook, with whom he had a daughter, Rosanna Phelps Warren, in July 1953. In August 1953 Warren published the book-length verse drama *Brother to Dragons*, a work that chronicles a Kentucky slave owner's brutal murder of his slave for a trivial offense. The work also marks a major turning point from Warren's early concern for poetic form, as prescribed by Ransom, toward Warren's later

poetry, which uses a freer approach to both rhyme and meter.

Warren continued to be prolific in the 1950s, publishing the novel *Band of Angels* (1955), the nonfiction work *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956), and *Promises: Poems, 1954–1956* (1957), for which Warren received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award (1958). In 1965 Warren published a collection of interviews with African Americans entitled *Who Speaks for the Negro*, a collection that reflects a significant change in his views on race. In 1969 Warren published perhaps his most celebrated poem, *Audubon: A Vision*, in a single volume. Based on the five-volume *Ornithological Biography* of the painter and ornithologist John James Audubon, *Audubon* incorporates many of Warren's favorite themes into a singularly powerful poetic vision. In September 1978 a new collection of poetry, *Now and Then: Poems 1976–1979*, appeared, for which Warren received his third Pulitzer Prize, his second for poetry. This trend of late-blooming creativity continued in *Being Here: Poetry 1977–1980* (1980), *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979–1980* (1981), and *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1983). Even the 1985 edition of his *New and Selected Poems: 1923–1985* contained a section of new poems entitled *Altitudes and Extensions: 1980–1984*, which features two of Warren's best poems, “Mortal Limit,” a brief but powerful meditation on mortality and perception using Warren's familiar hawk imagery, and “After the Dinner Party,” a portrait of two lovers seeking solace in each other. In February 1986 the Library of Congress appointed Warren the first official poet laureate of the United States. A volume of *New and Selected Essays* appeared in March 1989. Warren's death of cancer on September 15, 1989, in West Wardsboro, Vermont, occurred less than a month after the birth of his grandson, Noah Penn Warren.

According to James Grimshaw, “In his sixty-eight years of productivity, Warren wrote ten novels, sixteen short stories, seventeen volumes of poetry, seven plays and television dramas, five textbooks, eight books of nonfiction, two children's books, and more than one hundred essays”—an extraordinarily prolific oeuvre that earned him “every major literary award that this country bestows upon its authors”

(*Understanding Robert Penn Warren* 1). The prominent literary critic Harold Bloom argues that Warren is one of the “modern American poets who will be permanent in our literature,” and *All the King's Men* remains one of the most highly regarded American novels of the 20th century (“Introduction” *Collected Poems* xxv–xxvi). As the works of this preeminent man of American letters continue to be read and his critical ideas continue to be debated, Warren’s singular literary voice refuses to be silenced. It rings out loud and clear for those who live what Socrates called the “examined life,” those seeking to understand the world, come to terms with the past, make sense of the present, and peer into their selves.

“Bearded Oaks” (1942)

“Bearded Oaks” first appeared in the collection *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*. One of Warren’s most often anthologized poems, “Bearded Oaks” bears many of the characteristics of his early poetry, including a preoccupation with metaphysical poetry techniques known as *conceits*—a literary term that refers to elaborate, fanciful devices that often incorporate metaphor, simile, hyperbole, or oxymoron. In “Bearded Oaks” Warren uses many such conceits, including paradox and extended metaphor, and employs strict meter and rhyme schemes. The poem unfolds on both a literal and a metaphorical level. Literally, two lovers lie on the ground beneath oak trees watching light filter through the leaves; metaphorically, they lie on the bottom of the ocean, watching themes of human history unfold through a storm on the ocean’s surface.

The poem’s first stanza sets its literal scene, describing how “layered light . . . swims” above the oaks (lines 2–3). The first part of the opening sentence with its unorthodox inversions recalls the poetry of John Donne: Its syntax demands that the reader pay close attention to the rhythms and content of Warren’s dense poetic language. The second stanza introduces the two individuals, who “now lie / Beneath the languorous tread of light” (2.1–2). The third stanza further extends the metaphor by

comparing the absence of light at the bottom of the sea with a sense of lying outside history’s confines.

In the next three stanzas the pair watch from their vantage point outside time as a storm on the sea’s surface rages. The storm’s descriptions express the pain, violence, and meaningless slaughter found in human history. Even though they have withdrawn to the floor of the ocean, the lovers still feel the effects of the storm in the world above. The last half of the seventh stanza reveals their motives. By withdrawing to a silent space, the lovers have rendered concepts such as hope and fear meaningless, freeing them from the burden of history and individual responsibility.

The poem’s final three stanzas break from the extended argument of the previous five. In the eighth stanza the lovers almost hit a deer, a symbol of oneness with the natural world, while in the next stanza one lover directly addresses the other, proclaiming that their love remains meaningful despite their withdrawal from the world of sense and time. The final stanza focuses on the inevitability of our mortality and the brief span of our lives in comparison with eternity. While eternity makes our earthly struggle seem futile, it also inspires us to make the most of the limited hours we are given. From a cosmic perspective the moss-shagged oaks are also mythic, an Eden-like image recalling our painful fall from innocence into experience and the way love and language, though imperfect, grant us moments of understanding. Yet, despite their transience, these moments and brief glimpses form our connection to what lies the beyond to which the poet gestures.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The speaker in Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress” uses a method of persuasion often referred to as *carpe diem* (seize the day) to seduce a woman. Compare and contrast the argument in “Bearded Oaks” with that found in Marvell’s poem. How does the ending of “Bearded Oaks” subvert the *carpe diem* form?
2. At this stage of his career Warren’s poetry was heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot’s masterpiece of modernist poetry *The Waste Land* (1922). Compare and contrast the imagery, themes, and

content of “Bearded Oaks” with the “Death by Water” sequence from *The Waste Land*.

3. What is the significance of the memory recalled in the poem’s eighth stanza?

***All the King’s Men* (1946)**

Originally published by Harcourt, Brace in 1946, *All the King’s Men* received the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 and established Warren’s reputation as a novelist. The novel tells the story of Willie Stark, a corrupt politician who resembles Huey P. Long, “the Kingfish,” former governor of Louisiana and U.S. senator during the 1930s. Warren, however, cautioned against drawing direct parallels with Long, as he explains in the introduction to the 1953 Random House edition of the novel:

One of the unfortunate characteristics of our time is that the reception of a novel may depend on its journalistic relevance. It is a little graceless of me to call this characteristic unfortunate, and to quarrel with it, for certainly the journalistic relevance of *All the King’s Men* had a good deal to do with what interest it evoked. My politician hero, whose name in the end, was Willie Stark, was quickly equated with the late Senator Huey P. Long, whose fame, even outside of Louisiana, was yet green in pious tears, anathema, and speculation. . . . For better or for worse, Willie Stark was not Huey Long. Willie was only himself, whatever that self turned out to be, a shadowy wraith or a blundering human being. . . . Now in making this disclaimer again, I do not mean to imply that there was no connection between Governor Stark and Senator Long. Certainly, it was the career of Long and the atmosphere of Louisiana that suggested the play that was to become the novel. But suggestion does not mean identity, and even if I had wanted to make Stark a projection of Long, I should not have known how to go about it. For one reason, simply because I did not, and do not, know what Long was like, and what were the secret forces that drove him along his violent path to meet the bullet in the

Capitol. And in any case, Long was but one of the figures that stood in the shadows of imagination behind Willie Stark. . . . Though I did not profess to be privy to the secret of Long’s soul, I did have some notions about the phenomenon of which Long was but one example, and I tried to put some of those notions into my book. (Introduction to *All the King’s Men* [New York: Random House, 1953])

Warren’s comments establish Long as an inspiration for the novel but also caution readers against either interpreting the novel in light of Long or trying to glean Long’s character from the book. It should be noted, however, that these comments are from a literary critic of the New Criticism school, which believed art works should stand alone and be evaluated without interjecting elements from “outside” the text. While Warren’s articulate defense of the novel should encourage all of us to consider the book outside a biographical framework, the “enveloping action”—the political climate of the time and the figure upon which Warren’s protagonist is roughly based—must be considered to appreciate both the novel’s many meanings and the critical sensation it created. Thus, anyone reading *All the King’s Men* would be well advised to consult a trustworthy information source and learn about Long, whose larger-than-life personality stands above and beyond Warren’s character (the Social Security Administration maintains one of the many excellent Internet sites on Long’s career: <http://www.ssa.gov/history/hlong1.html>).

The novel tells the story of Willie Stark, or “Willie Talos” in the Harcourt edition of the text fully restored and reintroduced by the literary scholar Noel Polk (textual editor of the works of William Faulkner). Polk’s edition follows Warren’s original intentions before the editorial process, during which, at the request of an editor, Warren changed the name from *Talos* to *Stark*. *Talos* is a symbolic name Warren took from Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, book 5, in which Talus (a name Spenser drew from *Talos* in Greek mythology) is the “iron groom” who carries out punishments decreed by his master, Artagall, the knight of justice. In Warren’s novel, Jack Burden—a

former journalist now hired, as Talus in the Spenser story, to accomplish the dirty work of a powerful political leader—narrates Governor Willie Stark's story. As is often the case with literary works written from such a first-person perspective, the novel is also the story of the narrator, Burden, who finds in Stark a mirror image of what he as a young journalist may become. Thus, the novel is also a story of initiation and self-discovery. As Burden tells about Stark's political machinations and observes his rise, fall, and death, he learns about himself and the complexity of moral thinking. Burden is something of a mystery detective who gradually pieces together clues. He, however, is what the critic Wayne Booth describes as an "unreliable narrator," a mediating presence who inflects the action of the novel with his own biased perceptions. What makes the novel a great work of art is that it leaves room for us to filter Burden's perceptions and interpretations and arrive at our own understanding of what takes place, what its significance is for Jack Burden, and what universal significance lies in Jack's discoveries. As with the Greek demigod Epimetheus, who only understands matters in retrospect, Burden does not foresee the repercussions of his own misdeeds and is slow to piece together the significance of what Stark says and does. By presenting an unreliable narrator who works to understand his self and the story of his mirror reflection, Willie Stark, Warren enables readers to pass judgment on both Stark and Burden. At times aware of what they are doing and at other times not, both have a negative impact on history, where individual actions have a rippling effect. For Warren, history provides the perspective from which value judgments can be made. While Stark makes his mark as a reformer, he ultimately becomes an unscrupulous politician hungry for power. Yet, despite Stark's evil deeds and self-aggrandizing schemes, he does accomplish things that benefit humanity, such as developing a massive interstate infrastructure, pouring money into public education, and building a free clinic. Such complex ethical situations leave Jack Burden and the reader to weigh good and evil.

By showing how Jack becomes a political pawn—one of the king's men—the novel focuses on Jack's experience: the way he begins to realize his place in

the present and its relationship to the past. Importantly, the narrative never endorses one vision of reality; Jack is ambiguous about his own actions and interpretations and is ambivalent about Willie Stark. Yet Jack accepts "the awful responsibility of Time": how his own ideas, actions, and words have meanings that affect everyone joined in the "web of being" (609). As the narrative progresses and as Jack learns about the complex web spun by the political world, the narrative details Willie's disillusionment and many of the questionable decisions he makes. As do Sophocles' Oedipus and many other tragic figures, Willie Stark fails to reach his potential. Ultimately, *All the King's Men* explores such grand themes as the way history affects the present; the inherent dangers of power, which in the novel is portrayed as a corruptive, blinding force; the alienation of the individual in the modern world; and the duty we all have to understand ourselves, come to terms with our past, and accept responsibility for our lives and the ways they affect others. These themes emerge as Jack Burden realizes his identity against the mercurial rise and fall of Huey P. Long's literary counterpart, Willie Stark. History functions in the novel as the backdrop against which Warren explores our lives and the tragic nature of the human condition.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Warren's first draft of *All the King's Men* began at the outset of Willie's career rather than with his encounter with Judge Irwin. Why do you think Warren decided to alter the novel's original sequence, presenting many of its events out of chronological order? What effect does this have on you as a reader?
2. The story Jack uncovers in his first "excursion into the past," his dissertation on Cass Mastern's journal, makes up a considerable portion of chapter 4 (224). How is this episode significant to the novel as a whole? How do the novel's later events help Jack better understand why Cass accepts responsibility for Duncan Trice's suicide?
3. The novel's title is a *literary allusion*, a reference by one text to another text. The title refers to the third line of the popular Mother Goose rhyme "Humpty Dumpty":

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
 Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
 All the king's horses and all the king's men
 Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Keeping the allusion in mind, discuss the meaning of the novel's title.

“Gold Glade” (1957)

“Gold Glade” first appeared in *Promises: Poems 1954–1956*, which received the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1958. As several other poems in *Promises* do, “Gold Glade” draws on Warren’s memories of his boyhood in Guthrie, Kentucky, and his grandfather’s farm in Tennessee. While the speaker cannot remember the exact location, he remembers the powerful event—an encounter with a giant tree in the middle of a gold glade, which helped forge his relationship with the natural world. The speaker’s discovery of the giant tree is an encounter with the sublimity of nature that momentarily suspends his awareness of time. The speaker connects this momentary “freezing” of time with the “gold light” the giant tree radiates. Faced with the overwhelming image of this gold light, the speaker asserts, “There could be no dark,” a sentiment he knows to be untrue yet cannot help but express given the extraordinary nature of his encounter. The next line reveals that the speaker is aware that the vision is temporary. Interestingly, however, the speaker insists that the image can be found “in no mansion under earth, / Nor imagination’s domain of bright air, / But solid in soil that gave it its birth,” suggesting that the feeling of timelessness he experienced originated in the natural world itself rather than his own creative imagination (7.1–3).

“Gold Glade” uses the poet’s memory as a springboard for complicated musings on the relationships among perception, time, and the creative act. Though Warren sets the scene for his speaker’s epiphany with detailed descriptions of “the woods of boyhood,” the poem undercuts the authority of the speaker’s memory by noting in the sixth stanza that he is unsure as to whether the memory originated

in childhood experiences in Kentucky or Tennessee. Though the gap in time between Warren’s boyhood experience and his writing “Gold Glade” in the late 1950s is considerable, we can also interpret this as Warren’s reminder that “Gold Glade,” like all literary remembering, is an attempt to (re)construct experience through language. For the speaker to have any hope of reliving his childhood vision, then, he must return to the place where it occurred, as he resolves to do in the poem’s final line: “I shall set my foot, and go there” (7.5).

For Discussion or Writing

1. The last line of “Gold Glade” recalls the first line of William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” which also concerns a speaker’s relationship to an idealized location in the natural world. Compare and contrast the attitudes the speakers in each poem adapt toward nature as well as the language each poet uses to describe the natural world.
2. In *Poems of Pure Imagination* the critic Lesa Carnes Corrigan connects the vision Warren describes in “Gold Glade” with the phenomenon described by the English romantic poet William Wordsworth in his work *The Prelude* as “spots of time.” Research Wordsworth’s concept, then compare and contrast “Gold Glade” with Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” considering imagery, themes, and content.
3. Warren wrote “Gold Glade” during the height of the Civil Rights movement. While Warren addresses the issue of race at length in many of his essays, poems, and novels, “Gold Glade” can be read as a sort of elegy for an idealized version of the U.S. South in which the suffering of African Americans was underrepresented, if not ignored. Do you feel that authors have an obligation to create art that explicitly addresses contemporary political issues? Why or why not?

Audubon: A Vision (1969)

A creative reimagining of the painter and ornithologist John James Audubon’s life, *Audubon: A Vision*,

perhaps one of Warren's most celebrated poems, first appeared as a single volume in 1969. Warren based the poem on Audubon's five-volume *Ornithological Biography* (1831–39), though Warren departs from that work at several points. One of his longest verse works, *Audubon* contains seven free verse poems (each with lettered subsections) totaling roughly 440 lines, in which Warren explores the way identity, time, history, perception, knowledge, and creativity are related.

In the preface Warren provides general information on John James (Jean-Jacques) Audubon and recounts the apocryphal legend that Audubon was the “Dauphin,” the son of the dethroned Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette (although Warren does not mention it, a con man calls himself “The Dauphin” in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). As Grimshaw points out, the opening poem, “I. Was Not the Lost Dauphin,” details one of Audubon's many contradictions: “Audubon's ethical quandary involves the necessity of killing birds so that he can study and paint them. His moral sentiments against destroying the birds are pitted against his aesthetic impulse to represent their beauty in art” (*Understanding Robert Penn Warren* 147). This stanza closes with a key rhetorical question, one that is reminiscent of the chorus's “Ode to Man” in Sophocles' *Antigone*. While in Sophocles' play man is the chief wonder of the world, in Warren's the central wonder is man's passion (“what / Is man but his passion?”), a force that inspires creativity, discovery, but also a driving, blind force like evolution, enabling Audubon to justify death as a part of the creative process. Yet, the poem also depicts Audubon's conflicted self, which weighs ethics and aesthetics: the sanctity of life and the impulse to create art. Thus, this first poem in the cycle deals with ethical issues in the creation of art and the pursuit of passion at a great cost: the loss of the very subject being explored. A creative and destructive force, art becomes Audubon's way of negotiating the world and of creating a sense of self.

The second poem functions as the narrative and thematic heart of *Audubon*. Audubon happens upon a cabin, whose owner, an old woman, resolves to kill him with the help of her two sons after Audubon

flashes a gold watch to prove he can afford a room. A one-eyed Indian alerts Audubon to the owner's plot, and three travelers appear just as Audubon is about to be murdered, saving him. The woman and her sons are sentenced to death; just before she is hanged, Audubon has a mystical vision, an epiphany about the connectedness of all things. The next two poems chronicle Audubon's continued artistic endeavors and death before shifting in the fifth poem to philosophical ruminations that persist until *Audubon's* conclusion. The last of *Audubon's* seven poems records thoughts of Warren's childhood and ends as the poem's speaker asks an unnamed audience, “Tell me a story of deep delight,” a command that invites us to connect Warren's writing and Audubon's art.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Choose at least two themes from the following list and discuss how Warren addresses them in *Audubon: A Vision*: the search for knowledge, the need to understand history, the passage of time and its effects, the formation of individual identity, and the Fall and its reversal. Now describe how the themes you chose are themselves interrelated in *Audubon*.
2. Warren expresses a desire in both *Audubon: A Vision* and “American Portrait: Old Style” to learn “the name of the world” (II.G.5). Explore the significance of this question in relation to similarities (thematic or otherwise) between the two poems.

“American Portrait: Old Style” (1976)

“American Portrait: Old Style” first appeared in the August 23, 1976, issue of the *New Yorker*; it was later included in *Now and Then: Poems 1976–1978* (1978), which earned Warren his third Pulitzer Prize (his second for poetry). Warren divided *Now and Then* into two sections: “Nostalgic,” which focuses on Warren's past, and “Speculative,” in which, as James H. Justus describes in *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, “the speaker struggles to reconcile rational assessment of the past and the knowledge it brings with more tentative and subliminal asser-

tions of meaning experienced in dream states and near-mystical moments” (100). The collection often contains powerful, revelatory moments from Warren’s youth—memories or “psychological imprints” that helped develop his imagination and inspired him to write about in late life. As Lesa Carnes Corrigan argues, “In *Now and Then*, Warren’s desire ‘just to know’ manifests itself not only in the poet’s forays into the realm of memory but also in intense, suspended moments of revelation experienced in the world of nature” (147). Thus, the first poem in the “Nostalgic” section—“American Portrait: Old Style”—recounts Warren’s memories of time spent with his childhood friend Kent Greenfield (referred to in the poem as “K”), about whom he had already written in the short story “Greenwood Comes Back.”

In many ways, however, the poem is more than an autobiographical sketch. It returns to familiar Warren themes: our personal relationship with history, the fictionlike nature of memory, the inevitability of change, and the power of the imagination, represented by the childhood games Warren and K play and in the poem’s subject matter and form. In the third of the poem’s nine sections Warren states that “in that last summer / I was almost ready to learn / What imagination is—it is only the lie we must learn to live by, if ever / We mean to live at all.” For Warren, childhood is not only an idyllic time to be remembered nostalgically; it is also a time when the imagination—the faculty that gives our lives meaning and enables us to love—develops. But this poem not only records Warren’s early love of the world; it also chronicles his embittered response to aging, to the lost dreams of youth, and to Kent’s habitual drinking that lost him a baseball career. Such a loss parallels the loss of meaning that maturity can often cause. Even though the poem deals with the anger that often accompanies disillusionment and the sorrow we feel with the passing of youth, the poem also looks to the future with hope, reflecting that “even in anger” the speaker loves the world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The “imagination” Warren describes as “the lie we must learn to live by” can be seen to include

the imaginative act of writing poetry. Explore how Warren’s descriptions of his childhood games with K (such as “we had to invent it all,”) can be seen to comment upon Warren’s attempt to “create” his own personal “history” through writing “American Portrait: Old Style.”

2. Though most of the poem is free verse, its final section breaks into rhyme. Explain why this sudden shift in the poem’s form is significant to its content.
3. Read Robert Frost’s poem “Birches” and then compare the way it, as does “American Portrait,” treats youth, maturity, understanding, and love.

“Evening Hawk” (1977)

“Evening Hawk” first appeared in a series of 10 new poems, *Can I See Arcturus from Where I Stand?* from the collection *Selected Poems: 1923–1975*. In six stanzas of varying length Warren describes movement through space in free verse with swooping rhythms that depict flight. Like birds, stars, and suns in Warren’s late poetry, the hawk (and later the bat in the poem’s third stanza) is sublime, a romantic image of awe-inspiring beauty and a divine presence that reaps stalks of grain “with the gold of our error” as it descends (2.1). Ironically, as Harold Bloom points out, “What is being harvested is our fault, and yet that mistake appears as golden grain” (204). Such a paradox has biblical overtones, the sort of transformative regeneration and rebirth that Jesus describes as the “harvest” in the “parable of the seed that grows mysteriously”:

He also said [to the disciples], “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4: 26–29 Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Edition)

The purpose of this parable is to teach the disciples about the Kingdom of God, which Jesus describes in the fourth chapter of Mark as a mysterious plan connected with the sowing of the word: the use of language, in this case the parable, but in Warren's case, the poem, to communicate mystery, to draw the listener/reader into an experience that defies rational explanation. Jesus employs the image of the harvest, a time of celebration in which the fruits of the earth are reaped, to instill hope in the disciples, who are experiencing a crisis of faith.

"Evening Hawk," as the Mark parable, describes an unbelieving world that lies under the shadow of the hawk's wing. As in the parable, Warren's poem describes a fallen world under the gaze of a divine presence that reaps the harvest: the Hawk's wings cut ("scythe") like "that of a honed steel-edge" (1.2). In Warren's poem humanity, unforgiven, is set apart, capable of witnessing sublimity but unable to climb the last light, cut off from transcendence, timelessness, the very things to which the poet aspires but can never attain. In the third stanza the hawk is replaced by a bat, whose "wisdom / Is ancient, too, and immense" and "Who knows neither Time nor error," and does not participate in the process of decay known as history, an experience endemic to the human race, one we live as imperfect beings caught in the field of time, forever erring, forever falling short of a platonic ideal. For Warren, we exist in a world grinding on its axis, a place where we labor, as does Sisyphus, who forever pushes the rock up an incline in Hades, only to see it fall and then begin the cycle anew. Yet, such visions as the hawk flying at sunset frame our existence, providing the ultimate horizon—whether we name it death, faith, belief, salvation, nothingness, or God—that defines our lives.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Windhover" by Gerard Manley Hopkins is another poem that attempts to approximate the rhythms of flight through innovative use of poetic meter. Read both poems aloud; notice where they speed up and slow down. Now compare Hopkins's usage of meter with Warren's, noting how each affects you as a reader.
2. Despite the images of forgiveness in the second and third stanzas, the fourth stanza describes the hawk's eye as "unforgiving" and refers to the world as "unforgiven." Why do you think this is? In what way(s) do these lines make reading the hawk as a Christ figure problematic? Do they render a reading so ambiguous as to be impossible, or does the ambiguity enhance your experience as a reader?

"Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn" (1980)

"Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn" first appeared in the collection *Being Here: Poetry 1977–1980* (1980). In the final part of this collection, from which this poem is drawn, the poetic voice describes life in old age, the "autumn" of our lives. The poem is written in free verse, without regular rhyme or metrical patterns, and its lines and stanzas vary in length. The first-person speaker whose voice we hear contemplates the nature of time, the nature of the self, and the changing seasons. For the poem's speaker, human life cannot be conceived apart from time, rendering us unable to comprehend it in its purest form. True insight into the nature of time remains just outside our understanding, beyond our grasp. Throughout the poem Warren uses philosophical language concerned with what our lives mean, our existence—the reality philosophers often refer to as being. In "Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn" Warren ruminates on how we understand and experience our own mortality and how we, as the natural world does, change. It is one of the Warren poems that treat the exploration of the self in a time-bound world and explore the paradox of living in a world to which we have no permanent connection. The natural world, with its changing seasons, may mirror the stages of our lives, but, as with God, we cannot communicate with it; our language, including poetic speech, always falls short. For the speaker of the poem, we live a bound life controlled by time and limited by language. This awareness causes the speaker to react with

anger and a bitter hatred for the one who fashioned the universe this way: God.

Warren uses a series of images from nature to explore complex philosophical issues, drawing comparisons between nature and our lives. The speaker lies floating in a “a mountain pool,” looking up at “one lone leaf” (3.19–20). The leaf is a symbol, something that signifies an idea or object beyond itself: in this case, the universal journey from birth to death mediated by time. The tree that the leaf hangs from symbolizes life, while the cold black water that the speaker lies on symbolizes death. The leaf dramatizes the passage from birth to death when, in stanzas 7 and 8, it detaches and floats down to the water.

In “Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn” the speaker both savors and laments time’s passing, celebrating the natural beauty brought about by seasonal change and simultaneously regretting mortality, the change time inevitably causes. Warren expresses time’s polar extremes in the poem’s final stanza, which describes life using a metaphor of currency: Life is the “payment” given by the “heart,” a “dime-thin, thumb-worn, two-sided, two-faced coin” (11.1). For Warren, to live is to deal with change and passing: the movement of time, which is at once active, alive, and also decaying, moving toward death, something expressed by the coin’s two-sidedness in the poem’s last lines.

For Discussion or Writing

1. According to the poem, how do the seasons reflect our lives?
2. If on one level the poem is about becoming aware of death, what truths does the poem tell us? What significance does the awareness of mortality have?
3. What is it that the water’s “one cold claw” releases in line 28? Why do you think the persona chooses to describe it as “a single drop?” How does this relate to the water symbolism throughout the poem?

“After the Dinner Party” (1985)

“After the Dinner Party” first appeared in *New and Selected Poems: 1923–1985* (1985). The poem consists

of seven four-line stanzas (quatrains), with an *abab* rhyme scheme. In the first line the speaker addresses the two party hosts directly, referring to them as “You two.” In the silence following the party’s conclusion the hosts sit and remember; the poem’s speaker describes the two from an objective perspective and lets us know what thoughts and images run through their minds. As with the fugitive gatherings Warren attended in his youth, the guests have shared “food, wine, laughter, and philosophy,” a communion that is physical and spiritual. But rather than focus solely on the party guests, “After the Dinner Party” dwells with the two hosts and describes, through the construction of a story line (a “narrative”) and through poignant images, the way they relate to each other. In this sense, “After the Dinner Party” is a love poem, one that enshrines an aging couple as they sit, think, ascend the stairs to bed, and hold each other’s hands.

“After the Dinner Party” also contains many of the themes for which Warren is known: the relationships among memory, death, language, and the passage of time. While the hosts’ thoughts turn to past parties whose guests have passed away, we see how these former guests live on in the words and minds of those who remain. The image of a group of smiling, laughing friends dramatically changes as one of the hosts imagines their deceased friend’s corpse, a horrifying image that, with the poem’s other death imagery, conjures both a feeling of nostalgia for things already gone and a premonition of things that will soon fade away.

With its images of mortality and of social and physical intimacy, the poem laments loss: of friends, community, youth, and conversation. In its silence the poem speaks of fullness, the sense of fulfillment that past experiences have given and present memory now gives. On one level, the poem, written near the end of Warren’s life, reflects on his career as a scholar, writer, teacher, father, and husband. But, on another level “After the Dinner Party” dwells on a universal feeling of nostalgia, the bittersweet taste of fulfillment we know in memory that generates both life and death, pleasure and pain, words and silence, causing us to savor the present while also making us yearn for the past. On this level the poem asserts that no mat-

ter how much we fear loss, yearn for those who have passed, and fail to capture our feelings and thoughts in language, we still must love. Even though the two hosts venture together toward a sleep that eerily resembles death, “one hand gropes out for another, again”; they seek solace in each other’s embrace, the tenuous feeling of community possible in a transient world, a world of feasting and of fasting, a world of plentitude and emptiness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the relationship the two hosts share in “After the Dinner Party” with the connection the two lovers share in John Donne’s “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning.” How are both relationships symbolic? How can both writers be said to be “metaphysical” poets?
2. First locate metaphors and images that relate to death in the poem and then compare and contrast how aging and death are portrayed in this poem with the way they are presented in Warren’s “Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn.” How does that poem’s metaphorical description of life in the latter as the “payment” given by the “heart,” a “dime-thin, thumb-worn, two-sided, two-faced coin,” relate to the hosts’ view of death in “After the Dinner Party”?

“Mortal Limit” (1985)

“Mortal Limit” first appeared in *Altitudes and Extension: 1980–1984*, a collection of new poems included in the anthology *New and Selected Poems: 1923–1985*. Were it not for its long lines, “Mortal Limit” would be a textbook example of a Shakespearean sonnet: It consists of three quatrains and a concluding couplet with a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*. In the poem an unnamed speaker watches a hawk disappear above Wyoming’s Teton mountain range. The speaker contemplates what effect the hawk’s high altitude has on its perception, wondering whether upon “tasting that atmosphere’s thinness” it will “Hang motionless in dying vision before / It knows it will accept the mortal limit” (3.1–3). Having reached this tenuous insight, the speaker seems on

the edge of a breakthrough in understanding the hawk. The vision remains incomplete; however, the line ends abruptly, and the brief final stanza consists of four attempts to finish the thought, none of which seems to satisfy the speaker.

The first stanza describes the hawk’s mystical ascent. The hawk reaches into a sublime space, one where transcendence appears on the horizon. Yet Warren does not allow the speaker access to what lies beyond. Instead, the speaker must imagine the hawk’s vantage point, which, while encompassing the unknown, is still constrained by its limits: its ability to fly and the constant pull of gravity. In this way the hawk may be seen to represent the human condition and the imagination, the facility with which human beings contemplate their limits in the field of time and endeavor to express what language cannot capture. Thus, the poem deals with poetry’s possibilities and limits, its potential and ultimate inefficacy.

Poetic language functions in the poem as a vehicle that helps us approach physical, sensory experiences other than our own. Though the speaker does not directly experience the hawk’s heightened perception, he can imagine the hawk’s view through language, as in the question that concludes the second stanza: “Beyond what range will gold eyes see / New ranges rise to mark a last scrawl of light?” (2.3–4). Despite this capability, however, poetic language appears incapable of describing what lies beyond the “mortal limit” of death, a failure manifested in the poem’s form by the break between the third and fourth stanzas. The grand unifying vision promised in line 12 remains incomplete; death lies beyond our ability to grasp or articulate, transcending poetic expression.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast “Mortal Limit” with “Evening Hawk,” another poem by Warren that details the flight of a hawk. In what ways is the hawk’s heightened physical perception linked with the two poems’ poetic and philosophical insights?
2. Both William Butler Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming” and Warren in “Mortal Limit” use gyrating images. Compare and contrast the

- Brosi, George. "Robert Penn Warren." KYLit—a Site Devoted to Kentucky Writers. October 5, 1997. Department of English and Theatre. Available online. URL: <http://www.english.eku.edu/SERVICES/KYLIT/WARREN.HTM>. Accessed July 16, 2006.
- Chambers, Robert H., ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1977.
- Corrigan, Lesa Carnes. *Poems of Pure Imagination: Robert Penn Warren and the Romantic Tradition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.
- Cowan, Louise. *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959.
- Cullick, Jonathan S. *Making History: The Biographical Narratives of Robert Penn Warren*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.
- Grimshaw, James A., Jr. *Robert Penn Warren: A Descriptive Bibliography 1922–79*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981.
- . *Understanding Robert Penn Warren*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
- Guttenberg, Barnett. *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975.
- Jancovich, Mark. *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Justus, James. *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.
- Koppleman, Robert S. *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Madden, David, ed. *The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.
- Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism Inc." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13 (Autumn 1937): 586–602.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 7: Early Twentieth Century—Robert Penn Warren." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap7/warren.html>. Accessed June 28, 2006.
- "Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989)." Modern American Poetry. Available online. URL: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/warren/warren.htm. Accessed June 28, 2006.
- Runyon, Randolph Paul. *The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren's Late Poetry*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.
- . *Ghostly Parallels: Robert Penn Warren and the Lyric Poetic Sequence*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006.
- Standberg, Victor H. *A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965.
- . *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977.
- Stewart, John L. *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965.
- Szczesiul, Anthony. *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.
- Walker, Marshall. *Robert Penn Warren: A Vision Earned*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Paul Harris, 1979.
- Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. New York: Harcourt, 2001.
- . *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998.
- . *Democracy and Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- . "Knowledge and the Image of Man." *Sewanee Review* 63 (Spring 1955): 192.
- . *Segregation, the Inner Conflict in the South*. New York: Random House, 1956.
- . *Who Speaks for the Negro?* New York: Random House, 1965.
- Warren, Robert Penn, and Cleanth Brooks. *Understanding Fiction*. 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1979.
- . *Understanding Poetry*. 4th ed. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1976.
- Watkins, Floyd. *Then and Now: The Personal Past in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992.
- West, Paul. *Robert Penn Warren*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964.

Blake G. Hobby and
Christopher M. Watson



EUDORA WELTY (1909–2001)

I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within.

(Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*)

Eudora Welty is so much associated with Mississippi in particular and the South in general that it may be surprising to learn that she was not the descendant of a long line of Mississippians; her parents were in fact relatively recent immigrants to that state at the time Welty was born. Her mother had been born and raised in West Virginia, her father in Ohio, but Welty herself grew up in the South and imbibed its sounds, sights, and smells in a way that allowed her to achieve, in her fiction, an incomparable feel for the place and its people. Yet, Welty is no mere regionalist; as did many of the greatest writers of the 20th century (a number of them, as she was, born and bred in the South), she drew on a specific local habitation to deal with timeless human experiences, emotions, and concerns. She lived much of her life in a relatively small southern city, but her vision was both wide and deep.

Welty was born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi (the state capital). Her parents—Chestina Andrews Welty and Christian Webb Welty—had already lost one child at a very early age, and Welty's own mother had come close to dying herself. These experiences undoubtedly helped lead to an especially close bond with her parents and her younger brothers, Edward and Walter (who arrived in 1912 and 1915, respectively). Welty's mother and father seem to have enjoyed an unusually loving marriage; many of Welty's earliest memories involve reminiscences of overhearing her parents talk in the gently intelligent

tones that obviously helped shape Welty's own voice and persona. Having suffered loss and near-loss, her parents had a deep appreciation of each other and of their surviving children, and Welty's accounts of her early life are full of recollections of parental devotion and self-sacrifice. Both parents valued learning, both were inveterate readers (although the father favored factual books while the mother leaned toward fiction), and both encouraged Welty's own early enthusiasm for reading and writing. The house was brimming with books, which became some of Welty's earliest friends.

Welty began first grade at Jefferson Davis Elementary School in January 1915, but by the time she was seven, she was diagnosed with a rapid heartbeat—a fact that meant she had to stay at home in her parents' big bed, where she could read to her heart's delight, watch life from an upstairs window, and, as evening drew on, listen to her mother and father talk after they thought she had fallen asleep. In Welty's later words,

I don't remember that any secrets were revealed to me, nor do I remember any avid curiosity on my part to learn something I wasn't supposed to—perhaps I was too young to know what to listen for. But I was present in the room with the chief secret there was—the two of them, father and mother, sitting there as one. . . . I suppose I was exercising as early as then the turn of

mind, the nature of temperament, of a privileged observer; and owing to the way I became so, it turned out that I became the loving kind. (862)

Welty's self-analysis is astute, for the later observations embedded in her fiction rarely seem caustic or satirical; she regards most of her characters as she seems to have regarded (and been regarded by) her parents: with an innate curiosity, a charitable attentiveness, and a willingness to listen thoughtfully and see the best in others.

Reflecting upon her childhood, Welty recalled going on casual Sunday drives, taking long car trips back to West Virginia and Ohio, attending plays and concerts, going to movies, and (of course) visiting the library (Ford and Kreyling 951–952). Welty's father's position as an insurance company executive meant that the family lived a comfortable middle-class existence; Welty's mother did not have to work (although she did sell milk from a cow she owned), and Welty herself enjoyed the emotionally secure life of a well-loved oldest child. Her artistic talents manifested themselves in various ways and won her various forms of recognition, including the publication of a childhood drawing in a children's magazine in 1920, the winning of a jingle contest in 1921, the publication of sketches and poems in the newspaper of Jackson's Central High School, and the publication of one of her drawings by the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* (Ford and Kreyling 952). In fall 1925 she entered Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus, where she planned to focus on writing; while there, she published fiction, poetry, and artwork in campus publications and met and befriended people from diverse sections of the state and was particularly struck by their varied accents. Another opportunity to expand her geographical and cultural horizons presented itself when she transferred in 1927 to the University of Wisconsin in Madison (known for its fine liberal arts program), where she studied literature and art and became particularly interested in the modern writers, especially William Butler Yeats. She graduated from Wisconsin (where she had unfortunately felt somewhat isolated) in 1929, having by now displayed talent as a poet, artist, photographer, and writer of fiction. Unfortunately,

1929 was also the year in which the United States entered the Great Depression—the huge economic collapse that darkened life for many Americans for much of the next decade.

Welty, on the advice of her ever-practical father, enrolled in 1930 in a one-year advertising program at the Graduate School of Business at Columbia University in New York City; if she could not make a living as a creative writer, she could at least help support herself by using her various talents in pragmatic ways. Not long after she returned to Jackson in 1931, her beloved father was stricken with leukemia, and, despite the desperate efforts of his wife to save him, he passed away quite quickly. For the next few years Welty earned an income by fulfilling various responsibilities at a local radio station and by reporting the Jackson social scene for a Memphis newspaper. It was in 1935, however, that she took a job that would have an especially important impact on her later career: She was hired by the Works Progress Administration (one of many federal programs designed to put people to work on useful projects during the depression) to travel Mississippi as a journalist and photographer. Welty's experiences as a roving reporter gave her an even greater knowledge of her home territory than she had acquired already, and her duties as a photographer (concentrating mainly on regular folks and their daily lives) helped sharpen both her eye and her insight. By 1935 she was seeking a New York publisher for a collection her photos. Although she was unsuccessful in that endeavor, some of the prints were publicly displayed in New York in 1936 and 1937. By this time, too, Welty had begun submitting her short stories for publication, meeting with success when a well-regarded literary magazine accepted one of her most noted works, "Death of a Traveling Salesman." From this point on, she increasingly became known as a writer of fiction, and although her stories were often rejected when first submitted, they usually found publishers eventually and thus helped establish Welty's growing reputation.

By 1938 one of Welty's tales had been selected for inclusion in the important anthology (part of an annual series) titled *The Best Short Stories 1938*, and recognition and support had also begun to come Welty's way thanks to the encouragement and

support of such fellow authors as Katherine Anne Porter and Ford Madox Ford and such influential critical voices as ROBERT PENN WARREN and Cleanth Brooks. The latter pair edited a well-regarded journal known as the *Southern Review*, in which many of Welty's stories first appeared. They also eventually became the authors of one of the most widely used textbooks in the country (*Understanding Fiction*); the inclusion of Welty's work in that book would enhance her national profile even further. In the meantime, however, her career in the late 1930s and early 1940s moved from one highlight to another. One of her works was selected for inclusion in *The Best Stories 1939*; another was chosen for republication in the prestigious *O. Henry Prize Stories of 1939*. Yet another work appeared in *The Best Stories 1940*, and in the latter year Welty began a professional association (and close friendship) with the literary agent Diarmuid Russell, with whom she would work for many years and who would succeed in placing her work in many of the best (and best-paying) journals and magazines in the country. In 1941 her first collection of stories (*A Curtain of Green*) appeared, followed quickly in 1942 by the publication of a novella (*The Robber Bridegroom*) and, in 1943, by another collection (*The Wide Net, and Other Stories*). By 1943 Welty had won a fellowship to the Yaddo writers' colony in New York (1941), had earned a second-place finish in the O. Henry Memorial Awards for short fiction (1941), had won a highly sought-after Guggenheim Fellowship (1942), had won first prize in the O. Henry Memorial Awards (1942), and then had won first prize again in the same competition the very next year. Furthermore, and to no one's surprise, one of her works was also included in *The Best American Short Stories 1943*. In little more than five years Welty moved from virtual obscurity to the front rank of fiction writers in the United States.

Welty's productivity continued unabated in the years immediately preceding and following the end of World War II in 1945. By 1946, for instance, she had produced another novel (*Delta Wedding*), and in 1949 she not only published a critical work titled *Short Stories* (based on a lecture given in 1947 at the University of Washington) but also issued a new collection of short fiction, titled *The Golden Apples*.

Also in 1949 she learned that her Guggenheim Fellowship had been extended, and during much of the late 1940s she traveled widely, visiting (and staying for lengthy periods) in such places as San Francisco, New York, Ireland, and England. In 1951, in fact, she lectured at Cambridge University and spent further time in Ireland (where she had become friends with the noted author Elizabeth Bowen). In 1952 she was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters; in 1953 her *Selected Stories* (introduced by Katherine Anne Porter) was published as part of the highly respected Modern Library series; and in 1954 her third novel, *The Ponder Heart*, was not only published but chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection (thus ensuring very healthy sales). In 1955 Welty published *The Bride of Innisfallen, and Other Stories*, and in 1956 she attended a New York theatrical adaptation of *The Ponder*. Unfortunately, events in Welty's personal life had now begun to take a darker turn: Her mother was increasingly frail (especially after eye surgery in 1955), and her brother Walter died in 1959. Welty herself had never married and never would, but she had an immense capacity for friendships that helped sustain her through the bleak times in her life.

Few people could have sustained the pace of productivity that Welty had set in the 1940s and 1950s, and Welty did not. Her work as a writer of short stories declined significantly in quantity (if not in quality) in the 1960s, but throughout the 1960s she gave lectures, wrote about fiction, and worked on various other writing projects. In 1970 she issued a novel titled *Losing Battles* that sold many copies, and in 1972 she published another novel (*The Optimist's Daughter*), which earned her the Pulitzer Prize (one of the few awards she had not previously won). *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* appeared in 1978, and in the following year Welty won the National Medal for Literature. In 1980 a large volume of her *Collected Stories* was published and won various significant awards, and in that same year Welty was presented with the presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House. Her 1983 autobiographical lectures at Harvard University were quickly published as the best-selling book *One Writer's Beginnings*, which soon won a number

of important awards of its own. A collection titled *Photographs* appeared in 1989, *A Writer's Eye: Collected Book Reviews* was issued in 1994, and in 1998 Welty received the major honor of seeing most of her writings published in two thick volumes as part of the prestigious Library of America series. By the time she died of pneumonia on July 23, 2001, she had established a reputation not only as one of her country's finest writers but also as a much-beloved human being, known for her personal kindness, generosity, and gentle spirit. The intellectual and moral values inculcated long ago by her loving parents had borne splendid fruit.

"Petrified Man" (1939)

As she works on the hair of the newly pregnant Mrs. Fletcher in a rundown beauty parlor in a small southern town, Leota describes her friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Pike, who recently have moved from New Orleans and are renting rooms from Leota and her husband. Amid much gossip and local social commentary, Leota describes a visit she and Mrs. Pike recently made to a traveling freak show, where they saw, among many other curiosities, a petrified man who could move his head only a quarter of an inch. Later Leota describes how Mrs. Pike, while reading a cheap crime magazine owned by Leota, spotted a picture of Mr. Petrie, an escaped rapist from California, who Mrs. Pike immediately realized was not only an old neighbor from New Orleans but also none other than the petrified man in the freak show. Mrs. Pike was thus able to turn him in and claim a \$500 reward, much to Leota's frustration, since the magazine belonged to her.

Like many of Welty's stories, this one is full of vivid characterizations of small-time, small-town southerners; its tone is comic, and much of its humor depends on dialect, dialogue, and odd-yet-somehow-oddly-familiar behavior. Nothing much "happens" in the tale, and there are no profound moral issues at stake (as there often are, for instance, in the comic works of FLANNERY O'CONNOR, another southern woman writer whose works are almost always set, like Welty's, within her own

region). Welty's main interest is in peculiarities of character—peculiarities of thought, speech, and conduct that are rendered in a tone that is, for the most part, gently amusing, although it sometimes contains a sardonic or satirical edge. In her superb overview of the history of, influences on, and critical responses to this tale, Diana R. Pingatore notes the ironic fact that when the editors of the *Southern Review* asked to have a second look at the text (which they had already once rejected), Welty, frustrated that the work had already been turned down by that journal and a number of others, had already destroyed the work. The tale as it now exists, then, was reconstructed from her memory; she was able to perform this feat rather easily (she claimed), because the story depended so much on reported speech. She was thus able to recall and rewrite it because she had memorized it almost as if it were a tape recording (Pingatore 29–30).

In the course of characterizing so many others, Leota inevitably characterizes herself—a standard technique in much of Welty's fiction, especially in such works as "Why I Live at the P.O." The success or failure of a tale such as "Petrified Man" depends on Welty's ability to capture convincingly the speech of the people she depicts, and there is no doubt that she achieves such success in the present story. In this as in a number of her other works, she reveals a flair for dramatization; her characters use the kinds of words, phrases, intonations, and bits of slang and dialect that make them seem real. This work, like so many of Welty's writings, is partly an example of the "local color" tradition in American fiction: It takes us into the typical life of a locale that may seem ordinary in some respects but also seems intriguingly off-the-beaten-path in others. There is a sense in which we, as readers of "Petrified Man," make a visit to a kind of freak show in much the same way as the characters in the story do. We enjoy observing (and listening to) Welty's characters perform their peculiar antics and speak their exotic English, yet our attitude toward them is less one of condescending superiority than of amused identification. Although in some respects they seem caricatures presented mainly to make us laugh, in other respects they are recognizably human, with all the foibles and stubbornness

that can make people both endearing and sometimes a bit exasperating.

Some readers of “Petrified Man” have found the tone of the work more satiric than comical. To these readers, the three main women characters (Leota, Mrs. Fletcher, and Mrs. Pike) are less amusing than vulgar, and their attitudes toward (and treatment of) the male characters have sometimes been seen as emasculating and even as symbolically castrating. According to this reading of the tale, Welty is mocking the mental and spiritual shallowness of the three women, who in turn represent the mental and spiritual shallowness of a certain kind of small town life and of a certain kind of aggressive female psychology (Pingatore 33–35). From this perspective, the women embody and epitomize the most superficial aspects of modern life, while the various tensions between males and females in the tale reflect the age-old battle of the sexes—a battle in which Welty seems less sympathetic to the women than one might have anticipated. Surprisingly, some early commentators even expressed a certain degree of admiration for the alleged rapist, Mr. Petrie, whom they saw as a male who had defied domination by women. Recent analysts, though, have been far less inclined to endorse this view (Pingatore 36). For most readers, however, the enduring interest of the tale is probably less the result of any themes it explores than the consequence of the vivid details of Welty’s phrasing and characterizations. Leota, in particular, is hard to forget once we have met her—a fact that makes it completely believable that Welty could reconstruct the whole tale simply by remembering Leota’s voice.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Welty’s later story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” How are the works similar and/or different in setting, tone, technique, perspective, and final impact? What is the purpose of each work, and how do those purposes differ from or resemble one another?
2. Discuss the use of satire, the techniques of characterization, and the depiction of relations between the sexes in this work and in Flannery O’Connor’s tale “Good Country People.” Does one (in your opinion) have more philosophical or moral depth than the other? If this is the case, does such a difference make one work more significant than the other? How and why is comedy used in each work? Does one work appeal to you more than the other? If so, explain why.
3. How does the depiction of small town life in this work resemble or differ from the depiction of such life in Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*? How are the works similar or distinct in tone, method, characterization, and underlying purpose? Could Wilder’s play have been set successfully in the South? Could Welty’s story have been set successfully in a small New England town? What do your answers to these questions imply about the use of local color in literature?

“Why I Live at the P.O.” (1941)

Sister, the speaker of this tale set in a tiny southern town, mentions the pleasant relations she once enjoyed with the rest of her family (including Mama; her grandfather, Papa-Daddy; and Uncle Rondo) before her younger sister, Stella-Rondo, returned from a brief stay in Illinois, where she had been married to a man named Mr. Whitaker (who had once shown an interest in Sister herself) and where she also acquired a young daughter named Shirley-T., whom Stella-Rondo insisted she had adopted but who Sister loudly claimed was Stella-Rondo’s own child. One by one (at least according to Sister), Stella-Rondo succeeded in turning each of the other family members against Sister: She told Papa-Daddy that Sister disliked the long beard in which he took such pride, she told Uncle Rondo that Sister had mocked the way he was dressed, and she even stirred up trouble between Sister and Mama. When Uncle Rondo retaliated against the alleged insults by setting off firecrackers in Sister’s room, Sister decided that she had had enough: She gathered up her belongings and moved into the small post office where she worked, and it is there that she tells her tale and nurses her grievances.

This tale is one of Welty's most famous, partly because it is a bravura exercise in the art of storytelling, both by Sister and by Welty herself. By creating such a memorable character and putting the whole narrative entirely in her mouth, Welty breathes vitality into her text. Sister is driven by a lifetime of sibling rivalry, a raft load of recent frustrations, and a crushing burden of feeling conspired against and unappreciated. Welty expertly captures the subtle inflections of Sister's anger and exasperation, and it is not difficult to imagine a real human voice speaking to a presumably sympathetic listener. Sister can recall every precise detail of her recent humiliations, and in the process of remembering them she re-creates all the detailed texture of a complicated family life. Admittedly, this family is perhaps more full of oddballs and kooks than most, and sometimes Welty seems to be treating them as eccentric caricatures in a situation comedy rather than as fully credible human beings. Nevertheless, the story achieves some measure of complexity thanks to the comic distance we achieve from Sister's belligerent perspective. Although Sister sometimes pauses to address her listener directly (for example, "Do you remember who it was really said that?" [64]), it is hard to take her account entirely at face value. In any case, it does not much matter who is right and who is wrong, who is aggrieved and who does the aggrieving; the chief interest of the tale results from Welty's lovingly detailed descriptions of the realistic minutiae of life and the real rhythms of southern speech. As Ruth M. Vande Kieft memorably states it:

Sister's monologue is comic not only because of the apparent illogic of her logic, but because of her manner of speaking. One can see the fierce indignant gleam in her eye as the stream of natural Southern idiom flows out of her: at once elliptical and baroque, full of irrelevancies, redolent of a way of life, a set of expressions, of prejudices, interests, problems, and human reactions that swiftly convey to the reader a comic and satiric portrait of this Mississippi family. (55)

Critical response to the story has often centered around the question of whether Sister may be crazy

(or at least clinically paranoid). Welty herself disputed this interpretation, arguing that Sister was merely isolated and therefore (partly as a result) in love with drama, exaggeration, and self-centered storytelling (Pingatore 73). The story clearly shows that individuals adopt (and adapt) their personal identities in response to family dynamics, and although the work is comic in many respects, it also offers a fairly unsentimental view of family relations (as when Sister reports, "I told you if you ever mentioned Annie Flo's name I'd slap your face," says Mama, and slaps my face" [62]). It seems both appropriate and ironic that the story takes place on the Fourth of July—appropriate since the events of the day lead Sister to declare her own independence, but ironic because Independence Day is ostensibly an occasion to celebrate a joyous new union, the creation of a new national family. The comic tone of Welty's tale suggests that this family will eventually heal its wounds, but in the meantime they (and we) have at least learned the limits of Sister's patience. The story is a particularly memorable contribution to the long southern tradition of oral storytelling, conveying in a few thousand words a memorable sense of a particular time and place and a vivid style of speech.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is Welty's depiction of complex family relations in this story similar to and especially different from Theodore Dreiser's depiction of such relations in "Old Rogaum and His Theresa"? Discuss the works in terms of such matters as tone, technique, style, and narrative point of view. How is geographical setting used effectively in both works?
2. William Faulkner's tale titled "Barn Burning" also deals with a central character in conflict with many other characters in the story. He also feels, as Sister does in Welty's tale, increasingly isolated, and he takes steps to isolate himself even further. Compare and contrast the two works in terms of their tones, settings, characterization, and final outcomes.
3. Like Welty's story, JOHN UPDIKE'S "A&P" is told from the perspective (and in the voice) of the central character. How do both authors use diction,

slang, dialogue, and tone to characterize their protagonists? How are the plots of the stories similar, especially in their movements toward the increasing isolation of Sister and Sammy? How and why does each author use comedy effectively?

“A Worn Path” (1941)

On a cold December day, old Phoenix Jackson—a black woman who lives out in the Mississippi countryside with her injured young grandson—makes the long, arduous trek into town, walking through woods, through fields, and across a stream and encountering (and speaking to) many creatures (including plants, birds, other animals, and even a scarecrow) along the way. When she meets a friendly if somewhat patronizing young white man who is out hunting with his dog (and who helps her up when he finds her fallen), she spies the chance to grab a nickel he has dropped; tucking it safely into her pocket, she moves on. When she eventually arrives in town, she heads for a doctor’s office, where a nurse not only gives her medicine for her grandson but also gives her another nickel—a nickel Phoenix plans to use to help purchase a little paper windmill for the boy.

Although most readers have been charmed and moved by Welty’s depiction of elderly Phoenix Jackson, with her spirit of persistence and stoic endurance, other readers have found the character an example of the ways African Americans are often stereotyped in fiction in general and in Welty’s fiction in particular. Rather than being treated as a complex human being (these later readers argue), Phoenix is depicted as a quaint, eccentric, good-natured, nonthreatening old woman (a kind of “mammy” or “Aunt Jemima” figure) whom the white characters can treat with a sort of condescending charity that sometimes verges (as in the case of the hunter) on hints of intimidation. Reading Welty’s story, it is certainly easy to forget the darker aspects of relations between the races in Mississippi in the 1940s, but perhaps part of the purpose of the tale is to demonstrate the true fellow feeling that can ideally exist when people see each other as parts of an extended family rather than as members of distinct racial or economic subgroups. A number of the whites in the story respond to Phoe-

nix as they might to their own grandparents, and the fact that the story is set at Christmastime is surely no accident: In some respects the tale is a celebration of the kind of generosity and love (especially by Phoenix toward her grandson) that we associate with that season of the year. On the other hand, it is also possible to read the tale as a subtle indictment of the patronizing racism of some of the whites—as understated satire of their failure, both in attitudes and in actions, to live up to the true spirit of both Christmas and Christianity.

Whatever their attitudes toward the whites in the tale, most readers have found the story and its central figure warm and appealing; in her good humor, perseverance, and selfless devotion to another, Phoenix seems to embody some of the best aspects of the human spirit. She, more than anyone else in the story, embodies the true spirit of charity and kindness, and although it would have been easy to make her entirely a figure of sentimental pity, Welty complicates our response by showing that Phoenix can be tough, sly, hard-nosed, and even skeptical (as in her complex response to the hunter or her later dealings with the nurse). Because of her first name (which suggests the legendary bird that rises, reborn, from the ashes of destruction—and that, for that reason, has often been associated with Christ), because of her quaint habit of speaking to flora and fauna, and because of her absent-mindedness as well as her single-minded imperturbability, Phoenix attains an almost mythic dimension. She is a small old woman, but somehow she is also larger than life. Her journey is the latest in a long line of quest narratives that run from the beginning of recorded time; the “worn path” of the title is not only the literal path Phoenix walks but also, metaphorically, her own life and the lives of all people throughout the ages who have walked long and worked hard in the struggle to survive and (more important) to sustain the next generation. However much Welty’s story may imply a critique of the specific social relations of her day, her tale is also a deeply affecting affirmation of the resilience of the human spirit. Phoenix Jackson is an archetype of the loving “grand mother,” who struggles, as she nears the end of her own life, to nurture the life of a child she loves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Flannery O'Connor's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" also deals with relations between whites and blacks in the South and with a white woman's gift of money to a poorer black. How do the stories resemble and/or differ from each other in tone, characterization, setting, and purpose? How are religious connotations used in both stories?
2. Compare and contrast Welty's depiction of an elderly person on a journey with the similar depiction offered in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Mr. Flood's Party." What are the purposes of the two journeys? How are Phoenix and Mr. Flood similar and/or different? How is comedy used in both texts? Which of the two characters is more isolated, and how do the different levels of isolation contribute to the tones of the two works?
3. Which factor—race, class, gender, or age—is most important in this story? How do they intersect and interact? What difference (if any) would it make if the central character were an old white woman, or an old black man, or a poor young white girl? How (if at all) does Welty prevent the story from becoming sentimental? How does she make the story relevant to readers outside rural Mississippi?
4. Welty herself wrote an essay about this story ("Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?"). First, without having read the essay, give your own response to the question its title asks; be sure to provide evidence to support your argument. Then, after having read the essay, compare Welty's answer and reasons for your own, and, in general, discuss the usefulness and effectiveness of Welty's own comments about her story.

"The Wide Net" (1942)

When William Wallace Jamieson's new wife, Hazel, becomes pregnant, she begins to ignore him and focus on her own condition; in response, he decides to spend a night out with his male friends, drinking, singing, and otherwise enjoying themselves. When he returns home, however, he finds an empty house and a note from Hazel in which she announces her

intention to drown herself in the local river—a threat that causes her husband to round up practically all the male neighbors to help him drag the river for her body. After a long and sometimes even festive communal effort to find and recover Hazel's corpse, the young husband returns home, only to discover Hazel waiting for him in a spirit of reconciliation but also of subtle dominance.

Some readers of this story, noting that William Wallace is accompanied on his journey/quest by a best friend named Virgil, have compared the tale both to the epic poem *The Aeneid* (by the Roman poet Virgil) and—with more obvious relevance—to Dante's epic *The Divine Comedy* (Pingatore 196). In the latter poem (which consists, as does Welty's story, of three major sections), the speaker first finds himself at a loss; then, assisted by a companion named Virgil, he engages in a long and arduous journey; finally, he attains a vision of happiness that involves a beautiful young woman. Although it would be foolish to push these parallels too far, certain basic similarities between "The Wide Net" and *The Divine Comedy* do seem to exist, and Welty's subtle use of literary echoes and allusions is indeed typical of her work in general. Welty's own reading was both wide and deep, but she wears her learning lightly, keeping her focus squarely (and, for the most part, convincingly) on her immediate Mississippi setting even when she may be playing variations on Dante at some deeper level of design.

The "wide net" of Welty's title refers to the literal net used to drag the river, but it also alludes, more broadly, to the wide range of people who join William Wallace in his quest. In few other of her most famous stories does Welty offer such a comprehensive picture of a broad local community: Her own "wide net" takes in a diverse range of character types, from the wise old man named Doc (who owns the net and who comments sagely, if somewhat pompously, on the communal quest), to the "gator-rass'lin'" Malone clan, to two young black boys named Robbie Bell and Sam (to mention just a few). Here, as in so many of her other works, Welty uses all the resources of the local color tradition (including eccentric characters, odd customs, peculiar dialect, unusual habits of thought and behavior, and an exotic locale) to cre-

ate a vision of an unfamiliar but highly textured way of life. However, at the same time as she presents a world that will inevitably seem distant from the lives of most readers, Welty also deals with some of the most common of all human experiences, such as the complicated relations between husbands and wives, the changes wrought in a marriage by the advent of pregnancy, the importance of connections between the individual self and the larger community, and the age-old battle of the sexes. That battle ends (in this story, at least) in an intriguing draw, with perhaps the woman positioned slightly on top. On the one hand, William Wallace does ultimately give Hazel (in a scene that will make feminists cringe) a mild spanking (preceded by what the narrator calls “a little tap and slap” [226]). On the other hand, the story ends with Hazel’s asserting (without William’s objection) her right to misbehave in the future, and the very last words of the tale describe her leading him “into the house, smiling as if she were smiling down on him” (227). If the ending of the story is comic, it is comic in a way that seems to affirm a certain degree of feminine power. As in most comedies, the story seems to celebrate both the spirit of community and the union of the sexes; it shows humans achieving a kind of balance not only with a sometimes-threatening nature but also with the self.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In “The Wide Net,” the main character gathers an ever-growing group of friends and community members who come to his assistance. How does this pattern reverse the basic narrative pattern underlying Welty’s story “Why I Live at the P.O.”? How does the gender of the main characters in each story affect their experiences? How does Welty complicate the tone of each work, darkening the obviously comic story and lightening the story that seems potentially tragic?
2. Compare and contrast “The Wide Net” with Jack London’s story “To Build a Fire.” In particular, discuss such matters as setting, isolation versus community, the wisdom of elderly people, and the differences of final tone. How and why is one story comic and the other tragic? How is each story typical of the works of the author who wrote it?
3. Is “The Wide Net” a credible, plausible work of fiction? Are there any respects in which it seems contrived or unconvincing? Do people actually behave as Welty’s characters do? How does Welty strive to make her characters and their actions convincing? How and why does she succeed? Are there any respects in which she fails? Is the story meant to be convincingly realistic, or is it meant to be primarily symbolic? Justify your responses by pointing to specific textual evidence.

“Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (1963)

An interior monologue given from the perspective of the imagined assassin of African-American civil rights activist Medgar Evers, this four-page story was written in a single night after Evers’s shooting. “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” recounts a famous tragedy that increased Americans’ awareness of the Civil Rights movement, brought to light the violent response to this movement, and presented the American public and the world with one of the many horrific moments in the long history of African-American suffering. Although Welty does not name the man killed, he is clearly Medgar Evers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader who led a boycott campaign against white merchants and helped desegregate the University of Mississippi. After investigating the murder of Emmett Till and serving as one of the leaders of the NAACP, Evers was the target of many threats in the weeks prior to his murder, when he was shot in the back of the head in his driveway just after returning from a meeting with NAACP lawyers. While this story is well known and recognized for its artful reimagining of the event, Welty does not provide an intervening narrator—someone who might interpret the murderer’s actions and question his perspective. In choosing to render the story from the perspective of a racist, bigoted killer who often uses the racial epithet *nigger*, and who chooses to murder and does so without remorse, Welty leaves the reader in a complicated situation, one where we must supply the moral corrective ourselves. Of course, as with

many cases in literature where authors do not supply such a perspective and deliberate moral cues, the story is open to interpretation, filled with ambiguity. While ambiguity and paradox may be at the heart of literature, these very characteristics place a great deal of responsibility on the reader and often engender surface-level criticisms that overlook the way the story transcends historical reporting and reflects the nature of man's inhumanity to man. Thus, in this case, the story was contested early on for its racist language and bigoted perspective.

In responding to such claims about ethical responsibility not only in her works but also in other southern American writers' works, Welty outlined in 1965 her conception of fiction and what fiction writers seek to accomplish:

The ordinary novelist does not argue; he hopes to show, to disclose. His persuasions are all toward allowing his reader to see and hear something for himself. He knows another bad thing about arguments: they carry the menace of neatness into fiction. Indeed, what we as the crusader-novelist are scared of most is confusion.

Great fiction, we very much fear, abounds in what makes for confusion; it generates it, being on a scale which copies life, which it confronts. It is very seldom neat, is given to sprawling and escaping from bounds, is capable of contradicting itself, and is not impervious to humor. There is absolutely everything in great fiction but a clear answer. (*New Yorker*)

Thus, indirectly, Welty justifies the aesthetic, formalistic, and narrative strategies she employs in "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" The story renders a time of civic unrest in America by presenting it through the imagined interior of a cold-blooded killer. While the story may refrain from making a commentary, it is a testimony both to the power of literature and to the many social concerns with which literature trades. As a work that captures its turbulent time, it brings to life a worrisome chapter in our nation's narrative. As a work of literature that forces us to enter a racist mind, inhabit its world, and ultimately make sense of it, "Where Is the Voice

Coming From?" places the awesome responsibility of understanding history and drawing ethical conclusions about its meaning on us.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Given the story's historical significance as a record of a turbulent time in America's past, consider its title. Write a well-developed essay on the significance of the story's title.
2. Evaluate Welty's creation of the persona in this story, itself an interior monologue. Is the language in this monologue believable, realistic? After answering that question, write an essay that analyzes the specific word choices and colloquial expressions that help create this perspective. Evaluate whether Welty's style here relies on stereotyping or whether the style achieved has captured the usual sorts of complexities and contradictions we associate with being human.

One Writer's Beginnings (1984)

In this late book of autobiographical reflections (which is divided into three parts, titled, respectively, "Listening," "Learning to See," and "Finding a Voice"), Welty recalls the lives of her parents, their influence on her own development, her growth as a writer, and her artistic ideals, aspirations, and practices.

First delivered as a series of lectures at Harvard University in April 1983, this book includes a number of photographs of Welty's ancestors and family, of her childhood neighborhood and home, of places she and her family visited, and of Welty herself at various stages of her life. Even more important than the actual photographs, however, are the verbal pictures Welty sketches of her supportive and loving parents, of her mother's (and her own) obsession with books, of her growing awareness of her physical surroundings and of other people, and of her early efforts in literature and photography. The overall picture that emerges is of a sensitive and generous young woman whose inquisitiveness and self-respect were nurtured by both parents in different ways—a woman whose gentle detachment, combined with a genuine and humane

interest in others, allowed her to see clearly and capture sharply (both on film and in fiction) the subtle shadings of the people and places she observed.

Welty begins by describing her practical-minded, inventive, but kind-natured father, who always looked to the future and tried to be prepared for whatever it might hold. Her mother was in love with literature (she once rescued a prize set of Dickens from a burning house), and young Welty's home was filled with books and with a love of reading and learning. At one point Welty in fact remarks, "I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me—and as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting—into knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling, by way of the alphabet" (847). Some of her most vivid memories involve specific books as well as the general process of reading, and it is clear that her early enthusiasm for words and for all manner of writing helped shape the kind of author she later became. Yet, books were not the only influence she embraced; she also loved listening to stories, whether told by her parents or related by neighbors. One woman, in particular, would accompany the Welty family on Sunday drives, and Welty recalls that "my mother sat in the back with her friend, and I'm told that as a small child I would ask to sit in the middle, and say as we started off, 'Now *talk*'" (852). From the habit of a lifetime of listening closely—a habit that began when she was a youngster—Welty developed into a story writer whose works are full of the convincing sounds of human voices. She read widely, but she also kept her ears open, and both practices had a major influence on her later fiction. As she notes in one important passage:

My instinct—the dramatic instinct—was to lead me, eventually, on the right track for a storyteller: the *scene* was full of hints, pointers, suggestions, and promises of things to find out and know about human beings. I had to grow up and learn to listen for the unspoken as well as the spoken—and to know a truth, I also had to recognize a lie. (854)

Just as important as the influence of books and voices on Welty's fiction, however, was the impact

of an increasingly observant and practiced eye. Her skills at precise observation were honed by her experiences as a traveling journalist/photographer in the 1930s for the Mississippi office of the national Works Progress Administration (WPA), which had been formed to help fight the depression by putting people to work on useful projects. "Traveling over the whole of Mississippi, writing news stories for county papers, taking pictures," Welty writes, "I saw my home state at close hand, really for the first time" (928). Her work as a photographer for the WPA helped teach her to observe closely and capture essences in precise moments of time—talents obviously relevant to her growing interest in the writing of fiction. One of her comments about photography, for instance, seems obviously relevant to her writing as well:

A good snapshot stopped a moment from running away. Photography taught me that to be able to capture transience, by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had. Making pictures of people in all sorts of situations, I learned that every feeling waits upon its gesture; and I had to be prepared to recognize this moment when I saw it. These were things a story writer needed to know. (928)

One Writer's Beginnings embodies the very values it describes: It is full of vivid pictures and of memorable voices, and it is typical of Welty's modesty that so much of the book is given over, in generous tribute, to others, including teachers and friends, relatives and acquaintances, and especially her beloved parents. All these persons, but especially her parents, helped shape the woman and writer she became. It seems fitting that her last major book, written late in life, should take her (and her readers) back to her childhood and youth, where everything began.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is Welty's autobiography similar to and/or different from Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, particularly in terms of setting(s), family circumstances, career aspirations, obstacles confronted, and achievements obtained? How do matters of race, class, and gender impinge upon

insightful commentator on her own fiction? In her reviews, by what criteria does she seem to evaluate the fiction of others? Are these criteria germane to her own works?

7. Choose one of Welty's works and try to place it in as full a historical context as possible. What was happening politically, socially, and economically at the time the work was written and first published? What was happening in Welty's own life at the time? What was happening in "pop" culture and "high" culture? How and why can Welty's work be related to all these various developments?
8. Welty was an accomplished photographer as well as an author of fiction. Examine one or more of her published collections of photographs—such as *One Time, One Place* (1971; rev. ed. 1996) or *Photographs* (1989)—and discuss the relevance of her pictures to her fiction. For instance, choose a particular story and relate it (in style, techniques, and subject matter) to photos taken in the years just preceding the composition of the story. What (if anything) do Welty's photographs imply about her attitudes toward the people she presents in her pictures and in her writings?
9. Choose one particular section from one particular work by Welty and discuss (1) how that section is typical of Welty's writing in general; (2) how that passage fits into, and contributes to, the larger work of which it is a part; and (3) how that section is effective as a piece of writing, especially in terms of such matters as diction, imagery, dialect, and rhythm.
10. Read the works in Welty's 1955 collection *The Bride of Innisfallen, and Other Stories*, and then compare and contrast the stories set in Europe with the ones set in the South. How do the settings affect the stories in terms of theme, characterization, and language, and how do they contribute to the overall effectiveness of the tales? Is Welty more successful in depicting one kind of setting than another? Can you make any other generalizations about the "southern" stories and the ones set in Europe?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Eudora Welty: Updated Edition*. New York: Chelsea House, 2007.
- Champion, Laurie, ed. *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994.
- "Eudora Welty Newsletter." Georgia State University. Available online. URL: <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwewn/index.htm>. Accessed March 11, 2007.
- Ford, Richard, and Michael Kreyling. "Chronology." In *Stories, Essays and Memoir*, by Eudora Welty, 951–999. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- Gretlund, Jan Nordby. *Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994.
- Johnston, Carol Ann. *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- "Mississippi Writer's Page: Eudora Welty (1909–2001)." The Internet Guide to Mississippi Writers. Available online. URL: http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/welty_eudora/. Accessed March 11, 2007.
- Pingatore, Diana R. *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Eudora Welty*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1996.
- Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, ed. *Eudora Welty: Thirteen Essays*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1983.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Eudora Welty." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/welty.html>. Accessed March 11, 2007.
- Schmidt, Peter. *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty's Short Fiction*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991.
- Vande Kieft, Ruth M. *Eudora Welty: Revised Edition*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.
- Welty, Eudora. *Stories, Essays, and Memoir*. Edited by Richard Ford and Michael Kreyling. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- . "Must the Novelist Crusade?" *New Yorker*, October 1965, 104–108.

Robert C. Evans



RICHARD WILBUR (1921–)

One of the jobs of poetry is to make the unbearable bearable, not by falsehood but by clear, precise confrontation. Even the most cheerful poet has to cope with pain as part of the human lot; what he shouldn't do is to complain, and dwell on his personal mischance.

(Richard Wilbur, qtd. in Butts, ed., *Conversations* 194)

Although Richard Wilbur is widely considered one of the most important American poets of the second half of the 20th century, and although that status has been confirmed through numerous awards, many honorary degrees, frequent laudatory reviews, and even his appointment as poet laureate of the United States, Wilbur has at the same time often been seen as a poet of limited range, forms, subjects, tones, and style. No writer, of course, can be wholly expansive and truly comprehensive, and Wilbur in fact deserves great respect for bucking many of the trends and fads of recent poetry and instead hewing closely to an authentically personal sense of his specific poetic vocation. In the process he has produced some of the most finely crafted and carefully phrased lyric verse of our era.

Richard Purdy Wilbur was born on March 1, 1921, in New York, New York, to Lawrence Lazear Wilbur, a painter who specialized in portraits, and Helen Ruth Purdy Wilbur, whose father was a journalist and editor. In 1923 young Wilbur and his family moved to a stone house, for which they paid a modest rent, which was located on the estate of a wealthy English businessman and expatriate named J. D. Armitage. Armitage had immigrated to America because he felt that businessmen were not properly appreciated in England, and in New Jersey he established a kind of English country manor, with a large house overlooking more than 400 acres of farmland, including “orchards, pastures, nurseries, walled gar-

dens and lanes [as well as a] barn and pen and dairy, massively constructed in stone and roofed with tile” (Wilbur, qtd. in Butts 116). In these idyllic surroundings Wilbur grew up, playing mostly with his brother and imbibing the love of natural beauty that distinguishes much of his verse. Life on the estate also helped to inculcate the kind of Anglophilia that seems to characterize much of Wilbur's temperament and many of his intellectual attitudes.

After attending a series of local schools—including Essex Falls Public School, Grover Cleveland Junior High School, and Montclair High School—Wilbur arrived at Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1938. While at Amherst he was active on the school paper, both as writer and editor, and he became extremely interested in the study of literature, particularly by the kind of “close reading” that was just then coming into vogue, and his interest was so great that although he had flirted with the ideas of becoming a painter or cartoonist, he increasingly assumed that he would become a professor of literature. During summer breaks from Amherst, Wilbur twice hitched rides on railcars and in automobiles and thus toured large sections of the United States, and he also fell in love with Mary Charlotte Hayes Ward, a student at nearby Smith College, whom he married on June 20, 1942, after graduation from Amherst. By this time, of course, the United States had been plunged into World War II because of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the preceding

December. Wilbur trained for service as a cryptographer, but when an investigation revealed that his political sympathies were left-wing, he was rejected as a security risk. Reassigned to regular service and sent to fight in Europe, he nevertheless became a cryptographer with his new unit when the man who had previously held that job lost his mind. While serving in Europe on some of the most important fronts of the war, Wilbur seriously began to write poetry during the long stretches of anxious boredom that characterizes so much of life in combat. Poetry, he has often said, helped him impose a sense of order on the chaos of the circumstances that then surrounded him.

Having survived the war, Wilbur was one of many soldiers who benefited from the GI Bill, which helped returning servicemen attend college with government assistance. Wilbur enrolled in graduate school at Harvard University, where he intended to study English in preparation for a career in college teaching. However, a friend with connections in publishing who happened to read some of the poems Wilbur had been writing quickly pronounced Wilbur a genuine poet and helped him secure a contract for his first book. This collection (which appeared in 1947, the same year Wilbur received his Harvard M.A.) was titled *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems*; it was widely reviewed and highly praised. In addition, more good fortune came Wilbur's way when he was appointed, in 1947, as a junior fellow at Harvard—an appointment that helped him afford to live in France the following year, the same year in which he received the prestigious Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize from *Poetry* magazine. As both an academic and a poet, then, his career was off to an extremely auspicious start.

Wilbur's second book—*Ceremony and Other Poems*—appeared in 1950, the same year in which he was also awarded the Oscar Blumenthal Prize by *Poetry* magazine and began a five-year teaching stint at Harvard. By 1952 his reputation was already so significant that he was awarded an honorary M.A. by Amherst, his alma mater, as well as a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, which was designed to give him the time and resources to try his hand at writ-

ing verse drama. Although Wilbur never felt that he was successful in crafting a strong verse play of his own, his efforts to educate himself in this task led him to engage in the first of many verse translations of the works of the French playwright Molière, thus launching another and highly successful phase of his career. His translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope* was published in 1955 to great acclaim, and his later translations of Molière and others have led him to be considered one of the most accomplished literary translators of our age. By 1955 he had also been awarded the Prix de Rome Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a prize that gave him an opportunity to live and write in Rome. Other accomplishments of 1955 included publication of *A Bestiary*, a book of poems and prose pieces about animals, and the coediting and publication of a significant anthology of recent English and American verse.

Also in 1955 Wilbur began a two-year tenure as a professor of English at Wellesley College, followed in 1956 by the publication of his third book of poetry, *Things of This World*, and in 1957 by his election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In that same year he received both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize as well as the Edna St. Vincent Millay Memorial Prize, and a collection of verse titled *Poems 1943–1956* was published in England. In 1957 also, his contributions as lyricist to the Broadway musical *Candide* (with a score by Leonard Bernstein) were published, and he was appointed professor of English at Wesleyan University, a position he held for 20 years. Thus, in little more than a decade since the end of World War II, Wilbur had risen to the top rank of creative writers in America, distinguishing himself not only as a writer of verse but as a translator and musical lyricist and even as a notable scholar of Edgar Allan Poe, a literary precursor with whom he engaged in an affectionate and long-running debate. He has often said that as a poet he has tried to define himself in opposition to Poe, attempting to emphasize the concrete and particular, in contrast to Poe's tendency toward rarefied abstractions. Nevertheless his attitude toward Poe, as indeed toward most other

writers (even those whose styles of writing are significantly different from his own), has usually been respectful and genially good-humored.

The 1960s was another decade of success for Wilbur. During 1960–61 he held a Ford Foundation Fellowship, and in the latter year he not only was elected chancellor of the American Academy of Poets but also represented the United States on a goodwill tour of the Soviet Union. In that same year, too, his latest collection of verse was issued—a volume titled *Advice to a Prophet and Other Poems*. This text, in 1962, won the Melville Cane Award from the Poetry Society of America, and in 1963 Wilbur himself received his second Guggenheim Fellowship. The year 1963 also saw the publication of a collected edition of his works (*The Poems of Richard Wilbur*), the appearance of his first book for children (*Loudmouse*), his sharing of the Bollingen Translation Prize, and his appointment as Olin Professor of English at Wesleyan. Further awards, travels, and honorary degrees followed in the next few years, but the most significant event of this period was undoubtedly the publication, in 1969, of his new collection, *Walking to Sleep: New Poems and Translation*, which was followed in 1970 by the printing of *Digging for China: A Poem*. By the end of the 1960s Wilbur was seen as one of the most eminent figures in American poetry, but his verse was also increasingly considered (by some critics, at least) as remote from the turmoil of the times—a kind of mannered, even Mandarin formalism that was often contrasted with the strongly personal, heavily “confessional” verse of ROBERT LOWELL and his many imitators. Certain critics of Wilbur accused his work of being tame, timid, and sometimes even trite; Wilbur’s admirers, on the other hand, valued his continuing commitment to form, sanity, craft, and restraint.

The 1970s brought further distinctions and achievements. In 1971 Wilbur won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, and the Prix Henri Desfeuilles. His translation of Molière’s *The School for Scandal* appeared that same year, and in 1972 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Another book for children (*Opposites*) was issued in

1973—the same year in which Wilbur also won the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. In 1974 his book *Seed Leaves* appeared in a limited edition, his edition of Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* was published, and Wilbur was elected president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. This honor was followed, in 1976, by his election as chancellor of the same organization and by the publication that same year of two major books: *The Mind-Reader: New Poems and Response: Prose Pieces, 1953–1976*. In 1977 Wilbur began a nearly 10-year stint as writer in residence at Smith College, while 1978 saw the publication of his translation of Molière’s *The Learned Ladies* and his selection, once more, as winner of the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award. In 1980 he was once again elected president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 1981 *Seven Poems and Advice from a Muse* was published. During all these years, of course, he continued to receive numerous honorary degrees.

Awards, prizes, degrees, and other distinctions have continued to be showered on Wilbur into the 21st century, but the most important achievements of any writer are the works he creates. For Wilbur, these have included such books as *The Whale and Other Uncollected Translations* (1982), *New and Collected Poems* (1988), *More Opposites* (1991), *A Game of Catch* (1994), *Runaway Opposites* (1995), a translation of Baudelaire’s *L’invitation au voyage* (1997), *The Catbird’s Song: Prose Pieces, 1963–1995* (1997), *The Disappearing Alphabet* (1998), *Mayflies: New Poems and Translations* (2000), *Opposites, More Opposites, and a Few Differences* (2000), *The Pig in the Spigot* (2000), and the monumental *Collected Poems, 1943–2004* (2005). More works, including a translation of Corneille’s *The Theatre of Illusion* were published in 2007, and even the publications listed here only begin to scratch of the surface of Wilbur’s astonishing productivity; in 2009 the Library of Congress catalog listed 126 separate items (including books, recordings, editions, and translations). In the final decades of his life he has become one of America’s most widely respected and most prolific writers, author of some of the most important poems and translations of his era. His life, in short,

has achieved the kind of grace, balance, sanity, good humor, and deeper thoughtfulness expressed in so many of his poems.

“The Beautiful Changes” (1947)

In this early poem, which shares the title of Wilbur’s first book, the speaker describes the nature of beauty: how it simultaneously transforms—and is transformed by—everything with which it is juxtaposed, thereby suggesting new and enriched perceptions both of itself and of its surroundings in ways that create a sense of wonder and renewal.

The wit of this poem begins with its title, whose key terms can suggest at least three meanings. On the one hand, the title may imply that the *beautiful* (noun) *changes* (verb) to something else, or it may imply that the *beautiful* (noun) is itself *changed* (verb), or it may seem to refer to *beautiful* (adjective) *changes* (noun). Such ambiguity and playfulness with language are typical of much of Wilbur’s writing; as do the works of the 17th-century metaphysical poets whom he admires so much, his verse demands a reader’s alert intelligence. He rarely wastes a word: His lines are often heavy with multiple meanings, yet the poems move with grace and ease, almost never seeming cluttered or clogged. The present lyric begins with literal movement: The speaker imagines a person (abstractly described as “One”) who is “wading a Fall meadow” (language that already establishes the main metaphor of the first stanza, which likens a field to a lake and develops that likeness over six distinct lines in the manner of a “metaphysical conceit,” or extended comparison). Just as the meadow reminds the walker of a lake, so the slightest thought of the speaker’s beloved reminds him of the astonishingly blue beauty of Lake Lucerne, in Switzerland. By the end of the final stanza the abstract opening emphasis on “One” has given way to an intensely personal relationship between the speaker and the beloved “you” (line 5).

One of the most impressive aspects of this poem (and indeed of many works by Wilbur) is the way it manages to combine form and flexibility. On the page, the poem appears highly regular in shape:

Each stanza consists of six lines, with two long lines followed by two shorter lines followed in turn by two long ones. Yet, the lengths of the lines (as measured by the number of syllables) are irregular and unpredictable, and so Wilbur succeeds in creating a poem that looks more strictly patterned than it actually is. Likewise, his pattern of rhyme in each stanza is both regular and loose (*abacdc*), creating the effect of order and symmetry without seeming heavy-handed, monotonous, or constricting. Similarly, his skillful use of enjambment (in which one line flows freely into the next, with punctuation at the end) gives the poem a smooth and easy flow—an effect enhanced by the fact that so many of the final words in each line are verbs. The effectiveness of the poem is also enriched by the ways Wilbur plays with language in unexpected ways, as when he turns the noun *valley* into a verb in line 6, or when he uses the noun-adjective combination of *leaf leafler* (in line 11) almost to mimic the close relation he describes between the mantis and the leaf, or when he plays throughout the poem with heavy assonance (i.e., repetition of vowel sounds), especially in lines 1–2, 6, 11–12, and 13. Wilbur’s poem itself, as do the beautiful things and actions it describes, helps enhance our sense of the beauty of the world around us, and thus it seems perfectly appropriate that this work ends with a word referring to the effect it both describes and creates—the effect of “wonder” (l. 18).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this poem with Wallace Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar,” particularly in terms of what the two works imply about the relationship between nature and art and between the speaker and his audience. How do the poems differ in purpose and tone?
2. Contrast this love lyric with T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Why does Wilbur emphasize natural imagery while Eliot emphasizes an urban setting? In which poem is irony a more prominent feature, and why? How does the speaker of Wilbur’s poem differ from the speaker of Eliot’s? Which poem is finally more affirmative?

3. Compare and contrast this poem and Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter." How do both poems use imagery of nature to discuss love? Which poem seems more abstract, and why? How do both works avoid sentimentality (a common fault of love poems)?

"A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness" (1950)

As its title punningly suggests, this poem celebrates a world of sensory (or "sensible") experience—a world of material objects, tangible things, and physical sensations—as opposed to a world that is purely abstract, rational, or reasonable ("sensible"). The first half of the work describes the movement of the spirit toward an entirely spiritual realm, but the second half implores the spirit not to abandon (but indeed to embrace and mesh with) the world known through the senses. In the final stanza the speaker subtly reminds his readers of one of the most famous instances of the union of body and soul—the Christian Incarnation, in which God became man and in which the spirit fully united with the flesh.

In the manner of the 17th-century metaphysical writers whom Wilbur admires deeply (in fact, the title of the poem is adapted from one of those writers, Thomas Traherne), the first three stanzas of the work amount to a metaphysical conceit (an extended comparison, developed over many lines). Although the comparison of the movement of the soul to the movement of camels across a desert may seem remote from common experience, that is part of the poem's point: The imagery, at this stage, is appropriately abstract and distant, because the poem associates the moving camels with the common human temptation to turn one's back on the familiar world of everyday life. The camel imagery also, however, foreshadows the imagery at the very end of the poem, where the Christian nativity is implied, thereby reminding us of the wise men, presumably on camels, who followed a star across a desert to discover the perfect union of the world and the spirit. By tying the imagery of the opening stanzas to the imagery of the final lines, Wilbur achieves the kind of unity prized by writers and

critics with a strong interest in formal harmony and coherence (including Wilbur himself). As the poem proceeds from the remote imagery of its opening lines, its language becomes more and more obviously religious, especially in describing the halos depicted in paintings of medieval Christian saints (lines 15–18), until it finally culminates in phrasing that is simultaneously familiar (as in the references to trees, country creeks, and barns) and strangely mysterious and otherworldly (as in the reference to the "supernova" [l. 26]). The final two words—"light incarnate"—not only look back to the imagery of lines 13–18 (thus enhancing the poem's formal unity) but also imply the birth of Christ. (The phrase gains extra emphasis because it breaks the previously established rhyme scheme.) Meanwhile, the poem also offers its share of the typical pleasures we associate with Wilbur's verse, such as his use of striking imagery (as in the "tall camels of the spirit" [l. 1]), clever sound effects (as in the reference to the "sawmill shrill of the locust" [l. 3]), alliteration (as in the reference to "whole honey" [l. 3]), literary allusions (as in his reference to Traherne both in the title and in line 6), and assonance (as in the reference to "sunken sub" [l. 24]). Here as in so many other poems by Wilbur, one has the sense that every line (in fact, every syllable) has been carefully crafted and polished. It is as if Wilbur, in writing this poem, has tried to enact the very kind of incarnation the poem celebrates—a perfect union of thought and imagery, idea and sound.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi." How do the poems resemble and differ from each other in their imagery, tones, points of view, and themes?
2. Compare and contrast this work with Wallace Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning." How do the poems differ in their implied attitudes toward Christianity, and how are they similar in their emphasis on the importance of the world we know through our senses? In what ways do both poems reject the abstract and ideal in favor of concrete, material reality?
3. Compare and contrast this work with Wallace Stevens's poem "The Plain Sense of Things." What

attitudes do the poems take toward the relation between the imagination and reality? Why does Stevens emphasize such plain, concrete imagery in his poem? Why is the imagery in Wilbur's poem often more abstract? How is the use of imagery in each poem somewhat ironic in view of the argument each work makes?

“Ceremony” (1950)

This poem opens by mentioning a painting by the French artist Jean-Frédéric Bazille (perhaps his *View of the Village of Castelnaud-le-Lez*) in which a woman wearing a “striped blouse” sits in a pastoral landscape; the speaker of the poem responds to the potential charge that the woman seems too superior to the landscape to be really connected to it. The speaker says that he prefers the wit of Bazille's painting to a possible alternative painting featuring a fictional nymph whose relation to the landscape may seem closer but who is also entirely artificial. It is (the poem suggests) when civilized people and things are juxtaposed with natural surroundings that we become most aware of our own relationship with our natural environment and of the wildness inherent in nature.

The opening line of this poem encapsulates the work's central subject: the human (symbolized by the geometrically precise “striped blouse”) and nature (symbolized by the open “clearing”) united by art (symbolized by the reference to Bazille). Appropriately enough (given its argument and subject) this poem is itself more highly structured than some others by Wilbur: There is no variation in the line lengths (each line, like the stripes of the blouse, is regular, consisting of exactly 10 syllables), the rhyme scheme is plainly apparent and also highly regular (*abcabc*), and punctuation at the end of many lines is more prominently emphasized than in other works by Wilbur. The poem thus has a more predictable, controlled, and stately movement than is found (for instance) in “The Beautiful Changes,” another text that also emphasizes relations between humans and nature. In addition, “Ceremony”—in its diction, its imagery, and its allusions—seems a

more mannered, more obviously “literary” poem than that earlier poem; the speaker is obviously a cultured person, familiar with French impressionist art, with the conventions of classical literature (such as nymphs), and with the figures of British mythology (such as Sabrina). Through a variety of devices (such as the direct address of line 2, the reference to “we” in line 6, and the personal pronoun in line 13), the speaker invites us to share his own responses, but many readers are perhaps likely to find the whole performance a bit too precious and mannered, a little too artificial and contrived, however artful the work's design. It is surely poems like “Ceremony” (skillful though it undeniably is) that have contributed to Wilbur's reputation in some quarters as a poet who is sometimes too artificial—in every sense of that word—for his own good.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with William Carlos Williams's poem “The Dance,” which concerns a painting by Brueghel. How do the poems partly imitate (in structure and phrasing) the paintings they describe? What do the poems imply about the relations between art and life and between painting and poetry? Do you think Wilbur would admire the painting Williams describes? Justify your answer.
2. Compare and contrast this work with ALLEN GINSBERG's poem “On Burroughs' Work.” What do both poems imply about the relationship of art to reality? How are the diction and tone of each work appropriate to the subject and argument of each poem?
3. Ezra Pound's poem “To Whistler, American” is also a work in which a specific painter and particular paintings are important, but how do the purpose, style, tone, and diction of that poem differ from those of Wilbur?

“The Death of a Toad” (1950)

The speaker notices a toad that has lost its leg after being run over by a power mower; it hobbles to

the edge of the garden, takes refuge under some leaves, and looks out upon the lawn as its life and blood drain from its body. The speaker imagines the toad's transition to a mystical realm of death, but the poem ends by returning to a focus on the toad's open but unseeing eyes as the daylight moves across the lawn.

Here, as in "The Beautiful Changes," Wilbur uses three six-line stanzas featuring a regular rhyme scheme (in this case, *aabcbc*) and a roughly similar appearance on the page, but he also introduces an element of freedom into his line lengths: The first line of stanza 1 (for instance) consists of eight syllables, while the first line of stanza 2 consists of nine, and the first line of stanza 3 consists of 10. Along with these unpredictable line lengths is a looseness of meter: Although the first line is solidly iambic (in other words, revealing a pattern in which an unaccented syllable is followed by an accented syllable), the rest of the poem shows a great deal of variation, and in fact, Wilbur makes very effective use of heavy accents on key words (often verbs) at the beginnings of lines, as in lines 2, 6, and 8. Enjambment (running lines together without punctuation) is skillfully employed to give the poem momentum, while assonance, alliteration, and an abrupt rhythm are all wittily used in the phrase "hobbling hop." The toad's death, meanwhile, obviously serves to symbolize the mortality common to all living things, including the humans who have (paradoxically) invented a destructive machine in order to cultivate natural beauty. Wilbur makes us pause and care about a death that might otherwise be unnoticed or unmourned, balancing a real sense of loss with poetic playfulness in his choice of words (as in the assonance of "monotone" [l. 12], in which the sound of the word itself mimics the concept the word describes, or in the extravagant and partly whimsical reference to "lost Amphibia's emperies" [l. 14]). If the poem has a flaw, it may be that the tone of the opening lines of stanza 3 is too playful, too clever, but by the end of the work Wilbur has again found his proper balance, and the poem ends on a note of seriousness that seems appropriate to the death even of so small and seemingly insignificant a creature.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the significance of mowing in this poem and in Robert Frost's "Mowing." In which poem is man more in harmony with nature? Why would the tone and imagery of lines 13–14 of Wilbur's poem seem inappropriate in Frost's work? How is the overall tone of Wilbur's poem more pessimistic?
2. Compare and contrast this poem with Marianne Moore's "To a Snail." How do both poems manage to take something seemingly insignificant and find deeper meaning in it? Which poem seems more abstract, and why? Which poem seems more inherently interesting, and why?
3. Compare and contrast this work with Philip Levine's poem "Animals Are Passing from Our Lives." Discuss the tone, diction, imagery, and implications of the two works. What do they imply about the relations between animals and humans? Which is the more "romantic" of the two works, and why?

"Years-End" (1950)

This poem, which is a meditation on change, decay, and death, begins (appropriately enough) by describing winter's descent in the form of snowfall on a town. The poem then offers a number of related images of living things frozen (sometimes literally) in time: falling leaves half-trapped in ice, once-living ferns imprinted on rock-solid fossils, woolly mammoths frozen in the arctic, and animals and humans embedded in the ashes of the volcanic eruption of Pompeii. Death, the speaker implies, enters too suddenly for most people, who want "more time" not only to live but to give shape and meaning to their lives—lives that often end all too abruptly.

This poem exhibits many of the virtues of phrasing and form that are so typical of Wilbur's work, including heavy use of assonance and alliteration (as in line 1), punning phrases (as in the reference to "settlement" in line 2, which can be read as referring both to a town and to a settling action), a highly regular rhyme scheme (*abbacc*), and an especially emphatic use of iambic pentameter meter (a rhythm

in which the line consists of 10 syllables, with the accents usually falling on syllables that are even-numbered). Often the rhythm in Wilbur's poems is not so strictly predictable, but in this poem the regular iambic beat gives the work a slow, measured, leisurely pace that seems appropriate to the subject matter, which focuses on the steady and inevitable passage of time. Of course, in poetry as in any other aspect of life, once a regular pattern has been established, any variation from it becomes especially noticeable, and thus Wilbur uses departures from the steady iambic beat to emphasize key words and phrases, as in the double-stressed reference to the "soft street" (l. 3), or the triple-stressed description of "late leaves down" (l. 8), or the strong emphasis on verbs at the very beginnings of lines 10 and 11. This poem seems unified, however, not only by its conservative stanzaic form and its regular meter but also by its consistent imagery. It opens and closes with reference to snowfall, and indeed downward movement of all kinds is emphasized throughout the work, from the falling of snow and the falling of leaves to the submersion of ferns and mammoths and the falling of the ashes of Vesuvius. Each of the examples discussed in the middle stanzas is merely one more instance of the general themes of mutability and mortality, and so the "argument" of the poem seems supported by the weight of overwhelming evidence. Yet, the movement of the work is not random: It progresses from a focus on the death of present-day vegetation (the leaves) to the death of vegetation millions of years ago (the ferns) to the death of prehistoric animals (the mammoths) to the death of an ancient animal (the dog at Pompeii) to the death of ancient humans (the people at Pompeii) to the implied death of modern persons, including the speaker and his readers. Unlike the vegetation and animals, and even unlike the people at Pompeii (caught unaware by the volcanic eruption), the poet and his readers are aware of their impending and unavoidable doom, and indeed in the final stanza the speaker of the poem, who had earlier spoken simply as an individual (in line 7), now makes common cause with his reader (in lines 25–26): It is our awareness of mortality, ironically, that unites us and makes us truly human. In the final line, the "New-year bells" (symbols of the present and future)

are juxtaposed with the "snow" (symbol of death) in a way that epitomizes the inescapable paradox of all life, which is vital now but is also doomed to die.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." How is snow imagery used in each work? What does each poem imply about human mortality? How do the rhyme scheme and rhythm contribute to the effectiveness of each work?
2. Compare and contrast this work with Wallace Stevens's poem "The Snow Man." Discuss the use of winter imagery in both works and the ways both poets use such imagery as occasions for meditations on existence. What do both poems imply about the nature of human life in particular?
3. Compare and contrast this work with Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "The Snow Storm." How is animal imagery used in both works? What role (if any) does death play in both works? How do the poems differ in tone and ultimate implications?

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" (1956)

The speaker of this poem describes awakening to the sound of laundry being hung out to dry on a rope controlled by pulleys; in his half-conscious state, he imagines that the hanging clothes resemble bodiless angels, moving (or not moving) in response to the changing or dying breeze. The speaker says that his "soul shrinks" from the idea of being fully awake, with all the burdens of consciousness and memory that wakefulness implies; he would prefer to stay in bed and watch the beautifully undulating laundry. Finally, however, the spirit must reunite with the flesh and must accept the material world, and in the end the speaker wishes that the clean clothes should be worn (not merely viewed) even by people who are inevitably imperfect, thus maintaining the "difficult balance" of body and soul, of earth and heaven.

Here as in his poem "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness," Wilbur concedes the attractiveness of the spiritual realm but insists

that spirit must be united with flesh if life is to seem authentic, meaningful, and rich. The artist who pretends that spirit alone is sufficient denies a basic truth of existence—a truth this poem finally affirms. The poem opens as the speaker's eyes open; our own awakening, developing consciousness as readers, thus mimics his. In a poem centrally concerned with the spirit, Wilbur wittily plays on the meaning of the phrase “spirited from sleep” (l. 2), while the imagery of the soul as it “Hangs” (a metrically emphasized verb) “bodiless” already foreshadows the ensuing central imagery of the hanging clothes (l. 3). In a clever pun that introduces that imagery, the speaker says that his vision is “awash” in “angels”—a noun that not only creates a strong visual impression of floating whiteness but also suggests the traditional role of angels as messengers who convey important meanings, as these “angels” certainly do by the time the poem has finished. The speaker creates a strong sense of immediacy and presence through such words as “Now” (l. 8) and such phrases as “there they are” (l. 7), and the lines themselves (appropriately enough) seem largely free-flowing, unconstrained, unpredictable in their movements, like the movements of the clothes on the line. Wilbur achieves this effect by dispensing altogether with rhyme, by frequently employing enjambment, by irregularly and radically varying the lengths of his line (using sometimes as few as two syllables, sometimes as many as 13), and by breaking lines abruptly (although always in a way that creates effective emphasis, as in lines 4, 17, 20, and 34). The wonderfully apt and beautiful imagery of the empty clothes as angels is juxtaposed with the startling reference to “the punctual rape of every blessed day” (l. 19), a phrase in which Wilbur gets maximal meaning out of each word. The idea of a “punctual rape,” for instance, seems paradoxical, since rapes are usually imagined as unusual, startling events. Here, however, the negative word *rape* (which ironically echoes the positive word *rapt* of line 15) is “punctual” in the sense that day arrives with unfailing regularity: The progress of time is inevitable, however painful it may be

and however much we may wish to resist it. Every day is “blesséd” in a double sense: Sometimes we feel like cursing its arrival, but each day is also an almost holy gift and must be accepted as such. Indeed, throughout the poem Wilbur relies on a sense of paradox (as in the reference to “bitter love” in line 26), because, he implies, life itself is paradoxical, and the trick to living fully is to maintain the “difficult balance” (l. 34) of being true to the spirit while accepting the flesh.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast this work with Wallace Stevens's poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” What do the works imply about the relations between flesh and spirit? How does each use religious imagery to convey its themes? What is the role of beauty in each work?
2. Compare and contrast this work with John Crowe Ransom's poem “Janet Waking.” How do the tones of the two poems differ, especially in their use of humor? What do the works imply about the nature of reality? Why is it significant that the titular figure in Ransom's poem is a young girl, whereas the speaker in Wilbur's poem is presumably an adult?
3. Compare and contrast this work with Mary Oliver's poem “Poppies.” How are the works similar in their imagery and in their implications concerning relations between beauty and day-to-day reality? How does each poem embrace loveliness without denying hard facts?

“The Mind-Reader” (1976)

In this poem (an unusually long one for Wilbur), the speaker is an Italian mind reader who performs for pay in a public setting but who feels somewhat cursed, not only by his inability to forget anything but also by the fact that so many different kinds of people besiege him, seeking answers he largely invents. He has little respect for his clients, since so often their concerns and desires seem selfish and petty. He ends by wondering whether there may indeed be a truly omniscient god who knows

ways, however, does Wilbur seem to be trying to distinguish himself from Stevens?

5. Somewhat surprisingly, Wilbur has expressed a strong admiration for the poems of William Carlos Williams (Butts 32). How do the writings of these two poets tend to differ in form, meter, and diction? What aspects of Williams's accomplishments might lead Wilbur to admire his work?
6. Wilbur once remarked that he considered "Ash Wednesday" the best poem written by T. S. Eliot (Butts 36). Why do you think he admired that poem so strongly? What aspects of that poem seem reflected in his best verse?
7. Wilbur once remarked that he admired the poetry of Robert Frost but did not think that he shared many of Frost's views (Butts 138). Which aspects of Frost's writings do you think Wilbur probably admired, and why? In what ways do you think he believed his attitudes differed from Frost's?
8. Wilbur once remarked that he found the poetry of Ezra Pound "emotionally and intellectually narrow" (qtd. in Butts 35). On the basis of your reading of Pound, what do you think Wilbur meant by this claim, and how do you think he tried to avoid the same faults in his own writings?
9. If you had to choose one poem by Wilbur as your favorite, which would it be, and why? If you had to choose one poem by Wilbur as your least favorite, which would it be, and why? Compare and contrast the two poems.
10. Read Wilbur's poem titled "Cottage Street, 1953," in which he comments on the works of his fellow poet SYLVIA PLATH. Read some of Plath's poems in light of Wilbur's assessment of them and then discuss the value and justice of his assessment.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Breslin, James E. *From Modern to Contemporary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Butts, William, ed. *Conversations with Richard Wilbur*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990.
- Cummins, Paul F. *Richard Wilbur*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971.
- Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Richard Wilbur*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995.
- Harris, Peter. "Forty Years of Richard Wilbur: The Loving Work of an Equilibrist." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 66 (Summer 1990): 412–425.
- Hill, Donald L. *Richard Wilbur*. New York: Twayne, 1967.
- Michelson, Bruce. *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Late Twentieth Century, 1945 to the Present—Richard Wilbur." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/wilbur.html>. Accessed December 10, 2006.
- Salinger, Wendy, ed. *Richard Wilbur's Creation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Waggoner, Hyatt. *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*. Rev. ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984.
- Wilbur, Richard. "The Art of Poetry." Interview with Helen McCloy Ellison, Ellesa Clay High, Peter A. Stitt. *Paris Review* 72 (Winter 1977). Available online. URL: <http://www.theparisreview.org/viewinterview.php/prmMID/3509>. Accessed December 10, 2006.
- . *Collected Poems: 1943–2004*. Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2004.

Robert C. Evans



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS (1911–1983)

Of course, it is a pity that so much of all creative work is so closely related to the personality of the one who does it.

(Preface to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*)

At the height of his powers, the American playwright, novelist, poet, and short story writer Tennessee Williams enjoyed fame and fortune usually reserved for Hollywood actors and directors. Born in rural Mississippi, Williams is known for the “southern gothic” style of his works and their emotional range, which often break with conventional modes of expression and tap into deeply felt human desires and needs, creating an often-grotesque portrait of 20th-century life. In his dramas, for which he is best known, Williams drew upon his own family background, especially in his depiction of women driven or destroyed by frustrated sexuality or mental instability. Replete with southern charm, broken relationships, substance abuse, and sexual frustration, Williams’s life was as dramatic as any of his plays. As do his best stage productions, his personal story weaves fact with fiction and imagination with reality.

Christened Thomas Lanier Williams III upon his March 26, 1911, birth in Columbus, Mississippi, Williams was the second of three children born to Cornelius Coffin (C. C.) Williams, a traveling salesman, and Edwina Dakin Williams, a housewife. Until 1918, he, Edwina, and his older sister, Rose, lived with Edwina’s parents, Walter and Rosina Dakin, while C. C. spent nearly all his time on the road. They moved frequently in Williams’s early years, following his grandfather Dakin’s career in the Episcopal clergy and occupying rectories in

Nashville, Tennessee, and three small Mississippi towns (Columbus, Canton, and Clarksdale). In 1916, as Williams approached school age, he contracted a near-fatal case of diphtheria that, coupled with a kidney infection, kept him housebound for 18 months. As a result of his poor health, both the schoolchildren and his father, who nicknamed Williams “Miss Nancy,” ridiculed his masculinity. This emotional form of abuse only grew worse after Williams’s brother, Dakin, eight years his junior, proved to be an extrovert who outshone Williams athletically and socially. By the time C. C. became branch manager with the International Shoe Company in 1918 and moved his family into a small St. Louis, Missouri, apartment, Williams had developed an introspective and sensitive personality.

The move to St. Louis proved traumatic not only for Williams—derided for his southern drawl and “sissy” mannerisms—but also for his mother, Edwina, who identified as a southern matriarch and never found her bearings in the Midwest. Edwina and C. C.’s already strained relationship grew increasingly contentious, and the cramped St. Louis apartment only magnified the tension. In addition to the familial alienation it caused, the “tragic” move, as Williams later called it, taught the young boy about class difference. Realizing for the first time he was poor, Williams reacted to the way the wealthy treat the impoverished with “shock and rebellion” (*Where I Live* 59). The shock remained with him for the rest

of his life; many of his important plays focus on social inequality.

Williams developed a literary disposition early in life. His mother read to him frequently and bought him a typewriter when he was 12. As a student at Ben Blewett Junior High, he published a short story in the school newspaper and a poem in the class yearbook. During his secondary school years, first at Soldan High and later at University City High, he won a cash prize in an essay contest and published a short story in *Weird Tales*.

Meanwhile, his father's habitual drinking became chronic. Edwina's resentment, both of C. C.'s angry outbursts and of the family's social standing, intensified. Rose's behavior turned erratic and rebellious, prompting C. C. and Edwina to send her in 1925 to All Saints College, a private boarding school in Vicksburg, Mississippi. The change of scenery failed to improve her condition, and after two years, she returned to St. Louis. Unable to cope with a stressful home life, Rose suffered a mental breakdown. In 1937 her parents committed her to St. Vincent's, a sanitarium near St. Louis. There, a psychiatrist diagnosed her with schizophrenia. Six years later, after electroshock therapy and insulin treatment, which induced convulsions, her condition remained unchanged. Edwina then authorized a lobotomy, a surgical operation that involved severing the brain's prefrontal cortex. During this time such operations were commonplace, although today such a procedure is considered to be a drastic treatment reserved for only the most severe psychiatric disorders. Although the operation rendered her more sedate, it did not cure Williams's sister. She remained institutionalized until her death in 1996.

As Rose's psychiatric problems emerged, Williams struggled with his own identity. Upon graduating high school in 1929, he enrolled at the University of Missouri at Columbia, planning to study journalism. After completing his third year, despite more success as a writer—he won honorable mention in the Dramatic Arts Club contest for his one-act play, *Beauty Is the Word*—poor grades, especially in then-required Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) military training classes, prompted C. C. to force Williams to quit school. By 1932, in the middle of the Great

Depression, the family had little money, so Williams took a job clerking for his father's company. After long days working for the International Shoe Company, Williams would go home, “tanking up on black coffee,” and write most of the night, producing dozens of poems and short stories. In 1933 “Stella for Star” won first prize in the St. Louis Writers Guild's annual Winifred Irwin short story contest. By 1935 the regimen had exhausted him; he had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. Because William was medically unfit to return to his day job, his father allowed him to visit Memphis, Tennessee, where he lived for the summer with his grandparents. During this time he read the works of the Russian playwright and short story writer Anton Chekhov. Delighted by Chekhov's plays, Williams began writing his own. Later that summer, when the Memphis Garden Players produced his one-act *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!*, Williams saw his work staged for the first time.

On the heels of this success Williams returned to St. Louis and took courses at Washington University. In 1936 he began writing for the Mummies, an amateur troupe dedicated to producing cutting-edge drama. The Mummies performed Williams's first full-length plays, *Candles to the Sun* and *Fugitive Kind*. The following year, distressed by his sister's psychological deterioration, Williams left St. Louis for the University of Iowa, where he studied playwriting under E. C. Mabie and E. P. Conkle and wrote *Spring Storm* and *Not about Nightingales*. Williams graduated in 1938 with a B.A. in English and returned to St. Louis determined to make it as a writer.

Williams sent his works to publishers, production companies, and writing contests. While awaiting feedback, he traveled to New Orleans looking for work. Initially shocked by the seemingly amoral lifestyle and permissive atmosphere of the French Quarter, Williams quickly fell in love with the city. Vowing to return, he traveled with a friend to California, where he received good news: One of his contest submissions had paid off. The Group Theater, a subsidiary of the Theater Guild, which sought work from young playwrights, awarded “Tennessee Williams” \$100 for *American Blues*, a collection of one-act plays. Exceeding the contest's age limitation

by three years, Williams had invented a pen name to disguise his identity, choosing *Tennessee* because his ancestors had “fought the Indians for Tennessee and I had already discovered that the life of a young writer was going to be something similar to the defense of a stockade against a band of savages” (*Where I Live* 59). Despite the relatively small sum of money, the award turned out to be Williams’s big break, calling him to the attention of Audrey Wood, one of New York’s most successful agents.

Between 1939 and 1944 Williams’s career underwent a series of ups and downs. A \$1,000 Rockefeller Foundation Grant enabled him to move to New York, where he studied drama at the New School for Social Research and worked on *Battle of Angels*, a play about a woman who cares for her cancer-stricken husband while having an affair with a mysterious traveler. *Battle of Angels*, his first professionally produced play, premiered in Boston in December 1940. On its debut night most audience members left early when a smoke machine malfunctioned, and the Boston City Council censored the play for mixing religion with sexuality. Despite the negative response the play foreshadowed Williams’s lifelong obsession with the clash between human sexuality and social mores. After the failure he collaborated with Donald Windham on a dramatic adaptation of D. H. Lawrence’s short story “You Touched Me,” which premiered in Cleveland to mixed reviews in 1943. During these years Williams lived in near-poverty, supporting his writing and vagabond lifestyle by working a series of part-time jobs. Yet, he traveled frequently, living in, among other places, New York, New Orleans, St. Louis, Miami, Key West, and Hollywood, where, in 1943, Audrey Wood secured him work as a contract writer for MGM.

Williams’s script *The Gentleman Caller* led to his first major theatrical success. After he reworked the script for the stage, *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in Chicago in December 1944 to rave reviews. The play performed well enough to secure a Broadway opening on March 31, 1945, at the Playhouse Theatre. That night, Williams received 24 curtain calls and became an overnight sensation. Two weeks later *The Glass Menagerie* won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award; shortly thereafter it won the Donaldson and

the Sydney Howard Memorial Awards. Set during the Great Depression in a cramped St. Louis apartment similar to the one Williams knew as a child, the play tells the story of Tom Wingfield, a young poet yearning for independence from his overbearing mother, Amanda, and his crippled sister, Laura. In Williams’s most autobiographical work Amanda and Laura were modeled on Edwina and Rose Williams. With its piercing psychological insights, complex characters, and emotional dialogue, the play was a revelation for American theatergoers, who had never experienced the unconventional techniques Williams used. As he explained in the play’s production notes:

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. (xix–xxii)

The Glass Menagerie catapulted Williams into national fame and provided him financial security for the first time in his life. He went from renting spare bedrooms and worrying about how he would pay for food to living in a first-class Manhattan hotel, where he ordered room service for every meal.

The excitement quickly gave way to a feeling of spiritual dislocation, prompting him to move to Mexico, where he began drafting “The Poker Night,” the play that would become *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In August 1945 he returned to the United States for the Broadway premier of *You Touched Me!* That year New Directions published *27 Wagons of Cotton and Other One Act Plays*, a collection that explores familiar Williams themes, such as the alienation of the individual from society and the conflict between spiritual fulfillment and the desires of the flesh. Over

the next two years, while dividing his time between Nantucket, in Massachusetts, and New Orleans, Williams wrote *Summer and Smoke*, which premiered in Dallas on July 8, 1947. On December 3 of that year, *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway for the first of 855 performances. A runaway sensation, the play starred Jessica Tandy as Blanche and Marlon Brando as Stanley, a role he reprised for the Academy Award-winning 1951 film version. In addition to its commercial success, the play won Williams his second Drama Critics' Circle and Donaldson Awards as well as his first Pulitzer Prize.

Over the next decade and a half Williams composed several plays that have entered the permanent American theater repertoire: *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), *Period of Adjustment* (1960), and *Night of the Iguana* (1961). Though not all were smash hits, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Night of the Iguana* each won a Drama Critics' Circle Award, and *Cat* earned Williams a second Pulitzer. During this period he composed a novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950); published a collection of poetry, *In the Winter of Cities* (1956); wrote an original screenplay, *Baby Doll* (1956); and collaborated on film adaptations of *Menagerie* (1950), *Streetcar* (1951), *Rose Tattoo* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), and *Orpheus Descending* (renamed *The Fugitive Kind*, 1960).

Despite his fame, fortune, and elevated literary reputation, Williams failed to achieve lasting happiness. His relationship with Frank Merlo, his lover from 1948 until 1961, was often tempestuous and strained. He continued to blame himself for leaving Rose in St. Louis just as her psyche was fracturing. From 1947 onward he supported her financially, moving her to a private sanitarium in Connecticut in 1949. Yet, Williams never alleviated his guilty conscience, which can be seen in the unstable female characters and rose imagery to which he frequently returned in his works. Adding to his depression, his beloved grandfather, Walter Dakin, died in 1955. Two years later Williams's father, with whom he never developed an understanding, also died, leaving emotional scars that never fully healed. In the

late 1950s his confidence began eroding, only temporarily buoyed by *Night of the Iguana*'s success. To alleviate his misery, he turned to alcohol and prescription pills. When Merlo, with whom Williams remained friends, died of lung cancer in 1963, Williams became an alcoholic and drug addict. With his substance dependency supported by Dr. Max Jacobson, who gave Williams barbiturates and injected him with amphetamines, Williams entered a six-year period he would later call his "Stoned Age." Finally, in September 1969, Williams's younger brother, Dakin, intervened and placed Williams in the mental ward at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis. Forced by physicians to undergo immediate withdrawal, Williams suffered two heart attacks and several seizures during his three-month hospital stay. In December he returned to Key West, where he had owned a home since 1949. Within two years he began using drugs again, a habit that plagued him for the rest of his life.

Although he received several lifetime achievement awards and honorary degrees in his final 20 years, Williams spent the last half of his career in steady decline. Unfavorable reviews piled up. Some were vitriolic. Critics portrayed him as an eccentric washed-up old man compensating for deteriorating skill by reverting to abstraction and overwrought symbolism. In a 1970 television interview Williams further damaged his reputation by discussing his history of sexual promiscuity with men. In his last two decades he continued to write prolifically, publishing his memoirs, a poetry collection, two short story collections, and a novel. During this period he managed to produce a new play nearly every year. With the exception of *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), all were commercial failures.

On February 24, 1983, Williams died alone in a New York hotel room. He choked on a pharmaceutical bottle cap, apparently having used it to spoon two sleeping pills into his mouth. His brother, Dakin, had Williams interred at Mt. Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis, against his stated wish to be cremated. Williams wanted his ashes scattered off the coast of Key West, where his favorite poet, Hart Crane, had committed suicide by leaping off a steamship. At the time of his death, his standing with audiences and critics

alike was at a 40-year low. The strange circumstances surrounding his death echoed many of the grotesque situations of his dramas; Williams died a colorful yet tragic character.

***The Glass Menagerie* (1944)**

The Glass Menagerie was Tennessee Williams's first great success, thrusting him from obscurity into the limelight, where, for two decades, he shared with ARTHUR MILLER distinction as America's most important playwright. Opening in December 1944 in Chicago, *Menagerie* moved to New York's Playhouse Theatre on March 31 of the following year. Quickly racking up several prestigious theater prizes including the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the play's Broadway run lasted 561 performances. Even though Williams went on to write several other critically acclaimed works, many literary scholars consider *Menagerie* his best work.

During the course of seven scenes the play records the Wingfield family's struggle to survive in St. Louis during the Great Depression. Living at home with his domineering mother, Amanda, and his psychologically troubled sister, Laura, Tom, a young poet, yearns to escape both the cramped apartment and the stifling responsibilities of home life. When Amanda discovers that Laura has dropped out of business school, she becomes obsessed with finding a suitor and financial supporter for her daughter. After initially balking at his mother's suggestion to join in the husband search, Tom invites his friend, Jim, to dinner. When Jim arrives, Laura is shocked to discover that he is the same man she had secretly loved in high school. Although Laura's anxiety gets the better of her and she passes the meal resting on the sofa, she eventually responds to Jim's extroverted personality. They dance together and share a kiss, but the romantic interlude is cut short when Jim breaks one of Laura's beloved glass figurines. The amorous spell broken, Jim tells Laura that he is engaged to another woman and that he can never see her again. After Jim leaves, Amanda blames Tom, accusing him of sabotaging the evening. In response, Tom storms

out of the apartment. A few days later he leaves home for good.

Williams's most autobiographical play, *The Glass Menagerie* was written to work through his painful early adult years. Williams crafted Tom in his own image and even named the character after himself—only in his late 20s did Williams change his name from *Thomas* to *Tennessee*. As does Tom Wingfield, Williams spent his later youth, adolescence, and early adulthood in St. Louis; attended Soldan High School; and wrote poetry while working at a shoe company. More important, as does Tom, Williams felt trapped between his individual goals and his familial obligations. According to Lyle Leverich, Williams's most thorough biographer, the playwright maintained two prevailing commitments: his writing career and his sister, Rose. Throughout Williams's life, especially his early adult years, his obligations to each conflicted. In 1937, just when Rose was losing her grip on reality, Williams left St. Louis to study English at the University of Iowa. While Rose received questionable treatments in a psychiatric ward, Williams found therapy in his writing. Rose had no artistic outlet, no coping mechanism for the social and familial pressure to conform. Nor does Laura Wingfield, whose crippled leg is an outward sign of her psychological weaknesses.

The autobiographical correlations extend to Williams's parents. Years after seeing Laurette Taylor's legendary performance as Amanda Wingfield, Edwina Williams privately joked that "Mrs. Winfield" was her alias. As does Edwina, Amanda never adjusts to midwestern urban life, which she finds unaccommodating to southern values. Like Edwina, Amanda is a southern matriarch with a dominating personality, especially when dealing with her children. Yet, like Edwina, Amanda is no villain. Rather, her character is complex and often sympathetic. During the course of the play, she is callous and tender, selfish and generous, arrogant and vulnerable. Although Tom delivers the play's most poignant lines, most critics consider Amanda the most rounded character. In contrast to his mother's dynamic onstage presence, Tom's father, "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances," is only a memory, symbolized by an oversized photograph hanging on the living room

wall. Williams's father, C. C. Williams, did not "skip the light fantastic out of town" and abandon his family. Nevertheless, his job, his disputes with Edwina, and his poor parenting skills estranged him from the rest of his family. Whereas the elder Wingfield physically deserts his wife and children, the elder Williams abandoned them emotionally and psychologically.

Although the biographical correspondences help explain Williams's motivation for writing it, the play's critical success and lasting appeal stem from its use of unconventional techniques to explore enduring human concerns. All the play's major themes—the quest for individual freedom, the conflict between desire and duty, the young man's need to forge his own identity—have been written about for centuries. However, Williams dealt with these themes in innovative ways. As he explains in the production notes, he hoped *Menagerie* would usher in an era of "plastic theater," which would employ nonrealistic dramatic conventions in order to get underneath surface appearances and more closely approximate the "truth." Williams opposes realism, which aims to reproduce human experience exactly as it seems to most people.

Several aspects of *Menagerie* are nonrealistic. Tom is both a character who interacts with other characters and the narrator who talks to the audience. In the latter capacity he sets up and comments on the action. The approach allows Williams to control the audience's interpretation of the play, preventing viewers from overlooking or misunderstanding key elements. For instance, Tom clarifies his own character as a symbol "for the long delayed but always expected something that we live for," he justifies the significance of several stage devices, and he explains the aims of the theater, which should convey truth "in the pleasant disguise of illusion." By directly addressing the audience using poetic language instead of everyday speech, Tom draws attention to the artifice of theater. He also does this, albeit more subtly, when speaking to other characters: In Scene 5, for example, he tells Amanda that "Mr. O'Connor has not yet appeared on the scene." The term *scene* simultaneously means "in our apartment" and "at this point in the script." In addition to the narration and dialogue, the set design and stage directions are

nonrealistic. The production notes call for a large screen onto which thematic legends and images are projected. Aiming to evoke memory's dreamlike quality, the script advises dim lighting and quaint music.

The unconventional staging and narration reflect the characters' inability to untangle reality from appearance, perception, and imagination. The play challenges the distinction between memory and present experience and between the inner and outer self. Amanda's identity is inseparable from southern codes of courtship and propriety. She measures a woman's success by the number of "gentlemen callers" she attracts. She revels in her adolescence, proudly announcing she once attracted 17 suitors in a single day. She fancies herself a paragon of social decorum, proper dress, and conversational ability. Yet, Amanda's actions fall short of her self-perception. The gentleman caller she married as a teenager has since abandoned her. Even though she understands "the art of conversation," she can neither sell magazine subscriptions nor talk to her son without prompting an argument; she is unable to teach her daughter how to emulate her self-declared social graces. Once she is stripped of the qualities on which she bases her identity, little of that identity remains.

While Amanda cannot separate reality from appearances, Tom and Laura cannot separate reality from imagination. Tom resembles the title character in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play that explores the gray area between the inner, imaginative self and what Hamlet calls "that within which passeth show." As Hamlet does, Tom lives within his mind, brooding about his place in the world and his family obligations. Both men long to escape prescribed social roles passed on by absent fathers. Yet, both men struggle to act. Their stories are marked by indecision and idleness. When each finally acts, tragic consequences ensue. In *Hamlet*, these consequences are overt and tangible; the entire royal family, including Hamlet, dies. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the consequences are understated and symbolic. By pursuing his artistic ambitions, he revokes his familial responsibility, severing his connection to Laura and burdening Amanda with Laura's care. The first step Tom takes toward inde-

pendence—using the electric bill money to join a seaman’s union—leads to the termination of light in the apartment, signaling the symbolic death of a fraternal bond. He returns to the darkness/death motif in his closing monologue, uttering the now-famous lines “for nowadays the world is lit by lightning.” Whereas Amanda escapes reality by harking back to a mythic southern past, Tom flees by immersing himself in an imaginary future.

Laura also surrenders to imagination, but unlike Tom, she cannot interact with the outside world. Laura resembles Shakespeare’s Ophelia, whom Hamlet forsakes in his quest to uncover his father’s killer. Both women display psychological abnormalities, yet male protagonists sacrifice both women: Ophelia is sacrificed by her former lover, Laura by her brother. Social realities prove too much for their psyches to bear. Ophelia commits suicide; Laura flees into a world of old music and glass figurines.

One of these figurines, Laura’s cherished unicorn, is the play’s most telling symbol. The unicorn’s beauty lies in its difference from other “plain” horses; the statuette shines more prominently than the other ornaments. Jim similarly assesses Laura. Reminded of his high school nickname for her, Jim tells Laura that, as with “Blue Roses,” her beauty lies in her departure from the norm. Unfortunately, when Jim breaks the unicorn’s horn, the link between beauty and difference breaks permanently. Laura tries to absolve Jim’s guilt, calling the broken horn “an operation” that makes the unicorn/horse “feel less freakish” and more “at home.” The unicorn symbolizes a common character type in Williams’s dramas. Gerald Weales, one of the first scholars to write a comprehensive overview of Williams’s works, labeled this character type the “fugitive kind,” a term he borrowed from an early Williams play of the same name. The fugitive kind is an outcast, a person whose artistic temperament, sexual habits, mental instability, or physical deformity provokes the “insider’s” contempt. Usually, fugitive kinds are outcasts consigned to society’s fringe.

In one way or another, Laura, Tom, and Amanda fit the fugitive mold. At 24, unable to cope with the social and familial pressure to conform, Laura

hangs on to the last shreds of sanity by avoiding all social interaction. Amanda fits the type for opposite reasons. Gregarious, pushy, and unabashedly southern, her values and personality strike a dissonant cord with midwestern city dwellers. Remarkably, Williams captures Amanda’s unfavorable St. Louis reception without casting a foil to accentuate her inability to assimilate. Instead, he emphasizes her fugitive standing through a series of failed telephone sales pitches Amanda delivers, hoping to sell magazine subscriptions to fellow Daughters of the American Revolution members. With access only to Amanda’s side of these conversations, the audience witnesses her growing desperation not only to earn a meager supplemental income but also to communicate with her peers. Of all the Wingfield characters, however, Tom most clearly fits the fugitive mold. As he narrates the play from afar, Tom’s artistic ambitions isolate him from friends and family alike. As Amanda does, Tom moves further away from communal integration with every action he takes. In his closing monologue he summarizes his loneliness as an attempt “to find in motion what was lost in space.”

With his portrayal of the Wingfield family, Williams created a masterful psychological profile of the archetypal outcast. Known for his richly rendered character studies, Williams was also deeply concerned with sociopolitical problems, particularly with the way they shape an individual’s self-perception and limit his or her freedom of expression. Jim expands the fugitive kind model, situating it within a social arena outside the Wingfield apartment. At first, Jim seems to be the quintessential “insider.” A sort of anti-Tom, Jim is down to earth, personable, and, as his habit of calling Tom “Shakespeare” indicates, suspicious of intellectualism. A high school hero turned corporate lackey, Jim is “an emissary from a world of reality that [the Wingfields] were set apart from.” Yet as Tom, Laura, and Amanda do, Jim feels alienated and dissatisfied. What separates Jim from the other characters is not that he is an insider, but, rather, that he has been seduced by the artificial comforts of conforming. Tom and Jim are foils for each other, each highlighting the

other's isolation. On the one hand, Jim accentuates Tom's inability to fit in at work, where conformism is a way of life. On the other hand, Tom highlights Jim's inability to chase his dreams. Whereas Tom's desires estrange him from others, Jim compensates by seeking others' affirmation. The audience glimpses a genuine longing in the normally articulate Jim when he finds himself at a loss for words to describe his attraction to Laura. Another tragic figure, Jim turns his back on self-fulfillment, living a socially approved but unromantic life with his fiancée. His tragedy is as great as Laura's, Tom's, or Amanda's. To the extent that so many Americans can identify with Jim—his lack of fulfillment, his resignation to a bland existence—his tragedy may be the greatest of all.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Would you consider yourself a "fugitive kind"? Why or why not? In your experience, is being an outsider a blessing or a curse?
2. The plot of *The Glass Menagerie* depends on a familiar literary convention: the introduction of a visitor who disrupts the lifestyle of the story's main characters. Another famous southern writer working at the time, FLANNERY O'CONNOR uses this conceit in many of her stories. Read O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and/or "Good Country People." Compare and contrast Jim in *Menagerie* with the Misfit and/or Manley Pointer in the O'Connor stories. In relation to each story's plot and theme, what role do these characters play?
3. Although *The Glass Menagerie* received positive reviews, many critics faulted Williams for using heavy-handed stage devices, such as the legend and the flashing images. Discuss the play's unconventional set. Do you think it adds to or detracts from the story?
4. Read a *Streetcar Named Desire* and compare Blanche DuBois with Amanda Wingfield. Both characters are aging southern belles who struggle to cope with a rapidly modernizing world. What are the similarities and differences between their respective environments? How do they react to those environments?

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

A Streetcar Named Desire had its Broadway debut on December 3, 1947. A commercial and critical success, the play ran for 855 performances—Williams's longest Broadway run—and was the first ever to earn theater's triple crown: the Pulitzer Prize, Donaldson Award, and Drama Critics' Circle Award. More than half a century later, it has become part of American literary and popular culture. The American Theatre Critics Association voted it the most significant American play of the 20th century; the American Film Institute voted the 1951 Academy Award-winning film adaptation one of the 50 greatest American movies of all time.

Set in New Orleans's Garden District, *Streetcar* tells the story of Blanche DuBois's six-month stay with her brother-in-law and pregnant sister, Stanley and Stella Kowalski. After the bank forecloses on the DuBois family's Mississippi Delta plantation, Blanche moves into the Kowalskis' two-room apartment. Confined to tight quarters, the refined Blanche and coarse Stanley quickly develop an aversion to one another, forcing Stella to mediate their arguments. Mitch, one of Stanley's poker buddies, falls in love with Blanche but calls off their engagement when Stanley reveals Blanche's checkered sexual history. The play climaxes on Blanche's birthday. After Stanley announces Mitch's change of heart, Stella goes into labor. While Stanley and Stella are at the hospital, Mitch drops by, making a lewd sexual advance toward Blanche, who kicks him out. A few hours later, Stanley returns alone, and a seemingly routine Blanche-Stanley fight climaxes in rape. Unable to bear any more psychological strain, Blanche descends into madness. In the final scene Stella reluctantly agrees to commit Blanche to a psychiatric ward.

When *Streetcar* opened on Broadway, Williams was already considered one of America's most promising young playwrights. *The Glass Menagerie* had made him the talk of New York's theater aficionados. These plays share several recurring character types, themes, and images. Both feature aging southern belles—Blanche DuBois and Amanda Wingfield—in alien environments. Although Blanche lacks artistic talent in the conventional sense, she has an artist's

temperament. Until she was fired for making a sexual advance toward one of her students, she taught high-school English in Laurel and by all accounts retained a lasting love of literature. With a chameleonlike ability to inhabit different roles, she is an artful manipulator. Her temperament, like Tom Wingfield's, makes her an outcast. Her encroaching madness reflects shades of Laura Wingfield. Yet, as telling as the similarities are, the differences between Williams's first two big hits reveal even more. With *Streetcar* Williams returned to exploring sex and violence, two issues he toned down considerably for *Menagerie*. In retrospect, Williams's first great success seems an aberration for a writer now remembered for composing some of the 20th century's most inflammatory dramas. In post-World War II America *Streetcar* was shocking. At the time domestic abuse and rough language were considered unsuitable for the stage. Even more unthinkable was Williams's refusal to moralize so-called aberrant sexual behavior. In 1947 such issues were considered inappropriate for public conversation, much less the high art of Broadway.

As in many of Williams's works, character development drives *A Streetcar Named Desire*. While the story proceeds in chronological time, the incremental revelation of Blanche's past creates most of the scene-to-scene anticipation. As do Maggie Pollit (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*), Lawrence Shannon (*Night of the Iguana*), and Amanda Wingfield (*The Glass Menagerie*), Blanche alienates those around her. She is petty, materialistic, insensitive, and offensive. She chides Stella about her impoverished lifestyle and fallen social standing; she considers Stanley "ape-like" and "sub-human." She is not, however, the story's villain. In spite of her often-repugnant behavior and commentary, she conveys an inner humanity. She is quintessentially southern, yet her struggles resonate with the general American experience. Even those unfamiliar with southern culture and history can find something of themselves in Blanche's character. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Sophocles' Oedipus, Blanche is an icon of her culture, a character type with universal appeal.

In Blanche's character, the conflict between social norms and the individual's freedom to act according to her desires is on full display. Blanche fancies

herself a lady of refined taste, manners, and values. Having internalized the ideal of southern decorum, she judges and offends those who fail to conform to the ideal. She is also emotionally impoverished and terrified of losing her attractive face and trim figure. Several times during the course of the play, Blanche evades direct light, hoping to obscure both her physical features and emotional pain. Blanche is not blind to the light symbolism. She uses the metaphor to describe her only experience with love: "It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow." Although she dodges an intruding headlight while confessing her guilt over her teen husband's suicide, the "blinding light" shines through her facade, if only temporarily.

When Stanley reveals her seamy past, he unwittingly converts her from a conceited snob into a tragic heroine. Stanley's fault-finding backfires, and audiences recognize that as her age advances, so, too, does her desperation, causing her to seek companionship with men whose desire for her temporarily restores her delicate self-image. Yet, every attempt at restoration takes her further from her goal. With each extramarital affair she betrays the very standards of propriety by which she wants to live. Ironically, in attempting to rebuild an idyllic feminine image, she develops a sordid reputation in Laurel. The most heartrending aspect of Blanche's predicament is the degree to which she has internalized an unattainable ideal. Her psyche bends under the glare of another's judgmental gaze; it breaks when she judges herself. And yet, her self-criticism lies buried deep inside her. By the play's end she has only grown less self-aware; her identity has become inseparable from the standards that make her miserable. Under social and self-induced pressure her psyche ruptures. Certainly, being raped hastens her psychosis; however, her mental breakdown began developing long before she arrived in New Orleans.

As the play's title suggests, desire is a central theme. Through Blanche, Stanley, Stella, and Mitch, Williams explores the thin line separating sexual passion and violence. Blanche yearns for emotional and financial support, as well as a world that conforms to antiquated southern norms. Mitch also wants to forge an emotional connection, but only with some-

one resembling his mother. As soon as he discovers Blanche's seedy past, his compassion evaporates, replaced by a dominating will. Love turns to lust, tenderness to brutality. Stanley and Stella have an even stormier relationship. The same passion that makes Stanley physically abusive drives him to despair when Stella momentarily leaves him. For both of them anger, love, and lust originate in the same emotional well. For Williams desire is the cornerstone of human existence; it is what separates humanity from other life-forms. Depending on whether or not it is fulfilled, desire is equally capable of producing unbridled ecstasy and unmitigated anguish.

Williams stands in a long line of playwrights, poets, and novelists obsessed with desire's tragic consequences. From the Greek tragedians to Shakespeare, desire has been synonymous with conflict. Rather than creating an entirely new take on tragedy, Williams contributes a fresh perspective on an ancient theme. Tragedy, roughly defined, demarcates a subgenre of drama featuring a hero whose tragic flaw brings about his or her own demise. According to this definition, *Streetcar* is textbook tragedy. In Blanche, Williams imagines the consummate tragic hero who possesses a uniquely American flaw: the inability to assimilate into a rapidly modernizing environment.

In addition to their fully realized psychological profiles, Blanche and Stanley play symbolic roles. Blanche embodies the southern agrarian ideal, wistfully longing for an idyllic past and mythic landscape that survive only in her mind. Blanche's idealized world, like the DuBois plantation, Belle Reve, is nothing more than a "beautiful dream." Elia Kazan, who directed both the Broadway production and the Warner Brothers film, labeled Blanche "the emblem of a dying civilization, making a last curlicued and romantic exit" ("Notebook for a *Streetcar Named Desire*" 365). Conversely, Stanley represents everything Blanche abhors: the cruel, vulgar, all-too-real industrialized urban landscape. Kazan described him as "the basic animal cynicism of [post-World War II America]," a man whose motto is "Eat, drink, get yours!" (365) Unlike Williams, who considered Blanche and Stanley equally flawed, Kazan envisioned the Blanche-Stanley relationship along a

good/evil axis. Their differences notwithstanding, Kazan and Williams were convinced that Blanche and Stanley stood for incompatible world orders. That Blanche's world was fated to lose from the outset is implied by symbols on her journey: After leaving Belle Reve, Blanche travels on a "street-car named Desire," transfers "to one called Cemeteries," and gets off at "Elysian Fields!" In her first lines, Blanche reveals her trajectory. Fueled by desire, she is expelled from a beautiful dream only to arrive at death's door, seeking passage to an afterlife reserved for antiquity's virtuous and brave. The grotesquely ominous foreshadowing draws us into Blanche's strange mixture of realism and fantasy, where her struggles with Stanley herald an ever-escalating battle between old and new, kindness and cruelty, imagination and reality, all lurking underneath the promise of the American dream. Williams portrays this dream, as the Kowalskis' rundown apartment complex, as an ironic ruse that traps us within invisible bubbles, rules out hope for community, and precludes human kindness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When used to describe a piece of literature, *tone* signifies the quality or characteristics of a writer's work that reveal his or her presuppositions and attitudes. What is the tone of Blanche's final line, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"?
2. Under pressure from the Motion Picture Association of America and the Catholic Legion of Decency, the Academy Award-winning 1951 film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* censored the script in two important ways. First, it excluded all references to homosexuality in scene 6. Second, it eliminated the implied rape in scene 10. After reviewing the script and watching the film (paying close attention to these two scenes), discuss the impact of the changes. Why do you think the film's Hollywood producers cut out these details? Does the film work as well without them? If you did not know that Blanche's husband, Allan Grey, was gay, would his suicide make sense? Given that Blanche blames herself for his death, does her descent into madness fit? Without knowing

- Stanley raped her, would you find her madness in scene 11 believable?
3. Williams is famous for exploring gender roles in mid-20th-century America. With this in mind, how does *A Streetcar Named Desire* portray differences between men and women? Are those differences based on genetic or cultural factors? Why do you think it is all right for Stanley to consume alcohol openly with his friends while Blanche must hide and/or feel ashamed of her drinking?
 4. Philip Kolin interprets the poles Stanley and Blanche inhabit as an embodiment of Williams's "androgynous nature. Like Blanche, Williams saw himself as the fugitive artist, a victim of rejection and hysteria. . . . Yet Williams was also present in Blanche's executioner, Stanley Kowalski," whose sexual appetite Williams recognized in himself and "the rough homosexual trade [he] was accustomed to in the 1940s". How is Williams's internal strife like Blanche's? Compared with Blanche, how is Williams's inner turmoil influenced by external social forces?
 5. The years between 1945 and 1960 make up one of America's most conservative periods, especially concerning sexuality. With his envelope-pushing plays, Williams is often credited with normalizing the portrayal and discussion of sexuality in American theater. For the most part, however, the characters who resist accepting traditional sexual norms wind up lonely, frustrated, and disturbed. This is particularly true of Williams's gay characters. How does American society deal with sexuality differently now than it did in 1947, when *Streetcar* was first produced? What similarities between then and now do you see? Consider comparing the play to a more contemporary film or novel that examines sexuality, such as *Brokeback Mountain*.

***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)**

Garnering Williams a second Pulitzer Prize and a third Drama Critics' Circle Award, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened at New York's Morosco Theatre on March 24, 1955. In spite of bad press—several

reviewers condemned the play's sexually explicit content and coarse language—and Williams's disappointment with Elia Kazan's directorial vision and script revisions, the Broadway production ran for more than 600 performances. In 1958 the play was adapted for the screen under Richard Brooks's direction and starred Paul Newman, Elizabeth Taylor, and Burl Ives in the lead roles. With its crackling dialogue and piercing psychological insights, especially in Acts 1 and 2, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* presents Williams at the height of his powers. Although it captures life in a particular time and place, many of its themes are still relevant today: the complexity of sexuality, the consequences of living a double standard in a judgmental world, the tragic origins and outcomes of substance abuse, and finally, the universality of human dignity.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof examines the relationships forged by three generations of Pollitts, as they compete for ownership of the family estate. Set in a bedroom of Big Daddy Pollitt's plantation home, the action takes place on a summer evening in the Mississippi Delta. When the curtain rises, the family (the patriarch, Big Daddy, his wife, Big Mama; their younger son, Brick, and his wife, Maggie; their older son, Gooper, and his pregnant wife, Mae; and their five children) has gathered for Big Daddy's 65th birthday. As the story unfolds, we learn that Big Daddy has terminal cancer; that Maggie, Gooper, and Mae are angling for the family riches; and that Brick's indifference, alcoholism, and refusal to share Maggie's bed, much less conceive a child with her, threaten their chances of receiving an inheritance. After several onstage arguments, including one in which Maggie falsely claims to be pregnant, the play concludes as Brick agrees to "make the lie true."

With just enough of a plot to propel the action forward, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is classic Williams: character driven, psychologically realistic, and rich in symbols. Having broken his ankle the night before, Brick is confined to the bedroom, hobbling back and forth in a ceaseless attempt to avoid interaction. A doubly wounded man, Brick needs a crutch to support his body and a bottle of whiskey to buoy his psyche. His greatest crutch, however, is his aloof personality. As his name and personality suggest, he

erects psychological brick walls, emotionally blocking out his wife and family. Ironically, the action revolves around Brick in spite of his repeated attempts to remove himself from view. The only character who figures prominently in all three acts, Brick holds together the play's structure in the same way the plantation holds together the Pollitt family.

In his *Memoirs* Williams claims that of all his major works, he liked *Cat* best. Adhering to Aristotle's rule that "a tragedy must have unity of time and place and magnitude of theme," Williams considered *Cat* "both a work of art and a work of craft" (168). Of his major plays *Cat* is the most tightly structured. Confined to a single, unchanged setting and proceeding seamlessly from beginning to end, the play diverges from the episodic structure Williams had used in his major pre-1955 scripts. His experimentation with classical rules for portraying time and space on the stage did not, however, prevent him from adding a few personal signatures. Whereas classical drama is plot driven, Williams presents a character-propelled story. Also characteristic of Williams's other plays—particularly *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*—*Cat* follows Williams's knack for creating stand-alone vignettes: Acts 1 and 2, for example, could work as miniplays staged on their own. Unlike in his earlier plays, however, Williams used real-time staging, limiting the passage of time to the action on the stage.

Of the four major prize-winning plays Williams composed, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is the only one lacking a clear-cut hero. While several critics have argued that Blanche and Stanley in *Streetcar* and Shannon, Maxine, and Hannah in *Night of the Iguana* are the central characters, most find Blanche and Shannon to be their stories' protagonists. With *Cat*, however, it is more difficult to isolate a protagonist. Both Maggie and Big Daddy spend too much time offstage to warrant serious consideration. Brick is physically present throughout, but he is often withdrawn from the conversation and from the audience's view. Brick threads the play together by linking narratives and characters, but he often seems more a moving prop than a hero.

Although technically a protracted dialogue between Maggie and Brick, Act 1 often seems more

Maggie's monologue. The first third of the play is her show. The actress portraying her must summon all her talents in order to cycle through the kaleidoscopic array of emotions Maggie experiences in the first act. By turns vibrant, witty, spiteful, greedy, insightful, and caring, Maggie is both nauseating and charismatic. Though she sometimes appears to be interested only in the Pollitt family riches, she loves Brick intensely, even if she has expressed her desires in socially unacceptable ways. During the first act's climactic exchange, when they finally divulge the cause of their caustic relationship, Maggie cries, "[Skipper and I] made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us! Yes, yes, yes! Truth, truth!" Incapable of recognizing Maggie's sincerity, Brick sees only that she has broken an entrenched social covenant, not only by having an extramarital affair but also by sleeping with his best friend (perhaps even his true love). Maggie, on the brink of tears, professes genuine love for Brick, but, as with many of Williams's characters, her departure from conventional sexual norms alienates her.

Act 1 introduces several important issues and themes that appear throughout the play. Brick and Maggie litter their conversation with sports metaphors, highlighting the competition upon which their marriage is based. Maggie, whose self-applied nickname, *Maggie the Cat*, sounds like a football mascot, copes with Brick's despondency by pushing their disputes to the verge of conflict, hoping to draw Brick out and force him to make concessions. Brick's refusal to respond to Maggie's persistent adulation and cajolery makes her feel like a "cat on a hot tin roof." This metaphor, as does everything else they discuss, means something different to each of them. For Maggie it signifies entrapment. No matter what she says or how she says it, Brick will never give her a second chance. For Brick, who considers Maggie's self-pity banal and exaggerated, cats on hot tin roofs can always jump off or, in Maggie's case, find sexual fulfillment elsewhere.

In Act 2, Maggie cedes the spotlight to Big Daddy, a man so domineering that his doctor is afraid to show him the lab results confirming terminal cancer. Act 2 also presents a second marriage, which, when compared to Maggie and Brick's, broadens

the play's insight into southern patriarchal relations. We are given much less access to Big Mama and Big Daddy's marriage, although we see enough to recognize its unbalanced and unhealthy structure. Big Daddy is verbally abusive and misogynistic. At one point he tells Brick that his clean bill of health makes him want to hire a prostitute, "strip her naked and smother her in minks and choke her with diamonds." Brick's apathy and lack of sex drive are matched only by Big Daddy's stridence and violent lust. Maggie and Big Mama are also polar opposites. Maggie is articulate and "well-bred," whereas Big Mama is the opposite of the archetypal well-mannered southern gentlewoman. In spite of the different individual personalities involved, the two marriages are strikingly similar. Both men say they are disgusted with their wives' "mendacious" habits. Brick "can't stand" Maggie, and Big Daddy's conversations with Big Mama are spiteful and cruel. Each marriage maintains a facade of functionality and happiness, yet devoid of tolerance and respect, neither allows intimacy and understanding.

Acts 1 and 2 bear nearly identical structures. Each portrays a conversation between Brick and another character, who dominates the conversation. Each ends with its own self-contained climax. In Act 2, Big Daddy does most of the talking. Although their discussion takes several seemingly aimless turns, Big Daddy returns to two subjects: Brick's reasons for drinking and the overall difficulty of genuine communication. Finally, Brick justifies his drinking as a means of withdrawing from a world of "mendacity." Big Daddy rebuffs Brick's generalization as "ninety-proof bull," suggesting that Brick is lying to himself. When Big Daddy spurns Brick's explanation, he inadvertently identifies the self-loathing that defines Brick's persona. Brick hates the lying ("mendacious") nature of human interaction, and yet he offers a vague generality about mendacity rather than admitting the truth about his drinking, a habit to which he turns in order to purge his guilt over Skipper's death. After several subtle hints, Williams finally exposes the link between mendacity and self-loathing in the second act's climactic sequence. Whether or not Brick is gay, a detail Williams leaves unresolved, it is clear Brick has been dishonest with both himself and oth-

ers about his sexuality. Because he has internalized a southern moral code, Brick's homophobia runs deep; he disowned his best friend because of it and now spends each day forcing his mind to "click" off, hoping to avoid any disturbing self-revelations.

The third act builds on the first two, confirming mendacity as the play's thematic glue. As Big Daddy raves offstage about the liars who made him believe he was healthy, thereby symbolically taking his life, the rest of the family gathers to compete over the terms of his will. Suddenly, in a desperate attempt to secure the plantation for herself and Brick, Maggie announces the play's most ostentatious lie: She is pregnant with Brick's child. As the curtain closes with Brick reluctantly agreeing to help Maggie conceive, interpretive possibilities abound. Is lying necessary to maintain functional human relationships, as Maggie's big lie seems to do for her marriage? Or, is it a fatal social disease, as Big Daddy claims? Rather than answering these questions, Williams leaves it up to each audience member to pass judgment. As does the complex social world depicted on stage, in which each individual character reaches a different, if dissatisfying conclusion about lies and the liars who tell them, our own experiences with truth, half-truth, and untruth color the way we cope in a mendacious world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although Williams never approved of Kazan's changes to *Cat's* script for the Broadway production, Williams's respect for Kazan's vision led him to rewrite Act 3 for the stage. Since then, the play has always been published with two versions of the last act. After reading both versions, discuss their differences. Which version is more plausible? Which version is more consistent with the first two acts? Brick undergoes a more pronounced transformation in the Broadway version. How likely is he to change so much after one conversation with his father?
2. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* features several recurring motifs, metaphors, and symbols—for example, cat/cattiness, sports/competition, and crutches. Choose one (not necessarily from this list), and discuss its meaning within the play's context.

3. *Mendacity* is an important word in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. What do you think Williams is trying to say about the role lying plays in our culture? Is lying sometimes necessary, or is it always wrong? Why?
4. Both Skipper and Allan Gray in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (especially in Scene 6) are absent gay men who wilted once subjected to homophobia. Now dead, each character haunts his respective story, playing a large role in key characters' decisions, motivations, and emotional stability. Compare and contrast these men. Which is more rounded? What impact does each man have on the characters haunted by his memory?
5. Compare and contrast the set (what is actually on the stage) of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with that in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Now compare the settings (the place the set is supposed to represent). Are there similarities between the Delta plantation bedroom and the two-room Elysian Fields apartment? How about between the mythical Belle Reve and the Pollitt home?

***The Night of the Iguana* (1961)**

The Night of the Iguana was Williams's last great critical and commercial success. The play debuted at Broadway's Royal Theatre on December 28, 1961, running for 316 performances and earning Williams his fourth Drama Critics' Circle Award. Beginning as a short story Williams sketched in 1940 while staying at the Hotel Costa Verde outside Acapulco, Mexico, the play evolved over a 20-year period. Although the final script bore little resemblance to the early drafts, Williams retained the locale and time that inspired the story. Set during the first stages of World War II, *Iguana* explores individual desperation in one of history's most anxious periods. Located across the ocean from the war's European theater, the story reminds us that human anguish arises not only out of grave but also out of banal circumstances.

The story centers on Dr. Lawrence Shannon, a defrocked Episcopalian-priest-turned-low-rent-vacation-tour-guide. Leading a group of schoolteachers from an all-female Baptist school in rural Texas,

Shannon abandons the itinerary midway through the trip, hoping to recuperate from physical and psychological exhaustion. The action picks up when the bewildered Shannon staggers into the Costa Verde Hotel outside Puerto Barrio, Mexico, where he knows the proprietor, Maxine Faulk. After discovering Maxine's husband has recently died, Shannon confesses to having slept with Charlotte Goodall, a 16-year-old student tagging along with the teachers. By the time Shannon arrives on Maxine's verandah, he has become the target of the trip leader Judith Fellowes's vitriol and the subject of the teachers' gossip. "At the end of his rope," Shannon confiscates the bus key and forces the women to stay at the Costa Verde. During the confusion, Hannah Jelkes emerges from the jungle with her wheelchair-bound 97-year-old grandfather, Jonathan Coffin (Nono), a semi-famous minor poet. Immediately attracted to Hannah, Shannon convinces Maxine to take them in despite their inability to pay. That evening, after rebuffing Charlotte's marriage overtures and changing into his clerical outfit to demonstrate his piety, Shannon strikes up a conversation with Hannah, who sketches him as he discusses the church's reasons for barring him from his own parish (fornication and heresy). An alternate tour conductor arrives, fires Shannon, forcibly takes the ignition key, and leads the ladies back to the bus. Sensing her victory, Miss Fellowes admonishes Shannon a final time. The completeness of his failure sinking in—"there's nothing lower than Blake Tours"—Shannon grows hysterical, prompting Maxine to have him tied down in a hammock as a precautionary measure. While bound, he has another profound conversation with Hannah, who diagnoses Shannon's problem as "the oldest one in the world—the need to believe in something or in someone—almost anyone—almost anything . . . something." Finally, Shannon frees himself. After Hannah rebuffs his sexual advances, he commits a last gesture of goodwill, freeing an iguana that has been tied to a cactus for the duration of the play. Upon the creature's release, Nono completes his final poem. The play concludes on a bittersweet note. Shannon agrees to help Maxine manage the hotel, thereby releasing him from his spiritual and religious bonds. As they walk to the beach for a night swim

- possible, attend a live production of the play(s) you are studying, or view the film adaptation—all of Williams's most famous works have been made into movies. How did the performance change your understanding of the play? What did you notice in the script that you missed while watching the production, and vice versa?
- Williams named most of his plays after a key symbol in the story. For the play(s) you are studying, discuss the title's meaning. What does the title represent, both literally and figuratively?
 - Tennessee Williams is often listed alongside William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, TRUMAN CAPOTE, and Carson McCullers as a southern gothic writer. The southern gothic style developed in the early and mid-20th century. Southern gothic writers tend to create grotesque, alienated characters whose physical and/or psychological abnormalities, sexual proclivities, or violent temperaments alienate them from each other and society. Often alienation results from a clash between a mythic and idealized southern past and a modern present. Discuss a character and/or scene of one of Williams's plays that typifies the southern gothic tradition. Then, compare Williams with another southern gothic writer. What similarities do you recognize? What differences?
 - Throughout his career Williams struggled with censorship. The Boston City Council threatened to shut down production of *Battle of Angels* in 1940 unless several "offensive" lines were removed. Ten years later Hollywood's regulatory commission, the Motion Picture Code, demanded elimination of the rape scene and all mention of homosexuality in the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* ran into similar problems. Perhaps Williams's major battle with censorship took place over his original 1956 screenplay, *Baby Doll*. The then-powerful Catholic Legion of Decency condemned the film; Francis Cardinal Spellman, though he had not seen the movie, called it "revolting . . . a contemptuous defiance of the natural law . . . immoral and corrupting . . . evil in concept. I exhort Catholic people from patronizing this film under pain of sin. . . . Since these degrading and immoral pictures stimulate immorality and crime they must be condemned" (quoted in Spoto 210). Choose one of Williams's plays and research its history with censorship. Was the censorship justified? Why or why not? Does the presentation of "immoral" behavior in art (theater, film, painting) cause viewers (or listeners) to behave immorally? Is censorship ever justified? On what grounds?
 - With the exception of *The Glass Menagerie*, all of Williams's critically acclaimed works deal explicitly with human sexuality. Many feature characters whose sexual preferences or habits thrust them out of the mainstream and precipitate moral judgment from other characters and/or the audience. Why do sexual issues and situations invite such strong responses? Should sexuality be considered a moral issue?
 - In an essay on the theater Williams writes, "In my opinion art is a kind of anarchy, and the theater is a province of art. . . . It runs counter to the sort of orderliness on which organized society apparently must be based. It is a benevolent anarchy: it must be that and if it is true art, it is. It is benevolent in the sense of constructing something which is missing, and what it constructs may be merely criticism of things as they exist" (*Where I Live* 8). Choose one play and discuss the "missing" element it constructs. What problem is the work exploring? Does the play suggest a solution to that problem?
 - Critics have called Williams an expressionist, a symbolist, and a realist. These literary movements, however, are usually defined in opposition to one another. Research and define *realism*, *expressionism*, and *symbolism*. Are these categories useful for understanding Williams's work? How would you classify the play(s) you have read?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Adler, Thomas. *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. Vol. 2: *Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie*. New York: Chelsea House, 1988.
- Costello, Donald. "Tennessee Williams' Fugitive Kind." *Modern Drama* 15 (1972): 26–43.
- Crandell, George W. *Tennessee Williams: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.
- Devlin, Albert J., ed. *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.
- Downer, Alan S., ed. *American Drama and Its Critics: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.
- Funke, Lewis, and John E. Booth. "Williams on Williams." *Theatre Arts* 46 (January 1962): 16–19, 22–23.
- Griffin, Alice. *Understanding Tennessee Williams*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.
- Gross, Robert F., ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Gunn, Drewey Wayne. *Tennessee Williams: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1991.
- Kolin, Philip C., ed. *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993.
- . *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Krasner, David, ed. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005.
- Leverich, Lyle. *Tenn: The Timeless World of Tennessee Williams*. New York: Crown, 1997.
- . *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. New York: Crown, 1995.
- Londré, Felicia Hardison. *Tennessee Williams*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979.
- Martin, Robert A., ed. *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1997.
- McDonough, Carla J. *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997.
- Murphy, Brenda. *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- "MWP: Tennessee Williams." The Mississippi Writers Page. Available online. URL: http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/williams_tennessee/. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Paller, Michael. *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Broadway Drama*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Rasky, Harry. *Tennessee Williams: A Portrait in Laughter and Lamentation*. Niagara Falls, N.Y.: Mosaic Press, 2000.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 8: Tennessee Williams." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—a Research and Reference Guide. Available online. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap8/williams.html>. Accessed May 21, 2007.
- Roudané, Mathew C., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Schlueter, June. *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990.
- Spoto, Donald. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1985.
- Stanton, Stephen S., ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1977.
- Summers, Claude, J. *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*. New York: Continuum, 1990.
- Tharpe, Jac, ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977.
- Tischler, Nancy M. *Student Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Weales, Gerald. *The Jumping-Off Place: American Drama in the 1960's*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- . *Tennessee Williams*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
- Williams, Edwina Dakin. *Remember Me to Tom*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963.
- Williams, Tennessee. *Collected Stories*. New York: New Directions, 1985.
- . *Memoirs*. New York: Doubleday, 1975.
- . *Plays: 1937–1955*. New York: Library of America, 2000.
- . *Plays: 1957–1980*. New York: Library of America, 2000.
- . *Where I Live: Selected Essays*. Edited by Christine R. Day and Bob Woods. New York: New Directions, 1978.

APPENDIX I

Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Adams, Henry	1838–1918	Volume 2	Collins, Billy	1941–	Volume 5
Adams, John, and Abigail Adams	1735–1826 1744–1818	Volume 1	Columbus, Christopher	1451–1506	Volume 1
Albee, Edward	1928–	Volume 4	Cooper, James Fenimore	1789–1851	Volume 1
Alcott, Louisa May	1832–1888	Volume 2	Crane, Hart	1899–1932	Volume 3
Alvarez, Julia	1950–	Volume 5	Crane, Stephen	1871–1900	Volume 2
Anaya, Rudolfo	1937–	Volume 5	Crèvecoeur, J. Hector	1735–1813	Volume 1
Anderson, Sherwood	1876–1942	Volume 3	St. John de		
Angelou, Maya	1928–	Volume 5	Cullen, Countee	1903–1946	Volume 3
Baca, Jimmy Santiago	1952–	Volume 5	Cummings, E. E.	1894–1962	Volume 3
Baldwin, James	1924–1987	Volume 4	Davis, Rebecca Harding	1831–1910	Volume 2
Bambara, Toni Cade	1939–	Volume 5	Dickinson, Emily	1830–1886	Volume 2
Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Dos Passos, John	1896–1970	Volume 3
Bellow, Saul	1915–2005	Volume 4	Douglass, Frederick	1818–1895	Volume 2
Bierce, Ambrose	1842–1914?	Volume 2	Dove, Rita	1952–	Volume 5
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911–1979	Volume 4	Dreiser, Theodore	1871–1945	Volume 3
Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	DuBois, W. E. B.	1868–1963	Volume 3
Bradbury, Ray	1920–	Volume 4	Dunbar, Paul Laurence	1872–1906	Volume 2
Bradford, William	1590–1657	Volume 1	Edwards, Jonathan	1703–1758	Volume 1
Bradstreet, Anne	1612–1672	Volume 1	Eliot, T. S.	1888–1965	Volume 3
Brooks, Gwendolyn	1917–2000	Volume 4	Ellison, Ralph	1914–1994	Volume 4
Brown, Charles Brockden	1771–1810	Volume 1	Emerson, Ralph Waldo	1803–1882	Volume 2
Bryant, William Cullen	1794–1878	Volume 1	Equiano, Olaudah	1745–1797	Volume 1
Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez	1490–1556	Volume 1	Erdrich, Louise	1954–	Volume 5
Capote, Truman	1924–1984	Volume 4	Faulkner, William	1897–1962	Volume 3
Carver, Raymond	1938–1988	Volume 5	Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	1920–	Volume 4
Chamler, Willa	1873–1947	Volume 3	Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
ChAMPLAIN, Samuel de	1570–1635	Volume 1	Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1896–1940	Volume 3
Cheever, John	1912–1982	Volume 4	Forché, Carolyn	1950–	Volume 5
Chesnut, Charles	1858–1932	Volume 2	Foster, Hannah Webster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Child, Lydia Maria	1802–1880	Volume 2	Franklin, Benjamin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Chopin, Kate	1850–1904	Volume 2	Freeman, Mary Eleanor	1852–1930	Volume 2
Cisneros, Sandra	1954–	Volume 5	Wilkins		
Cofer, Judith Ortiz	1952–	Volume 5	Freneau, Philip Morin	1752–1832	Volume 1
			Frost, Robert	1874–1963	Volume 3
			Fuller, Margaret	1810–1850	Volume 2
			Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	1860–1935	Volume 2

Ginsberg, Allen	1926–1997	Volume 4	McCarthy, Cormac	1933–	Volume 5
Giovanni, Nikki	1943–	Volume 5	McKay, Claude	1890–1948	Volume 3
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	McMurtry, Larry	1936–	Volume 5
Haley, Alex	1921–1992	Volume 4	Melville, Herman	1819–1891	Volume 2
Hammon, Jupiter	1711–1806	Volume 1	Millay, Edna St. Vincent	1892–1950	Volume 3
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Miller, Arthur	1915–2005	Volume 4
Hansberry, Lorraine	1930–1965	Volume 4	Momaday, N. Scott	1934–	Volume 4
Harjo, Joy	1951–	Volume 5	Moore, Marianne	1887–1972	Volume 3
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins	1825–1911	Volume 2	Mora, Pat	1942–	Volume 5
Harris, Joel Chandler	1848–1908	Volume 2	Morrison, Toni	1931–	Volume 5
Harte, Bret	1836–1902	Volume 2	Morton, Thomas	1579–1647	Volume 1
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	1804–1864	Volume 2	Murray, Judith Sargent	1751–1820	Volume 1
Hayden, Robert	1913–1980	Volume 4	Oates, Joyce Carol	1938–	Volume 5
Heller, Joseph	1923–1999	Volume 4	O'Brien, Tim	1946–	Volume 5
Hemingway, Ernest	1899–1961	Volume 3	Occom, Samson	1723–1792	Volume 1
Howells, William Dean	1837–1920	Volume 2	O'Connor, Flannery	1925–1964	Volume 4
Hughes, Langston	1871–1967	Volume 3	Oliver, Mary	1935–	Volume 5
Hurston, Zora Neale	1891–1960	Volume 3	O'Neill, Eugene	1888–1953	Volume 3
Irving, Washington	1783–1859	Volume 1	Ortiz, Simon J.	1941–	Volume 5
Jackson, Shirley	1919–1965	Volume 4	Paine, Thomas	1737–1809	Volume 1
Jacobs, Harriet	1813–1897	Volume 2	Piatt, Sarah M. B.	1836–1919	Volume 2
James, Henry	1843–1916	Volume 2	Pinsky, Robert	1940–	Volume 5
Jarrell, Randall	1914–1965	Volume 4	Plath, Sylvia	1932–1963	Volume 4
Jefferson, Thomas	1743–1826	Volume 1	Poe, Edgar Allan	1809–1849	Volume 2
Jewett, Sarah Orne	1849–1909	Volume 2	Porter, Katherine Anne	1890–1980	Volume 3
Kerouac, Jack	1922–1969	Volume 4	Potok, Chaim	1929–2002	Volume 4
Kesey, Ken	1935–2001	Volume 4	Pound, Ezra	1885–1972	Volume 3
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4	Rand, Ayn	1905–1982	Volume 4
Kingsolver, Barbara	1955–	Volume 5	Reed, Ishmael	1938–	Volume 5
Kingston, Maxine Hong	1940–	Volume 5	Rich, Adrienne	1929–	Volume 5
Knowles, John	1926–2001	Volume 4	Robinson,	1869–1935	Volume 3
Komunyakaa, Yusef	1947–	Volume 5	Edwin Arlington		
Larsen, Nella	1891–1964	Volume 3	Roethke, Theodore	1908–1963	Volume 4
Lee, Chang-rae	1965–	Volume 5	Roth, Philip	1933–	Volume 4
Lee, Harper	1926–	Volume 4	Rowson,	1762–1824	Volume 1
Levertov, Denise	1923–1997	Volume 4	Susanna Haswell		
London, Jack	1876–1916	Volume 3	Salinger, J. D.	1919–2010	Volume 4
Longfellow,	1807–1882	Volume 2	Sandburg, Carl	1878–1967	Volume 3
Henry Wadsworth			Sedgwick,	1789–1867	Volume 1
Lowell, Robert	1917–1977	Volume 4	Catharine Maria		
Malamud, Bernard	1914–1986	Volume 4	Sexton, Anne	1928–1974	Volume 4
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4	Silko, Leslie Marmon	1948–	Volume 5
Marshall, Paule	1929–	Volume 4	Smith, John	1580–1631	Volume 1
Mather, Cotton	1663–1728	Volume 1	Snyder, Gary	1930–	Volume 5
			Soto, Gary	1952–	Volume 5

Stein, Gertrude	1874–1946	Volume 3	Walker, Alice	1944–	Volume 5
Steinbeck, John	1902–1968	Volume 3	Warren, Robert Penn	1905–1989	Volume 4
Stevens, Wallace	1879–1955	Volume 3	Washington, Booker T.	1856–1915	Volume 3
Stowe, Harriet Beecher	1811–1896	Volume 2	Welty, Eudora	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Wharton, Edith	1862–1937	Volume 3
Swenson, May	1913–1989	Volume 4	Wheatley, Phillis	1753–1784	Volume 1
Tan, Amy	1952–	Volume 5	Whitman, Walt	1819–1892	Volume 2
Taylor, Edward	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Wilbur, Richard	1921–	Volume 4
Thoreau, Henry David	1817–1862	Volume 2	Wilder, Thornton	1897–1975	Volume 3
Toomer, Jean	1894–1967	Volume 3	Williams, Tennessee	1911–1983	Volume 4
Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2	Williams, William Carlos	1883–1961	Volume 3
Updike, John	1932–2009	Volume 4	Wilson, August	1945–2005	Volume 5
Viramontes, Helena María	1954–	Volume 5	Wilson, Harriet E.	1825–1900	Volume 2
Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4	Winthrop, John	1588–1649	Volume 1
			Wright, Richard	1908–1960	Volume 3

APPENDIX II

Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, by Birth Date

Note that authors are placed in the volume that covers the period during which they published their most important works. Some authors published their works relatively early or relatively late in their lives. This explains why, for example, certain authors placed in volume 3 were actually born before certain authors placed in volume 2.

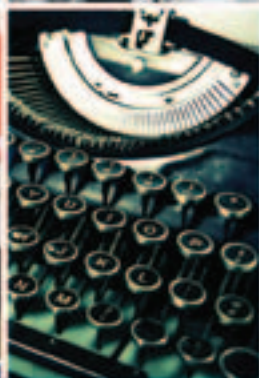
Christopher Columbus	1451–1506	Volume 1	William Cullen Bryant	1794–1878	Volume 1
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	1490–1556	Volume 1	Lydia Maria Child	1802–1880	Volume 2
Samuel de Champlain	1570–1635	Volume 1	Ralph Waldo Emerson	1803–1882	Volume 2
Thomas Morton	1579–1647	Volume 1	Nathaniel Hawthorne	1804–1864	Volume 2
John Smith	1580–1631	Volume 1	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	1807–1882	Volume 2
John Winthrop	1588–1649	Volume 1	Edgar Allan Poe	1809–1849	Volume 2
William Bradford	1590–1657	Volume 1	Margaret Fuller	1810–1850	Volume 2
Anne Bradstreet	1612–1672	Volume 1	Fanny Fern	1811–1872	Volume 2
Edward Taylor	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	(Sara Willis Parton)		
Cotton Mather	1663–1728	Volume 1	Harriet Beecher Stowe	1811–1896	Volume 2
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	Volume 1	Harriet Jacobs	1813–1897	Volume 2
Benjamin Franklin	1706–1790	Volume 1	Henry David Thoreau	1817–1862	Volume 2
Jupiter Hammon	1711–1806	Volume 1	Frederick Douglass	1818–1895	Volume 2
Samson Occom	1723–1792	Volume 1	Herman Melville	1819–1891	Volume 2
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	1735–1813	Volume 1	Walt Whitman	1819–1892	Volume 2
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	1825–1911	Volume 2
John Adams	1735–1826	Volume 1	Harriet E. Wilson	1825–1900	Volume 2
Thomas Paine	1737–1809	Volume 1	Emily Dickinson	1830–1886	Volume 2
Thomas Jefferson	1743–1826	Volume 1	Rebecca Harding Davis	1831–1910	Volume 2
Abigail Adams	1744–1818	Volume 1	Louisa May Alcott	1832–1888	Volume 2
Olaudah Equiano	1745–1797	Volume 1	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Judith Sargent Murray	1751–1820	Volume 1	Bret Harte	1836–1902	Volume 2
Philip Morin Freneau	1752–1832	Volume 1	Sarah M. B. Piatt	1836–1919	Volume 2
Phillis Wheatley	1753–1784	Volume 1	William Dean Howells	1837–1920	Volume 2
Hannah Webster Foster	1758–1840	Volume 1	Henry Adams	1838–1918	Volume 2
Susanna Haswell Rowson	1762–1824	Volume 1	Ambrose Bierce	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Charles Brockden Brown	1771–1810	Volume 1	Henry James	1843–1916	Volume 2
Washington Irving	1783–1859	Volume 1	Joel Chandler Harris	1848–1908	Volume 2
James Fenimore Cooper	1789–1851	Volume 1	Sarah Orne Jewett	1849–1909	Volume 2
Catharine Maria Sedgwick	1789–1867	Volume 1			

Kate Chopin	1850–1904	Volume 2	Countee Cullen	1903–1946	Volume 3
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	1852–1930	Volume 2	Ayn Rand	1905–1982	Volume 4
Booker T. Washington	1856–1915	Volume 3	Robert Penn Warren	1905–1989	Volume 4
Charles Chesnutt	1858–1932	Volume 2	Richard Wright	1908–1960	Volume 3
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	1860–1935	Volume 2	Theodore Roethke	1908–1963	Volume 4
Edith Wharton	1862–1937	Volume 3	Eudora Welty	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Elizabeth Bishop	1911–1979	Volume 4
W. E. B. DuBois	1868–1963	Volume 3	Tennessee Williams	1911–1983	Volume 4
Edwin Arlington Robinson	1869–1935	Volume 3	John Cheever	1912–1982	Volume 4
Stephen Crane	1871–1900	Volume 2	Robert Hayden	1913–1980	Volume 4
Theodore Dreiser	1871–1945	Volume 3	May Swenson	1913–1989	Volume 4
Langston Hughes	1871–1967	Volume 3	Randall Jarrell	1914–1965	Volume 4
Paul Laurence Dunbar	1872–1906	Volume 2	Bernard Malamud	1914–1986	Volume 4
Willa Cather	1873–1947	Volume 3	Ralph Ellison	1914–1994	Volume 4
Gertrude Stein	1874–1946	Volume 3	Saul Bellow	1915–2005	Volume 4
Robert Frost	1874–1963	Volume 3	Arthur Miller	1915–2005	Volume 4
Jack London	1876–1916	Volume 3	Robert Lowell	1917–1977	Volume 4
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Gwendolyn Brooks	1917–2000	Volume 4
Sherwood Anderson	1876–1942	Volume 3	Shirley Jackson	1919–1965	Volume 4
Carl Sandburg	1878–1967	Volume 3	J. D. Salinger	1919–2010	Volume 4
Wallace Stevens	1879–1955	Volume 3	Ray Bradbury	1920–	Volume 4
William Carlos Williams	1883–1961	Volume 3	Lawrence Ferlinghetti	1920–	Volume 4
Ezra Pound	1885–1972	Volume 3	Richard Wilbur	1921–	Volume 4
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	Alex Haley	1921–1992	Volume 4
Marianne Moore	1887–1972	Volume 3	Jack Kerouac	1922–1969	Volume 4
Eugene O'Neill	1888–1953	Volume 3	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4
T. S. Eliot	1888–1965	Volume 3	Denise Levertov	1923–1997	Volume 4
Claude McKay	1890–1948	Volume 3	Joseph Heller	1923–1999	Volume 4
Katherine Anne Porter	1890–1980	Volume 3	James Baldwin	1924–1987	Volume 4
Zora Neale Hurston	1891–1960	Volume 3	Truman Capote	1924–1984	Volume 4
Nella Larsen	1891–1964	Volume 3	Flannery O'Connor	1925–1964	Volume 4
Edna St. Vincent Millay	1892–1950	Volume 3	Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
E. E. Cummings	1894–1962	Volume 3	Harper Lee	1926–	Volume 4
Jean Toomer	1894–1967	Volume 3	Allen Ginsberg	1926–1997	Volume 4
F. Scott Fitzgerald	1896–1940	Volume 3	John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
John Dos Passos	1896–1970	Volume 3	Edward Albee	1928–	Volume 4
William Faulkner	1897–1962	Volume 3	Maya Angelou	1928–	Volume 5
Thornton Wilder	1897–1975	Volume 3	Anne Sexton	1928–1974	Volume 4
Hart Crane	1899–1932	Volume 3	Paule Marshall	1929–	Volume 4
Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961	Volume 3	Adrienne Rich	1929–	Volume 5
John Steinbeck	1902–1968	Volume 3	Martin Luther King, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
			Chaim Potok	1929–2002	Volume 4
			Gary Snyder	1930–	Volume 5
			Lorraine Hansberry	1930–1965	Volume 4
			Toni Morrison	1931–	Volume 5

Sylvia Plath	1932–1963	Volume 4	Nikki Giovanni	1943–	Volume 5
John Updike	1932–2009	Volume 4	Alice Walker	1944–	Volume 5
Cormac McCarthy	1933–	Volume 5	August Wilson	1945–2005	Volume 5
Philip Roth	1933–	Volume 4	Tim O’Brien	1946–	Volume 5
N. Scott Momaday	1934–	Volume 4	Yusef Komunyakaa	1947–	Volume 5
Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Leslie Marmon Silko	1948–	Volume 5
Mary Oliver	1935–	Volume 5	Julia Alvarez	1950–	Volume 5
Ken Kesey	1935–2001	Volume 4	Carolyn Forché	1950–	Volume 5
Larry McMurtry	1936–	Volume 5	Joy Harjo	1951–	Volume 5
Rudolfo Anaya	1937–	Volume 5	Jimmy Santiago Baca	1952–	Volume 5
Joyce Carol Oates	1938–	Volume 5	Judith Ortiz Cofer	1952–	Volume 5
Ishmael Reed	1938–	Volume 5	Rita Dove	1952–	Volume 5
Raymond Carver	1938–1988	Volume 5	Gary Soto	1952–	Volume 5
Toni Cade Bambara	1939–	Volume 5	Amy Tan	1952–	Volume 5
Maxine Hong Kingston	1940–	Volume 5	Sandra Cisneros	1954–	Volume 5
Robert Pinsky	1940–	Volume 5	Louise Erdrich	1954–	Volume 5
Billy Collins	1941–	Volume 5	Helena María Viramontes	1954–	Volume 5
Simon J. Ortiz	1941–	Volume 5	Barbara Kingsolver	1955–	Volume 5
Pat Mora	1942–	Volume 5	Chang-rae Lee	1965–	Volume 5

STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS





**STUDENT'S
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
GREAT AMERICAN
WRITERS**

VOLUME V: 1970 TO THE PRESENT



STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

VOLUME V: 1970 TO THE PRESENT

PATRICIA M. GANTT

Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers, 1970 to the Present

Copyright © 2010 by Patricia M. Gantt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Student's encyclopedia of great American writers / Patricia Gantt, general editor.
v. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: [1] Beginnings to 1830 / Andrea Tinnemeyer—[2] 1830 to 1900 / Paul Crumbley—[3] 1900 to 1945 / Robert C. Evans—[4] 1945 to 1970 / Blake Hobby—[5] 1970 to the present / Patricia Gantt.

ISBN 978-0-8160-6087-0 (hardcover: acid-free paper) ISBN 978-1-4381-3125-2 (e-book) 1. Authors, American—Biography—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. 2. American literature—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. I. Tinnemeyer, Andrea. II. Gantt, Patricia M., 1943–

PS129.S83 2009

810.9'0003—dc22[B] 2009030783

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text design by Annie O'Donnell
Composition by Mary Susan Ryan-Flynn
Cover printed by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Book printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Date printed: June 2010

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

List of Writers and Works Included	vi	Pat Mora	244
Series Preface	xi	Toni Morrison	253
Volume Introduction	xii	Joyce Carol Oates	276
		Tim O'Brien	285
Julia Alvarez	1	Mary Oliver	294
Rudolfo Anaya	13	Simon J. Ortiz	306
Maya Angelou	22	Robert Pinsky	316
Jimmy Santiago Baca	35	Ishmael Reed	326
Toni Cade Bambara	46	Adrienne Rich	340
Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. LeROI Jones)	54	Leslie Marmon Silko	352
Raymond Carver	68	Gary Snyder	364
Sandra Cisneros	79	Gary Soto	373
Judith Ortiz Cofer	92	Amy Tan	386
Billy Collins	103	Helena María Viramontes	399
Rita Dove	113	Alice Walker	410
Louise Erdrich	127	August Wilson	425
Carolyn Forché	141		
Nikki Giovanni	151	Appendix I: Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i>	445
Joy Harjo	166		
Barbara Kingsolver	176	Appendix II: Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the <i>Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers</i> , by Birth Date	448
Maxine Hong Kingston	188		
Yusef Komunyakaa	201		
Chang-rae Lee	214		
Cormac McCarthy	225		
Larry McMurtry	235		

LIST OF WRITERS AND WORKS INCLUDED

Julia Alvarez (1950–)	1	Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995)	46
“How I Learned to Sweep” (1984)		<i>Gorilla, My Love</i> (1972)	
<i>How the García Girls Lost Their Accents</i> (1991)		“Medley” (1977)	
“Daughter of Invention” (1991)		<i>The Salt Eaters</i> (1980)	
“Hold the Mayonnaise” (1992)			
<i>In the Time of Butterflies</i> (1994)		Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones)	
“Queens, 1963” (1995)		(1934–)	54
		“Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note” (1961)	
Rudolfo Anaya (1937–)	13	“In Memory of Radio” (1961)	
<i>Bless Me, Ultima</i> (1972)		“Notes for a Speech” (1961)	
<i>Tortuga</i> (1979)		“An Agony. As Now.” (1964)	
The Sonny Baca Mysteries (1995–2005)		“A Poem for Willie Best” (1964)	
		<i>Dutchman</i> (1964)	
Maya Angelou (1928–)	22	“Ka’Ba” (1966)	
<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> (1969)		“Will They Cry When You’re Gone, You Bet” (1969)	
“My Brother Bailey and Kay Francis” (1969)		“AM/TRAK” (1979)	
“Woman Work” (1978)		“Wise I” (1990)	
“On the Pulse of Morning” (1993)		“Monday in B-Flat” (1994)	
“Africa” (1997)			
		Raymond Carver (1938–1988)	68
Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952–)	35	“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” (1976)	
<i>Martin and Meditations on the South Valley</i> (1987)		“Furious Seasons” (1977)	
<i>Immigrants in Our Own Land & Selected Early Poems</i> (1990)		“What We Talk about When We Talk about Love” (1981)	
<i>Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio</i> (1992)		“Cathedral” (1982)	
<i>A Place to Stand</i> (2001)		“Where I’m Calling From” (1989)	
<i>The Importance of a Piece of Paper</i> (2004)		“A Small, Good Thing” (1989)	

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>Sandra Cisneros (1954–) 79
 <i>My Wicked Wicked Ways</i> (1987)
 <i>The House on Mango Street</i> (1984)
 “Hairs” (1984)
 <i>Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories</i> (1991)
 “Bread” (1991)
 “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn” (1991)</p> | <p>Louise Erdrich (1954–) 127
 “The Red Convertible” (1981)
 “Jacklight” (1984)
 “A Love Medicine” (1984)
 “Dear John Wayne” (1984)
 <i>Love Medicine</i> (1984)
 “Fleur” (1986)
 <i>The Beet Queen</i> (1986)
 <i>Tracks</i> (1988)</p> |
| <p>Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952–) 92
 <i>The Line of the Sun</i> (1989)
 <i>Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood</i> (1990)
 <i>The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women</i> (1993)
 <i>An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio</i> (1995)
 <i>The Meaning of Consuelo</i> (2003)</p> | <p>Carolyn Forché (1950–) 141
 <i>Gathering the Tribes</i> (1976)
 <i>The Country between Us</i> (1982)
 <i>The Angel of History</i> (1994)
 <i>Blue Hour</i> (2003)
 “On Earth” (2003)</p> |
| <p>Billy Collins (1941–) 103
 “Consolation” (1995)
 “Nightclub” (1995)
 “Forgetfulness” (2001)
 “Marginalia” (2001)
 “Osso Buco” (2001)
 “Tuesday, June 4, 1991” (2001)
 “The Lanyard” (2005)
 “Building with Its Face Blown Off” (2005)</p> | <p>Nikki Giovanni (1943–) 151
 “Nikki-Rosa” (1968)
 “Ego-Tripping” (1970)
 “When I Die” (1972)
 “Stardate Number 18628.190” (1995)
 “Train Rides” (1999)
 “Possum Crossing” (2002)
 “Have Dinner with Me” (2002)
 “Quilts” (2003)</p> |
| <p>Rita Dove (1952–) 113
 <i>The Yellow House on the Corner</i> (1980)
 “Geometry” (1980)
 “Parsley” (1983)
 <i>Thomas and Beulah</i> (1986)
 <i>Mother Love</i> (1995)
 <i>On the Bus with Rosa Parks</i> (1999)</p> | <p>Joy Harjo (1951–) 166
 <i>She Had Some Horses</i> (1983)
 <i>Reinventing the Enemy’s Language</i> (1997)
 <i>How We Became Human</i> (2002)</p> |
| | <p>Barbara Kingsolver (1955–) 176
 <i>The Bean Trees</i> (1988)
 <i>Animal Dreams</i> (1990)
 <i>Pigs in Heaven</i> (1993)
 <i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> (1998)
 <i>Prodigal Summer</i> (2000)</p> |

- Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–) 188**
“No Name Woman” (1976)
*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a
Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976)
China Men (1980)
Tripmaster Monkey (1989)
“Restaurant” (1981)
- Yusef Komunyakaa (1947–) 201**
“Tu Do Street” (1988)
“Prisoners” (1988)
“Thanks” (1988)
“Facing It” (1988)
“Blackberries” (1992)
“My Father’s Love Letters” (1992)
“Ode to the Maggot” (2000)
- Chang-rae Lee (1965–) 214**
Native Speaker (1995)
A Gesture Life (1999)
Aloft (2004)
- Cormac McCarthy (1933–) 225**
*Blood Meridian, or the Evening
Reduces in the West* (1985)
All the Pretty Horses (1992)
The Road (2006)
- Larry McMurtry (1936–) 235**
The Last Picture Show (1966)
Terms of Endearment (1975)
Lonesome Dove (1985)
- Pat Mora (1942–) 244**
“Borders” (1986)
“Sonrisas” (1986)
“Immigrants” (1986)
“Gentle Communion” (1991)
- Toni Morrison (1931–) 253**
The Bluest Eye (1970)
Sula (1973)
Song of Solomon (1977)
Tar Baby (1981)
“Recitatif” (1983)
Beloved (1987)
Jazz (1992)
The Nobel Lecture in Literature
(1993)
Paradise (1998)
Love (2003)
- Joyce Carol Oates (1938–) 276**
“Where Are You Going,
Where Have You Been?” (1970)
You Must Remember This (1987)
- Tim O’Brien (1946–) 285**
Going after Cacciato (1978)
The Things They Carried (1990)
- Mary Oliver (1935–) 294**
“The Black Snake” (1978)
“In Blackwater Woods” (1983)
“Wild Geese” (1986)
“Landscape” (1986)
“Goldenrod” (1991)
“Why I Wake Early” (2004)
- Simon J. Ortiz (1941–) 306**
“Speaking” (1977)
“Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun”
(1977)
“Vision Shadows” (1977)
“Poems from the Veterans Hospital” (1977)
“Travelling” (1977)

- | | | | |
|--|------------|---|------------|
| Robert Pinsky (1940–) | 316 | Leslie Marmon Silko (1948–) | 352 |
| “The Figured Wheel” (1984) | | “The Man to Send Rain Clouds”
(1969) | |
| “The Street” (1984) | | “Lullaby” (1974) | |
| “A Woman” (1984) | | “Yellow Woman” (1974) | |
| “Shirt” (1990) | | <i>Ceremony</i> (1977) | |
| “At Pleasure Bay” (1990) | | <i>Storyteller</i> (1981) | |
| Ishmael Reed (1938–) | 326 | <i>Almanac of the Dead</i> (1991) | |
| <i>Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down</i> (1969) | | Gary Snyder (1930–) | 364 |
| “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra”
(1970) | | “Milton by Firelight” (1955) | |
| <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> (1972) | | “Riprap” (1959) | |
| <i>The Last Days of Louisiana Red</i> (1974) | | “Straight-Creek—Great Burn” (1974) | |
| <i>Flight to Canada</i> (1976) | | “The Blue Sky” (1996) | |
| “The Reactionary Poet” (1978) | | Gary Soto (1952–) | 373 |
| “Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy”
(1978) | | “The Elements of San Joaquin”
(1977) | |
| <i>The Terrible Twos</i> and <i>The Terrible Threes</i>
(1982, 1989) | | “Mexicans Begin Jogging” (1981) | |
| <i>Reckless Eyeballing</i> (1986) | | <i>Living up the Street: Narrative
Recollections</i> (1985) | |
| <i>Japanese by Spring</i> (1993) | | “Like Mexicans” (1985) | |
| Adrienne Rich (1929–) | 340 | “Oranges” (1985) | |
| “Storm Warnings” (1951) | | <i>Baseball in April</i> (1990) | |
| “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (1951) | | “Home Course in Religion” (1991) | |
| “Living in Sin” (1955) | | “Bodily Responses to High Mass”
(1997) | |
| “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1963) | | “Teaching English from an Old
Composition Book” (1999) | |
| “I Am in Danger—Sir—” (1966) | | <i>Nerdlandia</i> (1999) | |
| “The Observer” (1969) | | Amy Tan (1952–) | 386 |
| “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as
Re-Vision” (1971) | | <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> (1989) | |
| “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning”
(From <i>A Will to Change</i> , 1971) | | “Two Kinds” (1989) | |
| “Power” (1974) | | “A Pair of Tickets” (1989) | |
| “If Not with Others, How?” (1985) | | <i>The Kitchen God’s Wife</i> (1991) | |
| “Transcendental Etude” (1977) | | <i>The Bonesetter’s Daughter</i> (2001) | |

Helena María Viramontes (1954–) 399

“The Moths” (1985)
 “Cariboo Cafe” (1985)
 “Miss Clairol” (1988)
Under the Feet of Jesus (1995)
Their Dogs Came with Them (2007)

Alice Walker (1944–) 410

“Everyday Use” (1973)
 “Expect Nothing” (1973)
 “Revolutionary Petunias” (1973)
Meridian (1976)
 “Nineteen Fifty-five” (1981)
The Color Purple (1982)
*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens:
 Womanist Prose* (1983)
 “I Said to Poetry” (1984)

August Wilson (1945–2005) 425

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
 (1981, 1985)
Fences (1986)
Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988)
The Piano Lesson (1990)
Two Trains Running (1993)
Seven Guitars (1996)
Jitney (1979, 1982, 2000)
The Ground on Which I Stand
 (1996, 2001)
King Hedley II (2001)
Gem of the Ocean (2003)
Radio Golf (2004)

SERIES PREFACE

The *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* is a unique reference intended to help high school students meet standards for literature education and prepare themselves for literature study in college. It offers extensive entries on important authors, as well as providing additional interpretive helps for students and their teachers. The set has been designed and written in the context of the national standards for English language arts, created by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, the two professional organizations that have the most at stake in high school language arts education (see <http://www.ncte.org/standards>).

The volume editors and many of the contributors to this set not only are university scholars but also have experience in secondary school literature education, ranging from working as readers of Advanced Placement examinations, to developing high school literature curricula, to having taught in high school English classrooms. Although the volume editors all have extensive experience as scholars and university professors, they all have strong roots in high school education and have drawn on their experience to ensure that entries are stylistically appealing and contain the necessary content for students.

The set's five volumes are organized chronologically, as many literature textbooks and anthologies are. This system is convenient for students and also facilitates cross-disciplinary study, increasingly common in high schools. For example, a section on the Civil War in history class might be accompanied by the study of Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane in English class. To help students find what they need, each volume contains two lists of all the authors included in the set: one organized chronologically and the other alphabetically.

Within each volume, authors are presented alphabetically. Each author entry contains a biog-

raphy and then subentries on the author's major works. After each subentry on a work is a set of questions for discussion and/or writing. Another set of broader discussion questions appears near the end of each author entry, followed by a bibliography. The entire five-volume set therefore contains more than 1,000 discussion questions. These questions make up perhaps the most important and useful features of the set, encouraging further creative thought and helping students get started on their own writing. Many of the questions reference not only the subject literary work or author but also related works and authors, thus helping students to make additional literary connections, as emphasized by the literature standards.

The authors and works included in the set were selected primarily from among those most popular in the high school classrooms—that is, those often featured in secondary-school literary anthologies and textbooks; those often appearing on age-appropriate reading lists; and those most often searched for in Facts On File's online literary database Bloom's Literature Online, used primarily in high schools. In addition, we have endeavored to include a range of writers from different backgrounds in all periods, as well as writers who, though not perhaps among the very most popular today, appear to have been unjustly neglected and are gaining in popularity. No selection could be perfect, and those writers favored by scholars and critics are not always as popular in the high school classroom, but the general editor and volumes editors have attempted to make the set's coverage as useful to students as possible.

Above all, we hope that this set serves not only to instruct but also to inspire students with the love of literature shared by all the editors and contributors who worked on this set.

Patricia M. Gantt

VOLUME INTRODUCTION

American literature from 1970 to the present encompasses a multitude of perspectives; it is both inclusive and innovative. In this period more than ever before, writers have come in from the cultural margins to add their voices to the literary discourse. It can truly be said that there is no modern perspective that is not represented in the literature of the last 40 years. No cultural or literary monolith exists; a reader can select a perspective and find it expressed in literature and then stand back and listen for a voice that counters that perspective. No writer can speak with authority about “the” woman’s perspective or “the” Native American experience. Each is multifold. As Walt Whitman proclaimed in an earlier time, “There is that lot of me, and all so luscious.” Readers are now privy to more ways of looking at life than ever before. Even genres themselves have become shape-shifters, as the current controversy over what constitutes memoir can testify.

The writing of this period reflects the insistent wrangle for truth in a postmodern age marked by ceaseless questioning. For example, in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), a father and son trek through an apocalyptic future similar to one Americans might confront should our important questions go unanswered, leaving us unable to understand and feel for one another in a barren world. Other works, such as McCarthy’s western fictions, bring readers to rethink history but also make us aware of the precipitous position in which writers and historians find themselves, each reliant upon narrative—some mode of fitting together shards to tell stories and make sense of our existence. Yet we have come to distrust fiction, and history as well, knowing what we do about how selective the process of inclusion and exclusion must be. It is difficult for us to trust stories. We can sense the doubt even in such affirmations as Leslie Marmon Silko’s in *Ceremony*: “I will tell you something about sto-

ries . . . / They aren’t just entertainment. / Don’t be fooled. / They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don’t have anything / if you don’t have the stories.” We have come to see through an ever-broadening array of media how the globalized world is interconnected, but we have also been forced to confront the unsettling realizations that have dissolved the optimism of the postwar age and left us with a profound and perplexing skepticism. Such crises are both reflected and challenged by postmodern American literature.

Postmodernism is a loaded word, rife with conflict; there are numerous definitions for the term. In essence, postmodern works reflect what all writers seek: an engagement with the world and a desire to communicate. Like all literature, postmodern works—even in their various forms, parodic and ironic stances, understanding of reality, critiques of power structures—are deeply engaged in life and written with care and concern for the world. We see this in the minimalist forms of Raymond Carver, the magical realism of Toni Morrison, the satirical and playful voices of Ishmael Reed, the souls seeking solace through cultural understanding in the fiction of Rudolfo Anaya and Julia Alvarez, the women seeking to come to terms with the world and to love each other in Adrienne Rich’s poetry or Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the ecologically conscious, nature-turned imaginations of Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver—all attempting to bring readers into dialogue with the postmodern condition.

Our postmodern age brings with it a lack of consensus about codes of ethics, philosophies, and religious systems of belief. Many of us distrust any one point of view, believing reality to be many-sided, while fearing that our inability to see multiple perspectives marginalizes those who may not share the dominant ideology or social back-

ground. We seek to guarantee that everyone has an opportunity to live the American Dream, while being aware that the American Dream, to a great extent, is an artificial construct that often leads to disillusionment and exclusion. Our intellectuals are increasingly preoccupied with our cultural limitations. Modern society is fast, visual, and technological, with increasing linguistic demands. Yet our culture, from many perspectives, has become less literate. The question becomes: What is the nature of language in a postmodern age? To what extent is language—and literature—necessarily political? For deeper understanding, we can turn to a powerful American presence, Toni Morrison, a Nobel laureate deeply engaged not only in exploring the significance of the word but also in the emancipatory potential of artistic expression.

In her *Nobel Lecture*, Morrison tells the story of an old woman who lives on the margins of society, a wise figure appearing before a group of game-playing children. The children ask the old woman to tell them whether the bird they hold is dead or alive. After telling this brief story, Morrison then interprets. She views the bird in hand as language. Morrison laments that language is subject to death and erasure if it is viewed as an abstraction. For her, language is agency or power, a view shared by many of the contemporary novelists, poets, and playwrights discussed in this volume. From Maxine Hong-Kingston and Amy Tan, for example, we have compelling explorations of identity in a contemporary America where the pressure to assimilate endangers cultural heritage. From the prison poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca to the works of Maya Angelou, contemporary literary art is invested with a view of language in which words are liberating, speech-acts affirm our identity, and self-expression is perhaps the most potent mode of resistance left to those who have been marginalized and alienated. Later in her lecture, Morrison outlines the theory of language that her 1992 novel *Jazz* metaphorically depicts. She sees language as a vital thing whose power lies in its ability to render the actual. The act of using language and of making meaning is, according to Morrison, central to our humanity. It is a grave responsibility.

Morrison says, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”

At the end of her lecture, Morrison returns to the next part of the story, in which the children demand that the old lady tell them a tale. Morrison presents the children as askers of questions, who come to a writer for answers. This writer supplies images, challenges, and multiple possibilities for interpretation, but she is powerless alone. What forms the creative act is the transaction between the children and the old lady; it is the act of reading that creates art. It is no coincidence that the closing words of the old woman in Morrison’s *Nobel Lecture* parallel the closing words of the narrator in her novel *Jazz*. Both describe a similar phenomenon. This phenomenon, whether in music or in text, is a complex transaction that produces meaning. Morrison sees all narrative acts as calls to action and social responsibility. How the listener chooses to be involved in the music has everything to do with the life the listener has or will experience.

Morrison’s exploration of narrative perspective enlarges our own sense of it, helping us to cultivate our narrative imaginations. She, like other visionary African-American writers, struggles to make sense of the contemporary African-American experience by facing the horrors of slavery, racism, and bigotry while at the same time recording the triumph of memory. From the incendiary plays and poetry of Amiri Baraka, to the autobiographical narratives and award-winning poetry of Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, and Nikki Giovanni, to the cries for social justice in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), to August Wilson’s masterful Pittsburgh cycle of plays, African-American authors since 1970 have offered their readers inspiring literary responses to horrific concrete experiences while giving voice to a culture often elided by history.

In addition to these, authors from many other cultural backgrounds have stepped forward to speak about the complexities of living between cultures. Sandra Cisernos’s short stories; Judith Ortiz Cofer’s essays, plays, and novels; Gary Soto’s poems; and Helena Maria Viramontes’s short

stories all provide readers reflections on their experience of American life seen from within Latino culture. Likewise, Native American writers such as Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Simon J. Ortiz, and Leslie Marmon Silko examine their own contemporary lives as well as the history of forced cultural assimilation and the annihilation of many Native cultures. Their works capture the need to heal, reconnect, and move on and are aware of the irony of using the colonizer's English to articulate the American Indian experience. These authors, all part of what Kenneth Lincoln calls "The Native American Renaissance," offer fresh perspectives on the complexity of recovering a sense of Native identity. They bear witness, listening to the howling wind, hearing voices in distress, and forging a poetics of liberation.

It would be a mistake to infer, however, that ethnic or racial protest is the dominant theme of American literature since 1970. As important as this impulse is, another force is inherent to the works created within this period—the simple need for story that has driven human beings since they sat around a fire in a cave and whiled away the long, dark hours with tales of exploits, emotions, and the search for answers to the eternal questions. The urge to tell and to hear a good story has been with us since the beginning and will remain when the period covered by this volume is a distant memory. However complex or conflicted the stories these writers create, they are at their core an imaginative response to the desire to share action and thought

with other people, to tease out meaning from experience, to laugh, to feel passion, to share ideas, to wonder about our place in the scheme of things, and to explore at the deepest level what it means to be human.

While they may differ in style and outlook, the works examined in this volume often place great demands on the reader. While previous American literature may have imagined that the American experience was somehow universal, postmodern literature deals with the sort of messiness we have to endure when we begin to think about reimagining our society and giving the voiceless a voice. To begin this difficult process is to know the pain of birth, or of literary composition: the daily ritual of confronting, examining, representing, proclaiming, critiquing, and satirizing that describes the creating of literature previously unimagined.

More explicitly than ever before, the literature of this period is wedded to our society. With this close cultural relationship in mind, this volume examines the stunning aesthetic creations of our time and their response to and influence on the American way of life. The works analyzed in these pages attest to our ability to share our stories and to understand that each story cannot be taken in isolation.

Note: Portions of the entry on August Wilson have been adapted from Patricia M. Gantt's essay "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle," published in *College Literature*.

Patricia M. Gantt and Blake Hobby



JULIA ALVAREZ (1950–)

¿Qué es Patria? ¿Sabes acaso lo que preguntas, mi amor? (What is a homeland? Do you know, my love, what you are asking?)

(*In the Name of Salomé*)

Julia Alvarez opens her book of essays, *Something to Declare*, with a series of declarations to her grandfather. She tells him she wants to be a bullfighter, a cowboy, an actress, an astronaut, and an ice-cream vendor, among other professions. Her grandfather chuckles with the knowledge that her dreams will soon settle on something more achievable, and when Alvarez tells him she wants to be a poet, he surprisingly smiles, saying, “A poet, yes. Now you are talking” (11). As a poet, novelist, and young-adult author, Alvarez fulfills her declaration. It is also as a bullfighter, cowboy, and a multitude of other ambitions that she takes on historical, gender, and political borders within her works.

Though she was born in New York City on March 27, 1950, Alvarez spent the first 10 years of her life in the Dominican Republic. However, because her family supported a rebel faction instead of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, they escaped the country in 1960 and Alvarez found herself back in the United States. Trujillo and his police state become the central historical setting for much of Alvarez’s work, while her own experience provides vibrant, raw material for her themes of displacement, struggle, and activism. Through her work, she gracefully crosses over boundaries and the ensnaring borders of the politics of expectations.

Her parents, Eduardo and Julia Tavares Alvarez, equally contributed to Alvarez’s sense of protest and determination. Earlier her father had been part

of an underground student movement to oust the corrupt dictator and was forced to flee to Canada for nine years. Her mother, who had wealth and political connections that are echoed in Alvarez’s books, helped her husband and four daughters to safety during these tumultuous times. While living in the Dominican Republic, the Alvarez parents insisted that their daughters learn the English language; it is through the blending of two languages and many cultures that Alvarez draws the meaning of things. In an interview, she explains, “I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend together” (quoted in Schaffer 1). The series of collisions that Alvarez experienced were both difficult and rewarding. Wading through the discrimination and racism she and her sisters confronted back in New York, she soon became enraptured with the magic she could create through words. She writes that the English language became a “fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language” (*Something to Declare* 29).

Her infatuation with language and writing soon became her passion. After her family immigrated to New York, she attended boarding school and then

Connecticut College from 1967 to 1969. While in her last year, she was recognized as a poet and participated in the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont. After transferring, she received her B.A. from Middlebury in 1971, graduating summa cum laude, and then attended Syracuse University for graduate school. After receiving her M.F.A. in 1975, she held a Poet in the Schools appointment in several states and taught English at Phillips Andover Academy from 1979 to 1981. She has also taught at the University of Vermont (1981–83), George Washington University (1984–85), and the University of Illinois (1985–88).

It was while she was teaching at the University of Vermont that Alvarez wrote her first book of poetry, *Homecoming* (1984). In the afterword of her second edition, which was published in 1996 when she was “three books braver” (118), Alvarez writes, “In writing *Homecoming*, I can see now how fiercely I was claiming my woman's voice. As I followed my mother cleaning house, washing and ironing clothes, rolling dough, I was using the material of my housebound girl life to claim my woman's legacy” (119). Her early poems emphasize the depth of the feminine and construct/deconstruct gender expectations. Her woman's legacy is the dominant theme in many of her works, works containing empowered women young and old. Yet in her afterword, Alvarez also admits the original collection lacks the political awareness of a woman at 33, the author's age when she began writing the poems. Compared to her later works, her accurate self-criticism punctuates her current social activism. However, in the 41 original sonnets under the section titled “33,” she deftly argues for feminine independence and sovereignty from traditional gender roles. “Tell me what is it women want the most?” she asks in one of the sonnets; “Is it what everyone says, a man, / a rich, kind, liberated man / who figures out what we want? Be honest / now, whatever our public politics, is that it?” (68). By the time Alvarez was 29, she had married and divorced twice and felt that she was unable to fulfill the traditional roles prescribed for the female gender and the familial expectations whose pressure she felt.

These “knockabout years” (*Something to Declare* 114) are reflected in the meaning and the nontraditional form of the sonnets: free verse and differing slant rhymes. She explains:

As a writer, I especially found my vocation at odds with my training as a female and as a member of la familia. It was a woman's place to be the guardian of the home and the family secrets, to keep things entre familia, to uphold the family honor. . . . A woman did not have a public voice. She did not have a public life, except through her husband, her brothers, her sons, and her endless stream of male cousins. (122)

In another sonnet, she writes, “Mami asks what I'm up to, that means men / in any declension except sex; it / means do I realize I am thirty- / three without a husband, house, or children / and going on thirty-four?” (59). Although Alvarez laments her lack of political gumption in these earlier poems, she creates notions of tearing down the boundaries that define and confine families and individuals. Her struggles, evident in the altering emotional connections to her domestic subjects, create the skeleton of her future works, works that are more politically charged and daring.

In *Something to Declare* (published in 1999), she provides an autobiographical background to the *Homecoming* poems. In one essay, “I Want to Be Miss América,” Alvarez describes that she and her sisters “were being groomed to go from being dutiful daughters to being dutiful wives with hymens intact” (42). Her poetry and essays contribute powerfully and wisely to current Chicana and third-world feminism, as she points out the unique hardships and differences faced by nonwhite women. She places emphasis on the challenges that women of color directly experience, which many white feminists failed to recognize.

In her 1996 collection of poetry, *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*, she focuses on subjects that place cultural splits in the foreground. In her first line of the collection's opening poem, “Bilingual Sestina,” she proclaims, “Some things I have to say

aren't getting said / in this snowy, blond, blue-eyed, gum-chewing English" (3). The section that immediately follows is titled "The Gladys Poems" after their Dominican maid, Gladys. Alvarez grapples with class divisions and the thorny recognition of one person's participation in another person's displacement. While some readers surmise that Alvarez focuses her work mainly on fictionalizing Trujillo's absolute rule, she writes in such a way that readers, regardless of their gender or culture, identify with friendly and surly truths. Her search for self becomes the reader's search for self. Indeed, she claims that the pretext to her essays is that "*we have something to declare*" (*Something to Declare* xiv). For her, language and writing are essential to exploring and finding places of connective belonging. She argues that writing and "entering into the writing of another" make for better people, adding:

Writing is a form of vision, and I agree with that proverb that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The artist keeps that vision alive, cleared of the muck and refuse and junk and little dishonesties that always collect and begin to cloud our view of the world around us. (299)

During the years between *Homecoming* and *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*, Alvarez wrote two books, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of Butterflies* (1994), and married her husband, Bill Eichner, a doctor from Nebraska, in 1989. In 1997, she published *¡Yo!*, a novel in which the main character, Yolanda García from *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, is reminiscent of Alvarez herself. Not only is *Yo* Spanish for "I," *Yo*'s character is also a successful author who bases her writing on her own experiences and has endured some of Alvarez's personal hardships. In the prologue, Fifi, *Yo*'s sister, details their family's harsh reaction to *Yo*'s first book, which, like Alvarez's, is largely autobiographical. The structure of this book pushes Alvarez's deep convictions of the power of writing even further, as the story is not recorded by *Yo*, but rather by a multitude of

people who all become connected in their involvement through language. In addition to *¡Yo!*, other Alvarez novels—including *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of Butterflies*, and *Before We Were Free*, a young-adult book published in 2002—contain strong female characters whose main purpose is to convey multitudes of truths and injustices. Their ability to tell these stories is significant to one of Alvarez's main purposes. In an interview with Salon.com, she explains:

I come from a culture where women are not encouraged to speak. [Instead, they are encouraged] to keep their mouths shut, to keep things in the family, to be the guardian of the stories and to be very careful who they're released to. It's a way of understanding that stories are powerful. You know, in the world we lived in, people "got disappeared" for saying the wrong thing. What people said mattered. I was raised in that world, and suddenly here I am—a woman with a voice in another language, one that we're supposed to keep things from, you know, the gringos and the Americans. And I have a voice and I'm saying things about women and women's experience which are not nice. That women have mouths and needs and bodies and problems and breakdowns and all of the stuff that is not nice to admit and certainly not to the [Americans]. (Garner)

Along with this gathering of women storytellers, her other works take on interesting storytellers, both male and female, who generate further awarenesses of today's realities. She claims her book *A Cafecito Story*, published in 2001, is a modern "eco-parable" based on a project she and her husband created (juliaalvarez.com). In 1996, she and Bill purchased a 260-acre farm in an impoverished area in the Dominican Republic. Naming the farm after the country's protector, La Altagracia, they hired workers to reharvest coffee plants. Today the successful farm sells organic coffee and houses an educational center where volunteers from the DREAM Project (Dominican Republic Education and Mentoring) help educate local people. On her

personal Web site, Alvarez emphasizes, “Beyond growing coffee, we chose to work for all the social, environmental, spiritual, and political issues that comprise sustainability” (juliaalvarez.com).

The connections between her own experiences and activist pursuits are evident in each of her works, which now include another book of poetry, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*; several young-adult and childrens' books; and novels. In 2006, she published *Saving the World*, a novel divided between two stories, both centering on epidemics. Her vision is again ambitious. In describing the book, she explained, “Where do I get off naming my novel, *Saving the World*! What can I tell you? I'm not feeling very optimistic as to where we are headed as a human family. But as the Seamus Heaney poem says, hope and history can sometimes be made to ‘rhyme’” (juliaalvarez.com). Collectively, Alvarez's works all focus on this theme of hope and history, and the power of the storyteller, whose job it is to draw truths to the reader's attention.

“How I Learned to Sweep” (1984)

One of the opening poems of *Homecoming*, “How I Learned to Sweep” is a prime example of Alvarez's weaving of her woman's voice and the layers found within domestic work. This poem is perhaps one of the most political in the collection and relates sweeping to war and peace. Though the time setting is vague, Alvarez, or the narrator of the poem, is watching television when her mother tells her to sweep the room bare. Alvarez writes, “I knew right away what she expected / and went at it. I stepped and swept; / the t.v. blared the news” (7). She watches news coverage of the president of the United States delivering a war speech: “in the Far East our soldiers were landing in their helicopters / into jungles their propellers / swept like weeds seen underwater” (7). As she watches the sweeping destruction of war, she, too, sweeps with new vigor, resweeping again and again as she watches and imagines the soldiers dying “as if their dust fell through the screen / upon the floor I had just cleaned” (7). When her mother inspects

the room, she finds it beautiful—“*That's beautiful*, she said, impressed, / she hadn't found a speck of death” (8).

While the war in the poem probably refers to the Vietnam War, Alvarez has constructed the details so that it could be one of several wars, regardless of the poem's date of publication. When the selection of poetry was revised and published again in 1996, the list of possible wars had become longer, including the cold war, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, and the Persian Gulf War. The poem's meanings are numerous and varied: death and the swift cleanup, a frustrated nation with an ever-silenced voice for peace, the reactions to a televised war, censorship and the pacifist's angst, immigration and patriotism, and traditional gender roles and war.

While “How I Learned to Sweep” remains a versatile poem, Alvarez's childhood is entrenched in most of her poetry, especially in the *Homecoming* poems. Through “How I Learned to Sweep,” Alvarez creates the distinct voice of youth familiar with war, war so common it lies on the floor in the living room. Death and violence accompanied with responsibilities and chores are combined to create the realities of those who are both the victims and the victors.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Some Dominicans view Fidel Castro as a hero who pulled Cuba away from the terrible realities that faced Dominicans under the reign of Trujillo. Think about this poem, the Cuban missile crisis, and how Dominican Americans would have seen Castro—portrayed as villain in the American media. How does Alvarez depict war as a political conflict as well as an individual one?
2. In his Bay of Pigs invasion speech in 1961, President John F. Kennedy declared, “The complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies are about to be swept away with the debris of history. Only the strong, only the industrious, only the determined, only the courageous, only the visionary who determine the real nature of our struggle can possibly survive.” How would the narrator's family feel upon hearing these words?

How is the poem a reaction to these words specifically?

***How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991)**

Identified as a novel but really a collection of 15 interrelated short stories, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* centers on the experiences of four sisters, Carla, Sandra (Sandi), Yolanda (Yoyo, Yo, or Joe), and Sophía (Fifi), and their exile from Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic. Largely autobiographical, the stories focus on several topics of the sisters' perpetual dislocation, adjustment, and certain influence on the two worlds they maneuver. Yoyo's character mirrors Alvarez: a poet/writer who invents stories and re-creates oral histories, using her experiences as fertilizer for meaning and movement. Her grandfather, like Alvarez's, is connected to the United Nations; her father is involved in an underground movement to overthrow Trujillo; the maid's name is also *Gladys*; the similarities are many, and readers will have a difficult time separating the García girls' realities from Alvarez's. The duality of Yolanda and Alvarez emphasizes her reaction as a writer to being placed outside mainstream American experiences. In an interview with Dwight Garner, she explains her perception as a writer: "I'm that mixed breed. I'm that hybrid. I think of myself very much as someone who is putting together different kinds of worlds and a different understanding of language from having those two worlds. I think that being American, of this hemisphere, is about that encounter." The encounters that the García girls experience are numerous, usual, and unusual.

The book is divided equally into three sections of five stories focusing on the girls as adults, then adolescents, and finally children. The first story of the book takes place back in the Dominican Republic, where Yo (which in Spanish means "I") has returned in search of some sort of union with her dissected self. Her fictional journey equates Alvarez's metaphorical journey of self back into language and storytelling. Yolanda appears to be innately

homeless as she departs her family's compound and heads into the hills her cousins and aunts warned were dangerous. The narrator comments, "This is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the states, never" (12). Yet as she contemplates the identity of her mother tongue (English or Spanish?), Yo awkwardly settles into English when she is confronted with tension.

The constantly shifting narrator(s) adds to the book's autobiographical feel as Alvarez seems to struggle through the identities of each of the sisters as they experience mental breakdowns, drugs, sex, defeat, and quiet triumphs. Each sister's experiences combine with the others' to create an entire collection of understanding. In another interview, Alvarez emphasizes the importance of storytelling and truth telling. The structure of her book follows her philosophy precisely. She states, "It is something you get at, that's right there, but the truth is all the points around the truth, around the circle. Each little perspective somehow is what the truth is" (qtd. in Schafer). She further adds:

A lot of what I have worked through has to do with coming to this country and losing a homeland and a culture, as a way of making sense, and also it has to do with the sisterhood of my sisters and myself. They were the only people I really had as models. We were moving in a circle, because none of us knew any more than the other one but all we had was each other, not feeling part of this world and not really feeling part of the old world either. (qtd. in Schafer)

In one of Yolanda's stories, she recounts the time when she crossed over from being a verbal virgin into the worlds of poetry, metaphorical meaning, and crude, sexual nouns with her college classmate Rudolf Elmenhurst. As she tells the story, she emphasizes, "There's more to the story. There always is to a true story" (102). Her storytelling and talent for invention characterize the García mother, Sofia, or Mami, to the girls. Her stories, working as oral histories for her girls, recreate new

meanings, given the circumstances in which they are told even for the 1,000th time. One chapter ends with her beginning another story and the narrator reminding the reader, "Everyone listens to the mother" (67). Yet the girls also contribute their own stories and their own oral truths.

The chief tools that Alvarez uses to find the truths of her experiences are the same tools the García girls struggle with: words. The subject of language is constant within *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In her adult life, Sandi suffers a minor nervous breakdown and is committed to a mental institution when she becomes a voracious reader who believes she will soon turn into an animal, "turned out of the human race" (54). Sandi's mother tells the doctor that one day Sandi no longer answered to her name and made "awful sounds like she's in a zoo" (55). Alvarez does not share the story of her recovery, because it is not what is important. Later, while the entire family is visiting Fifi and her new baby girl, Sofia makes clucking sounds to the little girl, cooing in her ear. Sandi lashes out, saying, "God! You sound like a goddamn zoo" (66). Her mother scolds her, saying, "Your language," and then "as if the words were an endearment, she coos them at her granddaughter, 'your language'" (66). The double meaning in the phrase is not accidental. Alvarez consistently plays out the struggle with language and its power in constructing/deconstructing identities. Yolanda also experiences a sort of breakdown when she is no longer able to communicate with her husband, John, playing out a current-day tower of Babel. Their relationship wanders from playful rhyming phrases to absolute non-communication. After she leaves him to live with her parents, she talks compulsively: "She talked in her sleep, she talked when she ate despite twenty-seven years of teaching her to keep her mouth shut when she chewed. She talked in comparisons, she spoke in riddles" (79). But Yolanda seems to be afflicted with an allergy to words. Her obsession with words and her subsequent suffering strongly correlate to the language war that many non-Anglos confront within the United States. The Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa asks "for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard

. . . Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 55). She adds that these border dwellers must have "[a] language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating with the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both" (55).

What Alvarez creates through the sorting of language, she also creates through her female characters. Just as Anzaldúa suggests the creation of the hybrid, a new reality, each of the García women has her own revolutions that create space for altered realities. Revolution is a theme in this book in many senses. Not only has Carlos, the father, participated in his country's underground revolution, but his daughters and wife also subversively fight against their own dictatorial circumstances. One of the stories, entitled "A Regular Revolution," contains several female uprisings. The daughters rebel against their controlling, conservative surroundings through unique insurgencies: smoking pot, "experimenting with hair removal cream," reading books centered on understanding the female body, hiding love letters, and sneaking out. The narrator relates, "It was a regular revolution: constant skirmishes. Until the time we took open aim and won, and our summers—if not our lives—became our own" (111). Sometimes the sisters share the same side, and at other times they plot against one another to help liberate the sister who is held down by tradition or misogyny. When Fifi, banished back to the Dominican Republic for possession, becomes "brainwashed" (126) and engaged to a machismo cousin, the three sisters stage a coup in a place where another coup took place 10 years earlier. As these women plan, struggle, and conquer, they create a new generation of feminist revolutionaries who are echoed in many of Alvarez's works.

Alvarez has earned several prizes for *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, including the Notable Book award from the American Library Association in 1992 and the Pen Oakland/Joséphine Miles Award for the book's multicultural viewpoint. It has also been translated into several languages.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Yo, in another of Alvarez's books (*¡Yo!*), claims that "language is the only homeland. . . . When there is no other ground under your feet, you learn quick." With this idea in mind, discuss the repercussions of the title *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. How does language become a landscape of borders and border crossings? How does the title figure into each of the stories? Explain your responses.
2. Alvarez talks about how storytelling arrives at truth. What are the "truths" that each of the García girls tells in her own stories? How do others perceive these truths? What differences do their perceptions make? Explain your answer fully.
3. What does it mean to the novel that the main character wants to be a writer? Explain your answer with references to specific incidents in the book.

"Daughter of Invention" (1991)

"Daughter of Invention," a short story contained within the framework of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, centers around Mami and her daughter, Yolanda. In this story, Alvarez explores multiple levels of feminism and sexism as well as the role of the female minority writer. The autobiographical connections between Yolanda and Alvarez are especially apparent within the events of "Daughter of Invention."

In the United States, Mami becomes a self-proclaimed inventor, busily scribbling ideas on a pad of paper only after she has "settled her house down at night" (134). Though none of her gadgets actually is patented, she unwittingly invents new meanings within her map of language, and language becomes the primary focus for the story. Speaking English as a second language, Mami alters idioms, changing their former meanings and creating new ones: "When in Rome, do unto the Romans"; "It takes two to tangle"; "There is no use trying to drink spilt milk" (135, 140). When Yolanda suffers from writer's block while trying to write her speech for

the Teacher's Day address, Mami alters Plato's words from the *Republic*, saying, "Like the Americans say, *Necessity is the daughter of invention*. I'll help you" (142). Her alteration of necessity as the daughter rather than the mother of invention draws attention to the relationship between the two words.

Yolanda's resulting speech reflects her own mother's practice of invention as Yoyo adopts the words of Walt Whitman and writes her own song of herself. While Mami is unabashedly proud, Yolanda's father, Papi, is furious. Within a short space, Alvarez creates an arena where masculinity and tradition snort and stamp with contempt for cultural feminism. Papi tears the speech into pieces, forbidding Yolanda to deliver it. She in turn accuses him of being just like Trujillo. Within the scaffold of language, Yolanda works to confront the suppression she feels as a female from both sides of her biographical border and the insignificance she struggles against as a minority student. Through her speech, she invents a place of power for herself. The Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga explains the method Chicana feminists use in writing themselves into places of power: "When we write for ourselves, our deepest selves, the work travels into the core of our experience with a cultural groundedness that illuminates a total humanity, one which requires a revolution to make manifest" (*Loving in the War Years* 148). She adds, "Our truest words and images are suppressed by the cultural mainstream" (148). As a result of her father's suppression, necessity does become the daughter of invention as Mami and Yolanda are forced into drafting a more "appropriate" speech. However, Plato's quote reverts to its original by the end of the story, with Yolanda as the victor when Papi presents her a typewriter—a symbol and tool to facilitate her own underground and open revolution in the United States as a female Dominican.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As characters who are forced into positions of "outsiders" from mainstream Americans, how do Sofia and Yolanda subvert and deconstruct their forced categories?

2. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W. E. B. DuBois discusses the idea of double consciousness: the double self of two cultures and two hierarchies of expectations that African Americans wrestle with on a daily basis, attempting to merge the two halves into a “better and truer self” (11). Analyze the double self of Mami and whether/how she attains or portrays her truer self.

“Hold the Mayonnaise” (1992)

First published in the *New York Times Magazine*, then in the anthology *New Worlds of Literature: Writings from America's Many Cultures*, Alvarez's essay “Hold the Mayonnaise” takes on the complexities of multicultural families and what Alvarez calls the “stepworld” (*New Worlds* 701). As a young girl, Alvarez trembled at the possibility of having an American stepmother, who would force her to eat mayonnaise. The only way this foreign terror would become an actuality would be if her mother died: “We were Catholics, so of course, the only kind of remarriage we could imagine had to involve our mother's death” (699). Mayonnaise became for her a cultural symbol of having had her home culture erased.

Years later, Alvarez finds herself in an ironic twist of her mayonnaise nightmare: Upon marrying her husband, Bill, she herself becomes a “foreign stepmother in a gringa household” (700). Her task of being a stepmother to her “husband's two tall, strapping, blond, mayonnaise-eating daughters” is uniquely informed by her past as an outsider. Her previous fears and experiences give her some insight into her stepdaughters' supposed pains. She explains, “On my side, being the newcomer in someone else's territory is a role I'm used to. I can tap into that struggling English speaker, that skinny, dark-haired, olive-skinned girl in a sixth grade of mostly blond and blue-eyed giants” (700). She admits, however, that in connection to her childhood of displacement, she creates a place outside her own stepfamily. As her stepdaughter wonders why her stepmother will not publicly identify her as a stepdaughter, Alvarez explains that she

did not want to presume. The stepworld and the world of the minority share similarities—“It feels as if all the goodies have gone somewhere else,” she writes.

The essay's conclusion makes unique connections to assimilationist and antiassimilationist approaches. Indeed, the controversy over whether to accept the dominant culture to the point of erasing one's own (assimilation) or to add aspects of the dominant culture to one's own home culture (acculturation) remains a controversy in cultural studies today. Alvarez makes it clear that while assimilationist traditions and advice are negative for Latinas/os today, they simultaneously become good advice for the stepworld. Continuing with her imagery of food throughout the essay, Alvarez creates a melting-pot metaphor: “Like a potluck supper . . . [y]ou put what you've got together with what everyone else brought and see what comes out of the pot. The luck part is if everyone brings something you like. No potato salad, no deviled eggs, no little party sandwiches with you know what in them” (701). Her version of the melting pot has been transformed from the traditional assimilationist pot of whitewash. By recognizing her own similarities and differences, she acts as an advocate of border crossing and cultural mixing where items still retain their distinctive qualities.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *Something to Declare*, Alvarez discusses the pressure for women to become mothers, stating, “For all our talk of feminism and pro-choice, willful childlessness continues to have a bad reputation” (99). She further argues that within Latin culture “being a woman and a mother are practically synonymous. Being childless—by choice—is tantamount to being wicked and selfish” (99). Alvarez combats these fixed beliefs by creating the notion of “imagined motherhood”—being able to grow as a mother through the imagining of being one. Keeping this idea in mind, how does Alvarez create new spaces of experience through the mind? Why are her notions important for her experiences in “Hold the Mayonnaise”?

2. Alvarez uses mayonnaise to symbolize the unfamiliarity of the United States. What other objects do people use to represent or generalize other groups of people? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this practice?
3. Set up a debate in your class, with the following proposition: People entering the United States to live should be acculturated, rather than assimilated. After the conclusion of the debate, write a brief (two-page) response to it, expressing your own opinion and supporting it with specific examples.

***In the Time of Butterflies* (1994)**

In 1986, two years after *Homecoming* was published, a women's press invited Alvarez to write a paragraph about a Dominican heroine for a series of postcards. Immediately she knew she wanted to write about the Mirabal sisters, three women who were murdered by Trujillo's regime on November 25, 1960 (a day now recognized as the International Day against Violence towards Women). After extensive research, Alvarez wrote a fictionalized account of the Mirabal family. Regarding the novel, she wrote, "I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart" (*In the Time of Butterflies* 324).

The Mirabal sisters were leaders of the same underground movement in which Alvarez's father participated. Three of the four sisters, Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa (Mate), were killed four months after the Alvarez family arrived as exiles in New York. Haunted by their stories, Alvarez set out to write a novel that would introduce English-speaking readers to the sisters' story and courage. In her postscript, she tells Dominicans, "I hope this book deepens North Americans' understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered—of which this story tells only a few" (324).

The structure of the book, similar to that of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, is centered

on not one narrator but many. Combining journal excerpts, newspaper clippings, letters, and drawings, each of the book's first three sections consists of interwoven stories from the sisters, including the surviving sister, Dedé. Mate, the youngest, gives expression to the power of unified female voices as she writes in her prison journal, "There *is* something deeper. Sometimes I really feel it in here, especially late at night, a current going among us, like an invisible needle stitching us together into the glorious, free nation we are becoming" (239). Alvarez's use of female collective memory resonates with notions of third-world feminism and what Emma Pérez identifies as the "decolonial imaginary": women's experiences that have been negated and usurped by a masculine universalist narrative. Alvarez creates sisters who speak uniquely from different spaces, showing the individual paths they have plowed in their journey of political consciousness and revolution, a subject with few female narrators. She writes, "I wanted to understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years. I believed that only by making them real, alive, could I make them mean anything to the rest of us" (*Something to Declare* 203). All of the sisters, including the surviving Dedé, create and represent unique roles of the revolution as they speak over decades of experience with mother- and sisterhood, love, school, religion, secrecy, prison torture, and bomb making.

In the final section of the book, an epilogue with Dedé speaking in 1994, Alvarez opens the novel's scope of political consciousness further by raising awareness of current world conditions. Dedé questions the notion that the full story has ended and wonders whether the sacrifice of her sisters ends in the conditions of today. By leaving room for future female heroines and revolutionaries, Alvarez creates a novel that unites past and present with difficult, complicated questions that run through the course of her works.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In her postscript to the book, Alvarez argues that as figures are glorified and mythified, they

- legacy of Trujillo? Find other writings that are based on the legacies of former rulers. How is a novel based on history different from actual historical writing? Explain your answer.
2. After Alvarez wrote the original version of *Homecoming*, she later published a revised version two years after the publication of *In the Time of Butterflies* in 1994. She claims that in writing the second edition of *Homecoming*, she had more political maturity. How do her added poems and ideas coincide with some of the major themes found within *In the Time of Butterflies*?
 3. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that as a Chicana feminist she fights multiple battles on cultural, gender, and sexual grounds. Many of these battles happen simultaneously. What simultaneous battles do Alvarez's characters fight? What sort of multiple causes are they fighting for?
 4. In *So Far from God*, Ana Castillo, another Latina author, has written a book in which the main characters are four sisters. Compare and contrast the themes of this book and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*.
 5. Alvarez writes as an immigrant in the 1960s and 1970s, yet how is her writing a critique on immigration today? How do authors like Alvarez negate the culture of silence when it comes to contemporary immigration wars? Provide specific examples from her work and that of others.
 6. Mothers are often depicted as strong influences in works by what Alvarez calls "hyphenated" Americans. Find three works in which this is so and analyze the role of the mother in each. Include citations to each work in your analysis.
- WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**
- Alvarez, Julia. *Before We Were Free*. New York: Knopf, 2002.
- . *A Cafecito Story*. White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green, 2001.
- . "Hold the Mayonnaise." *New Worlds of Literature: Writings from America's Many Cultures*, edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter, 699–701. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994.
- . *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*. New York: Dutton, 1996.
- . *The Housekeeping Book*. Illustrated by Caron MacDonald and Rene Schall. Burlington, Vt.: n.p., 1984.
- . *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume, 1992.
- . *In the Name of Salomé*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2000.
- . *In the Time of Butterflies*. New York: Plume, 1994.
- . *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*. New York: Plume, 1996.
- . *Something to Declare*. New York: Plume, 1999.
- . *¡Yo!* Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1997.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Barak, Julie. "Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre": A Second Coming into Language in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Melus* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1998).
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver. Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- Echevarría, Robert González. "Sisters in Death." *New York Times Book Review*, 18 December 1994, p. 28.
- Garner, Dwight. "Julia Alvarez." *Salon*, 25 September 1998. Available online. URL: <http://salon.com>. Accessed May 23, 2006.
- Gutiérrez, David. *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Johnson, Kelli Lyon. "Both Sides of the Massacre: Collective Memory and Narrative on Hispaniola." *Mosaic* 36, no. 3 (June 2003): 75–92.
- Jones, Deborah. "Alvarez Brews Up Coffee with a Social Conscience." Available online. URL: www.juliaalvarez.com. Accessed October 15, 2009.
- Luis, William. "A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." In *Dance between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature*

- Written in the United States*. Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997.
- Martinez, Elizabeth. Review of "In the Time of the Butterflies," *Progressive* 9 (July 1995). *Literature Resource Center*. Available online. URL: <http://galenet.galegroup.com>. Accessed May 29, 2006.
- Moraga, Cherríe. *Loving in the War Years*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000.
- Morales, Ed. "Madam Butterfly: How Julia Alvarez Found Her Accent." *Village Voice Literary Supplement* November 1994: 13.
- Nas, Loes. "Border Crossings in Latina Narrative: Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Journal of Literary Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 2003): 125–137.
- Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Rich, Charlotte. "Talking Back to El Jefe: Genre, Polyphony, and Dialogic Resistance in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies*." *Melus* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 165–184.
- Rifkind, Donna. "Speaking American." *New York Times Book Review*, 6 October 1991, p. 14.
- Rosario-Sievert, Heather. "Anxiety, Repression, and Return: The Language of Julia Alvarez." *Readerly/Writerly Texts: Essays on Literature, Literary/Textual Criticism, and Pedagogy* 4, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1997).
- Schafer, Andrea. "Julia Alvarez." *American Writers, Supplement VII*, edited Jay Parini. New York: Scribner, 2001. *Literature Resource Center*. Available online. URL: <http://galenet.galegroup.com>. Accessed May 29, 2006.
- Stavans, Ilan. "Daughters of Invention." *Commonweal* 119, no. 7 (April 1992): 23–25.
- Vela, Richard. "Daughter of Invention: The Poetry of Julia Alvarez." Paper presented at *Philological Association of the Carolinas*, Spartanburg, S.C. 20 March 1998.
- Wiley, Catherine. "Memory Is Already the Story You Made Up about the Past: An Interview with Julia Alvarez." *Bloomsbury Review*, March 1992, pp. 9–10.

Megan Inclán



RUDOLFO ANAYA (1937–)

A novel is not written to explain a culture; it creates its own.

(Rudolfo Anaya, neabigread.org/books/blessmeultima/teachersguide04.php)

While it may be true, as Anaya states, that a novel creates its own culture, his works are deeply autobiographical. As such, they cannot help but reflect the culture in which he was raised. Born to a large family on October 30, 1937, in the small town of Pastura, New Mexico, Anaya was in many ways caught between cultures. There was the obvious struggle between the dominant American culture and his own Hispanic home culture, but even on a family level, Rudolfo faced conflicting allegiances to the wandering ranching culture of his father and to the settled farm life of his mother.

In his autobiography, Anaya recounts an early experience when the differing expectations of his parents became especially apparent: As he was beginning to crawl, his extended family gathered around him. Each person had an item representative of his or her wishes for the baby. Martín Anaya, missing the *llano* (open plain) of his cowboy days and wishing the freedom of a ranch life for his son, put a saddle in front of the child. Rafaelita (Mares) valued education and hoped her son might become a priest. She placed a paper and a pencil in the circle. As if in prophecy, young Rudolfo crawled toward the pencil. Antonio, the young protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya's debut novel, similarly faces a struggle to choose his own path, despite parents who would choose for him. Anaya comments on the similarities between his life and fiction in an interview with Rubén Martínez:

I have a very close relationship to the characters I write about because they come out of my life. At the same time you have to remember that fiction somehow transcends that reality, that experience and reality that we use as a basis, as the ground, from which to work. I then let it take off, let it spiral, let it create itself so that it is not a completely historical reflection. I am doing it partially as a reflection of where I come from, the people I came from, the towns I came from, the barrio in Albuquerque here where I grew up, but always allowing the element of the imagination to create fiction and to create art, to create some kind of pattern out of that total experience. (Dick 117)

Anaya's mother encouraged a love for literature through the *cuentos* (folktales) that she told him. Sharing *cuentos* at gatherings is common in Hispanic culture and Anaya acknowledges the role of that oral tradition combined with the Saturday mornings he spent at the library: They surrounded him with "a milieu of words [. . . which are] important to stimulate the writer's imagination; to respond to what is going on around him, to incorporate the materials and then rehash them and make fiction—to start at a point of reference which is close to one's being and then to transcend it, that's important" (Dick 15).

Although Anaya had a love of learning, his early school years were difficult. As was the norm within

the Hispanic community, his parents spoke Spanish in the home. It was only when Anaya entered school at the age of six that he was introduced to the English-speaking world and, with it, the discrimination that separated Anglo and Hispanic cultures.

After World War II, many Mexican-American families moved to larger cities in search of work. Anaya's family was no exception. When he was 15, his family relocated to the barrio in Albuquerque known as Barelás. He did well in school and enjoyed the life of a typical teenager—playing basketball and baseball, riding a bike—until he was injured in a tragic accident that could easily have killed him.

He and his friends were at their favorite swimming spot, a deep irrigation ditch, when Anaya dove in and struck bottom. Two of vertebrae in his neck snapped, and he was instantly paralyzed. He would have drowned had a friend not dragged him to shore. In the months that followed, Anaya lived through a hellish recovery process that transformed him completely. To immobilize his neck, a pulley was strapped around his chin and counterbalanced with weights. When that was unsuccessful, a doctor “bore holes into his skull and placed pins to hold the ropes of the pulley that were attached to the headboard” (Baeza 7). Later he was driven to the Carrie Tingley Hospital, located in the middle of the desert, and placed in a full-body cast. He fought hard to recover, but he says, “The ‘Rudy’ of my childhood was dead—died in nights of tortured fever while he hung on ropes” (Baeza 7). The Rudolfo Anaya who emerged from the hospital to graduate with his class from Albuquerque High School in 1956 had built “a new faith inside the shell of bones and muscle” (Olmos 5).

Anaya attended business school for two years, then switched his major to English and transferred to the University of New Mexico. Although he found the university to be a primarily Anglo environment, Anaya formed a small clique with several other Chicano students who shared his interest in art and literature. Together, they read and encouraged one another's efforts. Anaya's first attempts

at writing were poems, but he soon realized he “probably didn't have the gift that some people are blessed with.” He switched to prose and immediately began to write novels, completing two or three while he was an undergraduate. He considered those early novels “exercises in learning to write” and burned them (Dick 14).

Anaya describes the process of learning to write as difficult, in part because of the lack of sufficient role models:

When I first began to work, I used Anglo American writers as role models. But I couldn't get my act together until I left them behind. They had a lot to teach me and I don't underestimate that—you're learning whether you're reading a comic book or Hemingway or Shakespeare or Cervantes—but I couldn't tell my story in their terms. (Dick 108)

Yet no other “terms” were available. In all his years of schooling, Anaya had not read a single example of Chicano prose. No one had succeeded in publishing a novel that reflected the true Chicano experience.

Upon completion of a B.A. in English and American literature at the University of New Mexico in 1963, Anaya became a teacher, instructing classes at both the junior- and senior-high levels. He continued his education, receiving an M.A. in English in 1968 and another in guidance and counseling in 1972. It was during his time in school that he met Patricia Lawless, a Kansas native also trained in guidance and counseling. They married in 1966 and Anaya felt he had found in her “the one person who believed I could be a writer” (Baeza 17).

With encouragement from his new wife, Anaya spent seven years writing and rewriting a story about Antonio, a young Chicano boy growing up in the Southwest. While the story had autobiographical roots, Anaya found it difficult to “uncover the symbols and patterns of his own culture.” The story felt flat and lifeless. It was then that Ultima appeared to him: “That strong old curandera . . . came to me one night and pointed the way. That is, she came to me from my subconscious, a guide and

mentor who was to lead me into the world of my native American experience” (Olmos 7).

For Anaya, the symbol of Ultima became a powerful demonstration of how the myths and symbols of a cultural conscious could be inculcated by literature. Under Ultima’s watchful guidance, Anaya grew to realize that to write authentically, he had to write not as a Chicano trying to fit his story into an Anglo framework, but as a Chicano giving birth to his own story, thereby laying claim to his full richness of heritage and language. Through this process of rebirth, the story of Antonio became more than a simple coming-of-age novel about a young boy; Antonio’s tale, now titled *Bless Me, Ultima*, represented *la tristeza de la vida* (literally, the sadness of life).

At the same time that Anaya was struggling to write his novel, Chicanos all over the Southwest were rallying behind leaders like César Chávez, Corky Gonzalez, Ramsey Muniz, and Reyes López Tijerina. Chicanos were no longer content to be treated as aliens within the nation of their birth. They demanded more rights and recognition of their worth as individuals and as a culture. The political and social upheavals created a Hispanic community hungry for literature that reflected the truths of their lives.

Publishers in New York were far removed from the political and social ripples of the Southwest. Unacquainted with the innovations Anaya’s work represented, they rejected his uniquely Chicano style, which did not fit within their definition of literature. Undaunted by the accumulating pile of rejection letters, Anaya answered a call for submission he had seen in *El Grito*, a literary magazine born of the Chicano movement at Berkeley. His novel was not only accepted by the newly formed Quinto Sol Publications, but also honored with the 1971 Premio Quinto Sol as the best novel written by a Chicano. Thus began Anaya’s fame as the father of Chicano literature.

When the book appeared on the market, Chicanos everywhere recognized themselves within its pages. It was incorporated into classrooms as teachers and professors realized its potential. Most rewarding to Anaya was the fact that the “working

people” were reading it. The world had proven it was ready for a new kind of literature that reflected the multicultural experience of America.

Still, the reaction to *Bless Me, Ultima* was not all positive. Anaya’s use of strong language, praised by many as lending an authenticity to the work, was condemned by some. Others objected to the inclusion of folk belief, which they interpreted as witchcraft, as a central theme. The scene in which the young hero observes his own birth—a wonderful introduction to the technique of magical realism—drew particular critical fire.

Public schools were deeply affected by the controversy, unsure whether to embrace its innovations or to reject them outright. Many chose rejection. In 1981 an administrator at Bloomfield High School in New Mexico burned the book, citing its use of corrupt language and the challenge it presents to sacred values of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Norwood High School banned the book, explaining that it was a double standard to use the book for mandatory assignments when school policy penalizes students for using similar profanity. In response to those who would ban his book, Anaya says, “There are still some very narrow views of what literature is and what literature should be taught in this country. . . . This country is multicultural and the more their children know about other communities not only the better off will they be communicating with those communities, but they will have a better life in terms of future work” (Dick 171).

Anaya’s success with *Bless Me, Ultima* led to a position in the English Department at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. By then, Anaya was hard at work on his second novel, a story about a displaced family’s struggle to overcome addiction and violence. The story was published in 1976 as *Heart of Aztlan* and received praise for exploring the strong bond between the Chicano people and the mythical Aztlan. Just three years later, *Tortuga* was published, winning the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award and completing what is referred to as Anaya’s New Mexico Trilogy.

Anaya’s trilogy is linked not only through the use of uniquely Anayan devices such as extended dream sequences, shamanlike characters, and the

infusion of myth, but also more subtly through the carrying over of characters. Jason, whom readers remember from *Bless Me, Ultima* as the boy with an Indian friend, appears as the son of the protagonist in *Heart of Aztlan*. Similarly Crispín, the blind poet of *Heart of Aztlan*, sends his blue guitar as a gift in *Tortuga*. Even the boy known only as Tortuga possibly has his origin in an earlier novel as Benjie Chavéz, who is shot in the left hand and paralyzed when he falls from a water tower (Olmos 74). And where actual characters do not overtly bridge the gap between novels, character traits do in the form of archetypes. There are Antonio, Clemente, and Tortuga, all on spiritual quests for identity; and Ultima, Crispín, and Salomón, the spiritual guides who mentor them. Even the lesser characters have their base in Jungian archetypes: the strong “good mother” figures of María and Adelita, the “feminine principle” (ideal woman) of Cristina and Ismelda, the “shadow” (destructive force) of Tenorio, Sapó, and Danny.

Novels may be Anaya's preferred form, but he has by no means limited himself to long-form prose. Several of his short stories appeared in his collection *The Silence of the Llano* (1982). Anaya turned his attention to children's books when he sat down to read bedtime stories to his grandchildren and realized “[Chicano] children who are pre-school age or in the early grades do not see themselves in stories, and they should. I thought it was really important to develop writing in that area” (Dick 175). To that end, Anaya began to write his own stories based on the *cuentos* of his childhood, publishing *The Legend of La Llorona* in 1984, *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcóatl* in 1987, and other picture books focusing on Chicano traditions and legends.

Lest Anaya's adult readers feel neglected, in 1992 he returned to the novel with *Alburquerque* [*sic*]. As is evident from the altered spelling of the city's name, *Alburquerque* is more political than his previous works, attacking the infrastructure of the city and raising questions about urban development. Still, in the words of John Nichols, author of *The Milagro Beanfield War*, the novel overcomes politics to reflect “a deep caring for the land and

culture and for the spiritual well being of people, environment, landscape” (Baeza 43).

Caring for the land, Anaya claims, is a cultural attribute that stems from an early and long-lasting reliance on the land. He describes the Chicano people as “a communal group that for a long period of time relied on the earth for subsistence, thereby becoming very tied to the cycles of weather, of planting, of nurturing, of watering, of caring. It is easy to see why *la tierra* becomes *la madre tierra* [the earth becomes mother earth]” (Dick 123–124). The theme of the earth as mother is present in all of Anaya's works but becomes especially important in *Alburquerque* as it examines the displacement of peoples and cultures in the Southwest.

The 1990s ushered in a new chapter in Anaya's writing with a shift to the detective novel. Detective fiction, as has most genre fiction, has largely been dismissed by universities as not worthy of literary study. But as Ralph Rodriguez explains, detective fiction is ultimately a quest for identity by an “alienated outsider, the moral man or woman in the corrupt world” (6), and provides a unique framework for exploring the underlying values of a culture. Rodriguez goes on to explain that the role of alienated outsider strikes a cord with many Chicanas/os, who are often portrayed as alien within their own country. It is not surprising then that Chicanas/os should turn to the detective novel as a platform for their own identity stories.

Rudolfo Anaya is not the first writer to cast a Chicano in the role of sleuth. But where other mystery writers use the genre as a form for their Chicano heroes, Anaya redefines it. From the relationship of the villain to the hero, his unique perspective on the nature of history, and the magical realism common in his earlier novels, only Anaya could have written the Sonny Baca detective series.

In 1993 Anaya retired from the University of New Mexico as professor emeritus. Leaving the university afforded him more time for exploring the world and fostering the day-to-day relationships he says grow more important as we age. He travels to discuss his work with others and devotes time to mentoring new writers. Through it all, he has continued to write, experimenting with still another

genre—the play. As Anaya himself has said, “One’s autobiography does not end; it simply moves into a new, and, one hopes, exciting plane of living” (González-T. 388).

In her critical companion, the biographer Margarite Fernández Olmos credits Rudolfo Anaya with “inscribing the physical and spiritual landscape of Chicano culture onto the terrain of contemporary U.S. literature” (1). That ability to transcend class and culture, integrating all it means to be Chicano into works with universal appeal, has earned Rudolfo Anaya a lasting place in literature.

***Bless Me, Ultima* (1972)**

Heralded by literary critics as Anaya’s “opus of Chicano life and culture” (Baeza 25), *Bless Me, Ultima* was like nothing the literary world had ever seen. Few works by Chicano writers had been published previously; of those, none had the mass appeal of Anaya’s story about a seven-year-old boy’s search to find his identity within the complex world of the Southwest. It seemed the right book at the right time for Chicanos, who were battling to redefine their status in the United States. Enrique Lamadrid describes the book as “serene in the face of this turmoil, full of conflict, yet non-combative, a portrait of the developing consciousness of the young protagonist, Antonio” (González-T. 464–465). The novel goes beyond Antonio to describe the developing conscious of the nation.

Antonio, the protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima*, guides readers through the complex terrain of his life. When he is a young child, Antonio’s parents speak only Spanish in the home; it is not until he goes to school that he is exposed to English. The narration reflects Antonio’s own language, a hybrid of his home/school community. The use of both Spanish and English, at first a barrier to publication, was recognized by Chicanos as an authentic representation of speech and a key literary innovation. Anaya did in his writing what millions of people do every day: He made language personal, functional, and representative of the multicultural nature of American society. This process, called

code switching, became a prevalent feature of the Chicano literary movement.

Antonio tells us on the first page that we will “begin at the beginning . . . not the beginning that was in my dreams and the stories they whispered to me about my birth, and the people of my father and mother, and my three brothers—but the beginning that came with Ultima.” Ultima is left alone when war scatters her village. While the people appreciate Ultima’s abilities as a *curandera*, “a miracle-worker who could heal the sick,” they are reluctant to take her in because of rumors that she is a *bruja* (witch). Antonio’s parents overcome their concern and invite Ultima to live with their family.

Ultima blends well with the Márez family, becoming an assistant to Maria, a confidant to Gabriel, and a mentor to Antonio. Soon she becomes indispensable: When the murder of the sheriff means trouble for the Márez home, it is Ultima’s owl that warns them and Ultima herself who provides comfort to Antonio, a witness of the vigilante justice meted out by the townsmen.

But Ultima represents more to the story of Antonio than the “good mother” of Jungian thought. She becomes a central figure when she is asked to cure Antonio’s uncle of a curse placed on him by Tenorio’s daughters. Ultima asks Tenorio to have his daughters lift the curse, but they refuse. Ultima uses her own powers to cure the uncle, with Antonio as a spiritual double. One by one, Tenorio’s daughters die and Tenorio vows vengeance upon Ultima.

Meanwhile, Antonio has grown old enough to attend school. His mother hopes that the church’s teachings will lead him to become a priest, but as Antonio approaches the date of his First Holy Communion, the lessons he learns outside school fuel his doubts regarding the Catholic Church. Ultima’s power to heal an illness that God himself could (or would) not cure and the willingness of his family to turn to a *curandera* for help confuse him. To make matters worse, a friend introduces him to the golden carp. The boys believe the golden carp is a god who prophesized that “the sins of the people would weigh so heavy upon the land that in the end the whole town would collapse and be swallowed by water” (123).

The golden carp is only one of the myths incorporated in the heart of the story. Throughout the book, there are references to La Llorona, the wailing woman said to search in the night for the children she herself killed. The story of Antonio and his quest for spiritual truth could not be told without references to the myths that surround him. But religion and myth do not have to be polar. Anaya had this to say about myth:

We often look at mythology as if it happened in the distant past. We say: "The Greeks had their mythology, and the Toltecs and Aztecs of meso-America had their mythology. Isn't that interesting? It's all in the past; it's gone." We tend to view myth as static. What I am saying is that it is not static. It's working in us even now. Because those same archetypes that were discovered by the ancient people are in us today. And it is the creation of myth and that reference to that collective pool that we all carry inside of us that re-energizes us and makes us more authentic. (González-T. 464–465)

Antonio cannot reconcile what he is learning about power with the teachings of his church. He cannot reconcile the desires of his father that he be of the *llano* with the wishes of his mother that he be of the pasture. He cannot reconcile his own vision of himself with the expectations of friends who require him to be their priest. In his dreams, Antonio begins to face what he cannot consciously understand, and Ultima goes to him there, serving the same purpose as a "conciliatory force . . . guiding Antonio between the extremes of his parents and the myriad other tensions he must attempt to resolve" (Olmos 38). But as much as Antonio needs Ultima, he has learned from her that he must find his own truths. Ultima's death is symbolic of Antonio's readiness to "love life," but even in her passing Ultima promises that Antonio will not be alone, telling him, "If despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills. I shall be with you" (276).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Anaya created the myth of the golden carp. What purpose does the myth serve in the story of Antonio? Why do you suppose Anaya did not use an existing myth?
2. Discuss *Bless Me, Ultima* as a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story. How does the character of Antonio universally reflect the struggle of any young person to find his or her place within society? In what way is Antonio's struggle unique to Chicanos?
3. Anaya says he looks at his own work through a sense of "the archetypal, about what we once must have known collectively" (Dick 422). Study the major archetypes and their attributes as described in Jungian theory. Create a chart of archetypes and the characters from Anaya's New Mexico Trilogy that correspond with each archetype. How do archetypes affect story? Experiment with archetypes in your own writing.
4. Look up the term *magical realism*. How does the scene in which Antonio views his own birth operate as this form of writing? Support your response.

Tortuga (1979)

Anaya's third novel in his New Mexico Trilogy is based loosely on his own experience as the survivor of a swimming accident. The story begins with an accident victim's being transported to the Crippled Children and Orphans Hospital of Agua Bendita by two colorful ambulance drivers. The drivers, Filomón and Clepo, tell the boy the story of Tortuga, the local mountain. Legend says the mountain is really a sea turtle that traveled north and became trapped beneath the earth's layers when the oceans turned to deserts. Filo proclaims that it is only a matter of time until the oceans return and free Tortuga. Meanwhile the people who live in Agua Bendita benefit from the rivers of "pee" that flow from Tortuga because they believe the minerals in the hot springs possess a healing power.

A doctor orders the boy placed in a full body cast to protect him while he begins physical therapy. The other children nickname him *Tortuga* because of his resemblance to the mountain: The cast surrounds and protects his body much the same as a turtle's shell. The name *Tortuga* is symbolic as well. It represents the boy's own entrapment and the hope that he, too, will one day break free of his cast and therefore his paralysis.

Unlike *Bless Me, Ultima*, in which the main character is revealed to readers by his own narration and dream sequences, it is through the interactions with the other characters in the book that we learn most about Tortuga. He is surrounded by other children who are in the hospital because of their own injuries and maladies. There are Mike, who survived the fire that killed his family, only to be physically and emotionally scarred for life; Danny, who becomes more and more fanatical as his arm withers away from some inexplicable cause; Jerry, the boy who was taken from his grandfather by "the Indian Health people" and waits in never-ending silence for his grandfather to track him down; Franco, whom we never actually meet, but whose songs float through the wards; and Salomón.

Of all the characters, it is Salomón who affects Tortuga most profoundly. Salomón is also paralyzed, but he has learned to turn the pages of books by using his tongue to manipulate a plastic rod. His stories have made him a legend within the hospital, and Tortuga often visits Salomón's room. Salomón is more than just another patient in the hospital. In "Journey into the Heart of Tortuga," Maria Lopez equates him with Aristotle's unmoved mover: "He is the immobile center of the hospital and those who dare must come to him" (González-T. 216). But before Tortuga can go to Salomón, Salomón goes to Tortuga in the form of a prophetic dream. As do Ultima and Crispín, he takes on the role of shaman, guiding Tortuga to his destiny.

It is Salomón who leads Tortuga to the infant ward, a macabre room filled with shriveled babies on iron lungs and feeding tubes. Salomón tells him, "That is why you have come here. . . . You must go

to the very roots of sadness before you let out this shout of life that bursts in your lungs" (117). The sight of all the children "more dead than alive" drives Tortuga into a suicidal depression, from which he emerges only when Danny and two others toss him into the hospital's pool in an attempt at assisted suicide. The experience, characteristic of the death and rebirth of mythic heroes, leaves Tortuga free of his shell and transformed into a man capable of fulfilling Salomón's instruction, "Sing a song of love, Tortuga! Oh yes, sing of love" (196).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the role of nicknames in *Tortuga*. Why are Tortuga's true identity and the cause of his accident withheld from readers? Why is it significant that it is Danny, not Mike, who gives Tortuga his nickname? Explain your answer.
2. Salomón tells Tortuga, "When we are not of this time then we encounter absolute freedom" (54). Discuss how a person who is paralyzed may experience freedom. How have others defined freedom? Is freedom absolute or relative? Support your opinion.
3. Mike describes coming to terms with the accident that killed his mother and sisters: "When I finally realized that things just happen, that there's no reason, that there's no big daddy up in the sky watching whether you burn or not . . . much less caring, then it helped" (47). Tortuga admits that he still wonders why things happen. Does it help to have a reason? How might Mike feel comforted by believing there is no God, while others feel comforted by believing in God?
4. In *Tortuga*, the turtle is believed to be godlike, capable of curing maladies with its urine. As a class, create a mural depicting the animals prevalent in Chicano myths and the reasons for each animal's importance.
5. As a class, make a chart of the qualities that cause stories to be defined as character driven or plot driven. Apply your chart to *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Tortuga*. How do these stories fit within the definitions you have created?

***The Sonny Baca Mysteries* (1995–2005)**

Anaya begins his series of detective fiction with *Zia Summer* (1995), in which he revives Sonny Baca, a minor character from *Albuquerque*. Baca's career as a private investigator is launched with the murder of his cousin, a case he resolves (as is typical of the genre) within the pages of the novel: Baca's cousin, it turns out, was sacrificed by Anthony Pájaro, a cult leader intent on destroying the world by detonating a nuclear device in New Mexico. Unlike other detective series, where the hero is constant and the villains change with each successive book, in Anaya's series both the hero and the villain remain constant. Pájaro comes to be known as Raven, a play on the English translation of his name and a more symbolic representation of his purpose in the series. *Zia Summer* is only round one in the ongoing battle between Baca and Raven, which is continued in the successive novels *Rio Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999), and *Jemez Spring* (2005).

The battle between Baca and Raven is more than the typical hero-versus-mass-murderer fare. As is often the case in Anaya's novels, the characters represent much more than is apparent on the surface. Baca's concerns go beyond the cases he investigates; he worries about the state of mankind's collective soul, fretting that "the beautiful people of Hollywood . . . [are] caricatures surrounding themselves with luxury, coated with a gold sheen but empty inside . . . all over the city we have the hombres dorados, men of empty promises" (*Zia* 362). Baca and Raven represent the forces of good and evil in their apocalyptic battle for control of humanity. Rodriguez contends that this conflict allows Anaya to examine "how, in the face of a persistent and commodified culture, it is possible to behave as a moral subject and thereby save not only one's own life but also the life of one's community" (108).

Anaya also uses the resurgence of Raven as a vehicle for exploring history as a living presence and influence on Chicano identity. In *Shaman Winter*, readers are told that "history did not happen and then go away for the people of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, it festered and grew into the bones,

blood and soul. . . . People here lived and breathed history" (168). This view of history as living lends itself well to Anaya's theme of identity formation. Throughout the series, he doles out details from the history of the Chicano people, details that are not meant to be read and forgotten, but build upon each other to explain the current context of social identity for not only Sonny Baca, but also for Chicanas/os as a people.

Anaya further uses history as a "static context for present dilemmas" (Rodriguez 108). Through extended dream sequences, Baca is transported into the past to confront the forces that have shaped both him and his people. But as in Anaya's other works, dreams are not meaningless wonderings of the unconscious mind; they are bestowed with the magical power to transport Baca into history, beyond his own existence to the times of significant events within the formation of the Chicano culture. Raven appears in this past, and Baca must battle him on that plane as well, as Raven eventually tries to eradicate Baca by eliminating his ancestral bloodline.

The transportation into the past is not the only magical device used by Anaya in the series. As the reader progresses through the cycle, the story shifts more and more toward Baca's quest to become a shaman, the spiritual leader for his people. In that pursuit, Baca becomes an apprentice to the elders, learning the indigenous religious practices so that he may protect the New Mexican identity by saving its collective memories. As Baca moves closer to his goal of shaman, the magical elements within the story increase.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Napoleon Bonaparte is quoted as having said, "History is a set of lies agreed upon." In *Zia Summer*, Elfego Baca makes the following claim: "Chicano heroes have been erased from the white man's history. Forgotten" (299). In *Shaman Winter*, we are repeatedly told that history is written by the victors. Is there such a thing as "white man's history"? How would you construct a more pluralistic history of America?



MAYA ANGELOU (1928–)

Courage is the most important of all the virtues. Without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistent without courage.

(David Frost, "An Interview with Maya Angelou")

Maya Angelou is legendary. She has achieved acclaim as an author, poet, playwright, professional stage and screen producer, director, performer, college professor, and singer. Add to these gifts those of chef, newspaper editor, community activist, dancer, and linguist fluent in French, Spanish, Italian, and West African Fanti. Her autobiographies are often considered classics, and her poems personal anthems for living.

Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the second child of Bailey Johnson, a naval cook, and Vivian (Baxter) Johnson, a gambler who ran a boarding house. Her parents divorced in 1931, when her brother, Bailey, was four years old and she was three. The children were sent to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas. In describing her home, Angelou wrote: "People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth. Other days he had to be satisfied with chocolate" (*Caged Bird* 47). Her brother, Bailey Johnson, was responsible for naming her Maya. "After Bailey learned definitely that I was his sister, he refused to call me Marguerite, but rather addressed me each time as 'Mya Sister,' and in later more articulate years, after the need for brevity had shortened the appellation to 'My,' it was elaborated into 'Maya'" (*Caged Bird* 66).

While visiting her mother in St. Louis in 1936, Maya was sexually assaulted by Vivian's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, setting off a chain of horrific events that Angelou would later detail in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). In 1940, Maya graduated at the top of her eighth-grade class at Lafayette County Training School in Arkansas. Vivian then took her children to San Francisco, where Maya attended George Washington High School. Artistically talented, she received a scholarship to the California Labor School in San Francisco, where she took classes in drama and dance. The school opened in 1942 and when it closed by 1948, "the remaining students continued to support a reduced number of classes on the cold war, McCarthyism, U.S. history, USSR and socialism, writing, literature and the arts" (California Labor School Collection).

Although a good student, Maya was fraught with adolescent insecurities, especially after she moved in with her father in Los Angeles in 1943. She ran away for a month, living in a junkyard with other homeless children. She then returned to her mother and to school in San Francisco, where, as a gawky six-foot-tall teenager struggling with questions of gender identity, she found difficulty establishing herself. Her relationship with the most popular boy at school resulted in a teenage pregnancy, and her son, Clyde Guy Johnson, was born the same year she graduated from high school, 1944.

Johnson, also an author, has written two books, *Standing at the Scratch Line* (1998) and *Echoes of a Distant Summer* (2002). He has this to say about growing up under his mother's shadow:

The truth is, my mother scared me as a child . . . there was nobody else like her, anywhere . . . through my elementary and junior high school years, my mother wore her hair natural and regularly wore African dress . . . she would proudly proclaim at public gatherings that she was a "black woman." It was almost more than I could bear. . . . As I look back on those times, I feel a bit embarrassed about my ignorance. She was a pioneer. She stood up to the glares, snide comments, and ridicule generated by our cultural ignorance. My mother says that "Courage is the most important of all the virtues, for without it one cannot practice any of the others with consistency." . . . I am truly blessed by the gods to be Maya Angelou's son. . . . My mother opened doors for me and held them open until I passed through. . . . "Old Moms was and is hot! Love that maternal instinct." (Johnson "A Tribute to Maya" 44)

Even as a young person, Maya exhibited a capacity to do the extraordinary. In 1945, she became the first black woman streetcar conductor in San Francisco. This was a full 10 years before Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., led the year-long Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott from 1955 to 1956. Angelou also grew up around extraordinary cooks, and she, too, became skillful. In 1946, she cooked for \$75 a week at the Creole Café in California, something she would refer to later in *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* (2004), a volume about the memorable meals and the good times she enjoyed growing up.

The 1940s continued to be a time of personal upheaval for Angelou. In 1947, she worked briefly as a prostitute. She returned to Stamps but was sent back to San Francisco by her grandmother, who feared her outspoken granddaughter would be hurt by the Ku Klux Klan. Back in the city, Angelou

worked as a nightclub dancer and continued prostituting herself until her frustrated brother stepped in and convinced her to stop.

Still trying to find herself, she married a sailor, Tosh Angelos, in 1950. She told herself that Tosh was "Greek, not white American; therefore I needn't feel that I had betrayed my race by marrying one of the enemy, nor could white Americans believe that I had so forgiven them the past that I was ready to love a member of their tribe" (Cudjoe 22). Her last name, *Angelou*, is an adaptation of Tosh's surname.

After the marriage failed in 1953, Angelou returned to dancing at the Purple Onion, a popular California club. In 1954, she joined a touring company of the African American folk opera *Porgy and Bess*, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. After a 22-nation tour of *Porgy*, Angelou became a dance instructor at the Rome Opera House and at Hambina Theatre in Tel Aviv. The following year she appeared in a play, *Calypto Heatwave*.

Also influenced by the burgeoning Civil Rights movement, Angelou decided to express herself in writing, moving to Brooklyn, New York, and joining the Harlem Writers Guild. In 1959 and 1960, she served as northern coordinator of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), in place of Bayard Rustin, who choreographed the 1963 March on Washington.

Angelou was prolific during the Black Arts Movement, or BAM, the artistic arm of the Black Power movement from the 1960s to 1970s. She appeared in one of the most important off-Broadway productions of the era, *The Blacks*, by Jean Genet, and in *Cabaret for Freedom*, both in 1960. In 1962, she moved to Cairo with Vusumzi Make, a South African Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) freedom fighter, and then moved to Ghana when their relationship ended. She worked as associate editor of the *Arab Observer*, an English-language newspaper; became feature editor of *African Review*; and contributed to the Ghanaian Broadcasting Company from 1963 to 1966. She was assistant administrator of the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies

at Legon-Accra, teaching dance, when Kwame Nkrumah was president. Her theater credits from this time include *Mother Courage* at the University of Ghana (1964), *Medea* in California (1966), and *The Least of These*, also in California (1966).

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, still Angelou's most famous book, made its first appearance in 1969. In 1970 alone, she was named writer-in-residence at the University of Kansas, received a Yale University fellowship, and saw *Caged Bird* nominated for a National Book Award. A year later, a volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. With several off-Broadway productions to her credit, Angelou prepared for a Broadway show, *Look Away* (1973), which received a Tony Award nomination. Of her inaugural body of work, James Baldwin said, "You will hear the regal woman, the mischievous street girl; you will hear the price of a black woman's survival and you will hear of her generosity. Black, bitter, and beautiful, she speaks of our survival" ("A Caged Bird She's Not," *Washington Post Magazine*).

Her diverse contributions continued as she published *Gather Together in My Name* (1974); directed the film *All Day Long* (1974); performed in *Ajax*, a classical play by Sophocles; and was named distinguished visiting professor at Wake Forest, Wichita State, and California State Universities. Next she published the poetic *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* and received honorary degrees from Smith College and Mills College—all in 1975. In 1976, she published *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*; that same year, she directed *And Still I Rise*, which was published in 1978. When Alex Haley's *Roots* changed the face of television forever by introducing the television miniseries, Angelou was a part of that, too, and received a nomination for best supporting actress in the production (1977).

Angelou can make writing appear effortless, but she revealed her stoic creative process in a 1977 interview with the *Black Scholar*:

Sometimes I will stay up in my room for a day trying to get two sentences that will flow, that

will just seem as if they were always there. And many times I come home unable to get it so I go back the next day, 6:30 in the morning, every morning, 6:30 I go to work. I'm there by 7:00; I work till 2:00 alone in this tiny little room, 7 × 10 feet. I have had the room for two years and they have never changed the linen. I've never slept there. There is nothing in the room except a bed, a face basin, and that's it. I write in longhand. (*Black Scholar* 40)

Between 1981 and 1987, Angelou continued her prolific outpouring of writing with the autobiography *The Heart of a Woman*, the poetry collection *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*, the autobiography *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, and the children's book *Mrs. Flowers: A Moment of Friendship*, closing out the decade with *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987). Honors and engagements, too, were as thick as publications. Angelou received a lifetime appointment as Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina (1981), was named one of the Top 100 Most Influential Women by *Ladies' Home Journal* (1983), won the North Carolina Award in Literature (1987), and directed a play written by Errol John, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, in London.

By the 1990s, she had published *I Shall Not Be Moved* (poetry, 1990); *Souls Look Back in Wonder* (children's book, 1993); *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (essays, 1993); *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me* (children's book, 1994); *Phenomenal Women: Four Poems Celebrating Women* (1994); *A Brave and Startling Truth* (poetry, 1995); and *Kofi and His Magic* (children's book, 1996). In 1993, a pop-culture movie based on her poetry, *Poetic Justice*, was created, starring the singer Janet Jackson and the rapper Tupac Shakur. That same year, her writing touched the new administration of President William Jefferson Clinton when she created an inaugural poem, "On the Pulse of Morning" (1993).

The Maya Angelou of the 21st century shows no signs of slowing down. In 2001, Eugene Redmond, poet laureate of East St. Louis, Illinois, and author of *The Eye in the Ceiling*, said of her:

I've known Maya more than 30 years. What may appear to be a meteoric rise has actually been a measured and powerful one. What hasn't changed is that Maya is always growing. She is constantly studying and she plays games—word games, parlour games and card games, to keep her mind sharp. She's 72 and she's smokin'! (Angaza 32)

***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)**

Angelou's first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, has become an American classic, read at almost every level of education. Nominated for a National Book Award, it was also a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection and has been published worldwide in numerous languages.

The work, an autobiography, is about being black and female in the South during the depression. It addresses powerful universal themes, including rootlessness, abandonment, learning to love one's self, the hurdles of humankind, and the role courage plays in the living of life. As Angelou said in an interview with the television talk-show host David Frost, "Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently" (Frost). This is Angelou's genius: Her writing allows readers to grow philosophically. Through her novels, she imparts wisdom, all through the looking glass of her multitextured experiences. As she herself has noted: "I speak to the black experience but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and still survive" (Gross 90–91).

The characters in the book are Marguerite Johnson (Maya Angelou), the narrator of the story; Bailey, her loyal brother; Annie Henderson, Maya's God-fearing paternal grandmother; Mr. McElroy, the independent neighbor; Vivian Baxter, Maya's beautiful mother; Bailey Johnson, Sr., Maya's insensitive father; Uncle Willie, Maya's disfigured relative; Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a literate neighbor; the Baxter family, which includes Grandmother Baxter and a group of uncles; Mr. Freeman, Viv-

ian's boyfriend, who rapes and threatens Maya; Daddy Clidell, Maya's worldly stepfather; and the white Mrs. Cullinan. To this long and varied list, Angelou adds numerous minor characters, who are in actuality not at all minor, as they memorably impact the book, regardless of how brief their appearances. The geographical settings, of course, mirror those of Angelou's life in Arkansas, California, and Missouri, from the depression-stained 1930s until the time Angelou became a teenage mother.

When the story opens, the reader finds two small children, three-year-old Marguerite and four-year-old Bailey, literally thrown away by their divorced parents. Sent to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, the children feel rejected and only marginally accepted by their adopted southern town. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat," Angelou has said (Yonge 25 May 2002). Threatened, yes, but Marguerite nevertheless manages to find two loves, both with the same name, *William*: her uncle Willie and William Shakespeare. She connects with Uncle Willie, who is crippled—enough to wish he were her real father—because she, too, feels uncomfortable and unpretty in her body. In Shakespeare, she finds a deep attraction to his way with words, a gift she will also acquire. To her surprise, when Maya becomes an adult and is attending Uncle Willie's funeral, she encounters a black man of note, an unlikely someone else who also loved her uncle:

I had no idea this elegant man way up north in Little Rock had any idea . . . would know Willie. My uncle, he was so ashamed of being crippled that he wouldn't even go to Louisville, Arkansas, which was five miles from Stamps and the County Seat. He said, "You know the State of Arkansas has lost a great man losing Willie." I asked him, Willie Johnson? He said, "The United States has lost a great man in Willie." I said, "W. M. Johnson?" He said, "The world." He said, "You know, I was the only child of a deaf mother, and your Uncle Willie gave me a

job in your store, paid me ten cents a week in the '20s. And, he taught me to love to learn. And I'm now—I guess you may want to know who I am—he taught me my times tables.” I said, “How did he do it?” He said, “He used to grab me by my clothes. . . . Because of him I am who I am. I guess you want to know who I am.” And I said, “Yes.” He said, “I am the Mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas.” (King 30 November 2003)

As in the work of the 1930s novelist Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), the narrator focuses on the general store, owned by the very strict Annie Henderson and kept by Uncle Willie. Owning the store allows Annie and Willie to stand slightly apart from their destitute black neighbors. They *own* something, and the children feel part of a family through the store and the chores involved there. Yet it is also in these early chapters that the reader learns of Marguerite's pain over not being physically beautiful. She is often teased by other children for being so large and gawky, but Bailey always lovingly protects her.

Early on, Angelou examines southern social rituals of the time, especially the habit of walking through town and speaking to everyone—something Maya finds unheard-of in urban settings. Most of the whites depicted in the novel live on the other side of the segregated town, where, Maya discovers, blacks must maintain a subservient and submissive demeanor. Even when blacks are flanked by rude white children who are disrespectful to them and taunt them at every opportunity, white society and law dictate that they must back down. Maya learns that if you are black and want to live a peaceful life, you have to “wear the mask,” as Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote in his poem “We Wear the Mask,” and must not allow fear to crack your public veneer. Angelou would grow to love this and other poems by Dunbar, reciting his work from memory. Nonetheless, she could never accept the second-class citizenship that was a daily reality for her grandmother and uncle.

Religion, too, plays a central role in the black community of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Faith is such a systemic part of the landscape that the character of Mr. McElroy, the Hendersons' next-door neighbor, immediately stands in stark contrast with the rest of Maya's world. Although he is always dressed formally in a suit, unlike the rest of the community McElroy never enters a church, a most unusual act for a black man living in the Bible Belt South. Unfortunately, the minister, the Reverend Howard Thomas, is the very representation of a sinner—a taker, glutton, and manipulator. Invited to dinner, Thomas sits at Annie's table and eats everything in sight, never pausing to consider what the children will do for their meal. Because he rejects the behavior Thomas espouses, Maya's kind friend Mr. McElroy becomes a hero for her, a symbol of independence.

As depicted by Angelou, even religion is not safe from the evils of white supremacy. The children see the great contrasts between the lives that white people enjoy and the privations of their own community. Reasoning that since God was the giver of all—a lesson taught repeatedly from the Stamps pulpit—Maya naturally assumes that he must be white also. By his very actions, which leave the white and black communities both separate and unequal, he was intentionally leaving her out. She naturally assumes, “Of course, I knew God was white too” (Bloom 27).

For the black residents of Stamps, fear as a means of control is a mainstay. When a local white woman has supposedly been “messed with,” all of the black men in town go into hiding. Even crippled Uncle Willie is hidden in the floor planks of the store, for fear of the vigilantes who hunt down black men without justice or due process. One of the most powerful scenes in the book takes place when Bailey, Maya's brother, encounters the aftermath of a lynching. As a measure of intimidation, the drowned, decomposing body of a black man is placed in a jail cell full of black prisoners. Bailey comes face to face with this dead man and is terrorized beyond belief. As does Maya, Bailey experiences horrors no child should have to face.

The children's relationship to their parents during these years is curious, to say the least. They do not see Bailey, Sr., and Vivian for some time but remain with their grandmother, never even receiving Christmas or birthday presents from their missing parents. One year, the children receive a major shock when their parents send gifts. They have more or less dismissed their mother and father, assuming that either they are dead or they do not love them—until the gifts prove otherwise. However, the gifts only usher in a new time of displacement for Maya and Bailey, who are subsequently tossed from relative to relative, including a spell with their maternal grandparents and their crowd of gamblers and blues singers, always willing to fight.

When Maya is eight years old and staying with Vivian in St. Louis, she is sexually assaulted by her mother's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. This part of the autobiography is pivotal, just as it was in Angelou's actual life, for the child's essence is stolen, and she spirals out of control for years afterward. Maya finally tells Bailey what has happened, hesitating only because Mr. Freeman has threatened that if she tells anyone, he will kill her brother. She testifies in court, and although Freeman is put in jail, he is freed the next day. Within hours, his body is discovered, kicked and beaten to death. By the manner in which Grandmother Bailey accepts this news—as if she is well aware of what happened and who performed the deed—the reader can surmise that her “mean” and very tough and fighting sons, acting as judge and jury on behalf of their defenseless niece, have taken care of Mr. Freeman. After his death, Marguerite concludes that her words have the power to kill and wills herself to a life of muteness. “Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people . . . I had to stop talking” (Gross 90–91).

The children are then moved back to Stamps and mute Maya is taken under the wing of Mrs. Flowers, a literate and gracious black woman in the neighborhood who introduces her to poetry and makes cookies and lemonade just for her. She absorbs the poetry and recites it well. Finally, she has something of her own! “I was liked, and what

a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson” (Bloom 35). She emerges from her silence and enters another part of her life with Mrs. Glory, Mrs. Cullinan's cook, who teaches Maya how to be in domestic service to a high-quality white family. Mrs. Glory shows Maya the finer things in life, but Mrs. Cullinan decides that she will call Maya “Mary” because Marguerite/Margaret is too long. No manner of entreaty can change Mrs. Cullinan's symbolic erasing of Maya's identity. However, when Maya takes Bailey's advice—to destroy her employer's favorite pieces of glass and fine china whenever she calls her by the wrong name—she wins both her identity and her dignity.

Central to the book is a scene that denotes black community strength as well as the reality of a de facto American apartheid existing in the 1930s. It occurs when the store is used as a community center to listen to the radio broadcast of the Joe Louis fight. Louis, known as “the brown bomber,” knocks out a white boxer, Primo Carnera—something unthinkable to whites at the time. A highly symbolic event to both blacks and whites, the victory becomes a cause for celebration among the community gathered around the radio, with soda, candy bars, and alcohol being passed freely around. These ordinary people, according to Angelou, do not know much of victory. If Louis had lost, she wrote, her Stamps community believed that black people would be “back in slavery and beyond help” (Lupton 59). After the fight, however, little changes. Black families continue to stay off main roads, because they know bands of infuriated whites will be looking for black people to harm in retaliation for Louis's victory. Still, they hold this symbolic victory close to their hearts.

In yet another crucial scene, Maya prepares to graduate from the eighth grade. She feels pretty and successful, but a white visitor to commencement dampens spirits by detailing the improvements that will go to the white school. Ironically, the visitor stereotypes Maya and her classmates as being incapable of intellectual achievement, hinting

that their black school, the home of athletes, may receive a paved playing field. The children, proud of their academic prowess as well as their other talents, are angered, but one boy stands and begins to sing the Negro national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” shaming the condescending visitor and making a collective and powerful response to the speaker’s news.

A scene at the dentist’s office is also painfully revealing of 1930s southern culture. The one dentist in town, a white man, does not accept black patients. However, he has borrowed money from Annie and still owes her. She and her granddaughter go for treatment but are turned away; he declares he would rather put his “hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (Lupton 58). Maya’s toothache is horrendous, so Annie confronts the dentist alone, hectoring him into paying back her 10 dollars so they can take the bus to visit the black dentist. This small victory gives the family a chuckle later that evening, one of the few they get at a white man’s expense—and an example of the ways in which Angelou depicts minor acts of courage in the ongoing struggles of life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a work of survival. Discuss this book, which takes place largely in the 1930s, in comparison with Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Consider such elements as their historical backgrounds, the depiction of the characters, and themes the two works share.
2. What is the relationship between Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” and Angelou’s autobiography? Analyze the poem, discussing its key metaphor as the central theme of Angelou’s work.
3. Although *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is on practically every school and book club reading list, it has its detractors. In September 1999 in *Harper’s Magazine*, the novelist Francine Prose cited what she calls “the manipulative melodramas of ALICE WALKER (*The Color Purple*) and Maya Angelou”:

One can see why this memoir might appeal to the lazy or uninspired teacher who can conduct the class as if the students were the studio audience for Angelou’s guest appearance on *Oprah*. But much more terrifying than the prospect of Angelou’s pieties being dissected for their deeper meaning, is the notion of her language being used as a model of “poetic” prose style. . . . Who told students to [place] a dozen mixed metaphors in one paragraph? Where do students learn to write stale, inaccurate similes? (Angaza 32–33)

Do you agree or disagree with Prose’s assessment? Cite specific examples of Angelou’s language to support your argument.

4. What is the role of African-American music in *Caged Bird*? Select two of the themes of the book and discuss how African-American music informs the reader with regard to each. Support your answer with specific examples from the text.

“My Brother Bailey and Kay Francis” (1969)

An excerpt from Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, this story focuses on the main character’s brother. The custom in their small southern enclave is for people to go into town, walking past the store for gossip and sweets. Maya’s grandmother, Annie Henderson, gives money to the children every week. Maya gives her portion to Bailey, who promptly heads to the movie theater in town, afterward purchasing cowboy books for his sister.

One Saturday evening, Bailey does not return home as usual. Dark falls, and his aunt and uncle fear the worst—that he may have been harmed by white thugs. When Bailey finally comes down the dark road, Maya notices he is not the same: He looks “tired and old-mannish. Hands in his pockets and head bent, he walked like a man trudging up

the hill behind a coffin” (*Caged Bird* 112). Because he cannot give an excuse for his tardiness, Uncle Willie beats him. Bailey does not even cry. When he goes to bed that night, he strangely reverts to his early youth and prays, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take” (113). Listening to him recount the childhood prayer, Maya knows Bailey has endured something terrible.

It takes a few days, but he finally talks to her. He did see a movie, but this time he sat through it twice, which is why he was so late getting home. He did so because he could not believe his eyes: “I saw Mother Dear. . . . It wasn’t really her. It was a woman named Kay Francis. She’s a white movie star who looks just like Mother Dear” (114). “Mother Dear” is Vivian, the children’s on-again, off-again mother. The children do not speak of her to Grandma Henderson or Uncle Willie because, as Maya writes, “She was our mother and belonged to us. She was never mentioned to anyone because we simply didn’t have enough of her to share” (114). Vivian is like a phantom to the children.

Two months after Bailey’s beating, the Kay Francis movie returns to town. This time, both children go. From their segregated seats in the balcony, they watch as the show, a comedy, depicts white people as rich and black people as idiot servants. Maya cannot help thinking that this woman looks just like her mother, except that her mother is prettier. Further, as did her mother, this woman lived in extravagance.

At the end of this show, Bailey, tormented by the loss of his mother, a person they barely know and who by all indication scarcely cares for them, tries to commit suicide on the railroad track. He is thrown into depression by a loss he cannot understand. The absence of his mother is more than he can bear. He no longer wants to live unless he can have his family intact, and that is why he has begun to chant the childlike prayer—something he learned when the entire family was together, when he was two or three years old and his mother was at least within his sight.

Maya’s reaction is quite different from Bailey’s. She feels that whenever the white theater patrons laugh at the buffoonery of the black actors and revel in Kay Francis’s beauty, they are in fact revealing their appreciation of a woman who bears a striking resemblance to her own mother. She understands that somehow, their response gives the Kay Francis/Mother figure the upper hand. Even though the white audience’s palpable hatred for black people rises from the first floor to the balcony in the form of sneers and hisses, she feels that the whites are inadvertently validating her mother’s beauty in all its blackness, something unheard-of in Stamps or anywhere in the South. Although their fancied representation of their mother tears the children apart because they live in such humble surroundings, they also remember that Vivian lives in sumptuousness, something even the white theater patrons here could never afford to do.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Most movies shown in southern theaters during this era depicted black people only as subservient stereotypes. From your local video store or on the Internet, locate a movie from this period and watch it. Critique the film, making comparisons about the depiction of African Americans in it and in Angelou’s story.
2. Compare and contrast the principal women in this story—Mrs. Flowers, Momma (Annie Henderson), and Vivian. Write a well-developed essay discussing what each character represents as a symbol, as a signifier of class, and as an individual.

“Woman Work” (1978)

“Woman Work,” from Angelou’s third volume of verse, *And Still I Rise* (1978), acknowledges and celebrates the place that women—as home managers, first teachers of a family’s children, and leaders of the sisterhood—have in society. She begins the poem with a list of domestic jobs historically associated with womenfolk. The rhythm of the poem is

like that of a marching band, setting to the sound of a drum roll the image of a woman rising early and marching a beat to attend to her duties:

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry. (lines 1–6)

The list is endless. The woman has no time—nor does she take any—to tend to her own needs. There is no time to nurture the relationship with her husband. She is mother and wife, a church sister who visits the sick and afflicted, and a laborer who picks cotton or tobacco in southern fields.

Alas, there is no time for anything—except in the next four stanzas, in which the speaker resolves woman is one with Mother Earth and waits to be blessed by Mother Earth, as a gift from the creator. She embraces the sun—“Shine on me, sunshine”—and asks the dewdrops to “cool my brow again.” She asks the storm to blow her from reality to float, in a surreal state, “across the sky” until she “can rest again,” with an aura of otherworldliness that suggests going to heaven or being taken to the promised land.

Strangely enough to some readers, the speaker expresses no bitterness over her load of responsibilities or for the isolation forced upon her by this schedule. The central character is simply content to be part of nature, who is her friend. Angelou begins “Woman Work” with a litany of chores but ends it with an affirmation, or possibly a plaintive cry: “Sun, rain, curving sky / Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone / Star shine, moon glow / You're all that I can call my own” (*Cape Verdean News* 6A).

Numerous critics have asserted that were it not for the immense popularity of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's poetry would hardly be given serious consideration. Her poems are thought by some to be thin in substance, lacking in poetic invention, and lackluster in language. Others, however, argue that her poems belong to a neglected

oral tradition, incorporating elements of African-American slave songs and work songs, and can be seen as lyrics that require performance to reveal their depth and riches. As the critic Lyman B. Hagen has observed, “Angelou may rank as a poet of moderate ability, but her poetry is praised for its honesty and for a moving sense of dignity” (133–134).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In “Woman Work,” the speaker is a woman enveloped in both domestic life and nature. Is this a demeaning position? Why or why not? Discuss your answer fully.
2. W. E. B. DuBois—sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—believed that work was noble. Do you think the narrator of “Woman Work” feels the same way? Locate another poem about a working woman or man. Compare the two poems and analyze the tone and attitude toward work in each.

“On the Pulse of Morning” (1993)

It was a windy, sun-filled day, January 20, 1993, when President William Jefferson Clinton and Vice President Albert Gore were sworn into office. Clinton, a native of Arkansas as well as former governor, selected Maya Angelou, a daughter of Arkansas, to create the inaugural poem. Back when Clinton was raised in the town of Hope and Angelou in nearby Stamps, the relationship between blacks and whites was malignant—thus the very act of inviting Angelou was political. In fact, there had been no inaugural poet since the late Robert Frost, who read for John F. Kennedy in 1961.

The over-100-line “On the Pulse of Morning” constitutes a plea for peace and harmony among the world's diverse peoples. It is a chronicle of the evolution of life on earth, beginning with its mention of “The dinosaur, who left dry tokens / Of their sojourn here / On our planet floor.” As Angelou names the descendants of this planet, she

enumerates “the African and Native American, the Sioux.” She establishes an entitlement for each, saying, “Each of you, descendant of some passed / On traveler, has been paid for.” Reprimanding listeners who have not been kind to the land, the speaker indicts the spoilers:

Each of you a bordered country
 Delicate and strangely made proud
 Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
 Your armed struggles for profit
 Have left collars of waste upon
 My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
 (lines 26–31)

As Mary Jane Lupton has noted in a significant critique of Angelou’s poem, “‘On the Pulse of Morning’” gives more than a nod to concerns that were subjects of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (18).

When Angelou was growing up, she regularly attended the CME (Colored Methodist Episcopal, later Christian Methodist Episcopal) Church, where her uncle Willie was superintendent of the Sunday school. It is only natural, then, that her poem bears the cadence of black ministers such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Jesse L. Jackson; and Louis Farrakhan: “But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully, / Come, you may stand upon my / Back and face your distant destiny, / But seek no haven in my shadow. / I will give you no hiding place down here.” In these lines, Angelou also recalls spirituals of determination sung in black churches throughout the South, such as the following, from “Ain’t Got Time to Die”: “Cause it takes all of my time to praise my Jesus / All of my time to praise my Lord / If I don’t praise Him the rock’s gonna cry out / Glory and honor / Glory and honor / Ain’t got time to die.” As with her other work, religion is a central element.

Angelou also calls for a newly infused dream, a revision of the one originally described by Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963 in his historic “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, D.C. In a clear allu-

sion to that speech, Angelou writes, “Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare / Praying for a dream.” She adds, “Root yourselves beside me / I am the Tree planted by the River / Which will not be moved”—another clear reference to the Civil Rights movement, with its memories of the old hymn sung by Dr. King and other demonstrators as they were attacked by southern law enforcement: “I shall not be moved / Like a tree planted by the water / I shall not be moved” (Negrospirituals.com).

After his presidency, Clinton reflected on the poem and wrote in his memoir: “Maya’s poem, ‘On the Pulse of Morning,’ riveted the crowd. Built on powerful images of a rock to stand on, a river to rest by, and a tree with roots in all the cultures and kinds that make up the American mosaic, the poem issued a passionate plea in the form of a neighborly invitation” (172). The critic and poet Marjorie Perloff, however, was not so impressed: “Dreadful” was her pronouncement (Lupton 18).

The former poet laureate RITA DOVE said only a day after hearing Angelou’s inaugural poem, “I wouldn’t compare it to a poem I’ll read over and over again in silence. That’s not the kind of poem it was meant to be. It’s a song, really” (Streitfield D11). Bill Eichenberger of the *Columbus Dispatch* confessed that he did not care much for the poem until he heard Angelou sing. Then, he says, his cynicism melted. Eichenberger sums up his feelings about her work: “For Angelou is, above all, an orator in the grand African American tradition. She is its rhythms and cadences, a powerful voice, the embodiment of persuasive fervor and, not least, the agent of humor” (Eichenberger 9H).

Notwithstanding the divergent reactions to her work, “On the Pulse of Morning” reflects Angelou’s trademark, to “keep it plain.” In this poem, “metaphors predominate . . . spotted with familiar words, terms, and phrases. . . . The use of African American folk idioms emerges as a strength in Angelou’s poetry” (West 15). With “On the Pulse of Morning,” Maya Angelou offers an encouraging poem to a new administration that was also filled with hope.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In "On the Pulse of Morning," why does the speaker name all of those varied peoples? Who are they? Why is their naming important? How would you feel if your people were named on such an occasion? Explain your answers.
2. What is the significance of an inaugural poem? Of the choice of an inaugural poet? Locate another inaugural poem and discuss its meaning for the occasion, comparing its themes and images to those in Angelou's "On the Pulse of Morning."
3. In what ways does "On the Pulse of Morning" make a political statement? Discuss your response in a well-organized essay, supporting your views with citations from the text.

"Africa" (1997)

Maya Angelou is certainly not the first African-American poet to acknowledge the continent in verse. Africa is motherland to people all over the African diaspora, those people of color who, rooted in Africa, range from African Caribbeans to African Germans and everyone in between. As such, the continent retains a special place in the hearts and pens of poets of the Harlem Renaissance (in the 1920s and 1930s), the Black Arts movement (in the 1960s and 1970s), and even as far back as Phillis Wheatley (1753?–1784), who wrote in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America": "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan Land; / Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there's a God, / that there's a Saviour too" (Gates 219).

African diaspora poets have articulated numerous and varied perceptions of Africa. Countee Cullen's famous poem "Heritage" asks, "What is Africa to me?" (Gates 1347). Langston Hughes, in "Danse Africaine," denotes a continent whose rhythms "stir your blood" (Gates 1292). More recently, Haki Madhubuti wrote about Africa in "The Primitive": "taken from the / shores of Mother Africa: / the savages they thought / we were— / they being the real savages" (Gates 1841).

In "Africa," Angelou essentially incorporates the theme of all these poems: the relationship between Africa and America for African Americans. Her poem begins with an image of Africa as voluptuous and healthy, black *and* comely. This Africa departs from the biblical "black but comely," needing no intervention or interference from anyone. It romanticizes Africa as a sexual temptress:

Thus she had lain
sugarcane sweet
deserts her hair
golden her feet
mountains her breasts
two Niles her tears.
Thus she has lain
Black through the years.

This view of Africa, while seductive, only establishes her vulnerability. The second stanza chronicles the inevitable—the arrival of land rapists, those who crossed the seas to kidnap the young and strong, to fill their heads and pacify them with a man-mangled Christianity that suits the purposes of white supremacy, and to hold them in line with guns.

The third stanza is a picture of the new America, now home to legal citizens who are heirs of those kidnapped Africans. It acknowledges changes from a once-brutal life but cautions the reader to "remember her pain / remember the losses / her screams loud and vain / remember her riches / her history slain / now she is striding / although she has lain." In true Angelou form, the poem ends on a hopeful note.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you think of Angelou's view of Africa? How does it resemble the images and impressions you have formed on the basis of your readings in social studies or what you have seen from news sources? Discuss your response, citing examples from your readings or viewings.
2. Read Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" and analyze the imagery in his poem. What do "Ozymandias" and "Africa" have in common?

- Grindeland, Sherry. "Maya Angelou Paints a Rainbow for Audience: Has Them Crying, Laughing, and Giving." *Seattle Times*, 15 March 2000, p. B3. Available online. URL: Lexis-Nexis. Accessed April 4, 2001.
- Hagen, Lyman B. *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997, 118–136.
- Holy Bible*. King James Version, Original African Heritage Edition. Nashville, Tenn.: James C. Winston, 1993.
- Hughes, Bill. "Maya Angelou Really Delivers." *Oakland Post*, 24 January 1993: 76(1). Available online. URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb>. Accessed February 5, 2007.
- "I Shall Not Be Moved." Available online. URL: NegroSpirituals.com. Accessed February 17, 2007.
- Johnson, Guy. "A Tribute to Maya: I Am Truly Blessed by the Gods to Be Maya Angelou's Son." *Black Issues Book Review*, May/June 1999, p. 44.
- Johnson, Guy. Online chat on 10 December 1998, archived by BarnesandNoble.com. Available online. URL: authors.aalbc.com/guyjohnson.htm. Accessed February 7, 2007.
- King, Lise Balk. "Maya Angelou Graces Us with Her Presence & Her Poetry: 'National Treasure' speaks to educators at NIEA (National Indian Education Association) Annual Conference in Greensboro, N.C. 2 November 2003." *The Native Voice*, The Women's Voice Section C, Rapid City, South Dakota, 30 November 2003: C1. Available online. URL: <http://proquest.umi.com>. Accessed February 5, 2007.
- Lupton, Mary Jane. *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- "Maya Angelou and Hallmark Debut New Inspirational Gift Line." *Cape Verdean News*, New Bedford, Mass., 28 February 2002, p. 6A. Available online. URL: <http://proquest.umi.com>. Accessed February 5, 2007.
- Metzger, Linda. *Black Writers: A Selection of Sketches from Contemporary Authors*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989.
- Neubauer, Carol E. "Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition." *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, edited by Tonette Bond Inge. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990.
- Online Archive of California. Inventory of the California Labor School Collection, 1942–1957. Available online. URL: findaid.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:13030/tf0489n414. Accessed February 8, 2007.
- Streitfield, David. "The Power and the Puzzle of the Poem: Reading between Maya Angelou's Inaugural Lines." *Washington Post*, 21 January 1992, p. D11.
- Thompson, Ericka P. "Maya Angelou Brings Courage to Butler University." *Indianapolis Recorder*, 6 May 2005, p. C3. Available online. URL: <http://proquest.umi.com>. Accessed February 5, 2007.
- West, Sandra L. "Maya Angelou." In *Contemporary American Women Poets: An A-to-Z Guide*, edited by Catherine Cucinella, 12–17. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Yonge, Gary. "No Surrender: A Conversation with Maya Angelou." *Guardian* (London), 25 May 2002. Available online. URL: www.howard.edu/library/Reference/Guides/Angelou/MayaIntro.htm. Accessed February 21, 2007.

Sandra L. West



JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA (1952–)

In the most difficult of circumstances, after working on a poem I walk out and feel that, whatever wall there is in front of me, I will go right through it like the saxifrage flower that splits the rock.

(Moyers 42)

While many writers acknowledge poetry's power to break down social and political barriers, the walls to which Jimmy Santiago Baca refers are also physical. His poetry cries out in protest of an America that can be "two societies standing in absolute opposition . . . two countries: a country of the poor and deprived, and a country of those who had a chance to make something of their lives" (*Working* 18). In order to understand the deep passion of his poetry, it is necessary to understand the context of the life in which it was written.

Born January 5, 1952, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Baca learned early to fend for himself. Abandoned by his parents when he was very young, Baca and his siblings lived with their paternal grandparents until the death of their grandfather. His grandmother's failing eyesight made it impossible for her to care for them, and he and his older brother, Miego, were sent to live at Saint Anthony's Boys' Home in Albuquerque. Being away from his family was hard, and although Miego was at the same facility, the brothers were separated except at meals and mass. Baca ran away frequently, always wandering back to where his family had lived, only to be returned to the home by one of his aunts or uncles. Eventually the police intervened, taking him to a detention center.

Life in D-Home, as the residents called it, was very different from the time he had spent in the

orphanage. Most of the boys in D-Home were there because of their criminal records. Their hardened attitudes and the small cells in which they slept made the facility feel less like a "home" and more like a jail. Baca was sent to school at a nearby junior high, but his inability to read and write made it impossible for him to succeed academically, and his status as D-Home resident caused him to withdraw socially. He instead found acceptance on the football field, earning the respect of classmates. The coach took an active interest in him, inviting Baca to live with his family. The invitation triggered a deep confusion that Baca found impossible to articulate. His experiences on the street and in D-Home had instilled in him a distrust of Anglos: His mother had abandoned her family to elope with a white man; white men had repressed his people for hundreds of years; they had sent him to live in D-Home. Despite the fact that the coach and his family were sincere in their desire to help him, Baca felt he could not abandon his race by going to live with Anglos. He quit school the next day; later that year when his brother took him out for a day trip, Baca ran away from D-Home.

According to his memoir, *A Place to Stand*, Baca and his brother spent the next three or four years "fighting, drinking, and getting high" (34). They lived with friends, or on the streets, in and out of jail, until Miego enlisted in the military, leaving Baca to drift aimlessly around the country. Uneducated

and homeless, Baca found himself at the mercy of other people's generosity, shuffling back and forth among friends and family and dealing drugs, until a home in which he was staying was raided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The resulting shoot-out between the FBI and the drug dealer injured one FBI agent and landed Baca in jail. He was counseled to plead guilty to possession of heroin with intent to distribute or face worse charges. He was sentenced to five to 10 years in prison.

Baca realized he had to turn his life around. Although his father had spent time in jail, Baca was the first person in his family to go to prison. He thought that if he could learn to read and write, possibly earn his general equivalency diploma (GED), then he would have a chance to change his circumstances. He wanted to stay clean, do his time, and get out alive, but prison did not allow the rehabilitation he had planned:

Cons who went to Nam say it's [prison] worse than jungle warfare. You live with your enemies here. There ain't no going home. You live hour to hour with your enemy standing next to you, eating next to you, walking next to you. The only thing that keeps him from killing you is respect. (*Place* 120)

Life in prison was a contradiction: To earn privileges and keep his time to a minimum, Baca had to follow rules and avoid fights; to earn respect, Baca had to stand up to those who would make him their victim, fighting whenever necessary. He fought to survive and in surviving lost what he was fighting for; the reclassification committee denied him school privileges.

Baca was tired of playing their games. The rules could not be followed, and so he stopped trying. He stayed in his cell, refusing to work or line up for roll call, until the guards grew so exasperated with him, they took him to solitary confinement, and eventually to a place Baca describes as "a dark subterranean sewer" called "the dungeon" (*Place* 176).

It was during his time there that Baca received his first letter. It took him hours to decipher the message, that a Good Samaritan was offering to

correspond with him. Baca immediately wrote back, asking for advice in learning to read and write. The man sent him a dictionary and religious pamphlets, written in English and Spanish, and continued to correspond with him until Baca learned to read and write intelligibly. He began to devote most of his time to reading and writing, trading his poetry with other inmates for books. He read everything he could get his hands on but found the most meaning in works by William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman, whose techniques fit best with Baca's developing sense of what a poem could be.

Despite the escape Baca found in poetry, prison life continued to intrude, pushing him until he was forced to take a stand against another inmate who was trying to force him out of his own cell. As Baca stood over the man, shank in hand, he realized his entire life hinged on that moment:

For a second, every horrible thing that had happened to me in my life exploded to the surface as if it had been building up to this moment. The blade in my hand, my legs spread over his chest, I loomed over him, staring into his eyes and then at his heart. While the desire to murder him was strong, so were the voices of Neruda and Lorca that passed through my mind, praising life as sacred and challenging me: How can you kill and still be a poet? How can you ever write another poem if you disrespect life in this manner? (*Place* 206)

Baca dropped the knife and began to search for deeper meaning. A fellow inmate educated him on the history of the Chicano people. By learning about their legends and folklore, their deep sense of family and connection to the earth, Baca began to understand that American society had redefined his culture, labeled it "inferior and lesser in moral character" (*Place* 225). His writing began to reflect that deepening connection to his people. During this time he wrote the poem "Healing Earthquakes," which reflects the quiet power one man can have to redefine himself. Meanwhile, Baca's poetry was drawing attention. Fellow inmates convinced him to submit his poems to magazines like

Mother Jones, *Illuminations*, and *Greenfield Review*, where he found editors who liked his work and encouraged him. Both Timberline Press and Rock Bottom Press asked for collections of his poetry for chapbooks.

Baca's vow to live the life worthy of a poet and of his people was continually challenged by a prison system that makes no attempt to recognize individuality. By the time he was released in 1978, he was 26-years old and his father had died of alcohol-related illness. He had lost every sense of how to function in the outside world and emerged from prison alone and afraid, yearning for the well-defined space of prison life. Still, he continued to write and study poetry, and in 1979 he earned his GED.

After a time he returned to Albuquerque and found a steady job working as a night watchman at a house for court-supervised adolescents, where he met a counselor named Beatrice who shared his love of books and poetry. They were married in 1981 and had two sons. Family took a primary role in Baca's life and he reconnected with his brother, Miego, and his sister, Martina. When his mother reentered his life, everything seemed to be moving full circle. Although she was still pretending to be Anglo and living affluently with the man who had convinced her to abandon her children, his mother seemed sincere in her desire to be part of Baca's life. She spoke of leaving her husband and telling her white children about their half siblings. Before she could, her husband shot her and himself. Her death deeply impacted Baca's brother Miego, who returned to drinking heavily. Within the year, he was found bludgeoned to death in an alley.

In the past, Baca would have reacted to such overwhelming personal tragedies with violence; now he could pour his pain and anger into his poetry. Baca completed his B.A. in English at the University of New Mexico and was later awarded an honorary Ph.D. He has published several volumes of poetry, a memoir, a novel in verse, and a screenplay, *Blood In . . . Blood Out: Bound by Honor*, which was made into a major motion picture.

While his work gives voice to the anguish of the oppressed and the despair of the forgotten, like his own life it also reflects a constant hope for spiritual

rebirth. In the anthology *Contemporary American Ethnic Poets*, Linda Cullum claims this sanguinity is primarily what makes his work so distinctive:

Unlike a growing number of "prison writers" who infuse their work with rage and desolation, Baca writes poems dealing with spiritual birth and triumph over tragedy . . . marked by themes of transformation, self-actualization, and metamorphosis.

His work has been widely recognized for its emotional honesty and passion, earning a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1986), the Pushcart Prize (1988), the American Book Award for Poetry (for *Martin & Meditations on the South Valley*, 1989), and the International Prize (for *A Place to Stand*, 2001).

Despite the critical acclaim, no writer is immune to controversy. The release of *Blood In . . . Blood Out: Bound by Honor* was met with disapproval by some members of the Hispanic community, who claimed the movie portrayed their culture in a negative manner. Baca addresses their criticism in *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*:

In this film I have cried out my rage, and nakedly shown the pain and abuse of life behind bars. All of this is an authentic part of our reality, and to deny it is to make us less than what we are.

I write to reveal all the treasures of Chicano experience, all that I have learned about life through our heritage, with nothing left out, of the suffering and the joy, because *all* of it has made us who we are. I believe that we will never overcome our obstacles unless we tell the whole truth, and in everything I write this is what I strive to do. (89)

Although Baca's work has done much to shed light on the cycle of neglect and oppression that has long prevented Hispanic and Native American peoples from being accepted as equally American by their Anglo neighbors, Baca knows sometimes

words are not enough. In 2005, he founded Cedar Tree Inc., a nonprofit foundation that “works to give people of all walks of life the opportunity to become educated and improve their lives” (jimmysantiagobaca.com). Cedar Tree provides individuals with free instruction, books, writing material, and scholarships.

In 2006, Baca was awarded the Cornelius P. Turner Award, which recognizes GED graduates who have made outstanding contributions to society in the field of education, justice, health, public service, or social welfare. Despite everything he has done to illuminate the injustices of American society, Jimmy Santiago Baca feels he can never stop “working in the dark to create for my people our own unique light” (*Working* 21).

***Martín & Meditations on the South Valley* (1987)**

In her introduction to this book of poetry, Denise Levertov likens *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley* to a hero tale:

Passing through the desert he emerges into a green and fertile valley of love and birth, but he has learned that the valley will be his to keep only if he cherishes it. The vow to never abandon his child . . . extends beyond the child . . . [to include] Martín's self. . . . Thus, the poem is essentially a myth of redemption. (xiv–xv)

The desert through which Martín must pass is similar in many ways to the harsh landscape of Baca's own life. Both experience abandonment and life on the streets. Both struggle to understand the cruel circumstances fate has dealt them. And both eventually become heroes, rescuing themselves from life in prison to find solace and acceptance through creation.

In the second portion of the book, *Meditations on the South Valley*, Martín's home burns down, destroying 10 years' worth of his writing. Martín struggles with the “end of all the cities and peoples I had become” (54). While Martín rebuilds his home,

his family is forced to move from the South Valley to the Heights, a place that represents success to some, but loss of self to Martín. Surrounded by walls that are “strangely clean and new,” among “the ceramic faces of women” and “buddha-cheeked men / who all wear straw hats / to walk their poodles” (55), Martín strives to understand the difference in cultures, finding that “in the Valley an old truck symbolizes prestige / and in the Heights, poverty. / Worth is determined in the Valley / by age and durability, / and in the Heights, by newness / and impression” (59). The cultural divide leaves Martín feeling lost and he searches for deeper meaning in Aztlán, the land of his forefathers.

Geographically, Aztlán refers to the mythic home of the Aztec people, believed to be the area annexed by the United States after the Mexican-American War—specifically Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. But for Martín and the Chicano people, Aztlán is more than a place. As Robert Franklin Gish explains in *Beyond Bounds*, Aztlán is “*la sagrada tierra*, the mother, the nourisher,” and for the writer “also a muse, an inspirer, the means of artistic revelation and epiphany” (139). In seeking out Aztlán, Martín discovers not only his history, but also the pieces of himself that he has lost.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the lines “Then, / the fairytale of my small life / stopped / when mother and father / abandoned me, and . . . I came forth into the dark world of freedom” (5). What does Baca's juxtaposition of the concepts of fairy tale and freedom imply? Do you associate freedom more with childhood or adulthood? Why?
2. Part 6 of *Meditations on the South Valley* discusses the life lived “between breakdowns and break-ups.” In what ways might such a life be fuller than “a life with everything perfect”? Discuss your answer fully.
3. Martín describes rebuilding his house as giving birth, yet he says he “became a child of the house” (100). In what ways is childbirth an opportunity for the parents to be reborn? Give specific examples to support your argument.

Immigrants in Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems (1990)

While the publication date on this anthology is 1990, 12 years after Baca's release from prison, most of the poems were written during his incarceration. Reflected within the lines is Baca's deepening sense that America has failed to fulfill its promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness equally for all citizens. Baca tells the interviewer John Keene that while the outward results of such denials are easily witnessed, his poetry is concerned with what lies beneath:

The other side of life, however, is a bit more complicated and concerns what happens in our souls, what constitutes all the cosmic and spiritual clashes that rearrange the plates of our spiritual landscapes. . . . I don't try to harvest my poetry from what happens in society's institutions as much as I try to reap the poems from what's happening behind the boundaries of society. (Keene)

The poems themselves emerge from behind the boundaries of society, from prison's depths and the ignored alleyways of the barrios, challenging readers to see the people there.

The collection's title poem, "Immigrants in Our Own Land," likens the newly incarcerated to the recent immigrant. Both go to new lands, seeking to "get away from false promises, / from dictators in our neighborhoods, / who wore blue suits and broke our doors down when they felt like, / swinging clubs and shooting guns as they pleased" (12). They hope for a better life in the new world, of "being able to finish school . . . learning an extra good trade." Instead they find "it's no different here. It's all concentrated" (12).

In the poem "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans," Baca tackles political rhetoric head-on, challenging those who complain of immigrants stealing their jobs to show him "just where the hell are these fighters" (24). The poem begins amicably enough; readers smile with the opening lines "O Yes? Do they come on horses / with rifles, and say / Ese

gringo, gimme your job?" and with Baca's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of people being mugged, the thieves demanding not money or jewels, but their jobs. Baca's humor serves dual purposes: to expose the inanity of such claims and to jolly readers into letting down their guard. Once readers are disarmed, nodding along with Baca, he delivers his rebuttal:

Below that cool green sea of money,
millions and millions of people fight to live,
search for pearls in the darkest depths
of their dreams, hold their breath for years
trying to cross poverty to just have something.
(24)

In an interview with John Keene, Baca describes the employment situation for many Chicanos as a "slave system that nobody wants to recognize." When one examines the types of jobs many of these "Mexicans" are taking—receiving as little as five dollars for an entire day's hard physical labor—it is difficult to imagine who would want the job in the first place. Baca contends that many Chicano workers take such low-paying jobs because those jobs are the only ones available; the need to pay their bills and feed their families puts them "completely at the mercy of these employers."

Despite the hardships faced by the people in his poems, Baca writes not about loss of power, but of the healing that results from reclaiming power. In discussing the role of a poet, he says:

I do believe the poet's job in the real sense of the word is to always be there where the emotional and psychic and spiritual earthquakes are happening, and to be strong enough to be able to sing in those big chasms. . . . We need to get to the epicenters before they happen, so we can participate in that power. Not be the victims of it. (Keene)

"Healing Earthquakes" details the journey of the poet into that chasm of "streets torn and twisted like gnawed bark" to "the crumbled houses of my people, / Through the scorpion-tailed magnums and / carbines / Held at their heads" (59). The poet

lifts his people, not by adding to the violence, but by “splitting its own body and heart,” so that “a lesser man by all the law books” may become more.

The seeming incompatibility of the two words in the title adds to the force of the poem, implying that healing cannot occur through gentle persuasion, but must be wrenched from earth's soul and bled from earth's veins. Baca says that is how he determines whether he has written a good poem: “If it feels like I've hit on a jugular . . . if I can feel it in the poem, then the poem's okay” (Keene).

For Discussion or Writing

1. The inmates in “Immigrants in Our Own Land” go to prison “thinking they'll get a chance to change their lives.” How do the changes they experience differ from their expectations? Are those changes intended by the penal system? Does the American prison system truly offer the chance for rehabilitation?
2. In “Immigrants in Our Own Land,” Baca describes inmates' being “sent to work as dishwashers, / to work in fields for three cents an hour.” Examine the role of inmate work programs. Should inmates be forced to work? Who benefits from such programs?
3. Examine the claims addressed by Baca in “So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans.” How has America's immigration policy determined the jobs available to immigrants?
4. Consider the ways in which the United States defines the value of its citizens. How is “a man awaking to the day with ground to stand upon and defend” (“Healing Earthquakes”) both disdained by America and the very definition of America?

Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio (1992)

After the release of his film *Blood In . . . Blood Out*, Baca faced criticism regarding his portrayal of Chicanos. *Working in the Dark* is, in part, his answer to those critics. The autobiographical essays in this volume justify his right as a Chicano to testify to what he has seen. Baca writes about the

deep-seated bigotry in an America that outwardly claims equal rights for all citizens while denying many of those rights on the basis of ethnicity. He writes of oppression not to justify the wrongdoing of Chicano individuals, but to explain the circumstances that have reduced a once-proud people to second-class citizens.

Through his earlier works, Baca described the tremendous obstacles placed in his path by poverty and racism. Here Baca further addresses those factors that might hinder minority success, detailing how language and poetry gave him the power to surmount them when so many others cannot. Baca cautions readers that he is “no polite singer, like so many poets of the European tradition. I am myself, Chicano, and I follow the wind-swept trail of my people, and how they convey emotion and song in their rituals” (62). His writing is angry and profane when it should be, using necessary metaphors to describe the horrific treatment he suffered in penal institutions, places he condemns as “America's worst nightmare” (13). In the first section of this book, he takes readers inside this nightmare, to view the beatings and confinement, the isolation and despair, the utter humiliation that defined his life as an inmate. It was his search for escape from self-hatred that led him to books and to writing, guiding him to find in language a freedom that could not be confined by jail walls:

Writing bridged my divided life of prisoner and free man. I wrote of the emotional butchery of prisons, and of my acute gratitude for poetry. . . . I wrote to sublimate my rage, from a place where all hope is gone, from a madness of having been damaged too much, from a silence of killing rage. I wrote to avenge the betrayals of a lifetime, to purge the bitterness of injustice. (11)

In another essay, Baca returns to San Quentin years later, not as inmate, but as actor and screenwriter, to film the movie *Blood In . . . Blood Out*. The disparity he experienced during this time, spending his days among the stark confinement of the hopeless and forgotten, his evenings walking free among the privileged and forgetful, created in him the feeling

that he was inhabiting two worlds. Such reeling dis-equilibrium stirred his old hatred and helplessness:

The urge grew in me to foment a revolt: tear down the walls, herd the guards into the bay, burn down everything until nothing was left but a smoldering heap of blackened bricks and molten iron. And I was filled with a yearning to escape, to go home and live the new life I had fought so hard to make. (17)

Baca left San Quentin realizing that his wounds would never completely heal, but they had helped to form the poet he had become. And that poet felt an obligation to tell the whole truth about what it means to be Chicano.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Baca condemns the prison system as entrenching, rather than reforming, criminality. He writes, “Confinement perverts and destroys every skill a man needs to live productively in society” (*Working* 16). What alternatives might we consider for the rehabilitation of nonviolent criminals? Justify your answer.
2. In “Imagine My Life,” Baca describes his early experiences with school. Compare JUDITH ORTIZ COFER’s experiences with the educational system to Baca’s. How is language, both spoken and written, reserved for the privileged and used as a weapon against the poor?
3. Baca has written, “Government grants and academic security are stultifying for the poet. Government should have no hand in poetry, in saying what poetry is, or validating this poet or that. The poet’s work is private and lonely” (*Working* 42). Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Defend your answer.

A Place to Stand (2001)

As a small child, Baca struggled to understand the events around him and the choices made by the adults in his life. As an adult, he began to understand that our choices are influenced by the context

in which we live. He has endeavored his whole life to understand the contexts of his parents’ lives, but his questions have always been met with reluctance or refusal. After the births of his sons, Baca realized that they would have questions, too, questions about his life and the contexts of the choices that would make him first prisoner, then poet. Although much of his poetry is rooted in his own experience, Baca did not want his children to have to sift fact from fiction. According to the prologue of *A Place to Stand*, he wrote this memoir so that his children would “know their father’s story, good parts and bad . . . so that they can make wiser choices where I did not and be invigorated with the courage and honor to live better lives” (6).

His memoir is also meant as a model for young Chicano people, who Baca says have been taught as a culture that it is “much better to keep your silence and not try to overreach yourself.” He wants them to “break the silence” so that they may see their “feelings are reaffirmed a million times throughout the day by other people who feel the same way” (Keene). In this memoir, Baca has broken the silence about what it means to grow up Chicano in American society.

One of the most important themes of Baca’s memoir is the power of childhood experiences to shape the adults we become. As a small child, Baca accompanied his mother to the local jail after his father’s arrest for drunk driving. Although his father was dangerous when he drank, Baca had difficulty reconciling the confusion and helplessness he felt at leaving his father behind in such a fearsome place. He writes:

In time I would become all too familiar with such places, not only with those very same cells down on Garcia Street but with a long string of others as well, on different if equally dusty streets, with different but similar jailers, different but similar men. That initial encounter, however, never left me. It remained a fixed, haunting reference point to which I would return to time and again. Whether I was approaching it or seeking escape from it, jail always defined in some way the measure of my life. (3)

Jail may have defined the measure of his life, but it was Baca who would determine what would happen within the confines of that life. Whereas many inmates turned to violence as an outlet for the rage instilled by the dehumanizing conditions of prison, Baca turned to language. He read whatever he could get his hands on—letters, religious pamphlets, the dictionary—until he finally found a “defense against the madness” in the works of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams (214). In the sensory deprivation of solitary confinement, language gave him vision: “Words electrified me. I could smell and taste and see their images vividly” (185). He poured his soul into journals, letters, and poetry, writing his way through the narrow bars of his cell to a spiritual freedom.

Baca's poetry took many forms in prison. Sometimes he would sell his poetry to other inmates, so they could impress their wives and girlfriends with tender words, but most of the time Baca's poetry reflected the insanity of prison life. He wrote about the institutionalized abuse prisoners suffered, the sharp racial divisions between prisoners, and the daily struggle to remain human.

One of the first poems Baca published, “They Only Came to See the Zoo,” was written from his prison cell and is printed in this book. The poem reflects the helplessness an inmate feels when he realizes that the legislators touring the cell block on a fact-finding visit are really only there for their own publicity. He uses imagery of the desert and death to portray the loss of hope and the sacrifice of will suffered by those within the prison system. In an interview with Gabriel Meléndez, Baca admits the poem was also a call to action:

That was some sort of voice in me talking to another voice in me, saying, “you’ve lived this: Did you tell them? Did you tell them?” It was almost the voice of guilt saying, “your obligation is to write!”

The hardest component of any memoir is to portray through a snapshot into the writer's life a universal lesson or truth. The truth in Baca's memoir is evident in the final chapter. Emerging from prison,

Baca works hard to earn his GED and to build a home for his new family. With his poetry gaining popularity, this could easily be the happily-ever-after of fairy tales. But Baca takes his story to an honest ending: His life is not perfect upon his release; his parents and brother all die in separate, tragic incidents; and he is left trying “to understand how so much injustice could happen to such good people” (263). There is no answer to that question, but Baca finds a sense of peace when he is finally able to forgive:

I began to forgive them [his parents] for what they had done or not done. I forgave myself for all my mistakes and for all I had done to hurt others. I forgave the world for how it had treated us. (264)

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the title “They Only Came to See the Zoo” provide context for the poem? Does the title support or undermine the underlying message?
2. Discuss the lines “Our muscles warped and scarr’d / wrap around our skeletons / like hot winds / That sweep the desert floor / In search of shade, / Sleeping each night / In the hollow of petrified / Skulls.” How might these lines describe more than the physical condition of the inmates?
3. *A Place to Stand* ends with a multitude of images: Church bells are ringing, it is raining, a baby is being baptized, the church is conducting a special service to apologize for sins against indigenous peoples. How do these images, both individually and collectively, contribute to the resolution of Baca's memoir?

The Importance of a Piece of Paper (2004)

In his first collection of short stories, Baca delves into the complexities faced when traditional and modern attitudes collide. He shows readers the heart and soul of characters who struggle to maintain a sense of self while searching for their places

in a society that would ignore them. These stories, as does his poetry, spring from Baca's own passions and experiences.

In the title story, "The Importance of a Piece of Paper," readers meet Marisol and her two brothers, Pancho and Adan. They are a family bound to the land by their parents' farm and the land grant that connects the entire community. Adan, despite protest from his siblings, sells his share of the land to Jaylen, an outsider, inadvertently causing personal disaster for Pancho and endangering the entire community's way of life.

Within the larger frame is a love story: Marisol falls in love with the outsider. Baca uses Pancho's disapproval of their relationship to illustrate further the trauma of Adan's selling his land to a white man:

The two cultures seldom mixed. Whether anyone admitted or talked about it openly, the ill feelings between Hispanics and gringos were real and present. The differences went deeper than mere cultural customs; there was long-standing, deep resentment toward Anglos for what they had done to Chicanos in the past. (71)

However, it is not cultural differences or racial tension that come between Marisol and Jaylen; they are divided over a legal issue. Jaylen does not understand the community's reliance on an old land grant. He finds its rules a nuisance. When he sues to dissolve the land grant, Marisol must choose sides.

The impetus for this story originated in part in Baca's concern that the Chicano people have "been disenfranchised from our culture, from our language, from our political base, from our land" (Gish 138). Baca has done more than write about the issue: Through his involvement with the Atrisco Land Rights Council in Albuquerque, he works actively to preserve a century-old agreement that granted 49,000 acres on the West Mesa of Albuquerque to the Chicano community there (Gish 138).

"Runaway" is perhaps the most heart-wrenching story in the collection. Through the character of Juanito (called Runaway because of his propensity

for flight), readers gain insight into the hardship of life in an orphanage. Runaway, as is Baca, is taken from his grandmother at a young age and placed in an orphanage. Runaway continually escapes from Saint Anthony's Boys' Home, returning each time to his grandmother, whose failing eyesight concerns him. As part of his punishment for his truancy, Runaway is ordered by Sister Anna Louise to buff the tiles in the chapel. While he is there, Father O'Neil, known for his "transgressive behavior with some of the kids" (187), rapes a newcomer in a confessional. Runaway takes the victim, a mute Indian boy, to the infirmary.

The Indian runs away and when he returns he is "caked in grime" (209). Sister Anna Louise orders Runaway to clean the boy, who is unresponsive. Runaway is disgusted and resentful of the chore until he notices "red liquid mixing with the brown water in the drain. He followed the red liquid up the boy's legs to the buttocks and realized where the blood was coming from" (214). Runaway takes the boy, whom he nicknames "Bullet," under his wing, telling his friends, "He's been through a lot—treat him straight up" (216).

Baca tells the interviewer John Keene that the shower scene between the two boys in this story is symbolic of what the Chicano people must do in order to reclaim their Chicanismo, which he describes as "a state of being, which has to do with compassion and humility and patience and love." In washing the Indian child's body, the Chicano boy is representative of the act of contrition that Baca suggests is necessary to grieve fully the loss suffered by his people.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As so many literary couples before them do, Marisol and Jaylen, in "The Importance of a Piece of Paper," face social disapproval. Find and compare other examples of forbidden love. How does society's censure limit the choices available to each couple? Why does the theme of forbidden love hold such universal appeal?
2. What is the significance of Jaylen's profession to the story entitled "The Importance of a Piece of Paper"? How does each character's occupation

African Arts and Letters, Winter 1994. Available online. URL: www.english.uiuc.edu. Accessed January 10, 2007.

Meléndez, Ganriel. "Carrying the Magic of His Peoples in His Heart: An Interview with Jimmy Santiago Baca." *Las Americas Journal*. Available

online. URL: www.english.uiuc.edu. Accessed January 10, 2007.

Moyers, Bill. "Jimmy Santiago Baca." In *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



TONI CADE BAMBARA (1939–1995)

Revolution begins with the self, in the self.

(“The Scattered Sopranos”)

Milona Mirkin Cade was born on March 25, 1939. She spent her childhood in Harlem observing and “adopting people” (*Deep Sightings* 208–209). For the rest of her life, she would hold Harlem as her ideal community in terms of diversity, freedom of political discussion, and shared culture. As a “truth-seeker,” she enjoyed comparing different opinions and perspectives. She cared as much about the questions being asked as the many different responses and found it necessary to understand them all. Perhaps this is why her voice speaks to audiences so strongly.

She began her writing as the neighborhood scribe, drawing up contracts for car sales and letters of complaint (219). Her keen ability to ask questions was matched by her gift of simply listening. Her mother gave her space; she “had great respect for the life of the mind,” Bambara wrote (212). In kindergarten, Milona shortened her name to *Toni*. She came upon *Bambara* later in life, when she was pregnant with her daughter, and took it as her last name. Fittingly, as a writer, artist, teacher, activist, mother, and filmmaker, Bambara was constantly evolving.

Toni Cade Bambara attended the Modern School and in 1959 graduated from Queen’s College (*Deep Sightings* 222). To fulfill a creative need and to maintain her connection with the arts, she often volunteered to model for art classes. She worked numerous odd jobs in the Village—at Montmar-

tre’s Spaghetti House, for instance, she offered to wash dishes so that she could listen to the George Wallington Quartet while out back with her huge soapy pot. Another job, at the exotic dance club Mona’s, required keeping a cab at the curb for the dancers and angry patrons. At the Open Door, she often had the opportunity to hear Miles Davis, whose jazz later influenced her writing. While working on her master’s degree, Bambara served as program director at Colony Settlement House.

From an early age, she was surrounded by those who raised critical questions and issues—especially her mother and others who expounded their views at speakers’ corners in Harlem. Her short stories in particular reflect a political voice that began early on. While teaching and serving as the director of the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) at City College of New York from 1965 to 1969, Bambara became involved in community organizations and with sociopolitical issues. Her membership in this community of ideas was critical to her. The sense of community she developed in Harlem recurs as a regular theme in her short-story collections *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*; a novel, *The Salt Eaters*; and *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, a posthumously published collection of fiction, essays, and interviews.

Before her own writing was independently published, she edited many anthologies. The first,

The Black Woman (1970), occurred at the height of the Civil Rights and women's movements. She contributed three essays to the collection, which also featured the writings of NIKKI GIOVANNI, ALICE WALKER, and others whose works were just becoming well known. Bambara felt the anthology would "open the door and prove that there was a market" for black women's work (*Deep Sightings* 230). Her instincts to keep the price as well as the size of the book small helped make the collection a success. As a result, Bambara's popularity soared. The literary world began to look to her as a spokesperson for women's issues. Answering calls to give lectures and workshops helped her to solidify a network of women who would continue to influence and guide her.

Her second anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, was published in 1971. Bambara describes the collection as stories she "wished [she] had read growing up" (Schirack). These stories reflect the African-American family, heritage, and oral tradition. What Bambara loves most about the book is that its reflections of a positive black family were something her students could identify with, allowing them to experience and share in a work based on their cultural traditions. Bambara put her students' writings into the text, giving them much more than a grade—even if it was nothing more than the knowledge that everyone on campus owned a copy.

Gorilla, My Love, a collection of short stories with overlapping themes and characters, was published in 1972. In the preface, Bambara claims not to have based her stories on actual experience—neither people nor events—in any way. Regardless, she created a wide range of believable characters—dealing with ageism, loss of control, love, power, education, family, identity—with whom her readers could identify. Bambara also struck a nerve with readers through her use of humor, as when one of her characters responds to her first surgery: "Jewel awakened . . . overwhelmed with . . . an irretrievable loss, till she remembered it was only her tonsils after all" (*Gorilla, My Love* 99). With this collection as well as the rest of her work, Bambara made use of an unmistakable

vernacular that established identity, characterization, and, at times, setting. *Gorilla, My Love* reads as an oral tradition in which something is to be learned and treasured in each of the stories.

The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, a second collection of short stories, was published in 1977. Between the two publications, Bambara traveled extensively. In Cuba, she saw women actively participating in the resolution of class and color conflicts. Her return from Cuba made her realize how her writing could become a "weapon in a [political] struggle" (*Deep Sightings* 219). Similarly, in Vietnam, she was "struck by the women's ability to break through traditional roles, traditional expectations" (Schirack). While traveling, she raised critical questions and took needed materials like penicillin, building materials, mops, diaphragms, and blood plasma to various locales; all the while, her own perceptions and writerly abilities were developing (*Deep Sightings* 233). After a second trip to North Vietnam became unfeasible, Bambara moved with her daughter to Atlanta and turned seriously to compiling the stories that would become *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*. "Most of those stories," she said, "had not been published; been hanging around the house, and they were completed during that spring and summer" (234). Bambara's focus turned once again to her writing.

Her first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, written in 1978 and published in 1980, came about somewhat by accident. The novel began as entries in her journal. Raising yet another critical question, Bambara wondered why spiritual and political people were so separate and in her writing tried to work out the puzzle. She had hoped that the two worlds would merge in a short story, whose main character, Velma, would contribute to the synthesis of spiritual and political. However, Bambara says that the work grew on her, soon becoming too large for her favorite genre. As the novel developed in length and complexity, Bambara found, "I was writing quite beyond myself in a number of ways" (235). Unfortunately, reaction to the novel was mixed, with reviewers finding that Bambara's strength lay in short fiction rather than in the novel form.

The power of the spoken word was not lost on Bambara, who began to look at her work in theatrical terms. The presentation of *The Sea Birds* was shaped by a short story written in seven sections. Between acts, she envisioned having music played, greeting cards from children in Vietnam being read, and artwork shown. Despite growing requests for public appearances, Bambara preferred to stay focused on her writing. "I am frequently asked to give a paper at a conference and I refuse," she has said of this time. "I don't do papers unless I am being paid to write an essay that is going to be published somewhere. . . . But I'm not going to do a talk and a paper. People then ask me to give a talk" (216). And so her writing took precedence over a more public existence.

Yet all of these impulses to pursue various media made up Bambara's aesthetic—intersecting, dividing, and reforming. Soon Bambara began to see filmmaking as a place to make her own rules and access African-American culture on her own terms. This took her to the founder-director of the Scribe Video Center, Louis Massiah. Preferring to learn editing, she learned that many films are actually structured and given substance in the editing room. Already experienced in creating work that spoke visually to readers, she believed she could extend this strong visual sense to the screen. In "Gorilla, My Love," for example, she had created a vivid image in this scene: "Mississippi Ham Rider brought his guitar and his granddaughter. He had on a white shirt and left the greatcoat at home. He mumbled his greetings and straddled a chair, dislocating my leg in the process. . . . Teddy heaved big bowls of things onto the table. There were collard greens and black-eye peas and ham hocks and a long pan of cornbread" (55). Surely enough, "Gorilla, My Love," "Medley," and "Witchbird" were easily translated into film.

Bambara held a blatant distaste for Hollywood's version of blacks and felt an urgency to change the industry. Her first documentary, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986), won the Academy Award for Best Documentary. Using her "truth-seeking" philosophy, she relied on interviews and eyewitness accounts. In this 90-minute gun battle of an

emerging black organization, the MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia and Cobb's Creek community were affected; ultimately, a bomb was dropped on the headquarters and 61 surrounding homes, killing 11 (Schirack).

Diagnosed with colon cancer in 1993, Bambara refused to be beaten. She continued working, determined to "kick cancer's ass" (4). Just before her death on December 9, 1995, her documentary *W. E. B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices*, which she worked on with Massiah, was released. Two additional works, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* (1996) and *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), a novel, were posthumously published, a tribute to a fighting spirit that worked up to the very end.

Toni Cade Bambara understood her purpose in any of her selected media. The many and diverse roles she played are reflected in each of her works. In an interview with Kay Bonetti of the American Audio Prose Library, Bambara said, "When I look back at my work with any little distance, the two characteristics that jump out at me is one, the tremendous capacity for laughter, but also a tremendous capacity for rage" (Bonetti 1). It is these twin impulses that are operative in so many of her creative works.

***Gorilla, My Love* (1972)**

The title story in this collection, "Gorilla, My Love," questions adults' treatment of children. Bambara introduces the reader to the character Hazel, variously nicknamed *Scout*, *Blackbird*, *Miss Muffin*, *Peaches*, and probably many others, depending on the situation and to whom she is talking. The narrator, a ball of emotion by the close of this story, "with grownups playin change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad," blames Hunca Bubba for the turmoil in her life and her uncertain sense of identity (20). "Grownups figure they can treat you just anyhow," Hazel asserts (15). She finds an ally in her brother as he cries beside her. Only another child can understand how she is feeling.

The story “My Man Bovanne” has the audacity to look at parents from their own perspective rather than as the people who continually embarrass us. We see Hazel admittedly, perhaps intentionally, enjoying herself at a party to the dismay of her children. Each one takes a turn at reprimanding his or her Mama. But at 62, Hazel is dancing for herself. She knows the consequences even as she is choosing to partner with Bovanne. She understands that he is no longer someone desirable to the neighborhood, although at one time this blind man fixed children’s skates and whatnot. She recognizes and has sympathy for his blindness and awkwardness. She narrates the negative responses from onlookers as she dances, but it makes her enjoy the dance all the more. From Joe Lee’s frown to Task’s embarrassment over her “makin a spectacle of [herself],” the tone of the party has changed in a few swings of her hips. The argument transforms, as we learn that her children are not so much upset about her dancing as by her disregard of Mr. Trent that evening. Her Man, Bovanne, and their dance have become a political statement, and his blindness a symbol.

In “Raymond’s Run,” the dynamic of Hazel’s family is present from the very first paragraph. The layering of characters in this short story allows the reader to learn about the narrator, whose responsibility for her brother, Raymond, exists in each word. In Hazel’s interactions with neighborhood peers and adults, it becomes clear what Hazel values in herself and what she appreciates—and does not—in others. She has created a space for herself through running: “I run. That’s what I’m all about” (28). Her family, too, appears to share this talent. By the close of the story, we see that Hazel’s running has transformed her as well as her relationship with her brother.

Bambara constantly reminds us of the way that one life leans on another. Such is the case with the story “Playin with Punjab.” That moment of being off-balance and accounting for and adjusting to the weight before regaining balance is one of Bambara’s many storytelling talents. It is in these moments when one character’s story changes another’s. Through the politics in this particular story, it seems that the neighborhood’s voice is lost.

“The Lesson” teaches its characters about cultural and economic differences. Miss Moore, “the only woman on the block with no first name,” feels the need to take care of the children of the neighborhood, seeking to teach them what she deems important during the summer months (87). Her students, however, resist her efforts, submitting only at their parents’ demand. Miss Moore has the power to see beyond the here and now for her students’ lives and attempts to create lessons by imparting her knowledge to them. They respond with sarcastic comments and wisecracks; only in retrospect do they recognize Miss Moore’s wisdom.

At Miss Moore’s suggestion, the students go to New York to window-shop at the toy store F. A. O. Schwarz. As children are known to do, they claim the toys they see as their own. When they begin their usual teasing of one another, Miss Moore is ready to challenge one student whose wish list starts with a microscope, asking him to explain its use, while another simultaneously laughs at and is awed by a paperweight. Miss Moore prods the children to think about what their homes are like. “It’s important to have a work area all your own,” she says (91). Soon the students are caught up in looking at the incredible toys and comparing price tags, vying to find the most expensive and intriguing item. The sailboat that Flyboy finds wins.

Then the comparisons begin. It starts with the world with which they are familiar already, the one in which sailboats cost a quarter, rather than the “one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars” of the boat in the window. At Miss Moore’s prompting, they are forced to admit that their boats do not sail and are eventually lost. This symbol in the story deepens as the narrator asks Miss Moore why someone would pay that much for a toy when he could have a real one. This is a question she cannot or does not answer.

Anger wells in the students as they line up in front of the mailboxes at Miss Moore’s request. She asks them what they think of F. A. O. Schwarz. Bambara creates a struggle between Miss Moore and the narrator over Sugar’s response about “this not being much of a democracy” (95). Through

the irony of this statement and the narrator's final reflection, the reader is able to discern who the actual winner and loser are.

In Bambara's story "The Survivor," marriage is both negated and romanticized. The journey that Jewel takes in her mind is paralleled by a bus ride to the sweetness of Miss Candy's. As in many of Bambara's works, strong women are exercising their power and control. But it is difficult to separate Jewel's acting from real life, leading the reader to ponder which is fact and fiction. This blurred line creates a more complete picture of Jewel. Meanwhile, the confidence Miss Candy exhibits defines a survivor as the person who blames herself for mishaps. And Jewel has much to feel guilty about.

In "Sweet Town," a mother-daughter relationship is sliced by love. Bambara takes the reader through a summer romance that ends all too suddenly for Kit. As is often the case with first loves, Kit's innocence is shattered and she is left fantasizing about reuniting.

"Basement" is as difficult to read as any story in the collection. Bambara explores the lengths we go to protect ourselves and to gain and keep friends. She delves into what we allow others, especially our parents, to know about us, and how their expectations of us shape who we are and how much we tell them.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Mark Twain's preface to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Bambara's "A Sort of Preface" to *Gorilla, My Love*. In what ways are the two similar? Consider the literary devices each author uses, as well as the narrator's stance. Explain the differences and similarities you find, supporting your response with references to both texts.
2. In her writing, Bambara often addresses the importance of names and naming. Why is this focus such an important one for her? Compare the first chapter of *Gorilla, My Love* to the first chapter of SANDRA CISNEROS's *House on Mango Street*. What does each say about the importance of a name? Cite from both texts to support your answer.
3. A frequent theme for Bambara is the relative merit of innocence and experience. Now that you have observed this theme in *Gorilla, My Love*, read five or six poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. Which do you feel contributes more to life, innocence or experience? Why? Support your response with citations from both Bambara's and Blake's texts.

"Medley" (1977)

A section of *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, "Medley" is one of the short stories that Bambara has translated into film. The first line of the story drops us into the middle of the action. We are immediately within the consciousness of Sweet Pea, the main character, glimpsing her identity through what she is not. Bambara's uses of repetition and alliteration welcome us into the aptly titled "Medley."

The mix of emotion is immediately evident in the first few pages. Sweet Pea draws comparisons of her work as mother and as manicurist. She knows she is good at giving manicures and feels she is making connections with each of her clients. Sweet Pea identifies each character by what it is he or she does and what he or she is good at: "Stories are not Hector's long suit. But he is an absolute artist on windows" (110). The way she describes each character's passion turns stereotypes upside down. Suddenly, window washing becomes an art form, a skill to be envied and desired.

Nor does Sweet Pea neglect anyone's hands, which she sees as extensions of our identities. As she considers each person's hands and his or her gifts, Sweet Pea reflects on her own, struggling to put her life in order. From all of the disparate compartments in which she lives, there are pieces of her own identity to be gleaned. The final scene shows the character's transformation and her ability to leave the apartment and step boldly out on her own.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bambara often depicts her characters in terms of a microcosm, or small world, which she builds

from the pieces of their ordinary lives. In so doing, she appears to see her literary characters as having heroic dimension. How does Bambara's evidentiary theory of heroism differ from traditional ones—say, Aristotle's view of a hero as a great man upon whom the fate of many people depends? Is it possible to have heroes today? Why or why not? Justify your answer with references to specific experiences and observations in the story.

2. According to Sweet Pea, "Music and water [are] the healthiest things in the world." What do you think she means? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer in global terms.

***The Salt Eaters* (1980)**

Bambara opens her first novel with the revelation that her main character, Velma, has just attempted suicide. The book is divided into chapters emerging from Velma's consciousness, as she floats from memory to memory. Each chapter includes characters significant to Velma, all with their own parallel stories. Each character depicts Velma in terms of her status as wife, friend, godchild, and political activist. It is difficult for the others to think of Velma as suicidal, since each recollection is of a time when she displayed great strength, despite facing significant hardships. In the ramblings of a spiritual healer, Minnie Ransom, the reader begins to see the justification for Velma's suicide attempt and to question whether she really wants to die. Reading about the "difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent" not only explains the title, but also provides insight into why Velma does attempt to take her life (8).

The character Minnie Ransom holds power symbolically through her name and spiritually as a healer. Bambara casts Minnie as the essence of traditional African culture, with an ability to transport herself mentally to Africa, where she can consult Ole Wife, a healer of consequence. Minnie questions why she must deal with Mrs. Velma Henry, who, unlike most of the others she attempts

to help, is extremely difficult to reach. Her struggle with Velma has caused Minnie to reflect on the changes in the new generation. The reader learns bits and pieces about Minnie's mentor, someone she knew among the living in her youth.

It is not long before the reader encounters Velma's friends on the bus, traveling to visit her. However, rather than focus on these friends, Bambara draws attention to the unrelated bus driver, Fred Holt. Fred considers the lives of all those he meets as personal reminders of what he does not have. The passengers on the bus become an extension of Fred: The musicians remind him of what he once wished he could be; the women gossiping make him reflect on just who his friends are; even an overheard conversation between a couple make him reflect on his lonely life and home. Fred seems to have come up missing in every aspect of his life, but the reader develops empathy for him despite his jealousy, envy, and even self-loathing.

James "Obie" Lee, Velma's husband, finds hope in Velma's suicide attempt. He sees his wife in a way that he has been unable to before her attempt. Their daily activities seem to have lost the spark that they once had, early in their marriage. A civil rights activist, in dangerous ways, he has a strong desire for progress. Obie is synonymous for yearning in the novel.

Morals are tested through the character of the journalist Buster. Although he has attempted to follow leads in the political underground workings of African Americans, when he reaches a dead end in a potential story, he is more concerned about meeting deadlines than in writing the truth. The political factions he encounters in the community point to an inability of African Americans to unite. Bambara's obvious statement made through Buster is one readers will see in many of her other works, as she often points out the differences between the generations.

Palma, the stereotypical big sister, is not sure just what to feel upon hearing the news about Velma. Her perspective takes Velma out of the victim's role. For the first time, the reader feels Velma's strength as more than the undercurrent it has previously been. Palma sums it up in a way that gives order to the previous chapters: "Velma was

- Heller, Janet Ruth. "Toni Cade Bambara's Use of African American Vernacular English in 'The Lesson.'" *Style* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 279–293.
- hooks, bell. "Uniquely Toni Cade Bambara." *Black Issues Book Review* 2, no. 1 (January–February 2000): 14–16.
- Parker, Bell, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1979.
- Schirack, Maureen. "Toni Cade Bambara." *Voices from the Gaps: Women Artists and Writers of Color*. University of Minnesota, 26 April 2001. Available online. URL: <http://voices.cl.umn.edu/artistpages/bambaraToni.php>. Accessed September 23, 2008.
- Tate, Claudia, ed. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983.

Carrie Morton



AMIRI BARAKA

(LEROI JONES) (1934–)

Art is political by its very nature. It has an ideology and reflects its creator's value system.

(“Talk with Leroi Jones,” *New York Times* 27 June 1971)

In July 1967, Amiri Baraka was arrested for illegally carrying a weapon during a time of riots in Newark, New Jersey, also known as the Newark rebellion. At the trial, the judge read Baraka's poem “Black People” (1967) to the all-white jury. “I'm being sentenced for the poem. Is that what you are saying?” responded Baraka (Hudson 51). Though not published until *after* the riots, “Black People” seemed a call to violence: “We must make our own World, man, our own world, and we cannot do this unless the white man is dead. Let's get together and kill him my man . . . let's make a world we want black children to grow and learn in” (*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, Harris 224). The poem was admitted as evidence of a plot to ignite violence, and on January 4, 1968, Baraka was sentenced to three years in New Jersey's state penitentiary and fined \$1,000; the conviction was overturned on appeal.

This incident illustrates the relationship between politics and art that is at the center of Baraka's work—a body of work that encompasses, at the time of this writing, 14 books of poetry, 24 plays, five books of essays, four anthologies, and a novel. As he explained in a recent interview: “All art is political. It takes a stand, it wants to convince you one way or another. Those who claim ‘art should not be political’ are making a political statement.” No literature exists in a vacuum, he added, and any suggestion to the contrary is meant “only to have

us look away from the real world so that ‘the pleasure of the text’ is a titillation of empty sensuality. All's well in the big house while the great majority—slaves, serfs, the generally exploited—suffer out of sight” (Trodd 375).

In part because of this insistence upon the political nature of art, Baraka is a controversial figure in American literature. Even more controversial, however, is his use of art to advocate violence. As with “Black People,” his poems often call for violent action. For example, in “A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand” (1969), he writes: “We have awaited the coming of a natural / phenomenon. . . . But none has come. . . . Will the machinegunners please step forward?” (Harris 210). Not only using art to advocate violence, he also imagines art *as* violent: In numerous poems he demands that writers be warriors, describes language as a weapon, and fashions poems themselves as daggers, fists, and poison gas. Following this lead in the late 1960s, the Black Students Union at San Francisco State College began to use as their symbol an image of a black man holding a gun and a book, and in 1970 the Black Panther Party member Emory Douglas told artists to “take up their paints and brushes in one hand and their gun in the other.” Douglas added: “all of the Fascist American empire must be blown up in our pictures” (Douglas 12). The pen had become a sword.

These calls to violence echo the rhetoric of the black militant leader Malcolm X, as do Baraka's

repeated critiques of nonviolence: As Malcolm X does, Baraka notes that nonviolence as a “theory of social and political demeanor” simply means “a continuation of the status quo” (*Home* 144). In fact, Malcolm’s influence on Baraka was profound. Malcolm was killed while speaking in Harlem on February 21, 1965, and in response to the assassination, Baraka wrote “A Poem for Black Hearts” (1965). Here he celebrates and mourns “Malcolm’s / heart, raising us above our filthy cities . . . Malcolm’s / pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life.” Again, the poem imagines words as weapons—“fire darts” (Harris 218). Also in response to the assassination, Baraka left his white wife, moved uptown to Harlem from his Greenwich Village home, and embraced black nationalism.

This was the first of Baraka’s two major transformations. Born Leroi Jones on October 7, 1934, in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey, he attended predominantly white public schools, then Rutgers University and Howard University, before beginning military service in the U.S. Air Force in 1954. After his release from the military in 1957, he attended graduate school and moved to New York City’s Greenwich Village, where he quickly met and married a white woman, Hettie Cohen. The couple went on to have two daughters. Baraka lived in the Village from 1957 to 1965, working as an editor, poet, dramatist, and jazz critic. He befriended numerous Beat writers, including Allen Ginsberg and Frank O’Hara, and established a magazine called *Yugen*, which published Beat literature. As part of the Village’s bohemian, avant-garde crowd, he published his first major collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), which has a stream-of-consciousness Beat aesthetic.

By 1962, however, he was pulling away from Ginsberg and rejecting the otherworldly poetics of Beat writers: “The one huge difference between myself and say, Allen G,” he told a friend, is that “I have a program . . . based on realizable human endeavour. . . . I want to put together a body of work that will at least provide some text that can be referred to in the event of the desired explosion”

(*Poetry and Poetics* 99). Then, in his poem “Western Front,” later published in the collection *Black Magic* (1969), he finally severed the link: “Poems are made / by fools like Allen Ginsberg, who loves God, and went to India / only to see God, finding him walking barefoot in the street, / blood sickness and hysteria” (Harris 216). Ginsberg responded with his own poem, observing in *Ankor Wat* (1968): “Nothing but a false Buddha afraid of / my own annihilation . . . Leroi I been done you wrong / I’m just an old Uncle Tom in disguise all along / Afraid of physical tanks” (32).

Instead of his Beat friends, Baraka began to seek out black nationalists, including Stokely Carmichael. Moving to Harlem in the wake of Malcolm’s death, he also married a black poet, Sylvia Robinson, in 1967, and the same year converted to Islam. To express this transformation, he changed his name: from *Leroi Jones* to *Imamu* (spiritual leader) *Amiri* (warrior) *Baraka* (sacrifice). He later explained of this name change: “[it] seemed fitting to me . . . and not just the meaning of the name, but the idea that I was now literally being changed into a blacker being” (Watts 310). In turn, Robinson changed her name to *Amina Baraka*. Becoming more and more engaged with black nationalist politics, Baraka assumed leadership of his own black Muslim organization, Kawaida. From 1968 to 1975, he chaired the Committee for Unified Newark, a Black United Front organization, and was also a prominent figure in the National Black Political Convention, which convened in 1972.

The Beat poet had become a black nationalist. Emphasizing his transformation still further, Baraka published a series of black nationalist poems. One, “leroy” (1969), observes: “When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to / black people. May they pick me apart and take the / useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave / the bitter bullshit rotten white parts / alone” (Harris 224). His hostility toward all white people appears in numerous other poems from this period, and his rejection of cross-racial collaboration was even more evident during an infamous encounter with a white woman. She stated her desire to help solve

racial tensions, and Baraka replied: "You can help by dying. You are a cancer. You can help the world's people with your death" (Harris xxv).

Advocating black revolution, Baraka argued, that "Black People are a race, a culture, a Nation" (Harris 167). He believed that art could create this black "Nation" and challenged black artists to create a "Black Poem" and a "Black World" in his 1966 poem "Black Art" (Harris 220). Later explaining that he "wanted to go 'beyond' poetry" and achieve "action literature" (*Autobiography* 275), he called for poetry that both described the situation of black people and showed how to change it. He also founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S) in Harlem, to assist the creation of a black culture. Focused on community art, BART/S produced "plays that shattered the illusions of the American body politic, and awakened Black people to the meaning of their lives," as Larry Neal described it in 1968 (34). Baraka then founded the Spirit House Players, which produced two of his plays about police brutality: *Arm Yrself or Harm Yrself* (1967) and *Police* (1968).

This attempt to make art *act* in the world fueled the Black Arts movement, which boasted Baraka and Neal among its figures, along with Addison Gayle, Jr., Hoyt Fuller, ISHMAEL REED, and James Stewart. The Black Arts Movement stressed cultural heritage, the beauty of blackness, and a "Black Aesthetic"—it was, Neal noted, "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (29). Equally important to the Black Arts Movement was a belief that political action would emerge through artistic expression. Art had to be social and political in nature: Neal observed that the artist and the political activist were one, and Stewart added that white Western aesthetics were "predicated on the idea of separating . . . a man's art from his actions" (*Black Fire* 9).

One new aesthetic that Baraka explored instead was the jazz avant garde. He believed that music articulated an authentic black expression, explaining in 1966 that "Negro music alone, because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes, has been able to survive the

constant and wilful dilutions of the black middle class" (Mitchell 165). Musical freedom as social activism continued the work of Harlem Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, and in a recent interview Baraka observed that the Black Arts Movement was on a continuum with the Harlem Renaissance (Trodd 375). Alongside this interest in music, the movement's poets stressed the orality of poetry.

Baraka noted in the same interview, however, that the Black Arts Movement was "a version of Mao's Cultural Revolution, a form of the Indigisme of Haiti, the Negrismo of Latin America, literally a sorting out and repositioning of cultural meanings, symbols, history." It was "an attempt to capture the minds of the people, to influence and direct them," he added, and explained that this was important because culture is one of the main tools of political organization by the rulers of any society. "We can tell what side you're on, what you celebrate, what you condemn . . . by your art," he concluded. "Art sez Mao is the ideological reflection of the world" (Trodd 375).

Baraka's references to Mao are in fact representative of his worldview after a second major transformation: from black nationalist to third-world Marxist, in 1974. A trip to Cuba in 1960 had begun to radicalize his thinking about oppression in the third world, and in the mid-1970s he proclaimed a complete identification with the artists he had met on his trip. Dissatisfied with Kenneth Gibson's black bourgeois leadership of their Newark organization, and newly impassioned by theories of African socialism, he refashioned the Congress of African People as the Revolutionary Communist League.

He still insisted that "poetry should be a weapon of revolutionary struggle," as he put it in 1979 (adding that otherwise poetry was "an ornament the imperialists wear to make a gesture toward humanity") (*Selected Poetry* 237, 239), but now proclaimed that this "struggle" was against the capitalist state. And while he continued to aim his art at the black community, he explained in 1974 that not all whites were enemies: "It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy. . . . National-

ism, so-called, when it says ‘all non-blacks are our enemies,’ is sickness or criminality, in fact, a form of fascism” (Harris xxviii). The enemy was simply first-world oppressors. Marking this second shift in his political and cultural identity, Baraka changed his name again, dropping *Imamu* to be known as simply *Amiri Baraka*.

In recent years, Baraka has continued to court controversy and has faced accusations of anti-Semitism. He was selected poet laureate of New Jersey in 2002, a position he was forced to resign in the wake of the scandal over his poem “Someone Blew Up America,” about the 9/11/2001 disaster.

Though Baraka’s life and art falls into these three periods—Beat generation, black nationalism, third-world Marxism—the thread that runs throughout is his stated belief that “ethics and aesthetics are one” (Trodd 375). Pointing in a recent interview to Bertolt Brecht’s description of a “Theater of Education or Theater of Instruction,” as opposed to “Psychological Theater,” Baraka summed up his central philosophy: “If poetry is not to tell us something . . . then it serves what purpose?” (Trodd 375).

“Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note” (1961)

In 1961, Baraka published his first book of poetry. Titled *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, it earned him critical acclaim. Throughout the poems, Baraka draws upon the styles of the Beat poets, the Black Mountain poets, and the poet William Carlos Williams to combine stream of consciousness, projective free verse, and dialect. The collection is introspective and melancholy, as evidenced in the title poem: “Nobody sings anymore,” writes Baraka, wistfully.

This title poem, “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,” is also significant for its contrast between the imaginative and the mundane. The poet is “accustomed” to the mundane: running for the bus, walking the dog. Even the stars hold no magic: “each night I get the same number.” Baraka emphasizes the repetitive nature of his days

by beginning three lines in a row with *And*: “And now . . . And each . . . And when. . . .” It is only when we reach the end of the poem that it offers a break from this pattern of meaninglessness. The poet encounters his daughter, to whom the poem is dedicated, engrossed in prayer. It seems as though she is “talking to someone,” and yet there is no one in the room—she speaks into “her own clasped hands.” This act of childhood imagination contrasts with the poet’s own sense of the mundane. When certain stars are not visible, he sees this absence as a sign that “nobody sings anymore,” while his daughter responds to the apparent absence of God by praying into the silence.

The moment expresses Baraka’s search for a responsive God. Over the following years, he would decide that the term *Black ideals* described the kind of God he wanted to believe in, explaining in 1965 that he sought a “righteous sanctity out of which worlds are built” (Harris 165). He went on in later poems to criticize the Western world’s tendency to “peek” into its “clasped hands” (as he describes his daughter’s prayer in “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note”). For example, in the poem “When We’ll Worship Jesus” (1975), he attacks capitalist America’s tradition of Christianity as “the oppression of the human mind” and observes: “We aint gonna worship jesus cause jesus dont exist / xcept in song and story . . . in / slum stained tears” (Harris 253).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read some Beat poetry, especially that of Allen Ginsberg. What features of this poetry can you find in Baraka’s “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note”? How would you describe the tone of these poems, both for the Beats and for Baraka? Explain your answer.
2. Consider the long history of imagining the moon and stars as symbols of constancy—for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To the Moon,” John Keats’s “Bright Star,” Walt Whitman’s “A Clear Midnight,” and W. H. Auden’s “As I Walked Out One Night.” Why might it be significant that for Baraka, the stars are *inconstant*? Cite examples from the texts of the poems to justify your answer.

“In Memory of Radio” (1961)

As does his “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,” Baraka’s poem “In Memory of Radio” appears to contrast the innocence of the childish imagination and the experience of the adult mind. Though the poem is written in free verse and has a conversational tone with direct addresses to the reader (“The rest of you . . . see what I mean?”), it seems to be an elegy nonetheless—mourning a loss of innocence. Baraka remembers with nostalgia the radio shows of his childhood and examines himself now: in a world that cannot enjoy that fantasy world of radio. The world cannot even understand the word *love*—instead, he explains, the word *love* has been inverted to become *evol*.

Yet far from seeking a return to that world of innocence and make-believe, Baraka is in fact criticizing the creation of false realities by the mass media. The poem’s central figure is a superhero of the 1930s and 1940s called “The Shadow,” who destroys evil while wearing a cloak of invisibility. Baraka quotes the superhero’s catchphrase: “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows.” The Shadow’s alter ego is Lamont Cranston, a millionaire playboy, and Baraka uses the image of a double self to examine the dividing line between reality and appearance. His poem asks the reader to question the media’s world of make-believe—that world of “Let’s Pretend.”

One danger of the media’s make-believe world is its assistance of a consumerist culture: The media tell Americans how to “get saved & rich!” Instead, the poem references and aligns itself with the Beat writer Jack Kerouac, who, as does Baraka, critiques the consumerism of postwar American culture. Of that consumerism, Baraka asks bitterly: “It is better to have loved and lost / Than to put linoleum in your living rooms?” As well, Baraka protests the creation of a commodified religious culture, which means that the process of being “saved” can be marketed and sold and is as important as getting “rich.”

This combination of consumerism and religion means that the Shadow might as well be divine: “Who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston?” asks Baraka. Examining the *real* “evol,” whereby mainstream America worships mil-

lionaires, linoleum, and religious propagandists such as “F. J. Sheen” (priest and author of 1950s books like *Life Is Worth Living*, *The Way to Happiness*, and *Thinking Life Through*), Baraka is one of the poem’s “unbelievers.” And unlike those unbelievers, he is a critic who *does* choose to “throw stones.”

For Discussion or Writing

Read Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). What similarities can you find between the tones and styles of Kerouac and Baraka in this poem?

“Notes for a Speech” (1961)

In his early poetry, Baraka expresses “the emotional history of the black man in this country as its victim and chronicler” (Benston 110). “Notes for a Speech,” as one of those early poems, is a meditation on the black man’s loneliness: Excluded from white America, he is also disconnected from black Africa. It lays out the poet’s isolation, exposing his racial identity. Echoing W. E. B. DuBois’s famous comment in 1903 that the black American exists in a state of “twoness . . . an American, a Negro” (3), Baraka notes that white culture tends to “shy away,” and yet Africans are only his “so called people.”

Here Baraka positions himself within what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., refers to as the “wild zone of the hyphen between African and American” (47). He imagines the social space occupied by African Americans as a no-man’s-land: a seemingly abandoned place where newspapers are “blown down pavements / of the world.” The gaps in Baraka’s poem, created by its structure as a series of shorthand “notes” (“Who / you” instead of “Who are you”), further develop the theme of a no-man’s-land—as though the true expression of black identity is hidden somewhere in the poem’s gaps. This strategy of imagining a no-man’s-land was a trope in numerous poems, novels, and stories by black writers of the 20th century. For example, in his story “The Man Who Went to Chicago” (1945), Richard Wright describes black workers who are “separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the rest of the hospital—just as America had kept [them]

locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years” (250).

Baraka’s focus on the existential isolation of African Americans would soon translate into the solution of black nationalism—a nation within a nation, and so a home for black people in white America. By 1965, he was celebrating the African heritage of African Americans. Africa is no longer the “foreign place” of “Notes for a Speech,” but rather, as in “Ka’Ba” (1966), black Americans have “African imaginations.” No longer the “ugly man” of “Notes for a Speech,” instead Baraka is the “beautiful” man of “Ka’Ba,” with a belief that the “Black Man must aspire to Blackness,” as he stated it in a 1966 essay (*Home* 248). This shift from dislocated black American to proud African American is visibly on the horizon in “Notes for a Speech” through the capitalization of *Africa* but not *american*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Setting “Notes for a Speech” in the context of Baraka’s later poetry (including “Ka’Ba” and “Wise I”), what transformations do you see in his approach to the question of “blackness” and national identity? How does Baraka take up the *problem* of his marginalized “Americanness” and cultivate isolation as a *solution* instead?
2. The poem uses the word *own* three times, once to refer to land, and twice to refer to death (“deaths apart / from my own” and “My own / dead souls”). Twice, Baraka calls attention to the word by positioning it at the end of a line. What connection is Baraka making between land (or lack of it) and death? Is being nationless, without a “people,” a form of social death for Baraka? If so, how else does the poem communicate this idea of homelessness or dislocation as a form of death?

“An Agony. As Now.” (1964)

The first-person speaker in Baraka’s “An Agony. As Now.” is trapped “inside someone who hates me.” Exploring this idea of self-alienation, Baraka is taking up W. E. B. DuBois’s famous formulation of “double consciousness” and applying it to this

later moment in time (“as now”). In 1903, DuBois explained the “peculiar sensation” for a black person in America of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” This meant, DuBois added, existing “within a world which yields [the black man] no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (3).

Now Baraka, who has frequently referred in interviews to the work of earlier black writers, including DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Frederick Douglass, echoes DuBois’s concept. He imagines the difference between his unacknowledged inner self and his despised outer self—an outer self defined by white America’s gaze and perspective. Constricted by the views of others, he can only see through “slits in the metal.” Baraka confirms that the poem is a revision of DuBois’s 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* by emphasizing that the division between outer and inner selves is a division between “flesh” and “soul.”

The form of the poem further expresses the sensation of being trapped. Baraka repeats the phrase “or pain” in the fourth stanza, as though he is unable to escape an ever-recurring hurt and must experience it over and over again. As well, on three occasions in the third stanza Baraka opens a parenthesis without closing it. The two sets of parentheses in the fourth stanza, and the one parenthesis in the fifth stanza, are therefore still three layers deep when they create a *fourth* layer. One of his initial sets of parentheses opened in the third stanza is eventually closed at the end of the fifth stanza, but this still leaves the rest of the poem embedded two layers deep. By building these containing layers, Baraka is echoing the theme, as he expresses it in the poem, of “enclosure.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the first chapter of W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Does DuBois see anything potentially positive about “double consciousness”? If so, does Baraka take a less optimistic view than DuBois of the ultimate result of double consciousness?
2. How far has Baraka internalized white racism to imagine blackness itself as a limitation in this

poem? Is it in fact the black body that is responsible for imprisoning the self, rather than the world's perception of the black body?

"A Poem for Willie Best" (1964)

Baraka's long verse ode focuses on the black actor Willie Best, who played a stereotyped black buffoon in films of the early and mid-20th century. "A Poem for Willie Best" takes up the same theme as "Notes for a Speech" and "An Agony. As Now."—a theme that Baraka later referred to as "the whole question of how [one relates] realistically to one's environment if one feels estranged from one's environment and especially a black person in a white situation" (Watts 104). Hidden behind his minstrel performances, Best is disconnected from himself and so might as well be disembodied—a face singing "alone / at the top / of the body."

The poem also fashions Best as a sacrificial lamb to white America—a Christ figure, "nailed stiff" on a "cross." Here Baraka echoes a long tradition in African-American literature of imagining the black man as white America's Christ, building on poems like Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" (1931) and Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified" (1922) and "The Black Christ" (1929), as well as stories like W. E. B. DuBois's "Jesus Christ in Texas" (1920) and drama like Georgia Douglass Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925).

Yet, in the case of Best, Baraka offers an end to the dynamic of estrangement, dislocation, victimhood, and sacrifice. He crafts a clear turning point: While trapped behind a mask like the speaker in "An Agony. As Now." and experiencing a divided self like the speaker in "Notes for a Speech," Best is reaching the point of escape. He is about to break from his performance and thus from the white stereotypes of African Americans: "He said, I'm tired / of losing. / 'I got to cut 'cha,'" writes Baraka toward the end of the poem, exposing the "renegade / behind the mask."

Noting in an interview about "A Poem for Willie Best" that the problem of environmental estrangement was even more pronounced for "a person who

is growing more and more political" (Watts 104), Baraka signaled in this poem his own ongoing politicization, and his own imminent shift to racial radicalism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Baraka uses numerous parentheses in this poem. What is the effect of this device? Why are some of the parentheses left open?
2. Read the poem aloud. What is the effect of the poem's line breaks? Do they alter the pace from beginning to end? How do these breaks add to or detract from the theme of the poem? What is its theme?

Dutchman (1964)

In March 1964, Baraka's one-act play *Dutchman* opened in New York. The story of a deadly encounter between a white woman and a black college student, it was what Baraka himself referred to the following year as the "theatre of assault." Going on to lay out his manifesto for a new kind of theater, Baraka explained: "The Revolutionary Theatre should force change . . . must EXPOSE! . . . must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked . . . it is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 4–6). To its shocked audiences and dazzled critics, *Dutchman* seemed just that kind of revolutionary theater. It went on to win an Obie Award, was proclaimed "the best play in America" by Norman Mailer (Harris xx), and in 2007 was controversially revived in New York.

While making him famous, *Dutchman* also signaled the explosion of Baraka's long-building anger toward white America. The two characters, Lula and Clay, meet on a New York subway car. They flirt, and eventually Lula provokes Clay into anger, then stabs him to death and throws him off the train. Other white passengers are impassive. The play ends with Lula's sizing up another black male victim; the cycle will continue.

This message of the seemingly unstoppable race war between black and white Americans is reinforced by the play's setting: The train car rushes ever onward in one direction, toward an unavoidable end. Baraka provides further reinforcement for this warning through the play's title, which refers to Richard Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman* (1843)—an opera based on the myth of a legendary ghost ship that can never go home, thus is doomed to sail the seas forever. Again, Baraka implies that *his* Dutchman, the subway car's confined space of white oppression, will sail on until the judgement day of black revolution.

Baraka's decision to end the play with the cycle continuing, and the message that Clay might as well be *any* black man, is echoed by his construction throughout of entirely allegorical characters. Lula enters the subway car eating an apple and proceeds to tempt Clay, her black Adam, as a 20th-century Eve. And in tempting and then destroying Clay, Lula is not only Eve but also a symbol of white America's seeming acceptance, then cruel denial, of black Americans. The characters are larger than they are, their story more significant than that of two individuals: Confirming that the play goes beyond realism, the stage directions insist that the subway is "heaped in modern myth."

Yet Baraka also questions the origins of racial myths, symbols, and stereotypes. Lula, and by implication white America, seems responsible for most of those constructions. She tells Clay that he is "a well-known type" and goes on to reference a series of racial stereotypes, from the fugitive slave ("escaped nigger") to an "Uncle Tom" to what she calls a "middle-class fake white man." In part, Clay has lost his individuality *not* because the play seeks to make him a symbol of the black man, but because white Americans like Lula—and black Americans such as the jacketed, polite Clay himself—have made the black man inauthentic. As well, Clay seems buried beneath the weight of history: The fleeting presence of a conductor who dances a minstrel-style shuffle step is the embodiment of slavery's racial legacy.

Baraka's solution to these constraints of racial stereotypes is either art or violence. On the one hand, when Clay finally reaches a state of real emo-

tion, he argues that Bessie Smith's music communicates the message: "Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass." On the other hand, Clay also argues that Charlie Parker "would have played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw." Here Baraka offers two choices: to rebel through music or to abandon music and rebel. And while Clay seems to settle upon the solution of action rather than art, telling Lula in anger that they "will cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones," this remains only a rhetorical gesture. It is Lula who moves beyond rhetoric and commits murder. Failing to act, Clay pays the price.

In a sense, the respectable, middle-class Clay is Baraka himself—struggling between artistry and activism, and on the brink of a transformation whereby he would collapse the distinction and embrace art as a radical tool of violent activism. When the play appeared in 1964, John F. Kennedy and Medgar Evers had been murdered, along with four little black girls in the Birmingham church bombings. Malcolm X's message of black power was gaining supporters, and he was about to be killed himself. The following year, Baraka would kill off his old self, like Clay. He would leave his white wife, move to Harlem, change his name, convert to Islam, and begin a new, revolutionary phase.

Dutchman, then, is in part Baraka's search for his own inner militant, the "renegade / behind the mask," as he states in "A Poem for Willie Best" (1964). Briefly, Clay had found that self behind the facade, telling Lula that she does not see beyond it to the "pumping black heart." And though this discovery occurs in vain for Clay, Baraka would take it to Harlem, and beyond, through his advocacy of black power, black revolution, and black art.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the opening pages of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). What resonances are there between these pages and Lula's advice to Clay that he "pretend the people cannot see you . . . that you are free of your own history"? In what way does Clay take the advice given by the

Invisible Man's grandfather to "live in the lion's mouth"? Explain.

2. Consider the setting of the play—the New York subway, or what the stage directions call the “underbelly of the city.” Bearing in mind the long history in African-American literature of imagining underground spaces (for example, in Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground,” from 1942; Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, from 1952; and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, from 1972), what might be the significance of this setting?

“Ka’Ba” (1966)

After his embrace of black nationalism in 1965, Baraka set about transforming the very notion of blackness. Returning to W. E. B. DuBois’s famous description of “double consciousness” (3)—a theme in earlier poems like “Notes for a Speech” (1961) and “An Agony. As Now.” (1964)—Baraka now asked that blacks no longer see through white eyes. He declared a hatred for the black middle class, equating its values with Euro-American values, and instead used his experimental poetry to subvert traditional forms and accepted values. If “white” and “black” were signifiers for “good” and “bad,” then Baraka would use the terms differently, celebrating what he often called “black magic”—or what James Brown expressed when he sang, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud.”

Baraka’s poem “Ka’Ba” calls for that “magic,” for “spells” and “sacred words.” It announces that the world of black Americans is “more lovely than anyone’s.” We are “beautiful people,” he adds. Here his poem echoes the rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s “Black Is Beautiful” movement. For Baraka, however, that beauty is specifically an African beauty: From the idea in “Notes for a Speech” that Africans are only his “so called people,” Baraka has shifted to celebrating the “African imaginations” of black people in America. He is expressing one of the tenets of black nationalism: the assertion of black Americans’ identity as a people of African ancestry. One of the ways to invert negative sym-

bols and stereotypes, he proposes, is to redefine the African-American past—a past otherwise evoked by the images of slavery in his poem (“gray chains . . . We have been captured, / and we labor to make our getaway”).

Others would echo Baraka’s pan-African pride: For example, the Black Panther Party member Stokely Carmichael called for pan-African political organization, explaining in *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (1971) that the only way forward for black power was a socialist pan-African revolution. Baraka, too, would later define his poem as calling for revolution: In a recent interview, he explained that the poem’s “sacred word” is “revolution, not only in a spiritual context, but in a context of class struggle.” The poem was, he added, part of his attempt to solve “the whole question of the unification of Black people” (Banks 2).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read TONI MORRISON’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which tells the story of a black girl’s internalization of white standards of beauty and her wish for blue eyes. How does Morrison apply the message of “Ka’Ba” specifically to women? Explain.
2. Consider the poem’s opening image, in which black people defy physics and “call across or scream across or walk across” a space that divides them. How does Baraka embed this possibility of conquering space in the *poem’s* space? In your analysis of this question, consider such aspects of the poem as line breaks, stanza breaks, pauses, and white space.

“Will They Cry When You’re Gone, You Bet” (1969)

In 1969, Baraka was at the height of his passion for black unity. After 1965 and his embrace of black nationalism, he had shifted from introspective, semiautobiographical poetry to forge a collective voice in his work. This transformation has been described by Paul Vangelisti as a reinvention of “the figure of the poet,” and a movement from lyric self-

consciousness to “lyrical communism” (xix). “Will They Cry When You’re Gone, You Bet,” however, mourns the failure of some black people to join the collective struggle for revolution and separatism: He attacks those who seek to integrate with whites in America, describing it as a desertion by friends who follow a mirage of attentive “white women” that isn’t “really there.”

Baraka imagines the process of separating from whites as “going off from them,” away from “the white heat.” It is better, he explains, to accept the “bitter water” of black life than believe the promises of “white drifting fairies” and devious “white women.” Here Baraka repeats one of his common strategies: symbolizing white America as a woman. In several poems, and most famously in his 1964 play *Dutchman*, he offers white women as the embodiment of white America’s false temptations, fickle warmth, and deathly allure.

This has drawn the anger of both black and white feminists, who protest the implied misogyny of such symbolism. In fact, Baraka’s symbolism in this poem is part of his broader gender politics, which again has been attacked by feminist critics. In 1970, for example, he explained that the recovery of “healthy African identities” depended on distinct gender roles and a submissive femininity: “We do not believe in ‘equality’ of men and women . . . nature has not provided thus” (“Black Women” 148–52).

As well, several of his poems discuss raping white women as a way to counterbalance the oppression of black men. This rhetoric of violence was echoed by the black activist Eldridge Cleaver, who famously described his rape of white women as “an insurrectionary act” (33). The black feminist bell hooks has criticized such rhetoric, noting that Cleaver and Baraka were the embodiment of a Black Power movement that had discarded “chivalrous codes of manhood” and lionized “the rapist, the macho man, the brute who uses force to get his demands met” (106).

Along with Baraka and Cleaver, other Black Power advocates stressed masculine regeneration at the cost of female empowerment. This even encompassed women’s roles within the movement: The Black Power activist Elaine Brown later observed

that a woman in the movement was considered “at best, irrelevant”; a woman asserting herself, “a pariah.” Brown explained: “If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people” (357).

For Discussion or Writing

1. The Black Power movement often seemed a cult of masculinity. In response, Michele Wallace denounced it as a “vehicle for black macho,” explaining in 1979 that “black males who stressed a traditionally patriarchal responsibility to their women and children, to their communities—to black people—were to be considered almost sissified. The black man’s sexuality and the physical fact of his penis were the major evidence of his manhood and the purpose of it.” She added: “Male black power activists [seemed] spurred to action by their genitals, which pointed unflinchingly at white women” (62). Take a look at Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968). How accurately does Wallace’s description match *Soul on Ice* and Baraka’s poem?
2. Read Baraka’s poem “Black Dada Nihilismus” (1964). Written while he was still married to a white woman, the poem is shocking for its call to rape white women. But while he issues an instruction to “rape the white girls,” he also instructs, “choke my friends.” He makes a similar connection to that in “Will They Cry When You’re Gone, You Bet,” which describes the betrayal of friends and the temptations of white women. What is the significance of that connection?

“AM/TRAK” (1979)

“AM/TRAK” showcases Baraka’s belief in poetry as a musical performance. It is one of several poems in which he attempts to translate poetry into music: From the late 1960s onward, he became increasingly interested in poetry as a process of performance and revision, rather than

as a static and finished product. He adopted the improvisatory aesthetic of jazz—embodying the cadences and movements of free jazz and bebop in particular. As he explained in an interview: “Poetry since the sixties [is] much more orally conceived rather than manuscript conceived . . . more intended to be read aloud. . . . To me [the text] is a score. . . . I’m much more interested in the spoken word” (“An Interview with Amiri Baraka” 20).

The poem “AM/TRAK” is therefore at once a poetic biography of John Coltrane and an imitation of Coltrane’s jazz style. Baraka chants phrases and words at varied intervals, imitating the jazz technique of repetition and riffs. Words are often repeated for their sound rather than their sense—as though they are notes in a piece of music. And these word repetitions, a form of jazz riff, suggest that Baraka is repeatedly redefining a word’s meaning, as though that meaning can evolve during the poem’s performance.

In the fourth section of the poem, he also imitates Thelonious Monk, who collaborated with Coltrane: Repeating *dub* (sometimes hyphenated as *dub-dub*), Baraka evokes Monk’s accented tunes. Then, echoing Monk’s style of letting notes ring after the piano’s keys have been struck, Baraka’s last repetition of *dub* is extended: “Duuuuuuuuuhhh-hhh.” Though seemingly nonsense, these parts of the poem are aurally conceived. They are political, too. As one scholar notes, Baraka “blackens the white avant-garde poem with scatting—a jazz singing technique that substitutes nonsense syllables for traditional lyrics” (*Poetry and Poetics* 107). Baraka’s moments of nonsense in “AM/TRAK” are a protest against the apolitical stance of the white avant garde.

In fact, as did other Black Arts Movement poets of the late 1960s and 1970s, Baraka understood performance as a political strategy for reaching mass audiences. He noted that poetry “must be a musical form,” that it is “speech musicked,” and explained that his ideal poetry “is oral by tradition, mass aimed as its fundamental functional motive” (*The Music* 243). Poetry as music would

reach that “mass,” he added, because it went beyond the purely intellectual and so was a form of “socio-aesthetic activism”: “There are areas of the brain that can only be stimulated by new feelings, feelings not expressed by the formally intellectual (though they may be pointed to!)” (*The Music* 265–266).

But Baraka’s embrace of poetry as a musical medium was based on his understanding of cultural aesthetics as well as activist efficacy. In his autobiography of 1984, Baraka noted that “the fact of music was the black poet’s basis for creation. And those of us in the Black Arts Movement were drenched in black music and wanted our poetry to be black music. . . . Its rhythms, its language, its history and struggle. It was meant to be a poetry we copped from the people and gave them right back, open and direct and moving” (237). Baraka believed that jazz, in particular, was a direct expression of the African-American experience, adding in his book *The Music* (1987) that its “sound, its total art face, carries the lives, history, tradition, pain, and hope, in the main, of the African American people” (319–320).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Watch an online video of Baraka reading his own poetry (www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main_video.html). How different is the experience of seeing/hearing the poem from that of reading it on the page? Does Baraka succeed in performing his poem as music?
2. Baraka ends the poem with a mention of his own arrest in the wake of the Newark rebellion of 1967. He notes that he heard of Coltrane’s death while in jail. What might be the significance of this connection between Baraka’s imprisonment and Coltrane’s death?

“Wise I” (1990)

“Wise I” is part of Baraka’s epic poem in progress, “Why’s/Wise,” which lays out in several parts the history of African Americans from the days of

slavery to the present. As in some earlier poems (including “AM/TRAK”), Baraka makes this poem distinctly musical. For example, he creates the effect of a key shift in a musical riff by repeating the phrase “oom boom ba boom” as a variation on “omm bomm ba boom.” But Baraka is in fact less interested in imitating the jazz aesthetic of African-American musicians than he is in adopting the style of the West African griots.

These artists were, he has explained, “African Singer-Poet-Historians who carried word from bird, mouth to ear, and who are the root of our own African American oral tradition” (Harris 493). In fact, Baraka has had a long-standing interest in the impact of African art and music on American styles. As early as 1963, in his book *Blues People*, he analyzed the impact of African musical traditions on the development of jazz as “an American sound.” Here he explains that after emancipation, former slaves encountered a hostile and dominant white culture and so chose “to fashion something out of that culture for [themselves], girded by the strength of the still evident African culture.” That “something” that they fashioned, he explains, was “indigenous to a certain kind of cultural existence in this country” and was “jazz” (79).

“Wise I” is also notable for its showcasing of Baraka’s humor. While his early poems, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, focus on the themes of death and despair, of moral and social corruption, and of self-hatred, and his black nationalist poems of 1965–75 are militant in tone, racially aware, and celebrate what he calls “black magic,” his later poems frequently exhibit a comic sensibility. As he explained in an interview in 1998, he was intrigued by a “sense of the wonderful, the bizarre, and the comic.” Though continuing to portray the struggles of the oppressed, Baraka had now found “the smile at the bottom of the world,” adding that, after all, in the “masks of drama, one smiles, one frowns” (Salaam 10). “Wise I,” therefore, acknowledges the long history of slavery in America but does so in a tragic-comic tone: “Probably take you several hundred years / to get / out!”

For Discussion or Writing

1. The Native American writer Sherman Alexie is known for his trademark aesthetic of biting wit. He explained in 1998 that “humor is the most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they’re laughing. . . . I never want to be earnest. I always want to be on the edge of offending somebody, of challenging one notion or another. . . . Humor is . . . about questioning the status quo” (West 28). In 2003, Alexie then wrote an article full of sardonic laughter: “Ha, ha! The United States is the freedom-loving country where Americans fought each other over the right to own slaves! Ha, ha, ha, ha! The United States is the democratic country that didn’t allow women to vote until 1920! Ha, ha, ha, ha! The United States is the moral country that accepted Jim Crow laws until 1964. Ha, ha, ha, ha!” (Alexie B3). Do you see any of this sardonic laughter in Baraka’s other pieces of work, aside from “Wise I”? And if Alexie’s sarcasm is an attempt to protest the image of the noble, tragic Indian, what might be the purpose of Baraka’s dark humor? Is it just to celebrate the “the wonderful, the bizarre, and the comic,” or does it seem designed to insult and provoke readers in any way?
2. In his epigraph to the poem, Baraka mentions the traditional hymn “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen.” Read the lyrics to this hymn and listen to a recording at www.indiana.edu/~jah/teaching/2004_03/sources/ex2_trouble.shtml. How has Baraka incorporated the rhythms and message of this hymn into his poem?

“Monday in B-Flat” (1994)

This seemingly simple poem takes up several of Baraka’s common themes. The title, “Monday in B-Flat,” makes one of his many references to jazz music: He imagines the sound of police sirens are in a musical key (B-flat). He also embeds the musical rhythms of jazz in the poem: Playfully, he

- Baraka, Amiri, and Amina Baraka. *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*. New York: Morrow, 1987.
- Benston, Kimberly. *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976.
- Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power*. New York: Anchor Books, 1992.
- Brown, Lloyd W. *Amiri Baraka*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Delta, 1999.
- Douglas, Emory. "Art." *Nation*, 211 (19 October 1970).
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam, 1989.
- Effiong, Philip Uko. *In Search of a Model for African-American Drama: A Study of Selected Plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka and Ntozake Shange*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Gayle, Addison, Jr. *The Black Aesthetic*. New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Ankor Wat*. London: Fulcrum Press, 1968.
- Harris, William J. "An Interview with Amiri Baraka." *Greenfield Review* 8, nos. 3–4 (Fall 1980): 19–31.
- . *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.
- , ed. *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Hudson, Theodore R. *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1973.
- Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Morrow, 1963.
- . "The Revolutionary Theatre." *Liberator*, July 1965, pp. 4–6.
- , and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire*. New York: Morrow, 1968.
- Lacey, Henry C. *To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1981.
- Mitchell, Angelyn, ed. *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994.
- Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundational." *Black Women Writers 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, 339–345. New York: Anchor Books, 1984.
- Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *Drama Review* 12 (Summer 1968): 29–39.
- The Official Web Site of Amiri Baraka. Available online. URL: www.amiribaraka.com. Accessed June 24, 2009.
- Reilly, Charlie, ed. *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Salaam, Kalamu ya. "Djali Dialogue with Amiri Baraka: Conversations with Established and Emerging African American Writers." *Black Collegian*, February 1998, pp. 10–13.
- Sollors, Werner. *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism."* New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.
- Trodd, Zoe, ed. *American Protest Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Vangelisti, Paul, ed. *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961–1995)*. New York: Marsilio, 1995.
- Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. 1979. New York: Verso, 1990.
- Watts, Jerry Gafio. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- West, Dennis, and Joan M. West. "An Interview with Sherman Alexie." *Cineaste*, Fall 1998, p. 28.
- Wright, Richard. "The Man Who Went to Chicago" (1945). In *Eight Men*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1987.



RAYMOND CARVER (1938–1988)

“Cathedrals,” the blind man said. He sat up and rolled his head back and forth. “If you want the truth, bub, that’s about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I wish you’d do it. I’d like that. If you want to know, I really don’t have a good idea.”

I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.

(Raymond Carver, “Cathedral”)

Raymond Carver, a writer known for his short stories and poetry, is often hailed as one of the great literary minds of the 20th century. Active primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, Carver had a substantial impact on prose writing. The critic Ewing Campbell has said, “Not since Ernest Hemingway has there been a more imitated American author” (ix–x). Published during his lifetime in *Western Humanities Review*, *December*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Esquire*, and the *New Yorker*, Carver took the world of periodical fiction by storm. His stories have appeared in dozens of anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories* series, *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and the *O. Henry Awards* series, on multiple occasions. His short-story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) garnered a National Book Award nomination.

Often categorized as a literary minimalist, Carver wrote with precision and a seemingly muted style. He resisted the label, however, considering it a pejorative classification. According to the writer Jay McInerney, “Ray wrote the way that he wrote and he thought it was a belittling term. He didn’t believe his work was any more minimalist than anyone else’s” (Halpert 49). As did many of his contemporaries, he questioned the usefulness of these types of terms. William Kittredge, one of his contempo-

raries, commented that Carver consistently wrote about difficult emotional questions. “I don’t think of Ray in terms of being minimalist. I don’t think he was an emotional minimalist at all. He was dealing with what was, at least for me, major emotions” (Halpert 34). Most critics agree that Carver revolutionized American prose writing. Randolph Paul Runyon remarks, “The problem here may be that Carver has been the most influential minimalist . . . while at the same time the least representative” (4).

Born in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938 and raised in Yakima, Washington, the author had humble beginnings. His mother, Ella Casey Carver, worked as a waitress, retail clerk, and stay-at-home mother, while his father, Cleve Raymond Carver, worked at a sawmill. At age 18, Carver married Maryann Burke, who gave birth to their first child six months later. Their daughter, Christine LaRae, was followed a year later by a son, Vance Lindsay. That same year, Carver enrolled at Chico State College, where he met the writing teacher John Gardner, who later went on to become a world-renowned novelist. Of Gardner, Carver stated, “Until I met John Gardner, I had no sense of serious literature. . . . Everything was more or less of equal merit, or value, until I met Gardner” (Gentry and Stull 234). Carver described Gardner, who was only in his twenties at the time, as a busy

man and a chronic reviser. But Gardner famously provided Carver with a key to his office so Carver could have a place to work. “He had a lot of correspondence from other writers in his office,” Carver said once in an interview, “which I naturally read. Anyway, I learned a good deal about this and that from all my snooping” (Gentry and Stull 4). Carver later transferred to Humboldt State College. That same year, 1963, one of his earliest published short stories, “Pastoral,” appeared in *Western Humanities Review* and his poem “The Brass Ring” appeared in a now-defunct magazine called *Targets*. (Depending on what they count as an officially “published” short story, some critics list “Pastoral” as his first published work. He had published several pieces in student magazines previously.)

Carver left Humboldt with a B.A. that spring and, in fall 1963, attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he remained for less than a year. Carver often explained his decision to drop out as a financially motivated one: “[A \$500 scholarship] wasn’t much money for a year’s worth of study, even with the \$2 an hour I earned working in the university library and the money my wife earned working in a restaurant. There was no way we could make it through a second year in Iowa” (Gentry and Stull 74). Moving back to California, Carver took a job as a janitor for the next two years. Switching to the night shift in 1965, he was able to enroll in a poetry workshop at Sacramento State College. In 1986, Carver reflected on his teacher at Sacramento, Dennis Schmitz: “He was for many years—and still is—an inspiration to me, even though our poetry is very different” (Gentry and Stull 180). In 1967, the short story “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” was included in *Best American Short Stories*, but in the same year, financial troubles forced the Carvers to file for bankruptcy. Carver’s father passed away that summer. A few weeks later, Carver took a job at Science Research Associates, editing textbooks, and moved to Palo Alto, California. Some time during that summer, he also met Gordon Lish, who had published some of Carver’s work at *Esquire*. Lish later took a position at Knopf and became Carver’s

book editor. “He was always a great advocate of my stories,” said Carver, “at all times championing my work, even during the period when I was not writing, when I was out in California devoting myself to drinking, Gordon read my work on radio and at writers conferences and so forth” (Gentry and Stull 234–235). In recent years, Lish’s role in editing and shaping Carver’s early stories has become controversial. In 2009, the Library of America published a collection entitled *Raymond Carver: Selected Stories*, which included “Beginners,” an early draft of a story that became, after much editing and compressing, the famous story “What We Talk about When We Talk about Love.”

In 1968, Carver’s wife received a scholarship to attend Tel Aviv University. Carver took a one-year leave of absence from Science Research Associates to travel with Maryann to Israel. They arrived in June, and in Maryann’s words, “Ray and my daughter both became very disgruntled” (Halpert 93). An explosion at a bus depot, which the Carver children often passed through on their way to school, was the last straw for Carver. He delivered an ultimatum to Maryann, pledging to take his children back to the United States with or without her. She left with him, however, and the entire family returned via cruise ship.

Throughout the early 1970s, Carver began to experience substantial success as a writer and a writing instructor. He lectured at U.C. Santa Cruz, U.C. Berkeley, U.C. Santa Barbara, and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He was awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University in 1971 and, according to Maryann, earned two nicknames: *Running Dog* and *Feather in the Wind*. “He kept his job teaching at Santa Cruz while teaching in Iowa and flew back and forth without either school knowing about it” (Halpert 94). In 1973, while lecturing at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Carver resided at the Iowa House Hotel one floor below John Cheever. “The entire time we were there,” said Carver, “I don’t think either of us ever took the cover off our typewriters. We made trips to a liquor store twice a week in my car” (Gentry and Stull 40). While Cheever famously spent a month

at Smithers, an alcoholic rehabilitation center in New York City, Carver's drinking habits became more pronounced.

Alcoholism and mounting family problems forced Carver to resign in December 1974 from a one-year position at U.C. Santa Barbara. The Carvers filed for bankruptcy for the second time and returned to Cupertino, California. In 1976, Carver was hospitalized four times for alcohol-related incidents. He and his wife separated and sold their house. Of the failed marriage, Maryann said, "I was so deep in that relationship—and he was too—that past clichés don't cut it. . . . We'd been in it forever. I met the love of my life when I was fourteen years old, for God's sake" (Halpert 100). Maryann and Carver tried to reconcile briefly but parted ways permanently in summer 1977. During that same year, Carver published one of the great works of his career, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, a book of short stories. The collection earned Carver a National Book Award nomination.

In 1977, Carver quit drinking and met the poet Tess Gallagher, whom he later married. He earned a Guggenheim Fellowship and published another book of short stories, *Furious Seasons*. Within two years, Carver and Gallagher were living together in El Paso, Texas. He also won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1979, but Gallagher recalled this period as a time of tension: "I remember feeling afraid when I was first with Ray that living with him might turn out to be like stepping into one of his stories. It seemed that a very thin membrane might separate the world of chaos and order when Ray's perceptions came into play" (*Carver Country* 16). Carver struggled to write and, according to Gallagher, distrusted the work he did when sober. But over time the author was able to return to a period of profound achievement, writing what some consider his best and most richly textured stories. "As the years of sobriety and literary accomplishment accumulated," said Gallagher, "Ray's face lost an almost bloated vagueness it had carried when I'd first met him. The jawline firmed up and the muscled places, where humor and a sense of confident

well being had come together, seemed to restore a youthful mischief to his looks" (*Carver Country* 18). The 1981 collection *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* preceded the 1983 collection *Cathedral*, often regarded as Carver's best work. During this period, Carver and Gallagher lived and taught at Syracuse University in New York and traveled extensively throughout Europe. Destinations included Switzerland, France, and Italy. In 1982, Carver's mentor John Gardner was killed in a motorcycle accident.

In spring 1987, Gallagher and Carver traveled to several European cities, but that fall, Carver became ill. Doctors removed two thirds of his cancerous left lung in October. This surgery provided a short reprieve from the illness, but in March 1988, the cancer returned, this time appearing in his brain. He went through a seven-week course of radiation treatment in April and May. A collection of short stories, *Where I'm Calling From*, was released in May. But in early June, doctors discovered a resurgence of cancer in Carver's lung. Amid mounting health problems, Carver and Tess decided to marry. The ceremony was held in Reno, Nevada, on June 17. He died of lung cancer on August 2, 1988, at the age of 50. Reacting to Carver's death, Tess wrote: "Besides the plain fact of Ray's genius being gone from the world, part of this outpouring was no doubt due to the fact that Ray was so young—barely fifty. We had all expected and hoped for many more years of his writing and company. It was a life cut short, and we suffered the loss as it was—an aberration, a blow, a chastisement to us all in our faulty assumptions about the future" (*Carver Country* 19). The following summer, Carver's final book of poetry, *A New Path to the Waterfall*, was published.

Authors and critics have commented on Carver's significance as a writer. Tobias Wolff, who first became friends with Carver in the late 1970s, theorized that Carver will continue to be an important writer long into the future: "I have a strong suspicion that Ray will be one of those writers who will be read with care and love as long as people read our language. He has penetrated a secret about us and brought it to the light, and he does it again

and again. You have to go to the water and drink. There's something pure and cool and honest in his vision of life, and the beauty of his language, its exactness, its cadences, and its music. People will go back to it again and again and again" (quoted in Halpert 11).

Several major works analyzing Carver's writings have appeared since his death. While the majority of reaction to Carver's work during his lifetime described him as a minimalist, several critics of late have attempted to delve beneath the label that Carver so openly deplored. Adam Meyer's 1989 essay "Now You See Him, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism," published in *Critique* magazine (reprinted in part in Campbell), exemplifies the standard narrative that Carver began as a minimalist and matured with *Cathedral*. The 1995 collection *Narrative Turns in Minor Genres in Postmodernism* includes an essay by W. M. Verhoeven entitled "What We Talk about When We Talk about Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado about Minimalism." G. P. Lainsbury, in his introduction to *The Carver Chronotope* (2004), discusses the critical context of Carver's minimalism. In Halpert's book, several of Carver's contemporaries respond to the term. Most notably, Geoffrey Wolff uses the expletive *bullshit* as a response to the term (112). Saltzman entertains an extended discussion on the "controversy" surrounding Carver's minimalism, analyzing as well the claim that Carver ought to be categorized as a postmodern writer (5; for more information, see Saltzman 1–20). Randolph Runyon also weighs in on the minimalist debate in the introduction to *Reading Raymond Carver*.

Even though Carver has for the most part escaped labels as a regionalist, recent work has attempted to establish a geographical or social aesthetic throughout his work. Lainsbury discusses his wilderness aesthetic, while Saltzman notices Carver's attention to the working classes of the United States. "Carver stays faithful to the gross tokens of American culture—the stuff of waitresses, fishermen, salesmen, mail carriers" (17). Likewise, scholars have begun to look at the politics of legacy and influence in his work. Carver listed Anton Chekhov

as one of his most direct influences. During his lifetime, he had interactions with Robert Altman, John Cheever, Richard Ford, John Gardner, Jay McInerney, William Kittredge, and Tobias Wolff. Lainsbury writes about connections between Carver and Hemingway, as well as Carver and Kafka.

In 2009, Carol Sklenicka published the first full-length biography of Carver, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life*. There are other several other important biographical sources. Carver's own works, of course, can be seen as partially autobiographical, while the 1990 collection *Carver Country* attempts to juxtapose autobiography and fiction in an attempt to paint a more textured portrait of Carver and his work. Tess Gallagher's *Soul Barnacles* (2000) attempts to consolidate several documents pertaining to Carver's life. Gallagher's travel journal from the couple's 1987 trip through Europe is included, as is Gallagher's eulogy of Carver from *Granta* (Autumn 1988). Interviews, reprinted essays, and letters make up the remainder of the collection. Halpert's . . . *When We Talk about Raymond Carver* collects interviews from 10 people who knew the author, including his first wife, Maryann, and several writers. A memoir by Maryann titled *What It Used to Be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* was published in 2006. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* collects more than 20 pieces of journalism pertinent to Carver's life. Some of these articles quote Carver in narrative form, while others reprint interviews with him in question/answer form. Several articles are regionally based and provide unique perspectives into Carver's legacy. *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver* (1993) also provides reminiscences about Carver, reprinting some previously published essays.

Although Carver never wrote a novel, several critics have attempted to construct a Carver worldview across the broad range of his fiction and poetry. Lainsbury argues, "Thinking of Carver's output as one large novel . . . is not as strange as it might at first seem," adding later that "the Carver chronotope makes artistically visible a discrete historical moment in the ongoing project that the world

knows as America" (8). *Carver Country* (1990) reprints poems and selected short stories of Carver's alongside photographs by Bob Adelman, who was a friend of his. These photographs add insight into the places that inspired Carver, as well as the people who touched his life. The work also includes several unpublished letters and photographs of Carver's notebooks and drafts. Tess Gallagher wrote the introduction to *Carver Country*, saying the collection "became a story, both of Ray's life as a writer and a man, and also of our lives together as writers, lovers, and helpmates" (8).

"Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" (1976)

The last piece in the 1976 short-story collection of the same title, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" is one of Carver's great achievements. Carver's subdued prose represents effectively a sense of moral ambiguity. Arthur Saltzman explains, "On the whole, things remain lukewarm; arid marriages and formulated phrases are the norm. Desires, doubts, and all manner of considerations flow sluggishly through the narrowest of verbal channels" (73). Ralph Wyman, the main character, feels purposeless as a young college student, until he comes under the influence of a teacher named Dr. Maxwell: "He had been educated at Vanderbilt, had studied in Europe, and had later had something to do with one or two literary magazines back East. Almost overnight, Ralph would later say, he decided on teaching as a career" (226). This tale mirrors Carver's own experience in college, approximating his relationship with John Gardner. Also reflecting an autobiographical voice is the author's decision to name Ralph wife's, whom he meets in a Chaucer class as a college senior, Marian.

Most of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" takes place years later, when Ralph discovers his wife's infidelity. Confronting her about an incident two or three years past, he finally hears the extent of her indiscretion and flees his home. The central conflict of the story, however, is not the

indiscretion itself but rather the main character's reaction to it. Ralph, as do many of Carver's characters, occupies a zone of moral ambiguity, a space of indecision. "He thought how Dr. Maxwell would handle a thing like this," states Carver, deciding "Dr. Maxwell would sit handsomely at the water's edge" (245). Wyman's idealized decision to contemplate his situation by the pier is interrupted when he accidentally bumps into a street thug, who takes offense and beats him into unconsciousness. Returning home perhaps even more defeated than when he left, Ralph must decide what to do about his wife and family. As his wife knocks on the locked bathroom door and his children cry in the background, Ralph speaks the title phrase, "Will you please be quiet, please?" which reflects his desire to avoid the conflict rather than address it. In Ewing Campbell's words, "The crisis resolves itself finally to his amazement and with his apparent acceptance of the old Marian and the new Ralph Wyman, for the old one died somewhere in the night" (30).

The final passage of the story reflects this sense of acceptance or, perhaps more appropriately, the decision to let go, as well as the powerful sexuality that dominates the story. Marian sits on the bed where her husband intends to sleep and begins stroking his lower back. "He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. It was easier to let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him" (249).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Carver address questions of morality in this short story? To what degree can actions be categorized in terms of right and wrong? How does Carver address mainstream ideas about forgiveness?

2. Ralph, in an effort to make sense of his wife's infidelity, attempts to sit by the docks and watch the sunrise, primarily because he imagines this to be what his mentor would do in his place. What does the disruption of Ralph's plan indicate about Carver's sense of aesthetics?

"Furious Seasons" (1977)

"Furious Seasons," published in the short-story collection of the same title, has been pointed out as something of an oddity when placed in the Carver oeuvre. While many of Carver's critics skip this collection when analyzing Carver's work, Saltzman includes an entire chapter on the collection, noting, "Apart from the title story, in which Carver makes surprising use of stream-of-consciousness techniques, the fictions in this collection are generally faithful to such conventions as narrative framing and definitive closure" (76).

The title story, however, is nonlinear, surrealistic, and abstract to the point of obfuscation. The main character, Lew Farrell, jumps between several locations, including a bedroom where he confronts his sister about her pregnancy and a goose-hunting trip with his friend Frank. Long passages describing the landscape and the weather interrupt these interior scenes. The story closes with this focus in mind: "The gutter water rushed over his feet, swirled frothing into a great whirlpool at the drain on the corner and rushed down to the center of the earth" (110). Shifts in verb tense complicate the narrative even further. The implication at the end of the story is that Farrell was responsible for impregnating his sister and has somehow caused her death. "Her carries her out to the porch, turns her face to the wall, and covers her up. He goes back into the bathroom, washes his hands, and stuffs the heavy, blood-soaked towel into the clothes hamper" (109). Halpert appropriately describes the ambiguity of the story's conclusion: "Whether or not Farrell is guilty of incest and murder is obscured by his subjective meanderings and lapses of focus; he shifts back and forth between robot-like desensitization

and surreal images of suffocation and violence" (96). The style of this work is often compared with that of William Faulkner.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Describe Carver's stylistic choices in this short story. How does his sense of surrealism compare with other writers'? What makes his voice distinct?
2. What can be said about the literary importance of Carver's landscapes and his sense of place? How does the weather contribute to the impact of this work?

"What We Talk about When We Talk about Love" (1981)

Perhaps one of Carver's most thoughtful works, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love" is essentially the story of a predinner conversation revolving around concepts of love. "My friend Mel McGinnis was talking," opens the story. "Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right" (170). While a discussion about love creates the crux for this work, Carver does not abandon his patented realism in favor of an abstract, intellectual debate. Four friends in Albuquerque, "all from somewhere else," drink from a cheap bottle of gin while discussing this topic (170). Mel, driven partly by his experiences as a doctor, insists that love is an absolute, while Terri, his wife, recalls her previous partner, Ed, who threatened Terri and Mel's life in the name of love and ultimately killed himself for the same stated reason. "He did love me though, Mel. Grant me that," Terri pleads, but Mel remains unconvinced. "I'm not interested in that kind of love," he says. "If that's love, you can have it" (174).

While the narrator, Nick, and his wife, Laura, avoid center stage for most of the story, the conversation eventually turns to the recently married couple. "Well, Nick and I know what love is," Laura says, but her idealism cannot last, not in this setting. "Stop that now. You're making me sick.

You're still on your honeymoon, for God's sake," Terri reminds them (175). Nick almost escapes the entire story without making a stand, but his final comment seems to carry some interpretive meaning: "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on into the sunset" (185). When questioned about the comment, which Laura sees as perhaps a kind of depressed resignation, Nick replies, "It means I could just keep going. That's all it means" (185). Perhaps the meaning of the story resides somewhere between Nick's desire to keep going and his implied resignation.

As the story progresses, Carver gives the impression that even though Mel may have "the right" to make claims about the absolute nature of love, his version of the emotion simplifies a deeply complicated philosophical question. Mel admits, "But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too. But I did, I know I did" (176). Mel does not insist on his own authority, instead concluding, "It seems to me we're just beginners at love" (176). But drunkenness provides the only closure available in this short story. The characters, slipping into stupor, never go out to dinner, and their debate trails off into a rant about Mel's former wife. According to Geoffrey Wolff: "'What We Talk about When We Talk about Love' I admire so much because, first of all, I don't think there has ever been anything even approximately as good written about drinking. I've done enough drinking in my life to know how it feels, what happens to syntax, what happens to diction, as the light begins to come down in the room and the stuff goes further down in the bottle" (115).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Some critics have suggested that Carver's dinner conversation approximates and updates the viewpoints of several classical thinkers. What philosophers' writings, historical or contemporary, could Carver be in conversation with? How would his views compare with the ideas of these thinkers? Why do you think so?
2. Carver seems to provide arguments in favor of two systems of love: one based on actions and

the other grounded primarily in sentiment. Which version is more applicable to your own life? Why is this the case? Explain your answer.

"Cathedral" (1982)

"Cathedral" has often been pointed to as one of Carver's most surprisingly textured works. In the words of Carver's former student Jay McInerney, "Something remarkable happens in that story that usually doesn't happen in a Carver story. It has a different kind of ending. The ending of a usual Carver story leaves you on the brink of an abyss, and you look down into it. In 'Cathedral' it's more like you're looking up to the sky and the sun is coming out" (Halpert 48). Noted for its optimism as well as its depth, "Cathedral" has a simple plot, on the literal level. The first-person narrator is jealous of his wife's relationship with Robert, a blind man for whom she used to work. After Robert's wife, Beulah, dies, he plans to visit the narrator's wife. "I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit," says the narrator. "He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me" (356). The narrator's awkwardness intrudes as he attempts to make small talk. He thinks about the scenic train ride along the Hudson River that Robert has taken and even asks him which side of the train he sat on. Of course, the scenery is of no consequence to Robert, but he undercuts the narrator's assumption that the ride held no meaning for him. "I hadn't been on a train in nearly forty years. Not since I was a kid. With my folks. That's been a long time. I'd nearly forgotten the sensation," he says (362). This response asserts Robert's connection to the experience in two ways. He can feel the train, of course, and has a nostalgic relationship with it. Similarly, the narrator assumes that Robert does not smoke because he "couldn't see the smoke [he] inhaled" (363). Once again, the assumption proves false: "This blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one" (363).

Unlike that in many Carver stories, the theme in "Cathedral" is growth and change, not stasis. The blind man's disability allows Carver to medi-

tate on seeing and knowing in several ways, but the conclusion makes this metaphor overt as Robert and the narrator work together to draw a cathedral. (A television documentary on cathedrals triggers the realization that Robert does not know what a cathedral is and that the narrator is unable to explain it.) “His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now” (374). The narrator closes his eyes at the conclusion of the tale, entering Robert’s universe. When Robert asks what the cathedral looks like, he replies without looking, “It’s really something” (375). While Carver denies his readers an outright epiphany, a sense of conversion can still be observed. Campbell suggests the narrator “will view from now on his wife’s experience in a manner different from his initial attitude, that his attitude toward Robert will be wholly different also” (66). In this manner, “Cathedral” stands as an articulation of Carver’s optimism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. See whether you can trace the narrator’s use of common expressions that rely on his sense of sight. To what degree does Carver use word-play in “Cathedral”? As the character’s attitude toward his blind acquaintance changes, does his language? Why do you think that is so? What does this change contribute to the work as a whole?
2. Why does Carver use a cathedral as the central metaphor for this piece? What does it represent? How does it relate to the theme of vision and seeing? What would be the consequences of a completely different metaphor?

“Where I’m Calling From” (1989)

As in many of his stories, Carver’s personal vulnerability becomes a focal point in “Where I’m Calling From.” The story is set in an alcohol treatment center called Frank Martin’s and reflects Carver’s “trying to navigate through the mirrorings of his own disease” (147). The story is based upon Carver’s own experience at Duffy’s, “a treatment center in

northern California within sight of Jack London’s house” (*Carver Country* 12). For the majority of the story, the narrator listens to his acquaintance J. P. talk about his own life. J. P. explains that he fell down a well at a young age. His fear can be seen as a roundabout way for Carver to discuss his own apprehensions about quitting alcohol: “He suffered all kinds of terror in that well, hollering for help, waiting, and then hollering some more” (281). Carver relates that J. P. wet his pants in the well and that “being at the bottom of that well had made a lasting impression” (281). Years later, says J. P., he became a chimney sweep, but the story of J. P.’s career turns out more appropriately to be the story of his marriage. He meets a female chimney sweep named Roxy, learns the trade from her, and eventually marries her. When she becomes pregnant, she stops working, but he continues with the career she helped him build. J. P.’s story, presumably like the narrator’s, is then marred by alcoholism.

Interspersed with J. P.’s story are realistic scenes of the narrator at Frank Martin’s drying-out facility. Another resident, Tiny, falls to the floor one day and goes into convulsions, which are caused by his withdrawal. According to Douglas Unger, Carver adapted an experience of his own to create this scene: “Ray hit the floor several times, like the character Tiny in [‘Where I’m Calling From’]. That’s where the detail is from. Ray was the one who was on the floor with his heels clicking. He was then terrified to quit drinking” (Halpert 59). Once again, fear becomes a central element in this short story. “But what happened to Tiny is something I won’t ever forget,” says the narrator, adding later: “So every time this little flitter starts up anywhere, I draw some breath and wait to find myself on my back, looking up, somebody’s fingers in my mouth” (280). Not coincidentally, the main character’s stay at Martin’s coincides with the winter holidays. As New Year’s Eve passes, the absence of alcohol becomes palpable: “‘I don’t want any f—ing cake,’ says the guy who goes to Europe and places. ‘Where’s the champagne?’ he says, and laughs” (291). The main character’s discomfort, the reader discovers, is enhanced by apprehension about his girlfriend, who was waiting for the results of a follow-up from a doctor after a disturbing Pap smear

result. The narrator reveals that his girlfriend's bad news triggered his alcohol relapse and his return for a second stay at Martin's. While apprehension and terror remain central motifs, Carver provides a glimmer of hope. Upon meeting J. P.'s wife, Roxy, he asks her for a kiss, with the explanation "I need some luck" (294). His mannerism recalls J. P.'s story about kissing Roxy for the first time, but his hope that the kiss will give him luck seems to be the narrator's own conclusion. Roxy grants him his request and wishes him luck. As the story moves to a close, he contemplates calling his girlfriend and his wife, who had asked him to move out some months before. "She'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her. I won't say anything about New Year's resolutions. There's no way to make a joke out of this" (296). At the conclusion of the story, Carver emphasizes the ongoing difficulty of a task like quitting alcohol. He provides some hope but does not gloss over the reality of the narrator's situation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A feminist critique of Carver's story might focus on how the narrator addresses spousal abuse, spending more time sympathizing with the abuser/addict than the victim. How does gender relate to the abuse/victim matrix Carver explores? Does it deserve to be criticized? Are there other elements of Carver's gender relationships that deserve to be scrutinized? Justify your answers.
2. Carver's story has been hailed as a powerful depiction of addiction and the difficulties of overcoming it. What kinds of rituals, customs, and emotional needs are associated with alcohol? How successful is Carver at depicting addiction, and why?

"A Small, Good Thing" (1989)

Expanded from an earlier story titled "The Bath," Carver's "A Small, Good Thing" has often been analyzed in terms of revision and maturation. Saltzman notices that the expansion decreases "the distances that separate Carver's characters from

one another and Carver's narrator from the story he relates" (144). The story relates the death of eight-year-old Scotty Weiss, the son of Ann and Howard Weiss. Injured in a hit-and-run car accident at the opening of the story, Scotty remains in a coma for the majority of the tale. Ann and Howard rush to the hospital to be by his side, and, in the process, Ann forgets about a cake she ordered for Scotty's eighth birthday. Ann and Howard, devastated by the accident, are forced to face genuine tragedy for the first time. "Until now," Carver states, "[Howard's] life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction—college, marriage, another year of college for the advanced degree in business, a junior partnership in an investment firm. Fatherhood" (379). Likewise, Ann is forced to reach out for a long-forsaken sense of faith: "I almost thought I'd forgotten how, but it came back to me. All I had to do was close my eyes and say, 'Please God, help us—help Scotty'" (384). While Scotty is expected to survive, a rare condition called a hidden occlusion results in his death. The doctor apologizes profusely, but it is all but impossible to get past the event itself.

The original story, "The Bath," ends shortly after Scotty's death, as the doctor attempts to console the bereaved parents. In the expanded version, Carver pursues a plot thread that originally was undeveloped. After forgetting to pick up the birthday cake at the bakery, the Weisses receive several increasingly aggressive phone calls from the baker. He cannot understand why the cake has been forgotten, and his calls border on harassment by the time Scotty dies. Ann suddenly realizes who must be calling, however, and she and her husband travel to the bakery to confront the baker. Upon realizing what he has done, the baker begs forgiveness. "I'm not an evil man, I don't think," he says. "Not evil, like you said on the phone. You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how to act any more, it would seem" (404). The Weisses do not verbalize their forgiveness, but they allow the baker to make partial reparations by accepting warm cinnamon rolls from his oven. The baker insists that "eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," but the

- . "Cathedral." In *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . "Furious Seasons." In *Furious Seasons*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Capra Press, 1977.
- . "A Small, Good Thing." In *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love." In *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . "Where I'm Calling From." In *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" In *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.
- Gallagher, Tess. *Soul Barnacles: Ten More Years with Ray*. Edited by Greg Simon. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Gentry, Marshall Bruce, and William L. Stull. *Conversations with Raymond Carver*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.
- Halpert, Sam, ed. . . . *When We Talk about Raymond Carver*. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1991.
- Kleppe, Sandra, and Robert Miltner. *New Paths to Raymond Carver: Critical Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.
- Lainsbury, G. P. *The Carver Chronotope: Inside the Life-World of Raymond Carver's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Rayson, Paul. Carversite: Raymond Carver. Available online. URL: <http://www.carversite.com>. Accessed June 24, 2009.
- Runyon, Randolph Paul. *Reading Raymond Carver*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1992.
- Saltzman, Arthur M. *Understanding Raymond Carver*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

Matthew Lavin



SANDRA CISNEROS (1954–)

I am a writer. It is my job to think. I live my life facing backwards.

(“Ghosts and Voices” 71)

Sandra Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. Alfredo Cisneros had fled Mexico for the southern part of the United States years earlier, too ashamed to face his father after failing his first year of college. From there, he traveled north into the barrios of Chicago, where he met Cisneros’s mother, Elvira Cordero Anguiano. At the time, Elvira was just 17 and living with her parents. Cisneros’s maternal grandfather was a large, generous man, who would freely share his food and home with anyone because he “knew what living without meant” (“Never” 70). But Elvira’s family never had much, and when Alfredo would visit, she was embarrassed by the poverty of her home. From the start, Elvira had been impressed by his fancy clothes and air of importance. Despite the meager living he was making in the United States, he was from a home in Mexico City “that was neither rich nor poor, but thought itself better than both” (“Never” 71). After they married, Elvira gave birth to seven boys and two girls, but Cisneros’s sister died young, leaving the future author to fend for herself in a world of young men.

Lost amid her brothers, who would not stoop to play with a mere girl, Cisneros lived a lonely childhood. This loneliness was only heightened by her family’s seasonal migration between Chicago and Mexico City to satisfy her father’s nostalgia. With-

out a sister as an ally against her brothers and the constancy that results from living in a permanent home where friendships could flourish, Cisneros turned to books for companionship. As undesirable as this solitude was at the time, Cisneros reflects on it as “a perfect beginning for a writer in training” (“Only Daughter” 256). In the absence of companionship, Cisneros found plenty of time to write and read—activities that made her imagination swell and created a voice in her head for narrating, even embellishing, life’s experiences with omniscient asides. Routinely, when her mother gave her simple instructions for buying bread and milk at the grocery store, she would replay the instructions like a novella:

“I want you to go to the store and get me a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Bring back all the change and don’t let them gyp you like they did last time.” In my head my narrator would add: . . . *she said in a voice that was neither reproachful nor tender. Thus clutching the coins in her pocket, our hero was off under a sky so blue and a wind so sweet she wondered it didn’t make her dizzy.* This is how I glamorized my days living in the third floor flats and shabby neighborhoods where the best friend I was always waiting for never materialized. (“Ghosts and Voices” 70)

But Cisneros was not the only woman suffering from this transience: Alfredo’s family, disapproving

of his choice in marriage, made visits to Mexico equally difficult for Elvira. In her story “Never Marry a Mexican,” Cisneros writes of her mother’s efforts to dissuade her from marrying a Mexican—or any Latin man, for that matter—because of her own hardships in marriage. Whether in Mexico City or Chicago, her mother had to “put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she was from *el otro lado*, the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would’ve been different. That would’ve been marrying up. . . . But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn’t even speak Spanish?” (69).

Elvira’s regret in marrying so young is given voice in “A Smart Cookie,” in *The House on Mango Street* (90). With a heavy sigh, she tells the fictional Esperanza that she “could’ve been somebody” had she not let her shame in being poor stop her from reaching for any of her many dreams. Determined to give her daughter what she herself did not have, she sternly tells Esperanza to study hard and stay in school. Cisneros’s mother, wanting to spare her daughter the unhappiness she had experienced as a woman financially dependent on her husband, went to great effort to instill in her a belief that education was her right and privilege. She ensured that Cisneros had her own library card and excused her from the domestic chores traditionally expected of an only daughter so that Cisneros might have more time to read and study. Such concessions gave Cisneros what she would later figuratively name “a room of her own,” a reference to Virginia Woolf’s theory that all women writers should have a space in which their imaginations could freely flourish and be freed from domestic concerns. When Cisneros reflects on why her mother did it, she supposes it was “because she didn’t want me to inherit her sadness and her rolling pin” (“Notes” 75).

During their seasons in Chicago, Cisneros’s family scraped by in apartments in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Although he always regretted his failed education, Alfredo found ways to support his family, usually through upholstery—a skill taught him by his uncle. Years of dreaming of a house of

their own were finally realized when Cisneros was 11 years old. Barely finding the down payment, the family purchased a house in the Puerto Rican neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago. This is the house that inspires the vignettes of Cisneros’s acclaimed *House on Mango Street*. As she describes in her book, the house was a far cry from the one her parents had built in her imagination, dilapidated on the outside and overcrowded on the inside. In her writing, Cisneros complains about its lack of space in which to find one’s self:

In my home private space was practically impossible; aside from the doors that opened to the street, the only room with a lock was the bathroom, and how could anyone who shared a bathroom with eight other people stay in there for more than a few minutes? Before college, no one in my family had a room of their own except me, a narrow closet just big enough for my twin bed and an oversized blond dresser we’d bought in the bargain basement of el Sears. The dresser was as long as a coffin and blocked the door from shutting completely. I had my own room, but I never had the luxury of shutting the door. (“Guadalupe” 46–47)

This worn-down house becomes the literal and figurative place from which, as a writer, she escapes in search of new ways to see herself as a Mexican American, a woman, and a daughter.

Although Cisneros would not begin to call herself a writer until her junior year in college, a poetry project on the Vietnam War gave her acclaim as a poet among her high-school peers, who acknowledged the talent she showed in her sophomore year. This reputation and interest in writing got her the position of editor of the school’s literary magazine. Still, she confesses that at the time she was “more a reader than a writer . . . I was reading and reading, nurturing myself with books like vitamins, only I didn’t know it then” (“Notes” 74).

When it was time to apply to college, Cisneros’s parents were in full support. Her mother wanted her daughter to be educated and self-sufficient, and her father wanted her to surround herself with eli-

gible husbands. Where else could she meet a nice professional to sweep her off her feet? She enrolled at Chicago's Loyola University, where in 1976 she earned a B.A. in English. She claims that because her father expected her to marry instead of getting a job after graduation, she never had to justify her decision to study "something silly like English," a major that promised the same kind of poverty in which she had grown up ("Only" 11). This gave her the "liberty to putter about embroidering [her] little poems and stories without [her] father interrupting with so much as a 'What's that you're writing?'" (11). With the help of a creative writing instructor during her junior year of college, Cisneros applied and was accepted into the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop.

Her experience there fell short of her expectations; she was dissatisfied with the instruction she was receiving. As the only Hispanic in her group, Cisneros felt she was learning and discussing other people's experiences. These sentiments boiled over in a seminar called Memory and the Imagination. As Cisneros tells the story, the class was discussing *The Poetics of Space*, by the French theorist Gaston Bachelard, and his postulation that the structure of a house offers a language for the human experience. Cisneros felt more out of place than ever in this discussion. She was not familiar with the academic language they were using; nor had she experienced the upper-class homes after which they were modeling their discussion. As she reports of her fellow classmates, "They had been bred as fine hot-house flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks" ("Ghosts and Voices" 64). As a child, she had read of such houses in her books, and her parents had promised her such a house, but the best they could offer was their dilapidated bungalow in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood. Sitting in that classroom, she began to wonder what she could possibly offer such a discussion. Suddenly it occurred to her that it was her uniqueness in the group that would make her a writer. Of this epiphany she writes:

You know, you always grow up thinking something's different or something's wrong, but you don't know what it is. If you're raised in a multi-

ethnic neighborhood, you think that the whole world is multi-ethnic like that. According to what you see in the media, you think that that's the norm; you don't ever question that you're different or that you're strange. It wasn't until I was twenty-two that it first hit me how different I really was. It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it. My race, my gender, and my class! (Rodríguez Aranda 65)

It was at that moment that Cisneros decided to write about something she knew no one else in her class could write about—her own childhood. Thus originated the childlike voice that would speak in her poetry for so many years and would map identity in her first publication, *The House on Mango Street* (1984). Armed with this new outlook, Cisneros received an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1978.

Cisneros has published a number of works that deal with her struggle for identity. In 1980, her first collection of poetry, *Bad Boys*, was published by Mango Press; these poems were reprinted in a second collection, *My Wicked Wicked Ways*. In 1984, she published the writings about her house that started on that fateful day in Iowa, *The House on Mango Street*. Although she clarifies that these stories are not all as her family would tell them, she claims they are all true because "every piece of fiction is based on something that really happened" (Rodríguez Aranda 64). This book, as was the first, was released by Arte Público Press in Houston, a publisher famous for its dedication to documenting the Hispanic experience in the United States. Originally only 500 copies were printed, but, as readership grew, Random House took over the publication rights and has been the primary publisher of Cisneros's works ever since.

Since earning national acclaim for *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros has written numerous works. *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) has won many awards, including the PEN Center Award for Best Fiction of the West, the Anisfield-Wolf

Book Award, and the Lannan Foundation Literary Award. Subsequent publications include *Loose Woman* (1994) and *Caramelo* (2002), which was nominated for the Orange Prize for Fiction, one of the most prestigious awards granted in the United Kingdom for a single work of fiction and the only one judged solely by women.

In her adult years, Cisneros has learned to detach herself from the patriarchal grip of traditional Mexican culture and has grown to appreciate the men in her life, especially her father. Despite his reluctance to acknowledge the professional value of writing while Cisneros was in school, he took great pride in her work when reading her first publication. To Cisneros, her father represents the majority of the country uninterested in reading, but for whom she insistently writes. In 2000, Cisneros set up the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation, in honor of her father, to benefit promising writers. In explanation, she writes of her father: "A meticulous craftsman, he would sooner rip the seams of a cushion apart and do it over, than put his name on an item that wasn't up to his high standards. I especially wanted to honor his memory by an award showcasing writers who are equally proud of their own craft" (Rice). This fidelity to high quality, a lesson learned from her father, is something Cisneros has often expressed a wish to abide by in her writing.

Also acknowledging the legacy of her father's Mexican roots, Cisneros's writing often reflects on the injustices to her ancestors because of their language and mourns the "essential wisdom" lost as those ancestors sacrificed their language for the safety and prosperity of their children. As a result of this loss, Cisneros writes, she and other second- and third-generation Mexicans "live like captives, lost from our culture, undergrounded, forever wandering like ghosts with a thorn in the heart" ("Offering" 1010). In an effort to reconcile her language with those of her ancestors and to reconfigure perceptions of identity for the Mexican-American woman, Cisneros incorporates Spanglish into her writings. Joining Spanish and English—or, for her, the old and the new—"gives [her] a way of looking at [her]self and at the world in a new way" ("Offering" 1011).

***My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987)**

In her poetic preface to this collection of poems, Cisneros tells readers these are her "wicked poems from when. / . . . I sinned" (x). She then explains that the sin of which she is speaking is not debauchery, but choosing a path different from what her Mexican-American *cultura* would have her follow. As a whole, these poems chronicle her attempts to renegotiate her ideas of a female *self* within the barrio, her family, her culture, and the world. The collection is divided into four parts, which can be read as the progression from childhood into female autonomy and empowerment.

In the first two sections, "1200 South / 2100 West" and "My Wicked Wicked Ways," Cisneros draws a picture of the restrictions set up for women in barrio life and within the family. "1200 South" returns readers to a Chicago barrio not unlike that in *The House on Mango Street*, where poverty and violent male domination create a condition of female dependency and objectification. These first 20 pages are filled with images of the dysfunctional female body, ranging from the betrayals of puberty to the ultimate submission of death. Consequently, this section presents the barrio, as Adriana Estill suggests, as "a restrictive, masculine, space that threatens the well-being of the girls that inhabit it" (28). In "Wicked Ways," this female dysfunctionality mutates from a physical one to a communal one. The stories told in this section are of women unable to perform as the submissive wives expected by their culture; their celebration of man-like behavior—such as "chug[ging] one bottle of Pabst," being "rowdy," and living alone—sets them apart as "wicked." Cisneros, unable to "[keep] the master plan, / the lovely motion of tradition," as her brothers have, reconciles herself to her birth "under a crooked star" and begins to align herself positively with her female predecessors and their "unlucky fate" (26, 38–39).

In the two final sections of the collection, Cisneros abandons the barrio and home to begin using foreign lands and space as an arena in which to negotiate her identity. In "Other Countries,"

Cisneros charts a literal and figurative exile into foreign lands where she can experiment with male-reserved roles of sexuality and independence. She finds liberation not only in her ability to take a lover, but also in her equal ability to reject one. As she asks of a male companion whom she deserted in Venice, “Isn’t freedom what you believe in? / Even the freedom to say no?” (50). As if freed from the restrictions of home, Cisneros looks for traces of identity within “her own body and consciousness” (Estill 35). This sexual liberation gives a jump-start to the more generalized self-liberation poeticized in the final section, “The Rodrigo Poems.” For the first time, the speaker is no longer dependent on the defining terms of a literal place such as the barrio, the home, or even the foreign lands in which she can pretend to be someone else. Instead, she transcends the idea of a spatially constructed identity, her own body becoming a map she uses to explain her ever-shifting sense of self.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the poem “For All Tuesday Travelers,” in *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, and the short story “Never Marry a Mexican,” in *Woman Hollering Creek*, Cisneros writes as the lover of married men. Compare and contrast the two works to explore the differences you can identify between the speakers’ tones. How does the difference in genre influence your attitude toward each speaker? Discuss your responses fully.
2. In “By Way of Explanation,” the speaker describes herself with allusions to numerous places and artistic references. Research these places and works of art; then discuss how their inclusion shapes our understanding of the speaker.

The House on Mango Street (1984)

The House on Mango Street is a collection of 44 vignettes set in and around the only house Cisneros knew as a child. Although each vignette can be read as an isolated narrative, when combined, these

literary sketches create a novel that maps the way the narrator, a young girl named Esperanza, begins to know and understand the world around her. The book is dedicated in both Spanish and English to “the Women,” presumably those of whom she writes—women who outside the novel live silently and without autonomy, but through our young narrator find a voice.

Sharing Cisneros’s regret over her family’s move into their one and only permanent residence, Esperanza is embarrassed by her family’s house, which in no way compares to her imaginative construct of *home*. Instead of the white house she has seen on television, with a picket fence and bathrooms to spare and trees around the perimeter, this house is decrepit, with “bricks . . . crumbling in places,” and has only one bathroom for the family to share (4). The space deficiency on the inside is personified in the house’s outward appearance, by windows “so small you’d think they were holding their breath . . . and the front door . . . so swollen, you have to push hard to get in” (4). Unable to see her house as the equivalent to her friend Alicia’s remembered *home* in Guadalajara, Esperanza looks forward to the home she can only dream of and swears against Alicia’s urgings that when she leaves Mango Street she will never return.

The things that disappoint Esperanza about her family’s house are largely structural and aesthetic. Her complaints might lead us to believe that her dream home would be the new and improved version of all her dislikes. On the contrary, Esperanza describes her dream home by the presence or absence of things on the inside rather than by the façade of the outside. Not only will her home be made up of all her favorite things, but it will also include her stories, void of the figures that she has perceived as the source of restrictions in her life. She wants “not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own” (108). Her wish to remove the male, especially the father, figure from the dynamics of a house reveals her desire to alter the restrictive male-dominated paradigm that prevails within her Mexican-American culture. For Cisneros, storytelling is the best way to “reinvent” the

Mexican-American woman's sense of self without "reject[ing] the entire culture" (Rodríguez Aranda 66).

Everywhere Esperanza looks, she is surrounded by women who live a quiet existence while locked away in the houses of the men closest to them. Most disturbing to Esperanza is the story of her great-grandmother, who was quite literally *taken* as a wife by Esperanza's great-grandfather. She laments being forced to share a name with her great-grandmother, a once wild, then broken "wild horse" whose fate was never more than "sadness" and "waiting" (10). Cisneros resents their connection:

She looked out the window her whole life,
the way so many sit their sadness on an elbow.
I wonder if she made the best with what she
got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all
the things she wanted to be. Esperanza, I have
inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit
her place by the window. (11)

Esperanza can easily find similarly fated women in her neighborhood. Rafaela, whose husband worries she will leave him, sits locked away in his house. From the window she can hear the music of the dance hall, representative of the youth she has been denied. Instead of dancing, she is doomed to "lean on her elbows," stare out the window, and dream of a Rapunzel-like rescue while waiting for her husband to return (79). Destined for a similar lifestyle, Mamacita, "the big mamma of the man across the street," went to live with her son after he worked for years around the clock to save money to bring her to the United States. Now "she sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (77).

Given the malcontent of these homebound women, it is surprising to find that so many of Esperanza's peers who manage to escape from their fathers' controlling hand seem to choose to reimprison themselves in the same restrictive structure. The limits to their dreaming may be explained by the limits of their experience: As "prisoners in houses ruled by their fathers, they seek escape in

the only way they know how: by acquiring their own household to rule over—a house in which they might rule themselves" (Sugiyama 17). Marin, who is older than Esperanza and sells Avon products out of the aunt's home where she lives, looks forward to the day she can leave the house to take on a "real job downtown," where she "can meet someone in the subway who might marry [her] and take [her] to live in a big house far away" (26). Sally makes the same backward move when, after years of her father's trying to beat the sex appeal out of her, she marries a traveling salesman who hits her and forbids her to talk on the phone. More unfortunate than the rest, she is even denied the luxury of looking out her husband's window.

But the house, or apartment, is only one symbol of the oppressive conditions in which these women live. While the house provides an image of male-enforced imprisonment, the physical restrictions that define male perceptions of beauty appear just as frequently. In her study of foot binding, Michelle Scalise Sugiyama looks into the physical and symbolic "crippling" effect of the practice of foot binding on women, as it "requires, ultimately, submission and dependence" (18). Inside and outside the houses around Mango Street, we see these references to foot binding, most often masked as beautifying. The fact that Mamacita is noticeably large emphasizes her noticeably small feet, which are "soft as a rabbit's ear" and fit into a "tiny pink shoe" that mesmerizes Esperanza (76). The threat of this crippling effect reaches its climax in "The Family of Little Feet," when Esperanza and her friends receive cast-off shoes from a family that is described as small. The grandmother's willingness to submit herself to "velvety high heels that made her walk with a wobble" simply because "they were pretty" explains the women's disturbing compliance to reduce themselves to objects in the landscape of male perception (39). When Esperanza and her friends put on the shoes, they, too, transform into images of sexuality to the men who see them on the streets. Children's legs, "skinny and spotted with satin scars where scabs were picked," turn into long women's legs that frighten Esperanza by their foreignness (40).

Significantly, this transformation into sexual beings happens on the streets and ends on the porch of Lucy's house, where the girls leave the shoes for her mother eventually to throw away. This shows what is true throughout the novel: Although life inside a house is tainted by what cannot be experienced, life outside promises the dangerous threat of sexual objectification. Esperanza explains the terms by which women must abide on the male-dominated streets of her neighborhood when she complains: "The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (8).

This disregard for women on the streets heightens into a dangerous threat in "Red Clowns," when a group of unknown boys rape Esperanza. Just as devastating as the violation is the incongruity between the experience and the myth she has been taught about sexual experiences: "Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?" (99). Despite Esperanza's growing determination not to end up like the women sadly framed inside their husbands' and fathers' windows, the world beyond the construct of house proves to be just as undesirable, as women are reduced to sexual objectification.

The opposition between house and street speaks to the dichotomy Cisneros sometimes describes in traditional Mexican culture. Traditionally, Mexican women have had two prominent role models: la Virgen de Guadalupe, the angelic mother figure, or la Malinche, the mistress of Cortez who was a traitor to her people. In "And Some More," the girls' argument over the possibility of multiple names for snow comes off as nonsense because, as Lucy asserts, their belief system only allows for "two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind" (35). The same is so of Mexican women: They can aspire to be good women who marry, have children, and live docile amid a patriarchal hierarchy; or they can fall from that aspiration to become one-dimensional objects of men's sexual desires. Because there is no in-between, in the myth

or in the lives of the women who make up Mango Street, it is no surprise, as Leslie Petty observes, that Esperanza's search for an acceptable role model leads to frustration and the desire to turn her back on the neighborhood altogether.

Limiting the women in her stories to these extreme opposites, Cisneros shows how artificial and confining such cultural stereotypes can be, and through her creation of Esperanza, she imagines a protagonist who can embody both the violation associated with la Malinche and the nurturing associated with la Virgen de Guadalupe, all the while rejecting the feminist passivity that is promoted by both role models. Therefore, Esperanza transcends the good/bad dichotomy associated with these archetypes and becomes a new model for Chicano womanhood (Petty 123). By the close of the novel, Esperanza has retracted her decision to turn her back on her community, learning that regardless of *where* she is, she "will always be Esperanza. [She] will always be Mango Street" (105).

For Discussion or Writing

1. At the end of the novel, Esperanza tells readers that the reason she is leaving Mango Street is so that she can go back. What does she hope to accomplish while she is away? What might be her purpose in returning? Explain your answer.
2. Sally resembles the women in the movies Esperanza admires in "Beautiful and Cruel." Where does Sally's power lead her? How has Sally's story influenced who and where Esperanza wants to be? In what ways? Support your answer with citations from the text.
3. Read Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" Comparing this poem to *The House on Mango Street*, how does each writer go about identifying herself within her community? Do you see similarities in their strategies? If so, what are they? Discuss your answer.

"Hairs" (1984)

As one of the shortest chapters in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), "Hairs," which is frequently

excerpted and anthologized, succinctly exemplifies Esperanza's efforts to negotiate ideas about herself in context of the *otherness* that surrounds her. As if aware of the more threatening danger that will accompany perceived differences between ethnicities and social classes in "Those Who Don't," this young Esperanza cautiously limits the perimeter of her inventory to the nuclear family, where similarities are abundant and differences are inconsequential to an individual's sense of belonging. Keeping her observations within the family allows this rudimentary exercise in comparing and contrasting to act as safe practice for future distinctions of *self* and *other*—a vital step in the coming-of-age process that runs through *The House on Mango Street*.

Less like a story and more like a poetic character sketch, this vignette is packed with vivid images of the different types of hair sported by those in Esperanza's family. Her father's hair is "like a broom, all up in the air"; Esperanza's hair is "lazy" for "it never obeys barrettes or bands"; Carlos's hair is "thick and straight" and never needs a comb; Nenny's hair is "slippery—slides out of your hands"; and Kiki "has hair like fur" (6). In each case, Esperanza's metaphor is as descriptive of the individual's personality as it is of his or her physical appearance. This seems to be especially true of Esperanza's adoring portrayal of her mother's hair, which begins as a description and evolves into a memory:

But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles, all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed, still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread. (6–7)

Typical of Cisneros's attempts to challenge sensory association, Esperanza begins to know her mother's hair as a smell, a place, and a feeling of comfortable safety, rather than just a visual object.

In the context of the novel, "Hairs" foreshadows Esperanza's progressively confident decision to be unlike the women in her neighborhood, who remain caged in houses not their own and restricted by the expectations of womanhood. Underlying Esperanza's affectionate description of her mother's hair are the one-dimensional role her mother plays and the metaphorical pin curls that describe her mother's identity, wrapped up in her husband and children. But Esperanza does not have hair like her mother's and will later realize the significance of this difference.

Ten years after its publication in *The House on Mango Street*, Random House published this chapter as a book in its own right, calling it *Hairs/Pelitos* (1994). In this publication, Cisneros's comparisons are accompanied by colorful illustrations by the artist Terry Ybáñez. In her hand, distinctions among family members are made not only by hair type, but also by skin colors that resemble *Sesame Street* characters and icons of each person's interests, which frame the page. Papa is surrounded by images of shoes, dice, coffee, and a nightlife that Esperanza apparently associates with him; Esperanza has flowers, high-heeled shoes, and a monkey framing her world; Carlos is busy with sandwiches, baseball, cars, and birds; Nenny is accompanied by her mother and enjoys herself on a playground; Kiki is riding his bike while faces of clowns border his pages; and her mother sits among candy, flowers, laundry, and their house. Accentuating and elaborating on the differences between family members limit the interpretation of the vignettes to merely an act of comparing and contrasting and creates a rich concept book for children. However, reading "Hairs" out of the context of *The House on Mango Street* stymies a fuller understanding of the part this chapter plays in Esperanza's progression toward self-awareness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When restored to its context in *The House on Mango Street*, "Hairs" "heralds [Esperanza's] final decision not to accept the imposition of certain conventions regarding her person" (Hernandez 1). Review the stories following "Hairs"

- in the collection, looking for other foreshadowing of Esperanza's eventual act of independence. Do you see a steady progression toward deciding who she wants to be? Why or why not? Explain.
2. A concept book is one that is "designed to teach very young children concepts and behaviors; their intention is didactic: the conveying of information" (Russell 67). Read Arnold Adoff's *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (1973) and Norma Simon's *All Kinds of Families* (1976). Consider how each book uses pictures to teach the words on the page, compared to the ways in which Cisneros's "Hairs" does so. Comment on your observations, making specific references to each text.

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991)

This collection of 22 stories and character sketches chronicles the various experiences through which women learn to know what the critic Mary Pat Brady refers to as "shifting terrains of power" (118). Although the collection uses childhood topography and much of the same playground politics found in *The House on Mango Street* to negotiate power, it also includes the grittier voice of *My Wicked Wicked Ways*. While some sketches offer models of blatant defiance of patriarchal authority—such as the pickup truck-driving, husbandless Felicia, who "holler[s] like Tarzan" and uses profanity reserved for men in "Women Hollering Creek"—in the majority of these pieces it is merely the rationale behind myths of gender and authority that is put in question.

Often, the constructs of hierarchy Cisneros chooses to critique are unremarkable relationships and occurrences of everyday life, such as birthdays, girl talk, eating, and trips to the movie theater. In "Eleven," Rachel is upset that on her 11th birthday, she has no more of a voice to assert herself against classroom authority and majority opinion than she had when she was three or in the subsequent years since. "What they don't understand about birthdays," she explains, "what they never tell you is that . . . when you wake up on your eleventh birthday,

you expect to feel eleven, but you don't" (6). The authoritative "they" she describes here represents the weightiness of Rachel's belief system. For her, the empowerment that should be her earned right is as elusive as a "runaway balloon" (9). Still, unachievable empowerment becomes an issue of gender in "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman." Here the only evident difference between the man and the woman is that the woman stares at the moon and cries, while the man "swallows" its eternalness. Carefully constructed, the only tangible reason for this difference is his male-engendered sense of empowerment.

Beyond the stories, there is much to be read in the telling of them—Cisneros's technique itself is a structure of authority. In many of the sketches, attempts to loosen patriarchal holds on women and their own sense of self are subversively made in the narrative structure. Woven within a plot or character sketch are "seemingly unsystematic asides and digressions" that "shrewdly exploit complex relationships between reader, narrative voice, text, and spatial gestures" (Brady 120). In stories like "Salvador Late or Early" and "Mexican Movies," we see challenges to conventions of a story, such as the avoidance of a formal plot. In "The Marlboro Man" and "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta," gossips circumscribe absolute truths with their versions of the story. The power of storytelling is perhaps most evident in "Eyes of Zapata," in which Emilio Zapata's first wife, Inés, retells his story from her point of view. Recreating his life through her storytelling generates a sense of power in her voice and even creates a dependency he feels upon her. As she tells him, "I am a story that never ends. Pull one string and the whole cloth unravels" (100).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the images of deformity in "Barbie Q" to those in Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls*. What similarities do you see in the images created by the two writers? What differences do you see in the effects of these images within the larger contexts of the poem or short story? Discuss your answer fully, citing from each text.

2. In “Mericans,” what are the implications of the nationality these children are claiming? Discuss the issues to which dual nationality gives rise. How does Cisneros treat them in this collection of stories? What conclusions do you draw? Explain.

“Bread” (1991)

This story, published in *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), is typical of Cisneros’s sensory-laden narratives that rely on simple, daily occurrences to expose deeper, more complicated landscapes of the mind. Recalling a memory, the speaker tells of a moment in a past affair with a now married man, in which the two lightheartedly enjoyed an afternoon of cruising the city, eating bread, and listening to music. As a memory, seemingly unnecessary details—such as the type of bread, the street they bought it on, the color of the car, and the musical instruments performing the tango to which they are listening—are as significant as, if not more important than, the larger elements of the story, such as plot and character development. Never do we learn the lovers’ names, the expectations of their relationship, or the terms that begin and end their affair. Instead, the focus is on the sensory experience of simply eating bread.

What better way to communicate the ephemeral pulse of an affair than to speak of the immediate satisfaction of hunger? Much of what we are told of their feast speaks equally of their relationship. Like “the whole car smell[ing] of bread,” the affair is all-encompassing, intoxicating, but fleeting (84). The presence of physical allure in their relationship is drawn into the lived metaphor as the speaker describes the look of the bread as like a “fat ass” as they “ripped big chunks with our hands and ate” (84). In retrospect, the act of eating bread provides a moment *by* which to remember the relationship instead of the relationship’s providing a moment *in* which to remember the eating of bread.

Even in this short glimpse of their affair, there is indication of the eventual separation. Despite the lovers’ momentary *connectedness* in the story—they

listen to their music so loud because they are “the only ones who could stand it like that”—there is a world of difference in the way they are perceiving the city and, we can assume, all that exists in it. When her lover shares how “charming” he finds all the city buildings, the speaker is not able to see what he sees. As if viewing a different landscape, the speaker tells us that all she could see in the buildings was a memory in which “a cousin’s baby . . . died from swallowing rat poison in a building like these” (84). These disparate interpretations reveal disparate experiences within the same socioeconomic landscape. Where the lover sees “charm,” he neglects to see the poverty and struggle of so many of those who occupy this building and others like it. The speaker’s refusal to romanticize the landscape, as her lover does, affirms her resistance to ignoring the wholeness of the lived city experience.

This determined resistance can best be understood when considering the role a cityscape plays in social constructions of identity. Monika Kaup emphasizes the significance of our attitudes toward city structures as a way of validating or rejecting our history. She says:

Architecture is a master code for the construction of identity. Buildings and cities express social aspirations and values; they function as barometers of social permanence and change. By reading the built environment we can decipher attitudes toward history. Both nostalgia and amnesia, the sense of the past and the dream of modernity, are expressed in architectural structures. (361)

From the standpoint of this reading, the speaker’s “sense of the past” prohibits her from forgetting the injustices of these buildings to her community, just as her lover’s “dream of modernity” prevents him from seeing those injustices. In the end, the speaker seems content with agreeing to disagree: “That’s just how it is. And that’s how we drove. With all his new city memories and all my old. Him kissing me between big bites of bread” (84).

As in many of the other stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*, Cisneros chooses to reveal larger

social criticism not as the obvious subject of the story, but, as Mary Pat Brady observes, “masked as asides” to the less threatening subject (121). Focusing on the feast of bread, rather than the different perspectives on civic injustice, then, can be seen as a “strategy for making dangerous revelations” (Brady 121). Although this gap in their experiences and perspectives seems to have no immediate effect on the afternoon—perhaps because the speaker chooses to live the smaller, more ephemerally satisfying moment rather than the larger, socially responsible one—it does seem to hint at the pain that the speaker lets slip has passed between them.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read “Eyes of Zapata,” looking for the “asides” that are given outside the main plot of the story. What similarities do you see between the speaker of “Bread” and Inés of “Eyes of Zapata”? What do your conclusions tell us about the women of this collection, to whom Cisneros is giving a voice? Explain your answer.
2. Why do you suppose the speaker uses bread to explain their relationship? How would using another metaphor change our understanding of their relationship?

“My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn” (1991)

As the first vignette in the *Women Hollering Creek* collection, “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn” carries considerable weight in the book’s emphasis on female rejection of patriarchal, even colonial restrictions on women. Longing to be a part of Lucy’s family, the speaker, who sounds much like Esperanza of *The House on Mango Street*, develops a fetishlike admiration for her friend. She believes she and Lucy are alike enough to pass as sisters, with their “arms gummy from an orange Popsicle [they] split” and their simultaneous loss of their teeth (5). And, if passable as a sister, then the speaker could live in Lucy’s house, where “there ain’t no boys” and she could “sleep with sisters you could yell at one at a time or all together” instead of

sleeping “alone on the fold-out chair in [her] living room” where she is surrounded by brothers (4).

The speaker attempts to live this dream by modifying her physical appearance to match Lucy’s. Persistently, she sits in the blazing sun waiting for her skin to darken until “it’s blue where it bends like Lucy’s” and for the heat to bake into her head “the dust and weed grass and sweat” until it is “all steamy and smelling like sweet corn” (3, 4). As the title of the vignette indicates, it is the smell of Lucy’s hair that is most charming to the speaker. But she seems only able to explain her affection for it and what it represents in a string of compounded associations and metaphors familiar to child’s play: “Lucy Anguiano, Texas girl who smells like corn, like Frito Bandito chips, like tortillas, something like that warm smell of *nixtamal* or bread the way her hair smells when she’s leaning close to you over a paper cut-out doll or on the porch when we are squatting over marbles” (3). In this description, Lucy’s hair is like other warm, comfortable smells present in both Texan and Mesoamerican cultures. Because her friendly encounters with Lucy, involving such things as marbles and paper dolls, trigger these associations, Lucy then becomes an everyday bridge between modern-day America and ancient Mesoamerica.

Significantly, this is not the only appearance of Lucy’s hair in Cisneros’s work. Lucy enters into many of Esperanza’s adventures in *The House on Mango Street*; her hair, warm and smelling of corn, serves as a sharp contrast to the coldness of the living room that surrounds Lucy’s dead sister’s wake in “Velorio” of *My Wicked Wicked Ways*. Discussing the meaning of these recurring references to Lucy’s hair, Adriana Estill points to Gloria Anzaldúa’s comparison of Mexican women and corn, or *maize*, as crossbreeds intended for preservation. Estill customizes this comparison to speak directly to the smell of Lucy’s hair in Cisneros’s writing:

In our culture, which is preoccupied by the visual, any sensuality not based on sight destabilizes the drive towards meaning. . . . By metaphorically opening up the children’s world, the smell of corn, potentially refers us to maize, to an indigenous history, to a female subjectivity

- . “Never Marry a Mexican.” *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, 1991; Vintage Books, 1992.
- . “Notes to a Younger(er) Writer.” *Americas Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 74–76.
- . “An Offering to the Power of Language.” In *Literature and Ourselves*, edited by Gloria Mason Henderson, William Day, and Sandra Stevenson Waller. 3rd ed., 1009–1011. New York: Longman, 1997.
- . “Only Daughter.” *Glamour*, November 1990, pp. 256–257.
- . *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, 1991; Vintage Books, 1992.
- Doyle, Jacqueline. “More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*.” *Melus* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 5–35.
- Estill, Adriana. “Building the Chicana Body in Sandra Cisneros’ *My Wicked Wicked Ways*.” *Rocky Mountain Review*, Fall 2002, pp. 24–43.
- Ganz, Robin. “Sandra Cisneros: Border Crossing and Beyond.” *Melus* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 19–29.
- Hernandez, Martin Jorge. “In the Language of Children.” *Americas Review* 46, no. 6 (November/December 1994): 61.
- Kaup, Monika. “The Architecture of Ethnicity in Chicano Literature.” *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (June 1997): 361–397.
- Mullen, Haryette. “A Silence between Us like a Language: The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*.” *Melus* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 3–20.
- Newman, Maria. “Sandra Cisneros: Her New Book, Her New Look.” *Hispanic* 15 (2002): 44–47.
- Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Petty, Leslie. “The ‘Dual’-ing Images of Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.” *Melus* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 119–132.
- Rice, David. News and Press. 29 August 2005. Available online. URL: www.david-rice.com/subpage2.html. Accessed May 13, 2006.
- Rodríguez Aranda, Pilar E. “On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-Three: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros.” *Americas Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 64–80.
- Saldívar, Ramón. *Chicano Narrative: The Dialect of Difference*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- Sanborn, Geoffrey. “Keeping Her Distance: Cisneros, Dickinson, and the Politics of Private Employment.” *PMLA* 116, no. 5 (October 2001): 1334–1348.
- Sandra Cisneros: Official Web site. Available online. URL: <http://www.sandracisneros.com>. Accessed June 24, 2009.
- Sugiyama, Michelle Scalise. “Of Woman Bondage: The Eroticism of Feet in *The House on Mango Street*.” *Midwest Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 9–20.
- Thomson, Jeff. “‘What Is Called Heaven’: Identity in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 41,524. Available online. URL: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2455/is_n3_v31/ai_15801067/?tag=content;coll. Accessed July 11, 2005.

Carey Emmons Crockett



JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (1952–)

Early on, I instinctively knew storytelling was a form of empowerment, that the women in my family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life in a world where women led restricted lives. . . . I took what they gave me and made it into a weapon for myself.

(*Silent Dancing*)

Judith Ortiz Cofer begins her memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* with this line from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: "A woman writing thinks back through her mothers." These words form the perfect epigraph, not only for the memoir, but also for Cofer's entire collection of work. She is a woman who writes by thinking back through her mothers; the *cuentos*, or stories, that she weaves are rich with the tapestry of family. "I feel that there is this invisible umbilical cord connecting us and in my case, it became a literary umbilical cord. I feel that the life of my imagination began with the women of my family" (Acosta-Belén).

Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, on February 24, 1952, to Jesús Ortiz Lugo and Fanny Morot Ortiz, Judith Ortiz Cofer is descended from a history of storytelling. The primary narrator in Cofer's life was her maternal grandmother, most of whose stories carried a lesson, her grandmother's way of imparting important values. Mamá (as everyone in the family called her) would gather everyone around a giant mango tree that sported a natural ledge, the perfect throne for a storyteller, and describe the exploits of archetypal characters, such as María La Loca (literally, Crazy María), who lost everything pursuing love, and María Sabida (Smart María), who became the embodiment of the prevailing woman, using cleverness and inner strength to solve problems. These same characters

became the basis for Cofer's first stories, told to herself during the quiet siestas of rainy afternoons.

Not all of Cofer's childhood was spent in Mamá's house in Puerto Rico. Economic pressures caused her father to enlist in the military prior to her birth. When he returned after her second birthday, it was not to rejoin his family on the island but to move them to Paterson, New Jersey, the site of his new naval commission. While Cofer's father viewed the move as the only way to ensure his children a high-quality education, her mother wanted the family to remain on the island, where they could grow up surrounded by their island heritage. Ironically, part of that heritage dictated that it was a wife's duty to follow her husband.

The move to Paterson led to a split in Cofer's world. When her father was home on leave, the family lived in a neighborhood of mostly Puerto Ricans, described by Cofer as "a microcosm of Island life" where residents recreated the sights and sounds of Puerto Rico. Frequently, however, her father was stationed on ships that were gone for months at a time; then her mother would travel back to Puerto Rico with the children. This dual lifestyle presented Cofer and her younger brother with what she refers to as "conflictive expectations: the pressures from my father to become very well versed in the English language and the Anglo customs, and from my mother not to forget where we came from."

The transient lifestyle also made it difficult for her to fit in among her peers. Continually trying to reconcile the expectations of two very different cultures caused Cofer to feel she was “a composite of two worlds . . . I saw myself as different. Never quite belonging because after all, I speak English with a Spanish accent and Spanish with an American accent” (Acosta-Belén).

As if trying to reconcile two worlds was not enough, when Cofer was in high school, her father retired from the navy and moved the family to Augusta, Georgia. Relatives had convinced him it was a better place to raise teenagers, although for his daughter, suddenly the only Puerto Rican in a school of nearly two 2,000 students, it was “like moving from one planet to another” (Day 158). Still, she managed to excel in her studies and was awarded a scholarship to Augusta College in Georgia.

It was during her freshman year that she began to date John Cofer, a fellow student. They were married in 1971 at the age of 19; their daughter, Tanya, was born 18 months later. Despite the difficulty of attending college while raising a young child, both graduated from Augusta College, Cofer with a B.A. in English in 1974. The couple then took their young daughter to Florida so that Cofer could pursue her master’s degree at Florida Atlantic University. During her time in Florida, Cofer lost her father in an automobile accident. With no husband to keep her in the States, Cofer’s mother returned to Puerto Rico.

Although Cofer began her master’s program with the intention of teaching, she started composing poems and stories as a way to fulfill needs that writing a thesis could not. Compared to the poetry she was reading in her classes, she considered her own work unpublishable. Then one day over lunch, her first department chair, Betty Owen, suggested that Cofer write down some of the stories she had been sharing. Cofer admitted that she had been doing just that. After much coaxing by Owen, Cofer sent out a few poems to potential publishers. “Latin Women Pray” was her first poem to be published; it appeared in 1981 in *New Mexico Humanities Review*.

That was all it took for her finally to consider herself a writer.

Finding time to write was another matter. With a husband, a child, and a job, Cofer could have easily written only when it fit conveniently into her life. Instead, she decided to become serious. She describes her decision in an interview with Stephanie Gordon:

When I needed to write and had a strong urge, I had a child, a husband, and a job. I didn’t want any of it to disappear; I just wanted to find an opening in my busy life to write. I realized that window had to be constructed out of time no one else wanted, and I was out of energy by the time I got home at night. My solution was to get up two hours before my child. My first book of poetry and my novel *The Line of the Sun* were both written between the hours of five and seven A.M. My point is that writers must make difficult choices sometimes, in order to create.

At that time, most writers of Puerto Rican descent were publishing in journals geared toward a Puerto Rican audience. Cofer had been surrounded by literary and university journals throughout her higher education, so it was natural for her to submit her poems to more mainstream publications, such as the *New Mexico Humanities Review*, the *Southern Humanities Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and the *Georgia Review*, all of which readily accepted them. Her first chapbook, *Latin Women Pray*, was published in 1980, followed by two more in 1981: *Among the Ancestors* and *The Native Dancer*. In 1985, Cofer was honored with the poetry award in the Riverstone International Chapbook Competition for her chapbook *Peregrina* (meaning pilgrim). In 1987, she published two more collections of poetry, *Terms of Survival* and *Reaching for the Mainland*.

Despite her love for poetry, Cofer felt she “had a long story to tell and needed . . . freedom to tell it without the constraints of language that poetry imposes” (Ocasio). To meet that need, she began to

work on a novel based on stories she had heard as a child about her uncle Guzmán. While her poetry had gained widespread recognition, her first novel was met with resistance by the publishing community. “I was told that Puerto Ricans don’t read. I thought that was a foolish thing for the publisher to assume. But also, I didn’t write it for just Puerto Ricans to read. If the publisher had been wise he would have known that people write out of their experiences, to share mainly with people who need to know what it’s like to be different” (Gordon). After several rejections from New York publishers, *The Line of the Sun* was chosen in 1989 by the University of Georgia Press as the first original novel it would publish. It was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990.

That same year, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Memoir of a Puerto Rican Childhood* was accepted by a small but important publisher, Arte Público Press in Houston—the preeminent publisher of Latino literature and critical studies. *Silent Dancing* received the 1991 PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in Nonfiction and was selected for the Pushcart Prize.

Silent Dancing is autobiographical, but Cofer cautions readers that all people have different versions of events: “Only the camera could have recorded it [her childhood]. I didn’t write *Silent Dancing* as a camera, I wrote it as a poet” (Kevane). Pulling family and friends into the limelight can have a negative effect on those relationships, but Cofer was ready:

I took care, first of all, to write a foreword in which I discussed Virginia Woolf’s theory that the past really belongs to the teller [who is] basically a witness and a participant and not liable for getting everyone else’s version of the past right. I wanted to express that this is how I absorbed the events around me. I did it in the form of creative non-fiction, which means I put at the core of each of the pieces real events in real time. I was accurate in my historical time, but I felt free to dramatize conversations that I remembered or recalled without claiming that they were word for word accurate. . . . I was after a poetic truth. (Lopez)

While *Silent Dancing* is openly autobiographical, other works fuse parts of the author’s own life with the lives of fictitious characters. This is the case in *The Line of the Sun* and *The Meaning of Consuelo*. Both novels are told from the perspective of young Puerto Rican girls who live in the United States. Marisol is especially reminiscent of a young Cofer, with her navy father and her mother always yearning for the island. Cofer believes it should not be surprising when authors use their own lives as material for their books. In regard to her own work, she states:

Autobiography plays a large part, but it’s really a logical process. It’s not that it’s boring, but most everybody knows what it’s like to be professional in middle-class America. Not many people know what it’s like to be a Puerto Rican woman growing up in the 1960s. Why should I reach out and invent something, when my own life provides me with interesting material that is not readily available to the public? I thought to use my life first, because it was there. (Ocasio)

Blending fact with fiction can cause critics to circle, but Cofer fends them off with a quote from Emily Dickinson: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” She says she feels at liberty to cross over boundaries because

literature has a truth that has nothing to do with the dictionary definition of truth. I think there’s factuality and there’s truth. I can say to you, “My father was in the Cuban missile crisis,” and tell you the dates, but that is not as meaningful as the fact that we lost contact with him for six months and thought he was dead. The truth is what I felt about my father disappearing, not that he was actually on a ship in Cuba at that time. Truth is what I can make people feel. (Ocasio)

In an interview, Cofer described the limits of poetic truth by saying that the writer “has a pact with the reader and that is, your job [as a writer] is not to fool the reader or irritate the reader. It’s not

necessarily to please the reader. You have a deal to make with the reader to tell the story as honestly as possible.”

After her success at tackling the boundary governing objective truth, Cofer decided to challenge another boundary, that of genre. She had been writing poems, essays, and fiction about the central issues of growing up as a Latina in America for many years when she decided to lay out all the pieces she had been working on and “saw that they could be put together like a collage” (Gordon). That collage became *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women*. Through its use of multiple genres, it finally merges in a single work what she had inherited from her ancestors: her grandfather’s love of poetry and her grandmother’s art for storytelling.

Again publishers shied away, this time because the book could not readily be classified for a particular bookstore shelf. Although *Silent Dancing* had also combined poetry and creative nonfiction, it had done so under the genre of “memoir,” giving publishers an overarching classification. Cofer turned to her old ally, the University of Georgia Press, which published *The Latin Deli* in 1993. Early the next year, it received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, in recognition of its contribution toward the understanding of racism and the appreciation of the diversity of cultures. Out of curiosity, Cofer has looked for *The Latin Deli* in bookstores and found it in a variety of places, including, to her amusement, among the cookbooks.

The issues Cofer has chosen to address in her work have made her the target of critics, some of whom call her openly ideological. While she admits much of her work revolves around political issues, she states:

I am not a political writer in that I never take an issue and write a story about it. The people in my stories deal with political issues but only in accordance with the needs of their personal lives. My politics are imbedded in my work as part of the human experience. (Gordon)

One example she gives is her story “American History,” which appears in *The Latin Deli*. It takes

place on the day Kennedy was shot and describes a young girl’s inability to feel “the right way about the president’s death” because she is excited about her first date. When the boy’s mother rejects her because she is Puerto Rican, the girl is faced with a political situation. Cofer says,

The story doesn’t end with a speech on prejudice but with the heartbreak of a girl still unable to comprehend that it all comes together and affects her life: the death of a president, life in America, prejudice, the plight of the immigrant. (Gordon)

Cofer has also been criticized for intermingling Spanish and English within her work. Critics have long debated the validity of bilingual texts; Rafael Cancel Ortiz has gone so far as to criticize Puerto Rican writers for presenting “the Puerto Rican as a stuttering, ambivalent individual, incapable of expressing himself/herself coherently in either Spanish or English” (110). Responding to an interview question from Carmen Hernández regarding whether her inclusion of Spanish words was “a kind of code-switching,” Cofer suggests that code switching refers more to the style of Nuyorican writers (Hernández 101). Celia Genishi has defined code-switching as “the alteration of languages or dialects to convey social meaning” (133) and John Christie refers to it as a “sort of cultural hybridity,” giving the example of *la marketa*, a word derived from the Spanish *la bodega* and the English *market*. He states that by combining the two words into one, the writer calls to mind a “distinctly separate chain of connotations and emotional meanings that may or may not have anything to do with either ‘bodega’ or ‘market’” (2006).

Cofer, however, does not employ hybrid words, nor does she change the language to convey meaning. Instead, she describes her work as “interlingual writing” and uses Spanish words and phrases to remind readers that what they are reading “comes from the minds and thoughts of Spanish-speaking people” (Hernández 101). She further states that in her case,

the two languages are necessary to re-create or recall a particular image since bilingualism is an intrinsic part of my personal experience. English is the main language of my education; Spanish—of my imagination and creativity. . . . I use Spanish words and phrases almost as an incantation to lead me back to the images I need. . . . My native language and my Puerto Rican heritage are the “stuff of life” in my work. English is the vehicle for my artistic expression. (Acosta-Belén)

Christie supports that position, writing, “Spanish is the language that communicates precisely the Latino’s emotional memory.” There are some words that have such heavy connotations within a language that translation falls short. That one word must be used, untranslated, in order to convey just the right meaning. One example would be Cofer’s poem “El Olvido” from *Terms of Survival*. The poem’s title, directly translated, means “omission” or “forgetfulness”—words unable to reflect accurately the images rendered in the mind of a young Latina who heard her mother describing a child who had forgotten his mother as falling into *el olvido* (Hernández 101).

Despite the critics, Judith Ortiz Cofer has continued to defy definition. Realizing the appeal of Cofer’s work to young adults, an editor suggested that she try specifically to target that population. The result was *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*, Cofer’s first book published by a mainstream press. It was heralded by *Publishers Weekly* as “twelve consistently sparkling, sharp stories [that] recreate the atmosphere of a Puerto Rican barrio” and received multiple awards, including the Americas Award for Children and Young Adult Literature (Honor Book, 1995), the American Library Association’s Reforma Pura Belpré Medal (1995), and the *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year List.

Cofer has since published several books of poetry and fiction, as well as two books that focus on what it is like to be a woman writer. She lives on a farm in Georgia with her husband, John Cofer, a high school algebra teacher, and continues to teach

at the University of Georgia, where in 2006 she served as the Regents’ and Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing.

***The Line of the Sun* (1989)**

Although told through the eyes of Marisol, a young girl born in the United States to Puerto Rican immigrants, this novel is really the story of Marisol’s uncle Guzmán, who has acquired mythic proportions through the stories his family passes on about him. As a young boy he is full of mischief, causing even his own mother, Mamá Cielo, to refer to him as her “niño del diablo” (demon child). Matters only get worse as Guzmán matures, until finally Mamá Cielo is persuaded by a close friend to take Guzmán to see a spiritist, a local woman referred to by the villagers as La Cabra (she-goat). Against her better judgment, Mamá Cielo leaves Guzmán with La Cabra in the hope that he will be cured of his evil ways, but La Cabra—or Rosa, as Guzmán comes to know her—seduces him. The townspeople drive La Cabra away, leaving Guzmán devastated.

Guzmán travels to America, where he eventually meets Marisol, the niece for whom he has become such a hero. But to Marisol he is a disappointment. On the run from a migrant camp where he was held against his will and forced to work, Guzmán stays with Marisol’s family but soon wears out his welcome as he tries to convince his sister to leave El Building, the only place she feels safe.

Like most first novels, *The Line of the Sun* is highly autobiographical. Marisol is reminiscent of the author as a child and faces many of the same issues: a navy father, a mother who longs for the island paradise of her homeland, the child as cultural bridge between family and society. The character of Guzmán is based on stories Cofer heard as a child about her uncle Guzmán. She began to ask herself “What if?” questions, inventing scenarios and imagining how he would react.

Through the characters of her novel, Cofer explores the ways in which cultural forces, both in Puerto Rico and in the United States, influence the

choices available to individuals. Guzmán's first love, Rosa, is particularly affected by those forces. The townspeople are blatantly hypocritical in their treatment of Rosa, publicly branding her "La Cabra" (which literally translated means she-goat, but on a deeper, connotative level implies whore). Privately, however, they seek out her services as medium and spiritual adviser. When her affair with Guzmán comes to light, Rosa is shunned and ridiculed and eventually run out of town, while Guzmán is seen as the victim. Characters such as Rosario, Marisol, and Melinda further illuminate the implied threat of social ostracism that keeps women within culturally defined boundaries.

As a child, Cofer was well aware of her mother's desire to return to Puerto Rico. The character of Marisol's mother, Ramona, shares that ache for her homeland. She finds solace in El Building, described as "an ethnic beehive" where adults "conducted their lives in two worlds in blithe acceptance of cultural schizophrenia" (170–171). The inhabitants of El Building recreate the sights and sounds of their homeland, engendering in Ramona a "garrison mentality" (172) causing her to resist her husband's desire for a single-family dwelling and, eventually, Guzmán's insistence that she move her children out of El Building to avoid impending trouble. Through characters such as Marisol and Ramona, readers see the struggle of immigrants to define themselves within a new culture, and their endless journey toward answering the question, Where is home?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although the reader is told on the first page that Guzmán's sister is the narrator's mother, Cofer does not reveal the name of the person telling the story until well into the book, on page 177. Why does she wait so long? Why does Cofer choose to tell this story from the perspective of Marisol? Is Marisol an effective narrator? Why or why not?
2. What do you think Marisol means when she says, "I learned about waiting at that time, a woman's primary occupation" (179)? Discuss your answer fully.
3. At the end of the book, Marisol admits, "This broken man . . . had little to do with the wild boy I had created in my imagination" but describes her uncle as "a good man and brave, even if finally not the hero of my myth" (282). What has led her to this conclusion? Do you agree or disagree with her assessment? Explain.

***Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990)**

After the publication of *The Line of the Sun*, people began to ask Judith Ortiz Cofer how much of it was based on actual events and people. Those questions were partly responsible for her second book, a collection of autobiographical essays. In the preface, Cofer describes her purpose and process for writing about her childhood experiences: "I wanted the essays to be, not just family history, but also creative explorations of known territory. . . . I wanted to try to connect myself to the threads of lives that had touched mine and at some point converged into the tapestry that is my memory of my childhood." Cofer cautions readers that in writing these essays, she "faced the possibility that the past is mainly a creation of the imagination also."

To illustrate her point that many factors influence how one remembers an event further, she includes in her memoir the *ensayos* (she says the Spanish word for essay, meaning "practice," better defines her style) "The Black Virgin" and "The Last Word." In "The Black Virgin," Cofer describes her first memory, her father's homecoming when she was only two years old. That memory is challenged by her mother's version of the incident in "The Last Word." These two stories act as bookends, framing the rest of Cofer's childhood for the reader in terms of how events are remembered and presenting a context for understanding the true meaning of *memoir*.

The stories and poems in *Silent Dancing* give insight into the issues that have helped to shape the writer Cofer has become, themes that continue to surface in her later works. One such issue is that of language as power. "One More Lesson"

illustrates how early in her schooling one of Cofer's teachers taught her a valuable, although unintentional, lesson. The teacher had written something on the board and then left the classroom. Because she could not read the language, one of Cofer's classmates was able to convince her that in order to use the bathroom, she had only to write her name beneath the teacher's message. The teacher returned and, seeing her out of her seat, threw a book at the back of Cofer's head. The lesson? "Language is the only weapon a child has against the absolute power of adults" (66).

For Discussion or Writing

Discuss the controversy regarding James Frey's 2003 "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces*. How does Cofer's view regarding the formation of memory affect the definition of memoir? Explain.

***The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women* (1993)**

The Latin Deli has been described by Ed Hall of *Atlanta Magazine* as "a marvelous patchwork memoir of a woman's growth away from one tradition and toward another." Despite that description, *The Latin Deli* is not strictly memoir; it blends fiction, poetry, and essays to tell the stories of women who have lived their lives in El Barrio, the Latino community of Paterson, New Jersey. Cofer addresses the hardships faced by the Latino people who have immigrated to the United States: women who feel displaced and yearn for their island paradise, men who struggle to maintain strong cultural morals within their transplanted families, and the teenagers who are caught between cultures, forced to follow the discipline of Puerto Rican fathers while living among American peers.

In order to cope with their feelings of isolation in an essentially foreign culture, the families stick together, creating in El Barrio a miniaturized version of their homeland. The title poem, "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica," describes one feature of El Barrio, which the Latinos visit "all wanting the comfort of spoken Spanish" and the experience of

having the owner conjure up "products from places that now exist only in their hearts."

The Latin Deli contains one of Judith Ortiz Cofer's most anthologized short stories, "American History." It is a story that has intergenerational appeal, telling the tale of Elena, a teenager described by her mother as acting *enamorada* (like a girl stupidly infatuated). Elena *is* enamorada, for she has fallen in love with Eugene, a boy who recently moved into the only house on the block with a yard and trees. Elena watches him from her reading perch on the fire escape of El Building (the tenement in which her family lives), until she finally has the nerve to approach him on the way home from school. They become friends, and Elena is delighted when Eugene invites her to his house to study for a test.

On the day that she is to meet Eugene for their study date, the gym teacher dismisses class early, telling the students, "The president is dead, you idiots" (12). Elena knows she should be as upset as the rest of the nation over Kennedy's death, but she cannot help feeling excited over her date with Eugene. Her mother chastises her for going out on such a tragic day, telling her that she is "heading for nothing but humiliation and pain" (13). Elena goes anyway.

Eugene does not answer the door. Instead, Elena is met by his mother, who informs her that Eugene will be moving soon and does not need the pain of making friends, only to leave them behind. The rebuke seems to be thinly veiled prejudice and sends Elena back to her empty apartment, where she tries to feel grief for the loss of the president but can only mourn her own loss.

"The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María" explores another type of prejudice faced by Latinas in the United States, that of stereotyping. In this essay, Cofer describes her experiences as a Puerto Rican girl trying to fit in, only to be singled out and stereotyped because of her Hispanic appearance. She discusses how "mixed cultural signals" perpetuate stereotypes and promote misunderstandings. One example she gives is differing cultural signals sent by clothing styles. As Cofer writes, "When a Puerto Rican girl dressed

in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place” (151).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Research the meaning of *Ars Poetica*. Why does Cofer choose to include it in the title of her poem “The Latin Deli: An *Ars Poetica*”?
2. When describing the relationship between El Building and Eugene’s house in the story “American History,” Cofer writes that El Building “blocked most of the sun” (10). In what way is that symbolic of El Building’s effect on Elena?
3. What made President Kennedy such a hero to the American people? Why would he be considered a saint by the Puerto Rican community (in the story “American History”)? Justify your answer.
4. What causes stereotypes to evolve? How do the media perpetuate the stereotyping of ethnic groups? In what ways are those ethnic groups impacted by such stereotypes? Explain your answer.

***An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995)**

As easily as she crosses the borders of genre, Cofer traverses the limitations of audience. Many of the pieces Cofer has written for adults appeal to young adults, addressing universal themes that speak to all readers, regardless of age. *An Island Like You* resulted from a request by an editor that she write specifically for younger readers.

Cofer sets the tone for her book in the last stanza of a poem entitled “Day in the Barrio”:

. . . At days end,
you scale the seven flights to an oasis on the
roof,
high above the city noise, where you can think
to the rhythms of your own band. Discordant
notes rise

with the traffic at five, mellow to a bolero at
sundown.
Keeping company with the pigeons, you watch
the people below,
flowing in currents on the street where you
live, each one alone in a crowd,
each one an island like you.

While the book is organized as a series of short stories revolving around the lives of barrio teenagers, it is actually a novel depicting the universal lessons of love and loss, peer pressure and parental expectations, social and ethnic discrimination, and the constant struggle for one generation to gain its independence from another. All these themes are addressed through the quests of individuals to become part of the larger community—in essence, for each island to be recognized as important to the world in which it exists.

Many of the stories are interconnected, as is the case with the story of Doris. Introduced to readers in “The One Who Watches,” Doris is Yolanda’s invisible friend and later becomes a heroine by organizing a birthday party for a social outcast in “White Balloons.” Doris starts out content to follow Yolanda, but as Yolanda takes more and more risks, she realizes that she needs to follow her own heart. In “White Balloons,” Doris befriends Rick Sanchez. Ostracized because of his sexual preference, Rick returns home to the barrio a successful actor. He wants to make a difference in the barrio by starting a juvenile theater group, but the adults forbid it.

Doris feels a connection to Rick when she thinks about his childhood: “I know from experience that you basically have two choices once you’re made to feel unwanted here: to leave home or to try to become invisible like me” (147). She vows to help Rick achieve his dream, organizing and planning an original production. But Rick passes away before the play is performed and Doris shrugs off her invisibility to throw him the birthday party he never had as a child of the barrio.

Arturo also identifies with Rick, but for different reasons. Introduced to readers in the story “Arturo’s Flight,” Arturo feels like he does not

belong. He is interested in poetry, which in the barrio “makes you suspicious as to your sexual preference” (32), and after being asked to recite a poem in class one day, he is harassed relentlessly by other students. In order to shock them into seeing him differently, Arturo dyes his hair purple, a plan that backfires and causes him to lose his job. Arturo appears again in “An Hour with Abuelo,” where he learns that the elderly are not as boring as he thought, and again when he helps Doris with the theater group and the party.

As Arturo and Doris struggle along with the other characters of *An Island Like You* to define their own place in a society that is in itself marginalized, they learn that they are not alone. Through their interactions with others, they find they are surrounded by other people who feel like isolated islands, everyone simultaneously searching for acceptance.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Doris never says why she was “made to feel unwanted.” Does it matter to the story? Most people have felt rejected at one time or another. Why does acceptance by society mean so much to us that it was designated by Abraham Maslow as one of humanity’s basic needs?
2. Cofer portrays the society of the barrio as very unforgiving. How does this compare to your opinion of high school society? American society in general?
3. The main characters in *An Island Like You* are teenagers who feel invisible, yet they act as if the elderly are invisible. What causes one person to marginalize another? What groups have been historically marginalized by mainstream America? Are there any groups that remain so?

The Meaning of Consuelo (2003)

Regarding the common themes in her writing, Cofer said in an interview, “I have three or four obsessions and whether I want them to or not, they peek through.” As do many of her earlier works, the novel *The Meaning of Consuelo* explores

Cofer’s obsession with language. Set in the 1950s, the story takes place in San Juan, the capital city of Puerto Rico, where Consuelo lives with her family in a well-kept modern subdivision. Consuelo learns early on that words define the world in which she lives and even who she is expected to be: “I was expected to live up to my name, Consuelo, from the word meaning comfort and consolation; Mili, from the word *milagros*, a miracle, was supposed to bring the light into our lives. I was to console, care for, and watch over her” (13).

Later, as she watches the people around her label one another, Consuelo learns that words carry weight beyond their dictionary definitions. There is the cross-dresser, María Sereno, referred to as *la fulana* (the outsider; he or she is never called by name) and publicly ridiculed. The people on the island separate themselves into groups based on class: *la gente decente* and *la polilla*, the gentle people and the common urbanized peasants, “who, like termites were to be found wherever they could build their messy nests and procreate” (101). Even Consuelo’s closest cousin, Patricio, is not safe from the label of *maldito y perdido* (damned and lost), put on him by his family because they suspect him of being homosexual. When Patricio begins to pull away from Consuelo, she is hurt but realizes he pushes her away because he “had been afraid of saying the words that would define him, in any language” (74).

Language rules Consuelo’s life, defining not only the people and the social circumstances under which they live, but also the events that befall them. When the *tragedia* that is later revealed to be schizophrenia begins to take over Mili, Consuelo learns that her “family had words for every occasion, even pain and sorrow” (154), but while language can imprison, words can be the “keys to power and freedom” (155). She begins to “see language as a weapon of destruction, as well as of self-defense” (50) and finally learns how to wield it in order to define for herself the meaning of Consuelo.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the ways in which language is used as a weapon in American culture. Discuss two or

- Hernández, Carmen Delores. *Puerto Rican Voices in English: Interviews with Writers*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1997.
- Judith Ortiz Cofer, interview by Stephanie Gordon, in *AWP Chronicle*, October/November 1997: 1–9.
- Judith Ortiz Cofer Web site. [http://Available online. URL: www.english.uga.edu/~jcofer](http://www.english.uga.edu/~jcofer). Accessed June 24, 2009.
- Kafka, Phillipa. “*Saddling La Gringa*”: *Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Kevane, Bridget, and Juanita Heredia. *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000.
- Ocasio, Rafael, and Rita Ganey. “Speaking in Puerto Rican: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer.” *Bilingual Review*, May–August 1992, pp. 143–146.
- Ortiz, Rafael Cancel. “The Language Conflict in Puerto Rican Literature.” *Americas Review*, Summer 1990, pp. 103–113.
- Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



BILLY COLLINS (1941–)

We are all so foolish, / . . . / so damn foolish / we have become beautiful without even knowing it.

(“Nightclub”)

Billy Collins ends each poetry reading with the preceding lines from his poem “Nightclub.” He says he is “totemistic” about the habit, but the words also serve as a summary of his poetry and his philosophy of life. These lines are also key to understanding his immense popularity, even among those who have previously disliked poetry, because they hint at an acceptance of and contentment with the lives each of us has been given. In an age that hungers for spirituality and relief from hectic lives, Collins points out that we are each beautiful and can find solace, and even humor, in our little corners of the world.

Collins’s career has in his words “gone from 0 to 60” in a short time. From his first book of poems, *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (1988), which he had great problems having published, to his latest, *Ballistics* (2008), published by Random House, Collins has become the most sought after poet in the country. His readings are attended not only by literati, but also by those who have never written a poem. Collins has achieved what most poets only dream of—financial success. His appeal is in his common themes, often discussed with underlying humor, and in his disregard for the accoutrements of poetry: rhyme, meter, and standard poetic form. This is not to say his poetry lacks form, but dialogue with the reader, not literary gymnastics, is always Collins’s goal. He says form is only a “box for the poem to live in,” which should be tidy, but subordinate to the clarity of the message.

The easiest way to understand Billy Collins’s ideas about poetry is to go back to a poem he wrote early on but still adheres to, entitled “Introduction to Poetry”:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light

. . .

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

. . .

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

. . .

The “torture” is what Collins believes has turned students away from poetry. Searching for metaphors and parsing for meter take the poem away from the student. The same turning away from traditional forms that makes his poems popular also makes them difficult to analyze. If teachers cannot teach deconstruction, how are they to teach poetry? Collins discusses this question in his introduction to *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*. He says opacity

has become so connected with modern poetry that readers have taken to novels and short stories instead, but that the goal of the poet is clarity. "Too often the hunt for Meaning becomes the only approach; literary devices form a field of barbed wire that students must crawl under to get to 'what the poet is trying to say.'" To clarify, he practices what he calls "ironic deflation" against the loftiness of the literary traditions. He even advocates taking poetry away from the classroom.

When he teaches poetry classes he does not ask, "What does the poem mean?" but "How does the poem operate?" In other words, how does it move from one point to another (Weich 4)? Again, in "Introduction to Poetry," he says the reader should "probe," "feel the walls," "waterski across the surface" to see how the poem gets from the beginning to the middle to the end. These three parts are the only poetic form to which Collins sticks. Most importantly, students should read the poem out loud so that they use their own voice and breathing to make the poem theirs. That immediate injection of the personal is what makes his poetry live—and what fills his poetry readings.

The importance of hearing poetry was perhaps indicated to him by his mother, whom Collins remembers as often singing in the kitchen and quoting poetry to her son. He was born in New York City on March 22, 1941. His mother, Katherine, was a nurse who had been born in Canada, and his father, William, was an electrician. Because he was an only child and a late-in-life child, he referred to himself as "their baby Jesus." Collins was a bright child and an avid reader, and his father hoped that he would go to the Harvard School of Business. Occasionally his father would take home a copy of *Poetry* magazine, an act that the poet later said he probably regretted. Collins was educated in Catholic schools and became enamored of the Beat poets while in high school. He recalls taking the train into New York City in the late 1950s to hang out around the wannabe Beat crowd, then going home to his snug bed in the suburbs. He wrote for his high school newspaper but had no poetry published until he submitted "The Discovery of Scat" to *Rolling Stone*, for which he was paid \$30. He

graduated from the College of the Holy Cross in 1963. Collins only became interested in poetry again after being admitted for graduate work at the University of California, Riverside, where he says, "I spent the first year reading" (Howard).

In 1968, Collins was hired at Hunter College in New York; shortly afterward, it became Lehman College of the City University of New York. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College, a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College, and an adjunct professor at Columbia University. He lives with his wife, Diane, an architect, in northern Westchester County in New York. Collins's poems have now appeared in every major poetry magazine and journal, as well as mainstream publications such as the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Harper's*, the *American Scholar*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. He has received many fellowships, including one from the National Endowment for the Arts. His career gained steam when he read his work and was interviewed by Terry Gross on National Public Radio (NPR). Garrison Keillor has also been intrigued by Collins's work, leading to an appearance on NPR's *A Prairie Home Companion*. This exposure, combined with publication of three more books in the 1990s—*Questions about Angels*, *The Art of Drowning*, and *Picnic, Lightning*—cemented Collins's popularity.

When he received the June 2001 call from Dr. James Billington of the Library of Congress saying that he had been selected as the United States poet laureate, Collins had never met another poet laureate. So successful was he as poet laureate, he was appointed to another term in 2002. His progressive idea was to take poetry out of its ivory tower and to put it in the subways and buses instead. He even convinced Delta Air Lines to include a poetry selection in its entertainment options. Much of his acclaim was due to Poetry 180, a Web site for high school students. He hoped to begin each high school day with a poem—mostly modern ones—to be read along with the sports schedules and events. Every day of the school year, a single poem was to be read to all students for enjoyment, but not analysis. The Web site received over 1 million hits in the first year, from users in not only the United States, but also Algeria, Bhutan, and Norway. The

site resulted in two books, *Poetry 180* and *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*.

Poetry 180 reflects Collins's belief that poetry should be taught in reverse chronology. Instead of beginning with *Beowulf* or *The Canterbury Tales*, he believes in starting with a poem like Theodore Roethke's "My Father's Waltz" to intrigue students, eventually working backward to the classics. The collection and its sequel, *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*, feature poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, MARY OLIVER, Sharon Olds, May Sarton, Robert Bly, Jane Kenyon, GARY SOTO, Donald Justice, James Tate, and William Stafford. The poems constitute what Garrison Keillor calls simply "good poems," those pieces that somehow touch your heart and make you stop a minute and think, "That's a good poem." The collections also include the occasional work by Hardy, Coleridge, and Anne Bradstreet. In short, Collins has selected poems much like his own, which, although not meant to be analyzed formally, are nevertheless easily understood and invite the reader to make a personal connection.

Collins's poems are often called "accessible," according to Collins a "modifier so overused that it has begun to have the aural effect of fingernails on a blackboard." He substitutes "easy to enter," feeling that reading a poem should be like a welcoming homecoming: "Poems that are hospitable toward their readers, poems in which a human voice is clearly sounded—poems with the front door left open" is a description of both the poems he loves and the poems he writes (*180 More Extraordinary Poems* xvi). Another way Collins describes poetry is "imaginative travel." He says, "If a poem has no clear starting place, how can it go anywhere? If a poem does not begin in lucidity, how can it advance into the mysterious?"

His poems are first firmly grounded in setting, the where and when, to orient the reader. From there, they usually advance to the mysterious, a sort of fanciful disorientation. For instance, "I Chop Parsley While Listening to Art Blakey's Version of 'Three Blind Mice'" starts in the kitchen, where the poet is chopping vegetables, but goes on to delve into the animals' thoughts. Collins calls this mental progression "beginning in terra firma and

progressing to terra incognita." He says he hopes to lead the reader in the same way Virgil led Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. His meanderings, his imaginative travels, always have a plan, a beginning, a middle, and an end. He explains the three stages thoroughly in his poem "Aristotle." The poet credits the rhetoric training in his Jesuit high school for his Aristotelian form.

Collins sidesteps the question of which poets have influenced him. He talks often about the conversational poems of Coleridge, and many critics also argue that Robert Frost or Walt Whitman has influenced his conversational style. His movement from specific to general or mysterious is the form Emily Dickinson often used. While Dickinson often borrowed the meter of her poems from the hymns that she could hear from the nearby Congregationalist church in Amherst, Collins uses the cadences of human conversation, often a conversation between the poet and the reader. More important, Dickinson's view of the world from her upstairs window, where she wrote of birds coming down the walk and snakes darting through the grass, is akin to Collins's fascination with household objects, such as salt shakers and oranges on the kitchen table. Collins seems to poke fun at this stance in "Monday": "The birds are in their trees, / the toast is in the toaster, / and the poets are at their windows." He continues, "the poets are at their windows / because it is their job for which / they are paid nothing every Friday afternoon" (*The Trouble with Poetry* 7). However, he is dead serious in saying that it is the job of the poet to observe common things and to weave them into the vast fabric of our lives. One of Collins's earlier poems was "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," a poem not about seducing Emily but revealing her poetic starting point: "You will want to know / that she was standing / by an open window in an upstairs bedroom, / motionless, a little wide-eyed / looking out on the orchard below" (*Sailing Alone around the Room* 119). The wide-eyed poet standing at a window, often holding a cup of tea or listening to jazz, is seen many times in Collins's own poems.

More admiration for Dickinson is seen in Collins's introduction to *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published by the Modern Library. He

says of her and other poets, "All poets must close the doors on the world to think and compose." Dickinson writes from her bedroom, while Collins often writes from the solitude of his kitchen. In "Design," he pours salt on the kitchen table and makes a circle with his finger. This design becomes more than a doodle in grains of salt but the design of life, fate, and the universe. In "Tuesday, June 4, 1991," he calls himself the "secretary to the morning whose only responsibility is to take down its bright, airy dictation" (*Sailing Alone* 58). Both poets see their roles as amanuenses of the world.

An example of a more direct comparison is in "Breathless." As does Dickinson, who loved to imagine life after death, Collins writes about his own burial. He says, "let me rest here / in my earthy little bedroom, / my lashes glazed with ice, / the roots of trees inching nearer, / and no dreams to frighten me anymore." Compare this with Dickinson's "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" and "I Died for Beauty," two of her many poems about the architecture and furniture of death. In another poem, he pictures his mother and father buried under a slab of granite (a favorite Dickinson word), and when the father sits up to admonish his son, who has been speeding past the cemetery, the mother quietly tells her husband to "just lie back down." This is reminiscent of the post-death conversation in Dickinson's "I Died for Beauty."

As does Dickinson, Collins avoids "metronomic rhythms and end rhyme" (Howard). He loves to make fun of traditional poetic forms. In "Sonnet," he says: "All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now, / and after this one just a dozen." He goes on, saying that sometimes the "iambic bongos must be played / and rhymes positioned at the end of lines" (*Sailing Alone* 146). In "Paradelle for Susan," he makes up a form, saying in a note that the paradelle is "one of the more demanding French fixed forms appearing in the *langue d'oc* love poetry of the eleventh century" (116). This was his affectionate joke on his fellow poets, who frantically searched their dictionaries for the paradelle, only to find that Collins had created it. In "American Sonnet," he suggests that the current sonnet is the postcard in which writers "do not speak like Petrarch or wear a

hat like Spenser / and it is not fourteen lines," but in this age, postcards are the true "compression of what we feel" (26).

Close readers of Collins will find very little of his personal life in his poetry. He dislikes confessional poems and remarks that people read his poetry to find out not about him, but about themselves. There is something in him of the polite gentleman, one who would never think of talking about his personal life. While most of us write when we are either sad or happy and have the need to express this emotion to the world, Collins says his best time to write is when he has nothing to say. He approaches human emotion "like a bankshot," approaching obliquely. He also ridicules poetry workshops, which people attend to learn to put their emotions on paper. "Workshop" is a poem about the inane comments that are heard in poetry workshops, and of this poem he says that it is his attempt to "bite the hand that feeds him," as much of his life's work includes conducting poetry workshops (*Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes* 78).

Collins is a poet of simple things. Readers find in his poems mice, cows, bowls of oranges, hats, musical instruments, and books, but these common objects are paths into complex and human thoughts. For instance, in "The Death of the Hat," a man's felt hat is the entry into a poem about the death of his hardworking father. In "The Best Cigarette," he tells of living in the moment. "The Lanyard" is a poem of a young boy weaving a plastic neck strap, but the real topic is the impossibility of ever paying back your mother for what she has done for you. He writes often about art, especially still life. "I usually find myself in front of the still lifes," he says in "Metropolis," as the careful examiner of the connection between things. He continues, "I can float suspended in the air around the glittering things / whose shadows will never lengthen / and whose weight no hand will ever feel" (*The Art of Drowning* 24). In other words, he declares himself to be an artist with words.

The topic of many of Collins's recent poems is the reader. "You, Reader" compares the poet and the reader to the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen table: "I wondered . . . if they were still strangers to one another / like you and I / who manage to be

known and unknown to each other at the same time” (*The Trouble with Poetry* 4). His four latest books begin with a poem to the reader, a sort of welcome mat to the collection. He calls this his attempt to form a “temporary companionship with the reader, without being presumptuous” (Weich 1). He talks to the reader as if the two were face to face, quietly sharing the surprising ending of the conversation.

Like Whitman and Dickinson, Collins is a distinctly American poet. He became aware of this fact while giving poetry readings in England. He noticed that the audience there did not follow him when he used phrases like “eggs over easy” but realized that he needed to use American idioms in order to maintain his conversational tone. He points to Whitman as the progenitor of distinctly American poems. Whitman’s veering away from convention, the “freedom from the box of the stanza and the harness of the iambic,” eventually led to the Beat poets, such as Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (“What’s American about American Poetry?” 2). Although Collins is well traveled, he rarely writes poems about his travels. For instance, in “Shoveling Snow with Buddha,” Buddha shovels not in Asia, but in a New York driveway. In “Lines Written Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey,” he pokes fun at Wordsworth and the English romantics and their idealization of the past: “Nothing will be like it was / a few hours ago, back in the glorious past.”

Unconventional but successful, Billy Collins just might be the poet who influences American poetry of the future, just as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman have influenced it in the past. Certainly his approach to poetry is quintessentially modern American.

“Consolation” (1995)

This poem was written after Collins and his wife had to cancel travel plans to Italy, ones that had been in place for a long time. At first feeling cheated out of the trip, he concludes that staying home is more pleasurable than traipsing around Italy. The poem legitimizes American language as well as common American experiences, like eat-

ing ham and eggs at a local restaurant. Americans seem to believe that Europe, with its long history and monarchies, is somehow better than their own country. Collins disagrees.

As travelers know, dealing with a foreign language is challenging. Collins mentions the confusion of foreign road signs, billboards, phrase books, and maps but then says that in his own country “all language barriers [are] down, / rivers of idiom running freely.” He illustrates with an American idiom, “eggs over easy.” The relationship of language to the American experience depends on its unique idioms, for they are a form of secret code that binds us together. The waitress is Dot, a name never found in a foreign country. After his cafe breakfast, Collins climbs back into his car “as if it were the great car of English itself / and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off / down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even to Bologna.” The poem relies on *no*, *not*, and *never* several times to compare the easy life around home with the tiring days touring castles, cathedrals, and tombs. Do we really have a good time traveling? As in “American Sonnet,” tourists “express the wish that you were here / and hide the wish that we were where you are / walking back from the mailbox.”

This poet’s view is that we cannot truly understand or appreciate being American until we travel to a foreign country. Collins says that he has tried extensive travel but now he wants to stay home.

For Discussion or Writing

1. List the words and lines that emphasize the negative or challenging aspects of foreign travel. What is Collins’s point? Why do you think so? Discuss.
2. On one level, “Consolation” is a poem of language. Which words and phrases are about American speech? What are the speaker’s conclusions? Do you agree? Why or why not? Discuss your answer.

“Nightclub” (1995)

This is one of Collins’s many poems about jazz. It begins with the theme of many songs: “You are so

beautiful and I am a fool / to be in love with you.” Collins jokes about love, saying no one wants to admit that he is a fool about it. “You are so beautiful, too bad you are a fool / is another one you don’t hear.” As often happens, the humor occurs in the beginning, before the poem veers off in a serious direction. Because he is listening to the songs of Johnny Hartman, “whose dark voice can curl around / the concepts of love, beauty, and foolishness,” the poet is reminded of a scene in a bar at three o’clock in the morning. At this point the air and the poem become hazy—smoky, really—as those “beautiful fools” left in the bar are intoxicated by either the liquor or the music, or both. They are “slipping by degrees into a rhythmic dream,” led by a large man playing the saxophone. Then a curious thing happens: The saxophonist hands the instrument over to Collins, who goes into a long bebop solo about the theme not only of this poem, but of all his poems: “We are all so foolish, / . . . / so damn foolish / we have become beautiful without even knowing it.”

Here is a poem that starts out naturally, as if the speaker is having an intimate conversation with the reader. Because the two are such close friends, the speaker can offer an important piece of advice: Time is fleeting, and we should each take time to slow down and acknowledge the beauty that each of us has.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “Nightclub” is an early Collins poem. What similarities in theme do you find between this poem and some of his later work? Select one or two of his later poems and discuss how they adhere to or differ from his earlier thematic explorations.
2. Read two or three Collins poems that contain references to music. What does his grounding in music—especially jazz—add to the poems? Explain your answer.

“Forgetfulness” (2001)

Of all the poems Collins reads (especially to a literate, middle-aged audience), none is more popular

than “Forgetfulness.” The poem attacks the familiar problem of not being able to recall facts that in a youth were readily accessible. The poem begins in a Mexican fishing village that the reader might have encountered on vacation but moves on to mythology—the River Lethe, to be exact, which the reader may or may not remember from college. By Collins’s not mentioning the river except to say, “whose name begins with an L, as far as you can recall,” the reader is forced into a sort of audience participation, in order to fill in the correct name. When Collins then mentions the nine muses, literate readers will be able to recall at least one or two of them. To this point, the poem is humorous.

Collins then alludes to the common fear that if we cannot remember the little things now, will we eventually forget how to “swim or even ride a bicycle” in the future? He also alludes to the brevity of life, the wistfulness we all feel when youth and love are but a memory: “No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted / out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.”

The poem includes many of Collins’s hallmarks, such as the view from a window and the moon. It also includes the reader, who is the “you” in the poem. It is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” in which the speaker stands at a window on the beach, watching the light on the straits and talking with a companion about the human condition.

“Forgetfulness” never fails to get a chuckle at the beginning, but as the poem progresses, the reaction of the audience turns to pensive musing. As he so often does, Collins begins on terra firma and ends on terra incognita.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” What similarities do you find between it and “Forgetfulness”? Why is Collins’s poem more humorous than Arnold’s? Discuss such elements as imagery and tone.
2. Where does Collins make the tonal changes in this poem? What do they contribute to its overall effect? What is that effect? Justify your answer with citations from the text.

“Marginalia” (2001)

As “Forgetfulness” does, this poem appeals specifically to those familiar with literature, but even more to English majors. After all, it helps to have at least heard of Conor Cruise O’Brien and to understand what Collins is talking about when he mentions Irish monks in cold scriptoria. The poem is about a common experience all readers have had: finding notes in the margins from previous readers.

These are comments we have all mumbled to ourselves—“Nonsense,” “Please,” “HA!!”—when we have read the notes of others. Educated readers can relate when Collins says, “And if you have managed to graduate from college / without ever having written ‘Man vs. Nature’ / in a margin, perhaps now / is the time to take one step forward.” The first eight stanzas of the poem serve as the beginning, grounding the reader in the here and now.

At the ninth stanza, the poem reaches the middle, for now it is not about “you” but about “I,” a personal vignette about Collins’s reading *The Catcher in the Rye* in high school. We can see him, a bored, lonely ninth grader in the summer, lying on his stomach on the family couch and reading to pass the time. Most of us can still recall those confused times of puberty, and the scene is made even more poignant because he is reading *Catcher*, a coming-of-age story of a New York boy. Then the poem reaches the third part, the end, with “how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed / when I found on one page / a few greasy smears.” A “beautiful girl, I could tell,” has written in the margin. Young Collins is in love, and it does not matter that there is little connection between egg salad stains in the margin and love. We can understand that this is what the boy has been looking for, and the enigmatic girl becomes fascinating to the reader as well. With this poem, Collins has also “pressed a thought into the way-side, / planted an impression along the verge,” and his thought is that no matter how well read and scholarly we become, nothing can compare with the joy of young love.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Characterize the main speaker in “Marginalia.” What techniques does Collins use to make this character accessible to his reading audience? How do these techniques contribute to the success of the poem as a whole? Explain.
2. How is the main speaker in “Marginalia” similar to Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*? Would it be helpful to discuss the two works together? Why or why not?

“Osso Buco” (2001)

Collins has said, “My poetry is suburban, it’s domestic, it’s middle class, and it’s sort of unashamedly that” (Weich 1). No poem shows this reality more than “Osso Buco.” Here is the contented householder after a delicious meal, a little tipsy while sipping a second glass of wine, watching the candlelight play on the table, confident that his agreeable wife will join him in bed later. This is as good as life gets. And this is not just any meal, but a meal of osso buco, a dish that includes not only a portion of lamb, but also the bone and marrow. Bone forms the crux of the meal and the poem; it not only is a solid image, but also contains the marrow. Collins scoops out and eats the essence of the animal’s life. He likes “the sound of the bone against the plate” because it is solid and real, but he also likes the “secret marrow, / the invaded privacy of the animal.”

The poem compares “hunger and deprivation,” the topic of most poems, with “hunger and pleasure,” the topic of many of Collins’s poems. He knows that many in the world lack food, but that does not prevent him from enjoying his meal. In the final part of the poem in the last 10 lines, he and his wife go to bed and to sleep, where they drift down into “the dark, soundless bottom . . . into the broken bones of earth itself, / into the marrow of the only place we know.” “Osso Buco” is emblematic of Collins’s work because it begins with a hospitable, congenial welcome into his warm kitchen, then travels to the imaginative realm, in which he makes the reader equally comfortable.

For Discussion or Writing

1. One of the words Collins emphasizes in the poem is *marrow*. What are the various meanings of the word? Why do you think Collins emphasizes this particular word in his poem?
2. Which images point to the comfort that Collins feels after a good meal? How do they add to the tone of the piece?

“Tuesday, June 4, 1991” (2001)

His wife is off to take her botany final, the painter is working on the front porch, and the speaker is inside his house reveling in being a poet. He is recording his day, living in the moment, doing what stenographers do in courtrooms, and “when there is a silence, they sit still as I do.” His fingers hover over the keyboard ready to record. He likens himself to Samuel Pepys, the 17th-century diarist, but London is not burning, and Collins records only the simple things: the clematis climbing over the window, the woodpile, and the small garden of herbs. “Yes, this is the kind of job I could succeed in, / an unpaid, the contented amanuensis of suburban life.”

Sound, or lack of it, is important. Music is playing, he can hear the rumble of traffic on the highway, and his fingers drum softly on the keys, but at the heart of the home are silence and contentment. It's a “sun-riddled Tuesday,” and sunlight splashes through the leaves in the garden. We are reminded of Emily Dickinson's poem about a certain slant of light on a winter's afternoon.

From the idyllic June morning in a small New England town, the poem moves into mythology. He imagines Aurora as his companion, not his student wife (“who would leave her sleeping husband in bed”): “But tomorrow, dawn will come the way I picture her, / barefoot, disheveled, standing outside my window.” Collins enjoys his life so much he determines to get up even earlier tomorrow, so as to prolong the day. “So convinced am I that I have found my vocation / tomorrow I will begin chronicling earlier at dawn.” Aurora will offer him “a handful of birdsong and a small cup of light.”

Here is a man who finds contentment in his corner of the world and invites us to do the same.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the importance of the title? How does the title emphasize the theme of this poem? Discuss your answer fully.
2. What symbolic elements does Collins choose to depict the day, especially at dawn? What do they contribute to the speaker's point of view?

“The Lanyard” (2005)

The unifying image of this poem is a woven plastic cord, worn around the neck, to which a key can be attached. Lanyard making is a common craft experience for children at camp, and Collins made one for his mother at an early age. However, he forgot about it until adulthood, when he saw the word *lanyard* in his dictionary. Then he was sent “suddenly into the past,” a time when he thought a plastic cord was an even trade for all his mother had given him: her own milk, hours of nursing him when he was sick, thousands of meals, clothing, and a good education. As a child, we do not see or understand these sacrifices; we believe that a small gift is enough. As an adult, we know that there are no gifts great enough to repay a mother.

Again, the poem has a defined beginning, middle, and end, but this time it goes from the present to the past and then back to the present. We are in Collins's study, where he happens to see a familiar word in the dictionary. He remembers crossing red and white plastic strands over and over. Then we see the poet as a child and the many acts of kindness by his mother, unappreciated at the time. The poem finishes with Collins as an adult, with a wish that he could give his mother a second gift, “the rueful admission that when she took / the two-toned lanyard from my hands, I was as sure as a boy could be / that this useless, worthless thing that I wove / out of boredom would be enough to make us even.” The gift he would give her is a thank you, for letting him be a foolish child, and an affirmation that he grew up to cherish her.

- . *Picnic, Lightning*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.
- . *Questions about Angels*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999.
- . *Sailing Alone around the Room*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- . *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes*. London: Picador, 1988.
- . *The Trouble with Poetry*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- . "What's American about American Poetry?" *Writers on America*. U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs. Available online. URL: www.usinfo.org/zhtw/DOCS/writers/collins.htm. Accessed September 6, 2006.
- , ed. *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- , ed. *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Introduction by Billy Collins. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- "Felicitous Spaces: An Interview with U.S. Poet Billy Collins." *Terra Incognita*. Available online. URL: www.terraincognita.50megs.com/interview.html. Accessed September 6, 2006.
- Howard, Edgar B., prod. *Billy Collins: On the Road with the Poet Laureate*. CD-ROM. New York: Checkerboard Films, 2003.
- Lund, Elizabeth. "Poet Laureate Promotes 'Events for the Ear.'" *Christian Science Monitor* 25 April 2002. Available online. URL: www.csmonitor.com/2002/0425/p15s01-bogn.html. Accessed September 23, 2009.
- Merrin, Jeredith. "Art Over Easy." *Southern Review* 38 (Winter 2002): 202–214.
- Taylor, John. Review of *Picnic, Lightning*, by Billy Collins, *Poetry* 17, no. 5 (February 2000): 273.
- Weber, Bruce. "On Literary Bridge, Poet Hits a Roadblock." *New York Times*, Sunday, December 19, 1999. Available online. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/121999collins-publish-war.html>. Accessed March 2007.
- Weich, Dave. "Author Interviews: Billy Collins, Bringing Poetry to the Public." Available online. URL: www.powells.com/authors/collins.html. Accessed September 6, 2006.

Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



RITA DOVE (1952–)

My intention has never been to make the beautiful object on paper, although I think that beauty beguiles us so well that no matter how horrific the topic, if the poem is beautiful, it convinces.

(quoted in Moyers)

When Rita Dove was asked to read at the first state dinner of President Bill Clinton, she chose what is perhaps her most politically provocative piece to date, “Parsley.” The poem recounts the 1937 slaughter of 20,000 Haitian farmworkers. Dove chose that particular poem because she “wanted to talk about the uses to which power has been put . . . [and] how necessary it is in all avenues of life to be able to imagine the other person” (Moyers 127). The willingness to tell the truth, even when it is inconvenient or uncomfortable, and the desire to use poetry to express the “many different aspects of human joy and triumph and tragedy” define Rita Dove, a poet who earned the Pulitzer Prize and served as poet laureate of the United States, both well before most contemporary writers attain the pinnacle of their careers.

Born into a middle-class home in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1952, Rita Frances Dove was raised to believe that education and effort were vital to a well-lived life. Her father, Ray Dove, was the only one in a family of 10 children to graduate from high school and go on to college. During World War II, he mastered Italian and German “to know the language of the enemy” (Steffen 13). At the time that Ray earned his master’s degree in chemistry, racial discrimination permeated the tire and rubber industry of Akron. While the rest of his classmates were employed as chemists, Ray was hired to operate the elevator. Despite the frustration this must have

caused, Ray concealed his struggle from his family and was a model of the belief in hard work and pride in a job well done. It was only through the persistence of a former professor that Ray eventually broke through the racial barrier to become the first black chemist in the industry.

Rita Dove’s mother, Elvira Elizabeth Hord Dove, also placed a high value on education. Elvira graduated from high school at the age of 16, after skipping two grades. Although Elvira was awarded a scholarship to Howard University, her parents were fearful of sending their young daughter off to Washington, D.C., and declined the offer. Dove credits her mother with helping to cultivate her deep love of literature.

As a child, Dove read everything she could get her hands on, from the backs of cereal boxes to volumes of Shakespeare. She states that she had an advantage over other children because no one ever suggested to her that a piece of literature might be too difficult. Her parents encouraged a love for books by allowing free access to their ample collection, supplemented with frequent trips to the local library. Dove was allowed to borrow any book in which she was interested, with the only requirement that she finish reading what she had taken out before going back for more. An intense desire to conquer the language of her father’s books led Dove to begin to learn German in the seventh grade.

When she was not reading, Dove liked to “eavesdrop” on the adults as they told stories in kitchens

and at family gatherings. She says her own desire to tell stories stems in part from “listening to these stories being told and how they would affect their listeners” (Carroll 83). The emphasis on story in the Dove household caused Rita and her siblings to turn to reading and writing as a pleasurable way to fill the long summer months. It became a ritual of sorts for Rita and her older brother, Tom, to create a summer newspaper. Dove confesses that as each summer wore on, she would eventually quit and form her own magazine, entitled *Poet's Delight*, but never got further than designing the cover (Ratiner 205). As early as third grade, Dove began her first novel. Entitled *Chaos*, the story was about “robots taking over the earth.” Each week she wrote a 20-line chapter based on the spelling words her teacher assigned (*Selected* xx).

Despite her love of writing, Dove thought of it as “some game that [she] would one day have to put away in order to become an adult.” It was only when a high school English teacher invited her to a book signing by John Ciardi that Dove realized writing “was really something adults did and were respected for” (Carroll 84). Dove's hard work in high school earned her national recognition as one of 100 students across the United States to be invited to the White House as presidential scholars.

Yet, when it was time to declare a college major, Dove chose prelaw. Dove says she believed her parents expected her to be a doctor or a lawyer. Although she tried to live up to those expectations, she found herself constantly rearranging her schedule to fit in creative writing courses. In her junior year, she finally found the courage to tell her parents that she had switched her major to English. Dove graduated with a B.A. from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1973. Her outstanding academic achievements earned her summa cum laude and national achievement scholar status.

In 1974, Dove traveled to Europe on a Fulbright Scholarship. Being abroad had a profound impact on Dove, both politically and as a writer:

I began to stop taking for granted that what I heard about our foreign policies was neces-

sarily the truth. . . . Being in Germany for a year and intimately in contact with another language sharpened my appreciation for my own language—what it could do, and what I hadn't asked it to do for me. (Moyers 115)

Dove cites her knowledge of the German language as the greatest influence on her work: “Put the verb on the end of a sentence and you've got to suspend everything until then and then revelation comes in a rush.” She began to experiment with whether an English sentence could be “stretched to sustain suspense like that” (Steffen 14).

Dove's poetry was not the only part of her life to be heavily impacted by her fluency in German. While working on her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, she accepted an invitation to serve as translator for a fellow student, Fred Viebahn, a German writer. Dove received her M.F.A. in 1977 and turned down an offer of a tenure-track position in Florida to join Viebahn at Oberlin College in Ohio. The two were married in 1979.

The Yellow House on the Corner, Dove's first published book of poetry, was released in 1980. Through the seemingly disconnected issues of family history, slavery, and budding sexuality, Dove explores one's ability to rise beyond the expectations of others. While critics responded favorably, citing Dove's “storyteller instincts” and her “determination to reveal what is magical in our contemporary lives” (McDowell), the volume was largely overlooked by academia.

After her marriage to Viebahn, the couple lived in Berlin and Israel, hoping to support themselves through freelance writing. Dove began working on her second book of poems during that time but worried that she was losing her English. To manage the damage, she switched her concentration to prose, which she felt did not require the “precise tone of a phrase” that poetry demanded (Steffen 15). When asked in an interview whether crossing the fence between poetry and fiction was difficult, Dove responded, “Just as it's tragic to pigeonhole individuals according to stereotypes, there's no reason to subscribe authors to particular genres, either.

I'm a writer, and I write in the form that most suits what I want to say" (http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/poets/bio/dove_r.htm). That form has more often than not been poetry, but Dove's forays into other genres have included a collection of short stories (*Fifth Sunday*, 1985), a novel (*Through the Ivory Gate*, 1992), drama (*The Darker Face of the Earth*, 1994), and the lyrics for a number of musical arrangements.

It is possible that Dove's aversion to stereotypes stems in part from the incredible pressure placed upon "any member of a minority who 'makes it.'" Dove describes success for a black woman as a double-edged sword:

As a model he or she must be perfect; no slip-ups or "you've let us down." As a special case, he or she is envied, even reviled. Move away from home court and you're accused of being "dicty": return and you're a prodigal. Write about home and you blaspheme; choose other topics and you're a traitor. (Steffen 21)

Dove refuses to view her genetic composition as an encumbrance. She accepts that any individual views topics from his or her unique perspective, filtered through a lens tinted by race and/or gender. Dove claims it is part of her "political/personal mandate" to represent life in all of its complexities:

That means that if I am writing a poem in which I notice a flower, if I felt it was important to talk about this flower, I would be dishonest not to do it just because I thought it wasn't directly about being black and a woman. Besides, how do I know it ISN'T about being black or a woman? (Steffen 17)

Dove herself is certainly not to be typecast. She began her career as a writer at the end of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), an artistic branch of the Black Power movement that began in the 1960s. Although she understood the reasons for the common topic and tone undertaken by that group, Dove felt that the "blighted urban world inhabited by the poems of the Black Arts Movement" did not

reflect her own experiences. Timing is everything in life, and Dove admits that writers like AMIRI BARAKA (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) and Haki Madhubuti (formerly known as Don E. Lee) laid the groundwork for a new generation of black artists to "walk up to the door they [BAM] had been battering at and squeeze through the breach" (Rowell, part 2). Although some have interpreted Dove's "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, in a Dream" as an attack on BAM, Dove states that it was never meant as a rejection of the poet or BAM, but instead was written as an "allegorical rendering of what happens when two artistic generations collide" (Rowell, part 2).

One should not infer from the lack of raw anger in Dove's poetry that she has never had cause to feel frustrated about race relations or political issues. She states that as a partner in an interracial marriage, she has her share of things to be "plenty angry about," but that "it is very hard to think when you are angry." Instead of letting emotion rule her response, Dove prefers to "find a way around the anger so you can do something about it." For her, that way is being "as clear as possible" in her poetry (Ratiner 214).

Dove's desire to avoid stereotypes and be as clear as possible is best reflected in the effort she puts into crafting characters who cannot be easily dismissed. These personae are especially well rendered in her 1986 poetic tribute to her maternal grandparents, *Thomas and Beulah*. According to the critic Pat Righelato, the book "began as a poem" and "grew poem by poem" (Righelato 68) into a two-part reflection on the lives of those who lived during the great migration of the early 20th century. Although Dove modeled the characters after her grandparents, she cast the mold loose enough to allow the story to "reinforce a larger sense of truth that is not, strictly speaking, reality" (Righelato 72). To effect that "larger sense of truth," it was necessary for the characters to be reflective of more than isolated individuals and at the same time avoid "stock characterization." In Dove's words, it became her mission to "restore individual human fates to the oeuvre." To accomplish this, she begins with the most basic building block of a story, the characters: "I don't

want you to think of a particular character simply as 'this black angry person.' . . . If you can see this man as an individual, then he cannot be lumped into a group and dismissed" (Ratiner 215).

Thomas and Beulah was immediately recognized as a literary triumph in which Dove "planed away unnecessary matter: pure shapes, her poems exhibit the thrift that Yeats called the sign of a perfected manner" (Helen Vendler, writing for the *New York Review of Books*). Selecting poetry as the form for biography allowed Dove to focus on defining moments in the lives of the protagonists through linking vignettes. Her stated goal for the volume was to "call my grandparents in to show how grand historical events can be happening around us but we remember them only in relation to what was happening to us as individuals at that particular moment" (Moyers 124). The volume was awarded the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

With the publication of *Grace Notes* in 1989, the public was allowed a glimpse into another facet of Dove's life, her love of music. The title is taken from the role grace notes serve in a musical composition: Each poem within the collection "testifies to those moments added to the basic melody of life that 'break with the ordinary' but make all the difference" (Steffen 28). Music permeates Dove's life. She describes her childhood home as being filled with music as diverse as Bessie Smith and Fauré. Her maternal grandparents played the mandolin and guitar and Dove learned early on to sing and play the cello, later adding the viola de gamba and modern dance and ballet to her repertoire. The musicality of Dove's writings results from her deep understanding of the inherent power of music to create epiphany: It has given her the experience "of something clicking into place, so that understanding went beyond, deeper than rational sense" (Ratiner 210). Dove describes poetry as a "sung language" capable of helping us "to *relive* the intensity of a moment" (Ratiner 211).

Her fellow poet Steven Ratiner praised Dove's debut novel, *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), for the "sheer musicality of her language . . . which, by turns, wails like a jazz riff, soars like a gospel choir, and simmers with a classical elegance." The story,

which grows out of several of the pieces included in *Fifth Sunday*, follows Virginia King as she struggles to define her own personal identity within mainstream America.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed Dove United States poet laureate and consultant on poetry. Barely in her forties, Dove was the youngest person ever to attain this prestigious position. In her acceptance speech, she stated, "If only the sun-drenched celebrities are being noticed and worshiped, then our children are going to have a tough time seeing value in the shadows, where the thinkers, probers and scientists are who are keeping society together" (Molotsky). During her two terms as poet laureate, Dove consistently shone a light into those shadows, championing the work of those often overlooked by mainstream America. She introduced a poetry and jazz program to the literary series, provided an audience for young Crow writers, and organized a two-day conference entitled *Oil on the Waters: The Black Diaspora* (Molotsky).

While the post of poet laureate is often viewed as a career capstone, it has been just one more jewel in Dove's literary crown. Since leaving the post, she has served as poet laureate of Virginia, earned the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) Great American Award, been named one of *Glamour* magazine's "Outstanding Women of the Year," and received 22 honorary doctorates, among innumerable other honors. Far from the reclusive writer, Dove has accepted her role as spokesperson for poetry with multiple television appearances on shows as diverse as the *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour* and *Sesame Street* and in 1994 hosted and produced a national program for children entitled *Shine Up Your Words*. Despite the demands on her time, she still manages to carve out time for writing. Her most recent works include three volumes of poetry, *Mother Love* (1995), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), and *American Smooth* (2004); the play *The Darker Face of the Earth* (theatrical premiere, 1996); several musical arrangements; and her newest venture, *Sonata Mulattica* (2009). Dove continues to share her passion for writing with her students and cur-

rently serves as Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, a position she has held since 1989.

No matter the subject or the genre, the writings of Rita Dove serve as a bridge—between individuals, cultures, countries. In the poet's own words:

I write a poem and offer it to you, the reader;
and if, on the other end, you can look up from
the page and say: "I know what you mean, I've
felt that, too"—then both of us are a little less
alone on this planet. (Ratiner 218)

***The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980)**

According to Therese Steffen, Dove's first published volume of poetry, which contains such important poems as "Geometry," sets the tone for her entire body of work by demanding "the liberty to move unfettered across boundaries and all facets of world culture" (164). Pat Righelato credits Dove's "antiphonal mode of expressing contrasting voices" to an "openness to history" and her "intimate sense of the contemporary" (6, 34).

The volume opens with "This Life," in which "the idea of charmed romance is tested by the actualities of travel" (Righelato 9). The female speaker of the poem is a traveler, "a stranger in this desert." She leaves her traveling companion and ventures out, where she encounters a man. Although the man tells her "the same thing / as that one, / asleep, upstairs," she is drawn to him.

Righelato ascribes such temptation to the "feminine susceptibility to the idea of romance as charmed destiny" (9), which is common in the fairy tales read to youngsters. Dove uses the image of this new man in whom "the possibilities / are golden dresses in a nutshell" to introduce the realm of fantasy: In the Grimm Brothers' story of Allerliehauh, a princess hides fine dresses in a nutshell in order to escape from the incestuous intentions of her father. The notion of charmed destiny is furthered by the speaker's allusion to a Japanese woodcut she loved as a child, in which a young girl gazed at the moon while awaiting her lover. Although the girl in the

woodcut waits eternally, in the speaker's fantasies the lover arrives in "white breeches and sandals." The speaker's belief in charmed destiny allows her to realize the lover in the woodcut had this man's face, "though [she] didn't know it."

Despite the speaker's yearning to be the heroine of her own fairy tale, she allows herself to be grounded by reality. The man before her is not the perfect prince, but just the craggy nutshell that represents the fantasy. Thus, she resolves "our lives will be the same" as those of the people captured in the woodcut—who, although destined to be together, are eternally apart.

The female speaker in Dove's trilogy of adolescence also yearns. The three poems address the stages of sexual maturation, in which young girls struggle to understand their changing feelings and integrate their newly acquired knowledge of sex into what they have always known about the world. It is in "Adolescence—I" that the speaker is introduced to the notion that boys might be the source of some future pleasure. There is an air of secrecy as the friends gather "in water-heavy nights behind grandmother's porch." Linda shares her newly acquired information that "a boy's lips are soft," and the speaker's universe is widened by that knowledge.

"Adolescence—II" portrays the same girl now "sit[ting] in the bathroom, waiting." Although she does not divulge why she waits in the night and for whom or what she waits, one can infer from the sensations she describes—"sweat prickles behind my knees, the baby-breasts are alert"—that she is anxious, perhaps even conflicted about its arrival. The girl is not surprised at the arrival of "three seal men" and in fact the line "I don't know what to say again" implies that she has seen these creatures before. They leave her clutching at "ragged holes . . . at the edge of darkness." Righelato postulates that the girl is awaiting the onset of puberty, her anxiety reflective of the "fears and pleasures of sexuality" (25).

In the final installment of the trilogy, the girl acknowledges her ripening body, which has begun to grow "orange and softer, swelling out," and dreams of the fairy-tale arrival of her true love. She envisions that they will meet "by the blue spruce,"

where he will confess that he has loved her in his dreams. The poem contrasts the “scarred knees” of a young girl with earlobes “baptized . . . with rose-water” and “lipstick stubs [that] glittered in their steel shells.” But even in fantasy, her maturation has a price: She sees her father over the shoulder of her lover, carrying “his tears in a bowl, / And blood hangs in the pine-soaked air.” Righelato describes this vision as “Freudian displacement” (25), whereby the girl’s fear of the unknown is transferred to her father.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Address Righelato’s claim that women are susceptible to the “idea of romance as charmed destiny.” What effect does such a belief have, if any, on society? If fairy tales instill a belief in “charmed destiny,” what might we expect from the messages of contemporary culture?
2. Examine the use of the carnation in “Geometry” and “Adolescence—III.” Where else does the carnation appear in Dove’s work? What does the flower symbolize in each poem? Why do you suppose Dove chooses that particular flower?

“Geometry” (1980)

This poem is in Dove’s collection *The Yellow House on the Corner*. Unlike the female speaker in other poems in the volume, the young girl in Dove’s “Geometry” is not preoccupied with her impending adolescence, but with proving a theorem. She tells us with confidence, “I prove a theorem and the house expands.” The girl’s mathematical proficiency results in “windows jerk[ing] free to hover near the ceiling,” but the violence implied in the verb *jerk* is tempered by the sigh of the ceiling as it floats away. Steffen suggests that the poem reflects a female speaker’s “decisive step from the past into her own future” as “the old structures called home break up or are outgrown” (79). The girl is not afraid when the disintegration of her house leaves her “out in the open” because she realizes that it is her own independence that has caused the boundaries to disappear. While she may

harbor some of the same self-doubt that plagues other young adults, she trusts that she, as the butterfly-windows, is “going to some point true and unproven.”

It is also possible to examine the poem in light of the cultural and academic repression endured by African Americans within the United States. Dove began her career at a time when African Americans were demanding not only equal rights but also recognition for their artistic contributions to American society. More and more black artists, actors, and musicians were weaving themselves into the fabric of America, causing a shift in preconceived notions of culturalism. According to Steffen, “Cultural space, as distinguished from place and location, is a space that has been seized upon and transmuted by imagination, knowledge, or experience” (44). In this context, the expansion of the house in “Geometry” represents the widening of the speaker’s cultural space. Dove has admitted in multiple interviews to an early fear that she would be “pulled into the whole net of whether this [her work] was black enough, or whether I was denigrating my own people” (Pereira 173). This dread prevented her from seeking publication as early as she could have. The speaker in “Geometry” might also reflect Dove’s own internal conflicts over the consequences of her poetic skills: freedom from preconceived cultural confines and simultaneous exposure to public censure.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Pat Righelato suggests that “Geometry” is a counterpart to Wallace Stevens’s poem “Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself” (16). Analyze the similarities between the two poems and discuss the validity of Righelato’s claim.
2. Analyze Dove’s works in relation to “Geometry.” Which poems align themselves with Therese Steffen’s suggested theme of the process of individualization?
3. Helen Vendler has suggested that “Geometry” serves as a comparison between mathematics and poetic form, especially in the hands of Dove, who “avoids proof by propositions in favor of the cunning arrangement of successive

images, which themselves enact, by their succession, an implicit argument” (4). Discuss the ways in which Dove’s poetry accomplishes this.

“Parsley” (1983)

This poem is in the Dove’s second collection, *Museum*, which the critic Malin Pereira describes as containing “poems of unofficial history” (Ingersoll 152), a description the poet happily embraces:

I suppose what I was trying to do in *Museum* was to deal with certain artifacts we have in life, not the ordinary artifacts, the ones that you’d expect to find in a museum, but anything that becomes frozen by memory, or by circumstance, or by history. . . . The other thing was to get to the underside of the story, not to tell the big historical events, but in fact to talk about things which no one will remember but which are just as important in shaping our concept of ourselves and the world we live in as the biggies, so to speak. (Ingersoll 6)

Dove began many of the poems that were to be included in *Museum* while she was in Europe, which afforded her the distance she needed to see history and the world from a new perspective. Most notable of these poems is “Parsley,” in which Dove explores the underside of an event that occurred in the Dominican Republic. In 1937, the dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered the executions of 20,000 Haitian blacks. What struck Dove about this atrocity was not just the magnitude of the massacre, but the “very bizarre and ultimately creative manner” in which it was carried out (Moyers 127): In order to segregate the Haitians from the Dominicans, the general demanded that each of the cane-field workers be forced to say the Spanish word for parsley. The difference in the two dialects would cause the Haitians to pronounce the word as *pelejil*, while the Dominicans would roll the *r* to say *perejil*.

The poem originally began as a villanelle told entirely from the perspective of the Haitians, but Dove felt that there was much more to be said. Her

second attempt involved a sestina, chosen for its ability to convey obsessiveness through repetition, but she found the form “too playful” for this purpose (Vendler 6) and settled instead on multiple forms within the same piece. The result is a songlike refrain from the Haitians, in which their attempted praise of the general’s deceased mother (“Katalina, mi madle, mi amol en muelte”) is answered by the compounding fury of the general at their inability to pronounce even her name correctly.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How would the overall effectiveness of “Parsley” differ had Dove remained true to her intention that the story be told entirely from the perspective of the Haitians? Justify your answer.
2. “Parsley” required Dove to combine multiple forms within one poem. Locate another work by Dove in which multiple perspectives are portrayed through differing techniques. Discuss the effectiveness of the piece. Support your analysis with citations from the text.

Thomas and Beulah (1986)

Although Dove’s poetry had already begun to attract critical recognition, it was with the release of her third volume, *Thomas and Beulah*, that she was propelled to the rank of Pulitzer Prize winner. The volume explores the underside of the Great Migration and the March on Washington through the viewpoints of two people whose lives are caught up in its aftermath. Dove states that she based the characters of Thomas and Beulah on her ancestors:

I call my grandparents in to show how historical events can be happening around us but we remember them only in relation to what was happening to us as individuals at that particular moment. (Moyer 24)

Dove roots the story in historical fact, infusing the poetry with the riches of her research into the Akron of the 1900s, the experiences of African Americans, and her own family. Yet through

her choice of form, she manages to avoid the tendency of narrative to get “bog[ged] down in the prosier transitional moments.” Dove describes her process as “trying to string moments as beads on a necklace” so that her lyric poems “when placed one after the other, reconstruct the sweep of time” (Righelato 72). Pat Righelato credits the success of the volume to Dove’s combined poetic techniques, which create “tension between temporal continuity and disjunct episodes taken out of time” (72).

Despite the great amount of research Dove puts into her work, she does not allow herself to become constrained by fact. Instead, she allows for the needs of the story, creatively filling in the gaps left by “History” to reflect “history” best. In this way she is able to breathe life into these ancestors-turned-characters. Her ear for the musicality of language and the need to fit everything into the prescribed package of poetry can also sometimes affect the strict adherence to fact. For example, Dove changed the name of her grandmother from Georgianna to *Beulah* because she needed a name that would portray femininity without overpowering the line in which it appeared (Steffen 105).

The story of *Thomas and Beulah* begins with Thomas. Originally Dove’s plan for the volume was to tell the entire story from his point of view, but as she wrote, the voice of Beulah kept popping up, wanting to tell her side of the story:

“Dusting” was my grandmother’s way of stepping into the work and kind of throttling me, saying, “Wake up Girl! I’m here, too! I wanna Talk!” So that poem became the bridge from one book to the next; it proclaimed, “This is an ongoing story.” “Dusting” led me to write the Beulah section in what turned out to be an entire book, yet it was also the linchpin, opening the door from room to room. (Dungy 1033)

The kernel for “The Event” was from Dove’s own family history. While traveling north as part of a song-and-dance team, Thomas’s best friend was killed in a drowning accident. Dove says she wrote many of the poems in the volume out of a desire to understand how the “sweet, wonderful, quiet

man” whom she knew as her grandfather had come to terms with his guilt over the death of his friend (Moyers 124). Dove’s grandfather never spoke to her of the drowning; all the details were told by his wife, who had not been present at the event.

“The Event” is the opening poem because the death of Thomas’s best friend becomes a lens for viewing the rest of Thomas’s life. His guilt over having uttered a dare, which caused Lem to leap to his death, colors everything else. The placement of the poem also provides the reader with an entry point into the story. In that first poem, Dove firmly grounds the reader in time and space: It is the time of Negroes and riverboats, and we join Thomas as he sings along the trail of the Great Migration. The image of “Thomas, dry / on deck,” with all that is left of Lem “a stinking circle of rags, / the half-shell mandolin” at his feet, gives readers all the information they need to comprehend that events in the future will be tainted with the odor of this tragedy.

After Lem’s death, Thomas takes on some aspects of his lost friend: He learns to play the mandolin and affects Lem’s carefree attitude, but as the long lines of “Straw Hat” reflect, Thomas eventually resigns himself to a life in the work barracks. The heaviness of a solitary life has settled Thomas into “a narrow grief.” He gives up his jaunty attitude, content just to “sleep third shift” on a mattress he shares with two other men whom he has never met. Music has lost its ability to comfort or entertain; it has become “like a woman / reaching into his chest / to spread [the pain] around.” However, the tip of his straw hat in honor of a woman hints that Thomas still harbors some playful gallantry and a hope for the future.

Righelato asserts that more than serving as a transition between Thomas’s carefree bachelor days and his married life, “Straw Hat” also “expresses the anonymity and degrading conditions of labor that young male migrants found in the North” (77). It is the specificity of Dove’s poetry that makes it so arresting. Through details such as mattress ticking that “smells / from the sweat of two other men,” she draws readers into the underside of the great migration, helping them to see for themselves the unspoken truths.

Thomas finds work in “The Zeppelin Factory.” At the time of its building, the Goodyear Zeppelin Air-Dock was heralded as a symbol of innovation and success for Akron, Ohio. The emotion captured in Dove’s poem, however, reflects Thomas’s trepidation at the magnitude of the factory, which devours him and his fellow workers into its “whale’s belly.” True to Thomas’s intuition, the Zeppelin does not gain acclaim for Akron. Its launch is marred by the death of one of Thomas’s coworkers when high winds reveal the blimp’s inability to function properly in inclement weather. Thomas is deeply affected by this tragedy, questioning the worth of his own life in the lines; “Here I am, intact / and faint-hearted.”

The remainder of the poems in Thomas’s cycle reflect increasing loss of confidence as he sacrifices his free spirit to become family man and provider. He grows to resent Beulah and his own frailty, which prevents him from going to fight in World War II. His frustration is magnified by his relegation to assembly-line labor while “women with fingers no smaller than his / dabble in the gnarled intelligence of an engine” (“Aircraft”).

“The Satisfaction Coal Company” is the center of Thomas’s trilogy of decline. The poem serves as a bridge between “The Stroke,” which signals Thomas’s impending death, and “Thomas at the Wheel,” in which he dies. “The Satisfaction Coal Company” gives Thomas a chance to reflect on his life through the lens of his retirement. While it is a comfort that the “gas heater takes care of itself,” it is also a symbol that Thomas has become obsolete. His ability to provide for his family and their need to be provided for have ended; now his major problem is “What to do with a day.” Thomas’s empty hours leave him ample time to look back on the past. He thinks almost longingly of a time when the need to keep his family warm had necessitated the second job of sweeping the floor at a coal company to earn scraps of coal for the family’s furnace.

Despite Dove’s tendency to “pull back from using overt blues idiom,” Pereira claims that a blues motif runs throughout the volume. She suggests that Thomas and Beulah are “blues artists who sing the pain of brutal experience with lyrical expression” (103). As if the dual themes of loss and pain

were not enough to support Pereira’s assertion, Thomas articulates the irony inherent to the blues when he is able to see his own death as a joke.

Beulah’s life is no less difficult. Although Dove denies that the poem “Taking in the Wash” was “ever on a conscious level . . . about incest,” Pereira interprets the relationship between Beulah and her father as incestuous, citing as proof the mother’s righteous anger in the lines “Touch that child / and I’ll cut you down / just like the cedar of Lebanon” (Pereira 179). In “Dusting,” Beulah takes stock of her life and its dreams deferred. In the doldrums of her most domestic chore, she thinks back upon her youth, when she met a “silly boy at the fair” whose name at first eludes her. She does remember his kiss and the “rippling wound” of the fish she won from him. As “her gray cloth brings / dark wood to life,” the details become clearer: a time when she returns home to find the water in the fish’s bowl frozen and resuscitates the fish by defrosting the ice that has encased him. It is only when Beulah resigns herself to the fact that “that was years before” that the name of the boy occurs to her: Maurice.

Throughout Beulah’s poetic cycle, she is defined in respect to what she means to others: She is her father’s “pearl”; then her name grows to mean “promise” and, finally, “desert-in-peace.” In “Dusting,” readers get a sense of the toll this has taken on Beulah. In discussing “Beulah’s martyrdom in the solarium,” Righelato assures readers that Beulah’s role as homemaker insulates her from the harsh realities that Thomas must face in the wider world (95). Beulah can immerse herself in thoughts, in memories of what was and wistfulness for things that might have been, and find not only disappointment, but comfort.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the circular components of *Thomas and Beulah*, focusing on the volume as a whole, the images of circles within the poems themselves, and the intersecting circles that transcribe the lives of each character.
2. In the poem “Missing” (*Mother Love*), Dove states that a lost child is “a fact hardening around its absence.” Categorize the losses in *Thomas*

and *Beulah*. How are the characters affected not only by their own losses but by each other's?

3. Discuss the symbolism of the USS *Akron*. What is represented through its presence, the characters' reactions to it, and its fate?
4. Discuss the use of names within *Thomas and Beulah*. What is signified by the fact that Beulah is never mentioned by name in the first section?
5. The critic Righelato has suggested that Jacob Lawrence's paintings numbered 47 and 48 in the migration series depict the conditions faced by young migrants of Thomas's time. Using those paintings as an example, create a pictorial time line to reflect pivotal events in the life of Thomas or Beulah.

***Mother Love* (1995)**

Dove began writing the poems in *Mother Love* as a reaction to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Rilke's collection explores the Greek myth of Orpheus, a skilled musician who journeys to Hades to bargain for the return of his wife. Although Orpheus is able to strike a deal with Hades and Persephone, his love for his late wife is so powerful that it prevents him from upholding his promise, and she is lost forever. Dove also writes of a consuming love, choosing as her topic the unbreakable bond between mother and daughter. Pat Righelato suggests that the poems in *Mother Love* represent Dove's "search to underwrite a new sense of feminine identity, one that will give due weight to that which pulls women to the earth" (171). To accomplish this, Dove explores maternal love in its many forms, seamlessly stitching modern references into the fabric of the myth.

"Sonnet in Primary Colors" stems from Dove's fascination with the underside of history. Written "for the woman with one black wing / perched over eyes: lovely Frida," the piece commemorates the life and work of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Kahlo contracted polio at an early age and later suffered severe injuries as the result of a collision between a trolley and the bus on which she was a passenger. Kahlo spent the majority of her life in isolated pain

and a tumultuous marriage, the grief of which she translated into oil paintings. The majority of her work consisted of self-portraits.

Dove, known for her deliberate choices regarding form, writes in the introduction to *Mother Love* that the sonnet "defends itself against the vicissitudes of fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble. All the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate." Dove claims that the sonnet is particularly suitable for conveying the "cycle of betrayal and regeneration" because "all three—mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet—are struggling to sing in their chains." Many critics have pointed out that although Dove has labeled this a collection of sonnets, the poems she has included depart from the traditional form and function of the sonnet in several ways. Dove has acknowledged this by her inclusion of herself as poet in the three that struggle in their chains. She embraces the sonnet but changes it to allow the full register of her song. Wheeler has suggested that Dove "violates the sonnet form" in order to conjure more fully the violated world reflected in the Demeter/Persephone myth (151).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is accomplished with the use of the word *present* in line 4 of "Sonnet in Primary Colors"?
2. Examine the poems in which Dove has created portraits of historical figures. What do the people in the collection represent? What does Dove's poetry tell us that history does not? How is Dove's choice of form related to the person she seeks to render?
3. Explore *Mother Love* as an expression of T. S. Eliot's "mythical method," whereby the writer "manipulates a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Righelato 169).

***On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999)**

Dove's desire to view history in terms of the many histories of which it is composed is reflected most perfectly in her volume *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*. In these collected poems, she re-creates the

individual life experiences that both led up to the need for a “Rosa Parks” and resulted because of Rosa Parks. The idea for the collection arose from a comment made by Dove’s daughter, Aviva, as they were transported between conference sites in Williamsburg, Virginia. Aviva reportedly leaned over to her mother and whispered, “We’re on the bus with Rosa Parks.” The remark resonated with what Dove already felt about the circular nature of history and stimulated the “meditation on history and the individual” that is the basis of this volume (*On the Bus* 91).

By invoking the name of Rosa Parks in the volume’s title, Dove immediately activates readers’ prior knowledge of history. Most Americans associate Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on a bus with the inception of the Civil Rights movement. Dove would like to draw the reader’s attention to the smaller details, thus revealing the larger reality: “History is often portrayed as a string of arias in a grand opera, all baritone intrigues and tenor heroics. Sometimes the most tumultuous events, however, have been provoked by serendipity” (*Time 100*). Through her poetry, Dove illuminates the minor accompaniments that provide the background for the “intrigues” and “heroics.”

The volume is divided into five sections. “Cameos” introduces a series of poems depicting the hardships of an African-American family during the depression. Despite Joe’s insistence that he “ain’t studying nobody,” the couple ultimately strives for the same American dream as everyone else. Through their hardships and biases, Dove sheds light on the roles of men and women, blacks and whites, in the time prior to Parks’s historic stand.

Where “Cameos” provides an intimate look at the dreams and heartaches of one family, “Freedom: Bird’s-Eye View” steps back to examine the institutional biases that have affected generations of Americans. Written after Dove’s tenure as poet laureate of the United States, the second section addresses the “artistic health of the nation” (Righelato 181). In “Singsong,” Dove recreates the freedom inherent in youth, when a child’s knowledge that the “moon spoke in riddles / and the stars rhymed” is yet unchallenged. In essence, she

is recalling the innocence of childhood, before we realize our differences and the societal rules to which we will be held. On Dove’s 11th birthday, her whole family drove to Washington, D.C., so that her father could participate in the March on Washington, but Rita was left behind with a relative. In an interview with Camille Dungy, Dove discusses the feelings she had “watching history occur . . . on TV” (4). The Civil Rights movement and the Watts riots also happened when Dove was too young to participate. She says that “looking through those kinds of frames” influenced the way she views events. “Singsong,” then, opens that same frame to the readers, so that they may see that the world is “already old.” The final line, “And I was older than I am today,” remarks on the invincibility that characterizes innocence. As we age, we become more vulnerable to the world.

As do many of the poems in “Freedom: Bird’s-Eye View,” “Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967” has an autobiographical feel to it. Dove has often commented on the hours she spent reading and how, as a child, the library was the only place she could go whenever she wished. In “A Chorus of Voices,” she tells the interviewer Steven Ratiner of an incident at a library that had a great impact on her life. A librarian had refused to allow her to check out a risqué novel by Françoise Sagan. Dove’s mother wrote a note insisting that Dove be allowed to check out any book she wanted. Although the incident itself was less than dramatic, to Dove it represented the moment when she knew her parents trusted her (Ratiner 205). The freedom to discover “all the time in the world” had been granted her, and sometimes she found “all the world in a single page” (*On the Bus* 33). While some may have been overwhelmed at the magnitude of information available, Dove embraced it as a quest to discover “the stuff we humans are made of,” taking a scrawled message on the boarded-up doors of an old garage as encouragement: “I can eat an elephant / If I take small bites” (33).

The final section shares the collection’s name and challenges readers to abdicate the comfortable role of historian and accept that each person is an active participant in the formation of future histories. It is

What are music or books if not ways to trap us in rumors? The freedom of fine cages!

What do you think is meant by those lines? Do the speaker's words reflect Dove's thoughts on music and books? Create a case where being trapped in such a "fine cage" is not the negative experience one might imagine. Support your argument with examples from Dove's work.

5. Dove describes a poem's power as a physical reaction that involves our entire body:

A poem convinces us not just through the words and the meanings of the words, but the sound of them in our mouths—the way our heart beat increases with the amount of breath it takes to say a sentence, whether a line of poetry may make us breathless at the end of it, or give us time for contemplation. . . . Even if we are reading the poem silently, those rhythms exist. (Ratiner 213)

Choose any poem of Dove's to which you have had such a complete physical response. Describe what it is that the poem evokes for you.

6. Discuss the themes of individual and cultural identity within the context of Dove's work. How does the poet resolve the "sense of belonging and not-belonging" (Steffen 114) that has defined the lives of many minorities within the United States?
7. Many poets cite music as a primary influence in their writings. Dove offered the following explanation for its role in her work:

I believe that language sings, has its own music, and I'm very conscious of the way something sounds, and that goes from a lyric poem all the way to an essay or to the novel, that it has a structure of sound which I think of more in symphonic terms for larger pieces. . . . I also think that reso-

lution of notes, the way that a chord will resolve itself, is something that applies to my poems—the way that, if it works, the last line of the poem, or the last word, will resolve something that's been hanging for a while. And I think musical structure affects even how the poems are ordered in a book. Each of the poems plays a role: sometimes it's an instrument, sometimes several of them are a section, and it all comes together that way too. (Ingersoll 153)

How is this influence manifested in a specific poem or poems by Dove?.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Carroll, Rebecca. *I Know What the Red Clay Looks Like*. New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1994.
- Dove, Rita. *Grace Notes*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989.
- . *Mother Love*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995.
- . *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- . "Rosa Parks: Her Simple Act of Protest Galvanized America's Civil Rights Revolution." *Time* 100, 14 June 1999. Available online. URL: www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/parks01.html. Accessed January 10, 2009.
- . *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- . *Thomas and Beulah*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1986.
- . *The Yellow House on the Corner*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1980.
- Dungy, Camille. "Interview with Rita Dove." *Callaloo* 28, no. 4 (2005): 1027–1040. Available online. URL: <http://people.virginia.edu/~rfd/dungy%20interview.pdf>. Accessed January 10, 2009.
- Ingersoll, Earl. *Conversations with Rita Dove*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003.
- McDowell, Robert. "The Assembling Vision of Rita Dove." In *Writers and Their Craft*, edited by Nicolas Delbanco and Laurence Goldstein. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

- Molotsky, Irvin. "Rita Dove Named Next Poet Laureate." *New York Times*, May 19, 1983, p. C15. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1993/05/19/arts/rita-dove-named-next-poet-laureate-first-black-in-post.html. Accessed January 4, 2009.
- Moyers, Bill. "Rita Dove." *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- Pereira, Malin. *Rita Dove's Cosmopolitanism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Ratiner, Steven. "Rita Dove—a Chorus of Voices." In *Giving Their Word: Conversations with Contemporary Poets*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.
- Righelato, Pat. *Understanding Rita Dove*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.
- Rowell, Charles. "Interview with Rita Dove, Parts 1 and 2." *Callaloo* 31, no. 3 (2008). Available online. URL: http://callaloo.tamu.edu/Rita_Interview%20P2.html. Accessed January 3, 2009.
- Steffen, Therese. *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove's Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Vendler, Helen. "Rita Dove: Identity Markers." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Available online. URL: www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nap/helen_vendler_dove.htm. Accessed January 5, 2009.
- Wheeler, Lesley. *The Poetics of Enclosure: American Poets from Dickinson to Dove*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002.

Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



LOUISE ERDRICH (1954–)

Soon we are trying to travel back to the beginning, trying to put families into order and make sense of things.

(*The Bingo Palace*)

Her settings include Ojibwa reservations on the Great Plains, small North Dakota towns, the Twin Cities region of Minneapolis-St. Paul, and rural New Hampshire. Her characters are extended families of mixed Ojibwa, German, and French background shaped by Native American and Roman Catholic traditions. This is the world Louise Erdrich creates in her fiction and poetry, and it is the world that has shaped her own life and art.

Born in Little Falls, Minnesota, on June 7, 1954, Erdrich was raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota, the eldest of the seven children of Rita Gourneau and Ralph Erdrich. Her childhood was shaped by small-town life, her Catholic school days, her parents' careers as teachers in a Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Wahpeton, and visits to her mother's extended family at the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation. Her father surrounded the family with poetry and with recordings of Shakespeare's plays, nurturing Erdrich's love for language and story.

Erdrich went to Dartmouth in fall 1972, a member of the college's first coed class. After earning her bachelor's degree, she returned to North Dakota, where she worked at a variety of low-paying jobs, including waiting tables and working at a truck weigh station, as well as teaching writing through the Poets in the Schools program of the North Dakota Arts Council. She earned her M.F.A. in creative writing on fellowship at Johns Hopkins

University in 1979 and worked in Boston as editor of the Indian Council's magazine the *Circle*.

As a Dartmouth undergraduate, she had met Michael Dorris, then a writing instructor and a faculty member in the newly established Native American Studies program. When Erdrich returned to Dartmouth as a writer in residence, they renewed their acquaintance, corresponding and offering each other feedback on manuscripts in process. After their 1981 marriage, Erdrich and Dorris collaborated intensely and extensively on their writing. Their custom was to read each other's drafts, offering substantive comments and suggestions. They did a great deal of writing together, even publishing under the joint pseudonym *Milou North*. Their major shared work, published under both their names, was *The Crown of Columbus* (1991), released for the quincentenary of the European arrival in the Caribbean.

Working with Dorris, Erdrich published a short story entitled "The World's Greatest Fisherman," which won the Nelson Algren Fiction Prize in 1982. Its success prompted them to expand the story into *Love Medicine* (1984). That first novel won Erdrich a number of major prizes, including the National Book Critics Circle Award (1984), the Los Angeles Times Book Award, and the Sue Kaufman Prize for the Best First Novel.

Love Medicine was the first in Erdrich's series of novels about several extended families living in

the fictional town of Argus and the Ojibwa reservations in the northern plains. Since 1984, she has produced a steady stream of novels dealing with the lives of Ojibwa, mixed-blood, and European Americans, most of whom are related to the Lazarre and Kashpaw families introduced in *Love Medicine*. Critics identify these novels as her Argus cycle or the North Dakota saga. The fiction draws on Erdrich's own ancestry, stories of family and the northern plains, the struggles of reservation life and of Native American adaptation to urban life. The multivocal narration and spiraling chronology established in *Love Medicine* continue to characterize Erdrich's fiction.

Erdrich has told interviewers that her Ojibwa and mixed-blood characters seem to have lives of their own, that she cannot "call them up at will." She says that some minor characters even insist on emerging in later novels as more fully developed individuals. For instance, Erdrich felt she had to find out more about the truck driver June meets in a bar in the opening pages of *Love Medicine*; she discovered that he was really Jack Mauser of *Tales of Burning Love*. Similarly, after the publication of *Tracks*, she knew she would have to return to the character of Father Damien, whose story is fully revealed in *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*.

Just as *Love Medicine* began as a short story, so did many of Erdrich's later novels. Her short fiction appears regularly in magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Esquire*. Between 1985 and 2006, six of Erdrich's short stories appeared in the O. Henry Prize Anthologies of Best American Short Stories: "Saint Marie" (1985), "Fleur" (1987), "Satan: Hijacker of a Planet" (1997), "Revival Road" (2000), "The Butcher's Wife" (2002), and "The Plague of Doves" (2006).

Erdrich began her serious writing career as a poet, in both her undergraduate and master's work. Her first book of poems, *Jacklight* (1984), was followed by *Baptism of Desire* (1989). The new and collected poems of *Original Fire* (2004) won the WILLA Poetry Award from Women Writing the West.

Erdrich's poetry addresses issues of identity: personal, communal, cultural, and spiritual. She

explores images drawn from the natural world of earth, water, sky, animals. The poems often blend Ojibwa myths—including the trickster tales of the "Old Man Potchikoo" prose-poems—and symbols from Roman Catholic liturgy, such as those in *Baptism of Desire*. Themes of coming of age, love, and parenthood also recur. Some characters and relationships that Erdrich explores in her poems resurface in her novels; in *Baptism of Desire*, 15 poems in a section called "The Butcher's Wife" might be seen as sketches for characters and relationships that make up *The Master Butchers' Singing Club*: Otto is much like Fidelis, while Eva and Delphine resemble the first and second "Mary Krögers." Her poetry and fiction draw on the same sources and give evidence of similar stylistic features; many reviews of her fiction make mention of her rich lyrical and image-laden prose style.

The many narrative voices in her novels echo the Native American oral tradition. In traditional culture, families passed on their lore, their genealogy, their beliefs in the supernatural, and their traditions of healing and medicines by telling stories, generation after generation. In these cultures, most listeners already know the stories, their characters, and their plots; in the act of telling, the teller gave life to the ancient tale. In *Love Medicine*, for example, Erdrich gives several characters the task of telling the story of June Kashpaw. Each character's relationship to June shapes the particular version of the story. Thus, while Albertine and Lipsha both recall events of June's life, each one's story is distinctive because of the character's experiences and way of speaking. Some of Erdrich's narrators, including Nanapush in *Tracks* and Lipsha in *Love Medicine*, directly address the reader, involving him or her in the creation of meaning as tribal elders would involve the next generation in learning family tales and lore. Erdrich understands the power of the spoken story: She told an interviewer that although she does not read her drafts in process aloud, she enjoys doing public readings of her work, and she tries to do the reading herself when her novels are made into audiobooks.

Another distinctive trait of Erdrich's fiction is the nonlinear or circular chronology of the stories.

Anthropologists who study Native American culture have shown that the sense of time and space of indigenous people is quite different from the perceptions of European Americans. While the Western world conceives of time as a linear progression from one event to the next, and human history as a succession of events leading (inevitably) toward progress and perfection, Native American cultures understand time as cycles or spirals, as in the progress of the seasons. Similarly, while Western images of history emphasize ever-growing human achievement (as in technology or science), indigenous people are generally more concerned with relationships within the immediate and the extended human families, as well as the relationships of humans with the natural and spiritual worlds. Indeed, Erdrich's stories are invariably about the bonds that join her characters, whether through blood, accident, or choice.

Likewise, many major works of literature in the Western European tradition often feature a solitary hero on a quest to find his identity through a series of adventures and conquests. This hero-quest genre includes texts from *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, through *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Don Quixote*, to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Updike's *Rabbit* novels. In contrast, as William Bevis and others have pointed out, fiction by Native American authors often emphasizes a central character wounded by his or her experiences in the outer world (often the urban white world) who needs to return to traditional ways in order to find healing and wholeness. Erdrich has discussed this homecoming image in interviews, and her novels—from *Love Medicine* through *The Painted Drum*—consistently illustrate this journey from family/home/reservation outward through difficulty and challenge, and back to the safety and healing of home.

Critics frequently compare Erdrich's fictional universe to that of William Faulkner. Argus and its environs are like Yoknapatawpha County, with many generations of complicated extended families and sometimes bizarre individuals, the apparently disjointed and nonlinear narrations, and the mul-

tipl narrators whose stories sometimes blur the story as much as they clarify it.

Her novels are also marked by what Erdrich calls "survival humor": The characters' approach to life that is sometimes sly, sometimes bawdy, sometimes darkly ironic. Oppressed people need to find ways to get through the difficulties that surround them without succumbing to the pain. The image of the Native American trickster often provides humor as well as salvation. A transgressive escape artist like Gerry Nanapush, a good-hearted innocent like Lipsha, a wily schemer like Nanapush all illustrate aspects of a native folk hero who subtly defies and cleverly outwits the oppressor.

Because so much of her work deals with Native American characters, themes, and traditions, many scholars read her work through the lens of multicultural criticism. Erdrich and Dorris told several interviewers that while one "can't write a book about Native Americans without being political," they never want the literature to be "polemical." They see themselves less as Native American writers than as writers who are Native American (Erdrich is Chippewa, Dorris Modoc). Nevertheless, Erdrich's connection to her Chippewa/Ojibwa heritage has continued to involve her in action on behalf of Native people. In 2002, for instance, Erdrich joined forces with two poets—Al Hunter, a Canadian, and her sister Heid E. Erdrich—to present a Native Writers Workshop at Turtle Mountain Community College. Sponsored by the National Book Foundation's American Voices Program, the week-long session provided 11 students, ages 22 to 53, with group and individual instruction in poetry and fiction, mining their own family histories for stories and themes.

In addition to her novels and poetry, Erdrich has written award-winning children's books. In *The Birchbark House* (1999), she offers middle-school readers an alternative picture of life on the prairie, telling the story of Ojibwa people on the shores of Lake Superior as the white American westward movement makes contact. Seven-year-old Omakayas and her family have to adapt their lives as white culture changes their world permanently.

Erdrich has been honored with numerous creative writing fellowships, including those from Johns Hopkins (1978), the MacDowell Colony (1980), the Yaddo Colony and Dartmouth (1981), the National Endowment for the Arts (1982), and the Guggenheim Foundation (1985). In addition to the O. Henry Awards, she has received numerous honors, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas in 2000, the Wordcraft Circle Writer of the Year Award in 2000, and the Minnesota Humanities Prize for Literature in 2002.

When Erdrich and Dorris married in 1981, he brought to the marriage his three adopted Native American children, all of whom had been born with fetal alcohol syndrome. (Dorris's book *The Broken Cord* tells the story of their eldest son's life.) Dorris and Erdrich together had three daughters. Their personal relationship began to unravel in 1991, when their eldest son was killed in an accident, and accusations of sexual abuse were leveled against Dorris. They separated in 1995, and Dorris took his own life in April 1997. Since then, Erdrich has lived with her children in the Minneapolis area, writing and operating a small business called Birchbark Books, Herbs, and Native Arts.

“The Red Convertible” (1981)

Originally published in the summer 1981 issue of *Mississippi Valley Review*, “The Red Convertible” reappeared as a chapter in *Love Medicine* in 1983. In the story, two young men, half brothers from a North Dakota reservation, buy a red Oldsmobile convertible from a lot in Winnipeg and then spend a glorious summer joyriding to Alaska and back. As summer turns to fall, the United States Marines remind the older brother, Henry, that he has enlisted. While he serves in Vietnam, his brother Lyman restores the car to its summertime glory. Upon his return, Henry's severe emotional damage from what he has seen and done disturbs Lyman enough that he takes a hammer to the car, hoping that Henry will pour himself into the therapeutic job of repairing

it. They celebrate the renewed car by driving to the Red River, in spring flood. There, unable to continue living, Henry gives the keys to Lyman and leaps into the river. Stunned but sympathetic, Lyman rolls the car into the river, giving it back to his dead brother.

As the narrator of the story, Lyman portrays himself as clever, entrepreneurial, and lucky. He had gone from dishwasher to manager of the Joliet Cafe by the time he was 16; when a tornado leveled the restaurant he used the insurance money to treat his extended family to a fine meal and still had enough to pool with Henry's two paychecks to buy the Olds. They found themselves in Alaska because they promised to take a pretty hitchhiker home. The idyllic summer of driving the convertible, spending time with Susy's family, and relaxing together was a bonding experience for the two young men.

Their closeness makes it extremely difficult for Lyman to witness the pain inflicted on his brother by the war. Henry no longer laughs or jokes, he sits motionless for hours in front of the television, and he is simply “jumpy and mean.” The perfectly restored convertible is a stark contrast to the damaged Henry. One day, something he sees on television makes him bite his lip, but he is so far from reality that he is unaware of the blood running down his chin, even into the bread he eats for dinner. Lyman and his mother know that a psychiatric hospitalization and medication will merely take Henry further from reality (“They don't fix them in those places”), so Lyman decides to give Henry something to fix: He beats the car to a ruin and waits for Henry to notice and to act. After Henry's death, the snapshot their little sister takes of them and the restored car becomes both a treasure and a wound for Lyman.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Erdrich describes the Red River in its spring flood stage. Tell how the scene at the river illustrates both life and death for the characters in the story.
2. The story ends with Lyman's describing the car in the river “running and going and running and running.” What metaphorical meanings does that phrase have?

“Jacklight” (1984)

The title of this poem, the first poem in *Jacklight*, Erdrich’s first published book of poetry, refers to a light used as a lure by nighttime hunters. The speaker of the poem, an unidentified “we,” has responded to “this battery of polarized acids, / that outshines the moon” by approaching as far as the edge of the woods. Most of the poem, chantlike, is the speaker’s repetitive assessment of the hunters’ smell and their violence. The poem ends with the speaker’s statement of challenge to the hunters, who will be at a disadvantage as soon as they enter the woods, the speaker’s natural habitat.

Erdrich describes the hunters with words suggestive of violence and brutality. Their minds are “like silver hammers / cocked back,” and there is “caked guts on their clothes.” The speakers smell not only the hunters themselves, but also “their mothers buried chin-deep in wet dirt” and “their sisters of crushed dogwood, bruised apples, / of fractured cups and concussions of burnt hooks.” Although they appear “faceless, invisible,” to the speaker, they are nevertheless dangerous.

But in the last stanza, the power dynamic changes as the hunters “put down their equipment” and step into the woods, where they will be powerless. The speaker is satisfied with this change in the hunt, because the hunters do not know “how deep the woods are and lightless. / How deep the woods are.” That final statement, in its monosyllables, expresses the speaker’s confidence that the hunters are now at a disadvantage.

The identity of the speaker is open to interpretation: animals or the natural world facing human hunters? Women facing dominating men? Native people facing the incursions of white culture? Erdrich provides the poem with an epigram that states that one Chippewa word means both flirting and hunting game; another Chippewa word denotes both rape and choking a bear with bare hands. If, then, the acts of hunting and killing game can be expressed with the same words as pursuing and taking a woman, perhaps Erdrich is challenging the reader to worry less about the difference between the hunter (with clenched fists, acid, and raw steel) and the hunted (at

home in brown grass in knotted twigs), and to give more thought to the apparent need for violence and domination in human relationships.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the stanzas in which the speaker describes his/her/their environment and actions. Which senses predominate? Contrast these descriptions with the sense imagery used for the hunters.
2. Which consciousness seems superior: that of the hunters or that of the hunted? Explain.
3. What is the artistic effect of the repetitive sentence structure, the lack of variety in the verbs? Compare the first stanza to the second-to-last stanza. Note the vowel sounds that predominate, especially in the final stanza. How do these language choices affect the mood of the poem?

“A Love Medicine” (1984)

In this understated elegy, the speaker stands with her sister Theresa against the violence of a rainy night and the violence of a man. The poem’s title alludes to a Native American way of spiritual and physical healing: In the italicized last lines, the speaker promises help, rescue, healing for her sister.

The poem begins gently enough, with the image of light rain and the blue light outside a dairy bar. Theresa is compared to a dragonfly, green and golden, which belongs to the “night of rising water.” Laughing, Theresa leaves her man in the foggy dimness.

When the setting shifts to the banks of the raging Red River in the fourth stanza, the sense of violence increases, and the metaphors of setting merge with the experience of the character, jarring and pitching, sockets and arches against fistwork and pilings. The man has followed Theresa, inflicting cold blows, “his boot plant[ing] its grin / among the arches of her face.”

The damage is done: As Theresa gropes her sightless way home, the streetlights are “seething,” the trees are “aching,” while the river maintains

insistently violent background sounds. The speaker offers three parallel sentences to describe her sister's broken condition: "I find her" . . . beaten down in tree roots, grass, ditch water, while the rain continues to pour on the river.

In the final stanza, the narrative voice shifts from singular to plural; as the speaker joins her sister, the violent action is stilled. Since they can see the moon, the sky must have cleared, the rain has stopped, "and the water, / as deep as it will go, / stops rising." The love medicine of the title has been offered in the speaker's compassion for her battered sister. Her mere presence heals: "*Sister, there is nothing / I would not do.*"

Ojibwa tradition records two kinds of love medicine: One is the kind that can be purchased from someone who knows how to concoct a potion or blend the right herbs and grasses, but the other is obtained directly from a person with "the touch," a person whose heart heals. Erdrich's poetry and fiction are full of characters who—like the speaker in this poem—see with the heart the suffering of another, who give the presence of a compassionate heart to heal what no potion can touch.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the nature imagery in the poem: water, earth, light and darkness, living creatures. Is nature dangerous or healing? Explain.
2. A recurring theme in Erdrich's poems is human domination of the natural world, or man's domination of woman. In "A Love Medicine," how does the natural world/woman resist, even triumph over, such domination?
3. Why is it important for the characters in this poem to be anonymous, even faceless? Explain.

"Dear John Wayne" (1984)

In this poem, the speakers are contemporary Native Americans at a drive-in watching a John Wayne western on a hot August night. These real Indians are joined by history with the movie Indians and the movie cowboys, embodied by Wayne's

character. Through the poem, Erdrich poses many questions about cultural dominance, about the effects of one culture's seizing, possessing, and destroying what belongs to another.

Under the star-lit sky, the screen is filled by the image of the movie star's face. With almost God-like power, John Wayne's eyes gaze out over the audience, and the italicized lines—apparently quotations from one of the movies—voice domination over the listeners. The culture represented by that fictional character, and its vision of violent domination of the land and its people ("*Everything we see belongs to us*"), glow from the movie screen. In contrast to these larger-than-life images and sounds, the spectators see themselves as "speechless and small."

Nevertheless, the speakers challenge that domination. "*The eye sees a lot, John, but the heart is so blind. / Death makes us owners of nothing.*" Noting the scars on the enormous face, the speakers refer to the cancer that eventually killed the actor, a disease in which a cell is "burning, doubling, splitting out of its skin." Similar uncontrollable power may well consume any dominator from within. Dramatic victories over the vanquished are costly and may be only temporary.

If the "good guys" in a typical western are the cowboys, then the Indians must be the "bad guys." The poems' speakers challenge such a simple division of the world into "good guys" and "bad guys." Many kinds of violence are alluded to in the poem, from mosquitoes to nuclear weapons.

Dean Rader, an English professor at the University of San Francisco, says that "Dear John Wayne" is "one of the best and most important American poems" of the late 20th century, "a *tour de force* of public and private tensions." As the Native Americans watch the movie, they are simultaneously cheering John Wayne's victory and identifying with his victims. Lounging on the hood of their Pontiac sedan, they are unthinkingly participating in the exploitation of native peoples in consumer culture. Erdrich's skillful creation of a multileveled dialogue allows her to pose many questions to America's dominant culture, as well as about that culture.

For Discussion or Writing

1. List the different groups whose conflicts are suggested in the poem: for example, cowboys versus Indians, moviegoers versus mosquitoes. What is the implied relationship among these conflicts?
2. Explain the poem's title: Is *Dear* an adjective, or is it the address of a personal letter? How does the interpretation of that one word influence your understanding of the poem?
3. Watch one of John Ford's great westerns starring John Wayne, such as *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Fort Apache*, or *Stagecoach*, and put yourself in the place of the speakers in the poem. How would the reactions of Native people to those movie heroes be different from those of the audience the moviemakers probably had in mind?

Love Medicine (1984)

Erdrich's debut novel weaves together stories of four generations of an extended family of Ojibwa and mixed-blood characters in Argus, North Dakota, and the nearby reservation. As teenagers, Marie Lazarre and Lulu Nanapush both set their hearts on Nector Kashpaw, who marries Marie but cannot give up Lulu. The story is framed by the Easter morning death of June Kashpaw, abandoned as a child and adopted by Marie. When word of her death reaches the reservation, the clan gathers to remember her, reclaiming her story and their own. Lipsha, another of Marie's adopted children, discovers that June was his mother, and that he shares in the spirit power of the Pillager clan, from whom he descends through his father, one of Lulu's sons. Between the sons and daughters of Nector and Marie, and Lulu and her clan of eight sons and a daughter by various fathers (including Nector), Erdrich shows the power of family to sustain people through difficulties and the power of love—domestic and romantic—to assure survival.

Erdrich's cyclic narrative structure in *Love Medicine* begins in 1981, cycles back to 1934, and then returns full circle to 1984. The interaction of the

characters and the interaction of the various versions of the family saga demonstrate Erdrich's engagement with traditional values and images while the characters are firmly rooted as well in contemporary American life.

A trademark of Erdrich's fiction is her use of multiple narrative voices. The 1993 edition of *Love Medicine* comprises six sections or chapters told, wholly or in part, by third-person narrators focused on the inner world of six different characters: June, Gordie, Marie, Lulu, Albertine, and Lyman. Fourteen chapters have first-person narrators: Marie and Lipsha speak three chapters each, while Lyman, Albertine, Nector, and Lulu each narrate two sections. Through this multivocality, some critics claim that Erdrich enacts the communal nature of Native American life; others describe it as a postmodern awareness that there is no single version of truth; still others attribute the technique to a feminist artistic mode that illustrates women's shared responsibility for life and relationships.

The construction of individual and community identity is another continuing theme in Erdrich's fiction. In *Love Medicine*, identity is related to gender, ethnicity, religious practice, and family. For many of Erdrich's male characters, manly behavior is tied to aggressiveness. Lulu's sons are shown shooting cans off fence rails; Nector and Eli are hunters. Too often, that aggression is directed toward women: The army veteran Henry, drunk and depressed, rapes Albertine; King Kashpaw has learned to control his wife by shouting at her and hitting her. The first-grader King Junior hates the violence so much that he chooses to be called Howard to dissociate himself from his violent father.

Erdrich's female characters often combine traits that are generally considered both masculine and feminine. For instance, Marie is the nurturing mother and faithful wife, but she also knows how to take charge of her own life. She buys and lays the linoleum for the kitchen floor and waxes that floor to bar her unfaithful husband's return to the home. But when he arrives at the door, terrified to enter, Marie takes the initiative and reaches through his fear to draw him back to the family.

The Kashpaw twins, Eli and Nector, represent old and new ways of being Indian, giving Erdrich an opening to challenge white America's stereotypical images. When their mother sent Nector to boarding school, she kept Eli hidden on the reservation, where he learned the ways of the woods and spoke the old language; when he is an old man, apparently on the edge of dementia, his children and grandchildren worry that he will forget what English he knows and be lost to them, since, as modern young people, they speak only English. Nector, on the other hand, took his "American" education to Hollywood, getting killed over and over again in westerns, becoming a poster boy for the vanishing Indian. When a famous artist makes Nector the model for her painting *The Plunge of the Brave*, later mounted in the statehouse, he finds himself the image of the noble savage. However, Nector understands that this image of the Indian is the image of a doomed man jumping to his death. Returning to the reservation, Nector settles down with Marie as a family man and eventually is elected tribal chairman. In her portraits of these brothers and their different approaches to traditional and Anglo life, Erdrich shows value and loss in both worldviews.

Nector's son Lyman continues the slide into white culture when he decides to bring economic development to the reservation by building a tomahawk factory to produce traditional artifacts. The workers he hires—cousins, neighbors, friends—are unable to work together. The breakdown in communication extends into a literal breakdown of the machinery, ruining Lyman's plans for industrialization.

Another central issue in *Love Medicine* and throughout Erdrich's fiction is the role of religion in the characters' lives. While some characters, such as Eli, preserve the beliefs and traditions of their ancestors, most of them have accepted Christianity to varying degrees. Missionaries introduced Catholicism to the reservation, and the nuns at Sacred Heart convent in Argus shape the children in the reservation school. In the 1934 episode in *Love Medicine*, teenaged Marie decides to test her vocation at the convent, entering into conflict with

the very peculiar Sister Leopolda, whose version of Catholicism is spiteful and egotistical rather than generous and loving.

In contrast, some characters, such as Eli, have maintained the old ways of the reservation. Lulu's eldest son is Gerry Nanapush, whose father is the mysterious Moses Pillager, who practices the old medicine. Gerry's son with June is Lipsha, another of the "thrown-away" children adopted by Marie and Nector. As he learns his identity, including his Pillager ancestry, Lipsha discovers that he has "the healing touch," access to the old medicine way, and begins to make use of his spiritual powers for healing.

Many scholars have discussed Erdrich's presentation of the extended family. While blood relationships are certainly important to the characters, alternative connections often establish stronger family ties. Hertha Wong notes the pattern of incorporating "thrown-away children" into families. Marie raises her own children with Nector but also remains sensitive to the abandoned children in the community, taking them into their home and raising them as her own.

An important consequence of the characters' identity formation is their relationship to the Anglo world off the reservation. Some characters yield to the pull of white society, but few find happiness outside the Ojibwa community. Marie's daughter Albertine studies nursing in Fargo, but a terrifying hotel-room episode with Henry sends her back to the family. Marie's grandson King Kashpaw virtually rejects his Indian identity, living miserably in Minneapolis with his wife, Lynnette, and their son. Beverly Lamartine has a blond wife and a career in the Twin Cities but still feels tied to the reservation by his son with Lulu. That son, Henry, returns from active duty in the army so damaged by his Vietnam experiences that he commits suicide. His half brother Gerry Nanapush resists the influence of white America, landing in the penitentiary for a variety of crimes, asserting that no white man's concrete walls can contain a Chippewa. Gerry's cousins King and Lynnette Kashpaw betray him, inviting the police to their apartment to apprehend him after he escapes from prison.

The central character of “Saint Marie,” the first of the flashback chapters, is 14-year-old Marie Lazarre. Raised on the reservation by the extended family and educated in the mission school, she yearns—she thinks—to be accepted at the Catholic convent and absorbed into the religion and culture of white society. Torn by competing pulls, she mothers “thrown-away” children to compensate for her own abandonment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In your judgment, who is the main character in *Love Medicine*? Argue for June, Lipsha, Marie, Lulu, or Nector as the character who unifies the novel.
2. One of Erdrich’s trademarks is her use of multiple narrators. What advantages does this technique provide in the novel? How would chapters/segments change if Erdrich had used a different narrative voice for particular incidents? What is the effect of mixing first- and third-person narrative voices?
3. The spiritual world is very real to the characters in *Love Medicine*, whether they are drawing on traditional beliefs or on the Catholic teachings learned from missionaries. Find incidents in which characters are helped and/or damaged by their commitment to religious beliefs and practices.
4. In the novel, Erdrich illustrates the conflict between the attractions of city life in “white” America and the pull of traditional life of the reservation. What happens to Erdrich’s characters who yield to the seductions of white America and leave the reservation?

“Fleur” (1986)

While working on her M.F.A. degree at Johns Hopkins University, Erdrich produced a 300-page fiction manuscript that she set aside, since her primary focus at that time was poetry. Ten years later, she took up the manuscript again and condensed what she deemed valuable into a short story, which was published as “Fleur” in the August 1986 issue

of *Esquire*. That story, in turn, became the seed of Erdrich’s third novel, *Tracks*, published in 1988. In the novel, “Fleur” has become the second chapter, “Summer 1913, *Miskomini-Geezis*, Raspberry Sun,” with Pauline Puyat as narrator.

Ostensibly, the narrator of this short story is telling the reader about the mysterious and threatening Fleur Pillager, but through her language and attitude, she reveals a great deal more about herself. The focus of the story is the summer Fleur spent working in a butcher shop in the town of Argus, where her silent power threatens the male coworkers. After a month of losing to Fleur at cards, the three men assault her behind the slaughter pens. The next day, the oppressive heat blooms into a tornado that roars through Argus, sending the men running to the meat locker for shelter. The narrator, who did not respond to Fleur’s cries during the assault the night before, slams the locker door shut but neglects to tell anyone of the men’s whereabouts until they are found frozen three days later. Lily, Tor, and Lily’s dog are dead, and Dutch only barely survives. Later, back on the reservation, Fleur gives birth to a child.

Despite its title, the short story is more about its narrator than it is about Fleur. Sometimes the narrative voice is plural, suggesting that the speaker is passing on the lore of the reservation women, who keep their distance from Fleur in dread of her mysterious powers. As a girl, Fleur survived three drownings. Each time, though, the man who rescues her dies unexpectedly by water. The women conclude that Fleur is aligned with the water monster *Misshepesu*, and because she keeps to herself, no one can find out the truth. The narrator shares in those negative judgments of Fleur, but, in her own shaky identity, she is extremely threatened by Fleur’s utter directness and self-possession.

The narrator has gone to Argus because she refuses to stay on the reservation. She wants to associate herself with her mother’s white Canadian heritage rather than her Native ancestry. Unable to accept herself as she is, she wants to be invisible, to be erased. In the closing paragraphs of the story, the narrator admits that she can look Fleur straight in the eyes only in her dreams.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the narrator's descriptions of Fleur's unusual behavior. Summarize the judgments made about her by the people on the reservation. How much of their opinion is based on fact and how much is based on their own fears of the unknown?
2. Who is responsible for the deaths of Tor and Lily?

***The Beet Queen* (1986)**

In her second novel, Erdrich focuses less on the Ojibwa than on the white and mixed-blood people in the North Dakota town near the reservation. Abandoned by their mother, Karl and Mary Adare ride a freight train to Argus to live with their aunt Fritzie and uncle Pete Kozka, owners of a butcher shop, and their cousin Sita. Karl, age 14, leaves town as quickly as he arrived, while Mary, age 11, takes root. Erdrich follows life in Argus as Mary and Sita grow to womanhood. With Celestine James, Mary assumes responsibility for the butcher shop and shares, with her neighbor Wallace Pfef, in the raising of Celestine's (and Karl's) daughter, Dot. Dot's coronation as queen of the Beet Festival is the culmination of a novel in which the characters struggle to find family connectedness.

The Beet Queen covers a span of 40 years, from 1932 to 1972, in direct chronology, unlike the nonlinear structure and flashbacks of *Love Medicine*. Erdrich writes most of the chapters using first-person narrators, scattering among them several short segments in which a third-person narrator fills in information that the main characters could not know themselves, particularly the fate of Mary and Karl's mother, Adelaide, and her third child, a baby adopted by a Minneapolis couple.

Six major characters narrate the 16 chapters of *The Beet Queen*. While most have a single voice, chapters 2 (1932) and 13 (1972) are voiced communally by Sita, Mary, and Celestine. Mary Adare is the central character of the novel, the speaker in five chapters. As a girl, she is "square and practical,"

and as an adult, she is independent and frank and a shrewd businesswoman. Having seen what happens to delicate and flighty women like her mother, Adelaide, and her cousin Sita, she determines to control her own life and destiny with whatever assets are at hand. As butcher, sausage maker, gardener, and cook, she excels, but she also sees visions and tells fortunes. Critics point out that through the character of Mary, Erdrich challenges stereotyped expectations of men's and women's behavior.

Sita Kozka, on the other hand, is "all girl," interested in fashion, jewelry, and finding a man. Displaced in her own family by Mary's arrival, Sita works as a model and sales clerk in a Fargo department store until she is nearly 30. Her marriage fails along with the fancy restaurant she runs with her husband; with her second marriage, her frustrated dreams lead to a fine suburban house, then drug dependency, disconnection from reality, and a slow slide into madness.

The third female character to narrate four chapters is Celestine James, the steadiest woman in the novel, not prone to the flights of fancy and emotional turmoil that Mary endures. After a surprising and peculiar two-month relationship with Karl Adare, Celestine becomes pregnant but chooses to raise her daughter alone.

Karl Adare, like his mother, is unreliable, unsteady. He is constantly on the move, trying various careers and establishing short-term liaisons with women and men as he struggles to establish his identity. In the three chapters that he narrates, he exhibits emotional extremes, seeking connections but lacking the relational skills to maintain them.

As with Karl, Wallace Pfef does not know his sexual identity until an encounter with Karl in a Minneapolis hotel. In his house, Wallace keeps a photo of a "poor dead sweetheart" that is nothing more than a framed picture he bought at a house sale but that excuses him from the socially sanctioned routines of courtship and marriage. His character is one of the nurturing men Erdrich develops in her novels: He serves as midwife at Dot's birth, stands as her godfather, and shares in raising the child whose baptismal name is *Wallac-*

ette. A civic leader, he is the one who spearheads sugar-beet cultivation in Argus.

Dot Adare narrates the final chapter. She has grown up to be a sturdy young woman like her mother, and feisty like her aunt Mary. But she goes home, drawn back to her mother and the others who love her.

Among the essential themes in *The Beet Queen* is the connectedness of family. The death of Mr. Ober, her longtime lover and father of her children, leaves Adelaide abandoned. She in turn abandons her children and flies off with Omar the Aeronaut Extraordinaire. Mary attaches herself firmly to the Kozka family but alienates Sita in the process. In her turn, Sita tries unsuccessfully to find herself but is unable to find happiness with either Jimmie or Louis. Dot Adare becomes the center of a curious alternative family with her mother, Celestine; her aunt Mary; and her “uncle” Wallace Pfef; her biological father, Karl, is never really part of her life. One day, as Celestine is nursing the baby, she notices a delicate spider at work in the child’s hair: “A web was forming, a complicated house.” This web becomes a metaphor for the complex of relationships that Erdrich creates in the novel.

In the novel’s final scene, that “complicated house” is unified. All of the main characters are reunited at the Beet Festival: Father Jude Miller, the baby brother of Mary and Karl, happens to be in Argus on the day of the festival, unrecognized by his siblings. Russell Kashpaw, the most decorated veteran, rides a float in the parade. Sita Kozka Bohr Tappe is there, too, even though she had died earlier that morning. Mary, Wallace and Celestine, even Karl, are very proud of their daughter; as angry as she is, Dot reconnects with her mother and those who love her so well.

In *The Beet Queen*, as in her other novels, Erdrich challenges readers’ expectations of gendered behavior with nurturing men like Wallace Pfef and assertive women like Mary. Even so, the stereotyped categories cease to have meaning in the novels, as Erdrich builds characters of both genders who are strong, nurturing, rational, spiritual, and practical. A character type that often surfaces in Erdrich’s fiction is the trickster, the comic

shape shifter. In *The Beet Queen*, Karl comes and goes, escaping from disasters, assuming a variety of identities. But others fit this pattern as well, including the tomboy Dot, who becomes the Beet Queen; Wallace Pfef, with his blend of hidden and visible identities; and the unintentionally comic Mary, with her turban and Ouija board.

The Beet Queen takes place in the town of Argus, North Dakota, where parts of *Tracks* are also set. Pete Kozka and his butcher shop appear in both novels, as do Russell Kashpaw, Fleur Pillager, and Celestine James, the daughter of Dutch James and Regina. While *The Beet Queen* covers approximately the same time span as *Love Medicine*, the only significant link between the novels is the presence of Sister Leopolda (Pauline from *Tracks*), who is teaching at St. Catherine’s School when Mary enrolls in the seventh grade.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In an interview, Erdrich has suggested that the central motif of *The Beet Queen* is air, hinting that earth, water, and fire would be central in other novels. Locate as many references to air, flight, and flying as you can. Which characters are associated with flight? What do these allusions reveal about the characters? Why?
2. Traditional family structures are few in *The Beet Queen*; instead, many kinds of family relationships are established. What are the common bonds that connect these “families”? What characteristics make for stable relationships? Why?
3. Unlike *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen* focuses on characters who are not Native Americans. In your judgment, how does *The Beet Queen* affect Erdrich’s classification as a Native American author? Justify your answer.
4. Find several of the comic scenes in the novel and analyze the sources of humor, considering such scenes as the following: Mary’s falling off the sliding board, Sita’s kidnapping, Mary and Mrs. Shumway’s naughty box, the Jell-O salad, the Christmas pageant, and Wallace and Dot at the dunking booth. What do these scenes add to the work as a whole? Explain.

Tracks (1988)

In *Tracks*, Erdrich tells the story of the Ojibwa people during the years 1912 to 1924, when U.S. treaty law established the reservation system in tribal territory, removing the land from the Indians' control. Nanapush, one of the central characters, is a tribal elder—a man who bridges the past and present; he saw the last buffalo hunt but who also reads and writes English. During winter 1912, he saves Fleur Pillager after her entire family has died of tuberculosis. That rescue bonds the old man to her as a father. During a summer tornado in Argus, Fleur survives unharmed, but the three men who rape her in the slaughterhouse yard do not. Another survivor, a mixed-blood girl named Pauline Puyat, shows a deep-seated hatred for Fleur. Despising her Indian heritage, Pauline chooses to “become white” by entering the convent, erasing her past to be what Indians can never be. As Sister Leopolda, she becomes “a merciful scavenger, . . . the reservation crow,” tending to the sick and dying, mortifying herself beyond all good sense. Meanwhile, Fleur snares Eli Kashpaw's heart, bears a child, and lives apart, separating herself from contact with white men. She refuses to comply with U.S. law and with the lumbermen who have bought the Pillager land by destroying the forest before the loggers have a chance to cut it themselves.

With his wives and children dead, Nanapush eventually marries Margaret, the widow of his old friend Kashpaw. However, he does not accept Catholicism as she does. Nanapush pragmatically selects from the old and new ways what will best serve the survival of the people. In another terrible winter, he saves Fleur's daughter Lulu, gives her his name, and raises her after Fleur abandons the settlement to move westward, away from the American incursions. In the chapters narrated by Nanapush, he is passing on to Lulu the story and legacy of the mother who has abandoned the child.

Published four years after *Love Medicine*, *Tracks* is a prequel to that novel, opening in 1912, 22 years before the earliest episode in *Love Medicine*, and introducing the ancestors of its characters. The baby borne and abandoned by Pauline (later Sister Leo-

polda) and raised by the Lazarres is Marie, one of the matriarchs of *Love Medicine*. Lulu is the other. In addition to shedding further light on the earlier generations of their extended families, *Tracks* also provides the political background for the development of the reservations. Twenty-five years after the Dawes Act, the grace period has ended, and the Native people now owe taxes on the lands allotted to them by the 1887 law. With no cash income, the people have few choices. They can either sell their land for ready cash or borrow against the land to meet their immediate needs, driving themselves deeper into debt and into default, at which point the land reverts to the government.

Erdrich uses only two narrative voices in *Tracks*: Nanapush, a wily tribal elder, and Pauline Puyat, a mixed-blood girl who despises her Native heritage and yearns to be white. The character of Nanapush echoes the Ojibwa mythic figure of Nanabozho, a comic healer and liberator of the people. As a tribal elder and witness to the end of the old ways, Nanapush passes on the lore of the people, especially to his adopted (grand)daughter Lulu. But having been educated in the mission schools, Nanapush also reads and writes English, deciphers the “tracks” on the papers, and tries to rescue the people and their land through his command of the white men's language. Language is the chief weapon in his arsenal; he uses talk to confuse and trick his enemies, to rescue the dying, to outwit the powerful. He attends mass with Margaret but prefers the old ways of belief and worship.

Pauline, on the other hand, rejects her Indianness. She tries to burn away her Ojibwa heritage by becoming a nun, an act not permitted to Native girls by tribal custom. Simultaneously repulsed by physical existence and sexually attracted to Eli Kashpaw, she buys a love potion from Moses Pillager and drugs Sophie Morrissey so she will seduce Eli. Watching their encounter from the bushes, Pauline participates vicariously in their lovemaking. Later, she snares Napoleon Morrissey and strangles him with her rosary beads, but not before becoming pregnant with his child. It is a child she desperately wants to destroy; when she delivers the baby, Ber-

2. Both traditional and Christian believers revere the power of the supernatural world. In Erdrich's work, which theology seems to offer more hope? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Examine one of Erdrich's characters who appear in multiple works, such as Fleur Pillager. How does that character change over the course of various works? What aspects of the character never change?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Beidler, Peter G., and Gay Barton. *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Native American Women Writers*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998, pp. 24–37.
- Chavkin, Allan, ed. *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*. Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1999.
- Erdrich, Louise. *The Antelope Wife*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- . *Baptism of Desire*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.
- . *The Beet Queen*. New York: Holt, 1986.
- . *The Bingo Palace*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- . *The Birchbark House*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.
- . *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- . *Four Souls*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.
- . *Grandmother's Pigeon*. New York: Hyperion, 1996.
- . *Jacklight*. New York: Holt, 1984.
- . *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- . *Love Medicine*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993, 1984.
- . *The Master Butchers' Singing Club*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- . *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- . *The Painted Drum*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- . *The Range Eternal*. New York: Hyperion, 2002.
- . *Tales of Burning Love*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- . *Tracks*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- , and Robert Spillman. "The Creative Instinct." Interview. Salon.com. Available online. URL: <http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960506.html>. Accessed June 30, 2009.
- Jacobs, Connie A. *The Novels of Louise Erdrich: Stories of Her People*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.
- Sarris, Greg, Connie A. Jacobs, and James R. Giles, eds. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004.
- Stookey, Lorena L. *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion*. Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers, edited by Kathleen Gregory Klein. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999.
- Voices from the Gaps. "Louise Erdrich." Available online. URL: http://voices.clu.umn.edu/vg/bios/entries/erdrich_louise.html. Accessed June 24, 2005.
- Wong, Hertha D. Sweet, ed. *Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Eileen Quinlan



CAROLYN FORCHÉ (1950–)

I have been told that a poet should be of his or her time. It is my feeling that the 20th-century human condition demands a poetry of witness. . . . If I did not wish to make poetry of what I had seen, what is it that I thought poetry was?

(quoted in Moyers)

When Carolyn Forché began writing at the age of nine, she did not intend to change the way the world viewed poetry. She did not plan to be a political activist. In fact, when her mother, Louise Blackford Sidlosky (a writer herself before retiring to devote more time to her growing family), introduced her to poetry, Forché saw it as a way to escape from the nonstop commotion inflicted on her as the oldest of seven children. Years later Forché would become famous for her poetry of witness, challenging the strict division between political and personal poetry by introducing the broader category of social poetry, a poetry that attests to the horrific consequences the political can wreak on the human soul.

Born Carolyn Louise Sidlosky on April 28, 1950, in Detroit, Forché says as a child she “wrote obsessively, the way some children draw obsessively” (Ratiner 148). That passion for writing led her to Michigan State University, where she switched majors five times, searching for something compatible with writing. She finally settled on international relations, and, in 1972, Forché became the first person in her family to graduate from college, earning a B.A. in international relations and creative writing.

Detroit, the capital of the American automotive industry, was not an easy place to find a job in the early 1970s. Foreign manufacturers were beginning to dominate the marketplace, causing

downsizing and rampant unemployment. Luckily, Forché had inherited a nomadic spirit from her paternal grandmother, Anna Bassarová, who had lived with the family for most of the poet’s childhood, often disappearing for long periods and returning with stories of visits to Indian pueblos, Amish communities, and myriad other places where she blended easily within cultures not her own. Forché left her native Michigan to take a job in Washington, D.C., at the Epilepsy Foundation of America, where she worked until she learned of an opportunity to attend a newly formed master of fine arts program at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She applied and was accepted on a full teaching scholarship.

While at Bowling Green, Forché wrote about issues concerning her life up to that point. Many of her poems reflected the strong sense of community she learned growing up in her large Czech-American family and living in the same neighborhood in rural Catholic Detroit throughout her childhood, focusing on the spirituality of family bonds, exploring the Czechoslovakian and Native American cultures. Other poems displayed her deep awareness of nature, invoking images from the northern regions of the country or exploring the sensuality of nature. These poems became the basis for a manuscript that she entered in a competition for poets under the age of 40 who had yet to publish a volume of poetry. The Yale Series of Younger Poets prize is the most

prestigious award available for young poets; shortly after Forché completed her M.F.A. and was hired to teach at San Diego State University, she was notified that she had been selected to receive it. The winning manuscript became her first published collection of poetry, entitled *Gathering the Tribes*.

While teaching at San Diego State, Forché became friends with Maya Flacol, who asked Forché to translate her mother's book of poetry into English. Working from a Spanish edition, Forché discovered that translating poetry was not as simple as substituting one word for another. The poetry of Flacol's mother, Claribel Alegría, was fraught with images with which Forché had no experience—the horrors of life under military dictatorship. Forché agreed to spend summer 1977 in Spain with Flacol at the home of Claribel Alegría. Forché spent her days translating poetry and her afternoons immersed in the company of international writers and artists who congregated at Alegría's home. Through them, Forché began to gain a deeper understanding of the hardships of Latin America and an intense desire somehow to make a difference.

Back in San Diego, Forché returned to teaching and writing letters on behalf of Amnesty International. She continued to work on translating Alegría's poetry (publishing *Flowers from the Volcano* in 1983 and *Sorrow* in 1999). She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, allowing her a year of expense-free travel to work on her writing, but before she could begin her travels, her experience in Spain followed her home in the form of Alegría's nephew, Leonel Gomez Vides.

Vides schooled her in El Salvadorian history, relevant to her plans for further translations of Latin American poets. He taught her about the past and present political climate of Central America, and, when he had completed his tutelage, Vides revealed his true motivation: "Claribel tells me you've won a Guggenheim Fellowship. Congratulations! So what are you going to do with your fellowship year?" (Ratiner 155).

Vides explained that El Salvador was going to be at war soon, and that Forché had the opportunity to be there from the beginning so that through her

poetry she could inform people back in the United States about the conditions of war. Although Forché believed that poets did not carry the same credibility that journalists did, Vides insisted that the job required a poet. "What are you going to do," he asked, "write poetry about yourself the rest of your life?" (Ratiner 155). That challenge spurred Forché into accepting his invitation.

Over the next two years, Forché traveled extensively in El Salvador, where she met her future husband, the journalist Harry Mattison, who was covering the war for *Time*. Forché worked closely with Monsignor Oscar Romero, a local church leader, and became immersed in the struggle against the widespread violence being inflicted upon the people of El Salvador by their own government. When the climate became too dangerous for her to stay, she returned home, charged by Monsignor Romero to convince the United States to stop its military aid.

Shortly after her departure, Monsignor Romero and six American churchwomen were murdered. Back in the States, Forché struggled to find an audience to which she could voice the injustices she had witnessed. She testified before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs, urging them not to send further military aid to the region. Despite her eloquent appeal, the aid was approved.

Meanwhile, Forché had completed a manuscript of her Salvadorian poems. Publishers shied away because of its intense political nature, but Forché found a willing audience in the crowds who attended her poetry readings. A chance encounter with Margaret Atwood led Forché to submit her manuscript to a new publisher; in 1981, *The Country between Us* appeared in bookstores. Although it received the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay di Castagnola Award and was the Lamont Selection of the Academy of American Poets, the book was attacked by both the political Right, who called Forché everything from naïve to hysterical, and the Left, who accused her of using the conflict in El Salvador to further her own poetic ambitions.

Forché believed that the attacks were mainly the result of "the cyclic debate peculiar to the United

States concerning the relationship between poetry and politics” (Ratiner 161). Poets were not expected to influence public policy with their writing, and, by choosing as her subject the political hotbed of El Salvador (which was receiving military support from the United States), Forché had stepped over some imagined line. In her defense, she began to call for a new way of thinking about poetry, a manner that allowed for works that were neither strictly personal (typified by the emotional) nor political (focused on controversial issues or events), but rather blended the two in a way that required a new classification, that of social poetry:

The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political . . . the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract. (Forché, *Against* 45)

In addition to outwardly defending the legitimacy of her work, Forché found herself waging an internal struggle. Her experiences in El Salvador had left her feeling that something in her had been broken. She traveled and worked in a variety of positions that allowed her to combat injustice, including as a journalist for Amnesty International and as the Beirut correspondent for National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*. She also worked in South Africa with her husband, covering the antiapartheid campaign.

During this time, Forché continued to write, but she felt what she was capturing on paper was disjointed, unlike real poetry. She saved it all in notebooks, considering it notes toward future poems. She recalls:

Something happened along the way to the introspective poet I had been. My new work seemed controversial to my American contemporaries, who argued against its “subject matter,” or against the right of a North American to contemplate such issues in her work, or against any mixing of what they saw as the mutually exclusive realms of the personal and the politi-

cal. Like many other poets, I felt I had no real choice regarding the impulse of my poems, and had only to wait, in meditative expectancy. In attempting to come to terms with the question of poetry and politics, I turned to the work of Anna Akhmatova, Yannis Ritsos, Paul Celan, Federico García Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and others. I began collecting their work, and soon found myself a repository of what began to be called “the poetry of witness.” (Forché, *Against* 30)

In 1986, Forché and Mattison conceived a child; as his birth neared, they moved to Paris, France, so he would not be born on South African soil. While waiting for the baby to arrive, Forché kept busy by translating a French text that she had found in the apartment’s cupboard. It turned out to be a book of poems by Robert Desnos, a poet who died in the concentration camps. (Her translation was published in 1991 as *The Selected Poems of Robert Desnos*.) In his writing, she found the beginnings of an explanation for why her own poetry had taken such an unexpected turn.

Forché found the poetry of witness to be a poetry of extremity, requiring a form of language to which the American literary public was unaccustomed. In order to convey the horrors that they have witnessed accurately, Forché claimed poets needed to resort to language that was itself extreme, as in the case of Desnos, whose poetry was at times violently obscene in order to portray accurately what he had witnessed.

Other times, there is simply no language to describe what has been witnessed. As Forché writes, “The narrative of trauma is itself traumatized” (*Against* 42). Writers are rendered unable to articulate directly that to which they must give voice, causing them to rely upon fragmented images to convey a greater meaning. Forché maintained that the trauma had left a mark on the writer that could be felt in his or her work, even when it was not specifically about war. She cites as example Paul Celan and claims, “If . . . a poet is a survivor of the camps during the shoah [the Jewish term for the Holocaust],

and the poet chooses to write about snow falling, one can discern the camps in the snow falling. The camps are *in* the snow” (Ratiner 163).

In 1987, after the birth of her son, Sean-Christophe, Forché returned to teaching in the United States. Over the next two decades she would teach at several institutions, including the University of Arkansas, Vassar College, George Mason University, Skidmore College, and Columbia University.

Still, Forché remained fascinated by the mark of trauma on language itself. She began to organize the poetry she was accumulating into a collection. While she worked, she received grants and fellowships from the Lannon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Art Council, and the District of Columbia Art Council. She took over a decade to complete the book, which includes the works of more than 144 poets, and in 1993 the volume was published as *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. In describing the anthology, Forché says she wanted it to be “a symphony of utterance, a living memorial to those who had died and those who survived the horrors of the 20th century. I wanted something that wasn’t a statue that pigeons could defecate on. I wanted something that would stay alive like language stays alive” (Ratiner 163).

Working so intensely with the poetry of other writers who had witnessed atrocities gave Forché a lens through which to view her own changed writings. She returned to her notebooks and began to see in them a mosaic, many individual voices speaking through the same poem. To write their message in a meaningful way, Forché knew she would have to step away from the first-person lyrical style of her earlier works.

Forché found a unifying thread for what she calls “these swatches of human language” in the work of Walter Benjamin. His “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” describes an angel of history who perceives history as one single catastrophe. Forché uses this idea as the basis for her fourth book, *The Angel of History*. Published in 1994 and winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Award, *The Angel of History* gives voice to the unspoken words of those

who have suffered during the calamity we call the 20th century.

In 1998, Forché was presented with the Edita and Ira Morris Hiroshima Foundation for Peace and Culture Award in recognition of her work on behalf of human rights and the preservation of memory and culture. The foundation routinely presents awards to people whose work in a cultural field furthers dialogue, understanding, and peace in conflict areas.

Forché’s most recent collection of poetry, *Blue Hour*, was published in 2003. Her inspiration for the title was the predawn light that the French refer to as *l’heure bleue*. The poems themselves are hauntingly reminiscent of the writing style Forché adopted for *The Angel of History*, seeking to give voice to those who have lost theirs, but she returns to the first-person lyric in some, letting her own memories of childhood and child rearing mingle with images of atrocity.

The most recognized poem in the collection is “On Earth,” a 46-page poem that has been described by David Need as illustrating “the unraveling of our hopes at immortality by arranging the movement of a dying person’s thoughts in an abecedary—a poem in which the lines are arranged in dictionary order—so that even as one adheres to that order, life unravels, and language breaks.”

Since the publication of *Blue Hour*, Carolyn Forché has continued to write and is currently working on a collection of essays. In 2006, Forché accepted a position at Skidmore College in New York, where she serves as professor and director of the creative writing program.

***Gathering the Tribes* (1976)**

The manuscript for *Gathering the Tribes*, produced while Forché was enrolled in the M.F.A program at Bowling Green University, was selected by Stanley Kunitz to receive the 1976 Yale Younger Poets prize. *Gathering the Tribes* is a richly woven tapestry of heritage and nature, blending threads of Native American culture with Forché’s own Slovak

ancestry to tell stories of kinship and ritual, sacrifice and ceremony.

With the lines “That from which these things are born / That by which they live / That to which they return at death / Try to know that,” Forché invites readers into “Burning the Tomato Worms.” From there she tells us of Anna—“Heavy sweated winter woman / Buried the October before I was grown”—and a granddaughter’s struggle to understand the legacy left to her. The portrait Forché paints, of a child who both loves and resents her elder, rings true to the duality of child-adult love.

The poem also explores the dual feelings of guilt and pleasure that accompany first love. The speaker secretly meets a boy in the barn but is sure her grandmother knows, because “It was all over my face,” yet her grandmother does not speak of it. The reader is left to guess at whether her silence is a form of disapproval or tacit acceptance.

The character of Anna is based on Forché’s own paternal grandmother, who lived with Forché for most of her childhood. The real Anna first left Slovakia for the United States when she was 11 years old and worked in a needle factory to earn enough money to bring over her own parents and grandparents. That spirit of self-determination and hard work is evident in the lines “She had drawn apple skin / Tightly bent feet / Pulled babushkas and rosary beads / On which she paid for all of us.”

Forché describes her grandmother as a woman who wandered, often disappearing from the family home for weeks, returning with stories of her stays with Native Americans or Mennonites. Forché admits to inheriting some of that nomadic lifestyle; the results are evident in the seamless way she immerses readers in other cultures. One example is the poem “Alfansa,” based on the true story of Chimayo, New Mexico, and its legendary shrine, El Santuario de Chimayó. Thousands pilgrimage travel there each year, believing the shrine to be the site of miraculous healings resulting from a crucifix found in the early 1800s by a local friar. In her poem, Forché addresses El Posito, the sandpit where the crucifix was reportedly found: “People come to this Santuario, / smear themselves with

mud, light candles. / Lift dry mud from the mud well to their mouths. / (It fills by itself while they sleep.)” Alfansa, of the southwestern Pueblo Indians, “strings Chimayo’s chilis, / like sacred hearts, tongues of fire tied together”; she is old and suffers, but even in her pain she hears the voice of Maria and is told the secret of Chimayo’s El Posito by “a voice of hills.”

Note that some poems in the book have content intended for mature readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why do you think Forché chose the title “Burning the Tomato Worms” for this poem? Discuss your reasons, supporting them with evidence from the text.
2. In the poem “Alfansa,” why does Alfansa weep as she fills the mud well with baskets of soil? What defines a miracle? Examine other sites where miracles have reportedly occurred. What explanations could account for the miracles? Does the possibility of human involvement in a miracle rule out the divine or support it?

The Country between Us (1982)

When Forché received the Guggenheim Fellowship allowing her a year of travel, she thought she would research foreign poets for possible translations. Instead, she accepted an invitation to travel to El Salvador, which was on the brink of war. By arriving when she did, and with Leonel Gomez Vides as her guide, Forché was able to see the conflict from the inside, immersing herself in the fight for human rights. For two years, she worked closely with Monsignor Oscar Romero and his church group, doing whatever needed to be done, from writing reports for human-rights organizations to searching for missing people in morgues. While she was there, people risked their lives to educate her about their ordeals in the hope that she would return to America to educate the world. The sum of these experiences changed her deeply; she was no longer the person who had boarded the plane

to El Salvador. Her poetry, which had always been focused on the world she knew, changed as that world expanded to include the atrocities of war.

Forché produced seven poems focusing on her experiences in El Salvador, many dedicated to the people she encountered there. They were eventually published as part of her second poetry collection, *The Country between Us*. It was immediately criticized as being too political, too hysterical, an overreaction to events she could not possibly understand. One critic even suggested that Forché had designed the entire trip in order to further her career.

The focus of the most criticism was the poem "The Colonel," which describes a dinner at the home of a high-ranking officer in the military regime. It is like dinner at any American home: a cop show on the television, pet dogs, daughter, son, wife. But "Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs," and after dinner the colonel "returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table." Critics claimed this could not have happened, but later the *New York Times* confirmed that it was not uncommon for Salvadorian soldiers "to cut the ears off the corpses of rebels to verify enemy casualties to commanders" (Farrah 20 May 1986).

The final poem is dedicated to Terrence des Pres, a friend of Forché's. Like Forché, de Pres is famous for his writings about atrocities (most notably *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*) and his challenges to the relationship of politics and poetry. "Ourselves or Nothing" describes the toll this had taken on him: "the chill in your throat like a small / blue bone, those years of your work / on the Holocaust. You had to walk / off the darkness, miles of winter / riverfront, windows the eyes in skulls / along the river." Forché shared de Pres's friendship, his home, and many of the same experiences. In telling readers about the effects writing has had on him, it is almost as if she is giving us a glimpse into the internal struggles she herself has faced. In fact, the lines "Go after that which is lost / and all the mass graves of the century's dead /

will open into your early waking hours" seem to be a warning: If you join in a war against atrocity, you will be haunted by what you see. Yet even as she issues that warning and describes what it is that haunts her, she charges the readers to do it anyway: "Everywhere and always / go after that which is lost."

When asked in a 1995 interview with Bill Moyers to name "the country between us" to which the title of the collection refers, Forché responds:

The country between us is perhaps the distance between one human being and another, how long it takes one human voice to reach another human voice. It's probably also a reference to El Salvador, which was the country that came into my heart when I was just becoming an adult, and the country which probably shaped my moral imagination. But perhaps it is the United States too, because for me the United States is very complex. It was the people of the United States who all through that war were very concerned and who cared about human rights and responded very favorably to all appeals while at the same time the United States was a government that didn't seem to know how to listen to any of that. So I have two countries in my mind: the country of my people and the country of the government that I knew as I was growing into adulthood.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Colonel" was met with harsh criticism; some accused Forché of making up the whole episode to dramatize her point, while others said she wrote the poem purely for its shock value. Many modern songwriters have been accused of the same thing. In what ways might Forché's idea of poetry of witness also apply to modern music (specifically rap)?
2. In describing the colonel's house in the poem "The Colonel," Forché intersperses details of war with the mundane items found in American homes: "There were daily papers, pet dogs,

a pistol on the cushion beside him.” How does this technique affect the overall feeling of the poem?

3. “Ourselves or Nothing” includes the lines “There is a cyclone fence between / ourselves and the slaughter and behind it / we hover in a calm protected world like / netted fish, exactly like netted fish.” Who is the “we” to whom Forché refers? How does this view of world relations both benefit and harm the “netted fish”?

***The Angel of History* (1994)**

After completing *The Country between Us*, Forché went through a period when her writing seemed to her more like fragmented images than poetry. She collected her writings in notebooks but did not attempt to publish anything other than translations or anthologies of the poems of other writers. Through the examination of poetry produced by writers who have endured extreme situations, Forché began to notice a commonality. Their work seemed deeply rooted in the heart of the trauma, changed in significant ways regardless of whether a particular poem was about the trauma or not. This work turned out to be a valuable process for Forché, allowing her to see in her own disconnected writings a wholeness interpretable only through the trauma. She returned to her notebooks and began to examine the interrelatedness of the images, seeing them in a new light:

I had this idea that language, human spoken language, might be like radio waves in the universe, always intact as they move onward. Everything that’s ever been said stays in the universe in some way—that the earth is somehow wrapped in the poem. There’s a line [in *The Angel of History*] that says: “The earth is wrapped in weather, and the weather in risen voices.” And all I could feel when I was writing was that I was somehow pulling at these pieces, these fragments, these swatches of human language. (Ratiner 165)

To give adequate voice to “these swatches of human language,” Forché needed to move away from the first-person narrative. She described her process of writing in an interview with David Wright:

I didn’t want to write *The Angel of History* in a confessional lyric mode. Or in a mode that was explorative of the self and its sensibilities. . . . I knew I wanted to write in a mode of wakeful listening; in a mode of receptivity; in a mode of recording rather than in a mode of pronouncement or confession or establishment of lyric identity and selfhood. (Available online. URL: www.nimblespirit.com)

Her poems became a story, told through the eyes of Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” who perceives all of human history as a single, continuous calamity. Therefore, this volume of poetry feels less like a collection of poems and more like a novel, told in parts.

One of these parts, entitled “The Angel of History,” interweaves the story of Ellie, a survivor of the German invasion of Poland who has lost two sons (one to winter and one “to her own attempt to silence him”), with that of 44 Jewish children hidden until they were discovered and taken to Auschwitz.

“The Garden of Shukkei-en” tells of two women visiting the Garden of Shukkei-en, a restored ornamental garden in Hiroshima, Japan. One woman was present when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945; she tries to tell the other what it was like but warns, “Nothing I say will be enough.” As she describes in vivid detail what she has seen, she wonders, “Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?” Those lines, which seemingly contradict each other, speak to the common theme Forché has described in language about atrocity: that it is at once not enough and too much. It is, as Forché has quoted Jabès, “the wounded words” that are left to the poet (Forché, *Against* 41).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the line “Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?” from “The Garden of Shukkei-en.” Usually precision in language serves to clarify, rather than obscure. Give other examples of precise language and discuss the effect they have on understanding.
2. Forché includes a selection by Paul Valéry describing scholars’ attempts to translate a book received from an angel. How does Forché’s use of Valéry’s parable relate to the poems in her book, which mostly address atrocities of war? Compare this to the children’s book *Seven Blind Mice*, by Ed Young (1993). What lesson might these stories hold for us regarding the future?

***Blue Hour* (2003)**

In describing the circumstances in which this book was written, Forché writes:

When my son was an infant in Paris, we woke together in the light the French call *l’heure bleue*, between darkness and day, between the night of a soul and its redemption, an hour associated with pure hovering. In Kabbalah, blue is *hokhmah*, the color of the second *sefirah*. In Tibetan Buddhism, the hour before dawn is associated with the ground luminosity, or “clear light,” arising at the moment of death. It is not a light apprehended through the senses, but is said to be the radiance of mind’s true nature. (*Blue* 71)

After reading this description, it is easy to see how the poems in *Blue Hour* might have been conceived, sitting in that luminous dark, hovering between thoughts of life and thoughts of death. The poems themselves hover, balanced on a thin line of conscious choice and accidental pairings: abundance and grief, coffins and cups, cribs and smoke. Ghostlike, these paired images haunt the reader until they blend among one’s own thoughts,

turning every thing of reality into a poem and every poem into a thing of reality.

“Blue Hour,” the collection’s title poem, is dedicated to the poet’s son and describes how one’s view of the past—in this case, the Franco-Prussian War—can be reshaped by the gift of a new life. The poem admonishes that one “shall not say *adieu* when a country ceases to be” and tells us that although she sits and learns French while her infant sleeps, she does this overlooking cemetery walls and reliving the horror of war.

While her son sleeps, the speaker revisits her own childhood, where isolation and confinement masquerade as medical treatment oddly like the asylum where her grandmother burned to death among other patients, chained like inmates to bedrails. This comparison leads her to conclude that “one can live without having survived.” When her son awakes and looks at her, those memories fade and she is able to put memory in its place and say, “*Adieu*, country,” after all.

For Discussion or Writing

1. “Blue Hour” juxtaposes the speaker’s childhood in a time when “*it was not as certain that a child would live to be grown*” with that of her infant son in postwar France. How does the America of today differ, both politically and socially, from the America when your parents were in high school?
2. Consider the phrase “*The human soul weighs twenty-six grams*” from “Blue Hour.” How would you assign weight to something so immeasurable? Choose something that cannot be definitively measured and give it a concrete value, supporting your position.

“On Earth” (2003)

“On Earth” was published in *Blue Hour* and is perhaps the most striking poem of that collection. The poem is prefaced with a quote from George Burgess, which gives us context for Forché’s poems:

- Forché, Carolyn. *The Angel of History*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- . *Blue Hour*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- . *The Country between Us*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.
- . *Gathering the Tribes*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1976.
- , ed. "Foreword." In *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1993.
- Modern American Poetry: Carolyn Forché. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/forche/forche.htm. Accessed June 25, 2009.
- Moyers, Bill. Interview with Carolyn Forché. *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*, edited by James Haba. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Available online. URL: www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/index.htm. Accessed August 6, 2006.
- Need, David. "The Blue Hour: Opening Heart-Worlds, Breaking Language." *OysterBoy Review: Print and Online Journal of Fiction and Poetry* 18 (Winter 2003–2004). Available online. URL: www.oysterboyreview.com/issue/18/index-reviews.html. Accessed July 30, 2006.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness." *American Poetry Review* 30, no. 2 (March–April 2001): 35–39.
- Ratiner, Steven. "Carolyn Forché—the Poetry of Witness." In *Giving Their Word: Conversations with Contemporary Poets*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.
- Smith, Leonora. "Carolyn Forché: Poet of Witness." In *Still the Frame Holds: Essays on Women Poets and Writers*, edited by Shelia Richards and Yvonne Pacheco Tevis, 15–28. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo, 1993.
- Wright, David. "Assembling Community: A Conversation with Carolyn Forché." *Nimble Spirit: The Literary Spirituality Review*, 20 February 2000. Available online. URL: www.nimblespirit.com. Accessed July 18, 2006.
- Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



NIKKI GIOVANNI (1943–)

It's better to take a chance and be wrong than to be safe and dull.

(quoted in *Virginia Tech Magazine*)

Nikki Giovanni's poetry constantly weaves the stories of yesterday with today's reality. Her earlier poetry plays off Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance poets and adds short word allusions to bigger events. At the same time, Giovanni serves as a bridge to the rap artists of the 1990s and beyond. Her content shifts with personal milestones and tragedies. Her poetry is rhythm-based, readable work that draws in many reluctant readers. She wrote during a specific political and cultural time; she shaped the movement of her day and the movement shaped her. Giovanni's identity was influenced by several strong women, especially the grandmother who pushed her into an activist's life. She grew up in a house of books and music, with parents who were educators and grandparents who taught as well. But this was not a quiet family.

Nikki Giovanni was born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr., on June 7, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee, to Yolande Cornelia and Jones "Gus" Giovanni. It was her sister, Gary Ann, three years her senior, who started calling her *Nikki*. The Giovanni family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where her father had grown up. During this time, Yolanda and the girls made frequent trips to Knoxville to visit her parents. Yolanda's mother, Emma Louvenia Watson, would remain a constant influence on Nikki's life.

Giovanni completed first through third grade at Oak Avenue School and then transferred to St.

Simon's, which she attended through eighth grade. It was her seventh-grade teacher, Sister Althea Augustine, who would have a tremendous impact on Giovanni's life. When her sister, Gary, transferred to Wyoming High School as part of a desegregation effort, both she and a friend walked out of a classroom when the teacher said that Emmett Till "got what he deserved" when he was killed by white men in the Mississippi Delta in 1955 (Fowler). For Giovanni, the Till murder would energize the Civil Rights movement and remain an important part of the historical African-American struggle.

Giovanni enrolled in an all-black high school in ninth grade, but because of tensions between her parents, she left Cincinnati to live with her grandparents back in Knoxville, where she attended Austin High School. Here she was influenced by her French teacher, Mrs. Emma Stokes, and an English teacher, Miss Alfreda Delaney. Giovanni later wrote about Delaney in the poem "In Praise of a Teacher": "It was, after all, Miss Delaney who introduced the class to 'My candle burns at both ends; / It will not last the night; / But, ah, my foes, and, oh, my friends—/ It gives a lovely light.' And I thought YES. Poetry is the main line. English is the train." Giovanni's grandmother also played a central role during this time. As the biographer Virginia Fowler notes: "Her grandmother, who is involved in numerous charitable and political endeavors, becomes an increasingly important

influence on her, teaching her the importance of helping others and of fighting injustice. When a demonstration is planned to protest segregated dining facilities at downtown Rich's department store, her grandmother Louvenia cheerfully volunteers her granddaughter Nikki" (xxxiii).

Giovanni was encouraged by both Stokes and Delaney to apply for early admission to Fisk University in Nashville. In the book *Racism 101*, Giovanni recalls in "Remembering Fisk . . . Thinking about DuBois": "The Ford Foundation played a small but significant part in my decision. It seems, if memory serves me well, that they had sponsored a study about taking talented students from high school early, as early as the sophomore year, testing them for intellectual readiness, and encouraging certain institutions to accept them as college freshmen. . . . Most of us, it is fair to say, are bored in high school. I jumped at the chance" (31–32).

Upon entering Fisk, Giovanni encountered problems, for she was "unprepared for the conservatism of this small black college. Almost from the outset she runs into trouble with the Dean of Women, Ann Cheatam, whose ideas about the behavior and attitudes appropriate to a Fisk woman are diametrically opposed to Giovanni's ideas about the intellectual seriousness and political awareness appropriate to a college student" (Fowler xxxiii). Giovanni was expelled from Fisk and returned to her parents' house in Cincinnati to help care for her nephew, Christopher. She worked at a Walgreens drugstore while taking classes at the University of Cincinnati and helping her mother with charity work.

In 1964, Giovanni reentered Fisk University with the support of the dean at the time, Blanche McConnell Cowan, who encouraged her during her years there. Giovanni later wrote in "Poem (for BMC No. 1)":

I was water-logged (having absorbed all that I
could)
I dreamed I was drowning
That no sun from Venice would dry my tears
But a silly green cricket with a pink umbrella
said

Hello Tell me about it
And we talked our way through the storm.
(lines 5–10)

While at Fisk, Giovanni majored in history, edited the student journal, reestablished the campus chapter of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and was involved in various writing workshops. She found a mentor in the writer in residence, John Oliver Killens, who coordinated the first writers' conference at Fisk. Killens and three friends had formed the Harlem Writers Guild in the early 1950s and worked for social causes and racial equality. Though he knew both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Killens identified with Malcolm X: "My fight is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid mainstream of American life." Under Killens's mentorship, Giovanni continued to write and met influential figures such as Dudley Randall, the founder of Broadside Press, and (LeRoi Jones, AMIRI BARAKA), one of the main leaders of the Black Arts Movement.

After graduating with honors in 1967, Giovanni moved back to Cincinnati, where, later that year, her grandmother, Louvenia Watson, died. That loss had a profound impact on Giovanni, who turned to writing several of the poems that were published in her first volume, *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. Giovanni worked with the Settlement House (a kind of community center) through the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work but "never did make it through grad school," she notes in "My Road to Virginia." She explains that "Dr. Louise Shoemaker thought I was more suited to writing and suggested that I should give myself a chance in that field. . . . And why did I have a difficult time in the M.S.W. program? I'm not institution-prone. Most times, in any dispute between an institution and a person, I take the side of a person" (139–140).

In April 1968, Giovanni attended the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., about which she wrote:

His headstone said
 FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST
 But death is a slave's freedom
 We seek the freedom of free men
 And the construction of a world
 Where Martin Luther King could have lived
 and preached non-violence. (*Black Feeling,*
Black Talk)

She then moved to New York City and published her second volume of poetry, *Black Judgement* (1968), which Broadside Press offered to distribute. While she was teaching at Queens College, her book talks and readings attracted the attention of national and international press. In August 1969, she returned to Cincinnati to give birth to her only child, Thomas Watson Giovanni.

Giovanni was a regular guest/host on the television program *Soull*, an entertainment show that promoted black art and culture and featured such names as Muhammad Ali, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier. By the end of 1970, she had become an established voice in the black literary scene and was named Woman of the Year by *Ebony*. In the following year, she published a book of children's poems and her memoir *Gemini*, which is part biography and part commentary on the world around her. *Gemini* prompted a reviewer in *Time* to write: "She is also one of the most visible, not only because she is beautiful but because she is a shrewd and energetic propagandist. In this interim autobiography, both poet and propagandist underscore that point about black love and happiness. Part memoir and part manifesto, it is a plainspoken, lively, provocative, confusing book."

But it was the 1971 release of the album *The Truth Is on Its Way*, which sold 100,000 copies in six months, that truly "launched her career as a national speaker and reader of her own poetry" (Fletcher). It was her first recording that set apart Giovanni as a poet to be heard rather than read. Between 1972 and 1973, Giovanni received many accolades for her writing and her strength as a woman, published more books (including *Ego-*

Tripping and Other Poems for Young People and *A Dialogue: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni*), and celebrated her sister's graduation from Xavier University by traveling to Paris and going on an African lecture tour.

Over the next decade, Giovanni continued to publish, travel, and speak internationally, and receive honorary doctorates from various universities. Her writing output slowed, however, when she moved back to Cincinnati to be with her ill father, who was diagnosed with cancer and died in June 1982. Giovanni has served as visiting professor at Ohio State University, Mount Saint Joseph's College, and at Virginia Tech, where she obtained a permanent position in 1989. In 1988, she published *Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles*, a collection of what one reviewer called "autobiographical essays" on a wide range of issues. Giovanni later reflected to *City Beat*, "I am iconoclastic. I wrote a book called *Sacred Cows and Other Edibles* and the point was that we take ourselves way too seriously. You have to laugh. I'm black. I laugh at everything. You have to laugh; otherwise, you'll be against yourself" (Wilson).

In 1994, *Racism 101*, a collection of previously published essays, was published. In it, Giovanni takes on a variety of topics ranging from higher education to the making of the film *Malcolm X* to the science fiction television series *Star Trek*. Giovanni notes: "I tried to vary by subject so you wouldn't be reading the same idea either in embrace or under attack, you know? I just wanted to write an interesting book and look at the world I inhabit. I'm a poet; I believe the image will reveal itself" (14).

In 1995, Giovanni was diagnosed with lung cancer. She notes:

I smoked my last cigarette on Tuesday, February 7, at 9:00 a.m. in the parking lot at Jewish Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio. I don't have any trouble remembering this because I was to go into surgery at 10:00 a.m. and I, quite frankly, was unsure of the results. If I survived the surgery, it would be my last cigarette because I

would have successfully had a cancerous tumor removed from my left lung. If I did not survive the surgery, well, I still wouldn't have another cigarette. ("A Deer in Headlights")

Giovanni wrote the introduction to the book *Breaking the Silence: Inspirational Stories of Black Cancer Survivors*, by Dr. Karin Stanford. Upon her recovery, Giovanni has continued to publish poetry, essays, and children's books while speaking and teaching. In 2004, her sister and mother died.

Nikki Giovanni's writings are rooted in the context of the Civil Rights movement and the struggle of the black American. Her voice during the height of debate in the 1960s and 1970s put Giovanni's poetry at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Founded by the writer and activist Amiri Baraka (born Everett LeRoi Jones), the movement has been called the "single most controversial moment in the history of African American literature—possibly in American literature as a whole" (*Time*). The Black Arts Movement, in its production of myriad forms of art, challenged the canon of literature, which up to this time had been predominately represented by "dead white men," and presented "politically engaged work that explored the African American cultural and historical experience" (poets.org). Many felt that Giovanni's *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk/Black Judgement* captured "the militant attitude of the civil rights and Black Arts movements of that time" (Hiltz). That attitude included her "call of urgency for Black people to realize their identities and understand their surroundings as part of a white-controlled culture."

The Black Arts Movement is sometimes referred to as the sister arm of the Black Power movement, with groups such as the Black Panthers and controversial figures like Malcolm X calling to the nation's consciousness militant voices that stood in contrast to some of the more peaceable approaches of the Civil Rights movement. In short, the Black Arts Movement did not march quietly through the streets singing "We Shall Overcome" so much as it "shouted emotional/political/cultural charged words as 'Bitter Black Bitterness/Black Black Bitter Bitterness/

Bitterness Black Brothers/Bitter Black Get/Blacker Get Bitter/Get Black Bitterness/NOW'" and

ever notice how it's only the ugly
honkies
who hate
like Hitler was an ugly dude
same with lyndon
ike nixon hhh wallace maddox
and all the governors of mississippi
and you don't ever see a good-looking
cop
perhaps this only relates to the physical
nature of the beast
at best interesting for a beast
and never beautiful
by that black standard ("Ugly Honkies, or The
Election Game and How to Win It")

Most of what has been written about Nikki Giovanni will include some synonym for *controversial* or *militant* or *activist*, and for many readers that is the draw of her writings. For those seeking poetry that strictly adheres to established rules and forms and a consistency of voice, Giovanni's writing will disappoint. For instance, one reviewer remarked that her "Kidnap Poem" contained "all the typical crap . . . the lack of punctuation for no real reason, the clichés weakly masked by NG's trying to fob this off as being from the POV of a child, the poor music, reasonless capitalization (& its lack), meaningless enjambment, etc." (Schneider). For the reader of Giovanni, the term *voice* seems to be a priority. As Fowler notes, "The development of a unique and distinctive voice has been perhaps the single most important achievement of Giovanni's career" (xxi). In fact, many people turn to Giovanni's poetry and essays after hearing a public reading. For Giovanni, Fowler continues, that is carrying on a central cultural theme of being black: "In her poetry Giovanni attempts to continue African and African American oral traditions, and she seems in many ways to have less reverence for the written word than for the spoken" (xxi).

On this theme of voice, it is also important to consider the content of Giovanni's writings, which

began with that militant, in-your-face voice within the Black Arts Movement. The thread that weaves its way through her work is “the centrality of race and gender,” as notes Fowler. That focus remains consistent even in later poems, although, as Ryan Wahlberg and Bianca Ward note, “She shows a new emphasis on a universal struggle for truth, exchanging her earlier ‘indignation,’ for the individual quest for beauty” (Wahlberg and Ward). Giovanni continues to be “truth-telling,” as she tells many of her audiences, and perhaps that may be why her writing is compelling: She and her poetry are accessible and yet difficult to categorize (or “institutionalize,” as mentioned earlier). Kheven Lee LaGrone may have been accurate in the observation “Giovanni’s activism is not an easy, simplistic, ‘get-whitey’ militancy. It’s more reflective than that—her questions have changed with the world. She hasn’t mellowed; she’s matured” (LaGrone RV-9).

It is indisputable that Giovanni’s words have moved some critics to vilify her forms of writing and the content of her emotionally charged ideas. And yet, 30 years after her initial thrust into the social consciousness, Giovanni’s poetry, children’s books, and nonfiction remain a strong voice in the human struggle for honest admission of past mistakes.

“Nikki-Rosa” (1968)

“Nikki-Rosa” was the nickname given the poet by her sister, Gary Ann (Fowler 381). Some consider this piece Giovanni’s signature poem.

In this “childhood remembrances” poem, the speaker refers to specific events from her life that could be seen as constituting a “hard childhood”—but she wants all to know that really “[she] was quite happy.” The poem gives the reader a glimpse of how the speaker views her own childhood and what in life really mattered to her.

The speaker reveals what it is like to remember growing up “Black”; in lines 2 through 26, she recalls memories that reflect the tone of Langston Hughes’s poem “Dream Deferred” or Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Fowler outlines the time

that Giovanni’s family was “in Woodlawn” (line 3): “The family leaves Glenview and moves briefly to Woodlawn, a suburb of Cincinnati. Father teaches at South Woodlawn School and works evenings and weekends at the YMCA. Because Woodlawn has no elementary school for black children, sister Gary lives with father’s half brother and his wife, Bill and Gladys Atkinson, in Columbus, Ohio, where she attends second grade” (xxx). This explains the lines “they never talk about how happy you were to have / your mother / all to yourself” (lines 6–8).

The speaker fears that people—“biographers,” which could mean literally the people who will write about the poet or, more universally, the reader of the poem who lacks similar experience—will not grasp the importance of the “Hollydale” event to her family. Hollydale was a subdivision located outside Cincinnati and intended for blacks. As had others, Giovanni’s father had invested in the project; he purchased the land but was unable to obtain financing to build the house. Fowler suggests, “Because they were Black, they could not find banks to lend them the money” (382). The family sold their share of the investment and instead purchased a house in Lincoln Heights.

The speaker makes reference to her parents’ relationship with a concessive tone: “And though they fought a lot / it isn’t your father’s drinking that makes any difference / but only that everybody is together” (lines 22–24). Later, in 1958, Giovanni would have to move to her grandparents’ home in Knoxville. But despite the poverty of her growing-up years, she does she want to be pitied, for she notes in the poem, “they never understand / Black love is Black wealth” (lines 29–30). The importance of the black family, Giovanni illustrates, is not based on external, material items (a nice house with indoor plumbing) and all of the niceties of living (quiet, tranquil family interactions). Rather, according to the speaker, the strength of the black family is the togetherness of the entire family—something the white person does not understand. Happiness, she notes, is achieved through from family; family is happiness.

As Kevin Lashley observes, “Giovanni’s constant guard against the harmful effects of

dominant white society on American Blacks contributes to her popularity among a Black readership similarly on guard. And to many readers, her work offers a sense of hope where there otherwise is none.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. What similarities do Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" and "Nikki-Rosa" share as they relate to dreams and families? How do their perspectives differ? Do both poems describe the same reality? Cite examples from each poem as you explain your answer.
2. Giovanni's narrator says "no white person" can ever understand "Black love." What does she mean by this comment? Is she herself stereotyping the "white person"?
3. The poem's speaker is concerned that "biographers never understand" her father's pain regarding the Hollydale situation. As you consider past events that you feel have shaped you, what do you think biographers will get wrong in your life? Why? What do you hope they will interpret correctly?

"Ego-Tripping" (1970)

Originally published in the volume *Re: Creation* (1970), this poem reappeared as the title poem in the 1973 children's collection *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People*. It serves as a reminder that there are bigger and "badder" things out there than humanity. Of all the people who have a right to boast, it is the "I" of the poem—and the poem supplies a list of reasons why this is so.

The first stanza may draw a connection between the Black Arts Movement and its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance, as both movements' writers drew upon Africa as their heritage ("congo," "fertile crescent," "sphinx," "pyramid"). For instance, notice the echoes of these lines from Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926):

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and
older than the

flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were
young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me
to sleep. (lines 1–6)

Giovanni echoes the pride of the "I" in the poem. After the indication that this "I" can compete with nature and the stars, the reader arrives at the colloquial line "I am bad."

The poem connects not only the place-names of Africa, but some of the human names. "My oldest daughter is nefertiti" (line 12) is a reference to "one of the most celebrated of the ancient Egyptians," Fowler notes, "despite the fact that relatively little is known of her" (402). The name *Nefertiti* means "the beauty has come" or "the beautiful woman has come." Most sources indicate she was the wife of Amenhotep IV (sometimes known as King Akhenaten), and, depending on the source, most believe that she helped him raise six daughters. When one of the daughters died, Fowler explains, the "parents' mourning was depicted in wall paintings." The speaker of the poem also refers to Hannibal, known for his military prowess and his conquests of the Punic Wars. Legend has it that he rode elephants to cross the Alps. She mentions that her "son noah built new / ark," perhaps a specific allusion to a contemporary person and Newark, New Jersey, or less symbolically, another vehicle for saving people. Last, the speaker says she puts the person of Jesus (God's son) into the things that "I" have done—specifically that she is "the one who would save."

This "I" is also involved in creation: She has made diamonds, uranium, jewels, oil, and gold. All of these things are traced back to the origin, or the birthplace: the Congo. And throughout the poem, Giovanni includes colloquial elements to connect past to present, sometimes using lofty language, "giving divine perfect light" (line 6), and following

it with “I am bad” (line 7). When she boasts, “I am so hip even my errors are correct” and then “I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal,” she uses the common modifier *so* to qualify perfect, divine, ethereal, and surreal.

Interestingly, Giovanni tells a story about flying with her son to Zaire and explaining that Zaire was called Congo: “‘The Congo!’ he said excitedly. ‘Mommy you were born here! We must be in Africa.’ He was beaming. And so was I. I was never so happy that I had written a poem than I was at that very moment. ‘Yes, Thomas. We’re in Africa. I was born in the Congo’” (*Collected* 368).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Giovanni, as in her other poems, makes bold claims through the speaker in “Ego-Tripping.” Some may interpret those claims as pride in one’s heritage, whereas others may see them as a step backward because of the emphasis on one culture rather than a celebration of all cultures. Compare the assertions of black identity in “Ego-Tripping” with claims made in other Giovanni poems.
2. Is using African imagery a positive way of celebrating black heritage? What is the nature of the relationship between African-American and African culture? Why did writers of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement draw heavily from African heritage? Has there been a shift in later generations of black artists?
3. What is the impact of Giovanni’s use of colloquial language? Why does she use such phrases and words, and does she accomplish her overall purpose through their use?
4. What poetic effect does Giovanni create in her selection of specific historical events and people?

“When I Die” (1972)

Published in the 1972 volume *My House*, this poem gives directions about how people should respond when the speaker dies. But in this last will and

testament, the speaker takes one last honest swing at those who have perpetuated injustice on her and on black women. She is direct and sometimes punishing with her words toward those who “hurt me,” the government for its failure to protect the rights of black women, the “black man” who criticized the poet, and “everyone who loved me.” She is specifically concerned that her son be told the correct story of the poet’s life—one that is about living “the true revolution.”

Whether significant or not, Giovanni, in both this poem and most of her earlier works, uses the uncapitalized first-person pronoun. Perhaps this indicates or represents how the poet views herself in retrospect, or perhaps it is a way to de-emphasize the individual and encourage the viewing of this poem’s narrator as one who is speaking truth. Perhaps the lowercase *i* is trying to underscore a theme within Giovanni’s work: to focus on the truth and not so much on the speaker of that truth. Whatever the reason, Giovanni will all but drop the *i* for *I* in her poetry beginning with the volume *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983).

The first stanza of “When I Die” is reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno*, in which the poet metes out just and appropriate punishment for the crime committed. The “crime” here is that if those “who ever hurt me” cry, it is not because of regret for their actions but because they are crying false tears. These people (or ideas) are “the evil that passed itself off as a person.” The speaker’s wish that these people cry until their eyes fall out evokes a common idiom in American culture. Note, too, that in some cultures it is said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. “A million maggots” may be a reference to the French poet Charles Baudelaire’s “Au Lecteur” (“To the Reader”) in his volume *Flowers of Evil* (1857): “like hives of maggots, thickly seething / Within our brains a host of demons surges” (lines 21–22). Giovanni’s speaker claims that she (or truth) has “probably tried to love” this type of “person.”

The poet’s political criticisms arise in the second stanza, in which she singles out the National Security Council (whose purpose is to advise and assist the president on national security and foreign policy),

Interpol (which facilitates international police cooperation even where diplomatic relations do not exist between particular countries), and the FBI-CIA Foundation, which is Giovanni's way of saying both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) really function as one unit. All of these governmental organizations, Giovanni notes, protected themselves more than they considered protecting their citizens (and, more specifically, the black woman).

In the third stanza, the speaker instructs her listeners to take those things that represented her work (poetry, books, pictures, posters) and "let them burn—throw acid on them—shit on them" because that is what in truth has been happening all along. Perhaps here Giovanni wants the reader to focus not so much on the poet, as again, on the message of truth.

Her work and life, the speaker continues in stanza 4, will only "[scare] white folk" and make "black ones truly mad." If anything, this stanza articulates the racial tension of the 1960s and the 1970s. For Giovanni, along with others in the Black Arts Movement, the vehicle for this "do what you do" sentiment is art.

The speaker has a special, specific message for her son, however—to tell him the story of how she lived and the story of wanting "rebirth." Here the agent holding the speaker back is not so much white repression or past events that cannot be changed, but her own people, who lack vision and fail to break free of history.

In coupletlike fashion, the poet ends with the truth: "Revolution," or radical change, results from "touching."

For Discussion or Writing

1. List the various things the poem's speaker wants done when she dies. Do these seem consistent with the conclusion she draws in the end—"and if ever i touched a life . . ."—or is this merely wishful thinking?
2. How can we reconcile the revolution of the Black Arts Movement with what Giovanni concludes constitutes "revolution"?
3. Why does the speaker single out Giovanni's poem "Nikki-Rosa" as being one that she does not want read when she dies?
4. How is this poem structured like a Shakespearean sonnet? How does the structure affect its impact on the reader?

"Stardate Number 18628.190" (1995)

This poem was originally published as "Light the Candles" in *Essence*, a magazine that describes itself as "the definitive voice of dynamic African American women." The original title seems to reflect the overall tone of the piece, while the revised poem refers to the *Star Trek* series, to which Giovanni makes periodic references in her talks. For Giovanni, to explore space is a "no-brainer"; she is a fan of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) Space Shuttle program. As she told students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, she spoke at NASA in February 2003 as the "token black person" during Black History Month.

The format of the poem is a style that Giovanni begins to experiment with in the volume *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), characterized by the use of block paragraphing and ellipses. The speaker reminds the reader, "This is not a poem" at the beginning of stanzas 1, 3, and 5. For Giovanni, as mentioned previously, poems are the vehicle for art, and preexisting institutions—such as a set way of writing poetry—are meant to be destroyed. Or, in Giovanni's case, deliberately stated: "This is not a poem."

Stanza 1 begins with a small yet familiar metaphor that the speaker recalls: something as simple as a hot drink in the beginning of spring. Giovanni then uses another familiar metaphor, that of a quilt, which evokes memories of family history and perhaps reinforces the idea "Black love is Black wealth." Here she may be referring to what white people do with quilts, treating them as something more to be admired than to be practically useful. For the poem's speaker, however, the quilt is made from family history and is thus comforting and "here to keep me warm."

The speaker begins stanza 3 with “This is not a sonnet,” referring to the 14-line form that was popularized in the 1200s and revived in the late 1500s by writers such as Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare. The sonnet, to the writers and readers of that era, was a vehicle of rhyme and meter. Not so for Giovanni, who turns to the rhyme and meter of her experiences: hymns, spirituals, and a progression of popular vocalists and performance artists known to the poet. Among them are the opera singers Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price and the blues singers Betsy Smith, Dinah Washington, and Etta James. To the poem’s speaker, the voices that truly reflect “Planet Earth” are the voices of black women such as these. And in stanza 3, the common objects and events that make up the experiences of the speaker are what truly matter.

So what *is* this poem that is neither a poem nor specifically a sonnet? “It is a celebration of the road we have traveled,” states Giovanni. “This is the Black woman,” she continues, and the full range of all she has experienced. It is a celebration of others who have suffered harm or death because of what they represented include blacks who fought in wars and were assassinated.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is poetic about the science fiction series *Star Trek*? What is it about the television series that energizes Giovanni’s poem? How is the tone of the poem affected when the title is changed from “Light the Candles” to “Stardate”? Discuss your answer fully.
2. Is the stardate a literal date (in *Star Trek* terms), or do you think Giovanni just made it up? You might consider a letter that Horace Greeley addressed to Abraham Lincoln entitled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions.” Why does Giovanni make this reference and what similarities do the letter and this poem share?
3. Why does Giovanni write “This is not a poem,” even though the work follows the general tone and form of her poems? Is the statement true in any way?
4. Read a few issues of the magazine *Essence*, for which this poem was first written. How does the editorial content of that magazine reflect the overall tone of this poem? Discuss.

“Train Rides” (1999)

Published in the volume *Blues: For All the Changes*, “Train Rides” continues Giovanni’s “truth-telling” expression, connecting trivial things in the near-present (what one wears and when) to the near-trivial train rides of her past. But, as seen in most of her poetry and writings, she will use the vehicle of words to note truth as she sees it and expose that truth’s implications as they relate to the poet. This particular volume of work was accepted fairly well, but some critics thought Giovanni was being lazy and relying too much on the poet’s personal life as subject matter for her rants.

A main thread in “Train Rides” is the notion of a black male and the desire to be that “beautiful boy.” Society is at fault for building institutions to make sure these boys/men do not fulfill their destinies or dreams; according to Giovanni, that institution is the prison—a place, she notes, for which there is “no excuse.” The speaker makes a small confession that at one time she thought prisons might be a good idea but now admits that is no longer true. What is true is that money could be spent on other things, such as better roads, but for the speaker, railway systems are the ideal mode of travel. And to complicate matters further, the speaker is going to rail against those black men who are not “beautiful” but are “foolish things” such as a “lawn jockey.”

The occasion of the poem is an October day, which may or may not be technically the “first day of fall,” but it feels like it. It is a time of transition in nature (working with the soil), but also in fashion. The speaker depicts the petty people (including the media) who emphasize the trivial things in life as the “fashion police” because their role is to shame the individual. Much of Giovanni’s poetry echos this idea of living in fear of being shamed.

As she told a college audience in 2002: "I think it's so sad, that we have a whole generation that's afraid. Afraid to speak up, afraid to say anything that may offend somebody, and yet your rights are being taken away slowly" (Brown). She continues this theme with the scene of coming face to face with a mother mouse; the speaker is afraid because "humans don't do very well with other life forms." The mother mouse will not abandon her babies, and thus the speaker recognizes a universal truth in the role of the mother mouse.

The occasion of the poem reminds the speaker of the trips she and her sister would take from Cincinnati, to Knoxville, traveling to her maternal grandparents' home. Giovanni points out that it is a congregation of black men who protect the two girls during their travels. Now, she laments, the black man is no longer in the position of protecting, as he should be, and is instead in prison. Although she admits that segregation is not right, she points out that the "Band of Brothers" watched over them.

The speaker then states that she has a "lawn jockey," which for many African Americans and other is an offensive reminder of the days when blacks were servants to whites. But she has one of them anyway, explaining, "I collect foolish things, but they make me happy." The prime example of the embodiment of a lawn jockey is those who stand in the way of progress for blacks, who are "despicable" and "lack good sense" and "common compassion."

The speaker singles out Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who makes "Thurgood Marshall turn over in his grave" by taking advantage of some of the benefits of desegregation while arguing that it does not work. For Giovanni, growing up in segregated America is a thing to be celebrated because of the sense of "keeping it real" and preserving that sense of community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the speaker's admission that she has a lawn jockey in her yard affect the tone of the poem? Many African Americans find lawn jockeys offensive. Why would the speaker's collection of such "foolish things" make her happy?
2. What impact does the title have on the rest of the poem? How would you interpret this poem if you did not know its title? Compare the fondness for railways in this poem with the attitudes in stories such as Donald Crews's children's books *Freight Train*, *Bigmama's*, and *Shortcut*.
3. Read "Train Rides" and "Possum Crossing." Explore the notions of interruptions by nature in both works.
4. Giovanni often returns to the idea of the "beautiful boy," especially in the context of rap and hip hop as well as in her criticism of the prison system. In the late 1990s, when the well-known rapper Tupac Shakur was killed, an *Ebony* writer noted that Giovanni responded by calling rap a "'petition,' a plea from young people to look at their lives." Giovanni added, "That's one reason that beautiful boy [Tupac] is dead, because he tried to 'keep it real'" (Kinnon). Explore Giovanni's concept of the "beautiful boy" in both her writing and her public speaking.

"Possum Crossing" (2002)

This poem appeared in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems*, published in 2002. For some readers, it sounds like an environmental statement, a variation on a "be kind to animals" sermon. However, such an interpretation would signal a complete shift from the poet's larger work. In Giovanni's later writing, we see her draw upon the entire world around her. In this poem, as in her other work, she continues to explore the relationship between the individual and the surrounding world. "Possum Crossing" is no different: She reminds the reader that as we climb into our man-made vehicles and rush to our destination, there is a whole world out there and we should remember it.

In stanza 1, Giovanni describes in an almost uncharacteristic way a scene: the beginning of a car trip. What is different about this stanza is that it can be considered a normal, formatted structure describing an everyday scene. The stanza has four

lines and no rhyme scheme, but a syllable form of 6-8-8-8. The car is the thing that interrupts the scene; its “lights cast an eerie glow.” The alliteration of “slick street” provides the anticipation for the next line’s “Hitting brakes.” The speaker does not seem to have learned from past encounters with animals in the road. The problem, she notes through her words and punctuation, is that the animals themselves seem to be bothered by the rushing of humans in their cars: “Mother-to-be possum occasionally lopes home . . . being / naturally . . . slow her condition makes her even more ginger.”

The speaker’s message, then, is in stanza 3: “We need a sign POSSUM CROSSING.” By shifting from the first-person singular (the *I* of the story) to the plural (the *We* of this stanza, including the “coffee-gurgling neighbors”), the speaker is not so much telling the world to look out for nature, but to look out for herself—for she, too, is one of those neighbors whose “coffee splashes over the cup.” The sign is to warn, to remind herself (and others) of the context of nature and the world and history: for, she notes, in stanza 4, the place in history that the birds have because of their heritage as the “living kin of dinosaurs.” The irony is that in the next moment, that bird could become what it is eating from the road. Giovanni may also be making a reference to humans here, and perhaps this is where the lesson lies: Like the dinosaurs, we are not “invincible.”

Back in real time, the speaker, who has not been paying attention to her driving, catches the reflection of light off some kind of animal. The first four lines of stanza 5 reflect the stream of thoughts racing through her mind; she then catches her breath, as indicated by the line length and ellipsis. The thing in the road, surprisingly, is “a big wet leaf” that is described in living terms (“struggling . . . to lift itself”). And the poem makes the connection: All living things are in the yearning, the evolution to be better.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In this particular poem, Giovanni focuses on the theme of nature and how humanity interacts with it. Often a poet will draw conclusions or lessons from these types of interactions. What is Giovanni’s intention in describing various aspects of nature juxtaposed with an everyday experience such as driving? To aid in your discussion or writing, begin by listing the contrasting elements of nature and human existence.
2. The traditional haiku generally presents a scene—perhaps from nature—and then surprises the reader with a touch of irony in the final line. With this in mind, how does “Possum Crossing” function like a traditional haiku?
3. Select other poets or writers who use nature as their main subject matter—for instance, Robert Frost, BARBARA KINGSOLVER, or Henry David Thoreau. Compare and contrast the messages expressed by those writers with Giovanni’s theme in this poem.

“Have Dinner with Me” (2002)

Like many Americans, Giovanni was deeply affected and disturbed by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Her volume *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* contained five poems about the events. These included “Desperate Acts,” in which she admits that it is hard to understand “Why angry men commit / desperate acts”; “9:11:01,” in which she denounces George W. Bush and says he “blew it” by not asking citizens, especially African Americans, for the United States to be forgiven; “The Self-Evident Poem,” in which she reflects on the plight and history of blacks and feels “sorry for the white folks who still do not understand this is another century and we just can’t keep bombing the same people over and over”; and “My America,” in which Giovanni responds to Hugh Downs (a news anchor during the time of the attacks) by saying her country is “Not a bad country . . . neither the best or the worst . . . just a place we call home.”

In “Have Dinner with Me,” the speaker pleads for a renewed sense of community. The first stanza

describes falling people as well as “Windows on the World,” the restaurant on the top floors of the World Trade Center’s North Tower. Seventy-three staff members and 77 guests were reportedly in the restaurant during the attack. Specifically, Giovanni singles out “the brother and the sister” some identified as Norberto Hernandez and Claribel Hernandez in one of the most controversial photos in the media coverage of the attack that became known as “The Falling Man” and showed a man jumping from the building. (It was discovered later that the man was not Norberto and that his remains were in fact found in a stairwell.) This does not, however, detract from the poem, for the reference reminds the reader that individuals were going about their work to serve others and to help their families.

Giovanni’s message to the reader is an oft-referenced stanza, a message that is consistent with her major concerns: “This is a time of neighbors / This is a time of neighborhoods.” In a kind of summary, she brings the poem’s pacing to a close by reviewing the “helpless characters” of the last stanzas with the verbs “Feed . . . Pet . . . Call . . . Eat . . .”: all neighborly things to do.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What impact does the later identity of the Falling Man have on the poem? Consider TIM O'BRIEN's take on “truth” in his story *The Things They Carried*: “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.” Discuss the impact of O'Brien's statement as it applies to this poem and to other written works that may include historical inaccuracies.
2. As with other tragic events in a country's history, the attacks of September 11, 2001, caused many people to attempt to articulate the emotion of the moment and to understand the meaning behind the events. Gather several other artistic and journalistic reactions to the events of September 11, 2001, and compare and contrast the meaning of those texts with Giovanni's poem.

“Quilts” (2003)

The real story behind this poem is its occasion: In 2003, the Contemporary QuiltArt Association called together 40 poets and 40 quilters “to do something special,” according to Gayle Bryan, former president of the association. The association matched up the quilters with poets; each pair would collaborate for a year “investigating the intersections between textile art and poetry, ultimately creating artforms that fused the two genres.” The quilter Sally Sellers approached Giovanni with the project after her daughter heard Giovanni at school. Seller notes that she struggled with ideas for her quilt she called “I’m Not Sorry,” until she received Giovanni’s poem “Quilts.” Following the poem’s first lines, Sellers composed her materials from mostly used and stained linens. “Nikki’s words reminded me that imperfect tablecloths were far more interesting than the pristine folds of fabric stashed away in the linen closet,” Sellers said. For Sellers, to highlight the stains in her quilt with gold beads was to play off Giovanni’s idea that “the stain was what was to be celebrated.”

The poem is an interesting extension to her earlier work “When I Die,” written when Giovanni was 25 years old. Now, 35 years later, we see the poet considering mutability and age and how she will be remembered. “Quilts,” as “When I Die,” does not offer an apology or regret for the past. Although the poem’s speaker states, “I am a failure,” it is not in the usual sense. The failure arises from becoming older—and this is what marks the most noticeable difference between the two poems. Giovanni continues the metaphor of the quilt as a life throughout the poem, utilizing words such as *fading*, *frayed*, and *failing*. And though the poem longs for those younger days, the speaker is nonetheless content with those memories. The speaker’s “plea” appears toward the end of the poem, when she hopes her words or actions will provide comfort to the young and companionship for the old.

Giovanni alludes to this quilt imagery in other poems as well, notably “Stardate Number 18628.190” in the lines “This is not a poem / This is a summer quilt.” Fowler notes that this is

“a metaphor of family history and family love; the pieces of the quilt are scraps of cloth, each of which reminds the speaker of an event and a person in her family’s history . . . the quilt’s value is based on its warming, life-sustaining, and life-nurturing powers” (xxiii–xxiv).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Find a photo of the quilt Sally Sellers made in collaboration with Giovanni (at the time of this writing, accessible at www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5946). How effective is the quilt by itself? How would you describe the quilt’s overall impact along with its detail? How is the meaning of Sellers’s piece enhanced by Giovanni’s poem? How is the Giovanni poem enhanced by Sellers’s quilt?
2. In his poem “Ars Poetica” Archibald MacLeish attempts to describe the art of the poem. He ends with the lines “A poem should not mean / But be.” MacLeish’s contemporary Carl Sandburg attempted the same challenge of defining poetry in the preface of “Good Morning, America.” Some poets, such as Robert Blake, have defied traditional definitions of poetry by combining it with other genres. Challenge the assertion that a poem should be able to stand by itself. What are the benefits and drawbacks of multigenre art?
3. Respond to Giovanni’s justification of the black perspective and why she thinks that viewpoint may be superior: “I’m totally convinced that any Black women who consciously circled the earth, let alone landed on another planet, would have a very different view of the heavens as well as the meagerness of earth. I think Black people, and Black Americans especially, are the only people to really view earth from its proper perspective since we have no land that we can in any historical way call our own” (*Sacred Cows* 61).
4. Giovanni thinks poets bear the responsibility of recording history: “I like to tell the truth as I see it. I hope others do the same. That’s why literature is so important. We cannot possibly leave it to history as a discipline nor to sociology nor science nor economics to tell the story of our people” (*Sacred Cows* 61). What is your response to Giovanni’s claim?
5. Some have termed Nikki Giovanni the “poet of the people,” while others say she is a social poet. Where do you place Giovanni in her overall contribution to the poetical canon?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Brown, Coryn. “Nikki Giovanni Spits Wisdom at Temple.” *Temple News* 21 November 2002. Available online. URL: <http://temple-news.com/2002/11/21/nikki-giovanni-spits-wisdom-at-temple>. Accessed February 25, 2007.
- Fletcher, Gilbert. “Painted Voices—Nikki Giovanni.” *The Black Collegian and IMDiversity*, 2006. Available online. URL: www.black-collegian.com/african/painted-voices/nikki.shtml. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- Fowler, Virginia C. *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- . *Nikki Giovanni*. New York: Twayne, 1999.
- Giovanni, Nikki. *Acolytes: Poems*. New York: William Morrow, 2007.
- . *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. 1968.
- . *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement*. New York: William Morrow, 1970.
- . *Black Judgement*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON GIOVANNI AND HER WORK

1. Who is Giovanni’s intended audience? From her poetry and essays, defend your answer. Then consider how she treats that audience and identify the tone she uses to address it.
2. Respond to Giovanni’s thoughts on the intersection of art and truth: “I like to think that if truth has any bearing on art, my poetry and prose is art because it’s truthful. I say that while recognizing that every time a truth is learned a new thesis, synthesis, antithesis is set in motion” (*Sacred Cows*).

- . *Blues: For All the Changes: New Poems*. New York: William Morrow, 1999.
- . *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni: 1968–1998*. Introduction by Virginia Fowler. New York: William Morrow, 2003.
- . *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*. New York: William Morrow, 1978.
- . *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People*. New York: Lawrence Hill, 1973.
- . *An Evening with Nikki Giovanni*. Interviewed by Pearl Cleage. DVD. Atlanta: History Makers, 17 June 2005; broadcast on PBS February 2006.
- . Introduction. In *Breaking the Silence: Inspirational Stories of Black Cancer Survivors*, by Karin Stanford. Chicago: Hilton, 2005:.
- . *Love Poems*. New York: William Morrow, 1997.
- . “Meet the Poet: Nikki Giovanni.” Harvard Graduate School of Education, Askwith Lecture Hall, Longfellow Hall, Boston, 4 February 2003. Available online. URL: http://forum.wgbh.org/wgbh/forum.php?lecture_id=1213. Accessed February 20, 2007.
- . *My House*. New York: William Morrow, 1972.
- . Nikki Giovanni official Web site. Available online. URL: www.nikki-giovanni.com. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- . *The Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni*. New York: Perennial, 2003.
- . *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems*. New York: William Morrow, 2002.
- . *Racism 101*. New York: William Morrow, 1994.
- . *Re: Creation*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970.
- . *Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles*. New York: William Morrow, 1988.
- . *Spirit to Spirit*. Directed by Mirra Banks. VHS, 1987.
- . *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*. New York: William Morrow, 1983.
- . *The Truth Is on Its Way*. Album. 1971.
- . “Truth Is on Its Way Concert Webcast” [podcast]. James Madison University, 27 February 2006. Available online. URL: http://media.jmu.edu/special/8_822.asx. Accessed February 23, 2007.
- . *The Women and the Men*. New York: William Morrow, 1975.
- Harris, Sally. “Nikki Giovanni: ‘It’s Better to Take a Chance and Be Wrong Than to Be Safe and Dull.’” *Virginia Tech Magazine* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 10–12. Available online. URL: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VTMAG/v13n1/page10-12.html>. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- Hiltz, Virginia, and Mike Sells. “Nikki Giovanni.” Black Arts Movement Web site, University of Michigan, 1998. Available online. URL: www.umich.edu/~eng499/people/giovanni.html. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- “Hustler and Fabulist.” *Time*, 12 January 1972. Available online. URL: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,877663-1,00.html. Accessed February 25, 2007.
- Jago, Carol. *Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom: “The Same Ol’ Danger but a Brand New Pleasure.”* NCTE High School Literature Series. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1999.
- Kinnon, Joy Bennett. “Does Rap Have a Future? Will Gangsta Rap Sink Hip-Hop?” *Ebony*, June 1997. Available online. URL: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_n8_v52/ai_194448530. Accessed February 28, 2007.
- LaGrone, Kheven Lee. “Nikki Giovanni’s Questions Change with the World.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 August 1999, p. RV-9. Available online. URL: www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1999/08/01/RV84534.DTL. Accessed February 24, 2007.
- Lashley, Kevin. “Nikki Giovanni.” Africana Research Center, 2006. Available online. URL: http://php.scripts.psu.edu/dept/arc//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=68&Itemid=78. Accessed February 24, 2007.
- Nikki Giovanni Website. Available online. URL: <http://nikki-giovanni.com>. Accessed June 25, 2009.
- Pulfer, Laura. “Poet Nikki Giovanni’s Art Not for Sissies.” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 3 June 1999. Available online. URL: www.enquirer.com/columns/

- pulfer/1999/06/03/lp_poet_nikki_giovanis.html. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- Schneider, Dan. "This Old Poem #24: Nikki Giovanni's Ego Tripping." *Cosmetica.com*, 21 September 2002. Available online. URL: www.cosmoetica.com/TOP24-DES22.htm. Accessed February 28, 2007.
- "Visual Verse: Poetry Meets Fabric." *Poets.org*, 2004. Academy of American Poets. Available online. URL: www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5946. Accessed February 25, 2007.
- Wahlberg, Ryan, and Bianca Ward. "Nikki Giovanni." *Voices from the Gaps: Women Artists and Writers of Color*. University of Minnesota, 23 May 2001. Available online. URL: http://voices.cl.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/giovanni_nikki.html. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- Wilson, Kathy. "Nikki Giovanni on Computers, Contributions and Cops." *City Beat* 08.1521 February 2002. Available online. URL: www.citybeat.com/2002-02-21/books.shtml. Accessed February 19, 2007.
- Wood, Brenda. "Spotlight: Nikki Giovanni." *11Alive.com/WXIA Atlanta*. Available online. URL: www.11alive.com/news/article_news.aspx?storyid=91554. Accessed February 5, 2007.
- "WPA Film Library Announces Exclusive Representation." *WPA Film Library Newsletter* September 2002. Available online. URL: www.wpafilmlibrary.com/wpnews/Volume_02.html. Accessed February 24, 2007.

Chris Judson



JOY HARJO (1951–)

This land is a poem of ochre and burnt sand I could never write, unless paper were the sacrament of sky, and ink the broken line of wild horses staggering the horizon several miles away. Even then, does anything written ever matter to the earth, wind, and sky?

(Harjo and Strom 30)

Kimberley Blaeser describes Joy Harjo as a writer who “challenges the boundaries between the oral and written” (253). Those familiar with Harjo’s life might argue that the need to challenge boundaries was something instilled in Harjo at birth.

Joy Harjo was born May 9, 1951, as Joy Foster, the daughter of Allen W. Foster, a full-blooded Muscogee (Creek), and Wynema Baker Foster, who was part Cherokee. She later changed her name to *Joy Harjo*, a family name that means “courage.” Although her parents raised her in the urban landscape of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Harjo says she has never considered that her only home. In an interview with Sharyn Stever, Harjo associates the feeling of displacement in her work to the 1832 forced removal of her ancestors from Alabama:

Displacement is a spiritual condition. It is not only physical displacement, but displacement of spirit as well. The original stories first occurred in another landscape, the older spirits live there, a particular matrix that feeds us. It’s linked up to the heart. (*The Spiral of Memory* 75–76)

Harjo calls upon that matrix when she writes, invoking the spirit of her ancestors as muse and spiritual guide. That connection is so strong that Harjo admits it is, at times, as if an old Creek Indian enters the room and stands over her as she writes (*Spiral* 37).

While the influence of Indian ancestry has benefited her writing, being “mixed blood” (as she refers to herself) has not always been easy. There was no reservation for the Oklahoma Muskogee, and Harjo often felt caught between two cultures. She found speaking difficult and school a frightening experience. Her teachers were frustrated by her muteness and often threatened to call her parents. Life at home was not much better. Her father suffered from alcoholism and her parents divorced when she was eight.

As a young child, Harjo found a way to express her pain and confusion through drawing. Art was a strong presence in Harjo’s life; her grandmother and her favorite aunt, Lois Harjo Ball, were both painters. Painting allowed Harjo to communicate without words, giving her opportunities to succeed in school. When Harjo was 14, she left home to attend the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a boarding school she describes as “sort of like an Indian *Fame* school,” referring to the fine-arts school portrayed in the 1980s television series (*Spiral* 119). But life is never as easy as it is on television, and the same year she graduated she gave birth to her first child.

For many women, becoming a mother at such an early age perpetuates the cycle of poverty, but Harjo wanted to show her new son, Phil Dayn, a better way. She enrolled in the University of New Mexico as a premed student, soon switching her

major to painting. It was during this time that Harjo became friends with Leo Romero, a poet who took Harjo to readings by native writers. The magic of language was nothing new to her; some of her strongest childhood memories involve her mother, who worked as a waitress and cook, sitting at the kitchen table composing “heartbreak songs” on an old typewriter. Still, it was not until the Acoma poet SIMON J. ORTIZ and the Laguna Pueblo poet and writer LESLIE MARMON SILKO took her under their wings that Harjo began to see the power of poetry to express the deep wounds and great joys of native peoples. She read more and more poetry, seeking out writers like Scott Momaday, James Welch, Roberta Hill, and Richard Hugo, authors whose work resonated with personal meaning for Harjo.

In her last year as an undergraduate, Harjo transferred to the English department as a creative writing major. She explains the shift in an interview with Laura Coltelli:

I found that language, through poetry, was taking on more magical qualities than my painting. I could say more when I wrote. Soon it wasn't a choice. Poetry-speaking “called me” in a sense. And I couldn't say no. (*Spiral* 60)

Poetry entered Harjo's life at a difficult time. She was raising two young children (Harjo's daughter, Rainy Dawn, was born four years after Phil) and was involved in a relationship with a volatile man who alternated between drinking and disappearing. She had no car and had to walk to classes, pushing a stroller loaded with school supplies, baby items, and her kids. Harjo was deeply depressed. Her first poems were borne of that depression; she describes them as poetry that

made roots from the compelling need to speak, to hear, to walk gracefully from one century to the next—despite the lines at the food stamp office, changing diapers, writing papers for classes, organizing for political action—without the luxury of a wife, a washer and dryer, a cook

or nanny or a known library of publications by Indian writers. (*How We Became Human* xx)

In 1975, those early poems were published in a chapbook entitled *The Last Song*. While many of the poems stemmed from Harjo's own experiences, both as an Indian and as a woman, they touched on universal truths, exposing the deepest meanings in the simplest things. Norma Wilson addresses Harjo's ability to capture the realities of life in her 2001 *The Nature of Native American Poetry*: “Rather than romanticizing the lives of Native American women, Harjo writes truthfully about the fragmented families of many of them and their consequent suffering” (112–113). This truth is especially revealed in the lines of the poem “Conversations between Here and Home,” where Harjo warns readers, “Angry women are building / houses of stones. / They are grinding the mortar / between straw-thin teeth / and broken families” (*Human* 11).

In 1976, Harjo graduated from the University of New Mexico with a B.A. in poetry and received an Academy for American Poetry Award that same year. Despite her apparent success, Harjo explains that poetry did not immediately transform her life:

I did not walk off into the sunset with poetry, or hit the town with a blaze of gunfire with poetry guarding my back. Rather, the journey toward poetry worked exactly as the process of writing a poem. It started from the inside out, then turned back in to complete a movement. (*Human* xix)

In 1978, Harjo completed her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and was awarded her first of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts; she received the second in 1992.

Harjo's second volume of poetry, *What Moon Drove Me to This?*, was published in 1980 and contained all of the poems from *The Last Song*, along with 48 new poems. Its release was met with acclaim from literary critics such as Andrew Wiglet, who

said, "At her best the energy generated by this journeying creates a powerful sense of identity that incorporates everything into the poetic self, so that finally she can speak for all the earth" (Wilson 112). The earth for which Harjo speaks is one of myth (meaning cultural stories based on truths) and heritage, where horses can be "finely tuned spirits of the psyche" (*Spiral* 28) and a woman can see herself in the "continuance of blue sky" and "the throat of the mountains" (*Human* 25).

Despite Harjo's decision to trade paintbrush for pen, the influence of her beginnings as a painter deeply informs her writing. In an interview with Marilyn Kallet, Harjo admits, "I made the decision to work with words and the power of words, to work with language, yet I approach the art as a visual artist" (Wilson 110–111). As if to nurture this side of herself further, Harjo studied filmmaking at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe in 1982. This training not only allowed her to accumulate numerous screenwriting credits, including public-service announcements and teleplays, but also served to enrich her poetry.

Published within a year of her film studies, Harjo's third collection, *She Had Some Horses*, is much more graphic than her previous writings. Place had always been an important facet of Harjo's work, but after Harjo's film training, the poems become so grounded in place and the personas depicted in the poems so formed that readers have taken them for real. This is especially the case with "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window." Many readers have approached Harjo about the woman in the poem, "sure that they knew her, or one of her cousins, her sister, or they had read about the story in the newspaper where they lived, be it New York or Lincoln, Nebraska, or Albuquerque" (*Spiral* 19). Harjo's ability to set the scene, to make a woman so real that readers feel they have known her, is what gives her poetry such force.

It is also in this volume that Harjo's writing begins to take on its own unique style, combining familiar literary techniques with her own sense of Indian tradition and ceremony. A primary example is Harjo's use of repetition. Where other poets

repeat words or phrases to create a feeling of balance or to accentuate meaning, Harjo uses repetition as a way to include the reader in the ceremony of the poem. Harjo says the technique is effective because "repetition has always been used, ceremonially, in telling stories, in effective speaking, so that what is said becomes a litany, and gives you a way to enter into what is being said, and a way to emerge whole, but changed" (*Spiral* 17).

Giving readers "a way to emerge whole, but changed" is something Harjo does intentionally, believing that poetry should be part form and part function: "In a native context art was not just something beautiful to put up on the wall and look at; it was created in the context of its *usefulness* for the people" (*Spiral* 43). As does CAROLYN FORCHÉ, Harjo uses her poetry to depict a true picture of the world. Although that world is not always pretty, Harjo writes that "the poet is charged with the role of being the truth teller of the culture, of the times . . . there is something about poetry that demands the truth, and you cannot separate the poem from your political reality" (*Spiral* 141).

Political reality is always evident in Harjo's poetry. She does not shy away from the complex issues of America's colonization and oppression of people of color and what she calls the "myth of Christopher Columbus's 'discovery'" (*Reinventing the Enemy's Language* 21). In 1986, Harjo was invited to present a paper at a conference on aboriginal education in Vancouver. There she met other women concerned over the loss of indigenous cultures. Through a lively discussion over coffee, the women began to recognize the need for an anthology where native women "could speak across the world intimately to each other" (*Reinventing* 21). Over the next three years, Harjo worked closely with her fellow native poet Gloria Bird to gather and edit essays, poems, and stories by contemporary native women from more than 50 tribal nations into an anthology entitled *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*.

Since 1989, Harjo has published six additional books: *Secrets from the Center of the World*, for which she composed poetic prose to be paired with

landscape photographs by the astronomer Stephen Strom; *In Mad Love and War* (1990), which received the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award and the William Carlos William Award; *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), which featured Harjo's own reflections on her poems and earned the Oklahoma Book Arts award; *A Map to the Next World* (2000); a children's book entitled *The Good Luck Cat* (2000); and *How We Became Human* (2002). Additionally, Harjo's poetry, essays, and short stories have been published in numerous magazines, journals, and anthologies.

In 1992, Harjo added musician to her list of professions, forming an all-Native American band called Poetic Justice. The band recorded two CDs, *Furious Light* (Bethesda, Md.: Watershed, 1986) and *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, Colo.: Silver Wave Records, 1996), on which Harjo plays soprano and alto saxophone and reads her poetry to music. Later Harjo would form a new band, Joy Harjo and the Real Revolution, and produce an additional CD entitled *Native Joy* (Brooklyn, N.Y., Mekko Records, 2003). Harjo says she does not separate "the self that practices the art of saxophone from the self who writes poetry . . . [but that] I initially felt closer to jazz than I ever did to any of the poetry I first read." She attributes that connection partly to difference in form: "Music doesn't have the added boundary of words" (*Spiral* 101).

The other reason Harjo may have felt closer to jazz than to poetry may be due to what Gloria Bird refers to as "conventional Euro-American standards of what constitutes good literature" (*Reinventing* 28). Those standards have led to a canonization of literature in the United States that has historically excluded women and people of color. This exclusion also initially caused Harjo to decline offers of teaching positions at universities: "I had run from teaching in the universities . . . I was afraid that in that atmosphere, in that place, I was going to lose my poetry" (*Spiral* 119). Eventually Harjo accepted a position at the University of Colorado and was able to find a way to include her vision of poetry in her teaching. Since then she has taught at Arizona State University, the University of Montana,

the University of Arizona, the University of New Mexico, and the University of California.

Poet, essayist, filmmaker, editor, musician, professor, mother, woman, Indian: For Harjo, these are not separate titles, but rather phases "in a continuous exploration of the self and the surrounding environment," a journey necessary for her life's work of "reclaiming the memory stolen from our peoples when we were dispossessed from our lands east of the Mississippi; it has to do with restoring us" (*Spiral* 11; *Reinventing* 59). Harjo's journey continues as she strives to find the perfect way to tell the story of us all, noting with each new experience that her vision "expands, deepens. Eventually, I might succeed in not needing words; perhaps the perfect poem is wordless" (*Spiral* 86).

***She Had Some Horses* (1983)**

Norma Wilson calls Harjo's third volume of poetry "an exorcism of the kind of fear that can paralyze an individual or a culture" (2001). In fact, the collection begins and ends on that note with the framework of paired poems, "Call It Fear," in which Harjo gives name to the "edge where shadows and bones of some of us walk backwards," and "I Give You Back," in which Harjo releases the fear that would haunt her. Between those two poems are other voices, other "Survivors" and "Things I Should Have Said," all tied together because of what has held them back.

"The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" is frozen on the ledge of a tenement building on the East Side of Chicago. She has no name, though her children do, and she is stuck there, between ascension and decline, so that all who see her may see themselves. To Harjo, her name is The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window, and while other poets might have considered the phrase too awkward, Harjo knows it as the woman's rightful name. The name is reminiscent of Indian surnames, like *Black Cloud* or *Running Bear*, and through its repetition the woman becomes worthy of it.

The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window could be anyone. Readers begin to know her through the layering of concrete details upon the repetitive framework of what the woman is—"She is a woman of children. . . . She is her mother's daughter. . . . She is all the women. . . ."—and what she sees: "She sees Lake Michigan. . . . She sees other buildings. . . . She sees other women. . . ." Through the incantation that names her, the woman becomes so real to readers that many have approached Harjo to say they have known her. And though the Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window was not based on a real person or event, Harjo told Sharyn Stever in an interview that the woman followed her "in spirit so to speak" from an empty rocking chair she saw on a visit to the Chicago Indian Center. The woman is real because she is born from "a woman's need to speak, to be seen in a cityscape that deemed her invisible," and she speaks for us all (*Spiral* 81).

A common theme in Native American literature is the role of memory. Harjo acknowledges the importance of memory in preserving traditions and language, in passing a culture onto the next generation. But Harjo also says there is another type of memory:

I see it as occurring, not just going back, but occurring right now, and also future occurrence so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful. . . . People often forget that everything they say, everything they do, think, feel, dream, has effect. . . . (*Spiral* 24)

This type of memory is invoked by Harjo in the poems of this anthology. In "Skeleton of Winter," Harjo is "memory alive . . . an intricate part of this web of motion," where she can see with "the other-sight." "Remember" implores readers to go beyond the act of thinking about the past, to remember what is and has been as "alive poems," so that we may "remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you."

The title poem, "She Had Some Horses," was inspired by Simon J. Ortiz's poem/song for his

daughter, "There Are Horses Everywhere" (*Human* 212–213). While the poem obviously makes use of repetition, its purpose is not so obvious. On the surface, readers can feel the building of momentum, the ceremonial aspect of the phrase "She had horses" pulling them into the poem, inviting them to chant with Harjo. The deeper effect is that readers become comfortable with the pattern of the poem and its opposition of phrases ("She had horses who lied. / She had horses who told the truth. . . . She had horses who whispered. . . . She had horses who screamed . . ."), so that when Harjo turns the poem on end with the last line, "These were the same horses," readers are stunned into recognizing that in this poem, as in many of life's conflicts, polarity is more often a function of the way one chooses to look at things than actual circumstances.

Harjo ends the collection with an attempt to "gather up all the wounded: women, the tribe and other tribes, and provoke a healing in the way that sometimes only the power of language can, by facing fear, addressing it, standing up to it, for fear is a real entity" (*Spiral* 78). In the poem "I Give You Back," the wounded are given voice through Harjo's litany of release and her reminder that fear only has power when we let it consume us. Inspired by "A Litany for Survival" from Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*, "I Give You Back" is Harjo's reaction to the hate and destruction that fear can instigate.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Carl Sandburg's poem "New Hampshire Again." Compare the techniques of repetition and imagery used by Harjo and Sandburg. Think of an event, person, or place that is central to who you have become and try to capture it in the form of an "I Remember" poem.
2. When asked what the horses in her poems represent, Harjo has replied that she feels "a sense of privacy about the act of poetry itself. I feel this especially about the horses. I have a kinship with horses that is beyond explanation" (*Spiral* 109). Why do you think Harjo may be reluc-

tant to spell out for readers the meaning of the horses? What do the horses represent for you?

3. Analyze Harjo's use of animals in her poetry. Which animals are most common in her work? What does each animal represent in the Creek culture? Does Harjo use each animal consistently with its Creek symbolism? If not, how has she adapted the animals to suit the need of each poem?

***Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997)**

Harjo and Bird begin this anthology with an introduction that explains its absolute necessity. They remind readers that "not very long ago, native peoples were 100 percent of the population of this hemisphere. In the United States we are now one-half of one percent, and growing" (21). They describe the continued struggle of indigenous peoples for survival in countries where their lands have been stolen and their customs and languages all but eradicated. The book is necessary as a forum for indigenous peoples to show the world that they are "still here, still telling stories, still singing whether it be in our native languages or in the 'enemy' tongue" (31). To that end, Harjo and Bird have collected poetry, fiction, prayers, and narratives from 87 writers to represent the literature of the aboriginal people of North America.

They believed strongly that "to understand the direction of a society one must look to the women who are birthing and ultimately raising the next generation" (21), and so they invited only women to submit their work. The writers they chose to include are diverse, ranging from the Arctic Circle to the southern United States. Despite their differences, they are all women and have known the same cycles within their lives. Harjo and Bird use these cycles to form the organization for the anthology: genesis, struggle, transformation, and the returning. Harjo herself has two pieces in the anthology, choosing to be heard at both the genesis and the returning.

"Warrior Road" is an autobiographical piece in which Harjo addresses the births of her chil-

dren. Through detailed description of the sterile, impersonal hospital and the cold detachment of the hospital staff, she emphasizes the inability of some governmental programs to meet the needs of the people they claim to serve. Although the hospital was built to fulfill the government's agreement to provide health care to the Indian people, the staff treats Harjo with disdain because of her heritage, going so far as to offer sterilization as a convenience best provided at the moment of birth.

But "Warrior Road" is more than an indictment of the medical system's treatment of Native Americans. By juxtaposing her own birth with the birth of her son, the birth of her daughter, and finally the birth of her first grandchild, Harjo illuminates the cyclical nature of life and the never-ending connection of family. Although her own mother is not with her at the birth of her son, Harjo feels "the sharp tug of my own birth cord, still connected to my mother. I believe it never pulls away, until death, and even then it becomes a streak in the sky symbolizing that most important warrior road" (55–56).

"Perhaps the World Ends Here" is aptly the last piece in the anthology. Reflecting on the origin of the collection, on women gathered around a kitchen table, the poem suggests that all of life is centered there, at the kitchen table. It is at that table where we are nurtured and at that table where we face our losses. By centering life's events around the table, Harjo suggests that it is in each detail that the greater meanings of life are contained.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* with *Against Forgetting*, an anthology edited by Carolyn Forché. What do the editors state as the goals for each anthology? Is such a compilation the most effective way of attaining those goals?
2. Discuss the meaning of the anthology's title. Harjo grew up speaking English. Why would she consider it the "enemy's language"? Why do bilingual writers in America choose to write in English, rather than in their native tongues?

***How We Became Human* (2002)**

In her introduction to *How We Became Human*, Harjo reminds readers that “Compassion is the first quality of a warrior; and compassion is why we are here, why we fell from the sky. The kitchen table is the turtle’s back on which this work is accomplished” (xxvii). It is that theme, of woman as compassionate warrior, that links the pieces in this collection.

Harjo tells readers in her notes at the end of the book that “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” was inspired by a classic Iroquois creation story about a pregnant woman who falls through a hole beneath the Great Tree and begins a new world on the back of the Sea Turtle (222–223). In Harjo’s story, the woman falling is Lila, who had “seen God and could tell you God was neither male nor female and made of absolutely everything of beauty, of wordlessness,” and she is caught by Saint Coincidence “in front of the Safeway as he made a turn from borrowing spare change from strangers” (96, 98). Saint Coincidence turns out to be Johnny, a boy Lila had known years earlier in Indian boarding school. Their coming together could be symbolic of the divine intervention of God or the chaos of coincidence, but to the stray cat on the corner they represent a disturbance in the web of earth that created a “wave of falling or the converse wave of gathering together” (99).

Lila, like most of Harjo’s female personae, is different from many of the women in Anglo poetry. She does not wait to be rescued from the drudgery of her Dairy Queen job. When she feels the urge to fly, she leaves “on the arms of one of the stars” to “find love in a place that did not know the disturbance of fear” (98). Lila knows intuitively that as birds do in flight, “everyone turns together though we may not see each other stacked in the invisible dimensions” (96). And although it is Johnny who catches and saves Lila from her fall, ultimately Lila will rescue him from “wandering without a home in the maze of asphalt” (95).

As Lila does, the woman in “The Deer Dancer” displays the warrior qualities of compassion and transcendence. When the woman in the red dress

enters the “bar of broken survivors,” no one knows her, although they recognize her as from a tribe related to deer. One man takes her for “Buffalo Calf Woman” and is deeply affected. A woman, Richard’s wife, tries to attack her. The others in the bar simply watch as she takes off her clothes and dances on a “table of names” (69).

In order to understand the layers of meaning in “The Deer Dancer,” it is necessary for readers to be familiar with the myths upon which the poem is based. Harjo provides a brief description of the stories in her endnotes. Buffalo Calf Woman is from Lakota lore and was said to have appeared to the Lakota in two forms: a beautiful woman and a buffalo. She taught the people how to live and promised to return “every generation cycle” (216). When Henry Jack sees the woman in the red dress, he believes she is Buffalo Calf Woman returned, and he transforms his life because of that belief. The speaker in the poem explains, “Some people see vision in a burned tortilla, some in the face of a woman,” referring in part to the pilgrimages people have made to see the face of Jesus, which is said to have miraculously appeared on a tortilla (67, 217).

The speaker in the poem sees “the woman inside the woman” in the red dress and knows her for the Deer Dancer. Although the traditional Mvskoke Deer Woman is portrayed as a sexual temptress who lures away and bewitches the weak, the speaker sees her as “the myth slipped down through dream-time. The promise of feast we all knew was coming. The deer who crossed through knots of a curse to find us” (69). So, while the woman in the red dress represents threat to some (Richard’s wife), to Henry Jack and the speaker she represents hope and salvation.

Not all of Harjo’s compassionate warriors are fictionalized. In her poem “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars (For We Remember the Story and Must Tell It Again So That We All May Live),” Harjo addresses the spirit of a woman who was active in the American Indian Movement: “Anna Mae, / everything and nothing changes. / You are the shimmering young woman / who found

her voice, / when you were warned to be silent, or have your body cut away / from you like an elegant weed" (70).

In the endnotes, Harjo gives readers the actual story of Aquash's death: In February 1976, a body was found on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Unable to identify the body, a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent ordered the hands severed and sent to Washington, D.C., for fingerprinting. The cause of death was listed as exposure and alcohol. Aquash's family later reported her missing and a second autopsy was ordered, which found no alcohol in her blood and the actual cause of death an execution-style murder. The leader of the American Indian Movement called the mutilation an act of war, but Harjo tells Aquash's spirit that rather than give in to "a righteous anger," the women "understood wordlessly the ripe meaning of your murder" (71).

In an interview with Helen Jaskoski, Harjo says poems like the one about Aquash develop from a responsibility she feels to be "one of those who help people remember . . . to keep these stories alive" (*Spiral* 58). The stories Harjo keeps alive are often difficult to tell, as with the case of Jacqueline Peters, a woman lynched by the Ku Klux Klan in 1981, whose story is told in the poem "Strange Fruit." Some stories are so overwhelming that Harjo cannot write about them right away. She says these stories need time to take shape and that "the sheer weight of memory coupled with imagery constructs poems" (*Spiral* 55).

Harjo's "The Flood" is poetic prose that tells the story of a young girl who is called upon to be a warrior in defense of herself. This story, as do most of Harjo's pieces, balances between fact and fiction, myth and reality. Although the story is written in the first person, Harjo says, "The 'I' is not always me, but a way I choose to speak the poem," adding that the stories she tells are always true "on some level" (*Spiral* 67).

"The Flood" is based in part on a Muscogee tribal myth in which *estakwvnyv*, a water snake who can transform himself, represents the power of the Lower World (*Human* 223). The girl in the

story faces the water monster, who "appeared as the most handsome man in the tribe" and walks "the stairway of the abyss" to return as his wife. Harjo could have written a simpler story, telling about a girl who tries to kill herself when her parents promise her in marriage, but she invokes myth as a framework to provide a depth of meaning. David Treuer addresses the use of myth as a basis for fiction in his essay "The Myth of Myth": "Myth and language here are not important in and of themselves. They are important because they lend resonance or deeper sonority to the action" (147–148). It is the girl's belief in the water monster that explains her actions and makes the story work.

The girl's belief also functions to caution readers that everything in the story is not what it appears. She is at once a "proverbial sixteen-year-old woman" with an "imagination larger than the small frame house at the north edge of town, with broken cars surrounding it like a necklace of futility, larger than the town itself leaning into the lake," who was lost when she drove her car into the lake, and the survivor who hurries away from the cashier in the convenience store because she "cannot see myself as I had abandoned her some twenty years ago" (103). Readers are left to decide whether they should believe this story told by an imaginative child who believes so strongly in mythology that she uses it to explain her life.

Whether they believe or not, the story is cautionary. The girl warns that "the power of the victim is a power that will always be reckoned with, one way or another" (103). Harjo also uses the story as a forum to warn of cultural loss, writing, "They'd entered a drought that no one recognized as a drought, the convenience store a signal of temporary amnesia" (103).

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" illustrates Harjo's belief that everything we say and do has an impact on the world. Discuss the implications of that belief for relatively small acts like going to see a particular movie or buying a certain product.

- . *She Had Some Horses*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1983.
- . *The Spiral of Memory*. Edited by Laura Coltelli. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- , and Gloria Bird, eds. *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.
- , and Stephen Strom. *Secrets from the Center of the World*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989.
- Treuer, David. *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2006.
- Wilson, Norma C. *The Nature of Native American Poetry*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.

Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



BARBARA KINGSOLVER (1955–)

Storytelling is as old as our need to remember where the water is, where the best food grows, where we find our courage for the hunt. It's as persistent as our desire to teach our children how to live in this place that we have known longer than they have. Our greatest and smallest explanations for ourselves grow from place, as surely as carrots grow in the dirt.

(Small Wonder)

Born on April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, Maryland, Barbara Kingsolver spent most of her childhood in rural Kentucky. As the second of three children of Dr. Wendell R. Kingsolver, family physician and part Cherokee descendant, and Virginia “Ginny” Lee Henry Kingsolver, homemaker and avid birdwatcher, she enjoyed tremendous freedom to explore the terrain of their Kentucky home.

Kingsolver developed a passion for the life sciences, which she credited to “having grown up among farmers, and . . . having parents who were deeply interested in natural history . . . creating education, entertainment, and pets out of snakes and turtles and every kind of thing we could find” (Snodgrass 9). For most of her childhood, the family had no television, filling their spare time with read-alouds punctuated by visits from the bookmobile. At the age of eight, Kingsolver received a diary and began to write almost daily. Despite the numerous notebooks she filled, she denies ever envisioning herself as a writer:

I’m in awe of those people who from early childhood seem bent on a passionate vocational path. . . . I planned to be a farmer and a ballerina and a writer and a doctor and a musician and a zookeeper. (*High Tide* 130)

Wendell Kingsolver exemplified for his family the importance of “doing what you think is right

regardless of whether or not that’s financially or otherwise regarded” (DeMarr 2). His children learned early on about the cruelties inherent in racial and class discrimination. When Kingsolver was in second grade, her parents accepted a public-health posting deep in the African Congo, plunging their young children into a world where they were total outsiders. After a brief return to Kentucky in 1966, the family then moved to St. Lucia in the Caribbean, where Dr. Kingsolver provided medical care at a convent hospital. Even as a child, Kingsolver was aware of contrasts between the cultural beliefs of the native obeah and the Catholicism of the settlers. Kingsolver’s memories of the landscape and customs of the island would coalesce years later in the short story “Jump-up Day.”

Despite the family’s return to the United States and Kentucky, Kingsolver continued to feel like an outsider. She was deeply shy, a condition exacerbated in sixth grade when she stood a full head taller than her classmates. Preoccupation with books and writing further isolated her from peers. She confides in “Letter to a Daughter at Thirteen” that she saw herself as “less valuable than everyone around” (*Small Wonder* 146).

In the essay “How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life,” Kingsolver describes Nicholas County High School, which required shop for boys and home economics for girls. Kingsolver quips, “And so I stand today, a woman who knows how to

upholster, color-coordinate a table setting, and plan a traditional wedding—valuable skills I’m still waiting to put to good use in my life.” Kentucky’s rank on educational spending in the 1970s was one of the lowest in the nation, but a school librarian rescued Kingsolver by inviting her to sort and catalog books. Through that process, she began to envision a life for herself beyond Nicholas County. Kingsolver’s voracious reading “jarred open a door that was right in front of me. I found I couldn’t close it” (*High Tide* 51).

Kingsolver graduated as valedictorian in 1972. To remain in Kentucky meant limited options, so she left home to attend DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, on a music scholarship. Citing the impracticality of the arts as a profession, she switched to biology, though she still indulged her creative side by jotting poems in the margins of her science notebooks (DeMarr 6). She graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1977.

Greencastle was by no means urban, but Kingsolver’s speech was noticeably tinted by her Kentucky home, again branding her an outsider. She describes herself as “stunned to discover that the world knows almost nothing about ‘hillbillies,’ and respects them even less.” That realization caused “an undercurrent of defensiveness” that she says has guided both her work and her life (www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp).

Kingsolver was drawn to political activism, but she soon sought a break from the politics of the United States. After college, she traveled to Europe, trying a variety of jobs, including housemaid, medical transcriptionist, X-ray technician, archaeologist, and editor. She returned to Kentucky with a greater perspective on America, resolved to “live inside this amazing beast, poking at its belly from the inside with my one little life and the small, pointed sword of my pen” (McMahon).

However, Kingsolver’s return to Kentucky was short lived. In 1979, she loaded up her car and drove to Tucson, Arizona, where she completed a master’s degree in evolutionary biology and ecology at the University of Arizona. Upon graduation, she served as a science writer, a position that

allowed her to combine her two greatest loves—science and writing.

Gradually, Kingsolver began to see herself as a professional writer. During the day, she worked as a freelance journalist, reporting, for example, on the strike against the Phelps Dodge copper mine in 1983. She attracted national attention for her unique insight into the lives of the women who held the line while their husbands sought work elsewhere. Kingsolver’s work was eventually published in 1989 as *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*. At night, she gave free reign to her imagination, crafting stories and poems that often overlapped with her nonfiction.

Meanwhile, Kingsolver married the chemistry professor Joseph Hoffmann in 1985. Although the couple divorced in 1992, their time together produced not only a child (Camille, born in 1987), but also Kingsolver’s first novel.

The Bean Trees began as a way to fill the insomnia that plagued Kingsolver’s pregnancy. She wrote huddled in a closet so as not to disturb her sleeping husband. The same day that Kingsolver brought home her new daughter, Camille, she received news from her agent: The first draft had been auctioned to publishers—a rare feat for an unknown writer. Kingsolver describes her first novel as the “longest letter to you [her mother] I’ve ever written. Finally, after a thousand tries, I’ve explained everything I believe in, exactly the way I’ve always wanted to: human rights, Central American refugees, the Problem That Has No Name, abuse of the powerless, racism, poetry, freedom, childhood, motherhood, Sisterhood is powerful. All that, and still some publisher has decided it makes a good story” (*Small Wonder* 170).

Readers found her work to be accessible, yet layered with political truths, a balance Kingsolver works hard to maintain:

I want to write books that anybody can read. . . . I want to challenge people who like literature, to give them something for their trouble, without closing any doors to people who are less educated. (DeMarr 19)

The Bean Trees received an Enoch Pratt Library Youth-to-Youth Books Award and was declared a Notable Book by the American Library Association and the *New York Times*.

In 1990, Kingsolver's short stories were anthologized in *Homeland and Other Stories*. The title piece examines loss of culture through the eyes of a child burdened with remembering her Cherokee heritage. "Rose-Johnny" examines the ostracism of individuals for perceived differences. Each story in the collection examines the theme of how community and place can influence individuals. *Homeland* garnered an American Library Association award.

With the release of the novel *Animal Dreams* in 1990, Kingsolver attracted the attention of academia. Scholarly articles examined her use of place and community and proclaimed her work—with its subplots of Guatemalan refugees, cultural annihilation, and governmental meddling in foreign affairs—as political. Kingsolver embraced the label, remarking that "most of the rest of the world considers social criticism to be, absolutely, the most legitimate domain of art." In her essay "Jabberwocky," Kingsolver describes fiction as "the antidote that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another. By virtue of that power, it is political, regardless of content." *Animal Dreams* received many awards, including the Pen/USA West Fiction Award and the Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction. It was also a *New York Times* Notable Book.

In 1991, Kingsolver grew weary of what she describes as the "clamor of war worship" in the United States, where yellow ribbons began to feel like "a prayer of godspeed to the killers" (*High Tide* 108–109). She moved her family to the Canary Islands and lived there for nearly a year.

Upon returning to the United States, she faced many changes in both her professional and personal lives. Her divorce from Hoffmann left her embroiled in a legal battle over her own writing. *Another America/Otra América* (1992) introduced the world to Barbara Kingsolver the poet. Despite critical praise, Kingsolver says, "I rarely think of poetry as something I make happen; it is more

accurate to say that it happens to *me*. Like a summer storm, a house afire, or the coincidence of both on the same day" (*Small Wonder* 229). The poems included in *Another America* reflect that serendipity, as in "What the Janitor Heard in the Elevator," which uses a real conversation to portray the near invisibility of the lower class.

Pigs in Heaven, released five years after *The Bean Trees*, revisits the characters of Taylor and Turtle and follows their struggle to remain together. The critic Mary Jean DeMarr suggests that the book corrects a serious flaw of Kingsolver's first novel, "the apparent suggestions that a Native American child might be given away lightly . . . [and] that the welfare of the child is the only issue to be considered" (DeMarr 15). Through alternating viewpoints, Kingsolver explores "the places where disparate points of view rub together—the spaces between . . . the sticky terrain of cultural differences" (*High Tide* 154). *Pigs in Heaven* received the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Prize, the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award, and an American Booksellers Book of the Year nomination. It was also a *New York Times* Notable Book.

Kingsolver met her second husband, Steven Hopp, an environmentalist, while serving as a visiting writer at Emory & Henry College in Virginia. The couple cowrote several essays and articles on natural history and, in 1996, celebrated the birth of their daughter, Lily.

Despite the political undertones of her fiction, some critics have dismissed it as "chick lit," a label Kingsolver abhors: "I don't feel my books are mainly for women. . . . *Moby-Dick* is a whale book, but I don't think only whales should read it" (Epstein 33). She adds that her whole life she's "been reading white guy books and there's plenty of those in the world" (Perry 159). Kingsolver moved politics to the forefront with the 1998 publication of *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Although her family spent two years in Africa during the 1960s, it was only years later that Kingsolver began to understand the United States's role in the political turmoil of the Congo. Kingsolver admits it would be easy to lecture on the evils of

colonialism in developing countries, but instead she uses political allegory to illustrate the humanity behind the headline and examine the question “Given this is what we did as a nation in Africa, how are we to feel about it now?” (Kanner).

The Poisonwood Bible is perhaps her most successful book yet, earning the National Book Prize of South Africa and a nomination for the PEN/Faulkner Award. It was named the American Booksellers Book of the Year, a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book, and one of the *New York Times*’s “Ten Best Books of 1998.” In 2000, President Bill Clinton honored Kingsolver with the National Humanities Medal, the nation’s most prestigious award for service through the arts.

After the intense research and heavy moral lessons of *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver returned to Appalachia for the setting of her next novel, *Prodigal Summer*. The terrain of the Kentucky hills may be comfortable for Kingsolver, but she admits in her essay “Taming the Beast with Two Backs” that the book itself, which she describes tongue in cheek as “an unchaste novel,” is a bit shocking, even to her. The story focuses on the triumph of life over death, with a heavy reliance on procreation to illustrate that theme. The critic Amanda Cockrell describes the novel’s theme as “people sex, bug sex, coyote sex . . . and the drive to pass on your genes” (Snodgrass 166). Kingsolver says that the topic of sexuality is taboo when used by women writers but argues that writers often mine personal matters for universal truths, and that sex should be no exception.

While Kingsolver is best known for her novels, it is in her essays and poetry that she opens herself to readers, sharing personal interests and deeply held beliefs. “Letter to My Mother” describes the guilt and loss that plagued her after she was raped by an acquaintance in her own home. The attack left her with a deep understanding of “the vast ocean of work it is to be a woman among men, that universe of effort, futile whimpers against hard stones” (*Small Wonder* 168). “This House I Cannot Leave” and “Ten Forty-four” (*Another America*) also address the rape, illustrating wounds that go much deeper than “a trace of hair or blood or sperm.”

Not all of Kingsolver’s essays and poems are so personal, but all address issues in which she takes a personal interest. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, HarperCollins released *Small Wonder*, described as Kingsolver’s “extended love song to the world we still have.” The book begins as a reaction to one horrific moment in world history and explores the event by discussing “who we seem to be, what remains for us to live for, and what [Kingsolver] believes we could make of ourselves” (*Small Wonder* xiv). Kingsolver’s essays challenge readers to examine their own lives for ways to become more responsible members of our worldwide family. Kingsolver led the charge by helping her own family in “realigning our lives with our food chain.” She describes her family’s journey of turning away from processed foods in the 2007 nonfiction book *Animal, Vegetable, and Miracle*.

Whether creating poetry, essays, or fiction, Kingsolver begins each work with an unmistakable grounding in place and asks readers to remember that every book we pick up “is made from the hearts of trees that died for the sake of our imagined lives. What you hold in your hands right now, beneath these words, is consecrated air and time and sunlight and, first of all, a place” (*Small Wonder* 40).

***The Bean Trees* (1988)**

At a glance, *The Bean Trees*, with its plucky heroine Taylor Greer, may seem a simple coming-of-age story: A young girl leaves home in search of freedom and eventually finds it through increasing responsibility to the world around her. Yet, as is true of all Kingsolver’s works, a careful reading reveals multiple layers. *The Bean Trees* is the bildungsroman that it appears, but through Kingsolver’s treatment, Taylor becomes much deeper than the typical female protagonist who is forced at story’s end to forfeit her independence in order to gain the love of a man. Taylor understands that dependence on a man is not her life’s goal. As a result, she is free to redefine coming of age as “being able to behave

with dignity when her desires are counter to her knowledge of what is right” (DeMarr 66–67).

A major theme within *The Bean Trees* is that of identity. As the main character, Marietta, drives from Kentucky to Arizona, she longs to leave her old life behind. She decides to begin by changing her name but believes that “a name is not something a person really has a right to pick out, but is something you’re provided with more or less by chance” (11). That belief results in part from her own name, which was chosen for the town in which she was born. Marietta accepts a new name from the town in which her car runs out of gas, Taylorville. The ease with which Marietta transforms into Taylor implies a disregard for the importance of names, yet through her relationships with other characters Taylor grows to understand the power of a name to define a person.

Taylor first encounters Turtle as a “round bundle with a head” (17), lacking a name and any notion of personality. The first real trait Turtle displays is tenacity, grabbing on to Taylor with the fierce determination of a mud turtle that “won’t let go until it thunders” (22). Taylor names the baby after the personality trait that defines her and decides to keep that name even when she later learns that the child’s name at birth had been April, illustrating her belief that names can be more than chance.

The characters of Estevan and Esperanza deepen Taylor’s understanding of the link between name and identity. Taylor first meets Estevan and his wife through Mattie, owner of the auto shop Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. The couple are refugees from Guatemala who put aside their own needs for anonymity to help Taylor adopt Turtle. To blend in with their adopted society, they Americanize their names, changing *Estevan* and *Esperanza* to *Steven* and *Hope*. Taylor seems to mourn their loss of identity more than the couple themselves, telling them: “I love your names. . . . They’re about the only thing you came here with that you’ve still got left. I think you should only be Steven and Hope when you need to pull the wool over somebody’s eyes, but keep your own names with your friends” (207). Ironically, Estevan and Esperanza had already sac-

rificed their “own names” when they first entered America, choosing Spanish names because their Mayan names could not be pronounced in English. Through Estevan and Esperanza, Taylor is able to see that true identity begins with home and family and deepens through the choices we make.

Political concerns are central to *The Bean Trees* and are at the forefront as the characters struggle with large issues on a personal level. Millie’s auto shop, which serves as a front for a shelter for refugees, introduces Taylor to the Guatemalan refugees Estevan and Esperanza. Through this couple, Kingsolver draws a parallel between the Mayan people and Native Americans. Taylor is told by Estevan that the Mayan people speak 22 different Mayan languages (193) and she learns that *Mayan* is as incomplete as *Native American* in defining the vastly unique cultures each term is meant to describe.

Like many conquered indigenous peoples, the Maya were transformed into slaves in their own lands. Yet the Maya have preserved their heritage and customs, as well as more than 22 distinct languages, despite governmental efforts to erase the entire Mayan culture. Periodically, the Maya have revolted against their oppressors, only to be beaten down by forces with better training and more advanced weaponry. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan military escalated their attempts to erase pockets of resistance in what has come to be known as the “Silent Holocaust.” According to statistics listed on the Web site for the Global Exchange, in one decade of systematic repression, torture, and genocide, military death squads were responsible for the deaths of 200,000 civilians and the destruction of 440 Mayan villages.

As Estevan shares his story with Taylor, she learns about the abduction of his daughter in a ploy by the government to force him to reveal the identities of 17 members of the teachers’ union. Taylor is astounded by his decision not to go to his daughter. When Estevan asks what she would have done, Taylor responds, “I really don’t know. I can’t even begin to think about a world where people have to make choices like that.” Estevan’s answer, “You live in that world,” is a gentle reprimand to those of us

who would claim innocence of complicity in world events (137).

Estevan and Esperanza also draw attention to the fate of those who immigrate to the United States seeking escape from political oppression. Although the 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act included amnesty for illegal U.S. immigrants, the reality is that once here, immigrants are often treated as trespassers who have no right to take jobs away from “real Americans,” an attitude that conveniently ignores the fact that the forefathers of Americans were themselves immigrants. Taylor is praised by Mattie for helping Estevan and Esperanza in their struggle to remain in the United States, but she shrugs it off, saying, “I can’t see why I shouldn’t do this. If I saw somebody was going to get hit by a truck I’d push them out of the way. Wouldn’t anybody? It’s a sad day for us all if I’m being a hero here” (188). Taylor’s willingness to help Estevan and Esperanza, despite the risk to her, and her belief that it is something anyone would do, echoes a persistent theme in Kingsolver’s work: Community and family are necessary for survival of the individual.

It is the theme of interconnectedness that forms the basis for *The Bean Trees*. Kingsolver uses Taylor’s inexperience as a mother to illustrate the need of new parents for familial and community support. Taylor’s flight from Kentucky has left her without those support systems, yet Taylor is adept at forging new friendships and gains with her new boss (Mattie) a surrogate mother and parenting advice. Taylor’s search for a home leads her to Lou Ann, who is also a single mother. Together, the two form a quasi-family that Taylor resists at first because they have fallen into the stereotypical roles of an old married couple. Eventually, Taylor accepts their interdependence and admits that she loves Lou Ann.

Related to the theme of interdependence is the issue of child welfare, which Kingsolver explores through Turtle. Taylor acquires Turtle when a stranger thrusts the baby at her in the deserted parking lot of a bar. Before long, Taylor discovers Turtle is not an inanimate object, but a girl whose gender “had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I

knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl” (23). Despite Taylor’s inexperience as a parent, she is able to protect Turtle from the abuse she suffered as a baby. But the truth is, Taylor has a lot of help. In her essay “Somebody’s Baby,” Kingsolver discusses the American distaste for other people’s children and our national “creed of every family for itself,” suggesting that Americans do not cherish their children the way other cultures do because “the worth of children in America is tied to their dollar value” (*High Tide* 101). Taylor’s ability to string together an impromptu support system for her small family illustrates Kingsolver’s belief that children “thrive best when their upbringing is the collective joy and responsibility of families, neighborhoods, communities, and nations” (*High Tide* 104).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss Mary Jean DeMarr’s assertion that the typical bildungsroman requires a female protagonist to choose between maturation and femininity (66). How is this reflected in Kingsolver’s novel? Take a stand for or against her claim and support your opinion with examples from Kingsolver and other writers.
2. In her search for a home, Taylor interviews with Fei, La-Isha, and Timothy to join their cooperative. What does the exchange illustrate about the American class system?
3. Compare the plight of Estevan and Esperanza to the struggles described in JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA’s *Immigrants in Our Own Land*.

***Animal Dreams* (1990)**

Animal Dreams explores the concept of national memory, specifically the ability of individuals to distance themselves from tragedy by forgetting about it. The book is dedicated to Ben Linder, an engineer who moved to Nicaragua in the 1980s to construct an electrical dam. Antigovernment contras ambushed the construction site, killing Linder

and two Nicaraguans, Sergio Hernández and Pablo Rosales. Kingsolver has spoken out in her essays against the funding provided to the contras through President Ronald Reagan's covert war in Central America. In *Animal Dreams*, Kingsolver puts a human face on the conflict by infusing the character of Hallie Noline with Linder's commitment to service and then subjecting her to a similar fate.

Although Hallie is central to the story, it is her absence that makes a statement: She is off in Nicaragua serving as a "cross between Johnny Appleseed and a freedom fighter" (30). Hallie is not so naive as to think she can save the world through pest management, yet she is content to help where she can.

Codi is "the sister who didn't go to war" (7). Raised by her emotionally unavailable father, Codi longs for unconditional love, yet she constantly distances herself from others by drifting through places and jobs. Codi even invents alternate lives for herself in conversations with strangers to avoid any "discussion of what I was *really*" (203). Kingsolver admits that there was a time in her life when she, too, would reinvent herself to strangers: "I strove for new heights in perjury, trying to see how absurd a yarn I could spin. . . . Through my tales I discovered not exactly myself but all the selves I might have been" (*High Tide* 260–261).

Although Codi may not consider herself the hero her sister is, even she cannot stand idly by when she discovers that Black Mountain Mining Company is polluting Grace's water. The finding, uncovered when Codi's students examine the pH levels of the river, allows Kingsolver to return to the theme of ecology. The Stitch and Bitch Club raises money through the sale of piñatas to have Grace declared a historic preserve.

Codi also allows Kingsolver to examine the issue of cruelty to animals. In discussing the "sport" of cockfighting, Codi tells her boyfriend, Lloyd, that she "can't feel good about people making a spectator sport out of puncture wounds and internal hemorrhage" (191). Codi's wording depicts the exact manner in which Lloyd's brother dies, a death that serves as a metaphor for the viciousness of such events.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In 2007, the United States adopted the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act, allowing a felony charge for those involved in the interstate transport of animals for fighting purposes. Discuss the issue of animal blood sports in light of Kingsolver's novel.
2. The Stitch and Bitch Club saves Grace by having the town declared a historic landmark. Research the history behind the National Historic Landmark Program and the process required to nominate a site (visit the NHL Web site at www.nps.gov/nhl). Debate the issue of making Grace a historic landmark from the viewpoint of the parties involved.

Pigs in Heaven (1993)

Pigs in Heaven picks up the story begun in *The Bean Trees*. This time, Taylor and Turtle are the refugees, embroiled in their own battle for rights as the Cherokee Nation investigates the legality of Turtle's adoption. Kingsolver admits that after the publication of her first novel, she felt compelled to return to the story: "I had completely neglected a whole moral area when I wrote about this Native American kid being swept off the reservation and being raised by a very loving white mother. It was something I hadn't thought about, and I felt I needed to make that right in another book" (Perry 165).

In addressing her oversight, Kingsolver examines the issue of outsider adoption from multiple perspectives. Taylor, adoptive mother of Turtle, sees the adoption as a rescue from an abusive family. Annawake Fourkiller is a Native American attorney who represents the Cherokee Nation's interests in preserving a heritage nearly decimated by outsider adoption. For her, the interests of the tribe must always be considered over the needs of the individual. Therefore, she sees Turtle's adoption as theft from the tribe; the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act supports her position. As the two square off over the fate of Turtle, their personal experiences make it nearly impossible for either to see the other's side.

Kingsolver uses the peripheral character of Jax, Taylor's boyfriend, to step back from the issue. Through a conversation between Jax and Annawake, Kingsolver illustrates the ways in which culture can influence perception. Jax points out that Annawake's guiding myth is "Do right by your people," and Annawake counters that the guiding myth of America is "Do right by yourself" (88). Kingsolver addresses that issue in an interview with David Gergen:

Our great unifying myths tell us things like anybody can make it in this country if he's smart enough and ambitious enough. . . . But it works only to an extent, because the other side of that story is that if you're not making it, you must be either stupid or lazy. So a lot of self-blame goes along with poverty.

Taylor's struggle to support herself personifies the breakdown of that myth. Her conversation with Kevin (a would-be suitor) further demonstrates the faulty assumption by mainstream America that "if you can dream it . . . you can be it" (210).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Kingsolver claims that the United States was founded on myths that no longer work for most citizens (Gergen). How is that portrayed in this novel? Discuss examples of myths that have contributed to the "American way of life."
2. Examine the references to the media in *Pigs in Heaven* in light of Kingsolver's essay "Careful What You Let in the Door" (*High Tide*).
3. What does Taylor mean when she admits most commercials are made by "the guardians of truth" (*Pigs in Heaven* 295)? What implications does that have for American society?

The Poisonwood Bible (1998)

Kingsolver's most celebrated work to date, and her most controversial, emerged from her need to understand the events she had witnessed as a

child in the Congo during the 1960s. Kingsolver discussed the seed of the story in her 1986 essay "Why I Am a Danger to the Public," in which she described her desire to address "the brief blossoming and destruction of the independence of the Congo, and what the CIA had to do with it." The story took nearly another decade to germinate into the 543-page novel, which avoids taking a didactic stance on the evils of colonialism in third-world countries by focusing on the experiences of the Price family as missionaries in the Congo and their guilt over American complicity in the events they witness. In the author's note, Kingsolver informs readers that the novel is a work of fiction, but that her invented characters have been surrounded by "historical figures and events . . . as real as I could render them" (ix). The book's bibliography reflects the intense research required to attain the level of accuracy that Kingsolver demands of her work.

Although Kingsolver introduced the Price family in "My Father's Africa," which appeared in *McCall's* in August 1991, *The Poisonwood Bible* provides a closer examination of their time in Africa. The novel is unique in both form and narrative method. It is structured using seven "books," six of which are named for books of the Bible (or, in the case of "Bel and the Serpent" and "Song of the Three Children," for books of the Apocrypha, which is not included in the King James Bible). The structure serves both to align the family's experiences with biblical themes and to underscore Nathan's beliefs. The first five books begin with Orleanna, the dominated wife of the Baptist minister Nathan Price, who is speaking years after the family's exodus from Africa. Following Orleanna's narrative, each book is subtitled to orient the reader in place and time and to reflect the focus of the four Price daughters on issues that directly impact the family. The structure also mirrors the dynamics of the Price family, in which Orleanna is a buffer between the strict biblical rulings of Nathan and their four daughters. The last book does not have a biblical title and serves as an epilogue in which Kingsolver pulls back to give a broader view of the novel's events.

The question Kingsolver hoped to answer through *The Poisonwood Bible* is “How do we live with it [America’s role in the assassination of the Congolese president Patrice Lumumba] and how do we move on? Given that this is our history, what do we do with it?” She found that “one thing is very clear, there isn’t a single answer—there’s a spectrum of answers” (Kanner). To convey that spectrum, Kingsolver uses the multiple voices of the women of the Price family: Orleanna, subservient wife to Nathan Price, a Baptist missionary; and the four Price daughters—Rachel, the twins Leah and Adah, and Ruth May. Each perspective offers its own take on coping with the weight of guilt.

Through the Price family, Kingsolver delves into the political hotbeds of genocide, the Congolese exploitation of its own people, female circumcision, and colonialism in third-world countries. Multiple viewpoints allow Kingsolver to step back from these issues and see them fresh through the eyes of the innocent. At the onset of the novel, the Price children are quite young and thus reflect events through that naiveté; as they mature, their ability to understand those events in a historical context deepens.

Although he is not given a voice of his own, Nathan Price is a strong presence in the novel. Kingsolver uses his character to personify the attitude taken by the United States toward third-world countries: “Nathan stands for the conqueror and for the hyperbole of our cultural arrogance” (Snodgrass 157). Rachel, the eldest daughter, sums up his personality as “the Father Knows Best of all times” (131). Throughout the novel, the United States adopts this attitude, both literally in terms of CIA involvement and figuratively through the character of Nathan Price, both of whom presume to know more about what is best for the Congo than those who reside there. Nathan’s time in the Congo is a political allegory meant to reflect America’s high-mindedness and arrogance. Nathan takes his family to Africa because he wants to give salvation to the uneducated. Yet, to his incomprehension, the Africans do not want his deliverance. Nathan’s primary obstacle is the basic assumptions each culture holds about the world. Similarly, a father-knows-best atti-

tude precludes an openness on America’s part to understand that so-called less developed countries may be capable of defining their own needs.

Kingsolver best illustrates this difference through linguistic misunderstandings between Nathan Price and the Congolese people. The language of the Kikongo is complex; words may mean different things, depending on how they are spoken. Nathan’s arrogance prevents him from attending to the minute differences in inflection that could aid his communication with the Congolese. The most salient example is rooted in the novel’s title. The Kikongo word *bangala* can refer to something that is very precious, and it is that meaning Nathan intends when he preaches that “Tata Jesus is bangala.” In his ignorance, Nathan uses an alternate pronunciation of the word *bangala*, and his statement actually translates to “Jesus is poisonwood,” a reference to an African tree with such poisonous wood that burning it can release fatal fumes. While Nathan (were he not deaf to the nuances of African languages) would consider his own words blasphemous, his inadvertent claim that “Jesus is poisonwood” actually holds more meaning for the Congolese, who have lost much to those intending to enlighten them.

Kingsolver furthers her theme of cultural differences when Nathan’s attempts to convert the Congolese to Western thought backfire. Nathan tries to convince the Congolese of the importance of a democratic election, only to stand by while the “congregation of his very own church interrupted the sermon to hold an election on whether or not to accept Jesus Christ as the personal Saviour of Kilanga” (327). Despite Nathan’s insistence that “Jesus is exempt from popular elections,” Tata Ndu holds an election in which “Jesus Christ lost, eleven to fifty-six” (334).

As is true of all of Kingsolver’s works, the theme of family is central to *The Poisonwood Bible*. Unlike the other families who populate her stories, the Price family seems to conform to the “Family of Dolls Family Value” mind-set. Ironically, it is the one family in Kingsolver’s work that cannot survive intact. Nathan’s tyrannical behavior as head of house results in the meek defeat of his wife, Orleanna, who remains by his side despite his abusive treatment of

her and his inability to “see no way to have a daughter but to own her like a plot of land. To work her, plow her under, rain down a dreadful poison on her.” Although Orleanna reviles Nathan “with every silent curse she knows,” she fails to retaliate because she believes such an attack would more likely “strike the child made in his image” (191), in other words, her own child. Kingsolver describes her own experience with a painful marriage in “Stone Soup”:

A nonfunctioning marriage is a slow asphyxiation. It is waking up despised each morning, listening to the pulse of your own loneliness . . . it is sharing your airless house with the threat of suicide or other kinds of violence, while the ghost that whispers, “Leave here and destroy your children,” has passed over every door and nailed it shut. (*High Tide* 138)

In many ways, Orleanna is representative of all women who are trapped in loveless marriages but stay for “the sake of the children.”

The daughters react to Nathan’s domination by at first trying all the harder to win his affections: “They elongate on the pale stalks of their longing, like sunflowers with heavy heads . . . they’ll bend to his light” (191). Orleanna predicts that a day will arrive when each daughter “turns away hard, never to speak to him again,” yet the fulfillment of her prognostication is not of their own choice, but through the death of Ruth May and their father’s eventual mental deterioration. Despite Nathan’s domination of them, three of the Price girls survive; Ruth May’s death serves as a reminder to women that a decision to stay with an abusive husband for the sake of the children is based on a faulty premise.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *The Poisonwood Bible* to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with specific focus on theme and character motivation. How is Africa employed as a character in each work?
2. A common theme in Kingsolver’s work is the belief that “bloodshed is necessary for preserving our way of life” (*Small Wonder* 182). How is this theme manifested in *The Poisonwood Bible*?
3. How might the story have been different if told through the eyes of Nathan Price or Anatole Ngemba? Why does Kingsolver give neither man a voice in the story?
4. Analyze the character of Nathan Price. What causes his fanaticism and emotional distance from his family? How does he change or fail to change through the course of the novel?
5. How is Adah’s hemiplegia important to her development as a character? How does it contribute to the story? What does her recovery symbolize, and what does she gain and lose because of her recovery?
6. Discuss Orleanna Price’s plea that readers not “presume there’s shame in the lot of the woman who carries on” and her comparison of such women to “the backbone of a history” (383). Is this self-justification on her part, or is it a valid explanation of her actions throughout the novel? How does her statement change the way we look at history?

Prodigal Summer (2000)

Within the pages of *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver returns to her Appalachian homeland to explore the “connections between humans and our habitat and our food chain” (Snodgrass 166). The book is divided into three parts: “Predators,” “Moth Love,” and “Old Chestnuts,” each with its own ecological lesson.

“Predators” follows the effort of the forest ranger Deanne Wolfe to restore the coyote to its place as the keystone predator of Zebulon Mountain. Deanne lives a solitary life, filled with quiet moments of celebration, as when she tracks a young family of coyotes and locates the sire. Kingsolver’s belief that “a mirror held up to every moral superiority will show its precise mirror image” (*Small Wonder* 6) is reflected through Eddie Bondo. Bondo goes to Zebulon Mountain to hunt a lamb-killing coyote. Throughout their relationship, the pair wrestle with irreconcilable differences: Wolfe attempts to persuade Bondo that destruction of the coyote will cause an imbalance in nature, while

and events as described in Kingsolver's novels to the portrayal of each in popular media. Discuss the factors that may contribute to inaccuracy in media coverage and the measures individuals may take to be better informed.

7. Dialogue is one of Kingsolver's favored techniques for examining cultural differences. Examine the conversations between Jax and Anna Fourkiller (*Pigs in Heaven*), Leah Price and Anatole Ngemba (*The Poisonwood Bible*), and Taylor Greer and Estevan (*The Bean Trees*). Then choose two characters from separate works and construct a conversation in which they discuss the realities of poverty in America.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Barbara Kingsolver Official Web site. Available online. URL: www.kingsolver.com/home/index.asp. Accessed May 20, 2009.
- Beattie, L. Elisabeth. "Barbara Kingsolver." In *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996.
- Bowdan, Janet. "Re-placing Ceremony: The Poetics of Barbara Kingsolver." *Southwestern American Literature* 20 (Spring 1995): 13–19.
- DeMarr, Mary Jean. *Barbara Kingsolver: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999.
- Epstein, Robin. "Barbara Kingsolver Interview." *Progressive*, February 1996.
- Gergen, David. "Barbara Kingsolver: November 24, 1995." Online NewsHour. Available online. URL: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/kingsolver.html>. Accessed June 25, 2009.
- Kanner, Ellen. "Barbara Kingsolver Turns to Her Past to Understand the Present." Available online. URL: http://www.bookpage.com/9811bp/barbara_kingsolver.html. Accessed June 30, 2008.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Animal Dreams*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.
- . *The Bean Trees*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- . *High Tide in Tucson*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- . *Homeland and Other Stories*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- . *Pigs in Heaven*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- . *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- . *Prodigal Summer*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- . *Small Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.
- , Steven L. Hopp, and Camille Kingsolver. *Animal, Vegetable, and Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- McMahon, Regan. "Barbara Kingsolver: An Army of One." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 April 2002.
- Murrey, Loretta Martin. "The Loner and the Matriarchal Community in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*." *Southern Studies* 5, no. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1994): 155–164.
- Perry, Donna. *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out: Interviews*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- Rubinstein, Roberta. "The Mark of Africa." *World and I* 14, no. 4 (April 1999): 254.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004.
- Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



MAXINE HONG KINGSTON (1940–)

Readers ought not to expect reading always to be as effortless as watching television.

(“Cultural Mis-reading by American Reviewers”)

“Who is Maxine Hong Kingston?” asked the critic John Leonard in his *New York Times* review of *The Woman Warrior*. “Nobody at Knopf seems to know,” he continues. “They have never laid eyes on her. She lives in Honolulu, nicely situated between the Occident and the Orient, with a husband and small son. She teaches English and creative writing. There is no one more qualified to teach English and creative writing” (78).

Maxine Hong was born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, to Tom Hong (who had renamed himself after Thomas Edison) and Chew Ying Lan (Brave Orchid). Maxine—whose family called her “Ting Ting”—was the eldest of six American-born children. Two previous children had died in China before her mother immigrated to the United States. Her father, a scholar and teacher in China, immigrated to America in 1924 and worked a series of jobs, including in a New York laundry that he started with friends, who later swindled him out of his share of the business. Kingston’s mother studied and practiced medicine in China before immigrating in 1939 to America, where she worked in the family laundry business, in agriculture, and in housekeeping. Maxine was named after a blond gambler who always seemed to win in the illegal gambling house that the Hongs managed in Stockton. One of her father’s main jobs at the gambling establishment was to “take the blame for the real owner” and be arrested (*China*

Men [CM] 242). He never did have a police record because he used multiple aliases, and, after all, “white demons can’t tell one Chinese name from another or one face from another” (CM 242).

The Hong family later owned the New Port Laundry and lived in a tough neighborhood on the south side of Stockton. (Years later, Kingston’s mother and father still lived in the same area, despite their children’s urging them to move to a nicer neighborhood.) The children put in many long and grueling hours at the laundry, but it was also the place where Maxine especially, with her mother, neighbors, grandfathers, cousins, aunts, and uncles coming and going, learned to talk-story. She listened to stories and songs, “village ditties,” as she called them. “I never knew,” Kingston says, “until I got to college and was taking Asian Lit Class, that that was important poetry. I just thought it was my parents’ tales. . . . And then I thought later, oh, Tu Fu, and Li Po—this is important stuff” (Chin 70). Kingston was surrounded by creative and imaginative stories; however, the stories often “transmitted the cultural conception . . . that girls were inferior, a useless drain on family resources” (Simmons 7). Expressions such as “When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls” hurt and confused young Maxine (*The Woman Warrior* [WW] 52). She listened, but she also began writing at the age of nine: “The day was very clear to me,” she recalls. “I was in the fourth grade and all of a

sudden this poem started coming out of me. On and on I went, oblivious to everything, and when it was over I had written thirty verses” (Robertson 89).

The school years were hard for young Maxine in many ways—she did not fit in the social circles—but she did excel in academics. In 1955, she won a five-dollar prize from *Girl Scout Magazine* for her essay “I Am an American” (Simmons xi). She was awarded 11 scholarships to attend the University of California at Berkeley, where she began college as an engineering major (Simmons 10). But what she felt was her duty to help the American space program gave way to her love for reading and writing, and she soon became an English major (Yeh). She graduated with a B.A. in English in 1962. While at Berkeley, she met and married Earll Kingston, a fellow English major. A son, Joseph, was born in 1963. Both Maxine and Earll taught in the high school in Hayward, California, and were very active in the peace movement, joining with thousands of others in protest against the Vietnam War (Simmons 13). For Kingston, the war was a “special agony . . . as Americans went to kill Asians—‘gooks’—and as the media churned out images of strange small people in silly pajama-like garb, who, it was widely expressed, did not value human life in the same way that Americans did”; additionally painful for Kingston was that she had two brothers in the service during the Vietnam War (Simmons 11).

Escalating violence and drug use caused the Kingstons to leave the area in 1967, but despite settling in Hawaii, they still found war all around them. Kingston credits a broken movie projector with helping her finally get started in writing down the stories of her ancestors. On a vacation to the tiny island of Lanai, the Kingstons went to see a movie, but the projector broke down. Maxine had nothing else to do but sit down and begin writing an outline for what would become *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* (Yeh).

The Woman Warrior debuted in 1976 to dazzling critical praise—although Kingston was troubled by many of the stereotyping and exoticizing reviews—and won the National Book Critics Circle Award as best work of nonfiction. It became

an immediate best seller, launching Kingston into nearly instant literary fame at the age of 36. Published at the height of the feminist movement, this book about the lives of women—many heroically strong—was embraced by feminists, academics, and general readers alike. Of it, John Leonard says, “Those rumbles you hear on the horizon are the big guns of autumn lining up, the howitzers of Vonnegut and Updike and Cheever and Mailer, the books that will be making loud noises for the next several months. But listen: this week a remarkable book has been quietly published; it is one of the best I’ve read in years” (77).

It is interesting that *The Woman Warrior*—a memoir—begins with this line of warning from Kingston’s mother: “You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you” (3). And then Kingston proceeds to tell. Much of Kingston’s writing is about her journey from silence to voice, from her earliest years when she did not talk—“My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint”—to her difficulty with translating between two languages and two cultures to finally tell her own talk-story (*WW* 165). Kingston defines talk-story as “a tradition that goes back to prewriting time in China, where people verbally pass on history and mythology and genealogy and how-to stories and bedtime stories and legends. They pass them down through the generations, and it keeps the community together” (quoted in Simmons 6).

Both *The Woman Warrior* and its sequel, *China Men*, draw on autobiographical and historical fact, but Kingston adds contemporized myth, legend, fantasy, and talk-story to create a genre that is difficult to categorize. Noting that *The Woman Warrior* is subtitled *Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Kingston emphasizes the genre in the subtitle by saying, “After all, I am not writing history or sociology but a ‘memoir’ like Proust” (“Cultural Mis-readings” 102). And yet, when *The Woman Warrior* hit the market, the world took notice. It was a groundbreaking work, which Kingston describes as, “riding the border between fiction and nonfiction” (Skandera-Trombley 35). She states:

I'm writing about real people and these real people have powerful imaginations. They have minds that make up fictions constantly, and so if I was going to write a true biography or an autobiography I would have to take into consideration the stories that people tell. I tell the dreams that they have and then when I do that, that border becomes so wide that it contains fiction and nonfiction and both going toward truth. (Skandera-Trombley 35)

The widening border served a practical purpose for Kingston as well. She states in a 2003 interview:

The way that I wrote when my mother and father were both alive was very different than the way I write now. In *Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, I wrote their stories in such a way that I protected them [her parents] from being deported. Both of them were illegal aliens, and I wrote about their coming from China to Cuba to America. I made up a new genre that is a mix of reality and imagination, and I did that because I was thinking that if immigration authorities read my books they could not find evidence to deport my parents. (Alegre and Weich)

In 1977, Kingston became a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii at Honolulu. She returned from Hawaii in the mid-1980s to her alma mater, UC Berkeley, where she became a senior lecturer; today, she is an emeritus professor there

“To best appreciate *The Woman Warrior*, you do need to read *China Men*,” Kingston advises (Lim 23). *China Men* (1980), the sequel to *The Woman Warrior*, was originally conceived by Kingston to be written alongside *The Woman Warrior*—not separated by gender: “I once meant for them to be one large book,” said Kingston. “But the women’s stories and the men’s stories parted into two volumes, naturally replicating history and geography: the women stayed in China and maintained communities; the men sailed off to Gold Mountain,

where they built bachelor Chinatowns” (Lim 24). As Kingston’s first book had, *China Men* received high praise, winning the National Book Award in 1981. Both books are based on Kingston’s life and the lives of her parents and ancestors—a collage of stories of the men and women, past and present, in Kingston’s life.

Kingston’s first attempt at “straight” fiction was the novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), which won the PEN USA West Award for fiction. It tells the story of Wittman Ah Sing, a fifth-generation Chinese American and would-be playwright, and is set in San Francisco in the 1960s. Wittman, a Walt Whitman incarnate, wants to set a new standard for being American: “The common man has Chinese looks” (*Tripmaster Monkey [TM]* 34). With the creation and performance of his play, he is able to transform his anger at living in a racist and materialistic society into communal love and peace.

In 1991, while returning home from her father’s funeral, Kingston learned that the hills of Oakland, California, were on fire and that her home was completely destroyed, along with the manuscript for her nearly completed book to be titled *The Fourth Book of Peace*. Rather than succumb to the loss, she recreated the lost fiction—a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*—alongside her own account of life after the fire, including her experiences teaching writing to local Vietnam veterans. The result is a melding of nonfiction and fiction entitled *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), in which Wittman Ah Sing returns as a main character. In this book, Kingston advocates a spirit of nonviolence and peace in the global community.

Kingston continues to be a visible writer and a visible peace activist. Her stories are often about men and women who are silenced—and Kingston feels an obligation to do the talking for them, to imagine what her ancestors might have done, or thought, or said. Kingston is forced to create her own scenarios, to fill in the gaps. She says: “I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You’ll just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong” (*CM* 15). Kingston was arrested

in March 2003—along with many other women, including her fellow authors ALICE WALKER and Terry Tempest Williams—while protesting the Iraq War in front of the White House in observance of International Women’s Day. She says of her vision for global peace: “I want to be able to manipulate reality as easily as I can manipulate fiction. Do we imagine the world? If we imagine characters, can we cause them to appear in the real world? What if I could strongly write peace, I could cause an end to war” (Seshachari).

Kingston rides the borders and blurs the boundaries between the genres of fiction and nonfiction, reality and imagination, and seems to meld the Chinese and American experiences—and the languages. She states, “My hands are writing English, but my mouth is speaking Chinese. Somehow I am able to write a language that captures the Chinese rhythms and tones and images, getting that power into English. I am working in some kind of fusion language” (Alegre and Weich). Part of this fusion, this melding, is the way Chinese myths have been “transmuted to America,” as Kingston says (Simmons 16). As culture evolves, so must the stories. “Stories and myths stay alive when they change like that,” she says. “That is being alive. But when they are frozen in one version, that’s when they die” (Skandera-Trombley 36). She adds, “Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American” (Lim 24). These border crossings and transmuted myths have served Kingston in creating her own identity as a Chinese American. And the transmutation continues: On the one hand, Kingston’s books are about ugly conflict—cultural conflict, gender conflict, the conflict of being a hyphenated Chinese American in an often-hostile white America. But on the other hand, her books are also full of beauty: Riding the border between fiction and nonfiction allows for beautiful prose. Although Kingston calls the language in *The Woman Warrior* “stilted and complicated . . . because I was trying to find a language for a very complicated story” (Lim 5), readers and critics alike most often find Kingston’s prose stunning, “a poem turned into a sword” (Leonard, “Defiance” 77).

The critic Maureen Sabine once claimed that Kingston has “secured a place in the American canon as the living author most frequently taught in U.S. universities” (4). Her works cross academic disciplines and are taught in many interdisciplinary courses: Asian studies, postmodernism, women’s and gender studies, family history, memoir, folklore, history, anthropology—the list goes on. Kingston notes that “*China Men* is listed in the Dewey Decimal system under California history” and adds, “My work is in so many categories that essentially it has not been categorized” (Skandera-Trombley 34). Among the many awards and honors she has received are the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature (1999) and the title National Living Treasure of Hawaii. In 1997, President Bill Clinton awarded Kingston a National Humanities Medal for inspiring “a new generation of writers to make their own unique voices and experiences heard” (“Famous Berkeley”).

“No Name Woman” (1976)

“You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (3). The opening line of “No Name Women,” the first chapter in the book *The Woman Warrior*, often anthologized as a stand-alone story, foretells the pattern that continues throughout the story: silencing and the ensuing attempts to find a voice for women, particularly the story’s narrator (young Kingston) and her nameless aunt.

The haunting story, told as a cautionary tale by Kingston’s mother—“Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you”—is about her father’s only sister, whose name is never mentioned because of the shame she causes the family when she becomes pregnant years after her husband left to seek his fortune in Gold Mountain (America) (5). Married as one of 17 brides in “hurry up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went ‘out on the road’ would responsibly come home”—she was to maintain the home and maintain the traditional ways

while her young husband was away. When the villagers discover the impossible pregnancy, they raid the house on the night the baby is to be born; the aunt gives birth in a pigsty, then drowns herself and her newborn baby in the well.

The story of Kingston's nameless aunt instructs her about being a Chinese woman, instruction that she must hold up against what she sees as "American-feminine" (11). She learns about the lowly status of women—that "to be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough"; that "women in old China did not choose" (6)—and that being a daughter-in-law in China means that a woman's in-laws could have "sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her" (8). She learns about "Chinese-feminine": hair removal with a depilatory string, the abandoned practice of foot binding, loud talking, and walking pigeon-toed; however, she must view these in relationship to the American-feminine ideal—which for young Kingston felt quite the opposite.

Kingston finds confusion in feminine identity and in other aspects of the story as well. She needs more information to make sense of the story, but since her mother has "told [her] once and for all the useful parts" (6), and her father forbids any mention of the aunt's name, Kingston is forced to read between the lines. She constructs her own story with what might have happened in an effort to make her aunt's life "branch into [hers]," using a series of *perhaps's* and *might have beens*: *perhaps* her aunt had a lover, or she *might have been* raped (8). With all the possibilities of what may have happened to her aunt, Kingston finally recognizes, as Judith Melton notes, "that her aunt was no adulterer who brought destruction onto her family; she was an ordinary woman caught in the punishing beliefs of feudal China" (76).

With her pregnancy, the nameless aunt has upset the Chinese tradition and the village structure—she has made a break in the "roundness" (13). She is punished by the villagers "for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (13). Roundness is symbolic here of community and wholeness, where the sins of one could pull

down many. Community is more important, more necessary, than the individual. Significant, too, is that the "real punishment was not the raid . . . but the family's deliberately forgetting her"—in effect, silencing her—which Kingston ends by "devot[ing] pages to her" and telling the story (16). The telling serves as both an act of self-empowerment and an act of open rebellion against her mother's admonishment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What attitudes about feminine behavior are prevalent in this chapter? What does the narrator learn about the "proper" roles for women? In what way(s) does she rebel against those attitudes?
2. Research the practice of Chinese foot binding and read Ruth Fainlight's poem "Flower Feet." Think about foot binding in terms of creating helpless women and as a form of beauty. In what ways do women hurt themselves in today's world for beauty's sake?
3. The mother in the story tells cautionary tales, or warning tales—"a story to grow up on," as Kingston says. What cautionary tales have you been told? Has reality differed from those stories? If so, how?
4. Read "No Name Woman" in conjunction with the chapter "White Tigers." Explore the attitudes about motherhood in each story.
5. Read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and discuss Hester Prynne in connection with Kingston's nameless aunt. In what ways are the two women similar?

***The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976)**

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston searches the memories of her childhood growing up in Stockton, California, but she is haunted by China, a place where she has never been, which she knows only through the tales and stories—the talk-stories—told by those around her, particularly her

mother. Confused about her Chinese-American identity, she asks members of her community:

Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate the peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing up with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (6)

She gets little help in answering the question. Her father is often silent, and her mother is an unreliable storyteller. In the last chapter, Kingston accuses her mother: “You lie with your stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story,’ or ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference” (202).

The *Woman Warrior* has five chapters, each one a story that can stand on its own (“No Name Woman” and “White Tigers” are often anthologized), and each one focusing on a particular woman whose story teaches young Kingston about her identity as a Chinese American. Many of the stories that Kingston tells are about women on the margins, marginalized in life and often completely silenced in history. From the stories that young Kingston hears, she learns that the repression of self is good for the community; thus, a conflict is precipitated between the suppression of the individual and the celebration of an individual’s story. Telling the story—often in open rebellion against demands not to tell—is an assertion of the individual, the capital *I*. In the final chapter, Kingston tells of her schooling and the inability to talk: “The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (166). It was easier to read aloud than to talk aloud, but young Kingston “could not understand ‘I’”—a genderless word, a letter with only three bold strokes, whereas the Chinese version had seven “intricate strokes” (166). Kingston points out that there is a “Chinese word for the female *I*—which is ‘slave’” (47). Her journey to find a voice is also a journey to find the capital *I*.

In a disturbing scene that goes on for seven pages, young Kingston tortures a quiet, timid Chinese girl in the bathroom at school in an effort to force her to speak. She pinches her cheeks, pulls her hair, screams at her, ridicules her, pleads with her: “‘I’ll let you go if you say just one word,’ I said. ‘You can say, ‘a’ or ‘the,’ and I’ll let you go. Come on. Please’” (179). She lashes out at this girl in a self-hating rage.

She hears the stories of the worthlessness of girls, the powerlessness of growing up as a Chinese-American female, and says, “I am useless, one more girl who couldn’t be sold.” She wants to believe that “they only say, ‘When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls’” (52). “But,” she continues, “I watched such words come out of my own mother’s and father’s mouths. . . . And I had to get out of hating range” (52). Young Maxine feels confusion because her mother told her that she “would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught [her] the song of the warrior woman,” Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior who takes her aged father’s place as a soldier, and dressed as a man, leads armies (20).

Kingston’s adaptation of the myth is mutilated: Fa Mu Lan’s power is derived as much from the words carved on her back (the burdens of the entire Chinese population) as from the sword in her hand. She wins battles, leads armies, marries, gives birth to a son (all the while disguised as a man), avenges the Chinese population, and becomes a legend of “perfect filiality” (45). Kingston carries words on her back as well—*chink* and *gook*—and she imagines herself as an avenger: Her revenge will be the “reporting” (53). “The reporting,” she claims, “is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (53). Kingston, when talking about the importance of words, says in a 1996 interview, “One kind of example I have in mind is to take the word ‘swordwoman’ and to look at its similarity with ‘wordswoman’ to include the idea of the woman warrior taking on the power of words” (Meachen and Williams).

Certainly Kingston is a “wordswoman.” In the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston’s

mother tells her the horrific story of her pregnant aunt (No Name Woman), who is brutally attacked by Chinese villagers and punished for her sexual sin: "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt," her mother says. "Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born" (15). But Kingston rebels against the admonition. She tells the story that she knows and speculates on the parts where her mother is silent. She tells of No Name Woman; she tells of smothered baby girls and young girls sold as slaves in China. Kingston tells the ugly stories, she tells the painful stories, and she reports the words that she carries as a burden on her back. As does Fa Mu Lan, whose heroic deeds are an assurance that she will escape her gender's fate of invisibility and silencing, Kingston, through her own reporting, her own talk-story, her own act of defiance, her *words*, finds her voice in her family, in her Chinese history, and in her own American history.

In the chapter entitled "Shaman," Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, a looming presence throughout the book, is seen as a strong, heroic woman scholar with "a room of her own," who defeats ghosts, earns a medical degree, eats anything (in China, "big eaters win"), and delivers babies, but she is also a woman who may have killed baby girls (90). She tells young Kingston, "The midwife or a relative would take the back of a girl baby's head in her hand and turn her face into the ashes" that had been left by the bedside. "It was very easy" (62). Again, Kingston is confronted with conflicting messages.

The fourth chapter, "In the Western Palace," tells of Brave Orchid's sister, the timid Moon Orchid, and her visit to the United States to reunite with her husband after a 30-year separation. Living in the United States and practicing medicine, he now has a second wife and family and knows nothing of Moon Orchid's visit. Brave Orchid insists that Moon Orchid "go to [her] husband's house and demand [her] rights as First Wife," plotting the different ways that her sister might dramatically surprise her husband. When they finally meet outside his office, her husband tells her she is like a character "in a book [he] had read long ago" (154). Moon Orchid is unable to assert herself. She cannot stand up to her bossy sister or her husband; she

is silenced, declared insane, and placed in a California state mental asylum.

In the final pages, Kingston writes a story of reconciliation, a seamless blend of two stories between Kingston and her mother: "The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (206). Kingston's legendary hero, Ts'ai Yen, is a woman whose poetry changes the sounds of captivity into beautiful music, and "it translated well" (209).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the chapter "White Tigers," look at the way the narrator reacts to sexist ideas about women. How does she rebel against these ideas? In what ways does she subscribe to them?
2. We all may have words "carved on our backs"—Kingston says two of her words are *chink* and *gook* (53). Or we might carry stories or "words to grow up on" as part of us. What words might you have "carved on your back"? What stories do you carry with you? What do these words and stories tell you about the values of your culture or family?
3. In the final chapter, the narrator/young Kingston resorts to physical abuse, verbal taunts, bribery, and pleading in her attempts to make the girl speak. Why is she so cruel and so intent on forcing the girl to speak? What is Kingston saying, in a broader sense, about women's being historically silenced?
4. "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (5). Consider this statement and the subtitle of the book, *A Girlhood among Ghosts*. What do the ghosts symbolize?

China Men (1980)

Originally conceived as a part of "one huge book" with *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* was instead published as a sequel in 1980. With *China Men*, Kingston moves away from the resentment that often filled *The Warrior Woman* and toward a voice of reconciliation. Unlike her first book, which has

“five interlocking pieces, each one like a short story or essay,” and myths seamlessly integrated into the stories, *China Men* comprises 18 chapters, with the myths as separate entries—the pattern of “a myth, and then a modern story, and then a myth,” symbolizing that the myths were not as integrated into the lives of the men (Lim 5). Kingston claims that while the women were caught up in the old myths, the men thought, “Why not be rid of the mythical, and be a free American?” (Lim 24).

The stories—most of which take place on American soil—are about Kingston’s father and many male relatives and sojourners: grandfathers, uncles, cousins, brother. The stories are particular to blood relatives, but they also tell the tale of the collective male heritage of Chinese Americans: workers in laundries, laborers in sugarcane fields, builders of railroads, and makers of America. A chapter called “The Making of More Americans” is a reference to Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, an allusion that “grounds [Kingston’s] work in the American tradition” (Lim 5). A prevalent theme in *China Men* is the search for the American dream, which is symbolized in the Chinese name for America—*Gold Mountain*—a name derived from the worldwide gold rush to California. A major part of the American dream was to “get rich quick” and return to the homeland, but many Chinese went through successive generations in the United States, from sojourner to settler to citizen (Chua 61).

Other references to the Hong family’s becoming American are artfully arranged throughout *China Men*. When relatives go to Stockton to visit Kingston’s family, they are taken to the place where “two of our four grandfathers had had their house, stable, and garden” (171). The relatives take pictures and say, “This is ancestral ground, their eyes filling with tears over a vacant lot in Stockton” (171). Ancestral ground establishes a claim to the land, a spiritual rootedness that reveals a sacred hold on the ground—a claim to being an American that was hard fought and hard won. A particularly poignant chapter is “The Brother in Vietnam.” When Kingston’s brother receives a Secret Security clearance while in the military, “The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precari-

ously American but super-American, extraordinarily secure—Q Clearance Americans” (299).

As in Kingston’s first book, silencing is a consistent theme in *China Men* (which makes the granting of the secret security clearance in the final chapter all the more meaningful). A grandfather is told by his white employer to be silent as he clears land in Hawaii: “Shut up. Go work. China-man, go work. You stay go work. Shut up” (101). Other grandfathers and fathers—who worked in American fields and on American railroads—were symbolically silenced, at least until the last few decades, by their absence from American history texts. And much as in *The Woman Warrior*, when Kingston lacks knowledge of the story because of silences, her only resort is to guess. Her father’s story of arrival in the United States takes on several different versions; after telling how her father was smuggled from China in a small crate in the ship’s cargo hold, she states: “Of course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way, something like this” (53), and Kingston then proceeds to tell the story of her father’s stay on Angel Island and his subsequent interrogation before being allowed to enter the country. In a 1996 interview, Kingston relates that when she teaches *China Men*, her students always think the real version is the legal entrance through Angel Island. But in recent years, her mother has told her that her father did indeed come as a stowaway, hidden in a box, and “he did it three times” (Meachen and William).

While *The Woman Warrior* is a story of the struggle to find voice, the *I*, Kingston claims that with *China Men*, “‘I’ achieved the adult narrator’s voice. The ‘I’ becomes more whole [than in *The Woman Warrior*] because of the ability to appreciate the other gender” (Lim 23). Kingston’s first-person voice becomes more distant as she moves throughout the book, and she becomes “a listener by the end” (Chin 59).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the first chapter, “On Discovery,” as a cautionary tale for men, much as the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior* is a cautionary tale for women. What is Kingston’s warning?

2. Why does Kingston include "The Laws" in the center of *China Men*? Look at the language of the chapter. How is it different from Kingston's prose in other chapters? Why? What effect does this have?
3. How was Kingston's father's life changed with the arrival of his wife in New York? What was his life like before her arrival? What did her arrival change?
4. Why does Kingston end the book with the chapter "My Brother in Vietnam"? How is this title particularly significant in terms of being an American?

***Tripmaster Monkey* (1989)**

When Maxine Hong Kingston set out to write her first novel, she did so in part to answer the reviewers and critics of *The Woman Warrior*, who often characterized her portrayal of Chinese women as stereotypically exotic and mysterious and questioned whether Kingston was writing about the "typical" Chinese-American experience. With *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston reveals a protagonist who is anything but stereotypically exotic and typically Chinese American. He is, in fact, American. Michelle Cliff observes: "To underline the Americanness of Wittman, Hong Kingston has named him for the most American of American poets." She continues, "To play with his name is irresistible. Wittman Ah Sing the body electric. Wittman, Ah hear America Singing" (Cliff 11).

The Kingston scholar Diane Simmons tells us that "from her earliest work, Kingston has taken it as her mission to intervene in the process by which the identity of the powerless is invented by the stories of the powerful" (140). In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston sets the fictional Wittman Ah Sing on a journey to "construct an identity by integrating his own dual inheritance," while fighting off cultural stereotypes (Simmons 140). *Tripmaster Monkey* is a book with "American rhythms . . . with slangy American, present day language" (Chin 71). Kingston shows the reader over and over again that Wittman is indeed not Chinese American, but American. Wittman

feels he has very little in common with the "fresh-off-the-boat" Chinese immigrants, whom he rather derisively labels as F.O.B.s. He reminds us that he is a fifth-generation native Californian, whose great-great-grandfather "came on the *Nootka*, as ancestral as the *Mayflower*" (41). Much as she does in *China Men*, Kingston again reminds us that there are other stories, less often told and heard, of the making of America. The people who traveled to the United States on the *Nootka* helped build America in an important and essential way, just as those who arrived on the *Mayflower* did.

Wittman Ah Sing is a year out of college as a liberal arts major in 1960s San Francisco. He is a writer, a reader, a beatnik, a hippie, a Walt Whitman incarnate, a drifter, a draft dodger, and a young man who is fired from his job in the toy section of a large department store after setting up a pornographic scene of a Barbie bride and the organ grinder's monkey doll: "A green razzberry to you, World," he says as he walks away (65). He goes on unemployment, falls into an impromptu wedding ceremony officiated by a draft-dodging mail-order minister, and works on the Great American Play. Marilyn Chin calls Wittman a "precocious and unhappy and alienated anti-hero, wading through the shit of American life" (60). But Wittman is also struggling against alienation; he is working toward integration in his quest for identity.

The novel opens with Wittman's contemplating suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge: "Anybody serious about killing himself does the big leap off the Golden Gate" (3). This moment of isolation and alienation is only temporary for Wittman, for not long after, Wittman, the "fool for literature," is reading Rilke aloud to passengers on a crosstown bus, mile after mile, striving for integration, trying to be part of a community (10). As in all of Kingston's writings, the community versus the individual is an ongoing theme. The narrator of *Tripmaster Monkey* (Kingston claims the narrator is female, although she is never directly noted as such) states, "Anybody American who really imagines Asia feels the loneliness of the U.S.A. and suffers from the distances human beings are apart" (141). The vision of community is "a Chinese thing," says Kingston

(Moyers). Wittman, much like his namesake Walt Whitman, is looking for a communal village in a land where individualism is held in highest esteem.

Ultimately, Wittman takes the vision of an integrated community to the stage as he puts on his play at a theater in Chinatown, a play based on the epic Chinese *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, “required reading for every literate Chinese child,” says John Leonard, who continues, “Chinese have been staging one version or another of it in theaters and opera houses in America ever since the railroad and Gold Rush days” (“Of Thee” 771). And Wittman is staging a version of his own. Wittman thinks, “whaddayaknow, I’ve written one of those plays that leave room for actors to do improv, a process as ancient as Chinese opera and as far-out as the theater of spontaneity that was happening in streets and parks” (141). His play will be the joining of cultures, ideas, and people. As Derek Parker Royal suggests, “Wittman’s theater is one of multiple possibility,” refusing to define itself in terms of “any static or categorical representations” (142). Wittman is trying to change the world, “solv[ing] the world’s problems through fun and theater. And with laughter,” says Kingston. She continues, “The reason this is all set in the Sixties is that the monkey was here in the Sixties. Abby Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, you know? They were monkey spirits, trying to change the world with costumes and street theater . . . and bring[ing] chaos to established order” (Chin). Wittman is modeled on the trickster monkey, “one of the most beloved anti-authority figures of Chinese literature” (Simmons 143). As monkey, Wittman can challenge materialism, consumerism, corporate America, and military authority. Bharati Mukherjee describes Wittman as “a werewolf, a shape-changer. He is the Monkey of Chinese legends, a tripper through seventy-two reincarnations, a savior, a discoverer of Inner Truth” (279). He is also playful and full of fun.

Wittman’s ancestors immigrated to California not for the gold rush (which drew many Chinese to “Gold Mountain”); instead, they “came to play”—his mother was a Flora Dora showgirl named Ruby Long Legs, and his father, Zeppelin Ah Sing, was a stagehand and, later, an onstage emcee (250).

Kingston states in an interview that she wanted Chinese Americans to have a reason to immigrate to America other than gold—a wonderful, honorable reason “like the Pilgrims, like religious freedom” (Moyers). “We came for fun, to put on shows,” she says. It is part of the monkey spirit.

While Wittman’s monkey spirit is playful, it also transforms into a reader. “Wittman’s mind is like an English major’s mind,” says Kingston (Moyers). She says that she imagined herself as part of a community of “writers both living and dead,” and Wittman is very much a part of that community as well (Sabine 6). Kingston asks Wittman to discover what he is going to do with all that knowledge—all the knowledge that is gained from a liberal arts degree and a life as a reader. “I want to see,” states Kingston, “whether Wittman can take all this wonderful literature and make the world a better place” (Chin 60). Kingston and Wittman know that America is multi-layered, multilingual, culture clashing, and certainly not easily divided into neat categories. “He’s tripped out,” as Caroline Ong sees him, “not on any of the mind and reality-altering drugs abundant in San Francisco in the 1960s, but on words and language, fictions and histories, handed down from his cultural past”—from a Chinese and an American *and* a global past (285). And Wittman’s final trip (at least for now) is to collect everyone he knows together to perform his version of the Chinese stories of heroism and community, a trip that surely draws counterculture community together.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Maxine Hong Kingston claims, “I loved being a young person in the ’60s. There were many, many wonderful adventures” (Seshachari). Do a cultural study of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the Beat generation in particular. What were the times like? What are some of Wittman’s traits and beliefs that might characterize him as a beatnik?
2. Read Allen Ginsberg’s poem “A Supermarket in California.” Note Walt Whitman’s presence in the poem. What was Ginsberg protesting? What did he find abhorrent? How does this relate to the situation of Wittman Ah Sing?

2. How would you define the American dream? What is the American dream for Kingston? For her ancestors? What are the problems for Kingston in finding it? For her ancestors? How does Kingston's American dream differ from yours? What influences have shaped the concept of the American dream?
3. Kingston has been chastised by some critics for falsifying Chinese history and distorting traditional myths and legends. What purpose does this distortion serve for Kingston? Why does she want to revision history? Do you think Kingston's critics are correct in chastising Kingston? How do you feel about Kingston's changing the myths?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alegre, Meil, and Dave Weich. "Author Interviews: Maxine Hong Kingston after the Fire." Available online. URL: www.powells.com/authors/kingston.html. Accessed July 1, 2006.
- Chin, Marilyn. "A *Melus* Interview: Maxine Hong Kingston." *Melus* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 57-74.
- Chu, Patricia P. "Tripmaster Monkey, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition." In *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Chua, Chen Lok. "Two Chinese Versions of the American Dream: The Gold Mountain in Lin Yutang and Maxine Hong Kingston." *Melus* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 61-70.
- Cliff, Michelle. "The Making of Americans: Maxine Hong Kingston's Cross-Over Dreams." *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 74 (May 1989): 11-13.
- Colanzi, Rita. "From Reviews to Ethnography of Restaurants: The Culture of Food in the Writing and Literature Class." *EAPSU Online* Fall 2004: 47-86. Available online. URL: www.ship.edu/~kmlong/epsu/voll.pdf. Accessed August 1, 2006.
- Fainlight, Ruth. "Flower Feet." Available online. URL: <http://amethystgroup.tripod.com>. Accessed August 1, 2006.
- "Famous Berkeley Alumni." U.C. Berkeley Online Tour. Available online. URL: www.berkeley.edu/tour/students/famous_alumni.html. Accessed July 1, 2006.
- Frankel, Hans H. Translation of "Ballad of Mulan." Available online. URL: www.geocities.com/Hollywood/5082/mulanpoem.html. Accessed July 1, 2006.
- Hongo, Garrett Kaoru. *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*. New York: Anchor Books, 1993.
- Hughes, Langston. "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria." Available online. URL: www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=6691&poem=32575. Accessed August 1, 2006.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- . "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers." In *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*, edited by Guy Amirthanayagam, 55-65. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- . *The Fifth Book of Peace*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- . *To Be the Poet*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- . *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. New York: Knopf, 1989.
- . *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Leonard John. "In Defiance of 2 Worlds." Review of *The Woman Warrior*. Originally published in *New York Times*, 17 September 1976, p. C21. *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, edited by Laura E. Skandera-Trombly, 77-78. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998.
- . "Of Thee Ah Sing." *Nation*, 5 June 1989, pp. 768-772.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991.
- Madsen, Deborah. *Maxine Hong Kingston*. Detroit: Manly/Gale, 2000.
- "Maxine Hong Kingston Bibliography." *Internet School Library Media Center*. Available online. URL: <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/kingston-bib.htm>. Accessed July 20, 2006.
- Meachen, Clive, and Dominic Williams. "Taking Tea with Maxine Hong Kingston." *Manuscript* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1996-1997). Available online. URL:

- www.art.man.ac.uk/english/manuscript/backiss/content/takingtea.html. Accessed July 20, 2006.
- Moyers, Bill. *A World of Ideas with Bill Moyers: The Stories of Maxine Hong Kingston*. PBS Video, 1990.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "Wittman at the Golden Gate." Review of *Tripmaster Monkey*. Originally published in *Washington Post*, 16 April 1989, p. X1. *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, edited by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, 279–281. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998.
- Ong, Caroline. "Demons and Warriors." Review of *Tripmaster Monkey*. Originally published in *Times (London) Literary Supplement*, 15 September 1989, p. 998. *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, edited by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, 285–287. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998.
- Piercy, Marge. "To Be of Use." Available online. URL: www.northnode.org/poem.htm. Accessed August 1, 2006.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 10: Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–)." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature*. Available online. URL: www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/kingston.html. Accessed July 20, 2006.
- Robertson, Nan. "'Ghosts' of Girlhood Lift Obscure Book to Peak of Acclaim." Review of *The Woman Warrior*. Originally published in *New York Times*, 12 February 1977. *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, edited by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, 88–91. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998.
- Royal, Derek Parker. "Literary Genre as Ethnic Resistance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*." *Melus* 29 (Summer 2004): 141–156.
- Sabine, Maureen Alice. *Maxine Hong Kingston's Broken Book of Life: An Intertextual Study of The Woman Warrior and China Men*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004.
- Seshachari, Neila C. "Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston." *Weber Studies* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1995).
- Simmons, Diane. *Maxine Hong Kingston*. Twayne's United States Authors Series, edited by Frank Day. New York: Twayne, 1999.
- Skandera-Trombley, Laura E. "A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston." In *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998.
- VG: Artist Biography: Kingston, Maxine Hong. Available online. URL: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/kingston_maxine_hong.html. Accessed June 25, 2009.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Yeh, Emerald. "Maxine Hong Kingston." Asian Pacific Fund Gala, 2002. Available online. URL: www.asianpacificfund.org/awards/bio_kingston.shtml. Accessed July 1, 2006.

Susan Andersen



YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA (1947–)

Poetry is a kind of distilled insinuation. It's a way of expanding and talking around an idea or a question. Sometimes, more actually gets said through such a technique than a full frontal assault.

(“Notations in Blue”)

Yusef Komunyakaa was born Willie James Brown, Jr., in 1947 in Bogalusa, Louisiana, the oldest of five children. The son of a carpenter and a mother who encouraged her children to learn as much as they could, he has commented on the influence of a set of encyclopedias his mother bought for them. Reading, listening to a small brown box radio, Komunyakaa gradually expanded his ideology to include not only the Civil Rights Movement taking place around him, but a widening world of cultural influences. He says that the first book he read entirely was the King James Bible. According to Susan Conley, “He cannot underestimate its effect on his own writing: ‘The hypnotic Biblical cadence brought me close to the texture of language, to the importance of music and metaphor’” (www.ploughshares.org). When he was 16, Komunyakaa discovered James Baldwin’s essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name* and decided to become a writer. He graduated from Bogalusa’s Central High School in 1965, reading at the ceremony a poem he had written. From 1965 to 1968, Komunyakaa served a tour of duty in Vietnam as an information specialist, editing a military newspaper called the *Southern Cross*. He also saw combat and for his service in Vietnam he won the bronze star.

After his tour of duty, Komunyakaa enrolled at the University of Colorado with a double major in English and sociology. He began writing poetry in 1973 and received his bachelor’s degree magna cum

laude in 1975. He has since published more than a dozen books, most of them collections of poetry. His first chapbook of poems, *Dedications & Other Darkhorses*, was published in 1977, followed by a second chapbook, *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory*, in 1979. During this time, Komunyakaa earned an M.A. from Colorado State University (1978) and an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine. He also solidified his desire to make writing poetry his life’s work.

Upon receiving his second graduate degree in 1980, Komunyakaa joined the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, where he felt he could hone his poetic voice. For an artist, he believes, “a sort of unearthing has to take place; sometimes one has to remove layers of facades and superficialities. The writer has to get down to the guts of the thing and rediscover the basic timbre of his or her existence.” The result of these further efforts to polish his art was *Copacetic* (1984), his first commercially published book. A collection of poems that demonstrated his incorporation of jazz influences and everyday speech, *Copacetic* established the voice that would eventually lead critics to pair Komunyakaa with the playwright AUGUST WILSON for his skill in capturing the vernacular. His use of jazz—a constant in his poems—leads the critic Keith Leonard to observe that for Komunyakaa, jazz is not so much “an exclusively black discursive practice available only to the black artist who is dedicated to defining blackness against racism” as

“a process of self-definition,” assisting in framing the uniqueness of the individual experience:

Neither exclusively ethnic cultural self-definition nor an erasure of difference, improvisation in Komunyakaa's verse is a postmodern introspective practice that rewrites the social discourses that create and justify exclusion, including but not limited to racism, making it the defining activity of the mind. Improvisation therefore becomes the defining process of all human identity. (826)

After teaching briefly at a number of universities, Komunyakaa moved to New Orleans in 1984. There he at first became an artist in residence in the public schools, working with fifth graders to explore their creativity. While teaching at the University of New Orleans in 1985, he met and married the Australian novelist and short story writer Mandy Sayer. During the early 1980s, having reflected on his Vietnam experiences for more than a decade, Komunyakaa began to write the poems that would give him his greatest fame.

He followed *Copacetic* with *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), winner of the San Francisco Poetry Center Award. In a 1997 editor's note in *Ploughshares*, Susan Conley states that *Apologize* is the book in which Komunyakaa begins to “to tap into the violence of Vietnam” with such poems as “Unnatural State of the Unicorn,” containing the lines “I am a man. I've scuffed / in mudholes, broken teeth in a grinning skull / like the moon behind bars” (www.pshares.org). That same year he followed *Apologize* with *Toys in a Field* (1986), a limited-edition chapbook in which several of his Vietnam poems appeared. When he began to write about the war, Komunyakaa later told the *New York Times*, “It was as if I had uncapped some hidden place in me. Poem after poem came spilling out.” According to the poet, he had not deliberately thought about creating poems based on his Vietnam experiences but must have been doing so unconsciously for many years.

His next collection, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), would explore his memories of Vietnam even more fully.

The title of the work means “crazy” in Vietnamese and is the name given by locals to American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. It won the Dark Room Poetry Prize and has been cited by luminaries such as Poet Laureate Robert Hass for its clarified pictures of the war. When the collection appeared, his fellow poet William Matthews declared: “The best writing we've had from the long war in Vietnam has been prose so far. Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* changes that.” Indeed, Komunyakaa has become almost systemically linked with poems about the Vietnam soldier's experience, including for the first time the experiences of black soldiers. Readers who know little about the totality of his work often associate him with the frequently anthologized “Facing It,” the concluding poem of *Dien Cai Dau*.

Memories of his experiences in Vietnam still fuel Komunyakaa's creative imagination more than 20 years after the publication of *Dien Cai Dau*, as a selection from *Warhorses* (2008), his 12th poetry collection, testifies. The unnamed poem is from the final section of the work “Autobiography of My Alter Ego.” Its speaker is a young man who goes “off to college / with colors & songs in my head. . . . Back then, my whole brain / was a swarm. A hemorrhage / of words & colors. I wanted everything / at once. I wanted to see / & hear everything. I wanted to be / everywhere” (53). But a part of “everywhere” he does not want to be intrudes on his world soon enough: “When my draft notice arrives / I was twenty, with apparitions / of Vietnam on the six o'clock news,” the speaker confides. Taking the “unopened envelope” to a bar his father owns, he places it on the bar for his father to open.

When the letter's contents are made clear, his father simply calls, “Drinks are on the house / everybody” (54). Not having served in his generation's war—World War II—the father appears proud for his son to go to Vietnam: “He was now gung ho” (55). The older man does not want “white feathers,” the symbol of cowardice in wartime, “to fall from the sky / onto his doorsteps” (55). For him, his son's defection would be unthinkable.

As for the speaker himself, ironically the poem does not offer even a suggestion of his reaction to

the news the letter gives him. The reader is left to puzzle over the speaker's feelings, which perhaps lie somewhere between those his father expresses and others we hear when he arrives home to show the letter to his mother.

For the women in the speaker's life, it is "another story" from the father's reaction (54). His mother, whom he has never heard utter a curse word before, says, "Those bastards / sent you their goddamn death letter" and that night begins a long vigil, staring at the mailbox for the second letter she fears, the one eventually announcing his death in battle (54–55). Roberta, evidently an elderly friend, says, "You go upstairs / & start packing your clothes. / You're my boy, / & you're going to Canada. / I'm not going to stand here / & let them bring you back dead / in a steel box. My forefathers / ran off to Canada, / & now you're on your way too" (55). She asserts that Canada, the ultimate goal of many runaway Southern slaves fleeing to the North, can once again provide protection, as it in fact did during the war in Vietnam, when crossing the border was many young men's means of avoiding the draft. Only a poet with Komunyakaa's skill with powerful imagery and his insight into the destructive evils of war could create this evocative piece.

February in Sydney (1989), the work following *Dien Cai Dau*, continues to explore Komunyakaa's fascination with jazz, combining it with an interest in Australian culture, particularly that of the Aborigine people. The poet has published more than a dozen books, including *Magic City* (1992), a poetry collection focusing on his childhood and New Orleans, and *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993), for which he received both the Pulitzer Prize and a \$50,000 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. Of this volume, the critic Linda Wagner-Martin observes: "The violence of war, the pain of identifying with the Vietnamese, and the anguish of returning to the States ha[s] seldom been so eloquently and hauntingly expressed" as it is by Komunyakaa (www.cengage.com). Notably, he was one of three African Americans to have won the Pulitzer, which had previously been awarded to Gwendolyn Brooks (1950) and to RITA DOVE (1987). According to the critic Trudier Harris,

Komunyakaa's receiving the prize not only "elevated his reputation [but] spurred critical and teaching interest in his poetry" (<http://www.answers.com>). His work became impossible to ignore.

After he received the Pulitzer Prize, Komunyakaa's talents became increasingly acknowledged. By 1994 the poet had won two creative writing fellowships, from the National Endowment for the Arts and the San Francisco Poetry Center Award, and had been named the Lilly Professor of Poetry at Indiana University. Subsequent collections include *Thieves of Paradise* (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000); *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems, 1975–1999* (2001); *Taboo* (2004); and *Warhorses: Poems* (2008).

A work in progress, "Requiem," demonstrates Komunyakaa's inclination to address current cultural happenings; dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated his beloved New Orleans in 2005, the poem begins:

So,
 when the strong unholy high winds
 whiplashed over the sold-off marshlands
 eaten back to a sigh of saltwater,
 the Crescent City was already shook down to
 her pilings,
 her floating ribs, her spleen & backbone,
 left trembling in her Old World facades
 & postmodern lethargy, lost to waterlogged
 memories & quitclaim deeds
 exposed for all eyes, damnable
 gaze & lamentation—plumb line
 & heartthrob, ballast & watertable—
 already the last ghost song
 of the Choctaw & the Chickasaw
 was long gone, no more than a drunken curse
 among the oak & sweet gum leaves, a tally
 of broken treaties & absences echoing
 cries of birds over the barrier islands
 inherited by the remittance man, scalawag
 & King Cotton . . .

In this latest work, Komunyakaa explores one of the issues he feels are overlooked too often in American

cultural deliberations—class: “The Katrina situation underlined a problem that we Americans attempt to deny or erase with silence: We talk about race and [W. E. B.] DuBois’ infamous color line, but seldom do we discuss problems of class in America” (Marshall). For Komunyakaa, no cultural issue—however close to the bone it rubs—is immune to poetic investigation.

Komunyakaa’s prose is collected in *Blues Notes: Essays, Interviews & Commentaries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). With J. A. Sasha Feinstein, he coedited *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991), which the pair followed five years later with *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology, Volume 2* (1996). As a cotranslator, he worked with Martha Collins to produce *The Insomnia of Fire* by Nguyen Quang Thieu (1995). Komunyakaa also served with David Lehman as coeditor for *The Best of American Poetry* (2003). He has written dramatic works, as well, including *Gilgamesh: A Verse Play* (2006). In addition to editing the journal *Gumbo: A Magazine for the Arts* (1976–79), Komunyakaa has published work in numerous periodicals, including *Black American Literature Forum*, *Callaloo*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Chameleon*, the *Paris Review*, *Free Lance, Poetry Now*, and *African American Review*.

A number of the poet’s musical compositions, both those performed live and those recorded, include *Slip Knot* (2003), a libretto written in collaboration with the composer T. J. Anderson and the historian T. H. Breen. Created at the behest of Northwestern University, where it was first performed, the work explores the true story of a Massachusetts slave falsely accused of raping a white woman and finally executed. Asked how his theory of composing music compares to that of writing poetry, Komunyakaa says that his songs are much more than poems set to music: “I wanted to write a different kind of lyric, with elements of imagery and surprise, the same as a poem. I didn’t want to have the lyric be cliché-driven, which is the situation with most songs. I also utilized rhyme and rhyme-approximations—that’s my other distinction between writing songs and poems” (www.poets.org). Although his lyrics of course include many of the powerful poetic devices and images that mark his poems,

Komunyakaa has said that when he composes for the musical line, he aims to leave the composers of the music free to improvise as their imaginations see fit, giving them “the freedom to be inventive. . . . I want to find an elastic structure, to pull it this way and that, the same way one does with a poem, to give the composer some freedom. Nothing should be ironclad” (www.poets.org). Komunyakaa believes strongly in the power of art to mitigate the negative forces and strains of culture, and his various creative genres speak to that impulse.

Komunyakaa’s many additional honors include the William Faulkner Prize from the Université de Rennes, the Thomas Forcade Award, the Hanes Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Louisiana Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1999 he was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, an honor he shares with poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, W. H. Auden, and ADRIENNE RICH. Besides teaching at the University of New Orleans, he has been on the faculty at Indiana University and the University of California, Berkeley and in the Council of Humanities and Creative Writing Program at Princeton University. In 2008 the Academy of American Poets and the National Council of Teachers of English selected him as one of our most notable American poets, publishing lesson plans for teachers on their Web site (“Get Ready for Poem in Your Pocket Day”). Currently Komunyakaa lives in New York City, where he is Distinguished Senior Poet in New York University’s graduate creative writing program.

Critics encountering Komunyakaa’s inventive, wide-ranging poetic style have frequently been at a loss about which literary movement his work reflects. They have variously compared him to “Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, AMIRI BARAKA (Leroi Jones), and William Carlos Williams. The author has acknowledged that his work has been influenced by these poets as well as by Melvin Tolson, Sterling Brown, Helen Johnson, Margaret Walker, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay,” yet Komunyakaa’s work escapes easy categorization (Ashford). Writing in the *New York Times*, Bruce Weber observes that

Komunyakaa is “a Wordsworthian type [of poet] whose worldly, philosophic mind might be stirred by something as homely and personal as a walk in a field of daffodils. His poems, many of which are built on fiercely autobiographical details—about his stint in Vietnam, about his childhood—deal with the stains that experience leaves on a life, and they are often achingly suggestive without resolution” (B1). The lack of resolution for the poetic situations that are Komunyakaa’s subject matter greatly accounts for the complexity and staying power his audience has come to expect in his writing.

After the publication of *Neon Vernacular*, the critic Diann Blakely Shoaf observed in the *Bloomsbury Review*: “The short-lined poem, a staple of the Deep Image movement, has seemed stale and tiresome in recent years, as too often it has been shaped by poets who equate the line with a unit of syntax. Komunyakaa mostly avoids this pitfall, in part because of his sensitive and well-tuned ear, in part because he knows that a short line as well as a long one should possess both content and integrity” (quoted in *Contemporary Authors*). The poet Toi Dericotte, writing in the *Kenyon Review*, comments on Komunyakaa’s creative imagination in this way: “He takes on the most complex moral issues, the most harrowing ugly subjects of our American life. His voice, whether it embodies the specific experiences of a black man, a soldier in Vietnam, or a child in Bogalusa, Louisiana, is universal. It shows us in ever deeper ways what it is to be human.”

In an essay from *Blue Notes* (2000), “Control Is the Mainspring,” Komunyakaa writes, “I learned that the body and the mind are indeed connected: good writing is physical and mental. I welcomed the knowledge of this because I am from a working-class people who believe that physical labor is sacred and spiritual.” According to Linda Wagner-Martin, “This combination of the realistic and the spiritual runs throughout Komunyakaa’s poems, whether they are about his childhood, the father-son relationship, the spiritual journey each of us takes—alone, and in whatever circumstances life hands us—and the various conflicts of war” (www.cengage.com).

Yusef Komunyakaa’s work, notable for its imagery and themes, is now being studied from grade

three on up. Whether one considers him a war poet, a jazz poet, or simply a poet who consistently crafts a telling image in a moving way, he is a definitely a poet for this or any other time.

“Tu Do Street” (1988)

Asked whether he feels that being a poet gives him an added responsibility to speak out against war, Komunyakaa replied decidedly in the affirmative to the interviewer Tod Marshall, citing a litany of poets whose work has cried out against wars across continents and time:

I feel that the artist or poet—more than the politician or professional soldier—is condemned to connect to what he or she observes and experiences. One thinks about Walt Whitman’s visceral Civil War poems; of Siegfried Sassoon and George Trakl and Wilfred Owen responding to the horrors of World War I; of Anna Akhmatova’s “Requiem” and Osip Mandelstam’s “The Stalin Epigram” giving voice to an outcry against the repression in the Soviet Union; of Aleksander Wat and Wislawa Szymborska and Zbigniew Herbert calling out from Eastern Europe; of Yehuda Amichai and Mahmoud Darwish in the Middle East; of Federico García Lorca and Miguel Hernández challenging the silence during the Spanish Civil War; of Max Jacob and Berthold Brecht and Alan Dugan attempting to depict the ugliness of World War II; and the long list goes on and on. Plato was aware of the poet’s obligation as witness. If one is totally connected to his or her feelings, then one sees and hears and witnesses—fully engaged—and one will have to address what one has seen and heard and dreamt. We address the internal and external, and perhaps speaking of both terrains can almost make us whole. (www.poetryfoundation.org)

Often anthologized, “Tu Do Street” is from the 1988 collection *Dien Cai Dau*. The title, a pun on having two doors, alludes to the racism that black

soldiers encountered in Vietnam, even from the bar girls and prostitutes. As the speaker enters the Saigon bar, he hears the music of Hank Snow on “the psychedelic jukebox” and is suddenly drawn to his childhood in Louisiana, where in memory “White Only” signs are paired with Snow’s songs (29). When he orders a beer, “the mama-san / behind the counter acts as if she / can’t understand, while her eyes / skirt each white face” (29). Having gone to Saigon for rest and recuperation, he does not at first realize that the racism he knows so well from America has followed him here, so many thousands of miles away.

He soon realizes that the soldiers are united only when “machine-gun fire brings us / together” (29). For black GIs, temporary solace with “these women / we now run to hold in our arms” can be found only “deeper into alleys,” past the off-limits signs where the girls, who seem like “tropical birds” to them, do not care about the color of the soldiers as long as their money is United States green (29).

According to the critic Alvin Aubert,

An implicit distinction is drawn in the poem between the GIs’ quest for sexless or pre-sexual socialization in the bars and their quest for sex in other rooms . . . [where] the black soldiers have access to prostitutes whose services are available on a nondiscriminatory basis. These assignations take place in “rooms” that invoke a transformational landscape: They “run into each other like tunnels / leading to the underworld.” Implicit in these conduits is a common humanity, linked to a common death, figuratively in sex and literally in war, for black and white GIs alike: “There’s more than a nation / inside us, as black & white / soldiers touch the same lovers / minutes apart, tasting / each other’s breath” (29). What’s “more than a nation / inside” the GIs, black and white, is of course their shared humanity. (122–123)

The speaker comments on the irony that these same soldiers, whether black or white, have “fought / the brothers of these women” back in the bush,

where there was no discrimination between them, only the common purpose of victory over the enemy (29). On the battlefield, Aubert notes, “where interracial camaraderie has immediate survival value, a different code of behavior prevails” (122).

Yet the speaker does not blame the women for the inequities he and other black soldiers suffer, even here. They, too, are victims of the war:

The bar girls and prostitutes of Saigon are metonymically depicted in “Tu Do Street” as victims, their “voices / wounded by their beauty and war.” These women are also a part of the “nation / inside us” quoted and commented on above, for it is they—“the same lovers” touched by black GIs and white GIs alike, implicitly by virtue of their capacity for motherhood, for bringing life into the world, and as the primary sources of nurturing—who are the conferrers and common denominators of the universal, of the common humanity that populates Komunyakaa’s projected socio-literary commonwealth and makes material his “unified vision.” (Aubert 123)

Ironically, it is these women who truly, physically unite the soldiers, even more than their common experience of war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do some historical research on the peacetime reception soldiers of color received after America’s wars were concluded. You might consider the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, whose story was the basis of the 1989 Academy Award–winning film *Glory*; the Tuskegee Airmen; the Navajo code talkers; or Ira Hamilton Hayes, the Pima Native American marine who assisted in raising the flag on Iwo Jima during World War II, immortalized in a famous photograph by Joe Rosenthal. What ironies lie in these soldiers’ treatment in peacetime? How do these ironies relate to those of the speaker in “Tu Do Street”? Discuss your answer, citing specifics both from

the historical incidents you research and from Komunyakaa's poem.

2. Listen to several songs by the country singer Hank Snow. Discuss Snow's music as a symbol in "Tu Do Street." Why does Komunyakaa say, "Music divides the evening"?

"Prisoners" (1988)

Also from *Dien Cai Dau*, "Prisoners" is an unusual poem in that it reveals Komunyakaa's sensitivity to and compassion for the Vietnamese soldiers, as well as for his fellow Americans. The speaker first sees the captured Viet Cong, bound and wearing "crokersacks" (burlap bags) at the helipad, where they have been flown in for interrogation by American troops. He notes how thin they are—"thin-framed as box kites / of sticks & black silk / anticipating a hard wind / that'll tug & snatch them / out into space"—making the men's bodies appear almost illusive in their delicacy. Though slight in stature, these men carry a weight, the poet says, that "is the soil we tread night & day" (35). These men are responsible for the danger American soldiers face constantly.

The speaker imagines that they "must be laughing / under their dust-colored hoods," thinking about the rockets that are already aimed at American camps and the sure destruction these rockets will cause in American lives, perhaps before the soldiers' interrogation even begins. He muses, "How can anyone anywhere love / these half-broken figures / bent under the sky's brightness? . . . Who can cry for them?"

Next the speaker recalls the actual procedure of getting information from the men: "I've heard the old ones / are the hardest to break. / An arm twist, a combat boot / against the skull, a .45 / jabbed into the mouth, nothing / works. When they start talking / with ancestors faint as camphor / smoke in pagodas, you know / you'll have to kill them / to get an answer" (35). There is no suggestion of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country) in this

poem; Komunyakaa treats the brutality of war with realism and candor.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed." Compare it with this poem, dealing especially with theme and tone and discussing how each poet achieves these aspects of his poem. Cite from each text to support your analysis.
2. In "Prisoners," Komunyakaa invokes elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Discuss each of these elements as he depicts it and comment on how each adds to the effect of the poem as a whole.
3. Do you sense that the speaker has any reluctance to torture or kill the prisoners? Why or why not? Discuss your interpretation fully, drawing on specific lines from the poem to support your analysis.
4. The poem ends with the lines "Sunlight throws / scythes against the afternoon" (35). Discuss the symbolism of both the scythes and the sunlight.

"Thanks" (1988)

"Thanks," another prose poem from *Dien Cai Dau*, is an extended prayer of gratitude for a coincidence experienced by the speaker on the battlefield. Rather than taking place in a bar distant from the field ("Tu Do Street") or on a base at an interrogation site ("Prisoners"), this poem occurs in the jungle, where American soldiers and the Viet Cong are actively engaged in warfare. The occasion for the poem is the accidental saving of the speaker's life when a random glint of sunlight off the barrel of a Viet Cong soldier's gun alerts him to danger.

Musing about being in San Francisco, arms entwined with a lover, he is hardly aware of his surroundings, much less the presence of a sniper. A tree standing between the two soldiers is another subject of thanks; its limb, which the speaker reaches to pull away from his face, makes him see "the intrepid / sun touch[ing] the bayonet" and

saves his life (44). He recalls other incidents when fate appears to have stepped between him and death. In particular, he thanks whatever Being he addresses in the poem for the fact that a “hand grenade tossed at my feet / outside Chu Lai” was a dud (44). The deadly potential the grenade carried for him recurs in his thoughts. The speaker owes his life, it seems, to a series of lucky coincidences having nothing to do with skill or merit or dedication to purpose. He does not know why he has been spared but is grateful to the whimsical fate that has taken him safely through to this point.

Despite its contemplative tone, “Thanks” reminds the reader of the constant danger inherent in war, and of the caprice that may take one life and save another. With his customary frankness, Komunyakaa creates a tension that remains after the reading of the poem.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Komunyakaa has said that writing a poem “isn’t a process of escape, but is one of confrontation and celebration, a naming ceremony” (Citino 141). What is the poet simultaneously celebrating and confronting in this poem? Explain your answer, citing from the text for support.
2. Consider any aspects of irony in Komunyakaa’s litany of things for which he is thankful. Where do you find this irony? How does it function in the poem?
3. Comment on Komunyakaa’s poetic style in this and other poems in the *Dien Cai Dau* collection, noting such things as his use of the ampersand for *and*, his failure to capitalize the initial word in each line, and his reliance on the first-person singular voice for his speaker. How does each of these techniques function in the poem as a whole? What does each add to the poem?

“Facing It” (1988)

This poem is the final selection in Komunyakaa’s celebrated *Dien Cai Dau*. It concludes the poet’s creative journey through his Vietnam experiences,

finding him at last in Washington, D.C., at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The poem is a masterpiece of perspective, as its persona is simultaneously a part of the crowd gathered at the memorial, in the stone composing it, back in Vietnam, and in his own reflections about the war. “Facing It” is a play on the many actual and figurative reflections a visit to the memorial elicits for him.

It begins with a literal reflection: The speaker sees “My black face . . . hiding inside the black granite” of which the memorial is made (63). Having arrived to pay tribute to the fallen, he has promised himself that he will not cry or show emotion: “No tears. / I’m stone,” he cries out inwardly (63). Nevertheless, he realizes that he is also flesh and must feel the impact of the memorial as a flesh-and-blood human being. It seems as if his emotions are raw.

As the light changes, the stone gathers him inside itself, and for a moment he and it are one. In lines 6–13, the speaker is variously inside and outside the memorial. The stone has power over him; it takes and releases him at will: “I turn / this way—the stone lets me go. / I turn that way—I’m inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again, depending on the light / to make a difference” (63). He cannot maintain the emotional coolness of his resolve but is moved deeply by the simple poignancy of the memorial.

The speaker reads the 58,022 names laser-burned into the stone, “half-expecting to find / my own in letters like smoke” (63). Seeing the name of someone he knew in the war, he traces it with his finger. All at once he is back in Vietnam, seeing the white flash of the booby trap that blew up and killed the man.

Next he sees the reflection of the list of names on a woman’s blouse, calling him back to where he really stands. He sees the crowd, the flash of a cardinal’s wings, a plane in the sky, and the sky itself. Normalcy temporarily returns. It does not remain for long, however, and a ghostly vision of a dead soldier begins to haunt him: “A white vet’s image floats / closer to me, then his pale eyes / look through mine” (63).

He is no longer just himself, but a conduit for the soldiers memorialized there, regardless of their color. “I’m a window,” the speaker realizes. He—and, by extension, Komunyakaa and his poems—can be a means for giving voice to all the soldiers of Vietnam. After making this admission, he is distracted by movement outside the wall and turns to see what he at first thinks is a woman “trying to erase names” from it, something he presumably will not allow. The poem ends when the speaker becomes aware that the woman is simply brushing her son’s hair. Her tender gesture, he implies, is one performed long ago for those memorialized in the hard surface of the granite wall.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When it was designed, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is central to this poem, was a very controversial monument, because it is a flat surface with names inscribed, rather than a three-dimensional depiction of a person, as so many monuments are in Washington, D.C. After doing some research on the background of the memorial, discuss whether you think it is an appropriate tribute to those who died in Vietnam.
2. In “Facing It,” Komunyakaa gives the poem a title that can be taken more than one way. Read another poem in which the title can be interpreted in multiple ways, such as Grace Yamada’s “Looking Out.” What does the title contribute to each poem by suggesting several interpretations? Support your answer with references to each one.
3. Known for his strong images, Komunyakaa in “Facing It” relies particularly on sensory ones of touch and sight. Select two or three of the sensory images you consider central to the poem and discuss what they add to the effect of the work as a whole.

“Blackberries” (1992)

This poem appears in *Magic City*, the 1992 collection that focuses on the poet’s early years, family

memories, and recollections of New Orleans, the city of the volume’s title. It couples the speaker’s memory of picking blackberries on the side of the road with an association between the berries and race.

Out in the “early morning’s / Terrestrial sweetness,” the 10-year-old speaker has gone to pick berries and earn a little pocket money by selling them (27). Accompanied only by his dog, Spot, he turns busily to his task, finding the ripe fruit plentiful and delicious. The berries are, he says, “so thick / The damp ground was consecrated / Where they fell among a garland of thorns” (27). He compares the appearance of his juice-stained hands to those of a printer or a thief being booked “before a police blotter” (27). Both have hands that are covered with ink—one, to create a literary work that will be read by many people; the other, to serve as a prelude to payment for his crimes. The berries fall quickly as the speaker, as does the thief in the comparison, “steals” the sweet fruit from the vines and drops it into two half-gallon containers.

Komunyakaa invests the simple act of picking blackberries with religious overtones, employing an image from sacred ceremony as the berries spill onto the ground, anointing it with their dark juice. The berry vines also constitute a crown of thorns, like the one worn by Christ in his Passion. When the speaker confesses he is “eating from one [hand] / & filling a half gallon with the other,” he defends himself by saying that the pies and cobblers he dreams of are “almost / Needful as forgiveness” (27). It is typical of Komunyakaa’s poetic style to invest even the simplest acts with significance.

In the second and third of the four stanzas, Komunyakaa’s numerous images describe the speaker’s lush surroundings. The ground is damp; “blue jays & thrashers” excite the interest of his dog; he hears “The mud frogs / In rich blackness, hid from daylight” (27). This young boy is obviously comfortable with the world in which he finds himself and appreciates its many beauties. It is a place of rural, romantic calm.

An hour later finds the speaker back on the main road, where he hopes to sell the berries he has

picked. “I balanced a gleaming can in each hand, / Limboed between worlds, repeating *one dollar*” (27). It is easy to picture him, standing between the natural idyll of the berry patch and the commercial reality of being on the side of the road, attempting to sell the fruit. Just as the two cans are balanced, so is he between those worlds.

In the final stanza, a new symbol of reality, a “big blue car,” pulls up to the speaker, making him “sweat” (27). The car windows, lowered to permit its driver to purchase the berries, produce a literal and figurative chill: “Wintertime crawled out of the windows” (27). Not only does the air conditioner inside the car exude a chill, but so does seeing the car’s occupants, a pair of children the speaker knows. They are just his age, perhaps classmates at school or perhaps acquaintances from another place. Regardless of the context in which he knows them, they make him uncomfortable when they stare at him, smirking. Their mocking is clearly reminiscent of many other implied incidents when these two have made the speaker feel inadequate.

Instantly he is aware of the great divide between their situations. Although Komunyakaa does not identify the children as white, they are at least of a different class than the speaker. Suddenly he feels this disparity down to his very fingertips: When they sneer at him, he says, “It was then I remembered my fingers / Burning with thorns among berries too ripe to touch” (27). Just as over-ripe blackberries almost dissolve to the touch, the speaker’s mood deteriorates at the sight of those smirking children.

By the time Komunyakaa wrote “Blackberries,” he had already published a collection of Vietnam poems, many of which explore his blackness, often in contrast to white soldiers as well as to the Vietnamese. Going back to his Louisiana beginnings in the poems of *Magic City*, he looks at the roots of racial difference as perceived by him and by others. New Orleans is not only the largest city near his hometown, but one with a complex ethnic heritage and makes a perfect background for exploring the complexity of human relationships. From the hurtful slight detailed in “Blackberries,” other poems in the collection investigate more sinister specters

of the racial divide—economic injustice (“Gristmill”), a black World War II veteran who is “black-jacked . . . to the ground” by racist police (“The Steel Plate”), the Ku Klux Klan (“Knights of the White Camellia & Deacons of Defense”), and the lynching of Emmett Till and other innocent black men (“History Lessons”). In each of these poems, Komunyakaa is unflinching in his explorations.

For Discussion or Writing

Examine other poems by Komunyakaa that, as “Blackberries” does, explore the significance of simple acts. How does Komunyakaa invest these acts with greater meaning?

“My Father’s Love Letters” (1992)

Several poems in *Magic City* are autobiographical, and “My Father’s Love Letters” is one of them. It follows a poem entitled “Mismatched Shoes,” which details the family legend of Komunyakaa’s grandfather and of his own adoption of the Komunyakaa name. The elder man was a refugee from Trinidad, so eager to get away from the plantation on which he worked that, when given a chance to flee to America, he hurriedly reached for the first clothing he could find: “He wore a boy’s shoe / & a girl’s shoe,” according to family oral history (42). Some years later, Komunyakaa relates in the poem, “I picked up those mismatched shoes / & slipped into his skin. Komunyakaa. / His blues, African fruit on my name” (42). The poet expresses his deep affection and admiration for his grandfather throughout.

Komunyakaa’s relationship with his father, however, seems to have been a far different one. The next poem in *Magic City*, “My Father’s Love Letters,” conveys the tension between the autobiographically inspired speaker and his father, a correlation to real life that Komunyakaa has often expressed both literally and figuratively. While the poem is an artistic rendering of their troubled relationship, it does grow from the strain that the poet says existed between the two. It depicts the father as a hostile and inarticulate man, a wife beater who

has driven his wife away but never ceases to try to get her back.

Every Friday, after returning home from work and reaching for a can of Jax beer (made locally in New Orleans), he asks his son to write to the mother. Illiterate, the father can “only sign / His name” and must plead with his wife through the son (43). His frustration and desire for her are made clear, not only because of his maintaining the ritual of writing, but because of the words that flow “from under the pressure / Of [the speaker’s] ballpoint: Love, / Baby, Honey, Please” (43). Each brief word is capitalized to emphasize the father’s longing.

She lives far away from them and occasionally sends “postcards of desert flowers / Taller than men” (43). In each letter to her, the father begs her to return, “Promising never to beat her / Again.” By positioning the word *again* at the first of the line, the poet conveys the father’s abuse as a habitual occurrence, just as writing the letters is. Each week, writing another, the speaker silently wonders whether his mother laughs when she receives them, holding them “over a gas burner” and watching them ignite (43).

The speaker himself rather wishes his mother would not return but does not say why. “Somehow,” he relates, “I was happy / She had gone” (43). He placidly waits as his father, struggling to express himself, becomes “lost between sentences” (43). Despite the tension between the two, the son feels a certain empathy for his father, who stands “With eyes closed & fists balled, / Laboring over a simple word, almost / Redeemed by what he tried to say” (43). This man, a carpenter who spends his weekdays laboring in a mill, works even harder on the weekend to dictate his thoughts in a letter. Words are not his natural medium, as are the “old nails, a claw hammer . . . a five-pound wedge” that he has mastered. A skilled laborer, the father can “look at blueprints / & say how many bricks / Formed each wall” (43). Yet trying to build a foundation with language leaves him frustrated and inept. A grown man, he must rely on his son to convey his innermost thoughts. Komunyakaa readily communicates the humiliation the father feels because of his lack of

verbal skill, as the two sit together in the tool shed, where the father exudes a “quiet brutality” (43).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays,” in which a father is depicted. Compare and contrast Hayden’s poem with “My Father’s Love Letters.” What do the fathers in the poems have in common? How do they differ? What do the two narrators share? Discuss your answer fully, citing from each text to support what you say.
2. Almost half of “My Father’s Love Letters” consists of elements of the workday world—concrete, voltage meters, pipe threaders, and so on. What do these images add to the poem? Address such aspects as tone and characterization, drawing on specific lines to support your analysis.

“Ode to the Maggot” (2000)

“Ode to the Maggot” is in *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000), a collection of 132 poems with four quatrains each. Ranging across topics as disparate as slime molds, nipples, dust, and rollerblades, the volume defies unified description. In choosing the book as one of its 25 favorites of the year, the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* proclaimed: “This new volume is remarkable exactly because it’s a category killer, a sustained anti-hierarchy. The poems speak equally to gods and maggots, to the mythical reaches of history, and to erotic immediacy . . . No turn in any life cycle is taboo as Yusef Komunyakaa examines the primal rituals shared by insects, animals, human beings, and deities” (verso cover).

In “Ode to the Maggot” the poet elevates the lowly destroyer to “master of earth,” a powerful force. As a traditional ode would do, this poem pours lavish praise on its subject.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The ode is a very formal type of lyric poem, one classical writers often adopted for special celebratory occasions in which persons of significance are honored. Explain the irony in writing about

- Aubert, Alvin. "Yusef Komunyakaa: The Unified Vision—Canonization and Humanity." *African American Review* 27, no. 1 (1993): 122–123.
- Citino, David. *The Eye of the Poet: Six Views of the Art and Craft of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Clytus, Radiclan. *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Conley, Susan. "About Yusef Komunyakaa: A Profile." *Ploughshares*. 23/1, no. 72 (Spring 1997): 202–208.
- "Get Ready for Poem in Your Pocket Day." *NCTE Inbox*. March 31, 2009. National Council of Teachers of English. Available online. URL: http://www.readwritethink.org/calendar/calendar_day.asp?id=484. Accessed October 2, 2009.
- Gotera, Vina F. "Depending on the Light: Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau*." In *America Rediscovered: Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, edited by Owen W. Gilman, Jr., and Lorrie Smith, 282–300. New York: Garland, 1990.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. *Dien Cai Dau*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988.
- . *Magic City*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992.
- . *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
- . *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems, 1975–1999*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- . *Taboo*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004.
- . *Talking Dirty to the Gods*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000.
- . *Warhorses: Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008.
- Leonard, Keith D. "Yusef Komunyakaa's Blues: The Postmodern Music of *Neon Vernacular*." *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (2005): 825–849.
- Marshall, Tod. "Every Tool Became a Weapon: Talking with Yusef Komunyakaa about Race and War." Available online. URL: www.poetryfoundation.org. Accessed October 5, 2009.
- Matthews, William. *Dien Cai Dau*. Verso cover. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988.
- Shoaf, Diann Blakely. Quoted in "Yusef Komunyakaa." *Contemporary Authors*. New York: Gale, 2002.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. "Yusef Komunyakaa." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Modern Period: 1910–1945. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Weber, Bruce. "A Poet's Values," *New York Times*, 2 May 1994, p. B1. Available online. URL: www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/g_1/komunyakaa/komunyakaa.htm. Accessed October 5, 2009.
- "Yusef. Komunyakaa." Available online. URL: www.poetryfoundation.org. Accessed October 5, 2009.
- "Yusef Komunyakaa." Internet Poetry Archive. Available online. URL: <http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/komunyakaa.php>. Accessed June 25, 2009.

Patricia M. Gantt



CHANG-RAE LEE (1965–)

For me, that is what fiction should do—bring home for the reader not just an act, historical or not, but the aftereffects, what happens in the act’s wake. And, most interestingly, how people live in that wake.

(interview with Ron Hogan, <http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/lee>)

Chang-rae Lee immigrated to America as a small child who could speak no English, yet by the age of 30, he had become one of the country’s finest writers. Lee credits much of his success to the example of his father.

Lee’s father trained in Korea as a physician and moved his family to the United States from Seoul, Korea, when Lee was only three years old. His mother spoke little English and struggled with everyday tasks, such as buying groceries, in a country with little patience for nonnative speakers, but his father overcame language barriers to build a successful psychiatric practice. While Lee was struck by the power of language and the toll it exacted upon his mother, he was inspired by the success of his father: “My father could have been a surgeon, where language isn’t as important. But instead he chose a profession where talking is everything” (Garner).

Lee learned English quickly, finding enjoyment in books. When he was 11, he read James Joyce’s “The Dead,” a short story that made him want to be a writer. He says authors like Joyce are so “conscious of their own language . . . you get the feeling that they’re handwriting it out, that very word has texture and contour” (JinAh Lee). Lee majored in English, receiving a B.A. in 1987 from Yale University, but initially suppressed his desire to become a writer, believing that he could not earn a living that way. Instead he went into finance, working

on Wall Street as an equities analyst until advice from a friend made him realize he should pursue his love of writing. Lee quit his job and enrolled in the University of Oregon’s M.F.A. program. His early writings were heavily influenced by authors such as Nabokov, Pynchon, DeLillo, and Styron, and it was not until after the death of his mother, in 1992, that Lee stepped back enough from his love of those works to examine his own reasons for writing, eventually asking himself, “Why did I get into writing if not to connect with life, with humanity, with other people?” (Marcus). In order to make those types of connections, Lee found he had to begin to write about issues that were important to him.

Lee discarded the novel-length manuscript on which he had been working and began a new one, focusing on the deeper issues of identity, assimilation, and the power of language, themes that he knew about on a personal level. That story became *Native Speaker* and the thesis for his M.F.A., completed in 1993. The book was published two years later and won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the American Book Award, among other honors.

Native Speaker began Lee’s tradition of choosing narrators who are unreliable in that they are unwilling or unable to tell readers the whole story. In discussing Henry Park, the unlikely spy hero of *Native Speaker*, Lee says, “I wanted to write about

someone who could seamlessly walk about and speak the language, and still feel very isolated, very alien” (Marcus). Park’s isolation is partially self-inflicted; he is emotionally unavailable to his wife and chooses espionage as his profession, a job that requires him to invent elaborate alternate selves in order to maneuver into positions of trust for his subjects. Nonetheless, Park is unhappy with his isolation and the distance it puts between him and his own life; he begins to examine his role as a cultural spy when his wife leaves him.

Despite the critical acclaim surrounding *Native Speaker*, New York’s 2002 attempt to adopt it as the subject of its fledgling One Book, One City program was met with a hailstorm of controversy. Many objections were not related to the book at all, but rather the fear that a government-sponsored reading program might transform the personal act of reading into a “coercive, collective, and politically correct activity that diminished the autonomy and agency of the reader” (Rachel C. Lee). Those who did object to the book itself focused on its possible portrayal of Koreans or Asian Americans in a negative, stereotypical manner. Lee states that his use of Park’s father (a Korean immigrant, trained as a scientist but employed as a greengrocer in New York) was intentional, creating a platform for addressing cultural stereotypes:

Henry Park is someone who understands that maybe that’s the way he is, but who acknowledges that that is a stereotype. . . . I think he’s quite dissatisfied with his silences, his inaction, his veiled persona. . . . Of course I could have made him an astronaut or this or that. But one of the things that I wanted to do, I wanted to give that particular greengrocer some humanity, to offer him a real human moment . . . in the hopes that I could give him a typically complicated, sometimes contradictory, sometimes not so pleasant life and personality; to make him real. (Plett)

Forcing readers to see the real people behind stereotypical characters is a skill Lee carries over into

his other novels. Published in 1999, *A Gesture Life* delves into the persona of Doc Hata. On first glance, Doc Hata appears to fit the mold of all that has come to embody America’s idea of the Asian immigrant: congenial, hardworking, solitary. But as Doc slowly reveals himself, readers begin to see him for who he actually is: a man haunted by his past, incapable of truly facing his own history for fear it may tarnish the façade he has worked so diligently to build.

The idea for Chang-rae Lee’s second novel grew out of an article he read while researching Korea (Garner). The article described the Japanese army’s practice during World War II of forcing thousands of women, mostly Korean, to serve the troops in the capacity of “comfort women.” While the phrase seems compassionate and respectable, what the women were actually subjected to was not. Girls as young as 10 years old were taken from their homes and forced into sexual slavery, a custom the Japanese military claimed would serve to prevent random sexual aggression against women in occupied territories, while curbing the rampant outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases contracted from prostitutes, as well as boosting the morale of the troops. Lee describes how he felt after reading the article: “I was just blown away. I remember being on a bus after reading what otherwise was a pretty dry academic article on the subject, and I had to get off and walk home just to think about what had happened” (Garner). That thinking led to work on a story told from the perspective of a Korean comfort woman.

Lee flew to South Korea and interviewed several surviving comfort women, working to capture on paper what they told him. In a 2000 interview with Ron Hogan, Lee says the story was especially difficult to write because the nature of the crime was so horrendous, it left little room for drama. After a year, he decided something was missing: “I began to feel that what I had written didn’t quite come up to the measure of what I had experienced, sitting in a room with these people. I began to feel that there was nothing like live witness” (Garner). Eventually Lee abandoned the manuscript in favor of a new viewpoint, promoting the minor character Doc Hata to narrator.

A Gesture Life received even higher critical acclaim than Lee's first novel, earning him the Anisfield-Wolf Prize, the Myers Outstanding Book Award, the NAIBA Book Award, and the Asian American Literary Award for Fiction, among others. It was also selected for Seattle's 2003 "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book" program, sponsored by the Seattle Public Library.

In Chang-rae Lee's third novel, *Aloft*, readers are introduced to another unreliable narrator, but one who appears on the surface quite different from Henry Park and Doc Hata. Jerry Battle is neither Asian nor introspective. He is an outspoken Caucasian man rapidly approaching the age of 60, one who spends more time thinking about food, sex, and money than the needs of his family. What connects Battle to Henry Park and Doc Hata is his unwillingness to talk openly about important issues with those he loves, as well as his inability to see the role he has played in shaping the current circumstances of his own life. When several family members face simultaneous crises, Battle is forced to contend with both past and present, finally giving his family the leader they need.

Using a non-Asian narrator affords Lee the opportunity to address issues of race, alienation, and language from a new perspective. The fact that Battle has married an Asian woman and produced children he describes as "mixed blood" (30) presents the perfect forum for exploring how unaware members of the majority can be of the feelings of alienation experienced by minorities, even those within their own households. Further, Battle's aging father faces alienation when he is placed in a nursing home, a socially acceptable form of ostracism to which many elderly are condemned.

Battle concedes that words matter, yet he believes others are overly concerned with cultural labels like *Asian American* versus *Oriental*. He considers his children Asian American despite the fact that they were born in America, but he has no qualms about calling himself "an average white guy" (73) and an American, even though his own family emigrated from Italy. Battle's attitude serves to illustrate further the discrepancy in which different types of immigrants are allowed to call themselves "Ameri-

can" without the obligatory hyphenated country of origin, one more way that language (and the way it is used to label people as "Other") is everything.

The idea that language is everything is more than just a common theme for Lee; it is also the way he approaches writing. He confesses, in an interview with JinAh Lee, to being obsessed with language, focusing so much on the weight of each sentence that he has thrown out entire manuscripts when something is not right: "For me, the unit of measure is the sentence, and I really can't change it sentence by sentence. You spend so much time on that sentence. How can you extract it or make it do something different?" (2000).

Lee's fourth novel, *The Surrendered* (2010), examines the effects of war on an American soldier, a Korean refugee, and the wife of a minister at an orphanage.

Lee currently lives with his wife and two daughters in New Jersey and teaches at Princeton University, where he serves as director of the creative writing program. He admits to his students that all stories have been told before, so new writers should "figure out your own voice . . . it's in the telling of [the story] that makes a writer special" (JinAh Lee). As for his own writing, Lee says, "I'm trying to figure out my own kind of story which, of course, I never will. I don't think I ever will. I hope I never do. Once I do, that's death" (Hogan).

***Native Speaker* (1995)**

While many writers address controversial issues at the heart of their work, Chang-rae Lee's first novel begins that discussion at the molecular level of title and genre. Before readers can even open the book, they are faced with the pairing of the phrase "native speaker" with cover art depicting an Asian-American child in a cowboy suit superimposed over the image of an Asian-American adult. There is no doubt the pairing is intentional and meant to call into question what it means to be a native in a nation of immigrants.

The fact that many Americans would lay claim to the title *native speaker* reflects America's his-

tory of repression and forgetfulness. As Rachel Lee points out in her article in *Melus*, when Americans hear the phrase “native speaker,” they think not of “the speaker of Nuahtl, Navaho, or the myriad other native languages,” but of themselves, forgetting that in America English is an immigrant tongue. By pairing the title *Native Speaker* with the face of an Asian American, Lee reminds readers that immigrants of all origins have equal right to that title.

Chang-rae Lee uses the substance of his novel to develop that idea further, never actually telling readers to whom the title refers. It could refer to the novel’s main character, Henry Park, but he learned English through the filter of his parents’ Korean and is overly conscious of language. Even his wife, Lelia, upon first meeting him, comments on his deliberate speech, saying, “You speak perfectly of course. I mean if we were talking on the phone I wouldn’t think twice. . . . You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you’re doing. If I had to guess, you’re not a native speaker” (12). Later, Henry finds a scrap of paper under their bed on which Lelia condemns him as a “False speaker of language,” a phrase that seems to haunt him. The title could be applied to Lelia, too: As a trained speech pathologist, she describes herself as “the standard-bearer” for the English language (12). But Henry depicts her as “executing the language” (10), implying that although she speaks well, she kills true meaning. By not directly labeling any one character as *the* native speaker, Lee invites readers to consider many possibilities.

Lee also uses the framework of genre to mirror the deeper controversies within the novel. On its surface, *Native Speaker* is a spy novel. Yet Lee has chosen to use the genre of spy novel in much the same way that Henry uses his “legends,” the descriptions of his fictionalized lives. The legends are the masks that Henry will present to his subjects while he uncovers their secret lives. Tina Chen describes Lee’s use of the spy story as a mask in her book *Double Agency* (2005): “As Henry discerns the paradoxical truth, that the masks he wears prevent him from speaking even as they are the very things that enable him to articulate a semblance of

self, readers of *Native Speaker* discover that Lee’s novel itself operates behind the mask of the spy story in order to expose the limitations of form in narrating Henry’s story” (154).

Throughout the novel, Lee challenges the conventions of the spy novel, replacing high-profile daredevil characters with the understated Henry Park, substituting mundane conversations for cloak-and-dagger escapades. In fact, Henry himself describes his occupation as the antithesis of the stereotypical spy:

In a phrase, we were spies. But the sound of that is all wrong. We weren’t the kind of figures you naturally thought of or maybe even hoped existed . . . our job was simply to even things out, clear the market as it were, act as secret arbitrageurs. . . . We pledged allegiance to no government. We weren’t ourselves political creatures. We weren’t patriots. Even less, heroes. We systematically overassessed risk, made it a bad word. Guns spooked us. . . . We knew nothing of weaponry, torture, psychological warfare, extortion, electronics, supercomputers, explosives. Never anything like that. (17)

So why does Lee employ the framework of the spy novel when he resists its conventions at every turn? According to Tina Chen, the spy novel affords Lee the opportunity to address prejudicial assumptions about Asians. Chen asserts that both Henry’s demeanor and his profession serve to expose the stereotypes of Asians as “sneaky and inscrutable” (178). By casting Henry as a spy, Lee invokes the cultural memory of all Asian sleuths who have used stereotype to the advantage of their profession and provides readers with a counterexample: someone who is cursed by his own inscrutability.

Beyond being inscrutable, his status as an Asian American renders Henry in many ways invisible. He is invisible to the Asian-American people on whom he spies because they perceive him as one of their own, and therefore not a threat, but he is also invisible to non-Asian Americans because they perceive him as different, and therefore not important. This tendency of the majority to interact with minority

immigrants as though they are nonentities is explicitly illustrated through Henry's father's customers. Although Mr. Park earned a master's degree in industrial engineering in Korea, his limited English and cultural barriers relegate him to the status of a greengrocer. The customers in his store do not see the educated man behind the grocer's apron; they do not see the man at all. Henry learns, through working in his father's shop, that "if I just kept speaking the language of our work the customers didn't seem to see me. I wasn't there. They didn't look at me. I was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them" (53). Such invisibility may seem a desirable trait in spy work; however, as Chen points out, invisibility that is not self-determined can be psychologically damaging, causing a feeling of "fractured identity, the loss of internal coherence, and a longing for wholeness that is ever deferred" (164).

Lee expands upon the themes of immigrant status and the importance of language within the body of the novel. Through Henry's interactions with his father, his wife, and his son, Lee demonstrates the power of words both spoken and withheld. Henry's dealings with the city councilman John Kwang expose the "ugly immigrant truth" that pervades America.

Henry Park is a man who wields words as weapons, crafting backstories to define himself to his subjects and transcribing the minutiae of those interactions into reports for unseen buyers. Yet even as he brokers in language, Henry allows others to use it to shape his true identity. He allows his boss to call him "Harry," his coworker to call him "Parky." Through his father, Henry begins to understand the weight of silence, the way in which Koreans tolerate and use silence to their advantage, but white Americans cannot: "We perhaps depend too often on the faulty honor of silence, use it too liberally and for gaining advantage. I showed Lelia how this was done, sometimes brutally, my face a peerless mask, the bluntest instrument" (96).

Henry's relationship with his wife begins with a discussion of race and speech, but, despite their willingness to address such issues, race and speech later divide the couple and contribute to their

separation. An incident involving Henry's father's housekeeper serves as the first clue of what is to come. Lelia asks the woman's name and Henry says he does not know. Lelia cannot reconcile the fact that the woman "practically raised" Henry, yet he does not know her name. Henry attributes the misunderstanding to cultural differences:

Americans live on a first-name basis. She [Lelia] didn't understand that there weren't moments in our language—the rigorous, regimental one of family and servants—when the woman's name would have naturally come out. Or why it wasn't important. (69)

When Lelia leaves Henry, she hands him a list of words. He becomes preoccupied with the words, accepting them as a true description of himself. Despite Henry's willingness to allow others to define him, when his son is called names by the neighborhood children, Henry denies the power of language, telling him, "They're just words" (103).

Councilman John Kwang serves not only as a subject for Henry's spy work, but also as the platform from which Lee can address the issue of immigration in America. Although Kwang is "unafraid to speak the language like a Puritan and like a Chinaman and like every boat person in between" (304), to mainstream America he is "just another ethnic pol" (303) and, as such, an outsider, someone who is not "native." During the course of the novel, Kwang and Henry are faced with several incidents that draw attention to immigrant issues: the random killings of cab drivers, the pattern of extortion and violence of Korean and Chinese gangs, and the arrests of aliens who had been smuggled into the country aboard a freighter. Each of these may seem to be an isolated occurrence, but as Leti Volpp points out in "The Legal Mapping of U.S. Immigration, 1965–1996," such incidents are inherent in a system that allows "economic demands, exclusions based on moral and sexual concerns, and politics [to define] overlapping and at times competing state policies about immigration." Henry himself comments upon the troubled

relationship between America and its immigrants, along with his own role (and his father's) in that oppression:

My ugly immigrant's truth, as was his, is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited. This forever is my burden to bear. But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (319–320)

At this point, the narrative shifts from Henry's simply telling his story to directly addressing readers. By so doing, Chang-rae Lee draws readers into the novel, linking them to that ugly American truth and reminding them again that while this may seem to be one man's story, it is really the story of us all; we are all bound together by our inherited immigration, Puritans and Chinamen and every boat person in between.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Create a character study that compares Henry Park to the nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison.
2. Lee uses a portion of Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers" as an epigraph for the novel. Why do you think Lee chose those lines to speak for the novel? Read the poem in its entirety. What effect does the context of those lines within the poem have on their meaning and on their relationship to the book?
3. Consider the phrase "A good spy is but the secret writer of all moments imminent" (198). How does Henry succeed or fail in that regard? How might the phrase apply to national intelligence agencies?

A Gesture Life (1999)

All Franklin Hata wants for himself is a quiet life of respect in the town of Bedley Run. When readers first meet him, it seems he has achieved just that. Recently retired from the medical-supply business he founded, Franklin Hata is greeted by townspeople as a regular fixture, with "an almost Oriental veneration as an elder" (1). They hail him as "Doc Hata," and, although he tells them that he is not a doctor, still they go to him for advice, which he freely gives.

Doc Hata would have people believe that he has lived his life serving others, that he is the "living breathing expression of . . . privacy and decorum and the quietude of hard-earned privilege" (275), but as the story unfolds we begin to view him as he really is: a man paralyzed by choice, unable to stand up for what he knows is right in the face of societal expectations. In this way, he is an unreliable storyteller, and he readily warns of that: "It seems difficult enough to consider one's own triumphs and failures with perfect verity, for it's no secret that the past proves a most unstable mirror, typically too severe and too flattering all at once, and never as truth-reflecting as people would like to believe" (5). The mirrors he shows us are his old store and his home, and while he intends them to reflect his life as a hardworking, dedicated man, instead they reveal deep fissures between who he wants to be and who he has become.

Soon after introducing himself, Doc Hata takes readers to his old store, Sunny Medical Supply. Named for his adopted daughter, the store was a source of great pride for him. Beyond being the local supplier of medical and surgical equipment, the store was his connection to the residents of Bedley Run; now that he no longer runs it, he has begun to feel that connection slipping away. As if to erode his place in the community further, three years after the sale, the gold signage is flaking and the same display is still half assembled in the window. Doc feels sorry for the Hickeys (the couple who purchased the place from him), admitting that he initially questioned their ability to run a store

with limited income and a young child, but implies that most of their trouble is due to a recession and the recent opening of a larger store nearby. When he stops in, Mr. Hickey verbally attacks him, and Mrs. Hickey confides that their son has been diagnosed with congenital heart disease, the financial burden of which has put them on the verge of bankruptcy. Nearly fleeing, Doc Hata takes readers to his home.

Doc Hata describes his house as “older vintage” in pristine condition. He tells of the slate swimming pool and the leaded glass and wrought-iron conservatory, the fireplace and the piano. It seems the perfect symbol of a life well lived until he takes readers inside, almost as an afterthought, to a room patched and painted to cover the hundreds of tiny holes that remained when his adopted daughter, Sunny, left. Instead of reflecting a prosperous, happy life, the house illustrates a life barely lived. By the end of the book, even Doc must admit it is nothing but “a lovely, standing forgery” lacking “the thousand tiny happenings” of life that would have made it a home (352).

The people who attempt to get close to Doc Hata see past the mirrors he presents. While in the service, Captain Ono, a superior officer, tells him, “There is the germ of infirmity in you, which infects everything you touch or attempt. Besides all else, how do you think you will become a surgeon? A surgeon determines his course and acts. He goes to the point he has determined without any other faith, and commits to an execution. You, Lieutenant, too much depend upon generous fate and gesture. There is no internal possession, no embodiment. Thus you fail in some measure always. You perennially disappoint someone like me” (266). Sunny, his adopted Korean daughter, for whom he tries to create a home and a successful business, is also disappointed in him and indicts him for his attempts: “All I’ve ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You’re always having to be the ideal partner and colleague” (95). While it

is expected that a child be critical of the parent, Sunny’s comments seem more than teenage angst and are confirmed by Mary Burns, Doc Hata’s romantic interest, who is reproachful of the way he raises Sunny: “You treat her like a grown woman . . . as if she’s a woman to whom you’re beholden . . . you act almost guilty, as if she’s someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you’re obliged to do whatever she wishes” (60). The death of Mary Burns, the decline of his old store, and increasing pressure from a local realtor to sell his home combine with the return of his estranged daughter to become the catalyst for Doc Hata’s examination of the life he has lived.

Doc has spent his entire life carefully arranging matters so that his past is as distant from him as possible, so he is not the type of person to sit down and write a long confessional. Instead, he tells his story in small increments, reporter style, devoid of any real emotion, parceling out details only as they occur to him. Lee admits much of the story’s drama results from that tension:

That was very important to me, that he [Doc Hata] was to just let you know what happened and let it sit there, and the distance between the act described and the calm and placid person telling you about it would be so great that there would be some drama in the telling as well. That for me is part of the drama of the story: How is he going to begin to tell you all these things that he doesn’t want to tell you? (Hogan)

And, although Doc casts himself in the role of paramedic and father, he seems unable to admit his own culpability in the events that occur, describing himself more as the helpless bystander who can only “sort out and address the primary disaster,” not treat the “chronic, complicated difficulty” (77). This difficulty takes the form of two life-changing situations: Doc Hata’s position as medical assistant in the Japanese army, where he must oversee the health of “comfort women” (Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese military), and, years later, his teenage daughter’s unplanned pregnancy. It is through

brief flashbacks into these incidents that readers understand the deep-rooted reasons behind Doc Hata's life of gestures.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Many critics have compared Doc Hata to the character Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, by Kazuo Ishiguro. In what ways are they different?
2. Choose one point in Doc Hata's life and describe how his life would have been different had he taken "hold of some moment and fully acquit[ted him]self to it, whether decently or ignobly" (340).
3. While the horrific treatment of the Jewish people during World War II is well known throughout the world, Japan was able to keep its military's use of comfort women a secret; in fact, many people are still unaware of it. Discuss the political, social, and religious factors that account for this discrepancy.

Aloft (2004)

In his third novel, Lee chooses as protagonist Jerry Battle, a white upper-middle-class man about to turn 60. From his name, readers might assume Jerry Battle is a man who would meet life's challenges head on—that is certainly the way his father, "Hank the Tank" Battle, approaches adversity. But Jerry prefers to "decline the real," hiding both figuratively and literally with his head in the clouds, drifting high above unstable ground. His failure to make purposeful decisions in his life has led to a convergence of all things avoided, which have festered and now pose significant problems: He has finally driven away his longtime companion, the family business is in ruin (in no small part due to his son's mismanagement), his daughter is facing simultaneous pregnancy and grave illness, and his father is resentful of his life in a nursing home. In essence, anything of lasting importance in Jerry's life is on the verge of being lost. Yet the real story in *Aloft* is not the events leading up to this crisis, or even its eventual resolution. The real story,

told through gradual revelations, is Jerry Battle himself—what he has done or failed to do, and how he will finally stand up for what he believes in or watch it all float away.

Death is a pervasive issue in *Aloft*: Jerry's brother and wife have both died prior to the commencement of the book, his daughter is diagnosed with cancer, his father's girlfriend chokes to death in front of him, and a coworker overdoses on painkillers. It is a wonder Jerry does not share Doc Hata's impulse to see himself as "at the vortex of bad happenings" (*A Gesture Life* 333). But Jerry Battle is very different from the quiet Asians who grace *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*. Viewing the world in more visceral terms, he is likelier to comment on food, money, or sex than on his role in the deeper issues of life. Despite, or maybe because of, the ways in which he differs from Lee's other characters, Jerry provides a platform for further addressing the issues of ethnicity, language, and passivity that are frequent in Lee's earlier works.

Although Jerry would probably not be considered a racist, he is extremely race-conscious. Race is often one of the first things he mentions when describing the people in his life. He tells readers that his daughter says he does so because he is "like most people in this country . . . hopelessly obsessed with race and difference and can't help but *privilege* the *normative* and *fetishize* what's not" (12). Jerry prefers to believe that his focus on race is due to his concern for his own children, whom he alternately describes as not "wholly normative of race" (13) and "mixed blood" (30), as a result of his marriage to the Asian American Daisy. While he proclaims himself the "father of Diversity," he fails to include himself in that diversity, seeming to consider himself more American than the hyphenated minority, despite his own immigrant ancestry. This tendency to view descendants of European immigrants as culturally more American than those of Asian or Eastern ancestry is a common theme in Lee's work; it is supported by Leti Volpp in her article regarding the impact of immigration law on the cultural diversity of America. Despite his obsession with ethnicity, Jerry does have a moment when he realizes, mostly through his dealings with

his daughter's fiancé, the Asian-American writer Paul Pyun (in occupation and choice of subject matter reminiscent of the author Chang-rae Lee), that individuals are not defined by their race:

People say that Asians don't show as much feeling as whites or blacks or Hispanics, and maybe on average that's not completely untrue, but I'll say, too, from my long if narrow experience (and I'm sure zero expertise), that the ones I've known and raised and loved have been completely a surprise in their emotive characters, confounding me to no end. This is not my way of proclaiming "We're all individuals" or "We're all the same" or any other smarmy notion about our species' solidarity, just that if a guy like me is always having to think twice when he'd rather not do so at all, what must that say about this existence of ours but that it restlessly defies our attempts at its capture time and time again. (248)

This sentiment, voiced by Jerry Battle as a White American, represents a shift from the accusatory tone of Henry Park's "This is your history" speech (*Native Speaker* 320) to one of hope that America will eventually embrace all of its immigrants.

While *Native Speaker* focuses on the role of language as barrier/bridge between cultures, both *A Gesture Life* and *Aloft* explore the complexity of language within families. Both Doc Hata and Jerry Battle know the power of silence—each learned it from his father. For Hata, silence seems less choice than cultural inheritance, but Jerry employs silence with a vengeance, following the advice given by his father after Daisy nearly bankrupts the family to "be a little brutal. . . . Treat her badly, don't give her any money or attention, or even a chance to bitch or argue" (111). Jerry admits he knows "how effective it can be to say grindingly little at the very moments when you ought to say a lot," and although he himself has been wounded by his father's tendency to invoke silence as a form of punishment, Jerry accepts his father's suggestion,

which only contributes further to Daisy's mental imbalance.

Jerry also allows silence to dominate his interactions with his children, especially his son, Jack. Communication is difficult between the two, in part because of what has not been addressed in the past, namely, the death of Daisy, Jerry's wife and the mother of Jack and Theresa. Jack was young when Daisy died, and he is profoundly affected by the loss, and although Jerry does not learn the full reason for that until years later, he does see that "for a year or so after she died he hardly said a word, he was just a kid with eyes" (85). Jerry's natural tendency toward passivity and Jack's withdrawal after Daisy's death set a pattern of noncommunication that makes it difficult for them to discuss important matters, such as the state of the family business or Theresa's illness. When it becomes impossible to avoid the subjects any longer, Jerry laments that his son is not more like him, so that "it would be easier to say something to him that I could be sure was tidy and effective, an impartial communication, like a patriarchal Post-it note with simple, useful information . . . or else something slightly chewier, some charming Taoist-accented aphorism bespeaking the endlessly curious circumstance and befuddlement of our lives" (236). But Jack is not Jerry and eventually Jerry realizes that his noncommunication is making the situation worse, that "over time it's this already anticipated turbulence that brings a family most harm, the knowledge unacknowledged, which at some point you can try but can't glide above" (152).

Beyond what language does within his family, Jerry is also aware of its power within a culture to define both individuals and their place in society. Jerry's family is what he calls an "ethnically jumbled bunch, a grab bag miscegenation of Korean . . . Italian . . . and English-German" (72), and while he claims not to notice that much, he often finds himself on shaky ground with his daughter and her fiancé, arguing over terms like *Asian American* versus *Oriental*. Theresa and Paul believe that the question of race is one that should not be asked

3. Compare CAROLYN FORCHÉ's poetry of witness to Chang-rae Lee's attempt to depict the violence faced by comfort women during World War II.
4. Walt Whitman is referred to in both *Native Speaker* and *Aloft*. In what ways might Chang-rae Lee have been influenced by the poet's work? Cite specific examples.
5. Consider the following excerpt from President John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants*:

There is no part of our nation that has not been touched by our immigrant background. Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life. As Walt Whitman says,

These States are the amplest poem,
Here is not merely a nation but
A teeming Nation of nations.

To know America, then, it is necessary to understand this peculiarly American social revolution. It is necessary to know why over 42 million people gave up their settled lives to start anew in a strange land. We must know how they met the new land and how it met them, and, most important, we must know what these things mean for our present and for our future. (Mendoza xxvi)

What might Kennedy have said about the role of fiction, particularly Chang-rae Lee's fiction, in furthering this understanding?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Chen, Tina. *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Corley, Liam. "Just Another Ethnic Pol': Literary Citizenship in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*." In *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, et al. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Cowart, David. *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Hogan, Ron. "The Beatrice Interview: 2000, Chang-rae Lee." Available online. URL: www.beatrice.com/interviews/lee. Accessed November 26, 2006.
- Lee, Chang-rae. *Aloft*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2004.
- . *A Gesture Life*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.
- . *Native Speaker*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.
- Lee, JinAh. "Award-Winning Novelist Discusses the Art of Writing and Reading." *Yale Bulletin and Calendar*, 14 April 2000. Available online. URL: www.yale.edu/opa/v28.n28/story10.html. Accessed October 14, 2006.
- Lee, Rachel C. "Reading Contests and Contesting Reading: Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Ethnic New York." *Melus* 29, nos. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2004): 341–352.
- Marcus, James. "Talking with Chang-rae Lee: A Cultural Spy." *Newsday*, Newspapers & Newswires, March 26, 1995, p. 34.
- Mendoza, Louis, and S. Shankar, eds. *Crossing into America: The New Literature of Immigration*. New York: New Press, 2003.
- Parikh, Crystal. "Ethnic America Undercover: The Intellectual and Minority Discourse." *Contemporary Literature* 43 (Summer 2002): 249–284.
- Plett, Nicole. "Chang-rae Lee Finds a Home." *U.S. 1 Newspaper*, 9 October 2002. Available online. URL: PrincetonInfo.com. Accessed November 5, 2006.
- Volpp, Leti. "The Legal Mapping of U.S. Immigration 1965–1996." *Crossing into America: The New Literature of Immigration*, edited by Louis Mendoza and S. Shankar. New York: New Press, 2003.
- Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



CORMAC MCCARTHY (1933–)

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.

(*Blood Meridian*)

The third of six siblings, the novelist, playwright, and screenplay writer Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr., was born on July 20, 1933, in Providence, Rhode Island, to Charles Joseph and Gladys Christina McGrail McCarthy. Four years later, the McCarthy family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where McCarthy's father served as chief counsel for the Tennessee Valley Authority. The eldest son named for his father, McCarthy legally changed his name to the Gaelic equivalent of "son of Charles," adopting "an old family nickname bestowed on his father by Irish aunts" (Woodward). Growing up in Knoxville, McCarthy attended Roman Catholic high school and the University of Tennessee briefly (1951–52) before joining the air force. During his term of service he hosted a radio show and read voraciously. He returned to the University of Tennessee, majoring in engineering and then business administration. While there he published two short pieces of fiction and won the 1959–60 Ingram Merrill Award.

In 1961, he married Lee Holleman, a poet and fellow student; moved to Chicago; worked as an auto mechanic; and began writing *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), which won the William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel. Set in rural eastern Tennessee during a time when this hilly region was still remote and disconnected from what many in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s might have considered civilization, *The Orchard Keeper*

tells the story of three southerners from different generations who search for their place in the world in the face of urbanization and modernization: Marion Sylder, a middle-generation bootlegger; John Wesley Rattner, a young boy who captures game illegally; and Arthur Ownsby, an older man who is the orchard keeper. Marion kills a man and leaves the body in a peach orchard. Arthur finds the body but does not report it to the authorities, leaving the corpse to rot for seven years. At the novel's close, the outside world, represented by the law and those who enforce it, closes in. Marion is arrested, and Arthur, presumed insane, is sent to an asylum. Not only do the themes encompass the dying of the Old South and the encroachment of the modern world upon rural life—themes worthy of Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses* (1942) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), but also the novel, as with the works of Flannery O'Connor, focuses upon misfits, those normally not chosen as subjects. McCarthy's early outcasts foreshadow his many grotesque characters yet to be created.

Fortuitously, McCarthy began a strong working relationship at this time with Albert Erskine at Random House, William Faulkner's editor until his death in 1962, who had also sponsored Malcolm Lowly's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). McCarthy and Erskine would work together until Erskine's retirement in the early 1990s. The year of *The Orchard Keeper's*

publication McCarthy divorced and sailed to Ireland with money he received from a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. On board the ship he met Anne DeLisle, a British pop singer–dancer who was working on the ship. They married in 1966, traveled extensively, and settled in an artist colony on the island of Ibiza, where he finished preparing his second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968). The McCarthys returned to Tennessee, and *Outer Dark* was published.

A story of incest between a brother (Culla Holme) and sister (Rinthy), *Outer Dark* contains many of the gothic elements for which McCarthy is known. Ashamed after impregnating his sister, Culla refuses to get help as Rinthy delivers their child; Culla takes the boy and leaves him to die in the woods during the dark night. A tinker comes upon the baby and takes him under his care. Most of the novel deals with the milk-carrying Rinthy's quest to find her child and Culla's journey to find Rinthy. An episodic story that, as with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, uses italics to signal flashbacks, the novel is set in the early 20th-century Deep South, an area much like eastern Tennessee. As with *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark* deals not only with a taboo subject but also with sinister figures, three night riders who torture Culla, cut the baby's throat, and hang the tinker in a tree, leaving him for vultures.

McCarthy's next book, *Child of God* (1974), based on actual events, follows the reclusive serial killer and necrophiliac Lester Ballard as he lurks in the woods and caves of Sevier County, Tennessee. With its lyrical style, McCarthy's narrative tempts readers to empathize with Ballard, who, despite his reprehensible actions, remains a pitiable and alienated outsider dispossessed of both home and community. In the end, Ballard is forced to retreat into the very earth, hiding from an angry mob in a system of caves, and eventually dies of pneumonia in a state mental hospital. The last chapter occurs a few months after Ballard has died and describes a farmer's discovery of the cave where seven of his victims lie rotting. This macabre and seemingly sympathetic portrait of human depravity garnered mixed reviews from critics, though many were

quick to perceive its literary merits. As Jonathan Yardley wrote in the *Washington Post's Book World*, “[Somewhere] deep in Lester Ballard, beneath all that anger and outrage and despair, there is love and yearning. It is that which makes his story so poignant and, in the end, surprisingly and affectingly universal” (1).

In 1975, McCarthy penned a screenplay called *The Gardener's Son*; he separated from Anne DeLisle in 1976 and moved to El Paso, Texas. In 1979, he published *Suttree*, a novel written over a 20-year span. Shifting in perspective and fragmented by design, *Suttree* tells the story of a man, Cornelius Suttree, who leaves his wife and infant son for the life of a fisherman, living on a houseboat in a community of outcasts. For example, Gene Harrogate, the character who serves as Suttree's foil, is sent to prison for sexually molesting watermelons. Filled with quirky characters and experimental in style, *Suttree* has been compared with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), with which the novel also shares a dark sense of humor. Set in the slums during the 1950s in Knoxville, Tennessee, the novel follows Suttree through his day-to-day experiences. Like *Outer Dark*, *Suttree* is an episodic work relying on the reader to stitch together narrative threads. Interestingly, the narrative ends with Suttree's breaking free of the Knoxville world, setting out for a new life, as did McCarthy some three years prior to the novel's publication. With its large cast of characters and focus on the suffering outcast, *Suttree* has been hailed as one of McCarthy's greatest achievements.

In 1981, McCarthy received a MacArthur Fellowship “genius” grant, which supported him while he wrote his first western novel, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), a bloody epic of scalp hunters who terrorize the Southwest in the 1840s that has often been compared with Melville's *Moby-Dick*. A historical novel that McCarthy spent much time researching, *Blood Meridian* chronicles the life of the “kid,” who learns to enjoy violence, and the sinister Judge Holden, a grand, archetypal Ahab-like figure. While critics praised his use of language, many critics and readers were deterred from reading it by the novel's graphic vio-

lence. Nevertheless, it is now viewed as being one of the most significant works McCarthy has written and lauded by critics such as Harold Bloom as one of the finest works in the American literary canon.

In 1990, McCarthy was inducted into the Southwest Writers Hall of Fame. Characteristically, he neither attended nor allowed his picture to be taken. Significantly, upon Albert Erskine's retirement, McCarthy began working with the editor Gary Fiskerton at Alfred Knopf. Through the years 1992 to 1998, McCarthy published *The Border Trilogy*, a series of novels about the adventures of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in the American Southwest and Mexico: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). As Arnold and Luce detail, "Combining a love story, an action plot, and a coming-of-age narrative, [*All the Pretty Horses*] sold over 100,000 copies in less than a year's time" (9). In addition to the readers McCarthy then gained, *All the Pretty Horses* garnered the National Book Award (December 1992) and the National Book Critics Circle Award (March 1993). Previously a small cadre of dedicated scholars had been following McCarthy's career closely; after the critical and commercial success of *All the Pretty Horses*, reviews, articles, books, and dissertations on McCarthy began to proliferate. In 1998, with *Cities of the Plain* complete, McCarthy married Jennifer Winkley and fathered a son, John Francis, with this, his third wife. They moved to Tesuque, New Mexico, where McCarthy has an office at the Santa Fe Institute, an interdisciplinary think tank.

No Country for Old Men (2005) and *The Road* (2006) are McCarthy's most recent works, the first a tale of a man on the run trying to escape borderland drug cartels, and the second a story of a man and son struggling to survive in a postapocalyptic world, a future America covered with ash where gangs of cannibals roam the highways in search of their next meal. In June 2007 the reclusive McCarthy shocked both critics and readers by appearing on daytime television for Oprah's Book Club, resulting in the printing of nearly 1 million copies of *The Road*, which is slated to become a major motion picture. Clips from this rare interview can be found

on various Internet sites, including youtube.com (Oprah's Web site includes clips from the interview: http://www.oprah.com/media/20080601_obc_267033502CORMACWEBEA_O_VIDE0v1). By January 2008, Joel and Ethan Coen had won multiple awards for their film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, and Cormac McCarthy had become a well known name, his work topping best-seller lists and taught in high school and college classrooms across the United States.

Although McCarthy remained reclusive during the early part of his career and refused to give interviews, he has now been interviewed by the *New York Times* and by the talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, appeared on television with the Cohen brothers, and had the good fortune of attracting the interest of top-notch scholars who have documented his life and works, most notably Robert L. Jarrett in *Cormac McCarthy* (1997), Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1999), and Kenneth Lincoln in his recent study of all the McCarthy works to date, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (2009). As Lincoln carefully observes:

Distinctly removed from literati, Cormac McCarthy is a college dropout and autodidact spanning popular border cultures and the high broad arts of American letters. He blends adventure tales and excruciating tragedies, mixes high jinks and low spirits, fuses the lyric sublime and repulsive grotesque. This self-made writer cobles his own hybrid genres from history, literature, and science. The novels and scripts cross tall tales with gritty truth, fuse adult westerns with futuristic apocalypse, pair raw innocence with mesmerizing debauchery, etch pure love of land and natural life-forms into Southern Gothic, city wasteland, and Southwest naturalism. (2)

While critics continue to debate whether his works contain gratuitous violence, whether his worldview is nihilistic, or whether he has neglected women in his works, many agree McCarthy is one of the most significant writers in the American literary

tradition, a novelist whose command of language and epic vision challenge us to confront the brutality of human life and the inevitability of death.

***Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985)**

A novel that blends history and fiction often considered by critics to be McCarthy's finest work, *Blood Meridian* depicts savage acts done in the name of Manifest Destiny, a term used during the 19th century to describe the expansion from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Ocean as the United States's responsibility, one ordained by God. Relying upon numerous historical records, the novel follows a gang of scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton, a member of the U.S. Army in the mid-19th century. Although the historical Glanton was initially hired by Mexican authorities to hunt and kill the Apache, eventually his gang began to scalp and massacre citizens, becoming one of the most notorious bands of outlaws in the Southwest. McCarthy went to great lengths in researching and writing the novel, learning Spanish and reading historical accounts, especially *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, a member of the Glanton gang. Further, McCarthy relied upon *Audubon's Western Journal 1849–1850* (1906) by John Woodhouse Audubon (for the full text, visit <http://www.archive.org/details/audubonswesternjOOaudufo>) and *The Scalp Hunters* (1860) by Thomas Mayne Reid (for the full text, visit http://www.archive.org/details/Captain_Mayne_Reid_The_Scalp_Hunters). Thus, the novel supplants stereotypical notions of the "Wild West" found in radio shows such as *The Lone Ranger* and in Hollywood blockbuster films starring John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, leaving us with a bloody history instead of the romanticized mythology of the Southwest.

McCarthy relies upon the Glanton gang's story for the novel's action, which contains some of the most graphic violence in the literary tradition, violence that has prohibited many readers from making it through the book. At the book's core lies

the gang's drive for human scalps, for which they receive \$200 apiece. *Blood Meridian* tells of the gang's initial hiring to kill the Apache, the gang's descent into the scalp trade, the pursuit of the gang by Mexican authorities, the gang's commandeering of a ferry used by Yuma Indians, and the gang's massacre at the hands of the Yuma. While such graphic descriptions might alone sustain interest in the conflicted past that often was justified under the name of God, what enables this book to be read and reread are its masterful language and its characters, which transcend the historical framework.

The novel's protagonist, "the kid," is born during the Leonids meteor shower of 1833, an ominous sign: "Sign of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall" (3). At 14 the kid leaves his home in Tennessee, makes his way to New Orleans and Galveston, and ultimately rides a decrepit mule into the town of Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1849. There he meets the book's antagonist, who is "bald as a stone" and has "no trace of beard" and "no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them": Judge Holden, whom the literary critic Harold Bloom calls "the most frightening figure in all of American literature" and "a villain worthy of Shakespeare, Iago-like and demonic, a theoretician of war everlasting" (*Cormac McCarthy* 1). Holden sees violence as endemic to the human condition and war as a sacred ritual: "War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (*Blood Meridian* 249). While the first chapters of the novel focus on the kid—his birth, travels, and ultimate imprisonment—the violence that follows dominates the narrative in which the kid appears. After the Yuma massacre, however, the narrative shifts to the kid, who along with Holden survives the Indian assault. Ultimately, Holden and the kid meet again in the book's penultimate scene, when Holden crushes the life out of the kid in an outhouse. At this dramatic moment, the narrative shifts to a brief epilogue that provides another haunting image: a man who makes holes in the

ground, ritualistically “striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there” as wanderers behind him search for bones or “move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by prudence or reflectiveness” (337). Here and throughout the novel, McCarthy opens up mythic possibilities, asking us to weigh image with word and deed, drawing us to make meaning from a powerful text whose interpretation can be as difficult as its violence is to bear.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Write a well-developed essay on Cormac McCarthy’s use of graphic violence in the novel. As you weigh the purpose and effect of the book’s many gruesome descriptions, decide whether the violent images are gratuitous or necessary. Support everything you say about McCarthy’s use of violence by using historical sources, especially *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, *Audubon’s Western Journal 1849–1850* (1906) by John Woodhouse Audubon, and *The Scalp Hunters* (1860) by Thomas Mayne Reid. Contrast historical passages with detailed descriptions from *Blood Meridian*.
2. What wisdom does the judge offer? Write a well-developed essay on the figure of Judge Holden and what he may represent. Consider not only what the judge does but also what he says, the wisdom he imparts. Speeches worth glossing can be found on the following pages: 329 (on death), 250 (on morality), and 141, 146, 199, and 245 (on the nature of reality).
3. Compare Judge Holden with Ahab in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. What qualities do the two share? How do both comment upon the order or lack thereof of the universe and the relationship between the human and the divine?

All the Pretty Horses (1992)

The first of McCarthy’s novels to be widely read, *All the Pretty Horses* follows the exploits of

John Grady Cole, a dispossessed adolescent who ventures from his family’s ranch in San Angelo, Texas, to Mexico in search of the cowboy life that is quickly disappearing from the American Southwest. Thus the novel is both a coming-of-age story that chronicles Grady’s loss of innocence and idealism as well as a lamentation for the death of an iconic and distinctly American myth: the self-sufficient and morally pure frontiersman. Though McCarthy’s first western novel, *Blood Meridian*, dramatically questions the idealized picture of the cowboy and America’s westward expansion propagated by numerous western novels and films, *All the Pretty Horses* offers readers a sympathetic protagonist who tries to live up to the moral codes these works enshrine.

John Grady Cole is the last inheritor of a long family tradition of ranching and working with horses. His grandfather, the last real rancher of the family, has died, and his mother proceeds to sell the family spread to oilmen. Unwilling to accept the options open to him in San Angelo, Grady leaves with his friend Lacy Rawlins for the “white space” on the map: Mexico. Grady and Rawlins are joined by a younger boy, Jimmy Blevins, whom they encounter on their way to the border atop a suspiciously valuable bay horse. Whereas Rawlins seems to be slightly more mature than Grady and is quick to recognize danger, Blevins proves to be superstitious, immature, gun-happy, and more than willing to live the cowboy life Grady idealizes.

After the three cross the Rio Grande into Coahuila, they have fair luck until Blevins loses his horse, pistol, and clothes in an attempt to evade the lightning of a passing storm. This image of frailty and ill fortune marks the beginning of trouble for the boys: When the three ride into the town of La Encantada, Blevins recognizes his missing bay horse tied up in an abandoned house and they scheme to get it back. During the chase that ensues, Blevins becomes separated from Rawlins and Cole in an attempt to draw off the villagers pursuing them. The narrative then follows Rawlins and Cole as they travel farther south and eventually find work at a ranch owned by Don Hector Rocha y Villarreal. After proving his brilliance with horses, Grady

befriends Don Hector, who entrusts him with his finest horses. Grady quickly falls in love with Don Hector's daughter, Alejandra, and, despite the admonitions of both Rawlins and Alejandra's aunt, Duena Alfonsa, pursues a secret romance with her. When Don Hector eventually learns of Grady's transgressions with his daughter, he turns them in to the police captain of Estancia as accomplices of Blevins, who is being held in the town jail for horse theft and murder. The three are reunited in jail and sent to Saltillo prison. En route, the captain stops the convoy and executes Blevins, whose last act is to give Grady the rest of his money from his boot.

Grady and Rawlins live in constant fear for their lives while incarcerated at Saltillo: Each day entails another fight with inmates and the two make few friends. Unfortunately, neither Grady nor Rawlins has enough money to buy their way out. Rawlins is stabbed by an inmate and hospitalized. Grady, now alone, uses Blevins's money to buy a switchblade from one of the few friends he has made in the prison. The purchase proves to be well timed: Grady soon has to kill an assailant wielding a cafeteria tray and a knife. Severely wounded from the encounter, Grady heals in a pitch-black cell where he senses "men had died" only to emerge with the news that Duena Alfonsa has bought their freedom in exchange for Alejandra's promise not to see him again. Rawlins embarks homeward and Grady hopes to find and marry Alejandra. When he arrives at the hacienda, Duena Alphonsa attempts to dissuade Grady by relating the tragedies that had befallen her and her revolutionary friends. Grady remains steadfast in his idealistic vision of the future despite these warnings and meets Alejandra in the town of Zacatecas. They briefly rekindle their romance in an old hotel, only for Alejandra to return to her aunt despite Grady's professions of love. Thus defeated he begins the long journey home and, upon passing a sign pointing the way to La Encantada, rashly decides to reclaim the horses confiscated by the captain after their arrest. Grady succeeds in stealing the horses back, takes the captain hostage, and flees northward with a posse pursuing him. Shot in the leg, Grady stops the bleeding by cauterizing

the wound with the fire-heated barrel of his pistol. Soon afterward, a mysterious group of mountain people carry off the captain, and Grady escapes. After crossing the Rio Grande once more, Grady attempts to find Blevins's family to return the horse. This eventually lands him in court, where a judge rules in Grady's favor after hearing his story of how he came to possess the horse. Afterward, Grady seeks the judge's counsel regarding his guilt at having killed a man and betrayed the trust of Don Hector.

As the novel ends, we are left to contemplate John Grady Cole riding in a solitary and desolate landscape, leading a horse whose rightful owner he cannot find, unsure whether he has acted justly in his adventures. Unmoored and exiled from both San Angelo and Mexico, Grady maintains his earnest and romantic dedication to the cowboy way of life, alienating him from human society, and ultimately from himself. Whereas *Blood Meridian* forces readers to reconsider national myths of the West by emphasizing the violent and amoral character of its conquest, *All the Pretty Horses* focuses on the psychological and interpersonal tragedies that the cowboy myth creates for a nostalgic 16-year-old making his way in a chaotic world where industry and urbanization are encroaching upon the vast expanses of the old West.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Throughout the novel John Grady Cole encounters characters who attempt to explain the ways of the world to him, including his self-professed "enemy," Duena Alphonsa. Toward the end of the conversation Cole has with her upon returning to the hacienda from prison, Duena Alphonsa tells him:

In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting. I've thought a great deal about my life and

about my country. I think there is little that can truly be known. (236)

Later, as Cole contemplates a doe's death, the narrator observes:

He remembered Alejandra and the sadness he'd first seen in the slope of her shoulders which he'd presumed to understand and of which he knew nothing and he felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world though he loved it still. He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower. (280)

In a well-developed essay, examine how McCarthy's protagonist is changed by his experiences in Mexico, focusing especially on his encounter with Duena Alphonsa. What sort of knowledge does Duena Alphonsa offer? How is it supported (or undermined) by the events of the novel? Would Cole agree with his antagonist's pronouncements by the novel's close?

2. Read McCarthy's entire Border Trilogy, paying special attention to the similarities between John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, the protagonist of *The Crossing*. In a well-developed essay, explore Cole and Parham's differing reactions to loss and their reasons for crossing the border into Mexico. While both characters are drawn to the cowboy life, are wrongfully prosecuted for horse theft, and become violent fugitives yearning for the past, they arrive at this common predicament by dramatically different paths. In your essay, describe how the themes of these two divergent plots resonate with each other and how McCarthy intertwaves them in the final installment of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*.

***The Road* (2006)**

Set in a postapocalyptic future, one when ash dusts the earth, clouds obscure the sun, and human beings have regressed to barbarism, *The Road* is a radical departure from the western novels McCarthy has been writing for some 20 years. It is a story of a father and son, one dedicated to McCarthy's son, John Francis. The father and son limp along the road, two vagabonds, like Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. As with Beckett's work, there is little to be done. But whereas Beckett stages a surreal setting in which a comedy in the style of Charlie Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy ensues, *The Road* offers no way of laughing at our fate. But it does offer the authenticity of a father-son bond, one unbroken by countless travels and one that does not end in death. In this sense, the novel deals with what alone is real in a world lacking transcendent values: our dependence upon one another. Although the boy wonders about God and the mother who adopts him at the novel's close assures him that "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time," *The Road* portrays a wintry, ashen world where our connection with the divine is through familial bonds, care the only lasting value in a world that has ceased to imagine its own future. Both a book about the end of the world and a gift to McCarthy's son, the book is a story about stories, each one vital to our understanding and self-preservation despite the fact that all stories, as the man tells the boy, are lies, and the world of the living causes the man to envy the dead.

That McCarthy provides a bleak, dystopian setting for a novel professing the importance of paternal love, one with an emotional, even sentimental ending, attests to the work's many layers of meaning and the many contradictions it records. As it provides little information about what has happened, why the world as it has been has vanished, *The Road* relies upon our ability to supply likely contexts, whether this context is global thermonuclear war, the sort of asteroid strike that probably ended the age of the dinosaurs, or a biblical apocalypse. All we know is that at 1:17 the world has stopped

No less than the classical masters, cultural historians, or modern prophets and eco-scientists, McCarthy alerts us to the disasters of history, the monstrosities of moral deviance, the absurdities of human fate, the sublime ranges of will and courage, the depths of suffering, pain, and psychopathology. He writes about old-time, frontier, futuristic America from the bottom up, portraying men from the decent and conflicted, to the raw and grimy, to the deformed and malign. He lyricizes landscape, climate, and animals with native reverence. He chronicles the search for justice and redemption with tragic sorrow and heroic stoicism. In lineage with Hemingway's homosocial focus on male agonies, McCarthy writes unapologetic canticles of masculinity about the challenges, dreams, betrayals, and defeats of men, as Adrienne Rich or Alice Walker focus on women. (3)

After considering the way McCarthy depicts women in at least two of his works, write a well-developed essay that considers both the critique of McCarthy and Lincoln's defense. Back up everything you say with textual evidence.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Andersen, Elisabeth. *The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Mueller, 2008.
- Arnold, Edwin T. *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.
- . *Cormac McCarthy*. Hattiesburg: University of Southern Mississippi Press, 1992.
- . *Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy*. Hattiesburg: University of Southern Mississippi Press, 2000.
- , and Dianne C. Luce. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Rev. ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.
- Bell, James. *Cormac McCarthy's West: The Border Trilogy Annotations*. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002.
- Bell, Madison Smartt. "The Man Who Understood Horses." *New York Times Book Review*, 17 May 1992, sec. 7, p. 9.
- Bell, Vereen. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988.
- Bloom, Harold. *Cormac McCarthy*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002.
- . *Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003.
- Brown, Fred. "Cormac McCarthy: On the Trail of a Legend." *Knoxville News Sentinel* December 16, 2007. Available online. URL: <http://www.knoxnews.com/news/2007/dec/16/1216cormac/>. Accessed June 18, 2009.
- Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Ciuba, Gary. *Desire, Violence and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction: Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007.
- The Cormac McCarthy Home Pages: Official Web Site of the Cormac McCarthy Society*. Cormac McCarthy Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/>. Accessed June 18, 2009.
- Ellis, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Ford, Adam, and Victoria Ford. *The Road by Cormac McCarthy: Notes*. Melbourne, Austral.: CAE Book Groups, 2007.
- Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
- Greenwood, Willard. *Reading Cormac McCarthy*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009.
- Guillemin, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. 1st ed. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004.
- Hall, Wade. *Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Works*. 2nd ed. El Paso, Tex.: Texas Western University of Texas at El Paso, 2002.
- . *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. 2nd ed. El Paso: Texas Western Press/University of Texas at El Paso, 2002.
- . *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy: Selected Essays from the first McCarthy Conference, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky*,

- October 15–17, 1993*. 1st ed. Ed Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 1995.
- Holloway, David. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Jarrett, Robert L. *Cormac McCarthy*. New York: London: Twayne, Prentice Hall International, 1997.
- Lilley, James. *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. 1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002.
- Lincoln, Kenneth. *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Luce, Dianne. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- . *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West*. 1985. Reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- . *Cities of the Plain*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- . *The Crossing*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- . *No Country for Old Men*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 2005.
- . *The Road*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 2006.
- . *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*. 1st ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.
- Owens, Barclay. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000.
- Pearce, Richard. "Foreword." In *The Gardener's Son: A Screenplay*. By Cormac McCarthy. Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco, 1996.
- Rudin, Scott. *No Country for Old Men: A Coen Brothers Film*. Burbank, Calif.: Miramax Films/Paramount Vantage, 2008.
- Salerno, Robert. *All the Pretty Horses*. Culver City, Calif.: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2001.
- Sanborn, Wallis. *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006.
- Tatum, Stephen. *Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Wallach, Rick. *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Woodward, Richard B. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *New York Times Magazine*, 19 April 1992, pp. 28–31.

Blake Hobby



LARRY MCMURTRY (1936–)

Texas is rich in unredeemed dreams, and now that the dust of its herds is settling the writers will be out on their pencils, looking for them in the suburbs and along the mythical Pecos. And except to the paper riders, the Pecos is a lonely and a bitter stream.

(*In a Narrow Grave*).

Larry McMurry was born into a cattle-ranching family in Wichita Falls, Texas, on June 3, 1936, and grew up steeped in cowboy culture. In the 1880s, McMurry's grandparents William Jefferson and Louisa Francis Jefferson bought a half-section of land in Archer County, west Texas, where they raised their 12 children and watched the last cattle drives headed north (Busby 3). McMurry writes, in a 1968 essay, that his family members "bespeak the region. . . . All of them gave such religious allegiance as they had to give to . . . the god whose principal myth was the myth of the Cowboy, the ground of whose divinity was the Range. They were many things, the McMurrays, but to themselves they were cowboys first and last, and the rituals of that faith they strictly kept" (*Narrow Grave* 142).

McMurry's parents, William Jefferson, Jr., and Hazel Ruth, lived on his grandfather's ranch until Larry was six years old. Hazel Ruth wanted to be nearer "civilization," so they moved to Archer City. In a 1978 lecture entitled "The Southwest as the Cradle of the Novelist," McMurry explains that it was while living in town and visiting the ranch that he realized "one set of values and traditions was being strongly challenged by another set of values and traditions. . . . I grew up just at the same time when rural and soil traditions in Texas were really, for the first time, being seriously challenged by urban traditions" (quoted in Busby 6). The changes in his family and community that McMurry wit-

nessed as a child and adolescent helped shape his personality and perspective—and became an important element in much of his writing.

McMurry was "unable to master the finer points of ranch work"; he writes that the family found him insufficiently "mean" for the kind of work they did (*Narrow Grave* 158), so he discovered books (Reynolds 6). McMurry remembers when he was eight years old "sitting in a hot pickup near Silverton, Texas, bored stiff, waiting for my father and two of my uncles . . . to conclude a cattle deal". He was reading *Last of the Great Scouts*—a book about Buffalo Bill Cody—when his father and uncles returned to the pickup. When they saw what he had been reading, they reminded each other that they had seen Cody once near the end of his life at a show in Oklahoma. Buffalo Bill Cody was "one of the most famous men in the world, and they had seen him with their own eyes," McMurry wrote 60 years after the experience (*The Colonel and Little Missie* 12). And, although he explains that the heat in the pickup was the most memorable part of that incident, it is significant because it clearly illustrates McMurry's position between two worlds: a world in which his own father and uncles not only saw Buffalo Bill Cody but also lived the kind of rough, pioneering lives that Cody and his show mythologized; and Larry's world—a world filled with books and stories that glorified the past his parents and grandparents had experienced.

McMurtry became, as he called himself, a “herder of words” instead of cattle (Reynolds 6). As a teenager, McMurtry was a good student with varied interests. He was an honor student at Archer City High School, where he lettered in band, basketball, and baseball. He was also a 4-H Club officer, editorial writer for the school paper *Cat's Claw*, member of both junior and senior class plays, fourth-place winner of the district mile race, and second-place winner in editorial writing (Peavy 13).

After graduation in 1954, McMurtry began college at Rice University. One semester later, he transferred to North Texas State University in Denton. While working toward his B.A. degree, McMurtry wrote what he deemed 52 “very bad” short stories, which he later burned (15). In 1958, during his senior year of college, he wrote two stories utilizing his cowboy background: one about the destruction of a cattle herd and the other about a cattle rancher's funeral. Sensing a connection between the two events, McMurtry continued writing a week after graduation. The result was the first 100 pages of *Horseman, Pass By*. He continued working on the novel, and by 1961, when it was published, he had been through six drafts (Peavy 16).

During McMurtry's years at North Texas State, he published fiction, poetry, and essays in *Avesta*, the student magazine, and the *Coexistence Review*. The latter was an unauthorized literary magazine that he and his friends Grover and John Lewis began (Busby 10). The second issue of *Coexistence Review* includes a poem by Jo Scott, a student at Texas Woman's University. McMurtry and Scott married in 1959 and had a son, James Lawrence McMurtry (15).

McMurtry returned to Rice University for graduate school, where his studies focused on English literature. He earned his M.A. in 1960 and was awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. Although McMurtry was reportedly shy and reserved, he did form long-lasting relationships with several young writers at Stanford. McMurtry connected with Ken Kesey, probably because of their shared western upbringing, as well as the Australian writer Chris Koch. Many of the 1960 Stegner Fellows continue to correspond, offering

support and praise for one another's success. In a 1994 interview, Kesey said, “When Larry won the Pulitzer Prize for *Lonesome Dove*, it gloried all of us” (Busby 16–17).

When McMurtry's fellowship at Stanford ended, he returned to Texas, where he taught at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth in the 1961–62 academic year. The following year, he went back to Rice to teach English and creative writing. In 1963, Paramount released a movie adaptation of *Horseman, Pass By* called *Hud*. *Hud* was the first of many film and television adaptations of McMurtry's work. Mark Busby writes:

Not only does McMurtry write in such a way that his works lend themselves to film, but he is the product of a generation that grew up on movies and moved into maturity as film itself began to be seen as a significant art form rather than mere entertainment. Movies have therefore shaped his imagination, and the more he began to work in the industry, the more his fiction began to reflect his knowledge of it and the actors and directors with whom he became friends. (279)

Hud and *Horseman, Pass By* dramatize the demise of the traditional cattle ranch and the displacement of the cowboy. Both the novel and the film mourn the loss of the Texas cattle-ranching way of life while attacking and undermining and undoing sentimental and romanticized notions of what it means to be a cowboy.

In 1963, Harper and Row published the second book in what has become known as McMurtry's Thalia Trilogy, *Leaving Cheyenne*. In this novel, McMurtry explores the possibilities of fulfillment in various types of southwestern rural life through three characters: Molly, Gid, and Johnny. Gid is a responsible, settled rancher; Johnny is a freedom-loving cowboy. Both men love Molly, but instead of choosing either one, she marries Eddie, an oil field worker. The novel's themes include unrequited love, unmet expectations, and generational conflict.

McMurtry spent most of the 1960s teaching at Rice, except for 1964–65, when he received a

Guggenheim Grant for creative writing (Peavy 22). Gregory Curtis, editor of *Texas Monthly*, was one of McMurtry's students at Rice. He describes McMurtry's teaching style as "polite discouragement" (quoted in Busby 19). McMurtry did not seem very interested in his students' writing, but, according to Curtis, he inspired by example. The 1960s were also a challenging time in his personal life. In 1964, McMurtry and his wife separated. They divorced in 1966 and McMurtry raised their son, James, who became a successful singer-songwriter (Busby 15). The year 1966 was also when Dial Press published McMurtry's third novel, *The Last Picture Show*. In *The Last Picture Show*, McMurtry "examines [the small west Texas town of Thalia's] inhabitants—the oil rich, the roughnecks, the religious fanatics, the high school football stars, the love-starved women, —with an eye that is at once sociological and satiric" (Peavy 34).

In 1969, McMurtry left Texas, both literally and figuratively. He moved to Waterford, Virginia, where he opened a rare-book store, Booked Up, with Marcia McGhee Carter, the daughter of the Texas oilman-diplomat George McGhee. McMurtry's romance with McGhee did not last, but their friendship and business partnership did. He lived in the area for nearly a decade, teaching at George Washington University and American University and, of course, writing. He wrote the screenplay for *The Last Picture Show*, which was released in 1971, as well as his Houston trilogy: *Moving On* (1970), *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* (1972), and *Terms of Endearment* (1975). By 1978, McMurtry was back in Archer City, where, according to Mark Busby's biography, he spent a significant amount of time at the Dairy Queen south of town, thinking about the art of storytelling, the literary critic Walter Benjamin, and his hometown (22).

In the early 1980s, McMurtry worked on a screenplay called *The Streets of Laredo*. No one seemed interested in it, so he switched genres, turning his trail-drive screenplay into a novel, *Lonesome Dove*, which was published in 1985. *Lonesome Dove* was a huge success. In the late 1960s, someone had given McMurtry a shirt with the words *Minor Regional Novelist* printed across the chest. Not surprisingly,

photos of him wearing the shirt while "typing . . . playing pool, . . . thoughtfully pondering a book—all activities that a minor regional novelist can reasonably be expected to take part in" appeared in the *Houston Post* (Ray Isle). While *Lonesome Dove* is certainly a regional novel, it solidified McMurtry's status as a serious and respected major American novelist when it won the Pulitzer Prize. McMurtry's hometown, which was less than enthusiastic about him after having been depicted so negatively in his writing, honored him by proclaiming one Saturday in October 1986 "Larry McMurtry Day." In a speech he gave that day, McMurtry thanked the hometown of which he had been so critical:

It's one thing to write a book that appeals to the taste of the people on the [Pulitzer] prize committee. It's harder to earn the respect of people who know you. The myth is that small towns in America don't care about their writers and are small minded and intolerant. But here I am, a writer being honored by his hometown. In a sense, you have all helped me with this award. I don't know if I have ever used a literal event that has happened in this town, but what I have used are the intimations and hunches you have given me. (quoted in Busby 25)

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel was adapted into a television miniseries starring Robert Duvall, Tommy Lee Jones, and Angelica Huston in 1989. The series proved as successful as the book.

McMurtry continued writing through the late 1980s and 1990s, publishing *The Streets of Laredo* (1993) and *The Evening Star* (1992), among other works. But he also spent time managing his bookstores Booked Up in Dallas and Houston and running the Blue Pig Book Shop in Archer City. He also dealt with some serious health problems: In 1991, he had a heart attack and underwent quadruple-bypass surgery. Fortunately, he recovered quickly and continued working—although the darkness of *Streets of Laredo* reveals some of the depression McMurtry suffered after his surgery.

More recently, McMurtry has been writing about the history of western icons and continuing

to expand his book business. His most recent public success is the 2005 Academy Award, for a screenplay he cowrote with his companion and writing partner Diana Ossana for the film *Brokeback Mountain*—a film adapted from a short story by Annie Proulx. Not surprisingly, McMurtry attended the Oscars wearing jeans and cowboy boots with his jacket and bow tie. And he thanked the booksellers of the world in his acceptance speech: “Remember,” he said, “*Brokeback Mountain* was a book before it was a movie. From the humblest paperback exchange to the masters of the great bookshops of the world. All are contributors to the survival of the culture of the book. A wonderful culture, which we mustn’t lose” (“Winner: Writer . . .”).

***The Last Picture Show* (1966)**

The Last Picture Show (1966) satirizes small-town Texans of the 1950s. The novel’s sarcastic dedication to McMurtry’s hometown, Archer City, is just one more manifestation of McMurtry’s conflicted—largely negative—feelings toward his home. The novel begins with Sonny Crawford, a high school senior, surveying Thalia’s main street from the cab of his ’41 Chevrolet truck early one Saturday morning. “Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in the town,” the novel begins (1). Although Sonny finds his friends in the pool hall that morning and continues to interact with others throughout the novel, he remains isolated and lonely—as does nearly everyone else in Thalia. The novel’s main characters, Sonny; his best friend, Duane; the much-sought-after Jacy Farrow; and the coach’s wife, Ruth Popper, fail in their attempts to build and sustain meaningful, mutually rewarding relationships. Although characters in the novel try new things and learn about themselves and each other—*The Last Picture Show* is a kind of coming-of-age story—they are unable to connect emotionally.

Much of the novel’s action revolves around the sexual adventures of Sonny, Duane, and Jacy. Sonny and his girlfriend, Charlene Duggs, break up toward the beginning of the novel. Unaffected

by the loss of Charlene—whom he never really liked and only dated because she was less prudish than the only other unattached girl in school—Sonny pines for Jacy Farrow. Jacy is the daughter of a wealthy oilman and the prettiest girl in school. She and Duane are a couple, despite Duane’s lowly social and economic status. Although Jacy professes to love Duane and, initially, plans to marry him, she uses and manipulates him to get the attention on which she thrives. While Sonny yearns for Jacy, he is surprised by Ruth Popper’s sexual advances. Ruth is alternately ignored and mistreated by her husband, the high school athletic coach, who is a latent homosexual. Ruth is as desperate for attention as Jacy Farrow, but, unlike Jacy, she is a powerless, pathetic character. She and Sonny have an affair that affords Ruth some opportunity for growth and fulfillment. But when Sonny leaves her for a time, she realizes how physically and emotionally dependent she is on a teenage boy who is not nearly as invested in the relationship as she is.

For Jacy, sex is a tool. She withholds it from Duane to make him—and the rest of the school—want her more. She decides that the senior-class trip to California is the perfect time to lose her virginity to Duane because all the seniors will know about it. After deciding a relationship with Duane has nothing else to offer her, Jacy breaks up with him and starts sleeping with Lester, a wealthy kid who is part of the social set to which Jacy wants to belong. She puts up with Lester in order to get the attention of Bobby Sheen, an even better target. Sex becomes a mode of climbing the social ladder and a way to keep people talking about her.

The characters in the novel are trying to escape—from bad marriages, bad decisions, and boredom. Sex provides a kind of escape. So do movies. Sam the Lion, a character who symbolizes several kinds of displacement, runs the pool hall and the picture show. Showing “comedies and serials and Westerns” to the kids in Thalia helps him recover from the death of his sons, the loss of his wife, and the end of the cattle-ranching lifestyle he had known and loved (4). For Sonny, the picture show is an escape from his distant relationship with his father,

his boredom with school and work, and his unsatisfactory relationships with women.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does McMurtry begin his novel with Sonny's description of Thalia? What is significant about the way Sonny views his hometown?
2. How does the picture show function in the lives of Thalia's residents? What is symbolic about its demise?
3. Analyze the final scene in the book. Why does Sonny go back to Ruth Popper? Why does she accept him? Describe their conversation/interaction. In what ways have the characters changed since their first meeting? In what ways have they remained the same?

Terms of Endearment (1975)

Terms of Endearment follows *Moving On* and *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* as the third book in McMurtry's Houston trilogy. In his preface to the novel, McMurtry explains that he had been reading several 19th-century novelists before he began writing *Terms of Endearment*, novelists who "had taken a very searching look at the fibers and textures of life" (5). "I doubt that I aspired to such profound achievement [as these European novelists]," he writes, "but I did hope to search at least a little less superficially among the flea market of details which constitute human existence" (5).

Terms of Endearment does indeed study the fibers and textures of life. It is a novel about normal—for the most part—middle-class people who live normal suburban lives. It explores parent-child, husband-wife, upstairs-downstairs, and husband/wife-lover relationships in ways that are touching, funny, and insightful. Its characters are likable, absurd, and engaging. Its descriptions are rich and its images evocative. And its themes and conclusions are accessible and meaningful to any thoughtful reader.

Divided into two parts, "Emma's Mother, 1962" and "Mrs. Greenway's Daughter, 1971–1976," the first section's focus is Aurora Greenway. Aurora is an attractive Houston widow who hates

to wear stockings, parks her big black Cadillac two feet from the curb, and has impeccable taste. She expects the world to revolve around her, and most of the time, it does. Aurora is selfish and manipulative and childish, but she is also intelligent and perceptive and can be generous. And she loves the people in her life—although that love manifests itself in unusual ways.

Aurora's main difficulty in the novel is choosing a suitor. Beloved by a four-star general who lives down the street, a washed-up Italian opera singer, a card-playing oilman, and a playboy yachtman, Aurora cannot bring herself to marry any of them. Instead, she takes the general as her lover and continues allowing the other men to adore her.

Emma's problems in the novel revolve around men, too—mainly her husband, Flap. Emma loves him but recognizes that her mother's criticisms of him are accurate. She also realizes that she does not have the energy to make him a successful man, and he does not have the drive to do it himself. "Emma's Mother, 1962" takes up most of the novel, but Emma's pregnancy with her first child and her relationship with Flap are a significant part of Aurora's life. As Emma struggles to remain close to Flap, she tries to understand her mother better, especially her mother's marriage to her father.

By the time the second part of the novel begins and the focus shifts from Aurora to Emma, 10 years have passed since the birth of her first child, and Emma has given up on her marriage. Flap has become a tenured professor and eventually department head at a university in Nebraska—in spite of which, both he and his wife consider him a failure. He has a mistress named Janice. He is a decent father to their three children, and Emma does not hate him for his infidelity. Instead, she has her own unsatisfying affairs with several men. At 37, Emma is diagnosed with terminal cancer and dies quite quickly. Aurora takes her children to raise. About Emma, McMurtry writes, "Though often praised for my insights into women, I'm still far from sure that I know what women are like; but if my hunches are anywhere near accurate, and if I'm not idealizing her, then Emma is what women are at their best" (7).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Analyze point of view in *Terms of Endearment*. What is the effect of readers' access to characters' thoughts at certain moments? Why not tell the story from Aurora's point of view only? Or Emma's? Or Rosie's?
2. Why does McMurtry think so highly of Emma? What are her strengths? Abilities? Quirks?
3. Why do you think the novel is titled *Terms of Endearment*? Refer to Emma's conversation with Flap on page 400 as you formulate your answer.

***Lonesome Dove* (1985)**

Larry McMurtry's ambivalence toward Texas is "deep as the bone" (*Narrow Grave* 142). "Such ambivalence," he says, "is not helpful in a discursive book but it can be the very blood of a novel" (*Narrow Grave* 142). McMurtry's being of two minds about Texas and its history animates his nearly 900-page novel *Lonesome Dove*. According to Don Graham:

The most surprising thing about *Lonesome Dove* was the fact that it was written at all. Just three years before [its publication] McMurtry had cast a cold eye on Texas letters, in a long article in the *Texas Observer* . . . Texas writers were lazy and unproductive, they were ill-read in the 19th-century masters of the craft, and they spent far too much of their time gazing backwards nostalgically at the vanished and superior past, and the days of cattlemen and land-centered values of small farmers, small towns, and small Dairy Queens. . . . McMurtry's prescription for curing Texas letters [was to] explore the "less simplistic experience of city life." (*Coming Home*)

McMurtry acknowledged, at one point, that although he is critical of the past, he is "apparently attracted to it" (*Narrow Grave* 141). So instead of taking his own advice, he wrote a western that was

a combination of "nostalgia, nineteenth-century realism, and Hollywood-like heroes" (Graham 312).

Lonesome Dove is a story packed with all the elements of a good western: former Texas Rangers, Mexican banditos, prostitutes, lawmen, horses with plenty of personality, farmers, cowboys, and bloodthirsty Indians. But this western story is hardly simplistic or romantic. In-depth character development is one way McMurtry debunks—or at least complicates—the stereotypes of the genre. Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call are aging former rangers who run the Hat Creek Cattle Company, just outside the town of Lonesome Dove. Both men are legends in Texas, and they have almost superhuman abilities. But long before readers see them saving kidnapped women or hanging horse thieves, they are exposed to the two men's doubts, vanities, and weaknesses. In addition to being the most resourceful, cool-headed man anyone could want in a fight, Augustus (Gus) is lazy and loud. He talks more than he works, and he will argue with anyone he can engage in conversation. Call, on the other hand, feels compelled to work constantly and retreats to solitude every night rather than sit with Gus and the other hands. Both men have serious regrets about women from their pasts. And neither one is satisfied with life in Lonesome Dove. When Jake Spoon, a man Gus and Call rangered with years ago, returns to Lonesome Dove talking about Montana, Call decides he wants to start a cattle ranch there.

As McMurtry's other novels do, *Lonesome Dove* addresses themes of displacement and loss. Life is not what it used to be for Gus and Call: The Indians in Texas have been about beaten and the Mexican cattle ranchers with whom they used to compete are dying off and losing power. Although they would not readily admit it, both men feel unimportant and uncertain about what to do next. Their former occupations and skills have become largely obsolete. Gus does not crave action and physical challenge as Call does, but his desire to visit—and possibly win over—the love of his younger days, Clara, motivates him to agree. So they decide to

head to Montana with their hired hands and several thousand head of cattle, most of which they stole in Mexico.

Lorena, another of the novel's main characters, wants to escape Lonesome Dove, too. Lorena is a prostitute at the Dry Bean Saloon. In order to cope with a life of card playing, alcohol, and the men who visit her, she withdraws mentally and emotionally. She is known for her silence and aloofness. And half the men in Lonesome Dove think they are in love with her—especially Dish Boggett, a skilled cowboy who hires on with Gus and Call. Lorena, even more than Gus and Call, feels trapped in Lonesome Dove. When she and Jake Spoon get together, she decides Jake is her ticket out of the Dry Bean Saloon and the dusty town. She, with some help from Gus, compels Jake to take her with him and the Hat Creek Outfit as they head toward Montana. Lorena seems determined—and able—to get what she wants from men, especially weak men like Jake. And as she gets farther away from Lonesome Dove and her former lifestyle, she becomes more human and even allows herself some optimistic thoughts about the future. It seems possible Lorena will conquer her past, her dependence on men, and her fears. She seems to start changing from a victim of circumstance and society and a few particularly brutal men into a capable woman who will determine her own destiny. But *Lonesome Dove* is not a romance. Lorena is kidnapped by Blue Duck, an Indian with a reputation for cruelty and mercilessness. The kidnapping is the result of Lorena's own foolish disregard of potential danger, as well as Jake's carelessness. Gus rescues Lorena eventually, but the experience halts her progress toward self-fulfillment and independence.

McMurtry depicts the cattle drive with the same kind of realism. Readers do not find images of contented cowboys singing around an evening fire after a hard day's work. Instead, the harsh and sometimes disturbing details of the experience destroy any idealistic notions of a cowboy's life. Newt—Call's young illegitimate son who is eager for experience and adventure—is assigned to ride behind the herd. Nearly choked by the dust kicked

up by thousands of hooves, Newt learns that driving cattle is not quite what he had imagined. His daily experiences disillusion him, and the losses he experiences shock and unnerve him. Newt and the entire outfit are particularly affected by the death of Sean Allen—a young Irish immigrant who was hired on mainly because he and his brother did not have anywhere to go or anything else to do. During a routine river crossing, Sean accidentally rides into a nest of water moccasins. The snakes kill Sean and his horse while the other cowboys look on helplessly. Newt is haunted by the sound of Sean's screams as the snakes swarmed over his body. Readers, too, are haunted by the images of Sean's death—and the other violent and tragic incidents that occur as the outfit heads north.

Lonesome Dove, though realistic, is not humorless. Some of the novel's humor is supplied by the animals in the story. Call has a beautiful, powerful horse that is the envy—and fear—of anyone who has anything to do with her. Named Hell Bitch by the Hat Creek hands, the horse has a way of outsmarting and surprising Call—something few humans would even attempt. Gus's pigs are also comic figures. They have the run of the place in the beginning of the novel and, according to Gus, are more intelligent than many men he has encountered. The pigs accompany the group all the way to Montana without being eaten by animals or cowboys. Several characters' intense fear of women also adds humor and depth to the novel. Pea Eye—a dense but likable cowboy—becomes acutely uncomfortable whenever Gus tells him he ought to marry a young widow Pea Eye has interacted with a couple of times. Pea Eye is completely mystified by women; he cannot imagine what it would be like to live with one. So he does his best not to think about the prospect.

Gus and Call and their group do make it to Montana, but at considerable cost and for reasons that never become clear. Gus does not win Clara's love. And, as the result of wounds sustained during a surprise Indian attack, he dies in a stuffy hotel room in Miles City. Jake is hanged for stealing horses. Lorena, who has become totally

- Superstardom in America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.
- . *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968.
- . *The Last Picture Show*. New York: Dial Press, 1966.
- . *Lonesome Dove*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.
- . *Terms of Endearment*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975.
- Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Peavy, Charles D. *Larry McMurtry*. Boston: Twayne, 1977.
- Pilkington, William T. *Critical Essays on the Western American Novel*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980.
- Reynolds, Clay. *Taking Stock: A Larry McMurtry Casebook*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989.
- Schmidt, Dorey, ed. *Larry McMurtry: Unredeemed Dreams*. Living Author Series No. 1. Edinburg, Tex.: Pan American University Print Shop, 1978.
- Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- “Winner: Writer (Adapted Screenplay) oscar.com. Available online. URL: www.academyawards.com/oscornight/winners/bestadaptedscreenplaycategory.html. Accessed June 8, 2006.

Rachel Rich



PAT MORA (1942–)

Language nurtures me and it also frees me.

(Leonard 154)

Pat Mora's intimate relationship with words began early. She spent much of her childhood listening to stories told by her mother, aunt, and grandmother. She was born in El Paso, Texas, and her home was filled with Spanish and English; for as long as she can remember there were always "two languages sort of streaming in and out of [her] mind" (Torres 248). Both sets of her grandparents immigrated to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, and her parents had to deal with a large dichotomy between their home and school cultures. By the time Mora was born, English was as much a part of her home as Spanish. So from her birth Mora has been bilingual; she literally cannot remember a time when she did not know both English and Spanish. Since both of her parents spoke English and Spanish interchangeably, she has always had a "sense of being at home in two languages" (Torres 244). Her years of education in Texas make her more English-dominant, but her poetry shows a unique blend of the two languages. Mora's work often includes seamless transitions from English to Spanish and back again.

As Mora mentions in an interview, "For the first seventeen years of my life I did not consider anything other than being a nun" (Ikas 131). The Catholic schools she attended for her elementary and high school education had a great impact on Mora's life. One of Mora's works, *Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints*, weaves stories of saints with

carvings of those saints. Her plea to Saint Clare shows how much the religion of her childhood has influenced her writing: "Spark your Carmen's pale faith to flare" (Mora 54), her speaker pleads, to persuade the saints to relight her own faith.

Mora earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Texas in El Paso, where she majored in English with a minor in speech. Mora went on to teach elementary, middle, and high school very briefly, but she has dedicated "much of her life as a writer and teacher to the preservation of her culture" (Ikas 128). She believes that there is a lack of understanding in the educational system, and teachers need to encourage "people to sing out their names, sing out their lives without embarrassment" (Mora UCTE). If teachers do not honor their students' home language, then they are making them choose which language is better (Mora UCTE). When Mora writes in Spanish, she does not include translations but instead allows readers to discover for themselves how Spanish and English are both essential to the poem's meaning. Her dedication to preserving her culture is one of the many reasons her poetry "is dense with cultural allusion" (Augenbraum 178).

In 1963, at age 21, Mora married William H. Burnside, but they later divorced. In 1984, she married the anthropologist Vernon Lee Scarborough and, for the first time, left behind her desert landscape for the cityscape of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Although Mora was always involved in speaking and writing projects at school, she did not seriously consider writing until she had children. As the children grew up, she began taking notes on possible subjects for writing, but when she first began to write, she says, “Every now and then I wrote a few things, and then they would be rejected, and I would just stop” (Ikas 131). Her first success was in the form of a Hallmark card, but it was not until much later that she began writing seriously. It was partially the influence of her colleague Larry Lane that drew her writing out of the shadows. He convinced her to exchange writing when she was not sharing her work with anyone. His presence in her life was brief—he died a few months later—but important. Once she began writing, Mora became a well-loved name for both children and adults, but the path to publication was especially difficult. Her writing was an “upwelling” of the pleasure she took in language (Torres 259), but publishers often tried to take the multiplicity out of her writing by making it monolingual. Mora’s particular style of writing about marginalized cultures in several genres makes her work accessible to many audiences.

Her first published works were poems, “Disguise” and “Migraine,” which appeared in *Poets and Writers* in 1981. Her first collection of poetry, *Chants*, appeared not long after, in 1985. *Chants* is composed of what Mora calls “desert incantations” between a personified desert and Mora’s own voice (Beaty 764). After *Chants*, Mora published *Borders* (1986), *Communion* (1991), *Agua Santa/Holy Water* (1995), and finally *Aunt Carmen’s Book of Practical Saints* (1997). She has also delved into the realm of nonfiction with *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993) and *House of Houses* (1997). By far, Mora’s most abundant works are children’s literature. She has published more than 30 children’s books, which have won numerous awards, including the National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award (2006), the Golden Kite Award (2005), and the Literary Lights for Children Award (2002).

Mora’s writing often focuses on the literal and figurative borders between the United States and

Mexico, English and Spanish, and different cultures. Charles M. Tatum recognizes Mora’s duality, noting that “Mora traffics between the borderlands as geography and the borderlands as a spiritual site of practical disposition” (Tatum 244). “Gentle Communion,” for example, even crosses the border between life and death when Mamande goes to the speaker, “from the desert” (Mora, *Communion* 2). As Mora states, “The issue is not so much ethnicity or gender. It is about the way we reach a point of communion as human beings sharing this difficult journey called life” (Ikas 127). Throughout her poetry, Mora manages to include her readers, whether they are bilingual or monolingual. She uses Spanish and English, but the poems flow between them successfully, crossing language and cultural borders concurrently. Mora has a great love for the desert and believes that “women like herself who grow up in the desert acquire some of its resilience and strength” (Tatum 184). All through Mora’s writing, she “employs the imagery of land and matrilineal healing” (Tatum 154), drawing from her childhood a knowledge of the power of women from the desert, evident especially in her grandmother. With her Spanish-speaking maternal grandmother in the house, Mora connected to her heritage from early childhood. In her poem “Gentle Communion,” Mora shows how much of an effect her *mamande* had on her life. Alongside the gendered poetry is the element of landscape. The desert, an unyielding and complex environment, is “portrayed as a place that offers solace and inner peace” (Ikas 128).

Although Mora seems to pull her different experiences into a unique and individual culture easily, she “remains acutely aware of her position as a person living between two cultures” (Augenbraum 180). Her poem “Sonrisas” directly addresses the borderlands where Mora feels she resides. As Augenbraum states in *U.S. Latino Literature*, “Mora has achieved that status of an internationally respected poet, yet her work remains both accessible and illuminating to the general reader” (182). In other words, Mora’s universality has not diminished her individualism in writing. Readers feel that Mora’s writing applies

to their personal lives even if they do not share the same background. Liz Gold notices that Mora leaves traces of meanings for those readers who are not bilingual but also gives a special treat to those readers who are (Augenbraum 251).

Mora describes her ideal reader as “the person who really hears what I’m saying, who is so open and attentive that the words have a chance of entering the reader” (Ikas). Reading Mora’s poetry is like standing in the desert’s searing heat and feeling a cool breeze lift your hair. Her sense of flow is flawless; when she transitions from English to Spanish, the reader feels as though she (or he), too, can speak two languages. When Mora wants to distinguish between the two languages, she adds crisp consonants and marked accents. Her relationship with Spanish is very intimate because she was educated mainly in English and considers it her dominant language. Spanish, however, was the only language her maternal grandmother spoke. She realized early on that Spanish did not “belong in school” (Torres 248) and thus Spanish became more of a home language for her. Her parents both spoke English and Spanish interchangeably, but Mora still says, “Family-Spanish doesn’t have to, but can often be a very affectionate language” (Torres 248). Mora is grateful to be bilingual because it “allows [her] to name the world in two different ways and also gives [her] two registers in which to work when writing” (Torres 248). She notes that having more than one language can help people figure out the world around them.

Mora encourages everyone to look for his or her own culture and environment. She says, “There is an incredible wealth that is there for us when we go back and do this sort of excavating work and find out about our own particular family” (Ikas 130). Mora’s own family has been a source of inspiration for her, an inspiration she did not know would be there. Her family was “an incredibly loving household” that provided safety and motivated her to do well in school (Torres 248). Knowing her own background, she wants other children to have the same kind of safety at home. Instead of treating Spanish as a secondary language, she would like students to be able to communicate in both languages. Her main concern is “the perception that the home lan-

guage could be a handicap” (Torres 248). One of her goals in writing is to take away the fear of having several languages accepted at home and school, to allay the anxiety some people have, so “that we could have a multiplicity of languages that are educationally sanctioned” (Torres 248).

Mora feels a kinship with writers who must cross borders of communication. Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, *MARY OLIVER*, and Lucille Clifton are among the authors she cites as her inspiration. She does not claim to share their experiences but instead draws similarities between their situations. For example, she admires Clifton’s courage and tenacity in writing. For Mora, language “nurtures” and “frees” her (Gold 154).

Although she is mainly known for her poetry, Mora has also published several prose works. She sees prose as “being practical . . . a way of reaching an audience that . . . poetry may never reach” (Ikas 132). Each of her works is crafted from her many experiences growing up on the border between Texas and Mexico, but her “identification radiates from her homespace” (Torres 246). She realizes that readers begin with their own backgrounds and biases, but by reading with an open mind, they can gain a deeper understanding of a culture that is both complex and magical.

“Borders” (1986)

At first glance, “Borders” may seem to be about the Mexican/American border, given Mora’s geographical background, but as the poem progresses, it becomes evident that there are many kinds of borders addressed. There are borders between countries and cultures, borders between languages, borders between generations and ages, and borders between genders, and that is where the poem climaxes. Although not all these borders are examined in the poem, Mora certainly describes the many cultural boundaries humans must cross. The speaker of the poem is not able to communicate with her spouse or partner because gender separates them. They may use the same words, but they interpret them differently.

The first section is a border between languages. It deals with a translation, so to speak, from Spanish to English. The point of the first section is to realize that even if one translates from one language to another directly, there is still a difference in meaning. As the poem states, the meaning is “similar but different” (9). Specifically, *luna* is translated as “moon,” but the connotation can be distinct in each language. The speaker “tasted *luna*” (5) with her tongue and felt the long open vowels of *moon* as a melancholy sigh (8). Here the art of communication, talking, is sensory, giving more depth to the words.

As the second section begins, the poem turns toward age distinctions. Children and adults speak on different levels, and with different meanings. The talk of children does not function for adults. Again, speaking is associated with the senses; “the child’s singsong / I want, I want / burned our mouth” is a line rich with physical sensations coinciding with words. Why do the children’s words burn? They burn because the speaker is no longer a child, and it does not matter what the speaker wants anymore, for it is time to move on to adult responsibilities.

The poem progresses and the speaker moves from age differences to gender relations. The final section is about a couple, it seems, who have grown apart over the years. Although they were talking to each other, it is as though they were not getting the translation correct (as in the struggle in the first section of the poem) or not defining things the same way. The speaker in the poem is asking for help figuring out what her partner is saying so they can communicate. There is a difference here between talking and communicating. Here is the final relationship with the senses and words, for words are “[tossed] back and forth . . . / over coffee, over wine / at parties, in bed” (19–23). The speaker and her spouse spoke, but that does not mean they were communicating. *Success* and *happiness* are ambiguous words that have very personal meanings. Perhaps the speaker’s idea of both success and happiness was different from her spouse’s. Even though they have spent time together, varying from a casual cup of coffee to the intimacy of

the bedroom, they have not lost their own translation of words.

The spacing adds a dimension of meaning to the poem, as in the final section the word *understood* is double spaced so the reader understands how the speaker may be yelling it and also disdainfully simplifying her language, making it slower so her husband can understand it. The first two lines of the poem are separate from the rest of the poem, almost a summation of the poem’s plea. They are intelligent, but that does not mean they can overcome the years of gender separation.

Several similar phrases are repeated in the poem. As the poem begins, the speaker realizes the difference between Spanish and English, “similar but different” (9). In the second section, the speaker realizes that adults and children are also using the same words for different things, and that she must adjust as she grows older, for “like became unlike” (12). Later, the speaker realizes that her relationship has been the same way. Her spouse was not speaking the same language, though their words sound the same. Again, their language includes more than just the words. The speaker seems to be asking for someone to “translate us to us” or, in other words, make them understand each other (31). The problem between them now is that they are not together, but two people parallel, who, as two parallel lines, will never meet.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the difference between translating and understanding the connotation of a word? How do the two people in the poem understand the words but not the meaning? Which words in particular do the couple not comprehend?
2. Does the poem suggest that it is even possible for the couple ever to understand each other? Or are their differences too great and their misunderstandings too deep? Explain your answer.

“Sonrisas” (1986)

“Sonrisas” is a poem about two worlds separated by language, attitude, and appearance. The characters

of the poem seem to be in the field of education but are two very different kinds of educators—one, relaxed and welcoming, and the other, tedious and detail-oriented. The speaker is in a position between them, as if in a doorway (1). She does not have to decide between the two worlds; in fact, it seems more that she cannot choose, but is fixed in between, for the speaker states, “I live in a doorway” (1). The speaker cannot pass between them, to enter one of them and occupy it, but is straddling a line between the two. It seems at first that she is trying to make a decision on where she will go, but then the reader realizes that the speaker is always going to be on the border between the worlds, forever bound by both, so she decides to observe how the worlds collide.

The first world is the one of the typical American teachers (or office personnel), with bitter coffee and subdued colors and subdued speech and subdued attitudes. These people are always watching themselves, not letting their emotions show. Their words are crisp and careful like *click*, *tenure*, and *curriculum* (4–5). They seem to indicate that the teachers are not just dignified, but also separated. Each word has a hard consonant sound stopping the flow of the sentence. They do not have a sense of camaraderie but cut off their association with appropriate subjects. Each word is also associated with the mechanics of school, how much money to spend, who will still be working there next year, and what the plan is for the future. They do not stray into comfortable subjects that build friendship.

In the other room, the women seem a swirl of skirts and steam. These women are still careful but seem more worried about disturbing the other room than about hiding who they are. There are camaraderie and friendship, but a “hush hush” attitude about them. This room is relaxed and contented. Even the word sounds suggest the difference. Instead of hard consonants, the words flow together with gentle *s* and *m* sounds. For example, their “laughter whirls with steam” (12–13). Each word in the phrase is able to blend into the next, creating an atmosphere of peacefulness. This room seems to represent the Mexican educators/office personnel, with women who are smiling with their

eyes, laughing, and at ease. They are friends, as is obvious by their dialogue and laughter. Despite the obvious distinction between the two rooms, they are connected. The speaker connects them. She is able to understand both rooms, both mentalities. The speaker does have preference for one room over another. The more friendly and open room with “señoras / in faded dresses” is portrayed in a more positive light. On the one hand, the speaker can hear the American teachers with their “quiet clicks” (3) discussing their careers, but on the other she “peeks” into the room with Mexican teachers (9). Why does she hear one group and see the other? The women are identified by their differences from the norm. In the first room, the speaker notices how distinct the teachers sound. In the second room, the speaker must see them to be able to distinguish who they are because she feels that their language and conversation are a part of who she already is.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is there evidence in the poem—that is, through tone, word choice, or flow—that the speaker prefers the second room? Why would the speaker feel caught between the two rooms? Does the poem suggest that the speaker is frustrated by the separation or that she has accepted it?
2. Who do you think the speaker of the poem is? Although both rooms are full of people involved in education, is the speaker like them or is she in a different situation?
3. Although the tone of this poem is lighter than that of “Borders,” the speaker is still dealing with cultural boundaries. How do cultures create boundaries even without a language barrier (although these people have that as well)? Support your response with examples from both poems.

“Immigrants” (1986)

“Immigrants” uses many different elements of language to show the fear and frustration immigrants must face as they enter their new country, try to fit

in, and, most importantly, make sure their children will be able to fit in. The entire poem is a continuous sentence, listing each fear beginning with the word *immigrants*. There is no other punctuation in the poem than a question mark. These immigrants are afraid and do not know what they need to do to become “American” enough.

The poem begins with a list of stereotypical American actions and items. Rather than encouraging their sons and daughters to remember their heritage, the parents feed them “mashed hot dogs and apple pie” (line 2). Even though their skin may be different from the majority’s, they still buy their children “blonde dolls and blink blue eyes” (3–4), the conventional ideal of fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. Also, the dolls with blond hair are typically the ones that have the most accessories. The media enforce the immigrants’ perception that to be American, their child must not be different. They force their children to learn the culture of their environment so that they will be liked.

As the poem progresses, the parents try to hide their own origins from their child, refusing to speak in their native tongue, and using “thick English” instead (7). Only in the privacy of their beds do the parents allow themselves to voice their fears. Although the reader has the impression that the parents speak their native tongue in that “dark parent bed,” the poem is written only in English. These immigrants are not allowed to speak for themselves. Instead, there is an omniscient third-person narrator who translates all their dialogue into English. This narrator even spells the words they speak differently, including the accent. *Speak* implies not the normal communication parents and children have, but a stilted and forced form of communication; speaking English, however, still seems better to the immigrants than speaking their native language (7). They whisper their native language only when the baby is asleep, as though it is a curse to speak a language other than English.

The sheer number of items in the list overwhelms the reader, just as the responsibility of teaching a child how to be “American” weighs on the immigrants. No capitalization is used unless the speaker is naming something. Interestingly, *America* is

capitalized at the beginning of the poem, but when quoting the immigrants, a lowercase *a* is used (1). This capitalization seems to suggest that despite all their work, the parents still wonder whether their child will ever be a capital-*A* American, or whether their child will remain an immigrant living in the United States.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Several stereotypically “American” items are listed in the poem. Why do you suppose the immigrants force these items on their children? Discuss your answer.
2. The form of the poem is similar to that of an Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet. Why do you think Mora uses this form to describe the situation of the immigrants? How does the use of a formal stanza reinforce their cultural situation?
3. Throughout the poem, a narrator’s voice overshadows the immigrants’ voices. Why do the immigrants not “speak” in the poem? Discuss Mora’s use of the voicelessness of immigrants in the context of current events about immigration policy.

“Gentle Communion” (1991)

In the poem “Gentle Communion,” the speaker seems to be either Mora herself or someone with a background similar to hers. She uses a confessional style of writing here, using her own biography as subject for the poem. “Mamande” is Mora’s maternal grandmother. This grandmother lived with Mora as she grew up and her presence influenced Mora’s life. The poem seems to suggest that Mamande has died, since she “can’t hear” and the speaker will “never know” about her past. The speaker’s grandmother returns to her from the desert, and her memory follows the speaker around, raising questions that cannot be answered.

The title suggests that the poem will have subtleties instead of explicit statements. The communion is a gentle one, and the language matches the mildness of the title. Mamande’s simple actions follow the speaker around. Each action is an act

2. Mora claims that there are always “two languages sort of streaming in and out of my mind” (Torres 248). How can you tell that she is bilingual from her poetry? Where are specific examples of her mastery of both English and Spanish? Can you tell whether she favors English or Spanish as a dominant language?
3. Research confessional poetry. Mora seems to use a confessional style of writing, that is, writing from her personal experiences. Which of her poems seems to demonstrate this best and why? Compare and contrast her work with that of another poet of the confessional school, such as Robert Lowell. Support your response by citing examples from both texts.
4. Although none of Mora’s poetry is overtly political, several of her poems seem to address current political situations. Do you find Mora’s poetry to be critical of current U.S. policies? Why or why not? In what ways? Support your answer, providing specifics on current events.
5. Much of Mora’s poetry deals with different kinds of borders—spiritual, physical, cultural, or geographical. Why do you suppose her poetry centers on this theme? What examples of borders do you find in her poetry? Fully discuss your answer, providing citations from and analyses of several poems.
6. Mora’s poetry is written without major reliance on obvious rhyme or meter. What are some possible reasons she avoids classical rhyme and meter? Are there examples of classical structure in her poetry as well? Support your answer with examples from three of her poems.
7. Compare the work of Pat Mora to that of JULIA ALVAREZ. What impact does the genre have on the subject? Why do you suppose Alvarez chooses prose, while Mora mainly writes poetry?
8. Mora also writes children’s literature. Look at some of these books. In what ways are they like her books for adults? Discuss your response fully.
9. While Mora often uses Spanish in her poetry, she does not provide a translation. Why do you suppose she chooses to omit translation, while authors such as Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* provides a glossary?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia: Conversations with Writers and Artists*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.
- Augenbraum, Harold, and Margarite F. Olmos, eds. *U.S. Latino Literature: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Barrera, Rosalinda B. “Profile: Pat Mora, Fiction/Nonfiction Writer and Poet.” *Language Arts* 75, no. 3 (March 1998): 221–227.
- Christian, B. Marie. *Belief in Dialogue: U.S. Latina Writers Confront Their Religious Heritage*. New York: Other Press, 2005.
- Grider, Sylvia A., and Lou H. Rodenberger, eds. *Texas Women Writers: A Tradition of Their Own*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997.
- Ikas, Karin R. *Chicana Ways*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002, 126–150.
- Leonard, Frances, and Ramona Cearley, eds. *Conversations with Texas Writers*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, 248–257.
- Mora, Pat. *Agua Santa/Holy Water*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- . *Aunt Carmen’s Book of Practical Saints*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.
- . *Communion*. Houston, Tex.: Arte Publico Press, 1991.
- . *House of Houses*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.
- . Keynote Address. UCTE-LA Conference. Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 26 October 2007.
- . *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.
- Official Home Page of Pat Mora. Available online. URL: <http://www.patmora.com>. Accessed June 26, 2009.

Rebolledo, Tey Diana. *The Chronicles of Panchita Villa and Other Guerrilleras: Essays on Chicana/Latina Literature and Criticism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Slovic, Scott, ed. *Getting Over the Color Green: Contemporary Environmental Literature of the Southwest*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001, 221–224.

Tatum, Charles M., ed. "New Chicana/Chicano Writing." *New Chicana/Chicano Writing*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992, 108–109.

Torres, Hector A. *Conversations with Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Writers*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

Amber Bowden



TONI MORRISON (1931–)

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.

(*Nobel Lecture*)

Toni Morrison became a writer in part to counteract what she saw as the erasure of African Americans from “a society seething with [our] presence” (“Unspeakable” 12). Like so many women and minorities, Morrison grew up surrounded by books written by, for, and about white men. Although she loved those stories for what they offered her, she wondered where the stories about everyone else were. When she became an adult, her love of books drove her to become an editor at a major publishing house, where the lack of stories reflecting America’s diverse culture became even clearer. It was an absence so intentional that Morrison examined it in her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” in which she contends that although books specifically about African Americans were virtually nonexistent prior to the 1970s, the presence of African Americans was palpable—invisible, but “not necessarily ‘not-there.’”

Even more alienating than invisibility is the misrepresentation of an entire race by those writers who did include African Americans in their stories. Morrison explains the bias as a cultural inability to see value in the outsider: The African with all his heritage was labeled “savage” and summarily dismissed as incapable of articulate thought. African Americans appeared in stories as caricatures, horribly rendered to have more in common with animals than Americans of European descent.

Morrison contends that critics continue to place an inordinate burden on African-American writers, demanding characters cut from a “politically representative canvas.” As a result, works by black writers are often judged not in terms of aesthetic value, but by their characters’ ability to bear the weight of an entire culture—a judgment inescapably rooted in politics:

If Phillis Wheatley wrote “The sky is blue,” the critical question was what could blue sky mean to a black slave woman? If Jean Toomer wrote “The iron is hot,” the question was how accurately or poorly he expressed the chains of servitude. (*Sula* xi)

While Morrison acknowledges the difficulty faced by writers whose work will automatically be labeled political, she shuns the suggestion that being a black writer is a problem to overcome: “My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racist world” (*Playing 4*). Morrison embraces the role of “black woman writer” and strives to reflect universal truths about being black and being a woman in a country that has historically devalued both. The resulting novels are steeped in the politically charged atmosphere that is home to her characters and yield a richly brewed “black-topic text” that

could not exist apart from the political realities of a historically oppressed people.

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, to George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. Second of four children, Morrison had the benefit of growing up in an integrated northern town while remaining firmly cradled in southern black culture through the songs and folktales of her parents. The stories her parents shared, of hard times and strong families, would later add texture and depth to Morrison's writing.

Ramah Willis Wofford, Morrison's mother, was born in Alabama long before the Civil Rights movement. Ramah's father, John Solomon Willis, was a former slave who owned land until white men used his illiteracy to cheat him out of it. In that era, African Americans had very little protection under the law. Left with no land, he became a sharecropper. While the term technically refers to a system of farming in which one person farms the land of another and shares in the profit, in practice it was a tool of oppression.

As if poverty were not enough, a black man in the South during that time could be attacked, beaten, or lynched and the law ignored it. Children and women were just as likely to be victimized. Willis escaped to Birmingham, where he worked as a musician and waited for his wife to join him. In 1906, Morrison's maternal grandmother gathered her seven children and made the perilous journey north with just \$30 in her pocket. Eventually the family settled in Lorain, Ohio.

It was in Lorain that Morrison's mother met George Wofford, the man who would become Morrison's father. Originally from Georgia, Wofford's family settled in Ohio during the great migration of 1880–1920, when many blacks left southern agricultural regions for the industrial North. Growing up in Georgia, where lynchings were common, had left its mark on Wofford; he remained distrustful of whites all of his life. Morrison describes her father as a dedicated man who took such pride in his work that he once signed his name to a perfect seam he had welded. He often worked two or three jobs to support his family during the Great Depression.

As a child, Morrison was surrounded by story and song. Her mother was a homemaker who played piano accompaniment in movie houses for silent movies and loved to sing. The arrivals of her mother's book club parcels filled Morrison with a sense of security. Morrison's grandfather played violin and told stories about his own childhood, her grandmother kept a dream journal, and even her father found time to thrill the children with ghost stories. Despite the wealth of story that surrounded her, Morrison never thought she would become a writer.

The community of Lorain was integrated, and although she was the only black child in her first-grade class, Morrison contends that she had no experience with prejudice until dating became an issue. In 1949, Morrison graduated with honors from Lorain High School and attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she was called *Toni* after her middle name. Despite Howard's place as a premier black college, African-American writers were not part of the curriculum. Instead Morrison studied the classics and joined the Howard University Players, touring the South to perform for black audiences. Morrison went on to complete a master's degree at Cornell University, with a thesis that examined alienation in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.

Morrison taught at Texas Southern University for two years before returning to Howard University. There she met the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison, whom she married in 1958. After the birth of their first son, Harold Ford Morrison, in 1961, Morrison began to feel lost within her marriage: "It was as though I had nothing left but my imagination. I had no will, no judgment, no perspective, no power, no authority, no self—just this brutal sense of irony, melancholy, and a trembling respect for words" (David 12). An ache for others who shared her passion for literature compelled her to join a writers' group at Howard University. In an effort to produce something for the group, she dashed off a short piece based on a childhood memory of a friend's prayer for blue eyes. Although Morrison realized the story's potential to convey a profound message about the identity formation

of young black children, the story was quickly put aside—sacrificed to the more pressing demands of child rearing and teaching.

In 1964, Morrison became pregnant again and left Howard University to travel Europe with her husband and son. The trip only intensified the couple's marital problems, which Morrison claims stemmed primarily from differing cultural expectations between Jamaicans and Americans: "Women in Jamaica are very subservient in their marriages. They never challenge their husbands. I was a constant nuisance to mine. He didn't need me making judgments about him, which I did" (David 12). After the birth of their second son, Slade Kevin Morrison, the couple divorced. Morrison took her young sons and returned to the safe harbor of her parents' home.

Morrison's independence would not allow her to rest there long. In the fall, she accepted an editorial position at a textbook subsidiary of Random House. To fill quiet evenings after the children were in bed, Morrison began to write, yet she would not let her new pastime interfere with her duties to her children: "What they deserve and need, in-house, is a mother. They do not need and cannot use a writer" (Kubitschek 6). Her devotion to her children produced two highly successful sons, one an architect, the other a sound engineer. Morrison admits that it was hard to be editor, teacher, writer, and single parent, yet she contends that black women have always served as "both safe harbor and ship"—the nurturing home and the financial provider—for their families.

Random House promoted Morrison to senior editor in 1967, and Morrison relocated her family to New York. The 1960s were a time of social and political changes: Martin Luther King, Jr., marshaled blacks to adopt a program of nonviolent civil disobedience, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson worked to build a "Great Society based on liberty for all," and the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which banned segregation and discrimination) was followed by the Voting Rights Act in 1965, ensuring African Americans the right to vote.

Rising out of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements was the Black Arts Movement (also

called the Black Aesthetic Movement), which advocated art reflecting the black experience and promoting racial pride. Morrison worked diligently to guarantee the black writer a place in the publishing industry where someone would "understand what he's trying to do, in his terms, not in somebody else's" (Tally 139). Morrison liked writers who focused on the "information you can find between the lines of history . . . the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names" (Tally 139). Her list included authors such as Muhammad Ali, Andrew Young, Angela Davis, and TONI CADE BAMBARA. Morrison's role at Random House also allowed her to participate in a groundbreaking project to document the lives of people who have been "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Tally 143). One part encyclopedia, two parts scrapbook, the project was eventually published in 1974 as *The Black Book*.

Morrison's tenure at Random House allowed her to make significant contributions to "the shelf" of African-American literature, but she found herself wanting to read books that were still not being written. She says that in this way her own journey into writing sprang from "a very long, sustained reading process—except that I was the one producing the words" (Tally 46). The words at first were based on the story she had written about the girl who prayed for blue eyes. Morrison revised and rewrote until she found herself with a novel called *The Bluest Eye*. Ironically, her position as editor in a major publishing house inhibited her quest for publication. Rather than announce to Random House that she had written a book, Morrison sent the manuscript to Holt.

When *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970, the critic John Leonard lauded it as "prose so precise, so faithful to speech, and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry" (David 15). The public, however, paid the book little attention. They did notice that someone was finally writing about black issues, however, and on that front, Morrison gained a wide audience. The *New York Times* published several articles and book reviews by Morrison while she continued to work at Ran-

dom House, taught writing courses at the State University of New York, and contemplated whether she would write another novel.

The women's liberation movement was at its peak during the early 1970s, with a rallying cry for a universal sisterhood of support. Morrison saw the cause as belonging to middle-class white women; in her experience black women had always supported one another. Considering the differences in the way women related to each other led Morrison to explore the friendship between two black women in her new book *Sula*. Published in 1973, *Sula* gained national exposure when an excerpt appeared in the widely read women's magazine *Redbook*. Critics praised the novel, and in 1975 it was nominated for the National Book Award.

Morrison shifted from the female friendships of *Sula* to the education of the middle-class black man in her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*. Although she felt a strong desire to write a book "informed by the male spirit," the transition was difficult for her. It was the death of her father that helped Morrison break through the gender barrier:

I began to think about the world he lived in through his point of view. . . . My father had that wholeness. He was able to command enormous respect from all sorts of people, though he was quite gentle. . . . And so I got interested in how it might happen that a human being could become complete. (Denard 19)

As illustrated in many of her books, Morrison does not view death as the end of one's presence on earth. As does her character Pilate, Morrison conversed with her deceased father, finding answers and inspiration. She dedicated *Song of Solomon* to him and begins it with the inscription "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names." *Song of Solomon* became a *New York Times* best seller and earned the National Book Critics Circle Award.

After the success of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison authored *Tar Baby* (1981), a novel that utilizes the Tar Baby of African folktales to illustrate the rela-

tionship between power and story, past and present, men and women. The novel was Morrison's most controversial to date, exposing the complexities of relationships within the black community. Despite four months as a *New York Times* best seller, *Tar Baby* met with lukewarm reviews from critics, who remarked on Morrison's "excessive use of dialogue" as "overly didactic" (David 104).

In 1986, Morrison's only play premiered in New York. Morrison had been attempting for two years to write a piece reflective of "a collision of three or four levels of time through the eyes of one person who could come back to life and seek vengeance" (Beaulieu 106). When the New York State Writers Institute commissioned the play, Morrison put her latest novel on hold and turned her full attention to the project. Performed by the Albany Capital Repertory Theatre to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, *Dreaming Emmett* resurrected a young black man named Emmett Till to illustrate "the contradiction of fact" surrounding his 1955 murder. No written record of the play exists.

The novel that Morrison had set aside to write her play was *Beloved*. During her earlier work on *The Black Book*, Morrison had read a newspaper article from the 1850s that told the story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman who escaped with her children and attempted to kill them rather than allow them to be made into slaves and "murdered by piecemeal" (David 112). The depth of despair that would drive a mother to take the lives of her children profoundly impacted Morrison, and, although the novel was difficult to write, she drew strength from the characters within the story and dedicated the novel to the "sixty million and more" African people sacrificed to slavery.

Beloved differed from anything that had been written about slavery before. The novel received critical acclaim, with John Leonard suggesting in the *Nation* that "*Beloved* belongs on the highest shelf of our literature even if half a dozen canonized Wonder Bread Boys have to be elbowed off. . . . Without *Beloved*, our imagination of America had a heart-sized hole in it big enough to die from." For many black writers, Leonard had hit on

the true reason that, despite accolades from reviewers, *Beloved* was overlooked for both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award: *Beloved* did not conform to expectations set by the white authors who preceded it. In January 1988, nearly 50 writers and critics expressed their frustration in the *New York Times Book Review*. The signed tribute accused the selection committees of “oversight and harmful whimsy” (David 24). The Pulitzer Prize committee seemed to agree and selected *Beloved* to receive its award in March of that same year.

Princeton University courted Morrison to join its efforts to build one of the nation’s top programs of African-American studies, appointing her the first black woman to serve as a named chair in an Ivy League college. The position allowed Morrison to pursue her passion for examining the influence of black culture on white writing, and 1992 saw the publication of her theories in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and the introduction for a collection of essays entitled *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, which she edited.

That same year Morrison published *Jazz*, a novel Henry Louis Gates, Jr., described as a redefinition of “the very possibilities of narrative point of view,” which creates “an ensemble of improvised sound out of a composed music,” referring to the way the writing mirrors jazz music and the improvisation of individual players within the overall piece. The “melody” of the story is given to readers on the first page, yet readers find themselves “bumping up against that melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth” (Tally 63). *Jazz* was not Morrison’s first attempt at using the nuances of music within her writing; the 1983 anthology *Confirmation* included Morrison’s only published short story, “Recitatif,” which mimicked sung narrative in form.

In 1993, Morrison traveled to Stockholm to receive the ultimate honor: the Nobel Prize in literature for her “novels characterized by visionary force

and poetic import” and her ability to give “life to an essential aspect of American reality.” Not only did Morrison’s selection represent a personal achievement, it also represented a milestone for women and blacks. Never before had a black American or a black woman of any nationality received the award. Her acceptance speech, based on a story derived from folklore, emphasized the power of language and the responsibility of all to keep language alive and use it for the benefit of everyone.

Morrison’s own writing continued to reflect that belief through her next novels, *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003), which challenged readers to coauthor the text by filtering it through the lens of their own experiences. Morrison believes that the reader “supplies the emotions . . . some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it” (Kubitschek 9). Allowing readers to enter the text gives them power over the story and therefore the interpretation of the story. While many would argue that the author is the determiner of a book’s meaning, Morrison disagrees and allows that readers who agree with her intended meaning may not be “any more right than people who see it another way” (Kubitschek 11).

After her retirement from Princeton in 2006, Morrison set to work on yet another novel, *A Mercy*, published in 2008. Set in the late 1680s, when slavery was relatively new to America, it, like *Beloved*, invokes the powerful themes of motherhood and abandonment.

While Toni Morrison could be described using any number of terms—novelist, professor, Nobel Prize laureate, African American, woman—she is much more than the sum of those parts. No one can describe the importance of her work more eloquently than Morrison herself:

There is no place that you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presence of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and the ones who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or wreath or wall

or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place did not exist (that I know of), the book had to. (Denard 44)

Through her lifetime achievements, Morrison herself has become "the small bench by the road" and she reminds us of the enormity of the job she has accepted for herself when she announces: "Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to reappropriate it" (David 31).

***The Bluest Eye* (1970)**

The idea for *The Bluest Eye* originated from Morrison's memory of a childhood friend who prayed for blue eyes. At first the image of "very blue eyes in a very black skin" repulsed Morrison, but, as an adult, she gradually realized her friend's wish stemmed from the "damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (*Bluest* 210). How could a black child grow up surrounded by white dolls, white movie stars, and white politicians and not learn to associate beauty with the definitive characteristics of whiteness?

The 1960s were a time of great change for African Americans, who, through social campaigns like Black Power and the Civil Rights movement, began to seize for themselves the "liberty and justice for all" guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Regarding the social upheaval around her, Morrison says she felt it "was not about me. . . . Nobody was going to tell me it had been that easy. That all I needed was a slogan: 'Black is Beautiful.' It wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country—it was rough. The psychological tricks you had to play in order to get through—and nobody said how it felt" (David 40). Morrison began to write because of that absence, to put down on paper "how it felt" to be black and female in a country that negated both.

To portray the crippling effects of societal loathing internalized, Morrison invented Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who feels so unloved she wishes for the one thing society has taught her to value: whiteness. In Pecola's community, and in fact American society in general during the early 1900s, whiteness is valued above all else. While the African Americans in her town are "free," they continue to be subjugated by a system of oppression that does not recognize them as worthy of any but the most menial of jobs. That blacks were until the 1960s denied the inalienable rights guaranteed to "all men" by the founders of the country implies that white America viewed blacks not only as inferior, but also as less than people. Black women were doubly excluded, first by their race and then by their gender. (Women had not secured the right to vote until 1920, and though women were guaranteed equal pay under the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the realization of equal pay was still a point of debate in the 2008 presidential campaign.)

But what causes racism to permeate the soul goes beyond issues of rights and pay scales to the standard upheld by mainstream culture. In Pecola's era, America was bombarded with images of idealized whiteness. Morrison illustrates this cultural bias in her work through the movies that shape the self-image of Pecola's mother, the mug of white milk upon which Shirley Temple's blue eyes and white dimpled cheeks are imprinted, and, most dramatically, the dolls mutilated by Claudia, Pecola's friend and the narrator of the story. Claudia destroys the white dolls to "see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability" and later transfers her curiosity to white girls, wondering, "What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwww' but not for me?" (22).

A further example of institutional racism is illustrated through Morrison's use of the Dick and Jane stories. The series, featuring a white middle-class family, was used from the 1930s through the 1970s as a primer to teach children to read. Many scholars have since argued that the stories convey the message that Dick and Jane, with their middle-class yet involved father and their doting stay-at-

home mother, are the ideal family and that many Americans feel “less than” because that standard is not reflected in their own homes. That the standard may not be attainable, or even desirable, does not lessen the psychological impact it has on those who are outside it.

Morrison uses the Dick and Jane story as subtext to illustrate those effects. *The Bluest Eye* begins with a prologue, which introduces readers to a simple Dick and Jane tale in which Mother laughs and Father smiles as Jane searches for someone with whom to play. The tone is light and readers take comfort in knowing that Jane was never really in jeopardy of being rejected; of course, Jane does find a friend. Immediately after the tale’s happy resolution, Morrison repeats the whole story—word for word, but absent any punctuation or capitalization. The effect is a chilling illustration of function without form. To drive home the point further, Morrison again repeats the tale, this time removing even the spaces between words, creating a frenetic jumble that is so completely devoid of the original carefree tone, it takes on a feeling of urgency and foreboding. Readers no longer feel so certain that Jane’s new friendship is not malignant.

Morrison uses the features from Jane’s world to introduce readers to the stark contrast of Pecola’s: Jane’s house is green and white and “very pretty,” while Pecola lives in an abandoned storefront that “foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy” (33). Jane’s mother is always present, happy and interacting with her children; Pecola’s mother must work 12 to 16 hours a day as a housekeeper in a white home, and, when she is home, her interaction with the children is based on correction, which creates in her son “a loud desire to run away” and in Pecola a “fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Pecola’s father cannot hold down a job and beats his wife when he drinks, which is often. In effect, he is the antithesis of Jane’s responsible, smiling father. In Pecola’s world, she cannot even find friendship in the cat, which is used by a “light skinned” boy as a weapon to alienate her further.

Although *The Bluest Eye* is primarily about Pecola, she is not strong enough to tell her own story, so the novel unfolds through the insight of an omniscient narrator and the commentary of Claudia MacTeer, Pecola’s best friend. Claudia begins the story by drawing in readers with the confidential tone contained in the words “Quiet as it’s kept” and telling us right away the “what” of the story is Pecola’s impregnation with her father’s baby and the baby’s subsequent death. But Claudia also informs us that there is more to the story—the “why” of it all, a topic she dismisses as “difficult to handle,” and the “how” of it all, in which we “must take refuge.” And more importantly, Claudia alludes to her own culpability in Pecola’s fate:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. . . . Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. (205)

The idea that racism is not limited to whites alone is common in Morrison’s work. Most of the damage inflicted upon Pecola is from the black community, who see her as personification of all the negative characteristics associated with blackness. Pauline, Pecola’s mother, internalizes the racist ideals of popular movies and begins to hate herself for failing to measure up to the standards they espouse. When Pauline sees the features she abhors in herself mirrored in newborn Pecola, she distances herself from the child, teaching Pecola to call her Mrs. Breedlove and not Mother. A further abandonment occurs when Pecola vomits on a rug belonging to the white family for whom Pauline works. Pauline lashes out at Pecola and rushes to comfort the white child.

Pecola’s father, Cholly (a derivative of *Charles*), is even more instrumental in Pecola’s ultimate

breakdown. Abandoned on a trash heap by his mother, Cholly is raised until age 13 by his great-aunt. When she dies, Cholly seeks solace in the arms of Darlene, but the couple are interrupted by two white hunters, who fix their flashlights on Cholly and tell him to “get on wid it.” Though their ridicule renders Cholly impotent, he pretends to have sex with the girl while the hunters watch. Cholly’s impotence is more than sexual—he wants to strike out at the hunters, but to do so would probably result in his death, so he transfers the rage and hostility he feels to the only other person available, Darlene.

Cholly runs away in search of the father he never knew, only to be “rejected for a crap game” (160). With nothing to lose, Cholly realizes he is truly free, untethered by the commitments of friends and family, until he meets Pauline and marries her. The marriage, with its “sheer weight of sameness,” dulls Cholly to despair. When their marriage produces children, Cholly, who had never had a real family, feels no connection to them. While his background cannot excuse Cholly’s abuse of his wife and eventual rape of his daughter, it does explain his inability to perform the role of husband and father, and how through his warped view of the world, he may think that his rape of Pecola stems from love.

Critics have often reflected on Morrison’s ability to use the techniques of narrative to infuse a subtle layering into her novels. Morrison herself comments on the purposefulness of that layering in her collection of essays *Playing in the Dark*, in which she asserts that language has always been used to “powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people” (Tally 153). Morrison turns the power of language to her own use when she pulls readers into her stories, making them accountable for their hidden biases. *The Bluest Eye* opens with one such device—the phrase “Quiet as it’s kept” is meant to imply illicit gossip, the type of “back fence” speech women would use with close neighbors. Morrison hoped the use of the phrase would produce “sudden familiarity” so that readers would not have the chance to build a wall between themselves and what follows—the “terrible story

about things one would rather not know anything about” (*Bluest* 212).

Morrison’s opening is also indicative of her commitment to write a truly African-American story, one that possesses an “aural quality . . . like spoken words instead of written words” (David 32). She carries that technique throughout *The Bluest Eye*, writing many phrases as the speakers would have actually voiced them. Yet Morrison’s attempts to capture the sounds and cadence of black language differs significantly from those of the early American writers whom she has criticized. Morrison writes from the sacred place of insider, able to convey the reason and meaning behind inflection and tone, whereas writers who endeavor to portray dialects that are foreign to them always taint the language with the static of their foreignness.

Still, the process does not come easily to Morrison, who claims some works stretch her attempts to “work credibly and, perhaps, elegantly with a discredited vocabulary” (*Sula* xiv). Even within her work, Morrison allows her characters to luxuriate in language, as when Claudia reflects on the talk of the adult women:

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throb of a heart made of jelly. . . . We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words . . . so we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre. (15)

Morrison’s readers, however, can know the “meanings of all their words” because Morrison so clearly depicts the faces, hands, feet, and timbre of the speakers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the difference between institutional racism and individualized prejudice? Outline

examples of institutional racism in *The Bluest Eye* and trace their effects on Claudia, Pecola, and Frieda. How does institutionalized racism manifest itself today? What effects does it continue to have on minority cultures and the dominant culture?

2. Look at sample pages from Dick and Jane (at the time of this writing, accessible via the Valparaiso University Web site at <http://faculty.valpo.edu/bflak/dickjane/index.html>). How do they portray the “typical” American family? Examine current children’s literature for examples that refute that stereotype. Is there such a thing as a typical American family? Should children’s literature reflect reality or uphold societal values? And who is to determine those values?
3. What purpose is served by the character of Soaphead Church? How does the “gift” he gives Pecola affect her?
4. Morrison contends in her 1993 afterword to the novel that the story fails to “handle effectively the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing’” (215). In view of Morrison’s later novels, how might she reshape that void into the “emptiness left by a boom or a cry”? Try rewriting the last section of *The Bluest Eye* to clarify Pecola’s psychosis through her invention of an imaginary friend.
5. *The Bluest Eye* has often been compared to the film *Imitation of Life* for its portrayal of the pressure on blacks to be part of white society. View the movie and compare and contrast the characters of Pauline and Annie in terms of roles, self-identity, societal place, and family dynamics.

***Sula* (1973)**

Morrison began writing *Sula* during the early 1970s, when members of the women’s liberation movement rallied behind a sisterhood in which women supported one another. She was surprised to learn that for “a large part of the female population a woman friend was considered a secondary relationship” (Denard 79). Such a revelation

piqued Morrison’s curiosity about related matters, such as the choices “available to black women outside their own society’s approval” and the shape of the “friendship between women when unmediated by men” (*Sula* xiii), questions she chose to explore in her 1973 novel *Sula*.

Writing *Sula* presented a major problem for Morrison. While she was committed to portraying the black community from an insider’s viewpoint, as did many black writers of the time she felt the “white gaze” of mainstream readers. Her original draft began with Shadrack in the midst of his life with the sentence “Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day.” But Morrison questioned the ability of white readers to enter the black-topic text without their own “emotional luggage.” To cushion the entrance she created a new beginning as preface to Shadrack: The reader is taken by the hand and gently led toward the black community by the ‘valley man.’ Morrison assumed that white readers would resist being plopped down abruptly in the black community, but that they might allow themselves to be guided in by another outsider, this valley man. While the choice made sense in 1973—no other writer had yet to write directly to a black market—Morrison later called this technique an embarrassing compromise to reconcile “the mere fact of writing about, for, and out of a black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream ‘white’ culture” (“Unspeakable” 26).

Despite her compromise, Morrison does realize her goal of expressing the truth of her story. Even in the “safe, welcoming lobby” where Morrison defers to “the line of demarcation between the sacred and the obscene, public and private, them and us,” she describes the black community of the Bottom with an image of white violence against blackness: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood.” Morrison painstakingly chose the types of plants to be symbolic of her double protagonists: Nel—the blackberry patch—“reliably sweet, but thorn-bound,” and Sula—the nightshade—

“dangerously female . . . uncontained and uncontrollable” (“Unspeaking” 25).

The novel explores the relationship between Nel and Sula and the forces that act upon their friendship. Morrison uses the symbol of a cross to explain the book's structure, describing Hannah, Nel, Eva, and Sula as the “points of a cross—each one a choice for characters bound by gender and race” and the main conflict as occurring on the “nexus of that cross” through a “merging of responsibility and liberty difficult to reach, a battle among women who are understood to be least able to win it” (*Sula* xiv). Sula is raised by Hannah, whose promiscuity is considered nonthreatening and almost complimentary by the women of the Bottom, and Eva, who is reported to have sacrificed her leg in return for money to support her children yet cannot provide the emotional nurturing they truly need. Their influence creates in Sula a woman capable of “extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things” (“Unspeaking” 25). While Hannah and Eva's nonconventional rearing liberates Sula from “lifelong dependency on others,” it also renders her incapable of forming any emotional attachment (Beaulieu 46).

Nel's friendship with Sula is based on her need to escape the rigid confines of her own mother, Helene. Helene would like others to view her as the perfect example of a middle-class housewife. Her fear that the facade may slip creates a need to control every facet of both her life and her daughter's. Helene's definition of “perfect” has been shaped by pressure to be less black, which she confers upon Nel—for instance, forcing her to wear a clothespin on her nose to make it less broad. Through her friendship with Sula, Nel finds the freedom to be herself.

Yet the same uncontainability that initially attracts Nel to Sula allows Sula to live so completely outside the norms of society that the people of the Bottom turn away from her. That Sula has a birthmark over her eye (which is variously interpreted by the community as a rose, a serpent, or the ashes of Sula's dead mother) and that her return to the Bottom is marked by a plague of robins give the community all of the evidence it needs to make

Sula a scapegoat for their ills. The ability to label one person as evil has a cleansing effect on everyone else, who band together against her.

Nel is the one person who tries to stay faithful to Sula. She welcomes Sula into her home and counsels her in how to care for the aging Eva. Eventually, however, Sula's nonconformity leads her into conflict with Nel over their disparate definitions of womanhood. Nel, who sees her role as woman defined by her position of wife and mother, cannot forgive Sula for sleeping with Jude, Nel's husband. When Sula takes ill, Nel confronts her about the betrayal, asking, “What did you take him for if you didn't love him and why didn't you think about me?” Sula's response—that she did not take Jude, just had sex with him—infuriates Nel, who cannot accept Sula's claim that a good friend would “get over it.”

Morrison as narrator refuses to take sides. She stated in an interview that “one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good—you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to. Evil is as useful as good is” (David 64). By presenting both sides of a moral dilemma, Morrison forces readers to examine their own values in the context of the greater community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of Shadrack's World War I experience? How does his involvement in the story shape Sula's?
2. On her deathbed, Sula asks Nel, “How you know . . . about who was good?”—suggesting that perhaps Nel was not the righteous one she believed herself to be (146). Examine the lives of Nel and Sula, making a list of virtues and faults. Whom do you believe to be “good” and on what factors do you base that conclusion?
3. Consider Morrison's statement that “evil is as useful as good is” (David 64). Do you agree or disagree? How does Morrison use evil as a conduit to good in *Sula*?
4. Critics have suggested that *Sula* is a lesbian novel, despite Morrison's insistence to the contrary (Tally 22). Debate the validity of each view, using examples from the novel for support.

Song of Solomon (1977)

Toni Morrison's third novel makes a significant shift in perspective. While *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* focus primarily on female characters—viewing men only in terms of their roles in the lives of women—in *Song of Solomon* the roles have reversed. The story centers around the protagonist Macon Dead III, the first black child to be born in No Mercy Hospital. As a child, Macon is known as Milkman by everyone but his parents, a nickname that disgusts his father because he believes it to be rooted in “some filthy connection” to Milkman's mother. Milkman does not know the origin of his nickname, although it hardly bothers him until a confrontation with his father reveals the reason for his father's suspicions. The disclosure spurs in Milkman a need to uncover the basis for his nickname, but his best friend, Guitar, tells him, “Niggers get their names the way they get everything else—the best way they can” (88). Milkman is not satisfied with that answer and begins a quest for truth.

Song of Solomon is in many ways a traditional bildungsroman (the story of a young person's maturation): Milkman is content to live his life passively, benefiting from his father's money and social status and the easy attentions of women, until he realizes he does not even know the meaning of his own nickname. Milkman's search for that meaning becomes a quest for identity attainable only through an understanding of his family's history and the ultimate acceptance of his adult role within a community.

Milkman's quest allows Morrison to explore the importance of naming to a culture that has been stripped of its identity. Ron David addresses slavery as theft of identity:

Every black American whose ancestors were taken from Africa by force has been robbed of his family name. That was no accident; you enslave a person's spirit by wiping out her identity; your name—and your family name—are badges of your identity . . . so an African American, free at last, is a person in search of his name. (35)

Slaves were property, devoid of any identity separate from their owner. As a result, many slaves—if they had a surname at all—were called after their owner. First names were given out of convenience, as is later evidenced in Morrison's novel *Beloved*, where the slaves at Sweet Home are all named Paul. By the time slavery was abolished in 1865, most blacks had been sold away from their families, and many had no way of knowing their rightful names. Milkman is named after his father and his father's father, yet the name they share—Macon Dead—results from an error on his grandfather's papers and “shows a mistake . . . the carelessness of white people . . . and the indifference when . . . they don't pay much attention to what the records are” (Denard 113).

It is interesting to note that Morrison herself experienced an inadvertent name change. Her first book was published under the name *Toni Morrison* because the editor knew her by her nickname, *Toni*. While the mistake was understandable and certainly not malicious, Morrison still felt upset: “My name is Chloe Wofford. Toni's a nickname. I write all the time about being misnamed. How you got your name is very special” (Denard 101).

Unlike the names given them by white slaveholders, nicknames are conferred by a person's own family or community and in some ways take on even greater meaning. Many of Morrison's characters have nicknames born of legends, a fact she discussed in a 1995 interview: “[Black people] don't just hand [nicknames] to you, they wait until you do something that they think represents something” (Denard 113). Macon is christened “Milkman” by the town gossip, Freddy, who happens to catch him still being breastfed at the age of four and cries, “A milkman. That's what you got here, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if ever I seen one. Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh!” (14). Freddy's statement acts as part prophecy: As Milkman grows older “the women did everything for him,” allowing him to remain in perpetual infancy “until he finally grew up” (Denard 113). Milkman's emotional maturation occurs once he understands the history behind his identity and accepts its importance: “When you know your name, you

should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (333).

That Milkman's given name is *Macon Dead III* has as much significance to the story as his nickname. The name becomes a joke between Milkman and Guitar when Hagar (Milkman's cousin with whom he breaks off a long-term affair) begins her attempts to kill him: "She can't kill me, I'm already Dead." Later in the story, the laughter behind the joke is lost. Guitar has joined a secret group, known to members as "the Seven Days," the purpose of which is to avenge the death of murdered blacks by killing a random white in the same manner and on the same day of the week as the murder. Eventually Guitar believes that Milkman has betrayed him and goes after Milkman. While Milkman had waited passively for Hagar's attempts on his life, dismissing her worth and the worth of his own life, by novel's end, Milkman turns to meet his death. Karen Waldron asserts that for Milkman, "facing death consciously becomes a means of flying, of outlasting pain and turning it to love, knowledge, and *responsible* freedom" (Beaulieu 97).

As Waldron suggests, flight is pivotal in the plot of *Song of Solomon*. The story opens with a dramatic suicidal leap by an insurance salesman (who later turns out to have been a member of the Seven Days) from the roof of No Mercy Hospital. That Morrison produces the entire scene without once referring to the man's leap as his death is no accident. Even when the firemen arrive, they are too late, for "Mr. Smith had seen the rose petals, heard the music, and leaped on into the air" (9). This leap is mirrored at the end of the book, when Milkman, having completed his quest for identity, "without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees," leaps from the cliff above Ryna's Gulch (341). Again the leap is not to certain death, but only to the question of it, as now Milkman knows "what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (341).

Although critics have identified the flight in *Song of Solomon*, and specifically Mr. Smith's leap at the beginning, with the legend of Icarus, Morrison contends that it is based on the African flying myth. Morrison has admitted that she does employ

Western mythology in her novels but usually does so to signal that characters are out of their element, that "they are pulling from another place that's not going to feed them" (Denard 113). Morrison goes on to insist that flying in this novel is not about "some Western form of escape" but "the whole business of how to handle one's self in a more dangerous element called air, learning how to trust, to risk . . . to be able to surrender one's self to the air, to surrender and control, both of those things" an act that requires the ability to "give up all of the weights, all of the vanities, all of the ignorances" (Denard 115–121). Indeed, Milkman's newfound understanding—that surrendering power is the first step toward achieving it—implies that he has cultivated those abilities.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics have described Morrison as being "on the one hand, a basher of many myths of Western culture, on the other, a new mythmaker who creates meaning out of connections to the past and to spiritual love," while allowing that "Morrison has created novels that transform and embody two warring literary selves" (McKay and Earle 14). Explore the references within *Song of Solomon* to the myths of Western, African, and Indian cultures. How does Morrison interpret these stories in the context of the African-American experience?
2. Discuss the role of Pilate as ancestor. How does she function as transmitter of both male and female knowledge to the next generation? What effect does the progressive distancing of women from male knowledge (indicated through Reba and Hagar) have in *Song of Solomon*? What does this loss imply for an American culture that is increasingly composed of single-parent homes?
3. Debate the form and function of the Seven Days from the perspectives of Guitar and Milkman. What effect does the secret organization have on each and on the greater society?
4. Morrison is skilled at the use of magical realism within her novels. *Magical realism* refers to the treatment of fantastical occurrences with as much credence as fact. Explore *Song of Solomon*

and *Beloved* in terms of magical realism's ability to "remember, express, and account for those experiences which Western notions of history, reality, and truth have failed to address" (Beaulieu 198).

5. Examine the characters of Milkman, his father, and Guitar in the context of Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil*. Which characters reflect Stepto's "articulate survivor"? His "articulate kinsmen"? Is one role better than another? Must black women conform to the same choices?

***Tar Baby* (1981)**

Morrison opens *Tar Baby* with an epigraph from the Bible: "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you." The verse, from First Corinthians, gains significance when readers are reminded that *Chloe* is Morrison's given name, therefore, "the house of Chloe" refers to Morrison's own community—black women. In this context, the epigraph serves as warning to the reader that Morrison is about to address the discord between blacks and whites (Kubitschek 100).

Never one to back away from controversy, Morrison follows through on her promise, addressing the rift between black American and white American on multiple fronts. Although Morrison could write an essay outlining her points in academic form, she chooses again to utilize allegory as a nonthreatening approach to her readers. The title is from the African folktale of Br'er Rabbit, in which the fox tries to trick Br'er Rabbit with a doll coated in tar. Yet throughout history, the tale of Br'er Rabbit has been appropriated to express the moral of the storyteller. Morrison is able to make her point regardless of which variation of the story readers have heard. In fact, the differences in the two tales are part of that point:

This masked and unmasked; enchanted and disenchanting; wounded and wounding world is played out on and by the varieties of interpreta-

tion . . . the Tar Baby myth has been . . . subjected to. Winging one's way through the vise and expulsion of history becomes possible in creative encounters with that history. Nothing, in those encounters, is safe, or should be. Safety is the foetus of power as well as protection from it, as the uses to which masks and myths are put in Afro-American culture reminds us. ("Unspeakable" 31)

Morrison wants readers to see the Tar Baby tale as about "not masks as covering what is to be hidden, but how the masks come to life, take life over, exercise the tensions between itself and what it covers" ("Unspeakable" 30). Morrison further explains that the masks worn by each character in her novel have been carefully constructed by the characters themselves and have come to life to determine and limit the choices available to those characters.

A surface reading may seem to expose direct connections between the roles in the Tar Baby tale and the characters Morrison has created. Son runs "lickety-split" like Br'er Rabbit and refers to Jadine as a "tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap" (220). Yet Trudier Harris cautions against making a strictly literal comparison of the novel to the folktale: "It becomes increasingly less clear in Morrison's work whose territory is being invaded, who is the tar baby, who is trapped, who needs rescue from whom, and whether or not he (or she) effects an escape" (McKay 144). In fact, some critics have suggested that the tar baby in Morrison's novel is not a specific character at all, but the act of "oversimplifying oneself or others for a false dream of safety" (Kubitschek 112) or even the text itself (McKay 153).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Valerian calls his son a "cultural orphan." What does the term imply? Who else in *Tar Baby* might be classified as a cultural orphan? What is the implication for society?
2. How has the Tar Baby tale been incorporated into the folklore of different cultures? Read several versions of the Tar Baby story and discuss the cultural and political implications of each.

- Morrison's *Tar Baby* has often been compared to the Tar Baby stories of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus and to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Create a chart in which you analyze the major characters in Morrison's tale and their likeness to characters from the other texts.

“Recitatif”(1983)

Morrison's only published short story appeared in the 1983 anthology *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, edited by AMIRI BARAKA (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) and Amina Baraka. Morrison describes “Recitatif” as an “experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial” (*Playing xi*).

The story begins on the day that Twyla is taken to St. Bonaventure, known as St. Bonny's, a home for “state kids,” most of whom have “beautiful dead parents in the sky.” Twyla is sent to room with Roberta, another new arrival, and the two soon learn that despite their racial differences, they have one important fact in common: The mothers of the girls are still alive—Twyla's mother, who leaves her alone to go out dancing, and Roberta's mother, who is ill. Twyla and Roberta's friendship is born of necessity; no one, not “even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians,” will play with them.

The friendship does not come easily. At first Twyla does not want to room with Roberta because of the racial differences between them. It seems that between her bouts of dancing, Twyla's mother tells her “something important . . . they never washed their hair and they smelled funny.” The “they” to whom her mother referred is “a whole other race” from Twyla's, but which race that is is left unspoken. Morrison explains that the words *black* and *white* were purposefully not applied to her main characters, stating that such words often act as “metaphorical shortcuts” that “provoke predictable responses” (*Playing x*; Denard 75).

Morrison's purposeful use of language causes readers to become aware of how “the process of

understanding depends on one's own prejudices, cultural memories, and expectations” (Tally 103). Readers must enter the text as active participants, and, in essence, the prejudices of those readers become another character in the story. Abena Busia describes the typical reader's back-and-forth assignments of race to the characters and maintains that his or her tendency to spend so much effort scouring for racial clues underscores Morrison's point regarding the overreliance of readers (and writers) on those clues (Tally 104).

For Discussion or Writing

- Examine “Recitatif” closely for character description. What does Morrison tell readers about the characters? What is not said, but rather learned through the characters' interactions and behaviors? What is left to the reader?
- What purpose does the character of Maggie serve? How is she central to the conflict between Twyla and Roberta, and how does each girl identify with her?
- Discuss the effects of gentrification on individuals, families, and the community. Are there areas in your community that have been affected by gentrification? Choose an area in your city and debate whether it should be subjected to renewal. Be sure to research and represent the views of all stakeholders.

Beloved (1987)

Beloved was born from Morrison's desire to understand the forces behind the true story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed her child rather than allow her to be returned to slavery. Morrison says to explore the effects of slavery on the enslaved, we must “get rid of these words like ‘the slave woman’ and ‘the slave child,’ and talk about people with names, like you and like me, who were there” (Denard 105–106). In this way, *Beloved* follows in the footsteps of other neoslave narratives in their attempts to overcome the misrepresentation of blacks in American history books and early

fiction. While the initial slave narratives sought to illustrate the evils of slavery, the time of their writing required the authors to balance on the edge of a very thin political line, between desire to encourage abolitionists and fear of alienating their readers. Neoslave narratives are concerned with an authentic representation of slavery and culture from the black perspective and do not worry about appeasing white audiences.

As Claudia warned readers in *The Bluest Eye*, sometimes the why of a story is “difficult to handle,” and we “must take refuge” in the how. It is that “how” that Morrison explores in *Beloved*. How does one woman kill the very thing she loves? How can she ever justify that choice? How can she ever be forgiven? The answers are found only when readers understand the true nature of slavery as a theft of the self and a chaining of the soul, the effects of which do not disintegrate when the bonds are lifted. To illustrate this, Morrison begins her novel in 1873, years after Sethe’s escape from slavery and the murder of her daughter. The reader enters the book the same way Paul D enters 124 Bluestone Road, considering the house itself and its rage: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom.”

One of Toni Morrison’s greatest attributes is the manner in which she unfolds a story. We may believe life is lived in linear fashion—first we are born, then we experience x , which affects us, produces y and resolves through a confrontation with z , then we die—but the truth is that as we live our present lives, we are constantly bombarded by our thoughts, memories, and sometimes (as in the case of *Beloved*) confrontations with the past. These breaks in linear motion impact the choices we make and shape who we become. Morrison is able to capture that flux and channel it into the framework of the novel. Ron David likened Morrison’s approach to the music of Charles Mingus, which “straddled history” by incorporating aspects from jazz’s past and future, without regard to the present (37). Walter Clemons, writing for *Newsweek*, described Morrison’s technique as “the splintered, piecemeal revelation of the past . . . that isn’t storytelling but the intricate exploration of trauma” (David 124).

In *Beloved*, even the trauma is layered. The 1856 newspaper article that served as inspiration for *Beloved* recounts the Reverend P. S. Bassett’s visit to Margaret Garner. Even in the midst of legal slavery, Rev. P. S. Bassett reflects, “Oh how terrible is irresponsible power, when exercised over intelligent beings!” Bassett goes on to contemplate such “fruits” in light of the fact that “we are frequently told that Kentucky slavery is very innocent” (Plasa 41). Bassett’s comments reflect the difficulty in placing blame for the death of Garner’s child. Does it lie with Garner herself, or with a society that has condoned a systematic destruction of humanity? Morrison furthers that debate by delving into the events that could have led up to Garner’s actions through the character of Sethe Suggs and the singularly horrific condition that was the life of a black woman during slavery.

A slave woman represented “property that reproduced itself without cost” (228). Barbara Omolade describes in her essay “Hearts of Darkness” the slave woman as a “fractured commodity”:

Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family. . . . Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment—the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market. (Plasa 124–125)

Not only did the slave woman belong to the slaveholder, but so did her unborn child. This use of slaves as brood mares is emphasized several times throughout *Beloved*: with Ella, who was kept locked in a house by a father and son and who “delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet’” (258); with Sethe’s African mother, who discarded every child and “without names, she threw them” (62),

except the one conceived by her own choice with a black man; and with Sethe, whose milk is stolen by the schoolteacher's nephews and on whose back a chokecherry tree is carved with a whip, while the men protected the unborn slave in her belly by forcing her to lie in a pit, a type of "grave for the living" (Plasa 125). Even Denver, born into freedom, understands the black woman's place in the slave system: "Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them" (209).

This forced reproduction had severe consequences for slave women. Many died in childbirth or as a result of giving birth so frequently. Others learned to protect themselves emotionally and "loved small" (162) by closing off a section of themselves, rejecting the label of *mother* as having anything to do with what they had suffered. Those women, as do Ella and Sethe's mother, often refused to nurse the newborn children, unconcerned with whether they lived or died.

Sethe turns from either definition of motherhood. She believes instead that motherhood is the part of herself that "exceeds the bounds of slavery" (Plasa 125). Such feelings were dangerous for slaves, whose families could be torn apart, raped, killed, or sold, all on the whim of a white man. Maternal instincts often worked to the advantage of the slaveholder, a type of guarantee that the woman would not run away and abandon her children. Sethe's attachment to her children was fostered at Sweet Home, which seemed the least hateful type of slavery until Mr. Garner died. Then the schoolteacher and his nephews took over the farm, intent on proving to all that "definitions belonged to the definer—not the defined" (190) and that nothing—not a slave's self or her children—is beyond the entitlement of white ownership.

Once free of Sweet Home, Sethe is overcome with love for her children:

I was big . . . and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could

get in between. I was *that* wide. Look like I loved em more after I got there. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. (162)

Sethe survives flight from Sweet Home through her determination to get her milk to her baby. Once there, she defines herself solely in terms of her children, who she feels are "all the parts of herself that [are] precious and fine and beautiful" (163). When the schoolteacher arrives to take them back to Sweet Home, Sethe loves them so much that she wants to put them "where no one could hurt them" (163). It is her consuming love for her children that causes Sethe to try to kill them rather than see them live to be slaves. It is Beloved, the two-year-old child who is "crawling already," who dies and for whom Sethe wants to atone.

Much debate has focused on the elusive character of Beloved: Who—or, more accurately, what—is she? Denver believes at once that Beloved is her lost sister returned. Her joy at finally having a sister temporarily prevents her from accepting that Beloved is not the benevolent presence she seems. Although it takes Sethe longer, she, too, has to accept that Beloved "came right on back, like a good girl, like a daughter" (203). Even Paul D senses in Beloved a supernatural power that drives him from Sethe's bed and then her home.

Deborah Horvitz endorses this spectral image of Beloved in "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*," in which she claims that the character of Beloved is not only the "ghost child who comes back to life" but also an "inter-generational, inter-continental, female" (Plasa 59) who represents Sethe's own African mother. Through her interactions with Beloved, Sethe remembers her mother's death and her own feelings of abandonment.

Pamela Barnett describes the novel as "haunted by rape," elevating the ghostly child to a "succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure . . .

[that] . . . drains Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality” (Plasa 74). Barnett cites Morrison’s depictions of and allusions to rape as explanations for Sethe’s murder of Beloved: “Sethe kills her child so that no white man will ever ‘dirty’ her, so that no young man with ‘mossy teeth’ will ever hold the child down and suck her breasts” (Plasa 73). Further, Barnett points out that rape is the trauma that most deeply marks the men of *Beloved*: Witnessing rape causes Halle to suffer a mental breakdown, Paul D to lock away his heart, and Stamp Paid to turn from his wife.

Elizabeth House takes an opposing view, arguing in “Toni Morrison’s Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved” that Beloved is not supernatural but “a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery” (Plasa 67). House suggests that Beloved’s stream-of-conscious thoughts in part 2 be read as poetry. Such an analysis supports House’s contention that, as is implied by the book’s biblical epigraph (“I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved” Romans 9:25), Beloved is not Beloved. In this interpretation, Beloved’s story is not about her own physical death, but rather her capture by slave hunters and her experiences during the middle passage. Beloved’s supernatural references to “men without skin” and the “little hill of dead people . . . [that] fall into the sea which is the color of bread” (211) allude to white slave traders who push the Africans who have died on the ship into the ocean. Beloved is a witness as her own mother commits suicide by leaping into the sea with the corpses, rather than remain captive on the ship. Her feelings of abandonment create in her a ravenous hunger and propel her on an endless quest for her mother’s smile. When she awakens to see Sethe smiling down at her, Beloved believes in Sethe as her mother. The character of Stamp Paid, a black man who helps fugitive slaves reach freedom through the Underground Railroad, seems consistent with House’s interpretation of Beloved as corporal. He tells Paul D about “a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman . . . since she was a pup” and suggests that Beloved could be that girl (235).

Beloved herself supports Stamp Paid’s theory when she tells Sethe that there was a man “without skin . . . in the house I was in. He hurt me” (215).

Morrison suggests that both views of Beloved may be correct, claiming that what is known as “superstition and magic” to Western readers is just “another way of knowing things” for the African-American culture. She laments that much of that culture has been lost as mainstream America marginalizes and discredits any way of thinking that is not Eurocentric. Morrison strives to recognize and reflect the cultural knowledge of her characters in her writing through attempts to “blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other” (Plasa 57). In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison describes the character of Beloved as the embodiment of that blending:

She is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from a true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience, which blends beautifully in her questions and answers, her preoccupations, with the desires of Denver and Sethe. So when they say “What was it like over there?” they may mean—they do mean—“What was it like being dead?” She tells them what it was like being where she was on that ship as a child. Both things are possible, and there’s evidence in the text so that both things could be approached, because the language of both experiences—death and the Middle Passage—is the same. (Plasa 32–33)

Whether readers accept Beloved as ghost reincarnate, escaped slave, or both, what they can all agree on is the effect of Beloved’s presence on Sethe.

Sethe neither apologizes for nor explains Beloved’s murder until Beloved appears to her as

flesh and blood. Then Sethe vows to tend to her and make her understand the reasons for her death. But “Beloved wasn’t interested” in forgiving Sethe and, as does Barnett’s succubus, begins to drain the life from Sethe through constant demands for attention and her never-ending need. Only through the help of the community and the acceptance that she is her own “best thing” is Sethe able to survive the weight of her guilt.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of the name *Garner* for the owners of Sweet Home? What were Mr. Garner’s motives for calling his slaves “men”? Did that make him better or worse than other slaveholders?
2. Compare Paul D to the character Albert in ALICE WALKER’s novel *The Color Purple*. How do both of these men benefit from the women they love? What do they offer in return? What do they sacrifice?
3. Read historical accounts of slavery and the Underground Railroad in high school history texts or popular encyclopedias. How do such accounts fail to represent the truth of American history accurately? In what other ways is the teaching of American history to students lacking?
4. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate asks, “What difference do it make if the thing you scared of is real or not?” (41). Cite evidence from the text in support of two different theories of Beloved’s existence: Beloved as Sethe’s murdered daughter reincarnate or House’s escaped slave girl. How does either interpretation change the meaning of the story? Is Pilate correct in her assertion that the reality of a thing does not matter?
5. Compare the use of dialect in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Gold-Bug” and Morrison’s *Beloved*. How does the way in which a writer portrays language impact the reader’s opinion of the characters?
6. Explore the allusions to hunger and thirst in *Beloved*. How does Morrison’s employment of physical need represent the emotional needs of her characters?

Jazz (1992)

As did *Beloved*, *Jazz* germinated from Morrison’s experience working on *The Black Book*. As she poured through artifacts looking for the truth of black America, Morrison discovered a picture taken by the photographer James Van der Zee for *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Morrison was intrigued by the photo of a pretty girl in a coffin (in the 1920s, family members often took pictures of their deceased loved ones), but the story behind it—of a young girl who so loved her killer that she protected him even to her death—compelled Morrison to compose a novel. And, as many critics have reflected, compose is just what she did: “Like Duke Ellington, Morrison has found a way, paradoxically, to create an ensemble of improvised sound out of a composed music” (David 146).

Such composition did not come easy to Morrison. She wanted the novel to reflect the feel of the 1920s, to be unmistakably jazz. To Morrison, jazz music represents “improvisation, originality, change,” and she wanted her novel to do more than describe those characteristics; she wanted it “to seek to become them” (*Jazz* xvii). Creating that feel required Morrison to “pull from the material . . . the compositional drama of the period, its unpredictability,” yet she constantly found herself frustrated with the character of Violet. Although Morrison knew everything about Joe’s wife—her rage at discovering her husband’s affair with a young girl, her violent attack on the girl’s corpse during the funeral—she could not find the “language to reveal her.” In her disgust, Morrison began typing out her frustration:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. (*Jazz* 3)

That impromptu purging of facts had exactly the feel Morrison wanted for the piece and became the book's opening. Furthermore, this unnamed narrator provided a gossipy tone that allows Morrison to effect the false start common in improvisational music—a miscue, which readers (and the narrator) at first trust but slowly begin to doubt as actual events are revealed through “shifting tempos and combinations [that] allow the emergence of secrets, of the past,” as the narrator's view is “destabilized by the ruptures and distinct rhythms of the various characters' unexpected solos” (Beaulieu 182).

Morrison intended the story of Dorcas Manfred to be part of *Beloved*, had in fact conceived of *Beloved* as a three-part tale (including *Paradise*) that would examine different versions of relationships and truth. Editors convinced Morrison that each tale could and should stand alone, but Morrison still prefers to think of them as her “trilogy” on love. Lay readers usually think of a trilogy as three separate and complete stories that contain the same characters, the same setting, or at the very least a continuation of the plotline. In this regard, *Jazz* is nearly unrecognizable as a continuation of *Beloved*. Yet Morrison defines her trilogy in terms of a more formal definition, which allows that the works be strongly related in theme. When examined in this context, Morrison's intent becomes clear: *Beloved*, with its focus on “mother-love,” explores “how and what one cherishes under the duress and emotional disfigurement that a slave society imposes”; *Jazz*, with its focus on “couple-love,” explores “how such relationships were altered, later, in (or by) a certain level of liberty”; and *Paradise*, with its focus on exclusion, explores what happens when one community loves itself so much that it seeks to protect that love through isolation (*Jazz* foreword).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explore the characters of Violet Trace and Alice Manfred, their relationship to each other, and the change that occurs in that relationship.
2. Morrison has called Wild a “type of *Beloved*” (Beaulieu 380). In what ways are the two characters similar? Knowing that Morrison intended *Jazz* to be a continuation of *Beloved*, what purpose does Wild fulfill?
3. Why does Alice Manfred decide not to seek prosecution of Dorcas's murderer? Debate whether crying all day is as bad as being in jail. Why does Alice think Joe is crying? Why is he really crying?
4. Compare the passage in which Alice discusses jazz music (54, 59) to Langston Hughes's description of bebop in *The Best of Simple* (McKay 159). How is music a conduit for true emotion? What does today's music express?

The Nobel Lecture in Literature (1993)

In 1993, Toni Morrison was selected to receive the Nobel Prize in literature for her ability to give “life to an essential aspect of American reality.” In keeping with her deep belief in the intergenerational aspect of the present, Morrison's Nobel banquet speech was an acknowledgment of those whose “astonishing brilliance” has challenged and nurtured her own, as well as an anticipation of those who “are mining, sifting, and polishing languages for illuminations none of us has dreamed of” (33).

Citing the importance of narrative in her own life, Morrison chose to begin her Nobel lecture with a fable that reflects her belief in the power of language. The story tells of some young people who go to an old blind woman to ask a question. The question—“Is the bird I am holding living or dead?”—could be interpreted two ways. Is it a trick by spiteful youth intent on “disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is” (10)? That is one interpretation.

But Morrison has ever held dear the role of ancestor. So, she chooses to tell another version: of a wise old woman who has turned her back on children in need of teaching. Morrison shows us that the children see the woman's blindness as a blessing allowing her to “speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names” (28). The children implore

her to help them define themselves by defining the things from which they have come: "Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man" (28). They want to know about their ancestors and the journey to become free. In their questioning, they recount a "wagonload of slaves" arriving at an inn and they repeatedly ask how—*how* they sang, *how* they knew, *how* they thought. Not *what* they did or *why*, but *how*. This attention to the *how* recalls Claudia's warning in the first pages of Morrison's inaugural novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Claudia tells readers "*why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (*Bluest* 6). The children of Morrison's speech understand the difficulty in knowing why a thing happens, but they also know that through exploring how it occurred, they may free themselves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Morrison's Nobel lecture touches on the core of her beliefs. Suppose you were asked to give a similar speech. What core belief would you hope to convey? Choose or create a metaphor to help your audience understand your belief. Possible forms include poetry, story, song, and quotation.
2. How is it possible for language to die? Through her lecture, what response or reaction does Morrison hope to provoke from her listeners?
3. Is Morrison's speech consistent with her body of work? Explain your analysis with examples from her novels and the speech itself.

Paradise (1998)

Ralph Ellison warned that those unable to free themselves from the "straitjacket of racist ideology" would create conditions where race takes a "position of total (really totalitarian) importance" (Morel 60). Perhaps Ellison was thinking of a place like Ruby, Oklahoma, Morrison's all-black community. Founded by families who were "disallowed" from the light-skinned town of Fairly for being too poor and too black, Ruby seeks to remain separate

from the outside world by excluding those who are not black enough.

Yet Ruby's youth are not content with the isolationist policies of their parents' generation. Encouraged by a young minister, the youth join the Black Power movement and express their beliefs by painting a black fist (the symbol of Black Power) on the side of the Oven. While the youth have adopted the Oven as their hangout, it has deep importance to the older generation, who remember the days when the Oven served as Ruby's gathering place—the town's "communal and symbolic center" (Beaulieu 262). The painting of the fist and the ensuing argument over the Oven's illegible inscription lead to a deepening rift between the generations, which culminates in an attack on the Convent.

While the Oven is a symbol of the town's patriarchy, the Convent is a place of "female subversiveness" (Beaulieu 262). Originally the mansion of an embezzler who used it to host an orgy, it was leased to the Catholic Church and used as a school where young Arapaho girls were taught. Later the Convent becomes a haven for troubled women, who are taken in and healed by Connie, a nearly blind visionary. Connie tells the women tales of Piedade, the maternal embodiment of paradise, and leads them through a type of therapy that involves "loud dreaming" (264) and birth reenactment. The strange actions of the women are interpreted as evil by the men of Ruby. As such, the Convent and its women become an easy scapegoat for the men who feel threatened by the division brewing in their small community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the premise of *Paradise* with Morrison's statement in her Nobel lecture concerning the Tower of Babel story:

Perhaps the achievement of *Paradise* was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet.

Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life. (“Nobel Lecture”)

How could the residents of Ruby find “the heaven they imagined”?

2. *Paradise* opens with the line “They shoot the white girl first.” What is accomplished by that opening? Is the race of the first one shot relevant to the story? Compose an argument for the identity of the white girl using evidence from the novel.
3. Examine Morrison’s treatment of art and music within *Paradise*. How is each used to express the power of language?
4. What does the Oven represent to the youth of Ruby? To its elders? How do the Oven’s physical changes throughout the novel represent the political changes within the town of Ruby?
5. What role does written language play in the novel? How is that consistent with Morrison’s belief that “oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge”?

Love (2003)

In her eighth novel, Morrison seeks to explore the “way sexual love and other kinds of love lend themselves to betrayal” (Denard 214). Morrison says she “wanted to give back to the worn-out word ‘love’ the emotions that it has lost through eternal presence” (Denard 225). To reinvest the word with the power she felt it should wield, Morrison used it sparingly “so that it would be raw when the first time those women say it, is the only time they could say it” (Denard 220).

The story revolves around Bill Cosey, a black entrepreneur living before the Civil Rights movement, whose quest to build a “playground” for affluent African Americans serves as “a cautionary lesson in black history” (201). Morrison has often

remarked on history as a function of the historian and the fact that most of American history has been recorded from a Eurocentric perspective. Through her novels, Morrison attempts to “reappropriate” America’s past, revisioning events through the lens of a black woman writer. The rise and decline of Cosey’s Resort allow Morrison to examine the Civil Rights movement through the eyes of the black bourgeoisie, showcasing the negative aspects of forced integration on a “vibrant, independent black society” (Denard 208).

The focal point for Morrison’s consideration of the construct of love is Bill Cosey. Although the inscription “Ideal Husband. Perfect Father” appears on his tombstone, his failure in both roles is reflected in the lifelong relationship between two women, Heed and Christine, who even 25 years after Cosey’s death cannot undo his power over them. Christine is Cosey’s granddaughter; her relationship with Heed is described by the narrator as “a child’s first chosen love.” The power of this first chosen love is derived from innocence:

If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. (199)

The innocence of each girl is taken by Bill Cosey, sacrificed to his pedophilic tendencies and his wanton quest for sexual gratification when he first molests Heed, then marries her when she is 11. Christine’s reaction, first of jealousy, then rage, has been taken by some scholars as implying that Cosey had also molested her.

The friendship is ruined, yet the girls remain bonded by this strange marriage even after Cosey’s death. Each girl believes she should inherit Cosey’s Resort (now abandoned as a result of the Civil Rights movement’s integration policies), and each interprets differently Cosey’s informal will, scrawled on a menu bequeathing all to his “sweet Cosey child.” As a result of the ambiguity, neither

- . *Jazz*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.
- . *Love*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- . *A Mercy*. New York: Knopf, 2008.
- . “Nobel Banquet Speech.” 10 December 1993. Nobel Foundation. Available online. URL: www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-speech.html. Accessed October 5, 2009.
- . “Nobel Lecture.” 7 December 1993. Nobel Foundation. Available online. URL: www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html. Accessed October 5, 2009.
- . *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- . *Paradise*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- . *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- , ed. *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- . *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- . *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004.
- . *Tar Baby*. New York: Knopf, 1981.
- . “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (winter 1989): 1–34.
- Official Web site of the Toni Morrison Society. Available online. URL: <http://www.tonimorrisonociety.org>. Accessed June 26, 2009.
- Page, Philip. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Plasa, Carl. *Toni Morrison, Beloved*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Samuels, Wilfred D., and Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Toni Morrison*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Tally, Justine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



JOYCE CAROL OATES (1938–)

I am a chronicler of the American experience. We have been historically a nation prone to violence, and it would be unreal to ignore this fact. What intrigues me is the response to violence: its aftermath in the private lives of women and children in particular.

(“Author Joyce Carol Oates on ‘Adolescent America.’” *U.S. News and World Report*)

Joyce Carol Oates has been both hailed for the depth of her chiseled characterization of class and criticized for her insistence on the darker, violent side of humanity. Oates, who her friend and fellow writer John Updike claimed “was perhaps born a hundred years too late” (119) because she needs an audience hungrier for words, has produced an astonishing number of works: At the time of this writing, she has published close to 50 novels and numerous collections of short stories, poems, plays, and essays of literary criticism. Although the sheer volume of her published work is by itself impressive, it is the haunting precision with which she portrays the inner workings of the criminal or the exploited mind that makes Oates’s writing memorable. The settings and characters in her stories are unmistakably American, and occasionally regional, but the struggles the characters face—moral, ethical, religious, or political—appeal to a wider, more universal audience.

Oates began writing at a young age and recognition occurred early, encouraging her to pursue what has been a remarkable career of more than four decades and counting. Oates received her first writing contest prize in 1959 from *Mademoiselle* magazine while still in college; among her other honors, she has won the National Book Award twice, has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist three times, and, in 2005, won the Prix Femina, a French literary prize for best foreign fiction. While she has created a body

of well-received works in multiple literary genres, she is probably best known for her short stories, for which she has received an O. Henry Special Award for Continuing Achievement.

Even though Oates has consistently devoted herself to portraying violence and victimization, especially of women, as integral parts of the human experience, she has defied clear and strict classification: She is by no means simply a writer of horror stories or a feminist crusader. In her 2003 book of essays *The Faith of a Writer*, she maintains that writing is above all an art form and, as such, is “the most solitary of arts” (xi). She explains another unique aspect of writing possibly observed by critics and readers:

To write is to invade another’s space, if only to memorialize it; to write is to invite angry censure from those who don’t write, or who don’t write in quite the way you do, for whom you may seem a threat. Art by its nature is a transgressive act, and artists must accept being punished for it. The more original and unsettling their art, the more devastating the punishment. (33)

On the theme of violence, she tells Jay Parini in a 1987 interview, “People frequently misunderstand serious art because it is often violent and unattractive. I wish the world were a prettier place, but I wouldn’t be honest as a writer if I ignored

the actual conditions around me” (Milazzo 155). Oates’s characters face rape, incest, murder, patricide, suicide, infanticide, self-mutilation; sometimes these acts of violence are survived by the actors or even the victims and the reader is privy to a chilling view into their plight.

Oates was born on June 16, 1938, in Rockport, New York, into a working-class family. She was the oldest of three children. Her father, Frederick Oates, a tool and die designer, had an Irish background, while her mother, Carolina (née Bush), descended from a family of Hungarian immigrants. The family lived in a farmhouse shared with Carolina’s parents. Oates attended a one-room schoolhouse she remembers fondly: “I would walk the approximate mile from our house, carrying my new pencil box and lunch pail, to sit on the front, stone step of the school building” (*Faith* 4). While she has equally affectionate memories of her teacher, Mrs. Dietz, and her lessons, her profound literary inspiration was received from Blanche, her Grandma Woodside, who presented her with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* when she was eight years old. As Greg Johnson reports in his biography *Invisible Writer*, Oates was inspired by how “[Alice] manages not simply to survive some very odd, alarming experiences, but to triumph. Everything shifts and changes about her, nothing is very stable . . . but Alice asserts herself,” and that for her, Carroll “affirmed the sovereignty of the imagination” (33). A typewriter, another gift from her grandmother when Oates was 14, added the sense of “self-awareness as a writer,” and she soon pounded out her first novel, which she submitted for publication. It is no small irony that the publisher found the work too dark for its intended audience and rejected the manuscript without knowing how young the writer was (48).

Two characteristics distinguished Oates in her high school years: her insatiable appetite for reading and writing, and her aloneness. While her English teachers constantly praised her for meticulously preparing herself for class and writing profusely, her junior high gym teacher confronted her about

always being alone. The character Laney Bartlett in her novel *Childwold* (1976) meets a similar fate. After ninth grade, Oates transferred from North Park to Williamsville High School, newly established yet strongly rooted in conservative traditions and strict morality. For Oates, from a small country school, the affluent middle-class environment provided a new challenge. She was made conscious even of her clothing—“homemade outfits sewn by Carolina and by Grandma Woodside” (Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 49). Yet “by her senior year, Joyce had become one of the most active students in her class: she sang in the chorus, played basketball and field hockey, worked on the yearbook, served as associate editor of *The Billboard* [the school newspaper], became president of Quill and Scroll [an honorary society for students interested in writing] and vice president of the French Club, and for good measure also joined the Drama Club, the Debate Club, the International Club, and even the Bowling Club” (51). She was even “given an affectionate nickname: ‘Oatsie’” (51).

While Oates thus dispelled the early stereotype of her as a social misfit, the true extent of her passion for writing remained unknown to most at this time. She developed a keen interest in the works of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Thoreau; for practice, she began to imitate their writing styles. “Hemingway’s disaffected posturing did not appeal to her, . . . but his structural device of arranging short stories into a novel would influence several of her mature works, including such otherwise dissimilar novels as *Bellefleur* (1980), with its maze of interlocking tales, and *Marya: A Life* (1986), each of which first appeared in story form” (Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 53). In *The Faith of a Writer*, she confesses: “In my life I’ve fallen in love with (and never wholly fallen out of love from) writers as diverse as Lewis Carroll, Emily Brontë, Kafka, Poe, Melville, Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, Charlotte Brontë, Dostoyevsky. . . . In reading the new edition of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* not long ago, I discovered I had memorized entire passages” (26).

In 1956, Oates graduated from Williamsville and, as the first of her family to attend college,

entered Syracuse University on a New York State Regents scholarship, matched by the receiving college. The ambitious Oates excelled in her studies, especially under the devoted tutelage of one of her English professors, Donald Dike, and began to submit stories to the *Syracuse Review*. Soon, however, Oates broke into nationwide publication when she won the prestigious *Mademoiselle* college fiction contest in 1959 for her short story "In the Old World."

In 1960, Oates was accepted in the graduate program of the University of Wisconsin, where she received an M.A. in English the next spring and married a fellow graduate student, Raymond J. Smith. After a year's uninspiring stay in Beaumont, Texas, both she and her husband received teaching positions at the University of Detroit. It was here in the university library that she accidentally found one of her stories listed on the year's Honor Roll in Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories* and decided to devote herself to writing. From 1967 to 1978, she and her husband joined the English Department at the University of Windsor, Ontario, after which she became a writer in residence at Princeton University, where she is currently the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities.

To place her earliest stories, Oates created an imaginary rural setting that she called, with unmistakable irony, Eden County, New York, a setting similar to the area where she grew up. The short story collections *By the North Gate* (1963) and *Upon the Sweeping Flood and Other Stories* (1966), set in this "barbarous Eden," as Greg Johnson calls it in his eponymous essay, "scrutinize with dogged thoroughness the moral conditions of an unstable American reality. They provide a carefully detailed portrait of the post-Depression rural poor; they investigate women's experience in a patriarchal mid-20th-century culture that conformed to long-standing social, religious, and family models, and they suggest the moral vacuum at the heart of such 'sacred' American institutions as the law and academe" (15). The common strand of these stories are mental and physical brutality and violence told in a chilling realistic and naturalistic style.

Urban and rural themes prevail in her next three novels, which compose a trilogy: *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) tells of a migrant worker; *Expensive People* (1968) examines the superrich of suburbia; and *them* (1969) takes on the classes in between. It was the third novel of the trilogy, *them*, that earned Oates the National Book Award in 1970. In her preface to the novel, Oates explained who "they" are:

They are Americans of a certain class and era—infected, in part, by the glamour of America, the adventure of aggressive and futile dreams—but they are not Americans most of us know. Neither impoverished enough to be italicized against the prodigious wealth of their culture, nor affluent enough to be comfortably assimilated into it, the Wendalls exist—and they continue to exist—in a world for which, for the most part, despair itself is a luxury, incompletely understood, and failure unthinkable. (*Woman* Writer 366)

The story line was prompted by the recollections of a student in a writing class taught by Oates, but she cautions that—despite incorporating the echo of the realistic circumstances, even her own name for a character in the story—it is true fiction. Oates confesses to be committed to art "in which human beings are presented honestly, without sentimentality and without cynicism" (367).

It was the artist's commitment further to explore American social institutions, as well as the psychological construct of the individual within, that spurred her on in the 1970s. In *Wonderland* (1971), Oates "explores the boundaries between 'objective' and 'subjective' modes of discourse—between science and romance—as they define personality and as they construct categories of gender" (Daly 49). Both *Wonderland* and *Do with Me What You Will* (1973) probe societal constraints that produce potentially damaging father-daughter relationships, but Oates focuses on the aspect of the law in the latter. While in *Do with Me What You Will* she experiments with parodying the staples of romance novels, the following two novels, *The*

Assassins (1975) and *Childwold* (1976), “[mark] a dramatic shift in her vision,” namely, “the mother-daughter story will figure in a more central way in Oates’s novels informing and sustaining her comic vision throughout the 1980s” (91). The 1979 *Unholy Loves* “is dedicated to reforming the vision of authority that governs the ‘unholy loves’ of the academic community” (123) and at the same time furthers Oates’s reputation as a maturing female satirist.

A celebrated realist by the early 1980s, Oates surprised her readers and critics by turning to genre writing. She completed what has come to be known as the gothic trilogy: *Bellefleur* in 1980, *A Bloodsmoor Romance* in 1982, and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* in 1984, which “blurred to near invisibility the line between Miss Oates and the scribblers of gothic romances,” John Updike noted in 1987 (119), though not without a sense of concern about the literary art. On the one hand, Oates believes that “the imaginative construction of a ‘Gothic’ novel involves the systematic transportation of realistic psychological and emotional experiences into ‘Gothic’ elements” (*Woman* Writer 370), and therefore she considers it “experimental” writing; on the other hand, she is devoted to exploring “the wrongs perpetrated against [American] women, for instance, and the vicious class and race warfare that has constituted much of America’s domestic history” (374). Through the stories of women she follows over generations, Oates is still writing the history of America: “America is a tale still being told—in many voices—and nowhere near its conclusion” (371).

It is this devotion to chronicling America through intricate portrayals of characters haunted or devoured by their psychological struggles that pervades Oates’s oeuvre in the following two decades. Unfailingly, her stories probe the destructive nature of love, whether erotic or filial, often against the complex social backdrop of class, race, or gender politics. The 1986 *Marya, A Life* and the 1987 *You Must Remember This* present strong autobiographical elements, while the 1990 *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* returns to the familiar themes of race and violence. The latter

novel was nominated for the National Book Award and praised for its “innovative structure” that “challenge[s] traditional ‘realistic’ novels, which, when they fail to challenge hierarchies of difference, perpetuate injustices” (Daly 180).

In the 1990s, Oates continued to engage her readers with novels both innovative in form and politically sensitive in content. Her 1992 *Black Water* reconstructs the brief and tragic encounter between a drunken politician and the young woman he leaves to drown when his vehicle plummets from the bridge into the dark water below. Though the plot recalls the similar event of 1969 involving Senator Edward Kennedy, the much-debated sexual-political power dynamics of the early 1990s are hard to dissociate from the story line. Told from the victim’s point of view, *Black Water* is “taut, powerfully imagined and beautifully written” (Bausch); it secured Oates a place on the finalist list for the Pulitzer Prize. In another gripping tale, the 1993 *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, Oates explores the binds and politics of sisterhood, however feeble and short-lived: A group of 1950s high school girls lash out against male (father, teacher, classmate) violence and sexual harassment.

It would be a mistake to call Oates a popular writer who writes *about* violence; rather, she is intrigued by investigating the workings of violent action on the human—specifically, the American—mind. The 1994 *What I Lived For* unravels the tale of Corky Corcoran, an Irish Catholic man, through an interior monologue; Corky has lived with the memory of the violent death of his father, and now he faces an opportunity to redeem himself through saving another person. In *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996), Oates meticulously investigates the moral ruination of a family after the daughter is raped by a fellow student; the novel is told from a brother’s point of view. The 1995 horror novel *Zombie* employs a third version of male monologue; this time, however, it springs forth from the mind of a serial killer who engrosses the reader in the disturbing story of a modern-day, criminally insane Dr. Frankenstein-like figure: Jeffrey Dahmer is on a quest to create a zombielike life companion for himself, one who will be loyal to him. In 1996,

the book earned the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award and the Boston Book Review's Fisk Fiction Prize.

Always remarkable and innovative in her portrayal of the troubled American soul, Oates hauntingly memorializes the iconic figure of Marilyn Monroe in her 2000 novel *Blonde*. Oates has said that she "came to think of her as a universal figure" (*Faith* 151), and, though she included biographical elements, the book should be read as fiction (148). What amplifies the tragedy of the young woman who was created by a culture yet also destroyed by it is that she tells her story *after* she commits suicide. *Blonde* was not only generally well received, but also distinguished by the National Book Award and became a Pulitzer Prize finalist, Oates's third.

While Oates has long been devoted to the study of violence and its "aftermath," she has also been meticulous about the form, the presentation, the art of her writing. "It took several years for me to acquire the voice, the rhythm, the tone of *Belle-fleur*," she confessed in her preface to the novel. In the 2002 *I'll Take You There*, she effortlessly recreates the voice of a breathless teenager, which evolves into that of the self-assured young woman by the end of the story. The book is also Oates's most autobiographical novel to date, as well as a beautiful homage to philosophy as a way of enriching one's life and empowering one's dreams.

Oates is considered one of the most prolific writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, who has created a significant body of works of fiction (also under the pseudonym *Rosamond Smith*), poetry, drama, and essays on diverse topics. In addition, she has been among the most admired authors of short stories since the publication of *By the North Gate*, in 1963. Her 2006 collection *High Lonesome* contains old favorites—among them "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"—and new additions of high acclaim.

Writing is a passion for Oates, an art form she seeks to perfect. She says in *The Faith of a Writer*: "I've never thought of writing as the mere arrangement of words on the page but the attempted embodiment of a vision; a complex of emotions;

raw experience. The effort of memorable art is to evoke in the reader or spectator emotions appropriate to that effort" (35).

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1970)

Joyce Carol Oates's most frequently anthologized short story first appeared in her collection *The Wheel of Love* (1970) to great acclaim. In her book (*Woman*) *Writer*, Oates reflects that

it was cast in a mode of fiction to which I am still partial . . . "realistic allegory," it might be called. It is Hawthornean, romantic, shading into parable. Like the medieval German engraving from which my title was taken, the story was minutely detailed yet clearly an allegory of the fatal attractions of death (or the devil). An innocent young girl is seduced by way of her own vanity; she mistakes death for erotic romance of a Particularly American/trashy sort. (317–318)

Like many of Oates's stories, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is based on real events—the story of a "tabloid psychopath known as 'The Pied Piper of Tucson'" whose "specialty was the seduction and occasional murder of teen-aged girls" (*[Woman] Writer* 316). What intrigued Oates was that "for some reason they kept his secret, deliberately did not inform parents or police" (316) and "that a number of teenagers—from 'good' families—aided and abetted his crimes" (317). The story suggests that the individual stands alone in the face of death (or the devil) and becomes the victim of his or her own vanity, which makes that person vulnerable to the seductive power of evil.

Connie, the central character, is a typical American adolescent girl who becomes vulnerable to the approaches of evil not only by virtue of her young age and lack of experience, but also because of her surroundings:

Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?" she would say. (249)

Oates skillfully draws the picture of a teenager who is left to her own resources to cope with temptations: Her mother looks upon her with jealousy, her father "was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed" (250); and her sister, who is nine years older and still lives at home, is "plain and steady" and has very little in common with her younger sibling. Consequently, as do other young female characters in Oates's work (e.g., *You Must Remember This*), Connie develops a double personality: one for home and one for going out to the mall. Even the narrator sounds distanced and detached, adopting a clearly ironic tone that emphasizes Connie's isolation. Oates herself describes her protagonist as "shallow, vain, silly, hopeful, [and] doomed" (*Woman* Writer 318), thus vulnerable to seduction.

In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" the author "dramatizes . . . a fiercely Nietzschean view of human relationships as a battle ground of contending wills" (Johnson, *Joyce Carol Oates* 44), where the female is entrapped by and is faced "with rapacious male power" (44). Connie is confronted by this potentially destructive power in the form of Arnold Friend, who pays a visit at her house while her family is away at a barbecue. Now Connie is truly alone. Many critics have pointed out that Friend resembles and possesses a power similar to that of the devil of Christian mythology; as such, he gains a hypnotic power over Connie, whose feeble resistance is effortlessly cancelled out by Friend's persuasion: He "reduces Connie to a zombielike state of docile submission" (45)

and eventually leads her off, possibly to rape and murder her—though the nature of her "sacrifice" (*Woman* Writer 318) is not revealed at the end. Oates writes that Connie "gives herself" (318) to Friend to save her family, exacerbating the sense of inevitability of her fate.

The greatest and darkest irony of the story is that it is Connie's fate to become powerless in the face of the devil:

Arnold Friend said, in a gentle-loud voice that was like a stage voice, "The place where you came from ain't there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it. You hear me?" (265)

Thus Oates skillfully creates a story that works on multiple levels, utilizing elements of the grotesque: The female falls victim to the intrinsic contradictions of her heart as she is unable to transcend the dichotomy of her own realistic and idealistic expectations. Connie longs for sexual attention and, when she is visited by a mock-gentleman caller, the puzzling forces of her own unfulfilled feelings versus the hypnotic power of the ultimate seducer enervate her sense of reality and finalize her fall.

A recurring theme in Oates's literary art, a "debased religious imagery" (Joyce Wegs, in Wagner 87), plays an important part in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Connie is fascinated by popular music, and it surrounds her—there is a song playing at the mall at all times and the radio is always on at her house, blaring shallow lyrics. It is these songs and their morals that seem to command Connie's spiritual life. In the restaurant that is shaped like a bottle (which visually recalls the shape of a church building), Connie and her friend "listened to the music that made everything so good: the music was always in the background, like music at a church service; it was something to depend upon" (251). Ironically, that is the music they should *not* depend upon.

Yet, with this story, Oates also memorializes popular culture. She maintains in her comments to the movie version that she “was intrigued by the music of Bob Dylan, particularly the hauntingly elegiac song ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,’ [and she] dedicated [it] to Bob Dylan” (*[Woman] Writer* 318). Connie has brown eyes, yet Arnold Friend’s last words to her, “My sweet little blue-eyed girl,” which “he said in a half-sung sigh” (266), clearly indicate the connection as well as emphasize the irony and the tragic finality of what is about to happen at the end of the story.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read closely the author’s descriptions of Arnold Friend and write about the clues that indicate the character’s devillike appearance and possible identity.
2. Watch the movie *Smooth Talk*, which is the screen adaptation of the story. Does the movie do justice to Oates’s story? Citing examples from both text and film, discuss how a different medium, that is, the visual presentation of the movie, adds to or subtracts from the effectiveness of the written story.
3. Read Joyce Carol Oates’s response to the aforementioned movie version of her story, reprinted in her book (*Woman*) *Writer: Occasions and Opportunities*. Do you agree with her point that the different ending in the film is justified? Why or why not?

You Must Remember This (1987)

Oates’s 18th novel, *You Must Remember This*, as she puts it, “takes place in a fictitious city, Port Oriskany, an amalgam of two cities in upstate New York—Buffalo (the first large city of my experience) and Lockport (the city of my birth, my paternal grandmother’s home, suffused forever for me with the extravagant dreams of adolescence)” (*[Woman] Writer* 379). The time is that much more real: the decade spanning 1944 to 1956, which W. H. Auden called the “age of anxiety,” a time of dreams and hopes suffocated by fears fueled by political

propaganda. The characters’ personal struggles are overshadowed and influenced by figures such as Senator McCarthy and Adlai Stevenson, as well as events like the Korean War and the execution of the Rosenbergs.

The novel chronicles the life of the Stevick family during the early 1950s. Lyle, the father, runs his own shabby used-furniture store, while Hannah is a stay-at-home mother and wife. Their oldest child and only son, Warren, is seriously wounded in the Korean War and, upon his return home, joins the early antinuclear protests, while the three girls’ lives reflect three different paths for young women of the time: Geraldine marries young and is engulfed by having and raising her children, Lizzie enters show business, and Enid Maria is accepted to college.

According to Oates, the novel’s

focus [is] upon Enid Stevick and her uncle, Felix, who loses his youth in the course of the novel, as Enid loses, by degrees, in a counter-movement, her attraction for death . . . Enid exorcises an instinct for suicide, by way of passion, and its somber consequences; Felix exorcises an instinct for self-destructive violence. The one suggestively “female,” the other “male”: poles of masochism and sadomasochism. Which is not, of course, to suggest that we are defined by such poles; only that they exert a gravitational pull, weak in some, powerful in others. (*[Woman] Writer* 380)

In the opening scene, while her family is laughing at the television downstairs, 15-year-old Enid attempts suicide by swallowing the contents of a whole bottle of aspirin. John Updike wrote, upon the novel’s publication, “Her attempted suicide, insofar as it is a romantic stratagem, demonstrates to [Felix] her toughness and places them on a plane of equality as death-defiers, as familiars of violence” (121). Enid, however, not only defies death but also searches for control over her life—a daunting quest for a teenager at any given time in history but especially in the 1950s. Her daring acrobatics on the trampoline, her self-starvation, her determination to excel in her studies and later at the piano,

- Oates, Joyce Carol. *The Assassins: A Book of Hours*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1975.
- . *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. New York: Dutton, 1990.
- . *Bellefleur*. New York: Dutton, 1980.
- . *Black Water*. New York: Dutton, 1992.
- . *Blonde*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- . *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. New York: Dutton, 1982.
- . *By the North Gate*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1963.
- . *Childwold*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1976.
- . *Do with Me What You Will*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1973.
- . *Expensive People*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1968.
- . *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- . *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*. New York: Dutton, 1993.
- . *A Garden of Earthly Delights*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1967. Rev. ed., New York: Random House, 2003.
- . *High Lonesome: New and Selected Stories, 1966–2006*. New York: Ecco Press, 2006.
- . *I'll Take You There*. New York: Ecco Press, 2002.
- . *Marya: A Life*. New York: Dutton, 1986.
- . *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. New York: Dutton, 1984.
- . *them*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1969. Reprinted with introduction by Greg Johnson and afterword by the author, New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- . *Uncensored: Views and (Re)views*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- . *Unholy Loves*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1979.
- . *Upon the Sweeping Flood and Other Stories*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1966.
- . *We Were the Mulvaney's*. New York: Dutton, 1996.
- . *What I Lived For*. New York: Dutton, 1994.
- . "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" In *High Lonesome: New and Selected Stories, 1966–2006*. New York: Ecco Press, 2006.
- . *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities*. New York: Dutton, 1988.
- . *Wonderland*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1971. Rev. ed., New York: Ontario Review Press, 1992.
- . *You Must Remember This*. New York: Dutton, 1987.
- . *Zombie*. New York: Dutton, 1995.
- Updike, John. "What You Deserve Is What You Get." *New Yorker*, 28 December 1987, pp. 119–123.
- Wagner, Linda W., ed. *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979.
- Waller, G. F. *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979.
- Wesley, Marilyn C. *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993.

Susan Nyikos



TIM O'BRIEN (1946–)

It wasn't the material that Vietnam presented me with so much as it was a revolution of personality. I'd been an academic and intellectual sort of person, and Vietnam changed all that.

(interview, *Artful Dodger*)

William Timothy “Tim” O’Brien is, at least as a person, one of contemporary literature’s most elusive authors. His experiences as a soldier during the Vietnam War made an indelible mark on O’Brien, and the war is present in everything he writes. But O’Brien also transcends the classification as *Vietnam writer*, acknowledged as a brilliant author beyond any single topic and a valuable voice in the American conscience.

O’Brien was born in 1946 to William T. and Ava Schultz O’Brien, an insurance salesman and an elementary-school teacher. Both parents participated in World War II, his father as a soldier in the Pacific theater and his mother as a volunteer in the navy division WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service). His father wrote about his war experiences, publishing personal accounts about Iwo Jima and Okinawa in the *New York Times* (Smith 1–3). O’Brien grew up in small-town Minnesota, the first of three children. He describes his hometown by saying, “If you looked in a dictionary under the word ‘boring,’ you will find a little pen-and-ink drawing of Worthington” . . . and “the people of that town [who] sent me to war . . . couldn’t spell the word ‘Hanoi’ if you spotted them three vowels” (quoted in Smith 2, brackets and ellipses in original). According to Don Lee, “As a child, O’Brien was lonely, overweight, and a professed ‘dreamer’” (1). He occupied himself by perfecting magic tricks (Lee 1), a habit mirrored by the lead character of his novel

In the Lake of the Woods (1994). An unathletic child as well, O’Brien writes, “I couldn’t hit a baseball. Too small for football, but I stuck it out through junior high, hoping something could change. When nothing happened, I began to read. I read Plato and Erich Fromm, the Hardy boys and enough Aristotle to make me prefer Plato” (*If I Die* 14).

O’Brien attended college at Macalester in St. Paul, where he studied political science. The Vietnam conflict was well under way while O’Brien was a student, and he opposed the war actively, attending peace vigils and campaigning for the anti-Vietnam War presidential candidate and congressman Gene McCarthy. O’Brien’s postcollege goals included working for the State Department because, he says, “I thought we needed more people who were progressive and had the patience to try diplomacy instead of dropping bombs on people” (quoted in Lee 1). O’Brien graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and president of his class. Barely a month after graduation, he was drafted. When he received his draft notice, O’Brien said, “I took it into the kitchen where my mother and father were having lunch, and I dropped it on the table. . . . They knew my feelings toward the war, how much I despised it, but they also knew I was a child of Worthington” (quoted in Smith 4).

O’Brien contemplated fleeing to Canada, but he ultimately felt too pressured by the weight of community to let his family and hometown down, a

mind-set explored in his short story “On the Rainy River” in *The Things They Carried* (1990) as well as in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) and his novel *Northern Lights* (1975). But O’Brien accepted his conscription, and his unhappiness only deepened when the army made him a grunt (foot soldier) and sent him to Vietnam in 1969. O’Brien said, “I couldn’t believe any of it was happening to me, someone who hated Boy Scouts and bugs and rifles” (quoted in Lee 2). Of his decision not to dodge the draft, O’Brien writes, “I was a coward. I went to Vietnam” (“The Vietnam in Me” 52).

O’Brien spent a year in Vietnam with the Americal division of the army, stationed in the Quang Ngai province. Quang Ngai includes the village cluster known as My Lai, site of the My Lai massacre. The massacre at My Lai is the Vietnam War’s most infamous atrocity and the worst documented war crime in U.S. history. On May 16, 1968, Lt. William Calley, possibly under orders, led his men to slaughter 500 or more unarmed Vietnamese civilians, many of them women, children, and elderly adults. Many victims were also raped and/or tortured before being killed. By his own admission, Calley, a draftee from Columbus, Ohio, killed at least 22 people (the number he was charged with during his trial). The U.S. government initially covered up the massacre, but letters from soldiers and the work of the independent reporter Seymour Hersh brought the events to light in America. In 1971, the government indicted 30 participants in the My Lai massacre. “Calley was by no means the only one responsible for the massacre at My Lai—but he was the only man ever found guilty of any offense committed there. In 1971, he was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor. Within three days, President Nixon ordered that he should be released from jail pending appeal” (Bilton and Sim 2).

The American people’s awareness of the atrocity further divided a nation unsure about its role in Vietnam.

The second moon landing was on the front pages when the news from My Lai broke late in 1969. For a time the two stories vied side

by side for news space: one story revealing the new horizons opening for mankind; the other, a ghastly slide into horror. . . . With My Lai the heart of darkness came home to America. . . . “It was this Nazi kind of thing,” [Americans] were told again and again by men who were there—an observation underscored by a single unassimilable thought: How could we behave like Nazis? (Bilton and Sim 3)

The youth and normalcy of the perpetrators at My Lai only further compounded America’s uncertainty—the killers had an average age of 20 and were a typical sampling of the American boys serving in Vietnam. Tim O’Brien went to Quang Ngai province at age 22, less than a year after the My Lai massacre. The hostility he faced from the locals, combined with the details of the attack, profoundly impacted O’Brien’s thought and writing. While My Lai is not always literally present in O’Brien’s fiction, it looms in the background, a permanent shadow over Tim O’Brien, one he will not let fade from the American consciousness of Vietnam.

Of his proximity to the My Lai massacre, O’Brien says, “When the unit I went with got [to Vietnam] in February 1969, we all wondered why the place was so hostile. We did not know there had been a massacre there a year earlier” (quoted in Smith 6, brackets in original). As a soldier, O’Brien received a shrapnel wound from an exploding grenade, for which he received a purple heart. He returned home a sergeant in 1970 and took up graduate work in political science at Harvard’s Kennedy School. Rather than completing his dissertation, O’Brien began working as a national affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*, where he had been interning (Smith 6). His memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was published in 1973. Smith says, “The memoir introduced readers to O’Brien’s trademark style and draws on a long tradition of American war writers with journalist backgrounds, including Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Normal Myler, and Philip Caputo” (6). Smith speaks later of how O’Brien and his contemporaries were also influenced by “the New Journalism, a style popularized by journalist Tom

Wolfe, who used a stream-of-consciousness narrative, creative details, and a conversational style to transform what had to that point been a traditional, objective news story into something that reflected the chaotic, surreal qualities of the subject" (12).

If I Die was written shortly after his hiring by the *Washington Post*. O'Brien stayed at the *Post* for one year before quitting to become a full-time book author. The title of *If I Die* is from a song new soldiers learn during basic training, "the violent and vulgar words ringing in their ears as their instructors turn raw recruits into more efficient soldiers—and killers" (Smith 26). The book is constrained by its memoir form, but O'Brien plays with the genre, using his strong journalistic background to record historical events in objective detail while also fictionalizing dialogue and plot points for emphasis or sustained narrative flow. Smith says, "The memoir is a precursor to his fiction, where O'Brien harnesses dichotomies—chaos breaking contemplative silence, death intruding upon the innocence of a young man's dreams—that create a jarring effect, negating the possibility of working within the comfort zone of absolutes" (27).

Northern Lights (1975) followed *If I Die*. O'Brien's first novel, it is about two brothers—one a war hero and the other a farm agent—who fight for survival during a blizzard in the Minnesota woods. The book explores Vietnam's influence on both soldiers and noncombatants, the complex relationships between human beings, and the smallness of humanity in the face of indifferent nature. *Northern Lights* received moderate critical acclaim, but O'Brien may be his own toughest critic, saying, "Overwriting is probably the chief flaw of the book. It's maybe a hundred pages too long" (quoted in Smith 46). Still, as a first attempt at fiction, *Northern Lights* is noteworthy, as it further establishes O'Brien's complex thoughts and themes surrounding the Vietnam War.

Going after Cacciato (1978), O'Brien's second novel, established him as a major voice in American literature. *Cacciato*, published three years after the United States ceased military operations in Vietnam, earned O'Brien serious critical and popular attention. The book, which received the National

Book Award in 1979, focuses on the perspective of a soldier, Paul Berlin, who, while on watch one night in Vietnam, remembers events that have happened in the last six months and imagines chasing his fellow soldier, Cacciato, who has abandoned the unit and is walking to Paris. The critic Richard Freedman deems *Cacciato* a novel that transcends the genre of "Vietnam writing," saying, "To call *Going after Cacciato* a novel about war, is like calling *Moby-Dick* a novel about whales" (1).

In 1985, O'Brien published *The Nuclear Age*, "about a draft dodger turned uranium speculator who is obsessed with the threat of nuclear holocaust" (Lee 2). *The Nuclear Age* found a much cooler reception than *Going after Cacciato*. It was followed, however, by a book to rival *Cacciato* in the O'Brien canon: *The Things They Carried* (1990). The well-known *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani says of *The Things They Carried*, "Mr. O'Brien gives the reader a shockingly visceral sense of what it felt like to tramp through the booby-trapped jungle" (C21). Some argue *The Things They Carried* is a collection of short stories, others that it is a novel. Either way, each chapter stands alone, but some characters and settings are featured throughout, frequently including the narrator named "Tim O'Brien." *The Things They Carried* allowed O'Brien to play with concepts of truth and reality in a way his memoir could not and provides, both literally and figuratively, a voice for Vietnam soldiers who do not have one.

In the Lake of the Woods directly explores the My Lai massacre and its influence over the life of a soldier who was there. The book opens with John Wade and his wife, Kathy, absorbing the shock of Wade's failed senatorial campaign after the revelation he was involved in the massacre. While recuperating at a lakeside cabin, Kathy goes missing, and the book deftly plays out different scenarios about what might have happened to her. *In the Lake of the Woods* received generally favorable reviews (although not to the level of *Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*) and "places the reader in the position of a jury member asked to analyze, organize, and make sense of the known information . . . [which] leads finally to an ambiguous outcome"

(Smith 118). At the time of publication, O'Brien considered *In the Lake of the Woods* his best-written book.

With *Tomcat in Love* (1998), O'Brien departed from his previous work by writing a comedy, featuring Thomas Chippering, a very unreliable narrator who has recently lost his wife to another man. *Tomcat*, as with previous works, toys with narrative time and space while putting a pseudoscholarly tone to the whole process, enhancing the humor (as opposed to the horror, as in *In the Lake of the Woods*). And despite *Tomcat's* comedy, the novel "only superficially conceals the serious topics that O'Brien explored in his earlier fiction" (Smith 132).

O'Brien's last novel to date, *July, July* (2002), acts as a retrospective look at the Vietnam generation. It is the eighth O'Brien book to explore Vietnam, nearly 30 years after *If I Die*. The book examines "a patchwork quilt of characters' shared experience" and met with ambivalent acclaim on par with that of *The Nuclear Age* (Smith 148). *July, July* features an impressive cast of characters getting together for their 30-year reunion, catching up and reminiscing about their lives in the 1960s and beyond. The character-driven novel contains vignettes of great beauty while occasionally suffering from larger narrative incoherence. It includes O'Brien's deliberate attempts to write strong female characters and allows him to make a broad assessment of the three decades since Vietnam as well as the war's impact on average Americans.

Despite the near-constant presence of Vietnam in his work, "war writer" is only one way to describe Tim O'Brien. Vietnam acts as just one of the themes and/or backdrops (albeit a major one) for O'Brien's literature. He displays an almost obsessive craftsmanship toward writing—one anecdote has him throwing out thousands of pages just to keep nine for *The Nuclear Age*. O'Brien's perfectionist nature, combined with sheer talent, is part of what makes him a great figure in contemporary American literature. "I think in every book I've written," O'Brien says, "I've had the twins of love and evil. They intertwine and intermix. They'll

separate, sometimes, yet they're hooked the way valances are hooked together. The emotions in war and in our ordinary lives are, if not identical, damn similar" (quoted in Lee 3). This love is mirrored by O'Brien's late marriage and the birth of his son. In a letter to his then-16-month old, O'Brien writes, "I had loved myself only insofar as I loved a chapter or a scene or a scrap of dialogue. . . . I doubt that at [age] twenty-eight or even thirty-eight I would have been so willing—so eager—to walk away from my work to warm your bottle" (15). O'Brien says every story he writes begins with an image, "a picture of a human being doing something" (quoted in Lee 3). And that image is profound, whether it is Cacciato walking to Paris, John and Kathy Wade sitting on their lake-view porch, or Tim O'Brien getting up from his computer to prepare a bottle for his infant son.

***Going after Cacciato* (1978)**

Tim O'Brien had already published a memoir and a novel when *Going after Cacciato* appeared in 1978. Neither of his previous efforts met with much general acclaim and acceptance. *Cacciato*, on the other hand, won the National Book Award. Dean McWilliams called it "the most important literary consequence of the American involvement in Vietnam" (245).

Going after Cacciato, told from the perspective of Paul Berlin, contains three distinct narrative threads. The first involves Berlin's squad's chasing Private Cacciato, a soldier just shy of mental retardation who has deserted his post and is planning to hump (walk) from Vietnam to Paris. The second thread explores Berlin's memories of the past six months in Vietnam. These memories are told out of chronological order and involve several deaths in the squad. The third and last narrative thread constitutes the narrative present of the novel—that is to say, the time in which the story is literally happening—as opposed to Berlin's thoughts about the past or, as we realize over time, his imaginary chase after Cacciato. In this narrative present, Paul Ber-

lin stands watch overnight (these chapters are all named "The Observation Post"), using his imaginary adventures on the road to Paris as a distraction from both the boredom of being on watch and the horror of his Vietnam memories. As Tobey C. Herzog writes, "O'Brien faces the problem of capturing the special character of the Vietnam experience (episodic, confused, and illogical) within a fictional framework providing unity, coherence, perspective, and meaning" (95).

As a result of the imaginative quality of the Cacciato sequences, *Going after Cacciato* has often been dubbed magical realism, a literary genre that toys with the reader's concepts of reality. In O'Brien's book, Cacciato's desertion begins the story, setting up the reader to believe his subsequent chase by Berlin's squad actually occurs. However, as the squad's adventures grow more and more fantastic—falling into a tunnel and discovering a trapped Vietnamese officer, narrowly escaping from an Iranian prison with the help of Cacciato himself—the reader begins to see how this narrative functions as an escapist fantasy for Berlin. And Cacciato (whose name derives from "the hunted" in Italian) becomes a foil for Berlin's guilt, as "Berlin sees himself as an innocent caught in the Vietnamese quagmire, an individual carried along mechanistically by forces beyond his control. If, however, he retraces recent events in their proper order, he will have to face a pattern which shows, first, his failure to live up to the idealistic goals he set for himself and, second, his complicity in mutiny and murder" (McWilliams 246). Berlin's desire to view himself as good and innocent becomes complicated when viewed alongside Cacciato's actual innocence.

Berlin's memory sequences appear out of order and skirt around the squad's fragging of their former commanding officer, Lt. Sidney Martin. (*Fragging* in Vietnam meant killing one's commanding officer.) Arguably, Martin brings the murder on himself by doing everything by the book, to the detriment of the men in his squad (specifically, ordering the men to inspect tunnels for Vietnamese soldiers [VC] before blowing them up, a very dangerous task, one the men's next commanding

officer, Lieutenant Corson, does not insist upon). But, as McWilliams writes:

The deaths in the tunnels are important not only because they reveal Berlin's failure to live up to his idealism but because they created the fear that leads to the fragging of Lt. Martin. The killing of Martin is absolutely crucial, and it is the event Berlin least wants to confront. In fact, he never confronts it completely. . . . What is *not* recounted is at least as important as what is recounted in this narrative. . . . By assenting to Martin's murder, Berlin and the others take a decisive moral step. . . . Henceforth, they will participate in the war only on their own terms. (248)

Despite Berlin's continued wishy-washy attitude, he condemns himself by being the soldier sent to gain Cacciato's agreement in Martin's fragging. When Cacciato will not touch the grenade that symbolizes complicity in the plan to murder Martin, "Paul Berlin pressed it firmly into the boy's hand," while Cacciato remains oblivious (*Cacciato* 286). Cacciato's strange and beautiful innocence, the dream of a world without war and murder, lies at the root of what Paul Berlin chases by "going after Cacciato."

Another foil for Berlin is Sarkin Aung Wan, his Vietnamese girlfriend during the Cacciato chase. As such, Sarkin Aung Wan exists only in Berlin's imagination, the voice of his conscience urging him to walk away from a war of which he disapproves. The essential conflict between Sarkin and Berlin comes to a head once the squad has reached Paris. Berlin imagines a diplomatic conference between him and Sarkin with her urging him to follow his heart while he argues for duty. "My obligation is to people, not to principle or politics or justice," Berlin tells her but goes on to say, "More than any positive sense of obligation, I confess that what dominates is the dread of abandoning all that I hold dear. . . . I fear the loss of my own reputation. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people in my hometown, my friends" (377). O'Brien reflects on the cold honesty of this way of thinking in other works, including *The Things They Carried* and *If I Die*.

The complicated and confusing narrative structure in *Going after Cacciato* “mirrors the American soldier’s problem of handling his Vietnam experiences by establishing meaning, order, and control in his life. . . . [The book] also involves readers in the pursuit of control as they struggle to master the disordered events in the book, find the center, and separate fact from fantasy” (Herzog 88). Paul Berlin becomes a symbol for the average soldier in Vietnam, as well as the average American citizen, going along to get along, “always marching at the rear of Third Squad, . . . helplessly dragged along by the day-to-day events” (Herzog 90). In contrast, there is Cacciato, the unachievable dream of innocence during war, making his impossible trek to Paris.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *Going after Cacciato* has been called a novel of magical realism. Read some works in this genre by famous authors such as Gabriel García Márquez. Then compare and contrast these works’ use of magical realism with O’Brien’s, noting particularly the techniques related to time.
2. Much of *Going after Cacciato* has a “filmic” quality—especially the sequences involving the chase to Paris. Vietnam stands as the first war in America where television, film, and other media had an overpowering presence, and in some ways the films dealing with Vietnam are as famous as any book on Vietnam. Watch some of the most famous of these films: *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Born on the Fourth of July*. Discuss the ways these films compare with *Cacciato* in their depictions of violence, women, ambiguity, morality/ethics, the country of Vietnam, the war, and America’s involvement.

The Things They Carried (1990)

The Things They Carried may be Tim O’Brien’s masterwork, a selection of linked chapters overseen by the presence of the narrator “Tim O’Brien”—“a 43-year-old writer who discusses his need for sto-

rytelling and guides the reader through the text, serving as a bridge from story to story and from reader to experience” (Smith 98). Despite the use of his name, O’Brien clearly fictionalizes details about his narrator, making a distinction between “Tim O’Brien,” the author of a novel, and “Tim O’Brien,” the created character of that novel. As he writes in the chapter “How to Tell a True War Story”:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. . . . And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (71)

Thus, Tim O’Brien takes on a task even more complex than that in *Going after Cacciato*—the exploration of truth in fiction, untruth in fact, and the inevitable complicating of the difference between soldiers and the people who stayed at home. In the end, O’Brien questions the people on both sides who insist on knowing what is what, because ultimately “What happened?” does not matter if the story is *true*.

In the initial chapter, “The Things They Carried,” O’Brien details the physical, emotional, and psychological baggage carried by the men of Alpha Company. Through his description, the reader gains a sense of who these men are—Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, Kiowa, and others—fictional (?) characters to whom the book is dedicated. “The things they carried were largely determined by necessity,” O’Brien writes, and “For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity,” and, finally, “They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight” (2, 19, 21). Through the fol-

lowing lists, and the story of Ted Lavendar's death, O'Brien creates a crash course in life as a grunt in Vietnam—not for the soldiers who were there and already know, but for every person who wished those soldiers well and stayed home. At the same time, O'Brien establishes himself as the storyteller, the voice, for every Vietnam vet unable to tell his own tale.

O'Brien continues his job as instructor in "How to Tell a True War Story," juxtaposing advice on how to tell or identify a "true" war story with details about Vietnam, most especially the death of Curt Lemon and its effect on Lemon's best friend, Rat Kiley (not to mention the narrator himself). The story begins with Rat's writing a letter to Lemon's sister after Lemon has been killed: "It's a terrific letter, very personal and touching. Rat almost bawls writing it," O'Brien says, and then, "What happens? Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back" (67, 68). In this way, "the dumb cooze" becomes a stand-in for every person back home, female or otherwise, who does not have the heart or stomach to listen to a vet's story. "Nobody listens," Mitchell Sanders whispers later on. "Nobody hears nothin'. Like the fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody's sweet little virgin girlfriend" (76).

Scattered throughout the "story" portion of "How to Tell a True War Story" are instructions for how to read or hear one. These instructions are probably not for the soldier telling the tale. "A true war story is never moral," O'Brien tells his readers. "It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue. . . . If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie" (68–69). Other points include the inherent obscenity in war ("Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" [69]) and the way a true war story never seems to end: "It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (78). O'Brien adds another nonlistener into his narrative, another "dumb cooze," an older woman,

"of kindly temperament and humane politics" who does not realize that "it *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story" (84, 85). And O'Brien, continuing his play with truth, will tell such a person that none of the story was real—Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley and the baby water buffalo Rat kills in his grief—"none of it happened" (85), because for people who don't get it, who cannot truly *hear*, none of it did.

"The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong" extends this interplay between the soldier in Vietnam and the person back home when Rat Kiley tells the story of a former squad mate who shipped his girlfriend to Vietnam. Rat insists the story is true: "This cute blonde . . . just barely out of high school . . . I swear to God, man," Rat says, "she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater" (90). Sweet Mary Anne starts out as you might expect—cuddling with her boyfriend and playing sister/sex object to the other men stationed in the medical unit. But then she begins to help with emergencies and learns how to fire a weapon. The relationship between Mary Anne and her boyfriend begins to break down; she then disappears into the Green Beret compound at the edge of the camp, "goes native," as it were. Rat needs to explicate at this point: "She was a girl, that's all," he says. "I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got up in the Nam . . . got seduced by the Greenies. . . . You got these blinder's on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. . . . Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude" (107).

The last time Rat sees Mary Anne, she is in the Green Berets' barracks, wearing her normal clothes and a necklace of human tongues. She says, "Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country. . . . When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body . . . I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else" (111). The last Rat hears of her, she has disappeared into the jungle. With "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong," O'Brien offsets the indifferent "readers" of the previous stories (mostly women) with a young girl who, upon going to war, becomes just as involved as any man, if not more. In the words of Pamela Smiley, "Women who never go to

from that of other famous American examinations of warfare, such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Discuss what *courage* might mean to Americans in particular.

2. The Vietnam War is a central feature in much of O'Brien's work, but not always as a setting. How does the war figure in works with post-Vietnam War settings, such as *July, July*? How do characters' attitudes toward the war change as they examine it in retrospect?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bilton, Michael, and Kevin Sim. *Four Hours in My Lai*. New York: Viking, 1992.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005.
- Blyn, Robin. "O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *Explicator* 61, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 189–191.
- Bonn, Maria S. "Can Stories Save Us? Tim O'Brien and the Efficacy of the Text." *Critique* 36, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 1–9.
- Goluboff, Benjamin. "Tim O'Brien's Quang Ngai." *ANQ* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 53–58.
- Heberle, Mark A. *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001.
- Herzog, Tobey C. "Going after Cacciato: The Soldier-Author-Character Seeking Control." *Critique* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1983): 88–96.
- . *Tim O'Brien*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Slogging Surreally in the Vietnamese Jungle." *New York Times*, 6 March 1990, p. 8.
- Lee, Don. "About Tim O'Brien." *Ploughshares* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1995–1996): 196–202.
- McWilliams, Dean. "Tim in O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*." *Critique* 29, no. 4 (Summer 1988): 245–255.
- O'Brien, Tim. *Going after Cacciato*. New York: Dell, 1978.
- . *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. New York: Delacorte, 1973.
- . *In the Lake of the Woods*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- . *July, July*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- . "A Letter to My Son." *Life* 15 October 2004, pp. 14–15.
- . *Northern Lights*. New York: Broadway Books, 1975.
- . *The Nuclear Age*. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- . *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.
- . *Tomcat in Love*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- . "The Vietnam in Me." *New York Times Magazine*, 2 October 1994, pp. 48–57.
- Olson, James S., and Randy Roberts. *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998.
- Shostak, Debra, and Daniel Bourne. "Artful Dodger Interviews Tim O'Brien." *Artful Dodger* 17 (1991): 74–90.
- Smiley, Pamela. "The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*: Why Should Real Women Play?" *Massachusetts Review* 42, no. 4 (2000): 602–613.
- Smith, Patrick A. *Tim O'Brien: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- "Timmerman, John H. "Tim O'Brien and the Art of the True War Story: 'Night March' and 'Speaking of Courage.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 100–115.
- "Tim O'Brien Homepage." Available online. URL: <http://www.illyria.com/tobhp.html>. Accessed July 8, 2009.

Sarah Stoeckl



MARY OLIVER (1935–)

Imagination is better than a sharp instrument. To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.

("Yes! No!" *White Pine*, 8)

In her 1995 essay collection *Blue Pastures*, Mary Oliver writes that the most important and exciting experience to affect her growth as a poet occurred in 1953, when she left Ohio the morning after her high school graduation to visit the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay's home, Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York. Oliver had been exchanging letters with Millay's sister, Norma Millay Ellis, since she was 15 years old. By 1953, Norma and her husband had moved into the Millay estate. Oliver had written to request permission to visit Millay's home, and Norma had granted it. It took her two days to drive from Ohio to Steepletop, and she stayed for three. She visited again and again, and eventually, Oliver moved in and served as a companion, secretary, and writer's assistant to the family. Norma's eccentricities and the stories about Edna St. Vincent Millay and her circle of friends, particularly from her Greenwich Village years of the early 1910s and 1920s, would have a lasting impact on Oliver, both personally and poetically.

In "Steepletop," another essay from *Blue Pastures*, Oliver remarks that she "would not be a biographer for all the tea in China" (74). Prompted by the "secrets" that Norma Millay Ellis shared with her about her sister's surreptitious love affairs and "weaknesses of various kinds," Oliver explores the biographer's respon-

sibility as she wonders about the motivation behind telling such secrets and concludes that they were shared from "the uncomfortable position of being unable to select, from all that was not written down, what was important from what was not important—or, more severely, what was proper biographical material from what was not" (78). Oliver wonders how it might be possible for a biographer to "know when enough is known, and known with sufficient certainty," and in the same essay from *Blue Pastures*, she asks the reader directly to consider the following questions:

What about secrets, what about errors, what about the small black holes where there is nothing at all? What about the wranglings among minor characters, the withholding of facts for thoughtful and not-so-thoughtful reasons—or their mishandling—and this not even in the present but in the past, hidden in letters, in remembered conversations, in reams of papers? And what about the waywardness of life itself—the proclivity toward randomness—the sudden meaningless uplift of wind that tosses out one sheet of paper and keeps another? What about the moment that speaks worlds, as the saying goes, but in the middle of the night, and into deaf ears, and so is never heard, or heard of? (73–74)

It is no wonder that Mary Oliver was considering the value of privacy as she listened to the secrets, errors, and misinterpreted black holes of Millay's private life.

The next important moment in Oliver's poetic development was the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, in 1959. Lowell's break with traditional forms and subject matter helped spark a revolution in American poetry. W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman all began writing openly about material that had not been previously discussed in the public arena. Private experiences with death, abortion, divorce, relationships, and depression, and the subsequent psychological responses to such traumatic events, were addressed, often autobiographically, in what the critic M. L. Rosenthal called "confessional" poetry. By the time Mary Oliver's first book, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, was published in the United States in 1965, after previously appearing in England in 1963, it was clear that her poetry would be quite different from the soul-baring laments of her contemporaries. While many of the poems address her poetic influences, people she knew, and even events from her life, they are not revelations of her inner emotional struggles.

Both the confessional writing style of the period and her intimate exposure to Edna St. Vincent Millay's private life would inform Oliver's writing style as well as her treatment of her own public persona. As if pushing against confessional poetry, often defined as the poetry of the personal, Oliver describes her approach to poetry as a literary disappearing act. In part, this explains her tendency toward keeping her personal life private, because, as she explains in an interview in the *Bloomsbury Review*, "if I've done my work well, I vanish completely from the scene. . . . I am trying in my poems to vanish and have the reader be the experiencer. I do not want to be there." However, much as a biographer may want to imply that Oliver's poetry pushes up against a confessional writing style, her poems are at once deeply personal and yet also intensely private.

Mary Oliver was born on September 10, 1935, in Maple Heights, Ohio, to Edward William Oliver and Helen M. Vlasak. Her mother's family had emigrated from Bohemia to farm in Ohio, and her father was a teacher in Cleveland. Mary Oliver spent her childhood and adolescence growing up in Ohio. After her stay at Steepletop with the Millay Ellis family, Oliver briefly attended both Ohio State University and Vassar College, which many critics have said marked Oliver's journey in the footsteps of Edna St. Vincent Millay, one of her major literary influences. After leaving Vassar, Oliver moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and settled into the artistic community that had also embraced Millay.

In the late 1950s, another significant moment occurred for Mary Oliver: She met someone and fell in love. Since that time, Oliver has dedicated almost every book to this same woman, whom she did not openly acknowledge as her partner and life companion until 1992, when she received the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems*. Perhaps prompted by the "out and proud" winner Paul Monette (nonfiction, *Borrowed Time*) and the nominee Dorothy Allison (fiction, *Bastard Out of Carolina*), Sue Russell, a poet and writer, reported in the *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, "Oliver took the stage at the award ceremony and thanked both the Democrats and 'the light of my life, Molly Malone Cook'" (Russell). True to her inclination to keep her personal life separate from her public persona, Oliver did not again mention the relationship, which would ultimately last nearly 50 years, until 1999 in *Winter Hours*, where she wrote simply: "M. and I met in the late fifties. For myself it was all adolescence again—shivers and whistles. Certainty. We have lived together for more than thirty years, so far. I would not tell much about it. Privacy, no longer cherished in the world, is all the same still a natural and sensible attribute of paradise. We are happy, and we are lucky." As if in answer to queries from the gay and lesbian community about her hesitation to share this relationship with the

world, Oliver continues: "We are neither political nor inclined to like company. Repeat: we are happy, and we are lucky" (100).

Mary Oliver's first book of poetry, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, received an unusual amount of attention when it appeared in the United States in 1965, two years after its debut in London. It was widely reviewed in intellectual publications such as the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *New Statesman*, and *Commonweal*, often by such prominent poets as Philip Booth and James Dickey. Some of the reviews, however, were stinging in their criticism. *No Voyage, and Other Poems* was a volume dedicated to what would become Oliver's lifelong theme, an exploration of the relationship between the human and natural worlds, and some critics found Oliver's book to be "too feminine." Oliver had not relied on free verse and the allusive language of her confessional peers but had utilized fixed patterns of meter and rhyme and preferred the plain, accessible language of another major literary influence, Robert Frost. As does Frost, Oliver turns again and again in this volume to nature, which she treats directly and in unsentimental fashion. Many of the reviews also noted the connection between Oliver's poetry and that of Edna St. Vincent Millay, a connection that was not seen as a compliment. In the *Christian Science Monitor*, Booth wrote that Oliver's "inclination toward what's 'poetic' becomes openly embarrassing," while in the *New York Times Book Review*, Dickey added "conventional and ordinary" to describe the volume. His main complaint was that "Miss Oliver . . . is good, but predictably good; . . . She never seems quite to be in her poems, as adroit as some of them are, but is always outside of them, putting them together from the available literary elements." One wonders whether Oliver's first book of poems would have been better received if she had been more willing to bare her soul.

The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems appeared in 1972, seven years after Oliver's first publication. Although this volume maintains her interest in traditional poetic forms, unlike her first book

it turns more often to human, familial, and social relationships for solace than to the natural world. While the confessional style of the late 1950s and early 1960s and the unfavorable response to *No Voyage* may have prompted this more personal and social subject matter, this preference may just as easily have been the influence of Robert Bly and James Wright, who had attempted a new method of joining nature and the human world through poetry using the "deep image." In the end, though, *The River Styx* is more of a local fact than a mythic image and yet more alienating and isolating than even *No Voyage* had been for Oliver. In short, both the natural and human worlds had failed to offer her any comfort. While magical places like Walden and the River Styx, Ohio, seem appealing in their mythology, Oliver realizes that the most difficult voyages are still intensely personal and introspective.

Oliver's subsequent publications, beginning with two chapbooks published by small Ohio presses, along with *Twelve Moons*, her third book, which was published in 1978, focus more intently on the natural world and move farther away from human subjects, although she is even bolder in her exploration of myths and symbols than in *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems*. In *The Night Traveler*, a chapbook published in 1978 by Bits Press in Cleveland, Oliver continues to utilize the "deep image" in order to describe, explore, and convey what Walt Whitman called "the merge." Through the surreal imagery of this mythic dimension, Oliver sees her character "the Night Traveler," who is made of "bits of wilderness. . . . Twigs, loam and leaves," as a guide meant to intercede for the poet (or anyone) attempting to merge the natural and the human realms. The award-winning author and literary critic Joyce Carol Oates calls these poems "carefully, beautifully, constructed around an image out of nature, or out of the poet's family life," which illuminate the tension between "two worlds, that of the personal and familial, and that of the impersonal and inhuman." As had her transcendentalist and romantic predecessors, Oliver wants desperately

to reconcile these two worlds by exploring their interconnectedness and their overlap by returning again and again to the places where they meet. *Twelve Moons* also explores natural processes and cycles and focuses specifically on particular items in nature, as in “Stone Poem”; identifiable plants like “Aunt Leaf,” “The Black Walnut Tree,” and “Looking for Mushrooms”; and animals such as “Turtles,” “Bats,” “Sharks,” and even “Snakes in Winter.” The volume is arranged around 12 moon poems, which refer specifically to phases of human experience and summon recollections of a time when lunar cycles were said to shape human behavior.

Oliver’s next book, *American Primitive* (1983), won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for poetry and was praised for its portrayal of familiar, natural objects and places in fresh and precise ways. Again concerning herself with “the merge” between humans and nature, Oliver utilizes “recurring images of ingestion” through the volume, according to Bruce Bennett’s review in the *New York Times Book Review*. Bennett continues, commending Oliver’s “distinctive voice and vision” as he describes the thoughtful journey that readers of *American Primitive* must take: “As we joyfully devour luscious objects and substances . . . we are continually reminded of our involvement in a process in which what consumes will be consumed.”

Throughout her career, Oliver seems to alternate the focus of her books back and forth between nature-based and human-based themes as she struggles to connect and reconcile the two worlds. While *American Primitive* focused on the natural world, *Dream Work* (1986) shifts again to human nature and history, including a poem that frankly and starkly addresses the Holocaust. *Dream Work* was praised for its lyrical mastery and was, for the poet-critic Alicia Ostriker, a move “from the natural world and its desires, the ‘heaven of appetite’ . . . into the world of historical and personal suffering.” Ostriker further asserts that Oliver steadily confronts “what she cannot change.” In fact, Colin Lowndes of the

Toronto Globe & Mail called Oliver “a poet of worked-for reconciliations.”

Oliver’s dedicated effort to reconcile, present, explore, and reconnect nature with humanity and spirituality is apparent in all of her subsequent work, including *House of Light* (1990), *New and Selected Poems* (1992), *White Pine* (1994), and *West Wind* (1997). She said herself, in an interview with Eleanor Swanson featured in the *Bloomsbury Review*, that nearly all of her poems “employ the natural world in an emblematic way, and yet, they are all—so was my intent!—about the human condition.” Even Oliver’s essays, prose poems, and handbooks further her work with humans and nature by examining words, language, and lyric, metered poetry as the mechanisms she uses to achieve that reconciliation.

Called “Blake-eyed” and “as visionary as Emerson,” and compared to Keats for her “controlled, lyrical flights,” Mary Oliver finds herself in excellent poetic company. Although she values Millay’s and Frost’s commitment to metered, fixed-form poetry, she has also been dubbed “the best living practitioner of the free verse line.” While many critics have cited Oliver’s poetry as a continuation of the work of Marianne Moore, D. H. Lawrence, and Elizabeth Bishop, her poetry, prose, and essay style is all her own. Indeed, Mary Oliver’s clarity, her freshness of perception, her directness, and her commitment to accessible vernacular language are joyful and, ultimately, deeply moving.

“The Black Snake” (1978)

Originally collected in Oliver’s third major work of poetry, *Twelve Moons* (1978), “The Black Snake” is an excellent representative example of the types of poems that appeared in that collection. From *Twelve Moons*’s first poem, “Sleeping in the Forest,” Oliver guides her readers toward the unifying theme of the book by beginning with the lines “By morning / I had vanished at least a dozen times / into something better.” As

she dreams over and over again that she is actually becoming a physical part of the forest, Oliver sets the stage for her readers, prompting them to imagine that they are engaging and reconnecting with the natural world and natural processes.

The structure of *Twelve Moons* also lends itself to this interpretation of reconnection; the book begins in April's springtime, which is representative of new birth, and continues on through the seasons of nature's cyclical calendar, ending in March on the cusp, again, of spring. The collection of 51 poems travels the course of a year and is divided by 12 moon poems that represent each month. This lunar structure, along with the title of the collection, is suggestive of a time when human affairs were thought to be influenced by the moon, immediately hinting at the value of reconsidering a human connection to nature.

As do the 12 moon poems also found in this collection, "The Black Snake" presents a moment of connection between the poet and nature through the precise description of highly focused observation and imagination. This poem focuses specifically on one moment after a literal collision between nature and the human world. The speaker begins as if she is retelling a poignant story: "When the black snake / flashed onto the morning road, / and the truck could not swerve— / *death*, that is how it happens." In these first four lines, readers might be startled by the quick movement of the snake as they recall the surprises and near-misses they may have had in their own automobiles. We understand those unavoidable and accidental moments and dread the end of the line, which tells us "the truck could not swerve." When we encounter the em-dash at the end of that line, our eyes slide like the truck into the inevitable thud of the italicized word *death* at the beginning of the next line. The narrative tale and the rhythm of the poem are interrupted both by the em-dash and the word *death* itself, as the speaker abruptly makes the grammatical choice to exchange "the black snake" for "*death*" as the subject of the sentence. The black snake's death is immediate, unexpected, and regrettable.

The speaker stops the car and notices that the snake is now lying as "looped and useless / as an old bicycle tire." As she carries him into the bushes on the side of the road, she notices that "He is as cool and gleaming / as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet / as a dead brother." Oliver's choice here first to compare the snake to a whip and then to examine the beauty of his quiet body as if it were our own dead brother's is an obvious appeal to our emotions. We realize that we are expected, as readers, to feel the loss of this snake as poignantly as if he were a close relative. However, Oliver does not simply romanticize the snake's death; she also acknowledges the potential danger inherent in nature by comparing the snake to a gleaming, braided whip. With each simile, Oliver highlights her desire to reconnect with the natural world. At first the speaker is alienated, disconnected from the natural world. She sees the dead snake as garbage, a "thing" to be disposed of. Then, she acknowledges the fear and danger that exist in the real natural world, and, finally, she accepts the snake as part of her own family.

The speaker drives on, thinking about "*death*: its suddenness, / its terrible weight, / its certain coming," and we feel her fear. The repetition of the word *its* in each of these three lines trudges heavily onward and inevitably toward the end punctuation that occurs in the middle of the line. But the line that begins with "its certain coming," ends with a hopeful "Yet." The poem continues by asserting that "a brighter fire," in each of us, devoid of reason, insists that we will not die. Oliver calls it "the story of endless good fortune" that "says to oblivion: not me!" She is certain that "It is the light at the center of every cell," and that "It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward / happily all spring through the green leaves before / he came to the road." Oliver's asserting that each of us, including the black snake, has "a brighter fire," and repeating two precisely declarative statements (*It is, It is*), tell readers of this poem that not only does Mary Oliver believe everything has the "brighter fire" of a soul, she knows it for a fact.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Mary Oliver places her poem “The Black Snake” near the beginning of her book *Twelve Moons*, just after the first moon poem, “Pink Moon—The Pond,” and just before the poem called “Spring.” Discuss why or why not this placement is appropriate for a poem about death.
2. Compare Oliver’s poem “Snakes in Winter” to “The Black Snake.” Instead of using the traditional spiritual/religious imagery of a snake that embodies evil, Mary Oliver depicts snakes that seem more benevolent, with forked tongues as “sensitive as an angel’s ear.” Their bodies flash like whips, and yet they are either sluggish or dead in these two poems. Discuss the implications of these apparent contradictions.

“In Blackwater Woods” (1983)

In *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999), Mary Oliver writes that “for many years, in a place I called Blackwater Woods, I wrote while I walked. That motion, hardly more than a dreamy sauntering, worked for me; it kept my body happy while I scribbled” (5). Over the course of her career, Oliver wrote often about this place, in poems called “At Blackwater Pond,” “White Heron Rises over Blackwater,” and two significantly different poems with the same title: “In Blackwater Woods.” This entry will examine the poem that was originally collected in *American Primitive* (1983). The longer poem with the same title can be found in Oliver’s collection *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems* (1994).

“In Blackwater Woods” begins with the command “Look,” immediately signifying to the reader that action is necessary and urgent. As we might expect from Oliver, the verb *to look* could simply be a suggestion to pay attention to the natural world. As the first stanza progresses, however, we understand the intensity of the command more fully, for we see that the speaker is actually describing a forest fire:

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

Oliver’s use of the active voice is startling here, for readers are accustomed to thinking of trees as the passive objects of a consuming and destructive forest fire. In the news media, forest fires are never described in this way. Trees do not turn “their own bodies / into pillars / of light”; they are the victims, acted upon and annihilated by fire. But here, “In Blackwater Woods,” if we read these lines carefully, noting the alliteration of *t* and *f* sounds, we see that the emphasis is on “trees” and “turning,” as well as the “fragrance” of “fulfillment.” It seems almost sacrilegious for a dedicated lover of nature like Oliver to be enjoying the smell of a burning forest as though it were incense or potpourri.

In the third stanza, Oliver employs the burning metaphor of a candle to describe “the long tapers / of cattails” as they burst into flames and float “away over / the blue shoulders / of the ponds.” The structural syntax in the fourth stanza highlights the destructive power of the fire as Oliver repeats *ponds* and *pond* at the end of the first two lines, creating a lovely rhythm that is carried through the third and fourth lines of stanza 4 and into the first line of stanza 5; “and every pond / no matter what its / name is, is / nameless now.” The emphasis is placed on the words *no*, *name*, *nameless*, and *now* through the repetition of *name* and through the alliteration of the *n* consonant sound.

As Oliver often does after a presentation of nature via clear imagery, she then turns inward, looking for answers. In this poem, she finds that “everything” she has “ever learned” in her “lifetime / leads back to this: the fires / and the black

river of loss.” But more than just a lament, “In Blackwater Woods” is hopeful. Oliver gives her readers a glimpse at the salvation of life in this world, but she insists that we “must be able / to do three things”:

to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

In the final two stanzas, Oliver’s melodic lines suggest that we must be able to love, to hold, and to let go if we want to be as fulfilled as the trees and as bursting and joyful as the cattails.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The tendencies toward romanticism in Mary Oliver’s “In Blackwater Woods” are especially significant. Discuss whether or not Oliver is participating in a rationalization of nature as she attempts to connect the human experience of loss to the natural occurrence of a forest fire.
2. Read Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One Art” and compare it to Oliver’s “In Blackwater Woods.” Both works deal with loss in distinctly different ways. Discuss the differences that you perceive in the two poems; then generate two lists that identify appropriate audiences for each. As you compose your lists, remember that dealing with loss is often a difficult task, and be prepared to defend your choices with evidence from the poems.

“Wild Geese” (1986)

Oliver published her fifth major collection of poetry, *Dream Work*, in 1986, while she was the poet in residence at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. In *Dream Work*, where

“Wild Geese” appeared originally, Oliver continues to explore the connection between humanity and the natural world, alternating between the potential joy that such a connection could generate and the doubt that such a connection is attainable.

“Wild Geese” begins by addressing the reader directly, repetitively, with the second-person pronoun *you*. The opening lines are meant to be comforting and reassuring as they address the despair and alienation that are sometimes part of the human condition:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert,
repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your
body
love what it loves.

As readers are soothed by the repetition and lyrical construction of these lines, we understand that the poet has chosen the second-person pronoun *you* as a plural, and not singular, referent. The poet invites us, all of us, to tell her “about despair, yours,” and she promises, “I will tell you mine.”

As the poem progresses, Oliver repeats the word *meanwhile* three times to indicate that even while despair and alienation may be consuming us, “the world goes on.” By utilizing the metaphor of “the soft animal of your body,” she encourages us to reestablish our connection with nature, so that we can be like the wild geese “high in the clean blue air” who are “heading home again.”

The final lines return briefly to the despair of alienation but then suggest an alternative. “Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,” Oliver insists, “the world offers itself to your imagination.” The poet echoes the opening lines by reiterating what we already know about the human condition: that finding our place in the world may not be an easy task. However, she promises that the world

will call to us “like the wild geese,” and it will be “harsh and exciting.” Ultimately, at least in this poem, Oliver is convinced that we will all be able to find our solace in nature, because the world itself, over and over, will announce our place “in the family of things.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read William Carlos Williams’s poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” and compare it to Oliver’s “Wild Geese.” Analyze the significance of wings and nature in both poems, and consider the themes of alienation and success. Discuss the messages that each poem conveys to the reader.
2. Compare Robert Frost’s poem “Birches” to Oliver’s “Wild Geese.” Both poets often explore the connections between nature and humanity. Discuss each work thematically but look also at the differences in style, tone, and imagery. Consider especially the “use” of nature in each poem.

“Landscape” (1986)

Also published in *Dream Work*, “Landscape” resumes Oliver’s work to reconnect humanity with the natural world in a decidedly spiritual way. In this poem, Oliver plays the role of what she has called “the imaginer.” Through a self-conscious use of what John Ruskin, a 19th-century writer, called the pathetic fallacy, which attributes human emotion and characteristics to plants, animals, and other elements of nature, Oliver recognizes our inability to reunite with or understand fully a nonhuman world. In the role of “the imaginer,” Oliver utilizes personification to employ the pathetic fallacy because, as she explains in *Rules for the Dance*, personification can create “a sense of intimacy” between the poet and any element of the natural world. For Oliver, creating “a sense, however impossible logically, of an operating will” assists both poet and reader in their attempts to understand and relate to nature.

She is often careful, however, about assuming that she can speak for the plants and animals because she understands the danger in doing so.

There are three examples of this cautious personification in “Landscape.” In the opening lines, Oliver asks, “Isn’t it plain the sheets of moss, except that / they have no tongues, could lecture / all day if they wanted about / / spiritual patience?” Oliver admits that she is appropriating nature for her own purposes in her personification of the moss with the two enjambed lines “except that / they have no tongues.” The next example immediately follows the first with Oliver’s second rhetorical question: “Isn’t it clear / the black oaks along the path are standing / as though they were the most fragile of flowers?” In this example, the poet imagines that the trees also have an imagination and are choosing to imitate “the most fragile of flowers.”

The third example occurs in the last two stanzas of “Landscape.” This time, the poet actually watches “the crows break off from the rest of the darkness / and burst up into the sky—as though / / all night they had thought of what they would like / their lives to be, and imagined / their strong, thick wings.” In the final example, Oliver is forthright about the crows’ imagination, but she softens the personification with the phrase “as though.” This phrase appears twice in the poem, along with the similar *except* signaling the poet’s ethical tendency to allow the moss, the trees, and the crows to have their own identity. With this cautiousness, Oliver admits that she might be getting it wrong.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the poem “Landscape,” the poet believes that “if the doors of my heart / ever close, I am as good as dead.” Discuss this line in relationship to the rest of the poem, considering the personification of nature and Oliver’s role as “the imaginer.”
2. Oliver’s personifications in “Landscape” seem to give “spiritual patience” to the moss and an imagination to the oaks and crows. Approaching

the landscape she depicts from a different perspective, what other attributes could be associated with these elements in nature?

“Goldenrod” (1991)

“Goldenrod,” circa 1991, appears under the heading “New Poems” in volume I of Oliver’s *New and Selected Poems*, which appeared in 1992. Arranged in reverse chronological order, *New and Selected Poems* emphasizes Oliver’s more recent poems, commanding her reader’s attention before we reread any of our old favorites.

“Goldenrod” begins with four stanzas that move the reader through “fall fields” of goldenrod “in rumpy bunches.” As readers we are entranced by these “sneeze-bringers and seed-bearers / full of bees and yellow beads and perfect flowerlets,” and we might be surprised to learn that goldenrod is, in fact, a weed. After such frolicking description, Oliver’s apparent dismissal of the plant seems unfair when she remarks, “I don’t suppose / much notice comes of it,” and “I don’t suppose anything loves it.” Readers realize that Oliver is downplaying the plants when she makes two exceptions: “except for honey, / and how it heartens the heart with its / / blank blaze” and “except, perhaps, / the rocky voids / filled by its dumb dazzle.” Oliver’s use of alliteration in these lines signals a sense of playfulness that belies any real dismissal of the natural world.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, Oliver remarks that she “was just passing by, when the wind flared / and the blossoms rustled, / and the glittering pandemonium / / leaned on me.” As a human, intent on being in and a part of the natural world, not surprisingly, Oliver, out “minding my own business,” is delighted to find herself “on their straw hillsides, / citron and butter-colored.” In the seventh stanza, the poet asks her readers directly—“and why not?”—whether there any reasons why she should not be happy in the goldenrod. At this moment of questioning, the poem shifts from the playful alliteration of the

consonant *h* used to describe how the goldenrod “heartens the heart” and turns to the more serious combination of the consonant sounds *d* and *l* that ask us to consider deeper implications: “Are not the difficult labors of our lives / full of dark hours?” What could be better than tossing in the wind on “airy backbones”?

Oliver imagines that the goldenrod must have a better life, and there is a hint of jealousy in her descriptions: “They bend as though it was natural and godly to bend, / they rise in a stiff sweetness, / in the pure peace of giving / one’s gold away.” As the poem concludes, the gentle repetition of the word *bend* and the alliterations of *stiff sweetness* and *pure peace* begin to feel controlled and comforting. In “Goldenrod,” the poet and the reader alike are able to find solace in the selfless process of pollination.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poetry influenced Mary Oliver tremendously. In conjunction with “Goldenrod,” read Millay’s poem “Weeds” and discuss the similarities or differences in style and theme.
2. Mary Oliver has been compared to William Wordsworth by critics who see them both as romantic nature poets. Compare “Goldenrod” to Wordsworth’s “To a Skylark.” After researching the characteristics of romantic poetry, discuss the elements of the romantic tradition that you uncover in each of the poems.

“Why I Wake Early” (2004)

“Why I Wake Early,” the title poem of Mary Oliver’s 2004 collection of poetry, utilizes anaphora, or the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of several successive lines, for emphasis. Traditional romantic poets were masters of this poetic technique, which serves to create a parallelism of language that resembles the litany of religious devotion. Readers will note that “Why I Wake Early” is, in fact, a prayer: of

be similar, citing specific examples from each poet's work as evidence.

2. As were Emerson and Thoreau before her, Oliver has been called a transcendentalist poet. After selecting poems by all three authors, discuss the transcendentalist themes and style in each. In a well-developed essay, discuss whether or not you would call Oliver a transcendentalist.
3. Read William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" and compare his poem to Mary Oliver's work. Discuss the differences and similarities in the two poets' writing styles, themes, and tone. Consider the fact that Mary Oliver is a 21st-century American poet and William Blake is an 18th-century English poet, and explore ways in which their historical and geographical differences may have influenced them as writers.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alford, Jean B. "The Poetry of Mary Oliver: Modern Renewal through Moral Acceptance." *Pembroke Magazine* 20 (1988): 283-288.
- Barron, Jonathan N. "Mary Oliver." In *American Writers, Supplement VII*, edited by Jay Parini, 229-248. New York: Scribner, 2001.
- Bennett, Bruce. "Three Poets." *New York Times Book Review*, 17 July 1983, p. 10.
- Bonds, Diane. "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver." *Women's Studies* 21 (1992): 1-15.
- Burton-Christie, Douglas. "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver." *Cross Currents* 46, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 77-87.
- Dickey, James. "Of Human Concern." *New York Times Book Review*, 21 November 1965, pp. BR74-BR75.
- Doty, Mark. "Natural Science: In Praise of Mary Oliver." *Provincetown Arts* 11 (1995): 26-29.
- Graham, Vicki. "'Into the Body of Another': Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other." *Papers on Language and Literature* 30, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 352-372.
- Kumin, Maxine. "Intimations of Mortality." *Women's Review of Books* 10, no. 7 (April 1993): 19.
- Long, Mark C. "Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud*." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 277-278.
- McNew, Janet. "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry." *Contemporary Literature* 30, no. 1 (1989): 59-77.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Review of *The Night Traveler*." *New Republic* 179 (9 December 1978): 28-29.
- Olander, Renée. "An Interview with Poet Mary Oliver." *AWP Chronicle* 27 (September 1994): 1.
- Oliver, Mary. *American Primitive*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1983.
- . *At Blackwater Pond: Mary Oliver Reads Mary Oliver*. Audio CD. Boston: Beacon, 2006.
- . *Blue Iris: Poems and Essays*. Boston: Beacon, 2004.
- . *Blue Pastures*. New York: Harcourt, 1995.
- . *Dream Work*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.
- . *House of Light*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.
- . *The Leaf and the Cloud*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2000.
- . *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2004.
- . *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- . *New and Selected Poems, Volume Two*. Boston: Beacon, 2004.
- . *The Night Traveler*. Cleveland: Bits Press, 1978.
- . *No Voyage, and Other Poems*. New York: Dent, 1963.
- . *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- . *Provincetown*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Appletree Alley, 1987.
- . *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems*. New York: Harcourt, 1972.
- . *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- . *Sleeping in the Forest*. Athens: Ohio Review Chapbook, 1979.

- . *Thirst: Poems*. Boston: Beacon, 2006.
- . *Twelve Moons*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1978.
- . *West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- . *What Do We Know: Poems*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2002.
- . *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1994.
- . *Why I Wake Early*. Boston: Beacon, 2004.
- . *Wild Geese: Selected Poems*. Highgreen, Tarsset, England: Bloodaxe Books, 2004.
- . *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "Review of *Dream Work*." *Nation* 243, no. 5 (1986): 148–150.
- The Poetry Foundation. "Mary Oliver." Available online. URL: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=5130>. Accessed July 8, 2009.
- Russell, Sue. "Mary Oliver: The Poet and the Persona." *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 21–22.
- Steinman, Lisa. "Dialogues between History and Dream." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 2 (1987): 428–438.
- Swanson, Eleanor. "The Language of Dreams: An Interview with Mary Oliver." *Bloomsbury Review* 10, no. 3 (May/June 1990): 1.
- Tillinghast, Richard. "Stars and Departures, Hummingbirds and Statues." *Poetry* 166, no. 5 (August 1995): 288–290.
- Voros, Gyorgyi. "Exquisite Environments." *Parnassus* 21, nos. 1–2 (1996): 231–250.
- Yaeger, Patricia. *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Maure Smith



SIMON J. ORTIZ (1941–)

The words are the vision by which we see out and in and around.

(A Good Journey)

Simon J. Ortiz has been referred to as the grandfather of Native American literature. His name is often invoked among greats such as Sherman Alexie, LESLIE MARMON SILKO, and JOY HARJO (his former wife) and writers such as Paula Gunn Allen cite Ortiz as one of their most important influences. Unlike such Native American writers as James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, and LOUISE ERDRICH, Ortiz has the distinction of growing up in a traditional Native American home where his family spoke their native Acoma language, Keresan; although his parents understood English and spoke it well, Ortiz learned English as a second language. Born to Joe Ortiz, a stonemason, and Mamie Torimio Ortiz, a potter, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on May 27, 1941, Ortiz grew up in an Acoma village in McCartys (Deetseyamah). His father was an Acoma elder with the responsibility of maintaining Acoma traditions, and his grandfather was a spiritual leader in the village. Ortiz inherited both their leadership qualities and their desire to support their cultural heritage.

The values he learned at home are perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in an anecdote Ortiz tells about his childhood reluctance to speak. In “Always the Stories,” Ortiz relays a story told by his family that he “did not speak until [he] was almost four years old” (“Stories” 58). When the matter was called to his grandfa-

ther’s attention, Ortiz’s grandfather retrieved a key from his pocket, saying:

Nana, you will grow to have a good and useful life. You will learn many things and help teach many things. There is a whole world around us in which we all live. Speech is an important part of knowing that world. You have a tongue and a mouth with which to speak. It is up to you to use them for the benefit of yourself and all things. You will be healthy in your growing, and you will now speak in order to fulfill yourself. You will speak. (“Stories” 58)

Upon saying this, Ortiz’s grandfather “turned the key, unlocking language,” and Ortiz reports that “sometime later [he] began to speak” (“Stories” 58). The anecdote is representative of Ortiz’s preoccupation with language and the lasting and definitive impression it made on his consciousness. Raised in an environment that valued the oral tradition of storytelling, Ortiz viewed stories as an opportunity for bonding with his family, his people, and his heritage and valued them for their ability to provide continuity between the past and the present.

Given the weight Ortiz attributes to language and narration, the striking absence of Native Americans in the stories he read as a child could not be merely incidental in Ortiz’s development

as a writer and poet. As Ortiz remarks, “I learned there were no Indians; they were visages of the historical past who rode painted ponies and attacked wagon trains . . . we were expected to identify with white American images of Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff and homes with white picket fences” (“Stories” 64). Feeling alienated by absence of America’s Indians from the dominant cultural construct, Ortiz “turned to language”: “the stories that always were; they were basic; they were knowledge which would help me . . . I regarded stories as a way I could deal with the world” (“Stories” 64). By telling the stories of American Indians in a language he was coercively made to privilege above his native language, Ortiz effectively uses the language of the colonizer to challenge U.S. cultural imperialism, environmental destruction, and economic injustice.

Ortiz’s interest in the politics of language was deeply personal from the beginning since, as a child, he was prohibited from speaking his native language at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in an era when the U.S. government took an assimilationist approach to schooling Native Americans. Reproached for speaking their native languages, the children were scolded and sometimes smacked with a ruler for greeting others in their native language or for failing to use only English at school. The experience goes a long way toward explaining why Ortiz later felt relief when, in college, he began to write about American Indian culture: “It was a revolutionary thought, at least to me, to write about my culture, history, and heritage, especially since there was nothing, not even a tiny bit of it, from a Native American perspective in previous works of literature” (“Stories” 65). Yet Ortiz helped to change all of that.

Ortiz attended the Bureau of Indian Affairs school until sixth grade, when he enrolled in St. Catherine’s Indian School in Sante Fe. A promising student, Ortiz demonstrated glimmers of a future as a writer throughout his school years. By age 11, Ortiz had published his first work, a Mother’s Day poem, in the school newspaper. Keeping journals and reading voraciously in high

school, Ortiz continued to develop the seeds of a writer’s mind. Upon graduating, Ortiz took a job in the uranium mines in 1960. Troubled by the working conditions there, Ortiz would later base a book on his experience with the mining industry. Between 1961 and 1962, Ortiz attended Fort Lewis College. From 1962 to 1965, Ortiz served in the U.S. Army, where he experienced overt racism and was made to utilize the “Colored Only” drinking fountains and restrooms. After these experiences, Ortiz once again sought higher learning at the University of New Mexico, from 1966 to 1968. In 1968 and 1969, Ortiz attended the University of Iowa, where he was a Fellow in the International Writing Program. By this time, Ortiz was becoming recognized as a writer. In 1969, he won the prestigious Discovery Award from the National Endowment for the Arts (which also awarded him a fellowship in 1981), and, in 1971, he published his first work, *Naked in the Wind*.

Emerging during the 1960s and 1970s when the Civil Rights movement was a dominant part of the American political consciousness, Ortiz offered a productive contribution to the themes resonant with the era of social and environmental justice. By the 1980s and 1990s, Ortiz had proved to be a prolific writer. While best known for his poetry, he has also written nonfiction essays, short stories, and songs. As a young student in Skull Valley, in fact, Ortiz wrote poetry and song lyrics influenced by the country-western singers Jimmy Rodgers and Hank Williams. His interest in songs would continue throughout his career. Indeed, as Ortiz explains in the essay “Song/Poetry and Language—Expression and Perception,” “There is also something in a song that is actually substantial” (239). More than mere words, songs become tangible when people realize the significance of what something means to them. For Ortiz, “The substance is emotional, but beyond that, spiritual, and it’s real and you are present in and part of it. The act of the song which you are experiencing is real, and the reality is its substance” (239–240). In keeping with an

interest in the aspect of the performance of songs and with his aim to continue the oral tradition so integral to Native American culture, much of Ortiz's work is available as video and audio recordings of poetry readings.

Addressing subject matter that ranges from human to environmental exploitation, Ortiz's work often examines themes of alienation, displacement, loss, and journeying. Indeed, throughout Ortiz's wider oeuvre, he is concerned with harmony among culturally diverse societies within biodiverse settings. The strength of Ortiz's contributions stem from his intense focus on the social and political injustices of the 20th-century United States and his ability to write about subjects that speak to all Americans, even as his work is profoundly personal at the same time. Given his concern with ecological well-being, in fact, perhaps now, more than ever, Ortiz's work will be of special interest to those who are concerned with the state of our environmental health.

In addition to his long career as a writer and poet, Ortiz has served a range of communities through his forays into the military, public relations, American Indian government, teaching, speaking, and performing. The recipient of awards such as Honored Poet of the White House Salute to Poetry (1981) and a Humanitarian Award from the New Mexico Humanities Council (1989), Ortiz may be considered a human and civil rights activist as much as an accomplished writer. By 1993, for example, Ortiz had already been honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award for literature at the Returning the Gift Festival of Native American Writers and Storytellers. He has a varied and impressive teaching history, with stints at schools such as San Diego State University; the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona; the College of Marin in Kentfield, California; the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque; Sinte Gleska College in Rosebud, South Dakota; and Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon; he is currently an instructor at the University of Toronto in Canada. He has also

been a tribal interpreter and lieutenant governor of the Acoma Pueblo and a consulting editor for Acoma Pueblo Press. In addition to his work as a writer, teacher, activist, humanitarian, and cultural critic, Ortiz is a father of three—Raho Nez, Rainy Dawn, and Sara Marie.

Influenced by the folksy beat of the American musician and poet Bob Dylan, the singer-songwriter Hank Williams, and the American poet Carl Sandburg, Ortiz's work is rooted, in part, in the rootless traveler, and he shares with some of his literary forebears (Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and Malcolm Lowry) the influence of alcoholism. In *Woven Stone*, in fact, Ortiz explains how alcoholism had always been a part of his life: "As a child I was traumatically afraid of the behavior of my father and others under the influence of alcohol." Ortiz was raised on works by the aforementioned authors as well as writers such as William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; these influences constitute just one dimension of the background informing Ortiz's work. To be sure, the most important influence in Ortiz's long career as a writer has been his heritage as a Native American from the Acoma people. Although Ortiz would later say becoming a writer was not something he had planned from the start, he was increasingly compelled to represent his own experiences and that of the wider community with which he identified. As Ortiz explains, "Personally, I don't know if I ever 'decided' to be a writer and poet, but I know I have felt it was important to participate in the act of helping to carry on the expression of a way of life that I believed in" (Anderson 42).

For Ortiz this way of life was, in many ways, antithetical to the way of living within the U.S. mainstream. In the preface to *From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which Is Our America*, Ortiz introduces the work as "an analysis of myself as an American, which is hemispheric, a U.S. citizen, which is national, and as an Indian, which is spiritual and human" (*From Sand Creek* 7). While he recognizes that none of these boundaries is

“strictly defined and not at all limiting,” Ortiz nevertheless is clear about his aims in this collection: “For Indian people, I would like *From Sand Creek* to be a study of that process which they have experienced as victim, subject and expendable resource. For people of European heritage, I want it to be a study, too, but one which looks at motive and mission and their own victimization” (*From Sand Creek* 7). Set in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Fort Lyons, Colorado, *From Sand Creek*, for instance, returns to the site where Ortiz underwent treatment for alcoholism between 1974 and 1975. Named after the geographical location of an 1864 massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, *From Sand Creek* is also a return to one of the most historically notorious examples of Native American struggles with the violence of the white colonizer. Winner of the 1981 Pushcart Prize, *From Sand Creek*, as is true of Ortiz’s work generally, achieves a rare tenderness. Unapologetic about his fierce criticisms of 20th-century U.S. tendencies toward cultural imperialism, Ortiz manages to offer hope rather than a purely cynical perspective on the often sinister realities his work confronts. The first poem of the collection *From Sand Creek*, for example, orients readers to the wisdom of a poet intent on serving the good news along with the bad: “This America / has been a burden / of steel and mad / death, / but, look now, there are flowers / and new grass / and a spring wind / rising / from Sand Creek” (*From Sand Creek* 9).

Tenacious in its criticism of the colonial and neocolonial efforts to displace Native Americans, Ortiz’s poetry is nonetheless as gentle as it is strong. *A Good Journey*, for example, is dedicated to his children, who make appearances throughout the collection. For Ortiz, in fact, “The only way to continue is to tell a story and there is no other way,” since “Your children will not survive unless you tell something about them—how they were born, how they came to this certain place, how they continued.” In the preface to *A Good Journey*, from which the poems that follow are taken, Ortiz responds to the question “Who do

you write for besides yourself?” with the answer “For my children, for my wife, for my mother and my father and my grandparents and then reverse order that way so that I may have a good journey on my way back home.” Primarily autobiographical, narrative, and imagistic, the poems explore Ortiz’s experiences during the late 1960s and 1970s; as Ortiz describes them in *Woven Stone*, they are based on “the oral voice of stories, song, history, and contemporary experience.”

“Speaking” (1977)

“Speaking” exemplifies Ortiz’s poetic contributions to the study of language as world building. Appearing in the collection of poems *A Good Journey*, “Speaking” is organized under the section “Notes for My Child,” which follows the section “Telling.” In the poem, a parent with a child is outside, introducing a newborn to the world around them and the language of “million years old sound.” They “listen to the crickets” as ants go by them, and the narrator tells them, “This is he, my son. / This boy is looking at you. / I am speaking for him.” As crickets, cicadas, and ants look on, the narrator’s son “murmurs infant words, / speaking, small laughter/bubbles from him.” While in the first stanza, the narrator says, “I am speaking for him,” by the second stanza, he acknowledges that the creatures hear “this boy speaking for me.”

As with Ortiz himself, the speaker in “Speaking” must tell a story. In doing so, he discovers that the newborn speaks as well. As the father introduces his son to the natural world, father, son, crickets, and ants join, in one poem, as beings with their own speech and their own story. While the language of each is unique, the stories are accessible to those willing to hear.

“Speaking” represents a moment in the journey to be connected with the world. Resonant with Ortiz’s desire to demonstrate the importance of all forms of language, “Speaking” reflects Ortiz’s belief that language is not just a human act, but

a “spiritual force” propelled through human reliance on speech and storytelling. Just as there is no division between expression and perception, there is “no division between that within you and that without you” (*A Good Journey* 242). Since for Ortiz, language is the “discovery of one’s capabilities and creative thought,” when speakers or poets tell stories, those stories are expressions of their perceived experience in and among the world (“Stories” 58). Further, language is “magic in its purest essence” since it can “create, change, rebuild” (“Stories” 58). Insofar as language has the capacity to create, “stories [are] actually the world in a way” (“Stories” 57). For Ortiz, this means that “the child is truly a creator of his world since it is his preoccupations that construct and inhabit his vision, and his vision is his knowledge” (“Stories” 57).

Because language is world building, according to Ortiz’s conception of it, in their use of language, all speakers affect others. Indeed, the danger of not speaking is evident in Ortiz’s poem “What I Mean” when the speaker recalls, “We didn’t talk much.” Refuting the idea that “Indians are just like that,” the speaker explains that often “we were just plain scared / and we kept our mouths shut.” Lamenting that “all that area used to be Indian land—Acoma land,” the speaker recalls how the government stole it, saying, “and there was plenty to say / but we didn’t say it.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do father and son affect the world around them through speech? What type of world do they build?
2. Consider the speaker’s statement about his son that “I am speaking for him.” What does “speaking for” mean in this instance? Does the speaker in “Speaking” suggest that he speaks because of his son or on behalf of his son? How does the ambiguity of “speaking for” inform a fuller interpretation of the poem? What is the significance of the son “speaking for me”?

“Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun” (1977)

Appearing in the collection *A Good Journey*, the poem “Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun” is also organized under the section titled “Notes for My Child.” The narrator begins by recounting a day when “near San Ysidro, / on the way to Colorado, / I stopped and looked” (6). Hearing “the sound of a meadowlark / through smell of fresh cut alfalfa,” Raho would say, “Look, Dad” (60). Marveling at a hawk “sweeping / its wings / clear through / the blue / of whole and pure / the wind / the sky,” father and son listen to “The Bringer. / The Thunderer” as they bask in the sun that falls to earth, “a green plant” (60). It is the day “the Katzina come. / The dancing prayers” (61). Telling his son, “it will not end, / this love,” the father enjoins his son to hold his mother’s hand and celebrate the “great joy” of this coming. Hand in hand, mother, father, and child listen to “the plants with bells. / The stones with voices,” for the earth, rain, plants, and sun are alive and have their own stories.

As in “Speaking,” the poem’s narrator is overcome with the language of the natural physical world around him. In “Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun,” however, the son is now old enough to talk. Read together with “Speaking,” then, the poem is a kind of return. Joyfully anticipating the coming of the dancing prayers, the family represents human harmony with the natural world around them. As they await the Katzina, the family’s sociability, this custom of dancing prayers, is at one with the world that they, with the plants and sun, inhabit.

Although both father and son appear in the poem to *look* at the world around them, it is clear that looking also involves hearing the story of the hawk, the wind, the sun, and earth all at once. Dennis R. Hoilman has noted that, for Ortiz, “words are the eyes through which people see and know themselves—as well as the world outside and around them” (Hoilman 245). In using sight as a metaphor for the speech act, which

entails both speaking and hearing, “Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun” subverts a dominant pattern in industrialized nations to prioritize the eyes over other modes of perception. Throwing a wrench in the logic that “seeing is believing,” Ortiz explodes another dominant belief system by investing the “stones with voices” and personifying the earth and its elements. In doing so, Ortiz suggests that certain belief systems must be upset in order to achieve a more balanced relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Recall Ortiz’s statement that writing is a journey. Determine what the phases both “Speaking” and “Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun” seem to represent. Offering a close reading of each poem, outline Ortiz’s vision of a “good journey.”
2. How does Ortiz complicate traditional thinking concerning binary divisions between humans and animals? Between the living and nonliving? Connect Ortiz’s expanded understanding of the “living” with his understanding of language. How integral are his impressions of life and language to his sense of the “good journey”?
3. The father-son trope appears in both “Speaking” and “Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun.” Examine representations of family in both. How does Ortiz imagine the son’s relationship to his parents? How does he describe the family’s relationship to the living and nonliving worlds?

“Vision Shadows” (1977)

Organized under the section “Will Come Forth in Tongues and Fury,” Ortiz’s poem “Vision Shadows” is more ominous than “Speaking” or “Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun.” Beginning with the line “Wind visions are honest,” the narrator immediately invokes the threat of less honest visions. As the eagle soars “into the craggy

peaks / of the mind” and “loops into the wind power,” allowing him to see “a million miles and more because of it,” something is nevertheless amiss. “*But what has happened,*” the narrator asks, interrupting himself midthought to consider the “strange news” of “thallium sulphate” and “ranchers bearing arms in helicopters” before finishing the question *to these visions?* Hearing the “scabs of strange deaths,” the narrator records the effects of the bad tidings on the snake, who “hurries through the grass”; the coyote, “befuddled by his own tricks”; and the Bear, who “whimpers pain into the wind” (122). While “poisonous fumes cross our sacred path,” Sky, Mountain, and Spirit suffer. Eagles are losing their battle as they “tumble dumbly into shadows / that swallow them with dull thuds,” and the sage and jackrabbit cannot breathe for it. Indeed, as the narrator concludes, “It is painful, aiee, without visions / to soothe dry whimpers / or repair the flight of eagle, our own brother” (122).

Distraught by the destruction to the land and sky, the narrator of “Vision Shadows” is, like the wind, himself a visionary, who, with foreboding, reports on the pillaging path of a human force with the superhuman power to destroy the natural world. Instigating the death of its own kin, this force implicated by the narrator of “Vision Shadows” is never named, but it is clear that by invoking “poisonous fumes,” a people who bear “arms in helicopters,” and “thallium sulphate” that the narrator has in mind both industrial pollution and police actions taken by a distinctly U.S. force.

In asserting the eagle is “our own brother,” Ortiz reimagines the boundaries between humans and nonhumans and offers a revisionist understanding of humanity’s family tree, as it were. At the same time, the eagle can be read as a still more figurative symbol, for Ortiz’s family belong to the Dyaamih hanoh, or, literally, “Eagle people.” In this sense, the poem might be read as a remembrance of Ortiz’s own people’s loss in their encounters with white colonizers and in the persistence of neoimperial practices such as

those Ortiz encountered in schools whose aims were to assimilate Native Americans into a predominantly white mainstream culture. From this perspective, the speaker's sense that the eagle is "our own brother" may be read as an unwavering criticism of the destructive force preying upon it. Yet the speaker's assertion that the eagle is "our brother" simultaneously suggests that he identifies with that force, even as he identifies with the eagle's struggle against it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Vision Shadows" tells the story of the far-reaching effects of environmental destruction. How does Ortiz relate the violence done to a people and the violence done to the earth and animals? What, according to Ortiz, are the social implications of human-induced ecological ruin?
2. Outline as thoroughly as possible the definition Ortiz invokes of the environment. How does Ortiz seem to define the environment? How is Ortiz's conception of the environment different from the destructive culture he represents in "Vision Shadows"? What ideals are reflected in a culture's attitudes toward the environment? Acting as the visionary of your own era and culture, elaborate on the forms of environmental injustice evident in your area and within the wider landscape as well.

"Poems from the Veterans Hospital" (1977)

"Poems from the Veterans Hospital" is a series of 10 vignettes, from the section in *A Good Journey* entitled "I Tell You Now." Providing a glimpse into the hospital that "contains men broken / from three American wars," the poems portray men in the aftermath of war, trying to recover from their psychological and physical wounds. These poems hear the stories that remain untold, even as the narrators speak. Overwhelmingly, they

are stories of loss. In "Cherry Pie," for example, the dialogue of men rises as they eat a meal of "barbecue beef on buns, / coleslaw with crushed pineapple, / coffee and cherry pie" (154). As the men express their appreciation for different flavors of pie, the narrator notices that "Deanda hasn't been yelling lately. They've been feeding him more. / and better mind silencers lately" (155). When one man's pie falls off his plate onto the floor, "he stands there and everything is gone / from his face except sorrow and loss / and it's hard to lose those" (155). For both Deanda and the man who loses his pie, silence is an indication of still greater suffering. In "Teeth," for example, a man recounts losing his teeth, replacing them, and losing them again when he lends his jacket to a man who volunteered to make an alcohol run but who "sonofagun . . . is still on that run" (156).

In their intense focus on loss, these poems articulate the psychological and social implications of displacement. In "Superchief," for instance, the narrator mourns not having the chance to say good-bye to Superchief, who "left on Friday." Recalling a time when he saw Superchief sitting on a curb and eating oranges out of a sack, the narrator remembers how "His head was wobbling / from side to side" and the way "a white woman watched him" with "contempt and disgust" (157). Wanting to recall the man's Acoma name, the narrator feels "useless" as it occurs to him that he even wished his feelings were "as convenient as that woman's" (157). In "Along the Arkansas River," the narrator walks to the river, where ducks swim away as he approaches. Feeling lonely, the narrator wonders "where Coyote is," deciding that he is "probably in Tulsa by the bridge, sitting on the grassy bank near the University, hoping / she's gonna come along / after her three o'clock class / like she said she would" (158–159). Then, as "a freight train was heading south," the narrator, "lonesome again," realizes "that's probably where Coyote is" (159). Suggesting Coyote is on

a freight train heading south, the narrator simultaneously implies that Coyote is either wherever the narrator is and feels lonesome or wherever there is desire.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Ortiz wrote the series “Poems from the Veterans Hospital” while he was being treated for alcoholism. While alcoholism in the United States is usually treated as a problem with the individual who has experienced trauma at home, consider alcoholism as a form of resistance—albeit ineffectual—to the same social and cultural forces underlying the colonialism and neoimperialism that Ortiz critiques.
2. In “Poems from the Veterans Hospital” Ortiz develops the theme of loss, even as he recovers the stories of men who, living at the margins of society, have been forgotten. Examine Ortiz’s concern here with men in particular and with the stories that each of the men he encounters has to tell of loss. What histories are lost to a society that marginalizes broken men? Consider the hospitals in your own town. What stories might there be in the patients who are there?

“Travelling” (1977)

Whereas most of the 10 poems in the series “Poems from the Veterans Hospital” treat displacement as loss, “Travelling” offers a different view of the connection Ortiz weaves between displacement and loss. In “Travelling,” in fact, a certain rootlessness is embraced as the poem opens with the image of a man who “has been in the VAH Library all day long” among “maps, the atlas, and the globe,” as he finds places—Acapulco, the Bay of Bengal, Antarctica, Madagascar, Rome, Luxembourg—and writes their names on a pad. As the man “hurries” to find a source, is “hurt” when he cannot locate it, and “rushes” back to the globe, “a faraway glee” surfaces “on

his face, in his eyes” as he studies Cape Cod; “He is Gaughin, he is Coyote, he is who he is, / travelling, the known and unknown places, / travelling, travelling” (156). Although the poem is suggestive of the type of explorer to whom Native American peoples lost their land, and who remains revered in American mythologies of the frontier, conflicting interpretation is possible as well based on the symbolism of Coyote in Native American literature.

For, as a literary trope in Native American literature and in Ortiz’s work in particular, Coyote is a symbol of some ambiguity. Layered with different connotations, Coyote’s significance is complexly nuanced. Hoilman points out that often “Ortiz identifies himself with Coyote,” who is at once “the trickster, the troublemaker, the constant victim of his own pranks” and a figure who is “ancient, present at the creation of the world” and, still more confounding, “a source of disorder and sorrow” who simultaneously “brings good things to the people” (Hoilman 245). In Patricia Clark Smith’s analysis of Ortiz’s use of the symbol in “Coyote Ortiz: *Canis iatrans iatrans* in the Poetry of Simon Ortiz,” she agrees that “the Ortiz Coyote is no one-dimensional comic,” for “in his myriad-mindedness, his actions silly and shrewd, Coyote establishes the range of human possibility” (Smith 194). For Smith, in fact, “he is what we are and what we could be” (Smith 194). More specifically, according to her interpretation, “throughout the body of Ortiz’ work, even more so than in the traditional oral tales, the emphasis is unremittingly on Coyote’s survival”; as Smith interprets it, “Coyote always gets up and brushes himself off and trots away *within* the narrative itself, perhaps not quite as good as new, but alive, in motion, surviving” (Smith 195). From this perspective, the man in “Travelling” who “is who he is” and who “is Coyote” might be read as a figure whose survival depends upon reclaiming the land after displacement or homelessness in order to accept uprootedness for the potential it offers of the good journey, rather than succumbing to

tim/poetry/so/ortizmain.htm. Accessed July 8, 2009.

- Smith, Patricia Clark. "Coyote Ortiz: *Canis iatrans iatrans* in the Poetry of Simon Ortiz." In *Studies in American Indian Literature*, edited by Paula Gunn Allen, 192–210. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983.
- Wiget, Andrew. *Simon Ortiz*. Boise State University Western Writers Series, no. 74. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1986.
- Wilson, Norma. *The Nature of Native American Poetry*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.

Kathryn Stevenson



ROBERT PINSKY (1940–)

So one great task we have to answer for is the keeping of an art that we did not invent, but were given, so that others who come after us can have it if they want it, as free to choose it and change it as we have been. . . . We must answer for what we see.

(“Responsibilities of the Poet”)

The poet Robert Neal Pinsky strives to link his work to the past and the future. As an educator, former poet laureate, and public figure, he advocates for the role of poetry in contemporary society. In his poetry, Pinsky frequently uses verse forms to deal with day-to-day objects, people, experiences, and events. His work is challenging and approachable, interested in exploring real human experience in a unique way. His prose, as well (much of it academic), speaks refreshingly to the reader as a comrade rather than a peon. In his impressive career, Pinsky has thus far published eight books of poetry, five books of criticism, three anthologies, two translations, a biography, and one computerized novel.

Pinsky was born on October 20, 1940, to Simon and Sylvia Pinsky in Long Branch, New Jersey. He says of his childhood, “I couldn’t be an absurdist, I was raised that way” (French). Long Branch was a resort community of which he writes, “When I was a child, the town had fallen from both its 19th-century glory and the prosperity of the 1920s, in the ’50s still clinging to a fading boardwalk of clam-bars, kiddy-rides, wheels of fortune, pinball parlors, and taffy stands. Summer resorts are elegiac most of the year, and a resort with its best days behind it is doubly elegiac” (“A Provincial Sense of Time”). His father was an optometrist and an amateur local historian, while his grandfather owned a bar in which Pinsky spent much time and enhanced his

early interest in music (French). Much of Pinsky’s material is related to his childhood, his parents, and his growing-up years in a “working-class, racially mixed kind of a neighborhood”; he has said that he “doesn’t want to be limited to a pose or mode as either a pure street kid or a pure professor. . . . As an ideal, I would like to have it all together” (Thomas 37). As a child, Pinsky played saxophone and dreamed of becoming a jazz musician. A music career did not materialize, but he transformed that love of sound, rhythm, and rhyme into a passion for poetry. Pinsky’s attraction to music, especially jazz, is apparent in much of his work.

Pinsky attended Rutgers University, where he wrote his senior thesis on the poet T. S. Eliot. After graduating in 1962, he entered the doctoral program at Stanford University, where he held the Wallace Stegner Fellowship in creative writing. In graduate school, he studied with the poet and critic Yvor Winters and wrote his dissertation on the poetry of Walter Savage Landor. After receiving his Ph.D., Pinsky taught at several academic institutions, including the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, and Wellesley College. Currently, he is a professor of English at Boston University, where he teaches in the graduate writing program (Thomas 12). Along with his teaching appointments, Pinsky also served as the poetry editor for the *New Republic* and now works as the poetry editor of the online publication *Slate*.

He lives in Massachusetts with his wife, the psychologist Dr. Ellen Pinsky.

Pinsky has been publishing award-winning poetry, essays, and novels since 1968. His first book of poetry, *Sadness and Happiness*, appeared in 1975, followed by *An Explanation of America* (1979); *History of My Heart* (1984); *The Want Bone* (1990); *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966–1996* (1996); *Jersey Rain* (2000); *First Things to Hand* (2006); and *Gulf Music* (2007). *The Figured Wheel* won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize in 1997 and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize as well. Louise Gluck praises Pinsky's differences from his contemporaries by noting his thoughtful yet passionate verses, saying the contemporary "preference for the heart-on-the-sleeve heart of lyric and rhapsodic poetry mistakes the performative nature of all art, mistakes performance for essence" (Gluck). But she claims that in Pinsky's work, which is personal *and* detached, "for [his] poems to be understood at all they must be apprehended entire, as shapes." In Gluck's estimation, Pinsky focuses more on ideas, moments, objects, and circumstances than on the confessional and concerns himself with the weight of history and the poet's responsibility to future generations, a trait that makes him, in his own estimation, "conservative" ("Responsibilities" 424). As Gluck says, he is "less a synthesizer of data than a student of the great mysteries," marking him as a unique American voice in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century.

Pinsky does not limit himself to the poetry genre alone. His books of criticism include *Landor's Poetry* (1968); *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (1976); *Poetry and the World* (1988); and *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In *The Sounds of Poetry*, he writes an approachable, reader-friendly guide to basic poetic understanding, describing poetry as among the most human things we can do. "Poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art," he states, claiming that in human speech, "it is almost as if we sing to one another all day" (8, 3).

Alongside his critical works, Pinsky has completed two translations. The first, a book of works by the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, *The Separate Notebooks: Poems by Czeslaw Milosz* (1984), he worked on with Renata Gorczynski, Robert Hass, and Milosz. The second was *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation* (1994), which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award and the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award. Pinsky said, "I think sometimes that a translation enters so much into the spirit of the new language that by a kind of luck it forms a new aesthetic whole" (Thomas 18). He has also written one novel, *Mindwheel* (1984), a computerized work that Judy Malloy refers to as a "narrative game" (77). In 2005, he published *The Life of David*, a biography of the biblical king. *Publishers Weekly* says he "dispels the conventional image of David as a simple shepherd who slew Goliath and became Israel's greatest king, depicting him realistically with all his failings as an adulterer, assassin and predator. Pinsky also portrays David's stellar achievements, presenting him as a complex character who deserves to be seen in shades of gray" (85).

In 1997, Pinsky became the 39th United States Poet Laureate, a role he took on with such enthusiasm and vigor he was awarded an unprecedented third term, serving until 2000. During his tenure, he founded the Favorite Poem Project, "dedicated to celebrating, documenting, and promoting poetry's role in Americans' lives" (favoritepoem.org/project.html). The project hoped to collect favorite poems from average Americans and record them reading their poems, but Pinsky had no idea how popular it would be. In the first year alone, the project received over 18,000 nominations for favorite poems. As Pinsky said, "To see many Americans of various ages, accents, and professions each saying a poem aloud clarifies the power of poetry and enhances a communal spirit. . . . To some degree, it helps remind us of who we are" (French). Much information on the project, including video of people reading their chosen poems, can be found on the project's Web site, www.favoritepoem.org. The project has also spawned four publications that Pinsky has had a hand in, including three anthologies—*Americans'*

Favorite Poems (1999), *Poems to Read* (2002), and *An Invitation to Poetry* (2004)—as well as a book based on Pinsky's Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry* (2002). This last work "demonstrates the significance of poetry to contemporary Americans, implicitly questioning some received ideas and stereotypes" (poetry.org/project.html).

Alongside these impressive publications, Pinsky has had poems and prose appear in, among others, the *New Yorker*, *Modern Philology*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Representation*, the *Paris Review*, *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. His numerous awards and honors include the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship (1974), Guggenheim Fellowship (1980), William Carlos Williams Award (1984), American Academy of Arts and Sciences Fellowship (1993), Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America (1996), Harold Washington Literary Award (1999), American Academy of Arts and Sciences Award (1999), Phi Beta Kappa Award (2003), Manhae Foundation Prize (2006), and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's Jewish Cultural Achievement Award (2006).

With his pop-culture sensibilities and unpretentious attitude, Pinsky challenges previous notions of poets as aloof figures in bifocals and tweeds—not only with the Favorite Poem Project's accessible Web site, but also with appearances as himself on the animated television sitcom *The Simpsons* (2002) and as host of a "Meta-Free-Phor-All" between the comedian Stephen Colbert and the actor Sean Penn on *The Colbert Report* (April 2007). His sense of humor and comfort with technology have set Pinsky apart from many of his peers—in both the academic and the literary worlds.

To say Pinsky is approachable is not to say he is not challenging. Pinsky's subject matter mirrors his genuine character, as he will often pick a seemingly innocuous topic (as seen in the poems "At Pleasure Bay" and "Shirt") and then complicate it beyond expectations. His poems require the reader to be engaged and active in the process of interpreting

poetry and, therefore, in the creation of poetry. James McCorkle notes that in Pinsky's estimation, "The poet is the place of transmission and therefore transformation," refuting W. H. Auden's oft-quoted claim that "poetry makes nothing happen" (172). Something does happen in poetry (Pinsky's included) that makes a bridge between the past, the present, and the future, and Pinsky recognizes this unique melding: "We must answer both for preserving [poetry], and for changing it," he writes. "Only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not already been made poetic by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive. Put to no use, the art rots" ("Responsibilities" 426).

Critics often note Pinsky's somber or troubling poetic themes or tones, which seem to belie his approachable demeanor. But, again, approachable in Pinsky does not mean easy, and he sees his somber subject matter as indicative of human life. He told an audience at the Library of Congress, "Most every poem I've written is about the same thing: We live in a haunted ruin" (French). Even though his poetry can be challenging to interpret, Pinsky attempts to make poetry more democratic. He has worked hard to topple the ivory tower and acknowledge the very human attraction to poetry. Pinsky illustrates the power of the art, including his own, in an essay for the *New York Times Book Review*:

Poetry is, among other things, a technology for remembering. . . . But this fact may touch our lives far more profoundly than jingles for remembering how many days there are in June. The buried conduits among memory and emotion and the physical sounds of language may touch our inner life every day. . . . Poetry, a form of language far older than prose, is under our skins. ("A Man Goes into a Bar")

"The Figured Wheel" (1984)

Robert Pinsky's "The Figured Wheel" begins his 1984 volume *History of My Heart*; it also serves

as title for his large collection of poetry *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966–1996* (1996). The entire poem, constructed of four-line stanzas, suggests an ominous inevitability in human life, without ever explaining, precisely, what this “figured wheel” is. Louise Gluck writes that for Pinsky’s poems “to be understood at all they must be apprehended entire, as shapes,” advice that certainly serves “The Figured Wheel” with its circular imagery (2). Ultimately, his “wheel” stands in for many things that roll over our lives, gathering and crushing in equal measure.

Pinsky begins by describing how “the figured wheel rolls through shopping malls and prisons, / Over farms, small and immense, and the rotten little downtowns. / Covered with symbols, it mills everything alive and grinds” (lines 1–3). This introduces the notion that the “figured wheel” is a part of all life and creates tension by highlighting its destructive attributes as well, making a paradoxical equation of life = death.

After describing the figured wheel’s entanglement with human affairs, the speaker then emphasizes its relation to religion, everything from “the grotesque demi-Gods, Hopi gargoyles and Ibo dryads” to “Jesus oblivious to hurt turning to give words to the unrighteous” (lines 21, 27). The tone returns a 21st-century reader to an earlier time, when human relations with God and religion were darker, more primal, and, potentially, dangerous. Soon the “figured wheel” becomes “festoon[ed]” by “Scientists and artists” with “brilliant / Toys and messages, jokes and zodiacs” (lines 36–37). Now the “figured wheel” becomes something that humans engage with, alter, decorate, and draw meaning from, not merely something that rolls over their lives. Intriguingly, Pinsky includes scientists and artists alongside the religious, who hang meaning upon the wheel.

In the end, he takes the abstraction of the poem full circle by acknowledging its wake in his own life: “it rolls unrelentingly over // . . . / . . . the haunts of Robert Pinsky’s mother and father / And wife and children and his sweet self / Which he hereby unwillingly and inexpertly gives up, because it is

// There, figured and pre-figured in the nothing-transfiguring wheel” (lines 44–49). By emphasizing his personal engagement, he also includes the reader in the inevitable, perpetual movement of the “figured wheel.” Pinsky’s paradox is enhanced when the reader realizes the “wheel” crushes *and* creates as it rolls along.

Alfred Corn writes that Pinsky “draws on the Vedic conception of the ‘wheel’ of existence as an endlessly repeated cycle of pain, trammled with all sorts of obstacles to salvation (achieved by escape from the wheel, from reincarnation),” noting the poem’s emphasis on creation and destruction—religion, art, science, history, culture are all creative/destructive. But Corn sees another, more prosaic, metaphor in Pinsky’s wheel as well: his “‘figured wheel’ is also a trope for figurative writing, for poetry, gobbling up subjects, locales, mythologies, images, and human lives in its unrelenting forward progress.” Either way, Pinsky’s poem reveals his profound interest in cycles of creation throughout human time. As he writes in “Responsibilities of the Poet”: “By practicing an art learned partly from the dead, one keeps it alive for the unborn” (424).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Pinsky use religious mythologies to form a universal human aesthetic? An American aesthetic? You might compare this poem to the first section of Anne Waldman’s “Iovis” and Allen Ginsberg’s “In Back of the Real” or “Sunflower Sutra.”
2. In Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the main character, Billy Pilgrim, has become unstuck in time. This idea of fracture and discontinuity became very important to 20th-century writers and artists, particularly after World Wars I and II. Compare and discuss the humanity of creation/destruction evident in both Pinsky and Vonnegut. Both works “name” the author as a character. Why? How does this vague dichotomy contribute to a feeling of fracture? Conversely, Pinsky’s wheel gives an impression of completion and fulfillment; does it therefore belie the idea of fracture?

“The Street” (1984)

In “The Street,” from the collection *History of My Heart*, Pinsky’s speaker (who lives on a street strikingly similar to Pinsky’s own childhood neighborhood) contrasts his imaginative world of historical, romantic pretensions against the sordid, slum existence of life on “the street.” Pinsky then continues his exploration of class and the way that culture—past and present—shapes our perceptions. As is also common in many of his poems, “The Street” features three-line stanzas and balances complexity with simplicity.

“The Street” begins with a funeral scene, reminiscent of ancient Rome: “The wheeled coffin // Of the dead favorite of the Emperor, / The child’s corpse propped seated / On brocade” (lines 6–9). This dramatic sight soon shifts, however, to the bleak street of the speaker’s childhood, a place where “Trouble—fights, the police, sickness— / Seemed never to come // For anyone when they were fully dressed. / It was always underwear or dirty pyjamas, / Unseemly stretches // of skin showing through a torn housecoat” (lines 17–22). By way of example, the speaker offers a scene in which a man’s wife leaves with another man while he stands broken, in his undershirt, for the whole neighborhood to witness.

As the speaker switches back, from the man to the elaborate funeral, and then back to the street, we see his personal childhood refuge: “It was a small place, and off the center, / But so much a place to itself, I felt / Like a young prince // Or aspirant squire” (lines 40–43). The boy’s love of solitude, of a world away from the street, is enhanced by the books he reads when alone, grand tales such as *Ivanhoe* (line 43). But the reading and the solitude are not merely escapist, as the speaker finds in his books recreations of the class and race struggles of his contemporary life, on the “live, dangerous / Gray bark of the street” (lines 53–54). Therefore, the speaker uses his books, intelligence, and difference to get away from his neighborhood, but within those same traits he recognizes his own reality and, thus, the street itself—a metaphor for

everyone who lives there and everything that goes on there.

Pinsky’s poems, while often dealing with “big” issues and concepts, also frequently focus on the realities of daily life. He said, “I do tend to distrust a poetry that I know is written by someone who in daily life engages shopping centers, cars, drug stores, and such, yet refuses to acknowledge any of these” (Sorkin 4). With “The Street” (and poems like it), Pinsky lends credence to his “big” questions by making them relevant to the real lives of actual people. By revealing and concealing himself, and his own history, within his poems as well, he avoids “navel-gazing” while lending authenticity and passion to the work. “I do have an intuitive sense that what one is surrounded by deserves one’s attention, and probably one’s attention as an artist,” he said. “How much evidence dare we . . . omit? And if we all omit certain evidence, are we perhaps less ‘free’ than we appear to be?” (Sorkin 4).

For Discussion or Writing

1. May Swenson’s “The Centaur” challenges the gendered expectations of her Mormon upbringing; her poem “That the Soul May Wax Plump” describes the death and funeral of a mother. In what ways are Swenson’s depictions of childhood, death, and adulthood similar to Pinsky’s in “The Street”? What do you imagine Swenson and Pinsky might have in common? How might they differ? Support your answers with citations from the texts.
2. Pinsky wrote, “I do tend to distrust a poetry that I know is written by someone who in daily life engages shopping centers, cars, drug stores, and such, yet refuses to acknowledge any of these.” What is Pinsky saying about writing and the writing process in “The Street”? Marianne Moore’s poems, on the other hand, often address day-to-day activities, but she frequently uses them as metaphors for writing and poetry, as in “Baseball and Writing” and “Poetry.” How might Pinsky have used Moore’s poems as a jumping-off point for his own thoughts on poetry?

“A Woman” (1984)

Robert Pinsky writes lyric poetry. According to Louise Gluck, “The glory of the lyric is that it does what life cannot do: this also means that it is less flexibly responsive to life, more defined by the poet’s obsessions and associations”: the poet’s obsessions and associations, yes, but not necessarily the poet’s autobiography. Such is true with Pinsky’s “A Woman,” from *History of My Heart*. Set mainly on the New Jersey shore near his hometown, the poem could too easily be read as a story from his childhood. But, ultimately, unspecified and undefined, “A Woman” tells of the tragic relationship between a child and the broken woman who inadvertently harms him by trying to keep him safe—a tale that moves beyond any individual details of Pinsky’s life into the cultural archetypes of America and the world.

“A Woman” takes the reader back 30 years to the mid-1950s, when “an old, fearful woman / Takes a child on a long walk” (lines 2–3). In this world, drenched in the woman’s fear, everything in the town and on the beach where they walk appears dangerous: “even the scant landmarks are like / Tokens of risk or rash judgement—drowning, / Sexual assault, fatal or crippling disease” (lines 16–18). Thus what should be a pleasant stroll is overshadowed by the woman’s fears, her nightmares, of “a whole family // Sitting in chairs in her own room, corpse-gray, / With throats cut; who were they?” (lines 24–26). As they walk farther and farther—“As far as Port-Au-Peck”—the day becomes overshadowed by the potential destruction of ocean and river roiled by a hurricane, “In a house-cracking exhilaration of water” (lines 32, 42). Later, drinking a milk shake, the child remembers the previous year’s Halloween parade, when he, dressed in cowboy gear, was invited to ride on a float of like-dressed children. The poem concludes as he remembers, “Her holding him back with both arms, crying herself, / Frightened at his force, and he vowing never, / Never to forgive her, not as long as he lived” (lines 52–54).

The poem features two instances of looking back—the adult speaker remembering this particu-

lar day and his child self remembering the ill-fated parade—and we can see the child who was reassessing not only the woman, but himself as well. As a child, he vowed never to forgive her for his spoiled fun. However, as an adult, he recognizes the sad and frightened existence of his caretaker, and thus she becomes someone deserving of compassion, “a woman”—flawed and tragic—rather than a specific person deliberately hurting him. The child’s vow becomes ironic, then, as the adult speaker realizes he has, to some degree, forgiven her after all.

Gluck claims that Pinsky’s poems do not have “the look, on the page, of the cutting edge, the experimental: no showy contempt for grammar, no murky lacunae, no cult of illogic. And yet,” she writes that “experimental” is exactly what he seems with his expansion of the tones and topics of poetry. In her mind, he enlarges “the definition of the art.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Ted Kooser’s “Dishwater” and “Porch Swing in September.” How does the grandmother in “Dishwater” differ from Pinsky’s “Woman”? Analyze what both of Kooser’s poems, in dialogue with Pinsky’s, say about childhood. Although Kooser’s work may appear less dark than Pinsky’s, can you cite examples where you feel the poets are saying similar things? Different things?
2. Read Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room.” What does the child Elizabeth find so important about this experience? How is it similar in profundity or memorableness to Pinsky’s poem “A Woman”? What would you say if you learned Bishop wrote this completely fictional poem to thwart critics who wanted her to be more confessional? Is Pinsky being confessional? Does it matter?

“Shirt” (1990)

Pinsky’s best-known poem, “Shirt,” published in *The Want Bone*, takes an everyday article of clothing

and muses on its origins among the working class, the enslaved, the impoverished, the discarded. Balancing history and speculation, “the poem is startlingly explicit about the relationship between the consumer and the worker. The shirt serves as an emblematic article of transaction and as an artifact of our obliviousness of the history of the toil that describes how and who made an object” (McCorkle 175). But Pinsky masterfully balances his political point with a tone of compassion and a detached attention to detail, allowing him “to locate a common object in history, to see it both as a material presence and as a ghostly embodiment of invisible forces and lives” (Gilbert).

“Shirt” begins with the speaker’s noting the detailed craftsmanship that went into his shirt but quickly imagines the sweatshop workers who most likely made it, the “Koreans or Malaysians // Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break / Or talking money or politics while one fitted / This armpiece with its overseam to the band” (lines 3–6). The attention to the shirt’s creation and the universality of the worker’s actions highlight their skilled craftsmanship and their humanity, ensuring that Pinsky never downgrades the workmen and -women into pitiable objects.

The speaker then discusses the historic “infamous blaze // At the Triangle Factory in nineteen–eleven,” compassionately imagining the horror and the humanity (lines 9–10). His musings lead him to notice the shirt’s print—“clan tartans // Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian, / To control their savage Scottish workers” (lines 30–32). He continues to imagine all the other people who contributed to the shirt’s arrival in his life, including “the planter, the picker, the sorter” and the inspector, “a Black / Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma / . . . Its color and fit // And feel and its clean smell have satisfied / Both her and me” (lines 37, 40–44). In the end, the speaker returns to describing the shirt in detail—“The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters”—to emphasize the massive amount of effort, taken from the working poor all over the world and throughout history, employed in the creation of one simple shirt.

Roger Gilbert claims that in “Shirt,” Pinsky’s goal is “to show us how much history lies behind all the things we touch and see.” As well, the musing on the shirt as an object of craftsmanship and beauty asks the reader to be aware of the effort entailed in its creation: “Pinsky is asking us to hold contradictory perspectives in our minds at once: to feel the shirt’s historical resonance, including its place in the long story of labor and exploitation, while also recognizing its beauty and elegance as a formal object. . . . History has its own rhymes and chords, its own patterns and symmetries” (Gilbert). This interweaving between musing and reality, countries and periods, and, most importantly, people themselves, makes “Shirt” one of Pinsky’s most memorable and compelling poems.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Hart Crane’s “To Brooklyn Bridge,” from which Pinsky took his allusion to the “Bedlamite, ‘shrill shirt ballooning.’” How do you think Crane’s poem of a New York suicide inspired Pinsky when he wrote “Shirt”? Why do you think Pinsky starts by discussing Asian factory workers and then compares them to a New Yorker and then Scottish millworkers?
2. Examine the lists in Pinsky’s “Shirt.” What are the visual and aural effects of listing nouns? How does Pinsky manipulate the lists to inform his poem? Compare the verbs and the adjectives that surround the lists of nouns. How do these words modify the nouns and inform the poem’s themes? You might compare “Shirts” to another poem that employs lists, such as Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.”

“At Pleasure Bay” (1990)

“At Pleasure Bay,” from *The Want Bone*, looks at a specific location in order to capture the idea of flux—in time, history, culture, life. Pinsky writes that Pleasure Bay “is a real place, part of my home town of Long Branch, New Jersey, where the Shrewsbury River meets the Atlantic Ocean. My father has often pointed out to me where the

2. Pinsky's work has been heavily influenced by jazz. Examine some of his poems for jazz influences. How these differ from the works of poets with less of a musical sensibility?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation*. Translated by Robert Pinsky. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994.
- Archambeau, Robert. "Roads Less Traveled: Two Paths out of Modernism in Postwar American Poetry." In *The Mechanics of the Mirage: Postwar American Poetry*, edited by Michel Delville and Christine Pagnouille, 35–48. Liège, Belgium: University of Liège Press, 2000.
- Corn, Alfred. "Poetry Review: *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966–1996*." *Boston Review*, December 1996/January 1997. Available online. URL: www.bostonreview.net/BR21.6/poetry.html. Accessed May 28, 2007.
- Favorite Poem Project Web site. Boston University, the Library of Congress, and other organizations. Available online. URL: www.favoritepoem.org. Accessed May 31, 2007.
- French, Yvonne. "Robert Pinsky and Friends: Poet Laureate Reads, Hosts Fellow Poets." *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* 57, no. 6 (June 1998). Available online. URL: www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/pinsky.html. Accessed May 23, 2007.
- Gilbert, Roger. "No Histories But in Things: Robert Pinsky's Rhizomatic X-Rays." Modern American Poetry Web site. "Robert Pinsky": "On 'Shirt.'" Available online. URL: www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pinsky/shirt.htm. Accessed May 28, 2007.
- Gluck, Louise. "Story Tellers." *American Poetry Review* 26, no. 4 (July/August 1997): 9–12.
- Longenbach, James. "Robert Pinsky and the Language of Our Time." *Salmagundi* 103 (Summer 1994): 155–177.
- Malloy, Judy. "Review of *Cybertext, Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, by Espen J. Aarseth." *Leonardo Music Journal* 8 (1998): 77–78.
- McCorkle, James. "Contemporary Poetics and History: Pinsky, Klepfisz, and Rothenberg." *Kenyon Review* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 171–188.
- Milosz, Czeslaw. *The Separate Notebooks: Poems by Czeslaw Milosz*. Translated by Robert Pinsky, Renata Gorczynski, and Robert Hass. New York: Ecco Press, 1984.
- Parini, Jay. "Explaining America: The Poetry of Robert Pinsky." *Chicago Review* 33, no. 1 (Summer 1981): 16–26.
- Pinsky, Robert. *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- . *An Explanation of America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- . *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966–1996*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996.
- . *First Things to Hand*. Louisville, Ky.: Sarabande Books, 2006.
- . *Gulf Music: Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007.
- . *History of My Heart: Poems*. New York: Noonday, 1984.
- . *Jersey Rain*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000.
- . *Landor's Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- . *The Life of David*. New York: Schocken, 2005.
- . "A Man Goes into a Bar, See, and Recites: 'The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained.'" *New York Times Book Review*, 25 September 1994, p. 19. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1994/09/25/books/a-man-goes-into-a-bar-see-and-recites-the-quality-of-mercy-is-not-strained.html. Accessed October 15, 2009.
- . *Mindwheel*. Programmed by Steve Hales and William Mataga. Richmond, Calif.: Synapse Software Corp., 1984.
- . *Poetry and the World*. New York: Ecco Press, 1988.
- . "A Provincial Sense of Time." *Writers on America*. U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs. Available online. URL: www.usinfo.org/zhtw/DOCS/writers/pinsky.htm. Accessed June 1, 2007.
- . "Responsibilities of the Poet." *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 421–433. Avail-

- able online. URL: JSTOR.org. Accessed May 23, 2007.
- . *Sadness and Happiness*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- . *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- . *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.
- . *The Want Bone*. New York: Ecco Press, 1990.
- Pinsky, Robert, and Maggie Dietz, eds. *Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- . *Poems to Read: A New Favorite Poem Project Anthology*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002.
- Pinsky, Robert, Maggie Dietz, and Rosemarie Ellis, eds. *An Invitation to Poetry: A New Favorite Poem Project Anthology*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.
- “Review of *The Life of David*.” *Publishers Weekly*, 11 July 2005, p. 85.
- “Robert Pinsky.” Poets.org from the Academy of American Poets. Available online. URL: www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/200. Accessed June 1, 2007.
- Sorkin, Adam J. “An Interview with Robert Pinsky.” *Contemporary Literature* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 1–14. Available online. URL: JSTOR.org. Accessed May 23, 2007.
- Thomas, Harry, ed. “Robert Pinsky.” *Talking with Poets*. New York: Handset Books, 2002.

Sarah Stoeckl and Russ Beck



ISHMAEL REED (1938–)

The Hoodoo stories, the “toasts,” and the riddles and other neo-African literary forms constitute the basis for Afro-American oral tradition, traces of which can be found wherever African people settled in this hemisphere.

(*Writin’ Is Fightin’* 135)

Regarded as one of the major satirists in recent American literature, Ishmael Reed is also one of the most multifaceted writers of the last half-century. His occupations include novelist, playwright, poet, publisher, literary critic, songwriter, editor, television producer, essayist, translator (of ancient Yoruba texts), and founder of the multicultural group Before Columbus Foundation and There City Cinema. In 1967, he changed the American literary scene when he published *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, a novel that set the tone and aesthetic for the novels, poems, plays, and essays that followed. Armed with Neo-Hoodooism or Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic, a multicultural writing style based on African and Haitian voodoo and religious beliefs that he mixes with elements from other cultural and traditions, Reed has consistently supported multiculturalism and argued for a multicultural society in the United States and the world over. Critics unfamiliar with African and African-American oral traditions have been baffled by Reed’s innovative techniques, which include combining several seemingly disparate elements from different cultures and periods into one text. Because his writings emulate jazz and bebop styles, the jazz drummer Max Roach has called Reed “the Charlie Parker of American fiction.” Parker, one of the great innovative stylists of jazz, appears in almost all of Reed’s novels.

Named after Ishmael Hubbard, his mother’s cousin, Ishmael Reed was born on February 22,

1938, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His father, a college graduate, failed to support Ishmael and his mother, forcing the latter to take care of both a baby and a mother afflicted with schizophrenia. Single motherhood prevented Reed’s mother, the brightest in her high school, from attending college. Instead, she left for Buffalo, New York, hoping for a better life. In the meantime, Ishmael was left in the care of Emmett Coleman, his grandmother’s brother and a ragtime piano player well known throughout Chattanooga. Emmett Coleman was an early role model of Reed’s, as he refused to perform menial jobs and learned tailoring from Ishmael Hubbard, who had learned his craft at the Tuskegee Institute.

Ishmael Reed grew up in Buffalo with Thelma Coleman Reed, his mother, and Bennie Stephen Reed, his stepfather. Reed started writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction in his early teens. In 1950, his mother commissioned him to write a poem to celebrate the birthday of one of her coworkers at Satler’s Department Store. As Reed points out in “Boxing on Paper: Thirty-Seven Years Later,” an essay collected in *Writin’ Is Fightin’*, as a young man living in the projects, he also wrote minisermos that he delivered at Saint Luke’s Church on Eagle Street.

In 1953, while Reed was walking home from his job at a drugstore on William Street, A. J. Smitherman, editor of the *Empire Star Weekly*, stopped his

car and asked Reed whether he could deliver newspapers for him. Through his work at the *Empire Star Weekly*, Reed met eloquent African Americans such as Smitherman, his son Toussaint, and Mary Crosby. In 1954, Reed started writing columns and jazz articles, from which his jazz writing style gradually developed.

From 1952 to 1954, Reed attended Buffalo Technical High School and stopped working at the *Empire Star Weekly*. Sensing that he had no business being in a technical high school because he lacked technical aptitude, he spent the majority of his time playing second violin and trombone in the band room. His short story "Something Pure" caught the attention of an English teacher, who recommended Reed to the University of Buffalo. From 1956 to 1960, he attended the Millard Fillmore College, the University of Buffalo's night-school division. During this time, Reed performed in *Mooney's Kid Don't Cry* and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, alongside the poet Lucille Clifton; Reed returned to *Antigone* in his 1974 novel, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. At the University of Buffalo, Reed studied Yeats, Pound, and Blake, who were later to influence his first poems, especially the way they drew imagery and references from their cultures. Reed had received a four-year scholarship but lost it when his stepfather refused to disclose his assets (as a southern black man, he mistrusted the white man's attempt to learn about his finances). Reed managed to stay in school until his junior year by working at the downtown library and getting loan assistance, but he dropped out around 1960, tired of feeling like a slave to anybody's reading list.

Also in 1960, Reed married Priscilla Rose Thompson and moved to Talbert Mall Project. Their daughter, Timothy Reed, was born later that year (he would have another daughter, Tennessee, with his second wife). After leaving school, he volunteered at the *Empire Star Weekly*, which was then under a new editor, Joe Walker. Reed developed his "Writin' Is Fightin'" style not only by observing Walker's fight against segregated schools on behalf of Black Power, but also by reading the columns Walker wrote to challenge segregation

in the schools, police brutality, and corrupt local politics. In his *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), Reed recounts several incidents and problems he had with the police in Buffalo, New York City, Los Angeles, and Berkeley, including when he was writing *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). One time, the police wanted to know if the car he was driving belonged to him, simply because they were suspicious of a black man's owning a nice car. From these incidents with the police, Reed learned that white Americans enjoyed their rights more than any other sector of the American population and that other Americans lived in what amounts to "a police state."

Reed learned about the power of writing at an early age, when a third-grade teacher kept criticizing him for malapropisms. When the teacher assigned reading topics, Reed chose "A Strange Profession" and wrote a fictional essay about a psychologically challenged teacher who lives with her mother and is involved in strange behavior with cats and dogs. The teacher sent Reed to the principal's office, where he was asked whether he knew all the "big words" he had used in the essay. Consequently, Reed decided to carry a dictionary around with him. As with many of his critics today, the teacher and the principal did not know what to do with him or his unusual essay.

In 1962, carrying a blue plastic bag containing his belongings, Reed moved to New York City. Before that, he had visited David Sharpe, an Irish-American poet who had liked a play of his, and been impressed by the city and by the book jackets of authors he had seen at the restaurant Chumley's. For the realization that New York City was the place to be, Reed credits his listening to Blue Note and Prestige records during his teenage years and talking to Wade Legge, a young bebop pianist who played with Charles Mingus and Dizzy Gillespie; in fact, Reed likens his writing style to bebop style, particularly that of Charlie "Bird" Parker. During his visit to New York City, a conversation with Malcolm X had convinced him that it was time to leave Buffalo. Furthermore, a screenwriter he had met,

after reading and liking a play of his, encouraged Reed to write more.

Reed supported himself by working in different places, including hospitals, factories, and the New York State Department of Labor. In 1963, he joined *Umbra* magazine and attended the meetings of the Umbra Society, a group of African-American writers who met every week in Tom Dent's apartment on the Lower East Side. The group included David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, Askia Muhammad Toure, Charles and Raymond Patterson, Lorenzo Thomas, and Norman Pritchard. Occasionally, Reed would find himself in the company of literary luminaries such as James Baldwin, AMIRI BARAKA (a.k.a. Leroi Jones), Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes (who helped to publish *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, Reed's first novel, at Doubleday), Norman Mailer, and John A. Williams. By attending the Umbra workshops, Reed learned various techniques of African-American literary style such as call and response, as well as the art of collage (or putting together ideas from African, African-American, and European cultural traditions). These workshops shaped and launched his literary career, for he wrote some of his first poems under their influence. Reed later developed his technique into Neo-HooDooism or Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic, the hallmark of all of his essays, novels, plays, and poems.

In 1967, Reed left New York for California. After the publication of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, he sensed that he might not know how to deal with so much adulation over his work. He spent the summer in Echo Park Canyon, a section of Los Angeles, while working on *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, his second novel. From a literary perspective, the move from New York to California favored Reed's further interest in and research on African-American religious beliefs, particularly Hoodoo, the North American version of Haitian voodoo and African vodoun. Reed lived in Los Angeles for six months. In 1968, he and Carla Blank, his second wife, moved to Berkeley.

Economically, conditions improved for Reed in 1971, when he signed a contract to write three

books for Doubleday. This measure of financial stability allowed him and his wife to move to the Berkeley Hills. Berkeley differed from Los Angeles in that "ex-Southerners" did not regard Reed with suspicion. Nonetheless, Reed still experienced racism, segregation, and the fear of the black man, themes that would later permeate his essays, novels, plays, and poems. Because he worked at home while writing his third novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, people became suspicious that he might be a drug dealer; the police even showed up at his apartment surreptitiously, claiming they had heard that a murder was committed there. In 1974, Reed and his wife moved back to the Berkeley flats on Edith Street, where they lived for two years. They then moved to Jayne Street, where they realized that people were afraid of blacks' moving into white neighborhoods. In 1976, they moved to another house, on Terrace Drive in El Cerrito, only to be told three years later that the house was for sale. Because the price was beyond their means, Reed and his wife soon understood that the houses they could afford were in primarily black neighborhoods in North Oakland. They settled for a termite-ridden 1906 Victorian on Fifty-third Street, where they have lived since 1979. Tennessee Reed, their daughter, is also a publisher, poet, and writer, who teaches creative writing.

Before he retired in 2005, Reed taught at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was awarded tenure in 1988, after unfairly being denied tenure in 1977. He has also taught at several other institutions such as Yale University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, Dartmouth College, Calhoun College, Columbia University, Harvard University, the University of California at Santa Barbara, and the University of Washington. He holds an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Reed is a multitalented writer and editor who is also a recording artist (*Conjure I* and *Conjure II*) and television producer. He is the publisher of *Konch*, an electronic magazine that showcases upcoming and well-established writers from around the world. Through Ishmael Reed Publishing

Company, Reed continues his multicultural work by publishing poetry and fiction from around the world. Titles include *25 New Nigerian Poets* (2000) and *Short Stories by 16 Nigerian Women* (2005), both edited by Toyin Adewale-Gabriel.

One can measure Reed's significant and immense contributions to American and world letters by looking at his body of work, the influence he has had on other writers, and the numerous awards he continues to receive. American writers whom Reed has influenced include Gayl Jones, TONI CADE BAMBARA, AUGUST WILSON, Reginald Martin, Terry McMillan, and Trey Ellis, to name a few. In 1973, Reed was nominated for two National Book Awards, for *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963–1970*, and a Pulitzer Prize for *Conjure*. He was also nominated that year for the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award. In 1974, he won the Guggenheim Foundation Award for fiction, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* as “the best non-commercial novel” of that year, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for creative writing. The following year, Reed received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award and the Rosenthal Foundation Award for *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Reed has also received the Sakai Kinu Award from the Osaka Community Foundation (probably for *Japanese by Spring* in 1993) and Literary Excellence from the Morgan State University Alumni in 1994. Also in 1994, the Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks chose Reed to receive the George Kent Award. In 1998, Reed received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, also known as the “genius grant.” In 2001, he received the Chancellor's Award for Community Service from the University of California at Berkeley. In 2003, he won the Otto Award for Political Theater, while in 2004 the *Los Angeles Times* honored him with its Robert Hirsch Award. On February 10, 2006, the Department of English at Howard University dedicated its Heart's Day of 2006 to honor the accomplishments of Ishmael Reed and his immense contributions to American letters.

To date, Reed has written more than 20 books of poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction (essays). His novels include *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Flight to Canada* (1976), *The Terrible Twos* (1982), *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), *The Terrible Threes* (1989), and *Japanese by Spring* (1993). Reed has been working on *The Terrible Fours* and what he calls “the Big O. J.” novel. His poetry collections include *Catechism of d Neoamerican Hoodoo Church* (1970), *Chattanooga* (1973), *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963–1970* (1973), *A Secretary to the Spirits* (1978), *New and Collected Poems* (1988), *The Reed Reader* (2000) (which contains excerpts from novels, selected poems and essays, and two plays), and *New and Collected Poems, 1964–2006* (2006). His six plays and one libretto are *Mother Hubbard* (1981), *Hubba City* (1988), *Savage Wilds* (1989), *The Preacher and the Rapper* (1994), *C above C above High C* (1997), *Gethsemane Park* (1998), and *Tough Love Game* (2004). The essays and nonfiction works include *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1978), *God Made Alaska for the Indians: Selected Essays* (1982), *Writin' Is Fightin': Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (1988), *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), and *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* (2003). Reed has edited or published anthologies such as *Calafia: The California Poetry* (1979), *The Before Columbus Fiction Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980–1990* (1992), *The Before Columbus Poetry Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980–1990* (1992), *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace* (1997), and *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry across the Americas, 1900–2001* (2003).

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969)

While the earlier *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) views voodoo negatively, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* begins tracing the roots of the North American Hoodoo to Haiti and West Africa. Influenced mainly by Voltaire's *Candide*, *The Free-Lance*

Pallbearers is the story of Bukka Doopeyduck, who wants to be like Harry Sam, the dictator of the country of the same name. But he eventually finds out that he has been duped. In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, Loop Garoo Kid reclaims the American West by using Hoodoo and Voodoo forces instead of guns. This novel also becomes Reed's manifesto about writing a novel. When Bo Shmo, a neorealist, tells Loop Garoo, "All art must be for the liberation of the masses," Loop Garoo counters that he can write circuses if he wants to, because "No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons" (36).

Further, the narrative of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* resembles Charlie "Bird" Parker's bebop style. When Drag Gibson asks the Pope what Loop Garou is putting on the town of Yellow Back, the Pope describes Loop Garoo's modus operandi as "scatting arbitrarily, using forms and adding his own. He's blowing like that celebrated musician Charles 'Yardbird' Parker—improvising as he goes along. He's throwing clusters of demon chords at you and you don't know the changes" (154).

In the *Reed Reader*, Reed describes *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and how he wrote it:

In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, a black cowboy, whose character is inspired by the Loup Garou legend of Haiti and the Louisiana Bayou, enters a Western town and causes such havoc that the ranchers have to call in the Pope for relief. As I was cutting and pasting characters in those days, the character also recalled a cowboy icon of my youth, Lash Larue, who disciplined his enemies with a whip. In Buffalo, black kids like me learned about good and evil from cowboys like Larue and Roy Rogers. (xv)

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explore the scatological imagery and corruption in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. Discuss how these images are conveyed and what they add to the work.
2. Examine the contributions of African Americans to the American West. Locate at least three and discuss what bearing they have on Reed's views of his characters.

"I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" (1970)

Originally published in *Catechism of d Neoamerican Hoodoo Church* (1970) and later collected in *Conjure*, "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" is a bebop jazz poem in which a Neo-Hoodoo cowboy reclaims the history and the place of African Americans in the American West through references to Egyptian deities—Ra, Osiris, Isis, Anubis, and Ptah—and pharaoh's wife, Nefertiti. "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" is a significant poem in Reed's writing, insofar as it functions as the genesis for *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, a Hoodoo bebop western novel, in which a werewolf becomes the Loop Garoo Kid.

The epigraph to "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra"—taken from *Rituale Romanum* (1947)—heralds the conflict between Hoodoo and Christianity that dominates the last three stanzas of the poem. Further, it announces that the devil must be coerced into revealing any magic potions and charms so they can be burned. The poem also contains references to the American West: a wanted poster, Wells Fargo, and the Chisholm Trail. In the first stanza, the speaker proclaims that he is "a cowboy in the Boat of Ra," whom, when he rode from town, people compared to the "dog-faced man." Further, he announces that he is not like Egyptologists "who do not know their trips" (*New and Collected Poems* 17). A note in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* informs us that Ra is the "Egyptian sun god of Heliopolis; typically represented as a hawk-headed man; father of Osiris, Isis and Set" and that the "dog-faced man" refers to Anubis, "the Egyptian god of the dead, shown typically as a jackal-headed man" (2252). In the next stanza, the cowboy laughs at those who cannot see that the Germans stole Nefertiti, Pharaoh Akenaten's wife, and left a fake chipped Nefertiti.

Here, Reed connects Ra to Sonny Rollins, the jazz saxophonist, with “a long horn winding / its bells thru the Field of Reeds [Reed himself]” (17). In the third stanza, he boasts of having gone to bed with Isis, the goddess of nature and Osiris’s sister and wife. In the next four stanzas, the cowboy recounts his escapades in the Old West, where he is biding his time while waiting for Osiris to return. Unlike Set, his brother, Osiris allowed a multiplicity of deities, an asset to Reed’s Neo-HooDooism, and loved to dance. In the Osiris-Isis myth, Isis is supposed to gather the limbs of Osiris so that the latter can return.

In the next two stanzas, the cowboy becomes the Loop Garoo Kid, the master of the lash and magic potions. He asks Pope Joan of the Ptah Ra (notice the combination of Catholicism and Egyptian mythology) to give him his HooDoo paraphernalia—this includes the bones of “Ju-Ju snake,” a direct reference to Damballah, the West African voodoo deity of fecundity and knowledge, which is represented by a snake—so that he can go after Set, who has murdered and dismembered Osiris, his brother, to usurp the Crown. Through punning (“to sunset Set”), the last sections of the poem reveal that Set is the Egyptian god of sunset. That Loop Garoo Kid requests the help of Pope Joan is pivotal to the poem, because retrieving old cultures and cultural/historical figures, especially those neglected or dismissed by the mainstream Euro-American culture, is the cornerstone of Reed’s Neo-HooDooism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Study the link between Loup Garoo Kid of “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra” and Loop Garoo Kid of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. What does this relationship contribute to a view of Reed’s poetics? Why?
2. Read Reed’s “Why I Often Allude to Osiris” and “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra” and compare Akenaten to Set. In what ways does the pharaoh differ from the Egyptian deity? How do their differences add to an understanding of Reed’s work?

Mumbo Jumbo (1972)

Mumbo Jumbo is Ishmael Reed’s best-known and most-studied novel for two reasons: First, critics have been enamored of its experimentation with language and narrative technique. Second, it inspired Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to develop his theory of the Signifyin(g) Monkey in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), a book that continues to influence students and critics of African-American literature.

Like other novels by Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a difficult one to summarize, for it does not follow a conventional plot. With a structure similar to jazz music, it contains several genres, plots, subplots, and a plethora of quotes, footnotes, drawings, photo prints, and bibliography entries (104 titles). Many of the book titles, footnotes, and quotations deal with colonization, Islam, Christianity, epidemic diseases, witchcraft, dance, ragtime, “swingtime,” voodoo in Haiti, rock and roll, drumming, and European and American history. As Reed’s reading of the 1920s “Jazz Age,” *Mumbo Jumbo* traces the origins of African-American oral traditions, especially voodoo, from Africa via Haiti and shows how African Americans such as PaPa LaBas, the leader of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, have used African-based traditions to counter racism and monoculturalism. Throughout the novel, PaPa LaBas tries to resurrect voodoo in North America but also battles the Atonists (of the Wallflower Order), who see other cultures as a threat to Western civilization.

Mumbo Jumbo takes its title from Mandingo: “[Mandingo *ma-ma-gyo-mbo*, “magician who makes troubled spirits of ancestors go away”: *ma-ma*, grandmother+*gyo*, trouble+*mbo*, to leave]” (7). The story begins in New Orleans, where Jes Grew, a “disease” that makes people dance, is possessing people. The mayor of New Orleans is worried that if Jes Grew becomes pandemic, it will obliterate Western Civilization. As it turns out, however, Jes Grew is not a disease:

The foolish Wallflower Order hadn’t learned a damned thing. They thought that by fumigating the Place Congo in the 1890s when people were

doing the Bamboula the Chacta the Babouille the Counjaille the Juba the Congo and the Voodoo that this would put an end to it. That it was merely a fad. But they did not understand that the Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. Other plagues were accompanied by bad air (malaria). Jes Grew victims said that the air was as clear as they had ever seen it and that there was the aroma of roses and perfumes which had never before enticed their nostrils. Some plagues arise from decomposing animals, but Jes Grew is electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy. Terrible plagues were due to the wrath of God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods. (6)

This is the gist of the story, compounded by the fact that *Mumbo Jumbo* is also about writing itself, particularly writing the manifold aspects of the African-American story. It is said that because there is not “liturgy without a text,” Jes Grew was seeking its words. “Its text” is in the 1920s—the time of the New Negro Renaissance, as the search had failed in the 1890s (6).

Mumbo Jumbo exemplifies Neo-HooDooism, which is characterized by synchronicity and syncretism. Synchronicity allows one to perceive time as circular, not linear; therefore, time past is present and future. Thus in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed is able to move from the Middle Ages to 1890s Place Congo to 1920s New Orleans and Harlem and link various stories/plots to 1970s America. Syncretism is similar to the technique of collage, which amounts to an amalgamation of disparate, nonrelated elements in one text. This is one of the characteristics of voodoo traditions in the Americas, whereby voodoo has been able to flourish by blending with Catholicism and absorbing other cultures. Syncretism and synchronicity have allowed Reed to turn his novels, plays, poems, and essays into multicultural and multilingual texts. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a multicultural novel par excellence. Almost every American ethnic group is represented in the novel,

and world cultures permeate its text. In “Ishmael Reed—Self-Interview,” Reed describes what went into the writing of *Mumbo Jumbo*:

Intuition, intellect, research, maybe even communicators from the psychic field. I was amazed the number of times I would play my hunches about a particular historical event and then be able to go out and prove it. I wanted to write about a time like the present or use the past to prophesy about the future—a process our ancestors called necromancy. I chose the twenties because they are very similar to what’s happening now. This is a valid method and has been used by writers from time immemorial. (130)

For Discussion or Writing

1. *Mumbo Jumbo* is heavily influenced by jazz. How does music inform the novel? How is jazz related to voodoo, according to the novel?
2. Compare Ishmael Reed’s take on the New Negro Renaissance (also known as the Harlem Renaissance) to TONI MORRISON’s *Jazz*. In what ways do they agree? In what ways do they differ? Explain.

The Last Days of Louisiana Red (1974)

Papa LaBas of *Mumbo Jumbo* reappears in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, Reed’s fourth novel, as a Neo-HooDoo detective who goes to Berkeley, California, to solve the murder of Ed Yellings, owner of the Solid Gumbo Works. Ed Yellings is an Osiris-type HooDoo therapist who is about to get rid of Louisiana Red, a neo-slave mentality that leads African Americans to murder and hold one another down like crabs in a barrel. But the Moochers, a group of militants being manipulated by white corporations, murder Ed Yellings before he is able to finish developing “the Gumbo pill into aural healing” and “experimenting with ways of healing people by manipulating their psychic fields” (143). In his study, PaPa LaBas defines Louisiana Red as

“Crabs in the Barrel. Each crab trying to keep the other from reaching the top” and traces it to Marie Laveau, the 19th-century Voodoo Queen of New Orleans: “‘Louisiana Red was a misuse of the Business. It gets hot quick and starts acting sullen—high blood pressure is its official disease. Marie decided that she was going to finish off Doc John. That’s when he took her daughter’” (140). *Business* and *Work* are code terms for Neo-HooDoo/Voodoo. Complicating PaPa LaBas’s detective work is the fact that Minnie Yellings/Minnie the Moocher is also part of the Moochers, who lead her to set a fire on Solid Gumbo Works, thus destroying his father’s Business. Meanwhile, Street Yellings and Wolf Street kill each other, while Wolf Yellings and Sister Yellings, his sister, are trying to help to save Solid Gumbo Works. At the end of the novel, PaPa LaBas saves Minnie from Blue Coal, who was about to rape her.

In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, Reed continues to reconnect the African diaspora through Gumbo, a code name for Neo-HooDoo, and shows what *houngans* (priests) and *mambos* (priestesses), such as Doc John and Marie Laveau, respectively, have had to do to ensure the survival of African oral and folkloric traditions in the Americas. In an interview with Robert Gover, Reed has characterized *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* as both “a casual use of the Voodoo esthetic,” as opposed to *Mumbo Jumbo*, where voodoo aesthetics is “more formalized,” and “the New Testament of Voodoo,” in which voodoo is taken “out of the backwoods” and made urban. The difference between the two kinds of voodoo, then, is like “the difference between a tenor player in, say, Duke Ellington’s band and the old time country tenor player. It’s a very sophisticated urban sound and what I’m trying to do is take the toad’s eyes out of it” (13).

As does *Mumbo Jumbo*, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* examines many other texts and subjects, including Cab Calloway’s song “Minnie the Moocher,” Sophocles’ Theban plays (*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*), Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Carl Paine Tobey’s *Astrology of Inner Space*, *The Pica-*

yune Creole Cook Book, the Congolese history of the 1960s, voodoo symbolism and mythology, the history of Doc John and Marie Laveau, and astrology. These intertexts allow Reed to satirize black-on-black crimes, street gangs, Berkeley, radical feminism, and the various stereotypes of the black man in America, making *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* a mixture of satire, allegory, mythology, African and Greek legends, and a comment upon contemporary American society.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Ed Yellings’s “Solid Gumbo Works” to PaPas LaBas’s Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral (in *Mumbo Jumbo*). How do they perform the same function in the works?
2. In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), Minnie Yellings/Minnie the Moocher is led to destroy her father’s Business, a code name for HooDoo/Voodoo therapy. In Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Minnie Ransom is not only aware of the African and Haitian HooDoo/Voodoo traditions—voodoo deities (loas) such as Oshun, Ogun, Oyo, Damballah, Shango, Legba, Baron Samedi, and the Radas—but also serves, along with Old Wife and the deities, as a healing medium for Velma Henry. Compare Minnie Yellings to Minnie Ransom. Compare also Reed’s and Bambara’s ways of using Charlie “Bird” Parker and his style in the two novels.

Flight to Canada (1976)

Flight to Canada explores the slave narrative genre and American history, particularly under Abraham Lincoln. In this neo-slave narrative, Reed revisits the time of the Civil War in order to comment on the present of the Bicentennial Year. It is the story of Raven Quickskill—based on the Tlingit myths of the raven—who writes a poem to inform Arthur Swille, his slave master, that he has escaped from his “Camelot” plantation. While the poem leads him to be invited to the White House, it is

also used by slave catchers to track him down. As other slaves' perspectives suggest, Canada is also a mental state.

Like other Reed novels, *Flight to Canada* is a composite of literary and popular texts. Not only does it reread Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and Edgar Allan Poe's stories, but it also contains excerpts from Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*, the play Abraham Lincoln was watching when John Wilkes Booth shot him.

For Discussion or Writing

Compare Reed's *Flight to Canada* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, also a neo-slave narrative. What does each work have in common with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? How do the modern works differ strategically? Discuss.

“The Reactionary Poet” (1978)

“The Reactionary Poet” first appeared in *A Secretary to the Spirits* and was later collected in *New and Collected Poems*. It seems to be a poetic manifesto against what sound like aesthetic prescriptions for the future. The speaker proclaims that if the addressee is a revolutionary who stands for the future, then he has to be a reactionary and stand for the past. Then the speaker lists items he wants brought back: suspenders, mom, homemade ice cream, the banjo, Crazy Kats, rent parties, and corn liquor, to name a few. In the second stanza, the list includes jazz, dance, literature, and popular culture:

The syncopation of
Fletcher Henderson
The Kiplingesque lines
of James Weldon Johnson
Black Eagle
Mickey Mouse
. . . (158)

In stark contrast, the addressee's future world bans humor and forces everybody to wear the same caps

and odd jackets. What is more, to love and to kiss will become “a crime against the state” and “Duke Ellington will be / Ordered to write more marches / ‘For the people’” (159). In the last two stanzas (couplets), the speaker reinforces his manifesto of the first stanza, “If you are what's coming / I must be what's going” (159).

For Discussion or Writing

Examine why syncopation and the music of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington would appeal to Ishmael Reed. How do these interests contribute to his poetics? Explain.

“Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy” (1978)

Charlie “Bird” Parker (Charles “Yardbird” Parker), the alto saxophonist whose hometown was Kansas City, Kansas, is Reed's favorite jazz musician. Reed loves his innovative techniques and improvisations so much that Charlie Parker appears in almost all of Reed's novels. This has earned accolades from Max Roach, a jazz drummer who played with Bird, and who describes Reed (on a book jacket) as “The Charlie Parker of American fiction.” On the back cover of *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, Reed states, “I think that if anybody is going to compare me to anybody, then compare me to someone like Mingus and Charlie Parker, musicians who have fluidity with the chord structure just as we have with the syntax or the sentence which is our basic unit.”

Centering on the primacy of rhythm, “Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy” is a conversation between the speaker (Ishmael Reed) and K. C. Bird (read, Kansas City Bird), a reference to Charlie “Bird” Parker. The time is one morning in 1970. Because Parker died in 1955, we assume that the dialogue is an imagined one. Indeed, the speaker reveals that the Bichot Beaujolais might have spurred the conversation.

As they discuss the importance of rhythm, the speaker declares that everything depends on

rhythm, prompting Bird to proclaim that rhythm is his precious constituent. They then assert that while nature cannot exist without rhythm, rhythm can exist without nature. The poem shifts to Baird Hall, probably the music building at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where a man is conducting rhythm “on Sunday afternoons” (155). In the seventh stanza, the speaker wants to play Bennie Morten’s “It’s Hard to Laugh or Smile,” but the machine will not work (156). The speaker does not mind, because Bird disappears. The poem ends with a steel band entering the room.

Born in Kansas City, Bennie Morten was a jazz pianist and band leader who was instrumental in defining Kansas City jazz style in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He recruited such jazz greats as Count Basie, Jimmy Rushing, and Walter Page. Bennie Morten and his Kansas City Orchestra recorded “It’s Hard to Laugh or Smile” in 1928.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Listen to Bennie Morten’s “It’s Hard to Laugh or Smile” and compare its effect to that of “Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy.” How does Reed convey the speaker’s mood in this poem?
2. How important is rhythm to poetry and blues or jazz music? What do they have in common? Discuss your answer in light of the poems of Ishmael Reed and Langston Hughes.

***The Terrible Twos and The Terrible Threes* (1982, 1989)**

Based structurally on Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* are satires on the Reagan-Bush administration and how its economic and cultural policies affected minorities and third-world countries. The two novels contain fantasy, science and detective fiction, Santa Claus, the myths of Black Peter and Saint Nicholas, feminism, Rastafarianism, Calypso, voodoo, and Obeahism.

In *The Terrible Twos*, Dean Clift is elected president thanks to big corporations, such as Oswald Zumwalt’s North Pole Development Corporation. The story begins on Christmas 1980, when the 40th president is being inaugurated, while Ebenezer Scrooge (from *A Christmas Carol*) is towering “above the Washington skyline, rubbing his hands and greedily peering over his spectacles” (4). Dean Clift soon mourns the death of his wife, who is electrocuted while lighting a Christmas tree cut in Alaska despite the objections of Native Americans. Because of the government’s racist and antiimmigrant policies and religious intolerance, Saint Nicholas takes Dean Clift to the American underground to see how former presidents live and learn from their mistakes. After the trip, Dean Clift endorses the Bill of Rights, promises to stop robbing Alaska of its beauty, and vows to recognize the contributions of minorities to American history, economy, and culture. No sooner does he deliver the speech than Bob Krantz declares him incapacitated and replaces him with Jesse Hatch.

As a sequel, *The Terrible Threes* explores further the myths of Black Peter and Saint Nicholas. While Saint Nicholas continues to help politicians change or reverse their discriminatory policies, Black Peter helps regular people solve their personal problems. But because everything in America is commercialized, Black Peter’s deeds are turned into a best-selling song, “Black Peter Calypso,” which begins the novel. Bob Krantz, Jesse Hatch, and Reverend Jones want the “surplus” people to convert to Christianity or leave the country. While the Supreme Court is about to adopt the Conversion Bill, Chief Justice Nola Payne, who is to cast the deciding vote, is visited by Saint Nicholas, who has Judge Taney with him. After acknowledging that he wronged Dred Scott, Judge Taney advises Nola Payne not to vote for a bill that would rid the country of blacks and Jews. Not only does she vote against the Conversion Bill, but she also overrules a lower court and restores the authority of Dean Clift. At the end of the novel, however, Dean Clift and his convoy are kidnapped on their way to the White House.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* influence the structure and themes in *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*?
2. Why does Reed compare the United States to a two-year-old baby in *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*? What do the two entities have in common? Explain the irony/satire in Reed's titles.

***Reckless Eyeballing* (1986)**

Exploring racism, feminism, white and black anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Obeahism, *Reckless Eyeballing* is Reed's response to feminists and critics who charged him with misogyny after either misreading or disagreeing with the way some female characters are characterized in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Ironically, critics have failed to notice that the seemingly sexist scenes, dialogues, and some characters in *Reckless Eyeballing* are culled from African-American novels by women, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ALICE WALKER's *The Color Purple* (especially the film), Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. There are also some quotes or references from novels by Paule Marshall and Charlene Hatcher Polite.

Having been branded as a misogynist after his play *Suzanna*, the character Ian Ball writes *Reckless Eyeballing* so that feminists will take him off the sexist list. For this purpose, he has to cater to the demands of Becky French, whose brand of feminism is likened to nazism, and Tremonisha Smarts, who gets grants from Becky French to write plays that stereotype black males. Based on Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, Tremonisha helps Ian Ball improve his play. In Ball's *Reckless Eyeballing*, Ham Hill—based on the biblical Ham and Emmett Till—is exhumed 20 years after his lynching so that he can be condemned anew for raping Cora Mae with his eyes and for ruining her life. Yet Becky French would rather stage a play about Eva Braun than let Ian Ball present his play. Meanwhile, Becky French helps Trem-

onisha stage her *Wrong-Headed Man*, a composite play that samples African-American women's novels. Consequently, the Flower Phantom, who shaves women and leaves a chrysanthemum flower, is after her for the way she has portrayed black men.

At the end of the novel, it is assumed that Ian Ball is the Flower Phantom. Having been hexed at birth and born two-headed, Ian Ball possesses “two minds, the one not knowing what the other was up to” (146). When Tremonisha realizes that Becky French has been using her, she and Ian Ball reconcile. While she goes to California to write more books, Ian Ball heads to New Oyo, a fictional country in the West Indies.

For Discussion or Writing

After doing research on Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, find out how the story of Reed's Tremonisha differs from that of Joplin's *Treemonisha*. Discuss the significance of these differences.

***Japanese by Spring* (1993)**

A satire of American orientalism and American universities, *Japanese by Spring* is a milestone in Reed's writing and, in a way, in literature in general. In it Reed achieves the highest degree of multiculturalism. The book is written in the English, Yoruba, and Japanese languages. For this, Reed had been studying Yoruba and Japanese for the preceding 10 years. Moreover, Reed appears in his novel, along with his wife and daughter, to challenge Roland Barthes's, Michel Foucault's, and Jacques Derrida's concept of the death of the author and to counter the views of Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt, an African-American professor at Jack London College.

Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt, named in honor of three four-star African-American generals—his father, a two-star air force general, expected his son to become a general, but Puttbutt was kicked out of the Air Force Academy—has a hard time getting tenure and spends his time trying to figure out the political ideologies of each group so that he can adjust

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- , and Nellie McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.
- Gover, Robert. "An Interview with Ishmael Reed." *Black Literature Forum* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 12–19.
- Harris, Norman. "The Gods Must Be Angry: *Flight to Canada* as Political History." *Modern Fiction Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 111–123.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Reprint, New York: Perennial Library, 1990.
- Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
- Lock, Helen. "'A Man's Story Is His Gris-Gris': Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic and the Afro-American Tradition." *South Central Review* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 67–77.
- Ludwig, Sämi. *Concrete Language: Intercultural Communication in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior and Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996.
- Martin, Reginald. *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- McGee, Patrick. *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Plume, 1973.
- Mvuyekure, Pierre-Damien. "American Neo-HooDooism: The Novels of Ishmael Reed." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, edited by Maryemma Graham, 203–220. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- . *The "Dark Heathenism" of the American Novelist Ishmael Reed: African Voodoo as American Literary HooDoo*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007.
- . "From Legba to PaPa LaBas: New World Metaphysical Self/Refashioning in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*." In *The African Diaspora: African Origins and the New World Identities*, edited by Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyle Davies, and Ali A. Mazrui, 350–366. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Mvuyekure, Pierre-Damien, ed. *A Casebook Study of Ishmael Reed's Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003.
- Nazareth, Peter. *In the Trickster Tradition: The Novels of Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejar, and Ishmael Reed*. London: Bogle L'Ouverture Press, 1994.
- Nimura, Tamiko. "'Time Is Not a River': The Implications of Mumbo Jumbo's Pendulum Chronology for Coalition Politics." *Ethnic Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2003).
- Punday, Daniel. "Ishmael Reed's Rhetorical Turn: Uses of 'Signifying' in *Reckless Eyeballing*." *College English* 54, no. 4 (1996): 446–461.
- Reed, Ishmael. *Airing Dirty Laundry*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993.
- . *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.
- . "Can a Metronome Know the Thunder or Summon a God?" In *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle, 405–406. New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- . *Flight to Canada*. 1976. Reprint, New York: Scribner, 1998.
- . *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. 1967. Reprint, Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999.
- . *God Made Alaska for the Indians: Selected Essays*. New York: Garland, 1982.
- . "Ishmael Reed—Self-Interview." In *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. New York: Atheneum, 1978.
- . *Japanese by Spring*. New York: Atheneum, 1993.
- . *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. 1974. Reprint, Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000.
- . *Mumbo Jumbo*. 1972. Reprint, New York: Scribner, 1988.
- . *New and Collected Poems*. New York: Atheneum, 1988.
- . *New and Collected Poems, 1964–2006*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006.
- . *The Reed Reader*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- . *Reckless Eyeballing*. 1986. Reprint, Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000.

- . *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. New York: Atheneum, 1978.
- . *The Terrible Threes*. 1989. Reprint, Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999.
- . *The Terrible Twos*. 1982. Reprint, Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999.
- . “The Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed.” In *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, edited by Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh, 59–73. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- . *Writin’ Is Fightin’: Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper*. New York: Atheneum, 1988.
- . *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. 1969. Reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1988.
- Reed, Ishmael, ed. *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*. New York: Viking, 1997.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin Or, Life among the Lowly*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Taylor, Tom. “Our American Cousin.” In *Trilby and Other Plays*, edited by George Taylor, 132–197. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *Idylls of the King*. Edited by J. M. Gray. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983.
- Voltaire. *Candide*. New York: Bantam Books, 1959.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure



ADRIENNE RICH (1929–)

Art is both tough and fragile. It speaks of what we long to hear and what we dread to find. Its source and native impulse, the imagination, may be shackled in early life, yet may find release in conditions offering little else to the spirit.

(“Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts”)

Born May 16, 1929, in Baltimore, Maryland, Adrienne Cecile Rich is the older of two daughters. Her mother, Helen Jones Rich, was a gifted pianist and composer who left her profession upon marriage to Arnold Rich, a physician and pathology professor at Johns Hopkins University. Rich admits she was lucky to be born “white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged [her] to read and write” but states such encouragement had a price: “I tried for a long time to please him, or rather, not to displease him” (“When We Dead Awaken” 93). The angst Rich suffered trying to conform to the expected roles for females gave her an “obscure, boiling anger” about those whose needs have been defined by others. It is her unwavering belief in what is right and her willingness to discuss difficult matters like rape, the Holocaust, and domestic and foreign clashes so openly and eloquently that allow Adrienne Rich to construct bridges capable of sustaining readers through tough political waters.

In 1951 Rich graduated from Radcliffe Colleges. That same year she received the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book, *A Change of World* (1951). The poet W. H. Auden’s praise of Rich’s poetry reflects the condescension commonly doled out to women writers of the time: “The poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not

cowed by them, and do not tell fibs” (Gelpi 126). Yet Auden accurately describes Rich’s early poetry as detached and formal, based on the traditions of her poetic predecessors. As a young woman in her poetry, as in her life, Rich obediently followed the rules. After graduation she was awarded a Guggenheim Scholarship for travel in Europe and England. During that time she wrote many of the poems that would be included in her second volume of poetry, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955).

Rich reminds us in her essay “When We Dead Awaken,” that in the 1950s a “full” life for a woman meant marriage and children. In pursuit of that dream, Rich married the Harvard economist Alfred Conrad at the age of 24 and the couple moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Their first son was born a year later, in 1955, the same month *The Diamond Cutters*, appeared.

Rather than blissful completion, marriage and motherhood led to feelings of frustration and anger. The sustained periods of concentration required to write poetry were no longer guaranteed and Rich began to feel torn between her needs and the needs of her family. This was only compounded by the illusion of housewives in homes all over America who seemed to be content “making careers of domestic perfection.” Rich writes: “I had a marriage and a child. If there were doubts, if there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps

a monster” (“When We Dead Awaken” 95). Despite her despair, Rich soon had two more sons—Paul, born in 1957, and Jacob, born in 1959. Through the despair and the diapers, she kept writing. Yet it would be eight years before Rich would return to the literary forefront with a new collection.

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) is set up as 10 sections, or “snapshots,” which illustrate women in the roles in which men have cast them and women themselves have accepted. Rich already had an established following by this point, and her readers had learned to expect subtlety in her poetry and obedience to tradition. Yet what Rich delivered in this volume is a “shock of imagery [due] to an accuracy so unsparring that the imagination reacts psychosomatically: muscles tighten and nerves twinge” (Gelpi 134). Gone is any semblance of the modest, quiet poetry for which Auden praised Rich’s earliest works. In her third volume Rich seems to have zeroed in on Auden’s final requirement of poetry, that it not “fib.” And she is clear in her purpose—to “outstare with truthfulness,” writing openly about the sexual oppression of women in America.

Much of America was not ready for that type of honesty. Rich had been warned, almost prophetically, by Auden in his 1951 commentary on her first volume, although she had shown no inclination in her early writings to break away from tradition:

Before . . . revolutionary artists . . . can appear again, there will have to be just such another cultural revolution replacing these attitudes with others. So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors we must follow in their traditions. (Gelpi 126)

Obviously in 1951, Auden could not possibly have predicted that such a cultural revolution would actually occur within Adrienne Rich’s lifetime. Nor could Auden have known that she would be called upon to be the voice for millions of women who, in the words of Helen Vendler, “read [Rich’s words] in almost disbelieving wonder; someone my age was writing down my life” (Gelpi 160).

Critical reaction to *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* was harsh, objecting to Rich’s bitter tone and the emotionality of the piece, so different from the detachment common in the poetry of her male counterparts. Yet more recent criticism of Rich’s work celebrates that ability to speak on behalf of the silenced. The critic Albert Gelpi praises the volume as a “rejection of the terms on which society says we must expend our existence and her departure on an inner journey of exploration and discovery” (138). The feminist critic Erica Jong praised Rich’s willingness to address the politics of America’s patriarchal society.

It is in her third volume that Rich also rebels against the common belief that poetry should exist separately from time. As early as 1954 Rich had taken up the practice of dating each poem, arguing that poetry is shaped and affected by the political and social forces at work within society. In *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* each poem includes the date of its completion as a postscript to the title.

Her next collection, *Necessities of Life* (1966), is filled with elegies. The title is meant “to suggest the awareness of death under everything that we are trying to escape from or that is coloring our response to things, the knowledge that after all time isn’t ours” (Gelpi 141). Yet, rather than being about death as the critic Deborah Pope suggests, Gelpi insists the poems are affirmations of the will to persist, citing “Like This Together” as proof:

Dead winter doesn’t die
it wears away, a piece of carrion
picked clean at last,
rained away or burnt dry.
Our desiring does this,
make no mistake, I’m speaking
of fact: through mere indifference
we could prevent it.
Only our fierce attention
gets hyacinths out of those
hard cerebral lumps,
unwraps the wet buds down
the whole length of a stem.

Although Rich continued to pursue a career as a poet and professor, as for many women of her generation Rich's own ambitions were secondary to those of her husband. In 1966 he accepted a post at New York's City College. She took a position in the SEEK program at the same college, working closely with minority and disadvantaged students, some of whom had only recently arrived in America from third world countries. Both Rich and her husband were instantly swept up in the anti-Vietnam War protests; however, Rich's daily exposure to women who faced so many forms of political oppression here on American soil raised issues that she could not ignore.

Leaflets (1969) expresses Rich's frustration at a society that increasingly accepts atrocity while going about routine events:

I'd rather
taste blood, yours or mine, flowing
from a sudden slash, than cut all day
with blunt scissors on dotted lines
like the teacher told. ("On Edges," 1968)

Rich's dramatic imagery seeks to pull the reader in, making the experience concrete so that one cannot turn away. Most importantly, though, it is at this point in her career that she becomes determined that her poetry have a political impact. It no longer mattered, she has said, whether her poems were aesthetically pleasing: "I wanted to choose words that even you / would have to be changed by" ("Implosions," 1968). At the same time Rich sought to invoke change in her readers, she was facing dramatic upheaval in her own life. In 1970 she left her marriage, finally admitting her own unhappiness. Later that year her husband Conrad committed suicide.

The title for *A Will To Change* (1971) is from Charles Olson's line "What does not change / is the will to change," to which Adrienne Rich adds, "the moment of change is the only poem." Gelpi describes the poetry included in this collection as a continuation of the techniques begun in the "Ghazals" of *Leaflets*. Much of the poetry has

evolved to include techniques common in film artistry, such as jump cuts and collage. Included in the collection is "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," wherein Rich describes "the experience of repetition as death." The death of her husband is depicted as weighing on her in this selection, where Rich's "swirling wants" are forever unanswered by Conrad's "frozen lips."

It would be easy for Rich's poetry to slip into themes of loneliness and depression, and she does allow herself to express those emotions. But Rich also holds herself up as a survivor and model for other women who have lost husbands, children, and so much more on the battlefield of their daily quest for survival. In that mode, she gave readers *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). In this volume she writes with "visionary anger" to describe her new identity:

I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the
lids
of the newborn child ("The Stranger")

The title poem describes a merperson, neither male nor female, possessing a book of myths that contains tales of our long-gone patriarchal culture. Rich suggests that to save our world from destruction, we must put aside the chasm that exists between male and female ways of thinking and embrace a mental sort of "bisexuality."

Diving into the Wreck received instant recognition and was selected to receive the 1974 National Book Award. Adrienne Rich rejected the award as an individual but accepted it in the name of all women "whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world," as she articulated in a statement written with two other nominees, ALICE WALKER and Audre Lord. More than 20 years later, Rich would again reject national recognition when the office of President Clinton sought to award her the

National Medal for the Arts. Rich responded, “Art means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power which holds it hostage.”

In 1976, Rich moved in with the writer and editor Michelle Cliff. The same year, she gave an address to the Women’s Commission and Gay Caucus, which was later published as “It Is the Lesbian in Us.” The piece addresses the “unspeakable” nature of the lesbian relationship, citing the power of literature as a very political force, capable of oppression.

In later years, Rich has defined herself as “a poet of oppositional imagination,” as she writes in *Arts of the Possible*: “For more than fifty years I have been writing, tearing up, revising poems, studying poets from every culture and century available to me. I have been a poet of the oppositional imagination, meaning that I don’t think my only argument is with myself” (8). She has expressed her hope that poetry will play a role in the national revolution that she believes must occur if we are to create a “society honoring both human individuality and the search for a decent, sustainable common life” (*Arts of the Possible* 146). The society that Rich envisions would be akin to the one that the founders of the United States wanted to create, although perhaps Rich would edit a few words in the Constitution in order to reflect a nation where all are truly created equal.

Rich’s poetry spans six decades and is contained in more than 16 volumes. Her latest essays were published in 2009, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society*. Each piece affirms her role as witness for those whose voices, she feels, would be erased or simply ignored forever by those in power. Rich has continued as dedicated teacher, advocating fiercely for the rights of women, the disadvantaged, and nontraditional students. She has taught at Swarthmore, Columbia, Brandeis, Rutgers, Cornell, San Jose State, and Stanford University and has been the recipient of innumerable awards including the 1999 Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, the Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Common Wealth Award in Literature, National Book Award,

the 1996 Tanning Award for Mastery in the Art of Poetry, the MacArthur Fellowship, and the 2003 Bollingen Prize for Poetry.

“Storm Warnings” (1951)

Rich launched her literary career with this poem, one that seems to be traditional on its surface, yet carries an underlying tension. It follows in the footsteps of its forefathers, describing in the words of W. H. Auden, “historical apprehension.” Yet Albert Gelpi argues as early as 1973 that this early poem from Rich was more complex than Auden acknowledged: “Rich’s reflex is consistent throughout: she seeks shelter as self-preservation” (131). The complex subtextual import of Rich’s poems would continue to be her hallmark throughout the decades.

While many today idealize the 1950s as a time of peace in America and may therefore misinterpret “Storm Warnings” as a poem about one woman’s handwringing over her inability to control the weather, in reality World War II had recently ended and America was in the midst of the cold war. The aftermath of the second world war was complicated especially for people of Jewish ancestry, such as Rich, who found themselves powerless as Hitler’s forces committed acts of mass genocide against the Jewish people in Europe.

Rich herself tells us in the 1993 foreword to her collected works that “Storm Warnings” is “a poem about powerlessness—about a force so much greater than our human powers that while it can be measured and even predicted, it is beyond human control. All ‘we’ can do is create an interior space against the storm, an enclave of self-protection, though the winds of change still penetrate keyholes and ‘unsealed apertures’” (*Collected Early Poems* xix).

For Discussion or Writing

1. “Storm Warnings” was published in 1951. Imagine a woman, alone, turning on the news to a broadcast today. Of what might she be forewarned? How might she prepare? Must she be

content with “a silent core of waiting,” or does the woman of today have different choices available to her? Explain.

2. Examine the poems within *A Change of World* for their interconnectedness. What binds them together? To what degree do they signify the change of world implied by the collection's title? Support your answer with textual references.
3. What imagery is employed by Rich within “Storm Warnings”? How does she use each item to build a sense of normalcy even while foreshadowing impending doom? Discuss your answer.

“Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” (1951)

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich tells readers that “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” looks with “deliberate detachment” at the split between “the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men” (Gelpi 94). Yet when Rich wrote “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers,” she was only 21 years old, much too young, perhaps, to examine her life objectively and to recognize the forces at work within it. She goes on to admit surprise at the resemblance between her and Aunt Jennifer. In “When We Dead Awaken” Rich professes to have believed she was writing about an entirely fictional character, rather than exploring her inner self: “It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible—distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone—even by putting the women in a different generation” (Gelpi 94). However, the similarities between Rich and this older, fictional character were a result of techniques Rich had developed to cope with the split she felt was necessary in order to be successful as a woman in the academic world. She constantly held herself back, refraining from putting too much of herself in her work, lest she be criticized for sentimentality. Rich states, “In those years formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me

to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded” (Gelpi 94).

Helen Dennis suggests that Aunt Jennifer's screen projects “an image of her psyche as wild, free unafraid—a creature that terrorizes men [. . . yet] which contains the woman within the domestic realm [. . . and is] produced at a cost—the cost is a woman's life-energies” (182). Aunt Jennifer may have been such a creature at one time, but now she is as frozen in her marriage as the tigers are on the canvas.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Aunt Jennifer to her tigers. What qualities does each have that the other lacks? Who is the freer of the two? Justify your answer.
2. What sort of person must Aunt Jennifer be? Why would it be important to Rich as a young poet that Aunt Jennifer be “a person as distinct from myself as possible”?
3. Examine “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” from a feminist point of view and from a patriarchal point of view. How might each interpret the poem and its symbolism?

“Living in Sin” (1955)

Rich writes of the 1950s as a time when “life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage . . . women didn't talk to each other very much in the fifties—not about their secret emptinesses, their frustrations” (“When We Dead Awaken” 95). Rich believed that poetry could help women deal with that isolation.

“Living In Sin” offers readers a glimpse through the keyhole of one woman's illicit relationship. The reader sees not as voyeur, but as kindred spirit, as a woman who has longed to be loved and waited for the moment when a man would choose her, only to be saddened by how quickly he tires of her.

The poem describes the passivity inherent in being a woman who has accepted the romantic dream: “She thought the studio would keep itself; / no dust upon the furniture of love.” As

the woman soon discovers, love does not care for itself. The man in the couple yawns, plays a few notes on the piano, and goes out for cigarettes. The woman is effectively trapped by domesticity, symbolically threatened by a cockroach that crawls out of the cabinet, leaving numberless others behind it, ominously waiting to appear. She dusts, makes the bed, and in frustration with her yet-to-return lover, lets the coffee pot boil over. Still, by evening she is “back in love again, / though not so wholly.” The romantic dream thus triumphs over reality.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do the activities of the man and woman reflect society’s roles for them? Cite from the text to support your answer.
2. Rewrite the poem from the point of view of each of the characters. Be sure to remain true to the poem’s setting and period, considering cultural and societal expectations for each gender.
3. What factors contribute to the disillusionment experienced by the woman in this poem? Compare her situation to that of women today.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1963)

Adrienne Rich may have been schooled in poetic traditions, but nothing she learned at Radcliffe could prepare her for the difficulty of writing poetry while raising three young sons. Nor could it forewarn her of the condescension she would face from her male colleagues, who called her poetry “sweet.” Add to that the turbulence of America during the 1960s, and it only makes sense that Rich’s poetry would evolve to reflect her changing identity.

This new poetry, different in form and substance, reflected a keener awareness of woman’s role in the patriarchal society that is America. The 10-part poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” pictures mythic, historical, and literary women, such as Emily Dickinson, Corinna, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley to illustrate how

women are defined in terms of their relationships to men. Even the title of the collection fails to allow the woman her own identity. She is not named specifically, or even called the woman or the girl, but labeled in relation to another because of her marriage to a man. She is simply a daughter-in-law, not an individual.

Rich expertly weaves quotes from many men throughout the poem, interspersing them without explanation as examples of how women have been discounted throughout history. It would be easy for the casual reader to miss their importance. In some ways the poetry of Adrienne Rich could be likened to the quilt codes of the Underground Railroad—a map for the oppressed so that they may be guided to freedom. Women who read carefully could see in the lines “Not that it is done well, but / that it is done at all?” an echo from a quotation by Dr. Samuel Johnson, who compared a woman preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs. A later line: “You all die at fifteen,” said Diderot, voices a male prejudice of the 1950s, implying that women are worthless without their virginity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Rich has layered the poem with allusions to famous real and fictional characters. How do these references add depth to her work? Is there any pattern in the characters she chooses?
2. Part 4 begins, “Knowing themselves too well in one another.” How does this line reflect the way women interact in society? In families? In the business arena? Explain.
3. What are the monsters with which a thinking woman sleeps? How do you think Rich would define a “thinking woman”? Does a thinking man also sleep with monsters?

“I Am in Danger—Sir—” (1966)

“I Am in Danger—Sir—” is a tribute to Emily Dickinson, a poet of whom Rich writes, “I have been surprised at how narrowly her work, still, is

known by women who are writing poetry, how much her legend has gotten in the way of her being repossessed, as a source and a foremother" (*On Lies* 167). In an essay entitled "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," Rich informs readers of key components in that legend. Emily Dickinson composed nearly 2,000 poems, to see only seven published within her lifetime. Rich writes of the dedication it must have taken for a woman to devote her life to writing in the 19th century when the "corseting of women's bodies, choices, and sexuality could spell insanity to a woman genius" (*On Lies* 161).

In fact, Dickinson's writing earned her the label of "half-cracked" by the magazine editor whom she most admired, Thomas Higginson. In "I Am in Danger—Sir—" Rich quotes Dickinson's poem # 488: "Myself was formed—a Carpenter— / An unpretending time / My plane—and I, together wrought / Before a Builder came" as evidence that Dickinson knew her "measure, regardless of the judgments of others" (171). Still she could not help but be affected by their opinions, which "battered" at her

till the air buzzing with soiled language
sang in your ears
of Perjury
("I Am in Danger—Sir—")

Erkkila suggests that this song of perjury results from years of watching women falsify themselves in attempts to please men in a patriarchal society (Langdell 85). Knowing that she was formed in an "unpretending time" Dickinson has a clear choice: She must conform to the standards of the time or know that she will not be accepted by her peers. Withdrawing from society was a matter of survival for Dickinson, as is suggested in the final lines of Rich's poem:

and in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment,
chose to have it out at last
on your own premises.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the life of Emily Dickinson to that of Adrienne Rich. Why might Dickinson serve as a kindred spirit for Rich? Study the writers described in this anthology for someone with whom you could identify. Describe the ways in which you connect on a personal level to that person's writings.
2. In her essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," Rich describes the dismissive manner with which editors handled Dickinson's work. How is the work of women perceived today? Why do you feel that is so? Explain your answer.

"The Observer" (1969)

As in other poems where she has illuminated the lives of women, in "The Observer" Rich again seeks to show readers an unconventional side of women. Dian Fossey, the subject of the poem, was born in 1932 in California. Having chosen a career in animal research over marriage and motherhood, Fossey joined a team of researchers in Africa to study the behavior of gorillas. Fossey soon realized that in order to make any new discoveries regarding gorillas, she would have to establish her own research center. She logged thousands of hours of observations, eventually becoming so embedded in the gorillas' social structure that they grew to trust her. Unfortunately poaching is a profitable industry in Africa, and Fossey was murdered in 1985, possibly as a result of her antipoaching activism.

Yet, the transitional line "When I lay me down to sleep" warns readers that the poem is more than a tribute to an outstanding woman. Rich compares the solitude and protection afforded Fossey to the "panicky life-cycle" of her own tribe. She envies the simplicity of the life Fossey has chosen, studying these strange beasts that humans might label as savage, and slips in the irony that it is our culture that has its "daily executions" in which she must live.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare “The Observer” to Rich’s other poems about identifiable women. What techniques does she use to ensure readers will know the identity of the poem’s inspiration? Choose a famous person who has inspired you in some way and create a poem that employs some of Rich’s techniques of embedded identity markers.
2. What are “the laws [Rich] cannot subscribe to”? What do you think are the laws she can subscribe to?
3. Rich wrote “The Observer” in 1968 (published in 1969), 17 years before Dian Fossey was murdered in her cabin. How might the poem change if Rich had written with the knowledge of poaching and its effects on Fossey’s life?

“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971)

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich celebrates the 1970s as a time of “awakening consciousness” for women. The title is from Henrik Ibsen’s 1899 play that examines the life of women as the subject matter for male artists in their creation of culture. Rich contends that women have long slumbered while their lives were put to men’s purposes, and the few women who did dare to question inequities or seek for themselves a different sort of life were thought defective in some way. But Rich describes the awakening that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s as a “collective reality” that made it “no longer such a lonely thing to open one’s eyes” (Gelpi 90).

Continuing her analogy to slumber, Rich describes the confusion and disorientation that accompany the sudden awakening of the female consciousness. She challenges women and female writers in particular to acquaint themselves with the writing of the past, so that they may “know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on tradition but to break its hold over us.”

Of particular interest is Rich’s discussion exploring the difference between the male and female creative processes and the way society is set up to sabotage one while supporting the other. Men have long been afforded periods of sustained silence: time to think and write, absolute necessities, according to Rich, if one is to harness the “subversive function of the imagination.” Women, with their traditional responsibilities of child rearing and household tasks, are constantly multitasking, so that even if they do hold full-time jobs, it is usually they who must constantly juggle the children and the home instead of sharing in a partnership, as would seem to make sense. As a result, women never have those periods of sustained silence when a poem may coalesce or a character may take shape. Rich concludes in her essay that “to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination” (Gelpi 96).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the original play that inspired Rich’s essay, Ibsen’s *When We Dead Awaken*, which examines the use that male artists have made of women and women’s gradual awakening to the hijacking of their lives. Discuss the relevance of Ibsen’s play to today’s society, and its connection to Rich’s essay.
2. Rich states that her style was “formed first by male poets: by the men [she] was reading as an undergraduate—Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden” (Gelpi 94). Has poetry instruction changed since Rich’s time, or are the styles of today’s poets still formed first and mainly by male poets? If they are, is there any reason to consider a change? Support your position with points from this and other texts.
3. Survey the required reading lists of your high school or college. What percentage of the authors are minorities? What percentage are women? How does that compare to the racial/gender makeup of your school? How do you interpret your findings? What would writers

such as MAYA ANGELOU, Adrienne Rich, JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA say about your findings?

“A Valediction Forbidding Mourning”

(From *A Will To Change*, 1971)

The title for this poem is from a 17th-century poem by the London poet John Donne. Donne's poem is a farewell from one soul to another but suggests that though these lovers separate, they “endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion, / Like gold to an aery thinness beat.”

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich admits feeling a sense of despair during her marriage, torn between “love—womanly, maternal love, altruistic love—a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism—a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others” (Gelpi 97). A year after she left her husband, he committed suicide, an act that must have compounded the feelings of guilt she already felt simply by standing up for her own needs, by doing “something very common, in [her] own way.”

“A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” is part elegy, then. It is part admission that Conrad's death has harmed her, left her feeling guilty for her “swirling wants” ignored once more by his “frozen lips.” The weight of her guilt turns her own skills against her, so that all she has longed to accomplish as a writer becomes nearly impossible under the mountains that have lost their meaning. Even grammar “turned and attacked.”

This notion of language turned inside out results in part from Rich's belief that in order for women to break free of traditional roles within the patriarchal society, there must be a new way of looking at not only women, but men, and the roles both genders accept for themselves so that neither is typecast into a position that will cause frustration and resentment.

Despite the speaker's muddled writings, she does managed one last shot at the departed before releasing his spirit to its final repose, something he

must hear now because he never heard it in his life: that the daily repetition of her life was as much a death to her as the finality of his own suicide.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is Rich's poem a tribute to or indictment of her dead husband? In terms of the images Rich uses in the poem, what impression do you have of the relationship between her and Conrad?
2. Compare Rich's poem with Donne's in style and meaning. Which techniques are common to both poems?
3. The critic Cheri Langdell suggests that Rich's use of the word *common* in the final line is synonymous with *vulgar* (111). If that is true, how might the meaning of the poem change?

“Power” (1974)

Rich accepted the National Book Award in the name of all the women “whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain” (Gelpi 204). In “Power” Rich writes of another woman who served in such capacity, Marie Curie.

The poem begins with the innocent unearthing of an amber bottle, “living in the earth—deposits of our history.” The implication is that the bottle has outlived the people who purchased the cure it supposedly contained. The voice of the poem then goes on to say she read of Marie Curie, describing Curie's illness from radiation poisoning in her attempt to purify the element. Although there is no direct link between the bottle and Curie, one could conclude that the bottle is symbolic of Curie, a woman of great intelligence who was determined to succeed and ultimately killed by her singular quest for success. She succeeds in her scientific pursuit but is left an empty shell, with “cataracts on her eyes / the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends / till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of the bottle unearthed? How does it relate to the themes of the poem? Compare the symbol of the bottle to other symbols within Rich's poetry.
2. Explore the possible implications of the title "Power." To what types of power could the title refer? Who holds the power? When is denial a form of power?
3. What impact does Rich's use of physical space and punctuation have on the meaning of the poem? Discuss several examples, citing from the text to support your response.
4. Whom does Rich ultimately hold accountable for Marie Curie's death? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

"If Not with Others, How?" (1985)

Rich was the elder of two daughters born to affluent parents for whom education was the foremost priority. Her father taught her "to hold reading and writing sacred" (*Arts of the Possible* 104). Although he was Jewish, he never introduced her to any of the traditions of his faith. During her time at Radcliffe College, Rich explored her Jewish heritage, finding acceptance and belonging in her newfound cultural identity for which she had been longing. Rich later quipped that though she was raised a "heterosexual gentile," she would become a "Jewish lesbian" (Langdell 12).

When Rich initially sought to utilize her education in order to effect social change, she was held back by the limits of a patriarchal society. In her essay "If Not with Others, How?" Rich looks at the dual exclusion faced by Jewish women and argues that the discrimination they have endured should serve to unite them into a powerful political coalition.

Rich opposes the type of hypocrisy that allows Americans to oppose South African apartheid, while ignoring racism on our own soil in its many malignant systemic forms. She insists that the success of the work depends on an understanding of

our history as a country that "has used skin color as the prime motive for persecution and genocide." Only once we have a clear notion of what it is that we must overcome can we move past that to affirm life in its many forms.

The essay ends by returning to the central question, extrapolated from the story of Hillel's three questions:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
If not now, when?

Hillel's questions reflect the classic Hebrew philosophy of a conscious effort to balance the pursuit of self-interest with service to others. Rich adds her own question, "If Not with Others, How?" implying that the goals toward which we work are best sought collectively.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Rich cites the medieval philosopher Judah ha-Levi as identifying "a hierarchy of all species, places on earth, races, families, and even languages." Rich goes on to say that, as a woman, she rejects "all such hierarchies." How do you feel about such hierarchies? What messages (subliminal and blatant) does our society send about its hierarchy of values?
2. Rich describes pride as follows: "Pride is often born in the place where we refuse to be victims, where we experience our own humanity under pressure, where we understand that we are not the hateful projections of others but intrinsically ourselves" ("If Not with Others, How?"). Then she asks readers whether perhaps she has not just defined love. What is the difference between pride and love? When is it possible for one to exist without the other? When might one interfere with the other? Define the terms using poems by Rich and other authors included in this text.
3. Respond to Rich's claim that America has never "mourned or desisted in or even acknowledged the original, deliberate, continuing genocide of the indigenous American people now called

5. "If Not with Others, How?" mentions an America "whose history is Disneyland, whose only legitimized passion is white male violence, whose people are starving for literal food and also for intangible sustenance they cannot always name, whose opiate is denial." How does Rich's own poetry both support and challenge this proposition?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Auden, W. H. "Foreword." In *A Change of World*, by Adrienne Rich. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951.
- Cooper, Jane Roberta, ed. *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-visions, 1951-81*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.
- Dennis, Helen. "Adrienne Rich: Consciousness Raising as Poetic Method." In *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, edited by Antony Easthope and John Thompson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Dennis, Helen. Gelpi, Barbara and Albert Gelpi, Eds. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Gelpi, Albert. "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change." In *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, edited by Helen Dennis, Barbara and Albert Gelpi. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975.
- Halpern, Nick. "'This Is What Is Possible': Adrienne Rich." In *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill and Rich*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.
- Langdell, Cheri Colby. *Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004.
- Pope, Deborah. "Rich's Life and Career." *Modern American Poetry*. Available online. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/bio.htm. Accessed May 12, 2009.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.
- . *Collected Early Poems 1950-1970*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993.
- . *The Fact of a Doorframe*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1974.
- . "If Not with Others, How?" In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.
- . *Necessities of Life*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.
- . *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1979.
- . *Poetry and Commitment*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007.
- . *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1980.
- Templeton, Alice. *The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich's Feminist Poetics*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994.
- Werner, Craig. *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1988.
- Kathy Higgs-Coulthard



LESLIE MARMON SILKO (1948–)

What I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being.

(quoted in Rosen 176)

Driving along New Mexico's Interstate 40, one might encounter a string of wonders: a herd of pronghorn antelope bounding through high desert grasses, a mare and colt grazing beneath a wind-twisted pine, a Santa Fe locomotive like a Christmas toy crawling along the base of a great red rock. Not far north are the undulating mounds and eroded rocks of the Bisti badlands; south is the cinder cone of the Bandera volcano, and under the ancient lava flows lie ice caves that have remained frozen for thousands of years. Midway between Gallup and Albuquerque is Mount Taylor, the "Turquoise Mountain" jutting skyward from the southwestern part of the San Mateo Mountains. In Navajo legend, the sacred Turquoise Mountain was fashioned from the sky with a great flint knife and decorated with turquoise, rain, dark mist, and all the species of animals and birds. It is the home of the mythic Turquoise Boy (Doot'izhii 'Ashkii) and Yellow Corn Girl (Naadá'áltsoii 'Át'ééd).

This is the land where the Native American novelist, short-story writer, and poet Leslie Marmon Silko grew up, and it is also the setting for many of her creative works. Silko writes primarily about relations between people, between cultures, and between humans and the natural world. Of mixed ancestry herself—Laguna Pueblo, Plains Indian, Anglo, and Mexican—she writes from the intersection of cultural traditions.

Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on March 5, 1948, to Leland Howard Marmon, a photographer, and Mary Virginia Leslie, Silko was raised at Old Laguna, a picturesque village about 45 miles west of Albuquerque, just north of Interstate 40. In 1948, her father, just out of the army, was managing the Marmon Trading Post in Old Laguna and just beginning his career as a professional photographer.

Leslie Marmon Silko grew up in the house where her father was born, on the southeast edge of Old Laguna—not in the village, but not outside it either. Built in the 1880s out of rock and adobe, it stood beside the house of Silko's great-grandmother, who had married a white man. In some ways like Silko herself, her ancestral home stood between the Indian world, represented by the village proper, and the Anglo world, represented by the busy highway, with its tourists and travelers and 18-wheelers.

The house was situated near the Rio San José, which runs along the south and southeast sides of the village—the border separating the village from the land along Interstate 40. In several of Silko's stories, this part of the river becomes a "contact zone" where different races and different genders meet (Nelson 16). It is also the place where the spirits of the Ka't'sinas gather once a year. Ka't'sinas, supernatural entities who influence the natural world, act as intermediaries

between humans and the gods. In these yearly ceremonies, just before dawn on a given day in November, the Ka't'sinas gather at the river crossing on their way into the village and take on the bodies of the masked dancers. This is the transforming event that Tayo, the protagonist of Silko's novel *Ceremony*, recalls when he watches the dawn spread across the sky:

He remembered the sound of the bells in late November, when the air carried the jingling like snowflakes in the wind. Before dawn, southeast of the village, the bells would announce their approach, the sound shimmering across the sand hills, followed by the clacking of turtle-shell rattles—all these sounds gathering with the dawn. Coming closer to the river, faintly at first, faint as the pale yellow light emerging across the southeast horizon, the sounds gathered intensity from the swelling colors of the dawn. And at the moment the sun came over the edge of the horizon, they suddenly appeared on the riverbank, the Ka't'sina approaching the river crossing. (181–182)

Robert Nelson suggests that Silko's affinity for this place, this river crossing, perhaps reflects what she feels is her own position, occupying an intersectional space with respect to both Laguna “within” and the dominant Anglo mainstream “out there” (15–16). In a biographical note at the end of *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko says, “I suppose at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed, or mixed-blooded person; what it is to grow up neither white nor fully traditional Indian. It is for this reason that I hesitate to say that I am representative of Indian poets or Indian people. I am only one human being, one Laguna woman” (“Old and New Biographical Notes” 197).

Her great-grandfather Robert went to Laguna as a surveyor from Ohio, just after the Civil War. He married Marie Anaya, referred to as Grandma A'mooh in *Storyteller*, and they had two sons, Kenneth and Henry. Her great-grandfather “never

seemed much interested in returning to Ohio,” Silko writes in *Storyteller*:

He had learned to speak Laguna
and Grandpa Hank said when great-grandpa
went away from
Laguna
white people who knew
sometimes called him “Squaw Man.” (16)

She also tells a story about when Grandpa Hank and Kenneth were little boys, and their father took them along on one of his trips to Albuquerque:

The boys got hungry
so great-grandpa started to take them
through the lobby of the only hotel in
Albuquerque
at that time.
Grandpa Hank said that when the hotel
manager
spotted him and Kenneth
the manager stopped them.
He told Grandpa Marmon that he was always
welcome
when he was alone
but when he had Indians with him
he should use the back entrance to reach the café.
My great-grandfather said,
“These are my sons.”
He walked out of the hotel
And never would set foot in that hotel again
not even years later
when they began to allow Indians inside. (17)

Silko's great-grandmother Marie had attended the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, and she and Robert sent their son Henry, Silko's paternal grandfather, to the Sherman Institute in California. Her great-aunt Susie had also attended both the Carlisle School and Dickinson College and taught school at Laguna upon her return. “Not surprisingly, given such a heritage,” writes Robert Nelson, “Leslie Marmon Silko grew up in a house full of books and stories, part of an extended family whose members have

always been prominent in Laguna's history of contact with Euro-American social, political, economic, and educational forces. The story of the Marmon family at Laguna is a story of outsiders who became insiders and of insiders who became outsiders—a story about the arts of cultural mediation, from both sides of the imaginary borderline" (17).

Two women in particular, her grandmother Lilly and her aunt Susie, made young Leslie familiar with the cultural folklore of the Laguna and Keres people through stories of her father's people and their shared history. She was in fact raised in that borderline between the oral and written traditions. Of her aunt Susie, Silko writes in *Storyteller* that she "had come to believe very much in books and in schooling." But at the same time, she was

of a generation,
the last generation here at Laguna,
that passed down an entire culture
by word of mouth
an entire history
an entire vision of the world
which depended upon memory
and retelling by subsequent generations. (5–6)

And the wonder and value of storytelling in the oral tradition is that it

depends upon each person
listening and remembering a portion
and it is together—
all of us remembering what we have heard
together—
that creates the whole story
the long story of the people.
I remember only a small part.
This is what I remember. (*Storyteller* 6–7)

Silko attended Laguna Day School until the fifth grade. At school, she was at first prohibited from speaking the Keresan language that her aunts and grandmothers used in storytelling. After the fifth grade, she commuted to Albuquerque to attend a Catholic school. In interviews, Silko has revealed

that living in Laguna society as a mixed blood was at times painful. She was made aware that she was different from, and not fully accepted by, both full-blooded Native Americans and white people. Yet despite the isolation and loneliness this caused her, Silko was able to overcome the initial lack of acceptance and to identify with Laguna culture. Though keenly aware of the equivocal position of mixed bloods in Laguna society, she considers herself Laguna: "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being" (Rosen 176).

In 1966, she married Richard C. Chapman, and they had one son, Robert William Chapman. She attended the University of New Mexico and earned a bachelor of arts degree in English in 1969. During her senior year, she published "Tony's Story" in *Thunderbird*, the university's literary magazine. More importantly, she published "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" in *New Mexico Quarterly*. Both stories have since been reprinted in various publications. That same year, 1969, she divorced Richard Chapman and entered law school at the University of New Mexico under the American Indian Law School Fellowship Program, determined to use the legal profession to obtain justice for her people.

In 1971, she was awarded the Discovery Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She left law school and began taking graduate classes in English. She also began teaching at Navajo Community College on the Navajo reservation at Tsaile, Arizona. She married her second husband, John Silko, and later taught creative writing and a course in oral tradition at the University of New Mexico.

In 1972, her second son, Cazimir Silko, was born, and she moved with her husband and children to Ketchikan, Alaska. Although 1973 was self-admittedly a difficult year for her, with emotional turmoil and the endless rain of the Alaskan coast, 1974 proved to be a banner year for publications. Ken Rosen published his anthology *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, which included not only Silko's title story but also her "Bravura," "Humaweepe, the Warrior Priest," and four other stories. The *Chicago Review* published "Lullaby,"

and the Greenfield Review Press published *Laguna Woman: Poems by Leslie Silko*.

She returned briefly to the Laguna Pueblo reservation in 1976, holding academic appointments first at the University of New Mexico and then the University of Arizona, and the following year was awarded the Pushcart Prize for poetry. In 1977, she published her novel *Ceremony*, which has been almost universally acclaimed. In 1978, she moved to Tucson and began teaching at the University of Arizona. It was here that she began her friendship and correspondence with the poet James Wright, which resulted in the book *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters Between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright* (1986).

In 1981, she was awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, also known as the “genius grant,” which would allow her to devote herself to writing full time, and published *Storyteller*, a collection of stories, photographs, reminiscences, and poems. In 1988, she was named a Living Cultural Treasure by the New Mexico Council for the Humanities. In 1991, she published her long-awaited novel *Almanac of the Dead* to mixed reviews.

Today Silko lives near Tucson, Arizona, and continues to write and to receive awards. In 1994, she received the Native Writers’ Circle of the Americas Lifetime Achievement Award, an honor she shares with N. Scott Momaday, SIMON J. ORTIZ, and JOY HARJO. In 1996, Simon & Schuster published *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*. Silko’s third novel, *Garden in the Dunes* (1999), takes place in the late 19th century and explores the relationship between myth and history.

“The Man to Send Rain Clouds” (1969)

Silko’s first published story, “The Man to Send Rain Clouds,” which appeared in *New Mexico Quarterly* in 1969, is the deceptively simple tale of the more or less traditional burial of an old Pueblo shepherd named Teofilo. The Catholic priest, committed to

converting the Pueblo people to Christianity, protests that the old man will not be given last rites or even a funeral mass. Yet the priest is talked into sprinkling holy water on the body, as the departed’s granddaughter requested, “so he won’t be thirsty,” and the story ends with Teofilo’s grandson Leon’s feeling happy about the sprinkling of the holy water because “now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure” (*Storyteller* 186).

As Silko’s novel *Ceremony* makes clear, tribal traditions and rituals are not diluted but made strong through their ability to incorporate new elements and to adapt to changing circumstances. The ability of the people to incorporate even traditions that are meant to negate them, and to change them for their own purposes, is dramatically shown in this early story. “The essential activity is to maintain and create the stories that show others how to survive,” writes Alanna Kathleen Brown. “The stories are the on-going process that repudiates cultural genocide” (176).

As Helen Jaskoski points out, the story can be seen as a critique of “single-minded quests for authenticity and the pursuit of cultural survival through avoidance of contamination.” Using characters from the story “Storyteller” as examples, she contrasts the assimilated Eskimo jailer, who wants to speak only English, with the protagonist, who feels she must protect her identity from any cultural contamination. In between these two examples, “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” offers “a sense of culture not as a monologue whose purity must be maintained regardless of the cost, but as a dynamic process, a matter of strategic negotiations, respectful deliberation and consultation, a sensitivity to nuances of communication, and above all a sense of proportion regarding which things are matters of principles and must be maintained and which are secondary means that may be adjusted to suit the occasion” (94).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is the detached, multiple point of view appropriate to the meaning of the story? Would a more conventional point of view be effective?

2. Did the priest do the right thing in agreeing to Leon's request to sprinkle holy water on Teofilo's body? What else could he have done?

"Lullaby" (1974)

"Lullaby," first published in the *Chicago Review* in 1974, is a painful story about senseless loss, but also about the processes of both grief and making peace. The main character is an old Navajo woman, Ayah, who has lost her eldest son, Jimmie, in a war and had her remaining two children taken away—apparently because of their tuberculosis but possibly because of a government relocation program. Most of the story's action takes place in her memories as she waits outside a bar for her husband, who has given in to despair.

Ayah's losses are nearly overwhelming. The old wool army blanket she wraps herself up in reminds her at first of her son Jimmie, but the loss is too painful for her to dwell on because he died in the war when his helicopter crashed and burned, and his body was never returned. He is gone, but she cannot even grieve properly because she has no place to do it. "It wasn't like Jimmie died," she laments. "He just never came back" (*Storyteller* 44). Her other two children, Danny and Ella, were taken from her probably because of a 1950s government policy designed to remove Native Americans from reservations and relocate them in urban environments, although the white doctors and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) police indicated her children had tuberculosis. Ayah's husband, Chato, had taught her to sign her name, but he had not taught her English; without knowing the content of the documents thrust at her, she had signed the papers that tore her children from her. "It was worse than if they had died," she thinks, "to lose the children and to know that somewhere, in a place called Colorado, in a place full of sick and dying strangers, her children were without her" (47).

And yet the story is also about recovery and making peace. When Ayah is troubled or pained by her memories, she often restores her balance and har-

mony by focusing on the natural world around her. When troubled by the loss of Jimmie, she remembers his birth, the natural process of life, the smell of the bee flowers growing at the springs. When she sees the fraying edges of the government-issue army blanket, Ayah recalls her mother weaving traditional blankets and the comfort they gave her. At the end of the story, Ayah remembers a song that her mother and her grandmother used to sing to their babies, a song whose words describe a natural harmony and unity with the people. Though she cannot remember whether she ever sang it for her children, she sings it now, finally, for Chato, as he is dying:

The earth is your mother
 she holds you.
 The sky is your father
 he protects you.
 Sleep,
 sleep.
 Rainbow is your sister,
 she loves you
 The winds are your brothers
 they sing to you.
 Sleep,
 sleep.
 We are together always
 We are together always
 There never was a time
 when this
 was not so.

For Discussion or Writing

Native American fiction is sometimes said to have a more "cyclic" structure than Western-style fiction. Is that true of this work? How does the structure affect its meaning?

"Yellow Woman" (1974)

In the beginning of Silko's "Yellow Woman," from *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, a young Pueblo woman tries to awaken the stranger she

has spent the night with beside a river. He tells her he is a ka'tsina spirit, calls her Yellow Woman, and compels her to go with him to his mountain home. She does not believe he is a ka'tsina, but she goes anyway, wondering about him, about herself, and about their relation to the old stories. After the stranger is caught rustling cattle, the young woman walks back to her family, sad to leave him and hoping he seeks her out again.

Paula Gunn Allen tells us that in their earliest forms, Yellow Woman stories were associated with the rituals featuring the Corn Mother (*Sacred Hoop* 226). Traditional Yellow Woman stories “are about daily life, not merely because they speak to the concerns of loss, persecution, rescue, and the relation of these to the sacred, but because the Yellow Women stolen are Irriaku—sacred ears of corn that link persons to our Mother, Iyatiku. The loss of these Yellow Women portends loss of rain, of livelihood, and of connection between the people and the sacred place where Iyatiku lives, Shipap” (*Spider Woman's Granddaughters* 210).

The style of Silko's story juxtaposes bits and pieces of these ancient Yellow Woman tales from the mythological world with the sharp and vivid details the narrator gives us of her world:

The small brown water birds came to the river and hopped across the mud, leaving brown scratches in the alkali-white crust. They bathed in the river silently. I could hear the water, almost at our feet where the narrow fast channel bubbled and washed green ragged moss and fern leaves. (*Storyteller* 54)

Storyteller contains six Yellow Woman stories, including one in which she is kidnapped by Buffalo Man, is rescued by Arrow Boy, and then reveals their hiding place while they are trying to escape. Arrow Boy shoots her dead with an arrow because he realizes she is in love with Buffalo Man, and this is the start of the Laguna people's hunting buffalo. Now, we are told, nobody will go hungry “because / one time long ago / our daughter, our sister Kochin-nakko / went away with them” (*Storyteller* 76).

Another version starts, “You should understand / the way it was / back then, / because it is the same / even now.” When Yellow Woman finally goes back home, her husband tells her she had better have a good story for the 10 months she has been gone and for those twin baby boys. The poem ends, “My husband / left / after he heard the story / and moved back in with his mother. / It was my fault and / I don't blame him either. / I could have told / the story / better than I did” (94–98).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you think is the significance of the narrator's romance with Silva? What does the *narrator* think is the significance of her romance with Silva?
2. How are the stories about Yellow Woman and the Mountain Ka't'sina relevant to this story?

Ceremony (1977)

Ceremony, published in 1977, tells the story of a mixed-blood Indian, Tayo, who undergoes a remarkable ceremony to heal himself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. A survivor of both combat and captivity in World War II, he is suffering from traumatic stress disorder made worse by white medicine and psychoanalysis. Eventually, an unusual medicine man named Betonie, a woman named Montano, and a quest to find his uncle Josiah's lost cattle help Tayo to see the convergence and interconnectedness of all life and finally to understand and accept himself as he gives meaning to the events that he has experienced.

The style of the novel reinforces these primary concerns and perfectly reflects the emotional tenor of the story. The novel's beginning is as disjointed and fragmentary as Tayo's mental condition. Time is undone as Tayo finds himself adrift in psychic disorder: “He cried at how the world had come undone. . . . Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time” (18).

The hybrid form of the novel also helps create this initial sense of chaos and disorder. The work combines not only past and present but also poetry and prose, English and Keresan (the language spoken by many Pueblo people). Traditional novel form is juxtaposed with Laguna Pueblo oral traditions and stories in such a way that they mutually transform each other. Memories, flashbacks of the war, and visions all contribute to the reader's feeling of disruption; this makes Tayo's task difficult—as well as the reader's—to gather the fragments into a coherent whole, to find a pattern of meaning.

“What differentiates Silko's style from that of most Anglo-American novelists,” notes Kristin Herzog, “is her use of oral traditions which are intricately woven into the narrative in the form of poems, ritual prayers, stories, and tribal rumors.” Herzog sees the more linear, novelistic narrative as a “masculine” element of style, while the interwoven “free associations of tribal rumors, fragments of history, and ritual songs” are more feminine, thereby creating balance and vitality of expression (Herzog 26). Early in the novel, in fact, we encounter a poem about an old man “pregnant” with stories like a woman with child: “See, it is moving. / There is life here / for the people” (2). Silko's style of “blending mythical and rational, circular and linear elements correspond to the balance of male and female traits in her characters, and they challenge the reader to question Western ways of portraying gender” (Herzog 26–27).

But not everyone approves of Silko's use of tribal narratives. Another writer from Laguna Pueblo, Paula Gunn Allen, argues that “Tayo” is in fact the name of a well-known mythical figure in their tribal traditions, and the tribal narrative Silko tells within the novel “is a clan story, and is not to be told outside of the clan.” She claims that previous “security breaches” of information about Pueblo religion and social culture resulted in drought—the same drought depicted in the novel—as well as the disastrous discovery of uranium on the reservation and its subsequent mining and use in the World War II atomic bomb. Silko “is aware of the discovery of the uranium used to bomb Hiroshima and Naga-

saki, she is aware of the devastating drought, the loss of self that the entire Pueblo suffered in those years, yet she is unaware of one small but essential bit of information: the information that telling the old stories, revealing the old ways can only lead to disaster” (“Special Problems” 384).

From the beginning of *Ceremony*, however, Silko seems to be deliberately depicting bits of ancient ritual not merely to reveal them but to provide the authentic foundation for a contemporary healing ceremony. First we are given a curious tribal narrative about Ts'its'nsi'nako, Thought-Woman, who is also Grandmother Spider. Whatever she thinks about appears, we are told, and with the help of her sisters, together they created the universe.

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.
She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story
she is thinking. (1)

This seems to suggest, among other implications, that the ceremony within the story is also being thought by Grandmother Spider, that as time turns the story evolves and the ceremonies are created anew. The metaphor of the web is especially appropriate for this novel because of the random yet cyclic pattern of the web, its simultaneous strength and fragility. In *Ceremony*, Tayo's healing begins when he learns “to bring a conscious, intuitive care to the balancing of a delicate universe” (Brown 172).

As Betonie, the part Mexican, part Navajo medicine man, explains to Tayo, “In many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing . . . at one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. . . . The people mistrust this

greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong” (126). Betonie’s home, on a hillside on the border between the Navajo reservation and the white town of Gallup, contains not only traditional medicine bundles, painted gourd rattles, and deer-hoof clackers, but also telephone books from distant cities, Santa Fe Railroad calendars, and Coke bottles, “the embodiment of a process of cultural transformation and innovation that sustains creative survival rather than the more familiar narratives of psychological and social disintegration of Native American cultures in the face of Western colonization” (Zamir 396).

By using the traditional name of Tayo, Silko creates a link to a traditional ritual in order to connect her work—and her readers—to the world around them. “In the end, Tayo’s story, through the agency of the narrator, becomes for us our ceremony of reading and, in restoring some of our shared humanity despite our cultural differences, offers us a healing equal to Tayo’s” (Wiget 89–90).

One of the most powerful themes in *Ceremony* explores the connections among uranium mining on the reservation, the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, the loss and recovery of Indian lands, and Tayo’s own confusion of Native American and Japanese faces during his war service in the Pacific:

He had been so close to it, caught up in it for so long that its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest: Trinity site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of him now. . . . There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. (245–246)

As in her other works, in *Ceremony* Silko blurs the boundary between myth and reality, between

the spiritual and the human worlds, but also between the people and the land itself. At the beginning of the novel, the land is suffering from a long and devastating drought, and Tayo is suffering a physical and psychological crisis:

The pain was solid and constant as the beating of his own heart. The old man only made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of the sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured. (38)

The novel creates a narrative structure that requires the reader to integrate an initially fragmented presentation into a coherent, linear narrative, as it depicts Tayo’s efforts to do the same. By the end of the novel, Tayo discovers his connection to the land and to ancient rituals and so recovers himself. He finds peace by “finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told.” As it takes only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, it takes only one to begin to repair the damage done. Tayo’s healing offers hope for our own healing, hope for the redemption of tribal cultures and for our world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is wrong with Tayo at the beginning of the novel? Why does Ku’oosh’s ceremony not work for Tayo? What finally does work for Tayo? How has he changed by the end of the novel?
2. What is the point of the story of Kaup’a’ta the gambler? How does it fit in with the larger concerns of the novel?
3. In what sense is the novel a “ceremony” for the reader as well as for Tayo? How might Native American readers and Americans of European heritage respond differently to this book? What about readers of African or Asian heritages?
4. What is the role of Ts’eh in the novel? Compare her to other female characters. Does it matter

that the main character of *Ceremony* is a man? How might the novel be different if the main character were a woman?

***Storyteller* (1981)**

Silko's *Storyteller*, published in 1981, comprises original short stories and poems, tribal narratives, personal anecdotes, memoirs, family reminiscences, and photographs, many of which were taken by her father, Lee H. Marmon, and her grandfather, Henry C. Marmon. The stories include some of Silko's best, such as "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," "Lullaby," and "Yellow Woman." *Storyteller* is a successful cross-cultural text in which traditional Laguna stories are juxtaposed with traditional Western narratives and a highly personal poetry.

Though many of the stories and poems had been published previously, this is much more than an anthology or a collection. The lack of formal demarcation, such as titles and dates of publication, helps create a seamless whole. *Storyteller* is a distinctively 'readerly' text," writes Linda Krumholz: "The many stories, poems, and photographs are gathered into an apparently random 'scrapbook' form, and it is left to the reader to construct connections between them" (64–65).

Readers' first encounter in *Storyteller* is a poem about a Hopi basket with a figure woven into it "which might be a Grasshopper or a Hummingbird Man." Inside the basket are hundreds of photographs taken in and around Laguna. It was while writing this book, Silko tells us, that she began to realize they had a special relationship to the stories. "The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories // and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs" (1). The Hopi basket, with old photographs described in words, some of the narratives framed by the images themselves, of Silko herself as a little girl, of family members, of Old Laguna, becomes a metaphor for the book itself.

As *Storyteller* attempts to integrate the world of the visual image and the written word, it attempts

as well to negotiate—if not a common ground, at least a meeting—between the published work and the oral tradition that informs it.

As with any generation
the oral tradition depends upon each person
listening and remembering a portion
and it is together—
all of us remembering what we have heard
together—
that creates the whole story
the long story of the people.

I remember only a small part.
But this is what I remember. (*Storyteller* 6–7)

For Discussion or Writing

1. This book, entitled *Storyteller*, contains a story that is also called "Storyteller." What is the relationship between the story and the book?
2. In this work, Silko is attempting to merge the oral tradition and her own written form. This requires, among other things, an alteration in the structure of traditional narrative to make a Western form express Native American concepts. How successful is she, in your estimation?

***Almanac of the Dead* (1991)**

Almanac of the Dead (1991) is a dystopian novel that depicts an American wasteland of violence, cruelty, self-absorption, and abuse. Silko herself describes *Almanac* as a "763-page indictment for five hundred years of theft, murder, pillage, and rape" (Perry 327), and that is precisely how it reads: As an indictment, it lists few if any admirable characters. As an almanac, it reads like a compendium of discontinuous happenings and stray bits of information rather than linear narratives, but it is unified in its insistence that the traditions of Western liberal individualism will result in "an utterly amoral and atomized society in which each isolated member is indifferent to anything but the

- by Richard F. Fleck, 233–239. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1993.
- . “The Psychological Landscape of *Ceremony*.” *American Indian Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1979): 7–12.
- . *The Sacred Hoop*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- . “Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*.” *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1990): 379–386.
- . *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1990.
- Anderson, Laurie. “Colorful Revenge in Silko’s *Storyteller*.” *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 15, no. 4 (1985): 11–12.
- Birkerts, Sven. “Leslie Marmon Silko.” In *American Energies: Essays on Fiction*. New York: William Morrow, 1992.
- Blicksilver, Edith. “Traditionalism vs. Modernity: Leslie Silko on American Indian Women.” *Southwest Review* 64, no. 2 (1979): 149–160.
- Brown, Alanna Kathleen. “Pulling Silko’s Threads through Time: An Exploration of Storytelling.” *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1995): 171–179.
- Chavkin, Allan. *Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony: A Casebook*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Danielson, Linda. “The Storytellers in *Storyteller*.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 1, no. 2 (1989): 21–31. Reprinted in *“Yellow Woman”/Leslie Marmon Silko*. Edited by Melody Graulich. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- Dinome, William. “Laguna Woman: An Annotated Leslie Silko Bibliography.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 21, no. 1 (1997): 207–280.
- Evasdaughter, Elizabeth N. “Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*: Healing Ethnic Hatred by Mixed-Breed Laughter.” *MELUS* 15, no. 1 (1988): 83–95.
- Fitz, Brewster E. *Silko: Writing Storyteller and Medicine Woman*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.
- Gilderhus, Nancy. “The Art of Storytelling in Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*.” *English Journal* 83, no. 2 (1994): 70–72.
- Graulich, Melody, ed. *“Yellow Woman”/Leslie Marmon Silko*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- Harjo, Joy. “The World Is Round: Some Notes on Leslie Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*.” *Blue Mesa Review* 4 (Spring 1992): 207–210.
- Herzog, Kristin. “Thinking Woman and Feeling Man: Gender in Silko’s *Ceremony*.” *MELUS* 12, no. 1 (1985): 25–36.
- Harvey, Valerie. “Navajo Sandpainting in *Ceremony*.” In *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*, edited by Richard F. Fleck, 256–259. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1993.
- Hirsch, Bernard A. “‘The Telling Which Continues’: Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*.” *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1988): 1–26. Reprinted in *“Yellow Woman”/Leslie Marmon Silko*. Edited by Melody Graulich. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- “An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko.” Available online. URL: <http://www.altx.com/interviews/silko.html>. Accessed July 9, 2009.
- Jaimes, Annette. Review of *Almanac of the Dead*. *Booklist*, February 15, 1996.
- Jaskoski, Helen. *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Twayne’s Studies in Short Fiction 71. New York: Twayne, 1998.
- King, Katherine Callen. “New Epic for an Old World: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*.” In *Native American Literatures*, edited by Laura Coltell, 31–42. Pisa: SEU, 1994.
- Krumholz, Linda. “Native Designs: Silko’s *Storyteller* and the Readers’ Initiation,” *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Edited by Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999.
- Lincoln, Kenneth. “Grandmother Storyteller: Leslie Silko.” In *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Oandasan, William. “A Familiar Love Component of Love in *Ceremony*.” In *Critical Perspectives in Native American Fiction*. Edited by Richard F. Fleck, 240–245. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1993.

- Ortiz, Simon J. "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism." *MELUS* 8, no. 2 (1981): 7-12.
- Owens, Louis. "'The Very Essence of Our Lives': Leslie Silko's Webs of Identity." In *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- Perry, Donna. *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out*. Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- St. Clair, Janet. "Death of Love/Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*." *MELUS* 21, no. 2 (1996): 141-156.
- Salyer, Greg. *Leslie Marmon Silko*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Seyersted, Per. *Leslie Marmon Silko*. Western Writers Series. 45. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1980.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.
- . *Ceremony*. New York: Viking, 1977.
- . *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2009.
- . *Garden of the Dunes*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- . *Laguna Woman: Poems by Leslie Silko*. Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1974.
- . *Silko and James Wright*. Edited by Anne Wright. Minneapolis, Minn.: Graywolf, 1986.
- . *Storyteller*. New York: Viking, 1981.
- . *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Stein, Rachel. "Contested Ground: Nature, Narrative, and Native American Identity in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*." In *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.
- Velie, Alan R. *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.

Curtis Yehnert



GARY SNYDER (1930–)

How rare to be born a human being!

(“Hunting”)

Born in San Francisco on May 8, 1930, Gary Snyder moved with his family to Washington when he was two years old, as a result of financial pressures brought on by the Great Depression. There they eked out a living managing a dairy farm and making cedar-wood shingles. Ten years later, they moved to Oregon. When Snyder was seven years old, he had to stay in bed for four months after a serious accident. This recovery time became a turning point in his life when his parents gave him piles of books from the public library, which he read eagerly. From that point on, he developed a voracious reading habit.

But Snyder also worked on his parents’ farm and spent significant time in the woods. He became interested in native peoples and, in particular, the Coast Salish tribe and their relationship with nature based on traditional practices. After Snyder’s parents separated, his mother, Lois, a newspaper journalist, raised him and his sister. He worked as both a newspaper copy boy and a camp counselor; he also began mountain climbing with a youth group and continued climbing during his twenties and thirties.

Snyder entered Reed College in 1947, on scholarship, and met two other students who would later achieve prominence in West Coast poetry circles, Lew Welch and Philip Whalen. The three became roommates for a time. Snyder studied literature and anthropology and published his first poems in a stu-

dent literary journal. One summer, he worked as a merchant seaman, a job that gave him contact with other cultures in foreign ports of call and expanded his awareness of our ocean environments. During his undergraduate years, he married Alison Gass. He wrote a senior thesis entitled “The Dimensions of a Haida Myth.”

After graduating from Reed, he spent the summer working as a timber scaler at Warm Springs Indian Reservation near Portland, Oregon, and the following year as a fire lookout at Desolation Peak in the North Cascades of Washington. These experiences found their way into his early poems and subsequently appeared in his book *The Back Country*. During this time, Snyder developed an interest in Buddhism and related traditional views of nature associated with the Far East. He also practiced self-taught Zen meditation.

Snyder then attended Indiana University in Bloomington to study anthropology, but stayed for only one semester before moving to San Francisco in 1952. He first stayed with Whalen, who shared his interest in Zen Buddhism. In 1953, after his divorce from Alison Gass, he enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley to study Asian culture and languages. The small cottage he rented in Berkeley, located near the Young Buddhist Association, became a hangout for writers of the fledgling Beat movement. He continued summer work as a forest lookout, on Sourdough Mountain at Mount

Baker National Forest, and worked as a trail builder in Yosemite.

Allen Ginsberg sought out Snyder on the recommendation of Kenneth Rexroth, who introduced Snyder to other members of the Beat movement. Snyder soon met Jack Kerouac, with whom he shared a cabin in Mill Valley, California, for some months in 1955. He and Kerouac climbed Yosemite's 12,000-foot Matterhorn Mountain, an experience that Kerouac enshrined in his novel *Dharma Bums*, whose character Japhy Ryder was modeled after Snyder. Snyder also attended the American Academy of Asian Studies, where, at the time, both Saburo Hasegawa and Alan Watts were teaching.

In October 1955, Snyder read his poem "A Berry Feast" at the now-famous Six Gallery event in San Francisco, the same night Ginsberg first read his poem "Howl." Still, Snyder did not have the urban background typical of Beat members, who regarded him as exotic given his rural origins, wilderness experiences, and history of manual labor. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who published Ginsberg's "Howl" and works of other Beat poets, referred to Snyder as "the Thoreau of the Beat Generation." Snyder's reputation in Beat circles was further enhanced by Alan Watts's positive depiction of him in his influential book *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, published in 1959. "Snyder is, in the best sense, a bum," Watts wrote. "His manner of life is a quietly individualistic deviation from everything expected of a 'good consumer.'"

Explaining the Beats' cultural influence in an oral history of Kerouac called *Jack's Book*, Snyder describes the sort of cultural composting the Beats engaged in, which contributed to a cultural shift. "The Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that existed heretofore, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American Bum. We put them together and opened them out again, and it becomes a literary motif, and then we add some Buddhism to it. The vision of the fifties and sixties taps a deep archetypal vein in the American consciousness."

In 1957, Snyder moved to Japan and, for the next 12 years, lived mainly in Kyoto, studying

and meditating at the Daitoku-ji Zen monastery. While there, he translated texts with his collaborator Ruth Fuller Sasaki; his knowledge of written Chinese prepared him for other professional projects as well. For a few years he was married to the American poet Joanne Kyger, who lived with him in Japan. His first book of poetry, *Riprap*, drawing on forest lookout work and his trail-crew experiences in Yosemite, was published in 1959; it was later expanded and published as *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* in 1969.

Snyder published a collection of poems entitled *Myths and Texts* in 1960, followed by *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End* in 1965. *Six Sections* was the start of a writing project that was to continue into the late 1990s. In the early 1960s, Snyder traveled through India for several months with his wife, Joanne, and Allen Ginsberg, and met the Dalai Lama. The couple separated soon after the trip and later divorced.

His self-studies continued with initiation into Shugendo, a type of ancient Japanese animism, and geomorphology and forestry. These interests, along with insights from his work as logger, carpenter, fire lookout, and steam freighter crew member, are all reflected in his poetry. Toward the end of his sojourn in Japan, he moved to Suwanose, a small volcanic island in the East China Sea, to practice communal living with a group of like-minded Japanese. Their back-to-the-land lifestyle included gathering edible plants, fishing, and beachcombing. On Suwanose, he married Masa Uehara, with whom he had two sons.

Readers will find useful connections between Snyder's Buddhist beliefs and his environmental views. The Buddhist belief in reincarnation leads to a different view of stewardship of the earth compared to the typically Western, short-term outlook. If one embraces, even philosophically, the idea that one may have lived past lives and may live future lives, sometimes as animal as sometimes as human, that idea leads to the belief that people and animals deserve equal respect and consideration. These ideas illuminate Snyder's concern for human beings and their physical and spiritual connections to the natural world. They also tie in to his interest in

community as a force in both natural and human relationships.

In the late 1960s, Snyder and his wife moved to San Francisco, where he participated in countercultural events such as the 1967 Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park and appeared at various rallies with Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Alan Watts. In 1968, he published *The Back Country*, poems collected over the previous 15 years, which included sections of his translations of poetry by Kenji Miyazawa. Snyder found that he already enjoyed a growing popularity and influence in the expanding popular evolution linking Beat culture to the wider 1960s movements. His emphasis on spiritual quietude, and his advocacy of a simple life lived in the wilds of nature, resonated among those who were dropping out of society to seek a simpler existence. People starting communes, living in teepees in the mountains, or seeking inspiration in the wilds all looked to Snyder's poetry for inspiration and guidance. As he recalled in an interview for *Shambhala Sun* in May 1996:

We were able to choose and learn other tricks for not being totally engaged with consumer culture. We learned how to live simply and were very good at it in my generation. That was what probably helped shape our sense of community. We not only knew each other, we depended on each other. We shared with each other. And there is a new simple-living movement coming back now, I understand, where people are getting together, comparing notes about how to live on less money, how to share, living simply. (Carolan)

In 1970, Snyder published *Regarding Wave*, which contained more lyrical and family-oriented poems. By the early 1970s, he and his family were homesteading on San Juan Ridge in the Sierra Nevada foothills of northern California, where they built a Japanese-style house, called Kitkitdizze, and established another small community of like-minded friends, ecologically aware Buddhist practitioners. His move to the former "Gold Country" galvanized an interest in the unique character of a wild place, particularly in a region ravaged by

hydraulic gold mining in the late 1880s. The poetry he published in the 1970s reflected his renewed immersion in American culture and reinvolvement in the back-to-the-land movement. Establishing community roots in this place, he became an outspoken advocate of watershed politics and an evangelist of bioregionalism. Both have remained major transformational efforts in Snyder's work.

Snyder's ideas began to see wider circulation in such forums as a taped roundtable discussion published in the *San Francisco Oracle*, which took up questions on pressures of the world-population explosion and the developing leisure society of the West. Snyder also understood early on the implications of the Hubbert "peak oil" theory, which found its way into public-policy discussions in the 1970s. Snyder maintained that our "fossil-fuel subsidy" of cheap oil and coal affected a large spectrum of societal relationships, including farming, food distribution, suburban life, and wealth and poverty.

In 1974, his book *Turtle Island*, the title of which refers to a Native American name for the North American continent, won a Pulitzer Prize. The following year, 1975, Governor-elect Jerry Brown appointed him chair of a new California Arts Council, made up primarily of working artists. Snyder's views on culture and society, religions, natural history and the environment, and spirituality also found outlets in essays he published in such volumes as *Earth House Hold* (1969), *The Old Ways* (1977), *The Real Work* (1980), *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), *A Place in Space* (1995), and the *Gary Snyder Reader* (1999). He also published an account of his travels in India in *Passage through India* (1983).

In the mid-1980s, Snyder became a professor at the University of California, Davis, teaching ethnopoetics, creative writing, and the literature of wilderness. Through his teaching, he was able to spread his interest in Far East studies to numerous younger writers. Snyder is now professor emeritus. In 1988, Snyder and Masa Uehara separated, and he was joined at Kitkitdizze by Carole Koda, whom he married in 1991, enlarging his family to two sons (by Uehara) and two young stepdaughters.

Among Snyder's numerous honors and awards are the Bess Hokin Prize (1964) and the Levinson

Prize (1968) from *Poetry* magazine; the American Book Award, for *Axe Handles* (1983); the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Memorial Award (1985/1986); membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1987); the Orion Society's John Hay Award for Nature Writing (1997); the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Association's Regional Book Award (1997), for *Mountains and Rivers without End*; and the Bollingen Prize (1997), whose past recipients have included such distinguished poets as Wallace Stevens, Maryanne Moore, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, and Richard Wilbur. In 1995, *Utne Reader* featured Snyder as one of 100 visionaries who could change your life, while the following year he was recognized with the Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement from the *Los Angeles Times*.

In 1998, Snyder became the first American to receive the Buddhism Transmission Award from the Japanese Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai Foundation, for his distinctive contributions in linking Zen thought and respect for the natural world across a lifelong body of poetry and prose. His most recent publications include *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), a masterwork written over a 40-year time span that has been translated into Japanese and French, and a collection of new poems entitled *Danger on Peaks* (2004). Snyder's active mountain climbing continues even in his sixties: Recently he spent three weeks with a group of family and friends hiking in the Himalayas and trekking up to base camp at Mount Everest.

"Milton by Firelight" (1955)

One of Snyder's early published poems from 1955, and later included in the collection *Riprap*, this is a poem of contrasts. The practical is contrasted with the literary: The "old Singlejack Miner" who can "blast granite" and "build switchbacks" stands in opposition to the "silly story" written by the great English poet John Milton (in his classic 17th-century epic *Paradise Lost*, centered around Adam and Eve) so long ago. Another telling contrast is between the Indian, representing the native inhabitants and care-

takers of the land for 14,000 years, and "the chainsaw boy," whose work it is to cut down the natural heritage of old trees. Yet another contrast is between the Sierra mountains of the present and what they will be in Snyder's apocalyptic vision of their future as "dry and dead, home of the scorpion."

The speaker addresses Milton, asking of what use is the story of our "lost generational parents / eaters of fruit." This biblical reference to Adam and Eve ties in with the later phrase "no paradise, no fall," which combines with images of Satan and hell to form the speaker's prediction of a bleak future for our natural world.

"Man, with his Satan" refers to the biblical Satan, who is also a central figure and character in Milton's epic poems; the phrasing here suggests that humans invented this personification of evil. That Satan is "scouring the chaos of the mind" indicates that our behavior, in destroying nature, results from our own mental disorientation and implies that if we can reclaim our proper relationship with nature, we might not doom ourselves. Both Indian and chainsaw boy ride together, perhaps signaling that there are at least two possibilities, always presented together: Will we be caretakers of the land and our natural environment or its destroyers?

The poem ends with an image of trying to gain sure footing: the "bell-mare," "scrambling through loose rocks / on an old trail," as a metaphor for our own modern situation, in which we seem to be confusedly stumbling about trying to find a sensible path into our own future, which is itself but a continuation of the "old trail" of human activity in, and indeed as part of, nature.

For Snyder the poet, the myth or "silly story" told in poems is not really silly at all, but a perhaps prophetic tale of the eventual fall of humankind that is directly evidenced in the "weathering land" and man's "scouring" of the landscape. The poem draws parallels among specific activities in the Sierras, the natural world, and the trajectory in Milton's great poem of paradise and fall, which itself retells the biblical myth of creation and man's self-imposed expulsion from paradise.

A constant theme in Snyder's poetry is evident here: that what goes on in the mind is the key to

understanding, and perhaps changing, what goes on in the physical world. So the answer to the rhetorical question—"What use" is Milton's silly story?—lies in how our own inner reflection on the future we are possibly creating can serve to steer us toward saving paradise, rather than toward experiencing some inevitable fall.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does the speaker call on John Milton in particular? Research Milton and read some of the famous passages in his great works *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. To what purpose does Snyder use the words and images of Milton's poems? Do you agree with Snyder's interpretation of the relationship between man and Satan?
2. In the third stanza, Snyder talks more abstractly about the distant future. How does he speak about it? Why does he leave the present so lackadaisically? What does that say about his attitude toward the past? The present?
3. The speaker refers to "no paradise, no fall." What does he mean by this?
4. Snyder's reverence for physical labor aligns him with Robert Frost. Compare Snyder's "Milton by Firelight" to Frost's "Mowing" or "After Apple-Picking." What do these poets share in technique and theme? Where do they diverge? How does this respect for work and the outdoors connect to the American identity?

"Riprap" (1959)

According to a note on the title page of *Riprap* (the book), a riprap is "a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains." In this poem, the pattern of words on the page visually mimics the arrangement of riprap stone on a trail, hence rippapping becomes a metaphor for poem making. Poetry is to metaphysics as riprap is to slick rock.

The imagery expands from the specific instances of "bark, leaf, or wall" to include the entire universe—"milky way" and "straying planets"—indicating that poetry itself captures relationships

among all elements and dimensions of the cosmos. "These poems" are part of the overall structure of things; therefore, the structural arrangement goes beyond the three dimensions of our physical world to include "worlds like an endless / four-dimensional / Game of *Go*," referring to the Japanese game of unit structure (similar to checkers), in which a rock or heavy object is thrown to determine the possibility and order of movement.

The theme of the structure of poem making is further illuminated with the lines "each rock a word / a creek-washed stone / Granite:ingrained." Granite is both rock and word, and the word *granite* derives from the Latin term for ingrained. Individual words are, of course, ingrained in poems. Geologically, granite results from a process in which molten magma is forced upward through the earth's crust. Granite is therefore shaped by "torment of fire and weight," similar to the process of thought and creation in the mental sphere. The mental world and the objective world are places of never-ending change, a process of flux and "torment." While geologic change can be episodic and stretch out over eons, it is nevertheless typical of Snyder's poetry to refer to and to notice evidence of such change over time in the way nature appears to us now. Likewise, poetic creation itself is not static, but a "trail" of cobbled words leading to a higher spiritual state. The art of poetry achieves a footing in the existential world, the result of experience under pressure in our world of time and change. In parallel to the way "torment of fire and . . . / Crystal and sediment linked hot" has resulted in solid stone, the heat of emotions rendered into language and then refined into poetic form results in the firm set shape of this poem. In this way, poetry provides a philosophy and foundation for living.

The aim of art, in Snyder's universe, is to create an inner harmony equal to the external harmony and flow of nature, which is also the core aim of Buddhism, the religious philosophy to which Snyder has been so strongly attracted. In turn, nature, if observed rather than exploited, can provide lessons and inspiration for understanding and developing higher mental processes. Snyder writes in the afterword to the 1990 edition of *Riprap and Cold*

Mountain Poems: “The title . . . celebrates the work of hands, the placing of rock, and my first glimpse of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting, and mutually embracing.”

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explore further the etymology of the word *granite*. What do some of the word’s origins and derivations tell us about the meaning of “Riprap”?
2. What do you make of the lines “These poems, people, / lost ponies with / Dragging saddles—”? What is the possible relationship of these various elements? What is Snyder saying about poetry and the act of creating poems?

“Straight-Creek—Great Burn” (1974)

This poem is from Snyder’s book *Turtle Island*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. Two distinct points of view are presented here. The first part describes a landscape without inhabitants or witnesses. Movement is emphasized. What is observed moves from ground to sky, and from past to eternal. The past includes “last fall’s seeds,” but also the evidence of a past avalanche piled up and the “flow-wear lines” in creek boulders and the “tumbled talus rock” that used to lie on a “sea bottom” very long ago. The vision moves upward into “changing clouds” and finally the “eternal azure” of the infinite sky.

Mention of human beholders of that mythic realm comprises the second point of view: “Us resting on dry fern and watching.” In observing the flight of birds, the poet tries to identify with (or merge with) the “empty / dancing mind” of the birds, who seem to move all at once as if sharing one consciousness, instinctually and without any leader. In this way, the flock moves like a school of fish, or falling leaves in the wind. The poetic mind is basically passive here, trying to see itself as part of nature rather than antagonistic or in opposition to it. Indeed, the earlier metaphorical comparison between water wearing on boulders and blood shaping heart valves emphasizes this melding of people and nature. The poem ends as the birds alight—

another indicator of the melding of the mind of the poet and elements of nature.

The reference to the “warm sea bottom” of another age demonstrates a thematic recurrence in Snyder of seeing nature not only as it appears in the present, but also with an appreciation of the change/flux of nature over eons, as if one should notice or understand those long-term shifts by paying attention to details or evidence in the present. The evidence is there, he suggests, to those who read the landscape and know what to look for. From the perspective of Buddhism, this refers to the “eternal mind” and awareness of the ever-changing nature of things. Throughout the poem there is movement and change: the change of seasons from winter to spring, the movement of water and evidence of past movement in avalanche and “flow-wear lines,” the “changing clouds,” “shapes on glowing sun ball writhing,” movement of the flock of birds, and even the “empty dancing mind.” “Empty” in Snyder’s spiritual view does not mean dumb or thoughtless. Rather, it can be understood as the kind of empty mind one strives for in meditation: open to the cosmic sense of being, aware of all things, letting the deepest natural vibrations flow through it.

The poem also uses the tension between the wish for material that “says itself” and the unavoidable knowledge that the poet is an interpreter speaking for silent things. The details of the natural landscape are self-evident in what they signify. Yet the “us” in the poem draws readers in as both observers and participants, and the description of the flight of the birds causes us to reflect on our own mental processes as the poet describes their harmonious and spontaneous movement together.

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem appears in the collection entitled *Turtle Island*. *Turtle Island* is also a Native American term for the North American continent. How is this significant in terms of the content and theme of this poem? Does knowing the title of the collection change the way you view the poem?
2. Look up terms such as *lichen*, *talus rock*, and *geosyncline*. Why did Snyder choose them for

this poem? How do they fit in with other imagery in the poem?

“The Blue Sky” (1996)

This poem, part of *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), combines definitions, folktales, Buddhist chants, and a dream that delivers a Zen lesson, all to conjure up a realm of azure heaven that promises some kind of enlightenment. As the author has stated:

If someone asked for a description of “The Blue Sky,” I would have to say that it is a poem dealing with the lore of healing from Asian and Native American cultures, which pivots around the figure of the cosmological “Healing Buddha” of Mahayana Buddhism. Shamanism, Buddhism, the lore and psychology of healing, and some of the historical figures of Buddhism are invoked here. (“The Blue Sky,” *Literature and Medicine*)

“The Blue Sky” employs the metaphor of the journey, as well as repeated references to directional movement. The opening suggests movement in “twelve thousand summer vacations / driving a car east all day every day” to reach the “realm of / Medicine Old Man Buddha.”

Following are several definitions and a Buddhist chant featuring the word *tathagata*, the name the historical Buddha Sakyamuni used to refer to himself, signifying the status of a fully enlightened being. In Sanskrit, *Tathāgata* means “one who comes and goes,” which fits the poem’s journey metaphor.

The first definitions here explore the words *blue* and *sky*. Though the name Bhaishajyaguru appears toward the end of the poem, it means “Supreme Healer” and is a figure characteristically portrayed in the color blue. Befittingly he is titled Lord of Lapis Lazuli, the stone whose color adorns him. This precious gemstone was an important ingredient in the medications he prescribed. According to lore, the Buddha emanated as Bhaishajyaguru, or Medicine Buddha, thousands of years ago and established the Tibetan medical tradition. He offers medicine

to people suffering from illness and grants nourishment to the mind and body. The English word *azure* links to the term *lapis lazuli*, which means “stone of azure.” In Sanskrit, Bhaishajyaguru is the Lord of the Pure Land of Bliss in the Eastern Quarter of Heaven, the Pure Land of Lapis-Lazuli. So the color blue, woven throughout the poem, is directly identified with this central Buddhist healer.

The story of Ono-no-Komachi, who “took ill” and saw the “medicine master in a dream,” refers to a Japanese poet who lived from about 833 to 857. Celebrated for her beauty and erotically charged poetry, she ranked among the most prominent poets of her day. It is helpful to note that romantic love involves a kind of sickness of the spirit—that is, being “lovesick”—as well as various cures and even suggests a path to enlightenment.

In a discussion of “Doctors and Nurses,” the poet and his friends agree that modern medical professionals should wear less authoritarian clothing, perhaps “masks and feathers,” the costume of traditional medicine men and healers. The poem then presents the Ramana Maharshi Dream. Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) was probably the most famous Indian sage of the 20th century, renowned for his saintly life, for the fullness of his self-realization, and for the feelings of deep peace that visitors experienced in his presence. The old man who appears in the dream is probably a version of Maharshi.

After definitions of the terms *medicine* and *celestial* are references to Kama, God of Love, from the Hindu god Kāmadeva. *Kāma* can be translated as “desire,” which links this passage to the legend of the 17-year-old poet mentioned earlier. The name *Shakyamuni* refers to the founder of Buddhism, born Prince Siddhartha around 563 B.C. in the southern foothills of the Himalayas, son of King Shuddhodana Gautama and Queen Maya (hence Snyder’s listing “Son of Maya”). The Buddha once summarized his entire teachings in one sentence: “I teach about suffering and the way to end it.”

Following this line of thought, Snyder’s poem probing “illness” can refer to the more general situation of our unenlightenment—that we *all* suffer from our spiritual shortcomings. But “Sakyamuni”

Philip Whalen, and Jack Kerouac. What common themes or interests can you identify? How is Snyder distinctly different in terms of subject matter and direction?

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Almon, Burt. "Gary Snyder." Albertsons Library Digital Collections: Western Writers Collection. Available online. URL: http://digital.boisestate.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/western&CISOPT R=29. Accessed July 9, 2009.
- Carolan, Trevor. "The Wild Mind of Gary Snyder." *Shambhala Sun* 4, no. 5 (May 1996): 18–26. Available online. URL: www.shambhalasun.com/Archives/Features/1996/May96/Snyder.htm. Accessed October 9, 2009.
- Dean, Tim. *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious: Inhabiting the Ground*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Gray, Timothy. *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Unity*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006.
- Halper, Jon, ed., *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991.
- Hunt, Anthony. *Genesis, Structure, and Meaning in Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers without End*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004.
- McNeil, Katherine. *Gary Snyder: A Bibliography*. New York: Phoenix Bookshop, 1983.
- Molesworth, Charles. *Gary Snyder's Vision: Poetry and the Real Work*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983.
- Murphy, Patrick D. *A Place for Wayfaring: The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000.
- Snyder, Gary. *Axe Handles: Poems*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983.
- . *The Back Country*. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- . *Back on the Fire*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007.
- . "The Blue Sky." *Literature and Medicine: Environment and Health* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 88–93.
- . *Danger on Peaks: Poems*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.
- . *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*. New York: New Directions, 1969.
- . *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations, 1952–1998*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999.
- . *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*. Bolinas, Calif.: Grey Fox Press, 1979.
- . *Left out in the Rain: New Poems, 1947–1985*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986.
- . *Mountains and Rivers without End*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996.
- . *Myths and Texts*. New York: New Directions, 1978.
- . *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- . *The Old Ways: Six Essays*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1977.
- . *Passage through India*. San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983.
- . *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds: New and Selected Prose*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995.
- . *The Practice of the Wild*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.
- . *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964–1979*. Edited by William Scott McLean. New York: New Directions, 1980.
- . *Regarding Wave*. New York: New Directions, 1970.
- . *Riprap*. Kyoto, Japan: Origin Press, 1959.
- . *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. San Francisco: Four Seasons, 1969.
- . *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. New York: North Point Press, 1990.
- . *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End*. San Francisco: Four Seasons, 1965.
- . *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974.
- Steuding, Bob. *Gary Snyder*. Boston: Twayne, 1976.
- Suiter, John. *Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Jack Kerouac in the North Cascades*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002.

Bruce Henderson



GARY SOTO (1952–)

How strange that we can begin at any time. / With two feet we get down the street. / With
a hand we undo the rose.

(“Looking Around, Believing”)

Gary Soto, one of America’s best-loved poets, hated reading when he was in school. A third-generation Mexican American, Soto grew up being warned by his mother to get an education lest he end up a field worker with no hope of getting ahead. Although he has earned unprecedented fame as a poet, essayist, novelist, and playwright, Gary Soto is no stranger to the pains of migrant labor and the culture of poverty.

Born on April 12, 1952, in Fresno, California, Soto has deep family roots in the San Joaquin Valley. It was in Fresno that his paternal grandfather, Frank Soto, an immigrant from Mexico, met and married Paola, who had entered the United States from Mexico years before him. To support their growing family, the two worked with their children in the agricultural fields of Fresno. Gary’s father, Manuel, is said to have been “a charming and intelligent boy with elegant good looks and glimmering brown eyes” (Ganz 426). It is no wonder that Angie Trevino, Gary’s mother, married Manuel when both were just 18 years old. Together the couple dropped out of high school and began working for local packing houses. In 1950, Angie gave birth to her first son, Rick. Gary followed two years later and their sister, Debra, joined the family merely nine months after that.

When Soto was only six years old, within a week of his family’s settling into a new home, his father died of a neck injury incurred at work. Soto recalls

that at the funeral he felt very little emotion at all. After the burial, Soto’s family never again spoke of the accident or his father, and all associations to that time were severed. It was not until his adult years, as a successful poet, that Soto began to explore his feelings about his father’s death, including those toward the man most responsible for it. On paper he wonders why this man took such obvious steps to avoid his responsibilities to Soto’s family. Remembering a sighting of the man years later, Soto recalls he was

large, his girth like a tree: I like to think he was eating for two, himself and father, who was inside like a worm taking his share; that after all those years he still thought of Manuel and the afternoon when he climbed that ladder with a tray of nails on his shoulder, lost his balance, and fell. “This is my hope, for my sake and this man’s, because we should remember the dead, call them back in memory to feel their worth.” (“This Man (1)” 68)

This tragedy, Soto writes, was the catalyst for years of incessant worrying over loss and never having enough. The only escape he knew from such anxiety occurred when he lashed out at something bigger and stronger than he was, which proved to have a “calming” effect (Soto, “The Childhood Worries” 6).

After Soto's mother remarried—this time to a white man—the family relocated to a predominately white neighborhood, but, as Soto notes, poverty was just as prevalent there. During his school years, Soto struggled with the questions of identity that emerged from social class distinctions, family conflict, and racism. His frequent playground brawls earned him the reputation of a troublemaker; many of his teachers and schoolmates predicted he would achieve very little in life. In fact, at a junior high school reunion years later, his peers were more shocked by his success as an author and professor than by the large number of their classmates who had been murdered or incarcerated (Lee 189). For a time, even Soto believed in the inevitability of his failure:

They said I'd work like a donkey and marry the first Mexican girl that came along. I was reminded so often, verbally and in the way I was treated at home, that I began to believe that chopping cotton might be a lifetime job for me. If not chopping cotton, then I might get lucky and find myself in a car wash or restaurant or junkyard. But it was clear; I'd work, and work hard. ("One Last Time" 110)

Motivated by his encounters with hard labor and his mother's pleas that he and his brother finish school, Soto managed to graduate from high school in 1970 with a D average. Although he remained uninterested in academics, he enrolled at Fresno City College to avoid the draft. As a child, Soto had entertained whims of being a priest, a paleontologist, and even a hobo, but when it was time to choose a major, he decided on geography, hoping he could "just look at maps, study some rivers, take multiple-choice tests, and that'd be that. Being semi-illiterate, I didn't want to be forced to write anything" (quoted in Lee 190).

But Soto did not stick with this decision for long. One day, while researching a paper on continental drift, he spotted a copy of the *New American Poetry 1945–1960*. Eager to avoid his "real" work, he began reading. Soto became enthralled with the irreverence of those so often associated with the Beat movement: Gregory Corso, Kenneth Koch, Allen Ginsberg, and

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others. He was surprised by their bold "audacity to shrug off the world" and felt, as he later described, that their "wildness should stampede through [his] own hometown, Fresno" ("Sizing" 1). The poem "Unwanted," by the post–World War II poet Edward Field, had a particularly strong impact on Soto because it resonated with his own feelings of alienation and helped him see the universal value of his individual experiences.

When Soto transferred to what is now California State University (CSU), Fresno, less than two years later, he wasted no time registering for creative writing classes taught by the noted poet Philip Levine. Levine, a "brilliant man with a clever wit" who "wouldn't spare you if you turned in insipid and poorly wrought poetry," became a major influence in Soto's work ("Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo" 26). While studying poetry at CSU Fresno, Soto met and befriended other now-well-known poets, namely, Ernesto Trejo, Jon Veinberg, and Christopher Buckley. The group became known as the Fresno school, noted for their works' "short lines, a denuded vocabulary, [and] an enumeration of small objects seen not as symbols but as presences which build the speaker's situation" (Cooley 305).

In retrospect, Soto recognizes that he knew very little of the canonical poetic dialogue to which he was contributing. But he was voraciously learning. While at CSU Fresno, Soto discovered and fell in love with the writings of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Soto remembers being in awe of "what must have been the godly permission this poet received to write so strangely. I wanted such permission, too. There was nothing to match Neruda's marvelous vision" ("Sizing" 2). Even now, Soto considers himself first and foremost an imagist—"one who tries to provide a really stark, quick image"—and credits Neruda's influence (Copeland 94).

In 1974, Soto graduated magna cum laude with a degree in English and headed south to attend graduate school at the University of California, Irvine. While there, he married Carolyn Oda, a native of Fresno. Soto met with remarkable success during his years at UC Irvine, winning the Academy of American Poets prize in 1975. He completed his graduate work in 1976, earning an M.F.A. in creative writ-

ing. His thesis, *The Elements of San Joaquin*, won Soto the International Poetry Forum's United States Award. It was published in 1977 as his first book of poetry, for which he received the Bess Hokin Prize.

Reactions to Soto's first publication were mixed. While many activists criticized Soto for not employing a culturally political rhetoric, scholars praised his work for its very lack of an activist agenda. Even at that early stage of his writing, Soto "knew that the more personal he was in his work, concentrating solely on his individual experiences, the more universality he could attain" (Lee 190). Closer to home, friends and family were at a loss for how to treat Soto's success. When he presented his illiterate grandmother with a copy of the work, she immediately framed it and placed it as the centerpiece in her living room, affectionately referred to by Soto as the "museum of bad taste" ("Who Is Your Reader?" 196). Soto began to wonder whether this would be a common reception for his writing.

After graduation, Soto continued to write and took a variety of faculty positions within the University of California system. He has been the recipient of countless awards, including the 1979 Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed Soto, his wife, and their young daughter, Mariko, to spend a year in Mexico; *Poetry* magazine's highly regarded Levinson Award; the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award; the Andrew Carnegie Medal; the Literature Award from the Hispanic Heritage Foundation; and *Skipping Stones* magazine's Honor Award.

In 1978, Soto published *The Tale of Sunlight*, a collection of poetry that received laudatory reviews. In the years that followed, Soto's style and tone began to change. *Where Sparrows Work Hard*, published in 1981, features a more personal, even intimate voice than that heard in Soto's previous works. As Theresa Melendez writes, "Situations that earlier might have been framed by the poet's anger . . . are now expressed through cynical wit" (77). *Living up the Street: Narrative Recollections*, published in 1985, marks a shift in his writing away from poetry and toward prose. Addressing this change, Soto explains, "I felt I could be louder, more direct, also sloppier, whereas with poetry, I believed you had to

control your statement, not be so obvious" (quoted in Lee 190).

After the publication of *Living up the Street*, Soto, to his surprise, began receiving fan mail from Mexican-American teenagers reading his work. Their praise and reported connections to his writing encouraged him to write more intentionally for a teenage audience: "I began to feel like I was doing something valuable. . . . I thought I might be able to make readers and writers out of this group of kids" (quoted in Lee 191). With this new audience in mind, in 1990 Soto published *A Fire in My Hands* and *Baseball in April*, the latter winning him the California Library Association's John and Patricia Beatty Award.

Since that time, Soto has continued to write prolifically, producing multiple works each year. Although he continues to write to an adult audience—with books such as *Who Will Know Us?* (1990), *Home Course in Religion* (1992), *New and Selected Poems* (1995), and *Junior College* (1997)—he has stuck to his resolution to write for the future writers of the world. In addition to those titles mentioned previously, Soto's junior fiction includes *Taking Sides* (1991), *Too Many Tamales* (1993), *Jesse* (1994), *Chato's Kitchen* (1995), *Buried Onions* (1997), *Petty Crimes* (1998), *Nerdlandia* (1999), and, most recently, *The Afterlife* (2003), among many others. He has also written, produced, and directed juvenile films, including *The Bike* (1991), *The Pool Party* (1993), and *Novio Boy* (1994).

Among the various praise given Soto's works, often commended are his gift of memory and the simple, even pure, language he uses to recreate these memories. As is French novelist Marcel Proust, Soto is credited for his ability to revive the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds of his childhood. Even in his prose, Soto's efforts as an imagist create for readers a universal "language [that] is straightforward enough to be accessible to students who have little experience and yet rich and subtle enough to reward even the most sophisticated reader" (Romero and Zancanella 27). Ever the Mexican-American boy from Fresno, Soto says the greatest reward he can receive for his work is for a reader to tell him, "I can see your stories." This is what I'm always working for, a story that becomes alive and meaningful in the reader's

mind. That's why I write so much about growing up in the barrio. It allows me to use specific memories that are vivid for me" ("Gary Soto's Biography").

"The Elements of San Joaquin" (1977)

This poem was written as part of Soto's graduate thesis shortly after attending a writing workshop in Wisconsin. In what was his first trip outside California, Soto recalls surreal feelings of alienation—as if his "life had been severed from the past" ("Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo" 25). This experience gave him the distance he needed to see the San Joaquin Valley not just for its "tragic nature," but also with a sense of its beauty ("Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo" 25). In what is hard to describe as anything other than haunting, "Elements" offers a bleak panorama of the valley's landscape from the perspective of the migrant laborer, "who reaps nothing for himself except an awareness of destitution" and his own insignificance (Melendez 76).

Without affectation, Soto describes the apocalyptic threat to the inhabitants of the valley, who are at the mercy of the natural elements. In "Field," instead of the farmworker's gleaning sustenance from the land, the land seems to be devouring him: "Already I am becoming the valley, / A soil that sprouts nothing" (lines 10–11). The wind makes its own threat of consumption, mocking life's ephemeral nature, as it turns bones to dust and denies man's toils, covering the "spiked tracks of beetles, / Of tumbleweed, of sparrows / That pecked the ground for insects" (lines 20–22). Similar scenes of nature's contempt toward the insignificant farmworker occur throughout the poem: The rain prevents work and causes "the skin of [his] belly" to "tighten like a belt" (line 68); the fog swallows all signs of life so that "one hundred years from now / There should be no reason to believe / I lived" (lines 91–93).

What saves this migrant farmworker and those like him from extinction lies somewhere between the occasional reprieve of the elements and the ambiguity of the poem. For example, in "Wind," where the wind "strokes / The skulls and spines of cattle," the word *stroke* eludes interpretation (lines

17–18). Whether it indicates violence or affection depends on a context that is itself largely ambiguous. Likewise, in "Sun," the dubious image of a couple's shadow "deep against the water" prevents us from knowing whether the water exists for the couple or the couple exists for the water (line 52). Patricia de la Fuentes believes Soto intentionally uses ambiguous language to "substantially reduce the terror and finality of annihilation by implying a capacity in man to survive and overcome the limitations of his destiny" ("Ambiguity" 38).

In "Daybreak," the final section of the poem, the farmworker's perseverance is firmly vocalized as the speaker offers his labor as proof of his continued existence and significance. Confidently, he reminds us that

When the season ends,
And the onions are unplugged from their sleep
We won't forget what you failed to see,
And nothing will heal
Under the rain's broken fingers. (lines 109–113)

In these closing lines, Soto asks readers to acknowledge the injustices to the migrant workers of California while stressing the growing need of labor unions to protect workers from harsh conditions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his review of *The Elements of San Joaquin*, Jerry Bradley concludes that the characters in the collection "rise above the meanness of their appearance, not as unscarred ideologues or saints or rhetoricians, but as humans—frail and impoverished—whose heritage is simply and redemptively the earth" (74). Do you agree with Bradley's analysis? If so, compare the speakers/characters in the collection and explain how the earth is their "heritage." If not, what is their role and relationship to the earth?
2. Research the United Farm Workers of America. How effective do you think the union has been in calling laborers' hardships to the attention of the general public? Explain your answer. What more can be done? How has this poem affected your view of the question?

“Mexicans Begin Jogging” (1981)

This comical poem is a retelling of a much darker time in Soto’s life (as later described in the short story “Black Hair”). At odds with his mother and stepfather, Soto had run away from home and, while living on the streets, found employment at the Valley Tire Factory. In other accounts, this experience is a raw, dismal one that proved to Soto “there was something worse than field work” (“Black Hair” 123). But as told here, the memory unfolds with the kind of dry humor typical of Soto’s later work.

“Mexicans Begin Jogging” describes the unnecessary escape of an American citizen from a border patrol raid in the factory where he works. Because his skin is brown, his boss assumes he is illegal and urges him to run with the others. When the speaker tries to explain he is an American, his boss stifles his words, telling him there is “No time for lies” (line 8). It is not until his boss presses a dollar into his hand that the speaker figures he will oblige, reasoning that he can just as easily run for his hourly wage as he can prepare tires for resale.

The comedic element of this poem lies in the title. As Julian Olivares observes, jogging is an activity reserved for white middle-class Americans; hard laborers find very little need for additional exertion. The speaker’s jogging while on the clock parodies this point. Further, the image becomes more entertaining as the reader imagines grown men trying to escape the reach of the border patrol, all the while maintaining the slow, casual pace of a jog. As Soto portrays them, the illegal workers choose to elude the border patrol via an apt show of assimilation into the American mainstream rather than a high-speed chase.

In the latter half of the poem, the speaker’s tone shifts from that of a boy caught up in a funny anecdote to that of a Mexican American increasingly aware of his limited value as a statistic of assimilation. Running through industrial streets into the neighborhoods of white middle-class America, the speaker becomes aware of the discomfort his presence is causing the street’s residents. In an impulsive effort to assuage their fear and testify to his “American-ness,” he cheers “*vivas*”

To baseball, milkshakes, and those sociologists
Who would clock me
As I jog into the next century
On the power of a great, silly grin. (lines 18–21)

The cheer lacks substance, however, and ends as a pathetic attempt to identify with meaningless icons of “America.”

Those final lines create a moving image of the “landless” Mexican American. Different from the illegal Mexicans with whom he works—in the story “Black Hair,” Soto tells us that his Mexican coworkers would laugh at him because he was “a *pochó* who spoke bad Spanish”—and still not a part of mainstream America thanks to his brown skin and low social class, Soto uses the street “to create a cultural space which the alienated Chicano can call his own” (Soto 119, Olivares 46). Although the runner in Soto’s poem had not wanted to run from the factory, while out, he discovers a trope for personal and cultural space.

For Discussion or Writing

Read Soto’s short story “Black Hair.” How do the different narrative tones in the poem and the story affect the way you read the account? What does each genre offer that the other one does not?

Living up the Street: *Narrative Recollections* (1985)

This collection of autobiographical sketches tells the story of Soto’s formative years in Fresno, California. They are the stories of Soto’s life as he is scheming his way into another, better one, and they delve into the world of the son of a widowed Chicana laborer who is, consequently, left to his own devices. But there is little in these stories that is exclusive to the Chicano experience. Soto’s tales are filled with sibling rivalry, efforts to fit in with his playground peers, schemes to get ahead in life, and, most especially, the failures that are inevitable when reaching for something. These failures add a sublime element to Soto’s storytelling—rather than defeating a young man who seems to have ended

up with the short end of the stick, failure becomes his motivation to write.

When we first meet Soto, he is five years old, his father is mere pages from an accidental death, and he is already enthusiastically “looking for trouble” on the streets (3). In “Being Mean,” he describes his and his brother’s disposition as “polite as only Mexicans can be polite, [but] we had a streak of orneriness that we imagined to be normal play” (2). This “ornerness,” as Soto terms it, is startling at times, leading him into brutal fights with his brother, the neighborhood kids, and eventually his entire kindergarten class. But these unsettling disturbances are offset by his confessions of wrongdoing, his efforts at reconciliation, and, in particular, the vulnerability he displays as he shares with readers the common frustration of failed ambitions.

In “Looking for Work,” Soto tells of the influence of television shows—such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*—on the way he gauged the worth of his home life. More often than not, his attempts at betterment were met with ridicule. His brother, Rick, for example, answered Soto’s request for a more formal dinner by showing up in his bathing suit, and his mother scoffed at his request for turtle soup, calling him a “crazy Mexican” (29).

As the sketches progress, we watch Soto mature and his struggles evolve toward a more serious nature. There is less humor in these later tales—perhaps the result of his growing awareness that what he has for so long described as his own “evilness” can now be interpreted as a very natural reaction to an unrelenting, hard-knock life.

In the last few sketches of the collection, we meet the older Soto, with wife and child. To the reader, Soto’s experiences—whether of poverty, employment lines, or losing his jacket and wallet to the Mexican police—seem to happen for the sole purpose of later being told. Perhaps this is why Soto chooses to tell his wife what happened on the day before she left him in Mexico in a letter, written after she is gone: With a little reflection, life turns into a story.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A myth is a story or belief common to a certain group that helps individuals within that group

make decisions and create judgments. In the United States, there is a myth that the 1950s were a golden age in America. How is this challenged by *Living up the Street*?

2. This collection of vignettes is often compared to SANDRA CISNEROS’s *The House on Mango Street* because both authors tell autobiographical stories of their childhood barrios. Read *The House on Mango Street* and compare and contrast the adventures of the authors. How is the tone in which they tell their stories similar or different? How does each author cope with life’s challenges and rise above them? Is it possible to extrapolate a common or shared Latino experience from these stories?

“Like Mexicans” (1985)

In this autobiographical essay, Soto tells his readers about his surprise that he married an Asian-American girl instead of a Mexican, as everyone has encouraged him to do. Underlying this story is an exploration of the racism that ruled his multiethnic neighborhood.

When he was a young teenager, Soto’s grandmother made it very clear that he should not marry an Asian, black, or “Okie,” a term that in California in the 1950s and 1960s pejoratively described very poor people of white and Native American descent who had been driven from Oklahoma during the Great Depression. For his grandmother, it included anyone of European descent. She drew her conclusions from a calendar “depicting the important races of the world” and a cantankerous “Okie” daughter-in-law (211). If Soto would marry a Mexican, she promised, he would be happy.

This early lesson in ethnocentricity is reiterated in a subsequent conversation with his best friend, Scott. Just as casually as they discuss school or music, each assures the other of his culturally driven choice for a wife. Soto is the first to make clear that he will never marry an “Okie”; Scott quickly reassures him that he will never marry a Mexican. Significantly, these offensive attitudes make no dent in their relationship because each boy has his own mental picture of the

right kind of girl, and their “vision was the same; to marry, get jobs, buy cars and maybe a house if we had money left over” (212). The boys prove to have enough in common to welcome the clarity these differences offer their friendship. At the mall, they sit side by side in a noncompetitive game of “claiming” girls as they walk by, both agreeing that “they couldn’t wait to be men and lift [the girls] on to our laps” (213).

Despite his intentions to follow instructions and find a Mexican girl, Soto falls in love with the Japanese-American girl he will one day marry. But even after he has decided to love her, his resolve is regularly interrupted by familial concern and self-doubt. When he tells his grandmother about Carolyn for the first time, she asks him to give her the “calendar of important races of the world” again so that she can graphically support her reaction to the match (213). After looking at Carolyn’s picture (because Soto had long since disposed of the calendar), she guesses the girl must be Chinese, communicating to Soto and the reader that race- and ethnicity-based generalizations have more to do with limitations of the imagination than with understood differences.

After constantly replaying these conversations in his mind, it finally hits Soto “like a baseball in the back” that what his mother and relatives want more than for him to marry a Mexican is to “marry someone of my own social class” (213). Consequently, it is the evidence of poverty in her family’s life that reassures Soto that Carolyn is the one for him. After sitting in the Oda family’s kitchen with Carolyn and her mother, Soto realizes that Carolyn does not have to be Mexican to be like him; their paradigms—their expectations for happiness—are the same.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his essay, Soto uses socioeconomic classification rather than ethnic classification to determine sameness. Why do you think he does this? How do social institutions tend to categorize different groups of people? Do you believe this thinking has shifted over time or become more entrenched? What does Soto appear to believe?
2. Compare Soto’s account of reconciling his old family with his new one to Joan Didion’s auto-

biographical essay “On Going Home.” How has choosing a spouse influenced the way each writer sees him- or herself? How does each writer define family and home?

“Oranges” (1985)

First appearing in *Black Hair* (1985), this narrative poem pays homage to the flickering ardor of young romance. The speaker, presumably an adult now, recollects an evening spent walking with a girl with whom he is quite taken. Eager to impress “his girl”—as he later calls her—he tells her at the five-and-dime store that she can have the candy of her choice. When he realizes her selection costs twice as much as the sole nickel he has in his pocket, he barterers one of his oranges, which is graciously accepted by the sales clerk. The evening ends with the young boy gleaming with satisfaction over his ability to please his date.

Published after Soto’s shift into dark humor, in which he freely pokes fun at his childhood perceptions, anxieties, and ambitions, this poem uniquely reveres the delicate transactions of first love. The youths’ fragile attempts to perform the roles of men and women are unscathed by mockery: Her apparently overrouged cheeks are not ridiculed; his unconventional substitution of an orange for money is routinely accepted.

Spared the jaded commentary of an experienced adult, the story is remarkably simple. The plot of the poem is little more than a string of images, occasionally connected by hanging verbs or an adjective. Because of this, the poem appears deceptively long. In the partial stanza that follows, the lone word *outside* sets an empty stage on which each image can position itself:

Outside,
A few cars hissing past,
Fog hanging like old
Coats between the trees.
I took my girl’s hand
In mine for two blocks,
Then released it to let
Her unwrap the chocolate. (lines 42–49)

According to Julianne White, the simultaneous longevity and brevity of the poem signifies the paradox of the adolescent experience that “seems drawn out while one is enduring it, but in reality disappears all too soon” (122).

Artistically Soto recreates the emotions of the evening in his symbolic descriptions of the setting and use of motifs. Like the crisp winter night, there is an awkward chill between them as the boy and girl set out on their walk. This coolness mutates into tension felt in the cramped quarters created by the “narrow aisle of goods” at the five-and-dime (line 24). Readers familiar with Soto’s work will recognize oranges as a recurring motif in his poetry and prose. Often oranges appear as a temporary reprieve from a grueling day or a difficult task. Here the oranges seem to hold both literal and figurative significance in the burgeoning relationship. As he is approaching his date’s house, the weight of the oranges in his coat pocket symbolizes the figurative weight of the importance and the pressure to impress his date the young man feels. Once in the store, the oranges become a means of achieving a “seemingly unreachable goal” represented by the chocolate (White 123). It is through this transaction that the couple reaffirms and accepts their expected roles in the relationship. The previous chill is now gone, and the remaining orange shines “bright against / The gray of December” (lines 51–52).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the last line of the poem, Soto describes his feelings of affection as “a fire in my hands.” Why is this metaphor appropriate? How else could his affection have been described?
2. In this poem, as in “Mexicans Begin Jogging,” Soto uses travel to create a narrative structure that will show a development in the speaker’s self-awareness. Compare the two poems, discussing the similarities and differences of each “journey.”

Baseball in April (1990)

Published in 1990, this collection marks Soto’s move into young-adult literature. Although the

characters in these vignettes are fictional, their situations echo those in the autobiographical pieces of *Living up the Street*. About teenagers and for teenagers, these stories tell of their awkward transformation “into facsimiles of adults”—specifically Anglo adults (Echevarría BR45).

More often than not, the individuals these children turn to for models are one-dimensional pop-culture icons who quickly prove their unsustainability in real, everyday living. The stories are thus primarily about the hardships and disenchantment these youths face as they learn to reconcile their sense of self with family and culture.

This reliance on family is perhaps most evident in the sketch “The No-Guitar Blues,” in which Fausto deceptively finds a way to make money in order to buy a guitar that will enable him to play like Los Lobos. Knowing that the cost of a guitar would be a hardship his parents are not willing to accept, Fausto makes a plan to return a stray dog to its rich owners, with the lie that he rescued it from danger. The plan works like a charm, and he receives \$20 for his good deed. But his dishonesty haunts him, and finally he puts the money into the collection basket in church the next day. Fortunately, fate rewards his honesty and, in a *deus ex machina*, his mother remembers that his grandfather has an old bass guitarron—“the same kind the guy in Los Lobos played” (50)—that Fausto can have, along with lessons from his grandfather. We see this same improbable resolution through saving grace in the story “Broken Chain,” in which Alfonso is rescued from a string of bad luck by his brother’s uncharacteristic charity. In each case, the lesson learned is that family will come through.

But just as often, resolution occurs when an individual reconsiders the payoff of his or her own ambitions. In “The Karate Kid,” Gilbert finds that what he thinks he wants is not so desirable after all. Inspired by Ralph Macchio in the 1980s classic movie of the same name, Gilbert is determined to be the neighborhood karate kid. Not long after he convinces his mother to pay for his lessons, he realizes his dream requires a bit more perseverance than he cares to give and a lot more talent than his neighborhood has to offer. In the end, Gilbert gladly settles

for comic-book superheroes that are “more real than karate. And they didn’t hurt him” (80).

Characteristically of Soto’s writing, strings of bad luck can be peppered with occasional good luck. This collection is no exception, as some resolutions come about simply because a kid gets lucky. In “La Bamba,” when the audience of the school talent show believes Manuel’s bumbling to a skipping record player is part of his planned comedy show, Manuel becomes the star of the night. When asked how he did it, he replies, “It just happened” (88). The simplicity of this answer carries the wisdom Soto seems to want to pass on to his readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. These stories chronicle a neighborhood of children’s coming-of-age experiences, including first love, dreams of becoming rich and famous, and the evolution of family relationships. What kind of external factors determine how one comes of age in a community—specifically in Soto’s community?
2. In this collection, traditional relationships between children and parental figures (parents, grandparents, older siblings, etc.) are often reconsidered as a child better understands him- or herself. Read Nikki Grimes’s *Jazmin’s Notebook*, set in Harlem in the 1960s, and compare these relationship constructions. How do the different characters redefine such relationships? What supportive or destructive role do parental and authority figures play in each book? Do you agree with the lessons imparted by each author?

“Home Course in Religion” (1991)

As do the other poems in this collection of the same title, “Home Course in Religion” describes one instance in Soto’s ongoing struggle to reconcile religion, specifically Catholicism, with the realities of his life. Although some pieces in the collection carry a more serious tone, the speaker of this poem is simple-minded to an extreme degree. His affected simplicity accentuates the inaccessibility of the theology and philosophy he is struggling to comprehend

and persuades the reader to prefer the more fulfilling “line of belief” to which he has reconciled himself by the end of the poem: visceral pleasure (line 147).

On their own, the examples of sophisticated writings shared in this poem are less than tantalizing. The reader may find them as sleep-inducing as the speaker does while reading excerpts from unidentified but supposedly highly acclaimed books: “The notion of ‘project’ is an ambiguous substitute for the notion of quiddity” (lines 3–4) and “Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call” (line 21) and “Oderunt peccare mali formidine ponae” (line 73). These words seem even less appealing when juxtaposed with Soto’s alternative activities: shooting hoops “to get air / Back into my brain so I wouldn’t feel so sleepy” (lines 17–18), eating, sleeping, practicing karate, and getting to third base with his girlfriend. Each of these activities becomes more desirable than metaphysical pursuits because it offers immediate satisfaction in proportion to the amount of effort involved. The speaker even appreciates the welts on his body from his karate lesson because they validate his feelings and document the experience. In comparison to such experience, the loftier philosophies in books seem to hold no value in the everyday world.

The speaker’s opinion of the absurdity of these readings is most blatant when he and his roommates tape, and thus document, their own thoughts of the world around them :

Nixon won’t confess
About the submarines or the money. Did you
see how
He picked up that dog by its ears. No that
Was Johnson. That’s not the point. The
certainty
Of life comes to an end. That Nixon!
People with big cars don’t know how much it
hurts.
Furthermore, if you realize the predicament
Then what’s there to say, etc. (lines 32–37)

It is no coincidence that their ramblings make just as much sense as the books that have been putting the speaker to sleep. There is no linear progression to their discussion; nor is there any overlap in what each

deems important enough to talk about. The speaker offers this same pointless reasoning to his girlfriend, suggesting that to avoid her human feelings of loneliness when he is not around, she should “just be mellow; just think of / [herself] as a flower, etc.”

What the speaker wants readers to see is that pursuits beyond sensory satisfaction—whether reading high-brow theology books, philosophizing with roommates, or striving for Zen contentment—all fall short of his expectations for life. Life is best lived while eating cereal from a Top Ramen bowl.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Research Zen Buddhism. Discuss what aspects of this religion would have been appealing to college students during the 1960s and to the speaker of this poem.
2. In the final stanza of the poem, Soto writes, “Thomas was not around when Jesus walked through the wall” (114). Why does Soto include this line? What does the meaning of this line add to the overall theme of the poem?

“Bodily Responses to High Mass” (1997)

This poem, like many of those first appearing in *Junior College*, is an attempt narratively, if not philosophically, to reconcile the teachings of Catholicism with a young man's earth-bound life experiences. This imaginative construct, typically categorized as magical realism, occurs repeatedly in Soto's poetry and can be attributed to the influence of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Pablo Neruda. Magical realism depicts quotidian activity incorporated with the magical, or even impossible, but treats both with the same nonchalance. In “Bodily Responses,” Soto uses this style of writing to reconfigure the relationship between the real and imagined and to redistribute the powers of creation.

Although the speaker's early experience of worship is typical of an unconverted but obedient youth, it quickly becomes exaggerated by his imagination. His tongue-in-cheek “conversion” suggests that the difference between a spiritual experience

and an imaginative one is virtually unrecognizable. The speaker begins by describing the rote nature of his worship: He dresses in shirt and tie, sits in a designated pew of the chapel, listens distractedly to the sermon, and decides Jesus's walking on water has nothing to do with him.

But as he yawns, he suddenly realizes he is wrong, and that miraculous elements usually reserved for sermons have somehow become part of his less-than-holy self-entertainment. What might otherwise seem like a young boy's distractions have now become divine actions: The lines he traces in the palms of his hands begin to look uncannily like the sign of the cross; a twitch in his loins brought about by kneeling in worship draws attention to his procreative power; his breathing suggests the rise and fall of empires. Traces of the primitive urge driving perceptions are most blatant as the stuffiness of the chapel turns him into “a jungle of pagan smells” (line 20). The sermon is only half over, but the speaker has already lived ages, made visible by the yellowing of his clothes and the lap-length beard he has grown.

The similarity between this final image of the speaker and that of a long-term prisoner is no coincidence. The speaker is at the mercy of the priest—as is Jesus, who must again be “set” back on the water so that the priest can teach the capriciousness of sin. This indirect affront to religious authority seems to be the impetus behind the poem. Soto, a once-Catholic-now-agnostic, finishes the poem with what could be interpreted as his dissent or “descent” from the church. When the sermon ends, so has the speaker's innocence, noted by his long-lost youth: “My youth passed. I shrunk like a mushroom, / And blue veins appeared on my arm” (lines 32–33). Upon leaving the chapel, he heads directly down—the presumed location of hell—to the basement, where “white powdery donuts, those stacked halos” await him as the suitable reward for his life's work (line 38).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It is often considered a classic example of magical realism. What similarities and differences do you see between these two pieces of literature?

How does each author use magical realism to raise questions about society, and which is more subversive? Is the magical realism in each work liberating or oppressive?

2. After reading the other poems in the collection *Junior College*, how would you explain the way Soto went about exploring religion in his early twenties? To which, if any, “truths” did Soto hold fast?

“Teaching English from an Old Composition Book” (1999)

This poem appears in one of Soto’s more recent collections, *A Natural Man*. Recalling a night of English as a second language (ESL) teaching early in his career, Soto describes in great detail the mood and activities of the night. Although these details are not unusual in his writing, here they seem to serve a unique purpose of naming and perhaps even limiting the experiences of the students outside as well as inside the classroom.

As the narrator reports, the classroom and its students create a less than ideal learning situation, as they are all “exhausted from keeping up” (line 10). With a coffee machine and broken piano as its focal points, the room offers a stale mood for education. The pathetic remnant of a chalk stick is now “no longer than a chip of fingernail” (line 1) and serves as a relic or the “dust of some educational bone” (line 13). In front of tired students who are “knuckle-wrapped from work as roofers” and “sour from scrubbing toilets and pedestal sinks” (lines 5–6), the speaker acts out daily activities such as drinking coffee and putting on shoes. His disparaging self-evaluation as a teacher is noted in his comparison between himself and the Mexican comedian Cantiflas, famous for his trivial chatter.

As the lesson continues, students take turns practicing the “pantomime of sumptuous living” modeled by their teacher. The wry sarcasm in this line makes the reader aware, as the narrator is, of the unlikelihood of these individuals’ drinking soda and beer or eating steak on any regular

basis. There seems to be a vast difference between the lifestyle they are learning to speak and the one they are actually living. Soto’s description of the class’s coming “alive” during this imitative exercise asks readers to reconsider what exactly it means to be “alive” in America and, in particular, the role that pantomiming American values plays in assimilation.

When the lesson moves on to prepositions, the teacher dryly jokes that *under*, *over*, and *between* constitute a more practical education for these students because these are “useful words” they will need when “la migra,” or the border patrol, arrive looking for them to hustle them back to a world where English no longer matters.

The humorous relief of the evening occurs during the cookie break, when Augustine asks his teacher the meaning of “tally-ho,” an outdated British saying included in the students’ outdated composition book. The teacher finds himself at a loss for words, but eventually draws a comparison to the Spanish exclamation *adelante*, which means to “move forward” or “look ahead” to something. Augustine and his friend are quite pleased with this translation, “now smarter by one word” (line 31). When class finally ends, seemingly just because they are all ready for it to, the teacher offers a final *adelante*, to which the students reply, “Tally-ho!” This closing image of Mexican laborers speaking highbrow British English offers a moment of laughter in an otherwise trying process of assimilation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. After reading PAT MORA’s poem “Immigrants,” compare and contrast the pictures each poet draws of assimilation in America. What roles do words and language play in the steps immigrants take to assimilate? Is language limiting or empowering to these immigrants?
2. Analyze how Soto uses humor in both this poem and an earlier work, “Mexicans Begin Jogging.” How do the poems approach assimilation? Is there a difference between adopting American values and pantomiming American values?

Soto “knew that the more personal he was in his work, concentrating solely on his individual experiences, the more universality he could attain” (Lee 190). Thinking of examples from all of Soto’s career, how has he made the personal political? Would you categorize him as an “activist” writer? Explain why or why not.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bradley, Jerry. “Review of *The Elements of San Joaquin*.” *Western American Literature* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 73–74.
- Cooley, Peter. “I Can Hear You Now.” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 8, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 1979): 297–311.
- Copeland, Jeffrey S. “Gary Soto.” In *Speaking of Poets: Interviews with Poets Who Write for Children and Young Adults*. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1993.
- De la Fuentes, Patricia. “Ambiguity in the Poetry of Gary Soto.” *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 34–39.
- . “Mutability and Stasis: Images of Time in Gary Soto’s ‘Black Hair.’” *Americas Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 100–107.
- Echevarría, Roberto González. “Growing Up North of the Border.” *New York Times*, 20 May 1990, p. BR45.
- Erben, Rudolf, and Ute Erben. “Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Chicano Identity in Gary Soto’s *Living Up the Street* and *Small Faces*.” *MELUS* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1991–Autumn 1992): 43–52.
- Ganz, Robin. “Gary Soto.” In *Updating the Literary West*, edited by Thomas J. Lyon, 426–433. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997.
- Gary Soto Home Page. Available online. URL: <http://www.garysoto.com>. Accessed July 10, 2009.
- “Gary Soto’s Biography.” Scholastic, Inc. 12 June 2006. Available online. URL: www2.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=3642. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Lee, Don. “About Gary Soto: A Profile.” *Ploughshares* 21 (Spring 1995): 188–192.
- Melendez, Theresa. “Review of *When Sparrows Work Hard*.” *MELUS* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 76–79.
- Murphy, Patricia. “Inventing Lunacy: An Interview with Gary Soto.” *Hayden’s Ferry Review* 18, no. 29 (1996): 29–37.
- Olivares, Julian. “The Streets of Gary Soto.” *Latin American Literary Review* 18, no. 35 (1990): 32–49.
- Paredes, Raymund A. “Mexican American Authors and the American Dream.” *MELUS* 8, no. 4 (1981): 71–80.
- Romero, Patricia Ann, and Don Zancanella. “Expanding the Circle: Hispanic Voices in American Literature.” *English Journal* 79, no. 1 (1990): 24–29.
- Soto, Gary. *Black Hair*. Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985.
- . “Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo in an Interview.” *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 25–33.
- . “One Last Time.” In *Living up the Street: Narrative Recollections*. New York: Laurel Leaf Books, 1985.
- . “Sizing Up the Sparrows, a Preface.” In *New and Selected Poems*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995.
- . “The Childhood Worries, or Why I Became a Writer.” In *The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy*. New York: Persea Books, 1983.
- . “This Man (1).” In *The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy*. New York: Persea Books, 1983.
- . “Who Is Your Reader?” In *The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy*. New York: Persea Books, 1983.
- White, Julianne. “Soto’s Oranges.” *Explicator* 63, no. 2 (Winter 2005), 121–124.
- Wolff, Donald. “Image and Narrative: A Review of *Who Will Know Us?* and *A Home Course in Religion* by Gary Soto.” *South Florida Poetry Review* 9 (1992): 54–62.

Carey Emmons Crockett



AMY TAN (1952–)

Placing on writers the responsibility to represent a culture is an onerous burden. Someone who writes fiction is not necessarily writing a depiction of any generalized group, they're writing a very specific story.

(interview with Salon.com)

Amy Tan's novels and stories are about mothers and daughters and the relationships between them. To be even more specific, Tan's novels explore the relationships between Chinese-born mothers (or mother figures) and Chinese-American "daughters." Such stories are very personal to Tan—emotionally and autobiographically—as she has struggled her whole life to understand her own Chinese-born mother while also trying to acquire an American identity. Tan is well aware that her books do not, and cannot, represent all of Chinese or Chinese American immigrant experience. However, they do recreate snapshots of lives lived in the in-between places, the cultural borderlands occupied by numerous Americans of multiple heritages. More importantly, Tan's writing stands as satisfying and popular literary work in its own right: "For Tan, the true keeper of memory is language" (Willard 1).

Tan was born on February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California, and dubbed An-mei Ruth "Amy" Tan. Her mother, Daisy Tan, insisted the family move often to escape evil or troublesome spirits. Moving between Oakland, Hayward, Santa Rosa, Palo Alto, Sunnyvale, and Santa Clara placed Tan in 11 school districts before the end of high school. Of the constant change, Tan writes, "I understood I had to be a chameleon to survive, that I should fit in quietly, and watch. In hindsight, I see that this was excellent

training for a budding writer. It sharpened my skills of observation" ("CliffsNotes" 22).

John Tan, Amy's father, worked as a Baptist minister, an entrepreneur, and an engineer. His faith in God permeated the Tan home, and he was, according to Tan, "easygoing . . . and not easily riled. He told multilingual jokes and roused friends into singing after dinner" ("CliffsNotes" 21). Her mother, however, was much more complicated, often threatening suicide, turning the house upside down with her tantrums, and believing Amy had a preternatural ability for speaking with ghosts ("CliffsNotes" 18–20). Daisy's moods placed her daughter in a state of near-perpetual anxiety, torment, and, eventually, rebellion. Even Tan's father, "smart and strong as he was, . . . always gave in to [Daisy's] demands" ("CliffsNotes" 21). Tan grew up living the dual life faced by many children of immigrants. At school, she tried to be a typical American, while at night, she clipped a clothespin to her nose in an effort to make it look more White. At home, Amy Tan, her two brothers, and their parents spoke Chinese or broken English, ate Chinese food, and practiced many Chinese customs. Tan discovered a love of books, as well, and snuck in the forbidden *The Catcher in the Rye* among others (Snodgrass 10). Despite Amy's affinity for literature, her mother was determined she become a doctor.

Even in Tan's earliest memories, her mother spoke of death, dying, and ghosts, giving her daughter a heightened awareness of death and not a little morbidity. Tan focused a lot of energy on thinking about ghosts, and Daisy believed Tan was able to communicate with them:

In our house we had two kinds [of ghosts]. First, there was the one we could talk about in front of others; that would be the Holy Ghost. . . . The second kind of ghost belonged to my mother. These ghosts were Chinese. We were not supposed to talk about them, because they were bad, of a different religion, and were specifically banned by the laws of the Holy Ghost. Yet . . . I could sense them. My mother told me I could. ("CliffsNotes" 19)

This preoccupation with death and ghosts is often manifested in Tan's novels, and Tan has also admitted a certain level of uncertainty regarding ghosts and their effects on the living.

Tragedy and death struck the Tan family in 1967 and 1968. Tan's older brother Peter, at age 16, lapsed into a coma, dying of a brain tumor two months later. A few months later, John Tan became paralyzed on one side of his body and also died of a brain tumor, at the age of 54. Amy Tan was 15. Compounding the strangeness, years later the family discovered a benign brain tumor in Daisy, apparently acquired around the same time. After the deaths, Daisy rejected Christianity and returned instead to Chinese religious beliefs. "After my father died, my mother no longer prayed to God," Tan said. "At times, my mother would go into obsessive monologues about our tragedies, about the curse. . . . To counter the curse, my mother began to call openly on the ghosts of her past" ("CliffsNotes" 24, 25). Daisy prayed to ancestors, hired people to inspect the house's feng shui, forced Amy to ask questions of the dead using a Ouija board, and looked for signs of haunting or bad karma. She finally decided the neighborhood was cursed, frequently recounting all the disasters that had occurred.

In August 1968, Tan watched Daisy "pick up a can of Old Dutch cleanser and stare at it as if it possessed the lucidity of a crystal ball. 'Holland,' she announced to us. 'Holland is clean. We moving to Holland'" ("CliffsNotes" 27). Daisy sold everything, hustled her daughter and remaining son, John, onto the SS *Rotterdam*, and bundled them off to Europe. They spent several weeks looking for a spot to settle, finally stopping in Switzerland, where Amy and John enrolled in the Institut Monte Rosa Internationale, a private boarding school. Here Tan found herself in a new situation, not only surrounded by the very privileged but also an object of envy herself. "In America, I had been a dateless dork," Tan writes. "In Switzerland, I was an *exotique*" ("CliffsNotes" 30).

Growing into a confused, rebellious teen, Tan also acquired her first boyfriend, a man Tan discovers was described as "an older German man, who had close contacts with drug dealers and organized crime," in the CliffsNotes for *The Joy Luck Club*. With humor, Tan responds, "Could this possibly be describing *my* Franz? True, he was older than I was, twenty-two years to my sixteen. . . . And yes, he was friends with a couple of Canadian hippies who sold hashish, but I don't remember them being *that* organized about it" ("CliffsNotes" 9). Ultimately, the lovers' plans to run away together were thwarted at the train station by Daisy, with the aid of the police, and led to "the biggest drug bust in Montreux's history," consisting of a small stash of psychedelic mushrooms discovered in the aforementioned hippies' Volkswagen van. This forced Tan into good behavior, and the next year she returned to the United States and enrolled at a Baptist school, Linfield College, in Oregon.

In college, Tan met her future husband, Louis DeMattei, an Italian-American law student who "offered her stability and affection" (Snodgrass 12). In 1972, Tan transferred to San Jose City College and switched majors from medicine to English and linguistics. Daisy was so angry when Tan gave up the possibility of a medical degree, the two did not speak to each other for nearly a year. Tan ultimately

received bachelor's and master's degrees from San Jose State University and began doctoral work in linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. On her 24th birthday, Tan and DeMattei's good friend, Pete, was strangled in his apartment during a burglary. Tan, who decided to abandon her Ph.D. work after Pete's murder, saw this as a period of great change and upheaval. "Hours after my twenty-fourth birthday," Tan writes, "my life began to change with strangely aligned events that today make me wonder whether they did not spring from the fictional leanings of my mind" ("A Question of Fate" 41).

Tan and DeMattei settled in San Francisco. She suffered bouts of depression and anxiety, ultimately accepting her need to use antidepressants and choosing not to risk passing on a legacy of mental illness and suicide to any children. Tan began work as a speech pathologist for mentally disabled children in 1978, transitioning in 1983 to a lucrative career as a technical speechwriter for executives. In 1985, Daisy suffered a small heart attack, an event that showed Tan her mother's vulnerability and inspired her to make a commitment to be a better daughter. She bought Daisy a home and promised a trip to China together. In 1987, Tan began to move away from her incredibly taxing job, accepting that success did not mean happiness. She read profusely and enrolled at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers workshop, where she found much encouragement from peers and mentors. Soon afterward, her short stories began to appear in popular magazines (Snodgrass 13–15).

In 1987, Tan and Daisy made their trip to China, where, despite her fears and her very American presence, Tan felt instantly at home. She also met, for the first time, three half sisters from her mother's earlier marriage. On their return, Tan began absorbing her mother's stories, pumping Daisy for more and more information. Tan's agent also surprised her with a contract to publish some of her stories in a collection under the working title *Wind and Water*. Tan officially ended her freelance business and began working on what became *The Joy Luck Club*.

The year 1989 introduced *The Joy Luck Club*, an interconnected group of stories, each told by a mother or daughter of Chinese descent who lives in San Francisco. Tan "later acknowledged that . . . the four daughters at the heart of the novel, reflect elements of her own personality and experience" (Snodgrass 16). The book was a huge success, praised by critics, readers, and feminists. It had poor sales in China, however (to Tan's surprise), and has been the subject of vicious attacks by certain critics who say Tan recreates stereotypes or overemphasizes Chinese misogyny in order to pander to white American readers and white American dollars. But Elaine H. Kim says, "*The Joy Luck Club* is the story of how women's lives flow through each other," notably not overemphasizing the novel's Chinese influence and suggesting that "the lines between 'Chinese' and 'Chinese American' are blurred" (83). In 1993, a popular movie version, directed by Wayne Wang, was released.

In 1991, *The Joy Luck Club* was followed by *The Kitchen God's Wife*, a novel that largely recreates Tan's mother's life in China, including her marriage to the Kuomintang pilot Wang Zo and subsequent romance with John Tan. The novel also features a strong historical element, much of it set during the Sino-Japanese War, a style Tan dabbled in with *The Joy Luck Club* and continued to employ in her following two novels. *The Kitchen God's Wife* features a Chinese-American woman named Pearl who has been hiding her multiple sclerosis from her mother. Winnie Louie/Jiang Weili, Pearl's mother, also has a secret from her daughter—a horrific history left behind in China, and the possibility that Winnie's evil former husband, Wen Fu, actually fathered Pearl. Determined to end the secrets between Pearl and Winnie is "Aunt" Helen, Winnie's friend and business partner. Helen's meddling prompts Winnie to relate her past to Pearl, making the two closer. In "Angst and the Second Book," Tan admits that *The Kitchen God's Wife* "is [her] favorite" and this "regardless of what others may think." "How could it not be?" she goes on to say. "I had to fight for every single character, every image, every word" (333).

And despite Tan's angst, *The Kitchen God's Wife* became a national best seller, a book compared to *Gone with the Wind* and sweeping Tolstoy epics and even, occasionally, dubbed "her best writing" (Snodgrass 94).

The Hundred Secret Senses, published in 1995, is, according to E. D. Huntley, "a novel of contrasts—the story of two sisters, two cultures, two lives, two centuries linked by loyalties and betrayals, love and loss, life and death" (114). With *Secret Senses*, Tan took a turn from her previous works, focusing on the relationship between half sisters—the much older, Chinese-born Kwan and the younger, American-born Olivia. Olivia struggles to be very American and modern, disdaining Kwan's worldview, only to need Kwan's psychic expertise and a return to China in order to mend her marriage. *The Hundred Secret Senses* has received the most mixed reviews of any of Tan's works. It contains a heavy emphasis on ghosts, karma, reincarnation, and the spiritual, much of it from Tan's imagination (as in Kwan's insistence that she has "yin eyes" and sees "yin people"), perhaps an ironic nod to those who seek the key to Chinese culture in her novels. Kwan is also "one of Tan's most original and best character creations," a fun and funny agent for Olivia—and herself. Ultimately, "the act of retrieving a hidden past . . . restores a wholeness of spirit that strengthens and affirms [the characters]" (Snodgrass 78).

Tan's next novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), returns to a mother-daughter dynamic, again featuring a mother relating her hidden past. Ruth, a professional "book doctor," is foundering in her life, most especially in her long-term relationship with Art. When Ruth discovers her mother's mind degenerating from Alzheimer's, Ruth begins to take an active interest in caring for LuLing and for herself. Part of this involves reading her mother's memoir, a sweeping tale of love, suicide, family, history, and war. "*The Bonesetter's Daughter* is essentially about writing and the act of writing . . . it is about how we, as women, creatively express ourselves via language" (Hull 1). *The Bonesetter's Daughter* also proved very personal for Tan, as she

wrote it in direct response to Daisy's Alzheimer's diagnosis. Mothers have long been the heart of Tan's novels, their voices the most eloquent, their stories the most profound; *Bonesetter's* is no exception. In the future, Akasha Hull hopes to see Tan "do for the *daughters* what she has so eloquently done for the mothers: make them heroic and sympathetic women with fiery stories of their own that they themselves passionately tell" (1).

A subsequent, somewhat more lighthearted novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), is about the disappearance of a group of American tourists in the Himalayan foothills. It received mixed reviews.

Since becoming a novelist, Tan has enjoyed much success, becoming one of America's most popular and critically acclaimed writers. In recent years, she has joined the Rock Bottom Remainers, a rock group with a rotating membership that includes other contemporary authors such as Stephen King, Dave Barry, and BARBARA KING-SOLVER. Tan's signature contribution to the group is a rendition of Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walking" performed in dominatrix gear. She is also the kind of woman who buys cheap crystal wine glasses on eBay out of fear of breaking nice ones. When Paul Gray and Andrea Sachs asked why "this high-stepping, whip-cracking woman worries about breaking crystal wineglasses," Tan replied, "I am . . . my mother's daughter" (3). And without her mother, it seems unlikely Tan would be the writer she is. She admits to drawing heavily from her own life experiences for her writing, especially with regard to Daisy, but asserts that "what [she] draw[s] from is not a photographic memory, but an emotional one." She goes on to conclude that the difference between memory and imagination, memoir and fiction, becomes blurred: "When I place that memory of feeling within a fictive home, it becomes imagination. . . . The possibilities are endless, but one is chosen. And as I write that possibility, it becomes a part of me. It has the power to change my memory of the way things really happened" ("*Thinly Disguised Memoir*" 109).

***The Joy Luck Club* (1989)**

Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, focuses on the relationships between mothers and daughters, the stories they tell about themselves, and the ways they view each other. The novel is bookended by narratives from Jing-mei/June Woo, whose voice stands in for the first of the "Joy Luck aunts" to have died, her mother, Suyuan. In this way, Tan sets up the idea of continuity between the generations, of the importance of sharing emotional heritages, and "suggest[s] strongly a journey of maturity, ethnic awakening, and return-to-home, not just for Jing-mei Woo, but metaphorically for all the daughters in the book" (Xu 55).

The Joy Luck Club also begins Tan's tradition of using "talk-story" as the main conveyance of narrative in her novels. Mary Ellen Snodgrass describes talk-story as "the tradition of passing family anecdotes, subjective narratives, testimonies, morality tales, and fables from parent to child" and includes Tan among a list of contemporary female authors who have "recovered the talk-story culture as a means of reclaiming women's history" (164). In other words, talk-story involves informal narratives, often in the voices of women or other subjugated peoples, as a means of explaining a particular worldview. In the case of fiction, talk-story gives a voice to people who may not have traditionally had one (including women, minorities, homosexuals, and the poor), while also allowing for explorations about the nature of truth, memory, history, and life. And with *The Joy Luck Club*, all of "these women need to maintain a psychological continuity, a coherent picture of life-world, and a continuity of self. Such a need requires the assuring structure of memory. . . . Memory is for them a socializing, ego-forming expression of anxieties, hopes, and survival instincts" (Xu 46).

While the functions of talk-story apply across the board between the Joy Luck aunts and their various daughters/"nieces" (most notably Jing-mei, sent on a mission to China by the aunts), this analysis will focus mainly on the narrative flows between the mothers and their daughters. *Joy Luck*

is more a loosely connected group of stories than a novel with a central climax, featuring two narratives from each character with the exception of Jing-mei, whose opening and closing chapters fill in for her dead mother's voice. It is easy to become confused, as well, remembering which mother's story precedes which daughter's, and whose history matches up where. This discontinuity, however, may give the reader a glimmer of the confusion ethnic minorities in the United States feel, or perhaps a sense of the disconnection between these families.

A matching look at the life stories of the Joy Luck mothers and daughters reveals the masterful way Tan has joined, and separated, her fictional generations. Witness the opening of the book, told in a folktale style:

Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, "This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions." And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.
(3-4)

Lindo and Waverly Jong embody the novel's most dualistic pair. When Lindo is a child, her grandmother tells her that her "character could lead to good and bad circumstances" and Lindo sees these same traits in Waverly, although Lindo talks about her Chinese face and her American face, while Waverly sees two-facedness as good "if you get what you want" (292, 304). In this way, we are equally impressed by Lindo's cleverness, when she escapes a bad marriage to a spoiled child, and irritated by the snide remarks she makes to Suyuan and Jing-mei ("The Red Candle," etc.). Likewise, Waverly holds our attention as a chess prodigy; tugs our heartstrings with her uncertain love for Rich, who is white; and enrages with her vanity and cruel jibes at Jing-mei ("Rules of the Game,"

“Four Directions,” etc.). While Lindo and Waverly’s characters are often ambiguous, their tenacity in clinging to their own selves is also undeniably admirable.

An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan share a link of having things done for them. As a child, An-mei goes to live with her mother and discovers how her mother, an honored widow, was raped by a rich man and forced to be his third wife. An-mei’s mother kills herself soon after, to ensure An-mei’s future, as the family, afraid of the ghost, will do anything for her child (“Magpies”). (Notably, the story of An-mei’s mother is incredibly similar to that of Tan’s grandmother, including details Daisy Tan did not reveal as facts until after the book was published.) Rose suffers from a lack of will, allowing Ted, her husband, to make all decisions for them (including marriage against his family’s wishes). After years of marriage, Ted tires of Rose and leaves her (“Half and Half”). An-mei tells Rose to keep trying amid tragedy, reminding Rose of her brother’s death. “This is not hope,” An-mei says. “Not reason. This is your fate. This is your life, what you must do” (139). Rose does not reconcile her marriage, but she does find her self and insists to Ted she is keeping their home because, as she tells him, “You can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away” (219). Buoyed by the hopes of both their mothers, An-mei and Rose find ways to remain whole people.

The stories between Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair are unique because one of each of theirs focuses on the other, and even though they have grown apart (as all the mothers and daughters have), they share a special understanding. Unlike the other Joy Luck aunties, Ying-Ying is from a wealthy family, and her childhood story involves being lost during the Moon Festival and feeling wonder at the sight of an actress play the “Moon Lady” (“The Moon Lady”). Lena’s childhood, however, was overrun by her mother’s fears and exoticness in the face of her white father’s ineptitude in understanding his Chinese wife. When Lena’s brother dies shortly after birth, Ying-Ying withdraws into herself (“The Voice from the Wall”). Perhaps the strange

inequality of her parents’ marriage has led Lena to her husband, Harold. Their relationship is so much based on “equality”—splitting of finances, unfailing “fairness”—that it has become dead, devoid of caring (“Rice Husband”). Ying-Ying, remembering her troubled past, recognizes her daughter’s unhappiness and the tiger spirit they share. She determines what to do: “I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because that is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (286).

The book’s final mother-daughter pairing is between Jing-mei/June and Suyuan Woo, a difficult narrative match since Suyuan has recently died and appears only in the other’s memories. Thus, all of Jing-mei’s stories center around her mother—her expectations, her history, her love for and meaning to Jing-mei. She remembers her failed attempt to be a piano prodigy (at her mother’s urging) and Suyuan’s understanding in the face of Lindo and Waverly’s nastiness (“Two Kinds,” “Best Quality”). But looking back, she concludes, “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more” (27).

Ultimately, Jing-mei’s bookending chapters, placed in sections in which the other aunties are voiced, give meaning to Suyuan’s life beyond Jing-mei. Her journey to China to find her sisters (the twin daughters Suyuan was forced to abandon during the Sino-Japanese War) connects Jing-mei to her mother and her Chinese heritage in ways she never imagined (“A Pair of Tickets”). But it is the scheming of the Joy Luck aunties, and their insistence that Jing-mei take her mother’s place at the mah-jongg table, that foreshadow all the book’s connections and subtexts (“The Joy Luck Club”). In Ben Xu’s estimation, “Just as the mah jong table is a linkage between the past and present for the Club Aunties, Jing-mei Woo, taking her mother’s seat at the table, becomes the frame narrator linking the two generations of American Chinese,

who are separated by age and cultural gaps and yet bound together by family ties and a continuity of ethnic heritage” (55). As Jing-mei steps into her mother’s place in the United States and China, she affirms the unbreakable connection between these mothers and daughters. In the end, “We learn just how vital it is for mothers and daughters to continually talk-story—not to wait, for instance, to speak only until spoken to or given authority to do so or till one can speak perfect American English” (Ho 106). Each of the *Joy Luck* characters becomes able to recognize her self reflected in the face of her mother or daughter.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Watch the film version of *The Joy Luck Club*. Which stories have been altered significantly? Which have been left out? Speculate on why. How are most men portrayed in the film? What is the difference between American and Chinese men? How do racism and sexism contrast in the United States and China? How do they contrast with depictions in the book? Compare this film to to others such as *Dim Sum* or *Saving Face*.
2. Read MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’s *The Woman Warrior*. In what ways does Kingston incorporate “talk-story” in her book? How are the two works different or similar? In what ways does Kingston’s portrayal of Chinese Americans differ from Tan’s? How do gender and sexism function in both books? Comment on the unorthodox flow between chapters and stories in each.

“Two Kinds” (1989)

“Two Kinds,” from *The Joy Luck Club*, relates the story of Jing-mei/June Woo and her struggles against her mother’s determination that June will be distinguished, a child prodigy. It highlights the differences between a Chinese-born mother who “believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America” and an American-born daughter who says, “I did not believe I could be anything I

wanted to be. I could only be me” (141, 154). But while Tan makes clear that her characters bear a Chinese ethnicity, their story beckons to all with its universal themes about parent-child tensions and the dreams we harbor for ourselves and for the ones we love.

Suyuan’s ambitions for her daughter revolve solely around June’s displaying some sort of genius, something that will make her instantly rich and famous. Tan treats this initial situation with a light touch as Suyuan fishes for her child’s hidden genius and June, filled with visions of grandeur, plays along. “We’d watch Shirley [Temple’s] old movies on TV as though they were training films,” June says, and when that does not work, “Every night after dinner, my mother and I would sit at the Formica table. She would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children she had read in *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*” (142, 143). But as June fails each exam, she says, “After seeing my mother’s disappointed face once again, something inside me began to die” (144). Confronting herself in the mirror, June sees the prodigy side of herself, but not in the way her mother expects: “The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. . . . I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not” (144). In this way, the stereotypes of Chinese ambition and hard work collide with the stereotype of American individualism.

In the end, Suyuan decides June must learn to play the piano; thus the family scrimps for an instrument to practice on and lessons from Mr. Chong. Old Chong’s deafness allows June willfully to disregard the playing, leading to her disastrous performance of Schumann’s *Pleading Child*. When, two days later, Suyuan orders June to practice piano, as if nothing has happened, June’s rebellion overflows. “I’ll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!” June yells, followed by Suyuan’s “Only two kinds of daughters. . . . Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind” (153). June’s subsequent wish that she were “dead! Like them” (her sisters, whom Suyuan was forced to abandon in China) ends the argument: “[Suyuan’s]

face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless” (153).

Looking back on the incident as an adult, June puzzles over “why [my mother] hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable. And even worse, I never asked her. . . . Why had she given up hope?” (154). June reflects on her disappointing life and, after Suyuan’s death, touches the piano for the first time in decades. Looking at the music for *Pleading Child*, she sees the song next to it, *Contented Child*, and realizes “they were two halves to the same song” (155). June understands, in the words of Catherine Romagnolo, that “because culture is always hybrid, any project that asserts purity must necessarily be ‘fake.’ This ‘fakeness’ should not, however, be read as inauthenticity, but as a deconstruction of the very concept of authenticity” (92). In other words, Suyuan believed June capable of anything and that the limits placed on her by, say, her gender, ethnicity, or her own self were meaningless in the face of self-creation. With this realization, June, ever the “pleading child” seeking understanding, transforms into the “contented child,” now aware that understanding was there all along.

For Discussion or Writing

Read “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” from MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’s *The Woman Warrior*. Compare Kingston’s reaction to Brave Orchid’s perceived expectations and June’s in “Two Kinds.” How are these portrayals of Chinese-American mother-daughter conflicts similar? How are they different? How are they similar to or different from mother-daughter conflicts everywhere?

“A Pair of Tickets” (1989)

This story, which also functions as the final chapter of *The Joy Luck Club*, takes us back to the story of Jing-mei/June Woo. While all the Joy Luck daughters display confusion over identity and their place in the world, Jing-mei/June embodies a life

in complete limbo, unsure of who she is or how she fits into either Chinese or American culture. In “A Pair of Tickets,” June visits China for the first time, accompanied by her father. Their mission is to meet the twin daughters June’s mother, Suyuan, was forced to abandon as babies decades before. June and Canning Woo are performing this task alone because Suyuan has died mere months before, unaware her daughters from another life are still alive.

In China June rejects her American name and becomes solely Jing-mei, a transformation represented physically, too, as China’s heat forces Jing-mei to abandon the fancy American hair and makeup products she relies on in the United States. Jing-mei says, “The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. . . . My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (306). She recognizes her own change in China’s alterations: “It seems all the cities I have heard of, except Shanghai, have changed their spellings. I think they are saying China has changed in other ways as well” (307). Intriguingly, Jing-mei is meeting her sisters in Shanghai, indicative of both her (and their) difference and sameness. Indeed, despite her feelings of “becoming Chinese,” Jing-mei still stands out as an American, towering over her father’s family. But Tan continues to complicate notions of recognizable identity (and stereotypes) as Jing-mei remembers her mother’s saying Jing-mei’s height was from her grandfather, who was “a northerner, and may have even had some Mongol blood” (312).

Jing-mei’s state of limbo continues until her father relates the story of the twins’ abandonment. Suyuan’s version, usually perfunctory, also varied, and Jing-mei was never certain of the truth. The real tale, however, absolves Suyuan of any wrongdoing and highlights her lifelong attempts to find her lost daughters. Hearing her mother’s story forces Jing-mei to recognize Suyuan’s tragedy, and her love, especially when Canning tells Jing-mei her name means “long cherished wish . . . the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of the others” (323). Jing-mei’s personal

and cultural uncertainty aligns with Catherine Romagnolo's reading:

The quests embarked upon by these women . . . repudiate the ability to recover any type of static identity which might solidify exclusionary conceptions of gendered and racialized subjectivity; at the same time, however, they stress the importance of the histories of these characters to their ongoing sense of agency, highlighting an idea of history as not completely knowable, but nevertheless significant to the discursive construction of identity. (93–94)

In the end, the meeting of Jing-mei and her sisters reconciles her personal angst. She thinks, "I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. . . . It is my family. It is in our blood" (331). This realization reflects on all the Joy Luck mothers and daughters and, indeed, family everywhere. As Wendy Ho suggests, "There is an impending change of guard at the end of the book which suggests the potential for continuity and transformation of mother-and-daughter bonding" (101). In the end, "A Pair of Tickets" and the whole of *The Joy Luck Club* eloquently display that the bonds between people have more relation to love than to nationality.

For Discussion or Writing

Tan has often been criticized for concluding her stories too neatly and too happily. Discuss whether you think this is true (or not true) in relation to "A Pair of Tickets." Is the ending dealt with too simply? Is it believable that the twin daughters survived? What are your thoughts on Jing-mei's reaction to being in China?

The Kitchen God's Wife (1991)

"First I told my daughter I no longer had a pain in my heart," says Winnie Louie as she begins to recount her secrets to her daughter Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife* (87). Claiming heart pain was

the ploy Winnie used to persuade Pearl to visit her, but the sentence is striking when one considers the horrific tale of war and abuse that follows. With time, and with the telling, Winnie truly "no longer [has] a pain in [her] heart."

The Kitchen God's Wife was a particularly difficult novel for Tan to write. Not only did Tan set high standards for her work after *The Joy Luck Club*—"Each of my books . . . would outdo its predecessor, increasing in scope, depth, precision of language, intelligence of form"—but she also absorbed everyone's advice that "the Second Book's doomed no matter what you do" ("Angst" 324–325). In the end, Tan began and abandoned seven novels and roughly 1,000 pages. What she finally connected with was the first-person narrative of a woman who had survived both war and an abusive spouse, much of the story drawn from her own mother's life before immigrating to the United States. What the woman needed, to make her story complete, was an audience, since, as Tan writes, "A story should be a gift" ("Angst" 332). Enter the woman's daughter, who has her own secret (multiple sclerosis) and is linked to her mother's history in ways she does not know.

The Kitchen God's Wife is, most simply, "a retelling of the Kitchen God's story—from a contemporary feminist point of view" (Huntley 85). In this Chinese folktale, an ungrateful husband degrades his good wife, only to commit suicide when faced with her mercy later. His capacity for shame prompts his deification, giving him responsibility for judging mortals at New Year's. Tan, via Winnie, reclaims the story, recognizing the wife as the true hero and deifying her in turn. This story stands as a backdrop for Winnie's own, for she, too, has lived as the degraded wife of an abusive man, yet was able to triumph over her own history. Ultimately, "Winnie's voice is that of a survivor, but it also is the voice of a mother who is compelled to share the story of her life with her daughter" (Huntley 84).

Looming larger than the Kitchen God's tale is the Sino-Japanese War, a backdrop for Winnie's story after she marries Wen Fu, a Kuomintang pilot. Winnie initially saw the marriage as an escape from her emotionally barren life, only to face even

worse with Wen Fu. As a pilot, he flies away from each battle, afterward claiming, “I was chasing a Japanese fighter that ran off another way. . . . Too bad I didn’t catch him” (204). As a husband, Wen Fu begins by degrading his wife sexually each night, moving on to beatings, rape, infidelity, public shaming, child abuse, and, through abuse and neglect, the deaths of their children. In large part, Wen Fu’s burgeoning evil is concurrent with the worsening conditions in war-stricken China.

The backdrop of war puts Tan’s book on troubled ground, as some find her focus on Winnie (instead of the war) or her brief description of major events (such as the Rape of Nanking, in which up to 300,000 civilians were raped and murdered in China’s capital city, Nanking/Nanjing, over the course of six weeks) a cruel denial of the facts of the Sino-Japanese War. However, many also praise Tan for her resistance to Japanese revisionism that says the events never happened. Tan’s focus on an individual’s story also hints at her Americanness, in which the individual’s trauma must be the primary focus. By making Winnie’s story the center of the book, with the war as background, Tan forges a stronger connection between her tale and her readers. As Bella Adams suggests, “*The Kitchen God’s Wife* addresses the fictionalization of rape to affect radically historical understanding of . . . factual rape” (“Representing History” 10).

Tan plays with concepts of truth, reality, and memory as Winnie tells her story and expresses both certainty and uncertainty regarding the truth of her memories. These are in particular contrast to the recollections of Winnie’s friend, Helen/Hulan, the woman who was Winnie’s companion during the war and who pushes both Winnie and Pearl into revealing their secrets. “Ten thousand different things,” Winnie says, “that come from your memory or imagination—and you do not know which is which, which was true, which is false” (89). Tan’s play with memory works on many levels: For one, it speaks to historical revisionists who say atrocities like the rape of Nanking (or, for that matter, the rape of a wife, Winnie) never happened. There is also a level of realism, an acceptance of how personal memories are unavoidably flawed and

yet say something profound about the one holding them, such as Winnie’s wanting to face facts, pleasant or not, while Helen wants to remember happiness: “Remember how you stole a pedicab the day the paper warnings fell from the sky?” . . . Helen laughed. ‘I don’t remember this. . . . Anyway, how can you accuse me of stealing? I never stole anything!’” (218). Despite these notes, Winnie’s telling has a more personal function as well: “As Winnie carefully and slowly remembers and then articulates the shaping events of her life, she progresses on the journey toward verbal authority and eloquence” (Huntley 109). This becomes especially profound as Winnie is forced to admit her final rape by Wen Fu, which probably resulted in Pearl’s conception, and her fears that Pearl would inherit his evil.

Verbal authority and eloquence, the right to own her history without shame in front of a beloved daughter, are the ultimate outcome in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and what release Winnie from her past. In telling how she survived both heinous marriage and war, “Winnie re-imagines her past and comes to terms with it, and she relives her traumatic history, transforming it into an allegory of the human spirit’s ability to survive the worst of circumstances” (Huntley 110). Inspired by her mother’s tale, Pearl tells Winnie of her multiple sclerosis, moving mother and daughter into an honest and loving understanding of each other. Winnie moves the aforementioned allegory full circle by giving Pearl a new goddess, no longer known as the Kitchen God’s Wife: “See her name,” Winnie tells Pearl. “Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world” (415).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do some research on the Rape of Nanking; one good resource is Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. How effective is *The Kitchen God’s Wife* as historical fiction? Does this seem to be an important period to remember? In your opinion, does Tan’s brief discussion of the Rape of Nanking (pages 233–235) serve to respect or disregard the memory of what happened? Explain.

2. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is full of dynamic female characters—Winnie, Auntie Du, Helen, Pearl, Winnie's mother and stepmother, Beautiful Betty. How do these characters function in the troubled circumstances they face? What actions do they take that are good or bad? How do these characters fit into Winnie's tale, and what do they say about Tan and feminism in a larger context?

***The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001)**

The Bonesetter's Daughter focuses on the originating connections between mothers and daughters. It is very personal for Amy Tan, as the book deals directly with Daisy Tan's battle with Alzheimer's disease and their mother-daughter relationship. While aspects of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* may be more directly biographical or autobiographical, there is an emotional resonance in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* that speaks to its truth. Tan describes the elements that reflect her mother's life, saying, "The regrets are hers, the fear of the curse, the sense of danger she instilled in me while wanting me to have a better life. Asking forgiveness is in the book as well. That was part of our saying goodbye" (Cujec 215). *The Bonesetter's Daughter* ultimately becomes, as was Tan's intention, a fictional contemplation on "the things we remember and the things that should be remembered" (quoted in Gray and Sachs).

Tan's struggle to give voice to her and her mother's experience, mirrored in LuLing and her daughter Ruth's own inability to speak, makes up an important subtext in the book. Tan struggled for more than four years trying to write the novel; upon Daisy Tan's death in 1999, she finished it in six months, perhaps viewing the book as a way to keep her mother near: "It almost felt as though, as long as I kept writing the book, [Daisy] would stay alive" (quoted in Adams, *Amy Tan* 126). In the introduction, Tan credits two ghostwriters for helping her finish the book, saying, "The heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to

my mother." The indication of ghosts and ghostwriters segues nicely into the novel, since Ruth works as a ghostwriter, or "book doctor," and also foreshadows the highly personal nature of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

The Bonesetter's Daughter begins with a prologue entitled "Truth," in which LuLing explains, in the first person, the things she knows to be true. But what she does not know is the real name of her mother, Precious Auntie, the woman she thought of as nursemaid, who told LuLing their family name and ordered her never to forget it. Further complicating the situation is LuLing's own worsening Alzheimer's disease, as well as her desire to pass on her memories to her daughter, Ruth. In addition, Precious Auntie's attempt at suicide—by drinking boiling ink, which mangled her face and left her mute—has made LuLing Precious Auntie's sole interpreter. Using a system of grunts, hand gestures, and seeming telepathy, Precious Auntie speaks only to LuLing: "Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with," LuLing writes, "soundless and strong" (2).

Ruth, too, suffers from an inability to speak, both literally and figuratively. She has been living with, but not married to, Art Kamen for 10 years and works as a ghostwriter (a term she hates) despite a lingering desire to write novels of her own. Regardless of desire, Ruth thinks she has no stories to tell. Ruth also loses her voice yearly, a psychosomatic week of silence that always begins on August 12. This stems from both a broken arm in Ruth's childhood and a period of muteness in Tan's real life, which followed the murder of a college friend. Ruth's loss of voice represents her inability to speak to those close to her, especially Art—regarding their disintegrating relationship—and LuLing, who is always threatening suicide and claiming Ruth does not love her. "She made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or a mystery," the book says, representing Ruth's disconnection from her heritage (10).

At the heart of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, surrounded by all these women who cannot speak,

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Adams, Bella. *Amy Tan*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- . "Representing History in *The Kitchen God's Wife*." *MELUS* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 9–30.
- Amy Tan Homepage. Available online. URL: <http://www.amytan.net>. Accessed July 10, 2009.
- Cujec, Carol. "Excavating Memory, Reconstructing Legacy." *World & I* 16, no. 7 (July 2001): 215–223.
- Gray, Paul, and Andrea Sachs. "The Joys and Sorrows of Amy Tan." *Time*, 11 February 2001. Available online. URL: Academic Search Premier/EBSCOhost. Also available online via www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,999251,00.html. Accessed August 4, 2006.
- Ho, Wendy. "Swan-Feather Mothers and Coca-Cola Daughters." In *Amy Tan*, edited by Harold Bloom, 99–113. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000.
- Hull, Akasha. "Uncommon Language." *Women's Review of Books* 18, no. 9 (June 2001): 13. Available online. URL: Academic Search Premier/EBSCOhost. Accessed August 4, 2006.
- Huntley, E. D. *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Kim, Elaine H. "'Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 68–93.
- Romagnolo, Catherine. "Narrative Beginnings in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*: A Feminist Study." *Studies in the Novel* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 89–108. Available online. URL: Academic Search Premier/EBSCOhost. Accessed August 10, 2006.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Amy Tan: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004.
- Tan, Amy. "Angst and the Second Book." In *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings*. New York: Putnam, 2003.
- . *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. New York: Putnam, 2001.
- . "The CliffsNotes Version of My Life." In *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings*. New York: Putnam, 2003.
- . *The Hundred Secret Senses*. New York: Putnam, Ivy Books, 1995.
- . *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Putnam, Ivy Books, 1989.
- . *The Kitchen God's Wife*. New York: Putnam, 1991.
- . "A Question of Fate." In *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings*. New York: Putnam, 2003.
- . "The Salon Interview: Amy Tan." In *Amy Tan*, edited by Harold Bloom, 93–97. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000.
- . "Thinly Disguised Memoir." In *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings*. New York: Putnam, 2003.
- Willard, Nancy. "Talking to Ghosts." *New York Times*, 18 February 2001, p. BR9. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/18/reviews/010218.18williat.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Xu, Ben. "Memory and the Ethnic Self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." In *Amy Tan*, edited by Harold Bloom, 43–57. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000.

Sarah Stoeckl



HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

(1954–)

TÚ ERES MUJER, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument. . . . “So what’s wrong with being a mujer,” she asked herself out loud.

(“Growing”)

Helena María Viramontes’s sparse, powerful language in tales about the ordinary, the downtrodden, and the forgotten have won her a faithful readership and critical appreciation. She was born in East Los Angeles, California, on February 26, 1954. She grew up with three brothers and five sisters, yet despite the family’s cramped quarters, they always made room for relatives and friends from Mexico who stayed temporarily. Viramontes attended James A. Garfield High School, one of the schools that, in the late 1960s, participated in protests over unfair treatment, including a general lack of funding. The school was later made famous by the film *Stand and Deliver*.

After she graduated from Garfield, Viramontes worked a part-time job and attended Immaculate Heart College, where she earned her B.A. in English in 1975. Although Viramontes recalls that her elementary, middle, and high school were populated by 99.9 percent Mexican Americans, she was one of only five Chicanas in her entire graduating class at Immaculate Heart (“Four Guiding Principles” 126). The culture shock of attending college was felt not only while in the classroom and on campus; Viramontes’s own family were puzzled by her desire to continue her education.

Viramontes next enrolled in the creative writing program at the University of California, Irvine. One of her short stories, “Requiem for the Poor,” received a prize in 1977 from *Statement* magazine.

She received the same honor from *Statement* the following year when her story “The Broken Web” was awarded top prize in fiction. In 1979, her short story “Birthday” won the Chicano Literary Contest at U.C. Irvine.

In “Birthday,” the Catholic Church appears as an unforgiving and immutable force, tormenting a young pregnant college student named Alice as she contemplates having an abortion. Viramontes’s story chronicles Alice’s psychological turmoil. Her thoughts during the procedure are fixed on her relationship with God: “No! I don’t love you, not you, God, knotted ball. I hate you, Alice” (*Moths* 50). Her hatred results from felt necessity to preserve herself against God’s hatred of her for committing the sins of adultery and murder, the Catholic Church’s view of abortion. Alice almost hypnotically begins the opening phrase of confession, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” which is also echoed in “The Broken Web.” But unlike the other story, which contains a priest, the Catholic Church in “Birthday” is represented only through Alice’s guilt and unhappiness. Alice finds some solace in her best friend, Terry, who speaks from experience about the anguish of preparing herself for an abortion: “Look, you’ll stew and brood and feel pitiful and pray until your knees chap, but in the end, you’ll decide on the abortion. So why not cut out all this silliness” (48). Clearly, Terry has gone through the very agonizing experience that

she anticipates for Alice, and it is in this friendship, in the sympathetic connection with Terry, rather than in the church or in her boyfriend, that Alice finds comfort.

Sisterhood functioning as a salve against life's pains and the judgment of others also appears in "Growing." This story features 14-year-old Naomi and her younger sister, Lucía, as the two walk to Jorge's house. Told from the teenager's perspective, the story begins first with a degree of hostility toward the younger sister, who tattles to the girls' parents all that she sees and hears. When Naomi looks at her sister and realizes that functioning as a chaperone is a duty imposed on her by their father rather than the younger sister's idea, the teenager's feelings soften. She sits on the curb watching a game of stickball, postponing her trip to Jorge's and, more profoundly, taking a moment out of a quickly disappearing childhood to enjoy the worry-free life embodied in the game. She knows the kids at play have nothing weighing on their minds except what game to play next, while she, who has been grounded for two months because she was caught making out with Joe behind the gym building at a carnival, must contend with the difficulties of being not quite an adult but no longer a child. The harshest reality she must wrestle with is her father's shifting treatment of her. She wonders "what she had done to make him so distrustful. *TÚ ERES MUJER*, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument" (36). In that one capitalized statement, "*TÚ ERES MUJER*," or "you are a woman," Viramontes encapsulates much of the machismo driving women into positions in which they feel shameful about their own sexuality and are always under suspicion. In many ways, the short phrase hearkens back to the biblical Eve of the Book of Genesis and seems to equate budding female sexuality with ultimate betrayal and sin. Naomi's father abruptly stops trusting her because her newfound sexuality makes her just like all other women.

Female sexuality and identity—and men's inability to reach beyond prescriptive views of women in order to see the ones in their lives more individu-

ally and compassionately—are also central topics in "The Long Reconciliation." Although Chato and Amanda begin their married life together in bliss, their relationship soon sours when Amanda seeks an abortion because they cannot financially provide for a child. She drinks corn-silk tea brewed by Don Serafín and prays in church for God to relieve "this . . . pain, Father, to sprout a child that we can't feed or care for" (89). Against the harsh realities of her meager existence with Chato as dirt farmers in pre-1910 Mexico, the priest offers only the consolation of prayer. Amanda responds, "But Father, wasn't He supposed to take care of us, His poor?" (89). Just as the priest offers Amanda a prescribed remedy to her dilemma, her husband, Chato, cannot break free of the church's rigid stance on abortion. He cannot forgive her for having aborted their child: "Amanda would touch him and try to make him love her again. Each time she touched him, he saw his child's face, and would jerk away from her grasp" (85). Chato's refusal to see Amanda outside the strict views of either virgin or whore, pure or sinful, effectively ends their marriage; it is only years later, when Chato lies dying in a hospital bed, that he is able to reconcile with his wife. Chato ultimately realizes that the hatred and pain he suffered from his inability to forgive Amanda, symbolized as an immovable mountain, "was no bigger than a stone, a stone I could have thrown into the distance . . . at twenty-four, but instead waited fifty-eight years later" (94). Tellingly, this idea of reconciliation that takes place over a considerable length of time also occurred in Viramontes's own life, in her relationship with the creative writing program at Irvine.

Viramontes left the M.F.A. program in 1981 but returned to complete her degree in 1994. As she relates in an essay entitled "Four Guiding Principles," Viramontes left U.C. Irvine because of a conversation she had with her adviser, who "began to explain why he thought I was a cheap imitation of Gabriel García Márquez. . . . [He said] the trouble is that you write about Chicanos. You should be writing about people" (128). In response, Viramontes left the office and "never

returned to the program and for another ten years never ever entered the Humanities building again.” In the interim, she published short stories in a variety of literary magazines such as *Maize*, *Cenzontle Chicano Short Stories and Poetry*, and *Xbisme Arte*. Viramontes helped to produce *Xbisme Arte*, an important small literary magazine, in a downtown Los Angeles studio along with colleagues she had met in workshops at the Los Angeles Latino Writers Association. Her major accomplishment before she earned her graduate degree was the 1985 publication of her collection *The Moths and Other Stories*. It was published by Arte Público Press, which is associated with the University of Houston.

In 1987, Viramontes organized a Chicana writers’ conference at the University of California at Irvine. That conference produced an important anthology, *Chicana Creativity and Criticism*, which she coedited with María Herrera-Sobek. The book collects numerous writers and critics who have helped form the foundation of Chicana literature and criticism, with contributions from academics such as Tey Diana Rebolledo and Norma Alarcón, as well as poetry and prose by Lucha Corpi, Denise Chávez, and Lorna Dee Cervantes.

Another of her award-winning short stories, “The Broken Web,” delves into the double standard toward sexuality in men and women. Tomas chastises his wife for having an affair yet does not accept her anger at his affair with Olivia, an aging barmaid from Tijuana: “Don’t I have a right to be unfaithful? Weren’t you?” (*Moths* 59). His anger toward her escalates, erupting into physical violence. His wife ends this cycle of abuse by shooting him. This violent act is never addressed directly, however. Rather, it appears in an abbreviated sentence yelled by Yreina, one of her daughters, as she tries to waken her sister, Martha. The tale of Tomas’s murder also appears in Martha’s confession to a distracted, less than sympathetic priest, and in this scene, Viramontes critically examines the church’s role in perpetuating the systems that oppress women. The wife strives to liberate herself “from the misery . . . of guilt imposed by man and

God” (16). The priest to whom Martha relates the tale of her mother’s shooting her father is distracted by his hunger. He is accustomed to hearing voices in confession: “It was always the same monotonous whisper; man or woman—no real difference. They came to him seeking redemption; they had stepped into the realm of sin; they had all slapped his walls with hideous, ridiculously funny and often imaginary sins—and they expected him to erase their sins, to ease their souls so that they could, with the innocence of a pure heart, enter into sin once again. The whispering tune of secrets hidden and finally banished” (53). For the priest, the contrite and their sins are blurred into an anonymous hum.

Similarly, the mother of Yreina and Martha is never called by her own proper name. She appears only as Tomas’s wife. She herself acknowledges her lack of individuality: “And she could not leave him because she no longer owned herself. He owned her, her children owned her, and she needed them all to live” (60). This pervasive sense of male dominance even characterizes the wife’s sense of Olivia. Rather than hating or despising her husband’s lover, Tomas’s wife feels pity for her and wonders whether she herself would be in Olivia’s position were Tomas to abandon her. “Tomas’ wife wondered if that old barmaid (what-was-her-name-now?) still worked there and she wondered if Tomas left her, would she become like her?” Against traditional treatment of mistresses by wives, in which there is much rancor and animosity, Tomas’s wife finds a certain kind of kinship with Olivia as they are both united by Tomas’s power over them.

Viramontes published her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, in 1995. Her second, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, appeared in 2007. She is currently a professor of English and creative writing at Cornell University.

Viramontes has received numerous awards in recognition of her talent, including a 1989 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship to work with Gabriel García Márquez at the Sundance Institute, as well as the 1995 John Dos Passos Prize. In 2006, she received the Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature from the University

of California, Santa Barbara and the Santa Barbara Book & Author Festival. Viramontes was named a Ford Fellow in 2007.

Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuena Córbova write of Viramontes's work ethic: "An extremely disciplined writer, she famously rises each day before dawn to work on her creations, and will not succumb to pressure from her fans to release any new work until she feels entirely comfortable that it is ready" (549). In an essay entitled "Why I Write," Viramontes explains, "Through writing, I have learned to protect the soles of my feet from the broken glass. . . . Writing is the only way I know how to pray."

"The Moths" (1985)

In this frequently anthologized short story, Viramontes chronicles the time in which her unnamed female protagonist begins to love and care for her grandmother, known only as *Abuelita*. The absence of names is a critical element in the story: The absence of markers that may limit the young girl's experience opens to all readers the lessons to be learned from the tale. The young girl in "The Moths" lashes out violently against family members, who she believes cannot and do not understand her. She carries a piece of brick in her shoe as a weapon against her sisters. At every juncture, she faces accusations about her own inability to fit in: She does not want to attend Mass every Sunday as her father expects, she cannot create "feminine" art with an embroidery needle, and she does not feel comfortable or at home in her own body. Her "bull hands" are large, misshapen, and conspicuously unfeminine. In short, the very identity issues with which the young girl struggles are the same for all young girls on their way to womanhood.

In the figure of her *Abuelita*, the unnamed protagonist finds a model she can and eventually does emulate. As *Abuelita* succumbs to stomach cancer, the protagonist begins to behave in ways that reverse the roles between grandmother and grand-

daughter. The girl shops for food and prepares meals for her grandmother, and, most poignantly, when her *Abuelita* dies, she lovingly prepares her body for burial.

The story's title is taken from the miraculous appearance of moths, which fly out of *Abuelita*'s mouth and hover above a light in the bathroom. As the protagonist draws a bath and gently lowers her *Abuelita* into the tub, she notices the moths that emerge from *Abuelita* and float upward. Moths symbolize the soul, the aspect of a person that survives after the human body expires. *Abuelita* had previously explained their significance to the protagonist, telling her of moths that "lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up" (32).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider all of the natural elements that appear in the story. How do they function? What role do they play in the story?
2. "The Moths" contains two moments that fall loosely into the realm of magical realism: the appearance of the moths from *Abuelita*'s mouth and the "melting" of the protagonist's "bull hands" with *Abuelita*'s salve and touch. Examine both the real and the magical elements of these two moments. How do they merge? How do they contribute to different interpretations of the story?
3. Compare the relationship between the grandmother and granddaughter in "The Moths" to the relationship between Arlene and Champ in "Miss Clairol." Who act as adults? Do the relationships change as the stories progress? If so, why or how?

"Cariboo Cafe" (1985)

Viramontes merges three different voices and story lines in this short but poignant tale, published in *The Moths and Other Stories*. In the first, she takes on the thoughts and words of a young girl named Sonya as she returns home from school. Having lost her house key in a tussle in the schoolyard,

Sonya thinks to retrace her steps to the house of Mrs. Avila, the woman who cares for her baby brother, Macky. In the second section, the narrator switches to the owner of the Cariboo Cafe. From his thoughts, we learn that he has lost his son in the Vietnam War; is divorced from his wife, Nell; and has a soft spot for transients, particularly one named Paulie who is the same age the owner's son would have been had he lived. In the third part, another war, that waged by the contras in Central America, is responsible for the disappearance and death of another child. Geraldo, the son of an unnamed washerwoman, is taken by soldiers and accused of espionage while making an innocuous trip to the market to buy a mango for his mother. Readers learn the grief and despair of the nameless woman from Central America who travels across borders into the United States in search of her lost son. To gain mastery over her loss and reclaim her dead son, the washerwoman abducts Macky and Sonya because Macky's eyes seem reminiscent of Geraldo's.

These various storylines converge inside the cafe that, because the "paint's peeled off 'cept for the two O's," is referred to as the "double zero cafe" (68). This accidental name is appropriate in its symbolism of the marginalized and forgotten people—the unnamed "illegals" who are rounded up and arrested by members of "La Migra," or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), as they take refuge in the cafe's restroom. Their stories are not told, and yet they appear as the faceless and nameless workers for an equally nameless and generic factory. With a view cankered by anger and hardened against humanity, the cafe owner describes "all these illegals running out of the factory to hide, like roaches when the lightswitch goes on" (71). What makes this description all the more disheartening, however, is his description of himself: "Look, I'm a nice guy."

The "police," "La Migra," and the contras are each just another force that figures centrally in the story, although one that is never named and whose perspective is never shown. In fact, Viramontes reduces the INS to the "green vans," making them

just as shadowy as the characters they arrest. These authorities interject chaos and function, serving as the *deus ex machina* in the story, breaking up families and shuttling characters from one location to another. Against this powerful force, Viramontes creates characters who act out of a profound impulse to connect, to become whole, and to unite or reunite families.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Cariboo Cafe" ends with a defiant stance taken by the unnamed washerwoman, mother of Geraldo. Compare this conclusion to the closing scene of *Their Dogs Came with Them*. How do these final scenes impact your view of the tales? Do you read them as hopeful or hopeless?
2. Make an argument explaining why the multiple viewpoints are appropriate for this story, citing examples from the text.

"Miss Clairol" (1988)

One of Viramontes's early stories, "Miss Clairol" was published in 1988 and first appeared in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism*. The story's title is from a hair-dye product that represented the epitome of Anglo beauty in the 1970s. As the story opens, Arlene's daughter Champ notes the changes in her mother based on the color of hair dye that she has used: Light Ash to Flame to Sun Bronze. All of these cycles of dyeing her hair, however, have left it "stiff, break[ing] at the ends" (164). The narrator says that "Arlene has burned the softness of her hair with peroxide." The images of hair dye and the damage it inflicts are indicative of the way the beauty industry markets white beauty to the detriment of women of color such as Arlene, who suffer to emulate a particular aesthetic norm. Of further significance is the name *Miss Clairol*. She is imagined to be a young woman, unmarried, and certainly without children. This sense of youthfulness and freedom is embraced by Arlene in her choice of attire. She wears "bell bottom jeans two sizes too small" and

a “pink, strapless tube top,” but her body seems to defy this clothing, as her stomach spills out over the top of her jeans and they bind her so tightly that she cannot bend over.

Arlene is trapped or bound in other ways as well. As she prepares for her date, singing along to the radio, Arlene recounts various sexual experiences she has had in the past; this is when the reader recognizes the violent cycles of abuse that Arlene has endured and survived. When she sings the song lyrics “I will do anything, forrr your love,” the reader recognizes the tragic undertones (166). For the idea of romance and love, Arlene has subjected herself to violence, “one nipple blind from a cigarette burn.” In the mirror, she sees reflected “the face who has worn too many relationships.” She recalls the first time she had sex under a house at the age of 11, but resolves not to tell Champ about her earlier encounter with a boy named Puppet. It is the notion of love or romance that has captured Arlene and left her forever searching for an ideal hawked in advertisements, products like Miss Clairol, Calgon commercials, and songs like “For Your Love.”

While Arlene goes through her rituals in preparation for her date, her daughter Champ appears to be acting out her own. She opens a can of soup, watches television, and cuts out “Miss Breck models” from magazines: “Champ collects the array of honey colored haired women, puts them in a shoe box with all her other special things” (166). The reader has the sense that one generation’s Miss Clairol becomes another’s Miss Breck.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The narrator refers to Arlene as a romantic. How do you interpret this characterization? Is it sincere? Sarcastic? Tragic?
2. Arlene promises to show Champ how she can look pretty when she is older. How should readers interpret this promise? Is it a threat? Does the story offer any evidence or hope that Champ might escape the same fate as Arlene? Consider the closing scene, in which Champ looks out the window.

***Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995)**

Under the Feet of Jesus tells the stories of migrant workers. Viramontes sets her novel in California and focuses primarily on one family held together by the mother, Petra. As the novel opens, Petra directs Perfecto, described repeatedly in the novel as “the man who was not [Estrella’s] father,” to another “shabby wood frame bungalow,” where they will work in the fields alongside her children: Estrella, Ricky, Perla, and Cuca.

Estrella is the true protagonist in this coming-of-age tale. Early in the novel, she wrestles with prejudice and other reminders of her foreshortened childhood. When she stumbles upon a Little League baseball game as she walks along some train tracks, she is blinded by the floodlights used to illuminate nighttime play. In this moment, in which Estrella makes a feeble attempt to shield her eyes from the light, she is reminded of “La Migra,” the border patrol.

Another moment that reminds Estrella of her difficult living conditions occurs in the classroom, where teachers like Mrs. Horn make her feel dirty. The teacher focuses on Estrella’s outer appearance rather than on the more important issue of educating her mind. “They inspected her head for lice, parting her long hair with ice cream sticks. They scrubbed her fingers with a toothbrush until they were so sore she couldn’t hold a pencil properly” (24). This attention to hygiene not only proves insulting and degrading, but also impedes learning. Estrella’s newly scrubbed fingers cannot hold on to a pencil, and her abbreviated time in the classroom leaves her feeling lost and angry, as if the teachers were “never giving her the information she wanted.” Her literacy seems to be gained in spite of rather than because of her teachers.

And it is Estrella who reads Maxine’s comic books to her, even though Maxine is older and the only one in the migrant camp to own a book of any kind. In the relationship between Estrella and Maxine, Viramontes reminds readers that not all migrant workers are Mexican or Mexican

American. Further, their dynamic reverses the traditional racial stereotypes usually present between Anglos and Chicanos. Maxine is crass, foul-mouthed, and sexually knowing for a young girl. Her uneven maturation stands in stark contrast to that of Estrella, whose burgeoning sexuality is treated as something special, secret, and pure by Viramontes and the other characters in the novel. Estrella's mother saddens at the sight of Estrella's carrying a watermelon as if it were a baby, a sure and poignant sign that Petra herself has suffered as a mother and wishes to postpone such difficult living for her daughter.

Against the harsh and unlikely background of the migrant camp, Viramontes stages the sweet and budding romance between Estrella and Alejo, a young scholar with a love of history and the earth. Under a truck, in search of shade and some privacy, Alejo holds Estrella's hand and tells her about the Le Brea tar pits and the source of oil. It is an unknown history, much like the tales of migrant workers. People buy their groceries from the store but do not think of their source; people put oil in their cars but do not stop to contemplate its deep history: "The bones lay in the seabed for millions of years. That's how it was. Makes sense don't it, bones becoming tar oil?" (87). Bones, lives, are the source of daily fuel for cars. And it is not surprising that when Alejo is sprayed by the pesticides, risking his own life to harvest food that will appear on other people's tables, he thinks of sinking in the pits. "As the rotary of the biplane approached again, he closed his eyes and imagined sinking into the tar pits" (78).

Estrella fights against the possibility of losing Alejo by driving him first to a clinic and then to a hospital. At the clinic, Estrella's family scrapes together what little money they have—nine dollars and seven cents—in the hope that someone will offer Alejo the medical help he so desperately needs. Perfecto scans the trailer with the intent of bartering his labor for services for Alejo. He notes that the posts need recementing, the toilet fixing. Petra scans the nurse's desk and makes her own assessment:

Even the many things on the nurse's desk implied fakery; the pictures of her smiling boys (Who did they think they were, smiling so boldly at the camera?), the porcelain statue of a calico kitten with a little stethoscope, wearing a folded white cap with a red cross between its too cute perky little ears; a pile of manila folder files stacked in a strange way that seemed cluttered and disordered. She wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean, too white just like the imitation cotton. She might fool other people but certainly not her. (141)

By including the kitten statue in her sweeping gaze of the nurse, Petra recognizes how jarringly different her life is from the nurse's. She also penetrates beneath the artificial, such as the bleached cottonballs and nurse's too-red lips, to discover an unkind woman who will not deviate from the rules, even when she knows Alejo is severely ill and those paying for his care are desperately poor. Petra sees excess, marking the vast difference between her and the nurse.

Estrella responds to this gap of haves and have-nots by violently smashing the kitten with a crowbar and retrieving the family's nine dollars and seven cents. Alejo, however, disapproves of Estrella's violence, arguing that Estrella is acting exactly as the nurse expects. In Petra's view of the nurse, and Estrella's violent reaction to the nurse's costly ineffectiveness, Viramontes tells a larger story of how poverty separates people and turns them against one another. Alejo, a victim of poverty alongside Estrella and her family, stands as a voice of compassion and understanding to bridge this gap.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Viramontes's idea for this novel began with mention of a barn as forbidden territory in Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's memoir, *Paletitas de Guayaba*. What does the barn symbolize for Estrella? For Perfecto? Does its meaning change as the novel progresses?

2. The narrator mentions packaging for food products, such as the elderly man on the box of Quaker Oats and the young, smiling girl on the Sun-Maid Raisins box. How do these advertising images compare with the beauty products mentioned in the short story "Miss Clairol"? In what ways are they different?
3. Explain the significance of the work's title. Where does it appear in the novel, and what larger message does it present?

***Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007)**

In a 2007 interview, Viramontes revealed that *Their Dogs Came with Them* was actually her first novel, before *Under the Feet of Jesus*. She began writing it during a busy time in her life, when she and her husband were raising two small children. She wrote a first and then a second draft of the novel in Puerto Rico, while her husband looked after their young children back home. And, as is her custom with all of her writing, she read someone else's work after completing a draft of her own. The novella was Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's *Paletitas de Guayaba*. In the memoir, Gonzales-Berry tells of her father's prohibiting her from going into a barn. Viramontes says this image "immediately struck my heart's chord" and became the beginning of *Under the Feet of Jesus*. She tabled *Their Dogs Came with Them* until the other work's completion. The 1990s and early 2000s as "decades of fear and binary language" greatly influenced her novel, as did the two Iraqi wars. Accordingly, Viramontes refers to *Their Dogs Came with Them* as a "project of great darkness that I had to . . . touch around with my fingers" (Silverblatt).

To bridge a decade (1960–70), a community, and a nation ripped apart, as well as multiple storylines from numerous characters, Viramontes struck upon freeways as her supporting structure. She drew upon her own memories of the 710 freeway, which was constructed during her childhood. This freeway, she explains, caused East Los Angeles to be "basically amputated from the rest of the city." She also knew, from urban legends in her childhood,

that the freeway construction had unearthed bodies disturbed from their graves. When she looks at the freeways, Viramontes recognizes that they are held up by "the bones of the forgotten." And telling their stories became the impetus for her novel: "This was my main commitment. What happened to this neighborhood? What happened to all the people?" (Silverblatt).

Viramontes's second novel is set in East L.A. in the tumultuous decade of 1960 to 1970, a time and a place disrupted by the Vietnam War, the Watts riots, a quarantine and curfew due to a rabies scare, and the construction of a large-scale freeway system. The cultural, spiritual, and spatial dislocations of the novel are echoed in the characters, whose disparate tales alternate, intersect, and crash into one another. One central character is Turtle, a female member of an otherwise all-male gang, who, as she does, carry memories of home (the gang is called McBride after the street of one of their founding members). As Viramontes has discussed in an interview, the character of Turtle was radically rewritten after she considered the comments of one of her graduate students at Cornell, the novelist Junot Diaz. After Diaz read portions of the novel, he remarked that Turtle, who was then a male character, was an unoriginal character, a cliché. Viramontes thought about Diaz's comment and then remembered a woman from her neighborhood who had killed her father, the neighborhood drunk. At the time, Viramontes says, there was no language to define this woman. In today's terms, she might be called a "butch dyke." This childhood memory became the basis for transforming Turtle's identity. In making her a woman who dressed and acted as a man, Viramontes was able to discard the cliché and reach into the psyche of a character who had been hardened by years of pain.

Turtle keeps her brother's lessons from gang life and combat in Vietnam close to her as she roams the streets in search of a safe place to sleep, temporary shelter from the rain and cold, and neutral territory in an area claimed by warring gangs. In her search, Turtle briefly glimpses an old and unnamed homeless woman who finds a warm meal

- (Winter 2000): 53–57. Available online. URL: Informe/Thomson Gale. Accessed December 1, 2006.
- Caminero Santangelo, Marta. "Beyond Otherness: Negotiated Identities and Viramontes' 'The Cariboo Cafe.'" In *Women on the Edge: Ethnicity and Gender in Short Stories by American Women*, edited by Corrine H. Dale and J. H. E. Paine, 19–34. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Carbonell, Ana Maria. "From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros." *Melus* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 53–74.
- Castillo, Debra A., and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Dos Santos, Paula et al. "Helena Maria Viramontes." *Voices from the Gaps: Women Artists and Writers of Color*. University of Minnesota, 7 May 1998. Available online. URL: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/viramontes_helena_maria.html. Accessed December 7, 2006.
- Fernández, Roberta. "'The Cariboo Cafe': Helena María Viramontes Discourses with Her Social and Cultural Contexts." *Women's Studies* 17, nos. 1–2 (1989): 71.
- Franklet, Duane. "Social Language: Bakhtin and Viramontes." *Americas Review* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 110–114.
- Hassett, J. J. "Under the Feet of Jesus—Viramontes, HM." *Chasqui-Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* 25, no. 2 (1996): 147–148.
- "Helena Viramontes." Cornell University Department of English Web site. Available online. URL: www.arts.cornell.edu/english/people/viramontes. Accessed December 7, 2006.
- Herrera-Sobek, María. "The Nature of Chicana Literature: Feminist Ecological Literary Criticism and Chicana Writers." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 37 (November 1998): 89–100.
- Johannessen, Lene. "The Meaning of Place in Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*." In *Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States*, edited by Dorothea Fischer-Hounung and Heike Raphael-Hernandez. Tübingen, Germany: Stauffenburg, 2000.
- . "*The Squatter and the Don, Carry Me Like Water, and Under the Feet of Jesus*: Readings of Crisis and Reconciliation." In *U.S. Latino Literatures and Cultures: Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Francisco A. Lomeli and Karin Ikas, 131–141. Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag, 2000.
- Lawless, Cecelia. "Helena María Viramontes' Homing Devices in *Under the Feet of Jesus*." In *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, edited by Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes. New York: Garland, 1996.
- Mermann-Jozwiak, Elisabeth. *Postmodern Vernaculars: Chicana Literature and Postmodern Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Moore, Deborah Owen. "La Llorona Dines at the Cariboo Cafe: Structure and Legend in the Work of Helena María Viramontes." *Studies in Short Fiction* 35, no. 3 (1998): 277. Available online. URL: Academic Search Premier/EBSCOhost. Accessed November 1, 2006.
- Moya, Paula M. L. *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Pavletich, J. A., and M. G. Backus. "With His Pistol in Her Hand: Rearticulating the Corrido Narrative." *Cultural Critique* 27 (Spring 1994): 127–152.
- Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. "Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary." *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (June 2001): 387–412.
- Richards, Judith. "Toward Chicana Critical Theories: Seeking Equilibrium in the Analysis of Infinite Complexities." *College Literature* 25, no. 2 (1998): 182.
- Saldívar, José David. "Frontera Crossings: Sites of Cultural Contestation." *Mester* 22–23:2,1 (Fall 1993–Spring 1994): 81–91.
- Saldívar-Hull, Sonia. *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- . "Political Identities in Contemporary Chicana Literature: Helena María Viramontes's Visions of the U.S. Third World." In "*Writing*" *Nation and "Writing" Region in America*, edited by Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, 156–165. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996.

- Silverblatt, Michael. "Bookworm: Helena María Viramontes" [podcast]. Santa Monica, Calif.: KCRW, 16 August 2007. Available online. URL: www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw070816helena_maria_viramontes. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Simal, Begoña. "'The Cariboo Cafe' as a Border Text: The Holographic Model." In *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands*, edited by Jesús Benito and Anna Manzanás, 81–93. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.
- Stockton, Sharon. "Rereading the Maternal Body: Viramontes' *The Moths* and the Construction of the New Chicana." *Americas Review* 22, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1994): 212–229.
- Swyt, Wendy. "Hungry Women: Borderlands Myths in Two Stories by Helena María Viramontes." *Melus* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 189–201.
- Viramontes, Helena María. "Four Guiding Principles to a Lived Experience." In *La Herencia/The Heritage: I Encuentro de Escritoras Chicanas*. Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2003.
- . *The Moths and Other Stories*. 2nd ed. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1995.
- . *Their Dogs Came with Them*. New York: Atria Books/Simon & Schuster, 2007.
- . *Under the Feet of Jesus*. New York: Dutton, 1995.
- , and María Herrera-Sobek, eds. *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*. Houston: Arte Público, 1988. Expanded 2nd ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Wilson, Ian Randall. "The Outsiders: Helena María Viramontes' 'The Cariboo Cafe.'" *Americas Review* 25 (1999): 179–201.
- Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Introduction." In *The Moths and Other Stories*, by Helena María Viramontes. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1995.
- Andrea Tinnemeyer and Megan Inclán



ALICE WALKER (1944–)

In search of my mother's garden, I found my own.

(*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*)

*P*oet, novelist, essayist, activist, womanist—these are all terms that describe Alice Walker. Whether she is communicating with her readers in personal poetry or taking a more public stance against social injustice worldwide, Walker has solidified her place in the American imagination.

She was born February 9, 1944, in Georgia, the daughter of sharecroppers. Her father, Willie Lee Walker, and mother, Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, were both master storytellers who encouraged Walker to create stories and poems. Injured by a childhood accident at age eight, Walker lost sight in her right eye. The accident resulted in a cataract and scarring that left her feeling unattractive. Walker subsequently turned to literature—particularly the classics and poetry—as a means of dealing with her loneliness. She soon began writing her own poetry. When she was 14 years old, she visited her brother in Boston, where she had the cataract removed. She recalls that this operation changed her life and that she became outgoing and confident once again. Walker graduated from high school as valedictorian, was selected most popular in her class, and was elected prom queen.

She received a scholarship to attend Spelman College in Atlanta, where, inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she became an activist in the Civil Rights movement. She did not, however, feel that Spelman supported her activities, so she trans-

ferred to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. Although Sarah Lawrence offered her more freedom, Walker encountered many struggles there. The summer after her junior year, she traveled to Uganda as an exchange student and worked in Georgia on voter registration drives. Upon returning to Sarah Lawrence, Walker discovered that she was pregnant midway through her senior year. She struggled with feelings of guilt and anxiety as she worried about how the pregnancy would affect her goal to earn a college degree. For several days she slept with a razor blade under her pillow as she contemplated suicide. She finally decided to have an abortion. After the abortion, she suffered from depression and again turned to writing as a means of handling distress. Walker graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with a bachelor's degree in January 1966.

Walker then took a job with New York City's welfare department and moved to Manhattan's Lower East Side. This experience fueled her view that not only the welfare system but also the entire country needed reform. The United States was in the midst of protests: against the Vietnam War, against racial bigotry, against society in general. It was during this time that the poems Walker had written while at Sarah Lawrence—and had slipped under the door of her professor, Muriel Rukeyser, who then sent them to her literary agent, Monica McCall—were published. The collection of 30 poems was

entitled *Once* and was dedicated to Howard Zinn, one of Walker's professors at Spelman who had influenced her activism.

In 1967, Walker married the civil rights attorney Melvyn Leventhal and relocated with him to Mississippi. Theirs was the first interracial marriage recognized by Mississippi. That same year, she published her first short story, "To Hell with Dying." Walker drew upon her observations of the effects of poverty on African-American men and women as she began her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The novel was completed only a few days before she gave birth to her daughter, Rebecca. Reviews were mixed: While many embraced the book, others thought that Walker represented black men in a negative manner. The novel spans three generations: Grange Copeland reacts to his mistreatment by whites by mistreating his wife, and his son, Brownfield, maintains his father's legacy with his own wife. Only after Grange violently attacks several minority figures who "act white" does he recognize what his hatred has accomplished. He returns home to share with his son what he has learned. "I know the danger of putting the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. . . . Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be. We own our own souls, don't we?" (187). After completion of the novel, Walker became a writer in residence at Jackson State College and later at Tougaloo College, both in Mississippi. In 1971, she accepted an offer for a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship.

Walker's father died in January 1973, an event she was unable to deal with until much later, through poetry and essays. Also in 1973, she published a collection of poetry and a collection of short stories. *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973) begins with several memories of people who played a major role in influencing Walker. The tributes include recollections of church events, old men, and strong women. One poem in particular, "Women," comments on the women of her mother's generation who fought for an education for their children. The wisdom of these women is reflected in the concluding lines:

How they knew what we
Must know
 Without knowing a page
 Of it
 Themselves. (lines 22–26)

Their duality of existence had them fighting even while continuing to iron the "Starched white / Shirts" (lines 10–11) of their employers. The poem is a forceful reminder that not all battles occur in a declared war zone; sometimes the battles are within our own communities. Other noteworthy poems in this collection include "Revolutionary Petunias," "Expect Nothing," "For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties," "Eagle Rock," "Reassurance," and "While Love Is Unfashionable." Walker says of this collection:

These poems reflect my delight at being once again in a Southern African American environment, and also my growing realization that the sincerest struggle to change the world must start within. I was saved from despair countless times by the flowers and the trees I planted. (*Her Blue Body* 153)

In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women, also published in 1973, contained 13 short stories about various black women and their problems. Walker addressed discrimination in "The Welcome Table" and a mother's ignorance in "Strong Horse Tea." In "The Child Who Favored Daughter," Walker drew upon personal experience: Her paternal grandmother had been murdered while Walker's father had watched. Even though the murderer would be caught and incarcerated, Willie Lee Walker carried the scars with him. As his daughter Ruth grew up, her resemblance to her grandmother would cause Mr. Walker to be harder on her than the other children as a way of dealing with his emotional scars. "To Hell with Dying," which had been published earlier by Langston Hughes in a collection of short stories, recalled a man Walker called "Mr. Sweet." In the story, Mr. Sweet is an alcoholic with a talent for playing the guitar. He hovers on the brink of

death several times but is restored to life when the narrator's father calls in the children to smother him with kisses and tickles. The narrator continues doing this for several years, and it is not until she is off at college that she is unable to return quickly enough to Mr. Sweet's side. "He was like a piece of rare and delicate china which was always being saved from breaking and which finally fell" (*In Love and Trouble* 137).

The story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" was inspired by an event in her childhood, when her mother was refused government surplus aid by a white woman because Minnie Walker was dressed too nicely. Walker developed the idea that the white woman would suffer from a voodoo curse. While researching voodoo for the story, Walker sought authentic black writers who knew about ancient voodoo methods and means. Her search led her to discover the writer Zora Neale Hurston. Walker was both amazed and distressed by the black community's ignorance of a woman she would call "A Genius of the South" (from one of Jean Toomer's poems) (*In Search* 107). Upset that not one of her professors had introduced her to Hurston's work, Walker subsequently made it a mission to recover Hurston's works and to gain recognition for someone she believed had "given so much of obvious value to all of us . . . [and was] so casually . . . consigned to a sneering oblivion" (86). "My feeling is that Zora Neale Hurston is probably one of the most misunderstood, least appreciated writers of this century. Which is a pity. She is great. A writer of courage, and incredible humor, with poetry in every line" (260). Largely as a result of Walker's efforts, Hurston's place in American literature has been solidified. In 1973, Walker placed a monument at the unmarked gravesite of Hurston in Fort Pierce, Florida.

Walker left Mississippi in 1974 to take a job as contributing editor at *Ms.* magazine. She divided her time between her writing for the magazine and her own work, which included a biography of the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. She also taught the first course on black women writers at Wellesley College. In 1976, after she and her husband filed for divorce, Walker began work on

a new novel inspired by her personal experiences working for civil rights. This book, *Meridian*, received both praise and criticism for its portrayal of a young black woman's experiences in Mississippi during the Civil Rights movement. While many saw the work as "the price blacks (and whites) paid as they struggled to achieve a common humanity" (E. White 285), others saw the book as antiblack, crude, and negative (295).

After her father's death and her divorce, Walker again turned to poetry to express her heartache. A third volume of poems, *Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*, was published in 1979. After being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, Walker moved to northern California and began her third (and best-known) novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). This work received the same mixed initial reviews as her previous novels: While many saw the beauty of the language and message, some felt that it, as did *Meridian*, portrayed black men in a negative light. Nonetheless, *The Color Purple* was soon widely recognized as a major achievement. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and was later made into a film starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Oprah Winfrey. Ten years after the film appeared, Walker would reflect on the movie in her book *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult: A Meditation on Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film The Color Purple; Ten Years Later* (1996).

Over the next 25 years, Walker would continue writing and publishing. Her output included a second short-story collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Short Stories* (1981); a collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983); and a third volume of poetry, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful: Poems* (1984). In a second collection of essays, published in 1988, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973–1987*, Walker comments on various topics such as meditation and Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1989, Walker produced another novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*. While many found the novel ponderous, Walker explained, "It's like any other thing you create. If I make shoes, then I'll make shoes and put them out there. My part will

have been done” (E. White 449). Although not a sequel to *The Color Purple*, both *The Temple of My Familiar* and her next novel would continue the story of characters from the Pulitzer-winning novel, relating the experiences of Tashi after being circumcised and mutilated, as was customary in many African cultures. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), Walker attacks the practice of genital mutilation in many parts of Africa. She then collaborated with Pratibha Parmar to write *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), a nonfiction explanation of the barbaric practice of female circumcision and the physical and emotional scarring that result from it.

In between the two novels was Walker’s fourth collection of poetry, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965–1990 Complete* (1991), which included the poems from the volumes *Once; Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems; Good Night, Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning*; and *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, as well as previously unpublished poems. Walker explored her involvement with activism on many fronts in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer’s Activism* (1997). She would continue expressing messages on various topics through another novel, *By the Light of My Father’s Smile: A Novel* (1998); another collection of short stories, *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000); post-9/11 commentary, *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit: After the Attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon* (2001); new poems, *A Poem Traveled down My Arm: Poems and Drawings* (2003) and *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* (2003); and, most recently, another essay collection, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (2006). Walker’s work continues to attract a major following, but some critics consider her more recent work too ideological and lacking the power of her earlier work, particularly *The Color Purple*.

Walker has been influenced by the philosophy of Albert Camus, the blues of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, the writings of Toomer, Hurston, O’Connor, and Hughes. She is well read and well

educated on world concerns; she weaves all of these influences together as she creates her writings. She has been recognized with numerous honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award in 1983, for *The Color Purple*; the O. Henry Award in 1986, for the short story “Kindred Spirits”; the National Endowment for the Arts’ Lillian Smith Book Award in 1973, for *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*; the Rosenthal Award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters; and fellowships from Radcliffe, the Merrill Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

In a 1972 address to graduates of her alma mater, Sarah Lawrence College, Walker read two poems. Both were from the *Revolutionary Petunias* collection. The first poem was “Be Nobody’s Darling”; the second was “Reassurance,” in which Walker acknowledges Rainer Maria Rilke’s influence. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke encourages us “to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue” (Rilke chapter 4). Walker’s poem reflects on this thought—that though we may not have all the keys to unlock the rooms, we must continue to search for answers in order to become who we are.

“Everyday Use” (1973)

One of Walker’s most anthologized short stories is entitled “Everyday Use,” one of 13 stories from the collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973). It is a story “in which a mother mediates a conflict between her sophisticated daughter, who comes home from the city, and her shy sister, who has remained at home” (Stanford and Amin 89). However, the conflict between sisters is not the only one that Walker considers; the mother, Mrs. Johnson, must serve as a buffer between Dee and Maggie. Additionally, Walker addresses the conflicts between cultures: the 1960s culture of the black nationalists versus the historical culture of the African-American heritage.

The story begins as Mama (Mrs. Johnson) awaits the arrival of Dee, her educated daughter, who is returning home for a visit. Mama fantasizes about the happy reunion between mother and daughter, an event full of love, respect, and admiration. However, Mama realizes that she is not the type of woman whom Dee would love, respect, or admire. "In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man" (*In Love and Trouble* 48). In her fantasy, she is just as Dee would want her to be: light skinned, thinner, witty. There is a sense that Mama would be all these things if only she could be. But reality returns; Mama realizes that she is describing Dee more than herself. She believes that Maggie feels that her sister has always had an easier time in life and that "no is a word the world never learned to say to [Dee]" (47).

In contrast to Dee is shy and uncertain Maggie, more like her mother in temperament and action. The two share many traits: fearing to look a white man in the face, being content with a summer's breeze, sharing a can of snuff. They also share an appreciation of the importance of personal heritage. Maggie's conflict with Dee is due to Dee's feeling that Maggie could make something of herself if she only wanted to. Dee was able to escape the rural "cow pasture" existence, and she does not understand why her mother and sister would want to remain there.

When Dee arrives, stepping forth from the automobile in a costume that screams African connection, along with her male companion, she crushes any chance for a happy reunion when she tells of her decision to discard her given name in preference for her new, authentic name, *Wangero*. When Mama asks what was wrong with her old name, Wangero states that she refuses to be named after "her oppressors." Mama points out that Dee had been named after her aunt and grandmother, but Wangero (Dee) refuses to accept this. She wants a name that will allow her to identify with her *true* African culture.

With a calculating eye, Dee selects the items from the meager home that she plans to acquire in order to display them "properly" in her residence in the city. The butter churn top and dasher are wrapped up—without any thought as to what Mama and Maggie will do for butter once they are gone. Dee gushes over the "rump" marks in the handmade benches. Then she moves in for what she has been eying all along—two quilts made from scraps of her grandparents' and relatives' clothing. Ironically, Dee has returned to the homestead to collect items that she views as quaint and representative of her heritage, while dismissing the family and history that *are* her heritage. The quilts (along with the handmade benches and butter dasher) represent the art that is abundant around us, created by us.

Mama hears a sound—it is Maggie, retreating from the scavenging. Gathering her inner courage, Mama informs Wangero that those quilts have been promised to Maggie. She offers two other quilts in their place, but Wangero demands the "authentic" pieces; she rejects the machine-stitched versions because she wants these quilts for display. For Dee, the quilts represent the artistic side of the meager existence amid the cow field. For Mama and Maggie, they represent a promise made. When Maggie offers the quilts to her sister—"I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts" (58)—Mama knows that her acknowledgment is true, but that truth and justice are not the same. In describing Maggie, David White suggests that

her lack of education and refinement does not prevent her from having an inherent understanding of heritage based on her love and respect for those who came before her. This is clear from her ability to associate pieces of fabric in two quilts with the people whose clothes they had been cut from.

Mama remains steadfast with her promise and Wangero exits the scene. Mama and Maggie resume their snuff dipping under the tree.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How might the story have been told differently from Dee's viewpoint? Maggie's viewpoint? A third-person viewpoint? What does Walker accomplish by telling the story from Mama's perspective?
2. Discuss the theme of artistry and the concept of "everyday use." What constitutes art? What is the significance of things put to everyday use? What are some items in your household that have personal significance to you? What link do these items have with your family's history?
3. Some critics believe there is a little of Walker in each of the three characters. In terms of her history, cite examples from Walker's life to support this theory. Which character do you identify with most? Why?

"Expect Nothing" (1973)

In her collection *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, Walker offers advice on survival in the poem "Expect Nothing." In a commencement speech to Spelman College on May 22, 1995, Walker introduced her poem:

The poet in me has made good use of everything, and I look back, the poems are like glistening stones along the moist riverbank of trial and error I have walked along. . . . And I ask myself: What can I give you for comfort on those bleak days to come—and they will—when you are wondering if "this" (whatever the limit is that you have reached) is all there is. I can give you this poem: ["Expect Nothing"]. (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 90)

"Expect Nothing" is a counsel on living one's life—knowing that bad days will occur, but, by expecting nothing, managing to enjoy the beautiful moments when they do. She cautions us to "become a stranger / To need of pity" (lines 3–4). Here Walker asks readers to live independently, not depending on others for pity, compassion, or even

kindness. Do not want too much, she warns, and do not beg. And when you have taken just enough of compassion to get by, stop yourself. Then do away with the further need of more compassion.

Wanting and wishing for things that are too much will only cause disappointment, according to the poem. Wrap yourself with a covering for your soul that will protect you from an uncaring and cold world. Then, Walker advocates, discover why we are here on this earth—as a creature so large and yet so small: "Discover the reason why / So tiny human midget / Exists at all" (lines 17–19). Finally, she cautions again that we expect nothing out of life and "Live frugally / On surprise" (lines 21–22).

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Walker read this poem aloud. Moyers introduced it by saying, "It's not new but it endures. . . . That seems to be pure Alice Walker." It seems that in this poem, "Alice Walker, healed and healer, expresses a sentiment that, perhaps more than any, embodies her victory" (E. White 453).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What dichotomies or oppositions can you discover within "Expect Nothing"? Explain why Walker uses them and what they signify.
2. Why does Walker caution us not to want too much? Do you agree or disagree with her reasoning?
3. What do you believe Walker means when she says to live "on surprise"? What overall message do you get from the poem? To whom do you believe the poem is addressed? Does its meaning change, depending on its audience?

"Revolutionary Petunias" (1973)

In Walker's introduction to the collection of poems published in 1973, she acknowledges that "these poems are about Revolutionaries and Lovers; and about the loss of compassion, trust, and the ability to expand in love that marks the end of hopeful strategy. Whether in love or revolution. They are

also about (and for) those few embattled souls who remain painfully committed to beauty and to love even while facing the firing squad” (*Her Blue Body* 154).

The title poem, “Revolutionary Petunias,” tells the story of a God-fearing woman who is sentenced to the electric chair for murdering her husband’s murderer using a cultivator’s hoe “with verve and skill” (line 5). We are not privy to how her husband died, or what finally snapped in Sammy Lou that made her commit the crime, which is opposed to her Christian values; we see only her “disbelief” at how others view her now.

There is a duality in her name, a combination of the masculine and the feminine—*Sammy* and *Lou*. While she acts with the vengeance of a man (killing her spouse’s murderer), she is also mindful of her womanly duties (to respect God and take care of the petunias). Her final words as she is led away comment on her values: “Always respect the word of God” and “Don’t yall forgit to *water* / my purple petunias” (lines 21, 25–26).

This “backwoods woman” represents the proper churchgoing woman of any rural community. Evelyn C. White’s biography tells the following story of Walker’s own mother:

The distinctive title of the collection paid tribute to Alice’s mother and her practice of brightening whatever inelegant sharecropper’s cabin the family found themselves in by planting petunias . . . in the front yard. Mrs. Walker had started the tradition years before Alice was born when one day she and Mr. Walker . . . passed a deserted house where there remained a single lavender petunia poking up from the ground. Charmed by the flower’s tenacity and splendor, Mrs. Walker took it home and planted it in a big stump in her yard. Every time the family moved, Mrs. Walker would gather up the petunia cluster, replant it, and watch with pride as it inevitably bloomed in each new setting. When Rebecca [Alice’s daughter] was born, more than thirty years after Mrs. Walker had first rescued the petunia, she gave Alice a cutting from the

plant, which continued to hold forth in riotous glory. (245)

In an interview with John O’Brien, Walker was asked why Sammy Lou was chosen to be the heroine of this poem. Walker responded that she wanted someone who was “incorrect” (342) and that

Although Sammy Lou is more a rebel than a revolutionary (since you need more than one for a revolution) I named the poem “Revolutionary Petunias” because she is not—when you view her kind of person historically—isolated. She is part of an ongoing revolution. Any black revolution, instead of calling her “incorrect,” will have to honor her single act of rebellion. (343)

Walker also likes petunias and says they “bloom their heads off—exactly . . . like black people tend to do” (343). Even as Sammy Lou’s life is about to end, she is mindful of what is important in life.

For Discussion or Writing

Reread the excerpt regarding Walker’s mother and the petunia. How is this poem (and other works by Walker) an expression of individuals’ wanting to save something beautiful? What price do they pay?

Meridian (1976)

Walker’s second novel, *Meridian*, is a coming-of-age story about the experiences of a young woman from the South who seeks fulfillment through personal connections with others. The protagonist, Meridian Hill, “after deadening experiences as a wife and mother, exciting but short-lived work in the Civil Rights movement, and distressing interaction with the revolutionary movement, seeks to work out a way of life that will permit her own growth and will allow her to stimulate growth in others” (Stanford and Amin 89). There is some confusion in that the events are not related chronologically; the story begins in the present,

with a former coworker and lover, Truman Held, searching to reunite with Meridian. Meridian then recalls a time 10 years earlier, when she leaves her revolutionary friends because she cannot kill in the name of revolution. The third part of the novel retreats further into Meridian's history, back to when she is 13 years old and decides to reject her mother's Christianity. In the final section, Walker takes us back to the beginning of the novel, where Meridian confronts Truman.

Meridian's ignorance of sex causes her to become trapped in a loveless marriage. This experience leaves her wanting more out of life. With a hint of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, she walks away from both her husband and her child (the former by way of divorce and the latter by sending him away) and attends college before beginning work with the voter registration drive (reminiscent of Walker's own experiences).

During this second phase of her life, Meridian seeks to interact with the people she registers, rather than preaching to them and encouraging them to revolt. Meridian wants to spill no blood and believes that her conscience would not allow it. She attempts to deal with the everyday skills necessary for the people's survival—not unlike Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which basic survival is needed before advancing toward the fulfillment of other needs. Even after her friends move on to other jobs and better conditions, Meridian continues to work with the poor.

The third phase of her life encompasses Meridian's experiences with the revolutionary movement in the South. She cannot remain with this group because she does not share its passion for the mission. When she is informed that she is expected to kill (that is, murder) for the revolution, she realizes that she does not belong. Instead she returns to the everyday people whom she feels she can best serve.

Throughout the novel, Meridian refuses to allow others to determine how she is to act or to dictate her beliefs. In the preface to the novel, Walker defines *meridian* as “in astronomy, an imaginary great circle of the celestial sphere” and “in geography, a great circle of the earth passing through

the geographical poles and any given point on the earth's surface.” This aptly defines the title character, in that she is centered, well balanced, and determined to do what she can to make the world a better place.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the relationships among Truman, Lynne, and Meridian with the relationships among Mr. ———, Celie, and Shug in *The Color Purple*. How do the novels' different settings and contexts affect these relationships?
2. What does Meridian do to define her individuality? Give specific examples of how she is able to avoid conformity. Does Meridian ever demonstrate the characteristics of a saint? How does this affect our view of her individuality?

“Nineteen Fifty-five” (1981)

Influenced by the blues musicians of the 1950s, Walker's short story “Nineteen Fifty-five,” from the 1981 collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, tells the story of Gracie Mae Still's experiences with a popular singer, Traynor.

Told in first-person narrative over a period of 22 years (from 1955 to 1977), Gracie Mae, through reflections and letters, relates several incidents regarding the purchase of one of her songs (which is never named but closely resembles “Hound Dog” and the relationship between Willie Mae Thornton and Elvis Presley). It was not uncommon in the 1950s for white singers to purchase the rights for songs by black artists. One irony is that although Traynor makes millions from his rendition of the song, he is unable to enjoy the wealth because he does not understand the meaning behind the lyrics. He searches Gracie Mae's background, learning all he can about her and her life, in an effort to unlock their mysteries. Traynor even goes so far as to admit to Gracie Mae, “I don't have the faintest notion what that song means” (*You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* 8), and he later asks, “Where out of your life did [that song] come from?” (11),

but she never answers him. His life ends amid overindulgence and pills without an answer to his question.

While it might seem that Gracie Mae is tricked into selling the rights to her song for a paltry \$500, perhaps she is the one who does the tricking. Gracie Mae is a down-to-earth individual who admits the “deacon” and “boy” into her front room, but she never invites them into the back, where her husband has escaped and, perhaps figuratively, where the basis of her song exists. It is in this “tricking” that Walker uses the literary term *signifying*. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., signifying has its roots in Africa from the oral tales of a monkey who instigates dissent through the use of language play. It is possible that Gracie Mae is the one who—by withholding the information Traynor wants—gets the better part of the deal.

The rise and fall of the singer Traynor parallel events from Presley's own life: television appearances with hip-swinging gyrations, military service, a southern mansion (Graceland), failed relationships, overindulgence/overweight, and death by overdose of pills. What is more important is the contrast between Gracie Mae and Traynor and how they handle the stardom, hers vicariously through his.

While Traynor appears to search for happiness through material gain (cars, houses, wives, jewelry), Gracie Mae finds her happiness in cultivating the ordinary things of life (fishing, watching TV with her husband, losing weight). It is through this cultivation of the ordinary life that she remains balanced and generally happy. Traynor, on the other hand, cannot find balance in his life. A part of him may even blame his failures on not being able to understand the song he sings. The hollowness of his life needs to be filled with the meaning of the song he has made famous but does not understand. This, ultimately, is his tragedy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is Gracie Mae the foil or opposite of Traynor? How are they alike?
2. Why did Walker choose to tell the story though a first-person narrative? Is there bias in her story? How would a different perspective change the telling of the story?
3. *Signifying* is the use of metaphors, similes, and double entendres—language play—to communicate pain and resistance. How do people use signifying when communicating today? How is it used in the story?
4. The critic Maria V. Johnson states that the example of Gracie Mae's experience with Traynor is “the racist and exploitative phenomenon of white singers imitating or ‘covering’ the songs of African Americans” (2). Discuss the merits of this statement, giving examples to support your viewpoint.

The Color Purple (1982)

Walker's third novel is arguably her best known. Upon its publication, *The Color Purple* drew praise and criticism for Walker's portrayal of characters such as Celie, Pa, Mr. ———, Nettie, and Shug. The novel, written in epistolary style, tells its story through a number of letters composed over several years. While it addresses several topics (such as incest, abuse, and redemption), it also traces the developing relationship between two women. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983 (the first such award to an African-American female) as well as the National Book Award. In 1984, *The Color Purple* was made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Oprah Winfrey; a musical stage version opened on Broadway in 2005.

In spite of her surroundings and the abuse she encounters, Celie develops over time into a strong, self-assured woman. She grows through her relationships with her husband's mistress, her sister, her daughters-in-law, and even her abusive husband. As her character evolves, so do her letters. In the beginning, she writes to God. As Nettie says in a letter to Celie, “I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was” (*The Color Purple* 125). This is important because Celie feels too ashamed

and insignificant to pray directly to God; instead, her only means of communication with him is through these letters, which track the sexual abuse she suffers from Pa, the sorrow from the death of her Mama, and her fear that her sister Nettie will be Pa's next victim.

After Celie marries Mr. ———, the letters become longer and more narrative in style. Through these letters, we discover that she is treated as a servant and feels ugly and undeserving of any kindness. When Nettie goes to live with Celie and Mr. ———, Celie is initially pleased, but Mr. ———'s attention becomes too invasive and Nettie must leave. Celie gives the names of a minister and his wife who might help Nettie. Celie has seen them in town and recognized their daughter as her own first child, whom Pa had taken away. Nettie leaves, but not before promising, "Nothing but death can keep me from [writing]" (18). Since Celie does not receive any letters from Nettie, she assumes this is because Nettie is dead. She continues her letters to God to tell him plainly what is happening to her and to those around her. After she discovers that Nettie is alive and has been writing to her for several years, she begins writing to Nettie instead of to God.

Why does Celie write to God? Because the novel begins with the admonition from her Pa: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (1). What Celie not supposed to tell? How she became pregnant. Through this first statement, the theme of religion and its influence is significant in the novel. The lack of God's response is central, making Celie's conversation one-sided. But it is through these conversations that she is able to give some order to her universe. Religion is sprinkled throughout the novel, as when the women at the local church make assumptions about Celie due to her two pregnancies out of wedlock. Instead of offering a kind, supportive atmosphere, they shun her and whisper about her behind her back. This hurtful behavior festers in Celie; instead of religion's serving as a comfort to her, it only makes her feel more alienated. Even the letters that Celie writes to God are unanswered. But religion does save Nettie, for Sammy and Corrine offer her a safe

home. It is Shug who gives a new view of religion to Celie: "[People] come to church to *share* God, not find God" (188). Then she goes on to explain, "God is inside you and inside everybody else. . . . But only them that search for it inside find it. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found [God]" (190).

Another recurring theme in the novel is the abuse that Celie and others must bear. The first abuse is sexual, at the hands of Pa, who she believes is her father. Because her mother is no longer able to satisfy Pa's physical needs, he turns to Celie for release. This abuse continues through two pregnancies and ends only when she is married off to Mr. ———. Once married, Celie suffers physically, sexually, and emotionally. Mr. ——— seems to believe the only way to keep a woman under control is to beat her into submission. When his oldest son, Harpo, marries, Mr. ——— gives him this same advice. Unfortunately for Harpo, his wife, Sophia, is not a willing participant in the beatings and gives as good as she gets.

Loss is another theme of the novel. Not only does Celie lose her virginity through violence, but she also loses her self-esteem through the treatment she receives at the hands of the two men most influential in her life, Pa and Mr. ———. A second loss concerns Celie's two babies, whom Pa takes away, letting Celie believe they are dead. It is not until years later that she discovers they have been adopted by a local minister. Many more years pass before she has the opportunity to see both of them and be reunited. Another loss that affects Celie very deeply is that of her sister Nettie. After Nettie leaves Celie, she does not write, so Celie assumes she is dead. However, with the aid of Shug, Celie discovers letters that Mr. ——— has kept from her over the years. After her original anger subsides, Celie feels matters are going to be put right. It is at this point that the novel takes another powerful turn, and Celie begins writing her letters to Nettie instead of God.

One key idea in the novel is the concept of identity. When Celie is first offered in marriage to Mr. ———, she has no name for him. In her mind,

he is nameless—he is simply another man who is her master. Once Shug arrives to stay with them, Celie learns Mr. ———'s first name, *Albert*. This is a turning point for Celie because she now sees him as a person and not a master. Celie gains her own identity through Shug's encouragement. After Celie makes a pair of pants for Shug, everyone wants a pair. Celie starts small but ultimately opens her own factory. For once, she is the one who is in charge; she gives the orders. Her new identity is one of power. When she discovers the letters from Nettie that Mr. ——— has withheld from her, for the first time in her life Celie becomes angry. Her new identity begins to surface as she is able to feel something.

Finally, relationships, mainly among the women of the novel, play an important part in Celie's growth. The relationship between Celie and Shug is arguably the most important in the novel. Through this highly unlikely union, Celie is able to throw aside her low self-esteem, her apathy toward sex, and her inability to be angry. Shug helps Celie feel good about herself by encouraging her to start her own business, to experience orgasm, and to stand up to Albert (Mr.———). Another relationship that develops is between Celie and her husband. In the beginning, she is like a slave, waiting on him and his four children day and night, working in the fields, and being treated as a piece of property rather than a person. With the help of Shug, however, Celie stands up to Albert and leaves him to join Shug in Memphis. While there, Celie begins to take care of her appearance; when she returns to Georgia, Albert not only has changed his ways (now that he has learned that he must fend for himself, he cleans up after himself), but is appreciative of the new Celie. The two begin an uneasy relationship that blooms into something akin to friendship. Although this causes some jealousy in Shug (who is accustomed to having all of Albert's affection), it is a very powerful accomplishment for Celie. While the relationship between Shug and Celie would appear to be strained because they feel "married to the same man" (*In Search* 355), they are in actuality drawn together. Meanwhile, the relationship between Nettie and Corrine (the

minister's wife) would appear to be supportive, since both are employed in God's work among the natives in Africa; however, their relationship is at odds and Corrine cannot handle her jealousy.

Walker uses both music and colors as themes or symbols in the novel. Music is an expressive means for Shug and Mary Agnes as well as for Celie. Shug uses her music not only as a means of making a living and being independent, but also for expressing her emotions. When she creates a song for Celie, Celie says, "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (72). Harpo's second wife, Mary Agnes (Squeak), also turns to music as a way of finding independence. The colors yellow, red, and purple have meaning as well. Celie mentions the yellow dress that Shug has donated for patches in a quilt. Celie says the pieces are like stars, like the wishes that Celie dare not dream. Red is associated with Shug and her clothes and indicates desire and sexuality. Early in the novel, Celie desires purple fabric for a dress because it is the color of royalty and it reminds her of Shug; instead, she settles for the less flamboyant blue. Later in the novel, Celie says that she has been so busy thinking about how God is a white man that she has never thought about "the color purple (where it come from?)" (192). But it is Shug who says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (191). At first Celie wants to be like Shug, but as she matures, she thinks more on her own and begins noticing the evidence of God around her.

Just as significantly, *The Color Purple* examines multiple forms of love: love between sisters, love between friends, love between a man and a woman, and love between two women. It is through these examples of love that Celie matures into an independent woman by the end of the novel. Nettie writes to Celie, "There is so much we don't understand. And so much unhappiness comes because of that" (186). It is through this truth that Celie becomes liberated.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How effective is Walker's use of epistolary style? Discuss other possible styles she could have

- used. Would they have been as effective? Why or why not?
2. Trace the character of Shug Avery in the novel. How is she important to Celie's growth? Give specific examples from the text.
 3. Is this a feminist novel? Why or why not? Walker has been criticized for what some would call "black male bashing" because of her treatment of characters such as Pa and Mr. ———. What are your ideas on this topic? Give evidence from the novel to support your viewpoint.
 4. Nettie lives in a round house in Africa; Shug wants a round house in Memphis. What do you believe is the link between these two houses? Why does Walker include these details?
 5. Walker's portrayal of whites is sometimes criticized. Are all of the white characters in this novel racists? Explain, citing examples from the novel.

***In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983)**

Walker's first collection of essays was *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Dedicated to her daughter, Rebecca, "Who saw in me / what I considered / a scar / And redefined it / as / a world," Walker begins with her definition of the word *womanist*. She says that a womanist is one who is serious and willful, one who is interested in grown-up things. Along with other requirements, a womanist loves herself. She concludes with the concept "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (xii).

Many of her essays in part 1 reflect the importance of those who preceded her, who exemplified the existence and possibility of being an artist. She includes in this list Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Earnest Gaines, and Flannery O'Connor. Walker states that "what is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before" (5). Walker recalls TONI MORRISON's statement that "she writes the kind of books she wants to read" (8) and expands upon it by including her own justification for writ-

ing: "In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things *I should have been able to read*" (13). Walker concludes her first essay by explaining why writers write:

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are "minority" writers or "majority." It is simply in our power to do this. We do it because we care. . . . We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own*. (14)

Part 2 deals mainly with the Civil Rights movement and revolutionaries such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Coretta Scott King; Angela Davis; and members of the Cuban revolution.

Addressing the creative side of women in part 3, Walker claims that "these grandmothers and mothers of ours were . . . Artists. . . . They were Creators" (233). Phillis Wheatley, Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin were all artists who used their creativity to express the gifts within them. Walker compares women like her mother to these artists. Despite a life of rising before dawn to work all day in the fields, only to go home to continue with housework, her mother had a creative spark that was demonstrated in her ability to create a garden of beautiful flowers wherever the family had to move. "Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them" (241–242).

The final section of the collection addresses revolutions that she has joined—fighting injustice for all, nuclear arms, anti-Semitism—and notably the revolution within her when she was face to face with the pain associated with losing sight in her eye at age eight. As Walker tells it, Rebecca (her daughter) had looked into her mother's face very carefully and said, "'Mommy, there's a world in your eye . . . Mommy, where did you get that world in your eye?'" (379). Walker's response was to realize that

- and Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Examine how Walker and other African-American writers found a room of their own.
3. Religion is an important element in Walker's novels and stories. Evaluate its influence in *The Color Purple*, "Revolutionary Petunias," "The Welcome Table," and *Meridian*. Some ideas to consider: How does Shug Avery change the way that Celie looks at religion? How is religion important to Sammy Lou Rue? What is Walker's message about God in "The Welcome Table"? How does religion cause a schism between *Meridian* and her mother?
 4. Walker has been criticized for portraying black men in a negative light. Some critics see this representation only in Walker's male characters who are especially sexually active. Do you agree or disagree? Evaluate several male characters who are outside (either younger or older) the role of sexual dominator. Are they portrayed in a positive or negative light, especially in comparison to other male characters?
- #### WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
- Alice Walker—the Official Web Site for Alice Walker. Available online. URL: http://www.alicewalkersgarden.com/alice_walker_welcom.html. Accessed July 10, 2009.
- Bates, Gerri. *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Danielle, Chris. "Living by Grace." 1999. Available online. URL: http://members.tripod.com/chris-danielle/alicebio_1.html. Accessed November 4, 2006.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- , and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Howard, Lillie P., ed. *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993.
- Johnson, Maria V. "You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down": Alice Walker Sings the Blues." *African American Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 221–236. Available online. URL: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_/ai_18571821. Accessed October 12, 2009
- Jokinen, Anniina. Anniina's Alice Walker Page Web site. Available online. URL: www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew. Accessed November 4, 2006.
- Kramer, Barbara. *Alice Walker: Author of "The Color Purple"*. Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow, 1995.
- Lauret, Maria. *Alice Walker*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Moyers, Bill. *Now with Bill Moyers* 21 March 2003. PBS. Available online. URL: www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript212_full.html. Accessed November 4, 2006.
- O'Brien, John. "Alice Walker: An Interview." In *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, 326–346. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Available online. URL: www.aracnet.com/~maime/rilke4.html. Accessed November 4, 2006.
- Stanford, Barbara Dodds, and Karima Amin. *Black Literature for High School Students*. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978.
- Walker, Alice. *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- . *Alice Walker Banned*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1996.
- . *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. New York: Random House, 1997.
- . *By the Light of My Father's Smile: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1998.
- . *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt, 1982.
- . *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning: Poems*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1979.
- . *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965–1990 Complete*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1991.
- . *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful: Poems*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1984.
- . *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1973.

- . *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1983.
- . *Langston Hughes, American Poet*. New York: Crowell, 1974.
- . *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973–1987*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1988.
- . *Meridian*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1976.
- . *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- . *Once: Poems*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1968.
- . *A Poem Traveled down My Arm: Poems and Drawings*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Harcourt, 1992.
- . *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1973.
- . *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult: A Meditation on Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film The Color Purple, Ten Years Later*. New York: Scribner, 1996.
- . *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit: After the Attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001.
- . *The Temple of My Familiar*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1989.
- . *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1970.
- . *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*. New York: Random House, 2000.
- . *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*. New York: New Press, 2006.
- . *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Short Stories*. New York: Harcourt, 1981.
- Walker, Alice, ed. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979.
- Walker, Alice, and Pratibha Parmar. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. New York: Harcourt, 1993.
- Watkins, Mel. "The Color Purple (1982): The New York Times Book Review July 25, 1982." In *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, 16–18. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- White, David. "'Everyday Use': Defining African-American Heritage." *Portals* 2001. Anniina's Alice Walker Page Web site. 19 September 2002. Available online. URL: www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew/davidwhite.htm. Accessed November 21, 2006.
- White, Evelyn C. *Alice Walker: A Life*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.
- Winchell, Donna Haisty. *Alice Walker*. New York: Twayne, 1992.

Kathleen McKenzie



AUGUST WILSON (1945–2005)

The message of America is “Leave your Africanness outside the door.” My message is “Claim what is yours.”

(quoted in the *New York Times Magazine*, 10 June 1987)

If it can be said that a single voice dominated the American theater from the 1980s through 2005, that voice definitely belonged to the playwright August Wilson. Wilson, whom the news analyst Gwen Ifill called “the American Shakespeare,” was a prolific writer with more than 10 major plays, numerous theatrical commentaries, and other creative work to his credit. Yet it is not merely the number of his productions that marks Wilson’s dominance in modern drama, but his ability to put into words the ideas and experiences of everyday African Americans, who have long been ignored or displaced altogether in drama created by playwrights from the mainstream white society. His characters, while living out their lives for the most part in a single locale, grapple with themes and issues that face all humanity. In constructing a thoroughly American world of recording studios, taxi stands, backyards, and kitchens, Wilson created a body of drama with universal appeal.

One of only seven Americans to have won multiple Pulitzer Prizes for drama, Wilson was, in addition to being one of the country’s finest playwrights, one of its most ambitious writers. (Other dramatists who won the Pulitzer Prize two or more times are Edward Albee, George S. Kaufman, Eugene O’Neill, Robert E. Sherwood, Thornton Wilder, and Tennessee Williams.) Early in his dramatic career, he assigned

himself the goal of writing 10 plays that, taken together, would depict African-American experiences in the 20th century. Each play was to be set in a different decade and to reflect cultural issues vital to giving a well-rounded picture of life in the United States.

Wilson devoted almost three decades to the project, which he completed just before his death in 2005. (*Radio Golf*, the 10th play in the cycle, made its Los Angeles debut after Wilson had been diagnosed with liver cancer, a scant four months before he died.) In the course of pursuing this dramatic cultural history of America, Wilson not only completed his mission, but also did so in a manner garnering widespread public and critical praise, as well as numerous fellowships and awards. Having “envisioned theatre as a means to raise the collective community’s conscience about black life in 20th-century America,” Wilson also proved himself to be a gifted writer whose themes and characters are so complex and so skillfully wrought that they merit the international acclaim they have received (Elkins xi).

It would be a mistake to classify Wilson as either a historian or a merely didactic writer. He denied that his primary interest was history, although his plays are steeped in actual events. Rather, he was more concerned with exploring black culture: “I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother’s life—her

myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art” (*Seven Guitars* n.p.). He referred to himself as

a representative of a culture and the carrier of some very valuable antecedents . . . [and says that his development as a writer originated in] black cultural nationalism as exemplified by Amiri Baraka in the sixties. It posited black Americans as coming from a long line of honorable people with a cultural and political history, a people of manners with a strong moral personality that had to be reclaimed by strengthening the elements of the culture that made it unique and by developing institutions for preserving and promoting it. The ideas of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense which it espoused are still very much a part of my life as I sit down to write. (*Three Plays* ix)

According to Mike Downing, Wilson elected to present America through a black cultural lens because “white culture has access to all the mechanisms to promote its own agenda; whereas black culture has not had the same benefits. That’s why he presses this agenda.”

Wilson did acknowledge himself to be “a race man,” claiming the Black Power movement of the 1960s as “the kiln in which I was fired,” the experience that caused him to see how deeply embedded race and racism are in the culture of the United States (*Ground* 12). He considered race the single most important aspect African Americans share, because it “allows for group identification and it is the organizing principle around which cultures are formed” (12). Since black Americans have the common legacy of slavery, Wilson says, “we [are] now seeking ways to alter our relationship to the society in which we live—and, perhaps more important, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of ourselves

as a community of people” (12). Wilson saw the dearth of black theaters as a reflection of “the problematic nature of the relationship between whites and blacks,” resulting not in any lack of talent, but in a lack of funding for black theater (16). In both his staged plays and his theatrical criticism, Wilson calls for a new kind of drama, one that is created by black artists writing about black experience and is staged by black directors. In an interview with *Ebony’s* Charles Whitaker, Wilson said, “I write, like any artist, for an audience of one, basically, to satisfy myself. But I’m also trying to make an aesthetic statement. What I am trying to do is put Black culture on stage and demonstrate to the world—not to White folks, not to Black folks, but to the world—that it exists and that it is capable of sustaining you. I want to show the world that there is no idea or concept in the human experience that cannot be examined through Black life and culture.” Wilson led the way in producing the drama he called for, with a body of work known around the world for its excellence.

Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr., in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945, the fourth of six children. His parents were Frederick August Kittel, Sr., a baker of Austro-Hungarian descent, and Daisy Wilson, an African-American cleaning woman of great inner strength, whose own determined mother had gone to Pittsburgh from Spear, North Carolina, walking the entire way (Snodgrass 5). Wilson recalls the importance of the cultural training he obtained growing up in his mother’s house:

I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain . . . that my mother had learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent. It is this culture that stands on these shores today as a testament to the resiliency of the African American spirit. (*Ground* 15–16)

After the death of his father in 1969, Wilson elected to adopt his mother's birth name, rather than that of his father or of David Bedford, his stepfather. The playwright dedicated his first dramatic success, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), to his mother and credits her for his habit of voracious reading and his love of words. Sadly, she died of lung cancer just months before *Ma Rainey* opened on Broadway.

Wilson's early childhood was spent in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, a diverse locale that figures as the setting for all but one of his plays. Until high school, he attended neighborhood Catholic schools. When in 1959 his stepfather moved the family to a mostly white suburb, Wilson encountered pervasive racism as the only black student in his school, Gladstone High. When he was 15, a teacher who failed to recognize the extent of his talent falsely accused him of plagiarizing a report on Napoleon Bonaparte and challenged him to prove his authorship. Outraged and disgusted, Wilson threw the report into the trash and left school, spending his days educating himself at the neighborhood Carnegie Library, where he read widely and voraciously. (One honor that Wilson particularly treasured is the high school diploma issued him by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in recognition of his de facto education there; his is the only one it has awarded.) About that period, the writer says, "Those were my learning years. I read everything and anything that I could get my hands on, things that interested me: Anthropology was one, cultural anthropology; theology was another. I read books on furniture making. I read everything, novels, whatever" (Fitzgerald 1). He spent the next two years in a series of jobs until entering the U.S. Army, securing a discharge after one year.

Returning to Pittsburgh, Wilson began his writing career as a poet rather than a dramatist. Much of his life over the next few years was spent in reading widely, buying hundreds of jazz records and playing them over and over, and listening to ordinary people speaking on the streets, all of which would form the foundation for his later

work in drama. In 1965, he helped to establish the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop, one of a number of artistic communities he would be instrumental in founding. Three years afterward, along with Rob Penny, Wilson founded the Black Horizon Theater. Wilson was married briefly, from 1969 to 1972, to Brenda Burton. During the 1970s, his poetry output intensified, culminating in the piece Wilson considered his best to date, 1973's "Morning Statement."

In 1976, Wilson attended Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, a play that, according to critics, "may be viewed as a theatrical response to the very complicated and dynamic sociopolitical situation [of apartheid]" (www.fb10.uni-bremen.de). From this experience, Wilson began increasingly to see theater as a critical ingredient of any discussion of cultural life in the United States. Further, he felt so strongly that he could play a role in the development of American drama in this important direction that in 1978 he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to write drama for Claude Purdy and to become a scriptwriter for the Science Museum of Minnesota. Soon Wilson was deeply involved with the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. His first play to be produced was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, a satirical western Wilson had adapted from an earlier series of poems; it appeared at the Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul in 1981. Other early plays by Wilson are *The Homecoming*, 1979; *The Coldest Day of the Year*, 1979; *Fullerton Street*, 1980; and *The Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket*, 1983.

The year before the appearance of *Black Bart*, Rob Penny, Wilson's longtime friend and collaborator, sent him a brochure calling for submissions for the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference in New York. Each summer, 15 of approximately 1,500 playwrights were invited to produce their work at this conference, which was conducted by the legendary director Lloyd Richards. Penny urged Wilson to submit his writing for consideration. Following Penny's suggestion, Wilson submitted a play that was rejected for the O'Neill, as were his next four.

Nevertheless, these were productive years. *Jitney*, a drama that later became a part of Wilson's 10-play cycle, was written during this period and in 1982 was produced at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. That same year, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted for production at the O'Neill Theater. Wilson says his experience at the O'Neill summer workshops cannot be overlooked in his growth as a playwright, and he credits the "many talented professionals, who, by their insights and provocations, have contributed to important changes in the texts" (*Three Plays* xii–xiii). From that time on, multiple revisions would become standard in the playwright's creative process.

Wilson went to New York, where he met Lloyd Richards, a man who would profoundly influence his writing. Richards's stature as dean of the American theater had been established long before their meeting, when in 1958 he directed Lorraine Hansberry's revolutionary drama *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway. Richards recognized in Wilson the dramatic talent he had been seeking. The two began a supportive relationship that would continue beyond Richards's retirement in 1991 and includes subsequent productions of *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, and *Seven Guitars*, all parts of Wilson's 10-play chronicle. Wilson and Richards also established a pattern that worked well for them—Wilson's new play would premiere in a regional theater, go through rewrites until it was ready for a larger audience, and then be presented on Broadway. In 1983 *Fences*, Wilson's play set in the 1950s, began its run at the O'Neill.

After an attention-getting engagement there, followed by further development, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* opened on Broadway on October 11, 1984. Critics were full of praise for the play and its creator, acknowledging Wilson as a significant new dramatic voice and calling the play

a major find for the American theater. . . . This play is a searing inside account of what white racism does to its victims—and it floats on

the same authentic artistry as the blues music it celebrates. Harrowing as *Ma Rainey's* can be, it is also funny, salty, carnal and lyrical. Like his real-life heroine, the legendary singer Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, Mr. Wilson articulates a legacy of unspeakable agony and rage in a spellbinding voice. (Rich "Wilson's *Ma Rainey's* Opens")

Ma Rainey went on to be nominated for a Tony Award and win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best American play, the first of several that would go to Wilson's work. Meanwhile, a new play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, had been accepted at the O'Neill. Wilson, no longer a struggling unknown, was also awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship, given in support of emerging talents who have the potential for being major forces in their fields.

In 1985, *Fences* opened at the Yale Repertory Company, to be followed by the Yale Repertory opening of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in 1986. Also that year, Wilson was the recipient of a Whiting Foundation Award for *Ma Rainey* and a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. When *Fences* began its New York run on March 26, 1987, its reception surpassed even that of Wilson's earlier work. The *New York Times* critic Frank Rich gave what for him was a rave review, saying, "*Fences* leaves no doubt that Mr. Wilson is a major writer, combining a poet's ear for vernacular with a robust sense of humor, a sure sense for crackling dramatic incident, and a passionate commitment to a great subject" ("Family Ties"). Awards for *Fences* seemingly could not stop coming: In 1987 alone, it won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Tony Award for best dramatic work, and finally the Pulitzer Prize. The Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Award honored Wilson as the best American playwright, and the *Chicago Tribune* capped off the year by naming him Artist of the Year. Early in 1988, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* appeared on Broadway, winning another Tony nomination and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

But Wilson was not slowing down. His next Pulitzer-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson*, was already being workshopped in New Haven, Connecticut, at the Yale Repertory. When it opened on Broadway in 1990, the play quickly won a Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Drama Desk Award for best new play, going on to obtain a second Pulitzer for its author. The *Time* critic William A. Henry III proclaimed, "The musical instrument of the title is the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Wingfield's glass menagerie." When the second Pulitzer was conferred upon Wilson, *Time* stated he had "established himself as the richest theatrical voice to emerge in the U.S. since Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Just as significant, he has transcended the categorization of 'black' playwright to demonstrate that his stories, although consistently about black families and communities, speak to the entire U.S. culture" ("Two-Timer"). Critics around the country raved, describing *The Piano Lesson* in such lavish terms as *haunting*, *mesmerizing*, *provocative*, and *riveting* (Wilson, *Piano Lesson* n.p.). Significantly, Clive Barnes of the *New York Post*, as well as the drama critic from the Newark, New Jersey, *Star-Ledger*, commented on the sophisticated humor in the play, while pointing to its dramatic dimensions. A solid, rich humor is an important part of most of Wilson's drama, whether used as a coping device; a cultural practice such as "doing the dozens," in which characters hurl taunts at one another, trying to see who can land a supreme blow; or just the realistic give and take of everyday living.

New Wilson plays followed quickly, as did awards and acclaim for them. At one point, Wilson even had two plays on Broadway simultaneously. *Two Trains Running* opened on Broadway in 1992 to critical praise, followed by an additional Tony nomination and an American Theatre Critics' Association award. In 1996, *Seven Guitars*, the sixth play written for the Pittsburgh Cycle, appeared and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best new play. Critics praised the work for its lyricism and gripping

action, its musicality, and its thoughtful comedy, all showing a writer who had come into his own. Next was *King Hedley II*, which was nominated for what would have been Wilson's third Pulitzer and garnered its author another Tony nomination. Despite critical kudos, *King Hedley's* intensity did not find an audience, and the play was not a popular success. Wilson saved the framework decades of the 1900s and 1990s for his last two plays in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*.

The 10 plays of Wilson's decades project, sometimes known as the Pittsburgh Cycle, have won a Tony Award, an Olivier Award, two Pulitzer Prizes, five New Play Awards from the American Theatre Critics Association, and seven New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards. The playwright won the Whiting Writers Award, the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre, and numerous other prestigious prizes. Additional honors include Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and McKnight fellowships; a National Humanities Medal; numerous honorary doctorates; and the 2003 Heinz Award in Arts and Humanities. He was a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1995, Wilson was nominated for an Emmy for his screenplay for *The Piano Lesson*. The New Dramatists, America's oldest nonprofit workshop, gave Wilson a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2003, and in 2006 the Signature Theatre Company in New York City was dedicated to his dramatic achievements.

Wilson was the father of two daughters—Sakina Ansari, from his short-lived marriage to Brenda Burton, and Azula Carmen Wilson, from his third marriage, to the artist and costume designer Constanza Romero. He habitually dedicated his theatrical works to those who played an important part in his life. For example, he dedicated *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to Sakina Ansari, *Fences* to Lloyd Richards, *The Piano Lesson* to his five sisters and brothers, *Seven Guitars* to Constanza Romero, *Jitney* to Azula Carmen,

and *King Hedley II* in part to Rob Penny. Wilson spent his last years in Seattle, Washington, where he made his home after the dissolution of his second marriage (1981–90), to Judy Oliver, a social worker.

Remembering the impulse that began his career as a dramatist, Wilson spoke of his deeply felt desire to emulate the blues, which he saw as “a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators” (*Three Plays* x). Early on, he recalled:

I turned my ear, my heart, and whatever analytical tools I possessed to embrace this world. I elevated it, rightly or wrongly, to biblical status. I rooted out the ideas and attitudes expressed in the music, charted them and bent and twisted and stretched them. I gave my whole being, muscle and bone and sinew and flesh and spirit, over to the emotional reference provided by the music. . . . This was life being lived in all its timbre and horrors, with the zest and purpose and the affirmation of the self of worthy of the highest possibilities and the highest celebration. What more fertile ground could any artist want? (x)

Throughout the decades of his dramatic creativity, Wilson continued to write “with the blues and what I call the blood’s memory as my only guide and companion” (xii). The world-class plays he created as a result of this strong commitment assure Wilson’s place in the artistic life of America.

Shortly after Wilson learned in June 2005 that he had liver cancer and would have only three to five months to live, he told Christopher Rawson, drama editor of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, “It’s not like poker, you can’t throw your hand in. I’ve lived a blessed life. I’m ready. I’m glad I finished the cycle [of plays].” He spent the two months after learning of his illness working on a

major rewrite of *Radio Golf*, although his condition did not allow him to go to Los Angeles for the rehearsals, the first such absence in his career; still, he communicated almost daily through fax and phone, spending his final months also working on a number of other writing projects.

At the time of Wilson’s death, the *Time* critic Richard Zoglin offered this assessment of the dramatist’s contribution:

His work stood apart from, and above, nearly everything else in contemporary American theater. While others wrote spare, personal, ironic plays, Wilson’s were big, verbose and passionate, brimming with social protest and epic poetry. Offstage, too, he was a maverick, opposing color-blind casting and advocating what some felt was a separatist black theater. Yet his work will endure, for everyone. (27)

***Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1981, 1985)**

Although *Ma Rainey* opened on Broadway in 1984, Wilson had begun writing it in 1976, after seriously listening to the blues for an extended time. As a young man, he had bought old 78 rpm records for a nickel apiece, eventually collecting about 2,000 and listening to all of them with an eager ear. The playwright acknowledged the blues as one of the prime influences on his artistry, which he calls his “four Bs”: “Romare Bearden [the collage artist]; Imamu AMIRI BARAKA [a.k.a. Leroi Jones]; the poet and dramatist; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine poet and short-story writer; and the most significant B of all: the blues” (Wilson, “How to Write a Play” 2.5). Pressed by the reporter Marcy Silman to prioritize these four, Wilson named the blues (www.npr.org). He recalls:

One night in the fall of 1965 I put a type-written yellow-labeled record titled “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine,” by someone named Bessie Smith, on

the turntable of my 78 rpm phonograph, and the universe stuttered and everything fell to a new place. . . . I cannot describe or even relate what I felt. Suffice it to say it was a birth, a baptism, a resurrection, and a redemption all rolled up in one. . . . With my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful, and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle. (*Three Plays ix*)

What Wilson discovered afresh that night was the power of vernacular language. Bessie Smith sang in the language of the street, yet communicated with all the subtlety the most elevated poet could employ. As much as he admired writers such as, say, Dylan Thomas, Wilson realized that the black vernacular is as powerful an instrument as any playwright could want for his characters. From that time on, he determined to make the same linguistic commitment as that made by Borges, whose work he so admires: "In the language of the day I will say eternal things" (*Seven Black Plays x*). *Ma Rainey*, as well as each of Wilson's subsequent plays, remains true to that commitment.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom takes its title from the blues song of the same name. The play is set in 1927 Chicago at a rundown recording studio on the South Side, where members of a blues band wait to record a session with Ma Rainey, the legendary blues queen. Tied to a slavery and sharecropping past they can still remember, caught in the conflicts between their rural past and urban present, *Ma Rainey's* black characters are searching for an identity of their own; presumably, they can find it in the music. The blues, in this play functioning as Wilson's symbol of the African-American heritage, could "instruct and allow [free men of definite and sincere worth] to reconnect if it were truly heard as Ma herself hears it, as a personal song to be improvised and sung with

fervor (*Ma Rainey xvi*). Ma values the blues as "life's way of talking . . . a way of understanding life . . . [and]keep[ing] things balanced" (82). Others do not see the matter Ma's way. For Sturdyvant and Irvin, the white producer and agent who have set up the session, the music is only a way to "make a bundle" (19). These men have become wealthy exploiting Ma's recordings, providing a strong example of black victimization by social racism. As one character explains, "White folks don't care nothing about Ma Rainey. She's just another nigger who they can use to make them some money" (97).

Nor is there black unity in *Ma Rainey*; the squabbles among the musicians offer a natural way for Wilson to explore both intra- and interracial conflict. Of particular note is Levee, whom the playwright pits against Ma, the band members, and the whites. The most frequent targets of Levee's abuse are Christianity and Toledo's philosophical talk about building a better life. He demeans Toledo's ideas as ineffectual nonsense, calling him "Booker T. Washington" and telling him he's "just a whole lot of mouth" with his "highfalutin ideas" and "that old philosophy bullshit" (41–42). Levee feels that "if there's a god up there, he done went to sleep . . . God don't mean nothing to me" (43, 46). This relentlessly bitter man has concluded that if there were a God, the inequities black people suffer daily would not be allowed. He becomes increasingly antagonistic, countering Toledo's dreams with his own horrific memories, including seeing his mother gang-raped when he was eight years old. Trying to defend her, Levee was slashed with a knife; he still carries the scar, both literally and metaphorically.

Much of the second act consists of a series of debates between Toledo and Levee about the fairness of life and the powerlessness of blacks in a white-dominated society. He becomes increasingly overwrought when he hears Cutler, the leader of the blues band, recall a bitter memory of his own. A minister whom Cutler knew, the Reverend Gates, became a victim of racist Jim

Crow laws when, getting off a train to use the bathroom at a small southern crossroads, he failed to return on time because the only facility available to blacks was a remote outhouse. A group of whites with guns torment the minister, tearing the cross from his neck, ripping his Bible, and making him dance. Hearing this story, Levee is incensed: "Why didn't God strike some of them crackers down? . . . 'Cause he a white man's God. That's why. God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers. God take a nigger's prayers and throw them in the garbage. . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart . . . "God can kiss my ass" (98). Hearing this, Cutler leaps to his feet and smashes Levee in the mouth. Levee pulls a knife and begins screaming, enraged not so much at Cutler as at life itself, which in his view offers a black man no recourse. Maybe, he thinks, he can find an outlet in the music, which he has a gift for arranging.

But Sturdyvant rejects Levee's music and dismisses him condescendingly. Levee again pulls his knife, this time turning on the first person he sees in order to express all the pent-up frustrations from the racism he and others have suffered at white hands North and South. It happens to be Toledo, and before he is aware of what he has done, Levee has stabbed and killed the man. This recording session—not a rehearsal of music so much as of the evils of a racist society—ends in victimization. Once again, the black man's ability to find and celebrate his song, so central an idea in Wilson's plays, is thwarted.

An important stylistic innovation began for Wilson in this first major play: the insertion of poetic introductions, often not acted out on stage or included in the playbill. These introductions display the skill Wilson had honed in his long years as a poet. *Ma Rainey's* introduction, for example, speaks to the blues, the ever-significant refrain in his drama: "It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other. . . . [It] would instruct and allow them

to reconnect, to reassemble and gird up for the next battle in which they would be both victim and the ten thousand slain" (16). The prologue to *Fences*, his next Broadway production, would maintain this new tradition in high poetic form. Even Wilson's stage directions for the entire cycle indicate that he always retained his poetic beginnings. In *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), for example, one of the characters, Solly, is mortally wounded. As Aunt Ester moves to treat the injury, Wilson directs the actress who plays the role: "Aunt Ester and Black Mary begin to work urgently at treating the wound, trying to stop the flow of blood. For Aunt Ester it is an old, old, unwelcome visitation" (81). By the time he had written *King Hedley II*, the 1980s play, Wilson was including prologues in which his overviews of the cultural life to be staged were acted out, becoming integral parts of the drama. For some playwrights, any introductions and stage directions are simply directions to cast and crew; for Wilson, that is not so. They must be interpreted along with the dialogue, often carrying serious weight.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Listen to several blues recordings, especially those featuring Bessie Smith. What features of the music do you think inspired Wilson?
2. Examine the character of Levee. Is he more a malcontent or a realist? Justify your response with quotes from the play.
3. Read ALICE WALKER's "Nineteen Fifty-five," from her collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). As Wilson's *Ma Rainey* does, Walker's short story deals with exploitation of a black artist. Compare and contrast the two main characters.

Fences (1986)

By the time of *Fences*, Wilson's 1950s play, the great migration had ended, leaving blacks in northern cities much busier coping with the challenges of everyday living than their parents

had hoped when they began the move out of the South. Wilson makes this focus clear in his prologue: Unlike European immigrants and their descendents, he writes,

descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation [in the city]. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they . . . [lived] in quiet desperation and vengeful pride . . . in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (xvii)

Wilson's main consideration in this play is the fences society builds around us and those we construct, willingly or unwillingly, around ourselves.

The chief individual in this family tragedy is Troy Maxon, played on Broadway in a Tony-winning performance by James Earl Jones. Troy's extreme bitterness results from never being able to realize his dream of playing professional baseball. His glory days were years before the 1957 setting of the play, when baseball was segregated and members of Troy's Negro League did not stand a chance for advancement. Unable to read, he has spent his life working as a garbage man, a menial job that does little more than put food on the table and constantly remind Troy how far he has fallen from his dreams. His son Cory, with whom Troy has an embattled relationship, is a star athlete, too, a football player. When Troy intervenes, forcing Cory to give up football just before a college recruiter is arriving to watch him play, tension between the two comes to a head as Cory accuses his father: "You ain't never gave me nothing! You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name. . . . You can't whup me no more. You're

too old. You just an old man" (86–87). Troy, enraged at his son's words—a mixture of truthful accusations and a hurtful inability to recognize what his father has done for him—advances on Cory with a baseball bat, then orders him to get out. His own dreams dashed, Cory runs away to join the army.

A theme of *Fences*, articulated so strongly before in Wilson's drama (particularly in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), is the need to sing one's own song. The recurrent melody in the play is a traditional folk song from Troy's childhood about a dog named Blue that "treed a possum out on a limb" (99). The final scene takes place eight years after Cory's last encounter with his father, on the day of Troy's funeral. Unable to stay away in spite of all that has passed between them, Cory goes home and confronts his connections with the past.

One of these legacies is his tie to his half sister Raynell, with whom he shares the memory of their father's song. When Cory connects with her, he affirms his part in a long continuum of events beginning in Pittsburgh but moving back beyond the middle passage to Africa. Cory and Raynell are finally able to sing their father's song together. It is at once theirs and Troy's and older than all of them, a melody that speaks of their interconnectedness. It signifies, as Ralph Ellison says of the blues, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (90). Threading backward through time, this simple song binds brother and sister to each other and to the mixture of pain and unarticulated love that is their common inheritance. At its conclusion, they are for the first time truly a family (Gantt *passim*).

One often-overlooked aspect of *Fences* is the strength of Rose, Troy's wife. A woman who has sacrificed everything of her own to try to make Troy happy, Rose at first may seem to support those critics who say Wilson does not have

a strong female character in his plays. But Rose emerges as Wilson's first important female character, a woman who foreshadows the outspoken Tonya in *King Hedley II* and the invincible Aunt Ester, the focal character in *Gem of the Ocean*. In Rose's most significant speech she challenges Troy:

Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me? Don't you think . . . that I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget my responsibilities? . . . You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you. . . . I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going . . . I wanted to be there with you. Cause you was my husband. Cause that's the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving! (70–71)

The irony in Rose's life is that the more she submerges her own personality in Troy's, the more resentment he feels about the responsibilities she embodies and the more he wants to escape her.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Wilson's introductory remarks and stage directions to *Fences* to the poetry of such writers as Robert Frost, RITA DOVE, or PAT MORA. Does Wilson's writing exhibit poetic qualities? How? Keep in mind that Wilson was a poet before he turned to writing drama.
2. Select a second Wilson play that contains a substantive introduction. Realizing that audiences would not hear or read these introductions, compare the two in terms of what they add to the play, even under these circumstances. Justify your response with support from each play and your own critical sense.
3. *Fences* has often been compared to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, primarily for its depiction of an authoritarian father/son conflict and for its treatment of the American dream. Do a comparative study of the two plays.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988)

Like all of Wilson's dramas, *Joe Turner* is a play in two acts. The year 1911 is the setting for its action, which treats the lives of people living in Seth Holly's Pittsburgh boardinghouse, a natural microcosm where a variety of people can come together. According to Wilson, *Joe Turner* began as a short story that soon moved into being a play (Shannon 229).

From the play's inception, Wilson introduces the idea of black Americans as a wandering people. The prologue places the action in the context of the diaspora—especially that involving southern slavery—with a lyrical description of the migration by the “sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves” to the great cities of the North, where they hope to shape “a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth” (iii). Significantly, slavery exists for these wanderers in the freshness of memory or of actual lived experience. “Foreigners in a strange land. . . . Isolated, cut off from memory . . . they arrive dazed and stunned” by all they have already endured (iii). The psychological baggage they carry is considerable: Refused full access both to their African heritage and to modern financial and political power, they desire ways to “give clear and luminous meaning” to the as-yet-unarticulated song they have within, one composed of both “a wail and a whelp of joy” (iii). They arrive “carrying Bibles and guitars,” symbols of old faith and new songs (iii).

In this play, as in others, Wilson shows no reluctance to explore the slave past, about which he says, “Blacks in America want to forget about slavery—the stigma, the shame. That's the wrong

move. If you can't be who you are, who can you be? How can you know what to do?" (Freedman 40). For *Joe Turner's* characters, the quest for identity and the pain of memory are inextricably bound.

Bynum, a root worker and conjure man, is in many ways the most intriguing character in the play. Always "lost in a world of his own making," he is searching—not, as is Herald Loomis, for an actual missing person, but for his "shiny man," who has appeared to him in a vision (4, 6). In Bynum's vision, the stranger promises to show him the secret of life but instead leads him to a mystic place where he encounters his father's ghost. The ghost charges Bynum not to sing someone else's song, but to find one of his own; the shiny man will give him a unique melody that will be "accepted and work its full power in the world" (10). Bynum's vision is heavy with symbolic meaning in the African-American search for identity. Forced for so long to sing others' songs, African Americans must find their own and sing them boldly.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look up the term *magical realism*. How does Wilson's use of magical realism in this play compare with examples by other writers? Compare Wilson's magical realism to that of writers such as RUDOLFO ANAYA or Gabriel García Márquez.
2. As do Ralph Ellison, TONI MORRISON, and others, Wilson incorporates several aspects of folk medicine in his drama. Discuss his use of the root worker in *Joe Turner*.
3. At the end of act 1, there is a lively musical display called a *juba*. What is a juba? What are its origins and traditions? How does it function in this play, both literally and symbolically?

The Piano Lesson (1990)

Set in 1936, *The Piano Lesson* takes place in the Pittsburgh kitchen and parlor of the house

that Doaker Charles occupies with his niece, Berniece, and her daughter, Maretha, and soon visited by Berniece's brother, Boy Willie. Typical of Wilson's plays, this one is in two acts. The background of the Great Depression, as well as the humble circumstances of the family, dictates simple surroundings. The focal point of their parlor is a piano, never played, which is decorated with elaborate carvings of figures.

The "whole solid past" that will not be rejected, but must be faced and dealt with, is perhaps strongest in this drama (Welty 206). The "lesson" of the title is not just one conducted on the keys of the upright that dominates the family parlor; it is also inscribed in the wooden carvings the piano bears, masklike figures of Berniece and Boy Willie's ancestors, long departed. The carvings are reminiscent of African sculptures "rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them . . . into the realm of art" (Wilson, *Piano Lesson* xiii). They are, for this family, the only record of the ancestors who live on in their names and memories.

Further, the piano's lesson is dramatically emphasized throughout the play in the Charleses' confrontations about whether to sell the piano to finance Boy Willie's dream of buying Mississippi farmland on which their family once worked as slaves for Sutter—a move resonant with irony and justice—or to hold on to it for what it represents to Berniece of their proud spiritual legacy of reverence for family and the past. According to Frank Rich, "the disposition of the piano becomes synonymous with the use to which the characters put their ancestral legacy . . . somber shrine to a tragic past [or] stake to freedom" ("A Family Confronts Its History"). Truly "the past has never passed" for this haunted sister and brother but exists in ghosts of their Mississippi heritage that are both actual and psychological (Ching 71). Here Wilson invites his audience to consider a number of crucial questions: What is the place of tradition? Of community? Of family? Of the past? What do we owe them and memory? To examine these issues, *The Piano Lesson's*

characters must recall and evaluate their heritage and what it signifies for their shared futures. For this reason, this play is presented more through storytelling than through action.

Wilson skillfully conducts the debate between brother and sister, with each confrontation adding more details to the family story. Wining Boy, Doaker's older brother, brings matters to a climax with his musical tribute to memory. All at once everyone feels the presence of Sutter's ghost, but no one can exorcise it. Even Boy Willie wrestles with the ghost but is thrown. Berniece then realizes that only she can save them from Sutter's evil presence, and that she must do so by playing the piano. She can neither ignore the past nor let it lie dormant nor sell it nor give it away. She must take it up and "play" it, making its song a part of her and of all of them.

She sits at the piano and begins a powerful song, playing her incantation to Mama Berniece, Mama Ester, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola—the old ones whose ancestral portraits in the legs of the piano have prevented the past from being forgotten—asking them repeatedly to help her preserve her family from their common enemy. Her prayer is granted, and Sutter's ghost vanishes. Berniece, in whose name kinship is embedded, liberates her family by squarely facing the past she has steadfastly avoided throughout the play. All find comfort in the confrontation. Berniece learns, as Wilson insists his people must, that she cannot suppress any portion of her own sense of self if she and her loved ones are to move on with their lives, balanced and whole. At the conclusion of *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie leaves for Mississippi, content for the piano to stay where it is so long as someone will make use of it to give music and meaning to the present. Through music, the piano's song reaffirms the stories of the past, transforming the ugly and awful, along with the beautiful and tender, into a joyous melody of hope (Gantt passim).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *The Piano Lesson*, a heavily carved piano functions as an important symbol. As you read Wilson's play, be alert to what the piano means to various characters. What is its "lesson"?
2. One of the fundamental principles of the debate between Berniece and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* is that neither side is clearly right or wrong. Discuss the key factors in each character's position, defending it as if it were your own.
3. Discuss Wilson's use of the vernacular in *The Piano Lesson*. What does it contribute to the play? Examine vernacular speech in the oral histories conducted during the 1930s by interviewers from the Federal Writers' Project, available on the Internet from the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov). How faithful is the speech of Wilson's characters to actual speech from the 1930s?
4. Compare *The Piano Lesson* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* for their views of the depression era in the United States. What are the similarities of the experiences of poor blacks and poor whites? What are the differences?
5. In connection with *The Piano Lesson*, read JULIA ALVAREZ'S *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, AMY TAN'S *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES'S *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and/or CHANG-RAE LEE'S *Native Speaker*. How does each work depict the complex legacy of the past?

Two Trains Running (1993)

Two Trains Running, set in 1969, finds Wilson's characters at the end of a turbulent and violent decade during which many saw their hopes for achieving racial equity dashed or greatly diminished. The locale, Memphis Lee's small Pittsburgh restaurant, is symbolically placed just across the street from Lutz's Meat Market (life) and West's Funeral Home (death). Memphis, who has witnessed tremendous change in the 40 years since he left the Jackson, Mississippi, farm where he grew up, sees every occurrence as an occasion

for a story. He and his friend Holloway, a regular at the restaurant and something of a historian, constantly swap memories. Now Memphis faces possible destruction as urban renewal threatens to tear down his restaurant, a risk that provokes his recollecting the past with even greater intensity than he has before.

Memphis intends to return to the South one day, to catch one of the two trains running daily there, and flaunt his material successes in Jackson, where he was robbed of his land and run out of town. He believes in working hard and saving money and has no use for Wolf, who plays the numbers, or Sterling, a young man who will not or cannot keep a series of menial jobs, his only option since release from prison. When Memphis calls Sterling “lazy,” he provokes a history lesson from Holloway: “People kill me talking about niggers is lazy. Niggers is the most hard-working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn’t take no lunch hour. . . . If it wasn’t for you the white man would be poor. Every little bit he got he got standing on top of you. That’s why he could reach so high” (34). Holloway ranges beyond the slave past to the middle passage, then returns to present inequities, thinking a sense of history will give Memphis some needed perspective. But Memphis does not care to take the long view: He has watched civil rights leaders felled one after another, and nothing seems to have improved much in his eyes. “Malcolm X is dead,” Memphis says (40). “They killed Martin. If they did that to him you can imagine what they do to me or you. If they kill the sheep you know what they do to the wolf. . . . Ain’t no justice. That’s why they got that statue of her and got her blindfolded” (41–42). His credo is that God blesses the child that’s got his own, and he intends to mind his own business and protect his property as best he can.

Going to the courthouse on the day that city officials are expected to announce their decision about his property, Memphis learns to his surprise that they are ready to pay him \$35,000 for the restaurant, \$10,000 more than he was planning to

fight for. Confused by this sudden turn, he goes for guidance to Aunt Ester, the local prophetess; she tells him he must “go back and pick up the ball” (109). He interprets Ester’s advice as a mandate to return to the South, face matters there, and reclaim the farm that is rightfully his. By dealing with the past, Memphis can be free to go forward. As the play closes, he is triumphant and full of plans for the future. Thus *Two Trains Running* carries a question that resonates through all Wilson’s plays: How can we know who we are and where we are going if we do not acknowledge the past, struggle toward understanding it, and reconcile ourselves to its present legacy to us?

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *Two Trains Running*, Wilson introduces the character of Aunt Ester, who will appear repeatedly in his subsequent plays, including *Gem of the Ocean*, which centers around her. Writers such as John Galsworthy in *The Forsyte Saga* and Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* also make use of recurring characters. From your reading, discuss the work of Wilson and another author who uses such characters. What might this technique contribute to a literary work? What are its shortcomings? Support your responses with specific references to the texts.
2. The train is a frequent symbol for Wilson. Discuss its function in *Two Trains Running* and another Wilson play.

Seven Guitars (1996)

This play is Wilson’s treatment of a sixth decade, the 1940s. It takes place in 1948—again in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. The story follows a small group of friends who gather to attend the funeral of Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton, a local blues artist “on the edge of stardom. Together, they reminisce about his short life and discover the unspoken passions and undying spirit that live within each of them” (verso cover). In

his review, the *Washington Times* critic Nelson Pressley commented, “Nobody puts more life on the stage than August Wilson” (“Plucking Drama”). The musicality promised in Wilson’s title is realized as, according to *Newsweek*’s Jack Kroll, Wilson stages “a gritty, lyrical polyphony of voices that evokes the character and destiny of men and women who can’t help singing the blues even when they’re just talking.” The play won a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best new drama.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Music holds a vital place in Wilson’s drama, and he has frequently spoken about the influence of the blues on his work. Note how many of his play titles relate to aspects of music, some of it not necessarily related to the blues—*The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, and *Gem of the Ocean*, for example. Why is music such a central motif in Wilson’s work? How does it function in the play(s) you have read or seen?
2. In *Seven Guitars*, Wilson makes use of recurring characters, as he had before (as in *Two Trains Running*) and would again (*King Hedley II*, *Gem of the Ocean*). What does this dramatic device add to his themes of the past, racial memory, African and African-American culture, and music?

Jitney (1979, 1982, 2000)

Although *Jitney*, Wilson’s 1970s play, did not have its New York premiere until April 2000, it was the first of the cycle plays Wilson wrote (although by the time it appeared on Broadway it was much changed from the earlier version). It is set in 1977 at a jitney, or gypsy taxicab, station in Pittsburgh. The director Marion McClinton has this to say about the universality of the play:

The story of Becker and Booster, a tale of father and son, becomes the legend of every parent and child. The story of Youngblood

and Rena, two young adults attempting with determination to do the heavy lifting that true love calls for, while also trying to make a decent and better life for their son. Turnbo, Doub, Fielding, Shealy, and Philmore, the drivers and customers of the Jitney Station, men who meet each day straight up and head on and who only want to reach the end of the day with the same amount of dignity and integrity that they began with. These are the stories that must be told and passed on because they reveal to us our humanity, giving us the hope that we might walk our day with similar grace and nobility. (*Jitney* 8)

This play, too, won a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best new drama.

For Discussion or Writing

Wilson’s drama is known for its reliance upon ordinary people as the models for his characters. How, then, do you think his definition of a tragic hero differs from the Aristotelian ideal? How would you defend Wilson’s choices?

The Ground on Which I Stand (1996, 2001)

The Ground on Which I Stand is a piece of expository prose, rather than a play, based on an address Wilson delivered on June 26, 1996, to the 11th biennial Theater Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University. In it, Wilson not only expresses his own poetics, but also calls for African-American artists to “seize the power over their own cultural identity and to establish permanent institutions that celebrate and preserve the singular achievements of African American dramatic art and reaffirm its equal importance in contemporary American culture” (verso cover).

After acknowledging that the dramatic ground on which he stands was peopled first “by the Greek dramatists—by Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles—by William Shakespeare, by Shaw,

Ibsen and Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams," Wilson goes on to assert that these dramatists constitute only a part of his heritage as an artist (11). He is also the inheritor, he states, of black activists like Nat Turner and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, men who affirmed the worth of black Americans "in the face of this society's urgent and sometimes profound denial" (11). He calls on all who have a stake in the theater, from critics to students of arts management to playwrights and actors themselves, to prevent black theater from stagnating. One of the key problems in the proliferation of the arts among black artists, Wilson states, is basic finance: "If you do not know, I will tell you: black theatre in America is alive, it is vibrant, it is vital . . . it just isn't funded" (17). Urging black artists to make a difference, he asserts their right "to amend, to explore, and to add our African consciousness and our African aesthetic" to the theatrical traditions American theater has inherited from its European forebears.

This address served as a rallying call to supporters of black theater. Part of its legacy has been an ongoing debate about the presence of cultural diversity on the American stage. As a result of Wilson's speech, the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA), an organization "dedicated to creating an environment to support artistic excellence and to promote the advancement and preservation of Black Theatre and Black Performing Arts," was formed (2). Wilson served as the AGIA chairman of the board.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Using both print resources and those available online at www.npr.org, examine a series of Wilson's interviews, considering him as an author who is also a literary critic, in the manner of Paula Gunn Allen or TONI MORRISON. How does their critical commentary shape their writing? How does their writing inform their critical views?
2. Explore Wilson's work in the context of cycle plays—those of the Greeks, for example. What

are the similarities and differences between his contemporary cycle and those of the ancients?

King Hedley II (2001)

Next in the dramatic cycle was *King Hedley II* (2001), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award. The hero of this play, set in 1985 in two tenement backyards in Pittsburgh's Hill District, is King, or King Hedley II, an ex-convict who is trying to make his way in a world that offers him few chances to succeed, which critic Mary Ellen Snodgrass sees as Wilson's major theme (125). Another key concept in the play is the ultimate importance of a sense of community and culture in the face of a crumbling urban society. This play can be compared to *Fences* in its investigation of the American dream; it is also interesting as a sequel, with many characters appearing in other Wilson dramas. Key to the work is the death of Aunt Ester, a recurring character for Wilson. Set in a decade of anger and violence, much of the play consists of "complex exchanges of angry males," especially its hero, whose obvious facial scar is a symbol of internal ferment and frustrations (Snodgrass 124).

While very much a product of his time, Hedley occupies the traditional role of the "baaaaad" folk hero, whose braggadocio is his stock in trade. He claims that he wants "everybody to know that King Hedley II is here. And I want everybody to know, just like my daddy, that you can't fuck with me . . . the next motherfucker that fucks with me it's gonna be World War III" (Wilson 1996, 58). Trying to negotiate his way through life, Hedley has encountered numerous injustices in the system, all of which have made him justifiably bitter. His claims to what he sees as his basic rights, honor and dignity, have been thwarted repeatedly by white society. He says in defiance: "I can do it all. I ain't got no limits. I know right from wrong. I know which way the wind blows too. It don't blow my way. Mellon got six houses. I

ain't got none. But that don't mean he six times a better man than me" (Wilson 1996, 55). Access to what his culture deems to be success is barred for King—partly, as for Troy Maxon in *Fences*, because of attitudes and events of his own making, and partly because he is surrounded by what he calls the “barbed wire” of prejudice (Wilson 1996, 55). Key to it all is that he simply wants a job, a way to obtain the things that he and his family have every right to expect. As Mister, a friend of King's, states, “If they had some barbed wire you could cut through it. But you can't cut through not having no job. You can't cut through that. That's better than barbed wire” (Wilson 1996, 55). Just as in earlier plays, Wilson here explores, in Langston Hughes's terms, what happens “to a dream deferred.” In King's case, it explodes, resulting in King's eventual murder. Despite critical kudos, *King Hedley*'s intensity did not find an audience, and the play was not a popular success.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Investigate the topic of finding a woman's voice in *King Hedley II*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. How does each author approach this search?
2. Although Wilson depends on the black agricultural past as an element in each of his plays, they are all set in the city—even in a place of urban decay. Discuss Wilson's juxtaposition of urban and rural elements.
3. Compare and contrast the tragic heroes of *King Hedley II* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Which one, in your opinion, constitutes the greater figure? Why? Support your opinion with examples from each text.
4. If you were casting actors for *King Hedley II* and could not have the choices Wilson made, what actors would you choose? Justify your selections on the sole criterion of faithfulness to the character as Wilson has created her/him.

Gem of the Ocean (2003)

Wilson saved the framework decades of the 1900s and 1990s for his last two plays in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) and *Radio Golf* (2004). Although the ninth play in Wilson's dramatic journey, *Gem of the Ocean* deals with the opening decade of the 20th century. Because this is Wilson's middle passage play, it is central to his treatment of the decade that there were still many people who could recall slavery as part of their lived experience.

The play begins on the eve of the 287th birthday of Aunt Ester, the “keeper of traditions that date to the arrival of the first slaves in America in the early 1600s. . . . Those traditions provide a sense of self for a people freed from slavery only four decades earlier. That freedom has proved elusive, particularly in 1904 Pittsburgh, where economic bondage has become just as stifling as life in the South before the Civil War” (Kuchwara 1–2). Aunt Ester is a recurring character in Wilson's cycle, a griot, or storyteller and spiritual adviser, who was sold into slavery at age 12 for \$607. Manipulating time over the centuries, Wilson infuses the play with aspects of his own brand of magical realism, as he previously had in making supernatural elements central to both *The Piano Lesson* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Again we are in Pittsburgh's Hill District, this time in Aunt Ester's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue, where numerous characters go for guidance.

The critic Michael Kuchwara maintains that the “two questions that hover over” what he defines as “Wilson's majestic, mystical rumination” are “‘How do you handle freedom once you have it? And what if you are not really free?’” (1–2). Principal searchers for the answers to these questions are Solly Two Kings, a former conductor on the Underground Railroad, and Citizen Barlow, a young man trying to elude the spiritual turmoil that consumes him.

What constitutes freedom varies with the character expressing his views. According to Eli, Aunt Ester's gatekeeper, “Freedom is what you make

it”; Solly, however, believes, “You got to fight to make it mean something. . . . What good is freedom if you can’t do nothing with it?” (28). Caesar, a local constable, defines freedom in terms of what he can control: “I’m a free man. I can get up whatever time I want to in the morning. I can move all over and pick any woman I want. I can walk down the street to the store and buy anything my money will buy. There ain’t nothing I can’t have” (37).

Wisely, Aunt Ester knows that you have to find yourself and be able to live with the truth of your life before you can really be free. When Barlow seeks Ester’s advice, she is magically able to transform her own bill of sale as a slave into a boat, which she calls *Gem of the Ocean*. On it Barlow sets off on a spiritual journey to find the mythic City of Bones, located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Barlow’s quest reveals a number of astonishing discoveries and sets him on a course of duty and redemption. What he, as do so many of Wilson’s characters, eventually learns is that one must reconcile himself to the past in order to move confidently toward the future, which is also the lesson of *Radio Golf*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wilson referred to *Gem of the Ocean* as his “Middle Passage play.” Read another work on the middle passage—for example, Walter Dean Myers’s *Amistad* or Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*. Compare the treatment of the Middle-Passage in each work. How does the genre of the work affect the telling of history?
2. Discuss what Aunt Ester contributes to *Gem of the Ocean*, both in its historicity and in its themes. Elaborate on your responses, supporting them with citations from the play.

Radio Golf (2004)

Radio Golf (2004), the last play of the Pittsburgh Cycle, takes place in 1997. The protagonist is

Harmond Wilks, an affluent graduate of Cornell, who now lives in an upscale suburb of the Hill and is well on his way to becoming Pittsburgh’s first black mayor. Set in the real-estate development office he shares with Roosevelt Hicks, the play chronicles what happens when Wilks tries to stop the demolition of 1839 Wylie Avenue, the former neighborhood sanctuary inhabited by Aunt Ester. Wilks becomes aware of the historical and aesthetic significance of 1839 Wylie, and he feels guilty for acquiring the property through a legal loophole that takes advantage of his cousin, Elder Barlow, with whom he has recently become reacquainted.

Hicks betrays Wilks and their heritage by serving as a “black face” for white investors, by enforcing the demolition, and by forcing Wilks’s removal from the project. Unwilling to compromise his values, Wilks is caught between his worlds. He can save neither Aunt Ester’s house nor his role as the project’s developer, suggesting that black assimilation and material success require unethical practices and a lack of reverence for one’s heritage. What more fertile ground could one find for the blues?

Remembering the impulse that began his career as a dramatist, Wilson spoke many times of his deeply felt desire to emulate the blues, which he saw as “a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators” (Wilson 1991, *Three Plays*, x). Early on, he recalled:

I turned my ear, my heart, and whatever analytical tools I possessed to embrace this world. I elevated it, rightly or wrongly, to biblical status. I rooted out the ideas and attitudes expressed in the music, charted them and bent and twisted and stretched them. I gave my whole being, muscle and bone and sinew and flesh and spirit, over to the emotional reference provided by the

be different without him? Why is it best—or not best—that he remain a minor, rather than a major, character? Support your study with citations from the plays in which these characters appear, as well as with your own original analysis.

WORKS CITED AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bryer, Jackson, and Mary Hartig. *Conversations with August Wilson*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.
- Caywood, Cynthia L., Marilyn Elkins, and Carlton Floyd, eds. Special Issue: August Wilson. *College Literature* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2009).
- Ching, Mei-Ling. "Wrestling against History." *Theater* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 70–71.
- Downing, Mike. "Is August Wilson Racist?" 29 May 2005. Available online. URL: www.augustwilson.net. Accessed August 29, 2005.
- . Home Page for August Wilson. URL: <http://www.augustwilson.net>. Accessed July 10, 2009.
- Elkins, Marilyn, ed. *August Wilson: A Casebook*. New York: Garland, 2000, 1994.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.
- Fachbereich 10/Faculty 10 Web site. Available online. URL: www.fb10.uni-bremen.de. Accessed June 4, 2005.
- Fitzgerald, Sharon. "August Wilson: The People's Playwright." *American Visions* (August 2000). Available online. URL: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1546/is_4_15/ai_65069608/. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Freedman, Samuel G. "A Voice from the Streets." *New York Times Magazine*, 15 March 1987, p. 36. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1987/03/15/magazine/a-voice-from-the-streets.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Gantt, Patricia M. "Ghosts from 'Down There': The Southernness of August Wilson." In *August Wilson: A Casebook*, edited by Marilyn Elkins, 69–88. New York: Garland, 2000.
- Henry III, William A. "A Ghostly Past, in Ragtime." *Time* January 30, 1989: 69. Available online. URL: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,956814,00.html. Accessed June 23, 2004.
- Herrington, Joan. *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.
- Ifill, Gwen. "American Shakespeare." *PBS News*. 6 April 2001.
- Kuchwara, Michael. "August Wilson's Ninth Play in Series Superb: An AP Arts Review." Available online. URL: <http://www.augustwilson.net/August%20Wilson's%20Ninth%20Play%20in%20Series%20Superb%20by%20Michael%20Kuchwara.htm>. Accessed July 10, 2009.
- Nadel, Alan, ed. *May All Your Fences Have Gates*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994.
- Pressley, Nelson. "Plucking Drama from Guitars." *Washington Times*, 14 January 1998.
- Rawson, Christopher. "Playwright Wilson Says He's Dying." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 26 August 2005. Available online. URL: www.post-gazette.com/pg/05238/560386.stm. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 8: August Wilson." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature*. Available online. URL: www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap8/wilson.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Rich, Frank. "A Family Confronts Its History in August Wilson's *Piano Lesson*." *New York Times* 17 April 1990, p. C13. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1990/04/17/theater/review-theater-a-family-confronts-its-history-in-august-wilson-s-piano-lesson.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- . "Family Ties in Wilson's *Fences*." *New York Times*, 27 March 1987, p. C3. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1987/03/27/theater/theater-family-ties-in-wilson-s-fences.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- . "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's *Joe Turner*." *New York Times*, 28 March 1988, p. C15. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1988/03/28/theater/review-theater-panoramic-history-of-blacks-in-america-in-wilson-s-joe-turner.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.

- . “Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s* Opens.” *New York Times* 12 October 1984. Available online. URL: www.nytimes.com/1984/10/12/theater/theater-wilson-s-ma-rainey-s-opens.html. Accessed October 12, 2009.
- Shannon, Sandra G. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004.
- “Two-Timer.” *Time* 23, April 1990, p. 99. Available online. URL: www.time.com. Accessed May 15, 2005.
- Welty, Eudora. *The Optimist’s Daughter*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.
- Williams, Dana, and Sandra Shannon. *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Wilson, August. *Fences*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- . “Foreword.” In *Seven Black Plays: The Theodore Ward Prize for African American Playwriting*, ed. Chuck Smith. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2004.
- . *Gem of the Ocean*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2003.
- . *The Ground on Which I Stand*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2001.
- . “How to Write a Play like August Wilson.” *New York Times*, 10 March 1991, p. 2.5.
- . *Jitney*. New York: Overlook Press, 2001.
- . *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- . *King Hedley II*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2005.
- . *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. New York: Penguin, 1985, 1981.
- . *The Piano Lesson*. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- . *Radio Golf*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2007.
- . *Seven Guitars*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- . *Three Plays*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991.
- . *Two Trains Running*. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- Whitaker, Charles. “Is August Wilson America’s Greatest Playwright?” *Ebony* (September 2001). Available online. URL: www.augustwilson.net/IsAugustWilsonAmericasFavoritePlaywright.htm. Accessed January 1, 2005.
- Zoglin, Richard. “Appreciation.” *Time*, 9 October 2005, p. 27.

Patricia M. Gantt

APPENDIX I

Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Adams, Henry	1838–1918	Volume 2	Collins, Billy	1941–	Volume 5
Adams, John, and Abigail Adams	1735–1826 1744–1818	Volume 1	Columbus, Christopher	1451–1506	Volume 1
Albee, Edward	1928–	Volume 4	Cooper, James Fenimore	1789–1851	Volume 1
Alcott, Louisa May	1832–1888	Volume 2	Crane, Hart	1899–1932	Volume 3
Alvarez, Julia	1950–	Volume 5	Crane, Stephen	1871–1900	Volume 2
Anaya, Rudolfo	1937–	Volume 5	Crèvecoeur, J. Hector	1735–1813	Volume 1
Anderson, Sherwood	1876–1942	Volume 3	St. John de		
Angelou, Maya	1928–	Volume 5	Cullen, Countee	1903–1946	Volume 3
Baca, Jimmy Santiago	1952–	Volume 5	Cummings, E. E.	1894–1962	Volume 3
Baldwin, James	1924–1987	Volume 4	Davis, Rebecca Harding	1831–1910	Volume 2
Bambara, Toni Cade	1939–	Volume 5	Dickinson, Emily	1830–1886	Volume 2
Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Dos Passos, John	1896–1970	Volume 3
Bellow, Saul	1915–2005	Volume 4	Douglass, Frederick	1818–1895	Volume 2
Bierce, Ambrose	1842–1914?	Volume 2	Dove, Rita	1952–	Volume 5
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911–1979	Volume 4	Dreiser, Theodore	1871–1945	Volume 3
Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	DuBois, W. E. B.	1868–1963	Volume 3
Bradbury, Ray	1920–	Volume 4	Dunbar, Paul Laurence	1872–1906	Volume 2
Bradford, William	1590–1657	Volume 1	Edwards, Jonathan	1703–1758	Volume 1
Bradstreet, Anne	1612–1672	Volume 1	Eliot, T. S.	1888–1965	Volume 3
Brooks, Gwendolyn	1917–2000	Volume 4	Ellison, Ralph	1914–1994	Volume 4
Brown, Charles Brockden	1771–1810	Volume 1	Emerson, Ralph Waldo	1803–1882	Volume 2
Bryant, William Cullen	1794–1878	Volume 1	Equiano, Olaudah	1745–1797	Volume 1
Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez	1490–1556	Volume 1	Erdrich, Louise	1954–	Volume 5
Capote, Truman	1924–1984	Volume 4	Faulkner, William	1897–1962	Volume 3
Carver, Raymond	1938–1988	Volume 5	Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	1920–	Volume 4
Cather, Willa	1873–1947	Volume 3	Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Champlain, Samuel de	1570–1635	Volume 1	Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1896–1940	Volume 3
Cheever, John	1912–1982	Volume 4	Forché, Carolyn	1950–	Volume 5
Chesnutt, Charles	1858–1932	Volume 2	Foster, Hannah Webster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Child, Lydia Maria	1802–1880	Volume 2	Franklin, Benjamin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Chopin, Kate	1850–1904	Volume 2	Freeman, Mary Eleanor	1852–1930	Volume 2
Cisneros, Sandra	1954–	Volume 5	Wilkins		
Cofer, Judith Ortiz	1952–	Volume 5	Freneau, Philip Morin	1752–1832	Volume 1
			Frost, Robert	1874–1963	Volume 3
			Fuller, Margaret	1810–1850	Volume 2
			Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	1860–1935	Volume 2

Ginsberg, Allen	1926–1997	Volume 4	McCarthy, Cormac	1933–	Volume 5
Giovanni, Nikki	1943–	Volume 5	McKay, Claude	1890–1948	Volume 3
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	McMurtry, Larry	1936–	Volume 5
Haley, Alex	1921–1992	Volume 4	Melville, Herman	1819–1891	Volume 2
Hammon, Jupiter	1711–1806	Volume 1	Millay, Edna St. Vincent	1892–1950	Volume 3
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Miller, Arthur	1915–2005	Volume 4
Hansberry, Lorraine	1930–1965	Volume 4	Momaday, N. Scott	1934–	Volume 4
Harjo, Joy	1951–	Volume 5	Moore, Marianne	1887–1972	Volume 3
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins	1825–1911	Volume 2	Mora, Pat	1942–	Volume 5
Harris, Joel Chandler	1848–1908	Volume 2	Morrison, Toni	1931–	Volume 5
Harte, Bret	1836–1902	Volume 2	Morton, Thomas	1579–1647	Volume 1
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	1804–1864	Volume 2	Murray, Judith Sargent	1751–1820	Volume 1
Hayden, Robert	1913–1980	Volume 4	Oates, Joyce Carol	1938–	Volume 5
Heller, Joseph	1923–1999	Volume 4	O'Brien, Tim	1946–	Volume 5
Hemingway, Ernest	1899–1961	Volume 3	Occom, Samson	1723–1792	Volume 1
Howells, William Dean	1837–1920	Volume 2	O'Connor, Flannery	1925–1964	Volume 4
Hughes, Langston	1871–1967	Volume 3	Oliver, Mary	1935–	Volume 5
Hurston, Zora Neale	1891–1960	Volume 3	O'Neill, Eugene	1888–1953	Volume 3
Irving, Washington	1783–1859	Volume 1	Ortiz, Simon J.	1941–	Volume 5
Jackson, Shirley	1919–1965	Volume 4	Paine, Thomas	1737–1809	Volume 1
Jacobs, Harriet	1813–1897	Volume 2	Piatt, Sarah M. B.	1836–1919	Volume 2
James, Henry	1843–1916	Volume 2	Pinsky, Robert	1940–	Volume 5
Jarrell, Randall	1914–1965	Volume 4	Plath, Sylvia	1932–1963	Volume 4
Jefferson, Thomas	1743–1826	Volume 1	Poe, Edgar Allan	1809–1849	Volume 2
Jewett, Sarah Orne	1849–1909	Volume 2	Porter, Katherine Anne	1890–1980	Volume 3
Kerouac, Jack	1922–1969	Volume 4	Potok, Chaim	1929–2002	Volume 4
Kesey, Ken	1935–2001	Volume 4	Pound, Ezra	1885–1972	Volume 3
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4	Rand, Ayn	1905–1982	Volume 4
Kingsolver, Barbara	1955–	Volume 5	Reed, Ishmael	1938–	Volume 5
Kingston, Maxine Hong	1940–	Volume 5	Rich, Adrienne	1929–	Volume 5
Knowles, John	1926–2001	Volume 4	Robinson,	1869–1935	Volume 3
Komunyakaa, Yusef	1947–	Volume 5	Edwin Arlington		
Larsen, Nella	1891–1964	Volume 3	Roethke, Theodore	1908–1963	Volume 4
Lee, Chang-rae	1965–	Volume 5	Roth, Philip	1933–	Volume 4
Lee, Harper	1926–	Volume 4	Rowson,	1762–1824	Volume 1
Levertov, Denise	1923–1997	Volume 4	Susanna Haswell		
London, Jack	1876–1916	Volume 3	Salinger, J. D.	1919–2010	Volume 4
Longfellow,	1807–1882	Volume 2	Sandburg, Carl	1878–1967	Volume 3
Henry Wadsworth			Sedgwick,	1789–1867	Volume 1
Lowell, Robert	1917–1977	Volume 4	Catharine Maria		
Malamud, Bernard	1914–1986	Volume 4	Sexton, Anne	1928–1974	Volume 4
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4	Silko, Leslie Marmon	1948–	Volume 5
Marshall, Paule	1929–	Volume 4	Smith, John	1580–1631	Volume 1
Mather, Cotton	1663–1728	Volume 1	Snyder, Gary	1930–	Volume 5
			Soto, Gary	1952–	Volume 5

Stein, Gertrude	1874–1946	Volume 3	Walker, Alice	1944–	Volume 5
Steinbeck, John	1902–1968	Volume 3	Warren, Robert Penn	1905–1989	Volume 4
Stevens, Wallace	1879–1955	Volume 3	Washington, Booker T.	1856–1915	Volume 3
Stowe, Harriet Beecher	1811–1896	Volume 2	Welty, Eudora	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far	1865–1914	Volume 3	Wharton, Edith	1862–1937	Volume 3
(Edith Maude Eaton)			Wheatley, Phillis	1753–1784	Volume 1
Swenson, May	1913–1989	Volume 4	Whitman, Walt	1819–1892	Volume 2
Tan, Amy	1952–	Volume 5	Wilbur, Richard	1921–	Volume 4
Taylor, Edward	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	Wilder, Thornton	1897–1975	Volume 3
Thoreau, Henry David	1817–1862	Volume 2	Williams, Tennessee	1911–1983	Volume 4
Toomer, Jean	1894–1967	Volume 3	Williams,		
Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2	William Carlos	1883–1961	Volume 3
Updike, John	1932–2009	Volume 4	Wilson, August	1945–2005	Volume 5
Viramontes, Helena María	1954–	Volume 5	Wilson, Harriet E.	1825–1900	Volume 2
Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4	Winthrop, John	1588–1649	Volume 1
			Wright, Richard	1908–1960	Volume 3

APPENDIX II

Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, by Birth Date

Note that authors are placed in the volume that covers the period during which they published their most important works. Some authors published their works relatively early or relatively late in their lives. This explains why, for example, certain authors placed in volume 3 were actually born before certain authors placed in volume 2.

Christopher Columbus	1451–1506	Volume 1	William Cullen Bryant	1794–1878	Volume 1
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	1490–1556	Volume 1	Lydia Maria Child	1802–1880	Volume 2
Samuel de Champlain	1570–1635	Volume 1	Ralph Waldo Emerson	1803–1882	Volume 2
Thomas Morton	1579–1647	Volume 1	Nathaniel Hawthorne	1804–1864	Volume 2
John Smith	1580–1631	Volume 1	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	1807–1882	Volume 2
John Winthrop	1588–1649	Volume 1	Edgar Allan Poe	1809–1849	Volume 2
William Bradford	1590–1657	Volume 1	Margaret Fuller	1810–1850	Volume 2
Anne Bradstreet	1612–1672	Volume 1	Fanny Fern	1811–1872	Volume 2
Edward Taylor	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1	(Sara Willis Parton)		
Cotton Mather	1663–1728	Volume 1	Harriet Beecher Stowe	1811–1896	Volume 2
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	Volume 1	Harriet Jacobs	1813–1897	Volume 2
Benjamin Franklin	1706–1790	Volume 1	Henry David Thoreau	1817–1862	Volume 2
Jupiter Hammon	1711–1806	Volume 1	Frederick Douglass	1818–1895	Volume 2
Samson Occom	1723–1792	Volume 1	Herman Melville	1819–1891	Volume 2
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	1735–1813	Volume 1	Walt Whitman	1819–1892	Volume 2
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1	Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	1825–1911	Volume 2
John Adams	1735–1826	Volume 1	Harriet E. Wilson	1825–1900	Volume 2
Thomas Paine	1737–1809	Volume 1	Emily Dickinson	1830–1886	Volume 2
Thomas Jefferson	1743–1826	Volume 1	Rebecca Harding Davis	1831–1910	Volume 2
Abigail Adams	1744–1818	Volume 1	Louisa May Alcott	1832–1888	Volume 2
Olaudah Equiano	1745–1797	Volume 1	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Judith Sargent Murray	1751–1820	Volume 1	Bret Harte	1836–1902	Volume 2
Philip Morin Freneau	1752–1832	Volume 1	Sarah M. B. Piatt	1836–1919	Volume 2
Phillis Wheatley	1753–1784	Volume 1	William Dean Howells	1837–1920	Volume 2
Hannah Webster Foster	1758–1840	Volume 1	Henry Adams	1838–1918	Volume 2
Susanna Haswell Rowson	1762–1824	Volume 1	Ambrose Bierce	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Charles Brockden Brown	1771–1810	Volume 1	Henry James	1843–1916	Volume 2
Washington Irving	1783–1859	Volume 1	Joel Chandler Harris	1848–1908	Volume 2
James Fenimore Cooper	1789–1851	Volume 1	Sarah Orne Jewett	1849–1909	Volume 2
Catharine Maria Sedgwick	1789–1867	Volume 1			

Kate Chopin	1850–1904	Volume 2	Countee Cullen	1903–1946	Volume 3
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	1852–1930	Volume 2	Ayn Rand	1905–1982	Volume 4
Booker T. Washington	1856–1915	Volume 3	Robert Penn Warren	1905–1989	Volume 4
Charles Chesnutt	1858–1932	Volume 2	Richard Wright	1908–1960	Volume 3
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	1860–1935	Volume 2	Theodore Roethke	1908–1963	Volume 4
Edith Wharton	1862–1937	Volume 3	Eudora Welty	1909–2001	Volume 4
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3	Elizabeth Bishop	1911–1979	Volume 4
W. E. B. DuBois	1868–1963	Volume 3	Tennessee Williams	1911–1983	Volume 4
Edwin Arlington Robinson	1869–1935	Volume 3	John Cheever	1912–1982	Volume 4
Stephen Crane	1871–1900	Volume 2	Robert Hayden	1913–1980	Volume 4
Theodore Dreiser	1871–1945	Volume 3	May Swenson	1913–1989	Volume 4
Langston Hughes	1871–1967	Volume 3	Randall Jarrell	1914–1965	Volume 4
Paul Laurence Dunbar	1872–1906	Volume 2	Bernard Malamud	1914–1986	Volume 4
Willa Cather	1873–1947	Volume 3	Ralph Ellison	1914–1994	Volume 4
Gertrude Stein	1874–1946	Volume 3	Saul Bellow	1915–2005	Volume 4
Robert Frost	1874–1963	Volume 3	Arthur Miller	1915–2005	Volume 4
Jack London	1876–1916	Volume 3	Robert Lowell	1917–1977	Volume 4
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3	Gwendolyn Brooks	1917–2000	Volume 4
Sherwood Anderson	1876–1942	Volume 3	Shirley Jackson	1919–1965	Volume 4
Carl Sandburg	1878–1967	Volume 3	J. D. Salinger	1919–2010	Volume 4
Wallace Stevens	1879–1955	Volume 3	Ray Bradbury	1920–	Volume 4
William Carlos Williams	1883–1961	Volume 3	Lawrence Ferlinghetti	1920–	Volume 4
Ezra Pound	1885–1972	Volume 3	Richard Wilbur	1921–	Volume 4
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3	Alex Haley	1921–1992	Volume 4
Marianne Moore	1887–1972	Volume 3	Jack Kerouac	1922–1969	Volume 4
Eugene O'Neill	1888–1953	Volume 3	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4
T. S. Eliot	1888–1965	Volume 3	Denise Levertov	1923–1997	Volume 4
Claude McKay	1890–1948	Volume 3	Joseph Heller	1923–1999	Volume 4
Katherine Anne Porter	1890–1980	Volume 3	James Baldwin	1924–1987	Volume 4
Zora Neale Hurston	1891–1960	Volume 3	Truman Capote	1924–1984	Volume 4
Nella Larsen	1891–1964	Volume 3	Flannery O'Connor	1925–1964	Volume 4
Edna St. Vincent Millay	1892–1950	Volume 3	Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
E. E. Cummings	1894–1962	Volume 3	Harper Lee	1926–	Volume 4
Jean Toomer	1894–1967	Volume 3	Allen Ginsberg	1926–1997	Volume 4
F. Scott Fitzgerald	1896–1940	Volume 3	John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
John Dos Passos	1896–1970	Volume 3	Edward Albee	1928–	Volume 4
William Faulkner	1897–1962	Volume 3	Maya Angelou	1928–	Volume 5
Thornton Wilder	1897–1975	Volume 3	Anne Sexton	1928–1974	Volume 4
Hart Crane	1899–1932	Volume 3	Paule Marshall	1929–	Volume 4
Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961	Volume 3	Adrienne Rich	1929–	Volume 5
John Steinbeck	1902–1968	Volume 3	Martin Luther King, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
			Chaim Potok	1929–2002	Volume 4
			Gary Snyder	1930–	Volume 5
			Lorraine Hansberry	1930–1965	Volume 4
			Toni Morrison	1931–	Volume 5

Sylvia Plath	1932–1963	Volume 4	Nikki Giovanni	1943–	Volume 5
John Updike	1932–2009	Volume 4	Alice Walker	1944–	Volume 5
Cormac McCarthy	1933–	Volume 5	August Wilson	1945–2005	Volume 5
Philip Roth	1933–	Volume 4	Tim O'Brien	1946–	Volume 5
N. Scott Momaday	1934–	Volume 4	Yusef Komunyakaa	1947–	Volume 5
Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Leslie Marmon Silko	1948–	Volume 5
Mary Oliver	1935–	Volume 5	Julia Alvarez	1950–	Volume 5
Ken Kesey	1935–2001	Volume 4	Carolyn Forché	1950–	Volume 5
Larry McMurtry	1936–	Volume 5	Joy Harjo	1951–	Volume 5
Rudolfo Anaya	1937–	Volume 5	Jimmy Santiago Baca	1952–	Volume 5
Joyce Carol Oates	1938–	Volume 5	Judith Ortiz Cofer	1952–	Volume 5
Ishmael Reed	1938–	Volume 5	Rita Dove	1952–	Volume 5
Raymond Carver	1938–1988	Volume 5	Gary Soto	1952–	Volume 5
Toni Cade Bambara	1939–	Volume 5	Amy Tan	1952–	Volume 5
Maxine Hong Kingston	1940–	Volume 5	Sandra Cisneros	1954–	Volume 5
Robert Pinsky	1940–	Volume 5	Louise Erdrich	1954–	Volume 5
Billy Collins	1941–	Volume 5	Helena María Viramontes	1954–	Volume 5
Simon J. Ortiz	1941–	Volume 5	Barbara Kingsolver	1955–	Volume 5
Pat Mora	1942–	Volume 5	Chang-rae Lee	1965–	Volume 5